Techno-Intransigence: The Resistances to Representation in Video Games

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Techno-Intransigence: The Resistances to Representation in Video Games

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Abstract

Though video games are the new dominant media in entertainment, there is a significant disparity in representation of gender, race, and sexuality. Upon examination of major titles and their supporting texts such as *The Last of Us, The Last of Us Part II*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Horizon Forbidden West*, *Battlefield*, *Assassin's Creed, Final Fantasy VII Remake*, and *League of Legends*, this disparity is largely attributed to a resistance to improving diversity due to financial risk aversion, technical decisions made for game engines that inadvertently limit capacity for visual representation, a workforce that skews heavily male, and an industry culture that encourages coworker competition rather than work/life balance. I will argue that diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility improvements result from implementation of equitable game design practices, improving game studio culture from the top down by hiring diverse talent in leadership positions, and fostering a people-first culture that values collaboration, empathy, and work/life balance.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Katherine Golden is senior leader in game development industry who has worked primarily on AAA titles such as *Forza Horizon 3, Forza Horizon 4, Forza Horizon 5, Destiny 2, Sonic Colors Ultimate*, and *Sonic Origins*. She serves as the Chair of the IGDA Game Credits SIG, a special interest group providing guidance on game accreditation policies. She also co-founded SavePoint Industry Gathering, a community for game industry professionals from gender underrepresented groups. She is employed at Riot Games as a Senior Product Manager, focused on driving alignment, facilitating communication, elevating marginalized voices, and helping game developers from all walks of life do their best work to create games they love.

Dedication

For Samantha and all her friends.

Acknowledgments

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Chapter I.

Introduction

Technologically phenomenal, but conservative in human representation? Video

games are creative, highly collaborative, and technically progressive visual mediums,

merging the seemingly unrelated crafts of art and software. Video games allow players to

interact in fantastical worlds, environments, and situations limited only by the

imagination of the designers and creators. Players can find themselves on a solo hero's

journey through new realms, they can construct creations for others to engage and create

their own play spaces, or they can team up with friends anywhere on the globe to fight,

chase, shoot, or build about anything comprehendible. Games offer the experiences of

agency, new identity, and interactivity. While film, TV, and theatre offer a passive

approach to entertainment centered upon observance, video games are distinguished from

other visual mediums as interactivity is at its core. Games involve active participation in

worlds and environments as the player is immersed into atmospheres and rules of

engagement created by the game developers. Arguably, the interactabilty creates a

heightened importance as the players experience the worlds as active participants, rather

than passive observers.

But even a cursory glance at top selling titles reveals a rather homogenous

representation of characters regarding gender, race, sexuality, and accessibility in

predominantly shooting or sports themed games; according to The NPD Group, the top

three selling games of 2021 are military based shooter *Call of Duty: Vanguard, Call of*

Duty: Black Ops: Cold War, and football-based *Madden NFL 22* (Rousseau, "How Much

Progress"). Women are infrequently leads or main protagonists in video games, and when they are, they're intentionally depicted as hypersexualized, evoking the male gaze. This has been the case for a while; in the 2015 book, *Gaming on the Edge*, video games scholar and author Adrienne Shaw observed this phenomenon, saying that "[i]n many ways, digital games, seem to be the least progressive form of media representation, despite being one of the newest mediated forms" (Shaw 6). Despite mass reach, large scope, multi-million-dollar blockbuster video games follow formulaic patterns: military games, shooters, sequels with little deviation from the previous subject matter, and characterizations that draw on stereotypes and tropes to tell stories.

Despite this absence of representation, the video games industry experienced a rise within the entertainment industry as a dominant force with expansion to larger audiences, wider demographics, and new global territories. According to NewZoo's Global Games Market Forecasting research, the video game industry earned more than NFL, NBA, MLB and NHL and global film industry combined in 2020 with $179.1 billion in revenue (Rousseau, "Video Game Market"; Witowski). While the quarantine brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic created an unprecedented spike in interest in video games as a hobby, the growth did not taper off. The video game industry is projected to bring in $203.1 billion and $222.6 billion in 2022 and 2024, respectively (Rousseau, "Video Game Market"). These figures are indicative of a massive cultural footprint spanning multiple demographics, and they challenge the widespread perception of a predominately young male audience that was created by the overwhelming presence of white male protagonist shooter or sport-centric themes and hypersexualized women.
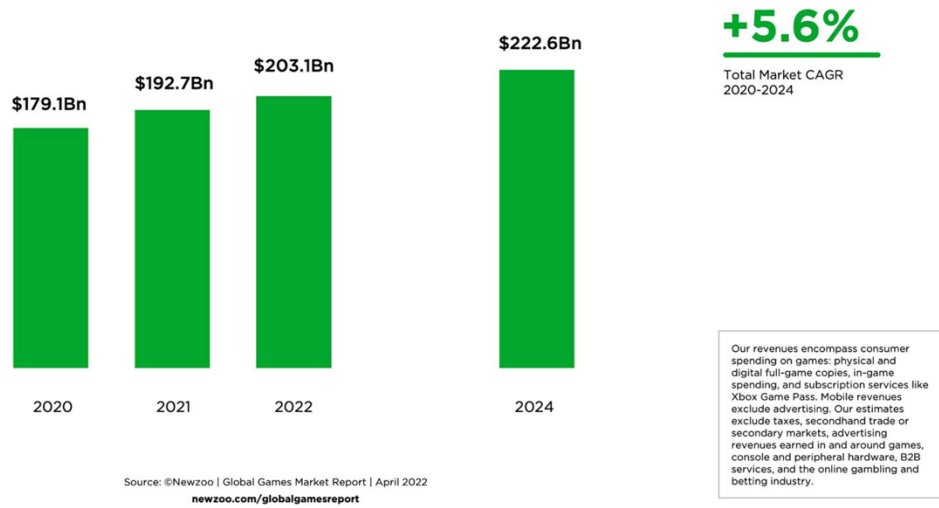
Figure. 1. Global Games Market Forecast.

A growth chart showing previous and predicted profits for the games industry (Rousseau, "Video Game Market").

Furthermore, the Entertainment Software Association annual publication of sales and demographics indicates that among US audiences "66 percent of Americans—more than 215 million people of all ages and backgrounds—play video games regularly. Three quarters of players are over 18, and the average age of a video game player is 33. Across all ages, players are about half female (48 percent) and half male (52 percent)" (2022 Essential Facts About The Video Game Industry - Entertainment Software Association). The cultural impact of the video games industry is undeniable, but representation of the diversity of this growing audience remains skewed.

Why is such a creative, play-driven space heavily comprised by homogeny and what are the limitations that prevent said progression of representation? Though other

visual mediums encounter similar reach and visibility, why do we not see the same advancement toward representation of race, gender, sexuality, and disability in video games? What is the source of resistance, and how can it be eliminated?

This thesis will explore the unique struggles within game development that bar representation of race, gender, sexuality, and disability, engaging with perspectives from video game scholars, including Soraya Murray, Adrienne Shaw, Jennifer Malkowski, TreaAndrea Russworm, Amanda C. Cote, Dr. Kishonna L. Gray, Shira Chess, Benjamin Nicoll, Branden Keogh, and Tanya DePass. Universally, these scholars agree that lack of representation in AAA game development is not a coincidence, but rather the product of active resistance to alter the status quo of hegemonic male lead characters, hypersexualized females, and unbalanced race representation in commonplace game designs. Each scholars' research describes perspectives on how this resistance surfaces, however, most scholars argue that the resistance is centered around the reluctance to upset the gaming fanbase, financial risk aversion of deviating from predicable development models and a proven user base, limitations within the game engines, and cultural issues within the game studios themselves that both deprioritize hiring of marginalized developers and create hostile work environments for them. These scholars' research is additionally supported by games journalists reporting on topics about representation as well as developers active in the industry giving presentations about their personal experiences.

Due to my profession in the games industry, my exposure to the systems in which games are developed, and my graduate work in the field of Dramatic Arts, I approach this research problem from the position of how business decisions, game engines, and game

studio culture all limit representation in video games and I offer my personal experiences to illustrate the weight of their impact. My professional career is game development; I have had the privilege of being in rooms in which topics of representation were cast aside due to cost and additional work that was, allegedly, too expansive, unwieldy, or financially irresponsible to adopt. Simultaneously, I've seen and felt the change, and I argue that leadership-driven efforts to prioritize diversity have begun to move the needle and will continue to do so.

In Chapter Two, I address the causes of underrepresentation of diversity in games. Primarily, I discuss underrepresentation in the video game labor force and the resulting lack of influence to business, creative, and technology decisions that impact diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Underrepresentation is indicative of a power structure imbalance among the decision makers in the technical gaming spaces. I ask and answer the questions: What are these power imbalances, and how are they created and sustained? In Chapter Three, I demonstrate progress at the AAA scale and provide critical examination of *Final Fantasy VII Remake* as compared to the original *Final Fantasy VII*. In doing so, I identify legacy variations, which are intentional inclusions of new or modified content, to create a baseline for representation in a ninth-generation console title. In Chapter Four, incorporating my perspective as a marginalized game developer, I will argue that priorization of people-first working environments and diverse hiring into leadership positions should be pursued as viable paths toward greater representation, and inclusivity, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA, hereafter) in gaming. I have seen the creation and support of barriers to representation, and I will argue that the visible

pivots from a business, cultural, and behavioral standpoint will break down these barriers and result in the permanent, lasting change.

What is Representation and Why Does it Matter?

For the purposes of my research on representation in game development, representation refers to the representation of marginalized groups that have historically been silenced, erased, or minimized. For shared meaning, I'll use the working definition of authentic diversity of these marginalized groups as put forward by Tanya DePass in *The Advanced Game Narrative Toolbox*: "Representation that does not fall back on or rely on tropes or stereotypes. Diversity that is thoughtfully portrayed as part of daily life, not an exception to the rule or an anomaly that needs to be explained, justified or otherwise hand-waved as something other than the regular operation of that media's world-building and the experience of the characters." This refers to factors such as culture, race, ethnicity, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability/disability, and neurodiversity (Gittins 3). Scholars studying representation in video games have a generally agreed upon definition of representation as a visual depiction of the makeup of human society within visual media. Rather than speaking to representation as binary (there is or there is not), the scholars provide a lens of the damage done to people of marginalized races and genders by stereotypical misrepresentation. These concepts speak to the theme of representation being a snapshot of society. According to Amanda C. Cote, "Representation reflects existing systems of power and control. How we process reality." (Cote 16) Shaw describes representation as "…as a type of 'imagined community' formed for political ends" (Shaw 16). Shira Chess also refers to representational politics; citing scholars Amanda Phillips, Jennifer Malkowski, and TreaAndrea Russworm who

agree that representation is closely tied to identity and does not happen "in a cultural vacuum" (Chess 91). Amanda Phillips echoes a sentiment from Shaw, saying that "Representation and inclusion are important to help us imagine and believe new spaces of possibility, but they are small steps in a more expansive quest for justice" (Chess 15). In addition to being a snapshot of society, cultural theorist Stuart Hall, cited by Cote, Murray, and Shaw, describes representation as action: "Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within discursive formations of a particular space and time" (Malkowski 4). C. Thu Nguyen goes a step further to define this action as agency: "…games are esteemed for their representational qualities-how they model and comment on the real world. When agency shows up in these sorts of discussions, it is usually considered a subordinate technique for the purpose of representation" (103). Lastly, Phillips also indicates that "lack of diversity is a symptom of larger systemic problems rather than the cause for inequality" (Chess 13), tying this all together, underrepresentation within visual media holds up a mirror to a society that does not value diversity of its people, their actions, or their agency.

<center>Why Study Representation in Video Games?</center>

When preparing my research, "what do video games have to do with dramatic arts?" was the most consistently asked question I received and was even the highest barrier to clearance to write a thesis on the topic from academia. As both art and software, video games exist as "bifurcated between humanities and computer science" which makes it challenging to study (Murray 8). The overarching perception of games in academia is plagued with descriptors of games as toxic, mind numbing, and a medium of

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lower socioeconomic class. These perceptions give video games a sense of unimportance to culture and unworthy of cultural study. Murray comments on this phenomenon with her perspective: "Within spaces of liberal education, it is common to find technical training in game development, yet from a critical cultural perspective, games themselves are openly thought of as entertainment of the uncultured, as intolerable visual forms. Liberal progressiveness often performs a disingenuous refusal to deal with video games" (12). As a result, there is a reluctance to accept video games among the visual mediums of TV, film, and theater. Scholars including Shaw, Murray, Malkowski and Russworm agree this refusal to engage in intellectual criticism may exacerbate to the current state of games as non-progressive, and that it is possible that visual medium studies scholars themselves are partially to blame for the lack of progressiveness in video games. Early scholarship was plagued with secondary motivations and was largely condemnatory and celebratory rather than critical as "[a]uthors were unfamiliar with video games, and the culture around them, and displayed an a priori distaste" focusing on the disruption of the industry and the seemingly negative impact of violent games on the youth (Dyer xxiv).

A lack of academic exploration lends itself to unchecked content in this form of mass media. Soraya Murray notes the existence of power dynamics at play in discussion of representation in games and argues that games are means to depict real world power struggles via fictional texts. She explains that "…analyzing games as dynamic forms of representation, using the tools of cultural critique, can provide a valuable means by which to better understand video games as culture within the matrix of power and difference." She says: "the simple question of identifying positive or negative representations is not what matters here, but rather understanding culture as an ongoing struggle that can be

observed in games" (3). The lack of representation in media is a commentary on the state of equality, and worthy of examination.

Additionally, as financial and engagement reports demonstrate that video games dominate media, they've also taken a dominating place in pop culture. Citing the rise of American politicians using video games to reach younger audiences and the growing popularity of celebrity video game streamers, Sean Monahan writes: "Where rock and hip hop were once crucibles of style, cyberpunk and fantasy gaming genres inspire a new generation. Where music venues were once the places youth movements found their most exciting form – Boomers in rock clubs, Gen Xers in grunge bars, Millennials in DIY warehouses – Gen Z meets up with friends online" (Monahan). No longer a niche toy marketed to boys, it is a mass medium eclipsing music and fashion as the driving influence of youth culture.

As video games offer online spaces to meet up that are overwhelmingly masculine, plagued with sexist racist language, and exclusionary to those who are not white males, influence has even extended into creating the breeding grounds for civil unrest in American politics. In 2014, women in the gaming industry weathered a large-scale controversy called GamerGate, in which the dam broke on the stronghold of masculinity over games; women developers, journalists, and game critics became targets for misogynistic online harassment campaigns comprised of threats of violence. Major players in the United States aligning with conservative extremism and the alt-right movement such as Steve Bannon have indicated they used harassment techniques out of the GamerGate playbook to target what they perceived to be "rootless, white males [with] monster power" and radicalized them to act in favor if the alt-right (Swearingen). Games

scholar Kristin MS Bezio says: "Bannon's site was responsible for a considerable portion of the articles which lambasted Sarkeesian, Quinn, and others during GamerGate, and which today continue to tout alt-right, anti-progressive policies in favor of isolationism, fear-mongering, and moral panic" (563). By creating a sense of distrust in minorities and progressives with GamerGate as a testing ground, alt-right proponents fostered white nationalism. Bannon went on to become a senior representative in the White House (Lees). These effects have impacted the global political landscape as well: "The same kind of exclusionary neo-conservative language…echoes separationist rhetoric surrounding Brexit and characterized the 2017 French election, and…Warsaw, Poland as demands for racial purity and a supposed "return" to a time and place when white men need not feel threatened" (Bezio 563). As the gaming industry has demonstrated the capacity and power to drive culture shifts, I posit that games still hold the same power and can sway public perception of representation away from feel good marketing or social justice work to that of a normal aspect of Western entertainment.

Terminology

As this topic can be technical in nature, I'll provide some definitions of frequently used terminology.

"AAA": A term used to describe games that are mass produced on a large scale for mainstream audiences. There is no clear, accepted definition for this term, but rather an extrapolation of the cost of a game based on its size, complexity, and quality. Due to the nature of this topic, this thesis focuses on what are called AAA games as primary sources. As I primarily agree with games scholars' findings of a significant lack of

representation due to intentionality and resistance, I intend to study games in which there is an intentional effort by the game developers to include representation of characters as a priority. Also, due the size and scope of these games and their intended reach, a choice to remain "apolitical" or avoid the IDEA discussion is a statement on representation of itself being considered. As I posit that deficiencies are around technical innovation, I focus my conversation around video games with the following criteria: they were released on video game consoles after 2013, received critical acclaim via a higher than 85% aggregated review score as determined by industry standard Metacritic.com, were nominated for or won a Game of the Year Award, feature performance outputs of a high definition resolution (1080p or 4K), and prominently feature a protagonist that is not identified as a cis heterosexual white male. As AAA games have the high production budgets and large target audiences, their cultural impact and reach increases both 1) the ability to influence other media and 2) the inability to remain apolitical as even neutral ground is a statement. As such, they are the subjects of my work.

Console games: Games that are played using a video game console rather than a PC. For example, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 5, which are the ninth-generation consoles; Xbox One, PlayStation 4 and the Nintendo Switch are the eighth-generation consoles. I will be focused on console games as many of these games have been released separately on the PC. Console games serve as the most accessible to a mass market due to a reduced barrier to entry of cost.

Gaming Industrial Complex (GIC): Borrowing this acronym from Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm to stand for Gaming Industrial Complex. This

refs to the collective whole of companies, organizations, and studios that develop video games.

Game Engine: I will use the description put forth by B. Nicoll and B. Keogh – "a game engine is a software tool that enables real-time, interactive content to be created, and a code framework that enables the content to run on different platforms…" (Nicoll 9). The game engine is the interface in which artists, designers, programmers, audio engineers, and writers contribute their work to develop a video game.

Video game: this is the umbrella term that will refer to an interactive game that is playable using a console designed to play games, PC, or mobile device.

Chapter II.

Fear of the Unknown: Risk Aversion, Behavioral Status Quo, and the Technical

Difficulties of Diversity

Despite the what seems like limitless freedom to design a bespoke game and

create any visual universe or atmosphere a developer can imagine, limited

homogenization of worlds, characters, and spaces continue to dominate high-selling

video games. It is this incongruency that creates a tension between large-scale video

game development and underrepresentation of race, gender, accessibility, and sexuality

that warrants critical examination.

To understand the causes and contributions to the lack of representation in game

development, video game scholars and journalists have examined the games themselves,

the tools to build games, and the company cultures in games studios. Themes and patterns

emerge that run contrary to representation and expansion of diversity within games:

financial risk aversion; game studio patriarchal and exclusionary cultures that influence

hiring and retention practices; and technical limitations borne from these limitations. I

argue that business, creative, and technology not only contribute to underrepresentation

in games, but they also feed into and perpetuate each other due to a culture that values

self-preservation. The solution to improving representation and IDEA in video game

requires defining how each of these pieces show up in game development and how they

interact with one another.

A Capitalistic Business: An Aversion to Risk via Formulas, Sequels, and Consolidation

While there is universal agreement among game scholars on there being resistance to inclusive representation in video games due to culture, several attribute underrepresentation to capitalistic business practices that intentionally prioritize risk reduction over diversity and inclusion. Soraya Murray notes that it is "no longer useful to merely point out racism, sexism, and homophobia in games with the preconceived notion that these exist within the industry and game culture as a result of ignorance. They exist as a result of essentialism" (39). She goes on to describe games as "the quintessential visual culture of advanced capitalism" (10). Amanda C. Cote provides back story to the origins of rigid business practices in games: as the economic recession in the 1980s hit the video game industry, "producers tentatively returned to making games, [and] they redefined their audiences more narrowly to manage future risk. Because young men had been visible during the arcade era…developers focused on this group as a proven user base" (4). Dyer describes "game capital's risk-averse adherence to proven shooting, sports, fighting, and racing formulae" (20), genres with proven demonstrative track records to sell, but that also singularly target the 18–34-year-old male demographic.

The male as the target demographic was not always the case, instead, it was developed due to the stereotyping of girls, computer usage, and the subject matters of the games that interest them. As home computers and computer games became prevalent in the early 1980s, a false perception developed from anecdotal experiences watching children play: girls did not show the same enthusiasm for computers as boys, therefore girls do not like computers, and computer games were not for girls. However, studies in game design and children's interactivity with games found that "girls are less enthusiastic

than boys about the thematic embedding of good versus evil in story narratives. Nor, as we saw earlier, do they like the violent feedback that normally accompanies such themes. Unfortunately, most commercially available video games make strong use of narrative that involves both violence and the conflict between good and evil" (Cassell 53). Game designers and researchers studying girl's interests such as Brenda Laurel and Sheri Graner Ray found instead that girls prefer mysteries, RPGs, and playing with props in non-violent settings. In parallel, research on computer usage found that boys have a slight advantage over girls in skills that involve spatial ability, a skill in "representing and transforming symbolic or nonlinguistic information through space" (Terlecki 433). As a result, boys innately have an easier time using computers. Researchers Terlecki and Newcombe confirm this delta in spatial abilities between males and females (with males performing better), but their study also concludes that exposure and experience to computers and video games lessened that gap; results from their research found "that the mediation of computer experience had a bigger impact on women; women with computer experience score higher...Introducing computer experience as a predictor, thus, had less effect on men because, according to our sample, most men already had large amounts of computer experience (whereas women were more variable)" (437). They hypothesize that girls were less likely to play videogames as the subject matters were more in line with "masculine interests, such as aggression and violence," but also that the experience that young girls and women reported having with computers was anxiety misinterpreted as inability or incompetency (Terlecki 436; Cassell 11). This created a self-fulfilling prophecy: computer education and games were focused solely on boys' interests, and girl's interests were cast aside with a lazy resignation that "girls don't like games." This

furthered the development of what became known as the "Digital Divide," or an economic and educational rift between those with access and ability to use computers and those without (434). A perception of a gender digital divide emerged, which informed the development and marketing of games as primarily for boys; this later led to predominately male hiring in tech and game development.

The 1983 video game market crash and the narrow focus on male audiences set a precedent of gender exclusion and solidified the target male demographic. The crash resulted from an influx of poor-quality games in the early 1980s which eroded the trust of consumers and caused sales to plummet. To recover, Nintendo began marketing its games and the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) not as a computer but as a toy. Operating off the false perception that boys liked computers more than girls, games were positioned in the boy's section of toy stores in an attempt to target them. While there were efforts to counter the genderization of video games, "Games industry representatives claim that one of the biggest obstacles in creating a girls' market was to do with the gatekeeping functions played by chain toystores, such as Toys 'R' Us and Kaybee" (Cassell 15). Branding the NES as a toy reinvigorated the video game industry and solidified the primary male target demographic, so the video game industry leaned into male focused interests based on social and cultural constructs of masculine gender (Cassell 6). Though girl-game centric companies such as HerInteractive, Girl Games, Girltech, and Purple Moon existed, they struggled with gaining traction in the video game marketplace and made choices to develop games with stereotypical feminine tastes to appeal to toy industry gender stereotyping. By the 1990s, marketing and advertisements responded to the niching of video games for the male audience only: "Television commercials for the

Game Boy feature only young boys and teenagers…Atari filmed a bizarre series

of infomercials that shows a man how much his life will improve if he upgrades to the

Jaguar console. With each 'improvement,' he has more and more attractive women

fawning over him" (Lien).

Figure. 2. A Change in Marketing Strategy.

The 1982 ad for Millipede (Lien) featuring a family playing together, and a 1992 ad for Mortal Kombat (u/RRobertstein) with two boys being grabbed by fighters.

As the games and game ads themselves shifted to males, problematic box art and

game-cover imagery with hypersexualized women, intended to appeal to only the 18–34-

year-old male, began to emerge in the late 1980s. Though the games of the time were

pixelated due to graphical quality, the box art featured women wearing minimal clothing in submissive or sexualized positions. In a 2012 interview with Brenda Romero, game designer Sheri Graner Ray describes the intentional hypersexualization of women in game design, saying: "For our female characters, we exaggerate the traits that indicate sexual receptivity, and then we dress them in clothing designed specifically to draw attention to these traits. We pose them in provocative postures to give even more of an appearance that she is ready for sex 'right now.' We do none of that for our male characters" (Brathwaite 391). Lien cites Barbarian (1987) for Commodore 64 as an example, "which featured a scantily clad, buxom woman at the feet of a barely clothed man. She's not a playable character in the game, of course. Her pixelated curves can be seen watching the game's action from the grandstand in the background" (Lien). Box art and video game packaging directed toward the male gaze was a mainstay marketing tactic; as box art features key art and a presentation of a game designed to capture the attention of a target market, game packaging provided an indicator of diversity and intentionality of representation. A study entitled "Selling Gender: Associations of Box Art Representation of Female Characters with Sales for Teen- and Mature-rated Video Games" explores the prevalence of female video game characters as they relate to game sales. It states: "Content analysis of video games has consistently shown that women are portrayed much less frequently than men and in subordinate roles, often in 'hypersexualized' ways" (Near 252). Women are depicted as weak support characters, in need of rescue, powerless, or hypersexualized. According to Michael Kimmel in *Guyland*, "The absence of female characters or their depiction as sexualized and powerless help to maintain this gendered space, both by preserving an association

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between masculinity and privilege, by deterring "invasion" of the space by female players (Kimmel 255). There's a reluctance and even backlash to featuring a woman in key art or box art for a video game, even if she's a playable or lead character. Upon EA's 2018 release of militaristic first-person shooter *Battlefield V*, games journalist Megan Farokhmanesh writes that fans launched a #NotMyBattlefield campaign on social media in protest of female playable characters available in the game as well as prominently placed on the cover. As a response, EA later offered an alternate cover featuring a male soldier at a $20 higher price point. Another prominent AAA game that saw universal acclaim is 2013's *The Last of Us*, a post-apocalyptic, action-adventure game. The player plays as a mid 30's, early 40's aged white male named Joel, while a 14-year-old girl Ellie follows him and eventually becomes playable herself. Despite Ellie's prominent lead role in the game, Creative Director Neill Druckmann comments that he was "asked to push Ellie to the back" of the box rather than on the cover, noting "a misconception that if you put a girl or a woman on the cover, the game will sell less" (Cook). On the heels of Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* cover controversy, Creative Director Ken Levine of Irrational Games admits the cover art for narrative-driven first-person shooter *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013) was designed to target "frat boys" and faced criticism for the decision to put the lead female, Elizabeth, on the back of the game box. Levine explains the decision: "if I'm just some guy, some frat guy… if I saw the cover of that box, what would I think? And I would think, this is a game about a robot and a little girl. Would I buy that game if I had 60 bucks and I bought three games a year... would I even pick up the box?" (Kohler) Both *Battlefield* and *The Last of Us* later had sequels with women on the cover

and as such did not experience the end of their franchise due to their decision to diversify,

suggesting that it is the deviation from the norm that draws anger, not inclusion itself.
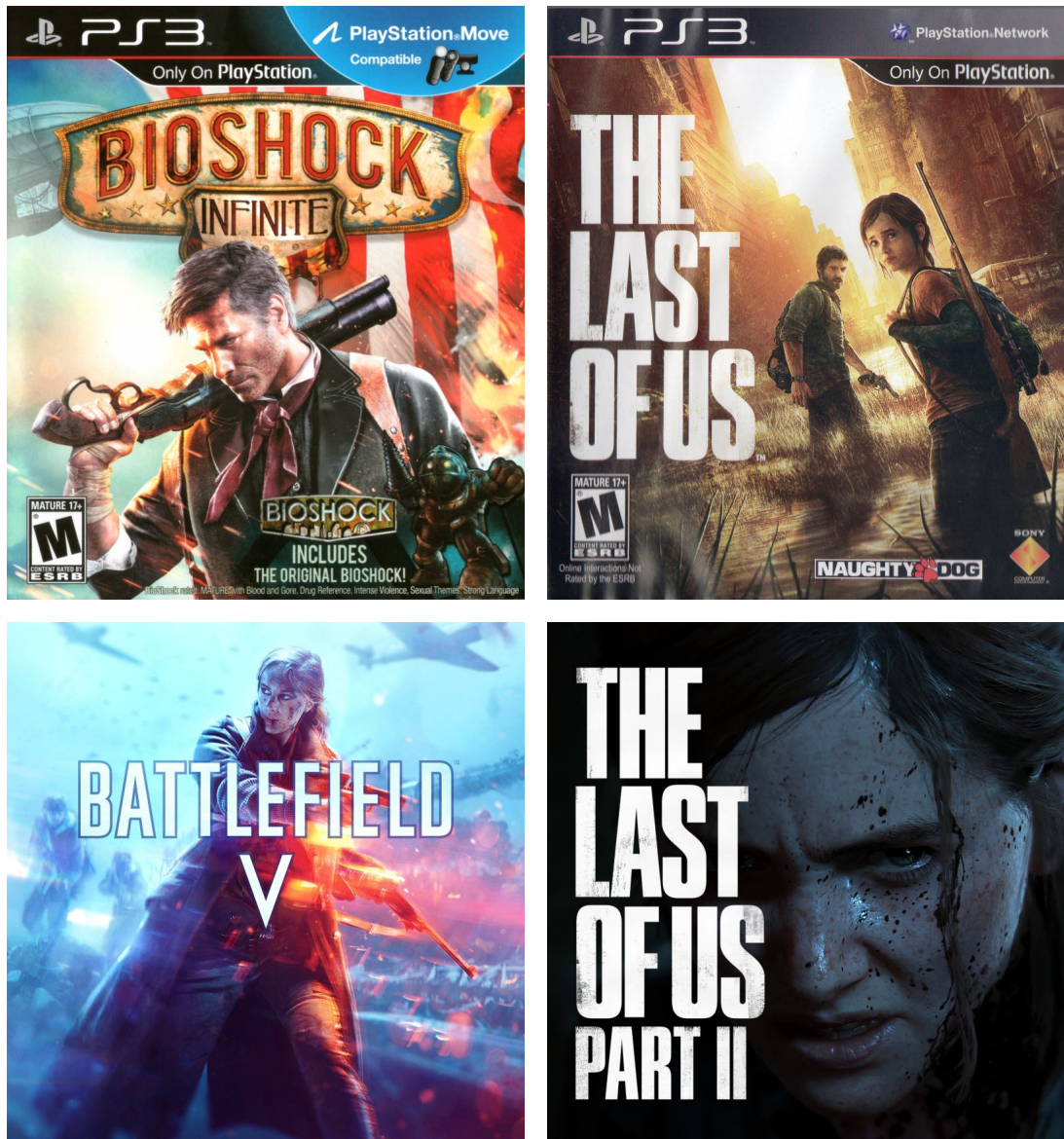
Figure. 3. Video Game Box Cover Art.

(Top, left to right) Bioshock Infinite cover, The Last of Us cover, (Bottom, left to right) Battlefield V cover, and The Last of Us Part II cover (as respective entries on mobygames.com)

Another risk-averse tactic is the development of sequels of existing, well-performing games. Studios can target predictable markets, and then, with funding from the original game's sales, develop a sequel. As the game already has an existing and established userbase that will purchase the game, sequels offer a safe means to secure capital for future projects. Additionally, it allows game studios to build upon existing tech environments; the tools, environments, characters, narrative, and design are all in place as a skeleton of a game, and a sequel is an iteration on content with a tested performative engine and a "stress-tested" development team. Given the reluctance to move away from masculine dominated characters, a growing trend in games is to lead a series with masculine dominated titles, and then branch out to include white women and people of color in the sequels. As there's already a strong userbase, the franchise can "afford" the predictable backlash of pulling forward diverse characters as their leads.

As an example of diversity within sequelization, *Forza Horizon 5* (2021) by Playground Games is set in Mexico, and was praised for its diversity and authenticity, even earning BAFTA and Video Game Award nominations for Game of the Year. However, as the fifth installment into the then nine-year-old franchise, this is a departure from its previous track record of setting the game in predominately white areas such as the Swiss Alps and Great Britain. Creative Director Ralph Fulton shared that the location of Great Britain was chosen due to familiarity as the studio, Playground Games, is in the UK. He says, "Being from the area, the development team has intimate knowledge of what makes the region perfect for a racing experience (Jarrard). Familiarity of an area equates to ease of development in multiple areas, including sourcing photography for environments, feel for controls, employing voice actors, and less of a need for

consultation due to familiarity of the area. It affords the team resources and time needed to explore additional gameplay functionality over the previous titles such as seasonal weather that affects handling, a complex Artificial Intelligence (AI) system, and networked gameplay. The unsaid statement of a deprioritization for diversity by choosing a location where all the developers are from rather than an area that would need considerable consultation to ensure authenticity speaks to either an inability to fund, or a choice not to fund, both at the same time.

Introduction of representation via sequels has become a notable formula for changing a lead character, particularly within ninth generation console titles. A highly recognized and publicized sequel lead's gender change in the ninth generation of game consoles is Naughty Dog's *The Last Us Part II* (notated going forward as *LOU2*), the sequel to *The Last of Us*. In the sequel, the player alternates between playing now 19-year-old Ellie and another woman, Abby. Ellie's role is expanded to the lead character in *LOU2*, and the player spends almost the entirely of the game playing as one of the two female leads. Many critics praised the game for representation; Ellie has a romantic relationship with a with a Jewish woman and there is intentional normalization of gender non-binary presentation in Abby's plot line. Abby's physique is notably muscular with broad shoulders and a strong jawline unlike the hypersexualized typecast of women in games. Additionally, Abby's plot includes the protection of a persecuted transgender boy named Lev, and as Abby's sidekick, Lev carries the same narrative weight as Ellie did for Joel in *LOU*. Still others brought criticism due to the influence of the "male gaze" due to the narrative. Though the game prominently features women, Abby and Ellie's primary

motivations are driven by anger and revenge for their fathers, thus still centering men in the narrative of a female-led title. Games journalist Jess Joho writes:

> The fact is, if the motivations of not one but both your women protagonists hinge almost exclusively on a psychotically single-minded obsession with their dead dads, then you have not created fully fleshed out human beings. You've created projections of the paternal gaze, capable only of reflecting women and girls through the limited perspectives of the men who raise them.

As a result, Abby and Ellie are unrelatable characters as their motivations seem inconsistent with their environments and even their character traits.

As a second example of intersectionality introduced in a sequel, first person action-adventure game *Assassins Creed III: Liberation* (2012) by Ubisoft for the Sony PlayStation Vita features a Black woman as lead. Developed as the fifth major installment into the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, Aveline de Grandpré is both the first female and Black lead in the game's series. However, the game was developed as a spinoff of *Assassin's Creed III*, and only for the PlayStation Vita: Sony's handheld console with a considerably smaller userbase than its seventh-generation main console line, the Sony PlayStation 3. While the game received favorable reviews, Sony and Ubisoft showed a lack of willingness to take risk with an intersectional character as the lead for a major tentpole title; Aveline is literally marginalized to a smaller console. By the nature of development, mobile titles have smaller budgets and lower quality bars they must hit; their screens are smaller, and they have less computational power than mainline consoles. The problem presents as an almost programmatic gerrymandering of game characters by relegating diverse characters to DLC, mobile titles, secondary players, and later installments of a solidified franchise. Both examples speak to how the male gaze manifests in franchises via bait and switch. Once an audience is secured with a white

male protagonist, there is a switch to a more diverse character, and the arguably unintentional but nonetheless still evident commentary is a valuation of the white male over white women and people of color.

A final risk aversion tactic of note is the consolidation of ownership of problematic game studios. Notably, Microsoft's Head of Xbox Phil Spencer has publicly stated a desire to invest in small studios via acquisions, and in 2018 acquired Playground Games (*Forza Horizon*), Undead Labs (*State of Decay*), Ninja Theory (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*) and Compulsion Games (*We Happy Few*). Rather than a publisher paying for a game or paying a studio to make a game with their Intellectual Property (IP), if the smaller studio owns a well performing IP, acquisition becomes a more advantageous position for both parties. The larger studio pays for the cost of development, and the smaller studio gains security that their titles will be funded and published. As Dyer explains, the games industry is a "hit-driven business, where 10 percent of the games make 90 percent of the money" (Dyer 43). This pressure to turn instant profit puts a strain on smaller companies to have a massive hit as their first game or face closure due to inability to fund a second title. However, this becomes incongruent with representation when large companies buy smaller companies that have received public criticism for toxic workplace behaviors such as abuse and sexual harassment. Notably, in early 2022, Microsoft purchased Activision Blizzard despite the state of California suing Activision Blizzard for workplace harassment. The backlash was fueled by disappointment, and a sense that Activision Blizzard President Bobby Kotick had "failed up" despite his poor treatment of workers. Similarly, in late 2021, Bungie received press for a hostile work environment and sexism, but months later was

purchased by Sony. The inherent statement made by these larger corporations is that the poor behavior does not matter; inappropriate behavior will be excused in favor of profitability.

The "Boy's Club": A Rejection of Women from the Game Development Labor Force

The theme of gender exclusion is consistent among video game scholar research, and there is general alignment on the root obstacle to innovation through better representation: the perception of video games as a male dominated, male-served industry; as such, the Gaming Industrial Complex workforce culture mirrors this same patriarchal bias. Shaw notes that "members of the gaming community continue to define 'game culture' as something specific and particularly masculine, heterosexual, and white" (Shaw 6), and directly attributes a "lack of portrayals of marginalized groups in video games to the fact that there is little diversity in the game industry's labor pool (Shaw 21). She posits that white male homogeny among game developers influences development decisions, as developers make games for themselves without consideration of other viewpoints or representation. Another point of agreement among scholars is a perception of the gaming community as protective, hostile, and intransigent and there is a hesitance to disrupt the status quo out of personal safety. Malkowski and Russworm describe gaming culture as "oft-violent" "misogynistic" and a "boy's club" that is protective of games and prone to gatekeeping (1). The active exclusion of women, and even personal attacks toward women in the gaming workforce, play a role in the lack of representation in games.

Exclusion of women is historically not unique to the video game industry. In her book, *Mediocre: the Dangerous Legacy of White Male America*, author Ijeoma Oluo

argues that Western society's rejection of women in the workforce is due to systemic sexism based on assumptions that women should not work. She argues, however, that "the idea that women were not made for work is only true to the extent that men have ensured that work was not made for women" (153), citing anti-woman worker rhetoric rising as a response to the end of World War II and the return of the soldiers. Women were encouraged to enter the workforce to support the American economy as men had been drafted to war, but solutions on how to handle the return of the soldiers that involved men taking up household responsibilities while their wives worked was "briefly floated but immediately dismissed" (168). Despite the years of experience working women had achieved in their field, there was a preference to deter them from continued work and replace them with unskilled male labor to avoid male discomfort. In the Gaming Industrial Complex, this preferential treatment toward male comfort is evident by the multiple articles outlining hostile workplace environments, sexual harassment, and a failure to respond to HR claims at game companies such as Riot, Ubisoft, Activision Blizzard, and Bungie. As Oluo argues, "workplaces that refuse to address issues of sexism and sexual harassment suffer not only higher turnover in their female employees" (154) they force women to self-select out of abusive environments and move to new companies. This has deep impact on personal financial security—since studios tend to award their employees with unvested stock shares, a high performing woman can be rewarded with the highest possible bonus, but still see a negative personal financial impact if they leave the company out of self-preservation before their stock vests.

Every video game scholar whose work is referenced post 2012 cites a moment in video game industry history known as GamerGate as an example of the gaming

community's hostility toward women. Positioned as a response to a lack of ethics in games journalism, GamerGate was a global campaign in which people who identified as gamers reckoned with the inclusion of women and diversity into gaming spaces by participating in hate-driven campaigns to physically harm, scare, and discredit those critical of gender representation in video games and female-presenting game developers. Perhaps the most poignant example is the efforts by media critic Anita Sarkeesian to fund a project to research and discuss tropes of women in video games. As described by Cote, the response to Sarkeesian's Kickstarter campaign was that "swaths of the gaming community published her personal information online, threatened her, and even created a video game in which users could beat up her virtual representation" (7). The threats to her included rape and death threats. Murray describes GamerGate as an encapsulation of the problem, describing it as an "iconic moment of the gaming world's endemic culture of hostility toward women" (35). Other non-male game scholars such as Shaw, Chess, and DePass all include in their research their perspectives on being personally attacked, threatened, sexually harassed, and verbally assaulted by the gaming community for their efforts to bring intellectual discourse to the status quo. Even while authoring the content of this thesis, I personally weighed the pros and cons of drawing the ire of the GamerGate group and potentially expose myself to harm.

The voices of women and the marginalized are not only removed, silenced, and excluded, but their voices are diverted away from video games themselves to the topic of their own othering and marginalization. Game designer Brenda Romero entered the industry in 1981 and notes that the perceived rarity of a marginalized person in games became the prominent topic for discussion despite her tenure, her success as a game

developer, and the lack of gender as a subject of her games. She says: "When I'm asked questions about my work, about 40% of the time they ask questions about my gender instead. What's it like to be a woman in technology? What's it like to be a woman in games? What's it like to be a woman who digs machines?" (Romero) She calls this the female tax, explaining: "I have to do 10 times as much press, it feels like, to get the same attention to my work, which is ridiculous…. I'm a game designer man, I can assure you my work is way more exciting than being a woman" (Romero). To her point, indeed, here I am, writing my Masters' Thesis primarily from my perspective as a woman first and foremost, and secondly as a game developer.

A prevailing theory as to what creates exclusion, hostility and othering is the presence and persistence of masculinized behaviors that create a game studio's culture. Dyer describes the culture of the game studio as a "masculine dungeon… a place of creative camaraderie, technological intensity, and cerebral whimsy, but it is also often obsessively hard driving, punishingly disassociated from rhythms of domesticity, sleep, and nourishment." He also calls out the long hours, or crunch, which are "a barrier to women, who often carry the responsibility for familial care—a barrier felt either as outright exclusion or as a "glass ceiling" halting promotion" (Dyer 67). Jennifer L. Berdahl et al. state in their article *Work as a Masculinity Contest* that Masculinity Contest Culture is the driving factor barring gender revolution as the set of bad behaviors culminate into the status quo:

> The masculinity contest concept focuses on how the very acts that serve to signify an individual man's masculinity can come to define an organization's culture. In this zero-sum game, men compete at work for dominance by showing no weakness, demonstrating a single-minded focus on professional success, displaying physical endurance and strength, and engaging in cut-throat competition. (430)

Once normalized, the culture eventually drives out those who do not identify with ideal hegemonic male traits to be "rich, White, heterosexual, tall, athletic, professionally successful, confident, courageous, and stoic" (Berdahl 426); employees not exhibiting these traits cannot compete, and what's more, traits such as sensitivity, weakness, insecurity, and femininity are shunned as harmful and unrelatable for employees attempting to compete in the environment. At the heart of this is an individualistic drive and "looking out for one's own self," which is by nature exclusionary and consistent with the punishingly hard driving nature of game development maintained by studio culture as Dyer describes. In advanced stages, "the need to repeatedly prove masculinity can lead men to behave aggressively, embrace risky behaviors, sexually harass women (or other men), and express homophobic attitudes, when men feel that their masculinity is threatened" (428). In creating and fostering an environment in which a Masculinity Culture Contest thrives and bad behavior is normalized and required to sustain said culture for productivity, it becomes challenging to punish any singular aspect, e.g., in the case of the games industry, workplace harassment and sexism.

These cultures, as a result, can encourage an environment where mediocrity thrives due to a collective value shift toward eliminating competition through bullying. Täuber and Mahmoudi describe the phenomenon in their article, "How Bullying Becomes a Career Tool," saying that "Experimental research has shown that when male hierarchies are disrupted by women, this incites hostile behaviour specifically from poorly performing men, because they stand to lose the most"; they cite that members of underrepresented groups in particular report observing these behaviors and experiencing bullying and sexual harassment (Täuber). This is consistent with the Masculinity Contest

Culture behaviors of targeting people with non-hegemonic traits, such as shyness and submissiveness. Though this was observed in academia, games culture writer and GamerGate target Leigh Alexander notes a similarity: "When you decline to create or to curate a culture in your spaces, you're responsible for what spawns in the vacuum. That's what's been happening to games" (Alexander). The academic environment shares traits like that of the games industry: highly competitive, prestigious, and unstable. Direct research on the theories around bullying as a masculine tactic to mask mediocre talent and remove women as competition was tested in a scientific environment, using *Halo 3* (2007) players. In their research, Kasumovic and Kuznekoff found that "low-status males increase female-directed hostility to minimize the loss of status as a consequence of hierarchical reconfiguration resulting from the entrance of a woman into the competitive arena. Higher-skilled players, in contrast, were more positive towards a female relative to a male teammate" (Kasumovic 1). While relevant since it provides evidence for theories around bullying, it is also notable that the behavior is observed directly withing the subject matter of gaming. Though very difficult to prove, we have a common understanding in the video games industry that studio culture shows up in the product, and male aggression targeting members of underrepresented groups is on par for the culture of gaming and the culture of the workforce as well.

This hostility toward non-males within the Gaming Industrial Complex employment force is clearly indicated by a severe imbalance of male to female workers as men remain a "large majority of the labor force with 73% identifying as man and 24% identifying as woman or non-binary" (Game Developers Conference, "2022 State of the Industry" 30). The imbalance becomes more dire in leadership positions. On the gender

discrepancy in the video game industry, "of 144 executives in the Top 14 companies, 121 are men and only 23 are women. So women make up only 16% of Executive Teams, significantly below the average female representation for the industry as a whole" (Whittenberg-Cox). In 2019, the Fortune 500 list had more men CEOs named John than there were women CEOs (Oluo 173). There is even bias around when women or people of color are brought into leadership and setting them up for success. A practice known as "glass cliffing," coined by University of Exeter researchers Michelle K. Ryan and S. Alexander Haslam, in which a woman or person of color is brought into leadership once a company has already experienced significant hardship. From their research, "women were appointed to boards more consistently when those companies experienced bad performance in the preceding five months" (Dishman). As a result, women and people of color are scapegoated and blamed for the company's failures once they happen, furthering the stereotype that women and people of color are not fit for leadership. This deprioritzation of hiring for diverse talent creates a reluctance to empower diverse candidates in leadership positions (Dishman).

In all, the predictably hostile environment and limited growth verticals creates an uncomfortably high barrier to entry for women; they must be willing to tolerate systemic harassment, bullying, and financial instability to be a game developer. The environment itself is challenging, the stories encourage potential new candidates to self-select out and choose other industries.

(Self-Imposed) Technical Limitations of Diversity

Unlike film, TV, and theatre, video games require the use of development software known as the game engine; it is within this software that programmers,

engineers, artists, designers, writers, and audio engineers synthesize their work to develop a video game. In their book, *The Unity Game Engine and the Circuits of Cultural Software*, Benjamin Nicoll and Brendan Keogh provide a description of the engine as "built to accommodate very specific types of software development and, in this way, they have distinct affordances. A video game studio might, for example, develop a custom engine that is specifically optimized for the development of first-person shooter video games" (14). Due to the high barrier to entry and high salaries required to finance the development of a video game company's engine of choice and subsequent development of the game with the engine, the business aspect of game development comes into consideration early on in financial forecasting. Engines must be prescriptive to the types of video games the game studio intends to make, and research on successful formulas for high-selling games informs the development of the game engine. As noted by Nicoll and Keogh, software development is hierarchical with the engineers and programmers at the top and these developers "have to make judgements as to the quality…versus the effort required to implement" (54). Should requests from artists or designers become too difficult, regardless of their status as a diversity representative, programmers must make compromises to ensure the video game can be completed within scope and budget. It is in these small moments, in which business needs overturn creative by means of restricting the technology.

As a game engine is a system running processes, "diversity shortcuts" are created through algorithms. Benjamin Nicoll and Branden Keogh describe how "game engines are designed to manage 'low-level' computational tasks such as rendering, physics, and artificial intelligence, thereby freeing up developers to focus on 'higher-level aspects of

the design process" (Nicoll 10). These higher-level aspects entail content that cannot be easily programmed via generic algorithms and need a specialist to customize. In her book *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space,* Soraya Murray speaks to this point as well and quotes Alexander Galloway saying, "the logic of race can never be more alive, can never be more purely actualized, than in a computer simulation" (11). As such, the logic of racism, sexism, and homophobia is also fully realized in a computer simulation. Software is purely deterministic; it runs using an architecture designed by a programmer who is limited by their toolsets. The programmer, however, is tasked with the chore of simplicity to streamline processes and reduce human error. It benefits a programmer to limit size, scope, and appearance of the representations on screen, thus encouraging homogenous representations of humanity. Representation is thus in competition against technical innovation for priority as it involves increasing breadth of capacity rather than evolving narrow, existing foci. Nicoll and Keogh also present an argument in favor of generalized software engines as they break down the power structures within development. More simplistic game engines allow the artists, designers, writers, and audio engineers to complete their work without the oversight of a programmer. However, they note that improving toolsets does not itself improve the likelihood of representation; it is societal change that drives the need to improve, not technical determinism (Nicoll 112). As an example, game development sees limitations to representation as they conflict with globalization efforts. In several countries federal law restricts representation of homosexuality, specifically, Russia's federal law restricts "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations," and content marketed toward children (anyone under the age of 18) that presents homosexuality as a societal norm, labeling it as

"propaganda" (Valentine); Russia imposes restrictions or modifications to media

featuring such content. This creates difficulty and complexity for game developers as

branching and shipping a separate piece of software with abbreviated content impacts the

development timelines. It creates additional burdens, since the content must still be

tested, approved, and go through a certification processes as a completely separate build.

The easiest solution is to exclude content that could be interpreted by law as

inappropriate.

Tanya DePass, founder of I Need Diverse Games, maintains that game

development leadership makes continuous, conscious decisions to not fund IDEA within

games, and as such to not fund engine work that could improve racial diversity. She cites

black skin tone as a problematic area that has plagued video games for years. While skin

color is largely determined by colorization choices, lighting is controlled by the engine

and shapes the aesthetic in which a character is presented in a 3D environment. Authors

Yussef Cole and Tanya DePass explain the limitations imposed on an engine:

> Lighting can be prohibitively expensive to render, so the fewer lights there
> are in the game, the smoother it runs. As a result, many games rely on
> light maps and other forms of "baked" lighting, which predetermine how
> objects in a scene will look but can further exacerbate inconsistencies in
> character lighting. (Cole)

This is particularly impactful on non-white skin tones, as the darker the tone, the less

versatility is possible. Shadows can wash out facial features, and characters become

indistinguishable in indoor or evening environments. These shortcuts, though cost

effective for development, have a high human cost for diversity; lighter skin tones, as

they are easier to work with, create a technical bias. Specifically, Shareef Jackson says

"…if companies wanted to get it right, they prioritize it. Unless they have people on the

team willing to call them out on it as well, it won't change" (Cole). In her book

Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming, Dr. Kishonna L. Gray cites the controversy around the launch of the Kinect, a motion sensing camera peripheral for the Microsoft Xbox with facial recognition that struggled to recognize dark-skinned users. Though many of Gray's respondents spoke of difficulty using the Kinect, respondent Tyrell sums up the complaint wholistically: "Yo, I got the Kinect [motion-sensing device.] it can't see me! I guess I'm too black. Technology is always the one that reminds me I'm black" (11). Microsoft denied the issue and official responses advised users to ensure they used the Kinect in well-lit spaces, indicating an understanding that there is a limitation that relies on lighting of darker skin tones to ensure full functionality. It is understandable and believable that this racially exclusionary design was unintentional, but the outcome is still harmful to the Black community. According to Dr. Gray "…when their technology excludes and renders people of color invisible, we must explore how and why these technologies continue to oppress, placing the burden on the creators" (5). It also is not a new problem to visual media; Gray explains the concept of Shirley cards, in which pictures of fair skinned women were used as references to "correctly" balance cameras until the 1990s. As Dr. Gray explains, "photo labs were calibrated to print her face with good clarity and contrast, leading to generations of poor photographic representations of dark-skinned people, in which Black faces and bodies sometimes appeared as shadows or blots, with few distinguishing features other than white teeth and eyes" (142, 143).

Figure. 4. A Kodak Shirley Card.

The Shirley Card featured a light-skinned woman for printers to calibrate against (Del Barco).

This remained unresolved until companies producing mail catalogs complained of poor-quality product shots for dark wood furniture, suggesting that once there was a strong enough financial incentive to resolve coloration discrepancies, it was addressed. Aside from skin tones, Black game reviewers have been critical of the intentional omission of traditionally Black hairstyles. On the limited number of Black hairstyles in the critically acclaimed FromSoft title *Elden Ring* (2022), reviewer Ash Parrish notes an incongruency to the outward, public facing discourse from FromSoft about their commitments to diversity: "I just don't understand how a game, after numerous, numerous calls for greater diversity and developers acknowledging its Black community members through Black Lives Matter posts and well wishes during Black History Month, can still fail to account for Black players" (Parrish). Echoing the

sentiment from other marginalized video game critics, she says, "It's certainly a choice in the year 2022, one that unfortunately reinforces a culture of exclusion already endemic to video games."

Figure. 5. The Elden Ring Character Creator.

The character creator and its limited Black hairstyles (Parrish).

Limited human hairstyles resulting from tech constraints has been a persistent struggle in games; hair is notoriously difficult to animate due to the natural fluidity of its movement. A game engine calculates player movement in real time based on inputs from the player and consumes processor bandwidth accordingly; the more movement, the more processor bandwidth, and "the amount of CPU/GPU time dedicated to hair has to be weighed against all the other things that could be happening on-screen (or being rendered off-screen) at any given moment" (Walker). Game developers have opted for static hair

styles such as short hair that is close to the head, or long hair in tight ponytails or buns, inadvertently lending itself a bias toward immovable, inauthentic hair styles. Without the forcing function of a desire for authentic and diverse characters, the tech remains unfunded, and players are left with limited options for physical appearance.

Similar to the tech improvements to accommodate skin tones in photography, intentional design decisions motivate game engine improvements to accommodate character physicality. This is the case with the Guerrilla Games title *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017), an open world RPG based on their original concept: set one thousand years in the future, a young red-headed woman named Aloy must survive in a post-apocalyptic North America by hunting powerful, high-tech animal like machines for their components. Guerrilla Games' original title was a linear, military-based series entitled *Killzone*, developed using their proprietary Decima engine. The engine needed substantial updates to support gameplay elements of open world design, including scoping for memory management, or the ability for the engine to render high quality environments, animations, and audio (The Making of Horizon Zero Dawn). It is this economy of processing power that generally leads to flat, inauthentic hairstyles in games; however, from conversations with the *Horizon: Zero Dawn* development team in their "The Making of Horizon Zero Dawn" documentary, they were intent on creating a female-driven story in a fantastical but believable world, and this intentionality includes a believable hairstyle and appearance. The game's third person perspective sets Aloy in view, meaning the back of her head is persistent and just below center frame, requiring a high Level of Detail (LOD) of her hair and the tech to support. Multiple disciplines in concert made this a reality. The Decima engine was updated to conserve CPU/GPU

processing bandwidth by loading assets, but only rendering what is in the player's cone of view and unobscured by other objects, techniques known as fulcrum and occlusion culling (Bean; Hurley).

Figure. 6. Aloy.

The final model of Aloy's hair created by hair specialist and character artist John Lithvall (Horizon Zero Dawn – Lithvall).

There were artistic choices to support believability of Aloy's hair: the hairstyle itself is comprised of braids, dreads, and twists to create a natural, realistic, in-world hairstyle that is performant. In cinematics, Aloy is frequently in front of moving landscapes such as rushing water or wind-blown plants to obscure exaggerated hair movement. Narratively, her hair is intrinsically tied to her appearance and identity

throughout the game and successor title, *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022); Aloy meets new characters in unfamiliar territories that call her "red," and "flame hair," and comment that they could recognize her anywhere by her hair. These choices represent a wholistic cohesion from engine, design, art, and narrative and buy-in from a creative perspective. Furthermore, it illustrates how representation involves effort from multiple supporting game disciplines.

Malkowski and Russworm speak to the importance of intentional software architecture and its barrier to representation as well, saying: "Representation and identity have often been sidelined in game studies with which the implicit justification that the discipline should focus on the richer objects of code and of game platforms as complex systems – not audiovisual surfaces" (Malkowski 3). Given this, a game team working with an engine and architecture already capable of representation of human diversity can shift its attention away from engine work and then prioritize audiovisual representation. Even still, these become modifications to an existing codebase, and are "caked on, not baked in," so adding representation as a feature requested after a game engine has been designed is difficult to address. Representation is a complex system that influences all elements of game development, and representation must be viewed as a "system" with an equal weight as the other discipline systems.

As an example of encoded human bias resulting in exclusion, Amazon attempted to automate resume reviews. The goal was for a Machine Learning Model (MLM) to observe previous data from years of candidate selection and hiring from their teams, and then replicate the practice of finding the best candidates with a machine, reducing the need of human overhead. The machine, rather than a person, would identify the best

possible candidate for hire. However, the engineers building the MLM noticed a pattern of bias as it filtered out women. By observing the previous 10 years of data, "Amazon's system taught itself that male candidates were preferable," scoring resumes with references to "women" or all-women's colleges as lower and less desirable (Dastin). Machines and computers behave in ways that humans tell them to; they are entirely deterministic and subject to unchecked ideological flaws without intervention. The same is true with video game programming. As such, the technical limitations of representation of game development are self-inflicted. They are the result of choices made to prioritize other aspects of development.

Six Days in Fallujah (unreleased at time of writing) provides a high-profile example of a bias in favor of militaristic game development, demonstrating the issues of modern computational techniques and representation. In development by High Wire Games, the game is yet another addition to the military-based shooter genre that dominates the games industry. (Note: due to the nature of the tightly coupled and even overlapping relationship between military simulators and casual games, military-based shooters got a firm foothold in the games industry early; they are considered a safe bet despite heavy market saturation.) Descriptions of the game and gameplay are based on trailers found on the game's official product page and game developers responding to the announcement trailers. The game focuses on events taking place during the Iraqi War in 2004, specifically the Second Battle of Fallujah. The narrative of the game's marketing from the Six Days in Fallujah website indicates the game leans into realism of actual events. The product description on the products page describes gameplay as such: "Lead a fireteam through real events from the battle. Each mission is played through the eyes of

a real person who narrates what happened." To create variance in the game play, the product page explains the use of procedural generation: "Procedural Architecture re-shapes the entire battlefield every time you play. Every room and every building changes every time. So, just like actual combat, you'll never know what to expect!" Procedural generation is a technique to create content rendered with a low-level of computational power as it runs algorithms to create content from prefabricated images or assets. Following a set of instructions dictated by said algorithm, a game engine will "create" a landscape, environment, asset, story, or character based on feature sets that encompass them but have been randomized to create variety. But when paired with the goal of creating characters, the procedural generation method runs counter to the goals of increased diversity; human figures are constructed by a set of facial features, structures, hairstyles, builds, hair/eye colors rather than hand created by an artist. This can become problematic, as was the case with *Six Days in Fallujah*, which procedurally generated the civilians in the Iraqi War. Doing so was met with backlash. Via tweet, Game Developer Rami Ismail expressed his frustrations of being minimalized and devalued in a review of the *Six Days in Fallujah* trailer:

> We're so replaceable we're a rogue like now…We've been randomized. We're so important that we're literally getting randomly generated before getting blown up… Have to admit that heroically murdering Muslims/Arab/Middle Eastern folks but make it procedural is new. We are literally not human enough to hand-design anymore. (@tha_rami "We're so replaceable"; "Have to admit")

Whether intentional or not, procedural generation of the Iraqi civilizations paints them as disposable, lacking depth, and worthy of dehumanization. While the developers did go on record stating they never intended to make a political statement, the juxtaposition of the realism claims against the reality of the war in which you play as an American solider is a

statement in itself. According to journalist Charlie Hall, the battle "cost around 100

American lives, and — according to the International Red Cross — the lives of at least

800 civilians" (Hall). The cases where procedural deterministic and non-deterministic AI

were used provide an equally concerning claim. Procedural generation is a common

means to create variants on combatants that a player must battle as obstacles or

obstructions; the application is "throwaway characters," drawing a correlation between

wartime civilians and Americans, and as such, Arabic and American people. *Six Days in

Fallujah* depicts an example of risk adverse iteration on first-person militaristic games,

but to innovate within a heavily saturated market, it attempts to carve out a niche: the

developers take an approach to increase realism. To do so at scale, however, humans are

procedurally generated. But even the idea of providing a more authentic experience is

fraught. Murray notes this is a familiar approach to war-themed games and there is a false

conflation between realism and higher quality. She quotes Thomas Payne: "Realism…Is

not necessarily synonymous with verisimilitude, or media technology's ability to

represent worldly sights and sounds. And yet, the entertainment industry purposefully

conflates the war game's ability to render photorealistic graphics and surround sound

with broader notions of experimental realism" (150). There must be a conscious decision

on a designer's behalf to show a player what is real and what is not. This lack of realism

further distances the player from the character, shifting the focus to the American

soldiers, the heroes of the story. Shaw notes "something was realistic if the audience

could either feel the characters' emotions or have an effective response to the characters

as they would a real person" (94). While an argument could be made that this is largely

the result of short sightedness, due to the developer's decision to generate civilians and

save time in their creation, a diversity problem is borne from a lack of desire and capacity to give the civilians equal narrative and programming time as the American Soldiers.

Conclusion

An overarching theme seems to present itself through the forms of resistance to diverse representation in AAA games discussed: fear and the behavioral responses to alleviate fear. Fueled by a culture that supports insecurity, risk aversion, and constraining actions taken during both the construction and finalization of the game's engine (which determines how and what a game can ever be), restrictions are placed on the range and promise of a game's potential. This shows up as resistance in the games. For changes to truly happen at a large scale, I believe there will have to be several notable financially successful AAA titles that outshine the rest of the industry with their level of investment in telling genuine human stories with authentic, representative environments and behaviors from the characters themselves.

Chapter III.

Remaking Representation: Classism, Defamiliarization of Gender Norms, Demasculinity,

and Power via Legacy Variance in *Final Fantasy VII Remake*

In the late 2010s and early 2020s, game development saw the sharp emergence of modern remakes, remasters, and ports (or uplifts) of financially successful games from previous generations of development. Uplifts serve as a low-risk addition into a video game company's portfolio. Since the potential success of an Intellectual Property (IP) has already been tested by a previous global audience, uplifts provide an entry point into said IP franchise for both current and expanding audiences. They are also a viable business mechanism to update old graphics and asset packages to modern game engines. I posit that with the introduction and popularization of uplifts as a new format of game production, there is also an invitation to a new conversation about representation; specifically, there is an invitation to discuss representation via comparisons of the updates to their original iterations, or legacy variations. It is within these moments of difference from the original title that we see representation that is highly visible to the original fan base, meets the expectations of a new fan base, and comments on the game industry standardization of representational content.

To observe representation via legacy variance, several AAA titles come to mind. *Spider-Man: Mile Morales* (2020) shows the evolution of Spider-Man, where non-white protagonist Miles Morales takes Peter Parker's long-standing place as Spider-Man; *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) presents the damsel-in-distress Zelda as a

nuanced character with power, ambition, and flaws; and *Age of Empires IV* (2021)

presents a well-researched, intentionally authentic representation of cultures compared to

its predecessors. Even Guerilla Games' pivot away from military shooter *Killzone* to the

Horizon: Zero Dawn franchise represents a modern-day, studio-wide shift away from risk

adverse military games to investment in a female protagonist.

However, this chapter's exploration of legacy variance focuses on what is

accepted within the game development community as the most popular video game uplift

in history: *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020). Based off Square Enix's 1997 PlayStation 1

exclusive title *Final Fantasy VII* (referred going forward as *FF7*), *Final Fantasy VII*

Remake was one of the most anticipated game releases in gaming history due the

popularity of its predecessor. *FF7* is regarded in the community of gamers and

developers alike to be among the greatest video games ever made, and it holds a

"perennial spot on every Top-100 of All Time list" (McLaughlin). While *FF7* has been

ported to updated consoles to expand its audience, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (referred to

going forward as *FF7R*) is not just a graphically updated game to newer hardware.

Instead, it is a full, new recreation made in a modern game engine. The central conflict of

the story maintains cultural relevance as it involves the battle between a small resistance

group known as Avalanche and their efforts to protect the environment from The Shinra

Electric Power Company (colloquially referenced as "Shinra"), a megacorporation that

effectively runs the Planet due to its overreaching power and conglomeracy. The main

protagonist is Cloud, a mercenary hired to assist Avalanche and thwart Shinra from

draining the Planet of its energy, Mako, for their corporate gains.

FF7R was awarded "Best Game in Show" at E3 2019, seven "The Game Awards 2020" nominations (including Game of the Year) and won in the categories of Best Score/Music and Best Role-Playing Game. Additionally, it holds a respectable Meta Score of 87 from review aggregator website, Metacritic.com. The game developers of Square Enix had a difficult task — create a faithful update of *FF7* that appeases both the existing 23-year fanbase, develop a complete game in 2020 with graphics, audio, game design, battle systems, narrative, cinematics, and design up to spec with the performance of the PlayStation 4 (and later PlayStation 5), and compete with the 2020 game landscape and capture new audiences. *FF7R* remains faithful to its original art styles, story, music motifs, and RPG-based gameplay, with suitable upgrades to all disciplines based on technological affordances of eighth and ninth generation consoles. Additionally, based on multiple personal playthroughs of *FF7* and *FF7R*, *FF7R* tightly resembles the narrative flow. At times, characters have identical dialog lines, and they wear near identical costumes with significantly improved detail to their original counterparts.

Just as there are modernizations to the graphic, design, audio, and engine systems to update a game, gaming studies scholars TreaAndrea Russworm and Jennifer Malkowski claim representation is itself a system subject to modernization:

> Representation and identity have often been sidelined in game studies with the implicit justification that the discipline should focus instead on the richer objects of code and of game platforms as complex systems--not audiovisual surfaces. Yet, as we argue throughout Gaming Representation, representation and identity are similarly complex systems that are always relevant to the ways in which games, codes, platforms—indeed, all technologies—are constructed. Representation in game studies must be viewed as a system that functions as akin to rather than as a distraction from the discipline's more celebrated, hard-core objects of study. (3)

Video games are an art of intentionality. Due to the complex nature of their construction, the cost of labor, the nature of a predictable interaction necessitating guided play, and the

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technological investment required to develop a digital experience, all content within a

large-scale multi-million-dollar project is purpose-driven and intentionally included. The

same is true for a project focused on a re-adaptation of original content. There is the same

level of intentionality behind the modernization of *FF7R*'s representation systems. Any

departures from the original, as such, are intentional and significant so as not to become

unfaithful to the original and alienate a historically passionate fanbase. These intentional

updates to the representation systems are legacy variants that are the subject of academic

scrutiny. *FF7R*'s accolades and footprint on the gaming industry make it well suited for

academic study for the topic of legacy variance representation, specifically that of its

treatment of classism, gender norms, masculinization, and hypersexuality.

Figure. 7. Aerith in *FF7* and *FF7R*.

Aerith from the title screen cinematics from FF7 *(left) and* FF7R *(right) to demonstrate the change in graphical fidelity between the releases. Screenshots by author from PlayStation 1 and PlayStation 5, respectively.*

The Ghettoization of Midgar: Landscapes and Cities as Representation of Classism

As urban landscapes and metropolitan cities are homes to their own cultures created and experienced by its citizens, realistic world building of a 3D game environment must accurately depict metropolitan areas that represent the culture with which its characters live and interact. In *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race Gender, and Space*, games scholar Soraya Murray presents the concept of urban dystopias and depictions of cities as a form of representation in gaming, describing them as "affective fictions critical for our imaginative capacities to envision potential eventualities" (228). Additionally, she cites architect Nezar AlSayyad on urbanization in visual media: "representations of the city and life mutually constitute each other in continual interplay. This is no less true in gamic cities. They participate with the world" (228). From a cultural relevance standpoint, in his article "Psychoanalysis and Cultural Studies," cultural theorist Stuart Hall states that an accurate commentary on human representation involves observation of their societal makeup of their environments: *"*[Representation] has to give an account which is internal to the ways in which the forms of society are lived subjectively, appropriated subjectively. It has to show the lack of any perfect fit between how groups (whether that group is a class or a gender or an ethnic group) are placed and positioned in their social relations and how their subjectivities are constituted" (Hall 894). Game cities provide a commentary on the quality of life, the daily activity, and the socioeconomic status of the characters which inhabit them.
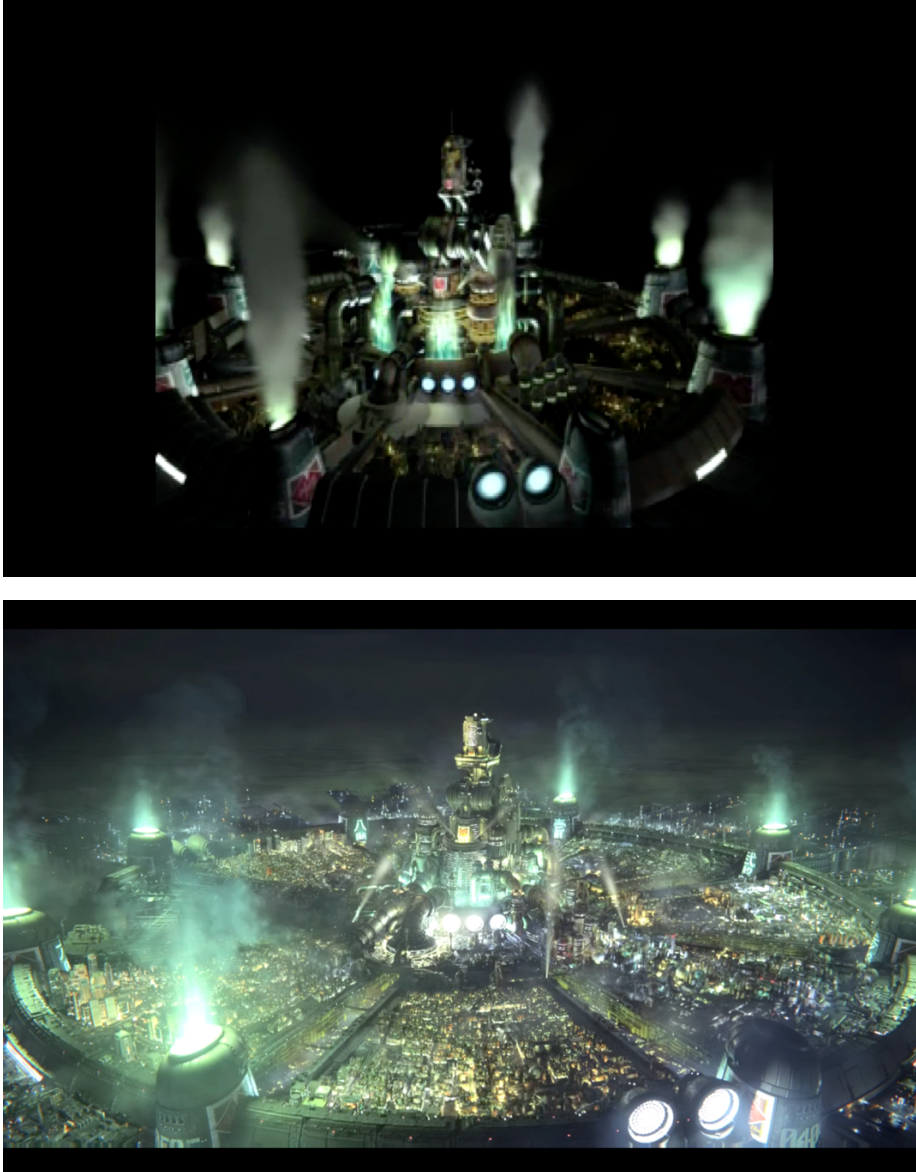
Figure. 8. Midgar in FF7 and FF7R.

The establishing shot from the opening cinematics of FF7 (top) and FF7R (bottom)*. The Shinra building is in the middle while mako towers are at the city limits. Screenshots by author from PlayStation 1 and PlayStation 5, respectively.*

Just as the fictional cities Gotham and Metropolis feature architecture and culture

with creative cues from real metropolitan areas, game cities draw inspiration from real

metropolitan areas, recreating the environments to photorealism. In the case of the *Final Fantasy VII* franchise, the cyberpunkesque, Tokyo-like, dystopian sci-fi city of Midgar is a visualization of the class conflict that underpins the game narrative. Built upon metallic plate installations that separate the metropolis from its slums below, the plates are a physical separation from the proletariat and the bourgeoisie of Midgar and a literal visual representation of the poverty line. The Shinra building stands out as the main focal point with both visual verticality and dominance over the sectors. Positioned at the city limits, eight of Shinra's reactors encircle the city and glow with mako, indicating the city exists inside a stronghold of Shinra reach. There is no presiding national government with power over Midgar or Shinra, rather, the mayor resides inside the Shinra building, and upon introduction, describes himself as a little more than a "paper pusher." The real power lies with the Shinra president. Law enforcement in Midgar consists of military-combat trained Shinra soldiers that roam streets, barring citizens from access to Shinra's restricted areas. Shinra's power is ubiquitous within the city's DNA, and they hold control over the city's government and socioeconomic prosperity. This creates a dangerous environment for the citizens. "Whoever controls all economic activity controls the means for all our ends…" indicating the far-reaching conglomerate owns not only the city but also has a hold over the citizen's agency (Hayek 126). As such, conflict in Midgar provides commentary on classism and representation via its depictions of poverty and wealth, war, and overreach from an imperial corporation. Though there is no overt depiction of racism, Dyer argues that the presentation of a game city can "reinforce the racialization of space" and, as its depiction is reminiscent of a world city, "reproduces imperial territorializations of class and race" (xxxii). By mimicking a poverty-stricken

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ghetto-like area, there are sociopolitical statements about the power of the people that closely mirrors racialization.

Midgar and its exploration is true to form in its *FF7R* adaptation, but with significant additional detail and gameplay elements. *FF7R* Director and Concept Designer Tetsuya Nomura notes that Square Enix research found that Midgar took *FF7* players about ten hours to complete; *FF7* players only pass through Midgar as an entry point to the game before exploring the Planet, and Midgar environments occupy a few screens, a few bespoke combatants, audio, and non-playable characters (NPCs) with expository narrative. However, the 40–50-hour experience of *FF7R* takes place entirely in Midgar. The linearity of the *FF7R* gameplay generally matches its predecessor when Cloud and his party visit Sector 5, 6, 7, 0 and the Shinra building, but the amount of time, gameplay, and interactions in Midgar are significantly greater. Though governmental overreach, oppressive Shinra law enforcement, and the visual spectacle of the Shinra building, as depicted in the original *FF7,* are enough to convey oppression over the lower class, the increase in size and scope of Midgar to encompass the entire desired gameplay experience indicates a significant investment in Midgar for *FF7R,* and as a result, the importance of the conflicts that take place as central to the narrative. The legacy variance of additional gameplay centered on Midgar-based conflicts indicates the narrative significance of the classist world created by power dynamics between Shina and the citizens of Midgar.

FF7R creates game environments where the player engages with the citizens of Midgar and learns directly how the people experience capitalist oppression. As Cloud, the player spends substantial amounts of time doing side quests and missions in the Sector

slums in which the player completes favors for citizens, interacts with children, runs

errands, and even finds missing pet cats. The player sees and hears about Shinra from the

perspective of Sector slums citizens, and these interactions mimic Cloud's aural

positioning via spatial-audio placement and surround sound as he moves about the city.

Cloud/the player overhear frustrations about Shinra and hears reactions from citizens

watching Shinra news broadcasts stoking fear of war against the neighboring region,

Wutai. Visually and kinesthetically, Shinra operatives are shown deliberating, smiling,

and laughing at suggestions of immoral actions, and their body language conveys

confidence in scheming. The people of Midgar are timid, worried, fearful, and humble in

their body language and communication with one another. As Murray notes, sociologist

Manuel Castell's commentary on these mega-city, ghetto-like game environments, with

their "social exclusion" of the poor and "populated by millions of homeless, incarcerated,

prostituted, criminalized, stigmatized, sick, and illiterate persons" is that their existence is

"inseparable from the rise of global capitalism" (204). As engagement with poverty is

gamified, providing perspective to the player, the reality of poverty and elitism is created

through these visual, aural, and narrative representations. Whereas *FF7* relied on

narrative and physical animations to communicate poverty, the fears, anxieties, and

frustrations of the characters come through in these moments as the player experiences

the day-to-day life of a Slum dweller rather than observing it.

Figure. 9. The Sector 5 Slums in *FF7* and *FF7R*.

Cloud and Aerith traversing through the slums of Midgar in FF7 *(top) and* FF7R *(bottom). Screenshots by author from PlayStation 1 and PlayStation 5, respectively.*

The poverty and class disparities are further emphasized by the environments and

the dangers that exist within them. The Sector 5, 6, and 7 slums are exactly that—devoid

of vegetation, war torn, sandy, deteriorated, and cluttered with scrap metal. Bandits roam the area, but legacy variance indicates a deeper significance: these bandits appear in the *FF7* Midgar, but are predominately located in the *FF7* Corel Prison, a dangerous, desert wasteland populated with powerful combatants in which the player must wander in the precisely correct direction to escape. These bandits, though unnamed, follow Cloud's party around the environment to intimidate, bully, and then steal valuable resources from the party in random encounters. Introducing the bandits in Midgar as recurring minor characters amplifies their importance, and legitimizing their presence as antagonists with names (Burke, Beck, and Butch rather than Bandit A, B, and C), increases a sense of despair and lawlessness in Midgar originally intended to resemble that of a prison. The parallel of the Sector slums of Midgar to a prison provides further commentary on class conflict between the Marxist proletariat and the bourgeoise, in which the lower class is entrapped by the upper class while the upper class exploits them to sustain their way of life.

Lastly, the legacy variance of increased gameplay within the slums of Midgar creates a dissonance for the player aware of the original story: Shinra destroys the plate above Sector 7, killing the Sector slum citizens below. The familiar player is aware that Sector 7 is inhabited by NPCs that will die though they are required to interact in the same spaces with them, thus assigning value to those in poverty and victimized by classism. The updated narrative avoids the pitfall of reinforcing stereotypes of the poor as expendable. There's a desperation to save them, a sadness to their loss, and further vilification of Shinra who, in contrast, intentionally causes the accident so they can frame Avalanche and Wutai as aggressors.

Aerith and Agency: Defamiliarization of Gender Norms and Demasculinization via

Character Space of Major Characters

The lead supporting female character in *FF7*, Aerith, plays a role in the central

story that has transcended to internet memedom – Aerith dies. Aerith's death is iconic to

the gaming community and is arguably the most notable high-profile death in gaming

history, consistently topping gaming journalism listicles of impactful major character

deaths; Aerith and death are antithetical to one another, and death is Aerith's antagonist

in the greater sense of the franchise. The reasoning behind this includes both surprise to

the player that she dies and lack of precedence for a death of this magnitude in

mainstream video games. As *FF7* pushed limits for storytelling through fifth generation

console-based 3D animation, video games had not yet had the death of a major character

played out over a series of slow, emotional cutscenes. Additionally, it was uncommon, if

not a first, to kill off a major character in which the player could invest significant

playtime toward advancing skillsets and earning XP. Aside from her death, she is an

object of pursuit for the player. She is not only a love interest to the protagonist, but her

rescue is central to the plot—she is kidnapped, captured, and endangered numerous

times. Due to the nature of her narrative absence, her game role in *FF7* is less impactful,

and seemingly scoped to accommodate. She is a physically weak fighter in battle,

generally dealing less physical damage than her counterparts and relying on magic-based

attacks. As a player tactic during battles and encounters, Aerith can be moved to

defensive positions where she can reliably use magic to heal her party while minimizing

damage, falling into a familiar trope of women as helpers and healers in fantasy

literatures (Sarkeesian, Damsel in Distress). Whereas other characters have special

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attacks called Limit Breaks that deal excessive damage to combatants, Aerith's Limit

Breaks have primarily healing functionalities with damage to combatants as secondary.

Aerith's powers and major contributions to gameplay are best suited as a crutch,

restricting her to purely heal. Her magic power grows at a faster rate than others,

encouraging optimization as a primary healer. As a result, the player can opt out of taking

Aerith in their party entirely, as all characters have the capacity to heal. While her

narrative death is deeply impactful, the player faces temptation to sideline her to ensure

character experience stays balanced when difficulty increases later in the game.

Alternatively, her focus as a healing character is a means to control a difficulty increase.

C. Thi Nguyen writes: "The greater the difficulty, and the more painful the failures, the

more fantastic the triumph we feel when we do pull it off" (69) indicating a justification

for why a player may choose artificial difficulty. There is a low stake involved as Aerith

can simply be reintroduced to the party in a support role.

In *FF7R*, Aerith's relationship with death becomes central to the plot, as it is her

villain, thus creating a legacy variant of her expanding her role and creating ownership of

the narrative. Cloud has distressing flashforwards visualizing her death within cinematic

cutscenes, and Aerith has a horribly unsubtle voice line in which she calls a Summon,

saying, "I'm dying to meet you." In Chapter 14, a new plot line is introduced in the

Midgar Train Graveyard that is reliant on Aerith's ability to commune with the dead. The

party becomes dependent on Aerith's conversation and instruction from ghosts, further

expanding her character as the focal point of a gameplay chapter. Lastly, a new ghost-like

entity called the Whispers are introduced to *FF7R* and positioned as villains. They appear

intermittently, preventing the characters from deviating from their "fate," including the

original story that requires Aerith to die at Sephiroth's hand. These Whispers manifest as a final battle at the end of the game before the party exits Midgar and represent a significant change in story and gameplay from the *FF7*. (One could argue the Whispers are a metaphor for the vocally demanding "pure remake" portion of the *FF7* fan base, and by proxy, calls for Aerith to be murdered by Sephiroth. Alternatively, the Whispers could simply alleviate the pressure on the development team and allow pathways for creative alterations to the story). The additional visual, narrative, and gameplay focus on Aerith's relationship with her death increases her spatiality as a character, or character-space, as defined by literature scholar Alex Woloch. He defines and describes character-space within fiction as "that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole" (15). He argues "the apportioning of attention the different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe" skews the weight of the character within a text and as such provides commentary on the power hierarchies among the characters (13). Jennifer Vargas also argues in favor of character-space and its impact on narrative form and cites this concept in her argument, saying: "the uneven distribution of characters in a novel can be analyzed as a system of power hierarchies" (11). The narrative spatiality afforded to Aerith via expansion of character-space thus disrupts her perceived role as a supporting character and suggests a change of hierarchical structure of her role. Aerith is the hero of the story, not Cloud. As she gains her own villain (the Whispers), her death is not a motivating driver for the other characters, but rather a tragedy on its own. To further expand on death as a central theme and villain, the minute long teaser trailer for the next installment, *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth*, has several references to character death. Tifa

questions if Cloud thinks she has died, and a character, Zack, (who is canonically dead) is shown alive in the present time, indicating that life and death will be central themes to the plot.

The developers also expand Aerith's game spatiality as she becomes a critical playable character in unskippable, difficult moments of gameplay, requiring the player to understand and correctly use her skillsets in battle. Cloud and Aerith face a combatant known as the Hell House – repurposed from the original game as a random encounter to a colosseum-sized boss fight. Due to the nature of the Hell House's attacks, adapting the play strategy from *FF7* of a primary attacker (Cloud) with another party member constantly healing (Aerith) is fraught. The Hell House is aptly named: it is as visually bizarre as it is difficult. It is frantic, flips weaknesses and immunities, deals excessive physical damage, and is near impossible to destroy without leveraging Aerith's strength in magic skills. Powerful playable fem-presenting characters are not unusual in fantasy games, but players familiar with Aerith's legacy fighting style and tactics from *FF7* will find this initially odd. She is not built to carry a team, so there is a forced perspective change required for players. The familiar player must equip her and use her in battle, and as a result, they find she is suited. While several of her attacks do heal and enhance other character's attacks, unlike in *FF7*, her base attacks can deal considerable physical damage, increasing her effectiveness as a fighter. There are five battles leading up to this moment, with increasing difficultly, telegraphing to the player that the path forward is using Cloud and Aerith in concert. The requirement of Aerith's inclusion and adept use of her move sets and expanded skillset serves as legacy variants that legitimize Aerith's formidability as a fighter, a character, and breaking previous tropes of the weak woman

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healer. Forcing the player to optimize and utilize a character that they believe and perceive to be a throwaway sends a message of intrinsic value that extends beyond the plot.

Figure. 10. Aerith vs. Hell House in *FF7* and *FF7R*.

Aerith attacks a Hell House in FF7 *(top). Aerith attacks the phase two iteration Hell House boss with her Ray of Judgement magic damage weapon ability in* FF7R *(bottom). Screenshots by author from PlayStation 1 and PlayStation 5, respectively.*

While Cloud is the central controllable character for most of the game, Aerith's game spatiality expands as she becomes the playable character in *FF7R*, leading the party. In Chapter 7, the player takes control of Aerith in moments where Cloud needs help. This transference of control also creates a transference of perspective for the player, seeing the world from Aerith's perspective, and as such, a change of agency. In *Games as Agency*, C. Thi Nguyen writes "To play a game is to take on a new agency – an agency designed by somebody else…When we play a game, we let it dictate the form of our agency for a while. We let others tell us what to focus on, what abilities to use – even what to care about" (Nguyen 74). Through the developer decision to require the player to control Aerith, players are told that Aerith's perspective is of importance. It is worth noting that there's a temptation to make an argument that interactivity gives Aerith agency as well. Adrienne Show, Shira Chess, and Sarah Stang are among game scholars that disagree with the concept of game characters holding agency and cite rather the "illusion of agency." As Cloud and Aerith are under the control of the player, they do not have a will to act themselves, only the presentation of a will to act. Chess does speak to the mere depiction of a woman expressing agency as a "training mechanism" for agency, noting that "Agency is a tool; it is a concept that reminds those who are marginalized how to act. To this end I argue that video games can become agentic-training tools" (102).

Aerith's legitimization as a character via ludic and character spatiality creates the capacity to demonstrate representation through her actions and narrative input, and the emphasis on Aerith's perspective of Cloud's infamous Honeybee Inn cross-dressing plot provides an acceptance and normalization of marginalized sexuality, gender fluidity, and

demasculinization. While in Wall Market, the party sneaks into mafia boss Don Corneo's

mansion by presenting themselves as suitors for marriage, and to do so, Cloud cross-

dresses as a woman. The original *FF7* positions the plan as a means to deceive Corneo

into believing Cloud is a woman; cross-dressing is meant to be an element of confusion.

The response from other characters supports this: Tifa is shocked, Aerith laughs at him,

and Corneo becomes angry. The alteration to the plot for *FF7R* is for cross-dressing

Cloud to seem sexually appealing regardless of his gender presentation. Aerith cheers

Cloud on as he dances with Honeybee Inn owner Andrea to demonstrate worthiness as a

suitor for Corneo, and after his transformation, she compliments his appearance rather

than mocking it. As the player has learned, Aerith's perspective carries importance. There

is a message sent that her carefree, nonjudgmental response to Cloud's gender fluid

presentation should be adopted by the player as well. To solidify this point, Andrea's

outspokenness about his appreciation for gender fluidity indicates an intentionality for

Cloud's appearance to be gender agnostic. Upon final approval of Cloud's presentation to

Corneo, Andrea offers praise: "Perfection! True beauty is an expression of the heart. A

thing without shame, to which notions of gender don't apply. Don't ever be afraid,

Cloud." As further acceptance of Cloud's demasculization, Cloud is the only character

who has a negative response to his appearance. True to his personality in *FF7*, Cloud

embodies many traits of the hegemonic male: "White, heterosexual, tall, athletic,

professionally successful, confident, courageous, and stoic" and a rejection of perceived

feminine traits to further entrench said opposing masculine traits (Berdahl 426, 428). His

personality meets expectations for the video gaming audience at the time of release in the

late 90s: the 18-34 aged, cis, straight male (Lien). As such, Cloud cross-dresses

begrudgingly, representing hegemonic male reluctance and repulsion to femininization. His distaste is a suitable reaction to appeal to the straight male demographic. However, the legacy variance lies in the reactions of the other characters. Cloud's stubbornness is contrasted with the acceptance, interest, and otherwise indifference by others at his choice to wear a dress. Aerith's position as Cloud's love interest adds commentary to an acceptance toward marginalized sexuality. She continues to flirt with Cloud, suggesting an openness and acceptance towards him.

Aerith's playability takes on another moment of significance for defamiliarization of gender roles and demasculinization through an examination of legacy variance when Cloud is chosen as Corneo's bride in *FF7R* rather than Tifa as in *FF7* (note: while it was possible in *FF7* for Tifa, Aerith, or Cloud to be chosen based on player choices, the most common and intended by game design choice was Tifa). Gender roles reverse as a man needs to be rescued from non-consensual sexual violence rather than a woman, a departure from the trope of the damsel in distress that plagues the video games industry (Sarkeesian, Damsel in Distress). With Aerith as the party lead, she and Tifa easily defend themselves from Corneo's bodyguards, a gesture symbolizing a lack of need for Cloud and a lack of need for masculinity as they overcome an all-male security team. Lastly, upon rescuing Cloud, the two women own the conclusion and objective of the mission: the interrogation of Corneo. These scenes demonstrate a break from the traditional presentation of gender. Williams notes that "males appear more frequently in games than females, and even more so as drivers of the action. When females do appear, they are more likely to be in secondary roles than primary ones" (824). While the script of the interrogation and threats to Corneo changes very little between *FF7* and *FF7R*, the

presentation is altered. Corneo, moments before a sexual predator, is then afraid of the women. Camera angles are downward and from his perspective to demonstrate the gravity of threats, and Cloud is in the back as support as a stark contrast to the battle positioning of Cloud in *FF7* where he is the primary fighter.

Figure. 11. The Interrogation of Don Corneo in *FF7* and *FF7R*.

Cloud, Aerith, and Tifa in Don Corneo's bedroom. Cloud leads the interrogation in FF7 *(left). Tifa and Aerith take lead in* FF7R *(right). Screenshots by author from PlayStation 1 and PlayStation 5, respectively.*

The narrative and game weight shift from the main character to a perceived

support character succeeds in serving critical functions in re-presentation of social

constructs of the marginalized. Not only does it create space for the unsung hero to rise as her story is told, but it sidesteps the danger of dismantling the original plot and alienating the original fan base. Through legacy variants of transference of narrative and game importance, defamiliarization of traditional video game gender roles and demasculinization is possible.

Depiction of Power Structures via Degenderization and Hypersexuality of Minor Characters

As *FF7R* was developed under the constraint of expectation for a faithful-yet-modernized adaptation of the original game, there is little room for alteration to the major character's storylines for representation of sexuality and gender. In many cases, the love lives and sexual preferences of these characters were solidified in *FF7*, and deviation from these perceived preferences walks a dangerous line of "too much change." The relationship between power, sexuality, and gender is depicted by examination of new minor characters, specifically Chadley, and depictions of other hypersexualized minor character counterparts, in contrast. Chadley, though not present in *FF7*, plays an indispensable role in *FF7R*. He is a young, uniformed Shinra Research and Development intern resembling a schoolboy that provides Cloud's party with Battle Intel Reports in which the player learns how to perform new battle techniques. Once completing goals of the Battle Intel Reports, the player returns to Chadley to earn a reward and a progressively more difficult skills or battles to master. As the nature of an RPG requires development of skills to match progressive game complexity and difficulty, the player must have persistent access throughout the entirety of the game to locations where they can acquire said items (stylized in game text as capitalized proper nouns) necessary for

advancing gameplay: stronger Weapons, advanced Armor, new Materia, and new Skills/Summons. Whereas Weapons, Items, and Materia upgrade acquisitions are purchases and agnostic to region, Battle Intel Reports and Summons are task-completion based and must be bespoke to one centralized point. The persistent required access includes the highly secured Shinra building after Cloud's party sneaks in. It is not possible to return to earlier portions of the game due to limited narrative, game design, and engine functions – backtracking creates a ludonarrative dissonance since it is unnatural behavior (or not possible where areas have been destroyed in the plate drop). As a result, linearization of game design pushes the player forward, and preloaded content is compartmentalized to optimize RAM usage. The game requires a portal that can reasonably exist in each major region of the game, including the Shinra building – this is the Shinra intern, Chadley. The rich narrative world and the weight given to minor characters calls for equal believability in Chadley's inclusion. While he is a Shinra employee (explaining his unquestioned access to the secure building) he is vocally disdainful of Shinra and aligned to overthrow Shinra by sharing priceless data with Shinra-resistance forces such as Avalanche. It is the nonchalant attitude to Chadley's existence that raises a question. Chadley presents as mild mannered, innocuous, and non-aggressive. Shinra employees and soldiers ignore him despite the nature of his motivations to destroy the corporation from the inside out. Chadley is androgenous, prepubescent, unthreatening. Selling Chadley's believability and non-threatening demeanor is played out via his androgenization.

Conversely, minor character Scarlet sets a precedence equating sexuality to power within both *FF7* and *FF7R*. As the Head of Shinra's Advanced Weaponry Development,

she is visually depicted wearing a floor-length, high slit red skirt, and a matching backless vest with a low plunging neckline exposing her cleavage, dramatic dark eye makeup, and high heels. While her outfit seems impractical for her line of work, she holds equal power as her male colleagues surrounding her in full business suits. She works alongside the executives of Shinra in both *FF7* and *FF7R* and is shown on TV addressing the people of Midgar on behalf of Shinra. She kinesthetically conveys power, confidence, and authority through her actions and gestures, coupled with her proclivity and enjoyment of violence. She proposes torture, kicks her subordinates, and requires a visibly uncomfortable Shinra soldier to follow her around on hands and knees to serve as a footrest at her whim. With her posterization, hypersexualized appearance, and sadomasochistic behaviors, the game narrative around Scarlet's characterization draws a correlation between power and sexuality. Michel Foucault describes sadomasochism, saying: "S/M is the eroticization of power, the eroticization of strategic power relations." This further cements the link between Scarlet's violence, sexuality, and power within the Shinra Corporation. Shaw's reading of Foucault's notion that power, sex, and pleasure as being interconnected is more direct: "power is pleasure, pleasure is power" (213). Scarlet's executive position within Shinra, dominating actions toward men around her, and her out-of-place wardrobe, accentuating her physicality, represents hegemonic, heterosexual power structures within the Shinra Corporation and strengthens the notions of patriarchal power. As described by Christopher Near, "Hypersexualized and objectified women, aggressive men, and signs relating to violence or war are effectively symptoms of a masculine-coded space or cultural object" (263).

Chadley's character is a narrative foil to Scarlet, and his androgenous nature thus

is intended to downplay his threat. As he is a Shinra employee specializing in Research

and Development in Scarlet's field, he is in Scarlet's chain of command; however, he

lacks masculine coding, as is depicted by his more powerful, senior executive colleagues.

His presentation is perceivable as non-threatening by lacking the components of idealized

hegemonic masculinity, particularly wealth, athleticism, professional success, but also,

"sexual prowess or power over women, and mastery of technology, including weaponry"

(Cote 10). Since he lacks the traits of the hegemonic male, he is unable to compete in the

Masculinity Contest Culture (Berdahl 428). Androgenization or degendering thus places

Chadley where he needs to be, "narratively neutering" him so the true threat he plays,

providing intel and access to a terrorist organization to harm Shinra, seems innocuous.

Glorification of masculinity is exacerbated by the non-threatening attitudes to Chadley

from surrounding characters and, as a result, othering non-binary individuals is of little

consequence, as is invalidating people who identify as such. Chadley is further othered

by his age, since he is visibly younger than any other playable character or NPC aligned

with Shinra. In her book *Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children* Elisabeth

Young-Bruehl describes childism as a form of prejudice that comes from a mindset of

subordinating an individual in another target group as property that is inferior. She says

"In childism, as in homophobia, all the psychological mechanisms that have been

discovered to operate in prejudices on the sexism, racism, and anti-Semitist models can

operate" (36). Throughout the game, children are generally depicted as innocent,

harmless, subjects of worry, and in need of assistance or rescue, enforcing a perspective

that they are inferior to adults, and this aids in painting a caricature of Chadley as

incapable of the danger he poses for Shinra. Though there is no overt prejudice toward Chadley pertaining to his age, childism works in concert with the other efforts to minimize and devalue him. As a final note, Chadley's narrative arc supports these theories. As part of the end game experience in which Cloud learns the true nature of his character (spoiler alert: for those invested in the 100 hour play experience of *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, skip the remainder of this paragraph); Chadley is not human. He is a newly self-aware android created by Shinra's Head of Science and Research Division, Professor Hojo. His lack of humanity thereby erases the non-binary representation of his character. Though one could argue that the inclusion of a non-binary presenting character offers representation, Chadley is an NPC with rules-based engagement limiting the illusion of his agency. Shira Chess describes agency as "the will to act and gain voice in a system of power" (Chess 101). Shaw notes that "Agency fundamentally shapes how identification can be experienced," (Shaw 100), but because the player cannot play as Chadley, this is not realized. Interactivity itself does not promote representation.

Conclusion: Representation Through Re-Presentation

Legacy variance tells a story of representation in *FF7R*. Though the game is not explicit in its goals to serve the marginalized, through intentionality of narrative and reweighted character spatiality there are improvements upon its predecessor. Developmental pressure to respond to calls of nostalgia, and the moments in which game development disagrees with these calls and elects to modify the game, speaks not only of the game designer's intention but also provides a baseline of industry expectation for representation as a system. Though game sequels see similar pressure to "make the same, but better," there's an affordance to creative expansion that makes room for improved

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representation. Remakes, however, re-present previous content, representation included. My hope is that game developers continue to recognize the system of representation and hold it with the same gravity as other systems working interconnectedly as a finished game.

While I do not think *FF7R* jumpstarts a trend in the games industry to accept representation, I do believe it is a loud voice in the room in a conversation that needs to get louder for there to be progress, and that loud voice is "intentional inclusion." The primary goal of a developer was a faithful adaptation of the original, but the intentionality with which the game is reimagined while supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion sets a bar for other remakes as well as new AAA hopeful titles of its caliber.

Chapter IV.

Empathetic Leadership, Transmedia, and Accessibility within Game Development

The work of diversity specialists, scholars, and developers identify sources of the blockers to accurate representation in video games, and there is evidence within games themselves that indicate improvement. Defining steps to resolution now comes into play. What actions must the Gaming Industrial Complex take to permanently improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in game development and resolve the imbalance of representation?

This chapter is heavily influenced by my opinion and perspective as a marginalized individual in the gaming industry labor force. I have felt the effects of exclusion in the video game industry and seen trends that directly impact my personal quality of life. I speak to actions and movements that I believe have the most likely chance to be effective in both the short and long term, with staying power and longevity to create the monumental shifts required for industry wide course correction. While I provide a generally hopeful outlook, it would be irresponsible for me to not acknowledge the limitations of my own perspectives. I am a cis heterosexual white woman who has held leadership roles in the games industry for four years at time of this writing. While I have been impacted by issues of sexism and I believe the suggestions put forward are beneficial toward greater diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, I cannot speak to resolution of pain to those whose lived experiences I do not share, such as people of color, transgender people, or gender non-binary people. I stay with the theme of my

research, which is to follow "where the money is going" as an indicator of where video game industry companies are investing their efforts, due to the aforementioned risk adverse nature of their approach. There has been a slight but observable shift to prioritize representation. The funding is flowing toward development of diverse talent, increasing the popularity of video game IP to capture other markets, and accessibility improvements.

As academia is slow to publish and journalism is generally industry adjacent, I look to culture talks by developers to support my hypotheses about change to improve representation and diversity within game development. Conferences and direct-developer communication is the fastest delivery of the current and precise state of our rapidly changing industry, so to research the current state of culture and diversity I attended Game Developers Conference 2022 in San Francisco, California. The conference is a weeklong series of lectures, talks, roundtables, and networking events from developers with the collective goal to further the craft of game development. In the industry, the Game Developers Conference (GDC for short) is regarded as a highly professional and internationally representational games industry conference. Developers from all over the globe present content on new technologies in game development and the issues that our industry faces. GDC is also considered in the industry as a "must attend" event for those seeking employment within the games industry as they can meet professionals and network directly.

Much of the content from my proposed improvements are sourced from 2022 GDC talks, in addition to white papers and surveys produced by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) and GDC, since the content is by developers and for developers. Of note, the sessions and documents frequently refer to "diverse talent" when

discussing inclusivity, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA). This is a commonly accepted phrase in tech recruitment to describe people who specifically do not identify as cis heterosexual white males. When possible, I have sought developer's opinions directly to support the concepts put forward.

Improve the Culture: Confront Workplace Toxicity with Empathetic Leadership and Culture Focused Positive Behaviors

Persistent, definitive, meaningful change in IDEA requires a confrontation and eradication of workplace toxicity in the Gaming Industrial Complex. As a break from precedent, several sponsored panels at Game Developers Conference 2022 spoke directly to this point. Organizationally, the Game Developers Conference (GDC) is divided into tracks such as Audio, Design, Narrative, Business and Marketing, and Programming, so attendees can easily identify talks that suit their discipline. Among the presentations, GDC spotlights those from the "Diamond Sponsors" that donate considerably to operational costs and contribute to content for panels. Historically, GDC Diamond Sponsors, such as Intel, Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Meta, feature presentations about AI, processors, computing, and cloud development in the Programming and Business & Marketing tracks; generally, most sponsored sessions fall in those two tracks. (For reference in 2022, 69 and 44 of the sponsored talks were in Programming and Business and Marketing respectively, indicating priority for these companies.)

Since 2017, "Game Career Development" or "Advocacy" tracks have an average of two to four Diamond Partner Sessions, frequently shared with the Programming or Design track; however, in 2022, there was a noticeable change to the content of the Sponsored Sessions. All of Xbox's Sponsored Sessions fell singularly within the "Game

Career Development" track. With three talks in total, the content was unlike that of previous talks. They were: "Developing and Retaining Diverse Talent," "Inclusive Leadership @ Xbox Game Studios" and "The New Face of Gaming." Notable themes of the talks included the culture of inclusive behavior, empathy, humanity through inclusive leadership, fostering inclusive culture, and elevating people of color in the game development community. There were no presenters on any of these panels that identified as a white male. While no other major company presented content of this nature, one other presentation entitled "Building a Strong Studio Culture Microtalks" consisted of leaders from independent developer studios and an employment attorney. The content, advice, and suggestions presented about their experiences with smaller development environments were near identical to those elevated by Xbox leaders, indicating that the shifts addressed pertain to not just major studios, but the industry at large.

The presenters in these four panels spoke to the current state of game development culture through shared learnings about the critical role of leadership to model good behavior and intervene against bad behavior, which is a destructive force that must be corrected to maintain the healthy culture. Game Product Leader from Phoenix Labs Carl Kwoh summarized the consistent theme and sentiment about culture among all presenters in these four talks:

> "You are what you do. Your behavior is what's going to drive the culture around you at every studio. And a lot of this is because human beings tend to be observational learners. They mimic what they see, they look at how you behave, and they're going to try to emulate it because that's how humans start to understand the social norms around them" (Game Developers Conference, "Building a Strong Studio Culture Microtalks").

In speaking of inclusive leadership, outgoing Studio Manager of World's Edge Shannon Loftis explained that a healthy culture is "very much about leading the kind of

team that you want to build. If you want an inclusive team that centers on respect, then that's what you have to give to the people that work for you" (Cherbak).

Figure. 12. The Inclusive Leadership @ Xbox Studios GDC Presentation.

Xbox Game Studios leaders (Top, from left to right) Mary McGuane, Kate Rayner, Shannon Loftis, (bottom from left to right) Helen Chiang, Kim Swift, Bonnie Ross, and Fiona Cherbak discuss their roles in supporting and inclusive talent and game content (Cherbak).

Behavior becomes culture, and bad culture impacts a game studio's capacity to retain the diverse talent they intentionally recruit. In the presentation entitled "Developing and Retaining Diverse Talent (Presented by Xbox)," General Manager of Creator Partnerships Jen MacLean discussed shifts in leadership to accommodate diverse talent, and modeling good behavior as critical for retaining them. She charged game studio leadership with the responsibility to set examples for all developers, saying

"Model the behavior you want to see, coach the behavior you want to see, and you care for your team members. If you can't do that, someone else can." She cited the 2022 IGDA Developer Satisfaction survey in addressing the games industry retention problem: "Diverse talent tends to leave the industry at about twice the rate as white men. So, if we broaden the funnel and we bring more diverse talent in, all we're doing is losing more people, and that's not an acceptable action plan. It's not going to make the kind of lasting change we need to see in our industry." Regarding retention of diverse talent, MacLean recommended actions for leaders and colleagues that foster an inclusive environment: charter team agreements to define core hours of work, hold team members accountable to ensure they use their vacation days, accommodate remote work, create shared definitions for flex time schedules, develop clear promotion paths, and demonstrate care for employees as humans. All of these were presented as ways to retain talent, especially for caregivers. "People are willing to make these tradeoffs," speaking of work/life balance and caregiving in particular, "regardless of gender, regardless of family status if they see there is a path forward."

From my perspective, intentionality and action to create positive sustainable cultures accommodating the needs of marginalized individuals signposts that the games industry has acknowledged a need for correction and is *beginning* to support diversity and representation in a meaningful way. Xbox created platforms for women senior leaders to discuss retention of diverse talent and to have inclusive leadership as a requirement, and this is a demonstration of understanding, from a major game development studio, that the culture of game development has not previously been suitable for marginalized individuals. The existence of an action plan to create space for,

and grow the careers of, diverse talent is an acknowledgement of a pervasive culture that is currently unaccommodating to those from diverse backgrounds. These presentations are a silent signal of change that is perceivable to those who are most impacted. Given the high volume of students and industry hopefuls, presenters tailored their content to the audience. The presentation of game studio leadership in this capacity is a marketing tool to attract new talent, and an Xbox sponsored talk is signaling to a target audience talent pool by showing leaders that are marginalized and speaking directly to their needs. Of note: there is undeniably heavy bias here. All these leaders are speaking on behalf of a corporation, and from my experience, these kinds of presentations are heavily scripted, rehearsed, and approved. However, it is the nature of the bias that creates the discussion. Xbox is incentivized to attract diverse talent and stands to benefit from this. It is this exact benefit that is the indicator of change.

The tech industry has a highly competitive hiring landscape, and so these Xbox presentations have added effects of influencing industry-wide hiring seasons. A major game publisher popularizing prioritization of health and wellbeing of diverse talent at one of the industry's largest conferences is 1) positioning themselves in a competitive landscape and 2) extending an invitation to employees of other studios to leave their current companies for better treatment. This raises the bar for worker treatment in the games industry. Moreover, it creates a foundation for new-to-industry prospectives to never expect maltreatment or workplace toxicity, inviting a new era of workplace behavior. It forces other game companies to respond to the culture shift by implementing empathetic leadership prioritization and model inclusive behavior to compete for labor resources and continue business operations or risk failure. If a game studio's most

valuable resources, the employees themselves, repeatedly reject a culture and eventually cannot be recruited due to a company's bad reputation, it becomes a business risk to maintain a toxic work culture instead of eradicating it. The cost of treating employees poorly becomes higher than treating them well.

While the sponsored presentations alone are evidence of game development funding now going toward people development and the creation of healthy workplace environments for retention, the large-scale positioning of Xbox indicates the trend is likely creating permanent business model changes. Loftis advised current and aspiring leaders to "Value culture and cultural contributions as much as you value any technical contribution…Incorporate culture as a critical business component" (Cherbak). Specifically, culture as a business component breaks down the "essentialism" of racism, sexism, and homophobia constructed into the status quo of game development culture. A focus on inclusive culture is an intentional act that suffocates exclusionary perspectives (Murray 39). To further validate this positioning, employment law attorney Irene Scholl-Tatevosyan explained that companies take on a liability of noncompliance as visibility of workplace mistreatment has risen to the point of international news coverage. She stated: "At this point, the US government and state agencies are getting involved in litigating disputes because they see a problem in the gaming industry," and advised the game development community to makes statements through their actions: "Your voice has power show leaders that what they're doing is unacceptable by finding a better studio" (Game Developers Conference, "Building a Strong Studio Culture of Microtalks").

Diverse talent development and humanizing employees directly challenges the individualistic, self-orienting behaviors of the Masculinity Contest Culture (MCC) as

described in Chapter One, suggesting a dismantling of this type of culture. Senior leaders who demonstrate cooperative and non-competitive behaviors create environments incompatible with poor behavior. Employees who function and thrive within cut-throat, competitive workplaces cannot succeed in cultures that value inclusive and collaborative behaviors and will self-select out. The MCC behaviors of "showing no weakness, displaying physical endurance and strength, and engaging in cut-throat competition" (Berdahl 430) when persisting unchecked, create a negative culture intolerable for those who do not identify with hegemonic, masculine traits. However, the principles of Inclusive Leadership discussed in these GDC presentations are intentional in defining, modeling, and fostering inclusive behavior that aims to avoid a toxic work culture and directly counter the MCC. For example, Corporate Vice President of Minecraft Helen Chiang directly challenges the MCC value of hiding weakness by praising vulnerability when she advised the audience that from her experience "the most important thing we can do as leaders is show our own learning journey and when we make mistakes, and, as you know, when we make mistakes recognizing that not everybody is perfect" (Cherbak). Rather than compete for dominance and operate out of self-preservation, she encouraged employees to focus on "Fostering an inclusive environment that everyone can thrive in" and stated that "creating this culture of inclusion is part of the day job. It's everyone's responsibility" (Cherbak). Lastly, the importance of taking time off directly competes with the presentation of physical endurance. MacLean stated that "we all have obligation to our team members to give them the time they need for their mental, emotional, physical health" (Gonzalez). Encouraging employees to use vacation days, defining core hours to support flex time, and encouraging team agreements displaces and denormalizes

the MCC values of "endurance" and heroics. How I've seen this play out in my experience: employees who operate outside agreed-upon hours or team agreements do not function as successful team members. They cannot be rewarded for modeling behavior, and they face challenges when pursuing leadership promotions due to their inability to model behavior that supports a healthy culture. More directly, there is research that supports the statements about leadership put forth by MacLean, Loftis, and Chiang that inclusive leadership has meaningful impact on work cultures. According to the findings of a 2021 article by Perry et al. published in *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion: An international Journal*:

> Leaders who behave more inclusively are expected to have work units and work unit members who experience more positive outcomes and fewer negative outcomes including sexual harassment and other forms of mistreatment. Leaders impact their work unit and work unit members' outcomes directly as well as indirectly through the more inclusive work unit climates they create.

The focus on retention and positive work cultures that support inclusivity are motivating factors to attract diverse talent into leadership who then recruit diverse talent themselves. "[W]hen you show you have a diverse team, you attract more diversity inherently" MacLean observed (Gonzalez). When people see leaders with similar backgrounds as themselves, they more readily believe the studio is a place people like them can succeed.

Recruiting, hiring, and retention strategies, along with inclusive cultures, are critical to a future of equitable representation in video games. These factors define and sustain the composition of the labor force. The strongest drivers for diversity and representation in games are the people within the workforce itself. According to the Inclusive Game Design and Development white paper developed by the IGDA

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(sponsored by Facebook Gaming, but again, of note a major corporation is funding IDEA research), "[a] diverse team will innately build a more diverse and inclusive game, as the team members will incorporate their own backgrounds, experiences, ability, heritage, and culture into their development process and creations" (Gittins 3). Meaningful change comes from the top, so specifically, diversity in leadership is the driving force. As an example, Loftis cited a motivation to accurately represent cultures in an authentic way for *Age of Empires IV* (World's Edge), a 2021 real-time strategy multiplayer game in set in the Early Ages of history. She explained that to handle cultures in which there was not representation, they staffed consultants who were representatives of the cultures chosen in their game: "We gave them a seat at the design table. And they signed off on how they showed up in the game" (Cherbak). Influence over a game's aesthetic is both incredibly powerful and difficult to manage, so a decision as critical as accepting consultation over a game's creative work and then following through involves buy-in from multiple disciplines. Alignment across discipline teams on these decisions generally requires support from studio leaders, indicating commitment to see the feedback through.

These types of diversity consultancy roles transitioned from novelty to critical for game development in the early 2020s. DePass explains that "telling a story outside your experience leaves room for mistakes, unintentional ways to reinforce racism, homophobia, and other biases." She explains, "[s]ince dev teams are more likely to be majority white men or in some cases mostly white women, it's very easy to fall back on stereotypes and tropes when creating characters outside your experience" (16, 17). Rejess Marshall, Head of Diversity and Inclusion at Iron Galaxy Studios, explains that studios see these roles as becoming full time. "[C]ompanies are hiring more DEI professionals to

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help lead these efforts and there are more efforts being made to show diverse

representation in the games" (Rousseau, "How Much Progress"). On the surface, this

seems like significant forward progress, viewing the systemic inclusion of diversity and

representation as "similarly complex systems" to other major craft disciplines, warranting

leadership oversight that is on equal footing. (Malkowski 3). However, to provide

personal anecdotal insight on this matter, there is a noticeably high turnover rate for these

positions and a general perception that IDEA specialists struggle as their co-leads block

progress due to being uneducated about social issues. IDEA specialists find themselves in

the role of educator first and foremost to explain the value of their input for each of their

initiatives (or even each of their sentences) and then convince their peers to buy in. this

work is disheartening. Developers who are not employed or compensated for the roles of

educators note that they constantly find themselves doing exactly that as part of their day

job just to create a functional environment. In *Game Devs & Others: Tales from the*

Margins Tanya DePass collects stories from game developers identifying as

marginalized. Long time industry vet and author of a webcomic called "Terrible Allies,"

Shayna Bryant describes an unwritten job requirement as "teach white people how not to

be racist with a smile" (Bryant 71). Bryant goes on to capture familiar frustrations from

marginalized people attempting to create equitable and inclusive environments for

themselves:

> There's the unspoken expectation of women, of people of color, of
> whoever is experiencing some invalid and gross things in their work lives,
> that they must always give the benefit of the doubt to whoever is
> offending them. That person clearly didn't mean it. Maybe we're
> overreacting. Maybe we misheard. Maybe we're just crazy people. It was
> just a joke. Can't you take a joke? Don't you know that *all* lives matter?
> And so, we double the load. Take the initial offending remark, manage
> both your own feelings and the feelings of the offender before responding,

if you respond. And even after all that, be prepared to defend a lifelong lived experience filled with thoughtless asides such as these against those of someone whose off-color comment about Muslims or dating a Black girl or pay gaps must-have-been-made-in-jest-or-in-good-faith-or-some-other-excuse-that-means-you-should-just-let-it-go. (Sidebar: Do you know how much we already let go? But I digress.) (Bryant 72)

This is exhausting, and the loop happens daily for marginalized people who work in games. I must stress that as an industry we are not even close to equity, and grave injustices still occur under the guise of "well intentioned" ignorance. When interviewed about this in February 2022, Dr. Gray said: "We constantly still fight tooth and nail to ensure that active changes are put in good faith till this day" (Rousseau, "How Much Progress"). While the proposed IDEA efforts do ring less hollow than empty promises from the industry in the late 2010s, to many, statements without demonstrated data feel like performative allyship. The action plans being put into practice encourage a needed culture shift that makes inequitable behavior abnormal. In future conferences, I look forward to presentations with data around retention rates, hiring, and proof of equitable salaries for diverse talent presented with the same brazen approach as updated talking points to recruit and further push the industry toward equity.

Defragmentation and Defamiliarization Through Expanded Narratives via Transmedia

The relationship between the gaming industry and popular culture evolved with the introduction of live online games, and in the early 2020s games unseated the music industry as the center of pop culture due to the nature of their social interaction and online engagement (Monahan). Though games are already by far the highest earning entertainment industry, I posit it will continue to grow as gaming IP expands into film, TV, theatre. As a notable shift in the Gaming Industrial Complex in the early 2020s,

gaming IPs have moved into other forms of visual mediums, including television shows, movies, and comic books. This presence of an IP across multiple texts is known as transmedia. Historically, video-game-based films have performed poorly in the box office and received low review scores regardless of the game's popularity, even jokingly earning a reputation of being cursed. For example, infamously, Nintendo's mascot character Mario starred in *Super Mario Brothers*, a live action film from 1993, but got a Metacritic score of 35 and generally unfavorable reviews (Metacritic). Iconic game IP films such as *Tomb Raider* (2001) and *Silent Hill* (2006) are high earning IPs for the publishers that own them, but they also received devastatingly low scores. In 2010, the average Metacritic score for a video game adaption was 30 (Thompson).

The relationship between Hollywood and game development has improved, meaning understandings of how to manage narratives and fandoms when changing texts have improved, increasing the quality of video-game-adapted films. As an example, *Sonic the Hedgehog* is a long running series from SEGA that saw significant success in the 90s, but the game quality since the early 2000s is perceived of being generally of lower quality than other games with similar release times, and Sonic games have an average Metacritic in low 70s (Metacritic). However, the Sonic franchise has seen record breaking success in cinema: *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* (2022), became the highest grossing domestic video game movie of all time (not adjusted for inflation) a few weeks after release, unseating its own predecessor *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020) that held first place, suggesting that film can rejuvenate and bring new life and fandom back to a video game IP. (Mendleson; Box Office Mojo). In addition to an improvement in quality of video-game-adapted IP texts, there's a notable increase in how many video game related

projects have considered film development. In early 2022, there were 22 video game

movies and 20 television series announced as in-development, with releases planned for

2022 or later (IGN). This significant increase represents a confidence in video games as a

legitimate source for adaptation.

Figure. 13. *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* as #1 Movie.

Promotional materials tweeted from the official Sonic the Hedgehog Movie Twitter
(@SonicMovie) two days after box office open.

The solidification of video games as the dominant mainstream form of

entertainment increases the importance of accurate representation and diversity, but also,

"the only way to reconstruct this mass medium into one that is reasonable, ecumenical,

diverse, and innovative is to overwhelm it with new kinds of consumers. Markets have

power" (Chess 87). Expanding a fanbase creates new vectors for fandom and additional

avenues to explore character intersectionality. As Dr. Gray explains, it "complicates the social construction of technological systems," creating additional space for critical examination from emotional and intellectual perspectives (164). As discussed in previous chapters, there are self-imposed limitations within software that welcome prejudice and limit expression of culture and emotions, but to a lesser degree in the visual mediums of film and television; there, representation can be expounded upon, inviting new fandom. This act of inclusion challenges the dominant audience of gaming as it invites perspectives, engagements, and interactions with digital content, and thus invites innovation into the space by creating a transmediated "fandom" that influences a franchise or an IP in new ways.

These complications include an expanded capacity for character depth and racialized experiences via narrative story telling. As an example, Dr. Gray cites the cinematic trailer for *Assassin's Creed IV: Freedom Cry* (2014), a live action cinematic piece used to promote the game's release. The trailer portrays the backstory of the protagonist Adéwalé by depicting the heartbreak of an enslaved Black mother losing her child, an enraged Black boy raising a rock to seemingly break his chains before a wider camera shot reveals the rock raised to crush the head of a slave master, and then the boy running free. The trailer then moves to a game-engine-rendered cutscene; the boy is an adult and as he pulls on a hood, the fabric falls into place to reveal the iconic Assassin's Creed protagonist's hood. The viewer has been watching a video game trailer, and Adéwalé is the protagonist for the next installment of *Assassin's Creed* (Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry).

Dr. Gray captured responses to the trailer from the Black community in her research, describing prominent Black creators streaming the video on their streams and reacting to their audiences in shock, surprise, and excitement of the unfolding story. To quote content creator TastyDiamond from her stream of the trailer: "Can you imagine it? A game that actually lets you kill slave masters? I mean, we see movies and shows all day do that…. And as much as gaming reflects Hollywood, this is a story line they have not done anything with" (Gray 111). At all times, the subject of the frame centers close-ups of Black pain, violence against Black people, Black oppression, and Black rage at their oppressors, conveying gravity, weight, and importance of these Black experiences through narrative and cinematography not only found in the game, but across media. This cinematic experience exists outside the capacity of what a game engine could produce in 2014, but uses language of lighting, framing, human expression, tone, and camera shots as defined and well understood in cinematography to accurately represent the pain of the Adéwalé's past and his motivation as a protagonist. This otherwise could not have been accomplished without transmediation of the content to tell a complex narrative of pain for the protagonist, and the Black narratives around it exist due to the further transmediation of the streams (Gray 116). Gray states, "the shock the many black folks in gaming experienced while viewing this trailer reveals the singular narratives of Black life in gaming and the desire for more nuanced representations" that can be delivered through transmedia in these forms (110).

Figure. 14. Adéwalé.

At the end of a live action trailer, Adéwalé is revealed as an Assassin's Creed *protagonist via in-engine cinematic (Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry).*

The narrative freedoms provided by transmediated texts also create space for LGBTQIA+ representation, most notably, Blizzard Entertainment's *Overwatch*. *Overwatch* is a multiplatform team-based first-person shooter launched in 2016 in which there is less focus on in-game narrative compared to hours of narrative cinematics that constitute other AAA games of similar size and popularity; the companion digital comics, however, feature rich stories about the characters in the universe. While the player has multiple options for their character, a white cis female character named Tracer dominates game key art, box art, marketing materials, and is the first character the player encounters as she is the tutorial character. Tracer represents the most recognizable character in the game and is iconic to the franchise. In the December 2016 digital comic issue *Reflections*, Tracer is relaxing on a couch while it is snowing outside, and after a gift exchange, a

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woman named Emily kisses her, formally canonizing that Tracer is gay (Chu).

Demonstrating that a major character as iconic as Tracer is gay defamiliarizes

homosexuality as it challenges perceptions that it is atypical of a major character.

Additionally, it "allow[s] men to experiment with the experience of disempowerment,"

since they are not front and center, (Cassell 31) and it normalizes representation of

queerness in games in a more adaptable environment for the narrative. *Overwatch* players

already have a relationship with Tracer due to her relevance to the game, so by presenting

Tracer in the relatable environment of a cozy home, her sexuality is revealed in a casual

manner. There is not space in a few lines of in-game dialogue to show complexities of

character sexuality, but there is in other media forms. The primary focus is interaction

and play, whereas the focus shifts to furthering engagement with the universe through

narrative and character depth, creating a space to expound on a character's sexuality.

Through transmedia, it is easier to create narrative that show LGBTQIA+

representation, but it also sidesteps sensitivities and laws prohibiting sexual

representation in media as part of national policy. This comic was blocked in Russia, but

Blizzard Entertainment confirmed via official statement: "We preemptively decided not

to publish [it in Russia] given the climate in Russia and Legal feedback" (Matulef). This

is far from ideal; in fact, it is still bad in its own right. Shaw argues that "optional

representation…places the burden of representation on players themselves," since players

can "opt out" of representation (34). Anecdotally, I will offer that the queer gaming

community finds this largely performative and a means to take as little risk as possible

without eliciting actual change. While I would not call it a long-term solution, I will

suggest that it is a gesture in the right direction for equity for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Transmediation of gaming IP is also a means to refocus previous stigmas and stereotypes reinforced by gaming's presentations of women as objects of sexual gratification. On November 3, 2018, Riot Games began its World Championship Finals Opening Ceremony for its video game League of Legends in South Korea to an online audience of 90 million concurrent viewers with a mixed augmented-reality presentation: an all-female, multi-racial, bilingual quartet of characters from the game, while a newly created virtual K-pop group, K/DA, performed their song "POP/STARS." The characters (referred to in-game as Champions), Akali, Evelynn, Ahri, and Kai'Sa shared front stage via screen overlay with their human counterparts who interacted with them, sang their lines, and engaged in their choreography, backed by an additional two dozen female dancers. An animated music video featuring the Champions played in the background of the live performance, and then served as a standalone music video that gained 13 million YouTube views in its first 48 hours after publication (Crecente). K/DA and the song "POP/STARS" drew immediate critical acclaim, and the second five track EP entitled "MORE," with accompanying music videos released in 2020, proclaims its legitimacy as a formidable act in texts of recorded music, recorded video, and live performance. The song features four female vocalists alternating English/Korean lyrics that convey power, strength, confidence, and personal victory. The visuals of the video feature choreography and positioning that demonstrate a controlling, commanding presence and complement the female-positive message. These artistic choices publicly position women in a positive regard via defamiliarization through the song's authoritative lyrics, redefining female

physical presence through dance, and the introduction of an acceptance of power and feminine sexuality into a masculine-coded space.

Figure. 15. K/DA debuts at the 2018 World Championship Finals Opening Ceremony.

League of Legends Champions Evelynn, Ahri, Ka'Sai, and Akali (left to right) on stage via AR projections alongside their human counterparts (POP/STARS - Opening Ceremony).

The choice of song as a medium directly addresses silence. Women are quite literally given a voice through K/DA via their performance of the song. As Adrienne Rich explains in "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," silence is "a crucial element of civilization" since it aids in the oppression of minorities and maintains status quo. She cites "namelessness, denial, secrets, taboo subjects, erasure, false-naming, non-naming, encoding, omission, veiling, fragmentation and lying" (Desmoines et al. 17). Through examination of the vocals and lyrics, women are unsilenced through naming,

challenging traditional speech encoding, and defragmentation. The lyrics directly

confront namelessness, false-naming, and non-naming through the three instances in

which specific names are referenced in the context of recollection. The name of the group

is introduced as the opening: "You know who it is/ Coming 'round again/ You want a

dose of this/ Right now/ It's K/DA uh!" (Riot Games). It's as though the audience is

familiar with the group and their existing notoriety. A second reference is in Korean in

the first verse: "Shout my name/ Unforgettably/ Loud loud loud loud" (molti24,

translated from Korean) followed by a third in the second verse, in English, stating

"You're about to hear my name/ Ringing in your head like ohhh" (Riot Games). The

repetition of "unforgettableness" sung in both English and Korean represent a resistance

to erasure as the women are not only memorable, but they cannot be forgotten, and thus

their names are not silenced.

The lyrics also challenge conventions of "woman speak," or encoding, through

confident language. Dale Splender addresses male and female encoding in *Man Made*

Language, describing hegemonic masculine speech as "forceful, efficient, blunt,

authoritative, serious, effective, sparing and masterful" and women's speech as "weak,

trivial, ineffectual, tentative, hesitant, hyperpolite, euphemistic, and is often marked by

gossip or gibberish" (Splender 33). Encoding is confronted through repetitious words of

power, confidence, victory, and success. There is prominent use of these language

mechanisms in the chorus:

> Ain't nobody bringing us down down down…
> They could try, but we're gonna wear the crown
> You can go another round round round…
> Wish you luck but you're not bringing us down
> We go hard
> Til we get it get it

> We go hard
> We so in it in it
> We POPSTARS
> Only winning now
> Ain't nobody bringing us down down down down (Riot Games)

Repetition both conveys the simplicity of the message and reinforces it simultaneously, and statements of unconditional victory are in direct opposition to traditional views of "woman speak" as meek, hesitant, and ineffectual. This rejection of encoding is a rejection of submissiveness and an establishment of authority. According to Susan Sniader Lanser in *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*: "self-deprecating, uncertain, and verbose discourse, which women in certain circumstances have supposedly been encouraged to adopt, also undermines its own authority (Ch.1, location 181). The lyrics not only insist upon their personal authority, but command authority. As a second example, the lyrics "And when I start to talk like that/ Oh you won't know how to react" adds commentary to this affront to coding by referencing a diversion from "woman speak." Those expecting speech that affirms stereotypical norms associated with the women's physical appearance will be confused. There is no reaction for this because this behavior is atypical. As a result, the audience must develop a new opinion of the women and "woman speak" and consider women as a vocal authorial presence. The implication is that the lyrics are not hegemonic "man speak;" they are "woman speak," and a space in human vocabulary for women to speak confidently must exist.

Unsilencing also occurs via lyrics through defragmentation. Through examination of the specific pronouns of the lyrics and how each woman refers to herself, there is a formation of community and unification. Akali and Evelynn's lyrics exclusively

reference "I", Ahri says both "I" and "we" and Kai'Sa exclusively uses "we;" additionally, this progression happens through the song in this order. The previously discussed authorial voice within Akali and Evelynn's lyrics, paired with the use of the word "I", establishes individual and personal authority of the women. Following this, there is a communal voice beginning with Ahri that "shifts the text away from individual protagonists and personal plots, calling into question the heterosocial contract that has defined woman's place" (Lanser Ch.1, location 108). The "we" presented in the song challenges the political norms of a fragmented community of women; the "we" is intentionally a collective female voice "appropriating the power of a plurality" to signify strength through their unity and to obscure who the "we" is being referenced (Lanser Ch. 1, location 406). As Simone de Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex*, those who typically use "we" or "communal voice" are of classes of people who "lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unity which can stand face to face with the correlative unity…" (28). In this case, the group of people historically lacking unity is women, as they have endured fragmentation. The "we" represents women as a whole, rather than only the four women present. The female collective becomes all women, and the declaration "Ain't nobody bringing us down" refers not to the gameplay, but a strength of resistance capable by all women.

Power, confidence, authority, and unification are also conveyed kinesthetically via the four women through dance and defamiliarize the perception of women's physical presence. According to *Music/video*, dance is a staple of pop music and necessary construct to supplement narrative; music videos are a "medium where narrative and characterization are absent or, at the very least, reduced due to a shorter timescale, the

face and body become sites where performance in conveyed" (Arnold et al. 70). A video

presentation becomes ideal for the female-positive message as dance is a familiar aspect

of the pop music video. Presenting the women in strong poses contributes to their

defamiliarization. According to Sandra Bartky, there are "significant gender differences

in gesture, posture, movement, and general bodily comportment: women are far more

restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their spatiality" (Bartky 163).

The women demonstrate confidence in their dance moves through the spatiality they

occupy: dance moves consist of fist punches into the air, throwing their arms out, and

spins. They each occupy center framing in individual shots, and they are individually the

central focus of the shots and command visual attention.

The choreography performed by K/DA in "POP/STARS" and "MORE"

contributes to defragmentation via kinesthetics and invites the audience to participate

with their own movement. This engagement can "move the listener/spectator from

passive consumption through the ears and eyes into active participation though the body"

(Arnold et al. 147). The short dances repeating throughout all instances of the two song

choruses encourage recognizability, inviting spectators to mimic the moves of the

women. The video then takes on a physical identity and transitions the women of K/DA

from observable to mimicable and thus aspirational. As discussed by Dr. Gray, fandoms

are defined by "activity and identity," and orienting playable game characters as dancers

invites a new fandom to engage in non-traditionally hegemonic ways (5).

The oversexualized visual presentations of the four women of K/DA may seem

anti-feminist and overly focused on physical appearances to serve the male audience, but

the videos defamiliarize hypersexuality when juxtaposed against the collective

authoritative actions of the women. While all four women flex their biceps, move with confidence, and make strong eye contact with the camera, Evelynn specifically interacts with her own body, moving her hands over her face, torso, legs, breasts, hair, and neck. As discussed in Chapter Two, video games are historically rife with hypersexualized women for the male gaze. But rather than androgenize the women of K/DA or depict them as powerful through masculine features and behaviors, the opposite happens. Evelynn seductively interacts with herself in addition to mirroring confident poses with the other women. Hypersexuality as a means of pleasure for men is thus challenged, since it opposes masculine coding. As "[n]on-central women do not threaten the game's coding as masculine (since men or even non-human objects such as cars are usually the central focus in such cases), but any indication that women are of sole or equal importance disrupts the assumption of a masculine-coded product." (Kimmel 256). Evelynn's outward, comfortable expressions of her own sexuality paired with her confident movements thus challenge the norm of the masculine-coded product. Eveylnn's ownership of femininity is a resistance to downplaying or erasing femininity. In comparison with her unified lyrics, femininity and sexualization of the women is framed and emphasized as essential to their power. This delivers the message that women can be powerful and sexual simultaneously, and the decoupling of sexualization and powerlessness (with the depiction of powerfulness) thus breaks this convention. Additionally, it challenges previous norms that have made games a space for males only and invites women into the realm. Lastly, the presence of the hypersexualized female negates the comfort zone for toxic hypermasculinity. One cannot envision themselves as

this character that is inextricably linked to the others and envision themselves in the space of toxic masculinity simultaneously (Jansz 234).

The presentation of women as powerful against the backdrop of its creator company's reputation also provides commentary of a repositioning or a rewriting of a narrative in the workforce. Months prior to the release of POP/STARS and the introduction of K/DA, creator studio Riot Games received large scale criticism in the press. Current and previous employees came forward confirming allegations of sexual harassment, unequal pay, lack of promotion due to sex, and gender-biased politics (D'Anastasio). The Riot Games controversy shifted focus of the #MeToo movement and national attention of sexism in the workplace to the video games industry, and their response addresses the previous silencing. The creation of K/DA, though not a response to the controversy, aids the positive narrative to heal the negative perception of women as four female *League of Legends* Champions are given the world stage and positioned to confidently overstate their prowess, strength, and power. As a result, this gives parent company Riot an opportunity to right injustices created by its toxic working culture.

According to Judith Levine in "Beyond #MeToo," "Transformation will only come if individual men's feelings about sex, women, and sexual minorities change" (Levine 24). I believe efforts put forth via transmedia to depict marginalized individuals aurally, visually, and kinesthetically, in nuanced, positive forms, is a means to reframe marginalized characters in games in a meaningful way.

Game Development for Everyone: Accessibility to Gaming via Equitable Design, Availability, and Remote Work

Lastly, I posit that diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility within game development will see improvement with increased availability of the games, accessibility of the design, and within the workspaces themselves. There are costs, design barriers, and geographic barriers that limit both exploration and increased interest in gaming to those who can't afford to participate or meet all the current "qualifications" to engage. Lowering or removing the bar to engage with gaming will increase the fandom, and by proxy, welcome marginalized individuals into the space. Simply put, the more people that enjoy and play video games, the greater the representation and diversity of the group.

Improved game design generally means more players, and I argue that equitable game design by way of standardized accessibility functionality is a major step to improved representation. Historically, games "are rarely designed to be accessible for differently abled bodies, especially those who are outside the hegemonic framing of design that privileges abled bodies" (Gray 122), and the status quo has not been to consider the physical, cognitive, or sensory limitations of the consumer. As games rely on auditory, visual, and kinetic cues to communicate and encourage interaction from the player, a particular reliance on a functionality can make games unplayable for disabled players. Hegemonic game design is exclusive by nature, as some players have a diminished experience, but entire subsets of players cannot play games that require certain sensory or physical capacity. Though heavily marketed as accessibility, "design justice" is a more apt description, described by Sasha Costanza-Chock as "a growing social movement that aims to ensure a more equitable distribution of design's benefits and burdens; fair and meaningful participation in design decisions; and recognition of community-based design traditions, knowledge, and practices" (Costanza-Chock 1).

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Rather than relying on the good intentions of designers who do not intend to exclude, the movement suggests bias toward intentional inclusion of users with disability into design conversations to inform designers of the limitations they may unintentionally impose in their games.

The emergence and success of the game review site Caniplaythat.com, founded by Susan Banks and Courtney Craven, which serves the disabled community with specialized usability reviews for games and tech focusing on accessibility functionality, is a testament to the relevance and adoption of equitable design. The reviews are scored on the presence of accessibility functionality such as the ability to resize subtitles for low vision, button remapping for motor functionality accessibility, caption support for those with hearing loss, and haptic feedback accompanying audio cues to cite a few points of examination. The reviewers also provide consultancy work for game studios to provide perspectives on accessibility functionality and core work for the game engine required to allow game designers to develop these design features. The site's review scores have been prominently featured in marketing pieces for video game launch trailers, including *Gears of War 5* (which received the first perfect score for accessibility). As another industry response, an Innovation in Accessibility Award was introduced at The Video Game Awards in 2021, honoring games for their accessibility work, formalizing accessibility as a vector of success and creating an invitation for game studios to embrace accessible game design.

While initially perceived as gimmicky, according to the 2022 State of the Game Industry white paper produced by Game Developers Conference, interest and concern in accessible game design has changed significantly in the past few years:

> We asked respondents whether their current games are implementing any accessibility measures for those with sensory, motor, or other impairments. In previous years, more respondents have said "No" (48% in 2020, 42% in 2021) than "Yes" (28% in 2020, 31% in 2021)—but the reverse happened this time around. In 2022, there was an increase in the number of developers who said their games were adding accessibility measures (39%) and a decrease in those who weren't (36%). It's the first time more respondents said "Yes" since the question was added to the survey in 2019.

A growing acceptance to design justice contributes to the movement as designers understand that accessibility functionality is far reaching in its benefits for gamers by way of the "curb cut effect." The introduction of the curb cut (originally inspired by an act of defiance by pouring concrete to create slopes onto sidewalks) intended to provide accessibility for wheelchairs, but also did so for parents with strollers, hand trucks, and rolling suitcases—these and more were unexpected benefits from this act of inclusion. (Blackwell). Increased accessibility functionality in game design sees the same benefits and has started shaping the definition of game design to be more equitable, "servicing a range of differently abled players, including players with a disability, or simply those unfamiliar with gaming, or a particular game. The knock-on effect is that players have greater choice when looking for games that suit them" (GamesHub). As a final note for the benefits to gamers on the benefits of game accessibility, I'll provide an example. *The Last of Us II* (2020) by Naughty Dog was widely praised for its breakthroughs in pushing the development of accessibility, with over 60 accessibility settings available to players, including auto pick up, an ability to adjust frequency of dodge prompts, high contrast display and navigation and traversal assistance. Game critic and streamer Steve Saylor, who goes by the name "The Blind Gamer," shared a video of himself streaming the game. Upon launching and opening the Accessibility options for the first time, he's emotionally overcome; he exclaims to his audience "Y'all don't even know…there's so

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much here!" Saylor is a moving example of what it means to make space for inclusion and how equitable design affects those who most need it.

Figure. 16. Blind Reaction.

Steve Saylor, also known as the Blind Gamer, is moved to tears upon seeing the low-vision accessibility options available in The Last of Us Part II (@stevesaylor).

In addition to design accessibility, improvement to accessibility of product availability will increase diversity and representation in games. The hobby of playing video games has always been exclusive to those who can afford the high cost of entry. Enjoying video games requires an initial investment of a high-cost PC or console, and then the additional buy-in of the price of a game. While it is obvious to suggest cost reductions to games and hardware will increase the audience size and lower the barrier to entry for those of lower socioeconomic status, the successful path for game publishers to

do so while remaining profitable is of consideration. I believe due to the growing costs to produce video games, developers must move away from the conventional boxed-product pricing to move the player base toward subscription-based services such as Xbox Game Pass, PlayStation Plus, and Nintendo Online. These services allow players to pay a monthly or annual fee to access a selection of a publisher's library of games available. These price points are generally lower than the cost of two full games. The entertainment industry has already proven the success of the digital subscription model with film and television, (Netflix, HBO Now, Hulu) and software (Adobe, Microsoft); video game publishers are creating their own digital content subscriptions to compete with the model, forecasting the success of subscription models for gaming as well. The added plus to a digital subscription is ease of delivery. Publishers have a direct-to-consumer delivery method, allowing them to sidestep packaging, printing, and brick and mortar sales; players can choose to play digital versions of the games, improving accessibility via reach and availability.

To date, Xbox Game Pass is consistently regarded by reviewers as the gaming subscription service with the most value due to its accessible price point, large game library, and benefit to game developers. Xbox recently presented their Game Pass data in the presentation "Game Pass: Maximizing Your Game's Total Value" at Game Developers Conference 2022. Scoped to an audience of potential independent game developers rather than consumers, the presentation provides insights on benefits to inclusion in the subscription service, including fifteen times more daily active users over the first 90 days after launch than independent games launched on Xbox but not part of Game Pass. This is a substantial amount of exposure that independent developers rely on

to drive attention and users toward their game. These are users that otherwise wouldn't have played the game, but due to the accessibility created by inclusion in a digital library accessible via monthly fee, consumers are emboldened to try new games and genres with no risk of additional sunk cost, only time. Rather than return a game they do not enjoy, they simply do not play it. The introduction of subscription-based gaming services creates a platform for indie game discovery that is vital for representation, since indie developers drive experimentation and innovation in the games industry. As noted in previous chapters, while AAA developers stick to formulaic trends, independent games are smaller in budget, scale, and team size, giving them freedom to create games and trends for larger studios to follow. In her GDC presentation about what has changed in the past 10 years and progress, Anita Sarkeesian commented that indies "afford themselves the ability to take greater risks, tell different stories, and they experiment with different mechanics. And when it succeeds, AAA does the same. I want AAA to take more risks" (Game Developers Conference, "It's Been 10 Years"). Senior Director Chris Charla of ID@Xbox, the studio that manages content curation of independent games, echoed the same trend and a likelihood it will continue: "I see the future is really independent developers having the opportunity to lead where the industry is going." He provided an example of developers wanting to replicate the success of *Hades* (Supergiant Games), a small budget rogue-like dungeon crawler game that released in 2020 to critical acclaim, receiving the third highest Metacritic score of its release year and several nominations for Game of The Year against AAA contenders. He explained that the game is aspirational even to larger studios: "I was in a situation recently where I was talking to a AAA developer. And they're like, 'Oh well, we want our next game to be like *Hades*'.

That's amazing! Hades is an unbelievably fantastic game, and it is now providing thought

leadership [to AAA developers]" (Dring). Improved accessibility to independent games

and a platform in which they can be discovered drives the cycle of consumers not voting

with their dollars, but rather with their hours. Developers can see trends of what games

users enjoy playing and then replicate it, meaning larger-scale AAA games not only have

to compete, but have reduced pressure to rely on hegemonic blockbusters to secure studio

funding.

　　　　As a final means of accessibility to improve representation in game development,

I believe in what MacLean described as "prioritizing people over presenteeism," by

means of full support of remote or distributed work rather than requiring employees to

come to a central in-person office (Gonzalez). Though related to culture, support of

distributed work is a culmination of behavior changes, work structure, and technological

capacity. Companies that offer remote work create inherit flexibilities to traditionally

firm aspects of employee's lives, such as where they live or what time they commute.

This also presents an accessibility argument as it increases the hiring pool to include

those with physical limitations to commuting, and those who do not wish to move to

expensive tech hubs and possibly away from their families. According to Chiang, "the

pandemic proved out that we can work wherever we want. Flexible work allows parents

to join the workforce" (Cherbak).

　　　　While the COVID-19 pandemic was devastating to many industries, the games

industry continued to thrive. The need for social distancing and quarantine brought on by

the pandemic proved that game development does not require in-person collaboration in

500-1000 person studios, and while it's a controversial topic, many game developers

have reported working from home increased productivity. The games industry saw a surge in hiring, and as a technical medium, had the groundwork and blueprint of remote operations already in place at major developer studios. The pandemic and quarantine introduced a need for large scale remote work technical capacity and "Zoom literacy" as workers then had to develop proficiency with video call technology and acquire and troubleshoot hardware or be unable to work. Major communication platforms saw dramatic increases in usership and demand for bandwidth, forcing them to scale to a new capacity demand to keep white-collar workers up and running. These communication platform scales are necessary to support widescale remote work, but arguably would not have happened this soon without the forcing function of the pandemic (Case). Unlike other industries, the video game industry grew during the pandemic, with developers even commenting that game studio hiring outpaced the building space to accommodate everyone.

Remote work capability, capacity, and literacy became an industry requirement during the pandemic, and the test run revealed there is a sizable portion of the talent pool that prefers remote work. The Great Resignation of the early 2020s in the tech industry played out more like a reshuffling; employees weren't quitting their jobs in video games, but they went to other studios (Gonzalez). If employees do not want to go into office, they change jobs. The shift to asynchronous work allows people to balance their commitments with work better, and those disabled or otherwise limited by an ability to commute due to travel difficulties or scheduling issues have a wider variety of jobs they can hold within the games industry. There are numerous anecdotal stories from developers about a quality of life increase due to the time they get back from commuting,

being able to live in less expensive areas of their city, and spending time with their loved ones. Also, numerous anecdotal stories from coworkers who've expressed an "over my dead body" sentiment to returning to an office. Crowd sourced documentation driven by game developers to compare company policies and game the industry show that the majority of video game studios support full time remote work. From this living document with over 273 entries, 78% of game studios support permanent remote work (Dudok de Wit).

Conclusion

A culmination of so much of this is "treating humans like humans," or the platinum rule – find out how others want to be treated, and then treat them as such. Common themes across all the points put forward are respect for others, self-education, and approaching interactions, culture, and development itself with a growth mindset.

Chapter V.

"We're Not There Yet"

Anecdotally, the most common descriptor of the state of representation and IDEA in the Gaming Industrial Complex is "we're not there yet." It is met by marginalized individuals with groans and eye rolls at industry-related social events and polite, pursed-lip nods of acknowledgement in the corporate environment. At its core, it is a charitable way to say "we are not an equitable industry" without taking on legal liability. However, almost a decade after the phrase was said to me in an interview for a junior position when I inquired about how many women worked in the studio, I repeat: "We're not there yet." The operative word in the phrase, though, is "yet." It morphs the phrase from a confession to intention to act. There is hard work that has begun, and it needs to not only continue, but pick up speed and large scale buy-in until it is completely normalized. This looks like the redundancy of employee resource groups focused on advocacy for the marginalized, not because of lack of support, but because advocacy and equality are unchallenged. This looks like the end of sexual harassment scandal articles, not because the victims have been silenced and erased, but because there are healthy pipelines to appropriately punish offenders rather than victims. This looks like a games industry comprised of a labor force that resembles the general populace and which influences hiring, retention, and game content. What the games will look like, I can't even begin to provide a description to do justice. That lies in the hearts, minds, and imaginations of the developers of a changed culture: inclusive, diverse, accessible, and psychologically safe,

so and the once-imposed limitations governed by reluctance and aversion to chase an

equitable video game industry are removed.

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