Diversity in Video Games: The Personal Experience of Gamers

Rebecca Ruggles
Department of Geography and Anthropology

Abstract

Diversity in video games has often been ignored or caricatured such as in Final Fantasy VII, where the main character, Barret Wallace, is portrayed as African American (Figure 2), or in the beloved franchise Mario Brothers (Figure 1), where two Italian stereotypes are the main characters. Video games are now big business, impacting almost every facet of American society and earning more than $91.5 billion dollars annually according to retail revenue of the U.S. video game industry from February 2016 to February 2018. This research explores how diverse A games portray character identities and why these portrayals may be changing? Data comes from seven semi-structured interviews with gamers about their experiences and perceptions about how diversity in video games affects their views about and enjoyment of the games they play. Do diverse characters enhance their gaming experience? Do they choose games that reflect their own cultural identity better? Furthermore, through a content analysis of three popular video game online forums, posts were analyzed to see what people are saying about increased character diversity online. I hypothesized that how diversity is portrayed in current games can have either a positive or negative perception of cultural identity among gamers (Table 1). With how much video game franchises are expanding, and as they try and capture more market share among diverse players, game designers are adding more character options for race, hair, body type, gender, and facial appearance. Public opinion is key to discovering if game companies are helping or hindering the intersectionality of cultural identity, gaming, and diversity.

Methods

The method used for this research involved non-probability sampling. Since I required current gamers’ views, opinions, and experiences around diversity in video games, I conducted semi-structured interviews. Selection criteria included gamers who had played franchise video games within the last five years. I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with gamers from KSU’s e-sports membership since it was convenient to find gamers willing to be interviewed. I had gone at what was referred to as the “peak” hour which was between 4:5 pm since most members were hanging out after class and playing games in the lobby area of the student center of the Marietta campus. All the people that were interviewed had been given a consent form and a sheet with the questions so they would understand what the interview was about. Furthermore, a content analysis was done on video game forums over the last five years. If the forum had over a hundred posts, only the first hundred original comments were counted and analyzed.

Findings

Of the seven people that I was able to interview, two were female, one identifying as non-binary, only one person above the age of 25, and only one person who identified as non-white. The main topics that were brought up by the interviewees were about gender and race in video games. Many of them had stated, when asked, that they would like more visibility for the LGBT community, but were unsure how. Five out of the seven expressed that they felt uncomfortable playing a female character that appears in skimpy clothing or with overly large breasts. One interviewee stated, “but then the bartender’s boobs are like perpetually bouncing and like there’s like fifty animators that are just like that ‘gotta get that right’. The people I played it made it funny, but at the same time, I would be annoyed if the character that I was playing was like that” (C.S., interview, March 21, 2018). All participants expressed that they would like to have more racial diversity along with 42.5% of the internet forums viewing increased diversity positively (Table 1); three interviewees specified a preference for black characters. Three of the seven interviewees believe that reaching out on social media has helped bring changes to video game character identity. Only one person believed that major industry titles were not progressing while the other six believed that character identities will continue to diversify.

Conclusion

People overall seem excited to have diversity in their gaming experiences (Table 1), but many do not want it added to video games if it is being done simply for the sake of “checking a box”. Diversity does not seem to be affecting the businesses bottom line, and in fact may be enhancing sales and appeal (Johnson 2016). The idea that only a certain race, gender, or sexual orientation are portrayed may be the reason for this. Instead, diversity can be seen as a marketing strategy to attract more players, and in turn, more money for the company. Adolescents are influenced by what their peers are playing, and may be more excited by the diversity that is being added to games. This can lead to more inclusion of diversity in the video game industry.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr. Brandon D. Lundy for advisement and assistance throughout this research project.

“Hey so to the people bawwing because they’re a buncha bigots- It isn’t some forced agenda. They’re expanding the universe of OW, giving background stories and Tracer just happens to be a lesbian. I love how she can be in a buncha porno movies and that’s fine but then she’s off-handedly shown enjoying xmas with her girlfriend and suddenly it’s forced agenda” (Wolfy, Online Forum, posted December 20, 2016).

Table 1. Identity-based Topics Most Discussed in Video Game Forums, N = 219

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>% Mentioned</th>
<th>Exemplar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>“How many will not play Overwatch heroes because of their skin colour or sex? I’ll go with none...” (WyanDuffy, Online Forum, posted March 15, 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>“Assassin's Creed not offering female assassins in multiplayer was stupid and shortsighted” (BigSocrates, Online Forum, posted March 15, 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
<td>“The fact that she's gay shouldn't change anything and won't change anything. I just thought it was a nice touch” (Kagrenac, Online Forum, posted December 20, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>“It's pretty bleak. And Walking Dead is the only one that manages to escape black stereotypes (though in the other games they're mostly part of the gay 1 guess)” (Luca72, Online Forum, posted August 3, 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>“I didn’t realize I’d get so much hate from a thank you &gt;&gt;&gt; but it is what it is” (Kagrenac, Online Forum, posted December 20, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trolling</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>“CHEERS LOVE, THE CALVALYRES QUEER” (Nesquis, Online Forum, posted December 20, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>“Tracer and her girlfriend look so happy and cute together. I hope we’ll see more relationships, not only the romantic ones” (Kamienw, Online Forum, posted December 20, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>“No one cares about you or your girlfriend” (Sonichlyn, Online Forum, posted December 20, 2016)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


Figure 1. Mario and Luigi Figures by Alex Fotos; Source: http://www.pixabay.com/en/mario-1557240/

Figure 2. Barret Wallace by Final Fantasy VII; Source: http://finalfantasy.wikia.com/wiki/Barret_Wallace

“Hey so to the people bawwing because they’re a buncha bigots- It isn’t some forced agenda. They’re expanding the universe of OW, giving background stories and Tracer just happens to be a lesbian. I love how she can be in a buncha porno movies and that’s fine but then she’s off-handedly shown enjoying xmas with her girlfriend and suddenly it’s forced agenda” (Wolfy, Online Forum, posted December 20, 2016).

“These are the same people that leave negative comments and reviews in mass for any game or article or whatever having any mention of LGBTQ subjects or characters and call those that defend them SJW’s (social justice warriors) like anyone actually takes that as an insult” (fatalabanana, Online Forum, posted March 30, 2017).

“Hey so to the people bawwing because they’re a buncha bigots- It isn’t some forced agenda. They’re expanding the universe of OW, giving background stories and Tracer just happens to be a lesbian. I love how she can be in a buncha porno movies and that’s fine but then she’s off-handedly shown enjoying xmas with her girlfriend and suddenly it’s forced agenda” (Wolfy, Online Forum, posted December 20, 2016).

“These are the same people that leave negative comments and reviews in mass for any game or article or whatever having any mention of LGBTQ subjects or characters and call those that defend them SJW’s (social justice warriors) like anyone actually takes that as an insult” (fatalabanana, Online Forum, posted March 30, 2017).