

Reflecting on Representation: Facilitating Nuanced Discussions of Diversity

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Shaw (2015) states that research around the representation of identities in videogames over-simplifies depictions as being either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, thus limiting the nuance of the conversations we can have on the topic of diversity. However, for scholars to broaden their approach, more options for language around representation and diversity needs to be established.

In their independent research, both authors have established frameworks and taxonomies to be used when analysing representations in pre-existing videogames or examining our own creative output. Together, these approaches to researching representation can give scholars new language for describing the societal impact of how diversity is depicted in videogames.

Although our individual approaches differ, they were inspired by similar research questions—and gaps in the existing scholarly discourse. Barker (forthcoming) was inspired by the research question ‘How can I develop serious games that help to better represent characters with chronic health conditions?’, while Cole (forthcoming) was responding to the question, ‘How do I represent diverse identities in my creative work?’.

Upon reflecting on this question and the lack of nuance in existing academic discourse around representation, Barker (forthcoming) presented four investigative lenses as part of his doctoral research—emotion, authenticity, significance, and interactivity—which provide ways to examine depictions of diverse identifiers in videogames and ‘consider different aspects of impacts of representation’. These ‘EASI lenses’ each includes a series of reflective questions, which can be used by analysts or designers to view a videogame from different perspectives. For example, the emotion lens lists questions including ‘what is the intended emotional experience of the player?’ and ‘does each design element enhance (or detract) from the intended emotional experience?’

Alternatively, Cole (forthcoming) created a framework consisting of three spectrums that can be used to describe videogame representation in more nuanced ways than ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ assumptions allow. This framework—described as ‘Categories of Representation’—consists of ‘central or incidental’, ‘explicit or implicit’, and ‘fixed or player-centric’ categories. These pairs of descriptors are designed to ‘inspire the creation

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of diverse characters with nuanced identities, while avoiding tokenism and introducing complexity’.

There are some similarities between the EASI lenses and Categories of Representation, with interactivity relating to the spectrum of fixed – player-centric and significance connecting with the spectrum of central – incidental. However, there are also clear differences, with emotion being dissimilar to any of the categories covered in the Categories of Representation framework.

This research will demonstrate how the EASI lenses, the Categories of Representation, and other upcoming frameworks can be used to analyse representations of diversity in pre-existing videogames and can be applied as a reflective tool to the creation of our own creative work. It is only by exploring the intersections between research approaches—and therefore identities—that we will be able to find language that allows for a complex, nuanced exploration of representation in videogames.

BIO

Dakoda Barker is a teacher, researcher, and award-winning game designer. His critical and creative work explores the interplay between videogames and chronic health conditions, and seeks to challenge the status quo. He is a director of Queerly Represent Me, a not-for-profit championing diverse representation in videogames, where he also works as a consultant on representation of indigenous Australians and chronic health conditions.

Dr Alayna Cole is a sessional course coordinator and lecturer in Serious Games at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She holds a doctorate in Creative Arts (Creative Writing) and has broad research interests, but is primarily focused on creating and analysing narratives that improve diverse representation, particularly of gender and sexuality. She is managing director of Queerly Represent Me, where she is currently researching the representation of queer identities in games and the games industry.

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