A Markus of the Times: Misspelling Female Videogame Character Names in the News

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ABSTRACT

Journalists have played a pivotal role in recent years in mounting public pressure against exclusionary practices in the videogames industry and male-dominated "hegemonic games culture" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2007). In part, this has involved overtly praising the inclusion of female characters, especially in the first- and third-person shooter genres that tend to favour male characters. Yet, my broader investigation of news framing around gender in shooter videogames across 10 news outlets found efforts to positively position diversity were often undermined by subtle (and likely unintentional) choices, as in misspelling female character names at a much higher rate than their male counterparts. Thus, this paper considers the inexplicable frequency with which journalists misspell the names of female videogame characters and discusses how this seemingly innocent error elides progress and reinforces the male-dominant status quo of the genres.

Keywords

News framing, gender norms, first- and third-person shooters, inclusivity, diversity

INTRODUCTION

Videogames have long been socially constructed as masculine and male-dominated, especially the first- and third-person shooter genres (e.g. Paaßen et al., 2017). This is now changing to some extent, with diversity becoming an increasing priority for videogame developers. Journalists have played a pivotal role in this shift, mounting public pressure against exclusionary practices in the videogames industry and "hegemonic games culture" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2007). In part, the push for gender diversity has involved praising the inclusion of female characters, particularly in the shooter genres that tend to favour male characters. Yet, my broader investigation of news framing around gender in shooter videogames found efforts to positively position diversity were often undermined by subtle (and likely unintentional) choices that, instead, served to reinforce the male-dominant status quo of the genres and gaming more broadly.

This paper investigates these subtle choices, focusing on the inexplicable frequency with which journalists misspell the names of female videogame characters compared to their male counterparts. It draws on 725 articles that emphasise the issue of gender in the Call of Duty, Gears of War and/or Overwatch series from a combination of 10 mainstream and specialist news outlets, but narrowly discusses the 2.3% that misspell prominent female characters' names. These female characters include Kait (various) in *Gears of War 4*, Ilona ("Illona") in *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* and Ana ("Anna") in *Overwatch*. In contrast, the sample included only one comparable misspelling of a male character's name—which was significant in itself for being Del in *Gears of War 4*, a man of colour.

In examining the misspelling of these character names, this paper draws on the broader scholarly literature about news accuracy to also consider many possible (but unsatisfying) explanations. Such literature has long tried to understand the existence and effects of inaccuracies, but often emphasises the source's perception of error (e.g. Blankenburg, 1970; Maier, 2005; Palmer, 2013) and simultaneously investigates typographical and interpretive inaccuracies (e.g. Berry, 1967). For this study of videogame news, the data is limited to the concrete misspelling of character names and, for obvious reasons, is more about the context of the error than how *Overwatch*'s Ana feels about the mistake.

It would be easy to frame this misspelling of female videogame character names as a series of trivial, innocent and unconnected mistakes. This is especially the case in light of academic studies that find the sources themselves tend to downplay errors, particularly those of a typographical nature, when the errors do not interfere with the overall meaning or purpose of the news story (Maier, 2005, 543; Palmer, 2013). As the sampled articles are either explicitly celebrating or at least bothering to mention these female characters (when they could easily be omitted if they were considered peripheral), it is hard to argue that minor misspelling is significant or detracts from an otherwise positive story. But the academic literature suggests readers do notice errors and that such inaccuracy, even when the source in question is "remarkably tolerant of error" (Maier, 2005, 543), shapes a reader's understanding and/or damages the credibility of the outlet to audiences.

Ultimately, the proposed reasons for the errors range from encroaching deadlines that promote copy-editing sloppiness (in which case female characters are merely unlucky) to blatant sexism (unlikely, given the context of the news stories). More convincingly, however, Blankenburg (1970) highlights the level of familiarity between journalist and source as a significant contributor. Although this possibility is just as practical as the first, in that of course a closer relationship between journalist and source or subject would reduce errors, the implication that female character names are potentially less familiar to videogames journalists is nevertheless troubling for what it says about progress.

As a result, a closer examination of this misspelling phenomenon can provide insight into how the videogames themselves are (or are not) evolving and, simultaneously, indicate how the culture surrounding videogames is (or is not) shifting towards greater inclusivity. Yet, these seemingly innocent mistakes are not exclusively a way to gauge progress, as the news both shapes and is shaped by public perception. Thus, these errors have the worrying effect of framing female characters as being somehow lesser than their correctly named male counterparts and, so, each inequitable error snowballs to reinforce the male-dominant status quo of the shooter genres and gaming more broadly.

BIO
Erin Maclean is a PhD candidate, tutor and journalist based at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. She is interested in intersections between popular culture and journalism. Her thesis focuses on the tensions that arise in the news and gaming communities as popular shooter videogames evolve in the way they represent gender.

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