

“Boys Wouldn’t Find it Believable”: How Realism Intersects with Female Inclusion in Shooter Videogames

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INTRODUCTION

Women have long struggled to be meaningfully represented in videogames. Analyses of videogame content and paratexts frequently indicate female characters are scarce, minimised, sexualised or stereotyped (e.g. Beasley and Collins Standley 2002; Behm-Morawitz 2017; Burgess et al. 2007; Dietz 1998; Downs and Smith 2010; Dunlop 2007; Ivory 2006; Martins et al. 2009; Miller and Summers 2007; Provenzo 1991; Scharrer 2004). Although some genres tend to be more inclusive than others (Wohn, 2011), those privileged in “hegemonic games culture” (Dovey & Kennedy 2007)—like first- and third-person shooters (see Lynch et al. 2016, 577)—are known for being especially masculine and exclusionary. But my doctoral work suggests popular shooter videogames are evolving away from gendered exclusion, with a marked rise in recent years of female characters in lead, supporting and player-determined roles. Given this trajectory towards inclusivity, it is more important now than ever before to understand how women are included and excluded. Existing research correlates in-game exclusion with the broader social context in which videogames are made (e.g. Near, 2013), so this paper instead examines the specific discursive barriers videogame women face.

This paper narrowly focuses on barriers pertaining to realism—a key point of tension in defending both the inclusion and exclusion of female characters that emerged in my ongoing research about gendered news discourses. To observe cues about how gender relates to forms of realism, I first look critically at the content of three shooter videogame series: Call of Duty, Gears of War and Overwatch. For the majority of this paper, however, I explore 62 news articles—a subset of a more comprehensive sample about gender in these videogame series from 10 news outlets—that refer to realism, reality, plausibility, authenticity, believability or historical accuracy. In doing so, I confront the ambiguous ideas of realism and realistic-ness (as defined by Galloway 2006) as they intersect with gender. This allows me to unpack how these common discourses are invoked to substantiate conflicting perspectives on inclusion. Although my scope is limited to how realism relates to female characters, there are inextricable links to age, sexuality, race and non-binary gender inclusion. As such, the study has implications for other forms of inclusion.

My analysis shows that realism and realistic-ness are often conflated in news articles but are linked to the inclusion of female characters in markedly different ways. Early Call of Duty titles, for example, are positioned as realistic and demonstrate such an emphasis with graphical fidelity, technological verisimilitude and by engaging with conventional war iconography (see Kontour 2011; Payne 2012). Accompanying this

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realistic-ness is the absence or minimisation of female characters, even in situations where their presence is compatible with accuracy. In the news sample, this general exclusion of women is usually explained as yet another way of the videogame being believable, best exemplified when one of Call of Duty's competitors did not include female soldiers in multiplayer because "boys wouldn't find it believable" (Lemon 2016). Interestingly, the Call of Duty series became more inclusive of female soldiers and supporting characters when it embraced fantastic settings and sometimes even the supernatural. Indeed, Gears of War and Overwatch feature more fantastic worlds than most Call of Duty titles, but they have greater claims on Galloway's (2006) idea of realism as a form of social reality or "fidelity of context" (78) for players. Rather than create a realness of physicality, history and technology, these franchises embrace a realism of social circumstances in which "normal things are normal" (Kaplan, quoted in Blake 2017, par. 9). That means, relevantly for this paper, representing marginalised communities and the diversity of people (see Galloway 2004). In this spirit, news articles about Gears of War and Overwatch tend to substantiate the inclusion of female characters by appealing to what is socially normal as a meaningful type of realism and authenticity—distinct from the lack of realistic-ness that comes with chainsaw guns, freeze rays and talking gorillas on the frontline. Tentatively, these case studies indicate that, despite their frequent conflation, realistic-ness is commonly used to exclude women from shooter videogames and realism is more often invoked to praise the inclusion of female characters.

BIO

Erin Maclean is a PhD candidate and tutor based at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. She is interested in intersections between popular culture, journalism and social issues. 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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