

# Beyond “Representation”: Shooter Videogames and Mediated Feminisms in News Discourse

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Where issues of gender in videogames once struggled to capture widespread public attention, the past decade has seen feminism develop a “new luminosity” (Gill 2016, 614) that is also characteristic of popular culture more broadly. That does not mean the gendered problems of so-called hegemonic games culture cease to exist; rather, the landscape in which we think about gender has shifted to be more open to these conversations, particularly about the inclusion of women. This new luminosity has also fostered greater attentiveness to emerging concerns about intersectionality and the material conditions of videogame production (e.g. Chess 2020; Kafai et al. 2016; Kocurek 2020; Shaw 2017), which indicates quite a departure from the concerns that drove the girls’ games movement of the 1990s or the interest in Tomb Raider’s Lara Croft as a cultural touchstone during that same time. According to Shaw (2017), “from starting conversations about the importance of representation in games, period, we are now in a better place to think critically about what inclusion and representation mean” (67). This paper considers this trajectory of feminist zeitgeist in terms of news discourse and, building on my previous work (e.g. Maclean 2022), begins to unpack the many different kinds of mediated feminisms in play over time.

To that end, this paper examines the news discourse around two uniquely positioned case studies in the traditionally masculine and male-dominated first-person shooter genre: Call of Duty (2003–2023) and Overwatch (2016–2022). These popular franchises make for a number of interesting comparisons, in part because gender diversity has been at the forefront of media discussion about specific instalments. Moreover, their developers all belong to Activision Blizzard—a company that has attracted public condemnation in recent years for allegations of sexual harassment and worker mistreatment behind the scenes. Where the Overwatch franchise seems to bookend two particular feminist moments (during 2016 and 2022), Call of Duty instead spans a much longer and more tumultuous period of gendered debate. There is thus opportunity here to understand the ways in which mediated feminisms “exist in tension with each other” (Gill 2016, 610) and tend to be “profoundly uneven” (615) in their visibility. To anchor this qualitative analysis, the paper also examines a large sample of news articles and reviews about videogames in the two franchises to provide a timeline of the rising and falling usage of “representation” as a key term.

Even though “popular feminisms are typically those that become visible precisely because they do not challenge deep structures of inequities” (Banet-Weiser et al.

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2020, 13), what ultimately emerges from the media accounts is a marked change in which kinds of mediated feminism circulate and are allowed to be visible in news discourse. The data from the mid-2010s, for example, emphasise the successes of female character representation—and, in doing so, speak to a fairly polite and corporate-friendly feminism, underpinned by neoliberal ideals. In apparent contrast, the contemporary Call of Duty and Overwatch data help make the argument that today’s feminist discourse tends to be articulated as a more critical feminism, one that is invested in intersectionality and the material conditions of videogame production over in-game representation. Yet, these recent shifts do not necessarily suggest a moving “beyond” representation in conversations about gender and videogames. Rather than supersede or displace that corporate-friendly feminism, the more critical feminisms of today point to a landscape—the same one in which feminism has developed that new luminosity—that appears to be increasingly complex and cyclical.

## BIO

Dr Erin Maclean is an early career researcher in the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research at Griffith University. With a background in journalism, she is interested in the intersections between popular media, journalism and social issues. Her recent work has focused on the tensions that arise in news as shooter videogames evolve in the way they represent gender. Erin is Vice President of DiGRA Australia and also a Technical Editor for the *Journal of Games Criticism*.

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