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REPRESENTATION AND TOKENISM - THE FIGHT FOR LGBT
VISIBILITY IN VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

The stigma and negative stereotypes that can be the result of misrepresentation of minority groups of people have been very widely noticed amid the pivotal switch from traditionalism to a more inclusive and diverse media platform. This dissertation addresses the representation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as well as anyone else who falls under the LGBT umbrella to explore the potential reasons as to why an increase in positive representation for these groups has become such a taboo topic in recent years. The study will use a mix of academic journals and research pieces to study the effects of the related topics on the gaming industry that have been evident for not only the past few years but the past decade. These studies will serve as context towards the overarching issues being discussed, used in combination with hard statistical evidence surrounding the matter of online harassment specifically experienced by LGBT players. The dissertation will then move away from the secondary research and dialogues to take a more hands-on approach, through first-hand research gathered by online survey. The survey will serve as an anchor point for the branching discussion on the overall effect of representation on the experience for LGBT gamers, and why it can be an important movement to push for further positive inclusion of more diverse casts and character archetypes.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The conversation about representation and the dissection of harmful stereotypes of the past is not a new topic. Gaming is an ever-changing industry; it is constantly evolving and redefining what it means to be a gamer. It is no surprise that academics and researchers are now turning their attention towards the miscommunication and misrepresentation of minority groups in a heteronormative world; an issue that has only risen in commonality from the past decade.

The idea that years of distorting the image of not only racial minorities but also members of the LGBT community has warped the population's picture of those around them is not a farfetched conclusion. Although recent years have given wind to a host of more culturally diverse casts, academics and public figures of the gaming community believe there is more work that can be done. As Deere, a popular LGBT gaming twitch streamer argues on multiple occasions through Twitter: "You can be partnered and still talk about how Twitch needs a Trans tag" (2021); this highlights the effect heteronormativity and miscommunication has on the urgency or confidence in speaking out that figureheads and company representatives often showcase when it comes to the representation and equality of minorities.

Representation has become a hot topic of debate in 2021 with games such as *The Last Of Us II* (2020) putting the issue at the forefront. Gamers are now questioning whether or not representation needs to be a point of criticism for video game companies. These discussions are most often conducted within communities and closed threads but these debates exist in every modern gaming space.

1.1 - AIMS & HYPOTHESIS

This study aims to explore the social reasons behind gamers' interest in the growth of positive Representation of marginalised groups of people whether it be through the inclusion of more culturally diverse nationalities of cast members or the acknowledgment of gender identities and the fluidity of sexuality. The introduction gives context to this by explaining the three most common talking points related to Representation in the gaming industry.

1. What is the difference between good and bad representation?
2. How new is representation as a debate and how long has it been of relevance?
3. To what extent does meaningful representation help to make gamers feel comfortable about themselves and others?

The hypotheses are divided similarly into three distinct points of interest, it is anticipated that despite the push for positive representation being on the increase, it is possible many early video game inclusions and recurring stereotypes may have caused a divide between gamers; making it a lot harder to find support where it is needed for representation to become a mainstream priority.

1. Representation can be both beneficial and a cause for negative consequences.
2. The topic of representation is not new and has only risen in popularity for the past decade.
3. Positive representation can influence the minds of the majority, making them more understanding and sympathetic to minority gamers' struggles.

1.2 - CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter 1 jumps directly into the literature review, dividing into two segments:

Representation or Tokenism and *The Fight for Representation*. The chapter aims to provide an insight into the importance and relevance of representation in video games as a topic and to shine a light on the real-world effects of both positive and negative inclusion.

The start of Chapter 2 serves as an introduction to the topic as a whole. The main points of discussion will include deep, resolute explorations into the definition and different forms of Representation that often appear in the media online. With multiple academic pieces journeying into the discussion around the common ways that representation has been provided, and how it continues to be a relevant point of importance when it comes to equality and the inclusivity of the gaming industry. It will also provide examples of tokenism, as well as explanations on what tokenism is and how it can be identified. The chapter will also present the two topics against one another to compare and contrast before finally taking a look at what is already represented in the video game industry as the 'norm', and highlighting the areas that require improvement when it comes to inclusivity.

Chapter 2 then forwards itself onto the fight for representation. This section will focus more on the importance of representation itself and challenge the argument that it's not necessary under certain circumstances. The chapter will also analyse video game companies, begging the question of why representation is so scarce or seemingly a 'risk' to game developers. This section will then take a look at a real-world example of representation in a modern video game, looking into the response, reactions, and how such representation came to be; with this opening a conversation about what makes representation feel 'honest' and genuine.

Towards the end of Chapter 2, the review takes a look at *Naughty Dog's The Last Of Us* as a case study of a positive form of representation showcased in most notably, the modern gaming industry. It will look at how the representation was showcased, as well as its effect on the gaming community whilst delving into the deeper conversation about the developers' intentions and why that representation came to be.

Chapter 3 presents my methodology for the research on this topic. It explains how I chose my method of posting an online survey and the reasons behind my disinterest in alternative options. It is also discussed how each question was structured and the choices that were made on whether to provide open-ended questions or closed-ended depending on the context or preferred outcome following the research by Taylor and Francis group (2017); the ability for respondents to answer honestly due to the approach of research is also outlined. This explanation of the methodology takes into account the potential disadvantages and explains how I accounted for it.

In Chapter 4, the key results from my research are presented alongside a result-by-result analysis. This chapter displays the common responses from participants alongside the more unorthodox answers to try to gain an understanding of the different arguments that could be made for both sides of the debate. The findings all relate to how representation can be important to gamers as individuals, as well as how background and identity can influence one's grasp of the relevance or requirement felt for inclusivity to be a mainstream practice.

In the concluding chapter, the key findings are summarised broadly and the underlying themes are elaborated on; the analysis turns to a dialogue about what the results could suggest

about the state of gaming as a whole, as well as what an ideal future could be for LGBT gamers.

CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 - REPRESENTATION OR TOKENISM?

With the ever-growing world that is the gaming industry, there is never a moment without a fresh topic of debate. The rise of the popularised culture surrounding the fluidity and diversity of sexuality and gender has given wind to a conversation of how different groups are represented, and the socio-economic effects that it has had on the industry as a whole in recent years. As is the case with most forms of media, video games hold cultural and semiotic meanings with messages that require decoding and cultural knowledge to understand them (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 19), and so any deliberation on the topic can quickly slope into a complex and sometimes subjective argument about who representation is important to and why it is even a subject to be brought up.

The increase and diversification of video game audiences in the past decade has led to an ever-growing demand for communities to be represented. Representation, in the context of video games, can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Visual representation, in which the gamer will be able to relate to a physical attribute of a character, is the most common type of representation. Skin colour, gender, and size are amongst a few examples. Despite it being one of the most obvious forms people can relate to characters in video games, visual signs and images carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted (Hall, 2013, p. 5). Representation may also be portrayed as a process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning (Hall, 2013, p. 45). In this case, by which to present an idea or notion about a perceived group of individuals or marginalised bracket to encourage a positive movement in not only how society views one another, but how one could view oneself.

Consumers of media products, whether that be television, film, or the plotline of a video game, may self-identify with the anchoring of the images and the specific context, typically a storyline. Discourse representation relies on self-identification, rather than static definitions applied from the outside (Shaw, p .29). Language allows the consumer to draw parallels to their own experiences and form an emotional connection. However, as criticised by Foucault (2002), textual relativism can come dangerously close to reducing people's lived experiences to merely narratives.

Queer people are known for consuming content that indulges in these readings or hosts queer potential. We financially support the content we hope will represent us (Sender, 1999, p. 190). Unfortunately, such a sequence of events can not always bring about a positive outcome for LGBT individuals; it sometimes becomes a construct of exploitation.

Danae Clark (1991) worries that "gay window advertising is a logical outgrowth of capitalist development, one which presumably will lead to more direct forms of marketing in the future" (p. 379).

The debate around meaningful representation has been going ongoing for years, with many scholars and leaders in minority communities debating the true value of tokenism. Tokenism can be defined by the practice of cherry-picking a handful of societally underrepresented individuals, as a perfunctory effort to appear diverse and representative of the larger society (Wilks-Harper, 2016). Hall (1966, p. 37) argues that tokenism could be the result of the industry's attitude towards its queer audiences; that it does not have to address these markets, as they are already buying the product.

Last year, *Blizzard* game *Overwatch* was met with a mixed reception after revealing a character who was not only in the original roster but is also a very prominent character featured in promotional material, to have had homosexual relations in the story. As *Blizzard* forum user DOOMGUY argues: "Soldier 76 being gay is bad because it's so painfully obvious blizzard did it as a PR stunt and had nothing to do with character development in mind". The user also states that "we don't see gay people being represented. We see how companies can abuse and take advantage of LGBT related decisions because of the traffic it generates".

Tokenism can be a subjective perspective to have on representation in video games. In contrast, many fans of the games applauded *Blizzard* for finally adding their first male, gay character. In an opinion piece for *Forbes*, columnist Paul Tassi applauded the leading video game company, saying: "So to have both Tracer and Soldier: 76 be gay, that's rather significant in an industry where almost no major gaming icons are confirmed to be LGBTQ. The list is painfully short, and the highest-profile character on it is probably Ellie from *The Last of Us*". It's clear from these polarising opinions that some consumers are happy to have any form of recognition whereas others crave a deeper, more meaningful form of representation.

Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series was applauded by many as a figure for the diversification of video game protagonists, standing out in a market of franchises with male-lead characters. Her class, race, sexuality, and gender presentation were made normative, and thus, the only challenge she posed to the mainstream game representation was in her performance of gendered labour (Shaw, 2015, p. 59). Whilst Lara Croft's inception was ground-breaking in relation to how women were portrayed in video games, many argued that

rather than send a message of women empowerment, it served more as a means to intensify appeal to the male market. Conforming to the stereotypical perceptions of female beauty (Schott & Horrell, 2000), Core Design relied on objectification rather than identification (Mikula, 2010, p. 79) to accentuate its relevance in comparison to competitor series. Shaw argues that whilst it was certainly a unique spectacle to feature a female protagonist at the time, Core Design's intentions clearly demonstrate a problematic conflation of online role-playing and identification with closed-game avatars.

For the longest time, it was very rare to see any other diverse groups or individuals represented in the industry; Queer identities were rarely presented by the mainstream Western media before the 1960s (Dhoest, 2016, p. 691). Sadly, some would suggest this is still broadly the case in the modern-day industry. As Cassell and Jenkins noted, when it comes to LGBT representation, often less gender normative or socially privileged (including lower class and racial minorities) members of the community are often excluded from media visibility, or at least given limited and problematic representation (2000, p. 248).

Brooks and Hébert's study on gender, race, and media representation draws up the conclusion that when whiteness is comfortable in its hegemony, it constructs the other as strange or different and itself as the norm (p. 502). This could shine a light on the implication that whiteness as a whole is more broadly presented within all forms of media, as well as a harsh insight into why this could be the case. Pop culture has the potential to affect social change (Godsil, MacFarlane & Sheppard, P.22, 2016), so if more companies began to implement world-reflecting diversity in their video games, we could also see positive change in the real world.

2.2 - THE FIGHT FOR REPRESENTATION

The debate around the importance of representation is abundant within LGBT spaces and online gaming communities, with many members of the specific groups in question opting to share anecdotal evidence on what representation means to them as an individual. That being said, it can sometimes be hard for unaffected parties to experience sympathy on the matter, as they are not directly hindered by it. However, as Dhoest argues, not only do such widely available representations help straight audiences to 'picture' LGBT people, but they also help LGBT people to construct self-images and identities (2015). Representation matters because it has an impact on how groups see themselves and how others see them; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation (Dyer, 1993a).

Video games, like other forms of popular culture, have potentially powerful effects on our perceptions of immigrants and people of color (Godsil, MacFarlane, Sheppard, 2016, p. 16). Interestingly, arguments for the representation of minorities rely on making the games more realistic (Shaw, 2010). Many gamers' calls for representation are based on an ethos that video games should still be reflective of the real world, despite engaging in often, a world of fantasy. They want game developers to strike a balance of fiction with their real-life personal experiences.

A more productive approach to demands for representation is to normalise video games for all audiences, finding ways to emphasise their 'everydayness' in contemporary media culture (Hall). Culture has always been a means to create a perceived difference on the basis of inclusion and exclusion (Horn, 2009), so by including a diverse group of characters, it can help achieve 'everyday' representation that many long for. The way we play is the way we

understand the world (Embrick, Wright, Lukacs, 2012), so an industry that relies on stereotypes and panders to the mass market, is not representative of real life.

Such discussion has also highlighted a glaring circulation of today's modern world; there is still an underlying hesitancy by the industry to increase diversity in the actual products and industry as a whole (Shaw, 2009, p. 239-240). Queer content tends to be optional when it comes to its inclusion in video games; some game content may include gay characters, but the industry does not make games for gay gamers (Hall). This leaves many LGBT players feeling like they are always an afterthought, which is often a supported feeling, with many games only including LGBT characters or other minorities as a side character simply existing to be the butt of a joke.

The lack of representation of marginalised groups in video games can usually be attributed to the fact that the gamer market, at least in Europe and North America, is constructed as primarily young, heterosexual, white/Anglo, and male. Such hesitancy is largely driven by the same financial motivations that guide other industries (Sender, 2003). For example, Lara Croft's inclusion exists solely to appeal to male audiences above leading competitor games.

The masculine prevalence in both the video game development community and audience, for instance, is the main reason given for the sexist portrayal of women in most video games if they are represented at all (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). This could also be attributed to the industry's worry that their sales will be negatively impacted.

The issues were described succinctly by Clive Thomson: “if it’s an explicitly GLBT game, Walmart probably won’t carry it, and that is the kiss of death for mass sales” (as quoted in Needham, 2018, p.36).

Due to an emphasis on achieving sales and appealing to a mass market, monetary decisions are tied to censorship that leads game designers, much like film and TV producers, to relegate queerness "to shadow and stereotypical shorthand" (Chang, 2017 a, p. 235). The pressure to derive profit from products often trumps the priority to express diversity, break social "norms" and create an environment where all feel welcome or seen.

The Last Of Us, however, took a different approach when it released the downloadable side game *The Last Of Us: Left Behind*. The game took the idea of political cowardice and flipped it onto its head, choosing to portray a kiss between female characters, Ellie and Riley. Although the characters' lesbian identity was not explored further until the game's sequel, the inclusion was met with positive responses from the fanbase. Many players uploaded their reactions to the scene to YouTube, showing many gamers' shock and excitement at the sudden representation of a lesbian couple in a mainstream video game. A compilation by *FanReactions* showcases perfectly the impact that such inclusion can have upon a game's players. The reception was evidently positive as *PewDiePie*, whose first reaction was to exclaim "I knew it.. That's so cute" and *TheGirlFromAus* who even broke into tears, ecstatic about the reveal.

Despite *Left Behind*'s queerphobic reactions from some of the game's audience, developers at *Naughty Dog* were defiant in their decision to portray Ellie as a lesbian. The writer of the *Last Of Us* and creator of the characters, Neil Druckmann, shared his insight in an interview with Sal Mattos for the *GayGamer* blog, saying "At the photo booth and the awkward moment there when they almost kiss, the way Riley calls Ellie her 'girl', these things could be taken either way but for me, the sum of their parts is pretty clear". Druckmann later went on

to share more about the decision to make Ellie gay, stating that he "asked someone who is gay on the team questions about experiences they've had, or what they would find offensive or not offensive", showcasing a level of care and sympathy for LGBT people that went into the creation of *Left Behind*'s representation.

The Last Of Us: Left Behind and the later sequel *The Last Of Us II*'s inclusion of two same-sex characters who took on leading roles was also met with a plethora of positivity. An opinion piece for *The Washington Post* describes writer Elise Favis' strong affinity for the characters' story; she writes about how Ellie's coming out story reminded her of her own (2020). Favis writes about her own story of coming out to her father which she feels was closely represented in *The Last Of Us II*, when Ellie came out to her father figure, Joel. The writer then goes on to talk about how the developers did a good job of weaving the narrative into the game during the quieter moments; as not to take away from the gameplay, which could have turned some players away.

Favis also expresses how positive depictions of this vulnerable process can be just as empowering and validating, showing the true effects that positive representation can have on a variety of players, sometimes even strengthening the relatability and realness of a character.

Whilst very rare, there are some examples of respectful and well-implemented forms of LGBT inclusion that showcase how representations have changed significantly in the first decade of the 2000s (Sender, 2006), despite the criticism of media portrayals from lesbians, gay and queer academics (Dhoest). The video game *Bully* (Rockstar, 2006) was a shining example, which garnered media attention not for its display of schoolyard violence but due to its inclusion of the ability for the player's male avatar Jimmy Hopkins to kiss both male and

female characters (Shaw). Such inclusion was met with mixed responses; it was both celebrated and decried by critics. Media coverage began to note that video games were becoming more inclusive in light of the optional homosexuality and bisexuality in *Bully*. The sudden appearance of representation in such an unexpected place was a predominant figurehead in paving the way to a more inclusive, and respectful gaming industry.

The general outlook on the topic of representation became more common, and the small crumbs of representation that came out of the industry shifted towards more positive motivations rather than simple passing side characters and implicit nods to queerness. LGBT romance had a brief spotlight in Bioware games (Needham, 2018) and the surprising *Grand Theft Auto IV* downloadable content, *The Ballad Of Gay Tony* (Rockstar Games, 2009). In spite of such revelations, Shaw raises the question of “Why then, when video games have been a popular medium since the 1970s, are questions about the representation of diverse sexualities and gender identities only now being discussed?”.

CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

For my research into representation, an online survey was conducted. To gather the sample's true feelings regarding LGBT representation and harassment in online video games, a mix of closed and open-ended questions was administered to gather a mix of qualitative and

quantitative data. Due to the ongoing Covid situation and the sensitive nature of discussing sexuality and identity, an online survey felt like the most appropriate research method.

I felt that the level of anonymity that an online survey provided when being promoted in such a public space would allow ample opportunity for samples to be completely honest and share their true thoughts, without the worry of being judged or questioned. As backed up in Taylor and Francis group's 'Research Methods: the Basics: 2nd Edition': There is also no personal influence of the researcher, and embarrassing questions can be asked with a fair chance of getting a true reply (2017). This would surely improve the accuracy of responses towards the survey, allowing for a more valid gathering of research that could be relied on for the drawing of conclusions.

It felt necessary as the survey conductor to provide samples with a fair balance of open-ended and closed-ended questions, with some questions allowing the applicant to write out some personal thoughts and get deeper into their own narratives about the topic but also opting for some questions to be more closed off when more specific and consistent answers are being sought after. Concerning the previously mentioned points, having a mixed bag of question types tends to permit freedom of expression and allow the respondent to qualify their responses (Steven J, Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods, 2015), whilst also providing a method in which to gauge a more prevailing response from interviewees, making it easier to analyse data and pick out a common theme amongst the results.

Where it may have made sense to take part in face-to-face interviews by looking around the local area for people to ask, the topic at hand is niche at best and requires recipients to already be involved in the communities and spaces that it revolves around. It would be

unreliable to ask people who are likely to have no idea what the subject is about these questions, as they are likely to just guess or make up answers. Using an online survey method grants the option of sharing and promoting the assessment in a space that is already suited to respond accurately and give informed responses.

3.1 - RECRUITMENT & SAMPLE

As mentioned in the research question, the study aims to highlight and explore the importance of representation that is felt by individuals, and to ponder what could be done to improve the future of representation and LGBT gaming as a whole. Because of this, it was important to me that I promoted it in related spaces, where I knew I could attract an audience who would be interested in answering my questions in full and as honest as possible. I decided that public social media would be the best place to promote the survey as it allowed me to present it directly to a community that was likely to respond thoroughly.

I chose to create the survey using the online service of Google Forms, as it provided a plethora of features for free such as automatic data sorting into graphs and pie charts, and individual response analysis.

The social media I decided to promote on was Twitter, as I already knew how to present the survey to a related group- the gaming community. This method of promotion would rely on engagement and sharing to spread it around, which I decided was a worthy risk as it could result in being able to gather a lot of data to work with, which I could then narrow down and analyse thoroughly to gather a rough idea about the consensus of the topic. The downside to

this is that I would not have full control over who was responding to the survey, as I could not foresee who the post would spread to on Twitter.

To account for this, I took steps to at least limit the number of participants that would be able to respond to the survey. I planned to leave the survey up for a full 7 days, Friday to Friday, to allow for a good amount of time to pass before closing but without leaving it up to the point where I ended up with too many responses. I also set a maximum number of responses I would allow, in which case I would take the survey down early if it was reached. I chose a limit of 80 participants, as I knew I would be able to get a good amount of quantitative data from this pool of recipients, but would also be able to spend time analysing some of the qualitative data and look into the more personal responses. By the end of the 7 days, the survey had reached 67 responses, and so I closed the survey for analysis.

3.2 - STRUCTURE & PROCEDURE

As previously mentioned, there are a few disadvantages to an anonymous online survey being posted on social media as its main promotion. Namely the fact that there is no full-proof way to ensure that respondents are directly related to the topic at hand, for example, whether or not the people filling in the survey are gamers. To semi-counter this disadvantage, I constructed the start of the survey by opening it with closed and semi-closed questions which are specifically designed to gather information on individual respondents.

Questions such as the participant's nationality, gender identity, and their age group were placed conveniently at the beginning of the survey to create a reference point which could

later be used to apply context to some responses during the analysis phase of the research. Google Docs allows for individual analysis, sorting respondent's questions into a convenient tab where you can view each of their answers despite being anonymous, allowing for answers to be pieced together to build up a picture of the respondent.

After the questions about the individual's identity, I also included some gaming related questions such as "How many hours do you spend on video games?" to capture the idea of how big of a gamer the participants were, I felt that this would be an important factor to take into consideration to account for otherwise having no idea of how much representation would affect them; the level of effect it would have on people is likely to influence their responses. I also asked samples if they had ever been represented in a video game, as this would be useful information to look at concerning the questions surrounding the individual's identity and nationality, namely for those who are part of minority groups in comparison to those that are not.

For the next section, I shifted the survey towards general questions on the topic of representation; such as if the respondent finds representation to be important from their perspective and whether they could list examples of representation with the latter allowing for respondents to think of any response from their head. These sorts of questions would later allow for me to analyse how the individuals' responses could correlate to their identity, and whether or not there is a visual pattern as a result.

I then chose to follow up with an open-ended question that challenges respondents to ask themselves why they feel that they are or are not Represented.

To get an idea of samples' overall opinions on the topic of representation, I followed the last question up with another closed question with a follow-up for the opportunity to elaborate, Asking "Is representation important to you?". I then provided said opportunity with an open-ended question of "Why do you feel this way?". This gives ample space for participants to either elaborate on why they find representation important or why they feel the opposite.

The final question around representation itself was open-ended, targeting the sample's previous responses to allow them to elaborate in their own way, asking whether the respondent could think of any ways in which LGBT representation could be better implemented into video games. This sort of question, being an open-ended question, allows for people already responding in a way favourable to the topic to answer with ease, but to also allow for other respondents who are generally likely to be against the subject to ponder their own thoughts about a context which could allow them to agree or find a common ground.

The survey was then structured in a way that flowed and progressed the topic seamlessly, flowing into a small section on tokenism. To help any respondents who were not familiar with the topic, I included a simplified definition to ensure that they knew what they were answering questions about. This segment only featured three questions, with the first being a simple closed question on whether recipients think tokenism is a good or bad form of representation. This question serves as an opener for the follow-up open question of "Why do you believe this?" which was one of the best opportunities to see different insights into the topics the survey aimed to cover. This question being open gave ample chance to obtain some different point-of-views, regardless of the individual's involvement in the debate.

As a conclusion on tokenism, I asked respondents if they could list any examples of video games where they feel tokenism is employed; I also asked them to explain why they think the mentioned game was an example of tokenism. This would provide a good idea of how relevant the issue of tokenism is, and whether it has a lasting effect on modern industry.

CHAPTER FOUR - RESULTS

4.1 Gamers' relationship with characters

The majority of participants stated they were under 18. Half of the respondents admitted to playing video games for at least 19 hours a week on average, with only 5% claiming to max out their playtime at up to 5 hours.

68.3% reported that they could recall being represented in a Video Game before and only a small number of those responding to the survey were able to list a Video Game they could think of that represented them. Some of which include: *Dead By Daylight*, *Overwatch*, *The Sims*, and *Apex Legends*. One respondent stated, "Most representation is very shallow, and has very little thought put into it. Either only known by people interested in the lore or not known at all". Multiple samples recalled not being able to relate to any characters, due to there not being "many notable gay characters in the media".

90% of respondents agreed that representation was important to them. Many respondents were able to agree that representation is important for the sake of normalising what is often seen as 'weird', for example, one participant said "It's important to change how minorities are viewed in society and how minorities view themselves. Some shared the feeling of 'alienation' from the lacking visibility of their race or identity, and found representation made media more enjoyable because it made them "feel like less of an outsider enjoying media that wasn't necessarily made for me".

Multiple contributors mentioned "usually characters only have one aspect that makes them "diverse" at a time", describing this as a "lack of complex characteristics" and pointed out how "seeing characters I could relate to or who reminded me of myself pushed for my interest in games that I probably would have skipped out on otherwise".

Some disagreed; one respondent admitted: "It just isn't necessary. You don't need someone to relate to in a game. Just play the game and stop worrying about this stuff". Some responses agreed with this idea too, writing that "I don't look for representation in my video games, I look for strong stories or strong gameplay".

Another shared, "I personally don't care. I feel like artists and creators should be able to do whatever they want with their game as long as it's not malicious".

Multiple participants suggested that Video Game companies should hire LGBT designers and people directly involved to be an accurate source of LGBT portrayal, going as far as to say they should "learn from them and consult them, give them more projects so they can set a good bar for representation". Other responses concluded they should "Normalise stories and games that include the LGBT community realistically and non dramatically with other groups of people. But don't make stories about the LGBT to try and represent them, have the stories and games with LGBT characters to add to your story".

A striking 100% of survey participants agreed that overall, more forms of positive representation could help to reduce the stigma surrounding minority figures.

4.2 Gamers' relationship with characters - Analysis

Reviewing the results yielded a lot of valuable information such as the fact that many respondents were below the age of 18. This information is important because it supports the overarching statement that was presented by earlier studies on the topic, that these sorts of issues affect young LGBT gamers the most. This information can be used in conjunction with

the statistics on the amount of hours samples spent on video games, to get an idea of understanding of the connection my respondents had to the issues surrounding representation.

A large number of survey participants felt they could not recall or list being represented in any video games, which could be a sign that there just isn't enough representation in general across many media platforms. The very few who could list themselves being represented also didn't have many positive things to say about the fact; most felt that although they were technically being represented it was either because they were part of the majority, or because they were stuck in there as "the token LGBT/Black person". Respondents who could at least relate to a character did not tend to feel they related for the right reasons, and that it did not solve that feeling of alienation that some experienced; they still felt like they were enjoying content not made for them which just so happened to feature a relatable character.

A vast majority were comfortable saying that they felt representation was important to them and whilst some disagreed, they were in a significant minority with that opinion. The ratio of these opinions could suggest that regardless of who the survey respondents were, or whether they were already vastly represented, they were still able to conclude that representation for others is likely a positive practice. This could stand to oppose the reasonings behind companies' disinterest in providing more inclusivity as it could suggest a shift in the number of gamers who desire to see more representation; the consensus could be changing, and so companies can no longer use the excuse that they need to cater to the majority.

Many of the responses surrounding potential ideas about how LGBT representation could be better implemented were very adamant that representation is about the intention of the developers, and that hiring LGBT writers and designers should always be the way to go about

it. After all, you shouldn't expect somebody who has not experienced something to write an accurate story about it. Furthermore, many survey participants felt that on top of this it was important that when representation comes along it shouldn't be over-exaggerated. This could infer the reasoning behind hiring LGBT staff could be that they would likely know how to include the representation in a way that is normalised and makes sense, rather than being the depiction of what a marginalised person views the LGBT community as.

Despite the results about the importance of representation being a mixed bag, all participants still felt that it was a net positive to try to push for more positive forms of representation. This could be representative of the idea that although the importance of representation can vary based on the context of a video game, as long as it is done with the right intent and communicates the lives of minorities well, it is always a good thing to try to push for.

4.3 The effects of tokenism

80.7% of respondents said tokenism was bad. The reasons for this were varied, with a lot of responses leaning along the lines of tokenism being "fake diversity", as one sample put it: "if you only have one or two minority individuals from a minority group in the mix of the majority, it is still under-representing minorities. while it is closer to representation, tokenism whether it be on the grounds of race, sexuality or gender creates the false appearance of equality in the said video game". Respondents claimed it "trivialises representation" for example through "The black character that always dies first in horror movies, the gay best friend in a rom-com". Some argued that "Tokenism creates stereotypes and "the good ones" mentality" whilst even going on to say There a repetitive connotation that tokenism is bad because it is not done with the intention of "enacting change or fully benefiting related

communities", some arguing that it is "extremely degrading" and makes minorities "feel like pets".

Some respondents disagreed, as one participant put it simply, "Any representation is good". This ideation is further supported by other responses; "I think every little step is welcome. For example, most of the game can just hint if someone is gay in the lore but later they can expand the lore via skins, events, or more added lore".

Overwatch (2016) was a common example provided. Many "felt as though Tracer and Soldier 76's reveal came out of nowhere" and that it didn't really serve a purpose or to add to the story apart from "hey look these characters are gay". A portion of respondents also brought up *Dead By Daylight (2016)* as a point of discussion, with numerous responses bringing up the fact that the game's developers, *Behaviour*, had "a whole statement on including LGBT representation, and it hasn't happened" as well as adding an in-game cosmetic "charm" as the first acknowledgment of queerness even existing, a whole year after the statement.

4.4 The effects of tokenism - Analysis

The statistics on tokenism yielded very interesting, but not exactly surprising results. The majority agreed that tokenism was a negative form of representation, which seems to suggest that those who are familiar with it are mostly staunch in their stance that it is bad (generally). Individual analysis of results seemed to show that the majority of people who felt tokenism was bad also felt representation was very important to them, which could indicate the relation between the two and how those very invested in the fight for representation are very passionate about the topic as a result.

The fact that many participants also felt this way due to it essentially feeling like 'fake diversity' marks a recurring pattern between the importance of representation that is felt, with many of the samples' reasonings behind wanting it directly referencing fake diversity as further incentive to want to represent minorities more accurately. The idea that only including one or two minorities or more specifically a queer character, could feel out of place and very random, even disingenuous, is very heavily supporting through the responses to the survey. It could be inferred that tokenism to many people feels like the opposite of representation, due to it being more of a misrepresentation in a lot of cases; tokenism creates a false appearance of what minority groups look like in reality. Some argued that it "trivialises representation", which brings up an interesting conversation topic about the bigger impact tokenism could be having on the way minorities and their desire for representation are viewed by a white, heteronormative society.

A lot of survey respondents seemed to resonate with the idea that tokenism was most commonly seen through stereotypes; For example "the gay best friend" or "the good ones" mentality, which suggests that queer people who do not act inherently queer are more tolerable to mainstream audiences. This could further allude to the concept that a lot of negative reactions to representations are based on a misunderstanding of minority figures.

Some responses also talked about tokenism in the way that representation is often implemented, arguing that tokenism is easy to spot when you find characters whose entire personality is about them being queer. This supports the argument of misrepresentation, as there are a lot of LGBT people who you wouldn't even be able to single out from heterosexuals / the majority. Such argument could be used as a way of spotting the difference

between the two as although some queer people are very outspoken about their status and may showcase that in their appearance, it could become very telling about a developer's intentions if their only minority characters are very obviously minorities, rather than it being presented nonchalantly.

Many of the survey participants felt that tokenism gave more of a 'pandering' feeling than a genuine show of support for the cause, shown by the persistent idea that tokenism is a degrading form of representation. The example that was recorded stating "it boils our community down to a single character/character trait" is a good representation of the negative connotations tokenism can have about the importance of inclusivity; it inherently results in more pushing of the generic stereotypes surrounding the LGBT community and other minorities.

Though tokenism can have harmful effects when it comes to misrepresentation and stigmatisation, there is a niche section of the community who feel that being so starved of it, any representation is better than none. This was showcased through a couple of samples who argued that even if not the best or most accurate representations of LGBT people, it could be a good way to at least acknowledge these communities and push for them to be a normalised group in the eyes of those who fit into the 'norm'. Though, many who argued this also felt that it would automatically become a negative representation if it showcases minorities in a very negative light. This could suggest tokenism is not inherently a bad practice by video game companies, but that it should always be done to widen mainstream audiences' perception of minority groups, making them more open to the possibility that they could operate similar spaces without it affecting them in any way.

The samples' grievance with the inclusion of queer characters in *Overwatch* seems to highlight a good example of what people see as tokenism. Though partly subjective, the results from the survey would seem to strongly suggest that many people feel the inclusion of *Overwatch's* gay characters was very random or did not serve to improve the lore of the universe. *Overwatch's* very 'out of the blue' inclusion of queer minorities could be used as an example of representation being used as a scapegoat to boost sales or interest towards LGBT gamers. As mentioned, however, some participants felt that no matter how random the representation is, so long as it portrays the minorities in a positive light or 'normalised way' it is still beneficial to the LGBT community to have their sexuality showcased in front of a mainstream audience.

The opposite could be said for other examples that were brought up though, in fact, *Dead by Daylight* was mentioned for very different reasons. Survey respondents spoke about *Dead by Daylight* due to its lack of inclusivity at all. Although the game showcases more minority races than other games in the industry, it has yet to even mention the existence of LGBT people. Survey respondents' arguments against the game's developers come from a place of exposing the supposed willful ignorance to bring light to the issues faced by their LGBT players and although they put out a statement to do better, nothing has come from it. *Dead by Daylight's* queer community has seemingly been very vocal about their desire to see more representation of their sexualities and identities but has received nothing but hints and nods towards the chance at such an event. This highlights a glaring issue with *Behaviour's* inability to cater towards their minority audience, despite there being a clear desire for it; an issue only heightened by the company's decision to finally acknowledge their queer audience through a very insignificant cosmetic item. For many people, it might feel like *Behaviour* simply has 'no time for their LGBT players', which could highlight a bigger issue in the industry that has

been recorded by multiple academics in the past. The overall disinterest of Video Game companies to provide positive representation for their queer players is a problem that has been rampant within the industry for years which only serves to further push the idea in mainstream audience's heads that representation is being "forced" by the LGBT community.

CHAPTER FIVE - CONCLUSION

5.1 - FURTHER DISCUSSION

The amount of excessive research and studies dedicated to the topic of representation illustrates that there is room to believe though there has been a lot of advancements within the gaming industry in the past few decades concerning inclusivity, there is still a lot of room for improvement. The world is constantly changing, and so too, is the gaming industry; there is no room for companies to fall behind or continue to show willful ignorance towards change. representation is no longer an underdog topic, and with the exposure of insincere practices of tokenism, there is increased pressure on video game companies to do better.

The consensus in my research is that regardless of whether or not a video game would benefit story-wise from the addition of representation, something as simple as such could have very positive effects on the global attitude towards LGBT gamers and maybe push for a more welcoming platform for minorities to actively be a part of. Despite many gamers who fall into the category of the majority failing to see the importance of representation or why there is such an active movement for it to be in 'their' video games, many are still able to be understanding and allow for minority figures to express their desire to see more of it.

From the primary research of the study, as well as the plethora of academic studies into the issue, it is plain to see that the gaming industry is not the same as it once was. Whilst a decade ago it would be very rare to see a company hard-pressed for the lack of diversity in their games, companies who refuse in the modern industry are often faced with backlash from minority communities. There is a far larger number of gamers pushing for all to be represented in games than there ever has been before, and it is slowly beginning to progress towards an industry where representation feels more like a requirement to developers than a luxury they can take advantage of to boost sales.

In spite of this, many of the academic studies, as well as my research, highlighted a glaring issue that is still prominent today. Video game companies are clearly still hesitant to provide for their LGBT audience, due to the risk it poses on their sales and global coverage (with certain countries banning games for showcasing content they do not deem as appropriate). The study suggests to me that there is still a long way to go and that a lot of the issues can be resolved by simply educating people on the topic.

5.2 - LIMITATIONS

Though this research provided an in-depth understanding and thorough analysis into the issues surrounding the push for inclusivity in video games, certain drawbacks also held the study back which otherwise could have yielded more valid and reliable research.

In many ways, the use of an online survey granted an advantage in that it provided a fast and easy way to find candidates who were willing to answer all of the questions, and the added anonymity also provided the added incentive for participants to be as honest as possible.

Whilst this was a useful method in pushing for honest and reliable answers across a large group of people, it was also limited to people in the specific spaces that the survey was shared online. This meant that although a large sample was able to be gathered, there was no consistent way to ensure the survey was being presented to a diverse audience who could provide varying responses.

Unfortunately, the research was also held back by the current situation of the world, during a global pandemic there was no option to go out to gaming events or populated locations to gather primary research from strangers who had no affiliation with me. It would have been useful to have been able to search out strangers at gaming events, as I would be able to ensure respondents have no bias towards my own opinions but are still knowledgeable about the topic.

5.3 - FUTURE RESEARCH

Whilst this research into the hot debate surrounding representation in a modern realm of gaming was very insightful, a more prolonged investigation into the effects and consequences of misrepresentation or the negativity associated with LGBT inclusivity would be the best approach for further research.

As the gaming industry continues to evolve and the social 'norm' begins to shift towards a more diverse and inclusive environment, it would be interesting to follow the issuance further and explore some of the more complex outcomes than positive representation can have on the overall health of individual gaming communities. It would be very insightful to pick specific gaming communities to examine and gather samples from those spaces about the impact representation has on the way they view not only themselves but other people around them.

It could be very beneficial to keep adding to a piece of research whenever a significant form of representation is introduced to the gaming community and ask not only LGBT gamers how it makes them feel but also members of the majority who play video games very often. There

could be a unique area of research that could be done by asking the same samples before and after representation is implemented how they feel about it, and whether or not the existence of positive representation could have an influential effect on those previously opposed to the idea or whether it could provide them a unique outlook for the future.

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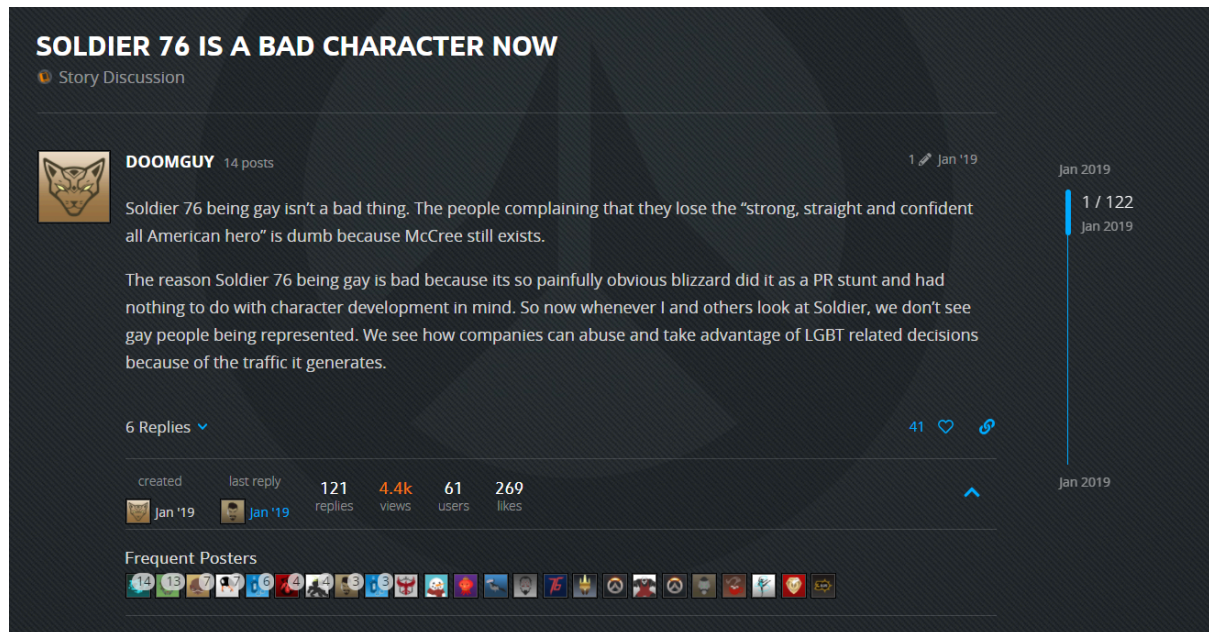
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APPENDIX

6A: Blizzard Forum post



6B: Survey Questions

Section A: Representation

- 1) Which of the following do you most identify with?
- 2) Which age group do you fit into?
- 3) What is your race? (White, Black etc)
- 4) On average, How many hours do you spend on video games a week?
- 5) Have you ever felt represented by a video game?
- 6) Can you list an example of a video game that has represented you?
- 7) If no, what would be the reason for this?
- 8) Is representation important to you?
- 9) Why do you feel this way?
- 10) What do you think could be the best way to implement LGBT representation in video games?
- 11) Do you feel like more forms of positive representation could help to reduce the stigma around minority figures?

Section B: Tokenism

- 1) Do you think tokenism is a good or bad form of representation?
- 2) Why do you believe this?
- 3) Can you list a video game which you think has employed tokenism, and why do you see it as such?