

Title

Design, Storytelling, and Visual Investigations into Harassment in Games Research

Abstract

Table of Contents

Vocabulary - essay, narrative, comic, graphic novel

Introduction

In this paper I will describe research, personal experiences, and accompanying aspects of a design project created as part of my graduate research at the Ohio State University and a MFA candidate in Design studying Digital Animation and Interactive Media. The core intent of this project was to explore the impact of toxic behavior in video games by **researching, writing about, and** depicting the broad range of emotional experiences, associations, and perceptions of a harassment victim through a graphic novel. Throughout this project I also investigated the design challenges of visualizing digital and physical identity, interactivity, and complex perception.

This primary research project will utilize research through design (Frayling, 1993) through a graphic novel investigating anonymity online, harassment in games, players relationships to their avatars, and depicting the interactivity online. A secondary design aspect this project examines ways of visualizing presence, embodiment, interactivity, and harassment in both spaces simultaneously through my film. The affordances of graphic novels to depict time and space with fluidity serve as the main framework to investigate this problem as a designer.

Prior to attending graduate school I studied and worked as a 3D generalist and visual effects artist for animated shorts, live action film, and commercial projects. During my graduate studies I began expanding my skill sets and design projects to include creating video games, interactive media, and live performance experiences. This project and media includes a combination of my prior and learned skill sets and serves as an expressive tool for the research I have done throughout my graduate studies.

But besides being a designer and researcher I am also a part of the target audience for this project as I have been playing online video games since I was very young. I have experienced harassment in games first hand and utilized some of the coping mechanisms many players use when navigating the potential toxic online landscape. My research started broadly for all people harassed online but began to focus on harassment in games specific to women and minorities. I also got first hand experience designing video games during an internship as a visual effects artist at Riot Games, a video game studio, in the research and development department. While there I discussed harassment with a number of interns with projects specifically targeted to reduce harassment in games. At the internship I gained first hand experience of the process that goes into designing a game from scratch but also was able to share research with a number of other students investigating this same problem space.

Research about harassment in games is growing as more and more people interact online. While video games offer an escape for many, they can be a toxic environment for others. Today people are interacting with digital spaces with increasing regularity (Ehrlich 2021). Online interactions can be connecting with friends but can cause an increase in stress when interacting with others with weak social ties (Tibbetts et al., 2021). While interconnectivity through technology has many positives there are a multitude of issues surrounding bullying and harassment in digital spaces. The main objective of my research is to explore this growing problem through narrative storytelling. But, very early into my research, I discovered an ongoing

visual challenge: showing interactivity with virtual spaces in film is a known issue that required additional exploration and research. As technology integrates more and more into modern society, filmmakers are running into unique challenges depicting people and characters that are interacting in digital spaces (Ehrlich 2021). Depicting someone playing a video game creates a design challenge balancing visualizations of presence, embodiment, interactivity, and harassment in both spaces simultaneously.

Why animation? Animation allows both design problems, harassment in games and showing someone playing a video game, to be explored simultaneously. To investigate harassment in games, animation serves as the design storytelling method to engage in the video game player's emotional journey through their highs, lows, and points of annoyance and anger (Lupton, 2017). To explore the visual depiction challenge of showing the coexistence of a player simultaneously in the real and virtual world (Allen & Mendelowitz, 2001) animation allows for the exploration of cinematic techniques that can depict transitions between time and space depicting abstractions to recreate reality, imagination, emotions, and sensations that might not otherwise be visible (Mukherjee, 2020). With this project my intent is to create a work that overlaps and connects my shared experiences as an animator, video game player, researcher, and designer. Designing and creating an animated short film also serves as both design research, a cross media exploration, and as a personal expression for my own experiences. In this paper I will review and discuss many of these intersecting interests and research points that connect to form a story and expression of the emotional journey of video game players navigating.

Project Research: Harassment in Games

~~When designing as a storyteller~~ a user's emotional journey **through a story** can include lows as well as highs, hitting points of annoyance and anger as well as satisfaction (Lupton, 2017). Video game designers also try to create emotional highs and lows in both individual and competitive games.

~~For my process~~ as a designer I ~~try to~~ immerse myself in a problem space from as many directions and viewpoints as possible before writing a story. In order to create an authentic and layered perspective in a fictional story I knew I would need a journalistic understanding of the who, what, where, when, why, and how that goes into harassment online and in video games. I also knew there were different forms of video game harassment between players of different races and genders from my own experiences as a video game player. I choose to be broad in my research but still focus on harassment towards women in games as I can relate through my own tacit knowledge which can aid with storytelling for designers. In this section I collect my research and findings from the last three years into one place.

Is harassment in games really a problem?

Video games are massively popular. There are over 215.5 million active video game players across all ages in the United States with 48% identifying as female and 52% identifying as male (Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry, 2022). Over 50% of gamers play with other people online at least weekly and nearly half of all global players say they have met a good friend, spouse, or significant other through video games (Power of play – global report, 2023). Although relationship building and teamwork are common, hostile communication is also typical in many online games (Yee, 2014, Fox and Tang, 2017). A video game player is more likely to have experienced harassment online than not to have experienced harassment online (Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry, 2022).

Despite changing demographics the perception or stereotype remains that video games are a male only hobby (Fox and Tang 2017). In a survey of over 1,400 gamers by Zajechowski, 90% of gamers said they have experienced or witnessed emotional abuse or bullying while playing video games and 7 in 10 have considered quitting because of what they witnessed. A majority of video game players have said they have witnessed racism and hate speech, as well (Zajechowski, 2023). In this survey players witnessed Offensive name-calling (53% of survey participants), Racism (44%), stalking (37%), hate speech (36%), insults (35%), explicit language (34%), swatting i.e. prank calling emergency services to dispatch a large number of armed police forces to your home (Kaufman, 2023) (26%), flaming/game rage 26%, physical threats 22%, doxxing i.e. the intentional revelation of a person's private information (Nguyen, 2023) (20%). People in the survey indicated they were targeted or bullied for their gender, race or ethnicity, perceived physical appearance, age, or perceived mental ableness. In a self-selected massively multiplayer online game sample players frequently reported being cyber-victimized (52%) and engaging in cyberbullying (35%) (Ballard and Welch, 2015). In this report males perpetrated more cyberbullying than females and heterosexuals perpetrated bullying at higher rates than lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender participants do. Female and LGBT participants experienced significantly higher rates of sexually related cyber-victimization with rates of victimization and perpetration overlapping substantially. Minorities also experience distressing and targeted harassment online if they are linguistically profiled when speaking (Gray, 2012).

Different platforms also have different rates of witnessed bullying with Xbox at 94% and Playstation at 92% at the highest level but PC, Nintendo, and Cell phone or tablet games all still above 88% (Zajechowski, 2023).

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4tZJHxd92f3VLvhywhggXk0/how-did-video-games-become-so-exclusive>

So, why does harassment in games happen?

Many aspects of the affordances of playing video games online contribute to a multitude of factors that can increase harassment between players. In online gaming spaces those perceived as outsiders are targets for harassment and hostility (Yee 2015). Individuals perceived as a minority in gaming spaces are targets of harassment (Ballard and Welch, 2015, Yee, 2014, Fox and Tang, 2017).

There are a number of theoretical frameworks used to describe the prevalence of harassment in online spaces. The *online disinhibition effect* (Suler, 2004) suggests that while online some people act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person. The framework suggests that anonymity, the lack of nonverbal cues, and the minimization of authority online can cause people to feel less constrained to social norms when compared to face-to-face interaction. If people believe there are no consequences, then behavior can turn into toxic disinhibition such as uncivil or hateful speech, threats, and other forms of harassment (Fox & Tang, 2016).

The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) framework suggests that anonymity causes deindividuation or a loss of sense of self, causing a deference to a common social identity (Lea & Spears, 1991, Reicher et al., 1995). The SIDE framework was created to explain the combination effect that both anonymity and context of 'in-group' and 'out-group' drive deindividuation (Reicher et al., 1995,). In online spaces when communicators share a common social identity, they appear to be more susceptible to group influence, social attraction, stereotyping, gender typing, and discrimination in anonymous computer mediated communication. Despite the fact that men are more likely to experience harassment in games, women are often the target of more severe sexual harassment, stalking, and sustained harassment resulting in high levels of emotional distress (Fox & Tang, 2016).

Researchers are also investigating video games and industry representation of women in relation to the frequency of sexism and sexual harassment in the gaming community. In video games there is significant underrepresentation, sexualization, and that female characters were largely secondary to male characters in video game depictions (Fox & Tang, 2017). Bègue et al. conducted a survey sampling 13,520 French youth, ages 11-19 years, measured weekly video game and television exposure, religiosity, and sexist attitudes toward women. When the study controlled for gender and socioeconomic level, the results showed that video game exposure and religiosity were both related to sexism (Bègue et al., 2017).

Men who played video games perceived to be high in sexism showed higher levels of benevolent sexism compared with men who did not play such games (Stermer & Berkley, 2015). Benevolent sexism is

Many powers within the video game industry are also responsible for fostering an environment that is unwelcoming or hostile towards women (Fox & Tang, 2017). Sexist content, including the symbolic annihilation of women and stereotypical and objectified portrayals of women, is prevalent within video games (Fox & Tang, 2017). Decisions to include this content come for the organizations creating and distributing video games. The Integrated Model of Sexual Harassment in Organizations posits that organizational characteristics that communicate tolerance of sexual harassment have consequences with increased frequency of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). For example: group gender ratio. Sexual harassment is more frequent when men outnumber women and the job tasks are perceived as masculine. Sexual harassment is also more prevalent when punishment is unlike or inconsequential (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). A study by Miner-Rubino and Cortina presented a model to observe hostility called the Organizational Unresponsiveness to Sexual Harassment Model to assess an organization's unresponsiveness to sexual harassment. When using this model they found that observing hostility toward women and perceiving the organization as lax about

harassment predict lower-well being translating to higher organizational withdrawal for both female and male employees. These findings suggest that working in a misogynistic environment can have negative effects on ALL employees (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007).

Another culprit is early marketing campaigns for online gaming that show “toxicity isn’t a bug, it’s a feature” (Morrissette, 2020). “You guys are so pathetic. You chafe my ass!” “Companies like Microsoft and Sony frequently marketed toxicity as a key selling point for their new online gaming platforms” (Morrissette, 2020). At Riot I heard the term “The Hero Moment” that games try to achieve a feeling of success and triumph over opponents. But what happens when you have your hero moment and you are more of a Homelander than a SuperMan. Booth Babes. Cyberdiversion theory. If we satisfy our primal violent urges on the net we don't have to hurt people in reality.

Early video game research focused primarily on two key areas, violence and harassment in games. “Of course, all of this suggests a fundamental chicken-or-egg problem. Did companies like Sega, Microsoft, and Sony identify a population of hyper-competitive, angry gamers and market their online services toward them, or did the marketing of these platforms model an acutely toxic mode of interaction that gamers then seized upon and imitated?” Today there is a shift The PlayStation Network urges its members, "Be patient and considerate. Be kind. Remember you were new once too. You can help make someone’s early gaming and community experiences good ones." Today, Xbox Live encourages gamers to "be yourself, but not at the expense of others."

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dmayn/games-marketing-toxic-gamer-culture-online-xbox-live-dreamcast>

"Poor communication is a common source of friction between people; this is only compounded by online spaces which lack the feedback of a real human presence," Hart said.

"Throw competition into the mix and that friction can get worse. We need to learn to do better, but don't think full-team voice chat is necessarily the answer. This is more about identifying what we need socially as humans interacting in an online setting than any particular feature."(Condit, 2020).

Harassment in game companies themselves: Detail Blizzard and Riot Games.

<https://www.engadget.com/2020-03-11-riot-player-dynamics-toxic-trolling-league-of-legends.html>

<https://kotaku.com/inside-the-culture-of-sexism-at-riot-games-1828165483>

How do video game developers reduce harassment in games?

Actions taken against players vary for victims and witnesses of harassment. Zajeckowski found that 58% of video game players said they had blocked or muted harassers, 49% said that they had reported them through an in-game reporting system, and 8% of players said they took other action while 19% of players said they did not take action against a bully. With a slight majority of players utilizing in-game methods of harassment and bullying reduction, these survey results serve as an important notice for game designers developing games with online interaction.

Through both my research and my time interning at Riot Games I saw that companies are gathering data and coming up with strategies to reduce harassment in games. From an altruistic viewpoint, game developers trying to make a fun game do not want to create a toxic community where players are harassed so heavily that they stop playing. But a more realistic view is that game developers ~~that~~ want monetization of their product and are concerned with

player retention (van Ede, 2016). Harassment in games is not ideal as it can lead players to quit playing a game altogether, which in the industry is called 'player churn'. Game developers are naturally concerned about player retention because monetization cannot happen if players quit a game altogether (van Ede, 2016). Player retention and Life Time Value (LTV) is impacted by deviant behavior (Debroek, 2020). In a study examining the nature and effects of toxic behavior in League of Legends findings support the notion that interactions with toxic players decrease retention rates of new players but players with a higher tolerance for toxic behavior were less likely to be driven off the game entirely (Grandprey-Shores et al., 2014). This creates a cyclical problem for developers attempting to reduce harassment when the players may have a level of tolerance or even expectation of toxicity.

In 2011 Riot Games created a peer regulated disciplinary system called the Tribunal where players reviewed cases of reported behavior claims and participated in determining innocence or guilt. It was disabled in 2014 and is not likely to return (Forbes et al., 2018) and alternative replacement systems were put in its place. But in 2015 Kwak et al. was able to review the massive dataset of reports on 1.46 million toxic players from the League of Legends tribunal. The findings showed that players are not engaged in actively reporting toxic behavior but explicitly pleas to report toxic behavior significantly increased engagement. The study also found that there are biases with respect to reporting allies vs. enemies and that what is viewed as toxic behavior has extremely varied perceptions between a neutral 3rd party and a player experiencing it. There are also cultural differences in perceptions concerning what defines toxic behavior. The result of a match is also significantly linked to the appearance of toxic behavior. Players are more likely to report if they are losing a match

The study showed how challenging it is for video game developers to even define what constitutes toxic behaviors. Korean tribunal reviewers were significantly more likely to punish intentional feeding and viewed it as severe toxic playing. The significance of the varying

perceptions of neutral 3rd parties and those players experiencing the toxic behavior also means that even defining what constitutes toxic behavior is highly subjective.

Companies are reacting to this growing knowledge on disruptive and cyberbullying behavior in games. As of 2023 League of Legends has a system where if a bystander player participates in a match and they did not report a player that was post game found guilty of toxic behavior the bystander player is then encouraged to report behavior. There is also a system where players are notified if a past report was found to be justified and the disruptive player was banned as a result of their report.

Using internal model analysis Riot Games found that penalties work. Of the players that received a penalty in 2021, less than 10% of players received another one within the calendar year (*An Update on Player Dynamics - Riot Games, 2022*). At the 2019 GDC conference the Fair Play Alliance representative Natasha Miller spoke about the 95/5 percentage that falls across the industry meaning 95% of people who are disruptive in games are only disruptive sometimes (Miller, 2019). For those players, warning and light penalties are usually enough to prevent them from reoffending. The last 5% are consistently and intentionally disruptive (*An Update on Player Dynamics - Riot Games, 2022*).

<https://www.riotgames.com/en/news/player-dynamics-design-looking-behind-the-curtain>

<https://www.riotgames.com/en/news/riot-games-ubisoft-tackling-toxicity-in-games-with-new-project>

<https://fairplayalliance.org/>

In an article that outlines the historical marketing campaign Morrissette starts out by sharing the community standards outlined by Microsoft that attempt to differentiate between good natured put downs and more toxic forms of online interaction.

According to Microsoft's acceptable standards there is a difference between trash talk and harassment:

Trash talk includes any lighthearted banter or bragging that focuses on the game at hand and encourages healthy competition. Harassment includes any negative behavior that's personalized, disruptive, or likely to make someone feel unwelcome or unsafe. To qualify as harassment, the behavior doesn't have to be drawn-out or persistent. Even a single abusive message could harm someone's experience. Know when to draw the line, when to back off. Know and respect the other player.

Trash talk does not include any threats, real-life intimidation, personal insults based on sexual orientation, age, appearances, gender, religion, cultural beliefs, ethnicity, race, disability, etc.

From Microsoft's community standards for Xbox in an update from 2019:

We get it—gaming can be competitive and interactions with other players can get heated. A little trash talk is an expected part of competitive multiplayer action, and that's not a bad thing. But hate has no place here, and what's not okay is when that trash talk turns into harassment.

Microsoft provides an example of what is acceptable:

“That sucked. Get good and then come back when your k/d's over 1.” (k/d means “kills to death ratio”).

And then an example of what is unacceptable:

“You suck. Get out of my country—maybe they'll let you back in when your k/d's over 1.”

But even in this example of what does and does not constitute harassment as set by the gaming communities may still be considered bullying by individual players who will quit. In the introduction to the conduct section Microsoft outlines that players should remember that “Win or lose, be a good sport” (*Xbox Community standards: Xbox, 2019*). By the Oxford definition of the word sportsmanship is “conduct (such as fairness, respect for one's opponent, and

graciousness in winning or losing) becoming to one participating in a sport”. But, in the example of acceptable trash talk provided by Microsoft I challenge that telling someone to ‘get good’ does not constitute being a ‘good sport’. And with game developers pushing for their games to be viewed as sporting events, and the popularity of e-sports only growing, then creating community standards that align with sportsmanship will increase legitimacy. When I see a code of conduct that says it is acceptable to trash talk I see that the reality is still that some game developers prioritize the retention of players despite unsportsmanlike behavior.

<https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1020389/Enhancing-Sportsmanship-in-Online#:~:text=Sportsmanship%20helps%20players%20win%20games,players%20who%20exhibit%20sportsmanlike%20conduct.>

Riot Games has taken a different stance on trash talk in recent years and has it as a reportable offense after a game in League of Legends. Riot’s head of Player Dynamics Weszt Hart said, “Toxicity means different things to different people. What’s trash talk to one person is totally inappropriate to someone else, which makes it really hard to proactively design a solution” (Conditt, 2020). In the article Weszt outlines how Riot Games tried to move away from the word ‘toxic’ and instead focus on disruptive behavior.

A talk at GDC by Jeffrey Lin through Riot Games offers insight to their stance on trash talk. The talk outlines that sportsmanship not only helps players win games, but win or lose, sportsmanship helps make games more fun. The talk discusses lessons learned and the implementation of features that can enhance sportsmanship. After the fallout from the class-action gender discrimination lawsuit in California it’s no wonder Riot employees have been reevaluating toxicity (Conditt, 2020). But I think it is a positive direction to take a harder stance on trash talking as disruption in play and fun can ruin a game.

When I see the contrasting stances on codes of conduct relating to trash talking from different developers I recognize that the reality is that some game developers prioritize the retention of players despite unsportsmanlike behavior. Those players with a higher tolerance for trash talking are playing games longer (Grandprey-Shores et al., 2014). If video game developers want to take toxicity or disruptive behavior seriously, then unsportsmanlike behavior, including trash talking, should not be allowed conduct.

Sporting events have referees. Unsportsmanlike behavior

Amazon files a patent for players to select preferences

<https://www.gamesindustry.biz/amazon-patents-method-of-grouping-toxic-players-together-online>

Building strong communities influence player retention

<https://venturebeat.com/games/game-devs-build-your-community-as-you-build-your-game/> and affect player spend

<https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/game-on-five-global-mobile-gaming-trends>.

Project Research: Design Research:

Depicting Simultaneous Coexistence in the Physical and Digital World

As a designer and artist immersing myself in the problem space of harassment I saw opportunities to connect one of the problems, harassment in online spaces as a result of disinhibition on anonymity, to one of the major affordances of creative storytelling media, the ability to show and potentially evoke emotional responses from viewers would allow me to design and create a story that could navigate this complex research topic.

As I started planning out and exploring ways to visualize harassment in games I ran into a new design problem. There are so many ways that someone can depict online interaction. When I started imagining and prototyping the type of shots or images I could use to build empathy for a character in a story I stumbled onto the design problem that is growing alongside the increased rate of technology use. I also knew that each chosen visual can have major consequences with a point of view versus a character close up essentially changing how a viewer experiences a film. Selecting and designing the visuals when telling a story is important as formal film features, such as shot choice, can also affect film viewers' cognition and emotion (Jungbauer, 2018). In their research, Jungbauer found that point of view shots increased a film viewer's emotional engagement but decreased their narrative understanding. Close-up shots of a character, when compared to long shots, were found to be associated with higher levels of Theory of Mind tendency, a psychological process by which people recognize and understand the mental states of others (Rooney and Bálint, 2018). S.N. Champman, an educator based in Australia argues that with the rise of children growing up with online experiences that create a multitude of issues surrounding empathy, proposes animation as an art tool in education to model. There is an ongoing research gap in film and media surrounding depicting online interactive spaces where a character can perceive themselves as inside the space but also outside the space (where they experience the pain of harassment) creating a unique and abstract visual challenge (Ehrlich & Hersko, 2021).

I knew I needed to research this topic more thoroughly to see if other designers encountered this challenge and if there was material that I could reference in my own design process. I started reading research papers and watching films that specifically discussed or showed depictions of people interacting online. I quickly noticed that other filmmakers, comic book artists, and designers were noticing and discussing this design challenge, as well. In the past, films featuring games and virtual worlds such as *Tron* or *The Matrix* were relegated to

niche genres such as science fiction or horror. But as technology integrates more and more into modern society, filmmakers are running into unique challenges depicting people and characters that are interacting in digital spaces (Ehrlich & Hersko, 2021).

But why does planning out how to show someone playing a video game bring up challenges? One of the main issues is a breakdown of location and sense of self. When we are playing a game or interacting with others in a virtual world our minds are able to coexist in both the digital and physical world simultaneously (Allen and Mendelowitz, 2001). In the same moment you can be traversing a fantasy castle with multiple friends, while also taking a sip of coffee while sitting on a couch with your laptop. How filmmakers, graphic novelists, designers, and other artists show that dual natured experience changes the meaning and perception of the work for the viewer. In virtual reality research this coexistence phenomenon is called 'presence' or 'embodiment'. Presence in film and presence in video games are similar but there is a key difference being the addition of spatial presence and agency that comes from interactivity in games (Warnders, 2014).

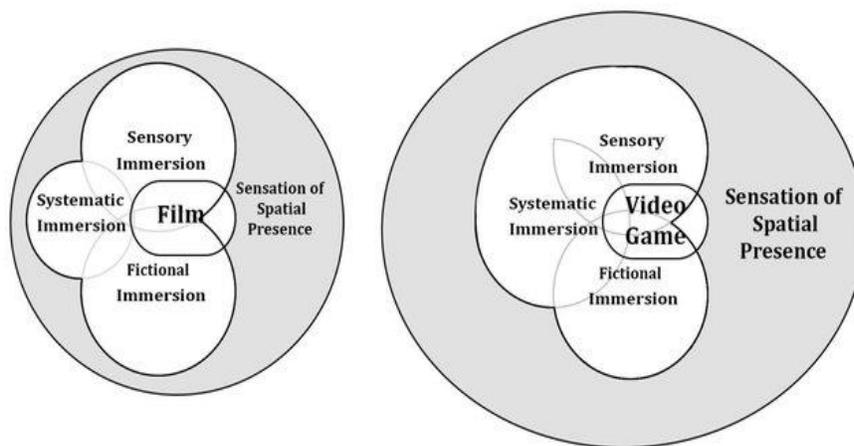


Figure from Warnders 2014 depicting a modified SSF-Model of the Experience of Spatial Presence in Films and Video Games.

Another challenge with visual depictions of online interactions includes converting 3D worlds, multiple windows, user interface graphics, and human interaction onto a 2D media

platform in the case of film. In film, depicting a character interacting inside of virtual spaces is a challenge because the media is a passive viewing experience with limits to two-dimensions. In a film a third person perspective of a person interacting with a digital space involves a balancing act between showing the character in the space, as an avatar perhaps, and the emotional state of the character outside of the digital space. These are editing and production design decisions.

To explain this visual design challenge more in depth, I like to use the example of texting in film. The seemingly simple visual of a text message actually has quite a few problems requiring different compromises in film shot decisions. If the phone screen is shown the screen typically needs to be enlarged and the text scaled up for readability, making a phone screen appear clunky or unrealistic. If a film is action packed the tempo of the edit may need to be slowed down because the screen has to be held up long enough for the audience to read the message. These two choices showing the screen can interrupt an extended reaction shot from the actor. To solve this problem some films have either the receiver or the sender read the dialogue, but that can take away from realism in a film, as well. A fairly recent solution that has emerged in film and television is typography overlay of an onscreen text message in a text bubble (Zhao & Ramos, 2014). This solution offers character reactions and message information all in the same shot and has become a rapidly normalized design solution in film language.



Entergalactic 2022

I knew that in order to tackle these design problems on my own I would need to investigate how other designers have tackled this issue to inform my own production design choices. Utilizing an informal research through design **approach** I analyzed films, comic books, and artist works that depicted people playing video games. I did watch a few modern video game adaptation films, as some are getting more creative with implementing gameplay and design into the story, but for the majority of my analysis I looked at works that showed people playing video games or interacting with others online. **Make an appendix of all the films, comic books, video games and “artist works that were analyzed by your and reference it here.**

I began noting trends and formed categorizations of what I was observing in existing media. **(provide a table of these trends and categorizations)** In films when we are playing a game or interacting with others in a virtual world our minds are able to coexist in both the digital and physical world (Allen and Mendelowitz 2001). How filmmakers show that dual natured experience changes the meaning and perception of the work for the viewer. By exploring how other filmmakers, designers, and designers have tackled this issue I tried to better inform my own production design and storyboarding choices.

I started by analyzing film media. I quickly found trends in the film's editing choices that started to categorize some of the visuals I was seeing.

The cut was one of the most common techniques I noticed. With this method an editor can cut between someone using a controller or keyboard, the screen, and the face of the player. I noticed that in this category video games or technology were frequently used as a distraction for a character and often used for comedic effect.

'Theater of the mind' was another category I observed where the digital space is never shown and instead characters are just shown interacting with their computers. While the true phrase coinage is unclear, 'theater of the mind' is originally associated with radio drama and is a method of storytelling in which a scene is described through audio performance rather than visual representation and relies on audience imagination (Verma, 2012). Today, theater of the mind is a term used by game designers and players in role-playing games (RPGs) and other types of storytelling games like Dungeons & Dragons when players do not rely on models or visual aids for their adventures and instead only utilize their own imagination (Huonker, 2023). The comedy web series *The Guild* (2007), a show created and starring Felicia Day, featured human characters almost exclusively playing video games and used this strategy of never showing the video game for multiple seasons. The characters moved away from screens almost entirely as the story progressed, but video games and video game culture remained a strong theme. Notably women and men are represented equally in the six person main cast. This series cleverly uses a storytelling device rooted in game culture that allows viewers to imagine the gameplay while watching the players faces as they interact with one another. Theater of the mind in film and editing essentially solves the coexistence in physical and digital spaces conundrum by letting the player's imagination fill in the blank spaces simultaneously instead of trying to solve the problem in the screen or edit.



Image still from *The Guild* Season 6 Episode 1: Dream Questline. Screens are almost never shown in the series. Instead computer interaction shots typically use static character close up shots cutting between members of the group while they simultaneously play together in the game. The cuts align with each character talking.

Isekai, or otherworld, is the opposite of theater of the mind and is a genre of Japanese anime that involves a person or people transported into another world. *The Wizard of Oz* is a non-Japanese example of this genre. Personified avatars is a category that is slightly different from *Isekai* because the characters can follow the rules of the digital space. South Park's *Make Love, Not Warcraft* is a good example of this style that cuts between characters as their digital avatar and back to 'real life' for exaggerated comedic effect.

Game user interface element integration or *UI Integration* is a technique that I am seeing more frequently, as well. The texting example I shared earlier utilizes this method. User interface elements are used to great effect in *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* and *Free Guy*. *Holograms* are

an elevated form of this category as the transparency of the hologram allows viewers to see both the screen and the character in the same shot framing.

A few other notable storytelling techniques that appeared were lighting projected over a character's face to emphasize their absorption into the game or digital space and reflections in glasses. The final and most conceptually stimulating category I noticed was transformation of a character into the digital world. As I started looking through films I quickly realized that animation had a high capacity to explore the transformation visual and other unique depictions conceptually as there are no physical limitations and many virtual worlds are themselves animated.

Liz - this is a long way to read and still not know how all of this information informs your project. Focus your writing on your project and integrate the above research into the making of your project.

Design Questions

- **1.) How can I investigate the problem space of harassment in games as an animator and designer?**
 - Why? Why investigate this problem space as an animator? Storytelling/discussion/.
 - Connect storytelling to design and design research with animation
 - Mention elements of design fiction and storyboarding that I will utilize in my design project methods
- **2.) How do I visually show online interaction?**
 - Investigating the question space of visual design research for showing online interaction
 - Investigating the bias between different depictions of people and characters interacting online

Project Plan

- Detailing the early stages of planning how to explore the problem through design project research for question 1.
- Research into film production design for question 2.

Project Process

As detailed in the previous section, most of my research has been circling the two broad areas of 1.) sexism and objectification in video games and 2.) the visual design around depicting how people interact with digital spaces. These two, seemingly separate topics relate to my design research process through the “theory as a shaping tool” model (Jordan & Stolterman 2016). This model follows the question leading to theory which results in a new question.

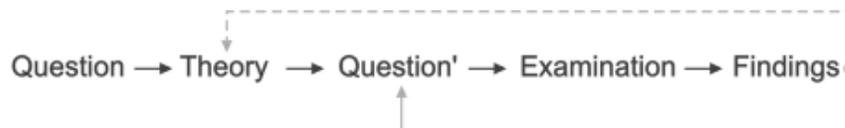


Figure 4 The “theory as shaping tool” model.

My current thesis thread aligns with the idea that design research can follow a question to theory to question path where examination and findings result in the tools necessary to develop my thesis thread.

One of the most notable that I intend to include in my film is the methods and use of an avatar in gameplay and film. An Avatar is a graphical representation of the player in the game world (Rouse). Falina and Pena suggest that there are 4 common avatar creation strategies for video game players. These suggested strategies include replication, enhancing, fitting, and

strategic distraction. Avatar replication is when the avatar takes the player's likeness. Avatar enhancement is when the avatar enhances the player's selected traits, like larger muscles or taller. Avatar fitting is when the character fits in the game world, such as choosing an orc in a fantasy game. And avatar strategic creation is when the avatar is surprisingly counter intuitive and is selected for gameplay advantages, such as a smaller character with a smaller hit box is harder to target by enemy players. For my film I intend to utilize avatar replication for the main character and avatar enhancement for the antagonist character.

Another aspect of avatars in game research is identification or how people imagine themselves being a media character. Avatar identification includes how a person or character views or speaks about themselves or when people replace their identity with the character's identity or become psychologically intertwined with the media character (Christoph et al.). Christoph et al. break down these identifications with dyadic and monadic identification. Dyadic identification is when people perceive a social distinction between themselves and the character and in research this is noticeable when people use phrases like "they are so brave, strong, etc." For monadic identification people begin merging their own self with the avatar and this is unique to video games. This can be identified in their research when players use phrases like, "I am so brave, strong, etc" when referring to their game character. For my short film I plan to experiment with this type of avatar identification by having the protagonist imagine herself in the game and even converse with herself to blur the lines between virtual and real self.

Other notable elements from my film reference research include seamless integration of user interface elements and isekai or portal world editing strategies. I plan to add a few comical elements of the game characters interacting with user interface elements to again blur the lines between player perception and identity. Utilizing some of these strategies and techniques I discovered during this analytic film reference investigation I plan to integrate this production design research into the multiple stylization of worlds in my short film. By using cuts, user

interface elements, and leaning into avatar identification as a major theme of the short film I plan to have more informed design and editing choices during the storyboarding and previsualization stage of the production. As this research is more novel I plan to dedicate a significant portion of my thesis writing to both academic research and design exploration of this section.

Project Final Reflections

- Project Connections to Research
- Design discoveries in the animation technical process
- Design discoveries relating to the problem space of online harassment in video games
- Implications of Research
- Limitations of Research

References

2022 Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry. Entertainment Software Association. (2022, June 10).

<https://www.theesa.com/resource/2022-essential-facts-about-the-video-game-industry/>

Allen, R., & Mendelowitz, E. (2001). "Coexistence." In *CAST01 - Living in Mixed Realities* (pp. 299–302). Sankt Augustin; FhG, Institut Medienkommunikation.

An Update on Player Dynamics - Riot Games. Riot Games. (2022, August 29).

<https://www.riotgames.com/en/news/an-update-on-player-dynamics>

Ballard, M. E., & Welch, K. M. (2015). Virtual warfare: Cyberbullying and Cyber-Victimization in MMOG Play. *Games and Culture*, 12(5), 466–491. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015592473>

Bègue, L., Sarda, E., Gentile, D. A., Bry, C., & Roché, S. (2017a). Video games exposure and sexism in a representative sample of adolescents. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00466>

Debroek, P. (2020, November 25). *The impact of toxicity on retention and LTV*. Game Developer. <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/the-impact-of-toxicity-on-retention-and-ltv->

Ehrlich, D., & Hersko, T. (2021, August 31). *How the future of entertainment will be forged between Hollywood and video games*. IndieWire. <https://www.indiewire.com/features/commentary/future-of-entertainment-hollywood-video-games-indiewire-25-1234659532/>

Forbes, B. "Draggles," Graylock, J. "Fearless," Jeffrey, A. "Bioluminescence," & Goulding, L. "Scathlocke." (2018). *Ask riot: Will tribunal return?*. Will Tribunal Return? – League of Legends. <https://nexus.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/2018/08/ask-riot-will-tribunal-return/>

Fox, J. (2023). Online Social Aggression: Harassment and Discrimination. In R. L. Nabi & J. G. Myrick (Eds.), *Emotions in the Digital World: Exploring Affective Experience and expression*. essay, OXFORD UNIV PRESS US.

Fox, J., & Tang, W. Y. (2014). Sexism in online video games: The role of conformity to masculine norms and social dominance orientation. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 33, 314–320. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.07.014>

Fox, J., & Tang, W. Y. (2016). Women's experiences with general and sexual harassment in online video games: Rumination, organizational responsiveness, withdrawal, and coping strategies. *New Media & Society*, 19(8), 1290–1307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816635778>

Fox, J., & Tang, W. Y. (2017). Sexism in video games and the Gaming Community. *New Perspectives on the Social Aspects of Digital Gaming*, 115–135. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315629308-8>

Grandprey-Shores, K., He, Y., Swanenburg, K. L., Kraut, R., & Riedl, J. (2014). The identification of deviance and its impact on retention in a multiplayer game. *Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2531602.2531724>

Gray, K. L. (2012a). Intersecting Oppressions and Online Communities. *Information, Communication, & Society*, 15(3), 411–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2011.642401>

The Guild. (2007). *Youtube*. episode. Retrieved 2023, from <https://watchtheguild.com/>.

Jungbauer, L. (2018). *The effect of motion dynamics and POV shots on film viewers' narrative engagement, empathy and arousal* (thesis). Tilburg University. Communicatie en Informatie, Tilburg.

Kaufman, J. (2023, March 31). *What is "swatting"? why is it done and how should students, staff and parents respond to "swatting" incidents at schools?* The Berkshire Eagle. https://www.berkshireeagle.com/news/local/what-is-swatting-why-do-people-do-it-swatting-hoax-phone-threats-explained-by-expert/article_d61f3dba-cfcb-11ed-9886-031ce59bca12.html

Lea, M., & Spears, R. (1991). Computer-Mediated Communication, de-individuation and group decision-making. *International Journal of Man-Machine Studies*, 34(2), 283–301.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/0020-7373\(91\)90045-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0020-7373(91)90045-9)

Lupton, E. (2017). *Design is storytelling*. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

Miller, N. (2019). Game Developers Conference. In *Dispelling Common Player Behavior Myths*. San Francisco, California; Fair Play Alliance. Retrieved October 10, 2023, from
<https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1025805/Dispelling-Common-Player-Behavior-Myths>.

Morrisette, J. (2020, March 25). *How games marketing invented toxic gamer culture*. VICE.
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dmayn/games-marketing-toxic-gamer-culture-online-xbox-live-dreamcast>

Mukherjee, D. (2020). Animated Documentary as a Social Tool. *Animation Studies*, 15.
<https://journal.animationstudies.org/debjani-mukherjee-animated-documentary-as-a-social-tool/>

Nguyen, S. (2023, July 6). *What is doxxing and what can you do if you are doxxed?*. CNN.
<https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/07/world/what-is-doxxing-explainer-as-equals-intl-cmd/index.html>

Power of play – global report 2023. Entertainment Software Association. (2023, October 10).
<https://www.theesa.com/power-of-play-2023/>

Reicher, S. D., Spears, R., & Postmes, T. (1995). A social identity model of deindividuation phenomena. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 6(1), 161–198.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779443000049>

Stermer, S. P., & Burkley, M. (2015a). Sex-box: Exposure to sexist video games predicts benevolent sexism. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 4(1), 47–55.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028397>

Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321–326. <https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>

Tibbetts, M., Epstein-Shuman, A., Leitao, M., & Kushlev, K. (2021). A week during COVID-19: Online social interactions are associated with greater connection and more stress. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 4, 100133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100133>

van Ede, J. (2016, October 26). *Why game developers should embrace player Churn* | *Venturebeat*. GamesBeat.
<https://venturebeat.com/games/why-game-developers-should-embrace-player-churn/>

Verma, N. (2012). Introduction: What Is the “Theater of the Mind.” *Theater of the Mind*, 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226853529.003.0001>

Warnders, B. (2014). *The Emotion of Horror in Fiction: Towards an Integrated Understanding of Emotional Responses in Mediated Contexts* (thesis). University of Groningen, Groningen.

Yee, N. (2015). *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us - And How They Don't*. Yale University Press.

Zajechowski, M. (2023, June 4). *Racism in video games study: Majority of gamers say they've witnessed racism and hate speech*. Language learning with Preply Blog.
<https://preply.com/en/blog/hate-speech-and-bullying-in-video-games/>

Zhao, T., & Ramos, T. (2014, August 15). *A Brief Look at Texting and the Internet in Film*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFfq2zblGXw>