A Framework for Meaningful LGBTQ Representation in Video Games

Jackson McLaren

Abstract

This work considers the concept of meaningful representation of LGBTQ content in digital video games. I first explore how the complex concept of representation in media has been dealt with across multiple disciplines, highlighting threads of similarity and contention between discourse happening within the fields of media and communication, game studies, and trans studies. Building off of a foundation of conversations that are already happening around issues of representation in general, and the representation of LGBTQ people in digital video games, I offer a framework for meaningful LGBTQ representation in video games. This framework offers a way to interrogate whether representations are meaningful, and how video games can improve the quality and impact of LGBTQ content that they incorporate into their games.

Extended Abstract

This work examines and interrogates the concept of meaningful representation for LGBTQ content, including but not limited to the nature, visibility, and dialogue of individual characters. I will explore how media scholars, and game studies scholars in particular, have conducted fruitful and complex conversations about representation. Additionally, I will consider what scholars in adjacent fields have argued about LGBTQ representation specifically. In teasing out the major arguments in these conversations, I highlight relevant themes and draw connections between different schools of thought. Of note are the conversations that game studies scholars, trans studies scholars, and scholars focused on issues of race have around representation. After establishing this important foundation, I offer a framework for how media

scholars can consider and analyze (1) whether digital game content includes meaningful LGBTQ representation and (2) how those who create video games can incorporate more complex LGBTQ content.

This work looks at and expands upon existing conversations with many communication and media scholars that have explored issues of representation across media (Gray, 2013; hooks, 2014; Kidd, 2015). There have been fruitful explorations of the problems with the representation of LGBTQ content in video games specifically (see Shaw 2009, 2012, and her 2016 work with Friesem; Ruberg, 2018, 2019). I also incorporate relavent conversations about representation from trans studies regarding transgender critiqies of media (Billard & Zhang, 2022), and work on the effect of LGBTQ representation (McInroy & Craig, 2017). The key is building upon this powerful mix of voices to better understand and establish what meaningful LGBTQ representation can, and should, look like in video games.

Upon building this foundation, I offer a framework for moving towards more meaningful and complex representation of LGBTQ characters in digital video games. I suggest a few key components that we should consider as a part of meaningful representation for LGBTQ characters in digital video games specifically, which can also be applied to other media. In an effort to move toward better and more LGBTQ centric representation in digital games, I seek to address questions such as: What does meaningful representation mean? What does it look like? What can it look like? And what are concrete ways that studios can develop more complex LGBTQ representations and characters? In an effort to answer such questionss, I suggest the following framework for considering representation as meaningful: (1) LGBTQ characters, storylines, and locations should be integrated into the game in a substantial manner; (2) there should be a high likelihood that this content cannot be missed or opted out of; (3) if the LGBTQ

representation is a particular character, they must be a meaningful part of the storyline; (4) LGBTQ representation should be explicit; (5) if the LGBTQ representation is a character, the player should be able to physically see the LGBTQ character on screen or be able to interact with them in some way; and (6) LGBTQ people and communities should be consulted in the process of creating LGBTQ characters, storylines, and content. In order to be considered meaningful, representation should include at least a few of these qualities. Game creators should be called upon to consider the impact that theserepresentations have on both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ audiences. Finally, LGBTQ content should be integrated into the game itself, as opposed to being treated as an add-on.

This work offers a way to critically interrogate meaningful representations in digital video games. This should be helpful for scholars, as well as those that have a stake in such representations, who are invested in issues of LGBTQ representation. Perhaps more importantly, this framework can also serve as a guide for game creators who are looking to incorporate meaningful representation of LGBTQ folks in their games.

References

Billard, T. J., & Zhang, E. (2022). Toward a Transgender Critique of Media Representation. JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies, 61(2), 194-199.

Gray, H. (2013). Subject (ed) to Recognition. American Quarterly, 65(4), 771-798.

hooks, B. (2014). Black looks: Race and representation.

Kidd, J. (2015). Representation. Routledge.

McInroy, L. B., & Craig, S. L. (2017). Perspectives of LGBTQ emerging adults on the depiction and impact of LGBTQ media representation. Journal of youth studies, 20(1), 32-46.

Ruberg, B. (2018). Straightwashing Undertale: Video games and the limits of LGBTQ representation. Transformative Works and Cultures, 28.

Ruberg, B. (2019). Video games have always been queer. NYU Press.

Shaw, A. (2009). Putting the gay in games: Cultural production and GLBT content in video games. Games and Culture, 4(3), 228-253.

Shaw, A. (2012). Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity. new

    media & society, 14(1), 28-44.

Shaw, A., & Friesem, E. (2016). Where is the queerness in games?: Types of lesbian, gay,

    bisexual, transgender, and queer content in digital games. International Journal of

    Communication, 10, 13.