New Media & Society
http://nms.sagepub.com/

Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity

Adrienne Shaw

New Media Society 2012 14: 28 originally published online 16 June 2011
DOI: 10.1177/1461444811410394

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://nms.sagepub.com/content/14/1/28

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *New Media & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://nms.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Feb 24, 2012

OnlineFirst Version of Record - Jun 16, 2011

What is This?

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

Article

new media & society
14(1) 28–44
© The Author(s) 2011
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1461444811410394
nms.sagepub.com

Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity

Adrienne Shaw
University of Pittsburgh, USA

Abstract
The demand for minority representation in video games often focuses on proving that members of marginalized groups are gamers. In turn, it is asserted that the gaming industry should focus on appealing to these players via targeted content. Being targeted as a gamer, however, does not a gamer make. Identity as a gamer intersects with other identities like gender, race, and sexuality. Negative connotations about gaming lead people to not identify as gamers, and even to not play video games. This article concludes, based on interview data, that those invested in diversity in video games must focus their attention on the construction of the medium, and not the construction of the audience as such. This shift in academic attention is necessary to develop arguments for representation in games that do not rely on marking groups as specific kinds of gaming markets via identifiers like gender, race, and sexuality.

Keywords
gamer, gender, identity, media representation, race, sexuality, target marketing, video games

Introduction

The lack of portrayals of marginalized groups[1] in video games[2] is often tied to the fact that the industry rarely recognizes members of these groups as gamers. Video game designer and professor Brenda Braithwaite synthesizes this perspective: 'developers eventually got hip to the fact that there are women out there who want to control female characters [in video games], and now they're getting hip to the fact that there are

Corresponding author:
Adrienne Shaw, Department of Communication, University of Pittsburgh, 1117 Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, USA
Email: adrienneshaw13@gmail.com

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

[lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] gamers out there who want to control LGBT characters' (Ochalla, 2009: 1). This focus on specific types of identity, and an emphasis on targeted marketing based on those identities, however, is an ideologically problematic way to approach issues of representation. By exploring why people who are members of marginalized groups do and do not identify as gamers, this article demonstrates that targeted marketing's overemphasis of discrete identity categories like gender, sexualities, and races might actually have a negative impact on players' relationship to the medium. It also argues that researchers must be more attentive to the fact that playing games does not define one as a gamer. Like any identity, being a gamer intersects with other identities and is experienced in relation to different social contexts.

Many studies disprove the dominant White, heterosexual, male, teen gamer image (e.g. Williams et al., 2008). Indeed, this stereotype is consistently discredited, both popularly and academically (Shaw, 2010). Still, when it comes to arguments for representation in video games, authors focus on the forgotten minority of players who consume these texts but are not represented within them, typically along the dimensions of gender, race, and sexuality (Graner Ray, 2004; Leonard, 2006; Leupold, 2006; Miller, 2006). Though disparities in age and class representations also exist (see Williams et al., 2009b), race, gender, and sexuality are emphasized when linking representational disparities and audience demographics. The argument is that if scholars can prove that members of marginalized groups are gamers, the industry will have to offer content that is more diverse.

Questioning the gamer stereotype, however, is not the only grounds on which to argue for representation. Looking for alternative truths to the construction of the gamer audience is reactionary and promotes a plurality of gamer markets, not diversity in gaming more broadly. In contrast, this article looks critically at how and if interviewees who are members of marginalized groups self-identify as gamers, rather than labeling them as gamers simply because they play video games. It argues that targeted marketing may make members of targeted groups less likely to identify as gamers. It also demonstrates that negative connotations surrounding gaming lead people to feel less invested in representation in games. It argues that the social construction of the medium itself, not the targeting of markets, should be a more central concern to those who wish to promote diversity in game texts.

Gamer: identity or label?

The term 'gamer' is often used to describe people who play video games. This is why news articles citing the Entertainment Software Association's (2010) audience statistics proclaim that gamers are older and less male than is typically presumed (for this presumption, see for example Hefflinger, 2008). In academic research, players, including members of marginalized groups, are similarly labeled as gamers by virtue of their actions (Royse et al., 2007; Schott and Horrell, 2000; Westwood and Griffiths 2010; Williams et al., 2009a). These approaches tend to focus on whether the label of gamer should be more inclusive, not on whether individuals identify as gamers. Labeling everyone who plays video games as a gamer, however, is misguided.

How people *identify* as gamers, is a different question from who *counts* as a gamer. As Hall (1966) argues, identification allows for the self-definition of the individual, rather

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

than on static definitions of identity applied from the outside. In an interview, Homi Bhabha (1994) similarly asserts that 'people always exist as a multiple form of identification, waiting to be created and constructed' (Rutherford, 1990: 220-1). Identification allows us to parse how one might be externally placed into a category from how one actually describes one's own identity. An identification-based approach allows scholars to recognize that an individual may identify with a variety of social categories (e.g. being a woman and Latina and bisexual and a gamer), without the *a priori* privileging of a particular category at the outset. Identification recognizes that people work within contexts in which particular identities are articulated, and that inhabiting certain identity categories can shift one's relationship with another category (e.g. being both a woman and a gamer). This type of identity theory offers a way of addressing the relationship between identity, game play, and representation in games, which does not rely on labeling players based on their actions nor over-privileging certain identity categories over others (e.g. gender over race).

This article focuses on how and why people *identify as* gamers or not. It approaches identity through the lens of reflexivity, as Giddens (1991) articulates: '*the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*' (p. 57, italics in original). Everything we do is inherently social; however, social structures do not determine our actions, as Latour (2005) argues. That is not to say that identity is wholly self-defined, but rather researchers can look at how structures shape identification through individuals' reflexive articulations of their identities. As Valentine (2007) describes, 'in order to research people you wish to help, you need to understand and use the categories by which they understand themselves' (p. 139). In order to make political arguments on behalf of marginalized players, one must look critically at how they articulate their own relationship to gaming writ large.

This study does not distinguish between types of gamers in the way many studies do, following Ang's (1991) call that researchers not allow industry constructions to shape audience studies. Much of the limited view of gaming culture has stemmed from the industry's construction of the hardcore gamer as the ideal market (Kerr, 2006: 104), resulting in a lack of adequate attention paid to, for example, casual gaming fans (Consalvo, 2009). As defined by Juul (2010), the stereotypical casual player 'has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit small amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games' (p. 29). A hardcore player, on the other hand, stereotypically prefers 'emotionally negative fictions … has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games' (p. 29). He acknowledges later (p.146) that players rarely fit easily into these stereotypes. Consalvo (2009) too has argued that casual gamers can be dedicated fans of their preferred games in much the same way as hardcore gamers. It is perhaps more accurate to say that hardcore and casual refer to the effort required in making the games, than it does players' approaches to the games. There is, for example, nothing casual about playing *Farmville* on Facebook for hours on end, just as there is nothing inherently hardcore about playing an hour of *Halo* with friends at a gaming party. As this study explores, however, it is not enough to pay attention to different types of gamer identities. It is also important to distinguish playing video games from the process of identifying as

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

a gamer. It is not enough to question the popular construction of the gaming audience, though the construction of the audience is still important to how players relate to the medium.

According to Foucault (1982: 781), subjects are produced, not just limited, by power. Drawing on Foucault, Butler (1995) states, '[d]iscourse does not merely represent or report on pregiven practices and relations, but it enters into their articulation and is, in that sense, productive' (p. 138). Zipin (1998) similarly describes how individuals are made subjects via the construction of 'selves.' The obfuscation of the creation of the gamer subject by industry, and academic and popular discourse, hides the extent to which these constructions shape players' relationship to the medium. In their review, Dovey and Kennedy (2006) argue that '[g]ames culture is … a critical site where discourses around technology, technological innovation and technological competence converge with dominant conceptions of gender and race' (p. 131). Nakamura (2002, 2008) has made similar critiques of cyberculture more generally. These are the discourses with which interviewees' claims, or rejection, of gamer identity are in dialogue.

By focusing on how people identify as gamers, rather than on the construction of the audience or assuming that the act of playing video games is what defines one as a 'gamer,' this article demonstrates the contextuality and intersectionality of gamer identity. It posits that gamer identity exists in relation to, but is not determined by, other identities like gender, race, and sexuality. Interviewees also felt gaming trivial and stigmatized. This affected whether or not they identified as gamers, as well as whether they felt representation in this medium was important. Simply arguing that members of marginalized groups are or could be gamers is an inadequate approach to arguing for representation, as it does not fully take into account the social context in which games are experienced. In concluding, it is argued that the construction of the medium itself, not simply the construction of the audience, is a necessary site for critical action in the politics of representation in video games.

Method

Studying gamer identity

This article comes out of a larger, three-staged ethnographic study of members of marginalized groups who play video games. First, a general survey was administered online, to locate potential interviewees. As arguments for representation in video games often speak *for* those that fall out of the heterosexual, White male stereotype, this study sought to speak *to* members of these groups. A sample of interviewees who identified as non-heterosexual, non-male, and not solely White/Anglo, were selected from the completed surveys. Of the 52 total people who fit into one or more of the selection criteria, 38 were contacted, 27 of whom agreed to be interviewed (see Appendix 1 for diagram). An effort was made to include people from a wide range of ages and socioeconomic statuses. In addition, I had the opportunity to speak with two heterosexual, White male partners of two of those interviewees, and the non-gaming, queer White female partner of one other participant.

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

By using sexuality, gender, and race as starting points for selecting interviewees, it is not asserted that these categories matter to the interviewees' relationship with gaming. Rather, these are categories whose representations both popular and academic discourses about gaming have made to matter. The challenge this study poses, however, is in leaving them as starting points, not predetermining lenses with which to interpret results. In addition, as the focus was people who play video games, rather than 'gamers' *per se*, interviewees varied in types of games, platforms, and amount of time they play. Two separate interviews were conducted. In the first, a modified life history approach was used (Langness and Frank, 1965). The second interview was a 'gaming interview,' as described in Schott and Horrell (2000). Qualitative data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2006 [1967]), with themes coded via the qualitative software program Nvivo. Quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS. All names used to reference interviewees are aliases, most selected by participants themselves.

Contextualization of gamer identity

Identities become relevant in particular social interactions, including the research moment. When recruiting people to talk about video games, for example, participants assume that they are being called upon to answer as 'gamers.' Though I was careful not to include categories of gender, race and sexuality in the recruitment announcement, the announcement did say that I was looking for 'hardcore gamers, casual gamers, and everyone in between.' Snowball sampling allowed me to encourage anyone who had played any sort of digital game to fill out the survey. Yet, even then, many people wondered why I wanted to interview them, particularly if they did not see themselves as gamers. This is because both the word gamer in the recruitment announcement, as well as the 'gamer' focus of many game studies and popular discussions of gaming, empowered gamer as a meaningful category. There is an expectation that, as an interviewee, one is called upon to speak from a particular point of view; my interviewees wanted to know which identity I was attempting to hail when I made them research subjects.

How interviewees identify themselves in the interviews, moreover, must be understood as a particular, momentary articulation of how they view themselves in relation to what they believe is the purpose of the study. Some interviewees, for example, identified themselves using certain identifiers on the survey, but in different ways in the interview. Sexualities shifted from bisexual or queer to gay, races from Latino/White to simply White, multiracial to Black, male to transgender. In both interviews, I asked interviewees if they identified as gamers. Non-gamers became gamers and 'sort of' gamers became 'not really' gamers in the time between the two interviews (which was typically no more than one month). Researchers must be careful to account for the mutability of all identities in research that seeks to understand the relationship between identity and media consumption.

Gamer identity can change. Tanner, an Arab/White neurologist from New Jersey in her late 30s, and her husband Rusty, a White writer from Chicago in his late 30s, have both played video games for most of their lives. Rusty, however, identified as a 'full-on gamer,' whereas Tanner said that she identified as a gamer at one time, but goes back and forth about identifying as one now.

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

> Tanner: I guess there were times when I would say yes and times when I would say not really. I guess overall yeah, as someone who is maybe drawn to games more than the average person […] But not like a full on gamer-gamer kind of person where it's a major part of what I do with my recreational time.

In another interview, she concluded that she is 'a gamer at heart,' but that does not lead her to declare herself a gamer. While she mostly plays games like *Wii Sports* and *Mario Kart* now (games mainly targeted to a casual gamer market), Tanner was perhaps among the most 'hard core' of all interviewees. She has a collection of old consoles in her basement and rarely goes more than a few months without playing. Other interviewees, like Evan and Julia, played games that are marketed more to the hardcore gamer market, yet they do not identify as gamers either. Over-simplistic assumptions that playing video games, even certain types of video games, marks one as a gamer have obscured the other reasons people may or may not be invested in this identity. The meanings attached to 'gamer identity' by industry, and academic and popular discourse, shape people's relationship with the category. This is evident in the relationship between gender, race, and sexuality and gamer identity.

Gamer identity and targeting markets: gender, sexuality and race

A primary reason for 'proving' that gamers are a diverse group is to argue for diversity in game texts. In this sense, as Gitlin (1983) argues, representation is only provided as part of the 'restricted pluralism of consumption' (p. 330). Groups are representable only insofar as they are marketable. Some interviewees accepted, if begrudgingly, the lack of representation of a group in video games because they are not part of the White/Anglo, heterosexual, male gaming market. At times, this resulted in a sort of defeated apathy, as Sasha, a heterosexual, African American woman in her early 20s, explained: 'they've been doing this shit for years, so it's not going to change.' At other times, interviewees argued that their group is a good market for video games or that not marketing to groups is not only discriminatory, it is illogical. As Carol, a heterosexual, White woman in her early 30s, pointed out, 'it's stupid to not market to people who have money to spend on your product.' There is an assumption that if only the industry could get beyond its myopic view of its market, they could make more money by offering more diversity in their products.

This focus on market logic is one way audiences account for the lack of representation in media. Marketing to particular groups, however, results in a similar sort of marginalization as under- or misrepresentation. Research that uses this kind of market logic repeats many of the over-simplifications, the static notions of identity, evident in the industry's construction of the audience. Interpellation by cultural industries, moreover, is not the only factor in whether or not people see themselves as part of the audience. Identifiers like genders, races/ethnicities, and sexualities can shape how individuals relate to gamer identity. Interestingly, however, in this study only gender was correlated with accounts of who identified as a gamer. No other category, including race, sexuality, religion, education, age or type of gaming platform, demonstrated such a striking disparity between who identified as a gamer and who did not.

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

Some interviewees did mention use of a particular gaming platform as a reason they may or may not identify as a gamer, but when analyzed in combination with the survey data this was not the case. Interviewees who were non-heterosexual mentioned sexuality, specifically whether or not gaming culture was homophobic or open-minded, in the course of the interviews (though there was no consensus on the matter). Interviewees only mentioned race when they described the 'straight White dude' gamer stereotype. Not being White/Anglo was never articulated as a reason for not identifying as a gamer. Often gamers are described as young (though there are endless studies asserting that the average gamer is in their 30s), yet age was not mentioned by interviewees as a reason for identifying as a gamer or not. All of the interviewees, ranging from their early 20s to late 30s, grew up with video games, though some did not start playing until their teens and some played when they were kids and then again when they were older. Although race, sexuality, age, and platform shaped people's relationship with gaming, these did not determine whether they identified as gamers. Moreover, even though gender was correlated with gamer identity, interviewees rarely gave it as a reason for not identifying as a gamer.

Gender. Although gender was not mentioned as a reason for identifying, or not, as a gamer, there was a definite correlation between gender and gamer identity. Male interviewees were much more likely to identify as gamers than female, transgender or genderqueer interviewees were. Of the 29 interviewees that played games, twelve identified unequivocally as gamers (four female-identified and eight male-identified). Three 'sort of' identified as gamers (two female- and one male-identified) and five asserted that they were 'not really' gamers (four female- and one genderqueer- identified). Eight said that they were unequivocally not gamers, seven of whom were female-identified and one of whom was male-identified (he was also transgender, though I hesitate to claim that is maybe the reason he does not proclaim a gamer identity more readily). This finding is unsurprising, as others have found that women tend to underestimate the amount of time they play and do not generally identify as gamers (Aquila, 2006; Lucas and Sherry, 2004; Kerr, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Williams et al., 2009a; Yates and Littleton, 1999). Moreover, a great deal of research on gender and games have described games as 'boys only' spaces (Burrill, 2008; Cassell and Jenkins, 2000).

What is interesting, however, is that gender only came up explicitly in two interviews. Klara, an early 20s, half-Japanese, half-Norwegian woman, said that gamers are 'usually guys. I know one girl gamer […] I don't really consider her as a gamer. I don't know maybe my perception of gamer is too extreme. But she considers herself as a gamer.' Janet, an early 30s, White, queer identified woman asked if I was talking to people about the gendered aspects of gaming, because she had originally thought my research focused on female gamers. In past conversations, she and her friends had discussed gaming as a very male domain. In the other interviews, I might have pushed more to find out if the hesitance to identify as a gamer was somehow a deference to gender norms; however, the primacy of gender as a factor did not emerge until after data collection was completed. Moreover, it is interesting that gender was so relevant to gamer identity without being consciously articulated as such.

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

The prominence of gender as factor may be related to the fact that gender is the primary way in which representation in games, the texts, the industry, and the audience, has been studied (see Burrill, 2008; Cassell and Jenkins, 2000; Graner Ray, 2004; Hayes, 2007; Kerr, 2006; Lucas and Sherry, 2004; Royse et al., 2007; Taylor, 2006; Yates and Littleton, 1999). The way researchers and marketers discuss gender difference in gaming often promotes the traditional correlations between masculinity and technology, and the converse disassociation of femininity and technology. This affects, Cassell (2002: 5) argues, how women who are good with computers feel about themselves. Echoing this in one interview, Carol lamented that she only ever played video games when men she was dating played: 'I somehow feel a little pathetic that I never really got anything on my own. It was always sort of like I needed an excuse to have that.' One might argue that the women who do not identify as gamers feel that they have less expertise with gaming. Nearly everyone who asserted that they were not gamers, for example, said it was because they 'don't play enough,' which might be a proxy for an assessment of their own skills. Having watched them play, however, it seems to have been more a question of investment than skill that was behind their denial of gamer identity.

Sasha was the one exception in that not spending enough money on video games, rather than not playing enough, was the reason she gave for not identifying as a gamer. She indirectly related her expertise with games to gender, however. Gender motivated her because, she said, 'when I'm playing a guy. I get fully absorbed because I really have to win. Because he just expects me to lose anyway, because I'm a girl.' She played against her brother and his friends in order to get better, because for her gaming was highly competitive. Although she said the men she plays against are gamers, however, she still did not think of herself as a gamer.

Gender is a factor in media consumption, but research demonstrates that this is because socialization and power relations shape the gender differences in media practices (Ang, 2003; Bird, 1992; Butsch, 2000; Morley, 1986). The socialization of individuals as members of specific groups influences their interaction with particular media texts or genres (Hoover et al., 2003; Morley, 1986; Seiter, 1999). Play theorists too assert that gender socialization shapes play practices (Roberts and Sutton-Smith, 1962). Gender norms have also been shown to affect players' relationships with gaming (Carr, 2005; Royse et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2009a), though not always consciously or in expected ways. Beyond gender role theory and a focus on norms, there are other theoretical tools available to make sense of this interaction.

Bhabha's (1994) discussion of hybridity and the 'third space,' for example, is useful in articulating the relationship between gamer identity and other types of identity. His 'third space' does not entail the hybridizing of two identity categories that are taken for granted. Instead, there is something specific about the experience of being in that third space, which is not the result of adding the experiences of two different identity categories together. Kraidy (2005) summarizes that the 'notion of hybridity invokes the fusion of two (or more) components into a third term irreducible to the sum of its parts' (p. 14). Or as Valentine (2007) discusses in relation to transgender as an identity category, 'age, race, class, and so on don't merely inflect or intersect with those experiences we call gender and sexuality but rather *shift the very boundaries of what 'gender' and sexuality*

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

can mean in particular contexts' (p. 100, italics in original). Other identities similarly shape how, rather than define if, individuals identify as gamers.

Sexuality. Ephram is an Asian American man in his mid-20s. He identified as a gay gamer, or gaymer, which is an excellent example of an identity that is not additive, but rather exists in the space between two group affiliations. He notes this in describing why he announces his sexuality via his gaming profile.

> Ephram: We're still gamers, but we're not the typical gamer I guess. And I think it's just a way of differentiating us and letting people know right off the bat. Kind of weeding out some of the, for lack of a better word, some of the douchebags in the game that would otherwise not be really cool with it.

Here he articulated his gaymer identity in the context of online gaming. Ephram also tied identifying as gaymer to the fact that he and his partner Devon were early members of the online, gay-gamer community, gamerexperimentations.org, where the term gaymer was allegedly first coined. Not all gamers who are not heterosexual identify as gaymers, and participating in gaymer communities does not necessitate being gay and a gamer, as explored in this author's earlier research (Shaw, 2007). Regardless, gaymer is an identity experienced at the intersection of, at the disruption posed by, two categories that are not always easily reconciled. Gamers are not gay, and gays do not play video games – or so the dominant discourses go. Gaymer exists in Bhabha's 'third space.'

Sexuality shaped how some LGBTQ[3] interviewees related to video game culture, but not whether they identified as gamers. Some mentioned homophobic speech in online gaming spaces in the context of characterizing gaming in general as an unwelcoming space. Both Ephram and Devon found ways of challenging or avoiding such speech in their online play, as did Pouncy, who identified as a late 20s White genderqueer.

> Pouncy: If someone is taking a really long time to take their turn some people say, 'Hey stop watching gay porn.' Be like, 'Man sorry that *Harry Potter* slash fiction just really makes me hot.' (We both laugh). And they'll be like, 'Ew, are you gay?' And then I have to decide where to go from there. Usually like, 'Yes. I'm a huge hairy faggot and I have so much dick in my mouth right now.' Something like that.

There is a dominant assumption that gaming culture is at best heteronormative and at worst blatantly homophobic. Not all interviewees, however, felt that was the case. Zahriel, a late-20s White, bisexual woman pointed to queerness in many of the Japanese texts that form the basis of gaming culture as an example of this. Tanner and Rusty discussed gender-switching (often interpreted as a queer practice) as a common element in pen-and-paper role-playing games, though they disagreed as to whether there was a stigma attached to this practice. Sexuality may shape people's relationships to gaming, but it did not affect whether they identify as gamers. This may be because gaymers are not yet a targeted market. Gay content tends to be optional; some gamers might be gay, some game content may include gay characters, but the industry does not make games for gay gamers.

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

Race. Race was similarly not correlated with whether interviewees identified as gamers or not, but also was not brought up in interviews in relation to gamer identity. I recognize that being a White interviewer may have made interviewees less likely to bring up race as a dominant factor, though they did discuss race and racism at other points of the interviews. It is also possible that Whiteness in gaming, like Whiteness in general, is uninterrogated. That is to say, if race seems to disappear as a dominant factor in how people relate to the category of gamer, this may be because Whiteness itself often disappears as a subject of inquiry, as Dyer (2002) argues. Not being targeted may also be part of why race, like sexuality, is not as salient a category as gender when it comes to identifying as a gamer.

The industry's disinterest in the racial makeup of its audience is evident in its published statistics. The Entertainment Software Association publishes 'Essential Facts' about their audience every year. In all of the reports since 2004,[4] the only demographic data reported in relation to game sales are age and gender. It is unsurprising that the game industry does not address sexuality in their research; even the US census does not. The absence of race, however, seems to indicate that it is not important to the way the industry thinks about their audience. Only the Kaiser Family Foundation (2002, 2010) has published data on race and video game play, though only for children. In 2002 (p. 1), they found that African-American and Hispanic children play more video games than their White counterparts, and that low- and middle-income children play more than children from families with higher incomes. As of 2010 (pp. 5, 25), those differences persist. Perhaps the industry feels that it does not have to address these markets, as they are already buying the product. Race, it seems, does not matter when it comes to the *construction* of the gamer audience, a form of 'symbolic annihilation' (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 1978) that exists beyond game texts themselves.

In one interview, Cody may have alluded to race in the context of explaining why it is 'ok' for him, who identified as a heterosexual, African-American man in his mid-20s, to identify as a gamer. Cody said that there has been an increased visibility of athletes playing video games: 'what else are you going to do in that break of time that you have from practice to other stuff. It's a form of entertainment. It's like anything else.' This movement of games into the mainstream, via athletics, may serve as a way of signaling, without mentioning, race. In two out of three of the most popular US sports the majority of professional athletes are African-American (Leonard WM, 1997). David Leonard (2004) and Dean Chan (2005) have both described sports games (along with crime games) as being the primary place people of color, African-Americans specifically, are represented in video games. These sports games are also the games Cody plays most often. What is interesting about Cody's assertion, however, is that when games became 'like anything else' it became 'ok' to play video games. It is not that video games are marketed to a bigger more diverse audience. Rather, video games are losing their place as a distinct medium that only particular (i.e. White) audiences use. As will be shown next, this suggests that researchers must find ways to address the marginality of games, rather than the marginality of certain types of gamers, in arguments for representation.

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

Stigma and guilty gaming

Not identifying as a gamer was not usually a matter of interviewees seeing themselves as excluded from the interpellated gamer market. Not wanting to be identified with stigma of gaming was a more important factor. Bryan, a late 20s, Latino/White, heterosexual man, and Evan, a White, transgender, bisexual man in his early 30s, both eschewed video game play in high school because it was not 'cool.' Sara, a late 20s, White, heterosexual woman, was a bit ambivalent about identifying as a gamer because 'there's that whole negative connotation that gamers are nerds.' Carol did not identify as a gamer because, 'I feel like I don't fit in with that geekier antisocial aspect of it.' To Renee, a White, heterosexual woman in her late 20s, who has played video games consistently for most of her life, 'gamer has an image in my head and it's Snickers and Mountain Dew and 3 o'clock in the morning.' Cody recognized the negative stereotypes about gamers, but defied them. When asked if he identified as a gamer he said:

> Cody: I mean on the outside, no. But you know I don't ever hide my love for video games. I don't really care what people think about it […] I think people label [gamers] as kids who sit in their basement […] Like I'll beat you in a video game basketball game, and I'll kick your ass in real life.

It is important to note here, that he does not display his gamer identity either, even if he identified as one. This is because performances of identities have important implications, as Evan described.

> Evan: Actually being with [my boyfriend] changed my perception of gaming a little bit. Because I never felt guilty or like it should be a guilty pleasure that once every six to nine months I'd play games. I was like, I don't do it often. It's not like I waste my life away doing it. But even that little bit [he] criticized and I was like now I'm starting to think it's juvenile, maybe I should get rid of my game system.

Choosing to identify as a member of a particular group affects one's relationship to others, as well as the investments one has in that identifier. When it comes to gamer identity, this investment, or lack thereof, is applied to the medium as well. People tied their opinion of whether representation in video games is important to how they felt about games in general.

As with a variety of media, from soap operas (Ang, 1989) to romance novels (Radway, 1984), there is a stigma attached to certain types of consumption, a guilty pleasure. Like Radway's (1984) romance readers, some interviewees described video games as a drug habit. Bryan, for example, referred to the game he played for the second interview, *Disgaea*, as the 'crack' that got him back into gaming. Amy, an Asian-American woman in her late 20s referenced the addictive property of games several times as the main reason she did not play more. This articulation of popular media as a narcotic has its roots in early mass culture critiques, like those of the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1993), as Ang (2000: 267) also describes. Interviewees expressed that games are 'silly' and thus not to be taken seriously, as Newman (2008) also finds. Guilty

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

pleasures indicate that we think of ourselves as being certain *kinds* of people, as Giddens argues (1991: 65). Guilty pleasure, like shame more generally, is a product of social interaction (Goffman, 1986). In a culture in which games are not taken seriously, representation in games is viewed as inconsequential and fewer people are invested in demanding diversity in the texts.

Although Juul (2010) argues that games have become normalized, this misses an important point emphasized in several of interviews. Participants saw gaming as something separate from other media. The fact that video games are viewed negatively affected whether or not interviewees thought that representation in games mattered. Those who argue for the importance of representation in games must deal more directly with the marginality of the medium. As Zahriel pointed out, combating this marginalization might offer the solution to the problem of representation in video games: 'People are starting to say, "Hey wait! A lot of people play video games. A lot more people play video games than we thought!" They don't have to play in the closet any more. Yay!' The site for struggle then, is not just the construction of the gamer audience, but also the construction of games as a particular type of media.

Conclusion

The lack of representation of marginalized groups in games is usually 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. Researchers tend to position their work in opposition to this construction, question the construction, and offer their own alternative constructions. To say that the representation of marginalized groups is important in video games because members of these groups *could* be gamers, however, misses the point. Similarly, studies that focus on marginalized gaming audiences often conflate the act of playing video games with identifying as a gamer. Rather than question the construction of the gamer market, this study looked at how individuals relate to this construction, specifically by asking *if*, not assuming *that*, those that play video games identify as gamers.

The audience is an industrial construction, and these constructions shape how people approach media; however, simply adding diversity to games will not automatically make the gamer audience more diverse. To assert one's presence in the marketplace does not ensure an equal place in mainstream game texts. The 'girl games' movement, for example, made content designed to be 'for girls' a peripheral interest (Cassell and Jenkins, 2000; Hayes, 2007; Kafai et al., 2008). This kind of targeting distances women from mainstream games. The act of marking 'girl gamers' as a market, whether women feel adequately appealed to by those attempts or not (often not), makes gender a salient category when talking about games. That gender was correlated with gamer identity, but race and sexuality were not, is one sign of this. Both race and sexuality may shape conversations within gamer circles, if one chooses to interact in those circles. The marking of gender as a salient category through research and marketing, however, more directly shaped whether interviewees felt invited to take part in the conversation. Marking an audience as distinct, in this way, acts as a form of marginalization. The solution to the invisibility of gender, race,

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

and sexuality in gaming is not the creation of a plurality of video game markets, but instead an insistence on diversity in the construction of the market.

Interviewees also rejected gamer identity, in part, because they viewed games as peripheral to mainstream media culture, a guilty pleasure, a juvenile pastime, and as a medium that is inherently unimportant. In sum, it is not just relating to institutionalized gamer identity that makes one a gamer. Other factors such as the relationship between 'gamer' and other identities, different contexts, and games' position in relation to mainstream media culture are important factors as well. Juul (2010) claims that though not everyone plays video games, nothing 'prevents this from happening. Video games are fast becoming games for *everyone*' (p. 152, italics in original). That there are games that appeal to mass audiences, however, is not the same as saying that all games are *for* everyone.

Research on the politics of representation in games must deal directly with the marginality of games as a medium. Those invested in the representation of marginalized groups in video games should focus on how the construction of the medium, not the construction of the market, shapes discourse about representation games. That is to say, it is not enough to make the game industry recognize that their consumer base is broader than they tend to assume. Such an approach promotes targeting groups on the basis of essentialized notions of identity. In turn, this targeting marks those groups as peripheral gaming markets; it does not create a more diverse video game market more broadly. Studying the intersection of game play and audience identities, moreover, should not rely on the *a priori* assumption that certain identities matter. As this study has shown, researchers can analyze identity without taking for granted what identities might matter to participants. Rather than focus on gamers or marginalized groups, researchers must address how video games enter into people's everyday lives. Normalizing video games for all audiences, finding ways to emphasize their 'everydayness' in contemporary media culture, is a more productive approach to demands for representation. This is the only way to argue for representation in this medium in a way that does not reify the very categories already used by the industry.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr Katherine Sender, Dr Marwan Kraidy, Dr John L. Jackson, Jr, and Dr Rosa Mikeal Martey for their comments on earlier versions of this analysis. This research was sponsored by the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. She would also like to express thanks to the Mudra Institute for Communication Ahmedabad and the University of Pittsburgh for their support during the preparation of this manuscript. Finally, the comments of two anonymous reviewers and the editors for *New Media and Society* were invaluable in the revision of this piece.

Notes

1. These groups may or may not be statistical minorities in a given local or global context, but are usually defined as marginal by their lack of access to the means of mass media production (cordoning off for the moment user-generated and independently produced content).
2. I use video game here as an all-inclusive term for digital, interactive games played on personal computers, video game consoles, handheld devices, mobile phones, etc.
3. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.
4. This is the earliest accessible report.

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

References

Adorno T and Horkheimer M (1993) The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception. In: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum.

Ang I (1989) *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. New York: Routledge.

Ang I (1991) *Desperately Seeking the Audience*. New York: Routledge.

Ang I (2000) Dallas and the ideology of mass culture. In Storey J (ed.) *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (2nd edn). Athens: University of Georgia Press, 265–274.

Ang I (2003) Living room wars: Rethinking audiences for a postmodern world. In: Brooker W and Jermyn D (eds) *The Audience Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 226–234.

Aquila M (2006) Video play pathways of females: Developing theory. Unpublished Master of Science thesis, Cornell University.

Bhabha H (1994) *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Bird S (1992) *For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Burrill D (2008) *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, and Culture*. New York: Peter Lang.

Butler J (1995) For a careful reading. In: Benhabib S, Butler J, Cornell D and Fraser N (eds) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 127–143.

Butsch R (2000) *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Carr D (2005) Contexts, gaming pleasures, and gendered preferences. *Simulation Gaming* 36(4): 464–482.

Cassell J (2002) Genderizing HCI. In: Jacko J and Sears A (eds) *The Handbook of Human–Computer Interaction*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 402–411.

Cassell J and Jenkins H (2000) *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Chan D (2005) Playing with race: The ethics of racialized representations in E-Games. *IRIE* 4: 24–30.

Consalvo M (2009) Hardcore casual: Game culture *Return(s) to Ravenhearst*. Paper presented at 4th International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games, Port Canaveral, FL, April 26–30.

Dovey J and Kennedy H (2006) *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*. New York: Open University Press.

Dyer R (2002) *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (2nd edn). New York: Routledge.

Entertainment Software Association (2010) *Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*. Available at: http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_Essential_Facts_2010.PDF (accessed 7 January 2011).

Foucault M (1982) The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry* 8(4): 777–795.

Gerbner G and Gross L (1976) Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication* 26: 172–199.

Giddens A (1991) *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gitlin T (1983) *Inside Prime Time.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Glaser B and Strauss A (2006 [1967]) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction.

Goffman E (1986) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Graner Ray S (2004) *Gender Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market*. Hingham, MA: Charles River Media.

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

Hall S (1966) Who needs identity? In: Hall S and du Gay P (eds) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 1–18.

Hayes E (2007) Gendered identities at Play: Case studies of two women playing Morrowind. *Games and Culture* 2(1): 23–48.

Hefflinger M (2008) *Survey: Average U.S. Gamer Age is 35; 40% are Women.* Available at: http://www.dmwmedia.com/news/2008/07/17/survey:-average-u.s.-gamer-age-35;-40%25-are-women (accessed 7 January 2011).

Hoover S, Clark L and Alters D (2003) *Media, Home and Family*. New York: Routledge.

Juul J (2010) *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kafai YB, Heeter C, Denner J and Sun JY (eds) (2008) *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Kaiser Family Foundation (2002) *Key Facts: Children and Video Games*. Available at: http://www.kff.org/entmedia/3271-index.cfm (accessed 7 January 2011).

Kaiser Family Foundation (2010) *Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-year-olds.* Available at: http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf (accessed 7 January 2011).

Kerr A (2006) *The Buisness and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework/Gameplay*. London: Sage.

Kraidy M (2005) *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Langness L and Frank G (1965) *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography*. Novato, CA: Chandler and Sharp Publishers.

Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leonard D (2004) High tech blackface: Race, sports, video games and becoming the other. *Intelligent Agent* 4(4.2). Available at: http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/IA4_4gamingleonard.pdf (accessed 7 January 2011).

Leonard D (2006) Not a hater, just keepin' it real: The importance of race- and gender-based game studies. *Games and Culture* 1(1): 83–88.

Leonard WM (1997) Racial composition of NBA, NFL and MLB teams and racial composition of franchise cities. *Journal of Sport Behavior* 20(4): 424–434.

Leupold T (2006) Is there room for 'gaymers' in the gaming industry? *Oakland Tribune*, April 7.

Lucas K and Sherry J (2004) Sex differences in video game play: A communication-based explanation. *Communication Research* 31(5): 499–523.

Miller P (2006) You got your race in my video game. *Escapist*, vol. 56. Available at: http://www.escapistmagazine.com/issue/56 (accessed 7 January 2011).

Morley D (1986) *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*. London: Comedia Publishing Group.

Nakamura L (2002) *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.

Nakamura L (2008) *Digitizing Race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Newman J (2008) *Playing with Videogames*. New York: Routledge.

Ochalla B (2009) Are video games getting gayer? *The Advocate Online* August 26. Available at: http://www.bryanochalla.com/articles/article.aspx?article_id=172 (accessed 7 January 2011).

Radway J (1984) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Roberts J and Sutton-Smith B (1962) Child training and game involvement. *Ethnology* 1(2): 166–185.

Royse P, Lee J, Undrahbuyan B, Hopson M and Consalvo M (2007) Women and games: Technologies of the gendered self. *New Media and Society* 9(4): 555–576.

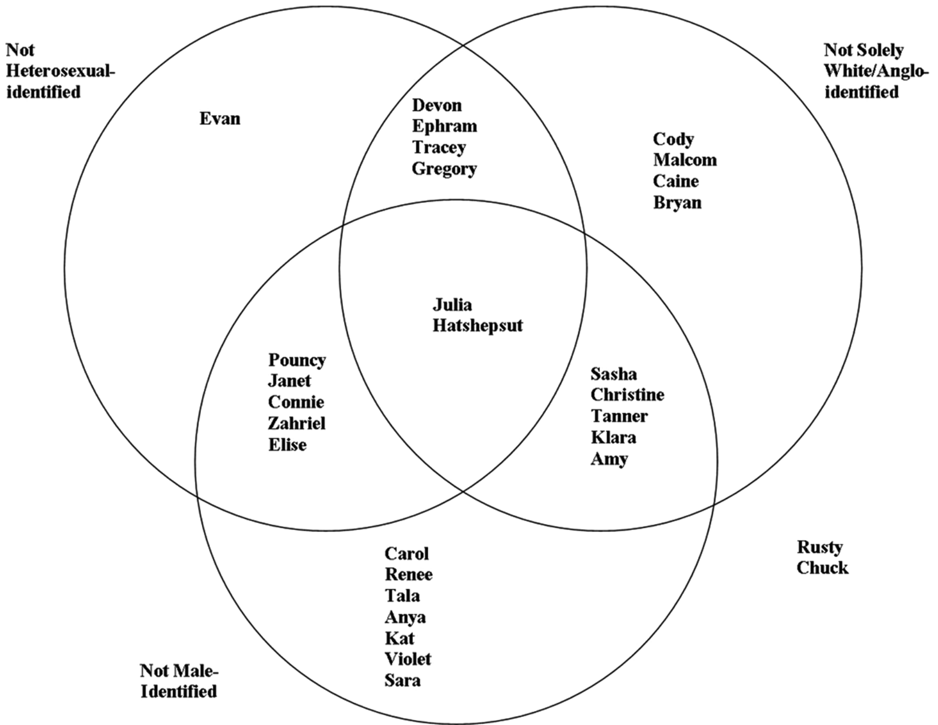
Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

Rutherford J (1990) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
Schott G and Horrell K (2000) Girl gamers and their relationship with the gaming culture. *The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 6(4): 36–53.
Seiter E (1999) *Television and New Media Audiences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Shaw A (2007) *In-Gayme Representation?* Paper presented at The 7th International Digital Arts and Culture Conference: The Future of Digital Media Culture, Perth, Australia. September 15–18.
Shaw A (2010) What is video game culture?: Cultural studies and game studies. *Games and Culture* 5(4): 403–424.
Taylor TL (2006) *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Tuchman G (1978) The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media. In: Tuchman G, Daniels AK and Benet J (eds) *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*. New York: Oxford University Press, 3–38.
Valentine D (2007) *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Westwood D and Griffiths M (2010) The role of structural characteristics in video-game play motivation: A Q-methodology study. *CyberPsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 13(5): 581–585.
Williams D, Yee N and Caplan S (2008) Who plays, how much, and why? Debunking the stereotypical gamer profile. *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* 13(4): 993–1018.
Williams D, Consalvo M, Caplan S and Yee N (2009a) Looking for gender: Gender roles and behavior among online gamers. *Journal of Communication* 59(4): 700–725.
Williams D, Martins N, Consalvo M and Ivory J (2009b) The virtual census: Representations of gender, race and age in video games. *New Media and Society* 11(5): 815–834.
Yates S and Littleton K (1999) Understanding computer game cultures: A situated approach. *Information, Communication and Society* 2(4): 566–583.
Zipin L (1998) Looking for sentient life in discursive practices: The question of human agency in critical theories and school research. In: Popkewitz TS and Brennan M (eds) *Foucault's Challenge: Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 316–347.

Adrienne Shaw is currently a School of Arts and Sciences Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Communication at the University of Pittsburgh. She received her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication in 2010. In Fall of 2010, she was a Postdoctoral Scholar at the Mudra Institute for Communication Ahmedabad in India. She studies and lectures on the politics of representation, video games and gaming culture, cultural production, and qualitative audience research.

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014

Appendix 1: Diagram of interviewees



Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at INRIA RENNES on September 22, 2014