Diversity in Games

How and Why?

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DISCLAIMER: I am a queer woman living with mental illness, which are aspects of my life that have caused me to be oppressed in social spaces. That said, I also have the privilege of being cisgender, Caucasian, and (mostly) able-bodied, of not deviating from the predominant religious and cultural norms of my society, and of living with financial security.

Games have a problem with diversity.

The IGDA’s developer satisfaction survey most recently notes that 61% of game developers self-identify as being solely ‘white/Caucasian/European’, 74% as ‘male’, 81% as ‘heterosexual’, and 75% as not having a disability. Despite being a global survey, 49% of respondents are working in the USA – but statistics that are specific to other regions reveal similar demographics.

I live in Australia, where 18% of people working in the games industry identify as female (IGEA, 2018). The statistics are not much better in the United Kingdom, where only 19% identify as women and 4% are described as ‘Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)’ (Creative Skillset, 2016).

The industry is homogenous: predominantly white, cisgender, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, and neurotypical. But it is not just game development companies that lack diversity; it is also the games that are being developed. For example, at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in 2018, only 8% of games featured exclusively female protagonists (Feminist...
Frequency 2018). And that is just the types of diversity that are most commonly being given attention: there are no accessible, up-to-date statistics about the number of people of colour, disabled people, or queer people in games announced at major industry events.

Queerly Represent Me – an organisation of which I am managing director – has some statistics around representations of queer folks in games, but not in comparison to all games being released in any given year. The LGBTQ Video Game Archive is similarly tracking the number of games released with queer characters, narratives, or themes, but not in comparison to games that do not feature these elements. In-depth analysis and holistic study of the representations that exist are being published more, but limited work is being done to increase the quantities of these representations throughout games – and the industry that is making them.

In 2017, a man – James Damore – was fired from his job at Google for writing and circulating a memo entitled ‘Google’s Ideological Echo Chamber’. The document insists that we stop stereotyping people based on gender, and then proceeds to say that women often ‘prefer jobs in social or artistic areas’ over coding, ‘generally have a harder time negotiating salary, asking for raises, speaking up, and leading’, and have a ‘lower stress tolerance’ and therefore are less likely to work high stress jobs. The memo boils down to saying that women are biologically less likely to be good at or interested in software engineering because of a predisposition to being people-oriented, cooperative, and anxious.

However, ‘tech and games are not naturally male-dominated fields’ (Golding & van Deventer, 2016: 28). In fact, women’s enrolment in computer science and information technology degrees were following a steady, rising trajectory until 1984 – just as marketing companies began to suggest that ‘computers and videogames are boys’ toys’ (Golding & van Deventer, 2016: 28). There is a cyclical relationship between these facets of the games industry: if games are marketed towards boys (and one technique for this is ensuring they feature playable characters that appeal to those boys), then boys are more likely to become interested in games. If more boys are interested in games, they are more likely to be interested in working within the games industry. Once working in the industry, they are more likely to make characters that resemble themselves and their own experiences, and to market those characters – and the games that contain them – to boys like themselves. And the cycle continues.

It is difficult to solve a problem that is cyclical, particularly when the people inside the cycle are unable to see what is occurring. A game
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The audience survey Queerly Represent Me conducted in 2017 asked participants whether they felt representation of diverse identities was important in games and to explain their answer. The main justifications for individuals deeming representation unimportant focused on its ‘irrelevance’ to a good game and that ‘narrative’ or ‘gameplay’ should be prioritised, but a number of participants specifically suggested that games are already ‘diverse enough’.

‘There’s plenty of diversity already’, one participant said. Another stated, ‘Games are already the most egalitarian form of entertainment. Many games let you make whatever character you want to represent you’. A third respondent suggested that, ‘Representation is adequate already, and not of concern to anyone besides those who do not play games, in my experience’.

There are several misconceptions evident in just these three responses. If diversity can be defined as ‘including a broad variety of different people with an assortment of backgrounds and experiences, as well as demographics such as gender, sexuality, race, and ability’ (Zammit & Cole 2019), then our earlier statistics show that games – and the games industry that are producing them – are not as diverse as they could be. While character creators are impressive, there are limitations to the types of characters that can be built within them (Cole et al., 2017) – and limitations to the positive impact that these ‘optional’ forms of representation can have on audiences (Cole, 2018: 9). Most harmful, however, is the misconception that the only people who are advocating for increased and improved representation of diversity in games are people who do not play games.

The idea that nobody playing games would like those games to be more diverse is an unconstructive mentality, which is captured well by this respondent: ‘sjw [social justice warriors] don’t play games and will find any [sic] reason to make a game look bad … the normal people are already included’ (Queerly Represent Me, 2017). Firstly, suggesting that people who aren’t currently represented in games are ‘abnormal’ reinforces the in-group and out-group dynamics that cause us to form bonds with people who appear similar to ourselves and dismiss or exclude people who do not (Henry, 2010). The construction of barriers between dominant and marginalised groups leads to ongoing discrimination. Secondly, this respondent’s statement is objectively untrue – the statistics show that many socially progressive people who this respondent might consider ‘social justice warriors’ do play games (IGEA, 2017; Queerly Represent Me, 2017).
And even without the statistics, all you need to do is look at my game library to know that this ‘social justice warrior’ is also a game consumer.

But this attitude is indicative of the problem that games have with diversity. Marketing companies actively worked to make games appeal to a subset of the population (Golding & van Deventer, 2016: 28) and now that subset believes they can act as gatekeepers for games and the games industry. As one respondent so eloquently puts it: ‘ayy get out of my hobby’ (Queerly Represent Me, 2017). Until these gatekeepers acknowledge that women, people of colour, queer folks, people with disabilities, and many other diverse social groups are interested in playing and developing games, marginalised groups are going to feel unwelcome within a medium and industry that they are continuing to play, work in, and engage with regardless of how uncomfortable they are made to feel.

So, how do we solve the problem?

Well, first we need to figure out exactly what the problem is. Games are an incredible medium and should be for everyone – and, currently, they are not. Anybody from any social group should be able to access games that interest them and represent them, and that were made by people who are similar to them – in terms of demographics, background, experience, views, personality, and so on. This ideal situation does not describe an overturning or replacing of the dominant group with another dominant group; instead, diversification refers to a broadening of the scope to include those who currently play and develop games while also welcoming new voices.

By broadening the number of people who feel welcome both playing and developing games, we can encourage variety in the games that are being released, steering away from publishers of triple-A titles falling back on the same archetypes because of the financial risk that arises from experimentation, and instead telling new stories from different perspectives.

To achieve this, we need to do more than simply talk about it. Discussions of diversity are often theoretical, and for them to make a difference in the games industry, they need to be accompanied by actionable steps that can be followed by individuals in a range of situations and positions of power.

The ultimate piece of advice that should be followed by all employers, event organisers, and game developers is to hire consultants. And the key word here is hire; do not approach somebody in your network who identifies as being from a marginalised group and expect them to consult on your project for free. Not everybody wants to use their experiences with a particular demographic or social group to give you advice,
and particularly not for free. Diversity consultants are able to look at your workplace, event, or game, and provide specific advice to ensure that it is inclusive and accessible.

There are also many guides and resources that will teach you how to alter your hardware and software, your convention space, or your workplace so that it is as diverse, inclusive, and accessible as possible. This is a perfect first step before reaching out for specific advice, particularly if consultancy is outside your budget or cannot be on the agenda yet.

Support is also important and comes in many forms. Individuals and companies can offer financial support to marginalised creators, speakers, and so on to ensure they are valued for their work. Events dedicated to diversity in the games industry suffer from difficulty acquiring sponsors because of the fear that funding an inclusive event is making a political statement; financially supporting these events helps highlight the importance of diversity in games.

Support is not always financial. You can boost the voices of marginalised people by hiring them for your studios, asking them to speak at your events, sharing their work with your networks, nominating them for awards, and publicly celebrating their successes. If you or an ally are offered an opportunity, a job, or a speaking arrangement that you do not need for your career, recommend a marginalised person who does. If a developer represents a diverse cast of people in their game, give them positive feedback and encourage them to continue supporting marginalised people through representation.

Games have a problem with diversity. But they do not have to. We have the power to boost marginalised people, support their work, and irrevocably change the games industry.

REFERENCES


