

Race, Gender, and Sexuality Representation in Contemporary Triple-A Video Game Narratives

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Abstract

By conducting both qualitative and quantitative analysis of data from interviews and game content, I examine representations of race, gender, and sexuality in contemporary video-game narratives. I use data from interviews to show how they view their representations in this medium and to set categorical criteria for an interpretive content analysis. I analyze a sample of top-selling narrative-driven video games in the United States released from 2016-2019. My content coding incorporates aforementioned interview data as well as theoretical-based and intersectional concepts on video game characters and their narratives. The content analysis includes measures of narrative importance, narrative role, positivity of representation, and demographic categories of characters, though the scale of this study may not allow for a full test of intersectional theory of links between demographics and roles. Interview and content analysis results suggest an overrepresentation of white characters and extreme under-representation of non-white women.

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General Abstract

I examine representations of race, gender, and sexuality in contemporary video-game narratives. I use data from interviews to show how people view their representations in video games and to set a guide for analyzing the games themselves. I analyze a sample of top-selling narrative-driven video games in the United States released from 2016-2019. My content coding incorporates aforementioned interview data as well as theoretical-based and intersectional concepts on video game characters and their narratives. The content analysis includes measures of narrative importance, narrative role, positivity of representation, and demographic categories of characters, though the scale of this study may not allow for a full test of intersectional theory of links between demographics and roles. Interview and content analysis results suggest an overrepresentation of white characters and extreme under-representation of non-white women.

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Introduction

New sociological interest in video game research began to focus on proportional representation of unequal social groups, as categorized by race, gender, and sexuality. Most researchers employ a roll-call methodology which correlates the representation of groups divided by an inequality or two with simple aspects of narrative (e.g., Burgess, Melinda. C., Stermer, Steven. P., & Burgess, Stephen. R. 2007; Williams, Dmitri, Martins, Nicole, Consalvo, Mia, & Ivory, James 2009; Fisher 2015;). So far, researchers have not used intersectional theory to understand links between race, gender, and sexuality in video-game narratives. To address this gap, I used intersectional analysis and a mixed-methods approach to examine players' responses to representations of race, gender, and sexuality in contemporary video game narratives.

In my approach, I utilize both qualitative and quantitative data. First, the qualitative data consist of interview responses and the quantitative data consist of coding of characters featured in online play-throughs of contemporary video games. One major benefit of my approach is that analysis of the interview data informed the interpretive content analysis. Additionally, this approach allows measures and/or constructs based on experiences of underrepresented groups playing the games to emerge.

In addition, my content analysis employs measures of character importance and role drawn from the scholarly study of motion-picture narrative as well as these interviews. While other researchers have applied film-studies concepts of narrative to narrative-driven video game analysis (Jenkins, 2004; Harris 2013; Hughey 2014; Neitzel 2014), the field lacks sociological

analysis, intersectional driven analysis of video game narratives. In the following thesis, I outline the basic concepts of narrative content analysis and then specifies its original contribution to this literature.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical framework I employ assumes that when groups repeatedly consume video games, they experience socially reflexive effects, which may include pride or shame in group membership or fear versus acceptance of other groups. To illustrate, scholars have used a television-based research development called the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis to explore media consumption and the development of positive attitudes towards out-groups (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). The hypothesis holds that people engage in pseudo-interaction with different groups through their representation in the media and thus learn about those groups by that media facilitated interaction (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Schiappa et al. (2005) used three experiments to show how viewing a person or group through such media as television narrative, referred to as *parasocial contact*, can reduce prejudice among viewers who have little direct contact with minority groups.

Though Schiappa et al. (2005) observed other media, their results suggest some potential effects for video game media. Playing video games may foster parasocial contact to a greater degree than watching television, as players not only consume narratives about but also actively interact with virtual characters belonging to underrepresented groups. Such interaction places players in control of main characters, allowing a form of first-person interaction with others.

The consumption of popular imagery occurring in scripted, regular group interactions can grant it a ritualistic quality. In Marshall's (2002) discussion of ritual's effects on belief and belonging, he argues that such consumption can affirm presumptions based on stories shared in those contexts, building belief at the center of enthusiastic group attention in the embedded stereotypes, and cementing such beliefs with solidarity among enthused members.

Indeed, much research has shown how a group's feelings change by how they appear in popular stories. Such public depictions provide means for groups to examine and evaluate both themselves and their positions within larger societies. By consuming the depiction, members establish senses of *group vitality*, or collective well-being. Abrams et. al (2003) propose that representation of marginalized groups by dominant groups in television can either improve or diminish the former's group vitality. Consequently, some underrepresented groups use popular storytelling to foster vitality by avoiding mainstream belittlement (Abrams & Giles 2007) or by engaging with stories that flatter them more (Ramasubramanian, Srividya, Joanna, Doshi, Saleem, Munibal 2017). In short, media can provide symbolic support for groups or diminish them. As such, researchers ought to focus on video games' potential impacts on intergroup relations and vitality à la Mastro (2015).

I do not mean to overstate the singular importance of any communication medium or play platform. Many critiques of Gerber's (1980) cultivation framework stem from its prioritizing media's influence over other institutional forces. Socialization theory, which informs my work, frames media as agents of socialization which influence mainstream views of various groups (Grusec & Hastings 2014). Likewise, to avoid overgeneralizing in the style of Gerber's (1980)

claim that television news consumption fostered fascist ideologies, I follow Hughes' (1980) principle that media operate in concert and conflict with other agents of socialization and may be defeated or overruled by those other agents. Socialization theory recognizes that diverse institutions, including families, peers, schools, and other organizations and media compete for behavioral influence (Grusec & Hastings 2014). To illustrate, Kuszynski, Parkin, and Pitman (2014) situate agents of socialization in a dialectic process with one another; where negotiation of messages between various agents constructs behavior.

Finally, it is worth touching on the sociological framing of video game research as proposed by Garry Crawford's frame analysis (2009). Crawford refuted past conceptualizations of "the magic circle" proposed by other media scholars. Their frame analysis model situates the importance of video games elements of the everyday and social. They do not establish an abstract exclusionary space as the magic circle would suggest, in that they do not allow the participant (ie; player) to renegotiate the rules by which the game is played. These rules, narratives, and mechanics the player experiences may partially allow them to project beyond their immediate social reality, but those very same rules originate and are grounded in a social reality. They are social activities, wherein the player interacts with socially derived narratives and rules.

Literature Review

While many researchers focus on race and gender, few call attention to sexuality or on interactions between the three in an intersectional approach. This thesis builds upon decades of research into patterns of representation in video games. I contribute to the body of knowledge by applying narrative and intersectional based frameworks to video game analysis.

In this context, *narrative* refers to video game protagonists' struggles to meet goals against the resistance of antagonists, wherein actions and events are framed to appear clearly motivated by said goals (Mulvey 1975; Bordwell, Staiger, & Thompson 1985; Hughey 2014; Riedl & Young 2003). Next, *narrative importance* refers to the position of protagonists and the frequency of other characters' interactions with them. Likewise, *narrative role* refers to the responses of characters to the protagonists. Such responses might include attacks on the protagonist, seeking their romantic or sexual contact, providing them with support, and so on. Given the importance of the protagonist's perspective and the nature of their interactions with other characters, player responses to narrative are likely to be shaped in part by the casting of dominant and underrepresented groups in certain roles. In other words, groups are more likely to experience group vitality as they consume some stories than when they play through others.

Inequalities in Video Games

Media based researchers have long focused on racial inequalities and misrepresentation in diverse industries. Unfortunately, small samples and the assumption that inequalities in representation, such as race and gender, do not intersect in notable ways limit relevant studies.

Dmitri Williams (1999) illustrates the latter issue in his content analysis of video game titles from the years of 2006 to 2008. Williams finds, relative to US populations as counted by the census, whites were over-represented in video games. Likewise, Burgess, Melinda. C., Dill, Karen. E., Stermer, Steven. P., Burgess, Stephen. R., & Brown, Brian (2011) found that non-white women are nearly invisible in games and that non-white men appeared in roles that emphasized physical prowess, physical violence, and crime. Harris (2016) supported this finding, further noting that black characters appear relatively one-dimensional compared to white characters. He also noted that games tend to depict black characters with relatively lower intelligence, greater focus on physical prowess, and a small range of roles that resemble antebellum American stereotypes of black people. However, Harris (2016) also documents a trend in the industry toward more diverse and less negative representations of black people. Blackness in video games is heavily tackled by Daniel Leonard's work, but of note here are the implications Leonard who explored race representations in video games in "Not a Hater, Just Keepin' it Real: The importance of race and gender studies in video games (2006)" and "Live in Your World, Play in Ours: Race, video games, and consuming the other (2003)". In both pieces, Leonard tackled the social implications of virtual minstrel/black face and representations of urban African Americans and Latinos. These representations (often keyed towards themes of violence, hyper sexuality, and crime) provide safe avenues for privileged bodies to use virtual nonwhite bodies to engage with stereotypically loaded narratives. A critical approach conducted by Treaandrea Russworm (2017) to the representations in the acclaimed *The Walk Dead* (Telltale Games 2012) revealed that even when game narratives attempt to subvert stereotypes there are

still shortcomings that need to be addressed. Russworm's analysis of the series found that the fictional break-down of society still perpetuates the victimization of non-white bodies.

Overrepresentation is overtly tackled in Yi Mou and Wei Peng's (2009) content analysis, wherein all protagonists in the games studied are male. Moreover, the researchers also find that 74% of these men are white. Similar findings appear in Burgess, Dill, and Sterner's (2007) study examining race and gender construction in video game advertisements. In comparing the representation of race and sex with U.S. Census data, the study found that white men and women are overrepresented in video game advertisements and even non-human characters such as aliens, animals, or monsters are represented more than certain minority groups such as Native Americans or indigenous peoples.

Mainstream video games also maintain traditional gender dichotomy and rarely feature transgender or non-binary characters. Friedberg's (2015) findings support this, as they note that men vastly outnumber women among main characters, most female characters support male protagonists rather than enjoy equal narrative importance, and the female main characters that do appear are relatively sexualized, submissive, and less powerful than the male main characters. In a 31-year content analysis of women in video games, Lynch, Driel, and Fritz (2016) provide timespans showing the rise and fall in sexualization of women in video games. They measure exposure of breasts, buttocks, waists, legs, and bodily movements and find that, for female characters, such sexualization is quite prominent in certain genres (action adventure and shooters), while lesser narrative importance remains a consistent trend. A similar methodology and sets of findings was published by Downs & Smith (2010), but these authors also pointed

towards a key feature of console in regards to sexualization. Downs & Smith found that female sexualization was highly prominent on the Microsoft Xbox and male sexualization was relevant on the Nintendo Gamecube.

Only recently have scholars added sexuality and nonbinary gender to the set of their studied inequalities in video-game representation. Jared Talbert (2016) finds that characters with marginalized orientations, gender identities, and intersex characters (MOGAI) appear within video game narratives as jarring deviants, usually providing comedy or serving as sub-plot antagonists. Such characters hold a long history in video games but remain numerically far and few between. Shaw and Friesem (2016) find a similar pattern to MOGAI casting, in which non-heterosexual and non-binary gender presentations, player-chosen characteristics (game mechanics), and narratives remain rare.

Lauteria (2011) also explores the mechanical traits of ambiguously queer characters and narratives. Specifically, she notes the trend of characters written to incorporate the player character's gender identity in regards to scripted romance narratives with non-player characters. Such gender identities are usually limited to a strict male-female dichotomy or binary selection (with independently published or smaller publishing houses going beyond). Despite the supposed choice offered, these narratives neither branch off from nor differ between male or female selections, in effect assuming a neoliberal stance on queer narratives and non-queer narratives. Lauteria (2011) argues these narratives downplay the consequences of sexual identity on physical safety and survival, instead assuming a neoliberal stance of inconsequential diversity.

Overall, the research suggests that video games depict transgender or gender non-binary characters mainly as tragedies, quirky deviants, or comedic relief. Furthermore, even within these roles, such characters have less narrative importance and provide more negative representation than others.

Intersectionality and Video Games

Though researchers often examine race, gender, and sexuality in video games, usually observing one inequality at a time, few work within an intersectional framework. An intersectional framework allows researchers both to explain and to avoid perpetuating the erasure and invisibility of underrepresented groups from both the content studied and the framework it is studied through. In their study of how an underrepresented population responded to video games and desired yet unavailable representations, Smith and Decker (2016) call for the video game industry to improve its representation of queer people of color. Their results illustrate how queer people of color find themselves underrepresented and how they manage that experience. Likewise, McCarthy's (2015) extensive content analysis of race and gender in video games examines how various racial groups of women are treated and appear in different proportions over time. She found that games often sexualize non-white women characters more than white women characters, but likewise more often secure important roles for the former.

Meyer (2015) finds that media (cinema) represents women with marginal identities, such as those who are non-white and non-heterosexual, in ways that reinstate dominant hierarchies and downplay those marginal identities:

Thus, while these characters are visible—profoundly visible in a sense through their ubiquity—they are at the same time quite invisible: invisible as a point of discussion for identity politics in racial/ethnic representation, invisible to discussions of queer representation in the sense that they are not the right kind of queer, particularly in how they are framed conventionally in ways that can be read as heterosexual. As a result, they blend seamlessly into narratives that more commonly reify the status quo, while at the same time allow those narratives to appear, at least on the surface, progressive in their identity politics (Meyers, 912, 2015).

While members of an underrepresented group such as Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2018) or the eponymous *Bayonetta* (*Bayonetta 1* Sega, 2009; *Bayonetta 2* Nintendo, 2012) may sometimes enjoy high narrative importance, researchers find that certain demographic groups such as white, apparently cis-gender females who are predominantly heterosexual tend to appear in certain roles including sex-object, nurturing supporter, antagonist, and so on. (Leonard 2009). Game designers employ such stereotypes as a form of design short-cutting, allowing for rapid production at the cost of maintaining professional-class ideas of many groups (Butsch 2003). While advocates have arguably made progress to improve representations across demographics, designers still reproduce many of the same trends even with increasing on-screen diverse bodies (Aldama 2010; Kondrat 2015).

Trends I have observed in the literature suggest that intersections between identities lead designers to cast demographic groups in stereotypical roles. However, researchers have mostly focused on one form of inequality at a time. For example, one study might examine gender but not race. Another might focus on race but not gender, while yet another focuses on sexuality alone. A more complex analysis based on an intersectional framework (Choo & Ferree 2010) allows scholars to better theorize and test for correlations of narrative roles with categories of

multiple, intersecting inequalities at the same time. To illustrate, Behm-Morawitz (2017), in her quantitative content analysis found that non-white race and gender statuses were both significantly correlated as both roles were associated with violence and overt sexuality.

To speculate, in comparing white female characters to non-white female characters, such as black or Latin-American ones, one may find that both have sexualized roles but that the non-white characters will often do violence as well (see West 1995). In relation to the second research question, research suggests that non-white women in video game narratives, often having less narrative importance thus appear less often and disproportionately act as both victims and perpetrators of video game sex and video game violence.

Colorism in eastern markets constitutes another applicable intersectional topic for this research avenue. Lei's (2018) thesis of whiteness in anime offers insight into why most characters from traditionally Eastern publishers have white or fair skin. Lei's (2018). Her analysis of anime and past literature suggests that Japanese and other Eastern markets use ambiguously white characters for multiple reasons including the marketability of whiteness and uplifting Asian or Eastern indicators (names and locations) with European or Western indicators (skin-color) against dark or black skinned indicators. Mercantile favoring of lighter skin colors and associating them with more positive narrative elements constitutes a form of colorism due to the fact that such practices come hand-in-hand with stereotyping and vilifying of brown and dark-skinned characters (Lei 2018).

The use of images to foster intersecting inequalities is not a new concept in the field of sociology. Crenshaw (1989) discusses the importance of intersectional analysis to understanding

how inequalities operate to render some groups invisible, focusing on the example of how black women are situated in feminist and race discourses of law. These inequalities within media representation often are used to reinforce hierarchies of power and domination.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) invokes the image of the mammy and other racialized caricatures as examples of “controlling images,” representations that demean race/gender groups such as black women. Dominant groups create such images to justify and dehumanize others; and black women have been the key targets of misrepresentation in the media (Littlefield 2008). Controlling images come in the forms of stereotypes, and those may affect group behavior, such as by convincing whites of threats posed by African Americans (Steele & Aronson 1995), by sexualizing adolescents (Daniels 2009; Stice & Shaw 1994), and by dehumanizing women of color (Brooks & Hebert 2006). The mammy who lends support to a white protagonist in popular storytelling appears in video games, as do other stereotyped images. A contemporary example of the mammy can be found in the character Courrine in *Xenoblade Chronicles* (Nintendo & Monolith Studios 2018) embodies the “Mammy” archetype. To illustrate, Courrine, a dark-skinned island woman, in addition to raising the white-skinned protagonist also provides recipes for food, a place for characters to sleep at little-to-no charge, advice and consolation to the white-skinned characters, and other such “motherly” services. Such caricatures reflect a trend that harkens to the invisible reproductive labor that women of color often provide (Nakano 1992).

The lack of non-white women and LGBTQ characters in video games may also be an element of symbolic annihilation. Symbolic annihilation, in this context, refers to the systematic belittling, ignoring, and/or removal of a group within a cultural arena such as media. (Klein &

Shiffman 2009; Merskin 1998). Merskin examines the social and cultural practices designed to hide or obscure Native American peoples' culture and existence (1998). The practice of symbolic annihilation is explored by Keil & Shiffman (2009), who explore the underrepresentation of non-white, male, or slim bodies within children's media as another arena in which a group's existence is obscured.

Defining what is a *positive* or *empowering* image as opposed to a *negative* or *controlling* one is a complicated endeavor, as various groups come to different interpretations of the same symbols. Scholars have responded to the lack of scholarly consensus by turning to users' constructions, based on interviews with underrepresented groups (Kitzinger, Haran, Chimba & Boyce 2008; Zhang & Haller 2013). These authors have found that images that are diverse in type, or those which distribute underrepresented groups across various roles, counter the (mis)understandings of dominant groups by subverting stereotypes and tropes, humanize the group by countering its objectification, and incorporate narratives unique to/developed by the underrepresented group can be classified as *positive* representations (Zhang & Haller 2013). Conversely, *negative* representations invert those same processes by relying on common stereotypes and tropes, staying within dominant-group ideology, objectifying underrepresented groups, and remaining rooted in assumptions developed outside the group depicted (Kitzinger, Haran, Chimba & Boyce 2008). Clichés and stereotypes often employ negative aspects of appearance, as exemplified by the sexualizing of women in video games (Lynch, et al. 2016).

Queer communities and fandom communities offer one potential strategy for measuring control and empowerment in responses to images in gaming, by allowing researchers to see how

under-represented groups engage with poor media representation. Researchers using this strategy have found, for instance, that members of fandom communities often engage in queering of characters otherwise depicted as straight and also engage with social issues, turning those same spaces into arenas (Vironche 2007; Pande & Moitra 2017). Such strategy answers not only to a matter of operationalizing “controlling” or “empowering,” but also to the call, by such scholars as Zinn, Cannon, Higginbotham, and Dill (1986), for scientists to acknowledge various actors’ locations, that is their social identity and place within a social institution, as we develop scientific concepts.

With these findings and debates in the literature in mind, I formulate the following research questions and hypotheses.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: *How do players from underrepresented groups respond to the stories and how do they distinguish positive or dignified representations from negative or embarrassing ones?*

While content analysis demonstrates how game designers have shaped characters, player testimonies allow us to focus on previously under-conceptualized characteristics (e.g., stereotypes noticed by players from marginal groups that may not yet appear in the academic literature) , to avoid erasing those social locations of respondents that intersectional scholarship both theorizes and fights against, and explore those stories’ effects as well. As they engage other players through a large and interactive medium, how do black, bisexual women respond to the characters they create and those they encounter? By adding to the inclusion of traditionally

under-represented groups' insights and strategies, I avoid excluding the voices of underrepresented groups from my content analysis. To construct an operational definition of moral status of a character or story, or what strikes player as "positive" or "negative" representations, I analyze data from interviews with members of underrepresented groups, with relevant literature guiding my focus.

RQ2: *Is narrative importance spread equally throughout character demographics of race, gender, and sexuality?*

I define *narrative importance* in terms of player control and the frequency with which a character speaks to a main character or protagonist. This combines two aspects of video games, the first defined by ludology, focused on player control of the story. Ludologists refer to the theory of players' interaction with the rules and mechanics, how the game is constructed with rules, and whether those rule constructions are the same as physical games such as football (Majewski 2003). The second aspect of video gaming is the focus of narratology, study of the story as given to the player. Narratologists draw upon film and television studies to focus on narrative (Jenkins 2004). I pull from both perspectives by first focusing on protagonists as controlled by players and then looking to see how they interact with other characters in pre-written narratives.

Hypothesis 1: Characterization as white, male, and/or heterosexual-cisgender correlates with higher narrative importance. Non-white, non-male, and/or non-heterosexual-cisgender characters hold less narrative importance by comparison (Everett & Watkins, 2008; Burgess, M. C., Dill, K. E., Stermer, S. P., 2007; Burgess, S. R., & Brown, B. P. 2011).

RQ3: *Are roles spread equally among race, gender, and sexuality in video game narratives or do some groups play certain roles more often?*

In my analysis, I draw on Leslie McCall’s approach to intercategorical complexity. To explain, this approach “requir[es] that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality...and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions” (McCall 2005: 4). I identify characters in terms of categories of social groups and examine on how multiple inequalities affect these narratives.

Hypothesis 2a: Groups underrepresented in multiple play fewer narrative roles (Aldama 2013; Lynch et al. 2016; Kondrat 2015; Zhang & Haller 2013).

Hypothesis 2b: Groups underrepresented in multiple ways hold higher correlations with negatively coded roles (Leonard 2009).

Methodology

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative Data Collection

To address my first research question about what strikes players as controlling/negative vs. empowering/positive images and stories and inform my open coding within the content analysis, I conducted exploratory, semi-structured interviews. Respondents consist of adults above the age of 18 who are non-white and/or non-heterosexual, non-cis male, or non-binary,

and play narrative-driven video games either as casual hobby or in a more time-consuming method. I recruited respondents through online platforms including chatrooms, forums, and other forms of social media targeted towards video game players. My recruitment message was also tailored for requesting that only the targeted demographics volunteer for the interview. For accountability and ease of replication, I have included a copy of the recruitment message in Appendix C.

However, due to minimal response and time constraints, I used a convenience sample to conduct interviews. I recruited participants from special interest servers and discussion boards. I discuss the implications of this sampling method in my limitations section.

Interviews focused on how underrepresented groups view their depictions in video games. First, I encouraged participants to first examine how they see their race, gender, and sexuality represented in other media. Next, I followed up with how often they view characters that share aspects of their identity and what roles within the narrative they see those characters playing. After completing the topics of representation, I prompted participants to explicitly define positive and negative representation.

Qualitative Analysis

I analyzed transcriptions and notes from each interview through two rounds of coding. During the first pass of open coding, I looked for trends in the responses, demographic information of respondents, distinguishing those from irrelevant data such as responses to filler questions or small talk. During the second round of coding, I consolidated open codes into focus

codes based on trends, and constructed a common narrative among the participants' interviews (see Glaser 1978 for more on code consolidation).

Quantitative Methods

Quantitative Data Collection

I address my two hypotheses through an interpretive content analysis. This is interpretive due to the lack of inner-coder reliability. I selected titles for the content analysis based on number of units sold as reported by the video game sales tracking website VGchartz.com. In the same manner, I used genre tags to determine the presence of a narrative, to exclude sports and simulation games, and to determine if a game was published by a Triple-A video game publisher.

The definition of a Triple-A publisher is difficult to ascertain and a topic of debate within the industry. Only one source could provide an operational definition of a Triple-A publisher and Triple-A game. Specifically, Andrew Alvarez industry reports cover various market and user demographic research. The reports define a Triple-A game as “game released by a major publisher that has the full funding of the publisher behind its development, marketing and distribution; typically the next entry in a long-running, highly successful series” (Alvarez 2017: 41). Likewise, the reports also contain breakdowns of the leading publishing houses within the video game industry: Nintendo, Sony, Blizzard-Activision, Microsoft, and Electronic Arts (EA). I sample games from these companies as they are the ones who reports classify as “major publishers” or those who can afford to produce high capital games.

To sample data for content analyses, I utilized “Let’s Play” and “Walkthrough” videos produced by players and publicly hosted on the YouTube video platform. Such videos can typically range from brisk commentaries on a game’s content to documenting the entire game’s contents for others to see. Due to financial constraints prohibiting purchase of video games, the videos offer a feasible alternative. I limited my selection of such recordings to videos that claim to have games in their entirety and with minimal commentary.

Quantitative Data Analysis

For this phase, characters are my units of analysis. The content analysis explores themes between characters’ demographic categories such as race, gender, and sexuality, their narrative importance, and their roles. Codes include character name, character race, character gender, sexuality, character screen time measured in minutes, character dialogue measured time spent speaking in minutes, character attire, and noticeable behaviors. For character race, I use character skin-tone as potential indicators for race and code for WHITE, BLACK, TAN, BROWN, or, BLACK skintone codings. Likewise, for character gender, I use character appearance and pronouns as potential indicators and code for MALE, FEMALE, TRANSGENDER, or NON-BINARY. Finally, for sexuality, I use dialogue, supplemental/background information, and actions as indicators and code for HETEROSEXUAL or NOT HETEROSEXUAL. Noticeable behaviors served as a “catch-all” category to facilitate open coding.

Coding for skin-tones, attire, and behavior rather than simply interpreting race in the initial round of coding had advantages and disadvantages; but the use of skin-tone in this

research ultimately resulted from the occurrence of various complications. When coding began, *Fire Emblem Fates* posed a challenge to my interpretation of character race. Many of the characters appeared in feudal Japanese attire and bore Japanese names, but had fairly white and anglo-European features (pale/white skin and bright hair), suggesting a mixture of conventional markers of race. These characters had features easily associated with both white and Asian categories. For example, *Fire Emblem Fate* features both a gothic European group and a feudal Japanese group (coded as such based on names, clothing styles, and fighting styles). Both groups however, had the same skin-color. This presented a conundrum. How should I categorize characters with, for examples, light-brown hair, white skin, and other traditionally assumed Anglo-European features? What would categorizing these white-skinned women as Asian women mean under an intersectional framework that treats them as racial groups opposed by the very relations of inequality under study?

This is where I turned to the issue of colorism and Eastern media, particularly in anime, as addressed by Anne Lei (2018), who finds that Anglo-European features such as white skin-color are strategically paired with Eastern identifiers (names, locations, and attire) to make the characters and their games more marketable. For example, a character may be named Takeshi and dress in stereotypically Japanese attire (kimono, Japanese schoolboy uniform, etc.), yet have blonde hair with white skin. Anne Lei argues that such coloring is intended to make Takeshi more marketable to broader audiences. Other important characters would likely also have white skin, and the characters with non-white skin-tones would likely be secondary or antagonistic. Lei's research highlights the importance of colorism when categorizing fictional characters, and

suggests a way to approach inconsistencies in fictional races (see prior discussion of *Fire Emblem Fate* characters). With this in mind, I removed racial categories from the initial character coding schema. The race coded in the first method relied on a mixture of the character's skin-color, attire, and behavior. As the latter two were categories to themselves (attire and behavior being categories within the character coding schema), the focus toward skin-color did not alter the coding too significantly (many characters seemed to be designed with skin-color and conventional race categories in mind outside of Nintendo video games). Categories for skin-color were white, tan, brown, and black. I derived those by grouping similar skin-tones and establishing the darkest and lightest cases for each skin-color category. In reflection, this method minimized the impact of biases inherent to my position and privilege (Stoelzler & Yuval-Davis 2002) in judgements on race based on behaviors and attire. Though this loses the strength of discussing race relations, as per conventional intersectional research, the white-skinned characters discussed here raised an important question to said research. What would it mean, intersectionally, to classify these white-skinned characters as Asian? What would it mean to classify them as racially white? However, this research strived to continue an intersectional perspective in examining how these skin-colors are attached to narratives and characters that are also gendered and sexualized. While it does depart from conventional categories of race, it does so to further the discussion of how the body is constructed within narratives.

Much of this nuanced coding, however (clothing, behavior, and skin-tone) was collapsed into white-versus-non-white and focus codes due to the small range of skin-tones in the sample. Due to this consolidation and the exclusion of alternative sexualities and non-cisgender

characters, the intersectional model explored only race and gender within video game representation.

I open coded *roles* for characters based on the character's actions, both verbal and non-verbal, and their appearance, which includes both their attire and physique. I then condense open codes into focus codes. This method allows for flexibility in defining what role a character could have through use of open-ended classification. From here, I then distill and reduce those classifications into analyzable categories. This coding schema departs from traditional content analysis in using more qualitative elements while sacrificing some aspects of reliability and reproducibility.

The narrative role open codes were distilled into three focus code variables; active or passive, hero or not-hero, and positive or negative for the character's identity. Active or passive was derived from examining character behavior in regards to how they react to plot events. Did they act upon the plot or did the plot act upon them? Open-codes for that became incorporated into this variable were based on were: supporting role/caregiver, in need of rescue, cowardly, and so on. Hero or not hero was derived by examining who was the protagonist cast, the antagonists, and those who were neutral/ambivalent to the main plots events. Finally, positive and negative for their identity was derived from interview data and past research and focused on narrative role and attires.

I operationalize *Narrative importance* in terms of player controllability and frequency of speech. Categories of narrative importance include main character, main cast member, side cast member, and background character.

Findings

Qualitative Results

I conducted nine interviews. Of my participants, two identified as non-binary/agender category, five were cis men, one was a trans man, and one was a cis woman. Five participants were white and six identified as being non-heterosexual. Both non-binary/agender participants were white, as well as the only woman participant.

While few women fell in the sample, having a portion of the sample composed of traditionally unheard groups or those outside the cisgender binary provided valuable insight into how LGBTQ+ individuals are represented and how they view their LGBTQ+ representation in relation to their racial representation.

The first major theme that emerged from the interviews is the universality of whiteness in video games and the lack of other races. All white participants recognized that their race was overrepresented in video game character casts and all non-white participants reported various experiences of low or unsatisfactory levels of representation. Additionally, white participants found their race spread throughout various roles and levels of importance (main character, side character, background character, etc.). 96wc, a white, agender poly/pansexual participant, whose insight into how their race is represented was shared by other participants, describes whiteness as being not only the most prevalent racial category, but prevalent in all levels of narrative importance and more often having positive and protagonist roles.

96wc: Oh I see my race A LOT in games.

96wc: They usually play the main characters, or all the characters, or all the human characters. It's really common to see a white person in a video game, especially in main protagonist

96wc: The amount of white people I see in side roles is smaller, even in antagonist roles. While seeing a white person in any role is more common, they're less likely to be a side character or villain [sic].

The next theme from the interviews concerned the varying degrees of representation for LGBTQ+. Participants who identified as gay or lesbian note that the amount of representation they receive is improving but still low. Those outside of this binary (pansexual, asexual, etc.) are even less likely to be represented. Additionally, participants identified a theme of LGBTQ+ signifiers for characters being buried within background or flavor text (optional information with no significance to gameplay or plot) but never having markers of their sexuality beyond that. This also ties into what one participant described as LGBTQ+ characters being mentioned in said background/flavor text but never making an appearance.

Respondent 66ds, a white, bisexual cis woman explored this issue of sexuality being sent to the background and how this makes identifying characters difficult.

...actually no, not really. there might be a small handful out there, but none that i can remember off the top of my head because there are so few. also, oftentimes i see game characters' sexualities only quietly hinted at instead of being plainly stated, so it's hard to say for sure which ones are examples of LGBT+ representation and which ones aren't [sic].

Regarding the first research question, there were differences in how in-depth each was willing to discuss and verbalize differences in representation. The heterosexual cis men speak

more briefly on their issues of representation and define and react to negative representation in more subdued ways. While all participants discuss the impacts of negative representation of groups with which they did not identify, the heterosexual cis men rarely or briefly spoke on issues of sexuality representation and often just discuss representation of their own race and of cis men and cis women. Additionally, these men had less nuance strategies for engaging with negative representations, often conveying simple annoyance and/or uneasy acceptance of how their identities (often race) were represented. They employed a mix between using humor and disdainful acceptance to cope with negative representation. This contrasted heavily with how the LGBTQ+ participants used various strategies to cope with negative representation, but these strategies all had a similar theme of active engagement. Active engagement here encompassed activities such as content creation, fandom engagement, and vocal activism on the subject of representation.

The most prevalent definitions of negative representation and positive representation for heterosexual cis men concerned the existence and escape from the most blatant of stereotypes for their race. For the non-white and heterosexual men, negative representation was based on popular stereotypes of their race and masculinity-the black thug and the Asian karate master. Sexuality and intersectional components of their identity discussion were limited to these blatant stereotypes of their non-white masculinities. Participant 2n1v tackled this in his discussion of black masculinity. Describing positive representations, 2n1v stressed multi-dimensional characteristics that run counter to popular stereotypes. For non-white and non-LGBTQ participants like 2n1v, positive was defined as the antithesis of mainstream stereotypes.

2n1v: positive representation is always the kind and generous black character that looks out for a character, kind of like a guardian angel. Giving words of wisdom to hell further the story.

2n1v: Negative representation is like our own media likes to have one sided coverage. Bandannas, guns, and drug smuggling made out to be obstacles to hinder progression.

All other groups were more likely to point out stereotypes of groups to which they did not belong. “It sucks” was the common sentiment. Definitions of and responses to positive and negative representation were more involved in the responses of non-heterosexual, cis men, often involving issues of multi-dimensionality and of anti-tokenism. These participants desired more multi-dimensional characters that escape from tropes and stereotypes *while also* being more prevalent in all levels of narrative importance. For white LGBTQ participants, defining positive and negative representation was a mixture of empathizing with non-white groups and discussing lack of visibility for gender and sexuality (see above on hidden LGBTQ-status). White participants with marginalized gender and sexualities were highly critical of how whiteness was constructed and often expressed negative sentiments on the overabundance of whiteness. For the non-white men, narrative role was crucial in how they defined positive and negative representation. This focus on role versus visibility suggests an improvement in visibility of non-white men in video game narratives, as implied by v8je, “As of recently I would say there is a better representation of my race in video games. It is still not to the level I think is appropriate but it’s definitely better then, let’s say a decade ago.” In general, the following themes were associated with negative representation; stereotyping (which includes one-dimensional characters), invisibility, and stressing of one component/tokenism. For defining positive representation; multi-dimensionality, variety, and counter to popular stereotypes. This finding is

similar to that of Zhang & Haller (2013)'s interview research exploring what makes a *positive* representation to a group. All participants discussed wanting their most underrepresented characteristics (i.e.; their races, genders, or sexualities) to be represented more often, and in more narratively active and crucial ways.

To summarize, I derived the following themes from my analysis of the interview data. *The universality of whiteness* was the most prominent theme, with each white participant able to discuss the over-representation of their race in video games. *Hidden or no LGBTQ representation* was the next prominent theme, with non-heterosexual or non-gender binary participants stating that their LGBTQ identities are often ignored or hidden away as background information. *Critical reflexivity of position* appeared in conversation with more marginalized participants (particularly LGBTQ), who discuss issues of representation and identity with more nuance and with more reference to other groups.

Shifting the Analysis for Nonwhite Characters

As past research and the above interviews would suggest, non-white female characters were quite scarce in the content analysis sample. Only 13 characters were identified as non-white women. I analyzed this sample qualitatively to assess what role in the narrative they play. Only one character was identified as the player character, and only four seemed to be active and major characters within the plot. Furthermore, of those with major narrative importance, half were victims of violence by white men and in need of rescue by men.

Betty from *Infamous Second Son* (Sony, 2014) exemplified this trope. Betty is an elderly native woman who acts as a maternal figure for the main protagonist Delsin, a non-white man who is a member of a native tribe. She requires rescue from a fire that a white man caused; and the main antagonist, a militaristic white woman, later attacks and near fatally wounds her, making her the object of the main protagonist's efforts.

Rinkah from *Fire Emblem: Fates* (Nintendo, 2015) follows a similar pattern. I coded her as a native woman which is based on her vaguely non-white skin tone and tribal attire (which is quite revealing of skin for someone originating in a snowy mountain village). A white male emperor abducts Rinkah and forces her to fight for her life against the white male protagonist. Like Betty, Rinkah requires rescue by the protagonist.

The other active non-white women are Josephine from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Electronic Arts, 2014) and Salter from *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* (Activision Blizzard, 2016). Whereas both Betty and Rinkah are coded as native women, Josephine is coded as having a somewhat southern Asian skin-tone but using a high-class French attire and motif. She provides the player with goals to gain currency and supervises the protagonist's relations with high-standing figures, acting as both diplomat and accountant. These codings of her attire and behavior are counter to stereotypical representations of nonwhite women (not being sexualized and being diplomatic) provided the basis for coding her as positive for her identity. She also reacts to the plot, establishing quests for the player and serving as the player's political advisor. These two features were used to code her as active in her plot.

Salter is a simpler character. In sharp contrast to Josephine, Salter acts as a prominent squad member for the white man protagonist and has a soldier motif (camouflage combat gear and curt/to the point behavior). Both of these women however, are coded as having more positive representations of their identities than negative: both are high-ranking individuals (focus coded as multi-dimensional and counter to common stereotypes), focus coded as active within their respective plots (both actively behaving against the plot) but, both are under the command of white men and both being associated with war and violence-focus coded as negative for their identity. This coding was derived from examining character attire and behavior against interview responses and past literature. Interview responses from non-white men stressed multi-dimensionality as being a positive characteristic of their race. Past literature on non-white women representation showed a negative representation for these characters could be sexualized attire, victimization, and heavy association with violence (Littlefield, 2008; Harris, 2016). Of the non-major, non-white women, there was a spread of different contexts and roles they fill, but the majority of them served only passive supporting positions such as providing quests or goals for the player or simply serving as secondary plot Non Player Characters (NPCs).

The Stand-out Themes of Non-white Men

Though not as rare as non-white women, only 44 characters were both non-white and male. Sixteen of these were categorized as being part of the relevant cast, with two from this subset being player characters. Military service represented a prominent theme amongst non-white men characters, though this may be due to a significant portion of these characters originated from a *Call of Duty* video games (13). These non-white men had various roles within

the *Call of Duty* narratives, even having roles of leadership and authority, but the positive impact these leadership roles have on their identity was diminished due guns, military, and themes of western colonialism being rampant within the narratives. Their presence in the more militaristic games however, caused many of these non-white male to have much more active roles. Role-playing games were the other largest source of non-white men, but these characters were often coded as being passive and often has not being critical to the overall narrative. Non-white men play more antagonistic and sidekick roles than non-white women do. Examples include Liam supporting Scott Ryder in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (Electronic Arts, 2017), Jonah Maiava aiding Laura Croft in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Sony, 2015), and the unnamed boy to the beast of *The Last Guardian* (Sony, 2016). This pairing of a non-white man to a white protagonist also comes from antagonistic/rival relationships, Hau to the Player Character in *Pokémon Ultra Sun/Moon* (Nintendo, 2017) and Martin Hutch to Serene *Quantum Break* (Microsoft, 2016). That is not to say that many of these representations were coded as negative, as half of the non-white men coded in the research were positive. Further examination of characters between the role-playing and military/shooter video games revealed differences in how non-white men were represented. *Bravely Default* (Nintendod, 2012) featured five non-white men of various narrative roles (knight, king, inn-keeper, and villain), but only one was coded as being active in the plot. In contrast, *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* (Blizzard-Activision, 2016) had many non-white men as soldiers who took active steps advancing the plot (whether it be storming locations, rallying troops, or joining into a gunfight when violence broke out). These two genres are alike in that a vast majority of these characters were secondary or were providing back-up services for white

characters. In neither of these cases did any non-white men play significant plot roles or have lasting impact on the narrative.

Quantitative Results

I removed sexuality from the analysis due to the lack of non-heterosexual-markers for characters across the sample. I explore this later with the mixed methods results. Additionally, no characters gave any appearance (in text, lore, etc.) of being outside the cisgender binary.

Of the sample of eighty-one video games, I studied twenty-four. This decision was due to time constraints and the labour required to thoroughly code two-hours worth of footage. Of the games analyzed, five are published by Nintendo, six by Microsoft, five from EA, four by Blizzard-Activision, and four by Sony. Nintendo (34%) and Blizzard/Activision (25.5%) games account for over half of all characters in the analysis. The remaining three publishers were roughly equal in this regard, as Electronic Arts published 15%, Sony 14%, and Microsoft 13.8%. Nintendo published vastly more titles than any other, with their potential sample pool of 40 video games between the years of 2014-2018, with roughly 8-10 games per year.

I recorded two-hundred and thirty-nine characters for this analysis; and, of those, removed thirty from the final analysis due to having unknown, non-human, or customizable skin tones and/or gender, producing a sample of two hundred and nine characters. Table 1 contains a breakdown of characters' skin tone and gender composition. One striking yet expected result is the overabundance of white men characters and the small numbers of non-white women. Non-white men make up 33% of the total men characters in the sample, but non-white women only

make 21% of all female characters. With such low counts of characters who are not white men, I have little basis for reliable generalization to any larger population.

Gender	White	Tan	Brown	Black	Total
Man	96 (46%)	15 (7%)	16 (8%)	16 (8%)	143 (68%)
Woman	52 (25%)	5 (2%)	6 (3%)	3 (1%)	66 (32%)
Total	148 (71%)	20 (10%)	22 (11%)	19 (9%)	209

Table 1: Characters' Race and Gender

Some trends stand out within publisher and character demographics. To illustrate, I observed a nearly two-to-one ratio (~60% to ~30% of all characters) of men to women in the games of all publishers other than Blizzard-Activision. Blizzard-Activision served as an outlier with a rough four to one (81.7% to 18.3%) ratio of men to women. Skin color varied most among publishers. Where Blizzard/Activision had a prominent skew in the number of men and women characters their games, this publisher also had the closest to an equal split of white versus non-white characters: 60% white to 40% non-white. A major characteristic of this publisher however, was that three out of four video game for this publisher were *Call of Duty* titles. This was due to the yearly release of this franchise, which skewed the potential sample pool for Blizzard-Activision (which could be interpreted as either an over-representation of one particular genre or

a telling feature of the publisher). Sony featured the highest proportion of white men (82%), In this regard, Nintendo and Microsoft were near equal (74% and 76% respectively), and finally Electronic Arts has 68%. Table 2 shows the titles for each publisher, total number of characters, number of nonwhite characters, number of nonwhite women and men, and number of white women. Electronic Arts' Call of Duty titles and Nintendo's non-Fire Emblem role-play titles (Pokemon, Bravelly Default, and Yokai Watch) had equal numbers of non-white men. Electronic Arts and Blizzard-Activision had the highest numbers of nonwhite women (5 and 4 respectfully).

Game Title (Sorted by Publisher)	Number of Characters Sampled	Number of Nonwhite Characters	Numbers of Nonwhite Men	Number of Nonwhite Women	Number of White Women
<u>Nintendo</u>					
Fire Emblem Fates	24	1	0	1	1
Tokyo Mirage Sessions	11	0	0	0	5
Bravely Default	13	5	5	0	4
Pokemon Ultra Sun/Moon	8	5	4	1	2
Yokai Watch 2	17	7	7	0	4
<u>Electronic Arts</u>					
Mirror's Edge Catalyst	6	2	1	1	0

Dragonage Inquisition	13	1	0	1	5
Mass Effect Andromeda	12	8	5	3	2
Titanfall	4	0	0	0	0
<u>Blizzard- Activision</u>					
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	18	6	6	0	1
Destiny	3	1	0	1	1
Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare	20	11	8	3	3
Call of Duty: World War 2	15	2	2	0	2
<u>Sony</u>					
Bloodborne	10	0	0	0	5

Infamous Second Son	5	3	2	1	2
The Order 1882	8	0	0	0	1
Rise of the Tomraider	9	1	1	0	3
<u>Microsoft</u>					
Sunset Overdrive	10	5	4	1	1
The Last Guardian	1	1	1	0	0
Halo Wars	6	0	0	0	3
ReCore	3	0	0	0	2
Quantum Break	13	2	1	1	4

Table 2: Character Demographics by Video Game Title.

In terms of narrative importance, many of the characters recorded in the content analysis fall within the background category for both screen time and speaking time. Background characters, which I recorded as having 36.50 minutes or less of screen time and 9.30 minutes or

less of speaking time, composed 90% of the sample. This leaves very little of the sample remaining for other categories of narrative importance such as side, main cast, and main party. Due to the low sample in other categories of narrative importance, I consolidated side, main cast, and main party categories into the “relevant” category for the sake of comparison. Narrative importance results are addressed in the mixed methods section.

I found no statistically significant difference in screen and speaking times between white and non-white characters. All p-values were above 0.10, well beyond any traditionally accepted p-value. Low correlations persisted across relationships of gender and skin color with narrative importance and role variables. Again, much of the research on video game representation only measured identity in completely separate categories, with much larger sample sizes, and primarily qualitative methods. To read the following correlations (R), background casting is the negative value (-1) and relevant casting is the positive value (1). A value of 0 would indicate no correlation/no relationship. The closer a given r value is to -1 or 1 indicates which casting a character demographic would tend towards. A p-value is the probability that a given result/relationship/finding occurred due to chance. In research, findings with a p-value above 0.05 (5%) are rejected/interpreted as statistically insignificant. For narrative importance variables, character identity was not correlated with being in placed in background or relevant castings. White men had the strongest correlation ($r=0.10$, $p=0.139$) towards being in the relevant category of screen time, but also had the second weakest correlation for time speaking ($r=-0.009$, $p=0.893$). White women had a lowest correlation with screen time ($r=-0.003$, $p=0.964$) an extremely weak correlation towards relevant speaking time ($r=0.042$, $p=0.533$).

Nonwhite men had the second strongest correlation towards being background cast for screen time ($r=-0.065$, $p=0.335$) and an extremely weak correlation towards relevant casting for speaking time ($r=0.017$, $p=0.801$). Non-white women had both screen and speaking time correlations towards background casting, but again both were extremely weak correlations ($r=-0.023$, $p=0.732$ & $r=-0.019$, $p=0.771$ respectively).

However, based on descriptive statistics of past literature and interview data, this data appeared to reflect the greater population of triple A video game characters. Whites dominated both the relevant and background categories. For time spent speaking, white characters made 89.9% of the background characters and 10.1% of relevant characters. For time spent on screen, white characters were 87.8% of background characters and 12.2% of relevant characters. Non-white characters were less prevalent in the relevant category regarding screen time (6.6%) and speaking time (9.8), and were slightly more prevalent than white characters as background characters (90.2% and 93.4%). I found near-parallel results between men and women for narrative importance variable. For speaking time, background characters made up 91.2% of men characters and 90.5 of women characters. For screen time, a similar pattern emerged (89.9% and 91.9% respectfully). Subtle differences appeared in narrative importance for non-white men and women, but this is likely due to non-white men appearing more. For comparison, the total screen time, speaking time, and even count for non-white women were only a third of those same variables for non-white men. For comparison, the total screen time, speaking time, and even count for non-white women were only a third of those same variables for non-white men. One major finding in this research was the higher ratio of non-white characters in the background

casts than that of white characters. For screen time, non-white men had a ratio 15-1 of background to relevant cast, while white men had a ratio of 6-1. For speaking time, this ratio became 8-1 and 10-1 respectively. White women were at a 9-1 ratio for screen time casting and an 8-1 ratio for speaking time. The low count of non-white women serves as its own ratio.

CATEGORY	COUNT	SCREEN TIME (0)		SPEAKING TIME (1)	
		<i>Background</i>	<i>Relevant</i>	<i>Background</i>	<i>Relevant</i>
NON-WHITE MEN	47	44 (94%)	3 (6%)	42 (89%)	5 (11%)
<i>PEARSON R</i>		-0.065		0.017	
NON-WHITE WOMEN	14	13 (92%)	1(8%)	13 (92%)	1 (8%)
<i>PEARSON R</i>		-0.023		-0.019	

Table 3: Non-white men and women and Narrative Importance (background cast or relevant cast). non-white Men and non-white women set as dummy variables. Speaking and Screen Time set as dichotomous variables.

CATEGORY	COUNT	SCREEN TIME		SPEAKING TIME	
		<i>Background</i> (0)	<i>Relevant</i> (1)	<i>Background</i> (0)	<i>Relevant</i> (1)
WHITE MEN	96	83 (86%)	13 (14%)	87 (91%)	9 (9%)
<i>PEARSON R</i>		0.100		-0.009	
WHITE WOMEN	52	47 (90%)	5 (11%)	46 (88%)	6 (12%)
<i>PEARSON R</i>		-0.003		0.042	

Table 4: White men and women and Narrative Importance (background cast or relevant cast). White men and women set as dummy variables. Speaking and Screen Time set as dichotomous variables.

For positive and negative representation variables, non-white men had slightly higher positive representations than negative (41% of positively coded characters versus 39%). Inversely, white women are slightly more negatively represented (42% positively coded characters versus 44% negative). non-white women, when present, were more often coded positive. This pattern persisted after consolidating neutral and negative representation together (15% of positively coded characters versus 11% neutral and negative).

For active and passive coding, white men were significantly more often coded as active than any other group, with 66.7% being coded as active. 49% of white women characters were coded as active, and 53.3% of all non-white characters were coded as active. When comparing non-white men and women, 57.4% of non-white men were coded as active and only 38.5% for non-white women.

No major pattern emerged for hero or not-hero coding (consolidation of neutral and villain categories). Of the white men characters, 80.2% were coded as being heroes ($r = -0.027$). Non-white characters were coded slightly less often as being heroes (74.5%, $r = 0.085$) and white women were most often coded as heroes (85.1%, $r = -0.069$). For non-white men and women characters, 71.4% of non-white men were coded as being heroes ($r = 0.098$) and 84.6% of non-white women ($r = -0.029$), though these results must be taken with hesitation due to the low number of non-white women.

Category	Positive or Negative		Hero or Not-Hero		Passive or Active	
	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Hero</i>	<i>Not Hero</i>	<i>Active</i>	<i>Passive</i>
White Men*	-	-	80.2%	19.8%	66.7%	33.3%
White Women	45.5%	54.5%	85.1%	14.9%	49%	51%
Nonwhite Men	50%	50%	71.4%	28.6%	57.4%	42.6%
Nonwhite Women	63.6%	36.4%	84.6%	15.4%	38.5%	61.5%

Table 5: Summary of Narrative Roles by Gender and Skin color.

* White men were excluded from positive and negative measures due there being no consensus among respondents on how to describe positive or negative for this group. As they dominate all categories of character role, they can be seen more as the ‘default.’

Mixed Methods Results

As the interviews and past literature would suggest, there was an overabundance of white characters among Triple-A video game characters. A prominent theme found in the interviews

was the universality of whiteness. Participants identified whiteness as being spread through various roles and levels of importance, and this may be due to the high saturation of the casts by whiteness. More data is required to capture any nuances in links of skin color to narrative role beyond the overrepresentation of white characters in nearly all categories. The only category in which non-white characters are overrepresented is passive narrative roles (25-28 active-to-passive for non-whites, and 29-20 for whites).

The theme of hidden queerness presented during one interview offers explanation for the lack of sexual and gender diversity within the content analysis results. 66ds' comment on "quietly hinted at" queerness highlights a potential drawback of this method of measuring narrative importance. This methodology only permitted coding for the first two hours of content for each video game, and what is and is not available within this timeframe can be telling. Queer characters or queer-hinted characters may be present within Triple A video game narratives, but either through background information within the narrative or not viewable within the opening hours.

Non-white men also discussed trends in representation of their races, which align with the findings from the games. These men discussed mixed ways in which their identity is represented (that their representation is improving but still negative at times), but all agreed on a trend of improving representation of visibility of non-white men (see quote from v8je in qualitative section). As discussed earlier, non-white men focused on the most blatant examples of stereotypes for their racial masculinities, but also followed with brief counter-examples or vague notions of representation improving with time. This report aligned with the pattern in the

playthroughs, in which non-white male characters were split evenly between positive and negative, and between passive and active. Nonwhite women were also a point of discussion for non-white players, who genuinely reflected on the differences between how non-white men and women were represented. Such reflections however, centered around that non-white women rarely were seen and that they were often victims.

Discussion

This study explored how race, gender, and sexuality were represented in contemporary video game narratives. While the final sample size for both the interviews and the content analysis hindered the generalizability of these findings, trends appeared and bear remark. As literature would suggest, whiteness was overrepresented in this content analysis; and non-white women are rarely present. However, some nuance emerged from examining the interview data and narrative role findings.

First, this research confirms findings in the literature on the overabundance of white male characters. White men characters were the most prevalent across Triple-A publishers, dominated every level of narrative importance and narrative roles. This finding aligned with two similar findings of Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory (2010), though it does differ in the use of skin-color instead of racial categorical identities. Second, the extreme underrepresentation of non-white women and the overall negative representations of this group supported traditional media literature and video game research on non-white women. Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess, & Brown (2011) rarely mentioned nonwhite women in their results due to the low counts of

nonwhite women in video game magazines, with only 14 nonwhite women in their sample. Of the nonwhite women and men examined qualitatively, the trends of needing white saving, being paired with white characters, and being related to some form of violence strongly aligned with the trends discussed by Mathew Hughey (2014). While Hughey's research on the white savior was focused on film representation, the strong synergy between Hughey's agentic (without agency) nonwhite characters and the passive nonwhite women and supporting role nonwhite men paints a clear picture broader Western representation of nonwhite bodies. A significant point of this research was the symbolic annihilation of non-white women and LGBTQ groups and the issue of colorism for non-white women. Counter to the findings of Shaw & Friesem (2016) no LGBTQ content was found in this research. Could be due to the limited time scope of this research, the hidden element discussed in the interview data, or open-ended coding schema that Shaw & Friesem that allows for "hinted" at markers of LGBTQ status. Before and after consolidation, there was a clear negative relationship between perceived lightness of skin-tone and sample size for non-white characters. This in turn, contributes to great macro-level discourse within intersectional research. The underrepresentation and negative representation of this group contributes to cultural and social systems that harm this group. The non-white female characters in this research strongly resemble those described by Patricia Hill Collins as controlling images and the prevalence of caricatures for non-white women. Decades after her review of those stereotypes, non-white women on screen remain bound by themes of passivity, supporting of white goals, and victimization. Non-white men are still associated with the controlling image of the violent black man, in that black men were seen in militaristic/violent settings and usually paired with white counterparts.

Second, the incorporation of interview data in both the analysis (the mixed methods comparison) and in data collection (deriving content analysis codes from interview data) accomplished two goals, bringing marginalized voices directly to the center of this research and strengthening otherwise weak statistical results. Linda Beckman (2014) provided a feminist framework for applying and conducting research. For Beckman, an application of feminist research includes examining power imbalances, a drive to expand the questions asked, bringing in women's (marginalized people's) voices, emphasizing intersectionality, a multidisciplinary approach, reflexivity, maintaining social relations and participant agency during research, and finally a use for the results. These components of feminist research were originally derived for application in clinical research, but this research on fictional characters and representation synergizes with Beckman's proposal. It is still unclear if these results can be a drive for change, but it is hopeful.

So what does this all mean in the grand scheme of things? Let us now connect the concepts of intersectionality, symbolic annihilation, and group vitality to these findings. A prominent drive within intersectional theory and methods is to bring those on the margins to the center. As would be predicted in an intersectional model, non-white women characters occupied the marginal space in video game narratives. In keeping with intersection theory, shifting their analysis away from quantitative to a more heuristic qualitative approach (that included marginalized voices) places the non-white woman character closer to the spotlight. Based on the hidden and invisibility of LGBTQ characters discussed in the mixed method results, we can also infer which groups are symbolically annihilated within high budget video game narratives.

Whether it be in no representation or hidden signifiers of group identification, the lack of visibility of LGBTQ characters in a popular medium of triple A video games others LGBTQ people. This lack of visibility establishes who is considered normal and who is not. The underrepresentation, skewed importance, and trends in narrative roles of non-white men and women and LGBTQ thus contribute to those groups' vitality. These trends in representation create implicit narratives with which these groups can evaluate their standing in a culture at large. Within an intersectional framework, we would assume that non-white men would have a higher standing in a white man dominated culture. This aligns with the mixed-results of non-white men in this research who are represented in both positive and negative ways, and report shifts in how they are being represented.

Genre was an unaddressed element in this research, but there some allusions to genre specific trends in this research. Many of the non-white men in this research came out of video games from either two genres: roleplaying games or shooter/war games. This again ties into themes explored by Leonard (2009), but differs in the settings of the violence. Where Leonard explored narratives of stereotyped violence in urban settings, the violence used by nonwhite men in the *Call of Duty* titles is written as retaliative to a greater, morally corrupt force. Due to the large cast and its yearly publication, the inclusion of so many titles in the series may have skewed the findings of this research. That is, it may have exaggerated the association of non-white men with violence and guns. However, the association in my sample matches that reported in Leonard's (2009) discussion of non-white men represented as violent thugs, the interview narrative critiquing the representation of non-white men's violence, and the research of Burgess

(2007 & 2011) Further research is needed to create a clearer picture on how genre affects the intersection of gender and race on screen.

Limitations

This thesis underwent various changes from conception, to execution, and to the final analysis. It was intended for there to be a substantial sample size to conduct adequate hypothesis testing in this research. Due to time-constraints, much of the discussion in this research is to be seen as exploratory. The original sample-size for the content analysis called for roughly 40 video games to be used. In-depth content analyses such as this one, require a much larger amount of labor and resources to properly conduct. Even at a reduced sample size, the content analysis coding pushed this project well beyond its anticipated deadline. In coding two-hours of multi-modal data (visual, audio, and narrative contexts simultaneously) for each game, it has become obvious why many researchers in media use coding teams to code such large amount of data, or limit themselves to more manageable content sizes (using trailers, half-hour sections, magazine images, etc.). This is not to say that this research has no merit, but that I cannot base predictions upon it. This project failed to collect a large enough sample to satisfy the demands of a rigorous test of an intersectional model. This can be seen as a failure to heed the warnings made by McCall (2005) of the large sample sizes needed to test intersectional models. With each new identity dimension (race, class, sexuality, etc.) added such a model, we need more cases to satisfy basic cell-count rules. Williams, Martins, Consalvo, Ivory (2009) use a sample size of 8572 characters to analyze characters on skin-color and gender (though not together).

Another limitation of this research design may be the operationalization of narrative importance as appearance in the background vs. relevance to the protagonist's progress. Roughly 90% of the characters coded fell into the background category. This, combined with a low sample size, may point towards a problem with the use of that measure, at least for such small samples. If this research is to be redone, narrative importance and role coding schemes may need adjustment if low correlations persist with higher samples. Low samples also do not work well with intersectional models that require larger samples so that each identity combination (skin color x gender, gender x class, etc.) satisfies the cell-size requirements of statistical tests.

Finally, the sample schema requires refinement. A significant portion of the content produced by triple-A video game publishers are annual installments and sequels to popular titles. Sequels and new installments at first puzzled this research. Nearly half of all titles published by Blizzard-Activision were of iterations of *Call of Duty* (44%), which weighted my sampled with military shooting. With this in mind, a newer sampling schema would likely only permit one installment of a series per time span (ex: two *Call of Duty* titles per 2 years). This would still allow for any repeated representations and stereotypes between installments to be seen and offer sufficient data points to allow for analysis of how the passage of time may alter these representations. Another potential solution would be to remove sequels/repeat installments from the sampling frame by either of three methods: random selection, selection of most recent publication within any series, or selection of the first installments within a time-frame.

Appendix A: Content Analysis Code Sheet

Game:

Character 1: [NAME]

Race: [WHITE/1], [TAN/2], [BROWN/3], [BLACK/4], [CUSTOM/8], [UNKWN-NOT-WHITE/9]

Gender: [MALE/1], [FEMALE/2], [TRANS/3], [NONBI/4]

Sexuality: [HETERO/1], [NON-HETERO/2]

Total Screen Time: [IN SECONDS]

Total Speaking Time: [IN SECONDS]

Noticeable Behaviors: [What do they do? Fight the protagonist? Makes sexual behaviors to the protagonist? Etc.]

Attire: [Revealing? Practical? Style?]

Role Open Code: [BASED OFF ATTIRE AND BEHAVIOR]

Role Focus Code: [BASED ON SYNTHESIZING OPEN CODES]

-Passive or Active in Plot?: [DERIVED FROM NOTICEABLE BEHAVIORS AND ROLE CODING]

-Positive or Negative for Identity: [DERIVED FROM INTERVIEW DATA AGAINST SKINCOLOR, GENDER, AND ROLE CODINGS]

Appendix B: Interview Guide

(Note these are notes for the interviewer, while the questions may be worded differently interview to interview, the core/subject matter of each question will be addressed)

- GATHER RESPONDENTS DEMOGRAPHIC INFO: “How do you identify yourself on the following dimensions (allow for respondent flexibility):
 - Race
 - Gender
 - Sexuality

“Ok so now can we focus on video games in specific?”

- FILLER QUESTION SECTION
 - How long have you been gaming?
 - Favorite Genre?
 - Favorite Game?
 - How long have you been playing this game?
- HOW OFTEN DO YOU PLAY STORY DRIVEN VIDEO GAMES? (Define this term)
 - Gear respondent towards thinking on narrative games only
- CONSIDER YOUR RACE GENDER AND SEXUALITY SEPARATELY FOR A MOMENT:
- TALK TO ME ABOUT HOW YOUR RACE IS REPRESENTED IN VIDEO GAMES
 - Core questions:
 - How often
 - What roles do they play in the story?
 - Probe for positive and negative statements
 - Walk me through their criteria of what is positive/negative
 - Probe for examples throughout process
 - How do they see these roles in relation to their race?
 - What cultural schemas do they pull from?
- TALK TO ME ABOUT HOW YOUR GENDER IS REPRESENTED IN VIDEO GAMES
 - Repeat Above except
 - For Non-binary, Trans, or Gender Queer respondents: engage with WHY they believe they are underrepresented if they cannot continue beyond “How often”
- TALK TO ME ABOUT HOW YOUR SEXUALITY IS REPRESENTED IN VIDEO GAMES
 - Repeat

- BRING IT ALL TOGETHER NOW: CONSIDER YOUR RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY TOGETHER (2 or more parts)
 - Repeat with focus towards their identity holistically
 - Do unique representations emerge in the combo of multiple identities?
 - Does one overshadow the other in terms of representation:
 - I.e.: Does your RACE become more salient over your GENDER and SEXUALITY when you see characters who share 2 or more components of your identity?
- HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH NEGATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF HOW YOU'RE REPRESENTED? HOW DO NEGATIVE REPRESENTATIONS PERSONALLY AFFECT YOU?
 - Probe for any specific behaviors or strategies they may use (i.e.)
 - Video games versus general/other media discussion (i.e., television, music, novels, etc.)

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