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CHAPTER SEVEN

Representation Matters(?)

When, How, and If Representation Matters to Marginalized Game Audiences

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Why does representation matter? I begin many a class discussion on media diversity with that question. Most of my students give answers that imply some sort of media effect: "bad" representation, representation that casts a group in a negative light or makes people biased toward marginalized groups. "Good" representation, that which helps normalize marginalized groups, provides evidence for equality. Students working in areas of media production argue that it is important to represent groups well so that they will watch/listen/read/play/buy a product. Occasionally, someone will also say that representation matters so that children can grow up and have positive self-images, something that can only happen if they see "good" media representation of people like them. In nearly all cases, my students only talk about these effects in terms of other people, rarely connecting it to their own media consumption practices or experiences unless directly prompted.

My students' responses jibe well with the long history of research on media representation. Jessica Davis and Oscar Gandy (1999) assert, "Media representations play an important role in informing the ways in which we understand social, cultural, ethnic, and racial differences" (p. 367). Julie D'Acci (2004) demonstrates the ways that "television representations of gender ... have very profound effects on very real human bodies, societies, and economics" (p. 376). Film scholar Richard Dyer (2002) argues that "how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation" (p. 1). Similar arguments are made about representations of

marginalized groups in video games, as well (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; King & Krzywinska, 2006; Leonard, 2006; Shaw, 2009; Sisler, 2006).

Media scholars argue that representations have beneficial or negative social implications for a given group (reviewed in Gross, 2001). Some authors argue that it is important for individuals, minorities in particular, to see themselves reflected in the media. This is often discussed in relation to social identity theory (Blumler, Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985; Harwood, 1999). Alternatively, researchers argue that *good* representation of marginal groups is important because it can combat negative stereotypes and bigotry in dominant groups, or, conversely, *bad* representations can encourage negative stereotypes (Gorham, 1999). As Gross (2001) asserts, "The media are likely to be most powerful in cultivating images of events and groups about which we have little firsthand opportunity for learning" (p. 11). Even if we approach the problem through critical cultural theory, the literature is clear that representation matters in how groups are imagined (Hall, 1985).

Something that is often difficult to explain to my students is that the very idea we can describe representations of specific identifiers as good or bad implies a stability of meaning of those identifiers that simply does not hold up to scrutiny, as D'Acci (2004) describes. Further, what is beneficial or negative depends on one's point of view and politics (Gross & Woods, 1999, p. 20). When one looks at a medium that is built on interactivity, like a video game, the implications of representation are further complicated. How can we think about how audiences interact with representation in particular media and how representation comes to matter in a way that can account for intersectional or hybrid identities? How might an argument for representation take into account the macro-level media sphere and the micro-level of individual engagement with media texts?

By using video games as an entry point, in the study described here I spoke with dozens of people who identified as marginalized from the construction of the mainstream video game audience along the axes of race, gender, and sexuality. I did this because in previous research I had conducted on marginalized gamer communities, whenever I got to the question of representation many interviewees were very ambivalent about the importance of representation. In part, this was explained by individual political differences and an overwhelming presence of market logic that a group will be targeted for marketing if a game company deems it profitable. There was also a sense that representation matters at some times, in some texts, and in some genres or media more than others. Representation was not as much an issue for video games, many argued, as it was in other media. In the project described here, I wanted to unpack this ambivalence about representation rather than merely dismiss it as a form of "false consciousness." As James Carey puts it in an interview with Larry Grossberg (2006), "Whether consciousness is true or false, it's the only consciousness we have, and you have to deal with it" (p. 220). To take this ambivalence seriously—to understand what it is and why

s expressed in this way—is important in thinking about what arguments for esentation look like in an era of interactive media.

In addition, I was concerned that in past research I focused too much on uiting people on the basis of identity categories. This put, I suspect, interwees in a marginalized position feeling pressure to, and resisting the call to, wer as members of those specific groups. To correct for this, in this study ed an online survey to recruit game players of all types and then selected m those people interviewees who identified outside the white, male, heteroual, U.S. gamer construction. By using sexuality, gender, and race as starting ints for selecting interviewees, I do not mean to imply that these categories tter to the interviewees' relationship with gaming. Rather, these are categos that popular and academic discourses about gaming foreground as being derrepresented and particularly concerned with representation. The chalge this study poses, however, is in leaving them as starting points, not deterinistic lenses through which to interpret results. In addition, as my focus was ople who play video games, rather than gamers per se, interviewees varied types of games, platforms, and amount of playing time. Over the course of o interviews, the second being a gaming interview during which they played game while I watched and asked questions, I spoke to them about games, as ell as other media, to help unpack the different ways representation matters ross media. In concluding, I demonstrate the ways this repositioning of the scussion on *how* rather than *that* representation matters offers a new way to gue for the importance of diversity in media representation, particularly when oking at interactive media.

TO WHOM IT MATTERS

Given the stakes of representation described above, it would be logical to assume hat members of marginalized groups are particularly attuned to or care about repesentation of people "like them," leaving "like them" open to encompass a variety f identifications. In my research with members of marginalized groups, however, his is not always the case. Contrasting two pairs of interviewees, however, offers nother perspective from which to view this issue.

Rusty identifies[1] as a heterosexual, white male[2] in his late 30s, who grew up in the Chicago suburbs, and currently lives with his partner, Tanner,[3] in a Philadelphia suburb. Gregory, in contrast, identifies as a black, gay man in his early 30s, who was born and raised in a middle-working-class family in North Philadelphia. Rusty asserted that he does not think much about whether he identifies with characters or about representation: "I just kind of know who I am, and that's the only thinking I do about that." In part, he ties this to the fact that he sees himself

as boring and views games as a way to escape, rather than find, himself. "I'm white; I'm boring (laughs). I want to be that Orc that could rip a car in half with my hands, or, you know, blasting cities from orbit." In contrast, representation is important to Gregory. He stated very specifically that seeing people like him in media "shows that I'm being heard and seen and I'm being acknowledged and I'm here." Though it is rhetorically useful for me to contrast Rusty and Gregory based on their social demographics, to rely on those as the explanatory factors for their differing opinions is overly simplistic. It is more than their demographic differences that explain their divergent takes on the importance of representation, which can be seen by looking at a counter-example.

Kat, identified as a white woman in her early 20s, did not disclose her sexuality, and was raised in what she called the "WASPy" suburbs of Atlanta. I contrast her answers here with Julia, who was in her late 30s and identified as an African American, gay woman from Northwest Philadelphia. Julia does not feel strongly about representation. She argued, however, that this was because she does not identify with the signifiers that typically signal "blackness." Her partner, Elise,[4] who took part in the first interview, made a similar comment about queer identity and representation. An excerpt of their interview:

> Julia: All I'm saying is that, not to generalize ... I don't identify with those people, even though they are black. We have nothing in common whatsoever. So I don't, for me, [representation is] not important at all.
>
> *[later in the discussion]*
>
> Elise: Being gay is this much of my life [holds up thumb and forefinger slightly parted] ... I mean we tend to hang out with gay people, just, I think, by virtue of being into the same stuff, but I don't think I would specifically watch a show, like we never watched *Queer Eye* or the *L Word* or anything. ... It wasn't like, "Oh my God there's a queer person!" You know what I mean?

Julia also believed that lack of representation in video games is not an issue because they are "just games." For Kat, however, representation is very important, even in video games. Due to this, when she discussed the importance of seeing people like her in media, she felt that it is important, but that diversity in media in general is important and this tempered her need to see people specifically "like her":

> It's important to me. ... I'm definitely more prone to go see a movie if I see someone who looks like me and who has encountered situations like me, rather than someone else. But at the same time, I definitely value diversity. I mean, as a white American girl, I wouldn't be offended if they put more diversity in there. Because I think that's beneficial. I don't think that our media needs more white American girls, you know?

Tying these two comparisons together, we can see that the importance of representation is not tied specifically to the marginalized identifiers most research tends to emphasize. That is not to say that people did not stress these marginalized identities when they described representation, but that there is not an inherent connection between marginalization and feeling that representation is important. Rather, there is an approach to media evident in these four interviewees' comments that cannot be reduced to social demographics. Moreover, regardless of whether interviewees thought representation was important to them, the power of media was largely described in terms of escapism and imaginative power. Representation can help audiences imagine what might be possible, which is in many ways a counter-narrative to much previous research that talks about representation in terms of realism. To say representation is important implies either that (1) media must be realistic (something Rusty pushed back against) or (2) one is making allegiances to a specific group identity (something Julia and Elise rejected). Certainly, diversity was important to interviewees in a general sense because it demonstrates what types of being are possible (as both Kat and Gregory argued). The "what might be" importance representation, thus, was significant to interviewees whether they felt representation had an important effect.

I am not arguing that representation is not important, and thus textual analyses that form the backbone of much of representation studies is passé. Rather, in finding the ways it is not inherently important, taking at face value that it does not always matter to audiences, we can begin to unpack how representation matters. Focusing on the specific moments in which it comes to matter, according to interviewees, I found that it became relevant in relation to an individual's connection to specific identities, the text itself, and the context in which a text was used.

IDENTITY MATTERS

For some interviewees the representation of certain identifiers was extremely important, though not always. Gregory explicated the nuances and complications of representation, specifically in relation to his sexual and racial identities:

> I used to watch *Queer as Folk* all the time, and I was like this is the only fucking town where there is no gay black people! (laughs) *[later in the discussion]* You ever see that show called *The Wire*? ... I never watched it. But, they said it's a good show. I don't know. I mean, that might depict something, but everybody in the hood ain't a drug dealer.

In discussing two shows that purportedly include characters like him, Gregory offered an exemplar for the issue that is at the core of this analysis. Focusing on single identifiers in discussing representation, even focusing on intersectional identities, is far too limited to capture the essence of why representation matters.

He critiqued representation by discussing the ways texts closed down options for being, particularly as they connect with the entirety of the media sphere where such images dominate.

Interviewees made connections between how they identify themselves and the importance they give to seeing people like them, but not in the way usually assumed. This was evident in Julia and Elise's exchange, above. Seeing people like them was largely immaterial to their media consumption. This was not, as assumed in the SIT literature, because these identities were less salient for them but rather that the typical articulation of those identifiers does not correlate with their experiences. Evan, having struggled with his own identity over time, and because he tends to identify with heroic characters, stated: "I don't think I identify with people like me. ... I'm a transman ... they're not really depicted in movies and if they are they're not really heroic per se." In another interview he referenced *Queer as Folk* and the *L Word* as texts that, by all accounts, should have resonated with him as an early 30s, white, middle-class, bisexual transman. He stated, "It was like queer content that was very specifically something that had to do with me and my lifestyle, and you want to talk about underrepresented—I had no interest." Both shows have characters that represent a variety of identities with which he might, in theory, connect. For Evan and other interviewees, however, seeing people like them was just not a driving factor for their media consumption—at least not always. Often this was because they do not identify with the way their many identities typically are portrayed, particularly in a way that honors the intersectionality of their identities.

In addition, interviewees were cognizant of the problems of representation; they recognize that tokenization and stereotyping are dangers of demanding diversity in representation, as Chuck pointed out:

> When I think of diversity, how it's done in the media—do you remember ... the [Burger King Kids Club] where it would be like the kid in the wheelchair who's named Wheels, and there's like the one black kid, the one Asian girl. That stuff always drives me insane.

Largely those problems stem from a focus on specific identifiers without the acknowledgment that identities are not reducible to individual signifiers. Yes, group differences exist. However, the ways these differences are marked in media often oversimplify these differences.

Some interviewees argued that games could be uniquely suited to overcoming such problems of representation. Character creation tools were seen as a way for players to have the option of playing as people like them without feeling limited by producers' construction of their "group." Speaking of race, Sasha said, for example, that avatar customization allows players more choices, "like Nintendo Wii, they have like all shades. You can, like, customize a shade. Because everybody comes in different colors. You know all black people aren't dark skinned. All Caucasian

people aren't pale." Other interviewees discussed the moral choices or dialog options of some games as offering them a chance to express their personalities. In these ways games were seen to offer nuances not available in other media.

Avatar creation tools and character options make video games more readily suited to providing audiences with the opportunity to create more diverse visual representations than other media, but the options are limited. T. L. Taylor (2006) points out that in Everquest, for example, "some bodies are ascribed legitimacy and some are not" (p. 117). A few interviewees discussed this in relation to creating avatars that end up being the "skinny" version of the player, as avatar creation tools do not include a variety of body type options. Kat also points out that while making Miis during her gaming interview, "It was interesting to see the things that weren't there. Like, there were no dreadlocks, there were no weaves. I don't know. It was interesting." Making exact replications of oneself is not always the goal in using these tools. Several interviewees described making characters that were attractive or created aspirational versions of themselves. Certain types of game spaces and texts, however, encourage self-representation as I discuss below, and even in the ones that do not researchers can still be critical of the limits placed on avatar creation. When the choices included in those spaces limit the types of "selves" that can be represented, audiences notice the absence.

In addition, representation as an option marks particular identities as the exception to the norm of heterosexual, white, and male, as Janet describes:

> I guess I'm very aware of the extent to which white male is seen as like the default, and so like these are all regular people plus one black person—black people aren't regular people? Or like, these are all regular drivers but we'll show one female driver. She's not a regular driver. She's a female driver.

Not only should researchers be critical of what representations exist, they should also pay attention to when they are made available. Zahriel, for example, said that in games like Zelda and Halo, gender does not matter to the game and yet the protagonists are still male. "Where it's painfully obvious that they could have used a woman if they wanted to, that really annoys me. ... You could just make a person who is very androgynous, who could go either way, and leave it at that. But they just default to men." In games where there are choices of avatars, she felt that games tend to make room for a gender choice, though these are only choices of binary gender. The problem with which she took issue is not just the lack of choice but also the overall resistance to use female, or even androgynous, as a default. Video games do not offer players infinite options. Games are structured in ways that encourage and value certain types of play over others. In terms of representation, different identities make sense in some games in ways they do not in others, which we can also see when looking at how representation is made relevant in specific kinds of texts.

TEXTUAL MATTERS

How identities are signaled is important, but why is crucial as well. Representations of identifiers become relevant, salient, and are experienced in relation to specific moments of articulation. They are also related to the individual's reason for engaging with the text. As Janet points out, "I guess it depends on what I'm getting out of it." Using a non-game example, she discussed the types of people and bodies represented in the yoga DVDs she gets from Netflix: "I'm like, oh man they should totally make a yoga DVD with somebody who's like kinda old and has bad knees like me. That would be great." In the context of other genres of shows, however, that kind of representation was less important: "I don't require like, somebody on a cooking show to be old and have bad knees because that's not really relevant to the product that I'm consuming." In video games, similarly, Janet discusses the ways game mechanics shape the relative importance of representation:

> I guess it would depend on how important that was in the game. Like if I'm playing *The Sims* I want to play someone who looks like me because why should I have to play a character who doesn't look anything like me? ... If I was playing a fighting game, I wouldn't want a character who looked like me (laughs) because I would be terrible at it. I understand that I'm not particularly suited for some modes (laughing).

Sometimes the ludic elements of games matter more to players than representation, as explored by some games theorists (Aarseth, 2004; Newman, 2002). In games, representation does not always matter, and yet this is the very reason one might expect more diversity in games. If players truly are unconcerned, or not always concerned, with the figure that represents them on the screen, then why do we not see more diversity in what comprises that image?

Representation matters more in some games than it does in others of course. Interviewees stressed, for example, connections between game mechanics and how they approach avatar creation. Cody, who identifies as a heterosexual, African American male in his mid-20s, said that how he chooses a character depends on the type of game. When he plays EverQuest or World of Warcraft (WoW),[5] he does not care what his character looks like. He picks the one that has the abilities he needs to do well in the game. When he plays sports games, he picks the professional athletes he most identifies with, being an athlete himself. When playing a realistic skateboarding game like Tony Hawk, he picks an African American avatar if available, but he was ambivalent about its importance.

In the gaming interview, there was some evidence that, when given the option, Cody would choose to represent his race and gender, but not necessarily to represent himself. He showed me the avatar he created for the wrestling game he played during the gaming interview. It did not look like him as the wrestler had dreadlocks (which Cody did not), was covered in tattoos (which Cody did not

ibly have), and wore a gas mask and leather cape (which Cody seemed unlikely wear). It did have Cody's skin tone and a similar name, but he did not feel the aracter reflected him. According to Cody, "I just wanted to make the guy as nuts I could. No real reflection of me." In contrast, when creating an avatar on Xbox ive he said he made it look as much like him as possible because it was meant to e a representation of himself to his friends.

In an interactive medium like games, the relative importance of representation an be traced through the ways players make decisions about their characters. This not, however, because researchers can decipher a player's identity from their vatar design. Rather it is because the process of making those decisions illumiates when, how, and if self-representation is important to them. Players work with the game world, because they have to if they want to play (Taylor, 2006). According to Hayes (2007), players' use of a game involves an interplay between their own dispositions and the game's mechanics. They balance what they enjoy doing in the game with what will make them successful in the game. Knowing this allows researchers to analyze the way game designers limit player's choices in some game texts but expand upon them in others. We can also look at how decisions are made in relation to the context in which the game is played.

CONTEXT MATTERS

Countering prevailing discourses that embodied identities like gender and race disappear online, there is plenty of evidence that this is not the case (Haggin, 2009; Nakamura, 2002). When social identifiers are considered unimportant in online spaces, it is through the pretense that everyone is the same. Usually the assumption is that everyone is heterosexual, white or Anglo, and male. During their[6] gaming interview, Pouncy described this in relation to an online version of Settlers of Catan: "Unless someone has an overtly feminine sounding name in their screen name, everyone assumes that everyone is male. Well, I don't (laughs) but most people." How players can and do represent themselves online affects the game space and other players' experiences with the space.

Related to this, the relative importance of what avatars players choose can shift if they play online or offline. In the game Diablo II, for example, Malcolm explains: "If you choose one class you're playing a male character, if you choose another class you're playing a female character." He played as both a male and female avatar during the gaming interview.[7] On the other hand, when he plays WoW he does not play as a female character, because even if other players "know psychologically that 90% of the people that play these games are male, they are still going to, you know, hope that that's a female and try to interact with you in that way." Playing in an online environment changes the types of and implications of

choices players make. In online spaces, people represent themselves to an audience who will make assumptions about them based on the aesthetic and ludic choices they make. The interpretations of those choices are shaped by the way those games spaces are designed. If, for example, everyone in WoW had to play as an androgynous or even female character, it would alter the implications of playing as a female *toon*—the term for the player's in-game WoW character.

Speaking of context more broadly, many interviewees said that representation is socially important, even if it is not important to them. It is not merely important for individuals to see themselves reflected in a mediated mirror. Representation also is important because it is an external acknowledgment of one's existence. This is intertwined with Gregory's assertion that people want representation because they want people like them to be seen. The interviewees who felt they were mainstream—regardless of whether they may be seen as marginalized in some way—did not think they needed, or in some cases had the right, to say that representation of their group is important.

Regardless of whether people feel that it is important for them to see people like themselves in media, everyone believes that it is important for other people. In some cases they display what communication scholars call a "third-person effect" (Davison, 1983). They assume that others do not usually get to see themselves and, thus, for them representation is important.

> Renee: That's really funny because I don't really think it's important to me. But I think it's important to other people, to see people that look like them. Like I see people that look like me all the time and so I don't think of it as that important but I think that if I didn't see people that looked like me all the time I would think that I would think that it's important. But that's a lot of "I would thinks."

Part of this stems from the idea that individuals, as Renee describes, feel that they do get to see themselves represented in some aspects of their identities. Pouncy makes this point, for example:

> I feel like the media is full of representations of people who look like me in terms of skin color and—well, I don't feel like my gender is represented very often in terms of gender not being a binary, which is not a way that a lot of people look at that—but more in terms of characters that think like me and have my values.

People can think of themselves, and sometimes even their group, in a nuanced and inclusive manner. When they talk about other groups, however, they tend to view them as static and cohesive. This is, in fact, the very trouble of representation. Part of the problem of saying that media makers should offer diverse representations is that when producers try to represent groups, they tend to think narrowly about what membership in those groups entails.

Interviewees were hesitant, however, to say that representation should matter to other people. Janet, for example, acknowledges that her own position on representation being important could be potentially proscriptive:

> I don't always think it's a bad thing. If you're going into a gaming environment as a bespectacled Asian dude and you want to play a gigantic blonde Amazon, like it's no skin off my ass. I don't think you should have to sit down with a therapist and fill in a form, like whether it's okay for you to do that (chuckles). Whether it's culturally acceptable.

Moreover, as Anya points out, to some extent the emphasis on representation may be a form of hegemonic discourse: "It's supposed to be important and society and media tells you that it's supposed to be important so that's why people argue for it. But I don't know how many people really stop and think about whether it's important." Nick Couldry (2003) discusses this in terms of the "myth of the mediated center," the assumption that "'the media' has a privileged relationship to that 'centre,' as a highly centralized system of symbolic production whose 'natural' role is to represent or frame that 'centre'" (p. 45). The very notion that media representation is important is tied to assumptions about social power. The media are assumed to be the primary site at which we can make sense of social reality. This, in turn, is why people think that media representation signals or is the path to social equality. Media become the target for treatment, when it is only a symptom of inequality.

This focus on media derives from assumptions about media effects. As Gregory points out, however, in an excerpt that seems to represent a quick history of social and communication theory: "Some people are influenced in so many different ways ... you learn from all different places. You can learn from friends, you can learn from reading a magazine ... you could have ten people play this game and they all take something different from it." Here we see incidental references to active audiences (Fiske, 1989), polysemy (Hebdige, 1979), and personal influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006). The assumption that representation matters is disentangled rarely from how and why it matters. It matters if, as some scholars suggest, media help shape our world views (Gerbner, Gross, Moran, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). As Gregory suggests, however, this is not a deterministic process. Arguments for the importance of representation cannot ignore the active meaning-making process, nor can they focus too specifically on the individual, marginalized audience member as the primary target for media representation.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the initial question: Why is representation important? When interviewees asserted that representation is important to them, it was largely through critiquing what representations exist or do not exist in relation to realism. In this

...in my previous research, interviewees did not necessarily say that they always sought out representation. This is because, as Taylor describes, "People may not know what they *could* enjoy" (... 102). Wanting representation, the act of desiring it, is a very different ... critiquing portrayals that exist. The reason representation matters to ... people is because they see the under- or misrepresentation of certain ... unrealistic.

Overall, interviewees were aware of the arguments for the importance of representation. However, they dubbed representation as unimportant in texts they used for escapism, which they view as primarily fantasy. The goal of researchers and activists must ... deal with the fact that for those who think that video games' main purpose is not to reflect reality, the argument that games are misrepresenting reality holds little value. The paradox those dealing with issues of representation in fiction must face is arguing for the seriousness of fantasy without diminishing enjoyment of the fictional.

Interviewees felt they could see themselves represented, or represent themselves, in many media texts regardless of their membership in marginalized identity categories. If games are to be play spaces, we can be critical of the limits placed on identity play. In research, we must also be careful about making assumptions about those with whom audiences are willing to identify. Being sensitive to identity is not the same as using identity as an analytic category through which to analyze data. How representation matters exists at the nexus of several factors: a given audience member's reasons for using a text; how individual players-viewers understand their identities; how and if the representation is made relevant in a given text; the context in which the text is consumed; and the social sphere in which those texts are created and consumed. That representation does not always matter frees us to focus on those times in which it does matter. Specifically, it is imperative that media offer a diverse view of the world that exists and a world that might be across texts.

NOTES

1. All descriptions of interviewees' identifiers are a combination of survey and interview data.
2. Although the main focus of this project was marginalized gamers, I had the opportunity to speak to Rusty and Chuck, who were partners of Tanner and Carol, respectively. As mainstream gamers they provided useful points of contrast and connection with other interviewees.
3. Tanner identifies as a heterosexual, white/Arab/Arab American female in her late 30s from the New Jersey Shore area.
4. Elise did not fill out the survey, so I do not know how she identifies. She appeared to be white/Anglo and a woman, however, and called herself queer in the course of the interview.
5. These are both massive multiplayer online role-playing games.
6. This is Pouncy's preferred pronoun.
7. He had played this game on previous occasions and had played as all of the characters at some point.

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PART THREE

Challenging Communicative Action AND Agency