

Chapter 11

Toward an Ethic of Representation:

Ethics and the Representation of Marginalized Groups in Videogames

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ABSTRACT

Often, literature on the representation of marginalized groups in videogames focuses on how groups have been and should be portrayed in games. Taking a different focus, this chapter offers a broader ethical basis for the production and critique of games. It begins by outlining the issues surrounding the representation of marginalized groups (focusing on sexuality, gender and race) in digital games. It then addresses the ethical importance of representation in games as fictional play spaces. Moving from there, the writings on hospitality, recognition, and truthfulness are examined with regard to the representation of marginalized groups in games. It then uses these concepts to create an integrated ethical argument for diversity in videogames that takes into account gameplay, representation, and their relationship.

INTRODUCTION

How groups, specifically marginalized ones, are represented in digital games has been the subject of increasing attention in recent years (see Barton, 2004; Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Chan, 2005; Consalvo, 2003a, 2003b; Delp, 1997; Dietz, 1998; Glaubke, 2002;

Graner Ray, 2004; Haggin, 2009; Huntemann, 2002; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008; King & Krzywinska, 2006; Leonard, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Machin & Suleiman, 2006; Miller, 2006; Scharer, 2004; Sisler, 2006). Representation here refers to how particular identities are marked and deployed within a game. Much of this work focuses on videogame portrayals of women and other marginalized groups that, while they may not always be statistical minorities in a given context,

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are characterized by being under- or mis-represented in mainstream media. While the chapter will briefly outline these concerns, the goal is not to make claims about how these groups should be portrayed. Rather it is to make an ethics-based argument for the importance of diversity in game texts. Most research on representation in media implies that producers *should* be concerned with representation by stressing the ideological implications of misrepresentation (reviewed in Hermes, 2005, pp. 1-13). These approaches have not led to developing a framework that can serve as the basis of production ethics. By drawing together threads from three philosophical perspectives, recognition, hospitality and truthfulness, this chapter offers a starting point for such an ethic. Echoing Couldry, “[b]y *ethics*, I mean neither a specific ethical code...nor an agreed list of specific, and narrowly circumscribed, ‘virtues’...but rather an open-ended process of reflecting on how we need to act so that we live well, both individually and collectively” (Couldry, 2006, p. 102). This is not an argument for how games should be designed, but rather an assertion of what must be ethically considered in the design process. For the purposes of this chapter, the author focuses on videogames which visually represent human-like characters and does not encompass online persistent worlds like those described in Castranova (2005) and Taylor (2006).

The chapter begins by looking at literature on the representation of marginalized groups in videogames, as well as literature that argues that producers should be concerned with proper representation. Similar concerns are discussed in relation to other media, but in the interest of space only representation in videogames are discussed here. While earlier research offers ideological critiques of representation in games, they do not necessarily offer an ethics based argument for diversity in videogames; that is the task of this chapter. One might argue, as interviewees in the author’s past research have, that these are “just games” and thus issues of representation should

not be an issue (Shaw, 2007, 2009a, 2010). In response to such claims, however, this chapter demonstrates that there is still an ethical case to make for representation even in fictional realms. More specifically, three ethical perspectives are useful for making an argument for diversity in videogames.

We might discuss issues of representation through the lens of hospitality, as discussed in Ricoeur (2007), or recognition, as in Honneth (2007) or Taylor (1994). A Levinasian perspective (2001, 1996) on recognition usefully connects both recognition and hospitality. Recognition and hospitality, however, are not quite enough to make a complete argument for the importance of representation in games. Thus, truthfulness is discussed as an added consideration in an ethical approach to representation in videogames. We must also consider some of the particularities of videogames as a medium when addressing the issue of representation. Gameplay is arguably one of the main characteristics that makes videogames different from other media: “[g]ames are different, in that what matters is not just *representation* but also the active process of *gameplay*” (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 186). Thus in the final section the implications of these three philosophical perspectives are discussed in relation to the visual representation in games, gameplay, and the relationship between the two. In concluding, this chapter makes an ethical argument for the importance of representation in games by stressing reflexivity in the way videogames are constructed, as well as the ethical obligation of game designers to recognize and make videogame spaces hospitable to a diversity of identities at the level of representation and gameplay.

BACKGROUND

This chapter discusses representation, or the way in which groups are portrayed in videogame texts, from the perspective of ethical theory. Generally,

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