



Identity Performance in Roleplaying Games

Danielle Nielsen *

Murray State University, Faculty Hall 7C, Murray, KY 42071, United States of America

Abstract

This article argues that roleplaying games have the potential to challenge, encourage, and subsume the privilege of the stereotypical gamer, one who is white, male, and heterosexual. Though roleplaying games as they are currently designed are neither ideal nor perfect, the article contends they embrace feminist programming strategies and offer those who do not want to play a straight male avatar the opportunity to develop and explore identities through characters in ways that other genres do not. Roleplaying games extend the privilege of representation to other gaming demographics, giving players the opportunity to “play who they are” in the digital world, whether they are able to, or even desire to, explore this identity offline. Without the diversity of representation found in roleplaying games, players would be unable to participate in the potentially fruitful criticism of stereotypes and the ability to interact with players and characters different from themselves.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Video games; Roleplaying Games; Identity; Gender; LGBT; Race

1. Introduction

In Spring 2011, Bastal, a BioWare forum member, started the thread “BioWare Neglected Their Main Demographic: The Straight Male Gamer.” Bastal complained that *Dragon Age 2*, a BioWare roleplaying game (RPG), provided players with the choice to have their avatar engage in same-sex relationships. Bastal argued that even though there are heterosexual romance options for both male and female avatars, the heterosexual options for men are “exotic” and not to his liking. As his title implies, Bastal believed game designers should better cater to him and other “straight male gamers” because they are the “main demographic” of RPGs like *Dragon Age 2*. To prove “straight male gamers” are the target audience, Bastal undertook his own ethnography and estimated that *Dragon Age*’s LGBT player population is 5% and admitted that

there are a substantial amount of women who play video games, but they’re usually gamers who play games like *The Sims*, rather than games like *Dragon Age*. That’s not to say there isn’t a significant number of women who play *Dragon Age* and that BioWare should forego the option of playing as a women [sic] altogether, but there should have been much more focus on making sure us [sic] male gamers were happy. (Bastal, 2011)

Bastal’s response provides us not only with an example of the type of person many people believe to be the stereotypical gamer – straight, male, probably white (his avatar photo in the forum shows an older, white male character)

* Tel.: +1-270-809-2407.

E-mail address: dnielsen@murraystate.edu

who chooses to play with an avatar that represents the player both physically and sexually – but also one who is protective of the gaming environment and who uses his own identity to defend that environment in forums. While Bastal freely admitted women, members of the LGBT community, and those who engage in interracial relationships game, he also claimed they do not usually play *his* games – the roleplaying game.¹ Bastal’s identity performance – straight and male who prefers to “date” women who look like him – used literacy skills specific to the gaming community when he both performed his identity onscreen through his avatar and in writing through his forum post. He used his privilege as a straight, white, male gamer to communicate and created or performed a “relational identity,” composed of “the dialects we speak, the degree of formality we adopt in our speech, the deeds we do, the places we go, the emotions we express, and the clothes we wear” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 127). Bastal performed his identity not only through language – the post itself – but also in the avatar picture associated with his account, what we might call “the clothes he wears.” He presented himself *in relation to* and *more important than* other gamers, women and those in the LGBT community, specifically. By including himself in the “main demographic” and by providing evidence to demonstrate he is a representative of that demographic, Bastal tried to prove why designers should pay more attention to his desires. It is this type of multimodal identity performance that calls readers to consider how roleplaying games encourage players to perform and interrogate their identities.

Bastal’s comments sparked discussion within the LGBT blogosphere and prompted BioWare designer David Gaider’s response in the forums. In his response, Gaider reminded Bastal

the romances in the game are not for ‘the straight male gamer’. They’re for everyone. We [BioWare] have a lot of fans, many of whom are neither straight nor male, and they deserve no less attention. . . .The majority has no inherent ‘right’ to get more options than anyone else. (as cited in [Pearse, 2011a](#), March 25)

Gaider’s response emphasized BioWare’s position that games are “for everyone” and acknowledged that all players in the gaming community deserve to have their interests and identities portrayed. In essence, Gaider’s response argues that LGBT and female players deserve *equal*, not proportional, representation in games.

It is not surprising that members of the gaming community responded to Bastal. Though the straight male gamer may be the stereotype, he is far from the only gamer. The [Entertainment Software Association \(ESA\) reported in the 2011 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry](#) that 42% of all gamers are women and adult women make up 37% of the gaming population, more than teenage boys (ages 17 or younger) who comprise only 13% of the gaming population (p. 3). ESA (2011) also reported 7.7% of all console games and 20.3% of computer games sold in 2010 were roleplaying games (p. 8). While the statistics do not account for the type of game played when they discuss gender and age distribution, clearly women game. Additionally, while RPGs are not the most popular console genre, the 20% of all computer games sold make roleplaying one of the most popular computer genres.

In addition to this data, in 2006, Jason Rockwood, a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, conducted a “gaymer survey,” which received over 10,000 responses. Rockwood asked gamers to disclose their sexual orientation, genre preferences, and how they saw themselves reflected in games. Rockwood found that 28% of respondents self-reported as “completely heterosexual,” 23.4% as “completely homosexual,” and approximately 45% as bisexual. Forty-two percent of survey respondents answered that RPGs were their favorite genre, more than any other genre by nearly 15%. Players also said that they would like to see more gay and lesbian content in RPGs but not necessarily in other genres ([Silwinski, 2007](#), February 26). Both the ESA’s 2011 results and Rockwood’s survey demonstrate the straight male gamer is not the only person who plays video games, including RPGs. Rather, the gaming world is as diverse as the genres of games available, making it an unwise business practice to cater to any one population when the goal is to sell games. Instead, as Gaider insisted in his response to Bastal, inclusivity is important for game designers wishing to sell their product.

At the heart of Bastal’s original comments, Gaider’s response, and the “gaymer survey,” is the question of privilege and the ways in which technology creates privilege to enact and explore identities and navigate the gameworld and its attendant spheres like message boards and forums. It is this question of privilege and how RPGs challenge, encourage, or subsume what is understood as the stereotypical privilege of the gamer that is the focus of this essay. Drawing

¹ Bastal’s commentary is sexist and homophobic. While this essay addresses the ways in which RPGs afford people the opportunity to combat sexism and homophobia, I will not address Bastal’s homophobia and sexism specifically. Given the response to his comments, both on the forums and in the blogosphere, he does not singularly represent the gaming community.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/347730>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/347730>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)