By the Campfire: How Representation in Video Games Can Be Improved

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Recommended Citation
Smith, Hunter, "By the Campfire: How Representation in Video Games Can Be Improved" (2023). WWU Honors College Senior Projects. 754.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/754

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About this document

This document serves as a collection of information to contextualize this project and explains the process by which this project was created. This is not a research paper intended for academic use, this is purely to accompany the project to provide more insight on what the project is.

Where this project started: Stardew Valley

In my course “Understanding the social world through games” that I took with Dr. Osborne, we had a conversation about the game Stardew Valley. The immense popularity of the game brought people’s attention to it, and allowed people to notice something unique it did in terms of diversity: allowing the player to be in a relationship with any of the dateable NPCs, regardless of the gender the player chose for their character. This led to the fanbase of the game praising it for being an “LGBT Utopia” where they had the freedom to express themselves and be whoever they wanted to be.

This led to some criticism, an example being an article we read in class by Aimee Hart, who pointed out the game’s lack of racial diversity and overall representation should be considered before the game is praised for its diversity and representation. In our conversation we discussed ways the game fails to represent certain demographics. First, the game only has 2 gender options. This serves as a reminder of the gender binary and limits who can feel fully represented while playing the game. The gender you choose has very little impact on the game, but there are a couple things: there is a “bath house” where you can only enter the locker room that corresponds to your chosen gender, and at the beginning of the game you are sent a letter - either cookies from your mom or money from your dad (if you choose male or female respectively). The letter does have some impact on the game, as speedrunners with the intent of maximizing profit in the game might have to choose the female gender in order to do so.

As far as things done ‘right’ with gender, there is technically a way to change your gender in the game, but this requires completing a rather long series of quests for
the “Wizard,” and the average player might never experience this option. Additionally, the clothing options in the game are not gender specific, which is something many video games tend to limit the player by, however, the game does reset your clothing options when you change the gender of your character in the menu, which to me does give off some implication that “you wouldn’t be wearing the same clothes if you were a different gender,” which could be a feeling a player would not want to feel when making their character.

Lastly, Stardew Valley has an extreme lack of racial diversity. There are only 2 people of color in the game, Demetrius, and Maru, who are related to each other. There have been points made that the lack of racial diversity is a byproduct of the game’s creator, Eric Barone, growing up in a mostly white town in rural Washington, and reflecting that in the game. However this does not make up for the fact that their dialogue has been “white-washed” in a sense, as Eric chose to write all of the dialogue on his own, without reflecting anything about their race or their background as people of color in the dialogue or story of the game.

Addressing these issues

There are two primary ways these issues can be addressed. The first is mods. There are countless mods among video games in general made by fans who decide that there is something about a given game that is missing and choose to implement that feature themselves by modding the game and making that accessible to anyone else via the internet. This has been done for Stardew Valley, and there are even mods that address the issue of representation in the game by adding more diverse characters or even taking existing characters and changing aspects of them to make the game feel more diverse.

This is a perfectly valid way to increase the level of representation in a video game, but there is a big issue with this: all responsibility has been removed from the game’s creator to provide accurate or thorough representation into any game. So, the second way this issue can be addressed, and what I wanted to do with my project, is create a game that focuses on implementing well throughout and accurate representation from the start. This comes with its own issue though: I am limited by my own experiences as a straight white person that’s lived in the state of Washington their whole life, and who has a very limited time frame to do this. This prompted me to craft a survey that I could send out to my peers at Western Washington University in order to gather some new perspectives on this issue.

For the survey, I wanted to know people’s perceptions of good and bad representation in video games, examples that they’ve encountered, demographics that they’ve seen being particularly under or misrepresented, and other themes/topics they’d
like to see in a video game. I sent this survey out to many colleges, departments, and clubs at WWU, and unfortunately only the Honors department actually chose to send the survey out. I was able to gather a total of 26 responses between that and sending it out to a couple friends and through the Game Design Club which I was a part of. That number isn’t bad, and I was able to get some really great information out of it, but it wasn’t as many responses as I would have liked to be able to use for this project.

Among the responders, the ages ranged from 18 to 26, with most of them being in the 19 to 21 range, which was expected as this is primarily college students taking this survey. Below is a breakdown of the demographics of survey respondents. A couple items of note: there is a wide variety of gender identities and sexual orientations among responders, which is great for this purpose. Additionally, 100% of responders identified as White/Caucasian, which is certainly something to keep in mind when applying this information practically.
Racial and/or ethnic identities (check all that apply):
25 responses

- Asian: 0 (0%)
- White/Caucasian: 25 (100%)
- Native/indigenous: 0 (0%)
- Middle Eastern or North African: 1 (4%)
- Black/African American: 0 (0%)
- Hispanic/Latinx: 4 (16%)
- Pacific Islander: 0 (0%)
- Multiracial: 1 (4%)

Gender Identities of Survey Responders

- bigender: 1
- Man: 10
- Woman: 9
- Trans man: 2
- Genderqueer/fluid: 5
- Non-binary: 9
- Agender: 3
The responder’s relationship to video games varied for the most part, especially among their most played and favorite video games. In general, people said that the reasons for their favorite game being so was: nostalgia, freedom (to do or be whatever you want as well as exploration in general), and good and engaging narrative. The majority of responders said that they played video games all the time or occasionally. This is to be expected since these are people who chose to take a survey about video games.

There was a wide variety of things that made representation good or bad according to survey responders. Good representation: Important in general, Having diverse character options, “Everyone” is represented, Characters that represent marginalized groups depicted accurately, NPC’s with many different experiences, Player character creation and customization, Good narratives that highlight the representative qualities of the characters. Bad representation: Further marginalization, Stereotyping, Two gender options, Clothing specific to gender, Using specific
demographics only in one specific way, Only one type of race, gender, body type, level of disability, etc. represented, and Over sexualization of certain demographics (historically very common with women in video games).

The underrepresented demographics that were mentioned were, from most to least mentioned: The LGBTQ+ Community, People with disabilities, Non-White characters, Neurodivergence, and Different body sizes.

What responders said they’d like to see in video games specifically: More gender options and multiple gender options per character, Clothing options variable and non-gender dependent, The ability to change aspects of the player throughout the game, Visible and invisible disability representation, and Aromantic partnerships

There are two major key takeaways from this survey that I’ve discerned: the importance of the player character representation and the importance of the non-player character’s representation. For the player character: people want the ability to see themselves in their character, and don’t want traditional gender norms such as the gender binary and clothing limitation to interfere with the gameplay, and they want to be able to change these aspects about their character whenever within the game. For the NPCs, it is really important that diverse demographics are represented, and that they are represented accurately. Games that attempt to represent these characters but fail to do so accurately and with care may actually be more harmful to those groups than beneficial for including them, as stereotypes can be easily reinforced through misrepresentation. Additionally, the narrative and dialogue should reflect these characters’ experience in a way that highlights the demographic they are representing.

By the Campfire

Now with the goal in mind of creating a game that is more representative from the start, and with additional perspectives on how to do so and what to incorporate, I need a game to actually make. I decided to go for a 2D game similar to Stardew Valley set on a foreign planet in which you can converse with other characters, collect items, complete quests, and build things with your materials. This is the outline I created for a game I could make; however all of these things can take an extremely long time to do, and making something like Stardew Valley can take years to accomplish. So, what I was able to do is create a framework for a game that accomplishes this better representation and allows for a game to be built on top of it. Additionally, I wanted to make enough of the game to be able to showcase that these things can indeed be incorporated into the game, and not just used for a “character creation simulator” that doesn’t have anything more to it.
The Player Character

I wanted to create a robust character creation menu that allows the player to use any name and pronouns they want and provide an array of appearance options that can be selected from and allow the player to choose any color they would like for each piece of the appearance. The overall goal is to provide the player with as much freedom and leniency as possible so that any player can feel represented in this game, no matter what.

For the player name, it can be any length of characters other than 0, as the dialogue system requires some way to refer to the player. For the player pronouns I have created an easy-to-use editor that allows the player to enter as many options as they want and can easily remove individual options or all of them with one button. The menu can be navigated easily and intuitively with different keystrokes. Each pronoun option once entered has a slider signifying its “weight.” This is to simulate preference of one pronoun over another for people who use multiple sets of pronouns. The weight is limited to 1 through 10 for each entry, this is to improve the game’s performance, since an extremely high weight would result in an extremely large list being formed behind the scenes and using that list would slow the game down. However, I did not want to fully limit the player in that regard, so it is possible to enter the pronoun option multiple times in order to get a higher weight on that one. Lastly, the UI for the pronoun options will scale with how many options the player has input so that it is always readable, and very large amount-of-character pronoun options are valid entries, though a bit hard to read.

When the player is finished inputting pronoun options, a queue is generated that will be used by the dialogue system. This ensures that each pronoun is used within the context of conversation exactly how many times specified by the weight. The pronoun menu can be accessed at any time in the game via pausing it (with the escape key), and when anything about the pronouns is changed, this queue is fully regenerated to reflect the player’s new pronouns and weights.

The dialogue system can easily access player pronouns with a single function call by specifying which form of pronoun it needs (subject, object, or possessive), and if the pronoun should be capitalized or not. Additionally, some functions to assist grammatical consistency have been written. This includes compensation for if the subject pronoun “they” has been selected, since the pronoun “they” behaves a bit differently in English (to be, to have, to do, and any verb that follows the pronoun including an ‘s’ at the end are all different for “they”), I wanted to ensure it was reflected correctly in the dialogue output. Possessive pronouns also occasionally need an ‘s’ to follow, so there is a way to specify if that is required or not, since I didn’t want to assume the player would include the ‘s’ in their pronoun entry.

For the player’s appearance, I have provided multiple options to choose from for their legs, body, head, and hair. Each of these is required except for hair as there needs to be a full player sprite within the game. The player can choose any color they want.
from a color picker and apply it to the different parts of the appearance. The UI of the colors menu will indicate which one you are currently selecting. The color will also stay consistent if you change which appearance option you are using (i.e. if the legs are changed the color will stay the same). All sprites have to have a default color since they need to look like something to be able to select and modify, so gray was chosen as it is a relatively neutral color that doesn't promote any one skin color being a “default color”. Lastly, it is worth noting that this appearance and colors system is not exactly a new innovation that I have created for this project, in fact I modeled my system after the game Terraria (with some influence from Stardew Valley). While this is not a new thing for games, I think it’s extremely important to include it in this game as I want the player to feel as represented as possible.

Non-Player Characters

It is clear from the survey results that accurate and thorough representation of diverse demographics should be handled with care and misrepresentation of these demographics can be more detrimental than not including them. Because of this, I chose not to attempt to create any NPCs that represent any specific diverse groups of people. Instead, what I have done in order to give the player characters that they can interact with and have conversations with, I have created a system that will randomly generate colors for each piece of the NPC’s appearance as well as giving them a randomly generated set of pronouns. This will ensure that no specific demographics can be misrepresented by the game, while still promoting an overall sense of diversity and giving the player characters to interact with.

The pronouns generated for the NPCs are stored in a .txt file within the game, and currently consists of a list of common neopronouns I found [here](#). This file can be easily modified by me in the future and can actually be modified by a player who downloads the windows build of the game, if they would really like to increase the amount of options for the NPC’s pronouns. At the start of the game, each NPC is assigned a random collection of pronouns. This is done by giving each pronoun from the text file a $3 / n$ (where $n$ is the amount of pronoun sets in the file) chance of being chosen for each NPC. This leads to each NPC typically having 3 pronoun options, although it can be more or less (including 0, if none are chosen, the NPCs name will be used within the dialogue system). Additionally, when chosen the pronoun set is assigned a weight 1 through 10 just like for the player. All taken together, this system is meant to randomly generate NPCs that feel like regular people the player might encounter.
Beyond this Project

As far as the future of By the Campfire goes, I plan on continuing development of the game and expanding on both what the game is as well as the ways it tackles representation. I would like to expand on what I did: adding more options for the player appearance, fleshing out the NPC generation even more by correcting the color options to look a bit more realistic and adding more pronoun options for them, and adding more checks for grammatical consistency for both what I have set up as well as neopronouns that do not follow traditional English grammar.

I would also like to implement new features into By the Campfire such as more body size options for the player sprite to increase body type representation. I would also like to be able to create some NPCs not based on randomness but crafted based on real people's experience. This could be done by basing an NPC on the likeness of a real person and having them write the dialogue and provide background for the character. This would be a real solution to the issue of misrepresenting diverse groups and including real, meaningful representation in a video game.

This framework can also be applied to any other game that I create in the future. It would be very simple to copy and paste certain scripts and Unity objects into another game in order to allow my future games to also incorporate this level of player character representation. This could also be applied quite easily by other indie game developers with a similar amount of effort put as I did during this project.

Lastly, this can and should be applied by large companies developing extremely big games. There are many AAA games that have robust character creation but fail to allow the player to choose any pronouns they like or other simple aspects of their character. The key takeaway I would like to provide from this project is that this was not that hard to do, and I see no reason why large companies with nothing but time and resources on their hands cannot provide more options for their player customization. If I can do it, they can do it.

The Actual Game

A build of the game can be downloaded here. This is a Windows build so it will only work on a Windows computer. To play, (1) download the zip file at that link, (2) unzip the file, (3) double click on 'By the Campfire.exe'. Note that this is the game in its state as of completion of this project, so there is not much to 'play.' However, the character creation menu can be played around with, and it can be seen in the game how the NPCs are randomly generated each play, and how the dialogue uses the pronouns that are given as input. To follow the development of this game, visit the game's GitHub repository here.
Special Thanks To

Shalla Newman (@artist_shahleelah on Instagram) for making all of the sprites for the game.

Melissa Osborne for providing so much guidance and support to me during the creation of this project.