

COOPERATIVE GAMING

DIVERSITY IN THE GAMES INDUSTRY
AND HOW TO CULTIVATE INCLUSION

ALAYNA COLE
JESSICA ZAMMIT



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Introduction

GAMES AND DIVERSITY HAVE a complicated relationship. Examining games, their content, the industry that produces them, and the audiences that consume them reveals a range of issues. It's vital that we continue conversations about diversity and games, but the multifaceted nature of these issues and the industry makes it difficult to know where to start.

The International Game Developers Association (IGDA)—a global network of people working in the games industry—is responsible for ongoing surveying of the industry. The results of their 2017 Developer Satisfaction Survey (IGDA 2017) revealed that 61% of game developers self-identify as being “white/Caucasian/European,” 74% as “male,” 81% as “heterosexual,” and 75% as not having a disability.

Despite being a global survey, a large proportion of the IGDA's respondents—49%—are working in the United States. However, demographic statistics in other Western regions reveal similar results. In Australia, 18% of people working in the games industry identify as female (IGEA 2018). The statistics are not much better in the United Kingdom, where only 19% identify as women and 4% are described as “Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)” (Creative Skillset 2016).

In these Western countries, the games industry is homogenous: predominantly white, cisgender, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, and neurotypical. But it's not just the companies creating games that feature a lack of diversity. At the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in 2018, only 5% of games featured exclusively female protagonists (Feminist Frequency 2018). People from marginalized groups are not being adequately represented in game content or the game studios producing that content, and this is leading to the lack of diversity across games overall.

But what is diversity?

The same terms are repeatedly used when discussing the demographics of games and the games industry, but there's limited history of

people establishing whether we have a shared understanding of what these terms mean. Research conducted by Queerly Represent Me (of which both authors are directors) in 2017 indicates that, despite using similar words like “diversity” and “representation,” individuals are “referring to marginally—or sometimes significantly—different concepts” (Zammit & Cole 2019a: 2).

In the responses to this survey, we saw respondents who implied that diversity means trying to suppress white people, that representation is about “forcing” characters into games without properly incorporating them into the narrative, that diversity is “a trick, a scam, or an agenda,” or that representation of diverse perspectives is creating divisions between people (Zammit & Cole 2019b). One respondent declared, “Diversity is a code word for white genocide.”

It’s difficult to begin discussing whether games have a problem with diversity and representation, what this problem entails, and how we might solve it, when there is no guarantee that the people having this discussion are using terms with a shared meaning.

The Queerly Represent Me survey asked participants to define “representation,” “diversity,” and “marginalized groups” and then performed an analysis of responses (Zammit & Cole 2019b) to determine the “tying threads” that could be used to create foundational definitions of these terms (Shaw 2014: 69). This process resulted in the following definitions:

- **Representation** is a portrayal, typically in media, that individuals can identify with and that grants visibility to a group.
- **Diversity** is including a broad variety of different people with an assortment of backgrounds and experiences, as well as demographics such as gender, sexuality, race, and ability.
- **Marginalized groups** are oppressed by and pushed to the fringes of society due to systematic discrimination and power imbalance in social situations, the legal system, politics, and other institutions.

These definitions act as a basis for the conversation that we will be having with you in this book and for the ongoing conversations that we are calling you to have with the people you work with, create with, and play with. They allow us to understand what people might be thinking when they use terms like “representation,” “diversity,” and “marginalized groups” and also

allow us to interrogate our own internal definitions of these terms. Terms that are used as part of political conversations become charged with politics of their own, and it's only by questioning our biases that we can learn how to best acknowledge one another's humanity and ensure games are a space where everyone is included.

Another question in Queerly Represent Me's survey asked participants whether they felt that representation of diverse identities was important in games and to explain why or why not (Queerly Represent Me 2017). Despite statistics demonstrating that there is a significant underrepresentation of marginalized groups in games and the games industry, a number of survey respondents had a skewed perspective of either what "diversity" means or what it looks like. This is captured perfectly by one participant's statement: "There's plenty of diversity already."

This was not an isolated attitude. Another respondent suggested that, "Representation is adequate already, and not of concern to anyone besides those who do not play games, in my experience." This participant seems certain that the Venn diagram of "people who play games" and "people who would like to see more diverse characters in games" are two separate circles. Another respondent takes this further: "sjw [social justice warriors] don't play games and will find eny [*sic*] reason to make a game look bad ... the normal people are already included" (Queerly Represent Me 2017).

Marginalized people have always been involved in both playing and making videogames (Golding & van Deventer 2016: 22). It wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s that videogames began to be specifically designed for and marketed towards male markets (Fron et al. 2007), with the "gamer" being assumed to be white, straight, and male (Golding & van Deventer 2016: 27).

By referring to "the normal people" (Queerly Represent Me 2017), this survey respondent is suggesting that people outside the dominant social group are "abnormal." This reinforces the in-group and out-group mentality that was first established in the 1980s by advertising companies, encouraging us to form bonds with the people who are similar to ourselves and to dismiss or exclude those who are not (Henry et al. 2010). This unconstructive mentality demonstrates the participant's ignorance of what diversity is and what increased diversity means for games. It also dismisses the hundreds of other survey respondents who said that they *do* think diversity is important—for being able to see themselves in games, to create examples for others, and for the greater good of the games industry overall. Statistics demonstrate that many socially progressive people—who