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Abstract:

The Pokémon franchise is a global powerhouse however it lacks representation that is necessary for the variety of races, sexualities, genders, and sexes that inhabit the countries where the games are released. These are fleshed out with the analysis of the works of Anne Fausto-Sterling, Jack Judith Halberstam, Judith Butler, and a critical analysis of the releases and features of the Pokémon games. An observance on representation is also conducted.

Statement of Problem:

In the Pokémon video game series, the game begins with a question attempting to detail one's gender orientation. Then the character's race may be questioned. Lastly, the character's gender identity is explored. In the video game industry, representation is lacking and as Pokémon is the third largest video game franchise of all time and willing to explore these topics, they must be willing to expand it to fulfil many varieties and needs.

Contextual Research:

The Pokémon franchise entered the world in February 1996. Since the release of the first games, there have been nearly 100 games released since. These games spawned a television show of nearly 1000 episodes, and 18 movies, and a trading card game. Overall, the franchise has earned in excess of \$37.76 billion worldwide in 20 years (Famitsu). Pokémon is considered the third best-selling video game series of all-time, at 270.8 million units of sale (Polygon, Nintedo.jp). To say that Pokémon does not have a cultural power nor influence over both individuals and society is an egregious affront to its lasting tour-de-force.

While the entire franchise is titillating and entertaining, I have decided to hone my argument specifically on the “core” game series, being the named “colour” or “letter” releases. These games were the first to be released along with being the bulk of sales. These games are released in “waves,” with some potential stagger between individual releases, referred to as “generations” which introduce new mechanics and new monsters into the canon. Generation I began in February 1996 with the release of Pokémon Red and Green in Japan, introducing the original 151 and the basis of 20 years of gameplay.

The premise is essentially glorified bug-collecting, typology, and combat by proxy. A 10-year old avatar is released into a world containing hundreds of different kinds of monsters (Pokémon) than can fit in digitizing orbs (Pokeballs) to be carried on and called upon later to engage in a conflict on the owner’s behalf. Gameplay progresses by wandering around, talking with people, though your responses are limited to optional chats (“yes or no” and “this or that”). This lack of dialogue from the avatar is so that the player can determine the further story and mythos of their character.

With the first generation of games, avatars were limited to a default avatar, of male and light in skin tone, likely Japanese. Beginning with Pokémon Crystal in 2000, a game released late into Generation II, the ability to choose a sexed avatar was available. The game began with a question of “Are you a Boy or a Girl,” and your response formed the avatar, either a boy or a girl. This expanded the ability to role-play, as regardless of your identity on the outside of the world, you could be whatever you wanted in-game. Or, at least, anything light in skin tone and inside of the sex binary. In October of 2013, the release of Pokémon X and Y, another wave of variance became available. A player could choose to be blonde and pale, brunette and pale, or brunette and white-washed black (Appendix A).

With the release of X and Y, the ability to customize appearance also became available. The players were offered a default outfit that, with money earned from various events in the game, one could buy new clothing to customize their character with the visual flair they so desired. Each sex had a set of clothing that could be chosen from, but absolutely no interchange is permitted. A boy, for example, has access to a knit cap, and a girl has access to a tiered skirt. The character is limited to being cisgender, preventing transgender, crossgender, genderfluid, genderqueer, nonbinary, and agender avatars from existing.

A potential argument in favour of the current situation of sex in the games, between Generations III and V, is that the sex of the player compliments the sex of the primary rival in-game. Should the player choose a boy avatar, the rival would be a girl. In Generation VI, multiple avatars were introduced, remaining consistent regardless of gameplay. Should the player choose either a boy or a girl, the rivals would always be Calem and Serena, a boy and a girl respectively.

Due to the lack of input dialogue, and because the avatar is perpetually 10-years old, sexuality is not available in the games, either. This does not mean sexual overtones but even so much as flirting is non-existent, from the avatar. Through the game, there are non-playing characters (NPCs) that do interact in a way that invoke some kind of flirtation. These avatars can either be the child-sized avatars or the adult-sized avatar, both different “heights” than the player’s avatar. An argument could be made that the child characters are not flirting but are rather in-awe of the journey that the player is engaged in and is more infatuated by their power than their person which is produced out of conversations surrounding attractiveness of the avatar. Similarly, the adult characters could be not flirting but rather engaging in a somewhat condescending remark, akin to familial greetings and exclamations, resulting out of a lack of coordination in adolescent-adult conversation. These conversations are along the lines of “my, how strong you are” and “what do you mean that you don’t have a girlfriend?” The latter, of course raises the issue of heterosexism, if asked to a male avatar, but as sexuality is still nevertheless limited, it is less of a concern.

Now that I have addressed the general history and representation in the Pokémon video game series, I am going to talk about queer theory. Anne Fausto-Sterling in 1993, argued that the sex binary, of male and female, is incredibly limiting and unreflective of biology. She argues that “biologically speaking, there are many gradations running from female to male; and depending on how one calls the shots, one can argue that along that spectrum lie at least five sexes—and perhaps even more” (“Five Sexes”). Fausto-Sterling describes the in-between, intersex, as comprised of three categories, which she, lovingly, calls “herms,” “merms,” and “ferms.” She explains that

“the so-called true hermaphrodites, whom I call herms, who possess one testis and one ovary (the sperm- and egg-producing vessels, or gonads); the male pseudohermaphrodites (the ‘merms’), who have testes and some aspects of the female genitalia but no ovaries; and the female pseudohermaphrodites (the ‘merms’ (sic)), who have ovaries and some aspects of the male genitalia but lack testes” (“Five Sexes”).

This new exploration of identity allows intersex people to see themselves as whole, rather than shoehorned into an identity that they do not relate to. Fausto-Sterling’s determination to see intersex people as, not just more than varied from male and female, but as further classification, with intersex being used as the umbrella, offers representation for more people. She sees the futility in restricting to just male and female, and sees both the physical and psychological variety that needs to be addressed.

Representation is lacking in the Pokémon games despite a lack of reasoning and resources that permit it.

Judith Butler takes sex categorizations and pits them alongside, but not necessarily coupled with, gender categorizations. In doing so, she argues that sex and gender are both social constructions. In doing so, she critiques the notions of what gender and sex look like. If both are constructions, then there is no universality to them, nor is there a consistency in-between cultures. Gender is a performance and reliant on the actions of one and many to determine the “gender” for themselves and all. Each action is a representation on something that is then gendered and produces the illusion of gender.

“In this sense, gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled

by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (*Gender Trouble* 33).

This degree of actions necessitates the free-flowing of actions to self-determine whatever one so wants to be. For, without variety and accessibility, what can one perform without props? “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 33). Gender is founded in what we make of it.

It is with this de-shackling as posited by Butler, that Jack Judith Halberstam takes the offensive. Halberstam believes that the various binaries afflicting gender and sex restrict both identity and exploration. Halberstam responds to any pronouns and by the name he was assigned at birth, Judith, and does not attempt to police those who use antiquated descriptors for him. “Like many other tomboys, I was mistaken for a boy throughout my childhood, and like many other tomboy adolescents, I was forced into some semblance of femininity for my teenage years” (*Female Masculinity* 19). In this policing, Halberstam was unable to full express himself how he so wanted. “I have been stigmatized by a masculinity that marked me as ambiguous and illegible [... and] it was not until my midtwenties that I finally found a word for my particular gender configuration: butch” (*Female Masculinity* 19). Halberstam’s journey toward seizing his masculinity granted him a liberation by exploration and terminology.

Despite Jack Halberstam’s revelations in his masculinity, by undergoing a sort of routine performance, he came to critique it as not fully encompassing. He acknowledges the variability in this, and senses a tension that even the masculine-led descriptors do not describe him well-enough.

“I have a couple of kids in my life, my partner’s children, and they were quite young when I met them—three and five years old. Both were at an age when gender is not so fixed, and so, upon meeting them for the first time, I got what was for me a very predictable question from them [both: “Are you a boy or a girl?”] When I did not give a definitive answer, they came up with a category that worked for them—boy/girl. They said it just like that, “boygirl,” as if it were one word, and, moreover, as if it were already a well-known term and obvious at that. Since naming has been an issue my whole life (as a young person I was constantly mistaken for a boy; as an adult, my gender regularly confuses strangers), this simple resolution of my gender ambiguity within a term that stitches boy and girl together was liberating to say the least. Boygirl I am and boygirl I will remain” (*Gaga Feminism* 8, 9)

This freedom of terminology that his children gave to him, inspired by childlike innocence of linguistics, became a more liberating experience than his studies. Something so obvious could be substantially more freeing.

In an effort to be linguistically correct and able to successfully distinguish between nuances that very lives are based on, there is a gap in the visuals of people in media. In a system constructed of hegemonic patriarchal heteronormativity, any deviation is relegated to an Other, an entity that manifests as a direct threat to “stable” existence. Thus, in part, those who do not fit within this neat category are rarely depicted in media without manifesting characteristics usually not associated with them or their culture. “Queer characters who appear in these telenarratives conform to a very specific type of paradigmatic, visual appeal. They generally are measured by the degree to which they deviate from the white, heteronormative, nuclear family model historically central and indispensable to the ideals of U.S. culture” (Ryan and Macey *Television*).

For instance, upon the release of *Stonewall*, a 2015 film by Roland Emmerich, the protagonist, a white homosexual, is depicted as throwing the first stone that urged the gay rights movement to emerge more forcefully rather than Martha P Johnson, a black street queen whom is often credited with actually throwing the first stone. “This was seen as making a film most socially digestible by making a masculine white character the focal point instead of an androgynous person of colour.

With the politicization of identity, accurate representation of a culture is difficult to secure if it is not part of the privileged spheres. “Television supplies a ready-made commodity in the form of characters of color in neatly packaged narratives who appear, speak, behave and perform their queer identities in highly choreographed and persuasive ways that appeal to their targeted audiences” (Ryan and Macey *Television*). This perpetuation of minorities as a caricature, rather than a real semblance of identity mocks attempts at grandeur by the minorities. Thus, with the release of *Star Trek*, and Nichelle Nichols as the fourth in command of the Enterprise, did many black individuals find themselves somewhat represented. Nichols reflected on her conversation with Martin Luther King Jr and described King’s vehemence that she remain on *Star Trek* for she was now an aspiration, a dream made real. “We don’t need you on the - to march. You are marching. You are reflecting what we are fighting for. [...] [D]on’t you understand what this man [Gene Rodenberry] has achieved? For the first time, we are being seen the world over as we should be seen. He says, do you understand that this is the only show that my wife Coretta and I will allow our little children to stay up and watch. I was speechless” (NPR).

Thus, with an increase in visual representation, it should come as no surprise that people feel some form of validation and excitement. When Nichols met Whoopi Goldberg, she realized the immensity of her power as a diverse actress. “I met Whoopi Goldberg when Gene was doing The

Next Generation and she had told me when Star Trek came on she was nine years old and she said she turned the TV on and saw me and ran through the house screaming: Come quick, come quick. There's a black lady on TV and she ain't no maid" (*NPR*). When someone not classically represented in media, they find elation and solidarity among those like them. By seeing another black individual, specifically a black woman, in a role of elegance, power, and respect, gave people like Goldberg inspiration that anything she sought to achieve could be done. Nichols further commented on audience perception by saying, "fourth in command on a starship. They didn't see this as being oh, it doesn't happen till the 23rd century. Young people and adults saw it as now" (*NPR*). Similar things can be said for queer identities, other races and ethnicities, various religions, and the breadth of sexes and genders. Seeing a positive gay character validates, to some degree, gay existence, such as with Maxxie Oliver in *Skins*. Seeing a successful female direction gives hope to young females, with such cases as Phyllida Lloyd. Seeing a positive black lead actor sets aspirational goals, like with Viola Davis in *The Help*. Seeing an elderly transgender parent character gives courage to those worried about experiencing such an experience themselves, such as with Maura Pfefferman, Jeffrey Tambor's character in *Transparent*. Or, perhaps, seeing a disabled character able to overcome or adapt with their disability, which may ease internalized anguish, such as with partially-deaf Hawkeye in Marvel Comics. Seeing oneself represented, even if only a facet of their identity, will create positive reflection of identity in culture.

In August 2014, Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu, and Anita Sarkeesian were subjected to extreme discrimination by gamers, under the title Gamergate. They have previously discussed sexualization of female characters, which ties into the lack of females in the gaming industry, despite females being statistically more likely to own a video game console (*pewinternet*). This level of intolerance and hostility is rooted in patriarchal systems and requires careful maneuvering to protect those engaged while also spreading tolerance.

There is a culture of intolerance and discrimination against perceived minorities in gaming. Despite fields of study, such as feminist and queer theory, devoted to analyzing identity, the gaming industry is lacking in its representation.

Gloria:

Imagine, a young girl. Imagine Gloria. Gloria is an 8 year old, androgynous female living with her newly married biological parents in Queens. She loves cooking, comic books, soap operas, and video games. Her favourite video games are Cooking Mama and Pokémon. Gloria is half-Ethiopian and half-Dominican who is living with partial deafness. She wants to immerse herself in the world of Pokémon but is unable to see herself represented due to the limitations of the visual gradients of skin tone and she is unable to customize her avatar to represent herself. She likes wearing baseball caps with dresses, something she cannot do in the games, despite character customization.

As the Pokémon games have a limitation on the ability to reflect her skin tone, her androgyny, her style of dress, nor her disability. She is unable to fully view herself as a character within the franchise, currently

Conclusion:

The state of the video game industry, in regards to representation, is becoming better. Unfortunately, things like Gamergate are keeping true representation from being achieved. That being said, in Pokémon, Game Freak has the capabilities and shown some intention to diversify their avatars so that more individuals may be represented in their games. With encouragement, likely in the next wave of games, an even greater spread of diversity will be available, against the current white and generally light-skinned black, and the cisgendered clothing choices. Without going out and making the representation of minorities in Pop Media fully available, or at least

attempt to garner that degree of diversity, few attempts will occur naturally. The most hopeful of the changes would be to alter the initial question in Pokémon from “are you a boy or a girl” to something more neutral such as “how do you identify” or “what do you look like?”

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Appendix:

Appendix A:

