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**Categories of representation: Improving the discussion and depiction of diversity**

Abstract:

Videogames commonly represent dominant identities as a default: white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied. But with greater acceptance of game texts as artefacts worthy of analysis, and increased accessibility of game-tools so that marginalised creators can use the medium to tell their story, diversity in games has been increasing. Discussions around this resulting diversity often highlight whether a depiction is ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, which does not allow creators or consumers to consider identity in a nuanced way. This paper proposes six categories that can be used as lenses for examining representations when writing and analysing videogame texts: central and incidental; explicit and implicit; and fixed and player-centric. By using examples of the ways my creative output represents queerness within games, and comparing these to other existing texts, this paper demonstrates how nuanced narratives can be produced at the intersections of these categories, and how this framework can be used across multiple mediums to increase and diversify representation.

Biographical note:

Dr Alayna Cole is a sessional course coordinator and lecturer in Serious Games at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She holds a doctorate in Creative Arts (Creative Writing) and has broad research interests, but is primarily focused on creating and analysing narratives that improve diverse representation, particularly of gender and sexuality. She is currently researching the representation of queer identities in games from the mid-1980s to present.

Keywords:

Creative writing – representation – diversity – queer – games

## Introduction

In her foundational text about sexuality and gender in games, *Gaming at the Edge*, Adrienne Shaw (2015) destabilises research about the representation of identities in media. In questioning the assumed benefits of representation, the often ambiguously defined concept of ‘identification’ in media, and the over-simplification of referring to representation as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, Shaw (2015) encourages future researchers (and creators) to consider representation in more nuanced ways. Shaw contends that written discourse often simplifies representation to whether it is ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, with positive representation determined by its ability to educate, while negative representation is defined by its reliance on stereotyping or tokenism (Shaw 2015: 19, 40). Focusing on these qualities relates to the assumption that the representation of diverse identities is important because it helps those who are being represented to understand and solidify their identity, and those who are not being represented to develop an understanding of other groups (Athanases 1998: 291; Bishop 1990: 9; Smolkin & Young 2011: 217). As we grow to understand the importance of representation for audiences, it is important that writers of all mediums improve the ways they reflect on their own characters and narratives.

To understand the ways in which representation can help people solidify their own identities, it is first important to understand what ‘identity’ is and how it is formed. Identity can be defined as the self ‘by which we are known to others’, and this ‘self’ is thus defined as an individual’s established ‘persona’, which feels ‘total and exclusive’ (Altheide 2000: 2). Onorato and Turner (2004: 275) suggest that this ‘self’ is comprised of both fixed and fluid components: the demographic identifiers (such as sexuality, gender, race, and so on) and social groups to which an individual belongs are fixed aspects of self-concept, while an individual’s understanding of themselves and their connection to these components are fluid and context-dependent. As such, the construction of identity is a ‘negotiated’ process, with this negotiation relating to the performativity of identity, which is in turn dependent upon the context an individual finds themselves in (Altheide 2000: 1-2).

This negotiation occurs between the individual and society and is simultaneously policed by society through the complexities of identity politics. Although identity and the components that comprise identity are often assumed to be constant, there is great potential for the identity of individuals to be influenced by the contexts they engage in and are surrounded by (Shaw 2015: 65; Altheide 2000: 1-2). The psychological responses that lead to identity formation and the challenging of internal understandings of an individual’s identifiers can be referred to as ‘identification’ (Papale 2014: n.p.).

Examining identification in all mediums is an important area of research, but this paper focuses on representation in videogames. Writing for videogames is a growing discipline that requires more in-depth study; while videogames can use techniques adopted from creative writing theory, they also have unique considerations due to their typical requirement of active participation from their audience. ‘Player-characters’ are typically a videogame’s protagonist and are able to be controlled by the player. The identity of these player-characters – and whether an individual ‘identifies’ *with* or *as* those characters (Shaw 2015) – can change a person’s understanding of their own identity (Kendall 1998: 130). Similarly, a person’s non-game identity can influence their construction and understanding of in-game characters’ identities (Kendall 1998: 150). Identities that are or are not represented within a text – including games – can impact upon a person’s self-esteem, confidence, and feelings of belonging (Zadro, Williams & Richardson 2004: 8); if an individual’s identity or demographic identifiers are continually excluded from texts, this can diminish their self-worth.

Studies by Athanases (1998) and Smolkin and Young (2011) focusing on children and young-adult audiences of books both show that diverse representation in texts can positively influence an individual's establishment of self-identity or empathy for others. This aligns with Shaw's (2015: 194) findings, with her videogame player interviewees suggesting that representation is most important to younger audiences who are 'forming [their] sense of self'. In fact, many of these interviewees assert that although representation of people similar to them within games is 'nice when it happens' (Shaw 2015: 209), they are able to identify with characters regardless of their demographic identifiers. This indicates that, on an individual level, one person is able to engage with one videogame text, regardless of whether they are represented; however, diverse representation *across a medium* can have a positive impact on the identity formation and empathy building of audiences, and therefore it is 'irresponsible' of creators to maintain a medium where characters and representations are homogeneous (2015: 225).

Games are particularly homogenous in terms of representation, with many titles – especially big-budget triple-A releases – focusing on the perspectives of white, cisgender, heterosexual men. This makes games an interesting case study for understanding the impact that non-diverse representation can have on the identification process of audiences, and the ways that creators can consider representation in new ways to ensure their texts contain characters that validate the identities of marginalised groups.

Game developers must understand that white, cisgender, heterosexual, and male should not be seen as 'defaults when a case for the representation of marginalized groups cannot be made' (Shaw 2015: 225). This notion of the 'default' also extends to characters being middle-class, able-bodied, and neurotypical. It is the 'responsibility' of creators and publishers to ensure diversity is represented across a medium (Shaw 2015: 225), and once a creator becomes aware of this duty, the following question becomes paramount: how do I represent diverse identities in my creative work? With aforementioned discussions of 'positive' and 'negative' representation dominating academic discourse, I have identified a need to establish more nuanced methods of categorising, discussing, analysing, and creating diverse representations.

Following this, I constructed a framework for categorising and guiding the representation of diverse identities within my own creative output as a game developer and writer. This framework allowed me to create and reflect on my own games using terms other than 'positive' or 'negative', and was designed based on my instincts when creating a game or narrative, the feedback I received from players, the feelings I had when playing games or engaging with creative artefacts made by others, and the scholarly research I have been conducting in the field. The framework considers representations to be:

1. Central to the narrative, or incidental to the unfolding story or mechanics;
2. Explicitly revealed to the audience, or implied through the use of stereotypes, appearance, behaviours, and/or passing references;
3. Fixed regardless of the audience's behaviour, or able to be influenced (or ignored) by an audience as they interact with the text.

While the first two of these pairs is applicable to most forms of text, the third is particularly relevant to the unique way games rely on 'optional' content (Shaw 2015: 25) and allow users to influence a text, customising characters and narratives to suit their own perceptions of both real and in-game worlds. As such, despite their relevance to all mediums, these categories of representation and their value will be discussed in this paper with games as a primary source of exemplars, including existing texts (which must be examined if we are to learn from works that have already been experimenting with ways to represent diversity)

and my own creative output in this field. Specifically, I will be examining representation in five games that I have been involved in developing:

***Fairy Tale (Cole 2015a)***

An incremental game that encourages players to explore a forest and build a kingdom by rescuing princesses, princes, and prins (nonbinary royal characters).

***The Icecream Parlour (Cole 2015b)***

An interactive narrative set in an icecream parlour where icecream flavours are used as a metaphor for sexualities.

***Snapshot (Cole 2016c)***

A semi-autobiographical interactive narrative that explores my lived experiences and navigation of sexuality during adolescence.

***Wizlets (Horned Llama 2017)***

An incremental game exploring what it means to belong within a community when you are ostracised by society.

***Constellations (Horned Llama In development)***

An interactive narrative set aboard a spaceship, with the plot primarily driven by the player attempting to solve a mystery alongside a diverse crew.

These games feature characters and narratives that explore multi-faceted identities, which is vital because of the inherently intersectional nature of real-life identities, and of meaningful, non-tokenistic characterisation (Shaw 2015: 7, 239). It is important to recognise that, although in this paper I am suggesting the importance of diversifying the demographic identifiers of characters, there is more to a character than simply one or a combination of these identifiers; similarly, individuals connect with more than these superficial characteristics. According to Shaw (2015: 70), in addition to these identifiers, players can identify with the ‘life experiences, personalities, senses of humor [sic], actions, and choices’ of a character.

However, despite representing many identifiers and other facets of identity, a common thread between these five listed creative works is their spotlighting of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender characters; therefore, these games are most useful for comparing varied approaches of depicting queerness in games. Historically, queerness has been absent from scholarly discussions of representation in games, with these analyses being more focused on race and gender (Shaw 2009: 229). Although scholarly understanding of demographic identifiers has broadened to include non-normative sexualities and genders more recently (Greer 2013: 4), this is still an area requiring further discussion.

**Central and incidental representation**

Waern (2011: 1) suggests that romance can feature in games in at least three ways: ‘as part of a fixed storyline, as an optional (and sometimes branching) side story to the main story, and as a gameplay mechanism’. Similarly, queer romance options can be central to a game’s overarching narrative or included incidentally as a ‘side-quest’ (Waern 2011: 1).

Representation of non-heterosexual sexualities are often included in games through romance plots and subplots, and these romances are a common focus of scholarly and journalistic writing about representations of queerness in games (Clinnick 2015; Condis 2015; Gravning 2014; Greer 2013). However, romance is not the only (or necessarily the most effective) way to explore queer perspectives. Prioritising romantic relationships as the only way to represent queer characters has several effects: it indicates that sexuality is

inseparable from sexual or romantic behaviour, and cannot be considered part of an individual's identity unless they are considering or within a romantic relationship; it erases identifiers such as asexuality and aromanticism, which may require the absence of sexual attraction and/or romantic relationships to be properly explored; and it disallows diverse genders – which have nothing to do with the types of relationships a person forms – from being included as part of 'queerness'.

Just as romances can be central or incidental to a game's primary narrative, so too can representations of queerness that are not romance-centric. *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012) revolves entirely around the lived experiences of a trans woman and the impact of gender dysphoria; queerness is central to the narrative of *Dys4ia*, and as a result, the game can become a tool for identifying and empathising with a trans character. In contrast, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015) features several queer characters whose queerness is explicitly stated but is incidental to the primary plot. For example: one of the protagonists – Ciri – is bisexual, and the player has the option of revealing her queerness in dialogue; a hunter named Mislav reveals that he is gay if Geralt empathises with him about being different; and a character named Elihal is depicted as both masculine and feminine and refers to themselves only as 'Elihal' when asked about their gender identity. These three instances of queer representation in *The Witcher 3* are incidental to the primary narrative and yet are revealed to the player in ways that do not revolve around romance and relationships.

Gravning (2014) suggests that 'there is something elegant in handling LGBT characters in this indirect way'. By making narratives focus on something other than a character's queerness, it allows that character to avoid becoming tokens defined solely by their sexuality or gender identity (Gravning 2014). However, there is also value in creating games with narratives that are specifically about the experiences of being queer – whether that be in terms of sexuality, gender, or other aspects of queerness such as diverse relationship structures and preferences.

There is value to representing queerness centrally and incidentally, and thus my games have done both to elicit different effects. *Snapshot*, *Wizlets*, and *The Icecream Parlour* each feature central representations of queerness. *Snapshot* presents a contemporary Western depiction of an adolescent player-character's specific sexuality and allows the player to explore the adolescent player-character's sexuality through the intimate activity of navigating her bedroom. The game mentions relationships but portrays the player-character's bisexuality as transcending these relationships, and as being an integral part of her identity regardless of the impact of external forces. The centrality of this representation is suited to its semi-autobiographical genre, and allows individuals playing the game to see how the character's experiences are directly driven by their sexuality.

*Wizlets* broadens the scope of queer representation from the specific lived experiences of one character – reminiscent of *Dys4ia* – to the experiences of a larger community, and the feelings of belonging that can come from finding a community who shares similar identifiers with you. *Wizlets* follows the journey of one isolated protagonist who identifies as nonbinary, and the way belonging to a community of similarly gender diverse 'wizlets' helps to give them strength. The centrality of representation in *Wizlets* allows the narrative to be built around the community-building that can come from individuals sharing identities; although stories where identity is incidental could be told within these communities, making the narrative *about* a community of people with shared identities makes this a central representation.

Queerness is also central in *The Icecream Parlour* (Cole 2015b), but is instead portrayed through metaphor. The view of queerness in *The Icecream Parlour* is broader still than that of *Wizlets*, with this interactive narrative encouraging the player to explore many types of sexuality. Using the metaphor of different flavours of icecream for different sexual attractions, the game asks the player to make seemingly insignificant choices before hearing how other icecream-lovers might unfairly respond to their preferences.

My choice to make queer themes central to the narratives of *Snapshot*, *Wizlets*, and *The Icecream Parlour* relates to the purpose of these texts; overall, mediums need more narratives driven by the conflicts that are unique to diverse groups, as no one experience is applicable to all people who share a demographic identifier. Diversity of experiences leads to diversity of narrative, which allows more people the opportunity to find themselves – or part of themselves – in the texts they engage with.

These three examples use central representations in a variety of ways, but none of these focus on romance between queer characters as a way of revealing or reinforcing their queer identities. Similarly, the incidental inclusion of ‘prins’ in *Fairy Tale*, as well as the diverse sexualities and gender identities of characters in *Constellations*, do not rely on romantic interactions. I chose to include incidental representation of sexuality – as well as varied genders, races, classes, and levels of ablebodiedness – in these texts as a way of disrupting the ‘default’ (Shaw 2015: 225) identifiers that are often assumed when left unspecified. Incorporating diverse characters who are well-researched, authentic, but otherwise incidental allows us to prove that diverse characters don’t need a reason to be included in a text beyond their existence and potential for being in that narrative space.

We can use an understanding of central and incidental representation to create narratives that focus on queer experiences, while also producing other stories that normalise queer identities by making queerness tangential to the primary story; both approaches provide queer and non-queer audiences with new perspectives through which to understand themselves and the queer community.

### **Explicit and implicit representation**

In addition to being central or incidental to a game’s narrative, I determined that representations of an identity may be explicitly declared to the audience, or otherwise implied through behaviours, appearance, stereotypes, and/or passing references. In relation to this, Greer (2013: 12) asks: ‘Does ... a dynamic of orientation need to be both explicit and consequential to be meaningful?’ It has already been established that a representation does not need to be ‘consequential’ (central) to be valuable, but is there also value in implied representations?

I spoke on a panel at PAX Australia in 2016, where David Hollingworth, games critic and online editor for Next Media, perfectly summarised the value of explicit and implicit representation of queerness in games. In an article written after its conclusion, I paraphrased his statement from the live panel:

The ‘out and proud’ narrative is a powerful story that helps those who are queer see that coming out and being visible can be positive. At the same time, normalising sexuality through implicit representation is equally powerful, as it allows queer audiences to feel accepted regardless of how vocal they are about their identity, while also showing non-queer audiences that people with diverse sexualities and genders are embedded in society and are not always distinguishable through stereotypical ideas of ‘queerness’. (Cole 2016b)

Hollingsworth's sentiment was echoed by the other panellists, who felt that 'both [explicit and implicit] forms of representation are equally important' (Cole 2016b).

Explicit representations can be a focal point within a game, or an explicit reference to an identifier can be otherwise incidental. For example, queerness in *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012) is central and explicit; in contrast, queer characters in the *Borderlands* series (Gearbox Software 2009) – such as Moxxi, Sir Hammerlock, Tiny Tina, Mr. Torgue, Maya, Janey, and Athena – explicitly reveal their queerness in dialogue options or through side missions, but sexuality and gender identity is rarely responsible for driving the action in these games.

Instances of explicit representations are notable because they help to normalise queerness without audiences being able to dispute a character's identity; while implicit representations allow room for debate, removing ambiguity ensures that a character's identity cannot be denied or erased. However, characters explicitly declaring their queerness to the player or to other characters can sometimes be unrealistic, particularly when that character's demographic identifiers are incidental to the primary narrative.

Queer representation is explicit in three of my five games: *Snapshot*, *Wizlets*, and *Constellations*. *Constellations* includes explicit representation that is otherwise incidental to the narrative – it is undeniably there, and revealed through imagery and dialogue, but does not drive the narrative. In contrast, *Snapshot* and *Wizlets* feature queer representation that is both central and explicit. However, in *Snapshot*, the player-character's queerness is established from the beginning of the interactive narrative and is explored throughout, while the queerness of the protagonist in *Wizlets* is implied until the narrative's climax, at which time this information is revealed organically through dialogue.

For representation to be explicit, it does not need to be known from the beginning of a narrative. I made the creative decision in *Snapshot* to reveal the sexuality of the protagonist early because the story revolves around her struggle to understand her identity. However, revealing the identity of the protagonist in *Wizlets* at the narrative climax allows players to become curious about the conflict within the story and potentially develop empathy for the protagonist before truly understanding what it is that has caused them to be ostracised.

It is important to be careful when using the 'reveal' of queerness as a climactic moment; using demographic identifiers as though they are exciting plot twists can create tokenistic characters.

My intent with these three games was to create undeniable instances of representation, which is particularly important in the games medium currently where implied or possible representations of queerness are significantly more common than explicit, undeniable identities. However, not all of my games feature explicit queerness; *The Icecream Parlour* and *Fairy Tale* feature implicit representation rather than explicit, which is in line with other narrative techniques and decisions that I made in their creation. For example, *The Icecream Parlour*'s reliance on metaphor and symbolism to communicate ideas of sexuality led to my decision to keep references to sexuality implicit, despite this representation being 'central', as I hoped to encourage audiences to form their own opinions regarding the game's purpose and themes. Representations of queerness are implicit and incidental in *Fairy Tale*, where it is implied that 'prins' are nonbinary due to their juxtaposition against binary-gendered 'princess' and 'prince' characters, as well as the use of gender neutral pronouns to describe them. This leads to an understated diversification of the gameworld that still challenges the notion of 'default' characters (Shaw 2015: 225).

However, 'explicit' and 'implicit' representation can be considered as a scale, rather than as two binary options. While some of my games have implicit representations, existing

games can feature implicit representation that is even more subdued; for example, this can be seen in the way some players have interpreted the relationship between Lara Croft and Samantha Nishimura in *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2015). It is suggested that Lara and Sam are more than platonic friends, and there are no aspects of the game world that contradict this narrative (Gravning 2014). In fact, in an interview with Kill Screen after the release of *Tomb Raider*, the game's writer, Rhianna Pratchett, said, 'There's a part of me that would've loved to make Lara gay. I'm not sure Crystal [Dynamics] would be ready for it' (in Lejacq 2013: n.p.).

Although Lara is not explicitly 'gay', she is also not depicted as explicitly heterosexual in the game franchise, which leaves space for the exploration of her potential queerness. This can be powerful for gamers, with one gamer stating that the unconfirmed relationship between Lara and Sam is their favourite representation of diverse sexuality in games (Queerly Represent Me 2016).

While implied representation allows for the potentiality of queerness, these representations can also be interpreted as potentiality for straightness; by not making representations explicit, audience members are permitted to 'overlook or deny' queerness (Gravning 2014). In *Dragon Age II* (BioWare 2011), Anders' queerness is explicit if the player-character is male, but implicit if the player-character is female (Clinnick 2015; Greer 2013: 15). In an interview about the character, lead writer David Gaider said, 'a player who prefers to think of Anders as straight is welcome to do so' (in Clinnick 2015: n.p.), demonstrating that, although implicit representation creates space to explore queerness, it also creates space to ignore queerness.

These spaces are not equal: it has been established that when demographic identifiers are not specifically declared or revealed, a person 'is often assumed to be a member of the dominant class: a white straight able-bodied [cis] male' (Condis 2015: 201). When dominant identifiers, such as heterosexuality, are deemed 'neutral' (Ahmed 2006: 69), implicit representation helps queer audiences to identify with characters, but does not help normalise diverse sexualities and genders for non-queer audiences as effectively as explicit central or explicit incidental representation can. Therefore, creators who are intending to create safe spaces for queer audiences to explore their identities can use implicit representations to do so, but creators hoping to use their narratives to normalise queerness should rely instead on explicit representation.

When audiences identify with a character whose queerness is implied, this can lead to challenges if implicit representations are altered to become explicit. For example, dialogue in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014) implied Cole – a party member and non-player-character (NPC) – could be asexual, which is a particularly uncommon representation in games. However, after asexual players had already identified with Cole, downloadable content was released for the game that explicitly indicated Cole was only disinterested in sex because he wasn't human; not only did this change to the narrative disallow asexual audiences from identifying with his character, it also implied that asexual people lack humanity (S— 2015). When queerness is not part of a game's 'canon', there is potential for it to be removed or denied, causing further harm than if queerness was never implied at all.

There can be issues with both explicit and implicit representations of queerness. Explicit representations can appear inauthentic if a character's queerness is not 'revealed' to the player in a believable and relevant way, but implicit representations leave space for audiences to assume characters are non-queer unless otherwise stated, or for implied identifiers to be contradicted by explicit identifiers that are revealed later. However, these



challenges are not reasons to avoid representations of queer characters, and there is still space for both types of representation to contribute to the overall diversity of games.

### **Fixed and player-centric representation**

The ability of a user to influence outcomes in games makes them particularly suited for creating representations that shift depending on the audience's preferences. Unlike linear storytelling methods, games may allow players to customise their experience by playing as a character of their choosing or by exploring (or not exploring) main and side plots at their leisure.

As Waern (2011: 1) explains, romances within a narrative can be 'fixed' in that they are written into the main story and cannot be influenced by a player's actions, or they can be reliant entirely on the player's choices. Similar can be said of character identities: they can be fixed or player-centric.

Player-centric representation does not promote diversity, but rather leads to 'pluralism' (Shaw 2015: 157), which depends on the labour of players by demanding that they create their own diversity in games through their character creation and narrative choices. This approach provides players with relative freedom to experience (and ignore) aspects of games as they wish. When players are not forced to see diverse representations, it reduces the political and educational value of those representations (Shaw 2015: 215); in contrast, fixed representations confront audiences with diverse characters and narratives, amplifying the transformative potential of games.

The ability to avoid aspects of games – including diversity – is tied to the concept of player freedom, with player-centric design choices being made to give players a sense of being within a 'sandbox' that allows them to do whatever they wish. Divergent pathways in games are an opportunity for games to provide their players with diverse options. However, despite their ability to give players choices, the range of available options must be selected and implemented by a developer or team of developers, which can result in some demographic identifiers still being excluded, either deliberately or accidentally. For example, a study of character creation systems by Dietrich (2013: 98-9) found a lack of options for creating racially diverse characters. He stated that while this absence did not 'constitute explicit racist intent', it did indicate 'the unquestioned standards of normative whiteness'.

In the same way that creating 'whitewashed' game worlds can have 'very real and substantial impacts on racial interaction both online and off' (Dietrich 2013: 98-9), restricting player choices to only dominant identifiers erases minority groups. For example, many character creation systems force the player to assign a binary gender to their player-character by not allowing the player to continue without selecting from 'male' and 'female' options. This occurs despite the fact that these game systems rarely require gender information (Cole 2017) and creating systems that provide diverse gender options instead of making gender assumptions can be 'lifesaving' (McAllan, cited in Cole 2016b: n.p.).

The games I have written – and examined in this paper – feature fixed representation, despite their differences in terms of central / incidental and explicit / implicit inclusions of queerness. This is not necessarily due to a belief that fixed representation is inherently better than player-centric representation, but rather due to the overwhelming number of games currently relying on player-centric representation to incorporate diverse perspectives.

The potential for players to experience parts of a narrative while missing others is unique to the ways players interact with games, in contrast with the typical linearity of other

narrative mediums. For example, *Constellations* requires the player to investigate events through dialogue. Based on the decisions of the player, this dialogue branches into multiple pathways, so players will always miss some interactions during each play-through. As dialogue is one of the key ways players discover the explicit, incidental references to the sexuality, gender, and other aspects of characters' identities in *Constellations*, I had to ensure that these references would always be found by players so that this representation was fixed, and not player-centric; I did not wish to give players the opportunity to avoid references to diversity. To achieve this, I included multiple references to particular diverse characteristics, so that if players missed one, the game system knew to discuss this at a different point. Although the player can still choose who they speak to and what they speak about, these aspects of diversity will eventually be revealed if the players are to complete *Constellations*, thus achieving my goal of making representation within the game unavoidable.

In addition to narrative branches and character creation options, player-centric sexuality is often included in games through the romance options available to players. 'Playersexuality' is a term used to describe romances within games where all romanceable characters will be interested in the player-character, regardless of their gender, and is often conflated with bisexuality (Clinnick 2015; Cole 2016b; Queerly Represent Me 2017). However, playersexuality differs from bisexuality, in that playersexual characters typically have their sexuality 'discussed or disclosed only in relation to the player-character's desire to romance them' (Clinnick 2015: n.p.); the difference between a playersexual and bisexual (or otherwise non-monosexual) character is that the former is a player-centric representation, while the latter is a fixed representation.

For example, *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios 2015) allows player-characters the freedom to date any of the romanceable characters throughout the game, regardless of gender, but places the player-character in an unavoidable heteronormative relationship as part of the primary narrative (see Cole 2016a). Aside from the initial heteronormativity in *Fallout 4*, the game is a clear example of playersexuality, with the player-character being able to initiate relationships with any of the seven romanceable characters, regardless of gender. Similarly, the most recent title in Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls* series – *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) – features playersexual romanceable characters, who lack even the minor characterisation attributed to companions in *Fallout 4*. These games, which are known for being expansive worlds in which players can do whatever they wish, make romance part of the 'sandbox': within this context, 'playersexuality begins to make more sense' as it allows players to 'become whoever they wish, go wherever they please, and date whomever they like' (Cole 2016b: n.p.).

In contrast to the freedom (partially) established in sandbox games like *Fallout 4* and *Skyrim*, the *Fable* series (Big Blue Box 2004) treads a middle ground between fixed and player-centric identities. When describing player-character and NPC sexualities in *Fable*, Greer (2013: 10) says, 'while the sexuality of NPCs is fixed (and, in the second two games, explicitly identified within sub-menus), the player character's orientation is structurally fluid and potentially unmarked'.

While the *Fable* series establishes the sexualities of NPCs as 'fixed properties defined by a limited number of exclusionary categories', *Dragon Age II*'s characters instead 'orient themselves towards the player, regardless of gender: the appearance of a given sexuality is a response relative to the player's active choices' (Greer 2013: 14). Despite some characters being explicitly bisexual or pansexual within the text, their sexuality – and the reveal of their sexuality – is player-oriented.

*Dragon Age: Inquisition* instead adopts a mixture of player-centric and fixed approaches, similar to the *Fable* series; although *Dragon Age: Inquisition* retains the mechanic of romances being ‘initiated by the player: if the player does not choose to flirt, the romance will not develop’ (Waern 2011: 2), the sexuality of NPCs remains outside romantic interactions. For example, in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* Dorian is a gay man and Sera is a lesbian, but these identities are not reliant on the actions of the player. Although the player-character’s gender alters whether romances can be pursued, Dorian and Sera will still discuss aspects of their sexuality regardless of the player-character’s gender, ensuring these identities are fixed and explicit (unlike the seemingly shifting sexuality that players were invited to ignore with Anders, as discussed in relation to implicit representation). Fixed identifiers such as these are Clinnick’s (2015) preference, who believes ‘it is a more powerful, deliberate narrative design choice to have characters who have sexual identities that exist outside of the presence of a romantically or sexually interested player-character’.

Romantic relationships between characters – particularly between a player-character and NPC – are often used as a way for players to self-determine their character’s sexuality; however, there are other methods for establishing the identities of player-characters and NPCs that do not rely on relationships exclusively, or at all. My five games that have been discussed within this paper do not include romantic relationships between player-characters and NPCs at all, and only one includes romantic relationships between NPCs; still, fixed representation has been included in all five titles, with a mixture of central / incidental and explicit / implicit representation also included.

While player-centric representation allows players freedom, and functions particularly well in the ‘sandbox’ environment of role-playing games, it’s important to acknowledge that the ‘freedoms’ permitted by these games are influenced by restrictions that the creator imposes – either knowingly or unknowingly. It is also important to recognise that player-centric representation only works when aspects of narrative – such as the heteronormative premise of *Fallout 4* – do not interfere with the overarching sense of freedom (Cole 2016b), otherwise this approach simply favours of notion of ‘default’ characters and relies on the labour of players to produce their own diversity within that gameworld.

In contrast, pre-made characters with nuanced characterisation and fixed identities provide touchstones for players to identify and empathise with, and I have attempted to create new characters and narratives with fixed representations of diversity within *Fairy Tale*, *The Icecream Parlour*, *Snapshot*, *Wizlets*, and *Constellations*.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have established categories that can be used to inspire the creation of diverse characters with nuanced identities, while avoiding tokenism and introducing complexity that is not supported by describing representations as simply ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. These categories – central or incidental, explicit or implicit, and fixed or player-centric – give both creators and consumers of texts language with which to understand representations of diversity, and combat the concept of characters being white, heterosexual, cisgender, male, middle-class, ablebodied, and neurotypical by default.

Representations can take many forms and still have equal value. There is room for creative exploration within these categories of representation, and interesting narratives can be forged at their intersections: stories where representation is explicitly portrayed and integral to a narrative; stories where representation is integral but portrayed implicitly through metaphor or fantasy landscapes; stories where representation is peripheral to the primary narrative, but explicitly discussed and normalised; stories where representation is not

discussed, but simply exists without negativity; and stories where representations are treated negatively so that harmful spaces can be reclaimed for empowerment as a vehicle for social commentary. The power of diversity is not derived from a single ‘best’ representation, but instead from the power of these diverse narratives co-existing across a medium, and all mediums.

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