Inclusivity and Diversity

In Volition games, other games, and some science!
Who am I?

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• Associate User Researcher
  • At Volition since 2008
  • GUR since 2012
Premises:

- FACT: Video games characters tend to not be very diverse
- FACT: This does not reflect the diversity of our playerbase
- FACT: Inclusive characters can make *some* players feel good
- FACT: Inclusive characters *may* also increase motivation to play
Premises:

There is a ‘Player Need’ to see elements of themselves reflected in games that they play

**THIS DOES NOT MEAN:**

That all players are equally motivated by this need

That all games must address this need
What is “inclusivity”?  

*noun*  
An intention or policy of including people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized

How are people feeling excluded in games?  
Players who do not see their own gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or body types represented frequently in the medium may feel excluded.

- Figure 1 Gender breakdowns by role

\[ t \text{-tests for male vs. female: for all characters, } t = 224.31, df = 4343, p < .001; \text{ for primary characters, } t = 22.05, df = 96, p < .001; \text{ for secondary characters, } t = 175.331, df = 4231, p < .001 \]
Figure 2  Over-representation and under-representation by race

Why is representation socially important?

Social Identity Theory
- Presence of portrayals of a group serve as an indicator of that group’s weight in society
- Absence of portrayals can lead to feelings of relative unimportance and powerlessness

Why is representation important in games?
- Players that see aspects of their self in a game character can form faster, deeper emotional connections
- These players can then have an increased motivation to play the title
The Virtual Self

- Actual Self vs. Ideal Self
  - Self Discrepancy Theory

- Virtual Self
The Virtual Self

- **Allows exploration**
  - “Video games are intrinsically motivating in part because they provide a context (albeit a virtual one) in which players can explore different aspects of their selves and “try on” ideal characteristics.” – Przybylski et al.

- **Can improve mental well-being**
  - “Users realize some aspects of their “ideal selves” through the avatar, which may have positive implications for those with low self-esteem” – Ducheneaut et al.

- **More impactful to female, older, and (possibly) POC users**
  - “Female users are more likely to create avatars that are idealized versions of themselves compared to male users. [...] Older users broadly prefer creating an avatar that looks like an idealized version of themselves.” – Ducheneaut et al.
**Other Science**

**In-Group Favoritism**
- A pattern of favoring members of one’s own group
- NOT the same as out-group negativity

**Presence**
- “A psychological state in which virtual objects are experienced as actual objects in either sensory or nonsensory ways.” – Lombard
- Some players have a “need for presence,” or tendency to enjoy feeling “there” in game environments - Skalski et al.
Remember!

Players value characters in a variety of ways:

- Utility
- Personal Investment
- Identity and Self-Expression
- Enjoyment
- New-Experience
- Memory and Sentimental
- Aesthetic and Creative
- Sociability
- Social Communication

Your game doesn’t need to meet all of them!
And now, Saints Row...

- How have we approached diversity?
  - Character Customization
  - Diverse NPCs
  - Gender-neutral scripts
  - Gender-neutral romances
  - Gender-neutral clothing
  - Learning from our mistakes
  - Not singling out specific groups with our humor

http://thefreshprince-of-stilwater.tumblr.com/post/1101025562
Saints Row - A History

- Saints Row
  - Limited Customization
  - Diverse cast, but leaning on stereotypes

- Saints Row 2
  - Went ALL IN on customization
  - Became more satirical

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZsBYfKSEwg
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRtzfzRujHU
Saints Row - A History

- Saints Row the Third
  - Streamlined our player customization
  - Became full-on satire

- Saints Row IV
  - Added romances
  - Introduced multiple new POC NPCs

http://saintsrow.wikia.com/wiki/Romance
http://www.gamesradar.com/top-7-biggest-bulges/?page=2
Saints Row IV

- **Inclusive Protagonist:**
  - We allow total customization of the Boss
  - Are totally gender and ethnicity-neutral in how we handle that character

- **Diverse Supporting Cast:**
  - The ‘main cast’ of SRIV was less than 50% White Dudes
  - Women: Shaundi (x2), Asha, Kinzie
  - POC: Keith Davis, Ben King, Johnny Gat, Pierce, Asha

- **Have well-rounded characters:**
  - Tried to avoid stereotypes and tokenism
Saints Row IV Data

Initial Player Customization Usage During SRIV Playtests (n=81)
Initial Player Customization Usage During SRIV Playtests (n=81)

- Nearly 85% engaged in at least some form of customization
- Women and POC were very likely to recreate core elements of their own identity in their Boss

http://nihilnovisubsole.tumblr.com/post/70073430234
Initial Player Customization Usage During SRIV Playtests (n=81)

- White Males were more likely to create ‘wacky’ Bosses

- Customization options used most frequently were ones that make large scale changes most immediately visible and recognizable
  - Gender, body type, skin color, hair color, hair style, voice
Saints Row IV Data

Conclusion: Saints Row IV playtesters use customization to create a diverse array of Bosses, frequently reflecting core aspects of their actual selves.

Hypotheses:

- Players underrepresented in games often take this opportunity to see themselves.
- Players who do see themselves represented in games use customization to experiment more with gender and skin color, and also create more ‘wacky’ Bosses.

Supporting Data:

- “Female user more likely to create avatars that are idealized version of themselves [...] male users tend to favor avatars that stand out more.”
  - Ducheneaut et al.
Saints Row IV Data

Players spent an average of roughly 5 minutes in initial customization.

This is what you can accomplish:
Volition and Diversity

- We use gender-inclusive options on surveys
- Conduct an annual Fan Census to stay aware of the makeup of our fanbase
- Focus our social media on sharing and supporting how fans interact with our games
Volition and Diversity

Studies support that increased emotional attachment to characters, and the ability to see oneself present in those characters, increases likelihood of continued play of a title in some players.

By providing diverse NPCs and a customizable Boss, we offer a wider array of players a character to form an attachment to.
How Do Other Titles Handle This?

There are many ways to handle diversity and inclusivity

• No Main Character
• Hidden Main Character
• Character Customization

• Cast-of-Character Selection
• Authored Character
• MP-Only Customization
No Main Character

Some very successful titles do not have a protagonist

- Ex: Candy Crush
- Ex: Tetris
No Main Character

Some very successful titles do not have a protagonist

PROS:
- Accessible to everyone

CONS:
- Nothing for players to identify with
Hidden Main Character

Some games obscure the main character

• Ex: Journey

• Ex: Metroid
Hidden Main Character

Some games obscure the main character

**PROS:**
- Accessible to everyone

**CONS:**
- More constrained storytelling
- Less for players to identify with
Character Customization

Some games allow character looks to be customized

- Ex: Dragon Age
- Ex: Fallout
Character Customization

Some games allow character looks to be customized

**PROS:**
- Accessible to everyone (within bounds of the system)

**CONS:**
- More constrained storytelling
- Resource intensive
Cast-of-Character Selection

The player is allowed to select their choice from a cast

- Ex: Overwatch
- Ex: Borderlands
Cast-of-Character Selection

The player is allowed to select their choice from a cast

**PROS:**
- Able to develop authored experiences
- Provide a variety of characters for players to identify with

**CONS:**
- Not possible to represent all players
- Story telling resources divided
Authored Character

Some games deliver a strong, authored protagonist(s)

- Ex: GTA V
- Ex: Tomb Raider
Authored Character

Some games deliver a strong, authored protagonist(s)

**PROS:**
- Story is focused on one character, allowing more depth
- Player can be forced into experiences outside of their comfort zone

**CONS:**
- Very limited representation
- Players can be discomforted by some experiences
• MP-Only Customization

Some games only allow customization in their multiplayer

• Ex: GTA V Online

• Ex: Call of Duty

What Can You Do?

The Industry has a lot of momentum
- We’re heavily cis, straight, white dudes
- Diversity can be seen as “risky”

Example of our stuck-in-a-rut-ness:
- When Naughty Dog hired a firm to do focus testing on The Last of Us, women were by default being excluded from testing groups
What Can You Do?

Be Aware

• You are not representative of your entire player base
• Just being actively aware of this can reduce your biases

Ask Questions

• “Why is this character white? Is that a crucial part of their backstory?”
• “Why are all of the enemies male?”
What Can You Do?

Be aware of Stereotypes and Tokenism
- Stereotypes are easy shortcuts to rely on, but can be harmful
- Token characters can add diversity, but feel pandering or cheap

Do your research
- If you’re including a character outside your own life experiences, be sensitive
- Read, listen, and invite people to share their experiences with you

Increase diversity on your team
- Let people tell their own stories
What Can You Do?

Be awesome!

- Mistakes happen - just be willing to learn from them
- Take critique well
- Even one voice in a company can make a difference
- You don’t have to be perfect, just don’t be an asshole

Make awesome games!
And on a fun final note…

Most of the illustrations in this presentation are Saints Row fanart.

Shout out to all our fans who draw, write, mod, and otherwise are just really cool.


Questions?