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Representation of Primary Characters in Narrative-based Games

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Abstract

A quantitative study is performed on protagonists from games that have accumulated the most retail sales between 2007 and 2016, with this case particularly focusing on the categories of gender, physical characteristics, sexuality and age. Results show that white male leads are almost half of all characters in the study and are a much larger group than any other. Close to all characters show signs of being heterosexual or have unspecified sexualities. The small number LGB-characters are bisexual, meaning that there is no homosexual lead. Further, a large majority of protagonists are young adults while elderly people are absent. Correlations among these results, game genre, and developer location are examined. Lastly, the effects of representation on identification, world view and game enjoyment are discussed to express the importance of diverse representation in the medium and across all of entertainment media.

Key words: games, character design, representation, protagonists, identification, game enjoyment, diversity

Abstrakt

En kvantitativ studie är genomförd på protagonister i de spel som har sålt flest exemplar i butik mellan 2007 och 2016, i detta fall med särskilt focus på kategorierna genus, fysiska egenskaper, sexualitet och ålder. Resultat visar att vita manliga huvudpersoner utgör nästan hälften av alla karaktärer i studien och är en betydligt större grupp än någon annan. Nästintill alla karaktärer visar tecken på att vara heterosexuella eller har ospecificerad sexualitet. Det lilla antalet LGB-karaktärer är bisexuella, vilket betyder att det inte finns någon homosexuell huvudkaraktär. Vidare, en stor majoritet protagonister är unga vuxna medan åldrade personer är frånvarande. Samband mellan dessa resultat, spelgenre och utvecklarnas belägenhet är undersökta. Slutligen diskuteras representations påverkan på identifiering, världsbild och spelnöje för att uttrycka hur viktig mångfaldig representation är i mediet och över all underhållande media.

Nyckelord: spel, karaktärsdesign, representation, protagonister, identifiering, spelnöje, mångfald

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1 Introduction and Purpose

There are many games on the market with high ratings, captivating storytelling, interesting mechanics and stunning graphics that do not provide with a cast of diverse characters. For inexperienced designers, rather than being in control of the representational choices one makes for the in-game characters, if one does not have proper training and a critical way of thinking, one might risk reinforcing cultural patterns that one has internalized throughout one's life.

This thesis examines the traits of primary protagonists in narrative-based games that have sold the most retail copies for the past ten years. Patterns and correlations among protagonist representations are studied. Earlier studies of representation in games, film and television are included as a basis to compare the situation of video games as a storytelling medium. At the end of the paper, the results are compared to the previous work to see if the pattern is consistent across the included studies.

The games examined in this study are narrative-based and tell their stories in a way that is similar to cinematography. The games chosen also do not have customizable characters. In these games, the story revolves around a protagonist and the player is not given power to decide the characteristics of these protagonists. Therefore, the responsibility of representation and character design is completely with the companies that produced the games.

Protagonist, main character, avatar and lead refer to the same concept in this essay.

Popular games are defined as the digital games that have the most retail sales according to the site *VGChartz* (VGChartz, 2006).

The purpose and main question of the thesis is to observe the current situation on games as a representational medium. It is inspired by previous works on representation in media, which can be found in chapters two and three. Like studies that have been made on representation of characters in Hollywood films and television series, this is an attempt at replicating a similar observation on the current situation of how central characters in games are being represented. The data from game protagonists is then compared to the data from previous work.

These questions are asked to gain further understanding of the current situation of games as a representational medium:

RQ1: How frequently are different gender, ethnicity, sexuality and age groups represented among protagonists of popular games?

RQ2: How common is the brown-haired white male as a protagonist in popular games?

RQ3: Are females generally represented as younger than males?

RQ4: Do developers in different continents show distinct patterns in the representation of gender, physical characteristics and sexuality?

RQ5: Are there any notable correlations between game genre and representation?

2 Background

This chapter presents summaries of theories that are relevant within the context of this paper. It discusses the topics of representation, identification with characters in entertainment media and the white male lead archetype.

2.1 Stuart Hall on Representation

Hall describes representation as using language to produce meaning, in which language includes not just what is spoken and written but also visual signs and more (2003, p.28). He includes the role of discourse in his view of representation as the French philosopher Foucault has stated that there is no meaning outside discourse (2003, p.45). As discourse can control the way people act and think by defining what is appropriate and not appropriate to say within its context, a power/knowledge relationship is said to exist (2003, p.6).

2.2 Why Representation in Entertainment Media Matters

George Gerbner (1994) argues that popular media does have an effect on people when sending out a meaning repeatedly. In his particular example he addresses excessive portrayals of violence in television. He writes that there are people who only accept a direct cause and effect sort of proof that violence in media has a bad effect on society as a whole. Culture is not simple enough to read as would be required to provide such proof, and the power of representation is therefore neglected by some as it is too abstract to them. However, Gerbner argues that when popular media such as television presents a theme repeatedly, the consumers of such content start to normalize and become desensitized to those themes. As the mentality towards a theme can slowly change due to exposure and due to how it is represented in media, it is possible for media to affect behavior of people long-term (p.883).

Shrum et al. (2005) present a model asserting that frequently consuming a media makes relevant content easily accessible in one's memory, having it affect one's worldview (p.473). They conducted a study in which large amounts of television viewing affected the likelihood for the individual to suspend disbelief when viewing and to also let the constructed realities of the media affect the individual's perception of social constructs. They further suggest that simply being aware of how reality is distorted in media does not always help if the process of judging the content is relatively automatic (p.477). In other words, whether we are aware of how media is distorted or not, by consuming a large amount of it we are more likely to let it affect the way we see and relate to the world we live in, as our memories of the media content is easily accessible in our minds.

Williams et al. (2009) apply these theories to representation in gaming to strengthen their hypothesis that when a player repeatedly see groups of people represented in particular roles, the player will subconsciously use the memories from the representation as referencing points as to what a group of people is like (p.820). It could be closely connected with typing, categorization to make sense of the world and stereotyping, when a type is reduced to its most essential characteristics and adds nothing more (Hall, 2003, p.258).

2.3 Identification Theories

To gain a deeper understanding of identification as a process, one must distinguish the difference between identifying and interpreting as different ways of relating to the context presented in a story. Jonathan Cohen (2006) explains the act of identification as following.

Identification is part of a referential approach to a text, which makes the text as an artifact (i.e., its authors, actors, producers, design, etc.) invisible, and in which the viewer is engrossed in the world the text creates. In a referential reading, viewers accept the basic assumptions of the producers and imagine the events described in the text as if they were, or could be, real. One important vehicle for a referential reading is to forget one's role as a viewer and to adopt the perspective of the character, to identify with a character.

(Cohen, 2006, p.191)

2.3.1 Similarity and Homophily in Relation to Identification

Cohen (2006) gathered data indicating that sharing similar appearance or being of a similar demographic were not the most important factors for identifying with a fictional character. The data rather pointed towards sharing similar attitudes with the character as the more important aspect. A majority of people prove to either choose to identify with a character because they want to be them to some extent or because they are attracted to some part of the character. Children often identify with characters who they want to become in some way, while teenagers also begin to identify with characters that attract them (p.187). This can be correlated to the self-discrepancy theory of Higgins (1987), which describes the complex relation between the actual, ideal and ought selves. The identifying with a character who one wants to be as described by Cohen fits together with the ideal self as defined by Higgins. Trepte and Reinecke (2010) conducted a study supporting the theory of a relationship between avatar and player similarity in appearance and game enjoyment. The test subjects reported that they could identify more with their avatars when they shared similar appearances to themselves. Further on the results showed a correlation between identification and the subjects' feelings of enjoying the games in the study (p.179). It contradicts the arguments of Cohen and can be used as an indication that identification with game avatars potentially works differently than with characters in film and television. However, both studies show a strong correlation between sharing similarities with a character in some way and identifying with it.

2.4 The White Male Lead Archetype

The archetype of the white male lead is a commonly known phenomenon among those interested in Hollywood film, television series and/or video games. Many gamers know that a majority of action and shooter games have main characters that fit into this trope. There are many online articles discussing the preponderance of this type, quoting developers who call the leads "average" and "normal"(Shaw-Williams, 2014). Several online sources that are easily accessible for the general public claim that the white male lead is so common because

western entertainment is likely to use a white male lead when aiming to appeal to all demographics (White Male Lead, 2016). As the sources are not as reliable as academia one can question the viability of what is written in the articles, but these claims exist in large enough quantities to prove that it is something that is commonly believed among many in the West.

3 Previous works within the subject area

As games often tell their stories in a cinematographic way much as films do, previous work on storytelling in film and in games will be presented together to provide an overall view on the current situation on representation in entertainment media.

3.1 Male/Female Representation

Williams et al (2009) show that male protagonists in video games make 90% of the total in a study with 8572 primary and secondary characters. Females were more likely to be secondary characters when they appeared (p.824).

Comstock and Scharrer (2010) present a study in which females appear to be systematically underrepresented throughout many forms of media with video games being worst for females by a large margin (p.87).

The *Hollywood Diversity Report* presents data stating that female leading roles in Hollywood films released in 2014 were at 25.8% while 74.2% had male leads (Hunt, Ramón and Tran, 2016, p.11).

3.2 LGBT Representation

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) reports an estimation for 2015-16 that out of 881 regular characters on primetime television programs 4% are identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. The largest numbers of these were gay characters at 47% and lesbians at 33%. Bisexual characters were not as many with females at 17% and bisexual males at only 3% of the LGB characters (2015).

There were no transgender characters to be counted for in the same type of programs. Cable television had three recurring trans characters, but not with a leading role. Streaming series had four transgender characters with two of them being series leads. Only one of the seven trans characters counted were a transgender man (GLAAD, 2015).

In observations about LGBT history in gaming, a majority of the characters exist in role-playing games in which the player can customize their own character. Outside of this game genre, there are very few major characters to be mentioned (MacDonald, 2016).

3.3 Representation of Physical Characteristics

A study on representation in video games reports that 80% of characters in games are white while the remaining 20% is shared by US minority groups (Williams et al., 2009, p.825). Wohn presents a study on representation in casual games in which only 6% of the games had non-white primary characters (2011, p.201).

Hollywood films of 2014 consisted of 87% white lead roles and 13% minority leads (Hunt, Ramón and Tran, 2016, p.11). However, the study does not specify what types of characters are counted in the study and it is therefore not likely to record video game protagonists who have the largest role in their games.

3.4 Age Representation

From the results of over eight thousand characters, 87% of all characters were classified as adults. Approximately 8% of the characters were teenagers. Children and the elderly were greatly underrepresented in comparison to the U.S. population (Williams et al., 2009, p.826).

3.4.1 Male/Female Age Representation Correlation

A study on representation of age among primetime television characters show that the age of 30-39 is the most overrepresented compared to the U.S. population and the most underrepresented age group are 60+. Women from 50 and up are the most underrepresented group. Young males between 13 and 29 years are underrepresented while females of the same age category are slightly overrepresented compared to U.S. population statistics, meaning that women tend to be represented as younger and men older than reality (Comstock and Scharrer, 2010, p.92). They additionally show data that the white ethnicity is represented by a large majority in commercials and children's television (p.90).

4 Method and materials

Data from a total of 162 protagonists from 123 different games was gathered. The games were gathered from the website *VGChartz* (2006), which lists retail sales of games around the world and organizes the information into top 100 charts. The charts from 2007 to 2016 were used in this instance. For a game to be included in the study, it had to be narrative-based with a non-customizable character. The only choice that has been allowed is if that of gender, which applies mainly to the *Pokémon* (2006/2014) games in this case, but in those instances the appearance or names cannot be altered. What is intended to be extracted from the data is what players are told to identify with or as when they do not have a choice in what form it takes, when the character and the story is a primary driving force for gameplay. The charts list the top 100 best-selling retail games every year, which means that 1000 games were looked at to find 123 of them fit the criteria for the study. The coding of the data was done as follows.

Data was gathered from the charts starting from 2016 and going back. Whenever a game fit the criteria of being narrative-based and having a specific lead it would be recorded. If the same character appeared more than once because a game was part of a franchise, the additional games were not included in the list to avoid repetition.

The 13 different variables that were documented on each game were Last Year Listed (on the chart), First Release of Original, Developer Location (country), Game Genre, Title, Character Name, Human Age, Sex, Gender, Physical Characteristics, Sexuality, Hair Color and Eye Color.

First release of original was coded from when the first version of the game listed was released anywhere in the world. If a high definition (HD) remake of a game was released recently but the original game was released ten years ago, then the original year will be used.

Game genre is based on the categorization provided by *VGChartz* (2016) with the exception of *Hannah Montana* (2006) which was listed as an Action game. After observing game footage, the author determined to change the genre of that game to Adventure instead.

Age is recorded based on the information provided on each game's individual Wikipedia site. If there is no such information to be found, an estimate will be made based on the character's appearance and noted with red numbers to be separated from the definite numbers. There are times when fictional characters are much older than what they appear due to specific reasons in the story. At those times, an estimate based on appearance was made. It was deemed to be more relevant for the study to note if a character appeared to look like a thirty-year-old rather than if the lore states that they are hundreds of years old.

Gender identity and biological sex of the characters were separated into individual columns as they do not need to be the same. This made it possible for gender queer or genderless characters to be recorded in the chart. There is however a risk for discrepancy in determining the sex as the characters are likely to be fully clothed and are based on an estimation made from potential descriptions from developers and physical appearance such as bone structure. The strategy to avoid discrepancy as much as possible was to read character descriptions

made by the developer. Sexless characters such as robots were assigned to “None” on sex, but were observed for potential gender roles.

As with finding definite proof of biological sex, sexuality is often difficult to fully confirm in game characters and is a matter of interpreting what signs there are available. In this case, sexuality is coded on the basis of the protagonists love interests in the game or an official statement from the developer (if any) about the character. As statements of game characters’ sexualities are rare, the majority of cases are based on whether the character has a partner, love interest or if they engage in flirting with another character. If the lead’s interaction with another character is too subtle to confirm flirting, even if the other character is designed to be sexualized or appealing to the player, it could not count as a sign of the lead’s own sexual interests. These cases and games that do not include love interests were therefore encoded as “no data found”.

While physical characteristics based on heritage is a complex issue, there had to be simplifications made in order for the coding to become manageable. The final categories that were compatible with at least one character each in this study were Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern and Indeterminable.

5 Results

All variables observed have strong majority groups while leaving little to the minority categories, meaning that protagonists in popular games are not diverse on a characteristic level. Below, all data that is significant to the research questions is presented under separated sections.

5.1 Sex and Gender Distribution

78% of the protagonists in this study are cis-male while 20% are cis-female. There are no transgender leads in the games included in this study. Three characters (1.9%) are considered to be robots/technical constructions so they have no biological sex, but all of them have a male gender identity. Therefore, the gender distribution settles at 80% male and 20% female in this case. Please see figure 1.

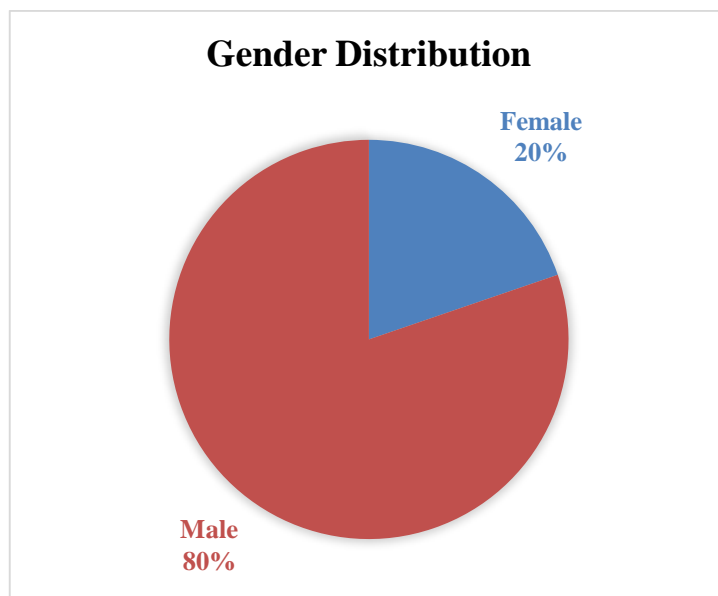


Figure 1

5.1.1 Gender in Different Game Genres

A majority of the characters in the study come from the shooter and action genres, which together make 62% of the total. Both of these genres underrepresent females drastically as protagonists in action games are 86% male and shooter games are at 90%.

The most balanced gender distribution is found in the adventure genre with 8 female leads (47%). In role-playing games females are 13 (36%) of the protagonists. However, 10 of these are in games where the player can choose to be either female or male. If these types of games would not be included there are only 3 female leads (19%). In the platform and puzzle genres that made it into this study, none of them have female leads.

There are no transgender and gender neutral protagonists among these games as all characters fit into a gender binary. Please see figure 2.

Row Labels	Female	Male	Total
Shooter	5	46	51
Action	6	43	49
Role-Playing	13	23	36
Adventure	8	9	17
Platform	0	8	8
Puzzle	0	1	1
Grand Total	32	130	162

Figure 2

5.1.2 Gender and Non-White Characters

When looking at gender representation exclusively for minority groups, 28% are female and the remaining 72% male.

5.1.3 Gender and Developer Location

The representation of female leads gives varying results when looking at which continent the game was developed in. Japan has the highest number at 29% female protagonists, followed by Europe at 27%. Games from North America has the lowest number at 9% female leads, which is a drastic difference compared to the other two.

Continent	Female	Male
North America	6 (9%)	61 (91%)
Europe	10 (26%)	29 (74%)
Japan	16 (29%)	39 (71%)

Figure 3

5.2 Age

The largest age group is young adults between 20-39 years old, making 58% of all human character where age could be estimated. Teenagers between 13-19 are the second largest group at 24%. Older adults between 40-55 (13%) and children between 0-12 (6%) are in the minority. There are no characters older than 55.

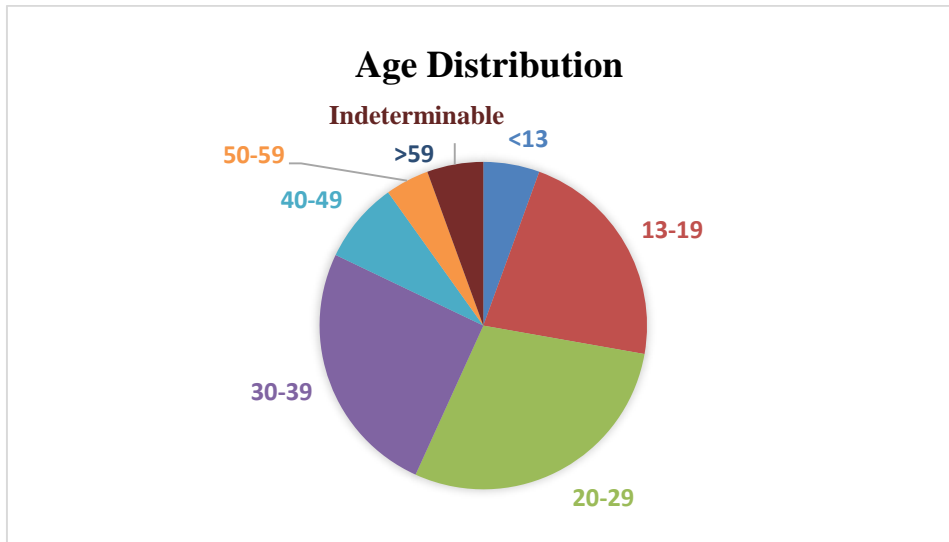


Figure 4

5.2.1 Age and Gender

The average age of female and male main characters differs by 11 years with the average of females being 19 years and males 30 years. The oldest female character is Rochelle from *Left 4 Dead 2* (2009) at 29 years of age, not even reaching the average of males. However, one should remember the skewed distribution of male and female characters and how it can affect the results.

5.3 Physical Characteristics

The Indeterminable category is separated from the rest of the data in this particular occasion and discussed for itself because its nature is different from the rest. By observing the results in this manner, an observation of how actual characteristics are being represented can be made.

When excluding the Indeterminable category, 78% of protagonists in bestseller games are White. At marginally lower numbers, 10% are Black, 6% are Asian, 4% Hispanic and 0.9% (1 character) Middle Eastern. See figure 5 for more information

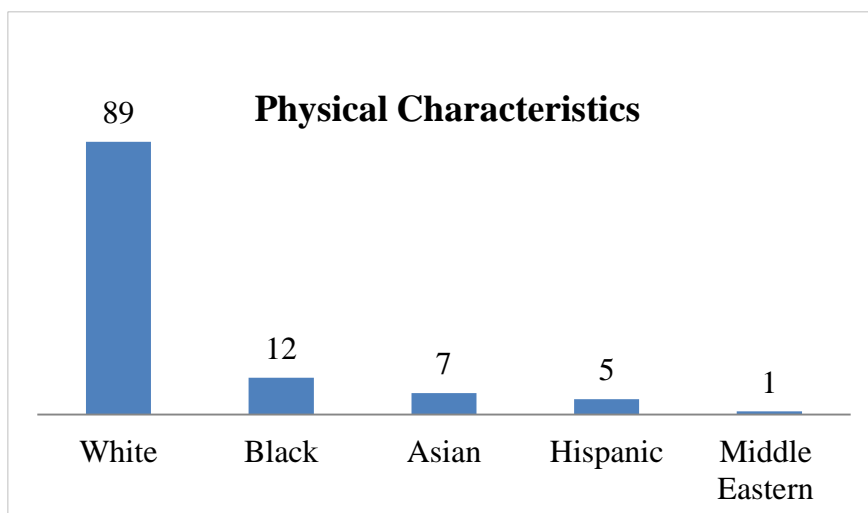


Figure 5

5.3.1 Game Genre and Physical Characteristics

Adventure games are the most diverse with the lowest number of White characters (59%) and highest numbers in all other categories. Action is one of the worse genres at representing physical characteristics as White protagonists are a large majority (83%) in this genre. There are however no minority leads in the most popular platform games and role-playing games in this study. Please see Figure 6 for further details.

Genre / P.C.	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Middle Eastern	Grand Total
Shooter	2	6	2	38	0	48
Action	2	4	2	39	0	47
Adventure	3	2	1	10	1	17
Role-Playing	0	0	0	1	0	1
Platform	0	0	0	1	0	1
Grand Total	7	12	5	89	1	114

Figure 6

5.3.2 Developer Location and Physical Characteristic Distribution

North America represents physical characteristics as 78% White, 9% Black and 9% Indeterminable, leaving Asian, Hispanic and Middle Eastern with 1% each. The distribution looks slightly more diverse in games developed in European countries however; 62% White, 15% Black, 10% Asian, 8% Hispanic, 5% Indeterminable and no Middle Eastern characters. Please see Figure 7 for a quick overview.

Continent	Indeterminable	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Middle Eastern	Grand Total
North America	9,0%	1,5%	9,0%	1,5%	77,5%	1,5%	100,0%
Europe	5,1%	10,3%	15,4%	7,7%	61,5%	0,0%	100,0%
Japan	72,7%	3,7%	0,0%	1,8%	21,8%	0,0%	100,0%

Figure 7

5.3.3 The Indeterminable Characters from Japan

All human characters with visible faces that were placed in the Indeterminable category come from Japanese developers and are rendered in an anime style. With the characters being as highly stylized as they are, observations for this group mainly rely on hair and eye color. In the popular games from Japan with anime-style characters, brown hair (50%) and blue eyes (53%) are the most popular. The results are affected by the significant number of *Pokémon* (2006/2014) protagonists who next to all have brown hair. But even if one removed all these games from the calculation brown hair still is the most common hair color. The second most popular colors are blonde hair (13%) and brown eyes (18%). Black hair, which is a more naturally common color among the Japanese demographic, comes third at 10%. See figures 8 and 9 for an overview on eye and hair color distribution among indeterminable characters from Japanese developers.

Eye Color	Distribution
Black	10,0%
Blue	52,5%
Blue/Green	2,5%
Brown	17,5%
Gray	5,0%
Green	5,0%
Grey	7,5%
Grand Total	100,0%

Figure 8

Hair Color	Distribution
Black	10,0%
Blonde	12,5%
Blue	2,5%
Brown	50,0%
Green	5,0%
Grey	5,0%
Pink	5,0%
Red	2,5%
Unknown	2,5%
White	5,0%
Grand Total	100,0%

Figure 9

5.4 Sexuality

Out of all characters in this study, 70 protagonists (43%) have a partner or love interest of the opposite sex. There are 3 leads (2%) that show interest in both sexes. These are Trevor Philips from *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), Jacob Frye in *Assassins Creed: Syndicate* (2015) and Max Caulfield in *Life is Strange* (2015). There is no homosexual primary character in any of the games. The remaining 89 cases which make the majority at 55% do not specify what sexual or romantic preference the character has. See figure 10.

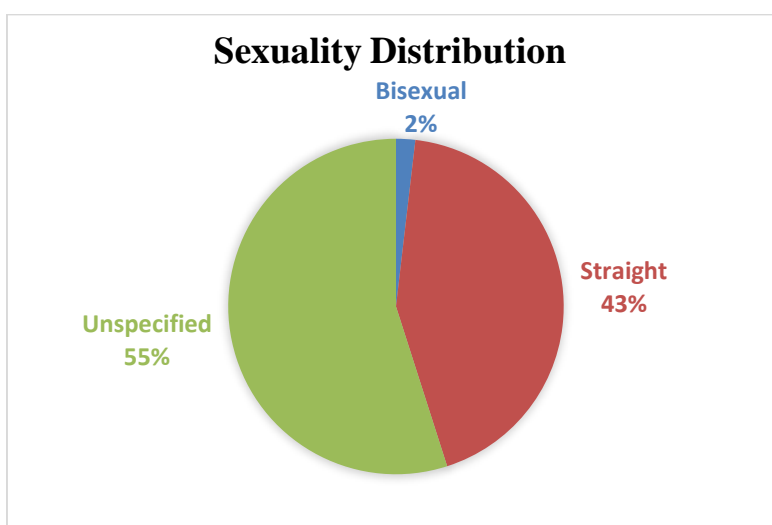


Figure 10

5.4.1 Developer Location and Character Sexuality

European developers have the fewest protagonists with unspecified sexualities (36%) and have the highest number of bisexual protagonists (5%). Games from Japanese developers show an opposite pattern with a large portion of characters having unspecified sexualities (71%) which is likely to be the case because a majority of them are children. No Japanese games in this study indicate that a protagonist is anything other than straight or unspecified. North American developers show results in-between those of Europe and Japan with 54% Unspecified, 45% Straight and 1% Bisexual. See figure 11 for further details.

Developer	Bisexual	Straight	Unspecified	Grand Total
North America	1	30	36	67
Europe	2	23	14	39
Japan	0	16	39	55

Figure 11

5.4.2 Game Genre and Sexuality

The Adventure and Action genres are the only genres that have a small number of protagonists with sexualities other than heterosexual or unspecified. Furthermore, they are the only two genres which unspecified characters make less than half of all their leads, meaning that they also have the highest number heterosexual characters, Adventure at 82% and Action at 57%. See figure 12.

Genre	Bisexual	Straight	Unspecified	Grand Total
Action	2	28	19	49
Adventure	1	14	2	17
Platform	0	3	5	8
Puzzle	0	0	1	1
Role-Playing	0	7	29	36
Shooter	0	18	33	51
Grand Total	3	70	89	162

Figure 12

5.5 The Brown-haired White Male

Characters had to have three different variables in order to fit this archetype. Yet 59 (36%) of the total characters have all these requirements. Next to all of these are found in the shooter and action genres, the two most popular game genres. When including all hair colors it reveals that 78 (48%) of all characters are white males. When Indeterminable characteristics are not included in the calculation, white male leads are 68% of all characters with distinct physical characteristics. To put the situation into further perspective one can turn the criteria around. There are only 7 (4%) minority females among all main characters that are included in this study (6% without indeterminate). It is notable that White Female leads are in-between Minority Males and Minority Females in frequency. See figure 13 for the full distribution of characters with specified characteristics, making a total of 114 characters.

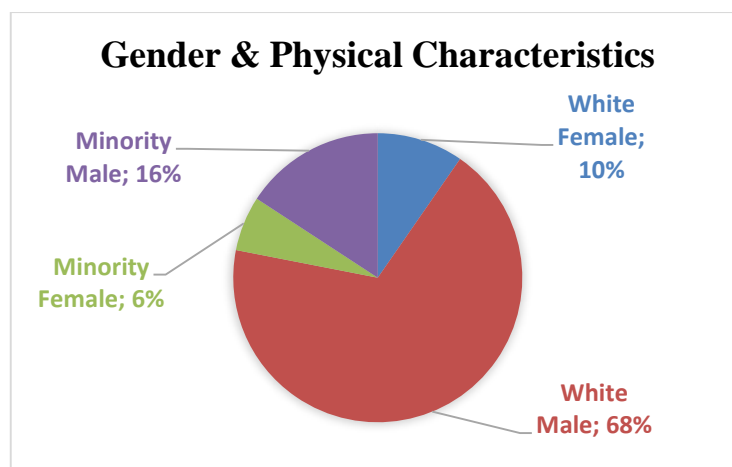


Figure 13

6 Analysis

The overall view is that all categories had a respective majority group that was attributed to the protagonist more often than others. Below is an analysis of the results as well as remarks of how different variables correlate with each other.

6.1 Gender

Based on these results, there is a lack of gender diversity as a large majority of protagonists are portrayed as cis-male. Cis means that the gender identity matches the biological sex a person was born with. Females are greatly underrepresented at 20% and characters that defy the gender binary are not present in this study at all. If one looks exclusively at these bestseller games and what pattern they reinforce is that the cis-male as a group is more important than other groups and that their perspective matters the most.

6.2 Age

Adults in their twenties and thirties are the most represented age groups in popular games. There were barely any young children and there were no elderly characters at all. However, as the charts are dominated by the shooter and action genres that might be a rational reason as to why that is the case. Children and elderly are not as suitable for the battlefield as young adults are. There is no rational explanation for why the average age of female characters should be much lower than for males. To gain an understanding of the reason behind this situation, one is likely to look at studies of how societies value different traits in different genders. Older age groups are practically invisible in the popular games of today and the situation is especially bad for women. As the generations that have grown up playing games become older, there is a possibility that businesses put more effort in the representation of these demographics. However, as it is at the moment, there is not much diversity in the representation of age groups.

6.3 Physical Characteristics

The number of White leads is in this study approximately as high as males are for gender. The physical characteristics of protagonists are not diverse, and it shows a pattern that looking White is valued higher than any other characteristic as the most significant character in a story is much more often White than not.

The anime-style characters from Japan are in this case stylized to the point where faces do not have particular characteristics. It is noted however that with brown hair and blue eyes being the most used in these games, a typically White, western look appears to be favored in these games. If one only bases categorization on the appearance without taking background and life situation into account - like this study has done it – many of these characters would be more compatible as White than another group.

6.4 Sexuality

The majority of characters have unspecified sexualities, meaning that it plays no role in the story or gameplay of a game. This potentially avoids the possibility of anyone feeling alienated based on their sexuality alone. However, there is a distinct absence of LGB-

characters which makes them practically invisible in gaming culture of today. A number of protagonists with unspecified sexualities still had supportive characters of the opposite sex who they shared strong bonds with, but the main character did not show any concrete evidence of being interested in that person other than being close to them platonically. There were also cases in which a male protagonist had a female supportive character be romantically interested in him but did not show any interest back, which did not give any concrete sign that he was heterosexual. There is a possibility that some of these cases are created to be interpreted as a heterosexual, romantic relationship in the making as they often involved young characters. An example of this is the 13-year-old Oliver in *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* (2010) who in a large portion of the game travels with his female companion Ester. Early into the game the characters' change clothes into bathing suits to fit the tropical environment. When Ester arrives in her new bikini she turns around as the cinematic camera from Oliver's perspective pans over her with glittering effects, a way to communicate Ester's attractiveness. However, when Oliver is prompted to comment her appearance he changes the subject without directly showing the players if he is interested in her or not. There are also several times where Oliver holds girls' hands and look into their eyes as they interact, but in a way that does not bring up any direct hints on romance and is interpreted as sweet and innocent. As concrete evidence arguing his romantic/sexual interest in another character cannot be found, his sexuality could not be coded.

6.5 The Adventure Genre is the Most Diverse

On the variables of Gender, Physical Characteristics and Sexuality, the Adventure genre had the most diverse cast of protagonists. The two most common genres in this study, Shooter and Action, are generally less diverse than other genres, with the exception for Action having two bisexual leads; Trevor Philips of *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) and Jacob Frye of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015).

6.6 Summary

All variables that have been observed in this study show a pattern of non-diversity since there are strong majorities and extreme minorities among these main characters. As there are many variables but almost half of all characters are white males, the current situation of representation in gaming appears to be very imbalanced.

7 Discussion

This chapter connects the background chapter to games in a way that is relevant to the results of the study which has been made. Lastly the research questions will be answered and compared with results from previous work within the subject.

7.1 Example of When Cohen's Theories Are Applied to Games

The theories Cohen (2006) of the two common ways of identification can be applied to how game characters are likely to be more appealing to certain groups of people. Taking games that have sexualized female protagonists for example, would in theory mostly appeal to straight male players who can identify with her as they feel attraction towards her. The females or others that are not attracted to her nor want to be sexualized like her will in that case not be as likely to identify with her and not enjoy the game as much as someone who can. The same would apply to games with male characters that are designed as power fantasies, which instead appeal to the form of identification that is made through wanting to be or possess the powers of the main character. The character then does not necessarily need to possess attractive traits for an audience to identify with them. But for the people who do not appreciate the power of the character, there will not be much else to create the feeling of identification. Based on the results from the most sold games for the past ten years, the biggest games are mainly aimed towards the enjoyment of a white heterosexual cis-male demographic.

However, these are the author's speculations based on the theory that identification and enjoyment correlate with each other. This study does not approach the subject on a deeper level to see how often this theory can be applied in practice. Also, there can be other aspects about the game that a player likes enough to find the game enjoyable even without a high level of identification.

7.2 The Meaning That is Created

When looking through the lens of Hall (2003), games use the language of audiovisual stimuli and gameplay mechanics to produce meaning. The language of gameplay puts the primary character in the position of agency, which communicates that this character is the most important one for the game to function. Further, as avatars serve as representations of the players in the game world, it is likely to be the most important for some form of identification to occur between the player and the avatar they are controlling. The lead of a game is therefore the most important in many different ways due to the context they are presented in.

If protagonists are attributed with certain types of characteristics repeatedly with little variation, those characteristics can on a subconscious level be connected to the role of the protagonist, much like Williams et al. (2009) states happens for frequent media consumers. In the case of the games that are consumed the most in our current time, the protagonists are much more likely to be white cis-males in their young adulthood and if their sexuality is specified it is almost exclusively heterosexual. This has been recognized by people and

therefore the trope of the *White Male Lead* (2016) is born, which does not only exist within the realm of games. Like an actor that stars in leading roles in many different films, the white male with brown hair appears to dominate the market of our bestselling games. To connect back to the theories of Hall (2003) and creation of meaning, the characteristics of white, male, adulthood and heterosexuality would be communicated as the most important as the most important characters in both games and film are likely to be all of these.

7.3 Lack of Diversity versus Game Enjoyment

The representation of protagonists shows results very similar for both games and Hollywood film among all the variables examined in this essay. The protagonists are far from diverse at this moment. One way this has a negative effect was just mentioned in the previous section; that longstanding, repeated exposure to all these white male protagonists has potential to reinforce a mentality that they are more important than other types of people. Another is the avatar's effect on game enjoyment. Trepte and Reinecke (2010) explain that players show tendencies of enjoying a game more if they experience likeness with the avatar they are controlling. If this is true it means that games are the most enjoyable for those who identify as white, male and heterosexual. Age does not work exactly like the other variables as all demographics grow up and grow older. As the lead roles most often go to young adults, either those currently being around the same age or those who wish to be that age would identify with them and enjoy the game more, much like Cohen (2006) describes likeability and identification with similarities.

7.4 Comparison of Results with Previous Work

The gender distribution of characters in this study supports the results found in previous studies on entertainment media and the results on physical characteristics is similar to the previously mentioned study on game characters. In television series, bisexual characters were rarer than homosexual characters, but that was not the case in this study as all LGB-people found among the main characters are bisexual. But all such characters are a rare occurrence among game protagonists. Transgender characters are largely absent in entertainment media based on the results from these studies. Lastly, the results of age representation and the correlation of gender and age are similar in previous work and in this study, as women are generally portrayed as younger than men and older women are absent.

7.5 Answering the Research Questions

RQ1: How frequently are different gender, ethnicity, sexuality and age groups represented among protagonists of popular games?

The frequency that different genders, physical characteristics, sexualities and ages are being represented in popular games are drastically unbalanced in all categories and looks similar to statistics of Hollywood film, showing that the diversity problem spreads across more than one medium.

RQ2: How common is the brown-haired white male as a protagonist in popular games?

The brown-haired white male protagonist is over a third of all protagonists in our bestselling narrative-based games. White males with any hair color are close to half of all main characters.

RQ3: Are females generally represented as younger than males?

Females are generally represented as younger than males as the average age between these genders differ with 11 years.

RQ4: Do developers in different continents show distinct patterns in the representation of gender, physical characteristics and sexuality?

Games developed in North America are the least diverse at representing gender and physical characteristics. Japanese games are the ones that bring up sexuality the least and have no LGB-characters. European developers are the most diverse in all three categories, but LGBT-characters are a very small minority across all developers. Another distinguished imbalance is the North American representation of gender at 91% Male and 9% Female.

RQ5: Are there any notable correlations between game genre and representation?

The Adventure genre shows results of having the most diverse cast of protagonists at the moment. Male/Female distribution is close to equally divided, white characters are not a strong majority which gives other physical characteristics more space and has the highest percentage of characters other than heterosexual or unspecified. The two most prevailing game genres, Shooter and Action, are dominated by white male leads.

7.5.1 Answering the Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to observe the current situation of games as a representational medium. The answers to these questions indicate that the representation in popular games are imbalanced in a similar way as earlier studies have stated on Hollywood film by Hunt, Ramón and Tran (2016). These questions enable the observation of nuances within the game industry as to how representation looks different in various genres and areas of the world. According to this study, diversity in narrative-based games' protagonists are generally imbalanced even though it is more or less the case depending on where one choses to look. However, there is room for improvement on all continents and in all genres. To make the young, white, male lead less dominant a primary character is a suggestion to designers who wish to create more diverse games.

7.6 Suggestion for Future Studies

What is not focused upon in this paper but should be mentioned is how representations are done on a qualitative level in terms of stereotyping and the behaviors of the characters. No matter how much a group is represented, if a majority of the representations reinforce a negative stereotype they are not likely to have positive effects either. Just because almost half of protagonists are white males, it does not mean that all white male consumers will identify with those characters. Many white male protagonists can potentially reinforce a type of personality or behavior that reflects the values put upon men in society. To observe representations on a more personal and qualitative level is recommended for future studies on this subject as it too is a very important component in representation.

Another suggestion is to gather more information on the correlation between identifying with the avatar and enjoying the game, as it would strengthen the argument for diverse characters if the theory can be proved to be a common occurrence.

8 Conclusion

The study concludes that when popular narrative-based games do not have customizable characters, the types of characters that lead the players through their games are similar to those of Hollywood film. The percentage of male protagonists is near identical to the results taken from research from the film industry. LGBT-leads are a very small minority and some groups are non-existent as all characters in the study fit into a gender binary and if sexuality is specified they are closest to always presented as heterosexual. The representation of different age groups is very restricted and generally portrays female characters as much younger than male characters, with the oldest female being 29 years old. These studies express a large systematic imbalance in the representation of people in entertainment media across several categories.

Previous studies find the potential effects that media consumption has over an extended amount of time as well as the level of identification and media enjoyment that the characters can provide. When placing all of this together, increasing the level of diverse primary characters in entertainment media is very likely to have positive effects in several ways. By making stories revolve around characters that are currently seen as representational minorities, the consumers' views of people around the world is likely to slowly be affected by it. And the minorities which are being represented can receive more identification and enjoyment from entertainment media if they feel included more.

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Anon 2015. *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*. Rennes: Ubisoft.

Anon 2015. *Life is Strange*. Paris: Dontnod Entertainment.

Game Appendix

These are the titles that are included in the study.

Title	First Release of Original
<i>[Prototype]</i>	2009
<i>Army of Two</i>	2008
<i>Assassin's Creed</i>	2007
<i>Assassin's Creed III</i>	2012
<i>Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag</i>	2013
<i>Assassin's Creed: Revelations</i>	2011
<i>Assassin's Creed: Rogue</i>	2014
<i>Assassin's Creed: Syndicate</i>	2015
<i>Assassin's Creed: Unity</i>	2014
<i>Batman: Arkham Knight</i>	2015
<i>Battlefield 3</i>	2011
<i>Battlefield 4</i>	2013
<i>Battlefield: Bad Company 2</i>	2010
<i>Battlefield: Hardline</i>	2014
<i>Beyond: Two Souls</i>	2013
<i>BioShock</i>	2007
<i>Bioshock 2</i>	2010
<i>Bioshock Infinite</i>	2013
<i>Borderlands</i>	2009
<i>Borderlands 2</i>	2012
<i>Bratz: Forever Diamondz</i>	2006
<i>Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare</i>	2007
<i>Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare</i>	2014
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops</i>	2010
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops 3</i>	2015
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops II</i>	2012
<i>Call of Duty: World at War</i>	2008
<i>Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII</i>	2007
<i>Crysis 2</i>	2011
<i>Daxter</i>	2006
<i>Dead Island</i>	2011
<i>Dead Space 3</i>	2013
<i>Deadpool</i>	2013
<i>Deus Ex: Human Revolution</i>	2011
<i>Devil May Cry 4</i>	2008
<i>Dishonored</i>	2012
<i>Dragon Quest IV: Chapters of the Chosen</i>	1990
<i>Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker</i>	2006
<i>Dragon Quest Monsters: Terry's Wonderland 3D</i>	1998

<i>Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King</i>	2004
<i>Far Cry 3</i>	2012
<i>Far Cry 4</i>	2014
<i>Far Cry Primal</i>	2016
<i>Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions</i>	2007
<i>Final Fantasy X (HD Remaster)</i>	2001
<i>Final Fantasy X-2 (HD Remaster)</i>	2003
<i>Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings</i>	2007
<i>Final Fantasy XIII</i>	2010
<i>Final Fantasy XIII-2</i>	2011
<i>Gears of War</i>	2006
<i>God of War: Ascension</i>	2013
<i>Grand Theft Auto IV</i>	2008
<i>Grand Theft Auto V</i>	2013
<i>Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars</i>	2009
<i>Grand Theft Auto: Episodes from Liberty City</i>	2009
<i>Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories</i>	2006
<i>Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories</i>	2006
<i>Halo 5: Guardians</i>	2015
<i>Hannah Montana</i>	2006
<i>Heavenly Sword</i>	2007
<i>Heavy Rain</i>	2010
<i>Hitman: Absolution</i>	2012
<i>Homefront</i>	2011
<i>Inazuma Eleven 2: Kyoui no Shinryokusha</i>	2009
<i>inFAMOUS 2</i>	2011
<i>Infamous Second Son</i>	2014
<i>Just Cause 3</i>	2015
<i>Kid Icarus: Uprising</i>	2012
<i>Killzone 3</i>	2011
<i>Killzone: Shadow Fall</i>	2013
<i>Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 ReMIX</i>	2002
<i>Knack</i>	2013
<i>Kung Fu Panda</i>	2008
<i>L.A. Noire</i>	2011
<i>Left 4 Dead</i>	2008
<i>Left 4 Dead 2</i>	2009
<i>Life is Strange</i>	2015
<i>Lost Planet: Extreme Condition</i>	2006
<i>Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon</i>	2013
<i>Mad Max</i>	2015
<i>Max Payne 3</i>	2012
<i>Medal of Honor: Warfighter</i>	2012

<i>Mega Man Legacy Collection</i>	1987
<i>Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain</i>	2015
<i>Metroid Prime 3: Corruption</i>	2007
<i>Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor</i>	2014
<i>Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch</i>	2010
<i>Pokemon Black / White</i>	2010
<i>Pokemon Black / White Version 2</i>	2012
<i>Pokemon Diamond / Pearl Version</i>	2006
<i>Pokemon HeartGold / SoulSilver Version</i>	2009
<i>Pokemon Omega Ruby / Alpha Sapphire</i>	2014
<i>Pokemon Ranger: Guardian Signs</i>	2006
<i>Pokemon Ranger: Shadows of Almia</i>	2008
<i>Pokemon X / Y</i>	2013
<i>Professor Layton and the Last Specter</i>	2009
<i>Rage</i>	2011
<i>Ratatouille</i>	2007
<i>Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters</i>	2007
<i>Red Dead Redemption</i>	2010
<i>Resident Evil (Origins Collection)</i>	1996
<i>Resident Evil 6</i>	2012
<i>Resident Evil Zero (Origins Collection)</i>	2002
<i>Resistance 2</i>	2008
<i>Resistance 3</i>	2011
<i>Rise of the Tomb Raider</i>	2015
<i>Scribblenauts</i>	2009
<i>Shin Megami Tensei IV: Final</i>	2016
<i>Sonic and the Secret Rings</i>	2007
<i>Star Wars: The Force Unleashed</i>	2008
<i>Super Mario Galaxy</i>	2007
<i>The Evil Within</i>	2014
<i>The Last of Us Remastered</i>	2013
<i>The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess HD</i>	2006
<i>The Order 1866</i>	2015
<i>The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt</i>	2015
<i>Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction</i>	2010
<i>Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection</i>	2007
<i>Wall-E</i>	2008
<i>Watch Dogs</i>	2014
<i>Wolfenstein: The New Order</i>	2014
<i>Yakuza: Kiwami</i>	2005
<i>Youkai Watch 2 Ganso/Honke</i>	2014