Discrimination in video games

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**Editor’s Note:** This is a response to The Metropolitan’s January/February article written by our copy editor, Andrew Prater, who was interviewing Alex Layne. In the interview, Prater and Layne discussed Layne’s contribution to the blog “Not Your Mama’s Gamer.” The topic of diversity is still contentious in the video game industry. However, over time, the situation is slowly getting better.

As an art and as a form of media, video games provide a unique experience to players, offering agency over action, the ability to contextualize the struggles of others and, above all else, interactivity. Video games are among the most exciting kinds of mass media because they provide a feeling of agency; players feel a responsibility for in-game characters. It’s through this level of agency that limits and lessons of the game take their true form.

But, what happens when game developers unintentionally indoctrinate the player with misguided or even deplorable attitudes?

Let me explain.

We often look back at old Western movies that glorify the slaughter of Native Americans. Despite the obvious cringe value brought on by barbaric nostalgia, Middle Eastern people are to video games what Native Americans were to the movies. Even if many modern military first-person shooters use these populations only as the occupants for a setting and place, in doing so they turn those populations into faceless mobs.

More than ever, developers need to be conscientious about diversity. One of the most tone-deaf examples of unintended indoctrination in recent memory comes from 2011’s “The Call of Juarez: The Cartel.” The game itself is a mishmash of terrible design choices, poor research into its subject — the Mexican drug wars — and dense characters. The shooting aspect of the gameplay was a repetitive slog that any second rate “Call of Duty”clone was able to exceed circa 2009. But the gameplay was hardly the main issue.

There is a point during the game when the player character is driving around a ghetto in L.A. to incite race riots — yes, I know, but it gets worse — when an achievement, a milestone attained through a specific playthough ruleset, called “Gang Bang” is given for killing a certain amount of enemies in this level.

The problem is this is the only level in which every enemy is black.

There are dozens of other examples in the game, but to focus too much on one game would be missing the point. It’s not just the lack of diversity that plagues the video game community, not just the lack of tolerance. It’s the unintended and lazy design choices that prevent progress. Many role-playing games give male characters aesthetically beefed-up armor as they level up, while their female counterparts are given functionally identical but scantily-clad armor. Many fighting games rely on embarrassing racial stereotypes. Regardless of genre, the medium’s history lends credence to the idea that the main audience for games is adolescent boys, who gloss over any major social issue and desire nothing but sex and explosions.

There are some signs of progress, however. In games like 2013’s “Rust,” an online survival game similar to “Minecraft,” the player character’s appearance is randomly generated, and white player can be assigned a character who is a minority. There have been reports that players have felt the closest thing to direct racism through this game. That is the power games have: the gift of agency. They allow you to truly put yourself in someone else’s shoes. Even games like the ”Mass Effect” series or 2015’s “The Witcher: The Wild Hunt” challenge the concept of sexuality and gave players a plethora of choices. They connect sexuality and intimacy in games with meaning and agency, not just titillation.

These are a handful of works that have shown progress in the games industry — progress that will probably continue to escalate, assuming the industry itself grows and stabilizes. But, to assume these games are the norm of the industry is ignorant. There is a long way to go, whether it’s in regards to Gamergate, the Cross Assault sexism fiasco or a mission in “Call of Duty” where you mow down a bunch of Middle Eastern people without knowing their motivations or fully understanding your own. However, we, as consumers of the media, dictate the direction in which the medium is driven. That is our power. Let’s become more enlightened towards this progression and keep the momentum going.