arts

MDPI

Article

The Vicissitudes of Representation: Critical Game Studies, Belonging, and Anti-Essentialism

Soraya Murray

Film & Digital Media Department, The University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA; semurray@ucsc.edu

Abstract: Video games are enjoying a flourishing of critical studies; they are finally taken as consequential forms of visual culture worthy of historical, theoretical, and cultural attention. At one time, their scholarship was largely overdetermined by issues of medium and treated largely as an entertainment product. But with the complexifying of the form, combined with a new generation of dynamic scholars and an expanded understanding of how to write about them, games now constitute a robust area of critical engagement with topics in race, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, ability, and other markers of difference. Those interventions have been key in driving the discourse forward, but game studies now faces a new set of strategic challenges. The gains have likely come at great methodological cost. This essay explores the consequences of identity-focused analyses and the roles of intersectional considerations of self and anti-essentialism as crucial tools in combatting enforced notions of belongingness. The author argues that the frontier of methodology in critical game studies may be to think outside of the prescribed ways in which academia encourages monolithic affiliation (or even false segregation) by validating and codifying identity-driven forms of expertise.

Keywords: representation; video games; videogames; belonging; anti-essentialism; game studies

Citation: Murray, Soraya. 2023. The Vicissitudes of Representation: Critical Game Studies, Belonging, and Anti-Essentialism. *Arts* 12: 230. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12060230

Academic Editor: Michelle Facos

Received: 28 June 2023
Revised: 15 September 2023
Accepted: 27 October 2023
Published: 1 November 2023

Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction: Video Games, Identity-Driven Expertise and Its Costs

Video games have come a long way since their humble beginnings in military and scientific contexts. The first games[1], like William Higinbotham's *Tennis for Two* (1958) and *Spacewar!* by Steve Russell and collaborators (1962), originated in labs and were at least in part created to demonstrate what a computer could do—and to connect with non-specialists. As a relatively new field, it was not until 2001 with the establishment of the international scholarly journal *Game Studies* that any organized discourse of video games that one might call "canonical" existed. Prior to that, most of the writing on games originated with reviews and popular journalism, since they were largely treated as entertainment products. With the exception of rare interventions like Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* (1991), Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), there was little dedicated focus on video games. But by the mid-2000s, the terrain changed, and books like Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's *Tomb Raiders & Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (2006); John Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy's *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media* (2006); Alexander Galloway's *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006); Derek A. Burrill's *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture* (2008); Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (2009); and Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (2009) demonstrated that there was finally traction for a critical cultural approach to games.

Alongside these burgeoning conversations, academic conferences sprung up, like The Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) in 2003 and Foundations of Digital Games (FDG), originally the Microsoft Academic Days on Game Development in Computer Science Education (GDCSE), in 2006. Scholars from pre-existing disciplines began taking video games seriously as their objects of study, including people such as T.L. Taylor, Anna Everett, Craig Watkins, Steven E. Jones, Justine Cassell, Henry Jenkins, Yasmin B. Kafai et al.,

Lisa Nakamura, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, and Mia Consalvo. But with the complexifying of the form, combined with a new generation of dynamic scholars and an expanded understanding of how to write about them, video games now constitute a robust area of critical engagement with topics in race, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, ability, and other markers of difference. Scholars Patrick Jagoda and Jennifer Malkowski have identified proto-canonical debates in games around medium specificity, as well as proceduralist versus play-centric and, perhaps lesser-known, computational versus representational (Jagoda and Malkowski 2022). Now, there are scholars who have written their doctoral dissertations in game studies, graduated, entered into academia and other related fields, and begun shaping the field in meaningful directions. People like Tara Fickle, Amanda Phillips, Carly Kocurek, TreaAndrea Russworm, Jennifer Malkowski, Amanda Cote, micha cárdenas, Aubrey Anable, Matthew Thomas Payne, Kishonna Gray, Shira Chess, Nina Huntemann, Souvik Mukherjee, Christopher B. Patterson, Aaron Trammell, Vít Šisler, Whit Pow, Bo Ruberg, D. Fox Harrell, Gerald Voorhees, Adrienne Shaw, and Patrick Jagoda—there are now simply too many to list here—are intervening in myriad invaluable ways (Malkowski and Russworm 2017; S. Murray 2018; Ruberg 2019; Payne and Huntemann 2019). I take the trouble to name names because a canonic history is still being negotiated, and some of these formative scholars will become submerged in the process. There are many academic journals dedicated specifically to games (both analog and digital), and it is now common for non-game-specific academic journals to engage scholarship on video games. Today, video games are understood to be consequential media forms worthy of historical, theoretical, critical, and cultural attention.

Those interventions, including addressing representation and intersectionality in games, have been key in driving the discourse forward. But now, game studies faces a new set of strategic challenges. The gains may have come at great methodological cost. This essay explores the consequences of identity-focused analyses and the role of intersectional considerations of self and anti-essentialism as crucial tools in combatting enforced notions of belongingness. While matters of representation are still consequential and certainly should not be taken as passé, I argue that the frontier of methodology in critical game studies may be to think outside of the prescribed ways in which academia encourages monolithic affiliation (or even false segregation) by validating and codifying identity-driven forms of expertise. How does scholarly discourse essentialize identity, and what methodologies can be used to interrupt that tendency? By first grounding the discussion in a critical video-games-oriented history of representational concerns, and then considering the larger stakes of how game representation discussions are advanced in academia, I share anti-essentialist pedagogical strategies and perspectives that have helped me instill an expanded understanding of who can be an expert.

What follows is less a discussion of representation as it pertains to diverse players and whether they may (or may not) feel seen in the player characters[2] they control and more of an anti-essentialist look at how, in critical game studies, identity has become tied to certain forms of knowledge—and the canonical perils that lie therein. But as I will show, these two concerns are not entirely disconnected since they spring from the same origins in Eurocentric value systems. Drawing on my more than a dozen years of personal experience teaching video games within a cultural and visual studies framework, I propose that there is much to be gained from the self-conscious interruption of underlying presumptions, many of which are negotiated on the level of identity and representation but also live in deceptively small pedagogical decisions.

Although my scholarly work has taken various forms of visual culture as objects of study, including art, video games, and, more recently, cinema, beneath those various media lies a concern with sociotechnical imaginaries. This is because it is often through the close reading of visual objects like films, art, and material culture that it is possible to access ideological understandings that inform those imaginaries. I borrow this term from Science and Technology Studies scholars Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, who define sociotechnical imaginaries as follows:

> collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology. . .It goes without saying that imaginations of desirable and desired futures correlate, tacitly or explicitly, with the obverse—shared fears of harms that might be incurred through invention and innovation, or of course the failure to innovate. (Jasanoff 2015, pp. 4–5)

These collective visions are rooted in shared hopes but also fears, both of which drive stories of our technological futures. Jasanoff also writes that when we engage with sociotechnical imaginaries, we can access the connection between how people collectively desire things to be in the future and the nature of the various present-day infrastructures that we have built for ourselves as a society (Jasanoff 2015, p. 22).

The term "sociotechnical imaginary" also signals how science and technology engage with national political cultures and public trajectories to imagine a collective vision of the future, which then serves to shape policy, legitimates particular aims, fuels investments, and contributes to a social order that centralizes innovation. This concept is important because it shows the connection between desired futures and the sorts of stories we tell ourselves as a society about our innovation—and our innovators.

But these notions are also struggled with and reified on the level of the image, and my primary interest in this concept is in how social imaginaries are evidenced, shaped, contested, and galvanized through visual representations such as in video games (Evans et al. 2010). This is because, of course, such narratives involve visions of who belongs in the future and who the drivers of innovation are. Biased visions and exclusionary representations become oppressive and should be actively contested. For the sake of this work, I am also specifically interested in pedagogical interventions that refuse toxic forms of belongingness or academic tribalism and invite more expansive forms of belonging and inclusivity within our sociotechnical imaginaries.

2. Framing the Conversation

What does this all have to do with critical game studies? There have been several important points of friction within critical game studies that have, in my view, acted as proxy debates for something deeper that has to do with canonical formations of a new field and the stakes of game studies itself. While I would point interested readers to more detailed discussions, I want to briefly recount them here as they are critical to understanding the nature of the battleground as it stands (S. Murray 2018, see especially the Introduction). First, early scholarly disagreement around defining a proper dmethodological approach to game studies materialized in a form/content debate commonly referred to in terms of the competing approaches of "ludology" and "narratology." Self-described "ludologists" (who framed this debate) privileged the studies of games from a formal perspective and generally took the position that games are not like other forms of media, and therefore should not be studied through the lenses of pre-existing tools of analysis intended for things like literature, cinema, or theater. They asserted that representation in games should be thought of as incidental to things like rule-based systems (Aarseth 2001; Eskelinen 2001). Janet Murray called the position of ludology "game essentialism", describing it as:

> a field not merely differentiated by its objects of study, but as explicitly disconnected from the kinds of inquiry that have traditionally been applied to other cultural genres. According to this view, games in general and computer games in particular display a unique formalism which defines them as a discreet experience, a different genre from narrative, drama, poetry and also different from other "ergotic" or "configurational" forms. (J. Murray 2013)

In a gesture of academic siloing, ludologists deemed the study of games through pre-existing narrative cultural expressions "narratology"—effectively creating a false binary between the technical and the cultural. So, this label would apply to those who saw the

tools of previous media analyses as useful in understanding games, though it did not necessarily discount their unique formal properties. This would also mean that for so-called "narratologists", considerations of representation would hold value since video games are persuasive ideological forms—though unique for their playability (Bogost 2010). Critiques of such a position would be grounded largely in the idea that narratologists do not center the interactive or rule-based play components of games in favor of simple textual analysis of game story. This false dualism has long been refuted as effectively fabricated for academic territorial reasons or as encoded racialized and gendered bias in early games scholarship. But there certainly are competing schools of thought on how games should properly exist in the academy—looking back at my aforementioned list of key texts and scholars, this friction is very much on the surface of that research.

Notably, as someone trained in art history and visual culture studies, this struggle over method, and particularly the advocating for pure formalism and medium specificity, strongly resembled earlier canonical debates that took place within my own disciplinary training. These were also purportedly about form and content, largely waged in identity politics debates in the 1980s and 1990s. Within these debates, a false dualism was also created: on the one hand was the formalist pursuit of artmaking and the study of such work on its own terms, often tacitly associated with white male genius. On the other hand were minoritized subjectivities whose expressions were deemed 'identity art' and who were characterized as anthropologists or native informants of their own cultures. They were thought of as making something that resembled a 'trauma narrative', perhaps, but not art in its pure sense (Foster 1996). Similarly, revisionist scholars who affirmed the contributions of women, queer subjectivities, and people of color to art history were painted with a similar brush. This effectively theorized their presence as fundamentally outside of proper art history, something more akin to social activism. As my co-author Derek Conrad Murray and I wrote of this pernicious exclusion:

> The troubling misrecognition of these artists is rooted in an inside-outside, or binary-based construction of the relationship between identity-based art (minority, noncanonical) and mainstream (normative, canonical) production. Specifically, this construction can be located in the notion that there exists a "social art" and a "social art history" that operate externally to traditional output, which is indifferent to such concerns. Using the markers "social" or "activist" to describe these intellectual and artistic efforts is misleading, in that they place minority engagements in an inherently peripheral position. Simultaneously, it suggests that the politics of identity is somehow not practiced from within the mainstream [. . .] [T]here is no such thing as one art-historical or critical methodology that is engaged in identity politics and another that is not. There are only those social identities that are seeking recognition, and those that speak from a fictive normative position. The critique of revisionist efforts from the mainstream is essentially an effort to preserve one's identity politics (the histories and power relations they construct) from the political efforts of the Other. (Murray and Murray 2006, pp. 37–39, 'Uneasy Bedfellows')

Key is the last point: the struggle for history characterized above is one of competing forms of identity politics, in which the so-called 'normative' is in fact seeking to retain the dominance of their own identity politics as canon.

I recognize from this earlier debate a similar connection between the policing of game studies' borders through "game essentialism" as also being a kind of identity politics at work. It sought to keep certain kinds of approaches out, thus, by design or as a by-product, keeping certain subjectivities out, and was grounded in *a false presumption that such border-policing contained no identity politics of its own*. In fact, game essentialism demonstrated exactly the opposite. In both cases, we are talking about a conversation that purports to be about one thing but is really about another. In both cases, it is an apparent conversation about disciplinary purity, but underneath it is an essentialism that suggests who does not belong in a canonical history and theory of games. For me, this is a much more critical set

of stakes for games and representation, but one that is not disconnected from the matter of representation in games on the level of player/player-character identification. This is because it pre-emptively categorizes by identity those who are thought of as engaged in mainstream or normative conversations about video games as separate from those engaged with identity politics and representation. This is a false binary and is based on a belief in an imminent set of characteristics rather than understanding identity as experienced differently and fluidly among even those deemed to be of the same grouping.

The stakes of this binary may seem small, but in fact they are large enough to have become part of an ongoing culture war, a struggle for recognition in which a particular kind of toxic ideological white male dominance is shored up. Mounting critiques of the games industry's disproportionately high incidents of workplace chauvinism compared with many other professional spheres (Chang 2018; Neate 2015; Pao 2017; Wakabayashi 2017) and the ugly 2012 harassment campaign against then-emerging feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian pointed to the stakes of representation in games (Sarkeesian 2015. See also: Sreenivasan 2014; Alexander 2014b; Woolley 2014; Lien 2015; Ryerson 2014). But this was most spectacularly evidenced in the harassment campaign against the presence of female, trans, socially defined minorities, and progressives in games, dubbed "GamerGate", which began in 2014. GamerGaters often targeted indie or alternative "social justice warriors" making work representing their own subjectivities or scholars and journalists supporting those works and speaking out against intolerance in games.[3]

With the widespread reporting of incidents, ranging from trolling and doxxing[4] to other threats, GamerGate became so heated that the conventional construction of the 'gamer' as an identity associated with a particular type of white, male, disengaged, or antisocial player was declared dead by several critics (Alexander 2014a). The negativity and misogyny associated with gamers and increasing connections to the alt-right (which was effectively mobilizing online forums and communities to spread extremism) even led some within the player community to personally reject the title, even if they might solidly fall within the term's definition. In all of this churning debate, the titles characterized as destroying games as 'fun' often centered concerns of identity, including representations of race, sex, gender, nation, class, or other markers of difference. But this is all just a fancy way of saying who does or does not belong, which is incredibly consequential for the sociotechnical imaginary.

3. Vicissitudes of Representation

Many scholars have spoken out about the persisting importance of representation as a battleground within games. For example, media studies and games scholar TreaAndrea Russworm stridently opposes the tendency of mainstream video game representation to uphold dominant values:

> video games matter and will remain relevant because every inflection of the digital can service white supremacy just as the ideology of white supremacy is itself a technology of capitalism. Game culture's proximity to these things is widely apparent when doxxing, trolling, and overt threats of violence are the ready-made tactics of online hate campaigns like #Gamergate and are also techniques that are used by the president and his supporters. Additionally, when online and streaming gameplay is routinely interrupted by a barrage of racial epithets, and when popular game franchises like *Red Dead Redemption*, *Call of Duty*, and *Resident Evil* provide fantasies of destruction that laud settler colonialism, and when *Pokémon Go* limits collectible assets in less affluent neighborhoods, we need not look far to note the overt ways in which gaming culture harnesses the techniques of power that also define the political domain. (Russworm 2018, p. 75)

Russworm's work emblematizes struggles against a 'business as usual' response when it comes to games and representation, and this intervention is necessary for video games to grow and mature as a medium. Critical interventions by scholars such as Kishonna

Gray and David J. Leonard are engaging notions of representation and games as they intersect with social justice, folding in matters of inclusivity and representation across the spectrum of the games industry (Gray and Leonard 2018). This operates against a larger set of interventions taking place in discussions of technology, such as in the work of Lisa Nakamura, Safia Noble, and Ruja Benjamin (Nakamura 2008; Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018). There is much work to be done, and such efforts are incredibly consequential for shifting the terrain away from implicitly white constructions of futurity.

Some unexpected relations to representation have emerged that open-up new possibilities for how we can understand identity and games. Tara Fickle's *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (2019) moves away from representation in terms of Asian and Asian American identity per se. Instead, it considers games, broadly defined, delving deeper into the Orientalism present in game studies and engaging in a more sweeping genealogy of ideas around the connection between Asian race relations and games as "instruments of 'soft power' to advance political agendas and discipline national subjects" (Fickle 2019, p. 26).

Games scholar Adrienne Shaw, who has conducted extensive research on the connection between minoritized players and their player-characters, also grappled with the notion of representation in relation to games. In her "Diversity without Defense: Reframing Arguments for Diversity in Games", Shaw questions the tacit understanding within media studies that "representation matters" and carefully works through the nuances of what that exactly means—and to whom. Her core provocation is compelling: "How we talk about representation popularly and academically really does matter to the extent that how we make our arguments shapes the type of opposition we see" (Shaw 2017, p. 68). This indicates a keen awareness of how controlling the way a discussion is framed delimits the possible scope of responses. In other words, controlling the framing of the argument is, to a large extent, the means to control its outcome. This is in keeping with my own earlier concern that in advance of even dealing with the art itself on its own terms, many artists engaging identity directly were being theorized out on a canonical and methodological level—the terms of the conversation were already frontloaded with a concern with formal purity.

A key observation Shaw makes within the context of this conversation is that her own research outcomes did not conform neatly to the popularly held idea that people needed to necessarily consume images that directly reflected their own identity (See especially Shaw 2015). Instead, Shaw writes: "what they did need is people like them, in an expansive intersectional sense, to be seen. Representation matters because it makes their identity legible" (Shaw 2017, p. 55). Highlighting the many factors that impact a male-centric understanding of games, Shaw points to things like the overwhelmingly male-dominated industry, the historical narrative of games (despite the consistent presence of all walks of life from the beginning), and the term "gamer" itself as overdetermined by toxic masculine associations. I am interested in how this observation signals a connection between in-game representation, the demographics of identity, canon formation, and game culture.

Shaw suggests it is futile to persist in a struggle between 'good' or 'bad' representations to address deeper elisions. Rather, she embraces what she calls a "diversity without defense argument" that invites us to invest in change and stop trying to legitimate our academic research in relation to its use-value for the industry, its connectedness to accessing new audiences as 'good business sense', or niche marketing. Shaw instead advocates for a rejection of such logics, and an embrace of diversity and inclusion as its own goal, by generating "more kinds of narratives, more kinds of characters, and more kinds of mechanics if they [industry] want to promote innovation" (Shaw 2017, pp. 70–72). This outcome is complicated because although it does not eschew the importance of representation, it does significantly reframe or, arguably, displace its centrality in ways that might alarm those proponents of what Shaw calls the "Representation Matters!" school of thought. This also interrupts the taxonomies of difference that arise in response to the need to 'bean count'

the presence of particular minoritized peoples and for their presence to be considered an extension of a needed quota rather than an authentic asset.

Shaw's conclusions may be thought of as not precisely in lock-step agreement with the vehement "Representation matters!" crowd, one focused on liberal inclusivity, and I suspect it has caused this important research to be somewhat underattended to. But I argue that Shaw's position is extremely useful—not only for thinking about players, but also for who can be thought of as an expert in game studies and game design. In this, I am suggesting that one might consider canons and methodologies as equally important sites of intervention in terms of the mattering of representation.

This conversation is elaborated upon in "Are We There Yet? The Politics and Practices of Intersectional Game Studies", in which Shaw describes the troubling tendency of academic discourses toward taxonomies that artificially mischaracterize intersectional work as rooted in the singular positionality of the person professing their knowledge. So, for example, despite her scholarship being deeply invested in race, as a queer white woman her work is understood to be primarily about female gamers and/or queer gamers. She also complains on behalf of her colleague, Kishonna Gray, that the latter's work is understood to be primarily about race because Gray is African-American—although her scholarship is also deeply invested in gender and sexuality (Shaw 2018, p. 77). This tendency of course conflicts with critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's very notion of intersectionality, which posits that a more holistic approach to identity is necessary in order to understand how "we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1299).

I completely agree with this characterization of persisting disciplinary boundary-drawing, even when the scholar themselves may have a complex intersectional engagement with their objects of study. However, I do not think the problem resides in a lack of understanding about intersectionality. There are structures in place that tend to corral people into their predefined identitarian roles, to settle them into forms of expertise circumscribed by those identities, and to reinforce and validate particular kinds of participation through academic disciplinary formations, funding models, and various rewards and benefits that come with the academic legibility of staying in one's lane. This again becomes a matter of representation on a canonical level.

Who may speak, and on what topic? Who is deemed an expert, and what are particular subjectivities allowed to be experts in? What do funding models encourage or discourage in research endeavors, and how is institutional support for particular concerns of representation made measurable and counted by being legible in particular kinds of ways? The result is sometimes a lot of virtue signaling while also creating an enormous amount of intellectual strictures for minoritized academics who are surely experts and pedigreed in something more than their own identities. What I am talking about here is more than a strategy of changing hearts and minds by appealing to an ethics of inclusivity in fellow academics and students. For, as I have explained, this may pursue a noble goal at the cost of locking experts into roles of alterity. Rather, I am advocating that, like Shaw, we need a more complex understanding of what representation actually means. Intersectionality and anti-essentialism are useful tools for interrupting academic scenarios that function to codify alterity and delimit who may be an expert within the sociotechnical imaginary.

4. And What of the Classroom?

In acknowledgment of culturally imposed notions of expertise that are so much a part of academia as to be canon themselves, I am interested in how anti-essentialist strategies can be activated to interrupt this process. I have described this in relation to scholarship, but the classroom is another place where sociotechnical imaginaries are shaped. What representational troubling is possible, and how can the visual culture studies of video games become a crucial site of that interruption for the next generation of game design

students and critical game scholars? Part of this work is in enacting an intersectional approach, and outstripping the limiting presumptions of expertise as tied to identity.

Pedagogy forms one critical frontline of this struggle. To give one practical example, I designed a course called *Video Games as Visual Culture* that was initially intended as a stand-alone visual culture course to satisfy a general education requirement in culture and technology. Soon after, it was adopted as part of the core curriculum for an undergraduate dual-track games program. On one track, one could earn a Bachelor's in Science, with a heavier emphasis on the technical aspects of computer game engineering. On the other track, one could earn a Bachelor's in Art, with a focus on novel game systems, spaces, and configurations toward the artistic pursuit of games within their deeper social and historical contexts. This meant that every single person completing the degree would take the course, and thus it represented an opportunity to invite students into a collective larger conversation, a common language with which to understand why games matter. This also placed me pedagogically in the belly of the beast, in a research university with a wildly popular games degree, located in the immediate vicinity of Silicon Valley, during an ongoing and very ugly public struggle for inclusivity.

The opportunity of a large format lecture course to create a critical framing for how students think about games was apparent, but there were also larger outside factors influencing their perceptions. My critical game studies course swelled over the years to 400 students and brought together emerging engineers and artists. But these students often came dragging their ideological baggage behind them, particularly as it regarded the vision of an expert in video games, what writing constituted a canon for the field (such as it is), and who may wield authority in the conversation. In truth, students could hardly be blamed for this, given that the notion of tech expertise and authority is so strongly ideologically encoded and reinforced by an enormous architecture of media culture against which there is little defense. In addition, one could not ignore the unforeseen consequences of institutional efforts toward inclusivity, which have since the 1990s contributed to a false perception that the presence of diversity comes necessarily at the cost of high standards—or the obverse of this, that one's difference itself constitutes one's worth, rather than one's contribution.

Initially, in 2010, I designed the course rather typically and in accordance with one of the few textbooks on games available at the time. This textbook was conventional in that it presented a history of games and a focus on key themes including game culture, aesthetics, history, ludology vs. narratology, etc. Some of these intersected with identity so that there was a section on race, another on gender (in a binary sense), and, overwhelmingly, experts outside of these limited areas attending to difference were overwhelmingly white, male, and either European or American. Further, as a thirty-something woman of color teaching games, I was often implicitly not understood as an expert given the ideological encoding of technology as masculine (Oldenziel 1999). While many students were receptive, there was a strong contingent of students who initially rejected my presence, protesting in many small ways, mostly refusing to display any recognition of my authority as a professor. There was a false perception projected onto me that by engaging them in the context of serious topics like race, gender, sex, class, nation, and politics, I disliked games or sought to destroy the 'fun' of them. Over many weeks, students would reorient their positions as the course was revealed to actually validate games as significant and worthy of attention, complex, rich, and, in fact, a primary site of visual literacy for their generation.

In the early years of the course, great importance lay in having a conversation about representation, and over time the general sophistication of students grew in keeping with the fact that I was engaging with young people who had increasingly profound relationships to the games they played. But I also began to realize that intersectionality would be key to complexifying such discussions. Further, even more critical than addressing representation in game content—which certainly needed attention—was engaging a diversity of voices in game studies. I was noticing that an unintended consequence of pursuits revolving around particular identities and speaking on those identities exclusively was a kind of segregation of scholars and experts according to their identities. I did not want

to model or reinforce the book's lack of intersectionality and its compartmentalization by example in the classroom. In a radical revision to the course structure, I began disrupting my own presumptions and that of my students.

My students also disrupted my unconscious biases in ways that profoundly changed how I think about what I do. For example, early on I had a dedicated lecture on gender and games, which was in keeping with a section of the textbook. To some extent, one could say that this alone was activist in that it gave feminist approaches a toehold in the games conversation, whereas it might be otherwise ignored. But the primer implicitly took "gender" to mean "female gamers", and among other things did not acknowledge gender as a continuum. One year, because of a lively discussion in class, my gender lecture ran long, and I completed it the following session. Soon after, I received a handwritten, anonymous note from a student who said they were transgender, and that they had intended to skip my gender lecture because it did not acknowledge their trans identity. But when I returned to the topic the next class, they felt unwelcome in the course because of the binary gender presumptions of the textbook.

As someone whose right to belong was questioned throughout my education, I recognized that what they said was true: it was a painful identification of a blind spot. This was a difficult lesson, and I am grateful for the forthrightness of that student in speaking up. In fact, beyond the immediate matter of correcting the implicit binary gender politics in my course, it jarred something in me about my course as a whole and how methodology and pedagogy can impact how students think about games. I immediately changed my lectures, straying a little more each year from the textbook, integrating more essays by a diversity of scholars, selecting key game examples from a wide variety of makers, and ensuring that the whole student body can see themselves in the expertise presented to them. Eventually, I broke with the textbook altogether, engaging a modular thematic approach that can flex with issues in games that arise and the meaningful revisionist efforts to reinstate those who have been drowned out in the historical conversation of video games.

Perhaps most importantly, I am extremely transparent about my politics of citation demonstrated in the syllabus readings. To demonstrate that expertise in game studies can come from any person and often from any area of study, my course is transdisciplinary, intersectional, and anti-essentialist. More than half the syllabus is by women and/or people of color who are respected contributors to the field. Presentations pertaining to essays often contain images of authors to humanize the material and visually demonstrate to students that a wide variety of people operate at the apex of the field. Importantly, I self-consciously do not limit scholars' research agendas to their identities. I do not call upon female-identified scholars only in conversations of gender, or Black scholars only in the capacity of Blackness, or trans scholars only to discuss trans-related topics. Black scholars discuss dystopia or theorizations of play, female-identified scholars teach ethics, Latino scholars may theoretically engage with the haptic in games. White male scholars readily associated with the 'canon' are not ignored, because their contributions have also shaped the field, and self-consciously negating or erasing them would also be a form of negation, erasure, and essentialism. They are present, but in a larger eco-system of ideas. I often create a polemic to force students to engage deeply with these ideas and to decide for themselves what they think. To the best of my ability, I do not create the conditions for students to assume that their identities should cause them to have no place in dominant conversation or that their expertise should be limited to their identity. I model this in my own games research by asserting my authority to speak in ways that are intersectional and anti-essentialist, and which insistently unsettle the expectations set forth by markers of my identity.

5. Conclusions

On the scholarly front of this battle for recognition, a new generation of critical game studies scholars recognizes that representation matters, but they also mine the crucial racial logics that issue from their rule-based systems. For example, Tara Fickle and Christopher B.

Patterson's "Diversity is not a Win-Win Condition" explicitly tackles this problem, teasing out the pitfalls and opportunities of making games "more diverse" through analysis of the various strategies games have attempted—with mixed results— to address this (Fickle and Patterson 2022). By outlining the "procedural logics of racial management", they open-up new possibilities for how we can think about representation and inclusion in game design, industry, and game studies (Fickle and Patterson 2022, p. 211). These, along with those of Shaw, Nakamura, Anna Everett, Kishonna Gray, and Russworm, are all critical interventions. But I am particularly interested in the interconnectedness between the games we play, how and what we teach, core curriculum design, how we research, and the corners we may paint ourselves into as critical game scholars when we allow ourselves to be typecast into identity-based specializations.[5] All of these components feed social imaginaries about ourselves and each other that we should be extremely careful of. Employing anti-essentialist methodologies can be one effective intervention to reshape the nature of the conversation across the spectrum I have identified, slowly but surely.

We need to complexify our vision of what representation means for in-game representations—but also, as I would add, for what counts as canon and expertise in the field. This engagement with the idea of who constitutes a games expert can make legible those in the field who are already present and making critical contributions but are ideologically excised from canonical legitimacy: in other words, curbed in their authority to speak as legitimate experts. This expanded understanding is also, on a basic level, a form of professional competence. The pernicious ideological framing of minoritized scholars as methodologically outside of canon should be fiercely opposed in large and small ways. In addition, minoritized critical game scholars should be brazen about resisting both the external pressures and toxic forms of belongingness that demand the performance of one's identity as the price of admission into academic discourse. All of game studies belongs to us, not just a compartmentalized area corresponding to our identities. In fact, it is to the betterment of the discourse for a rigorous and divergent set of voices to push the field into new areas and model intersectional and anti-essentialist practices by embodying the idea that any person may potentially contribute to any discourse.

Intersectionality and anti-essentialism as pedagogical strategies for greater competence in the medium of games should be *de rigeur* in games programs as an extension of valuing collective belonging in educational systems. In addition to the many potential interventions I have proposed, it is key that games programs include critical game studies as a part of their core curriculum and invest in the stable presence of critical game studies scholars as necessary to cultivate excellence in students and normalize its institutional value. Department leaders might consider that the presence of critical studies in other creative/media forms (music, art, film, television, theater, etc.) is expected and normalized as part of a student's education, whereas in games programs this is often not the case. Even despite the pervasiveness of games and their great impact on sociotechnical imaginaries, within the academy, they are still thought of as primarily technical, not cultural. But it is on a methodological level that there remains a valuable opportunity to expand the possibilities around who is part of the canonical conversation, to model inclusivity around who is thought of as an expert, and of what they may profess their knowledge. I want to be clear here that I am not making an argument rooted in an emotional plea, an invocation for the field (such as it is) to do the right thing. In fact, this is an argument for professorial competence, as persisting in boundary policing is no longer viable. Not to do so is to allow academic liberalism to unwittingly serve the outcomes of disciplinary formalist and purity debates—at great cost to a young and growing field of study. Put another way, the cost of such essentialism would be obsolescence.

Known for her ongoing interventions into the paradigms that order our lives in repressive ways, law professor Trina Grillo argued for intersectionality and anti-essentialism as key to increasing a sense of collective belonging within institutional systems (in her case, she was speaking of legal and educational systems). Grillo wrote, "each of us has a limited view of the world, that we have a better chance of forming a vision of a post-patriarchal,

post-racist society both by trusting in our own experiences and by seeking out voices that are drowned out by essentialism in all its forms" (Grillo 1995, p. 30). These forms take the shape of larger canonical discussions that seek to frame the conversation so that certain entities are theorized out of ever becoming meaningful voices. Small but significant antiessentialist acts within the classroom can subtly nudge students to be better than the previous generation. Within various spheres of influence, critical game scholars, historians, and designers can recuperate and amplify those voices drowned out by essentialism by negotiating the vicissitudes of canonical representation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] For this discussion, I will sometimes use video games and games as interchangeable terms; but I want to acknowledge a rich body of knowledge in games that are not video games—tabletop, live role-playing, children's games, strategy games, card games, dice games, etc.

[2] A player-character is the common term for the character on-screen that a player controls. This is opposed to a non-player character, or a character in the game that the player does not control, or any character that populates the game either as a "background" ambient character or one with which the player character may interact.

[3] "Social Justice Warrior" or SJW became a pejorative umbrella term used by Gamergaters to signal progressive activists online.

[4] Doxxing is publicly posting sensitive personal information online, such as a social security number, bank account number, address, etc., with the incitement that others should harm the person targeted.

[5] Thanks to the anonymous reader for this term "typecast", which is exactly right.

References

Aarseth, Espen. 2001. Computer Game Studies, Year One. *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1. Available online: http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Alexander, Leigh. 2014a. "Gamers" Don't Have to Be Your Audience. "Gamers" Are Over. *Gamasutra*. August 28. Available online: http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_your_audience_Gamers_are_over.php (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Alexander, Leigh. 2014b. Sexism, Lies and Video Games: The Culture War Nobody Is Winning. *Time*. September 5. Available online: http://time.com/3274247/video-game-culture-war/ (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Benjamin, Ruha. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, 1st ed. Medford: Polity.

Bogost, Ian. 2010. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Chang, Emily. 2018. *Brotopia: Breaking Up the Boys' Club of Silicon Valley*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé W. 1991. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review* 43: 1241–99. [CrossRef]

Eskelinen, Markku. 2001. The Gaming Situation. *Game Studies* 1. Available online: https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/ (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Evans, Sam, Will Firestone, Ben Hurlbut, Sang-Hyung Kim, Lee Vinsel, and Sheila Jasanoff. 2010. STS Research Platforms: Sociotechnical Imaginaries. Harvard Kennedy School of Government Program on Science, Technology & Society. Available online: https://sts.hks.harvard.edu/research/platforms/imaginaries/ (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Fickle, Tara. 2019. *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities*. Postmillennial Pop. New York: New York University Press.

Fickle, Tara, and Christopher B. Patterson. 2022. Diversity Is Not a Win-Condition. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 39: 211–20. [CrossRef]

Foster, Hal. 1996. *The Return of the Real: The Avante-Garde at the End of the Century*. Paperback/Softback Edition. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Gray, Kishonna L., and David J. Leonard, eds. 2018. *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Grillo, Trina. 1995. Intersectionality: Tools to Dismantle the Master's House. *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 10: 16–30.

Jagoda, Patrick, and Jennifer Malkowski. 2022. Introduction: American Game Studies. *American Literature* 94: 1–16. [CrossRef]

Jasanoff, Sheila. 2015. Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity. In *Dreamscapes of Modernity*. Edited by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyung Kim. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 1–33. Available online: https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/D/bo20836025.html (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Lien, Tracey. 2015. Why Are Women Leaving the Tech Industry in Droves? *Los Angeles Times*. February 22. Available online: http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-women-tech-20150222-story.html#page=1 (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Malkowski, Jennifer, and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, eds. 2017. *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Digital Game Studies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Murray, Derek Conrad, and Soraya Murray. 2006. Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity. *Art Journal* 65: 22–39. [CrossRef]

Murray, Janet. 2013. The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology (2005). *Inventing the Medium (blog)*. June 28. Available online: https://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/ (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Murray, Soraya. 2018. *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2008. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. Electronic Mediations 23. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Neate, Rupert. 2015. Ellen Pao Gender Discrimination Trial Grips Silicon Valley | Technology |. *The Guardian*. March 13. Available online: http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/mar/13/ellen-pao-gender-lawsuit-silicon-valley (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Noble, Safiya Umoja. 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press.

Oldenziel, Ruth. 1999. *Making Technology Masculine: Men, Women, and Modern Machines in America, 1870–1945*, 1st ed. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Pao, Ellen. 2017. *Reset: My Fight for Inclusion and Lasting Change*, 1st ed. New York: Random House.

Payne, Matthew Thomas, and Nina Huntemann, eds. 2019. *How to Play Video Games*. New York: New York University Press.

Ruberg, Bonnie. 2019. *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*. Postmillennial Pop. New York: New York University Press.

Russworm, TreaAndrea M. 2018. A Call to Action for Video Game Studies in an Age of Reanimated White Supremacy. *The Velvet Light Trap* 81: 73–76.

Ryerson, Liz. 2014. On 'Gamers' and Identity. *First Person Scholar (blog)*. September 10. Available online: http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/on-gamers-and-identity/ (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Sarkeesian, Anita. 2015. One Week of Harassment on Twitter. *Feminist Frequency*. January 20. Available online: http://femfreq.tumblr.com/post/109319269825/one-week-of-harassment-on-twitter (accessed on 8 April 2017).

Shaw, Adrienne. 2015. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Shaw, Adrienne. 2017. Diversity without Defense: Reframing arguments for diversity in games. *Kinephanos*, 54–76.

Shaw, Adrienne. 2018. Are We There yet? The Politics and Practices of Intersectional Game Studies. *The Velvet Light Trap* 81: 76–80. [CrossRef]

Sreenivasan, Hari. 2014. #Gamergate Leads to Death Threats against Women. *PBS NewsHour (blog)*. October 16. Available online: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/gamergate-leads-death-threats-women-gaming-industry/ (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Wakabayashi, Daisuke. 2017. Google Fires Engineer Who Wrote Memo Questioning Women in Tech. *The New York Times*. August 7. Available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/07/business/google-women-engineer-fired-memo.html (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Woolley, Emma M. 2014. Don't Believe the "Conspiracy", Gaming Has Bigger Problems than "Corruption". *The Globe and Mail*. August 27. Available online: http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/digital-culture/dont-believe-the-conspiracy-gaming-has-bigger-problems-than-corruption/article20230850/ (accessed on 15 September 2023).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.