

A Gatekeeper Final Boss: An Analysis of MOGAI Representation in Video Games

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Abstract

There have been MOGAI characters since near the beginning of video games, but their representation has been something of debate and controversy. This paper looks at not only the history of representing MOGAI characters, but the dynamics of how these populations are represented within video games, and analyses how players feel regarding this subject.

Keywords

MOGAI; queer; queer studies; LGBTQ; representation; minority groups; marginalized; player demographics;

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Introduction

The evolution and improvement of technology in the past several decades have allowed video games to reach new levels of depth and storytelling. As a result, an entire genre of Role Playing Games emerged; with character depth and development being an important feature of them. Over the years the technology improved, and so did the characters, revealing depth and details for characters of all kinds. Despite this, there is one group of people who are incredibly under-represented. With the technology as it is, it is entirely possible to tell the stories of all different kinds of people, so why is it that MOGAI¹ characters are still critically under-represented within the game industry as a whole?

The Question: What Do Players Want?

At the core of things, a game's success is determined by whether or not it gives the players what they want. I wanted to see how players responded to trends in MOGAI representation in games, determining whether or not they felt positive or negatively about them. I did this in order to see if this was potentially the source of any resistance against MOGAI representation.

For the purposes of gathering information, an online survey was created using the website SurveyPlanet. The survey was 14 questions long, and asked questions regarding the participant's demographic information, opinions on MOGAI representative trends, and thoughts about representation of marginalized groups as a whole. The format of these questions was primarily multiple choice; however several of them also allowed for an open ended response from the participant. Participants were allowed to skip any question they so wished. To prevent abuse, participants were required to provide an email address before being allowed to access the survey, but were assured that it would not be used at all, and their information would be completely anonymous. The survey answers were organized into one of several characterizations: Positive, Negative, Neutral, or Not Applicable. This was done to allow the calculation of a basic metric of emotional response. A total of 100 responses were gathered².

¹ MOGAI is an acronym that stands for "Marginalized Orientations, Genders, And Identities." To put simply, it is an alternative way of saying "LGBTQIAA+" (Which itself stands for "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer, Intersexed, Asexual, Allies). By its formatting the definition of MOGAI is designed to not only include all members of the aforementioned groups, but any potential groups that may be included in the future.

² The original intent was to gather more responses, but an increasing number of hostile responses from non-survey takers from two sources, 4chan and Reddit's Kotaku In Action board, meant an increased risk of people abusing the survey to skew the results. As a result of this hostility, survey access had to be shut down early. However, an equal number of participants from each were used in the final sample.

The survey was promoted in several distinct areas in an attempt to get a balanced and more randomized sample. Initial promotions were via social media networks within the University of North Carolina at Asheville system. Because this university's political affiliations tend to lean more toward the liberal side, there was a risk of the data becoming skewed. Thus, to balance the results, the survey was promoted on several other websites that either had more conservative ideologies or were much more neutral or mixed. These included the Gaming, Game Discussion, and Kotaku In Action sections of the website *Reddit*, and the Game Generals section of the website 4chan.

Starting Up a New Game

Queer studies and video game studies within the realm of academia are relatively new fields of study. As a result, there is relatively little foundational work, compared to many other fields, in which to ground the current research. The relative dearth of this field of study tends to be scattered through a diversity of mediums and venues. Relevant formal academic research tends to be limited to the few sociological journals that accept material on the subject matter, or to their own niche journals; which are not always easy to access. Several popular websites, such as Kotaku, Escapist, and Feminist Frequency, do publish articles on these subject matters. But their academic validity and research quality is questionable. Thus, accessing the total and verifiable knowledge in this subject matter is a difficult task.

One of the few foundational works I could find in my research was Adrienne Shaw's article, "Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT content in Video Games". Shaw's work examines the representation of MOGAI people within the video game industry from every aspect. It is a great resource and informative foundation, and Shaw's proposed solution to combat the skewed perspective within the industry is a valid one. Shaw recommends having more MOGAI people involved in all levels of production within the industry. Thankfully, because Shaw's article was written in 2009, and the game industry possesses a proclivity toward rapid change and development, that solution has already been implemented by multiple companies, and the difference is notable.

Jenson and De Castell explored the relationship between gender and gaming in their 2010 study. They found some unique behavioural patterns when studying gender relationships in gaming, especially when it came to interacting with female players. But one thing that their research concludes is the need for more study of games through a queer lens:

In the future, the very real need for research on gender and gameplay that more carefully reports on, documents, and troubles identities of player, producers, and consumers of digital games, especially in relation to gender, cannot be

underestimated. In particular, this work would begin from the more nuanced theories of gender and identities that have been developed through postmodern, poststructural, feminist, postfeminist, queer theory, and theories of race and identity and then approach questions around gender and gameplay with a view to reporting on and accounting for those kinds of difference. (Jenson & de Castell, 2010)

Jenson and de Castell's call for more research in this field, in order to deconstruct and challenge some notions held by game players and designers has been heeded, and progress to that end has been made, albeit slowly. Scholarship on this subject is being produced, and conventions are being challenged. But this is something that is currently happening, and I hope to contribute to this conversation.

How Marginalized is Marginalized?

MOGAI characters have existed since near the beginning of video games, but their numbers were very sparse. From 1986, the first time a MOGAI character was included in a game; to 2000 there were only about ten video games that featured MOGAI characters in primary roles.³ Any other instances of MOGAI characters were minor background characters with little to no impact on the game itself. Even though the characters were there, some may wish they weren't; for these characters were typically very stereotypical and offensive. Examples include the infamous boss Ash from *Streets of Rage 3*, dressed in black leather and parading flamboyantly like the classic gay stereotype, or the multitude of non-player-characters in the background who become overly flirtatious with a male character for the pure comedy of making the player character uncomfortable, like in *Phantasy Star 2* or *Devil Summoner: Soul Hackers*. Even worse, when several games were translated to bring to the American markets, MOGAI characters would have their identities hidden or erased entirely, with development teams editing or deleting these aspects of their identities entirely. A majority of this editing was done by localization⁴ teams who thought that "sexual themes" could be offensive or inappropriate to include in video games,

³ These games are, *Final Fight* by Capcom (1989), *Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender* by MicroProse (1992), *Police Quest: Open Season* by Sierra Online (1993), *Chrono Trigger* by Square (1994), *The Orion Conspiracy* by Divide By Zero (1995), *Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh* by Sierra Entertainment (1996), *Fallout 2* by Interplay (1998), *Evil Zone* by Titus Software (1999), *Persona 2: Innocent Sin* by Atlus (1999), and *The Longest Journey* by Funcom (1999).

⁴ Localization is a term that means translating a game from another country for release in the market. Localization tends to go beyond merely translating, as culturally specific content sometimes tends to be edited to make sense to the intended market. This is the source of some debate, as sometimes localization can delete aspects of the game which some players deem important, such as MOGAI character identities.

at the time still considered something entirely for children⁵. This could speak to America's cultural sensitivity to the subject of sexuality, as many of these characters present no problem to Japanese audiences who receive exposure to the unedited games. This is only a point of speculation by several people on the internet, and impossible to tell, as many companies keep their guidelines and policies for localization private. I contacted one such company, Nintendo, about their localization policies and decisions (as Nintendo has edited two characters, removing their trans identity when their games were released to the North American market⁶). The representative I spoke with said he was not at liberty to give me any such information about those characters or their localization policies. He told me of an email address I could write to request that information. At the time of this writing, I have not received any response from Nintendo. This lack of information does at least garner suspicion, but no clear conclusion can be made regarding the phenomenon.

In the early 2000s there was a spike in representative⁷ characters in video games, but they tended to be one dimensional. These were gay, lesbian, and more rarely transgendered people who had an entire identity that could be summed up in a sentence or two. All of their problems were related to their MOGAI identity. They were very flat characters, who made little to no impact on players. The exact reason for this increase in representation is unknown. There have not been formal studies or research into why this trend occurred. A possible reason is that the MOGAI market was previously not considered before, and decisions were made to try and capitalize upon an untapped market. This is speculation, but the trend change in representation was of great importance for shaping the game market and representation ideologies of today.

Video games have shown that in many aspects that they are capable of rapid evolution. As technology and capacity for story increased in

⁵ The idea that localization companies censor identities due to sexual content is something that is brought up in discussions of games. In 2014, an article by Gabriel Arana criticized the major company Nintendo for censoring MOGAI content in some of their games, citing the reason of trying to promote family friendly content. Arana's article deconstructs how this statement and stance is ultimately negative and harmful. (Arana, 2014)

⁶ These two specific characters are Birdo, first appearing in *Super Mario Bros. 2*, and Vivian, appearing in *Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door*. Birdo's identity has been the subject of some debate regarding as to whether it was a true identity or merely an early draft. But the character Vivian and her trans identity is very clear, yet all traces of it were removed when the game was localized for the North American market.

⁷ In the context of this article, true representation is the presence of a dynamic, multifaceted character that has some relevance to the game's plot, and is not based on stereotypes. If a game character does not fall within this definition, then for the purposes of this study that is not a representative character of the MOGAI population.

games, so too did development of character. Characters became multi-dimensional, nuanced, and complex. And the MOGAI characters soon followed suit. These well rounded and fully developed MOGAI characters didn't really enter the scene until the 2010s, and continue to this day. Though they are much more complex, and refreshing compared to their origins, they are still drops in the bucket compared to the total number of video games and characters out there.

From 2010 to 2015, over 4000 video games were published for commercial release in the United States. In this time period, only 63 games were published that either featured MOGAI characters, or allowed the player to act as a MOGAI character⁸ (such as having a same sex relationship with another character in the game⁹). This is approximately one per cent of the total produced, and shows just how under-represented that MOGAI peoples are in this medium.

Some people can argue that this number is fair, because it is close or right at the population level of MOGAI people in the United States. As one respondent to the survey said, "When your entire demographic falls within the margin of error of any scientific survey, not being in 99.9% of games IS accurate representation. The vast majority of people who buy games are young white men in the US" (Survey Participant 32). This statement sums up one of the arguments of those against representation; video games should not include more representative characters because people who are not white, heterosexual men do not play video games in the same numbers as those who are. At its core, this argument is flawed. To begin, information collected by the Entertainment Software Association shows that 44% of gamers are female (ESA, 2014). My own survey results showed that 80% of participants identified as Caucasian. Comparable surveys or statistics on race and player demographics could not be found, as racial demographics tend to be unexplored in this subject matter, which is just as important to be aware of as MOGAI representation. The rest of my survey participants varied among many races. In terms of sexuality and gender, 17% of my participants did not identify as cisgendered, and 39% did not identify as heterosexual. When it comes to representation fitting in line with reality, there is a clear discrepancy here. But when it comes to MOGAI populations, the reality is even more complicated. Depending on the sociological definitions, there is a wide area of speculation as to what the actual numbers could be. From one study that looked at polled and census records, it places the adult MOGAI population in the US at anywhere between 3.7-4.7%, depending on the

⁸ These data were obtained by cross-referencing the list of MOGAI characters found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_characters_in_video_games with lists of game titles released each year, as documented on Wikipedia (for example, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_in_video_gaming)

⁹ Examples of games that allow this kind of decision would be games of the *Mass Effect* franchise, games of the *Fallout Franchise*, games of the *Dragon Age* franchise, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

area (Hasenbush et al., 2014). Very often the numbers of these characters are only one or two in a wide cast of numerous characters; minorities even within their own worlds. It just illustrates that the number of MOGAI characters in a game is incredibly small compared to the real world population. But do these numbers stack up with the people who play video games?

Who's Playing?

Obtaining hard numbers of exactly what population of people within any marginalized group plays video games is difficult. People who are against MOGAI representation can claim that some of these groups do not exist, but we know that they are real. Not only are they real, but having exposure to characters that represent them is a boon to their psychological well-being. Such results were found in Tony Kelso's study on Gender Variant Pre-Adolescent Children, and the impact of their media representation. Kelso's work theorized that increased positive representations of marginalized demographics could greatly increase their psychological well-being (Kelso, 2015). When asked if representation of minority groups and marginalized people in media is an important thing, many of the survey participants gave answers that fit in line with Kelso's theory.

Yes. Children who see themselves positively represented in media are more likely to be able to better relate to characters, which can have a positive influence on self-esteem. And when children see themselves represented in happy relationships, or in their dream jobs, etc., they are more likely to think that that is something they can achieve. (Survey Participant 94)

It typically does not occur to non-marginalized people that the importance and impact of seeing someone like you in a position of achievement can have amazing and inspiring effects on someone who is frequently marginalized because their identity is not in line with the dominant narrative. Even the mere presence, the existence of these characters is a boon to some, and potentially has greater effects to players as a whole: "Yes, it has a direct psychological effect on people to see media that has representation of other groups in it by making it harder for people in the majority to demonize marginalized people," (Survey Participant 10). Because video games have reached the level where they are having an impact on people, they have the social responsibility to completely and accurately represent all peoples. As Shaw says in her article on the subject of the benefits and need for representation of queer people within video games:

...queer readings may allow audiences to compensate for a lack of representation, but that does not preclude a demand for representation. Rather it signals that queerness is always-already a part of 'straight' media and thus does not have to be seen as

something at the margins. GLBT content does not have to exist *just* for those that identify with that acronym. (Shaw, 2009)

At the heart of it, Shaw's point shows that not only is there an underlying demand to fill this void, but that meeting this demand benefits not only the members within the marginalized groups. This has the potential to benefit the psychology of the marginalized groups that are being represented, and continued exposure of these people would allow them to become part of the everyday mind-set and rhetoric. Over time this could change the mind-set of future generations, leading to these groups potentially not being marginalized anymore. But, for anything of that nature to happen, first those who are opposed to such representation must be overcome.

Meet the Enemies

When it comes to discussing the subject of minority representation in video games, many people know that it is a dangerous topic to talk about online. That subject matter is known for getting a lot of negative and hostile responses. Of the participants of my survey, 46% of them said that when it came to the subject of MOGAI representation, they have experienced some resistance to it either first or second-hand. When asked to share some of their experiences, they gave some remarkable accounts of resistance from the outside community.

I was at a PAX panel where a representative for EA insisted that people didn't want MOGAI representation, and got into a bit of a disagreement with two panel attendees who felt that asking for representation was somehow compromising a game's integrity or quality. (Survey Participant 90)

This was a common narrative when it came to asking about resistance to MOGAI representation in games. A very vocal minority was dead set against any sort of change happening within their games, a minority that fills the comments sections of many internet articles with stubborn, rage filled opinions. Some of the survey participants who themselves were more resistant or disapproving of MOGAI trends took this survey as a chance to voice their opinions on the subject. As one participant responded to asking if they had ever personally encountered resistance to MOGAI representation, they responded with this:

Dragon Age cisquisition, what a fucking mess. Everyone is a special snowflake and is uninteresting. Everyone's gay and ugly because hamwhales don't want pretty women in the game for men to like. LGBT and SJW's go hand in hand. And they laugh while they infest the games with shit tropes then get fired when no one buys the fucking games. GET OUT MAKE YOUR OWN SHIT STOP STEAL YOU LOW EFFORT LAZY CUNTS. Go RP by yourselves it's easy... OH WAIT YOU NEED THE ATTENTION OF EVERYONE WHILE YOU DO IT? OH OK. FUCK YOU. Survey bitch

you wasted your time. If you like games go make your own, stop reporting on the 1% who don't actually play or buy games, it's a grand waste of time. This is a fad to them. (Survey Participant 39).

The above quote is not related to the question asked, and very quickly devolves into blaming several unrelated groups and throwing unrelated insults. Their comments suggest that people from out-groups are attempting to force their way into and intentionally ruin video game culture so that the current group can no longer enjoy them. The respondents that were very opposed to MOGAI representation ultimately produced a stream of rage directed at anything associated with MOGAI groups. All of them gave similar accounts as to how MOGAI groups are intentionally ruining games to force a political agenda upon the gaming community. It gives a glimpse of the mind-set and thinking of those opposed to MOGAI representation.

A common resistance tactic in many accounts is the argument that representation is nothing more than "pandering". Many of these accusations of pandering are entirely baseless, but it is a common complaint. As one participant put it:

There is a vocal minority of gamers who believe the status quo is fine, that there is nothing wrong with female characters being designed for sex appeal first and foremost, and that any inclusion of MOGAI characters is shoehorning or "cramming diversity down our throats". Many of them act as gatekeepers to the hobby and they drive away good people from joining the hobby and industry. (Participant 30)

There is a problem with this mind-set. It is a very selfish and limited mentality, one that demands games remain the same to fit the interests of a very minor population. Of those polled in my survey, only 8% reported that they did not like the trend of increasing MOGAI characters in video games. By the logic of multiple survey participants, developers should not cater to this extreme minority's whims. In short, refusal to have more MOGAI characters in games is nothing but pandering.

It is admittedly hard to extract the logic and reasoning behind the people who are resistant to or against MOGAI representation. In a lot of cases, their rhetoric tends to devolve into a tirade of inarticulate rage. To give examples from my survey, when asked the question if they felt their identity was accurately represented, one participant responded as such:

The fuck is wrong with you, what a waste of time. All the people who buy games in the western market (our market) are being represented enough. If you want your queer games with all sorts of quirky sexual preferences and ideas about gender. Make them yourselves, stop TAKING and start MAKING your OWN SHIT. Girls

do this the most, they claim the boys club as their own and take over. I just want games that are not shit because retards want to be included in THOUGHT A LONE. HARDLY ANY OF YOU FUCKERS PLAY GAMES. (Survey Participant 39)

This participant's answer does illustrate one thing about those resistant to MOGAI representation: misunderstandings. There is a trend of those against MOGAI representation not fully grasping the issue being raised. It is common for them to jump to the conclusion that if games had more MOGAI characters, it means that there would be no non-MOGAI characters in games. It is flawed reasoning, based in ignorance. But, it seems to be the foundation of at least some of this resistance, as essentially all who reported not liking the increase of MOGAI characters eventually devolved into this type of rage filled rhetoric when given the opportunity. This minority of players is the core of those against MOGAI representation. But, to make any true impact in changing how representation is perceived within games, change must happen not only with the players, but the developers as well.

Taking Down the Big Bosses

When it comes to deciding what content is in games, ultimately that is determined by the developers and publishers. Over the past five years, developers have been taking steps toward including more MOGAI characters in prominent roles, but progress has been slow, and not every company has been forward or accepting of this trend.

When it comes to deciding what will be in a major production game, money talks louder than any justice or responsibility. And that is the largest anxiety and obstacle when it comes to MOGAI characters in games. Yannick Lejacq wrote an article about an interview with a spokesman for one of the major game publishers, Ubisoft. When asked if games would ever feature gay protagonists, he said it was not likely because of fears that it would impact sales negatively (Lejacq, 2014). Later in the article, Lejacq brings up the counterpoint made by gay videogames advocates who suggest that other major media outlets produce content with gay characters, and it does not impact their sales or success in the least.

When it comes to the big picture problem of what developers should do when it comes to MOGAI characters, there is no easy answer. Developers can quite easily, and quite arbitrarily, make more characters have some sort of MOGAI identity, but this will not fix the problem. It will also not be what players on either side want. When looking at the results of my survey, there was a concept addressed by many of the participants which shows that MOGAI representation is not as simple as some think. One survey participant summarized this problem with this comment:

However, no individual piece of media is automatically bad (or hateful, or whatever) for falling short when it comes to representation. Likewise, any piece of media with good representation is not automatically a good thing, especially if the representation is forced, ham-fisted, relies on stereotypes, or tokenism. (Survey Participant 36)

This idea of stereotypes or tokenism harkens back to the second movement in representation mentioned in the background section above. Participants on both sides expressed that they did not want MOGAI characters to be unnaturally forced into games for the sake of filling a quota. But they respond to it in two separate ways. Pro-MOGAI people report wanting to see stories that just happen to have characters with a MOGAI identity, an identity which is not the focus of the story.

Yes it is important as long as they're not token characters. The fact that a character is gay/bi etc should not be included out of context for whatever reason. Important to the story is fine, otherwise it is just tokenism. This is different in relation to race however. If the game is based in Europe and in modern times the diversity should be there for realism. (Survey Participant 53)

A common theme in the responses was the want to escape from tokenism. The ideal would be a MOGAI character who is not token, who is more than just a background character to fill a quota, but rather one with more bearing on the game's story. This is essentially what pro-MOGAI representation people want from their characters in games. People who want more MOGAI representation want dynamic characters with impact on the story, characters where their MOGAI identity is but one facet of a grander person. People against MOGAI representation in video games view this through a different lens. Their claims vary in nature, but a common theme is that they feel the change is arbitrary and pointless, and a threat to an established status quo.

People are starting to catch on that 'diversity' is code for less white guys. That's not a good thing when we're the ones who buy the vast majority of games. It's annoying when it's just thrown in for no reason, like in *Borderlands 2*. It actively takes away from the game. Games are art. Should we have been angry Leonardo didn't paint enough black women, or should he have just been allowed to create his art as he saw fit? (Survey Participant 32)

This statement exemplifies a lot of the opposition's arguments, and argues that there should not be diverse representation because it might threaten creative freedom. This is not the actual nature of MOGAI people's desire, however. What is merely a request and argument that games should have a more diverse array of characters is instead viewed and treated as a demand to remove all cisgendered, white, heterosexual males from gameplay. This is not the request being made by many pro-

MOGAI people, and nothing resembling that claim was made by any of the participants who took my survey. But, as previously mentioned, this group tends to be misinformed about the nature of the argument. This does demonstrate however, that, despite any disagreement between the two groups, this is an issue that matters to video game players.

How can developers create more organic MOGAI characters? How can they create characters which the audience will react positively too, as well as be natural and organic to the story? In Shaw's previously mentioned article, she mentions that one of the most important things for this change to take place is to have more MOGAI people involved in the development process of the game (Shaw, 2009). Not only will this allow a freedom and likelihood that more MOGAI characters will be included within the game, but it also allows these developers to draw upon their own experience and create a more whole identity for these characters which will not be token appeasement. But, Shaw's article was published in 2009, and during that short time period things have apparently changed. Even in Lejaq's article he mentions that there are now many openly gay game developers working in major companies. This could potentially be the link or reason behind the change in style of representation in the last few years.

So if Shaw's solution has already been taken, what are developers to do? At this point the foundations have been laid to some extent. There are more MOGAI developers working on games, and that seems to be changing the narrative within games. Social media presence and interaction with fans also seems to have had some impact as well, as it allows developers and players a more direct line of communication about the decisions a developer makes and what the player wants in the game. I do believe that the pathway has been made. Only time will tell if developers will choose to cautiously inch forward on it, or be bold and take a large step down it.

Final Level

Though limited, my survey has shown a lot about how players respond to the subject of MOGAI representation within video games. It is a subject matter of great importance to them. It seems foundational work toward this goal has been laid, which is ultimately a good thing. An increase in the quality and total number of MOGAI characters in this new medium allows one to explore and become acquainted with an identity not normally seen or talked about most of the time. This will allow people who identify as MOGAI to see that they are just as normal and human as everyone else; and it will allow those who do not share that identity to gain a greater understanding of it. I think the interactivity of the video game medium gives this an extra boon as well, allowing the player a greater control and depth of this experience. With this ultimate goal, I do believe the two can challenge antiquated and harmful ideas that are in play, and allow for new thought and introspection about

human life and the human condition. And in doing so, video games will truly be at the level of art, for their capacity to move the human soul, and inspire change.

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