I CHOOSE YOU! DIVERSITY IN THE DESIGN OF POKÉMON

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Introduction

There have been many discussions surrounding women in games lately. Or perhaps more accurately, the discourse has focused on why women *aren't* in games. At the epicenter of the conversation is Anita Sarkeesian's (2013) hugely popular and equally controversial *Tropes vs. Women in Games* web video series. In her videos, Sarkeesian reveals the paucity of fully developed female characters in video games. The series also highlights how a large portion of the female characters in games are ultimately relegated to ghettoized roles such as damsel in distress, woman in the refrigerator, or are otherwise represented as insignificant and disposable. In late 2012, the *#1ReasonWhy* Twitter hashtag brought members of game developing and game playing communities together to discuss the myriad reasons why women leave—or choose not to pursue—careers in the game industry (Plunkett, 2012; Ochsner, 2015). More recently with the GamerGate controversy, highly publicized cases of threats and harassment brought against women in the game industry have led some women to question whether it is worth it to pursue a career in games. Quite understandably, most women are not

eager to serve even a short tenure as "the Internet's most hated person," an experience described by game developer Zoe Quinn (Quinn, 2014). In sum, game communities and pop culture circles have been committing a lot of time and talk to discourse around the roles and representations of women in games. These have been, and continue to be, difficult discussions to have, posing problems without straightforward solutions.

With so many legitimate causes for criticism and critique about the issues women in games face, it is sometimes tempting to throw our collective hands up and call the game industry and game culture lost causes. But we think it is sometimes important to also pause to reflect on the games we love and why we love them. We would not be gamers and game scholars if we did not play and enjoy games. While brainstorming possible topics for our submission to this *Well Played* special issue on Diversity in Games, we discovered that there is quite a bit of overlap in our lists of favorite games and game series. After several conversations, we opted to write about *Pokémon*. In *Pokémon*, players do not take up a role as an unconventional character; they do not explore themes that spark discussions on gender or politics; and the battle mechanics are standard for role-playing games. Why choose *Pokémon*, then? In this piece, we argue that the *Pokémon* series serves as an example of how game developers can make design for inclusive for player communication systems, diverse character representations, and player experiences without alienating their core gamer fan bases.

Pokémon Red and *Pokémon Blue* (Game Freak, 1996) were the first installments of what is now widely considered to be among the most successful role-playing game (RPG) franchises of all time (Nintendo of America, 2013; VGChartz, n.d.). As such, the *Pokémon* games have an immense fan base. *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue* were single-player RPGs in which players took on the role of an adolescent tasked with capturing and battling creatures known as Pokémon. In an ongoing process of capturing and training new *Pokémon*, players battle with non-

playable characters (NPCs) and wild *Pokémon* throughout the course of their journey. There have been minor changes throughout the games, such as different regions, new nemeses, and new Pokémon, but the core gameplay mechanics have remained largely the same across the various new installments in the series.

While there are many design features that allow the *Pokémon* games to appeal to a diverse audience, we choose to focus and elaborate on three in this article. First, Nintendo enforces a rigid structure for how players are able to communicate with one another. There are a variety of social features within the *Pokémon* games, but there are few venues for harassment and other antagonistic practices. Second, *Pokémon* has allowed for increased customization of characters as the series has progressed, but it remains a minimal feature that keeps the character as a relatively blank slate that players can develop—or not—as they play. Finally, the *Pokémon* series supports a variety of ways to approach gameplay, catering to a diverse array of play styles. In this paper, we explore these design features in greater detail. Before we continue, we want to note that we do not claim that the *Pokémon* series is a bastion of perfection among myriad failures. There are features of *Pokémon* that could promote or support diversity better, and many of the design features we outline in this series were likely not designed with inclusivity in mind. However, we argue that as a series that is not overtly concerned with themes of diversity, the *Pokémon* series nonetheless allows for diversity in ways that we believe are worthy of discussion.

Conceptual Framework

Games and gameplay are designed experiences (Squire, 2006). As such, it is important to consider design when analyzing the experiences that players have with a game. Though they refer to physical tools and artifacts as much as digital tools and interactions, we believe that literature on distributed intelligence (Pea, 1993) and on design affordances (Norman, 1988) can be

useful for this discussion. Pea (1993) describes how the mind rarely works alone. Rather, intelligence is *distributed* across other people, tools, and environments. Similarly, we believe that even in a single-player play experience, players never play alone. Tools–or "smart tools," as Lave (1998) has called them–carry intelligence *in* them. They carry the patterns of reasoning brought by the designers and are part of a greater cultural history. Games do this too.

Designed objects and experiences have affordances, which include both perceived and actual properties. A classic example is the properties of a door handle: a horizontal handle on a door affords a user to *push*, while a vertical handle affords *pulling* (Norman, 1988). More recently, scholars have argued that virtual spaces have affordances too, such as online communities (Dalgarno & Lee, 2010) and games (Squire, 2006). Like with the physical artifacts in the distributed intelligence (Pea, 1993) and human computer interaction literature (Norman, 1993), how players engage with a game not only reflects their own intentions, but also the intentions and desires of the designers, which shape how players can, and cannot, interact with the game.

Squire (2006) describes that the actions that take place in a game are a synthesis between the character and the affordances, or capacities for action, that the player has. Through "recursive cycles of perceiving and acting, thinking and doing with the game system" (p. 22), players eventually develop their own unique way of *being* in the world as the game character. Players are not able to do or be anything that they want in the game world: "they are motivated by challenges set up by designers…and are limited by the constraints of the game system" (p. 22). The designers' decisions about what content does or does not go into a game, or about how players are able to interact with their character, are ideological (Squire, 2006) and laden with values. In the following sections, we describe that several features in the evolving design of the *Pokémon* series afford diversity among players. These include a heavily bounded

communication system, a minimal but flexible character representation, and the ability for players to choose from multiple play styles.

Short and Sweet: Restricting Communication Curtails Harassment.

Although it could technically be considered a single-player game, the *Pokémon* play experience is inherently social. What made *Pokémon* game play novel at the time of its debut was that players needed friends to play the complementary game in order to obtain all of the Pokémon in the game's universe. For example, in order to catch all of the Pokémon in the first generation, players with the *Pokémon Red Version* needed to trade with players who owned the *Pokémon Blue Version* to catch every Pokémon in that particular generation. This design feature effectively socialized the game system—the Gameboy—which, due to its small size, generally provided only solitary gaming experiences. Contrary to the prevailing stereotype of gaming and game players as anti-social, *Pokémon* has always required social interaction to complete game objectives, such as collecting all of the Pokémon. It is possible to complete the game as a single-player experience, but players who want to catch all of the Pokémon need to connect with other players to do so.

Despite the social components of the series, Nintendo is known for its prohibitive communication format (Orland, 2013), a design choice that many players have criticized. In the *Pokémon* games on the Nintendo 3DS, players are only allowed to communicate vocally with others with whom they have Friended on their 3DS systems outside of the game itself. There is little to no vocal or textual communication between *Pokémon* players who are not friends, with the exception of "shout outs," a feature new to the *Pokémon X* and *Y* series (Game Freak, 2013). Shout outs are 16-character messages associated with a single player that can be seen by the community at large. Players are warned that they should only post appropriate messages in their shout outs. This system has been considered by some members of the

Pokémon community to be frustrating, as it is hard to coordinate trades and battles with other players when there is little communication between players (Marriland, 2014). To work around the game's limited communication systems, players coordinate in spaces outside the game, such as forums, social media networks, or in local game stores.

Despite some players' complaints about the restrictive communication system, we believe there are definite benefits to the design. Microsoft's player communication platform, *XBox Live*, is notorious for sexism and harassment (Grey, 2013). The types of hate and harassment that many women and minority groups encounter on less restrictive services like *XBox Live* simply are not present in *Pokémon* games. Because there is no way for players to communicate verbally unless they are friends, they cannot be judged, and subsequently punished or harassed, as they are in *XBox Live* (Grey, 2013). Any two players who want to battle or trade must both agree to participate in game-related activities, making it very difficult to engage in prolonged behaviors of abuse or harassment. And because the textual content produced by players is censored, it is exceedingly difficult for players to harass other players by typing offensive messages in their shout outs. That is, the design decision to heavily bound communication among players affords a harassment-free zone for players who typically are the targets of harassment.

Are You a Boy or a Girl?

Unlike recent-role-playing games in which players report spending up to several hours perfecting the appearance of their character, character creation in *Pokémon* has always been minimal. The first five games in the *Pokémon* series—*Red*, *Blue*, *Yellow*, *Gold*, and *Silver*—all featured (ambiguously) white male protagonists—the norm for the majority of games (Williams et al., 2009). In 2000, Game Freak released *Pokémon: Crystal*, which was considered to be an updated release of the second generation of the series (Harris, 2001). This was the first game in which the player could select either a male or female avatar.

The new ability for players to opt to play as a female avatar was well received among critics (IGN, 2000; Gamespot, 2000). It has also been well received among the games' fans, who have often poked fun at the scene in the beginning of the game's narrative where the Pokémon Professor asks the young character if they are a boy or a girl (#are you a boy or a girl, n.d.). We acknowledge that the boy/girl dichotomy in *Pokémon* treats gender as a binary rather than embracing more modern notions that gender is a culturally informed practice of production and performance (Butler, 1990). We hope that in the future, games transcend rather than reinforce gender as a simple binary construct. However, we also want to acknowledge that that giving players the option to select their gender is an improvement on the previous iterations of the series in which the character was male by default.

Selecting the playable character remained a simple matter of indicating a preference for a boy or girl until the release of the *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y* games in late 2013. In *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y*, players received the added ability to select from a variety of skin tones, haircuts, and outfits. This new feature was not designed to be obtrusive. For players who thought that changing their character's hair throughout the game was frivolous or distracting, there was no need to make any changes to the character after the initial character creation setup at the beginning of the game. However, for players who enjoy the freedom to change their character's skin color, hair, or clothing as they progress through the game, the ability was there. This relatively simple new feature affords players greater freedom to choose who they want to be on their *Pokémon* adventure.

Williams et al. (2009) argue that people who rarely see characters that are similar to them in media may experience feelings of being unimportant and powerless. They further explain that "groups of people who are not represented are slowly rendered invisible by virtue of their relative inaccessibility in the knowledge store" (p. 821). On *Pokémon*

forums and message boards, many players describe having felt this way and express that they are pleased with the new ability to select skin tone and hair color. A long-time female *Pokémon* fan explains on the Marriland *Pokémon* community:

> Think of it this way; I'm a black female and have been playing as a white girl for a DECADE. Now THAT'S unfair. There's never been any blondes either. The light skin/dark hair combo has been in EVERY Pokémon game. I'm happy with the change. (Pocketmaster, 2013)

By making the decision to allow players to select their race and gender, the *Pokémon* developers enable players who are traditionally underrepresented and "rendered invisible" to feel included, consequential, and more powerful. (1)

Gee (2005) observes, "good games offer players identities that trigger a deep investment on the part of the player" (p. 7). There are a great many games that offer players a substantive emotional connection with a well-written, well-developed character. But other games "offer a relatively empty character whose traits the player must determine, but in such a way that the player can create a deep and consequential life history in the game world for the character" (p. 7). The *Pokémon* series falls in this category. The playable character in *Pokémon* is largely a blank slate onto which players can project personality traits and motivations if they so choose. By adding the ability to choose the protagonist's gender and race, the developers afford players additional tools for creating that "deep and consequential life history," but it is fully optional. A deep and well-developed character is not designed into the game—the character actually remains relatively flat—but the game designed for flexibility for players to fill in the blanks to create a personally meaningful character. If the almost 80,000 *Pokémon* stories on the online community FanFiction.net are any indication, many players have filled in those blanks to expand on their character's experience.

Collect 'Em All. Or Don't. *Pokémon* Leaves It Up to You.

Among the greatest strengths in the design of the *Pokémon*

series is the number of play styles the series supports. *Pokémon* allows players a variety of ways to engage with the games, with the ability to shift seamlessly between them at will. Outlined below are just some of the ways that players may choose to approach *Pokémon*:

1. **Play the Narrative.** One way to approach a *Pokémon* game is to quite simply set off from your hometown and have a journey. You make your way from town to town, battling trainers, catching Pokémon, progressing merrily through the game. No wikis required. You need just a player, a system, and the game.
2. **Collect 'Em All**. Players were originally tasked to collect all 151 Pokémon in order to complete their Pokedexes. Now, across all of the games in the series, there are more than 700. With so many possible Pokémon to catch, enthusiasts of the games have endeavored to fill out their Pokedexes from the series' inception.
3. **Breed.** For players interested in maximizing the stats and the effectiveness of their Pokémon's abilities, there is such a thing as the perfect Pokémon, and some will go to great lengths to breed them. These players take advantage of various features in the game in order to optimize their Pokémon's stats by breeding the Pokémon that are likely to produce the perfect battle companion.
4. **Compete**. As the *Pokémon* games have evolved, so too has the stage for competitive play. Pokémon battles take on many forms—friendly competitions between friends, bitter rivalries among siblings, and tournaments that span local, regional, and even international player bases.

None of these play styles appear to be derided either by the game designers or by members of the *Pokémon*-playing community.

In contrast, the developers of the first-person shooter *Borderlands* series announced in 2012 a new skill tree for players who "suck at first-person shooters". Lacking a better term, the

team's lead designer dubbed this trajectory "the girlfriend skill tree" (Hamilton, 2012). Realizing that this way of presenting the new skill tree was offensive to many gamers, the team later clarified that "Girlfriend" wasn't the official title for the tree, but the initial label stuck, evolving into what is now popularly known as the *Girlfriend Mode* of play style in which one player in a team takes a less demanding support role, presumably because this player is less skilled than their partner (Griffiths, 2012).

That the skill tree for less experienced players became known as *Girlfriend Mode* is not exceptional in itself. It is illustrative of a larger trend in games in which the default skilled player is male, and women are often assumed to be less competitive, more novice, or even disinterested and playing for ulterior motives. Female players are often accused of being Fake Geek Girls, presumably playing video games more for attention than because they enjoy playing. Many games offer players different avenues of activity to focus on, but often there are subtle undertones suggesting that there is a *right* way to play, or at least that one way is more elite and respected among the game's aficionados. Additionally, play styles and genres come packed with connotations and assumptions about the people who play them. Genres like puzzle games and social games are often labeled casual and feminine. Individuals who identify as gamers often take condescending attitudes toward players of these games, claiming they aren't *real* games.

Among the greatest strengths of the *Pokémon* series is that it allows for a variety of ways to engage with the games without resorting to unnecessary labels and implied connotations about a player's gender, interests, or abilities. There is no one *right* way to approach *Pokémon* games. Instead, there are many ways to play. Some are elegantly simple. Some are mind-bogglingly complex, requiring a variety of resources to master. Many others fall somewhere between. We argue that this flexibility demonstrates the elegance of design that permeates throughout the *Pokémon* series.

Discussion

In this article, we have outlined how several design features of the *Pokémon* games make affordances for diversity. Rarely do the *Pokémon* games draw explicit attention to themes of diversity and inclusivity. Yet, features like the limited channels for communication, ongoing changes to the character selection process, and the ability to pursue different play styles all speak to an approach to design that does not make presuppositions of who the player is, or should be. The *Pokémon* games invite players to craft their own play experience and to respect others as they do the same.

The smart design of the *Pokémon* series could serve as inspiration for other developers as they explore new features, content, and designs in the future. We do not claim that *all* games should adopt these same design principles, but rather, argue that these features can serve as a point of reflection for how developers can design for diversity. For example, we would not want all player communication systems to be as prohibitive as the *Pokémon* system. However, the design of player communication systems reflects the assumptions, intentions, and values of the people designing them. Designers are responsible for considering how their systems do and do not allow for harassment, particularly more invasive forms of sexist, racist, and homophobic abuse. We welcome a future where developers find creative ways for players to connect without supporting or tolerating abuse and harassment.

We believe that well-established series provide a good opportunity for game developers to experiment with new types of characters. As we saw with the *Pokémon* series, the developers were able to provide their players with more character customization options (e.g., selection of gender and race), which appeared to be well received by the series' player communities. Other popular franchises have seen similar successes. The popularity of AMC's *Walking Dead* television series enabled the developers at Telltale to introduce a cast of characters that is

much more diverse than the average video game. The first season of the series had an African American male protagonist, which was notable because historically, African American males have rarely been featured in games outside of more stereotypical roles in sports games and *Grand Theft Auto*-style gang settings (Williams, 2009). These examples suggest that established game series and studios are able to successfully incorporate new concepts and characters into their content in ways that fans accept, and even celebrate, for their creativity and customizability. Diversity can thrive beyond the indie game scene.

Finally, developers are responsible for the connotations attached to their designs. They should take care to avoid making any of their players feel judged or condescended to based on their preferred play style or experience with the game. The *Borderlands'* "Girlfriend Mode" could—and probably *should*—have been an opportunity for the team to advertise an inclusive new play style that is welcoming to new players. Instead, the team inadvertently offended potential players by attaching a gendered judgment on their new mode of play. You cannot be inclusive if you are being condescending.

Designs inevitably reflect the values of their designers. The very designed nature of games implies that designers make choices and decisions about how to represent the world and characters, about how players can interact with the game, including what kinds of actions the game affords and what kinds of experiences the game allows for. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for game designers interested in exploring new ways of welcoming diversity and inclusivity in games. As gamers and scholars, we look forward to playing and reflecting on upcoming design innovations and inspirations from the game industry.

Endnotes

(1) The most recent releases in the *Pokémon* franchise *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* did not include the option for players to

select their character's race. It could be because these games were re-makes of previous installments in the series. We hope to see this option in future original *Pokémon* releases.

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