Representations of race, and ethnicity: supporting inclusion in the social landscape

"[After making all the characters in a popular sports video game black] people value being represented. I think that's a very powerful thing to be the default and so I think the reaction was one of empowerment for people who were the default for the first time, and there was one of curiosity for people who weren't the default for the first time. Like, uh, why would you make this choice not to make me the default?" – quote from an interview with a developer. LSD28788

Keywords: Art, Diversity, Inclusion, Social Value

Who will find this scenario particularly interesting? Developers, Policy makers

Description

With video games becoming increasingly an everyday presence in the lives of all ages of Europeans, especially people below the age of 30, they can play an important role in signifying a group's inclusion and integration within society. The few studies of race and ethnicity in games have shown an unrepresentative dominance of white people as lead characters, with other ethnicities (if present) typically included as minor enemy characters. The research of these statistics is scarce, which does not assist in getting a full and current picture of both the present state

of this issue or trends in development (i.e. whether this has begun to change in recent years, if there are types of games or developers that are performing better than others, what influences developers to include a diverse cast, etc.); the impact on players of such varied social contexts is both challenging to study and important to approach. Developers that were interviewed for Gaming Horizons acknowledged the importance of this topic (alongside other issues of inclusion), but players made few comments on race or ethnicity specifically, suggesting that racial and ethnic inclusion is an industry concern that has currently not reached the player-base to the same extent. Further research is necessary in this area to understand it more fully.

Meet Luuk, a social arts funding officer, and Naija, an artist and second-generation immigrant who makes video games

Naija would love to make a game inspired by the traditions of her Nigerian grandparents. She knows that it is a financial risk to make something different from mainstream Western or Eastern mythologies, but thinks this source material could inspire something unique. Arts funding would really help her get the project off the ground and would give it credibility to help her explore other funding options too. She is an artist and her work is inspired by being a European whose life is framed by a place where she has never lived: she hopes that it will inspire players and developers to learn about Nigerian culture. Luuk has money to distribute, but he doesn't see the evidence that games will inspire others. He comes from a traditional arts background and secretly feels very uncomfortable with looking at video games as a medium with cultural worth.
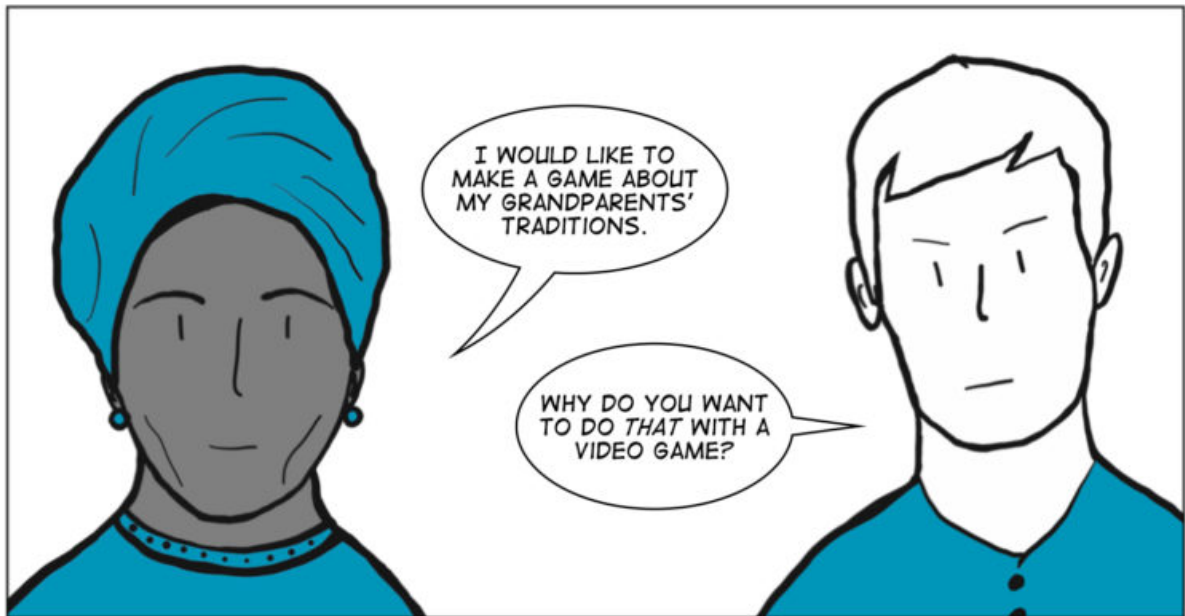
Without many precedents or research into the social impact of artistic games, Niaja has to try and convince Luuk by herself that games can be both expressive and inspire curiosity in players's actual lives.

In a nutshell

There is great potential for video games to assist in the visibility of racial and ethnic minorities in European culture, encouraging variety and inclusion as well as potentially increasing the expressive range and themes of the medium.

Three approaches would contribute to progress in this area:

- further research to understand the current, past, and possible future states of race and ethnicity in video games, particularly in a European cultural context;
- training and workshops aimed at minority groups specifically intended to give participants game development skills;
- targeted arts funding for creative video games that specifies inclusivity (either in theme, individual/team, or both) as a metric of consideration.

Resources
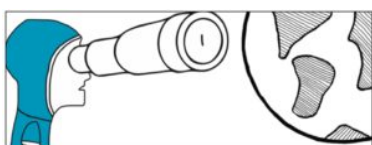
- Lack of Inclusion: Racial Minorities in Video Games

  Wright, S. (2015, August 08). Lack of Inclusion: Racial Minorities in Video Games. Retrieved December 15, 2017, from https://www.gameskinny.com/rwfmg/lack-of-inclusion-racial-minorities-in-video-games

- How One Video Game Unflinchingly Tackles Racism With History And Raw Interactions

  Smith, I. (2017, January 03). How One Video Game Unflinchingly Tackles Racism With History And Raw Interactions. Retrieved December 15, 2017, from https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/01/03/506762046/how-one-video-game-unflinchingly-tackles-racism-with-history-and-raw-interaction

- Watch Gordon Bellamy, renown game developer, talking about 'me-clusion' and the challenges of making mainstream video games more diverse.

- Fair Play? Violence, Gender and Race in Video Games

  Glaubke, C., Miller, P., Parker, M. A., & Espejo, E. (2001). Fair Play? Violence, Gender and Race in Video Games. Children Now.

- The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games

  Williams, D., Martins, N., Consalvo, M., & Ivory, J. D. (2009). The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games. New Media & Society, 11(5), 815-834. doi:10.1177/1461444809105354

Funding

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No 732332.

Partners