

Shadea Nance

October 3, 2023

Exploring Racial and Gender Diversity in Nintendo Wii Video Games

There is a growing body of literature exploring representation in video games, with considerable critique on their lack of diversity. Thanks to funding from Carleton's EDI action plan, I was able to pursue research studying the variety of racial and gender representations present in Nintendo Wii games. Under the supervision of Dr. Siobhan Angus, my interdisciplinary project combined theories from pop culture studies, intersectional feminism, and media studies. My study focused on the best-selling Nintendo Wii games, contrasting them with games that have been re-created and updated for the newer Switch Console. The games selected were comprised of:

Wii:

- Mario Kart (2008)
- Super Mario Bros. (2009)
- Super Smash Bros. Brawl (2008)
- Mario Party Eight (2007)
- Mario Party Nine (2012)

Switch:

- The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (2017)
*Included in the selection because of its incomparable popularity on the new console.
- Mario Party Superstars (2021)
- Super Smash Bros Ultimate (2018)
- Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe (2019)
- Mario Kart 8 Deluxe (2017)

My study examined pre-designed characters in these games and their visual characteristics during gameplay. The research inquiry outlined how racial and gender representations have changed between 2006 (the release of the original Wii) and 2019 (when the last set of Generation Z [born in 2012] turned 18). It also questioned the significance of playing third-person games which only include pre-designed playable characters. My Research methods included a review of the relevant literature and discourse analysis regarding game studies, gender studies, and critical race theories which included both scholarly works and pop-

culture criticism. I then surveyed the games, tracking the quantity and quality of how diverse characters were represented.

While there is still much to be uncovered in Nintendo Wii research, my study has produced some conclusive results. Diverse representations of gender in popular Nintendo games are still no closer to being equal. The quantity of non-gendered and feminine characters combined did not equal half of the masculine characters depicted in these games. Furthermore, a study completed by Dr. Eugene F. Provenzo found that across 47 Nintendo games, men were represented 92% of the time with women being featured on only 8% of game cover illustrations (Provenzo).

Gender Representations in Nintendo Wii Game Characters

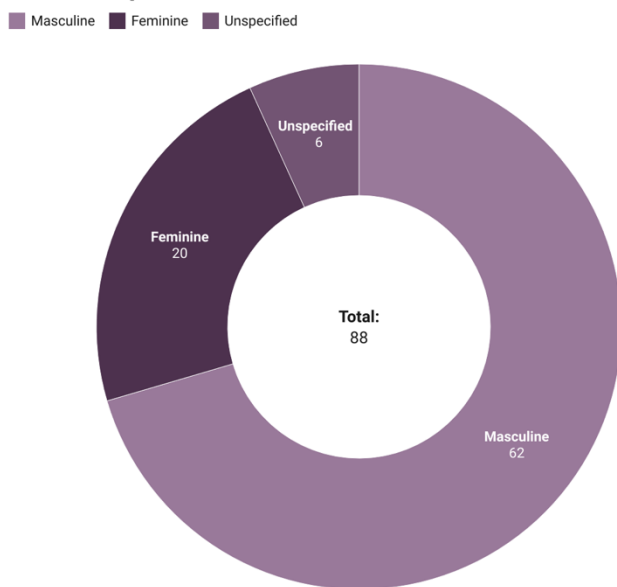


Chart: Shadea Nance • Created with Datawrapper

Gender Representations in Nintendo Switch Game Characters

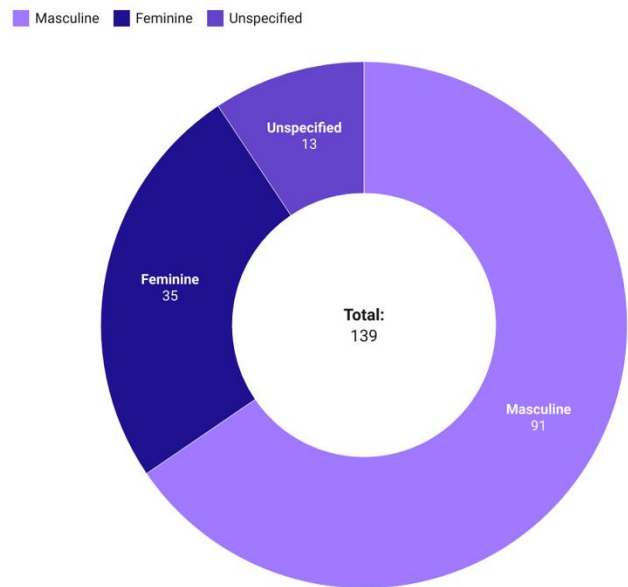


Chart: Shadea Nance • Created with Datawrapper

I proceeded to examine the variation of how weight was coded for feminine and masculine presenting characters. I found that masculine presenting characters were disproportionately weighted to be heavier than feminine presenting characters. This leads to unequal advantages for masculinized characters during gameplay.

In over ten years there was little change in the quantity of racially diverse characters portrayed. Across the games surveyed, there were no depictions of characters from Indigenous, Black, South-Asian, Latino, and Middle Eastern ethnicities. Asian characters were only represented in Super Smash Bros. Brawl (2008) and Super Smash Bros Ultimate (2018).

Racial Representations in Nintendo Wii Game Characters

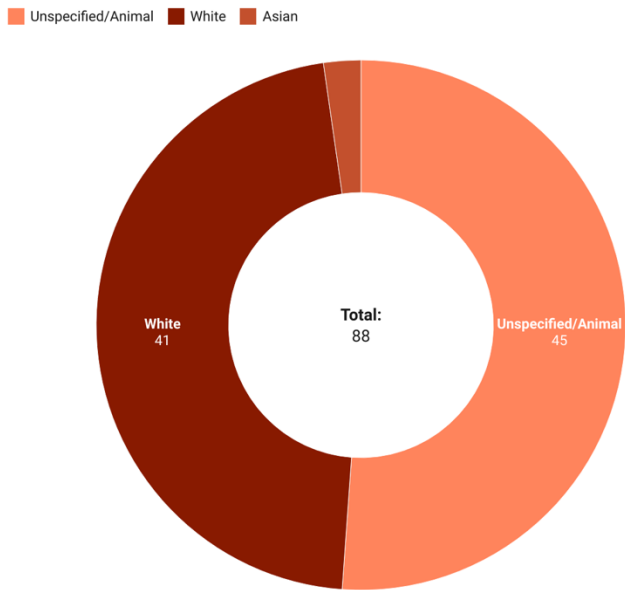


Chart: Shadea Nance · Created with Datawrapper

Racial Representations in Nintendo Switch Game Characters

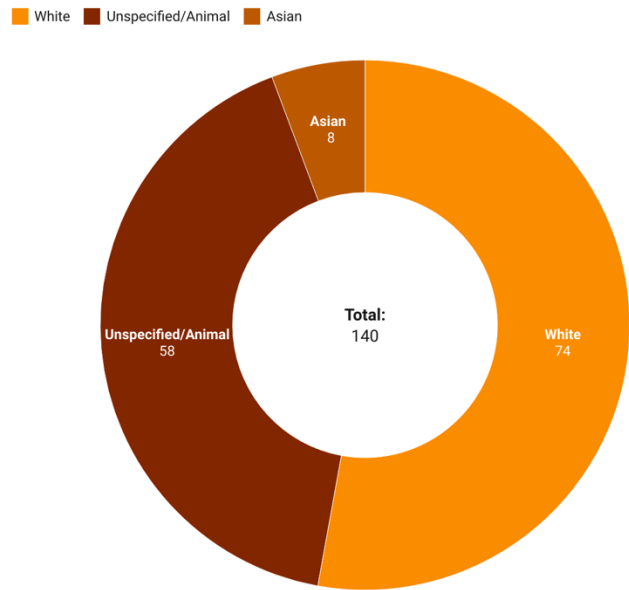


Chart: Shadea Nance · Created with Datawrapper

The absence of racially diverse characters did not leave adequate room to perform visual comparisons between characters during gameplay. Notably, feminized characters were typically depicted wearing attire that denote stereotypical feminized representations. The feminine presenting characters were also predominantly portrayed to have disproportionately wide hips and unreasonably dainty hands in comparison to their masculine counterparts.

In comparison to the original Wii games, there were no substantial advancements made regarding diverse racial and gender depictions for Switch games. Paradoxically, with many new characters having been created for Switch games along with significant innovations in visual gameplay, consideration was not extended to include representational diversity. I was unable to apply an intersectional lens to the characters as there was not enough diversity to study intersecting oppressions. Dr. David R. Dietrich explains that all-White virtual spaces construct a “White habitus” which can privilege Whiteness and depreciate other racial identities (Dietrich 85).

With most Switch games being re-released over a decade apart from their Wii predecessors, this research project underlines a cultural stagnancy in the game development industry. Dr. Michelle H. Raheja states that “these imagined landscapes also allow for the possibility of reclamation, reterritorialization, and futurity, all within a sovereign digital space, a space that can push back, a space that can truly become decolonial” (Bird 256). In the future, I would like to use the data collected from this project to further explore depictions of gender and race in Nintendo video games throughout my master’s at Carleton University.

Works Cited

- Bird, Ashlee. "Digital Disposessions: The Importance of Regional Specificity and Sovereign Spaces to Video Game Representations of Native American Cultural Heritage." *Studia Neophilologica*, vol. 93, no. 2, May 2021, pp. 242–257, doi:10.1080/00393274.2021.1916995.
- Dietrich, David R. "Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters." *Sociological Inquiry*, vol. 83, no. 1, 2013, pp. 82–105, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12001>.
- Provenzo, Eugene F. "Video Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2000, p. 491–.