Meaningful Blehs and Rabbid Gwahs: Identity Representation Through Non-Human Noise and Words

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Noise can mean more than language. This paper analyzes how the oral production and communicative abilities of the non-human main characters in *Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle* (Ubisoft 2017) and *Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope* (Ubisoft 2022) configure, amplify, and limit the ways identities are portrayed in video games through non-human characters and the noise and sound they produce. In both games, the world of the *Super Mario* franchise has fused with that of the rabbids—mischievous Minion-like humanoid rabbits originating from Ubisoft's *Rayman* series. As a result of this fusion, rabbid versions of key characters from *Super Mario* exist along their original counterparts. Almost half of the roster of playable characters in the games are rabbid versions of the other half (Mario, Luigi, Peach, etc.) who retain certain traits already present in the characters they are based on—such as their more recognizable clothing items—while significantly expanding others. Rabbid Mario, for instance, sports the same attire and moustache as Mario, but also expands and subverts the plumber's heroic disposition through continuous, comical, loud, and chaotic displays of strength and bravery. The rabbids' behavior in these games serve to construct a sense of Otherness that allows many identities to express themselves.

By comparison, Mario and his human friends are flat: they never step outside the actions and responses that decades of games have firmly established for them and they don't talk beyond the few words they are known for—such as "Mamma Mia" or "Let's go!". Mario behaves in the narrative portions of these games like any and every Mario in any *Mario* game released by Nintendo. Mario and his human friends' inability to talk reinforces this stasis, as their lack—or extremely limited use—of language limits even further the meanings of their actions and behaviors. Is the inability to talk always restrictive, though? Is the absence of language always a limitation?

In *Kingdom Battle*, the rabbid characters share Mario's inability to talk, but for them, as this paper will show, not talking allows their actions to mean more. In the first game, the rabbids shout, grunt, whine and wail to communicate, but the absence of formal language and the rabbids' attempts at communicating without the specificity of words work really well with the rest of their actions: in all their chaos, excess, and lack of specificity, their performed identities are full of radical potentialities. The absence of

language keeps the potentialities of the rabbids' actions unchained to the semantic concreteness of language. This changes, however, during the more narrative portions of *Sparks of Hope*, where the rabbids' noises are accompanied by chunks of perfectly grammatical text they produce to participate in written dialogues. In these instances, the rabbids' excess is flattened out and deleted to give room to the heroic, and much less ambiguous, rapport in which they participate.

After a looking at scholarship on human language and identity (Searle 1969), non-human identities (Haraway 2016), and sound in video games (Collins 2013, Stingel-Voigt 2020), this paper will analyze the rabbids' noises and sounds, their inability to use language in the first game, and the inclusion of written language in the second game to argue that non-human noise and sound, as well as the absence of language, have the potential to meaningfully and radically expand the types of identities video games can represent. In doing so, this paper will continue the work of scholars such as Michael Fuchs (2020), Marco Caracciolo (2021) or Juan F. Belmonte (2022) on non-human characters by introducing non-human noise, following Georgina Born's (2019) notion of sound as a key establisher of relationality, as a central articulator of wider forms of understanding and portraying identities in video games.

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