

Representations in Video Game: The Tension Between Accuracy and Creativity

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INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Media representations hold a profound capacity to influence social beliefs, shape cultural norms, and perpetuate or dismantle stereotypes. This dynamic is particularly evident when it comes to depictions of marginalized groups, such as neuroatypical individuals or those living with diverse mental health conditions. These representations are often caught between two competing imperatives: striving for documentary fidelity versus embracing creative freedom. This duality raises fundamental questions about the responsibilities of media creators and the social impacts of their choices.

CONSTRUCTING REALITY THROUGH MEDIA

Drawing on key theoretical frameworks, including Hall's Representation Theory (1997), Goffman's Framing Theory (1974), and social-semiotic approach (Bonenfant & Couturier, 2025) this work explores how media does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs it. Accurate depictions, often developed in collaboration with subject matter experts, aim to dismantle stigma, foster empathy, and raise awareness about complex realities (as was the case during the development of the video game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* or the *Atypical* series, for example). Ferrari et al. (2019) emphasize that nuanced portrayals have the potential to disrupt harmful tropes, fostering a more humanized understanding of conditions like neurodivergence or mental illness. However, they also reveal a troubling statistic: 97% of video games analyzed misrepresent mental health issues, often associating them with insanity,

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danger, and violence (Anderson, 2020; Dunlap, 2018). These portrayals reinforce stigmatizing narratives and obscure the complexities of lived experiences.

BEYOND THE TYRANNY OF REALISM

Conversely, media does not operate solely within the boundaries of fidelity. Noury (2023) highlights the poetic power of representation, emphasizing how artistic freedom allows creators to move beyond the constraints of factual accuracy to offer layered, interpretive narratives. Shaw (2015) underscores this tension by introducing the concept of the “tyranny of realism,” illustrating how pressures for accuracy can restrict creative narratives and limit the transformative potential of media. Shaw’s analysis of *Assassin’s Creed III* reveals how demands for realism often reflect the expectations of imagined audiences, shaping selective histories while privileging certain voices over others. However, the tyranny of realism can also underestimate the interpretive abilities of players themselves. Players are not passive recipients but active participants capable of engaging with poetic and metaphorical dimensions of representation. Fictional or stylized portrayals may offer deeper insight precisely because they invite symbolic interpretation, emotional resonance, and ambiguity. Similarly, Simond (2023) suggests that media representations, particularly in video games, should not be confined to replicating diagnostic criteria or serving purely therapeutic purposes. Instead, they should be celebrated as creative constructs capable of inspiring audiences and provoking critical thought. An illustration of this approach is *Fran Bow*, a game co-created by Natalia Figueroa. The game’s disturbing and fantastical aesthetic has been seen as a metaphorical vehicle for exploring trauma, grief, and mental illness for some players, based on Figueroa’s own experiences. She describes the project as both a creative outlet and an emotional ordeal, noting her desire to “tell stories about real things, but in an indirect way with otherworldly fantasy elements” (The Great Journey, 2023). This mode of representation shows how metaphor and fantasy can coexist with authenticity and serve as tools for self-expression and emotional truth. Schiappa (2008) critiques the rigid emphasis on “representational correctness,” advocating for a broader focus on the cultural and social work that representations perform, even when imperfect. Beach (2001) further highlights the value of reflective practices in creative work, emphasizing the need for balance between analytical precision and emotional depth in storytelling.

RESPONSIBILITY VERSUS IMAGINATION

These perspectives raise critical questions: Should creators prioritize fidelity to lived experiences, or should they embrace the freedom to reimagine reality through a creative lens? To what extent are creators responsible for the social implications of their representations? These questions are particularly pertinent in fields like game studies, where interactivity blurs the boundaries between spectator and participant, intensifying the ethical stakes of representation. This is especially evident in horror and survival genres, where mental illness is often fictionalized to serve a sensationalist or fear-based narrative. In games like *Manhunt 2*, *Outlast*, *Blackbay Asylum*, or *Get Even*, psychiatric patients are routinely portrayed as hyper-violent or psychopathic. Such representations reflect not only a reductionist and sanist worldview, but also a masculinist logic of survival through violence. These narratives reinforce harmful tropes under the guise of fiction and genre conventions, sidestepping critical responsibility with the defense of artistic license. The question of responsibility becomes even more layered when considering characters like Senua (*Hellblade*):

Senua's Sacrifice), Alice (Alice: Madness Returns), or Symmetra (Overwatch 2). These figures offer varied approaches to mental health and neurodiversity in games, some through well-researched, empathetic portrayals (e.g., Hellblade, developed in consultation with clinicians and people with lived experience), others through metaphorical abstraction (Alice), or inclusion in diverse rosters without foregrounding diagnostic labels (Symmetra). These characters highlight different narrative strategies and challenge us to consider not only how we represent, but also why and for whom we do so.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

Ultimately, this work advocates for an integrative perspective that balances fidelity and creativity. Media should strive to construct narratives that are not only educational but also imaginative, offering audiences the opportunity to challenge their preconceptions and engage more deeply with the diversity of human experiences. By navigating this tension thoughtfully, creators can mitigate the risks of reinforcing stereotypes while unlocking the potential for richer, multi-dimensional storytelling. This means not only balancing realism and imagination but also trusting audiences to engage with symbolic narratives, and holding creators accountable when fiction becomes a vehicle for exclusionary or oppressive tropes. Such an approach positions media as a transformative force, capable of shaping social norms and advancing inclusive understandings of diversity and otherness.

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