

# Identity Play as Identity Work: Representation, Identity Integration, and Possible Selves in Digital Games

**Paige Safyer**

Institute of Design  
Illinois Institute of Technology  
Chicago, IL  
[psafyer@hawk.illinoistech.edu](mailto:psafyer@hawk.illinoistech.edu)

**Zach Pino**

Institute of Design  
Illinois Institute of Technology  
Chicago, IL  
[zach.pino@illinoistech.edu](mailto:zach.pino@illinoistech.edu)

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how marginalized players conceptualize representation and identity in digital games through a mixed-method analysis of discussions across LGBTQ+, disability-focused, and neurodivergent gaming subreddits. While representation is often framed as demographic visibility, our findings show that players experience it as a multilayered process shaping access, self-expression, and meaning-making in play. Using theory-driven keyword clustering and reflexive thematic analysis, we show how identity-focused communities articulate accessibility needs, identity desires, emotional longings, and imaginative futures for more inclusive games. We introduce the *Representation Triad* to describe how structural, aesthetic, and experiential design layers collectively shape identity exploration and integration. Our findings demonstrate that meaningful representation emerges not only through visual similarity but through accessibility structures, expressive customization, and resonant narrative and relational systems.

## Keywords

Identity, possible selves, representation, accessibility, marginalized communities, social media analysis, LGBTQ+ gamers, disabled gamers, neurodivergent gamers

## INTRODUCTION

Video games offer unique opportunities to imagine alternative ways of being within fantastical worlds beyond our reality (Ruberg, 2019). In *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry, 2017), players embody an insectoid warrior navigating *Hallownest*—a once-glorious kingdom devastated by mysterious disease—while *Animal Well* (Bigmode, 2024) casts players as an amorphous blob exploring labyrinthine underground passages

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populated by strange creatures. These imaginative settings demonstrate gaming's potential for world-building and character creation. Despite this creative freedom, video games frequently reinforce problematic social constructs rather than challenging them, either by perpetuating stereotypical representations or by excluding diverse characters from these new worlds (Mejeur & Cote, 2021).

Characters from marginalized communities remain notably underrepresented in gaming, particularly as playable protagonists. When present, they predominantly appear as non-playable characters (NPCs)—secondary figures designed to facilitate gameplay rather than serve as the player's avatar. This distinction between playable and non-playable roles carries significant implications for representation. While able-bodied white male protagonists dominate as playable characters, marginalized identities are frequently relegated to supporting NPC roles (Marascalchi, 2020; Stasieńko et al., 2021), limiting their representation to surface-level characteristics rather than exploring the psychological and experiential dimensions of their identities (Warpefelt & Verhagen, 2015). Game designers face additional challenges representing non-visible aspects of identity in ways that are nuanced and multidimensional (Ellis, 2019).

Our research examines this complex representational landscape from the perspective of players from marginalized communities. We selected Reddit as our research platform due to its text-focused format and subreddit structure, which enables community formation around shared interests and identities. Research demonstrates that Reddit allows users to self-disclose experiences related to marginalization with less inhibition than platforms requiring real identities (De Choudhury & De, 2014). Additionally, Reddit communities often function as support networks for stigmatized identities (Suler, 2004), making them ideal spaces to observe how players from marginalized groups process representation in gaming media. With over 379 million weekly active users generating over 550 million posts and 2.7 billion comments annually, Reddit provides access to diverse player perspectives at scale (Reddit, 2025).

To fully understand how marginalized players navigate representation in digital games, our analysis examines not only who is represented but how representation operates across the structural, symbolic, and experiential dimensions of play. As will become clear in the following sections, players describe representation as a multi-layered phenomenon that shapes access, self-expression, and meaning-making in interconnected ways. These patterns motivate the development of a new conceptual framework that accounts for how representation functions systemically rather than solely through demographic presence.

## **Identity and the Self-Concept**

To understand the significance of representation in games, we must first examine the multifaceted construct of identity. Identity operates through distinct yet interconnected dimensions—personal identities comprise the traits we ascribe to ourselves (e.g., "introspective"), while social identities encompass both our relational qualities ("kindhearted") and our positions within social structures ("daughter") or collective memberships ("American", "Buddhist"). These diverse aspects of identity coalesce through our self-concept, an embodied framework that integrates our various identities into a coherent whole (Oyserman, 2007).

This embodiment is fundamental, as the self is first and foremost situated within a body. The body serves as the starting point for the self-construct, with body awareness providing the foundation upon which our broader sense of identity is constructed. One critical dimension of this bodily self is the sense of body ownership—the special perceptual status that makes bodily sensations feel uniquely our own, creating the fundamental feeling that "my body" belongs to me. The body is not just a vessel for identity but a fundamental element, shaping how we perceive ourselves and relate to others through dynamic interactions between sensory perception and social meaning (Beier, Miller, & Wang, 2012). This embodied foundation is critical for understanding representation in games, because players do not simply interpret identity cues visually; they engage them through embodied action, sensory experience, and self-referential meaning-making within the game world. Games invoke these sensory experiences through technologies such as controller haptics, motion controls, and immersive virtual reality, which together establish a tactile-kinesthetic link between player and avatar and can elicit a sense of body ownership over the virtual body (Gregersen and Grodal, 2009; Kilteni, Groten, and Slater, 2012).

## **Identity Exploration**

Identity exploration refers to the processes through which individuals actively test, evaluate, and refine aspects of their self-concept in response to internal motivations and external social contexts. Whereas the self-concept describes a relatively stable sense of who one is, identity exploration captures the dynamic and ongoing work of trying out alternatives, negotiating uncertainty, and experimenting with ways of being. Developmental theorists emphasize that identity exploration involves probing the boundaries of the self by imagining different roles, adopting provisional identities, and assessing how these possibilities align with one's embodied experience and social environment (Erikson, 1968; McLean & Syed, 2016). This process is not limited to adolescence. Contemporary models conceptualize identity exploration as a life-long, context-dependent activity that shifts across changing relationships, cultural formations, and technological affordances (McLean & Syed, 2016).

Importantly, identity exploration is both embodied and socially situated. Individuals rely on bodily cues, emotional responses, and sensory feedback to evaluate whether emerging identity possibilities feel coherent or dissonant, while social encounters provide affirmation, challenge, or recognition that shapes whether these identities feel viable, legitimate, or safe (Oyserman, 2015). Exploration therefore does not unfold solely within the individual but also through interactions between embodiment, cultural expectations, and the environments that enable or constrain experimentation. These dynamics become especially consequential under conditions of identity threat, which refers to situations in which individuals become acutely aware that a core aspect of who they are may be judged, devalued, or rendered unsafe in a given social context. Under identity threat, often conceptualized as stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), people anticipate negative evaluation not because of what they personally do, but because of the social meaning attached to their group membership. As a result, exploration becomes constrained by heightened self-monitoring, vigilance, and avoidance rather than open experimentation (Steele, 2010; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012).

Digital environments, and video games in particular, extend the landscape of identity exploration by offering spaces where individuals can engage with alternative roles, embodiments, and social positions with reduced real-world risk. Unlike most

traditional media, games do not position players solely as passive audiences but as active participants who function simultaneously as audience and author, shaping identity through sustained action, choice, and consequence (Gee, 2003; Murray, 1997). This dual positioning is critical for identity work, as social cognitive research demonstrates that identity development depends not only on exposure to diverse models but on opportunities for *enactive agency* in relation to those models (Bandura, 2001). Games therefore enable a procedural mode of identity exploration in which players test values, roles, competencies, and social positioning through action rather than observation alone. At the same time, games allow players to draw on both internal cues such as emotional resonance or discomfort and external feedback such as in-game consequence and community response when evaluating possible selves (Oyserman, 2015). These properties position digital play as one of the few widely accessible cultural spaces where identity exploration can occur actively rather than solely symbolically.

For marginalized communities in particular, identity exploration is not merely a normative developmental process but a compensatory one shaped by systemic underrepresentation, misrepresentation, and chronic exposure to identity-based threat. LGBTQ+ individuals, individuals with disabilities, individuals with neurodivergence, women, and people of color frequently encounter a scarcity of affirming and institutionally legitimate identity models in mainstream film, television, and traditional gaming cultures (Condis, 2018, Gray, 2014; 2020; Shaw, 2015). This absence constrains not only visibility but also the cognitive plausibility and motivational force of future-oriented possible selves (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Under such conditions, stereotype threat further narrows identity exploration by signaling that certain identities are incongruent with competence, belonging, or success (Steele, 2010). Digital games therefore take on heightened significance because they do not simply depict identity but allow players to author it through systems. Identity becomes something players do, not just something they see.

Crucially, this means that games must be representative in structurally different ways than historical media. Representation in games does not operate only at the level of character appearance or narrative inclusion but across mechanics, progression systems, social architectures, feedback loops, and affordances for customization and agency. When identity is supported only at the surface level of appearance without reinforcement in gameplay systems, exploration remains fragile and easily disrupted by threat. Conversely, when representation is embedded procedurally across narrative, mechanical, and social layers, games can function as rare sites of identity safety, rehearsal, and expansion. Under these conditions, digital play supports not only the emergence of possible selves but the regulation of identity threat itself, rendering identity exploration within games not only developmentally meaningful but socially protective and politically consequential (Gray, 2020; Shaw, 2015; Steele, 2010; Oyserman, 2015).

## **Possible Selves and Video Games**

Possible selves are the future-oriented dimensions of the self-concept, defined in dynamic relation to the actual self, or one's present sense of who one is (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). These projections include "hoped-for selves" that represent desired aspirations, "feared selves" that embody avoided outcomes, and "expected selves" that reflect what individuals believe is most likely given their current circumstances. The alignment and tension between actual and

possible selves play a central role in shaping motivation, self-regulation, and identity development by organizing goals, guiding behavior, and structuring self-evaluation (Oyserman et al., 2012). The psychological investment in these possible selves can serve as a powerful motivational mechanism that influences present behavioral patterns and decision-making processes (Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007).

This conceptualization of possible selves provides a valuable framework for understanding how digital games influence identity formation. Research examining a science-focused web-based game revealed how these experiences can foster “scientific possible selves” among adolescents. When students engaged with authentic scientific activities in game environments, they developed stronger science-oriented identities and career aspirations. Player testimonials expressed newfound interest in scientific careers following gameplay experiences that allowed them to visualize themselves succeeding in these roles (Beier, Miller, & Wang, 2012). Parallel work using Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) found that allowing adolescents to try on alternate identities in virtual environments similarly deepened engagement and broadened their understanding of diversity and possible selves (Lee & Hoadley, 2007). This identity development process extends beyond content knowledge to influence how players envision their future potential. The visual representation of possible selves through avatars further enhanced this effect. Research on a health-focused game showed that when players saw future versions of themselves through customized avatars, they formed stronger bonds to these possible futures (Przyblski et al., 2012).

Research on MMOs demonstrates how these virtual environments create immersive “playgrounds” for identity exploration, where players can experiment with different versions of themselves. MMOs are particularly effective for identity exploration because of their highly social nature and extensive customization options. Players can create avatars with distinct characteristics that differ from their offline selves, allowing them to test different identities in a space free from most real-world constraints. The social dimension of these environments means that players receive immediate feedback on their chosen identities through interactions with other participants, facilitating learning experiences about how different identities are perceived and treated within communities (Proferes, 2021).

Video games offer powerful experiences of possible selves through what Klimmt and colleagues (2009) call identification—a temporary transformation of the player’s self-perception through adopting a character’s attributes (Klimmt, Hefner, and Vorderer, 2009). Their experiments showed players unconsciously associated character-related concepts with their own identities after gameplay. Unlike passive media, games allow players to directly experience possible selves, providing a simulation of alternative identities that can influence how individuals conceptualize their future potential (Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007; Klimmt, 2009). This progression from simple representation to full embodiment and social validation of possible selves demonstrates why games have become increasingly important tools for identity exploration and development.

## **The Current Study**

This study investigates how players from marginalized communities perceive and respond to representational dynamics in video games, with particular attention to the psychological mechanisms of identity development and possible selves. We focus

marginalized communities because they are disproportionately impacted by the representational patterns and exclusions that characterize mainstream video game culture (Mejeur & Cote, 2021). For marginalized gamers, games may function as sites of both identity affirmation and injury, making the negotiation of possible selves especially salient. To contextualize these experiences, we also include a broad, non-identity-specific gaming discussion community as a comparison space. This community represents a large, general-interest gaming public and provides a useful baseline for identifying which themes, desires, and representational concerns are distinctive to marginalized communities versus common across gaming discourse more broadly. While we do not treat r/gaming as a normative standard or assume it reflects the entirety of mainstream gaming culture, its scale and visibility offer an important point of contrast for interpreting identity-focused patterns.

This study extends prior research that has focused primarily on controlled laboratory and design-centered evaluations by adopting a naturalistic, discourse-based approach to examine how players understand representation within semi-public online gaming communities. This method allows access to forms of experiential knowledge that are often overlooked in traditional player studies and centers player-authored interpretations of representational harm and possibility. While representation is often treated as demographic visibility, our findings show that players experience it across multiple layers of design. We propose that meaningful inclusion emerges through the interaction of structural accessibility, aesthetic visibility, and experiential resonance, which together form the framework developed in this analysis.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining computational text analysis with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine how marginalized gamers conceptualize representation in digital games through Reddit discourse.

### **Platform and Community Selection**

We analyzed discourse from Reddit gaming communities (Reddit, 2005), which are organized into subreddits that function as semi-autonomous discussion spaces with distinct norms and moderation practices. Reddit's pseudonymous structure supports candid discussion of stigmatized experiences (Proferes, 2021), making it well suited for identity-focused research.

Following prior social media research (Massanari 2017; Proferes 2021), we identified nine identity-focused gaming subreddits using systematic inclusion and exclusion criteria. We began with 735 subreddits identified through Reddit's search utility (Reddit, n.d.) and added 275 communities from an ongoing Academic Torrents dataset using data collected in 2024, since Reddit's search utility does not reliably return results from smaller communities (Baumgartner et al., 2020), yielding 1,010 total subreddits. After excluding inactive communities, non-identity-focused groups, geographic or linguistic identities, and pornographic content, nine subreddits remained: r/ADHDgaming, r/AspieGaming, r/disabledgamers, r/GamerGirls\_Community, r/gaymers, r/GirlGamers, r/LesbianGamers, r/transgamers, and r/TrueGirlGaming. We also included r/gaming as a large general-interest comparison space to distinguish identity-specific concerns from broader gaming discourse.

Filtering Step	Change	Total
Reddit search for gaming terms	+735	735
Academic Torrents dataset addition	+275	1,010
Exclude inactive subreddits	-141	869
Include only identity-focused subreddits	-813	56
Exclude geographic/linguistic identities	-41	15
Exclude pornographic subreddits	-6	9

**Table 1:** Subreddit inclusion/exclusion steps.

These communities were selected because they represent identity-based gaming groups that have historically experienced marginalization within mainstream gaming cultures. We treat these identities as distinct rather than equivalent and recognize their unique experiences of exclusion and structural constraint (Gray, 2020; Massanari, 2017; Condis, 2018). These subreddits function as community-of-practice spaces where members share identity-relevant experiences and articulate unmet needs outside hostile mainstream forums (Baym, 2010; Shaw, 2015; Nakamura, 2016; Domahidi et al., 2018).

Subreddit	Subscriber Count	Submission Count	Comment Count	Comments Per Subscriber	Post Count	Posts Per Subscriber
r/ADHDgaming	223	5	32	6.40	37	0.17
r/AspieGaming	3,482	30	148	4.93	178	0.05
r/disabledgamers	8,192	5,429	24,526	4.52	29,955	3.66
r/gaming	38,964,098	6,884,754	97,317,330	14.14	104,202,084	2.67
r/gaymers	272,441	157,502	1,431,582	9.09	1,589,084	5.83
r/GamerGirls_Community	5,191	1,531	6,767	4.42	8,298	1.60
r/GirlGamers	236,831	101,115	1,771,856	17.52	1,872,971	7.91
r/LesbianGamers	65,729	25,619	179,316	7.00	204,935	3.12
r/transgamers	66,023	33,107	242,052	7.31	275,159	4.17
r/TrueGirlGaming	6,896	253	873	3.45	1,126	0.16

**Table 2:** Subreddit size, activity, and user engagement.

## Computational Analysis

We used Python-based web scraping tools (Python Software Foundation, 2024; Reitz, 2024) to collect all posts and comments from these subreddits posted during the 2024 calendar year via Reddit’s old.reddit.com interface (Olston & Najork, 2010) yielding 1,075,740 submissions and comments. To identify identity-relevant discourse grounded in possible selves theory (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012), we first used regular expressions and fuzzy string matching to extract 13 core desire phrases as an affective entry point into the corpus (Jurafsky & Martin, 2020). These included five positively valenced and eight negatively valenced expressions (e.g., “I love,” “I want,” “I hope,” “I’m afraid,” “I’m frustrated”).

We then analyzed the linguistic contexts surrounding these desire-phrase passages to identify patterns of commonly occurring and semantically related terms. Through this process, we inductively derived five additional thematic lexical categories—Accessibility, Representation, Relational, Customization, and Identity—which captured the dominant structural, social, and self-referential dimensions of identity-relevant discourse. These six categories (Desire Phrases and the five derived domains) were then used to examine co-occurrence patterns and generate the thematic clusters summarized in Table 3.

Category	Terms
Desire Phrases	I love, I hate, I’m happy, I’m sad, I’m angry, I’m afraid, I’m excited, I’m anxious, I’m tired, I’m lonely, I’m frustrated, I want, I hope
Accessibility	accessibility, subtitles, remap, assist, screen-reader, cognitive, universal design, inclusive design, haptic, caption, contrast, text-to-speech, difficulty
Representation	represent, avatar, inclusi, visibility, divers, identi, character, authentic, npc, stereotype, superficial, meaningful, agency
Relational	canon, slash, ship, otp, stan, oc, rare, pair, femslash, au, romance, friendship, relationship, dating
Customization	custom, personal, adapt, mods, creation, loadouts, skins, settings, options, control, adjust, modes, scaling
Identity	disable, bisexual, neurodivergent, lgbt, queer, nonbinary, deaf, blind, lesbian, gay, pronoun, autis, adhd, add, spectrum, aspie, asperger, trans, asexual

**Table 3:** Thematic clusters of commonly occurring and relevant terms.

## Thematic Analysis

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s methodological guidance (2006, 2019, 2021), using concepts from identity exploration

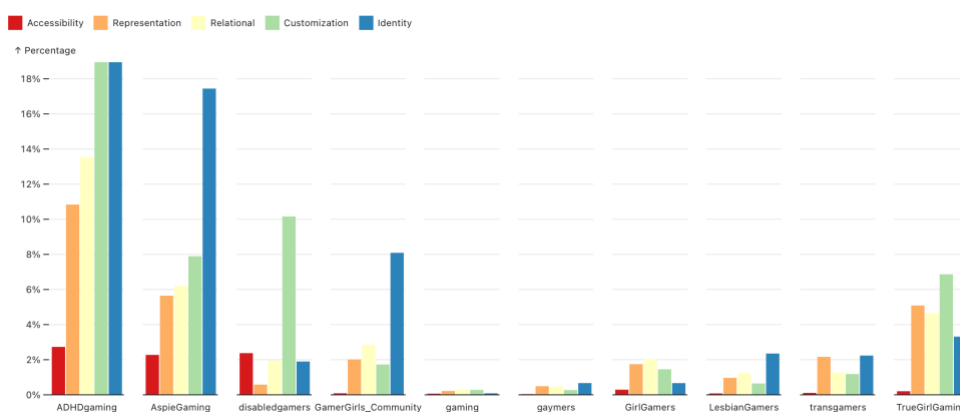
and integration (McLean & Syed, 2016) and possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Destin, 2010) to guide interpretation without imposing a fixed codebook. Themes emerged through iterative immersion, memo writing, and collaborative refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

The authors conducted contextual reading of posts in their native subreddit environments to attend to vernacular norms, moderation practices, and conversational logics (Massanari, 2017; Bishop, 2019). Through iterative coding and synthesis, we identified five thematic clusters composed of 10–15 theoretically salient terms, corresponding to the computationally derived categories. Because identity negotiation in gaming contexts is inherently intersectional, clusters were not mutually exclusive and frequently co-occurred within posts (Crenshaw, 1991; Shaw, 2015). Throughout the analytic process, the authors engaged in ongoing dialogue to refine thematic coherence, interrogate theoretical alignment, and ensure that emergent structures remained grounded in both the empirical data and relevant identity research. This iterative, reflexive approach allowed the thematic structure to evolve responsively rather than prescriptively.

## RESULTS

We conducted a thematic analysis of player experiences related to identity representation using a large social media corpus. Computational text analysis was used to categorize perceptions and experiences expressed by players from marginalized communities. The ten subreddits varied widely in size, activity, and engagement. Identity-focused subreddits consistently showed disproportionately high engagement relative to their size, reinforcing prior work on Reddit as a site of identity-centered discourse (DeVito et al., 2017).

Across games, accessibility features, representation, identity expression, customization systems, and relational mechanics operate together as interdependent domains shaping how players imagine, explore, and inhabit versions of themselves in play.



**Figure 1:** Percentage of submissions and comments per thematic category by subreddit.

Subreddit	Accessibility	Customization	Identity	Relational	Representation

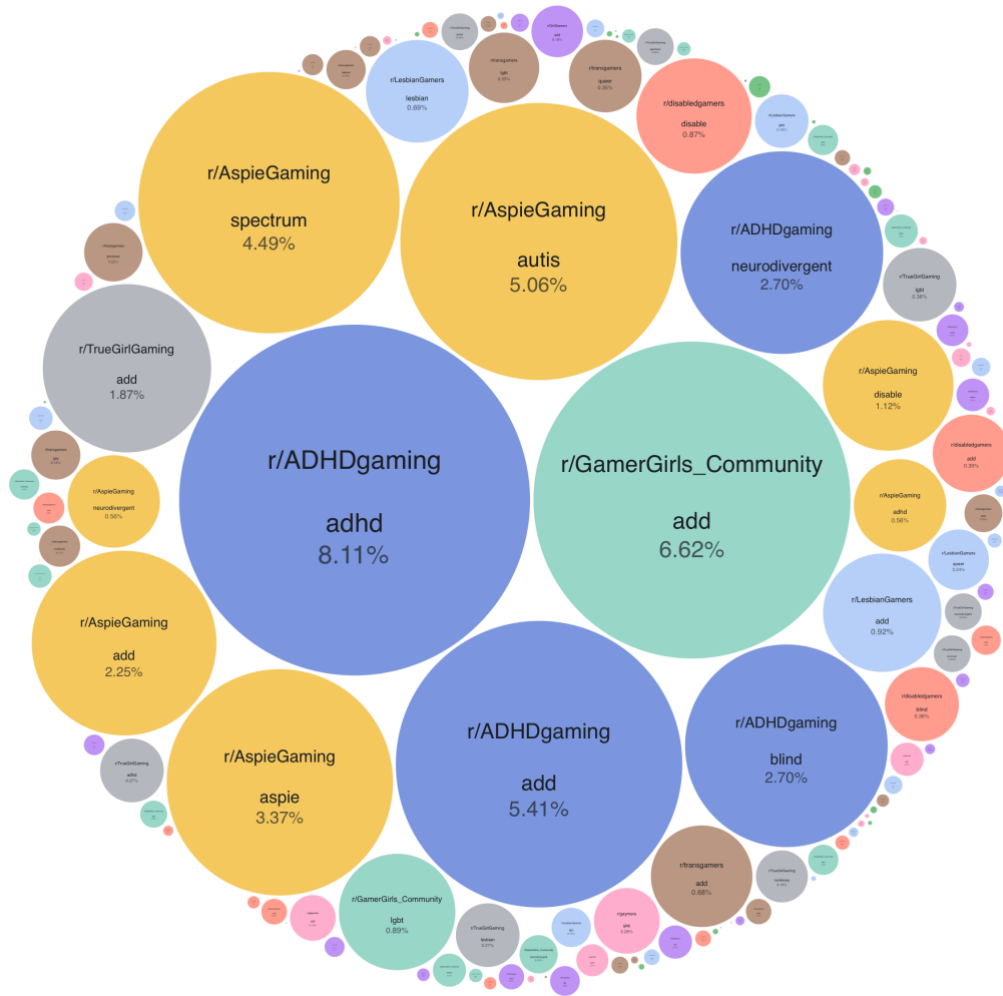
r/ADHDgaming	0 (2.70%)	0 (18.91%)	0 (18.91%)	0 (13.51%)	0 (10.81%)
r/AspieGaming	0 (2.24%)	2 (7.86%)	2 (17.41%)	0 (6.17%)	0 (5.61%)
r/disabledgamers	329 (2.34%)	199 (10.13%)	262 (1.86%)	3 (1.92%)	10 (0.55%)
r/GamerGirls_Community	0 (0.06%)	19 (1.69%)	1 (8.06%)	0 (2.81%)	3 (1.98%)
r/gaming	2050 (0.03%)	26274 (0.25%)	4037 (0.05%)	5557 (0.27%)	7561 (0.19%)
r/gaymers	10 (0.01%)	324 (0.24%)	25 (0.64%)	400 (0.44%)	682 (0.46%)
r/GirlGamers	224 (0.26%)	2845 (1.42%)	357 (0.63%)	731 (1.99%)	1650 (1.72%)
r/LesbianGamers	7 (0.05%)	126 (0.61%)	33 (2.32%)	89 (1.21%)	97 (0.93%)
r/transgamers	24 (0.08%)	536 (1.15%)	77 (2.20%)	196 (1.24%)	367 (2.13%)
r/TrueGirlGaming	1 (0.17%)	8 (6.83%)	0 (3.28%)	0 (4.61%)	3 (5.06%)

**Table 4:** Count and percentage distribution of submissions and comments across thematic categories by subreddit.

**Accessibility** refers to structural accommodations for physical, cognitive, and sensory inclusion. r/disabledgamers articulated clear priorities: “The ability to pause, save often, or play one-handed—all of those things make gaming possible for me.” “I wish more games let you adjust text size, color contrast, and remap controls—it makes all the difference.” Some praised inclusive design efforts: “I honestly love that Microsoft and Xbox have put huge focus on accessibility. Everyone should have the right to play video games.” r/ADHDgaming and r/GamerGirls\_Community discussed cognitive access more indirectly: “Honestly, *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011) has felt like a heaven lately... not having to worry about performance or time constraint just feels... relaxing.” “I've had some success with *Vampire Survivors* (Poncle, 2022) when I want something more action based and *House Flipper* (Frozen District, 2018) when I want something more chill and relaxed... It's very easy to pick up again if I need to take a break.” These accounts consistently framed accessibility as the condition of engaging imagined worlds, positioning structural accommodations not as optional supports but as the enabling infrastructure for free identity exploration.



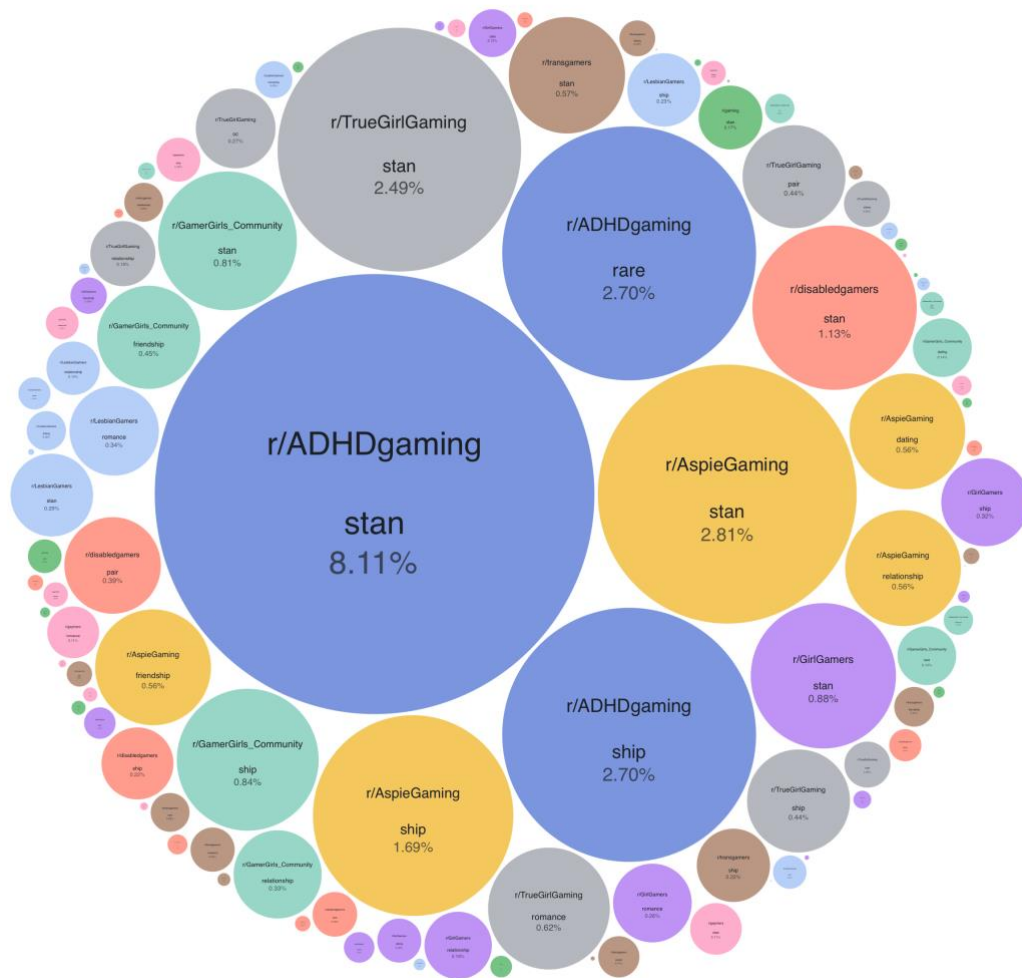




**Figure 4:** Percentage distribution of identity related term submissions and comments.

**Relationality** captures the affective and social dimensions of play: connection, comfort, belonging, and emotion regulation. *r/GirlGamers* users praised slower, narrative-rich games: “I consider *Firewatch* (Panic, 2016) and *Edith Finch* (Annapurna Interactive, 2017)... very cozy games... It allows me to sink into the game/the life of the person I'm playing.” For *r/AspieGaming*, routine and predictability supported regulation: “*Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011) helped me when I was melting down—I could just dig and build... It was my space.” “My favorite part is the sense of control and routine... games like *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2020) and *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) give me that.” In *r/TrueGirlGaming*, gaming was framed as imaginative liberation and power: “I personally love adventure and exploration, probably because as women we do not really have the same freedom to travel in real life.” “For my specific power fantasy, I want the game world to acknowledge I'm a girl first...” “I think the power to just make our own decisions, be independent and to not be at the mercy of anything or anybody else is pretty central to female power fantasies.” In *r/gamergirls\_community*, the desire for social connection surfaced strongly: “I've lacked friends to play with in games lately and all I want is a gamer girl bestie!!” “*Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) and *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2020) I also love but don't know anyone else that plays and playing with randoms is always hit or miss.”

These relational themes show that games function as affective infrastructures for comfort, autonomy, and belonging.



**Figure 5:** Percentage distribution of relationality related term submissions and comments.

**Representation** focuses on the inclusion and portrayal of marginalized identities in characters and narratives. Across multiple subreddits, users expressed frustration with misrepresentation and erasure. In *r/disabledgamers*, participants emphasized the lack of authentic portrayals: “I rarely see characters who use mobility aids in games. It’s like we don’t exist unless we’re a tragic backstory.” “Just once, I want to see a disabled character who’s not a villain or a victim.” In *r/transgamers*, the call for trans-centered narratives was just as direct: “I would kill for a trans protagonist who isn’t a side character or comic relief.” Even when representation did exist, delivery mattered. *r/gaymers* users rejected tokenism in favor of normalized inclusion: “I just want a game where I can date whoever I want without it being a ‘big deal’ or a coming-out plot.” “I cried when I saw a nonbinary character in a game. It was just... quiet, normal, there. I didn’t know how much I needed that.” These responses show that representation is evaluated by authenticity, complexity, and narrative centrality.



how accessibility features shift participation from exclusion to engagement. Trans players described moments of self-recognition through avatar customization. Neurodivergent players emphasized predictable mechanics and low-stakes systems as supports for emotional regulation. Taken together, these findings indicate that traditional, visibility-centered models of representation are insufficient for explaining how marginalized players understand inclusion in games. Instead, players describe representation as something that unfolds across multiple layers of design, from the conditions that make gameplay possible, to the visual markers that signal recognition, to the emotional and narrative experiences that enable identity exploration. To account for this multidimensionality, we propose a framework that captures representation as a systemic, layered process.

## The Representation Triad

Our thematic analysis revealed that players consistently evaluated representation across three distinct but interconnected dimensions. While accessibility concerns focused on *whether* players could participate, aesthetic concerns addressed *how* they could see themselves, and experiential concerns captured *what meaning* emerged from play. These patterns converged into what we term the *Representation Triad*, a framework describing how marginalized players evaluate inclusion across multiple registers of game design.

While representation in games is commonly framed through visual or narrative identity cues (Ruberg & Shaw 2017), our findings indicate that players describe inclusion through a broader set of concerns involving accessibility, customization, embodiment, and experiential resonance. These layers emerged inductively through our analysis and reflect the multidimensional processes through which players negotiate identity within digital play environments. The model comprises structural representation, aesthetic representation, and experiential representation, which together define how a game affords or restricts identity expression, self-concept activation, and the development of possible selves.

**Structural representation** refers to the conditions of participation that determine whether players can meaningfully access or sustain engagement with a game. This layer includes accessibility features, sensory modulation options, input flexibility, information architecture, and pacing structures. Prior work on accessible play has emphasized the necessity of adaptive controls, visual clarity, and cognitive scaffolding for equitable participation (Yuan et al., 2011). Players in our dataset similarly grounded their sense of inclusion in whether the game’s foundational systems aligned with their bodily, sensory, and cognitive needs. Structural representation therefore establishes the baseline through which identity work can occur. Without structurally inclusive systems, aesthetic or experiential representation cannot be perceived, accessed, or enacted.

**Aesthetic representation** describes the visible, symbolic, and stylistic dimensions through which players encounter identity in the game world. This includes avatar appearance options, pronoun choices, bodily variation, cultural markers, style expression, and the aesthetic composition of NPC populations. While visual representation is the most traditionally recognized form of diversity in games (Nakamura 2002; Gray 2020), our findings show that it plays a deeper psychological role in supporting self-concept and facilitating early stages of possible selves. Players consistently communicated that inclusive aesthetic representation allowed them to

see identity possibilities they had not yet articulated offline. These aesthetic encounters serve as affective entry points into the game world, allowing players to feel recognized, affirmed, and positioned as legitimate subjects within the fictional environment.

**Experiential representation** refers to the alignment between a game's narrative structures, relationship dynamics, mechanics, and worldbuilding with players' lived experiences, cultural contexts, and emotional realities. This form of representation involves the ways identity becomes meaningful within play and is associated with how the game enables emotional resonance, social interpretation, and identity-centered meaning-making. Narrative design scholarship argues that authenticity emerges through role affordances, relational depth, and the integration of cultural specificity into mechanics and world systems (Murray, 1997; Harrell, 2013). Our dataset reinforces this pattern. Marginalized players consistently sought forms of representation that positioned them as meaningful participants in the game world rather than symbolic figures with limited narrative purpose.

Prior research on narrative identification demonstrates that players can experience strong identification with characters or worlds through thematic and affective parallels rather than categorical similarity (Cohen, 2001; Klimmt et al., 2009). Many players in our dataset described feeling represented through the emotional tone or structural conditions of a world, such as navigating constraint, precarity, or limited agency, even when the characters depicted did not mirror their identities. These forms of resonance often emerge in historical or fantastical settings where allegory provides psychological distance that still enables self-concept activation (Murray, 1997).

Experiential representation therefore operates on multiple registers. It includes direct identity-based resonance through culturally grounded narratives and relational systems. It also includes indirect resonance through affective atmosphere, narrative structure, thematic alignment, emotional regulation, and the structural depiction of systemic pressures that echo players' lived experiences. Our findings show that players often map their identities onto fictional contexts through these emotional and thematic channels, particularly when direct representation is absent or incomplete. This broader understanding of experiential representation captures the multidimensional ways marginalized players negotiate belonging, identification, and meaning within digital play environments.

## **Identity-Related Processes**

Identity integration and identity exploration are two interrelated processes that describe how players use games to negotiate self-concept, experiment with possible selves, and reconcile internal conflicts or tensions within their identities. Research in media psychology has shown that digital environments provide unique opportunities for self-exploration because they combine embodiment, narrative, role-taking, and feedback in ways that support both stability and transformation of the self (Klimmt et al., 2009; Przybylski et al., 2012). These processes are especially significant for marginalized players, whose offline environments may restrict the articulation or recognition of their identities due to social stigma, structural barriers, or threats to safety (Gray, 2020; Shaw, 2015).

Identity exploration refers to the process through which players test, imagine, or enact versions of themselves that may not be accessible offline. Games offer experimental spaces where players can try out different roles, relational styles, social identities, embodiments, and narratives without the consequences or constraints imposed by physical or social environments (Cohen, 2001; Harrell, 2013). Our dataset reflects this function. Many players described using games to explore gender expression, cultural identification, or personal values, often identifying game worlds as sites where they could rehearse or articulate facets of identity that were otherwise suppressed or unrecognized. The aesthetic representation afforded by avatar customization and stylistic expression often served as the entry point for such exploration, while experiential representation provided narrative or relational contexts that allowed those explorations to feel meaningful, coherent, or emotionally safe.

Identity integration refers to the process through which players actively reconcile and coordinate multiple aspects of the self through play. Rather than emerging solely from recognition at the level of surface representation, integration unfolds procedurally as players interact with systems that either affirm or disrupt the alignment between identity, action, and meaning. This includes the integration of marginalized identities with personal goals, emotional regulation needs, cultural narratives, and future-oriented self-understanding. Integration is supported when a player's actions, emotional responses, and self-interpretations are rendered legible, consequential, and coherent within the game's representational and mechanical systems. Prior work on self-discrepancy and self-to-avatar alignment suggests that integration occurs when players experience coherence among who they are, who they imagine becoming, and the roles, constraints, and affordances offered by the game world (Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler., 2007; Hefner et al., 2007). In our dataset, players described feeling recognized not only through visual representation but through alignment between game structures and lived experience, such as the capacity to enact care, practice resilience, navigate precarity, or exercise agency in ways that resonated with their offline realities.

Identity integration and identity exploration are procedurally shaped by the representational layers described earlier. Structural representation determines whether integration and exploration are *possible at all*, as access, pacing, difficulty, and cognitive load regulate whether players can safely inhabit the play space. Aesthetic representation supplies the symbolic materials through which identity possibilities become visible and imaginable. Experiential representation organizes how those possibilities acquire meaning through narrative consequence, relational feedback, and affective tone. Integration emerges when these layers operate in coordination, enabling players not only to encounter identity-relevant symbols but to act through them in ways that stabilize meaning across time. When this coordination breaks down, identity remains fragmented, provisional, or unsafe to inhabit.

Within the context of this study, identity integration and exploration help explain why players respond strongly not only to explicit demographic representation but also to thematic, atmospheric, and mechanical forms of resonance. By framing identity as an ongoing process distributed across structural affordances, aesthetic visibility, and experiential meaning, these concepts clarify how digital play enables marginalized players to construct, revise, and sustain selves that are often foreclosed, fragmented, or destabilized in offline contexts. Identity is not merely reflected through

representation but assembled through repeated cycles of perception, action, feedback, and interpretation.

Layer	Definition	Game Mechanics	Example Games
Structural Representation	The conditions that make participation possible	Accessibility settings (text scaling, colorblind modes, remappable controls, one-handed play); pacing options (slow-mode, pause-anywhere, turn-based toggles); UI clarity (readable typography, contrast, reduced clutter); sensory options (motion blur reduction, vibration controls, flashing reduction); predictable structure (quest logs, routine loops).	<i>Celeste</i> (Extremely OK Games, 2018) assist mode; <i>Stardew Valley</i> (ConcernedApe, 2016) sensory settings; <i>Animal Crossing: New Horizons</i> (Nintendo, 2020) predictable loops, low pressure.
Aesthetic Representation	Visible identity cues that allow players to see themselves	Character customization (body types, hairstyles, skin tone gradients, gender sliders); pronoun & naming systems; identity props (mobility aids, prosthetics, hearing aids, cultural clothing); NPC diversity (bodies, genders, ages, sizes).	<i>Dragon Age: Inquisition</i> (Bioware, 2014) Character customization; <i>The Sims 4</i> (Electronic Arts, 2014) prosthetics, hearing aids.
Experiential Representation	Alignment of gameplay, narrative, culture, relationships, roles, and emotional arcs with players' lived experience	Narrative choice systems; branching dialogue; culturally specific worldbuilding; social simulation mechanics (relationships, belonging, family, community); emotional regulation spaces (safe zones, creative sandboxes); identity-expressive roles (builder, healer, diplomat, caretaker).	<i>Night in the Woods</i> (Finji, 2017) queer identity, class, mental health; <i>Red Dead Redemption 2</i> (Rockstar Games, 2018) chosen family, outsider identity; <i>Minecraft</i> (Mojang Studios, 2011) safe emotional regulation environment.

**Table 5:** Reddit-based examples of the Representation Triad

## Representation as a Multilayered System of Identity Work

Our findings show that marginalized players conceptualize representation as a multilayered and experiential phenomenon that shapes how they access, navigate, and make meaning in games. Representation emerges not only through who appears on screen, but through the conditions that enable identity exploration, emotional refuge, and imaginative expression. This broader framing clarifies why players describe games as environments for exploring identity possibilities that may be

restricted offline. Across communities, players articulated ways that game systems and narratives enabled them to experiment with self-presentation, explore relational possibilities, and inhabit identities that felt more coherent or authentic than those permitted in their everyday contexts.

Identity exploration occurred when players experimented with new forms of embodiment, expression, or relationality. Identity integration emerged when narrative, relational, or thematic structures affirmed, deepened, or stabilized aspects of self. These processes were not confined to any single dimension of design but instead were accelerated by the convergence of structural accessibility, aesthetic visibility, and experiential depth. In this sense, identity work is an emergent property of representational systems rather than a product of any single mechanic or representational choice.

Traditional approaches to representation often emphasize demographic visibility or the inclusion of marginalized characters. While such visibility matters, our data indicate that surface-level presence is insufficient for producing meaningful feelings of recognition or belonging. Some players expressed strong identification with games that did not reflect their demographic identities, while others rejected aesthetically diverse games that lacked narrative depth or structural inclusivity. These patterns highlight the limitations of visibility-centric representation models.

Players described ways that identification emerged through thematic or affective resonance rather than demographic similarity. Experiences of precarity, constraint, belonging, or loss served as meaningful points of connection even in fictional or fantastical settings that did not include their identity groups directly. Conversely, games that visually included marginalized identities but offered inaccessible mechanics, rigid categories, or shallow narrative arcs were often experienced as tokenistic or alienating. These findings underscore the need for representation models that account for how identity is mediated through structure, symbol, and experience simultaneously, rather than through character visibility alone.

Notably, the communities in our dataset emphasized relational and affective affordances as core to meaningful representation. Players described games as offering emotional refuge, predictable structure, and imaginative freedom that supported identity exploration and self-regulation. For neurodivergent players, these affordances were inseparable from feelings of inclusion. For women and queer players, games offered autonomy and relational agency unavailable in their offline contexts. Such accounts reveal that representation must be understood not only as who appears in a game world, but also as what emotional, cognitive, and social conditions the game provides.

## **Implications for Inclusive Game Design**

The findings from this study offer several implications for inclusive game design. First, designers must recognize structural accessibility as foundational rather than peripheral. Features such as flexible pacing, customizable controls, sensory modulation, and low cognitive load are not quality-of-life enhancements; they are conditions of participation, particularly for disabled and neurodivergent players. Without them, other forms of representation lose their meaning. Second, aesthetic representation must extend beyond demographic checklists. Players value customization systems that allow expressive and flexible identity construction.

Customization becomes meaningful when tied to relational and experiential depth, allowing players to imagine and inhabit versions of themselves that expand their sense of possibility. Third, experiential representation—narrative coherence, relational structures, thematic resonance, and affective tone—must be designed with the understanding that players use games to explore identity, regulate emotion, and seek forms of belonging that may be foreclosed offline. Games that support these experiences allow marginalized players to feel recognized not only visually but emotionally and narratively.

Together, these implications highlight that inclusive game design requires a holistic and systemic approach. Inclusion emerges when structural, aesthetic, and experiential conditions align to create environments where marginalized players can feel safe, seen, and capable of exploring who they are and who they may become. A game that excels in only one domain may still fail to support identity work if the others are neglected.

## **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. While our keyword-based schema enabled large-scale thematic analysis grounded in theory, it may have excluded emergent discourse not captured by our predefined phrases. Additionally, natural language processing methods are inherently imprecise; they may overlook contextually nuanced expressions or misclassify sentiment due to the complexity of informal digital speech. Reddit's platform architecture, while ideal for pseudonymous identity expression, limits demographic insights and skews toward certain user profiles.

Critically, our subreddit sampling revealed a notable absence of active gaming communities centered on race or ethnicity. This absence may reflect structural inequalities in community visibility, safety, and cohesion on Reddit itself. Whereas communities based on gender or neurodivergence have carved resilient digital spaces, racial identity groups may face higher barriers to digital community formation, platform hostility, or fragmentation across multiple platforms. As researchers, we are acutely aware of the ethical complexities of studying marginalized discourse online. While Reddit is publicly accessible, identity-focused subreddits often operate with an implicit expectation of privacy. Therefore, we avoided providing individual usernames and treated all data as sensitive.

Future scholars should continue to explore the digital lives of marginalized gamers, but do so with care, reflexivity, and community accountability and participation. While Reddit offers valuable insight into how marginalized groups articulate identity, representation, and accessibility needs, it is only one node in a broader ecosystem of social gaming and community platforms. Platforms such as Discord, Twitch, and other multiplayer or modding-heavy environments provide rich, immersive spaces where users do not just talk about identity, they perform, negotiate, and co-create it in real time. These spaces deserve further scholarly attention, particularly when aiming to understand how design affordances and community structures shape inclusive experiences.

However, expanding research into these more intimate and participatory platforms must be done without reproducing extractive or predatory academic practices. Too often, research on marginalized communities harvests content without engaging users as collaborators. Instead, future work should prioritize participatory and ethical

design methodologies that center the voices of gamers themselves—not only as subjects of study but as co-theorists of their own experiences. This includes obtaining informed consent when possible, building reciprocal relationships, and designing research outputs that are accessible and meaningful to the communities they describe. Ultimately, understanding what marginalized gamers need from games requires research methods that are just as inclusive as the games they hope to influence.

## Future Directions

We envision the *Representation Triad* not only as a contribution to academic discourse but as a practical tool for game developers, designers, and scholars seeking to build more inclusive and identity-affirming game experiences. To support this aim, we have made our aggregated, de-identified dataset available at <https://github.com/zachpino/identity-play-as-identity-work> for other scholars to analyze and discover additional insights. We also plan to return our findings to the subreddit communities from which the data was drawn, inviting feedback and reflexive dialogue. Additionally, we aim to explore the longer-term trajectories of these communities, including occurrences of certain terms derived from the *Representation Triad*, shifts in subscriber and posting dynamics over time, and indications of certain games and game mechanisms being praised and criticized by these communities. We hope our framework will stimulate further inquiry by scholars, and new experiments by game developers, aiming to support the continued exploration of possible selves by underrepresented gamers.

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