# Ethical Recognition of Marginalized Groups in Digital Games Culture

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## ABSTRACT
In this paper I argue that moral agents[1] are obligated to include and pay respect to the equal treatment, equal opportunities and justice of groups and identities usually marked by marginalization, discrimination and/or oppression in the domain of digital games. As a result, I point towards how individual and collective moral agents in digital games culture can pay respect through recognition and affirmation of different groups and identities. At first I establish what constitutes a group and my definition of marginalization. This allows me to identify which specific groups are marginalized in digital games through a literature overview of different research into the representation and inclusion of said group identities. This demarcation and identification of marginalized groups allow me to further propose the ways in which marginalization and discrimination occurs and is reproduced in the domain of digital games. In turn, I propose the ways in which this marginalization and discrimination can be curbed through recognition and affirmation of marginalized groups. As such, I provide and identify the ethical aspects and general actions that moral agents are confronted with and called to act upon. This results in specific suggestions on how moral agents within the domain of digital games are morally obligated to include and pay respect to groups and identities usually marked by marginalization, discrimination, and oppression.

## Keywords
Ethics, representation, marginalization, minority rights, race, sexuality, gender, identity, power, recognition

## INTRODUCTION
Within the Western domain of digital games, as culture, practice, and industry, different power relationships[2] are reproduced and reified which are manifested in the different designed objects, the marketing, the work environment, the cultural values, research areas, and the moral subjects involved in the production and consumption of digital game culture. Whether it is through the diversity of the workforce (IGDA, 2014), or how demands for more and better representation are addressed properly (Shaw, 2010; 2015), or how digital games as designed artifacts predispose specific types of representations and performances of identities (Sicart, 2013; Fron et al., 2007), structural power relationships between different group identities are reproduced and shored up in digital games culture. As such, I consider the research area of identifying these power relationships and their associated ethical aspects of how different identities and certain groups are conceptualized and treated in digital games culture highly significant. This focus allows me to determine and properly understand how moral agents within digital games culture are called on to reduce or eliminate asymmetrical power relationships and

oppressive state of affairs. In turn, such an investigation and understanding consequently draws out some of the normative implications of how moral agents have different opportunities to help ensure the equal treatment, equal opportunities and the justice of groups and identities usually marked by marginalization, discrimination and/or oppression.

Therefore, this paper seeks to identify the features of what constitutes a marginalized group, how this marginalization is operationalized in digital games, and consequently how moral agents are able to combat this particular form of marginalization. When discussing the matter of what we as moral agents can and should do, it is significant that all moral agents, including the author, should be called upon to reduce oppression and discrimination, not just producers or developers of digital games. I.e., "the impetus is on everyone to acknowledge and celebrate difference." (Shaw, 2015, p. 222). This is also emphasized in the final parts of the paper in regards to who and what all moral agents with sufficient power and status can and should do.

## MARGINALIZED GROUPS
In this section, I define the concept of a marginalized group of individuals in digital games culture. The importance of such a definition is especially crucial when one considers that group identities are not necessarily fixed, but rather fluid and intersectional (Altman, 2011). Additionally, it is important to keep in mind the problem of identity and how in addressing it, one might reproduce, reaffirm and codify the marginalization of said identity[3]. With these reservations in mind in outlining groups and identities, I now turn to defining them.

### Groups and identities
I define a group as constituting the cultural and historic identities of its members that group members know are theirs, either as elected by themselves or as having been ascribed to them externally (Young, 1990, p. 44). Therefore, I define social groups as not being real, i.e. neither do they exist as essential entities separate from individuals nor are they constituted from common characteristics of a group's members. Rather, groups exist through social relations (cf. May, 1987, pp. 22-23), meaning that what makes the group a group is the relation in which it stands to others. Consequently, my definition of groups as a relational interpretation of difference conceives groups less rigidly, which accounts for how different individuals in digital games culture elect to (not) identify as belonging to certain groups.

Thus, in my definition of group identity in this paper, I operationalize the comparative relational differences between two groups as the key aspect of demarcation. I.e. it is the exclusive non-trivial[4] relational traits, which define a person's membership to a group (Sigler, 1983). Within the context of the topic of marginalization, a group trait is usually referred to and conceptualized by the majority group as different, and it serves as a marker for collectively identifying the group and its members as a marginalized (ibid., p. 6). This means that the trait may be ascriptive or elective, but other groups commonly conceptualize it as a fixed characteristic of the group and its members (Galeotti, 2002, p. 89). These one or more exclusive traits help make the group and its members dissimilar from other groups through their relation to others. E.g. in my definition of a marginalized identity trait, persons who share a relationally demarcated characteristic are ascribed and fixed by others to a particular group classified as 'Black' within digital games culture, usually through visual signifiers (Young, 1990, p. 59). It is entirely possibly for an individual member of this group to not identify with the classification, yet the exclusive

trait is still conceptualized as fixed by other groups, most commonly by the majority group (ibid.). In turn, I now outline and define marginalization as employed in this paper.

## Marginalization

The ways in which groups and identities are marginalized, discriminated against, and oppressed require an elaboration and specification since the aim of this paper is to draw out the ethical aspects of how moral agents can and should combat structural marginalization. Thus, I define marginalization as referring to instances in which a group is "ignored, trivialized, rendered invisible and unheard, perceived as inconsequential, de-authorized, "other", or threatening, while others are comparatively valorized." (Tucker, 1992, p. 7). Moreover, the marginalized group in question is characterized as holding "a persistent nondominant position of the group in political, social, and cultural matters is the common feature of the minority." (Sigler, 1983, p. 5). In this regard, different groups are marginalized by virtue of their status within digital games culture, as evidenced in the subsequent section below.

The way in which marginalization of a group operates is through an act or a continuous process, either intentional or non-intentional, through which "different individual or collective actions, attitudes, media, institutions, political systems, and societal structures impose themselves upon and actively or passively marginalize the specific group in question" (Ibid.). As such, marginalization of groups and their associated identities refers to the continuous oppression, discrimination and trivialization of groups who are deemed unjustified in their respective group-specific claims to equal treatment, equal opportunities and justice[5] (Fraser, 1987). This form of marginalization can be instantiated as "an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people" (Frye, 1983, p. 11). Moreover, marginalized groups suffer injustices of "often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms - in short, the normal processes of everyday life." (Young, 1990, p. 41) This means that the issue of marginalization is not as simple as identifying and subsequently getting rid of the oppressors, as marginalization in the form of oppression is "systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions." (Ibid.), cf. the above delineation of marginalization as either intentional or non-intentional acts and processes.

## LITERATURE ON THE STATUS OF MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN DIGITAL GAMES

Due to the limited scope of my paper, I relegate the focus to traits pertaining to race (Sigler, 1983, p. 10), sexuality (Pascoe, 2007, p. 9), and gender (Butler 1999, p. 179), respectively. This limitation does not entail that other marginalized groups marked by different traits are not marginalized or worthy of discussion and analysis – far from it. E.g. groups marked by mentally and bodily disabilities make out 17.5 percent of the workforce according to IGDA. Additionally, as show, groups in terms of age are already underrepresented in the domain of digital games (Williams et al., 2009), despite the fact that different consumer-oriented studies highlight the wide spectrum of age as partaking in the activity of playing digital games (ESA, 2014; ISFA, 2012). Meanwhile, focus on non-binary gender conceptualizations are unfortunately sorely missing in the various data that I have come across. However, these areas of inquiry are beyond the scope of my analysis and I now proceed to review the literature on race, sexuality, and gender in digital games below. Note that most literature cited focus on digital games as texts in terms of only analyzing the proportionality of virtual characters, i.e. the games as texts –

as argued in Shaw (2015) such a view does not include the ways in which representation matter to audiences, nor how players interpret, negotiate and playfully appropriate digital games (Sicart, 2013).

## Race in digital games

Based on the studies on race in digital games and culture, the palette in digital games appears homogenously White. The studies focusing on virtual characters conclude in their character analysis that the overwhelming majority of characters in digital games are White, whereas non-Whites are relegated to either non-representation or a stereotypical depiction of their marginalized trait (Leonard, 2005). Dill et al. (2005) found results confirming the imbalance of representation of race, in which 72 percent of their sample pool were White. Mou & Peng (2008) found that 74 percent were White, where the only 4 Black leading characters in their study were characters in digital basketball games. Williams, et al. (2009) did a quantitative comparative study on character representation in the 150 top-selling digital games from 2005 to 2009 in contrast to the demographics of the U.S. population according to the U.S. Census pr. 2009. In regards to race, their results showed that

*"males, whites and adults are over-represented in comparison to the actual US population. These overrepresentations come at the expense of women, some minority groups – chiefly Latinos and Native Americans – and children and the elderly"* (ibid., p. 828)

Additionally, Dietrich's analysis of character creation in 60 different MMO's showed that "the vast majority of games, both online and offline, do not allow for the creation of avatars with a non-white racial appearance." (Dietrich, 2012, p. 82) Everett & Watkins (2008) arrived at a similar conclusion in their study of digital game protagonists, in which 70 percent of the depicted characters were White males.

From a workforce perspective, IGDA's survey from 2014 indicates that the racial composition of the industry is also pre-dominantly White (79 percent), while Africans/African-American (2,5 percent) and Hispanic/Latinos (8,2 percent) (IGDA, 2014) are underrepresented in the games industry's workforce in contrast to the actual demographics of e.g. the U.S. society. This also means that the power structures of the gaming industry are predominately White (Fron et al. 2007), which arguably has an effect on the production and marketing of digital games. As Gray claims,

*"Specifically, the industry targets and caters to the white male constructing him as the default gamer."* (Gray, 2012, p. 271)

From a player perspective, there is a lack of quantitative evidence on the racial makeup of players of digital games in Western countries. The North-American Entertainment Software Association publishes statistics on its demographics makeup each year, yet the yearly numbers originating since 2004 have not once addressed race, but only gender and age. This absence of statistics on the race of consumers, among others, "seems to indicate that it is not important to the way the industry thinks about their audience." (Shaw, 2012, p. 37). The only published data on race and digital game play was conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2002; Rideout et al., 2010), albeit only with a focus on children. In the two studies, the authors discovered that Hispanic and African-American children play more than their White counter-parts, and that low- and middle-income children play more than children from families with higher incomes. Between these two

studies in 2002 and 2010, these differences have persisted. Based on this, Nakamura (2014) makes the case for the notion that by spending more time with digital games, youth of color also expose themselves to the racial discourse that digital games reproduce. From the statistics by ESA, Shaw argues that

"*Perhaps the industry feels that it does not have to address these markets, as they are already buying the product. Race, it seems, does not matter when it comes to the construction of the gamer audience.*" (Shaw, 2012, p. 38)

## Sexuality in digital games

According to my literature research, not a large amount of quantitative data exist on the issue of representation of sexual identities in digital games. Shaw (2009, p. 249) points out that, as of 2009, only 56 digital games in total reportedly included a non-heterosexual character, while Mia Consalvo (2003, p. 172) states that when sexuality is represented in digital games, the instances are mostly heterosexual in nature. Some digital games offer optional representations of homo- or bisexualities, such as *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007), *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), *Bully* (Rockstar, 2006), *Fable* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004), and *Fallout 1 & 2* (Interplay Productions, 1997; 1998), but the general picture of sexualities in digital games is that it is primarily normative heterosexualities (Shaw, 2011, p. 161).

Additionally, in her qualitative interviews with people who both participated in the playing of digital games and identified as non-hegemonic sexualities, Shaw found out that the interviewees did not consider themselves to be culturally constructed enthusiasts of digital games, i.e. as a 'gamer'. Shaw states that the interviewee's reluctance to do so might be caused by the fact that they "are not yet a targeted market. Gay content tends to be optional; some gamers might be gay, some game content may include gay characters, but the industry does not make games for gay gamers." (Shaw, 2012, p. 36) Similar to statistics on race demographics of consumers of digital games, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA, 2014) fails to provide information on sexual identities and preferences, which arguably also contributes to the perception and construction of what constitutes the identities of players of digital games.

Finally, the sexual diversity in the workforce in the Western games industry was as of 2014 also one-sidedly heterosexual (86 percent) with homosexuals and bisexuals amounting to 2.8 percent and 6.5 percent, respectively (IGDA, 2014). As argued by Shaw (2009, pp. 243-5), it should be noted that this homogenous development environment could be argued to affect the creative output and conveyed values by the game industry's not having sufficiently different views and input on whatever issues and facets of society that the games portray.

## Gender in digital games

Beasley and Standley (2002) did a larger study on the appearance of female characters in digital games, in which they discovered that 13.74 percent of the 597 analyzed characters were female. Haninger and Thompson (2004) also supported the notion of imbalance in gender representation by virtue of their sample pool having 72 out 81 playable male characters versus only 42 playable female characters. An older study by Dietz (1998) analyzed the content of portrayal of women through a selection of 33 Nintendo and Sega Genesis games, in which he found out that 41 percent of the analyzed games did not include any female characters, while Dill et al. (2005) found that 10 percent of their sampled digital game characters were identified as female. Mou & Peng (2008) did a

similar study in which both gender and race were analyzed across the 19 most popular games in 2008, where all leading characters were male with no leading female character. More recently, Williams et al. (2009) showed that only 14.77 percent of all virtual characters in the 150 top selling digital games across all platforms in the U.S. were female. Similarly, Downs & Smith (2010) made comparable observations that showed that 14.3 percent of a sample pool of 489 virtual characters in 60 digital games were women. Unfortunately, questions of non-binary gender dispositions in the above studies were excluded to the detriment and marginalization of non-cis male or non-cis female groups.

Meanwhile, Kafai et al. claims that the gender divide is motivated by the notion that "the game companies clearly saw their male customer base as the more important one" (Kafai et al., 2008, p. 13). Kerr (2006) and Shaw (2012) also corroborate this assessment of priorities of target demographics, while T.L. Taylor echoes the same sentiment in her assertion that the Western games industry "actively cultivates, indeed courts, their existing male demographic (to the point of ignoring others). […] There is a web of practices, from advertising to reviews to game-store staffing and on and on, that constantly work to construct game artifacts as "not for girls"" (Taylor, 2008, p. 54). The attribution of causes for this lack of diversity could be numerous. Nick Yee discovered that while female players are severely underrepresented in MMO's, those who do play still invest approximately the same amount of time as male players (Yee, 2008, p. 85). Yee attributes this underrepresentation of women in this particular digital game genre to the social contexts, limited social access points to introduce women to this type of digital game, as well as how women are treated within that culture[6]. Bryce & Rutter likewise maintains that

*"many public gaming spaces are male-dominated and this gender asymmetry works toward excluding female gamers at a stage prior to the gendering of gaming texts."*(Bryce & Rutter, 2005, p. 305)

This industry-emphasis on a homogenous group of consumers and ostracizing non-male groups from participating in the culture of digital games may also potentially influence the desire to work and produce digital games themselves (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998, p. 47; Gorriz & Medina 2000, p. 43). According to the annual survey by Game Developer Magazine, the gender divide between men and women is not only heavily one-sided, but it also displays inequalities of salaries between genders[7]. IGDA's similar survey shows that 22 percent of the questioned developers identified as female, thereby indicating that the progress of diversity in the games industry in terms of gender is fortunately ongoing in contrast to IGDA's 2005 survey showing only 11.5 percent (IGDA, 2005). Likewise, Huntemann (2010) also point out how the labor practices of the Western games industry require workers to commit unpaid over-time, as well as crunch, thus producing inhospitable spaces and work conditions for women and family-oriented individuals looking to live lives outside of developing digital games.

## In sum
Based on the above outline of the presence and representation of identity categories related to race, sexuality, and gender, digital games culture is constructed as the hegemony of white, heterosexual cis-male identities, as also argued in Fron et al (2007). I now proceed to highlight the various ways in which marginalization, discrimination and oppression are operational in digital games culture.

## HOW DIGITAL GAMES CULTURE MARGINALIZE

In general, the aim of this paper in its specificity to digital games is qualified by the notion that play as a human activity is a generator of culture (Huizinga, 1955), and that games emerge as type of privileged forms of play (Caillois, 1961). Therefore, understanding the way in which the privileged form of play in specifically digital games affects groups and identities can be of high importance in understanding societal and cultural issues. To elaborate on this type of understanding on play and games in conjunction with the aims of this paper, I now bring up arguments on the importance of media representation and the discourses between media and their users.

It should be noted that in my reference to digital games and their impact on group identities I do not subscribe to a deterministic view of technology. Such a position makes flawed and implausible assumptions about the relationship between media and their users (Thornham, 2011, p. 152). Rather, I state that digital games operate as sites of ideologies, power, and meaning, which players perceive, interpret, and configure (Leonard, 2003, p. 8). This does not entail that whatever meaning is derived from a digital game is entirely dependent on the player's interpretation and configuration of it, as the design of the digital games still in some regard affect the possible constraints and affordances of the player's interpretation and configuration (Schut, 2007, pp. 218; Shaw, 2015, p. 137)

First, according to Ewick and Silbey, entertainment media function as "socially organized phenomena" which operate as "both the production of social meanings and the power relations expressed by and sustaining those meanings'' (Ewick and Silbey 1995, p. 200). In this way, popular digital games are able to articulate and reproduce contemporary values, ideologies and hegemonic relations of power and inequality (Gray, 2012, p. 262). Leonard similarly argues that digital games are not 'just games', "but a space to engage American discourses, ideologies, and racial dynamics" (Leonard, 2003, p. 3). Dyer sums up this production and maintenance of understanding the world and other groups:

*"how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life, that poverty, harassment, self-hate and discrimination […] are shored up and instituted by representation."* (Dyer, 2002, p. 1)

Given the state of affairs of a homogenous representational environment in popular digital games, the lack of representation of a diversity of identities add to the status quo of a single narrative of an alienated and excluded group of people, due to the fact that few types of representations of marginalized groups concerning non-heterosexualities, non-cis male, and non-Whites exist. It should be made clear that I am not assuming that representation in digital games are received statically by their audiences – the performative and playful aspects of digital games (Sicart, 2014), as well how audiences actually care about representation (Shaw, 2015), show that representation in itself is something that comes about in the discursive process between audience and game (Gadamer, 1993). Keeping this in mind, Gray posits that the contrast between the simplicity of a representation of marginalized groups and the numerous existences of the majority group, i.e. White heterosexual cis-males, enforce shorthanded and marginalizing understandings of the former:

*"This hegemonic vision of masculinity and whiteness only exists in relation to other forms of masculinity and femininity allowing for the dominant white male to construct himself in a certain way, hence the continued othering of women and people of color in video games"* (Gray, 2012, p. 264)

Likewise, Dietrich argues that the overwhelming presence of digital game avatars signified as White "reinforce a sense of normative whiteness" (Dietrich, 2012, p. 83), while Higgin (2009) makes a similar claim in regards to World of Warcraft's exclusion of black avatars perpetuating a "Blackless fantasy" (ibid., p. 6). Consequently, Dietrich argues that, "for minority players, the message communicated is that there is no place for you in these worlds." (Dietrich, 2012, p. 97).

Young (1990) applies a broader argument in reference to Nancy Fraser's (1987) concept of 'cultural imperialism', meaning that some social groups have exclusive, privileged, or primary access to the means of communication in a society: "As a consequence, the dominant cultural products of the society, that is, those most widely disseminated, express the experience, values, goals, and achievements of these groups." (Young, 1990, p. 59). Given the homogenous state of affairs in digital games regarding representation and participation of players, workforce, and characters, Young's broader argument on cultural imperialism could plausibly be relevant to the domain of digital games, as evidenced in the above sections on race, sexuality, and gender, respectively.

This standpoint of how digital games might convey asymmetrical and marginalizing positions of power between different groups serve to not only reflect the conditions of society, but they also help maintaining these conditions (Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Wilson II et al., 2003). Therefore, the status of representation and employment of gender, race, and sexuality in digital games have potential consequences for gendered, racial and sexualized interactions with other participants within these gaming spaces and arguably societies at large. Shaw states that "in essence, lack of media representation is a way of saying: "Your concerns/thoughts/lifestyle and so on are/is not important."" (Shaw, 2009, p. 231). In the same vein, Couldry similarly reasons that cultural representation can be phrased as "power relations which affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent." (Couldry, 2000, p. 2). Therefore, failing to include or represent marginalized members of society reinforces and reproduces marginalization and cultural invisibility of the marginalized group in question.

In relation to the above arguments, digital games are "sites for socially and materially distributed cognition, complex problem solving, identity work, individual and collaborative learning across multiple multimedia and multimodal 'attentional spaces', and rich meaning making." (Steinkuehler, 2008, p. 612). How or if some identities are represented matter in the players' understanding of and participation in digital games. Therefore, in our activity of playing a game, certain attitudes, ideologies, and behavior might be reinforced by a marginalizing state of affairs and as a result may lead to marginalizing practices and attitudes.

For example, Kuznekoff & Rose (2013) did a study in which they analyzed the reactions of other players towards a test player's female voice, a male voice and a voiceless one in the multiplayer game *Halo 3* (Bungie, 2008) across 163 matches. Their results data showed that the female player voice had received three times as many directed negatives than the male player or voiceless on (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013, p. 549). For this reason, it could be surmised that the visible participation of women in this particular game were reduced and even excluded by the behavior of other players. I.e. as an identified and exposed woman, the likelihood of feeling included and welcome to participate in a highly popular and culturally significant game activity like Halo 3 is deterred by this discrimination and marginalizing exclusion by other players. In similar fashion, both Nakamura (2011) and Gray (2012) highlight how social interactions with different

players through online communication in digital games are characterized by discriminatory, toxic and bigoted statements if another player is identified or ascribed as to being a member of a marginalized group, such as people of color or women. Concerning qualitative matters of representation, the character race 'Redguard' with an identified Black skin color in *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) is characterized by having superior athletic abilities compared to other non-Black races, while concurrently being disadvantaged in attributes pertaining to intellect and learning. This representation is highly problematic, as it signifies historical and already existing discriminatory attitudes and beliefs about specific groups ascribed to being 'Black'. As a result, discriminatory practices are symbolically reproduced through such a problematic characterization.

In summary, I assert that marginalization in digital games do have implications beyond the virtual events in each game. Whether it is as a gateway to certain types of careers in the technology industry, a sentiment of inclusion into society, or if it is a detrimental effect on people's perception of others or themselves, digital games and the surrounding culture do in some way affect people's lived experiences. These consequences are ethically relevant, in large part due to the potential marginalizing and exclusionary implications described above.

## RECOGNITION OF MARGINALIZATION APPLIED TO DIGITAL GAMES

Given the above claims and arguments on marginalization in the domain of digital games, I now turn to draw out the notion of how this form of marginalization can be curbed and combatted through the actions and attitudes of the different moral agents in the domain of digital games. Note that I am not merely addressing the issue of representation in digital games as texts, because textual representation in itself does not bring about just state of affairs, but I am also including the myriad of ways that different identities and groups can be recognized, such as support, platforms, visibility, practices, spaces, and so on.

Given that markers of race, sexuality and gender are marginalized in instances of non-White, non-heterosexual, and non-cismale identities, it could be argued that by paying respect to the representation and participation of marginalized groups and identities, the cultural spaces and values in the domain of digital games will reflect and recognize non-hegemonic identities. As Galeotti writes regarding the public, visible affirmation of marginalized groups:

*"[...] by admitting different behavior into the public domain, toleration symbolically affirms the legitimacy of that behavior and of the corresponding identity in the public domain. As a consequence, the public presence of the minority identities are publicly declared acceptable, not just the public presence of the individual members as individuals, but with their full-flown identities, customs, and ways of life, in the same way that majority identities have always been recognized."* (Galeotti, 2002, pp. 100-1)

Based on the above quote, I similarly argue that such a sense of legitimizing identities is relevant and applicable to the domain of digital games. Through an act, attitude and reflexivity of including different groups and bringing about diversity, the different identities in question become legitimate not only for the marginalized groups in question, but also for groups usually unfamiliar and unexposed to them. E.g. in the inclusion of women of color in a marquee industry conference, not only are their visible identities affirmed and recognized, but also their identities become normalized for spectators and participants[8].

Thus, a moral agent operating within the domain of digital games would be ethically obligated to strive for recognition and affirmation of marginalized groups in digital games by virtue of its "political and collective force" (ibid., p. 158). This notion is qualified by value of recognition, to the extent that this moral subject is able to include different behaviors, values, and worldviews into the representation and participation of marginalized groups in digital games culture. Moreover, the proposed approach of recognition is especially relevant for actors with the power and opportunity to improve and diversify the popular milieu of digital games, in its offerings, different members, stakeholders and practitioners. Indeed, as Larry Gross claims concerning matters of representation in media,

*"the power of the media should be used to equalize and not to skew further the radically unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources in our society."* (Gross, 1988, p. 191)

Recognizing and affirming marginalized groups in the context of digital games culture are able to lessen the asymmetrical power relationship between marginalized groups and hegemonic groups by contributing to the well-being of the former. Among others, if a digital games publisher, a developer, an organization, a conference organizer, a prominent developer personality, or researcher recognize a marginalized group as a positive acknowledgment of the specific identity, then their contribution to the domain of digital games would improve the social status and visibility of the group in question, i.e., reinforcing diversity.

E.g., if Electronics Arts made it possible to have different gender options in the fictional player creation in the *FIFA* (EA, 1994-) series, then they would allow for different understandings of what it means to play with self-created football players, and it would also allow for people interested in playing and performing a specific gender in the context of professional football to experience diversity in different ways. In this way, EA would symbolically affirm and equalize such identities and groups through the act of recognizing an otherwise excluded gender in a highly exposed digital game. As a result, different forms of representation and performances would be enabled for all audiences. Still, it is important to keep in mind that in cases of representation such as this one, the matter of audience interpretations complicate matters, as allowing customization works as what Shaw (2015) criticizes as a form of trivial pluralism, rather than valuable diversity. Moreover, media representation and inclusion can also work as a process of normalization and domestication, as "media portrayals, like marketing, flatten the real-world existences they reflect." (Ibid., p. 172). These contentions are significant to be aware of in comparable cases of representation and inclusion, especially "in ways that value, without essentializing, the differences between group" (ibid., p. 215).

Alternatively, relinquishing the power one might hold to marginalized others would be another case of recognition, i.e. by using one's upper status or platform in the power hierarchy within different cultural contexts in digital games culture would likewise enable identities usually marked by individual and systemic discrimination and oppression to attain what is justifiably theirs. For example, committing to giving platforms, positions of power, or financial support to otherwise marginalized identities would be one way of not only redistributing power in an already unjust state of affairs, but also providing recognition of identities and lived experiences as a value in itself. This relinquishment of power goes across all subdomains in digital games culture, whether it is research, media coverage, conventions, game publishers, developers, institutions, and so forth.

Thus, I argue that these implications should provide convincing reasons for why my proposed ideal of recognition of marginalized groups should be strived for by moral agents in the domain of digital games. Thus, my contribution is to highlight the ethical undercurrents of the marginalizing state of affairs in digital games to relocate the focus to how moral agents within digital games culture can and should act in ways that aim to diminish or eliminate the oppression and discrimination of marginalized identities. By virtue of the marginalized state of affairs in digital games culture, moral agents are obligated through their status, ability and power to pay respect through recognition and affirmation of different groups and identities.

## Exemplification of the ethical concept applied to digital games

Imagine a scenario in which a moral agent is responsible for the task of designing the procedures and semiotics (Sicart, 2013) of a digital game undergoing development. In her creative decisions regarding these two aspects, she has the opportunity to establish the possibilities for the potential players' activity of interpreting and configuring them. Recall that these aspects are able to affect and ex- or include different types of people and groups. Furthermore, we know that different groups marked by race, sexuality and gender are marginalized in the domain of digital games. Thus, if a specific marginalized group claim the right to be sufficiently recognized for e.g. their trait, or if these claims to rights are evident, then the developer in question is called to recognize their claim to right in her particular design. This fulfillment could potentially be in the form of what Kellner proposes, i.e. the developer should strive to promote;

*"[...] a multiculturalist politics and media pedagogy that aims to make people sensitive to how relations of power and domination are encoded, or embodied, in cultural texts.[...] It can also point to moments of resistance and criticism within media culture and thus help to promote development of more critical consciousness."* (Kellner, 1995, p. 8)

For example, when designing a digital game, the designer could establish the means of communication between players as being inclusive and acknowledging of specific marginalized groups, or perhaps make the depiction of identities be diverse and complex. As Shaw (2015) points out:

*"Media producers can take advantage of the fact that identities are complex, that identification does not require shared identifiers (particularly in video games), and that diversity in a nontokenistic sense can appeal to a much wider audience than pluralistic, niche marketing [...] Rather than see demand for representation as a limitation on creativity, it could be reframed as a checkpoint in design. Designers could look critically and ask themselves why they made the choices they did. What would it mean to flip the race, gender, sexuality, embodiment, and voice of a character they created? When creating avatar design choices, what shaped the options made available? What logic underlies the structure of options made, and what would happen if those logics were simply forgotten?"* (Shaw, 2015, pp. 225-30)

For instance, in *Animal Crossing New Leaf* (Nintendo, 2013), players are able to let their avatars wear make-up and clothes signified as feminine or masculine regardless of gender, which some virtual characters comment on as being entirely acceptable. Similarly, *Saint's Row 4* (Volition, 2013) allows for avatar customization that enables players to mix and match gender signifiers such as voice, make-up, clothes, etc., resulting in player self-expression that is not limited to singular hegemonic ideals. These examples emphasize how it is entirely possible to recognize and acknowledge diversity as valuable

for players in their participation and in their representation in digital games. With this in mind, Shaw (2011) states that,

*"game designers who wish to act ethically must actively reflect on their choices regarding gameplay and representation choices, as well as the relationship between the two."* (Shaw, 2011, p. 173)

Meanwhile, it is not only the producers of the meaning in digital games that are relevant for the application of recognition, due to the fact that other agents have an impact on the practices, spaces and general culture in digital games. E.g. a moral agent working in the media coverage of digital games would likewise be called on to include perspectives and considerations of marginalized groups and issues pertaining to their existence in society by the proposed ideal of recognition. For example, reporters and critics are demanded strive to pinpoint and expose problematic instances regarding the discrimination of marginalized groups, or conversely recognize and pay tribute to non-hegemonic identities in their reporting and criticism on digital games and their culture, as well as creating safe hospitable spaces, or elevating marginalized voices and perspectives in digital games culture. Alternatively, game researchers and individuals studying the field of digital games should likewise be aware of the ways attitudes and systems of oppression works to marginalize certain identities, and through this seek to relinquish their power and status to combat these systems and attitudes, such as conferences, codes of conduct, hiring processes, social access, student curriculums, etc. Finally, players of digital games ought to treat and address other players marked by marginalized traits with consideration and recognition, such as speaking up and reinforcing safe virtual spaces free from behavior and attitudes that work to exclude marginalized groups regardless of the player's original intentions. These are just some examples that many other people familiar with combatting marginalization are well equipped to answer and provide more and better suggestions on.

In this way, we see that moral agents can and should act accordingly in regards to combatting attitudes and systems of oppression and marginalization within digital games, whether it is industry professionals, game researchers, journalists or community managers, and even players themselves. Therefore, as moral agents within the context of digital games, actors and stakeholders in digital games have ethical obligations for recognition of marginalized identities and groups. In the involvement in the production, marketing, coverage, discourse, study, research, consumption, and play in digital games, moral subjects should be aware of the oppressive and excluding state of affairs in regards to the representation and participation of marginalized groups. Through this awareness and adherence to the proposed ethical obligation, moral agents commit to a proper ethical action in the form of symbolically recognizing marginalized groups.

## CONCLUSION
In conclusion, I have argued that marginalized groups within digital games possess specific moral rights by virtue of their marginal status in digital games culture. Because of these rights, I argue that moral agents within digital games culture can and should recognize the marginalized groups' claim to rights in question. Initially I established the terminology of what constitutes a group and the concept of marginalization. Subsequently, I elected three different markers of group identities, namely race, sexuality, and gender, and how they are represented and included in digital games culture and industry through a general literature overview. In turn, I operationalized how digital games culture, in its lack of representation and workforce diversity, contributes to marginalizing, discriminatory, and oppressive experiences for marginalized groups, who

are excluded at the expense of hegemonic White, heterosexual cis-male identities. These observations allowed me to draw out the ethical aspects of the contemporary oppressive state of affairs in digital games culture, which in turn gave rise to ways in how moral agents are able to take actions towards curbing injustices and oppression by recognizing marginalized groups and identities.

As such, the aim of this paper is to first of all establish the importance and signification of diversity on quantitative, qualitative, and ethical grounds, and secondly to provide a general guiding principle to actors and stakeholders in digital games culture. Most importantly, it is imperative that the focus and burden are put on those moral agents with the structural, economic, social, cultural, and symbolic power to enact changes that help create safe and fertile spaces and opportunities for different groups and identities, thereby affirming and reflecting "more modes of being in the world" (Shaw, 2015, p. 143) for everyone in digital games culture. It has been this paper's aim to provide justified reasons for why moral agents in digital games should commit to this objective. Further research and effort into how such an objective might be efficiently realized could prove beneficial.


**ENDNOTES**

[1] "Moral agents are individuals, who have a variety of sophisticated abilities, including the ability to bring impartial moral principles to bear on the determination of what, all considered, morally ought to be done." (Regan, 2004, p. 19). Adding to this definition, I also include collectives of moral agents, such as institutions, organizations, companies, groups, etc.

[2] By power relationship I am referring to on one hand Young's definition of power as relational between agents and structures (Young, 1990, p. 31), and on the other hand Foucault's definition of the phenomenon, i.e. "as something that circulates, or rather something which only functions in the form of a chain. […] Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising their power." (Foucault, 1980, p. 98)

[3] "On the one hand, any attempt to describe just what differentiates a social group from others and to define a common identity of its members tends to normalize some life experiences and sets up group borders that wrongly exclude. On the other hand, to deny a reality to social groupings both devalues processes of cultural and social affinities and makes political actors unable to analyze patterns of oppression, inequality, and exclusion that are nevertheless sources of conflict and claims for redress." (Young, 1997, p. 389). See also Couldry (2000), Hall (1987, p. 137), and Shaw (2015). I maintain that it is crucial that we remain vigilant in how we operationalize our use of language and terminology in order to avoid potential reproductions of existing asymmetrical power relationships, marginalized positions and limitations of fluid identities.

[4] By non-trivial I thereby exclude trivial or frivolous distinctions, e.g. "left-handedness […] tallness" (Sigler, 1983, p. 195) This exclusion is done as to avoid complex instances of claims to rights by moral subjects who are not marked by traits of marginalization.

[5] In this thesis, I define justice in an egalitarian sense, i.e. as an aspiration to equal opportunities (cf. Kymlicka, 2002, pp. 44-45)

[6] "And perhaps women are underrepresented in certain game genres not because they don't like those games but because male players who dominate many physical and social access points actively discourage women from entering." (Yee, 2008, p. 89)

[7] Examples of this inequality between salaries were male artists who made 29% more per year than their female counterparts; male game designers made 23.6% more annually than female game designers; in business and legal we see that men made 31% more than women. (Ibid.)

[8] C.f. Shaw's (2015, pp. 214-5) broader argument on the value of representation for everyone.

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