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“Re-living the Eternal Present: An Exploration of (Narrative) Loops in Video Games”

Time loops are arguably having a moment right now throughout various media. Video games are, at their core, a medium of repetition, too. But where gameplay loops go mostly unnoticed by the players, more recently, games have adopted recurring patterns deliberately on a ludonarrative level in time-loop games like *12 Minutes* and *Outer Wilds*, as well as in the reinvigorated genre of rogue-likes (and the subtype, rogue-lites) such as *Hades*. While conceptually redundant, repetitive play may generate an “engine’ which puts the narrative in motion” (Manovich 267) where the continuous engagement of the player with the given narrative rewards them with ever more interesting facets throughout each cycle. Starting over and over again, do loop narratives represent a symptom of modern anxiety, promising possible fixes even when it seems too late? Are they a form of optimism for a refusal to accept things as they are?

This talk aims to analyze how loop stories can be useful and engaging for societies that have largely shifted their focus from the future to the present. I focus on the concept of “limbotopia” (Gomel/Shemtov) to argue for a close link between the gamic and real-life tension of enjoyment of and desire to escape repetitive patterns. Moreover, I allocate the player’s knowledge and responsibility in-game that is so characteristic of time-loop fiction within Bakhtin’s notion of the “chronotope” to show how the themes of contemplation and personal transformation, as well as a gradually unfolding narrative, can create engaging interactive storytelling experiments through overt repetition. Combatting modern anxieties of stasis, loop games provide players with an outlet for creativity and contemplation, to explore the possibilities of a future (not) worth wanting.

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“Fear and Anxiety in Louisiana: Affects and Immersion in *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*”

This paper focuses on the role of affect and how it is created in Capcom’s *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*, primarily through the antagonistic characters within the game narrative and their house. The first-person perspective reinforces the player’s sense of subjectivity, or loss of it, in an environment that combines various forms of affective gameplay - most notably the sensations of anxiety and fear. However, what sets *Biohazard* apart from the rest of the *Resident Evil* franchise is the fact that it does not just rely on archetypal antagonistic characters, such as zombies or human bio-weapons called Tyrants, to create the aforementioned sensations. After an (un)pleasant, sepia-toned scene in which Ethan drives his car down an old road in search of his wife Mia, the player arrives at an old family estate. At this point, the player is introduced to two important elements of this immersive horror gameplay - the infected Baker family, who are the main antagonists of the game and who are depicted as predator-like figures that constantly pursue Ethan between the crumbling walls, and their dilapidated house that looks abandoned but is not. Following Dylan Trigg’s theory of the phenomenology of the uncanny (2012), this paper distinguishes between the sensations of anxiety and fear. In doing so, it argues that the former cannot be localized because players experience it throughout the course of the game, both inside and outside the house, while the latter can as it arises every time they encounter members of the Baker family. By emphasizing that the sensation of fear is more forceful out of the two, the paper underscores the importance of antagonistic characters for affective gameplay. It also argues that the only secure area is the “safe room” which is part of the house but exists, on an affective level, “outside” the house because it allows players to escape the Baker family and recover, if only temporarily, from an otherwise anxiety and fear-ridden atmosphere.

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“Not Actual Gameplay: Affective Non-Playable Characters in Match-3 Game Advertising”

Many casual free-to-play game genres, most notably, match-3 puzzles, do not have a playable character. In order to provide a point of identification or a companion to the player, most popular puzzle games such as *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012) or *Homescapes* (Playrix, 2017) add an external story with a relatable character that has no direct connection to gameplay. The audience is expected to empathize with this character, which sometimes starts living a life of their own in paratexts surrounding the game: for example, the gardener Austin from *Homescapes* appears in the song of the female rock star Zemfira (Zemfira, 2021). Culmination of this tendency can be found in the viral series of video ads on YouTube of a similar match-3 game *Lily's Garden* (Tactile Games, 2019): these animated videos parody Danish TV drama with its focus on broken families and sexual innuendos (Knezovic, 2022). These ads have no connection to the game that is advertised, although they are perceived as too bizarre to be considered misleading. I use this extreme case to analyze how digital affection (see Grace, 2014) is used in games that do not afford it in their gameplay. Firstly, affect is amplified in the economy of attention, as it has been already observed in game design (Ash, 2012). Secondly, we witness the return of the ‘disappearing’ subjectivity to the videogame that does not afford subjectivity as such, instead providing the disembodied ‘God’s view’ on the actual Lily’s garden. Contrary to previous studies of games (Ash, 2012; Wilde, 2018), this subjectivity does not need to be embodied in the avatar and is created by empathy and projection outside of the game.

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“A Female Rabbit Called Bonbon and a Male Lion Called Elvis: Gender Theoretical Analysis of the Naming of Characters in *Animal Crossing New Horizons*”

The game series *Animal Crossing* by Nintendo is mostly known for its utopian world and gameplay simulating the real world as well as its capitalist society. I have been playing *Animal Crossing* for a decade now, but since I started studying linguistics, I began to focus more and more on what language tells and shows us throughout this game. Language is known to construct reality which in turn influences our language – it is an endless system of linguistic (re-)production that moulds us as humans using language as well as the world we live in. *Animal Crossing* is a game which resembles the real world using similar, linguistic mechanics of constructing a world and its rules. One aspect is character interaction. In this game, you live in a place together with eight or nine so-called villagers who are NPCs. When they don’t talk to you, they spend their time fishing, reading, walking, or watering plants. In the latest game of the series, *New Horizons* (2020), there are 413 villagers in total. They are all individualized in animal species – hence the title of the game series –, and characterized by name, gender, catchphrase, personality, style, and hobby. Each category, except for name, has its set of options, which in various combinations form the villagers. What is interesting is that there seems to be some sort of connection between the categories, so names and gender seem to depend on which of the aforementioned traits a villager has and vice versa. Thus the naming of villagers and their general allocation of a distinct set of traits is not random and in many cases even follows stereotypical gender roles. The characterization of villagers is one way *Animal Crossing* constructs reality and keeps world building in this fictional game close to what we experience outside of it: gender norms.

In my talk I aim to point out the connections between onomastics and gender roles as part of the game’s character building. I want to show how *Animal Crossing* does not challenge our gender perception, thus constructing a world that binds us even more to our restricting language and hence to our (linguistic) reality.

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“Girls who Run the (End of the) World - Female Protagonists and Side-Kicks in Post-Apocalyptic Video Games”

The post-apocalypse as a practice place in which to ponder contemporary anxieties such as pandemics, nuclear threats, environmental decay and climate change, invites contemplation about how gender roles, gender expectations and gender identities are going to change in the future where these aspects reign. With the loss and re-evaluation of societal and political structures after an apocalyptic event, post-apocalyptic video games of recent years not only offer a stage on which female characters are not only featured more and more frequently as protagonists and/or key characters, but are also granted more varied, thoughtful and diverse representation. In this paper I would like to analyze the post-apocalyptic heroine and relate different feminist approaches (in particular the idea of eco-feminism) to their representations of in particular gender, sexuality and race. These intersectionalities will be related to the characters' developments in the post-apocalyptic space, the roles they take over in post-catastrophic societies and the specific traumata they experience in end of the world settings. Considering aspects such as violence against both women, motherhood and the changes of environmental spaces I hope to gain an insight of the concept of gender in relation to the post-apocalyptic space and society by suggesting a close-reading on lead and supporting female characters (both in terms of narration as well as gameplay) in Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* and Telltale's *The Walking Dead* franchises, which both feature women who grow up in the post-apocalypse and women who still remember the pre-apocalyptic world, queer women and women of color, which allows for a wider spectrum of representational opportunities.

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“Who is Controlling the Heart?": Non-Binary Identities and Troubled Player Agency in *Deltarune*”

“No one can choose who they are in this world,” the screen reads right before the player enters the world of *Deltarune* (2018), a recent indie-game title by Toby Fox. The question of choice and subsequently of control seeps into all facets of the game, most notably through the dissonance between the player's distinct presence and the avatar named Kris, whose own agency is forcefully overwritten by the player. Kris is presented through their pronouns, their interactions with family and friends, and their overall appearance as non-binary. While 'playing' through their daily life as well as fantastical and metaphorized world-within-the-world stages, the player's control is absolute except for two instances in which Kris regains authority over their body by ripping out their 'heart', thus demonstrating the parasitic nature of the player's presence and the avatar's means of self-affirmation through self-mutilation. In turn, *Deltarune* not only troubles common assumptions of player agency but also of the authority held over identities that refute processes of normalization. The avatar, in-game characters, the player, and the developer are all featured and transformed into aspects of digitized power relations that are inherently and inescapably at work in the game. With the help of queer and trans scholars as well as Foucauldian notions – and his concept of biopower in particular – my talk will explore how the avatar's silent struggle for autonomy and self-realization exemplarily showcases the demand of trans communities to decisively not turn their identity politics into immersive, playable experiences.

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“There Was No Country For People Like Me!': Ideologies and Identities of *Bioshock's Rapture*”

The city of Rapture in the *Bioshock* universe is built to be an underwater safe haven for people rejecting the governmental and social structures of 1940's America. As both a utopian example of libertarian ideals and a dystopian reality of life in a war-torn and addiction-riddled city, players can explore the now ruined city and discover traces of the rise and ruin of Rapturian society through left audiotapes, abandoned and vandalized environments, and the remaining and disturbed inhabitants. Through both this environmental storytelling as well as the main narrative, players learn about the values and ideologies Rapture was founded upon, as well as the businessman and founder of Rapture, Andrew Ryan. As an individualist and a proponent of free market, an opponent to socialism, communism, and religion, and a patron of the arts and sciences free from “petty morality”, he represents specific American ideological movements while the fate of Rapture also shows the inevitable (?) demise of a failed meritocracy reliant on the labor of the underprivileged.

In my paper, I aim to investigate some of the specific representations of U.S.-American national identity and ideology and their transformations in *Bioshock's Rapture*. A focus will be the individualist thinking and the libertarian influences that are portrayed as the cornerstones of Ryan's Rapture, as well as the consequences of that individualism on the people living in this utopia/dystopia of Ryan's making.

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“Playing ‘Climate Refugees’ in *Frostpunk*”

The latest report from the IPCC paints a grim picture of our collective life on an increasingly hot planet: the magnitude of existing and coming climate change impacts is much larger than previously acknowledged. As sea levels rise, temperatures become unbearable, and extreme weather events occur more often, tens of millions of people may not be able to stay in the area they were born. By 2030, for example, half the continent of Africa could be displaced as a result of climate change. Dominant discourses on so-called “climate refugees” continue to misrepresent climate mobilities as they feed into the same long-debunked narrative of the climate migrant as both a victim of global warming and a threat to western societies. Interestingly, through their multimodal design, video games like *No Man's Sky*, *Battlefield 2042*, and *Frostpunk* contribute to alternative climate imaginaries as they envision these so often marginalized figures as individuals with agency and do not depict them as mere victims of circumstance. In my presentation, I will analyze these multi-faceted representations of “climate refugees” through the lens of mobility theory and multimodal game studies. How does the procedural, visual, and narrative design of the games depict and simulate the “climate refugee”? What climate-changed future is imagined in the games? Paying attention to the diverse representations of “climate refugees,” their production and circulation through different (popular) media is vital, as they contribute to one imaginary or other and determine how we cope with ecological risks.

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“Between Interactivity and Activism: Identity Tourism and the ‘Playful Translations’ of (Radical) Resistance”

Video games such as *Mafia 3*, *WATCH_DOGS 2*, and *Assassin’s Creed: Liberation* allow players to engage in ludonarrative systems in which they combat systemic oppression. In the shoes of Black protagonists of varying backgrounds, the players can fight exploitative corporations, the police, slave owners or members of the KKK.

As these are all action games, the primary answer to racism, oppression, and exploitation inscribed within them is violence. Intentionally or not, these games therefore make the case that the liberation of Black people lies not in the power of the ballot, but that of the bullet.

But what happens in the conversation between player and game when the person who assumes control of these Black protagonists is not themselves Black? Particularly, what processes of identity and identification take place when a white player controls a Black body? And who is the assumed audience of these games, and how is this reflected in the gameplay systems?

By working with theories of game scholars such as Lisa Nakamura, Anna Everett and David Leonard this talk will look at the phenomenon of ‘identity tourism’ and investigate the intersections between activism and interactivity in video games.

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“This is my story, and it will go the way I want it!”

At first glance, it seems easy enough to identify the protagonist in a video game, especially in wide open roleplaying games which pride themselves in, and advertise themselves with notions of offering the player choices that affect the course of the story.

Clearly, the player is the protagonist.

However, upon closer examination, the many cases in this can easily be contested. Ranging from *Final Fantasy X* (which also lends the title to the talk by way of a quote spoken by the player avatar), to certain entries in the *Dragon Age* series, quite often an easy argument can be made that the player avatar is merely the deuteragonist or at most a co-protagonist, while many if not all of the traditional protagonist roles fall to key NPCs.

This talk wishes to highlight a number of notable examples of this pattern, and discuss the implications of these observations - chief among them the underlying, almost inherent, tension between the role of a traditional protagonist and the concept of player choice, in the context of digital games.

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“Niko Bellic: ‘The Gangster as Tragic Hero,’ Criminal Embodiment and Capitalist Escapism in *Grand Theft Auto IV*”

In 1948, pop-culture scholar Robert Warshaw published an essay entitled “The Gangster as Tragic Hero” that would later be considered as one of the first critical examinations of the gangster film as its own subgenre, and the gangster as an identifiable hero. To Warshaw, the American urban gangster of popular films like in *Little Caesar* (1931), *Scarface* (1932), and *Public Enemy* (1931) is one of the easiest fictional characters and positionalities for audiences to identify with “without requiring any serious distortion [of their identities]” like other genres would require. Most importantly, he argues that “the experience of the gangster as an experience of art is universal to Americans” namely due to their own struggles and failures while living in a neo-liberal, capitalist system (Warshaw 228). As the popularity of the gangster genre migrated

from film to television, it ultimately entered into the immersive narrative possibilities of video games. No longer was the genre linear in its narrative, but the criminal protagonist could now be embodied by audiences through a criminal avatar. This act of criminal identification and embodiment through a virtual avatar has arguably been most famously rendered through Rockstar USA's *Grand Theft Auto* game series. In this talk, I aim to demonstrate the effective ways in which Rockstar game and story developers—with more success than other *GTA* games—characterize the avatar of *GTA IV*'s gangster protagonist, Niko Bellic, as a highly player-identifiable tragic hero. In the tradition of the gangster media genre, Niko effectively presents a form of criminal embodiment that players can inhabit to fulfill fantasies of neo-liberal success and individual power by way of hyper-realism that, as Óliver Pérez Latorre argues, still contains that success fantasy within “the illusion of choice,” much like the realities of neo-liberal life itself (428).

Carmel Anne Abela

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“Rethinking the Player Character as an Outsider: a Different Perspective on the Playing Experience and Its Implications”

While scholarship on immersion tends to focus on character embodiment and technology, this research explores player immersion by way of their participation in their player character's hero's journey within the game-world – wherein the player starts as a visitor in the beginning, acquires varying experiences to gain familiarity and then becomes a native of the game-world. To this, Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs) – known for their grand narratives and fantastical world-building that invites players to explore and experience – offer conducive examples due to the fact that before the player character begins their heroic journey, they encounter complications (narrative and gameplay) that create literal and metaphoric distance between themselves and the game-world, thus subjecting them to become an 'Outsider'. To address this, game features and activities within the game-world help to improve the player character's position within the represented society, shifting to a significant role and rewarding with narrative progression and enhanced gameplay. Furthermore, following the works of Hutchinson (2018, 2022), and Schules (2022), JRPGs can be sites that reflect socio-cultural implications and community creation practices that resemble real-life experiences. Thus, the playing experience becomes multilayered and engaging, recreating a communal experience within a traditionally single-player game.

This research aims to rethink the player character within the society of the game-world through the lens of an 'Outsider'. Here, I propose a taxonomy to differentiate the states of being an 'Outsider' that the player character starts as, which can help us understand potential goals and challenges. The classifications will be analyzed in correlation with the in-game meaningful activities designed to create an impact both narratively and gameplay-wise. A large sample size of JRPGs is ideal, but for this presentation, I focus on 3 JRPGs (*Fire Emblem Three Houses*, *Xenoblade Chronicles 3*, and *Persona 5*) that represents examples of the 'Outsider' classification.

Agata Waszkiewicz

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Robin Longobardi Zingarelli

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“Emergence of Non-Binary Identities in Video Games: a Discourse Analysis Approach”

The last decades have seen the emergence of transgender and queer studies (Halbestram 2016, Richards et al. 2016, Stryker 2008) which has soon been mirrored in the field of game studies. Here scholars have noticed a growth of queerness in games (Shaw 2009, Utsch et al. 2017, Schwules Museum 2019), have analysed queer and trans authors' work (Ruberg 2020), and finally have employed queerness as a lens to analyse video games medium (Ruberg 2019). Particularly games featuring characters or topics that fall outside male and female gender binarity (as non-binary in Monro's definition, 2019) are currently understudied by the game scholars, and differently followed by the general public (as in Stalberg 2022).

Henceforth, the aim of this project is to map the emergence of non-binary identities in games and provide a taxonomy of those, by considering the various ways in which video games relate to non binary identities from a discourse analysis standpoint (a similar methodology has been employed in Enslinn 2017). In doing so, this project finds tentative categories in which non-binary characters tend to be presented:

1. Explicit mention of pronouns, but not gender
2. Explicit mention of pronouns and gender
3. No mention of pronouns or gender, but gender indicated in the paratext.

Aside from documenting these cases, this project also notes the overlap between gender neutral identities and non-humaness of the characters, and the presence non-binary identities and cosy/causal game genres, with the aim of identifying the cultural and linguistic context in which non-binary identities are discussed. In so doing, this article also provide a first step in analysing the emergence of non-binary themes in video games.

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“The Feminine Alternate: An Examination of ‘Default’ Avatar Genders in Role Playing Video Games”

The late 2000’s popularized a long time yet often neglected element of the growing world of role playing video games—the option of gender choice. Companies such as Bioware had subsequently released games where players now had the options to choose between a male and female version of the

main protagonist; Intelligent Systems revived the *Fire Emblem* franchise with the introduction of having their new medieval hero open to both gender options, and Lionhead Studios had long remained a pioneer in RPG gender options with their hit series, *Fable*.

While the bi-gender choice has long existed in video games such as *Pokemon* and the *Fallout* Series and classic MMORPG games like *World of Warcraft* and *Guild Wars*, the mechanic of a gendered character customization would find standardization much later in the years until it became a staple of the typical mass market RPG.

However, despite protagonists now coming in two flavors, there is a notable angle within video game marketing, implied canon, and community acceptance as to what is considered to be the default or ‘true’ gender of the protagonist—which often leads itself to be the male gender with the female counterpart simply designated as an ‘alternate’ version of the hero. This can especially be seen in RPGS where the community will denote a certain name to two versions of the protagonist in order to separate them properly: Shepard and FemShepard for example from Bioware’s *Mass Effect* series. This presentation will explore the representations of character avatar’s gender and how the ‘default’ is influenced through a combination of marketing, overall community acceptance, and developer bias, especially focusing on single-player role playing games. By examining how video game companies help inform the ‘true’ gender of their protagonist without open admission, I will reveal how this is unconsciously tied to the patriarchal-dominated state of video games—but also how the later years with

changing gender ideologies would abandoned said patriarchal order, and this, too, can be seen in the current state of avatar gender defaults.

Ultimately, my goal is to chronicle the historiography of avatar characters, their gendered options, and how they showcase video games’ development from a classical patriarchal era to a more progressive period. Several video game series will be in examination for this presentation such as *Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age*, *Fire Emblem*, and *Fallout*.

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“Transmutation and Mimicry. Shapeshifting Avatars as Spatial Reaction and Modes of Alienation”

As present in *Deus Ex* (2000-2017), *Prey* (2017) and most recently *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), transforming the digital body through cybernetic enhancements is a prominent and concept-

shaping feature of games within the broader genre of Science Fiction. All three games mentioned make those bio-modifications a key element of their gameplay, offering opportunities to not only adapt new skills, but also consciously alter the avatar throughout the play process.

While these examples are presenting a transformation based on adaption and optimization, games like *Witch It* (2020) don't stop there. Rather, the concept of Prop-Hunts involves the transmutation of bodies and use of mimicry. While entirely different in genre and target group, all examples are having in common, that instead of an understanding of a finite body as an absolute material limit, they present embodied identities, which are impermanent, inconsistent, and self-mutable.

Using *Prey* and *Witch It* as subjects for a case study, this research will present the self-mutable avatar as an agent for spatial reactions, creating a reciprocal relation between the body and alien and/or hostile environments. The confrontation with the digital environment is here defined as an experience of alienation. The shapeshifting and mimetic behaviour in both games allows the player to react to and interact with this estrangement, further alienating themselves from a humanoid corpus and dis-alienating their presence from the game world.

The impermanent body within *Prey* and *Witch It* becomes a tool for adapting to, exploring, and reflecting the alien experience of the game space, merging and familiarizing itself with the digital spatial surroundings.

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“Nikolay Dybowski's *Pathologic* as a Hypertextual Contemplation on Modernity and Progress”

Pathologic is a video game published by the Moscow based development studio “Ice-Pick Lodge” under the direction of Nikolay Dybowski in 2005. The game focuses on the impact of a mysterious plague on a secluded town and places its player in the role of one of three playable healers in charge of fending off that plague. The player thus gets the opportunity to experience the town and its inhabitants and influence the unfolding events from three vastly differing perspectives. *Pathologic* employs hypertextual modes of storytelling and non-linear interactive systems to utilise this change of avatar as an opportunity to confront the player with questions of cultural legacy, progress, and modernity.

In doing so, *Pathologic* employs complex interlocking systems of resource management, role-playing and spatial construction as ways of decreasing the distance between the player and their performed role. *Pathologic* invites the player to reflect on the way they perform in the text and on the relationship between author and reader through its use of theatre as a theme and through the unique role each of the three playable avatars plays within the story. Confronting the player with tangible hurdles in traversing the text, *Pathologic* seems to be primarily interested in the deliberate limiting of the player's interactional repertoire as a way of producing meaning through the experience of disempowerment.

This thesis aims to use Hypertext Theory to explore the ways in which *Pathologic* reconfigures the relationship between player and avatar, player and game world and player and author to serve a narrative and thematic end. *Pathologic's* interactive systems, its nonlinear structure, its usage of spatial construction, as well as the utilization of theatrical elements, which all directly relate to the relationship between player and avatar, were selected as the main aspects for analysis.

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“Gender and Race Representation in *Tekken*”

Representations of race and gender has gained more attention in recent years as the industry has become more diverse and inclusive. Academic research has shown that representation of gender and race in video games can have a significant impact on players

and their perceptions of these groups. For example, Williams et. al. argued that have found that players who identify with characters of the same gender or race may feel more connected to the game and have a more positive experience (Williams et al, 818). On the other hand, a lack of diversity in characters or negative stereotypes can contribute to harmful biases and prejudice (Leonard, 1).

The video game *Tekken* has been a popular and influential franchise since its debut in 1994. One aspect of the series that has garnered attention and criticism is its depiction of race and gender. In terms of race, the representation of characters has been criticized as being unbalanced and failing to accurately reflect the diversity of the global population (Şengün, et al,1). In terms of gender, the portrayal of female characters has also been the subject of criticism, with some arguing that they are sexualized and objectified (Şengün, et al,1). There has been a push in the industry to create more diverse and inclusive games, both in terms of the characters and the teams behind the games. This has led to the creation of games that feature more diverse casts and storylines that tackle important issues related to gender and race (Richard, 41). However, there is still work to be done to ensure that all players feel welcomed and represented in the gaming community.

In this talk, I will talk about the representation of race and gender in the video game industry in general, then I will discuss and showcase the specific representation of race and gender in *Tekken*. I will conclude my talk by showcasing the efforts of the video game industry of creating change and being more inclusive in their depiction of characters.