

*Normalizing the Representation of Marginalized Communities (the Physically and/or Mentally Disabled, LGBTQ+), Ethnic Minorities, and People of Colour in Video Games.*

Erika Cabrales

2021

An exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of English and New Media Studies.

## Abstract

The games industry is growing rapidly, yet developers are not always inclusive and appropriately representing those who are diverse in their video games. Previous research shows that excluding diversity and/or stereotyping representations of diversity perpetuate negative perceptions towards marginalized communities, ethnic minorities, and people of colour. This practice-based research focuses on reversing that notion by creating a visual novel with diverse characters to normalize them within a fantasy setting. Multiple sources from professionals in the gaming industry and previous studies help create the story, plot, and characters for the game. Following this, a focus group and consultations were held to acquire feedback and ensure appropriate representation of both culture and diversity. These processes defined character creation criteria and two ways of adequate representation of diversity: one, portrayal of diverse characters with problems that emphasize their humanity and the challenges the world gives them, unrelated to who they are and how they identify; and two, diverse characters within a plotline with problems related to their identity to challenge real-world societal issues. This research focused on the first type of representation. Final findings show that consultation is crucial to all appropriate representation, and the criteria created and followed are a good basis to specifically normalize diversity without problems that are defined by that diversity.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Attestation of Authorship.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Literature Review.....	8
Overview.....	8
The diversity of gamers .....	8
The importance of representation .....	9
The steps taken to improve.....	10
Identifying the theories.....	11
The gaps in the research .....	12
Methodology .....	14
Planning the game.....	14
Resources used .....	15
Worldbuilding.....	18
Characters.....	19
Story.....	21
Creating the game .....	22
Ren'Py.....	22
Art and Design .....	22
Game mechanics.....	23
Writing.....	24
Results .....	26
Focus group .....	26
Revisions made .....	28
Future uses of this research .....	29
Conclusion.....	31
Glossary of terms.....	32
Reference List.....	33
Appendix .....	38

## Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

19 July 2021

---

## *Acknowledgements*

---

The journey to create *Reason* was an interesting one, simply because I have never forced myself to sit down and actualize any of my ideas in a consumable medium. I have learned many lessons over the course of this year with the personal and ethical issues that cropped up.

There were so many people that were key to the development of this project: the team of people I hired for this project, my artist Rei, my programmer Nikan, and my proof-reader Rena. They encouraged me at every turn and adhered to my requests, no matter how randomly timed or inconvenient. Their support and work truly shines in this because without them, this project would not have reached the quality it currently has. They were the best team I could have had on this, and I could not thank them enough for their efforts.

The focus group played a key role. Their insight on scenes, characterization, and representation in general were invaluable to improving *Reason*. Their cooperation on meeting up for two hours was also a blessing considering their various backgrounds and timezones; the dedication to showing up to the session despite it being the middle of the night for some of them was truly appreciated. Both the encouragement and feedback made me reflect on my writing and storytelling, and overall, my perspective on diverse portrayal.

Last, but not least, is Tof, my supervisor on this project. Their guidance on the project was vital to structuring, planning, and production, and their constant encouragement helped me see this through. They went above and beyond as a supervisor, supporting me during this past year with not just an expert to badger with questions, but also as an ear to listen concerning personal issues that may have interfered with this research. I am very thankful to have received their tutelage.

## Introduction

*Reason* introduces its players to a fantastical setting with some modern influences presented through the video game medium in the form of a visual novel. Narrative choices are provided within the text to allow players a limited sense of exploration within the world they are given. The cast of characters is diverse and unique; their problems similar to ones that anyone would have either in real life or even as part of daily life in some of the fantastical worlds known in popular entertainment media today.

This research explores the representation of diversity in video games: this includes the LGBTQ+ community, people of colour, ethnic minorities, and/or those who possess a physical and/or mental disability. Women are mentioned because, much like the movie industry, the video game industry has catered principally to the heterosexual white male. Previous studies in the literature review address these concerns in more detail. Furthering that, this research also explores the idea of diverse representation and its effects with an emphasis on normalizing diversity within video games.

As of July 2021, *Reason* is not yet finished. However, it has undergone focus group testing where feedback on character representation has been given alongside other advice. The feedback has been implemented as much as possible within the bounds of this research. While not ready for general release, it is a body of work that serves as a lesson on how to improve diverse representation and normalization within video games.

This exegesis first explores the literature surrounding the research question 'can video games normalize the representation of marginalized communities (the physically and/or mentally disabled, LGBTQ+), ethnic minorities, and people of colour' and contextualizes this research with studies produced over the past two decades to cover the rise of video game culture and the representations within it. It then goes into the methodology of how the game was planned and how research on professional techniques support it and the creation of the world, characters, and setting. The next section explores the creation of the game through the visual novel creator engine Ren'Py, and how and why the game mechanics and visual aspects were designed the way they were. The final section of this exegesis describes the focus group used, the results of that focus group, and any changes, or justifications for not taking on suggestions from the focus group.

The practice component of this thesis, the visual novel *Reason*, can be downloaded from [itch.io](https://ecabra.itch.io/reason):

<https://ecabra.itch.io/reason>

A password is required to access the page. The password is the same as the game's title, i.e. 'Reason'. It is recommended to read this exegesis first before playing the game. There is a glossary to refer to on page 32 for any unfamiliar terms.

# Literature Review

## Overview

This literature review examines who video game players are today and why representation of diverse individuals is important. Despite progress in the games industry, there are still concerns about whether games are inclusive of diverse groups within their fictional cast and, if they are, that those representations are not stereotypes. The chosen readings reflect this, but also highlight progressive ways to prevent negative stereotypes and representation to instead perpetuate a positive, open, and informative mindset towards diversity.

All terminology used with references are of the source's terminology and are not of this author's choosing.

## The diversity of gamers

It has long been known that the gamers of today are not only heterosexual white men; nowadays, the gamer demographic is very diverse. Demographic reports have shown that forty-six percent of gamers are female within Aotearoa alone (Entertainment Software Association, 2019). More detailed information is available about gamers in the United States. AbleGamers charity reports that there may be up to 46 million American gamers that have disabilities (Baig, 2019). According to a recent study done by Nielsen, 10% of all US gamers identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community (T. Henderson, 2020). And, in a study by Passmore, Yates, Birk, and Mandryk (2017), it was found that white non-Hispanic Americans (48% of gamers) play less than Hispanic or Black non-Hispanic Americans (51% and 53% respectively) (p. 138).

Despite these statistics, gamers who identify with any of these diverse groups feel inadequately represented (Nielsen, 2015), and marginalized groups have mostly been portrayed in negative or limited roles in video games (Shaw, 2009, p. 25). However, positive, diverse representation in games combats social intolerance towards these minority groups (Smith & Decker, 2016, p. 2), which makes it imperative to normalize portraying underrepresented groups realistically and without feeding into negative preconceptions or mindsets.

An archive was built to examine the representation of LGBTQ content in video games from the first known representation in 1986; since then, 351 games were found that contained LGBTQ content (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3879); however, in 163 games made between 1985 and 2005, it was found that this representation was 'largely neutral and inconsequential' (Shaw et al., 2019, p. 1564). Even if represented, LGBTQ+ characters were

given stereotyped representation (Colliver, 2020; Shaw, 2009, 2012). Female characters within games were, and sometimes are still portrayed as weak, feeble, and needing to rely on male strength; they are also unable to be controlled by the player, which may be perceived as objectifying the female character in question (Liu, 2019). Proper representation would account for both negative and positive portrayals rather than predominantly negative and/or stereotypical. In terms of female representation, hyper-sexualization, and/or unrealistic portrayal of the feminine body and their lore consistently caters to the straight male audience (Brehm, 2013).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities state that disabled people include: ‘...those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (2007). Using this definition, this research regards two groups: characters with a physical disability, and characters with a mental disability. While mental disability representation has sufficient studies into it (Anderson, 2020; Dunlap, 2018; Ferrari et al, 2019; Shell, 2021), research into physical disability representation in games is staggeringly low. Readings found on disability representation suggest that, while characters with disabilities are present within video games, there is a comparatively low number to those without disabilities. More significantly, it is rare to find a video game that has a main character with a disability, especially one with a physical disability (Shell, 2021, p. 20). Despite the rarity of physically disabled characters, their representation was often significant and/or drove the narrative forward (Shell, 2021, p. 7). Mentally disabled characters have a significantly larger pool of characters represented yet their representation is overwhelmingly negative and often showcases the lack of research developers may have done into mental health and disability (Dunlap, 2018, p. 79; Ferrari et al., 2019, p. 5).

### The importance of representation

The people who play games are unquestionably diverse. While there have been various titles published inclusive of all these races, groups, and varying identities, the question of whether the representation is accurate, respectful, and positive remains. Yet why is it so important that representation be taken seriously?

Lack of representation and/or misrepresentation actively rejects the player demographic the gaming industry has (Bolton, 2016; Brehm, 2013; Murtaugh, 2017; Shaw, 2010). Game developers may even upset their audience depending on the way they handle LGBTQ+ characters within their franchise; writers have commonly by giving them a tragic ending for shock impact, thus perpetuating the ‘Bury Your Gays’ trope. This pop culture cliché has roots

in historical homophobia and violence against queer folk. Previously prevalent in television and cinema media, this trope has now made its way to video game narratives, where fanbases are vocal, interactive, and socially aware of the implications of killing queer people within video games and are outraged at the ongoing treatment of LGBTQ+ people (Bridges, 2018; A. Henderson, 2019; Waggoner, 2017). Awareness of this would benefit game developers; since LGBTQ+ people have received tragic treatment over the decades in entertainment media, positive portrayals of them would ideally cater to LGBTQ+ gamers and encourage them to play more. People with mental disabilities have been repeatedly subjected to negative stereotypes, the most common being portrayed as animalistic and violent, and not just in video games. Mental illness and disability are often associated with horror and the supernatural and expresses these concepts by stereotyping those with mental illnesses as 'crazy' or 'insane' and categorizing them as enemies simply for this reason. Video games may often set their players within an asylum or have 'feral' mental patients come and attack them (Dunlap, 2018, p. 78; Ferrari et al., 2019, p. 5).

Another concept that is prevalent across these readings is the idea of video games perpetuating negative stereotypes and promoting hate crimes against minority groups. Correlations between stereotyped and negatively portrayed minority groups in media to rising statistics of hate crime and harassment both in gaming communities and out of them was observed in the research reviewed (Brehm, 2013; Colliver, 2020; Dietz, 1998; Liu, 2019; Passmore et al., 2017; Shaw, 2010; Shliakhovchuk & Muñoz Garcia, 2020). Conversely, other research suggests the significance and potential of video games to be a driving force for normalizing and including minority groups by portraying them realistically (Colliver, 2020; Forni, 2020; Hawreliak & Lemieux, 2020; Lucas, 2019).

### The steps taken to improve

The lack of diversity has not gone unnoticed. The production of these games that are inclusive of these marginalized communities and ethnic minorities encourages the perception that the gaming industry is aware and listening to its audience and is being inclusive of them by portraying them in mainstream video games. Yet even if representation in video games has grown in recent years, the question of whether such representation is adequate and satisfactory is another matter.

Video games today are less likely to stereotype women as the 'mothering' archetype, creating heroines that do not fit the background/support roles a female character would previously have taken; researched examples of this would be *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, the *Dragon Age* series, and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Forni, 2020; Lucas, 2019). People of colour are also becoming more integrated within popular games such as *Apex Legends* and

*Overwatch*; both of which feature women of colour within their main cast (Hawreliak & Lemieux, 2020).

There are many blogs and news sites that review whether the representation is good such as the *London Evening Standard*, *Paste Magazine*, *Hypebae*, and *Kotaku*. These are relevant to this research because they give insight into how the consumers of the gaming industry respond to representation in the games they play. Many acknowledge gender issues in video games, yet there are still a significant number that normalise and even encourage the hyper-sexualisation. Webb credits *Apex Legends* for its diverse cast and coloured/mixed-race characters, most notably for how the characters' ethnicity did not define them (2020). *Life is Strange 2* has been examined in terms of its representation of racism towards ethnic minorities/people of colour in American society (Flores, 2018). Dornieden explained 'Daniel and Sean are just trying to navigate a system that's failing them' to describe the struggle of two Latino brothers trying to make their way back home (2020). Bioware has been commended for portraying Krem, a transman, and other LGBTQ+ characters in their video game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* very well (Webb, 2020; De Leon, 2020; DePass, 2016). In the making of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, a writer was advised to change Krem's story from being a victim in order to avoid re-traumatising transgender players who have been victimized in real life (Weekes, 2014). A recently published game, *Hades*, was praised for its unique characters and natural representation of diversity (Parrish, 2021).

As these reviews show, there are two clear ways to approach appropriate representation. The first is using representation to convey a message about the real-world bias against diversity. The main characters in *Life is Strange 2* are Latino. The ongoing conflict in the story calls attention to the fact that their troubles exist because of their race. This type of representation casts a spotlight on problematic behaviours such as homophobia, sexism, racism, etc. On the other hand, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* incorporates diverse characters naturally; they are not stereotyped and are treated just like any other character within the game. Any bias exists within the story world rather than with the identities of the characters.

### Identifying the theories

There are two prevalent theories across the previous texts explored above: social learning theory and critical theory. Social learning theory, as explained by Brehm (2013), is the idea that children develop preconceptions and ideologies based on the types of media they are exposed to while growing up. This includes video games, which makes it a significant medium to explore in changing perceptions of diversity and normalizing them rather than

stereotyping and marginalizing them to influence social behaviours towards the represented groups (Bolton, 2016; Brehm, 2013; Chess et al., 2016; Murtaugh, 2017).

Critical theory has developed extensively since its origins with the Frankfurt School, evolving to connect with the many social movements that have emerged in response to the needs of human beings and their power, or lack thereof, in relation to their societies. Because of this, it has a varied spectrum of interpretations of how to examine and tackle issues. However, at critical theory's core are three criteria that the theorist Max Horkeimer, identified:

*'...it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation.'* – Mark Horkeimer (as cited in Bohman, 2005)

Many of the studies in this literature review identify and express concerns surrounding the representation of diverse groups, and negative outcomes from lack of portrayal or stereotypical representation (Anderson, 2020; Baig, 2019; Bolton, 2016; Brehm, 2013; Chess et al., 2016; Colliver, 2020; Dietz, 1998; Dunlap, 2018; Ferrari et al., 2019; Hawreliak & Lemieux, 2020; Passmore et al., 2017 ; Shaw, 2009, 2010, 2012; Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Shaw et al., 2019; Shliakhovchuk, 2020; Smith & Decker, 2016). They identify video games as a medium through which harmful stereotypes and impressions are perpetuated, yet recognise that, if video games perpetuate these negative impressions, they can also be factors for change. The few studies on disability representation in games call for proper care and research on representation of the mentally disabled, if only to educate those who are uninformed on the reality of having a mental disability (Anderson, 2020; Dunlap, 2018).

### The gaps in the research

Literature I came across that surprised me explored the effect of representation and stereotyping on Brazil and its citizens. It was interesting to go through this reading because of how global American culture has become: not only does stereotyping affect its citizens, but those of other countries as well (Barreto & Jensen, 2020). Because of this, I believe a prevalent gap in the realm of diversity and representation is the examination of the effects of stereotyping on other countries. Not only would the effects of American games stereotyping other cultures be an interesting topic to explore, but also whether games created in other countries stereotype Americans, or if heterosexual white men are presumed to be the majority of gamers in other countries.

Disability representation is sparse. Most research on disability in the gaming industry explores accessibility of video games to disabled players, but there is a lack of research into disabled representation in video games, especially physical disabilities (Shell, 2021). Representation studies on mental disabilities are on the rise with a focus on identifying the stereotypes and the dangers of perpetuating those stereotypes; the few studies I have come across researching this topic research normalizing mental illness within video games rather than stigmatizing it and call to game developers to research thoroughly before presenting stereotyped disabled characters in their games (Anderson, 2020; Dunlap, 2018). On the other hand, research into video game representation for the physically disabled is sorely low; I acknowledge I may have missed other studies into it, but there was only one paper I found that related to this, which was done very recently (Shell, 2021).

In comparison, studies on representation of LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities, and people of colour are numerous, as explored in the other sections of this literature review, that it is hard to find a prevalent gap other than diversity normalization, which would happen in tandem with an increase in diverse representation. Given that games and portrayals can perpetuate the toxicity towards marginalized communities and ethnic minorities, how can they be used to negate that and communicate positive representation instead? Is it possible to normalize diversity in games when the video game industry is not diverse? How would one go about normalizing diversity, if one were to be more inclusive? Focusing on the positive aspects of diversity when they are included would show the steps being taken in the right direction for an inclusive, open-minded industry, and may provide an example for future developers looking to also portray diversity realistically and positively within their games. More games that represent diversity appropriately and studies that give criteria to follow would help contribute to this, which are things I aim to achieve with this practiced-based research.

## Methodology

Can video games normalize the representation of marginalized communities (the physically and/or mentally disabled, LGBTQ+), ethnic minorities, and people of colour? To answer this question, I decided to use a practice-based methodology. This allowed me to explore my research question through a creative output. This would later result in the visual novel demo. I would use the knowledge gained from the literature review to create and apply criteria to normalize diversity within a video game. Other sources, that will be specified and explored later in this section, supported the planning and creation of the visual novel demo. A focus group was used because my perspective on how to normalize diversity is limited due to my personal experiences surrounding my identity and ethnicity. I needed six participants to playtest and give feedback on the game. I found individuals who represent various marginalized groups and ethnicities; their unique perspectives could potentially inform me if they relate to the characters portrayed, and if the normalization of diversity needed improvement. The participants' backgrounds and identities cannot be specified because that would risk compromising their confidentiality.

The visual novel demo *Reason* follows the story of Aura, a young Seeress, who resides within the Prophet's Tower. Her powers of Sight aren't quite up to scratch, though her recurring dreams of the ocean may concern the recently defeated Queen and her army of the Tide. She struggles to balance this and maintaining her friends' happiness throughout the troubles plaguing them all.

This section will first describe the steps taken to planning the game, then the execution of the creation of this project. It will then discuss any problems encountered along the way and how they were dealt with.

### Planning the game

I had many resources to consider, particularly concerning how exactly I would go about not only representing diverse characters but normalizing them. First, I had to define what exactly I meant by 'normalizing'. Adequate representation is explored in the literature review, yet what about the normalization of representing these diverse groups? They are, I argue, inherently the same thing because having good and equal representation feeds into the normalization of the subject being represented. For example, representing white, heterosexual males as main characters has perpetuated the expectation and normalization of their role in video games. So, for this project, I decided this video game would host a diverse cast that explored their characterization and personal lives within a fantasy setting using the visual novel genre.

While there are several video game genres that would efficiently tell the type of story I wanted to create, such as action-adventure games like *Grand Theft Auto*, Role-playing Games like *Dragon Age*, or Massively Multiplayer Online like *Final Fantasy XIV*, all these genres required advanced coding and design that would be beyond my skill, as well as exceed the time and budget range for this Masters.

I chose to create a visual novel because I could utilize writing to the best of my ability. It also allowed me to adapt my writing to suit a game narrative style. Where prose writing allows the imagination to be completely with the reader, a visual novel video game supplies images to accompany the world, thus encouraging me to focus on conveying the rest of the characterization through dialogue and character thoughts.

To create *Reason*, I utilized the Ren'Py Visual Novel Engine (Rothamel, 2004). To begin the worldbuilding and project planning process, I consulted sources from the Game Developers Conference on YouTube, game narrative and planning books, games I was inspired by, and my own experience. After that, I started with the setting in which the story would take place, then developed the characters that would make up the diverse cast. After establishing that, I started on the plot of the story, but with a major focus on the personal stories the characters had.

### Resources used

The Game Developers Conference is the game industry's primary professional event that occurs annually. It provides resources for every aspect of game creation, including planning, designing, coding, writing, producing, managing, and much more. Experienced game developers contribute to these materials, and thus is a reliable place to start with this practice-based research. On YouTube, there is a plethora of videos on game developers talking about their experiences and teaching how they approached their game creation (Game Developers Conference, n.d.).

Swords illustrated a way to brainstorm a basic video game concept and story through creating a simple pitch. He called this a High Concept Formula. The way he demonstrated this was with the sentence: 'can the player <character> performs <activities> and manages <resources> to overcome <obstacles> and achieve the <goal>?' (2020). The bracketed words can be variables or set ideas that formulate the core of the video game narrative. This was used to develop a basic pitch for my game, which is covered in a later section in this document.

Laidlaw gave insight into time management and the creative process of producing a game with a focus on writing. Points concerning the scheduling and team management were

made, along with how to mitigate any loss of production time (2020). This was helpful to manage my time to create the video game for my Masters and to plan for unforeseen events. Laidlaw also recommended condensing the project as much as possible; games that he worked on often had twenty-five percent of the writing cut to leave time to edit and revise the rest of the writing when finalized (2020). After considering this advice, and the amount of time I had to work on the game, I realized the scale of the game I wanted to work on was far too large, and thus reduced the project size to about ten percent of the story. This would cover the introduction of the main characters and give players an insight into their lives.

A study by Anderson delved into the importance of game mechanics in helping players understand the effects of mental illness by, for example, fluctuating audio-visuals and restricting the interactive choices available to the player during traumatic moments (2020). This influenced one of the narrative choices in the visual presented to the player to convey a mental illness in the visual novel. The main character undergoes a panic attack, and a narrative choice is presented to the player. No matter what the player chooses, it leads to the same outcome to emphasize the reality of having a mental illness.

Another source that proved to be useful was *Tales Foundry*, a YouTube channel that gives various tips on creative writing and plotting. One of their videos brought worldbuilding down to a scale I could understand and plan around and made points I was not aware of before. One of these concepts was 'Worldbuilding Syndrome' where a writer would focus solely on worldbuilding and essentially delaying the plotting and writing by focusing on every micro-detail that could exist in the world they created (Mansfield & Cook, 2018). This made me realize that I have never taken steps towards producing something tangible, such as a novel or videogame, based on a world, characters, and plot I have been working on for years. This pushed my decision to use this world for this Masters.

Two books about narrative design were particularly useful to me. Mcrae gave an insightful overview of narrative design in a concise fashion; advice was given on how to structure NPC relationships, how to approach building the plot, and how to build the settings. He also underlined the importance of asking questions about each detail and whether things had a reason to be there (2017). This information was useful because consistently asking 'why' something exists is something players often do. The world should also exist independent of the player's character because different storylines within the world build the context and setting towards why the world is the way it is (Nicklin, 2020). Knowing how to answer each question towards why x and y exist creates an immersive world. More importantly, this indirectly helps address cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is when 'romanticized, orientalist, and/or generalized traditions or aesthetics [are taken] from minority cultures'

(Said, 1979, 1985, as cited in De Wildt et al., 2019, p. 964). There are many instances of this in video games, but a recent one is in *Cyberpunk 2077* where the developers allowed players to use *tā moko* as part of the character customization purely for aesthetic design, without respect to the culture nor giving a reasonable and respectful explanation on why it is there (Deguara, 2020). These sources were useful in not only paying attention to crucial details, but also to avoid cultural appropriation in this visual novel where I would be representing their traditions.

Lastly, another significant resource I looked at were published games. There are many out there that have diverse representation with good portrayal, story and world, and more that have done it badly. As was briefly discussed in the literature review, there were a couple of games I looked at critically in the planning of my visual novel. One of them was the *Dragon Age* series. This series has had three AAA games, all of which are fantasy, action role-playing games with interactive choices, an immersive interactive world, and characters that seem alive. While all three games can be used as good examples, the one I focused on was *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. In the game, there are characters who are companions to the player's character, and they can be played during battles or romanced during the storyline. These companions have varying sexual preferences: two examples of LGBTQ+ representation is Dorian, a gay man, and another Sera, a lesbian woman. There are a few more, even some that are not part of the main cast such as Krem, who is a trans man. There are also people of colour playing key roles such as Josephine and Vivienne, and the gender representation in the main cast is not overwhelmingly one or the other. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* has a diverse cast, yet the reason why I found this to be good inspiration is because of how normalized this representation is. Their story arcs were not wholly focused on their sexual or gender identity, or their ethnicity. Weekes, one of the writers on the *Dragon Age* franchise, commented 'every character in our game serves a purpose—reinforcing the theme of a plot, character, or area—and we do not have the budget for someone who is just there to tick off a box' (2014, para. 3). It was mentioned that any character's identity, in this case Krem's identity as a trans man, must be brought up naturally and within the bounds of the conversational context. Weekes also ensured that the representation and characterization of Krem was not upsetting to players who were transgender by seeking feedback where possible, and revised drafts that did not meet his original intentions (2014). This mirrored my plans with both creating the characters for my game and the goal of my focus group and made *Dragon Age: Inquisition* was a good example of normalized diversity.

## Worldbuilding

*Reason* has a fantastical world with a plot originally geared toward an epic action/adventure with some romance along the way, yet the narrative had large arcs that would take years to write and perfect, let alone code and create. The concept behind *Reason* comes from a story I had developed when I was younger but for this project, I handpicked which concepts made it into the story. Mansfield and Cook describe three techniques: 'free design', 'fixed design', and 'found design'. 'Free design' is where every aspect of the world is created without limit. 'Fixed design' is when conflict occurs at a specific place, which is then built and given history based on those limitations. For this *Masters*, I decided to go with their method of 'found design', where the settings are created based around where the story takes the player (2018). I focused on building the world that the story would directly take place in.

One immediate example would be the Prophet's Tower where the game's introduction takes place. Since I wanted to remain true to my own culture, I imagined this Tower to be on an island with climate and geography like the Philippines. Heussner et al. listed several questions that must be asked regarding the geography of an area, and the history of it. There must be a description of every relevant detail, and there must be a reason why and/or how it exists (2015, pp. 51-52). I also had to research the types of trees that were commonly found in the Philippines, and ancient languages the Filipino natives used.

The shape and geography of the land and setting was a critical challenge for worldbuilding reasons: why would these people live on an island if the sea houses their nemesis, the Queen and her Tide army? What reason would they have to build a Tower and hide it with illusory magic instead of having an entire village closer to the ground? How far away from the ocean do they have to be to be safe and live out their lives? Does trade occur between this Tower and other societies? Why isn't overpopulation a problem considering the Tower's static state and numbered floors? Answering these questions well provides an opportunity for the world to flourish and become more believable. If I had the time and the budget, I would have liked to consult with a geologist, a historian, an economist, and other experts, in order to make *Reason's* world as realistic and thorough as the one we live in today. Different aspects of worldbuilding tie into cultural growth, which I would argue is imperative to the goal of normalizing ethnic diversity and representation in video games.

Part of *Reason's* backstory is that, long before any sort of conflict arose, people settled on the island because of a strong connection they felt spiritually and magically with the land and built a life for themselves. A Tower was used because the clan that lives within this Tower is descended from the Sky Goddess they worship, and so the height brings them closer to their faith. The island they are on was home to their ancestors, yet their people and land were so

ravaged by war and invaders seeking their coveted abilities that they chose to hide in a single, concealed location to practice and teach their young there. Despite their efforts, they do still communicate with some outside cultures: the Tower is not self-sufficient, and thus a fragile trust was born between those within the Tower and those that came from beyond the sea. Overpopulation has not been a problem because their powers are fatally potent, shortening their lifespan through use, a secret maintained through the youth's cultivated respect and trust for their elders. These answers may not be flawless, yet they still offer an insight into how these peoples' culture was shaped by their history. Providing history and culture cultivates player interest in learning the deeper lore in *Reason*, as explored in the literature review. Optional dialogue could be provided to satisfy these using keyword/subject choices that provide the subtext around relevant concepts (Sawyer, 2017).

## Characters

This action/adventure/romance plot allows for the characters to develop, react, and live in a world that normalizes their diversity. The conflict does not centre around their struggle for acceptance or the ability to live, but instead goes back to the familiar story of the hero triumphing over adversity to save the world. I do acknowledge that this type of story may not be original, but the goal of this is to normalize diversity within a fantasy setting appealing to fans of the genre, as opposed to creating a plot about diversity.

Normalized representation of diversity was covered in the literature review, and on that basis, I propose four criteria for developing fictional characters that are of colour, an ethnic minority, disabled, LGBTQ+, and/or any other marginalized community:

1. The portrayal should not be stereotypical, one-dimensional, or facetious; the background and personality of the character must have depth to it, and what makes them diverse must not define them.
2. The portrayal should not constantly villainize or victimize any aspect of diversity. For example, having people of colour constantly shown as powerless victims when those who are not of colour are always in higher positions.
3. Make it normal. A diverse character in a fictional world is still a character that lives in that world and affects it. Their diversity should not be constantly advertised to the audience like a trophy. For example, Dunlap praises a passer-by in a game mentioning they were going to therapy as a normal occurrence (2018).
4. Trust your intuition *and* always seek consultation in matters you are uncertain of, and even in what you are certain of. There is a fine line between culture appropriation and culture appreciation; respect the culture by consulting with someone from that culture about what is and is not appropriate.

The most important thing to remember is that everything is dependent on the situation and the purpose and type of game that is being made. These criteria were created personally for this visual novel because *Reason's* main goal is to normalize a diverse cast. These are also criteria made for characters that would feature in the main cast as opposed to side characters that are optional to interact with and/or would feature only in one scene.

With all this in mind, I started the character creation process.

The main playable character in this story is called Aura, a coloured, cis female, heavysset, bisexual, and disabled protagonist. She has chronic anxiety and depression disorders. She wears her heart on her sleeve and cares deeply for her friends but tends to be socially awkward and forces herself to sometimes act differently if she thinks the situation calls for it. She is not very confrontational but knows when to stand her ground if needed. Her biggest desire is to make her friends happy and keep them happy. As she goes through the story, she must manage her mental illnesses, support her friends through the problems they encounter, and decide whether to pursue a budding romance with another character she meets.

The second main character is Ganta, a coloured, homosexual, cis male. He is a hopeless romantic and often looks to faith and superstition for answers. On the other hand, he is analytical and sharp academically, and is often excited about prominent figures in history he is passionate about. As a responsible person, he tends to lecture his friends when he thinks it is needed, though it comes from a place of care. His issue through the story is finding love and attempting to remain optimistic despite his many attempts and failings.

The third main character is Rui, a coloured, asexual biromantic, transgender man. He tends to come off as broody and sullen to appear 'cool'. Sometimes he may try too hard to do this and can appear silly instead. He is subtly playful and does not hold much respect for authority figures. He is proactive, preferring to get things over and done with and does not often hold his opinions back unless it is an important matter. He has an unrequited crush on Ganta, though despite this tends to try and live his best life, and often focuses on making Aura happy as well because he is aware how self-sacrificing she can get.

The final main character is Lana, a coloured, homosexual, transgender woman. She has chronic shoulder pain. She can be often misjudged to be tough and mean, but the moment she has a reason to smile, her demeanour changes completely. She is quietly observant and insightful. However, she can often be socially awkward and say the wrong thing at the wrong time. Her goal is to be a mighty warrior despite her physical disability and make her people proud.

In this context, 'coloured' refers to underrepresented, non-Caucasian ethnicities; each character is based on real-world ethnicities, though those terms are not used within the visual novel. These personalities provide a basis which I could work off; there would be room for them to grow and learn through the story. Further opinions would be needed on whether they seem realistic and normalized in the setting as the story is written, which is where the focus group comes in.

## Story

Instead of an epic journey that the main cast would take, I took the advice from Laidlaw to cut content that would not be able to fit into the production and writing timeline and focused on parts that were essential to expressing the personality of the characters and introducing the players to the world and potential problems that could arise.

I wanted there to be an overarching plot that lurked in the background of the story to indicate there were still problems that could pop up later; essentially, the Queen and her Tide army would be an antagonist that would make appearances throughout the beginning, but not be a significant threat at first. The scale of this threat is akin to expecting a war, but that would not yet be clear in the beginning stages of this story. Going back to Swords' High Concept Formula, and how I focused on only the beginning of the story, the core plotline became:

Can Aura perform activities (spending time with someone) to overcome obstacles (visions, background relationship drama) in her relationships (with Ganta, Rui, and Lana) to achieve her goal (keeping everyone happy).

At this story's heart is a girl who wishes her friends a happy life while doing everything in her power to support and ensure that happiness. This is a concept that may run similarly to other stories in Western Culture: on a larger scale, a hero may want to save the world to keep everyone safe; on a smaller scale, a mother may want her children to be happy. This concept is based on simple, selfless desire that has nothing to do with race, gender, sexuality, identity, or ethnicity. While there may be problems that coincide with these concepts, the overarching idea is that Aura is someone who wants what a lot of humans want: to make their loved ones happy. Her ethnicity, colour of her skin, her sexuality or gender should not affect that.

From there, it was a matter of deciding what factors would hinder this: personal factors from all of them concerning their innermost feelings, relationships, and anxieties, the visions that are experienced, and factors that are outside of any of the main characters' controls, such as the Queen and her Tide army.

## Creating the game

### Ren'Py

Having previously worked with Ren'Py, I was familiar with the simplified coding process, but I had not created anything that would prove to be so vast in scope. Both narrative and visual art were necessary to tell an engaging story using Ren'Py and in this specific video game genre, so I commissioned Rei, an artist, to create background images, the main title screen, and character images (otherwise known as sprites). I also hired someone to design and code the user interface of the visual novel and to give advice on visual aesthetics.

### Art and Design

Communication was heavily emphasised in many of my resources for game creation. It both ensures that the team know exactly what they are working on and how and it aligns the creative vision and goal with each feature in the game (Heussner et al., 2015, p. 4; Laidlaw, 2020; Sawyer, 2017; Swords, 2020). For example, I provided the general framework to my artist for a background image consisting of a tall hallway with markings along the wall, and silhouettes of students chatting away in the distance. I encouraged them to ask me questions because I had not worked with an artist so closely before and have primarily been a writer relying on imagination to do the visualizing. They asked me for references on the markings, the types of windows the hallway would have, the shapes of the students, and the camera angle from where this image would be witnessed. It was more information than I expected to give but it was a learning experience because the exchanges between myself and my artist pinpointed exactly what I pictured in my mind. From this conversation, I learned to give more specific references and be clearer about what I wanted to see. In addition, I would attempt a rough draft of the image to indicate where I wanted objects to be positioned, the colours to use, and any intricate details needed (see *fig. 1 & 2* in appendix).

The design for the characters proceeded the same way: I would give a basic description for each of the characters. This included hair, height, ethnicity, age, eye colour, body weight, and any special features. I also gave a personality description for the artist to keep in mind while drawing their facial features and expressions. For emotions that I needed for the story, I created a list that the artist could refer to and added to it as I wrote the story. A lesson I learned while doing this was to give the context this expression was used in. My mistake was that at first, I only communicated an emotion using one word and, as a result, sometimes the expression drawn did not match the scene. For example, I gave the prompt 'side-eye' to my artist. The expression that came out was too angry and intense for a neutral scene. I contacted the artist about this and proceeded to give the accompanying scene and

they edited the expression to be less aggressive. Going forward, I continued to do this for each emotion so that no errors like this occurred again.

During the design process of the characters, I considered culture and how it would play into their appearances. One of the cultures I wanted to pay respect to is the Māori culture (*fig. 3*). I wanted to follow *Black Panther's* example where African-American culture was portrayed and celebrated by subverting Western cultural influences; for example, the science-fiction fantasy and futuristic technology in movies has always had Caucasian people at the forefront and in charge. *Black Panther* subverted those conventions by weaving African culture into this classic genre, effectively making it their own (Smith, 2018). In my story there is a group called the 'Paladins' that maintains the peace and is seen as the land's protectors against the main antagonist the Queen and the Tide. I wanted Māori culture to dominate and embody this idea as mighty defenders, yet also still retain their own traditions and culture through the clothes they wore, the weapons they chose, their customs and mannerisms, and *tā moko*. I planned for further development, but unfortunately there were only a few snippets I could give about the Paladins through the description in the narrative, Lana's dialogue, and the clothes Lana wore. Since I am not Māori, I was nervous about doing this. I sought guidance from a Māori friend to ensure that I was paying the respect that the Māori culture deserves, and I learned about their traditions in order to appreciate them so that the players of this game would do the same.

Another culture I wanted prevalent in the game was Filipino culture because of my own ethnicity. Having grown up away from my heritage, this was a challenge: I had to research everything to do with the Philippines. The clothing designs were pulled from school uniforms and formal wear common in the Philippines. The classroom backgrounds were also inspired by Filipino schools. The images with markings on the walls are Baybayin, an ancient language that originated in the Philippines (see *fig. 4*). This was added, lore-wise, as a language that had power, and could spur players to ask questions about what the markings are and mean.

### Game mechanics

Mechanics can play a major part in supporting the storytelling in a game. Since this is a visual novel and I am not an expert in coding, the game mechanics are limited to the choices the player can make at specific points in the game. As explored in the literature review, game mechanics can be used to help the player understand the mental or emotional state their character is going through (Heussner et al., 2015, p. 6; Tremblay, 2020). For example, *Doki Doki Literature Club* is a visual novel in the horror genre. One can play it normally, but when a traumatic event occurs in front of the character, the game takes away the ability to

click through the story at the player's own pace and accelerates the in-game days to express how the character is feeling (Anderson, 2020, p. 26). Another example is a scene that occurs in *Life is Strange*. Throughout the game, the protagonist Max can rewind time to a limited extent so that the player can redo their choices. This allows for easy decision-making and seeing what choice is better in the short-term. However, there comes a critical moment where a friend of Max's tries to commit suicide by jumping off a building. It takes all of Max's power to freeze time just to get up to the building, so the player does not have the ability to rewind and redo their choices when they must convince that friend to not commit suicide (Dontnod Entertainment & Deck Nine, 2015). The player's agency is drastically reduced, and each dialogue choice suddenly matters infinitely more because, for once in the game, it is critical that the player chooses the right options. I found this powerful because limiting the player's agency makes the scene that much more impactful.

In *Reason*, Aura has an anxiety disorder. In her case, pervasive unease can develop and grow, either slowly from added stressors in her life, or suddenly from an event or information she finds triggering. This happens during a scene where she discovers her reoccurring dreams may be prophetic. She begins to have a panic attack, and the game gives the player two options: 'I can't calm down,' and 'There's nothing I can do about this.' (see *fig. 5*)

Essentially, these are not options at all because clicking either of these choices will lead to the same scene. This lack of choice, when the player has been given agency beforehand in the game like choosing to spend time with Rui or Ganta, becomes impactful by suggesting that those that live with an anxiety disorder do not have a choice when it comes to their mental illness.

## Writing

The writing process was altogether harder than anything else. The coding part of things was admittedly tedious, but only because there were sprites that were sometimes out of place or were not 'hidden' and thus stayed on the scene long after they should have disappeared. Proofreading the coding itself is a repetitive, long process to ensure that every part of it works together smoothly and, most importantly, consistently.

The most trouble I had was with keeping track of multiple branches of narrative choices and remembering what occurred within them to keep the content and information the players learn the same. I did have a narrative chart on Google Drive that I could readily access and consult, but as I started writing, it became a common occurrence that I would add details or scenes that did not coincide with that chart. These extra scenes, I believe, were imperative to set up the story and characters. My original plans were both vague and consisted only of

important plot points. Deciding to narrow down the project, was a good decision since these extra scenes provide the player more contextual dialogue and insight into the characters' underlying relationships. For example, 'Paladins are introduced' is vague and offers room for development and detours in dialogue. Originally, it was not planned that Lana would be noticed when this scene happened. As I wrote, I decided that Lana should be introduced as early as possible because of her importance to the story later. The library scene that occurs near the end of the playable game would have originally been where the player first meets Lana but introducing her near the start allows Lana and Aura some familiarity so that the library interaction does not feel awkward. This also allowed for normalizing pronoun usage in the game. This game ensures characters do not assume the gender of a stranger. Aura does not refer to Lana as anything other than they/them until she finds out Lana's preferred pronouns (see *fig. 6*).

## Results

### Focus group

After proofreading and finalizing the art and background images, I created distribution copies of *Reason* to share with my focus group members. This focus group consisted of six diverse participants as discussed in the Methodology. Everyone played through the game and went back and chose other choices to experience what other content the game offered.

Following are the open questions asked to prompt discussion amongst the participants. The following answers from the participants are not exact transcriptions but are summarized notes of what their answers were. Details that were not relevant to the topic discussed, or otherwise would violate ethical anonymity, are not shown.

*What interested you about the story? What did you like about it? Are there any specific examples you can give?*

**Participant One:** Liked that the main character (Aura) is fuller figured; these details felt natural and wasn't overstated. Their sexualities were not blown up.

**Participant Two:** Enjoyed Aura's personality. She felt like a normal person. Her body size, skin colour, and preferences do not come into play. Enjoyed how the power of divination was presented.

**Participant Three:** Really liked magic system and clairvoyance, and the school setting. Liked depiction of Aura encouraging Rui when she goes to spend time with him; it was portrayed well. Character interactions are well-written. Mannerisms were written well.

**Participant Four:** Enjoyed Lana's character greatly, most interested in her. Enjoyed the three main characters as well, thought they had a good dynamic and that they have realistic struggles for their ages.

**Participant Five:** Related to Aura's panic attack during assembly and appreciated the way Ganta comforted Aura.

*Were the characters normalized in this setting for you? Do these characters and characterization fit well in the setting?*

**Participant Five:** Felt like it was integrated well and not shoved in face. The story did not feel interrupted.

**Participant Two:** Enjoyed how Rui was presented. Felt that transgender/identity

issues are unavoidable in a story and thought that *Reason* handled it well. Not heavy-handed nor intrusive. Noticed that it was more focused on character's feelings and them as a person. Introduced with personalities first and foremost, while the sexual identities are something you find out about them afterward. Personalities are not about their minority group.

**Participant Four:** Thought characters were presented well. Impressed with the maturity of the situation. Feels that no characters are trite. Everyone is grappling with different things that are common and unique at the same time. The struggles feel human.

**Participant One:** Characters integrated to where they felt natural to story; sexual/racial identity secondary to personalities and story.

**Participant Three:** Transgender characters handled well. Likes that Rui is not pushed to look a certain way to represent his gender.

*Anything not normalized?*

**Participant Two:** Doesn't seem to be? Not a lot of material to go through for things to be not normalized.

*Opinions on cultural aspect of game? Does anything stand out?*

**Participant Five:** Suggested creating cultures.

**Participant Four:** Brought up Genshin Impact. The locations are based on actual cultures while being in a fantasy setting so it is not constrained to real life.

**Participant Two:** Expressed that culture is sacred; anyone that wants to borrow from a culture should always ask permission first and, if permission is given, then they should do their utmost to learn everything they can about that culture and pay the proper respects to it.

*Additional comments:*

**Participant Three:** Hover mechanic for UI (User Interface), did not know what certain icons did until clicked. Font was really good. Paladins, tide, different nations spark interest but feels lost. As someone with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), related to Ganta gushing about several topics at one point because that is how they are sometimes.

**Participant Two:** Felt that the pacing of the storytelling and the way information was given could be better. Information needed for context was only given through

certain choices. Subtle information about characters could be conveyed better. Needs more backstory for pivotal characters. More in-universe information needed. Felt lost during certain exchanges. Suggested including a map/nation in the main menu.

**Participant Four:** Felt a bit confused at times. Also thought that worldbuilding could have been better as well. Suggested an in-game dictionary. Highlighted words players can click on for a way of giving context without oversaturating exposition with the world-building.

**All participants:** Received well the scene where Aura has panic attack, and how neither choice relieves her anxiety.

## Revisions made

The feedback given by the focus group showed that the writing in *Reason* seemed to have satisfactorily normalized diversity for them. The characterizations were said to be natural and realistic, and that their identities did not define them. The portrayal of Rui, the transgender man, seemed to have also been written well; this was a subject I was not confident in handling, but giving the same amount of care and attention to his situation and character as the other main characters was adequate.

These results show that the purpose of normalizing a diverse cast seemed to have been achieved, but there were suggestions made by the participants about what can significantly improve the visual novel. The culture, for example, was something the participants struggled to comment on. This suggested that culture was not prevalent enough in the writing and in the visuals. Lana's sprite was not yet coloured in by the artist around the time the focus group was held, so features indicative of Māori culture were not as obvious. The Māori participant in the focus group did not comment on it either way, which suggested revision of the Paladins was needed.

Another problem was the worldbuilding. The focus group pointed out how the world was confusing to them, and sufficient exposition was not given. I expressed that I did not want to overload players with information and asked what could be changed or added to help that. Participant Four suggested that an in-game dictionary could be added, or highlighted words could be clicked to bring up a pop-up menu. This was interesting because it never occurred to me to provide exposition in different ways. Since I grew up writing prose, I was wary of information dumps that could bore the player. However, the participants made it clear that if players want to learn more about the world, they should be given the option to.

Unfortunately, this was beyond my skill in coding, and while I could ask my coder to do it, I did not have the budget to hire them for that additional job, nor did I have the time to learn

how to do it on my own. This ties in with the idea of providing keyword/subject dialogue that the player can pursue, which unfortunately did not occur to me before having the focus group.

On the other hand, a problem I could work on was the consistency they mentioned. Context that was present in one dialogue branch was sometimes not given in the other, so if that context was referred to further into the game, the player would not be fully aware of the situation. During revision, I found an error in the first branching choice: Ganta seemed to be staring at someone, and the player had to choose between: one, finding out who he was staring at; or, two, making him focus on the Paladins instead. The first option let the player know who he was looking at, the second option did not. If the player chose option two, Aura does not find out within the following scene as opposed to option one. Despite this, Aura knew who Ganta had been looking at no matter what option was chosen later in the story. There were also several sprite errors I had not caught before. My proof-reader also caught small pronouns errors regarding Lana I would not have seen otherwise.

To address the culture prevalence, I went in and edited a few scenes to make it clearer that Māori culture influenced the Paladin tradition. One change that could have made a large difference was commissioning my artist to create a sprite of Aaria, the Chieftess of the Paladins. I did not request a sprite for them because I thought that their appearance in the story would be infrequent. However, I realized that even if she is a minor character, I should have included her image to increase Māori representation. By the time I came to that conclusion, there was no time for my artist to design and draw Aaria, nor was there time to consult a Māori woman on how the *tā moko* should be designed. I believe my own hesitation and fear of potentially misrepresenting a culture that is not my own affected this outcome. While I wholeheartedly wished to include Māori culture and help players to learn about it, I was also afraid I would fail in doing so. I believe more consultation would have helped increase my confidence in this matter. There were a few sessions where I consulted with someone about cultural details, but that was only during the planning of the game. Having a close consultant throughout the process of writing and perhaps even while working on the feedback given from the focus group would only be beneficial.

### Future uses of this research

Creating a complete, commercial video game with original art and design requires a far higher budget than I had for this project. However, this was a learning experience in how to communicate with artists and programmers, and how best to utilize their skills. I would encourage anyone who decides to create a game normalizing diversity to consult with members of any culture they are uncertain about portraying in their story, and even when

they are certain about it. Second opinions on how characterizations are done will always merit revisions, especially if a game developer themselves does not identify with the character they created. When representing a marginalized culture, humbly requesting permission, and learning about the culture is a crucial way to respect and honour that culture.

This research highlights two different approaches to creating a diverse cast. On one hand, there are games like *Life is Strange 2* that highlights and challenges the racism still prevalent in humanity. On the other, there are games like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* where diverse characters are simply put into that world and have wholly human issues that do not coincide with their identity. Both ways of representation are imperative in breaking the perpetuation of toxicity against marginalized communities and ethnic minorities.

## Conclusion

This research supports the idea that video games can normalize the representation of marginalized communities (the physically and/or mentally disabled, LGBTQ+), ethnic minorities, and people of colour. This exegesis explored the literature surrounding this topic and used practice-based methodology to apply these learnings to the creative project, before submitting a visual novel demo to a diverse focus group for their feedback.

Although the visual novel *Reason* is not yet complete, key points were learned from the process of its creation and the feedback given by the focus group. Any game developer aiming to represent diverse characters in their video game can look to consultations, primary resources, and focus groups to ensure appropriate portrayal and content. Cultural sensitivity, and hesitance in representing traditions that are not your own, especially calls for consultation. Efforts made towards mitigating nervousness through learning and consultation secure the foundations of cultural appreciation in the video game. The focus group underlines the importance of normalizing diversity in video game characters, and especially of having a narrative that does not make everything about what makes them diverse. Representation must be natural when placed within another world and 'diverse' characters must be treated just the same as every other character within an organic story.

Points made within this research that can be expanded on: how would a game developer go about representing diversity to make a point about how society treats oppressed groups today? What practice-based research could be done to support this and/or determine the criteria for appropriate representation within a setting that is biased against them? Which type of representation is more beneficial in combatting harmful stereotypes?

Diversity can be normalized within video games. *Reason* exemplified this by portraying a diverse cast of characters within a modern, fantastical world, whose primary issues arose not from their identities, but more-so from the fictional world and their personal relationships. This research establishes two ways of appropriate representation: emphasizing stereotypes to highlight the injustice and harm they can bring; and normalizing diversity to let relatable characters exist in a world where their identity does not define them and their problems. This research, having focused on the latter method of representation, suggests the criteria to guide future character creation when normalizing diversity and reminds game developers to seek consistent consultation. Choosing to action these steps with a genuine desire for appropriate portrayal will only combat pre-existing harmful stereotypes, representation, and cultural appropriation within the gaming industry, and negate the stigma against diversity.

## Glossary of terms

- AAA – ‘Triple A’ is an informal reference to a high budget video game company/publisher. If a video game is referred to as a AAA game, then it may have been made and/or published by a AAA gaming company.
- Agency – In accordance with video game narrative, agency is the control that is given to the player. Aspects of control that they player may be given over the game may include story agency (the choices given within a game), character agency (the characterization and personality of the player character). Player agency may refer to both these things.
- Baybayin – An ancient scripture originating from the Philippines.
- Branch/branching dialogue – An essential part of interactive fiction. Branching narrative/dialogue is when a player is given options on what the character does or says next.
- GUI – Graphical User Interface. This encompasses the visual and interactive usability features of the entire game. In this context, the person hired for this coded where specific images, symbols, and text would go. They decided the font and colour of the interface and created the background of the text box of narration.
- Indie – Independent video game developers. This is another informal term given to small and/or start-up companies that make and/or publish games.
- NPC – Non-Playable Character. Fictional characters within a video game that the player cannot control at any point in the game.
- Player – The individual that plays a video game.
- Player character – The fictional character inside a video game played by the player.
- Sprites – The character images displayed at the left, middle, or right of the screen during the gameplay. They are primarily used to show the character and the emotions they have during scenes.
- Tā moko – Māori tattoo. It is the traditional way for Māori to express their heritage and social standing.
- Visual Novel – An interactive fiction video game genre; they are comprised of both narrative-style text and art.

## Reference List

- Anderson, S. L. (2020). Portraying mental illness in video games. *Loading*, 13(21), 20-33.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1071449ar>
- Baig E. (2019, May 9). Video games are a 'great equalizer' for people with disabilities. USA TODAY.  
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2019/05/09/passionate-video-gamers-dont-let-their-disabilities-stop-them/3661312002/>
- Barreto, D., & Jensen, L. K. (2020). Using cultural representations in video games to confront stereotypes and misconceptions about Brazil: Favelas, Futebol, and Brasilidade. *Handbook on Promoting Social Justice in Education*, 1663-1684. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14625-2\\_138](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14625-2_138)
- Benzies, L., Jones, D., Lashley, S., Sarwar, I., Thomson, B. (1997). Grand Theft Auto series [PC, Xbox, Playstation, Steam]. Rockstar Games, Take-Two Interactive, Capcom.  
<https://www.rockstargames.com/V/>
- Bolton, C. (2016, November 30). *Representation and design trends in games*. Gamasutra - The Art & Business of Making Games.  
[https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/ClaireBolton/20161130/286551/Representation\\_and\\_Design\\_Trends\\_in\\_Games.php](https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/ClaireBolton/20161130/286551/Representation_and_Design_Trends_in_Games.php)
- Brehm, A. L. (2013). Navigating the feminine in massively multiplayer online games: Gender in world of Warcraft. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00903>
- Bridges, E. (2018). A genealogy of queerbaiting: Legal codes, production codes, 'bury your gays' and 'The 100 mess'. *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, 6(2), 115-132.  
[https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.6.2.115\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.6.2.115_1)
- Chess, S., Evans, N. J., & Baines, J. J. (2016). What does a gamer look like? Video games, advertising, and diversity. *Television & New Media*, 18(1), 37-57.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416643765>
- Colliver, B. (2020). Representation of LGBTQ communities in the grand theft auto series. *Video Games Crime and Next-Gen Deviance*, 131-149. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83867-447-220201008>
- De Leon, P. (2020, August 3). LGBTQ+ gamers on the need for proper representation in today's gaming world. HYPEBAE. <https://hypebae.com/2020/8/lgbtq-representation-in-video-games-gaming-diversity-inclusivity-ea-the-sims-bioware-dragon-age-veronica-nikatine-ripley-interview>

- De Wildt, L., Apperley, T. H., Clemens, J., Fordyce, R., & Mukherjee, S. (2019). (re-)orienting the video game avatar. *Games and Culture*, 15(8), 962-981.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019858890>
- Deguara, B. (2020, December 18). 'It's definitely appropriation': Use of tā moko in cyberpunk 2077 video game. *Stuff*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/pou-tiaki/123715517/its-definitely-appropriation-use-of-t-moko-in-cyberpunk-2077-video-game>
- DePass, T. (2016, July 7). 9 games that do diversity right. *pastemagazine.com*.  
<https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/9-games-that-do-diversity-right/#6-the-sims-4>
- Dietz, T. L. (1998). An examination of violence and gender role portrayals in video games: Implications for gender socialization and aggressive behavior. *Sex Roles*, 38, 425-442.  
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1018709905920>
- Dontnod Entertainment, Deck Nine. (2015). [Video game] *Life is Strange*. Square Enix.
- Dunlap K. (2018, August). *Representation of mental illness in video games*. ResearchGate.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334306891\\_Representation\\_of\\_Mental\\_Illness\\_in\\_Video\\_Games](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334306891_Representation_of_Mental_Illness_in_Video_Games)
- Dornieden, N. (2020, December 20). Leveling up representation: Depictions of people of color in video games. *Independent Lens*. <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/leveling-up-representation-depictions-of-people-of-color-in-video-games/>
- Entertainment Software Association. (2019). *Interactive Aotearoa report*. New Zealand Game Developers Association. <https://nzgda.com/news/interactiveaotearoa/>
- Ferrari, M., McIlwaine, S. V., Jordan, G., Shah, J. L., Lal, S., & Iyer, S. N. (2019). Gaming with stigma: Analysis of messages about mental illnesses in video games. *JMIR Mental Health*, 6(5), e12418. <https://doi.org/10.2196/12418>
- Flores, N. (2018, October 31). What other games can learn from the racism in life is strange 2. *pastemagazine.com*. <https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/life-is-strange-2/what-other-games-can-learn-from-the-racism-in-life/>
- Forni, D. (2020). Horizon zero dawn: The educational influence of video games in counteracting gender stereotypes. *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 5(1).  
<https://doi.org/10.26503/todigra.v5i1.111>
- Gaider, D., Bioware. (2009). *Dragon Age* [PC, Xbox, Playstation, Steam]. Electronic Arts.  
<https://www.ea.com/games/dragon-age>
- Game Developers Conference. (n.d.) *Home* [YouTube Channel]. YouTube. Retrieved October 26, 2021, from [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0JB7TSe49lg56u6qH8y\\_MQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0JB7TSe49lg56u6qH8y_MQ)

- Hawreliak, J., & Lemieux, A. (2020). The semiotics of social justice: A multimodal approach to examining social justice issues in videogames. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1769936>
- Henderson, A. (2019). The butterfly effect: Player agency and trope subversion in *Life is Strange and Until Dawn*. *Cinder*, 2, 1-11. <https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/cinder/article/view/863/827>
- Henderson, T. (2020, August 18). 10 percent of gamers are LGBTQ+ nielsen study shows. *Out Magazine - Gay & Lesbian Travel, Fashion & Culture*. <https://www.out.com/tech/2020/8/07/10-percent-gamers-are-lgbtq-nielsen-study-shows>
- Heussner, T., Finley, T. K., Hepler, J. B., & Lemay, A. (2015). *The game narrative toolbox*. CRC Press.
- Laidlaw, M. (2020, March 11). Empires to ages: Storytelling lessons learned in 14 years at BioWare [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Gsh-aYdFWws>
- Liu, A. (2019). *Gender Representation in Video Games* (Order No. 22619723) [Master's thesis, Northeastern University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Lucas, R. (2019). *Out of the margins: Evolving narrative representation of women in video games* (Master's thesis). <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/5882/>
- Mansfield, C., & Cook, B. (2018, August 18). Worldbuilding: How to start — Worldbuilding series [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/lkDQrmyElzU>
- McRae, E. (2017). *Narrative design for Indies: Getting started*. Fiction Engine.
- Murtaugh, M. (2017). Gaming in Color. *Queer Studies in Media & Pop Culture*, 2(1), 143+.
- Nicklin, H. (2020, March 24). Kill the hero, save the (Narrative) world [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/oT0Pz4fJ3WM>
- Nielsen. (2015, March 24). *How diverse are video gamers*. <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2015/how-diverse-are-video-gamers-and-the-characters-they-play/>
- Parrish, A. (2021, January 5). The state of diversity in big budget video games. Kotaku. <https://kotaku.com/the-state-of-diversity-in-big-budget-video-games-1845994350>
- Passmore, C. J., Yates, R., Birk, M. V., & Mandryk, R. L. (2017). Racial diversity in indie games. *Extended Abstracts Publication of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play - CHI PLAY '17 Extended Abstracts*, 137-151. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3130859.3131438>
- Rothamel, T. (2004). *Ren'Py Visual Novel Engine* (computer software). <https://www.renpy.org/>

- Sawyer, J. (2017, April 7). Choice architecture, player expression, and narrative design in Fallout: New Vegas [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LR4OxNfzTvU&list=LL&index=292>
- Shaw, A. (2009). Putting the gay in games. *Games and Culture*, 4(3), 228-253.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009339729>
- Shaw, A. (2010). *Identity, identification, and media representation in video game play: An audience reception study* [Doctoral dissertation]. <https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/286/>
- Shaw, A. (2012). Talking to Gaymers: Questioning identity, community and media representation. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 9(1), 67.  
<https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.150>
- Shaw, A., & Friesem, E. (2016). Where is the queerness in games?: Types of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer content in digital games. *International Journal Of Communication*, 10(13). <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5449>
- Shaw, A., Lauteria, E., Yang, H., Persaud, C., & Cole, A. (2019). Counting queerness in games: Trends in LGBTQ digital game representation, 1985–2005. *International Journal Of Communication*, 13(26), 1544-1569. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9754/2611>
- Shell, J. (2021). What do we see: An investigation into the representation of disability in video games. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2103.17100*.
- Shliakhovchuk, E., & Muñoz Garcia, A. (2020). Intercultural perspective on impact of video games on players: Insights from a systematic review of recent literature. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 20(1), 40-58. <https://doi.org/10.12738/jestp.2020.1.004>
- Smith, R., & Decker, A. (2016). Understanding the impact of QPOC representation in video games. *2016 Research on Equity and Sustained Participation in Engineering, Computing, and Technology (RESPECT)*. <https://doi.org/10.1109/respect.2016.7836164>
- Smith, J. (2018, February 8). Behind the revolutionary power of Black Panther. TIME.com.  
<https://time.com/black-panther/>
- Swords, A. (2020, May 21). Game narrative summit: The forest paths method for accessible narrative design [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/mncyepcgJO8>
- Tremblay, K. (2020, March 17). Storytelling with verbs: Integrating Gameplay and narrative [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/ontNUxSLhb8>
- United Nations Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and optional protocol, March 30, 2007, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-1-purpose.html>

- Webb, J. (2020, June 12). Diversity in games: The best (and worst) examples of representation. London news | London Evening Standard. <https://www.standard.co.uk/tech/gaming/video-game-diversity-representation-a4461266.html>
- Weekes, P. (2014, December 4). Building a character: Cremisius "Krem" Aclassi. BioWare Blog. <https://blog.bioware.com/2014/12/04/building-a-character-cremisius-krem-aclassi/>
- Waggoner, E. B. (2017). Bury your gays and social media fan response: Television, LGBTQ representation, and communitarian ethics. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 65(13), 1877-1891. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1391015>
- Yoshida, N. (2010). *Final Fantasy XIV* [PC, Steam, Playstation]. Square Enix. <https://www.finalfantasyxiv.com/>

## Appendix

This appendix contains screenshots and images of *Reason*.

Figure 1 Rough draft of main menu.

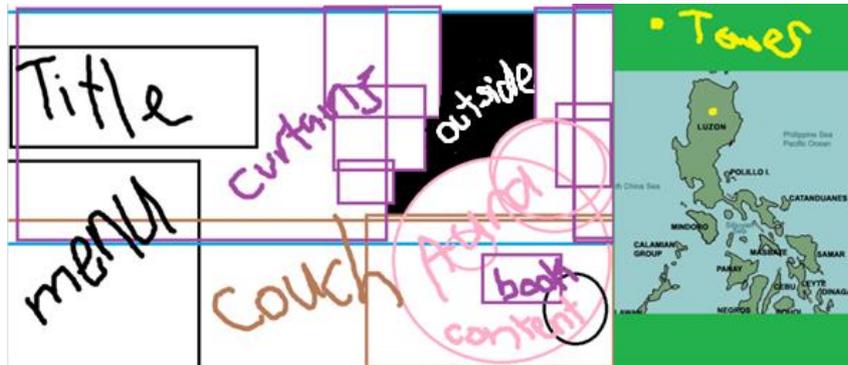


Figure 2 Final draft of main menu.



Figure 3 Lana sprite image.



Figure 4 Background containing Baybayin scripture.



Figure 5 Narrative choice.



Figure 6 Interaction between Lana and Aura.

