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Promoting Literacy through Inclusivity in Indie Games

**Abstract**

The essay “Promoting Literacy through Inclusivity in Indie Games” by Kelsey Burroughs explores how a selection of independent (indie) games, available on Steam, encourage inclusivity in gaming through a more diverse array of protagonists and subjects than most games include. The essay takes an intersectional feminist approach to inclusion and seeks to demonstrate some of the literacy practices and learning skills that the games offer players. The essay draws upon the gaming scholarship of Adrienne Shaw, James Paul Gee, and Steve Holmes and others to define the following key terms: intersectional feminism, gaming culture, gaming discourse, gaming literacy, gaming rhetoric, inclusion, representation, and accessibility.

**Introduction**

As the world of gaming grows, more and more small businesses and individuals are able to create games by learning coding, animation, entrepreneurship, and other needed skills. These creators and their games fall under the category of independent or “indie” game creation. Academic and popular discussion about gaming is also growing and with that growth comes the criticism that games and game companies are made by and for white men. Controversies like GamerGate, which resulted in women in gaming journalism being harassed and threatened with violence by male gamers and male gaming journalists (see “Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in ‘GamerGate’ Campaign by Nick Wingfield for *The New York Times* and “Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Even of #GamerGate” by T.E. Mortensen in *Games and Culture*), also bring this discussion to the attention of people outside gaming communities or gaming scholarship because controversies like these reach mainstream media and news. The root of the problem seems to be that not only are most games made by men for men, but also that this dynamic completely ignores the fact that approximately half of all adult women in the USA play video games (Brown).

Lack of positive representation in games and game development companies also extends beyond gender to race and other identities. It is a problem because limiting the realm of gaming to include a narrow and exclusive group of identities perpetuates the stereotypes of who games are for and what games should be about: white men and their interests. Doing so reiterates to this white male audience that they are the default and the norm who game developers and all of western society should cater to, reaffirming an extreme sense of entitlement that patriarchal society bestows upon them. Thus, when anyone doesn’t cater to them, and this entitlement is questioned, a common reaction is intense anger and sometimes even violence, such as the GamerGate example above, and examples from the following articles: “Fair Play? Violence, Gender and Race in Video Games” (Glaubke, et al)*Game Changers: From Minecraft to Misogyny, the Fight for the Future of Videogames* (Golding and van Deventer), “Women in Gaming: A Study of Female Players’ Experiences in Online FPS Games (McDaniel). Of course, not all white male gamers react this way, and not all men who are raised in patriarchal societies behave this way, but if they chose to do so, their behavior is considered excusable under patriarchal societal norms (usually by other men, but also by others in said society). In other words, white men don’t have to actively use or engage in behaviors that constitute their white male privilege in order to still benefit from that privilege. One way that part of this problem is being addressed is through indie games. Some indie developers are making more inclusive games and are including a greater diversity of creators on their teams.

These diverse indie creators and their more inclusive games promote literacy and social activism in several ways. First, indie games are often smaller/shorter games that are more affordable (sometimes even free) than most AAA titles and even lesser-quality games created by big companies. By being smaller or shorter games (and also typically just a digital file download and not a physical disk), gamers can also often play these games on typical laptops without the specialty high-powered processors or drivers that gaming computers need to play larger games. Thus, small size creates both more affordability and accessibility for a broader range of people. Affordable and accessible indie gaming allows people who have never been able to afford the usually-expensive hobby to become gamers and experience the many literacies involved in playing games. For some examples of the literacies that games can teach us, Gee describes over thirty literacies that come from playing games in his work *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*.

Another way that these games and their creators take an activist stance that promotes literacy is through more inclusive character design and more inclusive game developers. More inclusive character design and the inclusion of more diverse game creators means that there is better representation in games and behind the scenes of games, which shows people that they can be the hero of their own story or that they can pursue their dreams of being a creator regardless of what they look like or where they come from. More diversity in game development companies also means that more ideas and creativity are shared within the team or company, meaning they can create better games overall; when a team is made up of many similar and like-minded people, ideas and progress stagnate.

The following research will explore a selection of indie game developers and the games they have created that provide better representation of characters. Additionally, the essay will demonstrate some of the ways in which these games and their creators help their players engage in a variety of literacies. This essay will use the terms "protagonist" and "player/playable character" interchangeably.

**Literature Review**

In his article, “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction *and* What Is Literacy” James Paul Gee explains:

All of us, through our primary socialization early in life in the home and peer group, acquire (at least) one initial Discourse. This initial Discourse, which I call our primary discourse, is the one we first use to make sense of the world and interact with others. Our primary discourse constitutes our original and home-based sense of identity, and, I believe, it can be seen whenever we are interacting with “intimates” in totally casual “unmonitored” social interaction. We acquire this primary Discourse, not by overt instruction, but by being a member of a primary socializing group (family, clan, peer group). Further, aspects and pieces of the primary discourse become a “carrier” or “foundation” for Discourses acquired later in life. Primary discourses differ significantly across various social (cultural, ethnic, regional, and economic) groups in the Unites States … (527) I believe that any socially useful definition of “literacy” must be couched in terms of the notion of Discourse. Thus, I define “literacy” as the mastery of our fluent control over a secondary Discourse. Therefore, literacy is always plural: literacies (there are many of them, since there are many secondary Discourses, and we all have some and fail to have others) …We can talk about dominate literacies and nondominated literacies in terms of whether they involve mastery of dominate or nondominated secondary Discourses. We can also talk about a literacy being liberating (“powerful”) if it can be used as a “meta-language” (a set of meta-words, meta-values, meta-beliefs) for the critique of other literacies and the way they constitute us as persons and situate us in society. Liberating literacies can reconstitute and resituate us. (529)

As briefly mentioned before, Gee also has an extensive amount of work about literacies specific to gaming, including *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* and *Good Video Games + Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning and Literacy.*

Gee explains that a person’s inclusion in a Discourse (and the development of literacies from that Discourse) is tied to peer groups that a person is a part of. For people who play video games, that peer group involves other gamers. So, it may be useful to understand how academia defines gamer culture. In the introduction to her article, “What is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies” Adrienne Shaw writes:

“Game culture” is often defined via descriptions of gamers. The point of this article is not to outline the gamer stereotype yet again. Instead, it begins with the categories from which the stereotype stems. These categories include (a) who plays video games, (b) how they play, and (c) what they play. Starting with these categories and not looking for a prototypical definition of a gamer identity allows us to see that popular discourses actually offer a much more diverse view of what gaming is than they are generally given credit for. They still define “video game culture” as something very distinct and very different from mainstream U.S. culture. This othering of games, whether done in a positive or negative manner, shapes how video games are studied. Unpacking the discourses surrounding “video game culture” allows us to see the power dynamics involved in attributing certain characteristics to it, as well as naming it “video game culture” as such. (404)

As she continues, she defines who plays what games and how. Then she adds:

Many ... academics, define game culture in terms of interaction and immersion. ‘‘We are about to enter an intensification of the mediation of our everyday lives. An intensification in which we learn how to flow seamlessly between the virtual and the actual, with our experiences in one being just as affecting as those in the other’’ (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 2). There is a heavy emphasis on the interactivity between audience and text... (412)

This definition, focused on “interaction and immersion” and the fact that our experiences in the virtual world of gaming do affect our real lives in the actual world, is useful to this study because it points to how and why representation matters in gaming: the aforementioned real-life positive and negative consequences tied to either inclusivity or exclusivity in gaming culture.

Next, Steve Holmes’s *The Rhetoric of Videogames as Embodied Practice* gives us a way to further understand interaction and immersion: procedural habits and embodied practice in gaming. He defines procedural habits (and their place in his research) as:

…the specific forms of rhetoric that emerge from dynamic and locally situated repetitions of social, behavioral, and material habits that give rise to meaning and communicative agency in the activities of video game design, play, and writing about play…If we start theorizing videogame rhetorics through procedural habits, I contend that we will be able to start appreciating how these mundane [not intended to be rhetorical or habit-shaping] design elements and genres can serve as important sites of rhetorical negotiation and transformation, even in traditional videogame genres. Furthermore, these considerations do not require that we set aside political relations and issues with the rhetoric of video games. Rather, these considerations help us better understand how these issues emerge because of the ways in which rhetorical bodies can contract and main a wide array of habits through play. (10-11)

# Just a few of the many additional scholars of value to the conversations about gaming, literacy, and inclusion are Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher (*Gaming Lives In the Twenty-first Century: Literate Connections*), Catherine Beavis (“Games as Text, Games as Action: Video Games in the English Classroom), Alice Mitchel and Carol Savill-Smith (*The Use of Computer and Video Games for Learning: A Review of the Literature*), Gabriela T. Richard (“Supportive Online Gaming Communities as Models of Inclusive Communities of Practice and Informal Learning within Game Culture Across Game Genres”), Yasmin B. Kafai, Gabriela T. Richard, and Brendesha M. Tynes (*Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat: Intersectional Perspectives and Inclusive Designs in Gaming*), Kara A. Behnke (“Ladies of *Warcraft*: Changing Perceptions of Women and Technology Through Productive Play”), and Maria E. Beltran, et al (“Inclusive Gaming Creation by Design in Formal Learning Environments: “Girly-Girls” User Group in No One Left Behind”). Some relevant popular articles include Daniel Cook’s “How Can I Make My Games More Inclusive?” and Noah Graham’s “Gender Inclusiveness: It Costs a Little to Do a Lot. Lastly, it is useful to mention that there is at least one (if not more) indie game platform dedicated to the cause of inclusivity in gaming, the Indie Game Developer Network (IGDN). This network trains developers, provides scholarships, and more.

**Methodology**

For this research, I would like to apply an intersection feminist analytical framework. As mentioned above, multiple facets of identities are commonly excluded in game development by the top gaming companies. An intersectional feminist methodology would allow me to articulate how and why games should represent characters and acknowledge the diversity of gamer’s that enjoy their products. A term originally coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines intersectional feminism as “the complex, cumulative manner in which the effects of different forms of discrimination combine, overlap, or intersect” (IWDA). From my understanding, intersectional feminism acknowledges the ways in which people’s complex identities (made up of gender, race, ethnicity, language, religion, and so much more) cannot readily be separated as parts of a whole, with the context and experiences for each being completely divorced from the others. In the past (and probably still today), this was a problem that non-white feminists brought up in feminist discussions. “White feminism” often seemed to view women’s experiences as all the same, regardless of differing experiences of discrimination or oppression tied to other women’s identities. In short, intersectional feminism asks us to not see any one group of people as a monolith and to recognize that what is best for one group being used as the general good for all could hurt another if we don’t actively work to improve the conditions for everyone. For more information about intersectional feminism, see Julia Maj’s “The Significance of Intersectionality for Feminist Political Theory.”

**Methods and Limitations**

To complete this research, I investigated games under the Indie category on Steam. Steam is a platform for purchasing, reviewing, and curating information about games and game-related software that are available for players on PC. Using Steam itself is free, but you can make purchases and wish-lists much like Amazon or eBay. Unlike those online shopping sites, Steam also has a major community element for gamers. Within this category, I combed through the game listings to find those that were made by people of color or other minority groups and to find games with main characters who were not white males. Games that featured a non-human main player character or games where the information on the developer was limited or non-existent were obviously excluded, but I ended up having other obstacles that I hadn’t anticipated.

I decided not to include games where female protagonists were illustrated in a heavily sexualized manner and violent games. I do believe that these sorts of games have plenty to teach us, but for the purpose of this project they do no align with my intention to share games that serve an activist purpose to bring literacy, positive representation, and accessibility to wider audiences.

Within the Indie category, Steam users can filter their results based on their preferences that they set when the make an account. This filtering can be toggled on or off or changed at any time to show all results or different results. The main subcategories to choose from when looking for games on Steam are "New and Trending," "Top Selling," "What's Being Played," and "Upcoming". Users can also view all releases.

A few major obstacles occurred during my search. I started out knowing that Steam lists games with the title and a thumbnail image of the game art, so I thought I would be able to quickly glance at these listings to find games that fit my fairly broad parameters. However, as I began my search, I realized this task was not as easy as I had hoped. Many of the game names or images that seemed to indicate a game that might work ended up not being what I was looking for. For example, one game that I found early in my search seemed to be a cute game featuring a Japanese girl and her Shibu Inu dog going on an adventure (as far as I could tell from the art and title). The game, called *Montaro RE*, features an art thumbnail that shows a closeup of a cartoon Shibu Inu dog standing next to a girl (shown from the waist down) in a school uniform with stockings. I assumed this girl was the dog's owner and that the game might be from the dog's perspective, hence the image only showing the girl's lower half. As it turns out, the playable character is the dog, but the girl is not supposed to represent the dog's owner. The game is a side-scroller where the dog is supposed to walk past (underage) girls and look up their skirts. This sort of peeping is a common form of harassment in Japan. Another game that initially looked promising but wasn’t quite what I was looking for was *School of the Dead: Anastasia.* This action game has players acting as Anastasia, a girl who must fight monsters with her newfound power. However, the game immediately put me off after reading the description: “This is the story about a girl named Anastasia, who ends up in a school filled with hideous monsters and gains amazing strength after a strange incident. Are you ready to help a damsel in distress or leave her to the mercy of the terrible monsters? You decide” (Steam). How is a girl with “amazing strength” who fights monsters (saving the school/world) a damsel in distress? I also could not find much information about the game developers for either of these games, so I could not discern anything about the identities of the creators themselves.

Another set-back I experienced was the sheer lack of results that fit my parameter of a human protagonist and the immense amount of search results. There were over 1000 pages of results for Indie games with twenty-five results shown per page. Even with my filtering preferences (omitting explicitly sexual content) intact, only about 130 of those results were hidden from my preliminary search. For many of the games, if there was a human protagonist that fit my parameters, many of the titles and thumbnail images did not give any indication that would lead me to click on them. Eventually, after scrolling for so long, I gave up on this method of hoping to find something and tried using the search box to find results more effectively. My first game of focus, *Austen Translation*, is the only game I found while using my first search method.

My first search term, “woman” proved rather effective for finding games with women and girls as the protagonists. The search term found games with “woman” in the title, but also games with “woman” in the game descriptions. There were twenty-five pages of results with nineteen titles omitted from the results based on my filtering preferences. Even though I set my preferences to omit sexually explicit games, many of the games that appeared in the results were still sexually explicit games that made it past the filtering. These games may have come through anyway because of a lack of proper use of tags by the developer to categorize the game. The games I found from this search were: *Majin Woman, Neo Cab, Blind, I am Setsuna, Abha*, and *Within Whispers*. My next search term was “diverse”, and although I wasn’t sure if it would actually result in anything useful, it did, but not for the reason I was thinking. What I mean by this is that I was hoping some of the game descriptions might mention that the game characters are diverse, but that’s not usually what “diverse” was referring to if it was mentioned in the description (it usually referred to landscapes/regions or other types of things that weren’t people). There were twenty-nine pages of results for this search, but I stopped short of that, realizing that I might have a better search term if I used “culture” instead. My “diverse” search resulted in a *Nancy Drew* game because “diverse” is used in the game description to describe the places Nancy Drew will explore to solve the mystery. *Mineko Night Market, Sumer, Within Whispers, Paranoia,* *Last Inua,* and *Pamali* came from the “culture” search. Still not satisfied with the number of my results, and worried that my original perspective that Indie gaming was a haven of social activist creators had been incorrect, I decided to broaden my search even further, taking it beyond Steam.

# To confirm that my fear was unfounded, and to determine whether or not indie game developers were actually making games with better representation of race, gender, and other identities, I began to search websites to see if I could find news articles or other sources that would tell me whether my original notion of indie games was accurate or not. I found that many popular and news sources do show that indie games and their developers are working to increase diversity in gaming. For examples, see “How Indie Developers are Bringing Diversity to Video Games” by Anna Menta and Gina Echevarria for *NewsWeek*, [Hayley Tsukayama](https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/hayley-tsukayama/)’s “Critics Say Video Games Aren’t Diverse Enough. These Developers Are Trying to Change That” for the *Washington Post* and Stephanie Chen’s “Game Devs of Color Expo Highlights the Diversity Already in Gaming” for *Venture Beat*. On the other hand, other sources, including current academic scholarship, are showing where there are still plenty of gaps, such as Chella Ramanan’s “The video game industry has a diversity problem – but it can be fixed” for *The Guardian* and Cale J. Passmore, Rowan Yates, Max Birk, and Regan L. Mandryk‘s “Racial Diversity in Indie Games: Patterns, Challenges, and Opportunities”, conference proceedings from CHI Play 2017. Thus, I realized that there must be more indie games like the ones I am looking for, I was just having a hard time finding them. In one way, that is a relief; the games do exist. It would be better if they were easier to find, though. Making inclusive games and their makers easier to find should be a priority because if gamers struggle to find them, they may jump to the same conclusion I did: that these games aren’t there at all. It doesn’t make a difference for the games to exist affordably if players aren’t playing them because they can’t find them or can’t discern whether they are a game with positive representation and messages or not.

# I detailed the above narrative of my search experience because it demonstrates another type of literacy the is important for gamers: research. If gamers have particular interests or standards when looking for a new game to play, they are engaging in research literacies. They may utilize multiple search engines, search terms, other player reviews, and other skills or resources to find what they’re looking for. When their searches do not yield the results they want, they may become discouraged like I did. Eventually, I even extended my search to just Google, with the search term “inclusive indie gaming” and found a list of “LGBT+ Indie games” curated by Twitch but was discouraged a bit by this list because most of the games were overtly sexual in nature. I did find one rather promising game on this list, *One Night, Hot Springs.* There may be others that did not stand out to me, though.Thus, a secondary aspect of this research that I realized was important is helping game developers with their literacy practices regarding naming, labelling, and describing their games effectively so that it is easier for gamers to find their inclusive games. Certain rhetorical moves are useful for reaching their intended audiences, especially if they are engaging in activist purposes with their game creation.

**Analysis**

*Austen Translation* is a visual novel game inspired by the works of Jane Austen. In the game, strategizing skills are necessary to solve puzzles and progress through the story. In my selection of games to analyze, it is the only game where the player designs their own character. I did not originally want to include games with character creation because it seemed to be a shortcut way for creators to potentially include more diverse character design in their games without having to do the work to make a protagonist that is complex and dynamic. Nonetheless, I decided to include it because it was one of the first games I actually found that seemed to at least mostly fit my criteria. Also, the literary context of the game makes one of its connections to literacy quite obvious. Playing as the heroine of the story allows players to enjoy a positive form of escapism and imagine what it would be like to live in the world of Jane Austen, as one of her heroines who (usually politely) disrupts gender norms in late 1700s and early 1800s. *Austen Translation* comes from Worthing and Moncrieff, a team of only three creators. It is available on Steam at <https://store.steampowered.com/app/706880/Austen_Translation/>

*Majin Woman* is a side-scrolling shooting game where the player is a giant woman, fighting off aliens to save the world. In this game, sometimes math problems appear on screen for the player to choose to solve or not. If players choose to solve the problem and get the correct answer, they earn bonuses. *Majin* *Woman* is inspired by Japanese culture (perhaps particularly the film legacy of *Godzilla*) and Japanese city landscapes. The player character is a Japanese woman called Hanako Yamadain. Not only do the math problems provide a learning experience and a require mathematical literacy, but the connection to Japanese film and culture could also be most appreciated by gamers who have a level of literacy in intertextuality (to understand the subtle cultural references the game makes). The fact that the player character is also a giant could also be a subtle way to encourage girls not to have a negative self-image if they are tall, especially if they are taller than boys. *Majin Woman* is only $9.99 and was created by an individual indie game creator from Japan who uses the username Konekroyd. It is available on Steam at <https://store.steampowered.com/app/895180/Majin_Woman/>

*Neo Cab* is a game where the protagonist is one of the few human cab drivers left in the world. The driver competes with cars that are run by artificial intelligence. This game is highly narrative-driven and utilizes a lot of decision-making, with each decision affecting the outcomes of the game. It also demands a strong sense of emotional intelligence in the player as the player experiences the emotional turmoil of their passengers in a second-hand way. Emotional intelligence may not constitute its own literacy, but certainly involves practices that are crucial for many literacies like strong listening skills, compassion or empathy, and critical thinking. The game is currently in development by a small, but diverse team, called Chance Agency. It is available on Steam at <https://store.steampowered.com/app/794540/Neo_Cab/>

*Blind* is a virtual reality (VR) survival and escape game where the player character is blind. In the game, the player uses echolocation to find their way around a dangerous mansion and solves puzzles to try to escape. For many players, this game will be one of their first experiences feeling what it can be like to be blind. It is important to keep in mind that although the game itself is fairly affordable at only $24.99 (and currently on sale for $14.00), the hardware needed to play VR games is rather expensive, but for a gaming experience like this one, it may be worth it. *Blind* comes from an Italian indie company, Tiny Bull Studios. It is available on Steam at <https://store.steampowered.com/app/406860/Blind/>

*I am Setsuna* is an homage to the Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) genre made by Tokyo RPG Factory. The game relies heavily on narrative elements and draws on folk and fairytales. In the game, protagonist Setsuna seeks to save her island from a dangerous beast that has caused a dangerous tradition of human sacrifice to keep the peace. It is the most expensive game of the results I found, at $39.99. As a narrative-driven RPG, Setsuna encourages users to engage in story-telling and role-playing literacies to make the most of the adventure ahead of them. The game is available at <https://store.steampowered.com/app/441830/I_am_Setsuna/>

*Abha* is a game located in a fantasy jungle, inspired by tribal cultures. It is a point and click adventure with puzzles and item-collection driving the main gameplay. *Abha* is the most affordable of the paid games I found at only $3.99. Featuring an indigenous protagonist (especially one that does not feed into negative stereotypes) of any region is very uncommon in games. Holmes mentioned in his text that a game he would love for his students to play features a Native American protagonist and is one of the first of its kind. To learn more about Native American representation in games see Julie Morley’s “A Brief History of Native American Representation in Video Games” for *Cliqist Indie Gaming.* The game is available via <https://store.steampowered.com/app/794830/Abha_Light_on_the_Path/>

*Within Whispers* is an upcoming game, slated to be available in March 2019 that follows the story of a woman, named Aska, whose brother disappears fighting in World War I. The game follows her journey to find him, showing the destruction and tragedy of the war in the form of the ghosts that she sees. War is a common theme and subject in video games, but usually only in gruesome first-person shooters. For a game to show the other side of war, those left behind to pick up the pieces, is a new and refreshing take that I hope will remind players to honor the memories of people lost, teaching emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and other literacies needed to discuss war with compassion and tact. The following link is where players can find *Within Whispers* on Steam: <https://store.steampowered.com/app/698360/Within_Whispers_The_Fall/>

*Nancy Drew: Secret of the Scarlet Hand* is another literary-based game. In the game, the player plays as Nancy Drew to solve a mystery and catch a thief. It is a point and click game featuring puzzles much like *Abha*. Along with teaching intertextuality like *Austen Translation* would, the game, like its novel and films counterparts empowers girls to take charge and help others. It also teachers the play about the game setting of Washington, DC and about the Ancient Mayan artifacts that are located in one of the game’s main locations, a museum. It is the oldest game of the bunch, being released by HeR Interactive in 2002. Nonetheless, like the novels and other novels geared toward uplifting young girls, it seems to have stood the test of time. It is currently $6.99. It is available at <https://store.steampowered.com/app/31890/Nancy_Drew_Secret_of_the_Scarlet_Hand/>

*Mineko’s Night Market* is an upcoming game that will be available sometime in 2019. It represents a fictional version of Japan’s several cat islands: small islands where human inhabitants are largely outnumbered by their feline friends. Because it is located on a fictional version of a Japanese location, the game gives players an introduction to some features of Japanese culture in a fun-loving and sweetly-illustrated medium. It is an adventure game featuring the player character, Mineko, a girl who has recently moved to this cat island and will learn to be a part of the community. *Mineko’s Night Market* can be found at <https://store.steampowered.com/app/762940/Minekos_Night_Market/>

*Paranoia: Deliver Me* is a game exploring loss and mental health, topics rarely treated with tact in AAA games. It will be available on December 14, 2018. It follows the story of Lingluo, a girl who loses her best friend during college and struggles to cope and grieve. It was made by SukuraGame, a Chinese development company. AAA Games often address poor mental health in the same way that films do: as a horror trope or as the reason someone becomes a killer. The stigmas around mental health are still a major problem around the world, but games like these could help people understand mental health more. It is available at <https://store.steampowered.com/app/970600/Paranoia_Deliver_Me/>

*Sumer* is currently available as an early access title for only $14.99. It takes players on an adventure through the ancient civilization of Sumer with game art based on that of the ancient civilization. It is the game situated the farthest in the past of all the games and will introduce players to a civilization they have likely never heard of, including some of the religious and economic norms. The developers call it a digital board game, and it is largely strategy-driven. It is made by Studio Wumpus, a small but diverse team. The Steam page for *Sumer* is: <https://store.steampowered.com/app/464950/Sumer/>

*Last Inua* is a survival game following an Inuit father and son. It is currently available for $7.99. It features an Artic landscape and an Inuit mythological demon, both of which the father and son must survive against. It is described as an immersive and highly-emotional game, teaching players about the family dynamic of a father and son in the close-knit Inuit culture. Because the player plays as both the father and son, who have differing abilities, it encourages players to be adaptive and flexible in their play, while once again highlighting an often ignored, disenfranchised, and displaced Indigenous people. *Last Inua* is available at <https://store.steampowered.com/app/331980/Last_Inua/>

*Pamali* is an Indonesian folklore horror game. It should be available before the year’s end. The game comes from StoryTale Studios, a small indie development team from Indonesia. The horror of the story (made up of four parts or chapters) is based on ghost stories of Indonesia, which are in turn based on Indonesian taboos. Even though the Steam information page warns that this game is likely violent or at least gory, I decided to include it on the basis that very few games like it exist. Games based on non-western folklore are rare and often do not even acknowledge that fact that ghost stories and folklore often stem from stigmas and difficult parts of the human experience. So, because the game does acknowledge these facts, I think it still fits my parameters. Like *Paranoia*, it could help to normalize and improve the way stigmas are discussed by society and how people are treated when they experience/exhibit social taboos. *Pamali’s* Steam page is <https://store.steampowered.com/app/854570/Pamali_Indonesian_Folklore_Horror/>

*One Night, Hot Springs* is a game where the protagonist is a transgender woman, named Haru, struggling to deal with the experience of attending a hot spring in Japan, which are usually divided by male and female sexes or are totally unisex where everyone enjoys the hot spring together nude. This is a cultural norm in Japan, but it is still presents problems for Haru. The trouble begins from the moment she arrives at the hot spring, needing to fill out a permission form to enter the hot spring that requires her legal name and legal gender, neither of which match her current appearance and identity. This is small visual novel game, taking only about thirty minutes to play fully, but it is complete with genuine experiences that transgender women in Japan and the rest of the world face every day. It features a delicate cartoon art style and is totally free to play. It is the first game I have ever seen featuring a transgender protagonist. Because it shows a day-to-day experience, this game will hopefully help players understand concepts like that of microaggressions and body dysphoria that can be constant presences for transgender people. Gamers can find *One Night, Hot Springs* on Steam at <https://store.steampowered.com/app/917680/one_night_hot_springs/>

**Future Directions**

Because of the time limitations and my research struggles, I did not get to find and explore as many games as I would have liked. I wanted to be able to play the games I found that were available for a more in-depth analysis and review as well. Thus, in the future, I hope to play many of the games listed above and more similar games as well in order to confirm whether they live up to any goals of inclusivity and empowerment. I believe playing the games will also help me to better articulate the specific literacies each game employs in detailed terms, especially in terms of the aforementioned scholarly literature. Ideally, I will also further explore the nuances of accessibility in these games, beyond price. I would like some of this work to culminate in accessible infographics geared toward gamers and game developers to get the information to them in a format that is easy to read and understand, as well as visually engaging.

In the future, I also hope that a continuation of this work will become a part of doctoral thesis. Using games as teaching tools is very important to me because games taught me some of my earliest literacy practices as a child. I can remember the shift from not being able to read the words on the screen when playing *Super Mario World* on the Super Nintendo to being able to read the messages that guide Mario through the Mushroom Kingdom to save the Princess with the help of Yoshi. I have considered myself to be a part of the gaming community (and gaming to be one of my secondary discourses) for quite some time. Gaming is also a family pastime that continues to provide quality togetherness for my family and our close friends even though we are far apart while I am in graduate school. Thanks to the technological advances in online gaming, once we could only play together in one living room watching one TV screen, but now the miles between us do not matter. This ability to connect is one of the greatest benefits of gaming to me and I hope to use my research to explore the many other benefits gaming can have, not just for entertainment, but for many other purposes as well.

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