LESSON PLAN

First Person

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

LEVEL: Grade 9 to 12

DURATION: 2 to 2½ hours

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Overview

In this lesson students consider diversity representation in games by identifying examples of diversity in the games they play and comparing their findings to statistics on diversity in the Canadian population. They then learn how media works can act either as *mirrors* (reflecting a person or group's identity or experience) or *windows* (giving insight into another group's experience) and analyze games to understand how their design features affect how they represent diversity. Finally, students "remix" a game design to make it act as a better mirror or window.

Learning Outcomes

KEY CONCEPTS:

Media have social and political implications

Each medium has a unique aesthetic form

Digital media experiences are shaped by the tools we use

LEARNING GOALS:

Students will:

Know:

- identify examples of diversity representation in games
- select a game for analysis

Understand:

- analyze the content and affordances of a video game
- assess the impact of affordances and defaults on diversity representation

Do:

- identity content and affordances in a game the impact its representation of diversity

- explain the impact of affordances and defaults on diversity representation
- remix a game design in way that changes its function as a window or mirror

Preparation and Materials

Prepare to distribute the following documents

- *Windows or Mirrors? Diversity in Video Games*
- *Remixing Diversity*
- *Voluntary Industry Diversity Codes* (only used for Extension Activity)

Optional: Prepare to project the Digital Media Literacy 101 videos *Digital Media Experiences are Shaped by the Tools We Use* and *Media Have Social and Political Implications*

Procedure

THE GAMES WE PLAY

Begin by asking students how many of them play video or computer games. (Make sure to include "social" or "casual" games such as *Candy Crush*, *Pokémon Go* or *Wordle*.

Next, ask students to name some computer games they've played or have heard of and make a list on the board or on chart paper. Now tell students that games are different from other media because we don't consume them passively: instead, games are interactive tools that each have their own *affordances* (what you can do) and *defaults* (what your are *expected to do* or what you will do unless you actively choose not to.)

Optional: If you feel your students need a better understanding of this idea, show them the Digital Literacy 101 video *Digital Media Experiences are Shaped by the Tools We Use* before you continue.

Ask students to identify which of the games listed either have you play a character or simulate a world that has other people in it. Erase or cross off the games that do not have either of these (these will likely be more abstract games like *Candy Crush* or *Tetris*).

Once you've collected some examples, ask students to name or describe the main characters of the games; if there is more than one possible main character, ask them to name the "default" character (the one you play if you don't indicate otherwise, or the one that is featured in ads or game art.) If there is no "default" character, list all of the possible characters

When you have characters from about a dozen games listed, ask students to describe each one – first generally (sex, occupation, etc.) and then specifically in terms of diversity representation:

*   Race/ethnicity
*   Sexual orientation or identity
*   Religion
*   Ability or disability

Some of the games students will name, such as such as *Minecraft*, *Fortnite* or *The Sims*, will have "avatars" (customizable characters) as protagonists; in those cases, ask how much they can be customized in those terms.
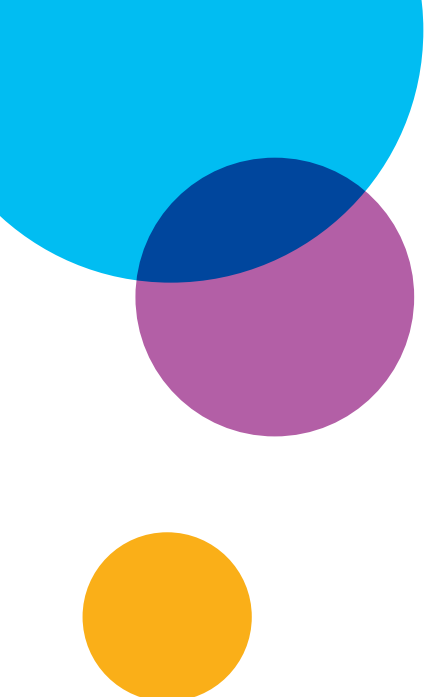
Ask students if any of the characters in the list are racialized, Indigenous 2SLGBTQ, have a disability, or are identified as belonging to a religion that is important to their character. Then ask if they can think of any other video game characters that are in any of those categories.

WINDOWS AND MIRRORS

Distribute the handout *Windows or Mirrors? Diversity in Games*. Have students read it (alone, in pairs or as a class) and answer questions. (This may be assigned as homework.)

Take up questions from the *Mirrors and Windows* handout. and relate them to their analysis of video game characters:

1. Based on what you read in the article, what are some effects of seeing yourself reflected accurately in "mirror" games? *(Seeing yourself reflected can improve self-esteem and academic achievement. It can also make you feel as though you belong and are appreciated, as Nadine Dornieden did when she saw the customization options for* Guild Wars 2.)

2. What are some effects of seeing other groups portrayed authentically in "window" games? *(Seeing accurate views of other groups can dispel stereotypes you might hold about them. Windows can also "de-centre" things like Whiteness or heterosexuality as the "default" identities.)*

3. More than one-quarter of Canadians are racialized or Indigenous (22 and 5 per cent respectively) and 22 per cent has a disability. Are those statistics reflected in the characters we listed in class? *(They will almost certainly be highly under-represented.)*

4. What might be some reasons why game creators might not accurately portray diversity in games? *(Because everything in a game has to be created and implemented, diversity representation only happens if game makers specifically think about it. Because most diverse groups are under-represented in the games industry, though, diversity is often overlooked.)*

5. Think about one of the games that we listed in class, or another game you know well. How do either its affordances or its defaults affect whether the game acts as a mirror, a window, or both? *(There are no right or wrong answers to this question. Instead, use it to get the class talking about the ways in which the architecture of specific games — their affordances and defaults — affect both the quantity and quality diversity representation.)*

Explain to students that media influence how we see the world: what we think is important, normal, or desirable. This doesn't necessarily mean that the creator of a media product intended those messages, because they can also come from the creator's assumptions and choices about what to include, what to leave out, and how to present what's included. Research has shown that media consumption can affect how we see others and how we see ourselves, even if we don't realize it – a condition known as *implicit* or *unconscious* bias. How different groups are portrayed in media – or not portrayed at all – can influence our attitudes towards those groups, which may affect how we behave towards them. As well, these impressions may come from more than just one media product: a single video game with a straight, White, abled main character may not mean anything, but if every main character in video games has those characteristics it probably does.

Optional: If you think students need more grounding in this concept, show them the Media Literacy 101 video *[Media Have Social and Political Implications](#)*.

If it has not yet been raised, ask the class to consider the idea that "it's just a game." Why are games considered to be less important than other media? (We associate games with childhood; games are generally judged on how much fun they are to play, not on their storyline or characters.)

(See the MediaSmarts article [Can Media Literacy Backfire?](#) for more on how to address the "it's just a game" attitude.)
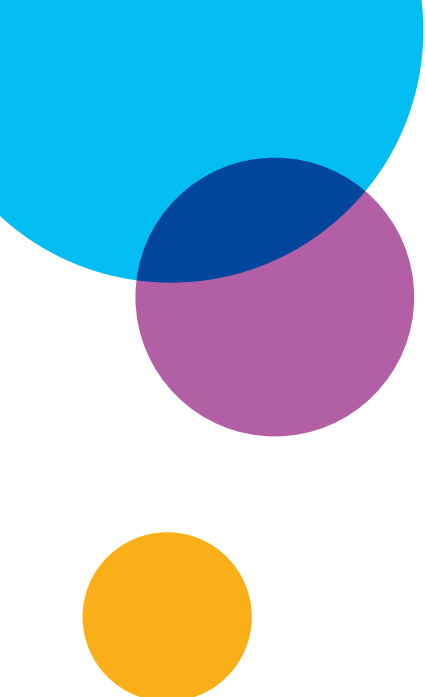
Ask if there are any reasons why we might be **more** concerned about diversity issues in games than in other genres (many games are immersive, so they can "feel" more real than other media; games usually take more time than other media, so we're exposed to the content for longer periods; because we see them as "just games," we may be less inclined to engage with them critically.)

ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY: REMIXING DIVERSITY

Distribute the assignment sheet *Remixing Diversity* and go through it with the class. Refer to the discussion of question 5 to provide examples of how a game's affordances and defaults might affect how it acts as a window or mirror to different groups or identities, then have students use the assignment sheet to analyze and remix an existing game.

If you have the time and technology available, you can have students use a game-making app or program to actually remix their video game. Here is a list of game creation resources for you to explore:

* Scratch
  https://scratch.mit.edu/educators/
  A very versatile tool that lets students create games and animation while learning coding. For resources on how to learn and use Scratch, see https://kidscodejeunesse.org/resources-for-educators?subject=scratch.

* Scratch is designed to make it easy to remix other people's games as well as making your own. See the Scratch Guide to Remixing for more information.

* Sploder
  http://www.sploder.com/
  A free online game maker that allows students to create custom games in several different genres.

* Stencyl
  http://www.stencyl.com/
  A game creator based on Scratch. The free version only publishes to the Web and places watermarks on games.

If time permits, have students present their games to the class and explain their choices.

Extension Activity: Distribute or project the *Voluntary Industry Diversity Codes* handout and read it with the class. Ask students: should video game makers adopt similar codes? Why or why not?

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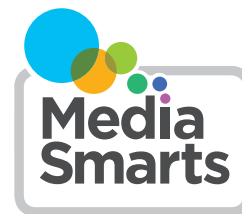
Windows or Mirrors? Diversity in Video Games

What we see – and *don't* see – in media affects how we view reality. Media works can be *mirrors* that reflect your own experience, *windows* that give you access to experiences you otherwise wouldn't have known, or in some cases both. Rosemary Truglio, Senior Vice President of Sesame Workshop, described the diverse cast of *Sesame Street* as giving children "a mirror for them to see themselves, and (...) a window for them to learn about others."

It's important for us to see both mirrors and windows in media. If you never see yourself *reflected* in media (mirrors) or only see reflections that are very limited or aren't accurate, it can hurt your self-esteem, make you do worse in school, and limit what you think you can do in life. If you don't see *other* groups (windows) or only see inaccurate portrayals of them, it can be easy to believe in *stereotypes* of them.

Stereotyping is the assumption that all members of a particular group share certain traits or qualities: that all athletes are stupid, for instance, or that men are hopeless at domestic tasks like cooking or doing laundry. Stereotypes can be either positive or negative, but most stereotypes tend to make us feel superior in some way to the person or group being stereotyped. Stereotypes ignore the uniqueness of people by painting all members of a group with the same brush. Almost any group of people can be stereotyped, but some of the most common stereotypes are based on ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and ability. Stereotypes of a group of people can affect the way society views them and change society's expectations of them.

On the other hand, seeing yourself or other groups shown accurately in media can have *reduce* your belief in stereotypes, which can have positive effects on your self-esteem and even make people less likely to be prejudiced.

Video games are no exception, but because they are *interactive* we have to think about diversity a bit differently. Whether a video game acts as a mirror or a window (or both), and to which groups, depends on two things. First, its *affordances*, which means what you are *allowed* to do in the game. Some affordances are always available to you, while others are *conditional*. For example, in most platforming games like the *Super Mario* series you can always run and jump, but you can only *sometimes* throw fireballs (after getting the fire flower.) In many games you can talk to kinds of characters but not others: in *World of Warcraft*, for instance, you can generally talk to characters who are on the same side as you, but those on the other side seem to speak in gibberish.

Because affordances are the "rules" of the game world, they send a powerful message. For example, many games let you date or marry other characters (in some, like dating simulations, it's the whole points of the game.) Whether or not it's possible to do this with characters of the same gender can have an impact on whether 2SLGBTQI+ people see themselves reflected in the game, and an even bigger impact by providing a window for heterosexual people to see their experience. For other groups, like trans people, having the ability to play a character who is the gender they identify as, rather than the one they were assigned at birth, can be a tremendously affirming "mirror" and even a step in the process of transitioning.

Another thing that can be just as important is a game's *defaults*, which is what you are expected to do or what happen if you don't actively choose otherwise. For example, some games like *Fortnite* or *Minecraft* let you change what your character looks like, but while one in four of these games *allow* you to choose their race, 60 percent *default* to a White character unless you actively change it.

For most of video game history, the default characters in games have been White, non-disabled, male, and assumed to be heterosexual or cisgender. As game writer Rico Norwood put it, "historically, whiteness has been regarded as the default, a privilege not afforded to people of color." In many games, Black characters have only been available as "Player Two" - meaning that you could only play as a Black character if someone else was already playing the White one.

But making the default character a member of an under-represented group can make a game a powerful *window*. 2020's *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* is one of the few big-budget games that requires you to play a non-White, character pushing against the idea of Whiteness as the default.

Character creation screen from *Guild Wars 2*

Giving players the ability to accurately represent themselves in a game is a big part of providing more authentic mirrors in games. Nadine Dornieden, who is Black, had this reaction when she saw the customization options in *Guild Wars 2*:

"Not only are there dreadlocks and braids featured that don't resemble Play-Doh spaghetti, but there are also actual hairstyles that feature locs and braids in a realistic and stylish fashion. One look at the featured

hairstyles shows me that actual Black people were either consulted or respectfully observed in the customization creation process... **I teared up when I realized how well-done the customization options in Guild Wars 2 were**."

Unlike film or TV, everything in a video game has to be designed and implemented from scratch. That means making them act as mirrors or widows can be a technical challenge. Ion Hazzikostas, director of the *World of Warcraft* expansion *Shadowlands*, explained why the game hadn't previously offered a diverse range of facial features and hairstyles: "Some of it was technical constraints, going back to the way things were built, and the number of different textures that could be mapped onto a single model from the engine 15 years ago. But those are lines of code that can be changed. And yes, the real question is why didn't we do it sooner?"

That quote illustrates that the questions game makers *don't* ask have as big an impact as any conscious decisions they make. Like in games, diversity in animation only happens if media makers think to make it happen. Hiring more people from under-represented communities is part of that. (While almost nine in ten Black teens play video games, just **one in fifty** game developers is Black.) But studios can make diversity part of their development process, too. The animation studio Pixar developed a tool that scans every frame to look make sure different kinds of diversity are represented in the background as well as in the main characters. This was first used in 2022's *Turning Red*, which earned praise from the disabled community for details like wheelchair ramps and background characters who used insulin pumps. For video games to fulfil their potential as both mirrors and windows, game makers will have to make diversity a priority in the same way.

Questions

1. Based on what you read in the article, what are some effects of seeing yourself reflected accurately in "mirror" games?

2. What are some effects of seeing other groups portrayed authentically in "window" games?

3. More than one-quarter of Canadians are racialized or Indigenous (22 and 5 per cent respectively) and 22 per cent has a disability. Are those statistics reflected in the characters we listed in class? What conclusions can you draw from that?

4. Are there any characters in those categories that can influence the events of the game they're in, or are they just background characters? Are any of them given stereotypical roles (Black characters as criminals or athletes or Asians as martial arts specialists, for example)?

5. Think about one of the games that we listed in class, or another game you know well. How do either its *affordances* or its *defaults* affect whether the game acts as a mirror, a window, or both?
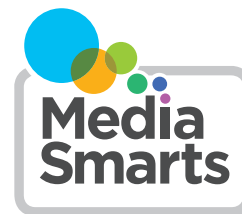
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Remixing Diversity

For this assignment, you will choose a video game and identify how its *affordances* and *defaults* affect how well it acts as a *mirror* for one or more under-represented groups and/or a window through which members of "mainstream" groups can see and understand other people's experiences. Make sure to include both the *gameplay* and things like character customization if the game has them.

You will then design a "remix" of the game in which some of those affordances and defaults are changed to make it a better mirror and/or window.

PART 1: GAME ANALYSIS

Choose a game that we did not discuss in class. Make sure it is a game that simulates a world in some way, not an abstract game like *Candy Crush*, *Tetris* or *Wordle.*

You can put jot notes on these pages but will need to write your full answers on separate paper.

Game title:

Content and characters

- Can you choose or customize your character(s), or is there a *default* character or characters?

- If you can choose or customize your character, what options are available to you in terms of diversity? Is there a *default* option, and if so what is it?

- If there is a default character or characters, what do you know about their identities? If the character is not represented in the game, are you given any indication that they are *not* White, male, heterosexual, abled, etc.?

- What *non-player* characters exist in the game? How many of them represent diverse communities and (so far as you know) how accurately do they represent them?

- Are there characters, or character types, that are coded to be like real-life groups? (Coding is when a fictional culture or species makes you think of a real one. For example, the Pandaren in World of Warcraft are coded as East Asian because they look like pandas, wear conical straw hats, and are martial arts experts.) If so, do they have any *stereotypes* of those groups?

Game action

- What things can you *always* or *almost always* do in the game?

- What things can you *sometimes* do? When can you do them?

- Are there things you can do in real life that you can *never* do in the game?

- What *must* you do to survive or succeed in the game? If there is more than one way to survive or succeed, is one of those easier or more obvious than the other?

- What *can* you do that *doesn't* affect whether you survive or succeed?

- If there are non-player characters, how can you interact with them? Is it different for different characters or in different situations? How?

PART 2: DIVERSITY ANALYSIS

Choose **at least three** of the defaults and affordances you analyzed in part 1 and explain their impact on how the game acts as a mirror and/or a window for one or more under-represented groups.

PART 3: REMIX

Explain how you would change **at least three** things about the game to make it a better mirror and/or window. (These can be the same as the ones you analyzed in part 2, but do not have to be) Be clear about which group(s) would be better represented and how.

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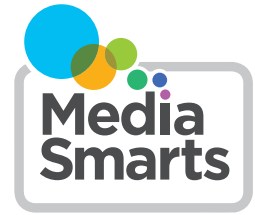
Voluntary Industry Diversity Codes

In Canada, there's a system in place to ensure equitable representation in broadcast media. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) – the regulatory agency that governs radio and television content in Canada – clearly states that Canadian television programming should reflect the country's cultural diversity, and when broadcasters apply for, or renew their licences, they are expected to demonstrate a commitment to cultural diversity through specific initiatives.

In response to the CRTC, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) created voluntary industry guidelines for avoiding negative portrayals based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability. CAB members are expected to:

• ensure balanced coverage of issues;

• refrain from broadcasting stories, news items or imagery that may incite hatred or contempt of others, based on ethnic or national heritage, colour or religion; and

• be sensitive to the use of offensive language or stereotypical portrayals.

The guidelines also require that broadcasters' commitment to cultural diversity be reflected in their hiring and training practices.

The issue of diversity is also addressed by the *CAB's Code of Ethics*. This code prohibits the broadcasting of abusive or discriminatory material based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability.

The application of these guidelines is overseen by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC), an industry organization that hears viewer complaints about programming content and tries to resolve them through mediation at the local level, between broadcaster and complainant. Most complaints are resolved this way.