Fighting Game Diversity

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Abstract

The fighting video game genre features diverse casts of combatants representing cultures throughout the world. This diversity comes both as a reflection of society's evolution towards inclusivity and from fighting games' stories of combatants traveling the world for worthy competition. This essay primarily takes a quantitative approach to finding diversity through analyzing the gender, race, and ethnicity of fighting game rosters. The games being analyzed are five of the most popular modern fighting games: "Street Fighter V," "Guilty Gear Strive," "Mortal Kombat 11," "Tekken 7," and "King of Fighters XV." Combining the rosters of each game, 182 data points were given and analyzed for the three characteristics. Fandom websites and crowdsourced digital databases using in-game information sourced details on character attributes. Data is presented through tables and graphs. The essay also details data categorization guidelines, particularly how the data measures fictional characteristics differently than non-fictional characteristics. Results displayed 34 unique non-fiction nationalities, 10 races, and three genders in total throughout the five games. The essay concludes with evidence that fighting games' efforts of inclusion are notable as reflection of society, and they also provide players a bigger outlet for self-expression.

Media diversity provides an outlet for groups' widespread representation, and having proper and appropriate representation both provides fulfillment for native groups as well as gives groups positive associations amongst other groups. One less mainstream form of media which unexpectedly receives praise for diversity is the fighting video game genre.

On March 28, 2022, "Guilty Gear Strive," the latest entry in the fighting video game franchise, released the character Testament. The fan favorite character's return received additional fanfare due to the game's creator confirming that Testament is non-binary. While numerous characters in the fighting game genre have vague gender statuses, this inclusion continues the trend of inclusivity spreading from society to media. With Testament's releases, it is important to note that fighting games are pro-diversity by design. "Street Fighter II: The World Warrior," released in 1991 and often considered the blueprint for the genre, featured franchise protagonist Ryu traveling the world to battle strong combatants. This game alone features fighters from seven

different countries, with fighting styles based on the respective countries' cultures

Beyond advertisement and press, does the genre uphold its reputation for dedicating itself to diversity in how its games represent countries, cultures, and, as displayed with Testament, varied gender types?

Data can track the genre's diversity by compiling the rosters of current popular fighting games — for the purpose of the study, "Street Fighter V," "Guilty Gear Strive," "Mortal Kombat 11," "Tekken 7," and "King of Fighters 15" — and measuring the characters' genders, races, and nationalities. Data collection began on February 15, 2022 and was last updated April 4, 2022, with a total of 182 data points. The information collected comes from each game's respective Fandom websites, which are fan-moderated databases compiling primary sources such as in-game biographies. With studies based on fictional characters, assumptions are needed if no source clarifies on where they fall under certain categories.

The most crucial element to categorization is the handling of race. Per the U. S. Census Bureau (2022), the five primary races are White, Black or African American, American Indian (Native American) or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Even though its categorization as a race is debated, "Hispanic/Latino" allows for additional categorization. This is not meant to generalize both together, rather to allow characters inspired by those cultures to be represented. If a character's race still does not fall in one of these categories, they are listed to one of the noted categories to be as specific as possible, noting some additional races featured in the 2021 Census (2021) if needed. Fortunately, gender and nationality, at least for a majority of the characters studied, is less complicated to track, as they are often listed in in-game character biographies.

To keep categorization consistent, fantastical elements with inspiration from specific cultures are coded under their inspirations. For example, Kotal Kahn from "Mortal Kombat 11" racially identifies as "Osh-Tekk," which is inspired by Azteca and therefore classifies his race as Native American. Fictional races are generalized under demons, monsters, "non-human" creatures, and animal-infused characters are under "animal," and any character with robotic elements are "bots." Godly characters were coded under "entity" since they were rather common in specific series. In the graph and chart, labels which were unable to be found in research are notated as "n/a" and labels that are canonically left vague are written with "?."

With these rules in mind, here are the results:

Category Frequencies	GENDER	RACE	NATIONALITY
Real-World Count [Includes races and nationalities with real world counterparts]	3	10	34

Figure 1: The following table lists the number of unique representations in the study's three categories. These numbers only include nonfictional classes, with fictional classes being excluded from the counts.

The top four represented races in order are Asian, White, non-human, and Hispanic/Latino. Asian characters alone make up a third of the combined rosters. This aligns with the fact that Japanese and Chinese were two of the three most common nationalities. The five games measured have a total of 34 real-world nationalities represented, with 10 real-world races present.
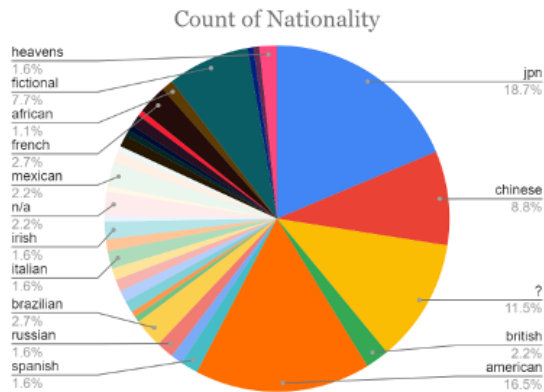
Figure 2: The pie chart shows how nationalities were represented amongst the 182 data points found in the fighting games. Chart courtesy of Shaun Lucas.

For nationalities, the most diverse title is "Tekken 7," with 22 unique nationalities, with the least diverse being "Mortal Kombat 11" with only American, Chinese, Japanese, and Australian fighters, as well as various non-fictional classifications. Some classifications lack the quantity in representation that others have. For example, the only Indian character represented both in race and nationality is Dhalsim, debuting in the influential "Street Fighter II." Middle Eastern representation even beats Indian representation by one character. In fact, both Rashid ("Street Fighter V") and Shaheen ("Tekken 7") had their debut within their series' latest installments, showing a progression towards more representation in terms of spread. No representation for Hawaiian or Pacific Islander characters is also notable. 58.2 percent of characters identify as male and 35.7 percent identify as female, with the remaining entries falling under other labels.

To answer the study's question, fighting games display diversity in all categories, and the genre will likely continue to become more diverse as more fighters become designed by increasingly diversifying workplaces. Core-A Gaming (2015), a YouTube fighting game analysis channel, states the guidelines of tournaments where anyone can join and play regardless of age, weight, gender. Above all, high representation allows for more players to connect with their characters on a personal level. Adding diverse characters like Testament ensures even more players can appreciate their games and fighters.

Whether it would be Ryu traveling the world or Guilty Gear's creators confirming Testament's non-binary identity, the data proves the genre's efforts towards diversity, offering a reflection of the world's increasing inclusivity.

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