

# Not a Hater, Just Keepin' It Real

## The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies

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Notwithstanding the presence of extreme racialized tropes within the world of video games, public discourses continue to focus on questions of violence, denying the importance of games in maintaining the hegemonic racial order. Efforts to exclude race (and intersections with gender, nation, and sexuality) from public discussions through its erasure and the acceptance of larger discourses of colorblindness contribute to a problematic understanding of video games and their significant role in contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural organization. How can one truly understand fantasy, violence, gender roles, plot, narrative, game playability, virtual realities, and the like without examining race, racism, and/or racial stratification—one cannot. This article challenges game studies scholars to move beyond simply studying games to begin to offer insight and analysis into the importance of race and racialized tropes within virtual reality and the larger implications of racist pedagogies of video games in the advancement of White supremacy.

**Keywords:** *video games; game studies; race; colorblind discourse; commodification*

I am known in the neighborhood as the video games guy. Kids and adults alike knock on my door daily to see if I have the newest title in hand, often wondering if I am a peddler of virtual reality. With each of these interactions and those more professional exchanges, I am asked continually why I study games. I treat each of these moments, like those in the classroom, as a teachable moment, challenging these would-be addicts to think of games as something more than entertainment, but instead as cultural projects saturated with racialized, gendered, sexualized, and national meaning. As a scholar of race and stereotypes, how could I not study video games?

Although extreme and blatant racial tropes flourish within video games, those simplistic notions that it is “just a game” or “kid’s entertainment,” as well as the prominence of colorblind discourses, limit serious inquiry into their racial content and context. Excluding race (and intersections with gender, nation, and sexuality) from public discussions through erasure and acceptance of larger discourses of colorblindness

contributes to problematic, if not faulty, understandings of video games and their significant role in contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural organization. How can one truly understand fantasy, violence, gender roles, plot, narrative, game playability, virtual realities (all common within the current literature), and the like without examining race, racism, and/or racial stratification—simply put, one cannot.

For those seeking answers regarding the importance of studying games, or looking at the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and nationality are constructed and subsequently taught within virtual reality, one needs to begin with the work of Children Now, a community-based organization out of Oakland, California. Children Now found that 64% of platform game characters are male, 19% are nonhuman, and 17% are female. More specifically, 73% of player-controlled characters are male, with less than 15% being female, of which 50% are props or bystanders. Those female characters included in games, especially those of color, serve as sexual eye candy. For example, 10% of female characters have large breasts and a small waist, with an equal number having disproportionate body types. More illustratively, video games limit the purpose of female characters to sex in that 20% of female characters expose their breasts, with more than 10% revealing their butts (Children Now, 2002). In 3 years, the industry has changed significantly, although not seeking to accommodate the critiques of Children Now and others regarding representations emanating from the video game industry. Rather, it seems that racialized and gender tropes are flourishing as the industry takes license from the popularity of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, *Extreme Volleyball*, and *Def Jam New York*.

As video games are a space about and for males, it is equally a White-centered space. More than 50% of player-controlled characters are White males; less than 40% of game characters are Black, of which the majority appear as athletic competitors. Rounding out this multiracial playground are Latino characters, which amount to 5% (all sports), 3% for Asian/Pacific Islander (usually wrestlers and fighters), and none for multiracial and Native Americans. Things are worse when it comes to female characters of color. Almost 80% of female player-controlled characters are White; the few minority characters can be seen with less than 10% African American, 7% for Asian/Pacific Islander, less than 1% Native American, and absolutely no Latinas. The centrality of White males transcends their sheer dominance in the virtual world with their presence as heroes. Out of 53 heroes, 46 were White; Asian/Pacific Islanders accounted for less than 8%, whereas African Americans and Latinos were even less likely to be heroes, at 4% and 2%, respectively. As Whites are heroic figures, Black characters are reduced to the stereotypical athletes. More than 80% of Black characters appear as competitors within sports-oriented games. Black women face a different racist reality, as more than 90% function as props, bystanders, or victims. African American women are far more likely than any other group to be victims of violence—90% of African American females were victims of violence (compared to 45% of White women).

Stereotypes can be found in virtually any game—Cuban drug dealers in *Vice City*; muscle-bound, violent rappers in *Def Jam Vendetta*; and Arab terrorists in every war game. *Ready to Rumble*, a boxing game, like *GTA III*, covers all bases, including

racialized stereotypes of virtually every community of color. The most popular character in the game is Afro Thunder, a gigantic, Afro-wearing boxer who is more adept at talking trash than fighting. The game also features a Hawaiian sumo wrestler, who of course is fat, speaks poor English, and has slanty eyes; a heavy-accented Croatian immigrant; and a Mexican boxer named Angel (Raging) Rivera. The stereotypes of Asians as martial artists, foreign, and speaking poor English are evident in a number of games (Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven, Dynasty Warriors, Crouching Tiger), as are the violent and muscular Black athlete (Street Hoops, NBA Live, Madden 2004), the Arab as terrorist (America's Army, Centcom, Desert Storm: Splinter Cell), and the Latino as criminals (GTA III, Vice City). Such stereotypes do not merely reflect ignorance or the flattening of characters through stock racial ideas but dominant ideas of race, thereby contributing to our commonsense ideas about race, acting as a compass for both daily and institutional relations.

Take the recent and much debated Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas as further evidence. As politicians and cultural commentators (conservative media pundits) lamented the game's promotion of violence and dysfunctional values, little was made of the racial content of the game. Set in a gang-ridden, war-like 1990s Los Angeles, San Andreas features an array of Black and Latino men, all with braids, bandanas, and guns. The game allows players to form gangs to rob, commit drive-by shootings, and even rape. Michael Marriott (2004) of *The New York Times* described this game in the following way:

The sense of place, peril and pigmentation evident in previews of the game, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, underscores what some critics consider a disturbing trend: popular video games that play on racial stereotypes, including images of black youths committing and reveling in violent street crime.

San Andreas does not merely give life to dominant stereotypes but gives legitimizing voice to hegemonic discourses about race, whether it is "illegal aliens are invading the country" or that "Latin America has less culture than a toilet bowl."

An important step that game studies must undertake is toward intersectional analysis; the representation of Black and Latino males in San Andreas is not simply a racial thing but reflects dominant discourses (and fears) of Black and brown masculinity. The representation of Arabs and Asians in any number of war games does not emanate exclusively from notions of race but reflects hegemonic ideas regarding gender and nation as well. We must push our analysis to look at how virtual identities intersect and infect one another, moving beyond simple statistical invoking of race or gender. For example, although little has been made of Outlaw Volleyball, those limited discussions have focused exclusively on gender and sexuality as separate issues. Given, all the female participants wear the skimpiest possible G-string bathing suits that leave little to the imagination; all the characters have large, exposed breasts, regardless of race. Yet the game plays on the fetish and exotification of women of color through both its narrative and image making. At one point in the game the announcer describes Shawnee as having a "great set of Tomahawks" while the gaze of the camera drags the

gaze of its players onto her breasts. Representing less than 1% of video game characters, the presence of a Native American player within this game represents a rarity. She however possesses every possible stereotype of indigenous people all while maintaining a vision of hypersexuality. With ample breasts and an absent waist, Shawnee mirrors the representation of all virtual women. Unlike the other women within this game and others, her sexuality is racialized, reflecting the intersectional nature of race, gender, and sexuality. Her skimpy bathing suit does not just reveal her ample breasts but marks her as Indian, savage and uncivilized. Animal teeth link her string bikini together with a print design encompassing animal prints. She wears braids and is covered with war paint as well. It is clear that she is both warrior and sexual goddess, neither quality interfering with the other. “Shawnee is arguably the best Native American volleyball player in the country today, right behind Dances with Volleyball and Sitting Spike.” In fact, virtually every textual signifier conveys both her sexuality and warrior demeanor, inscribing the exoticism of women of color and the dangerous savagery of Native Americans, elucidating the important ways race and gender operate toward the construction of representation of Native American women.

### **Not Just a Stereotype, but a Pleasurable Stereotype**

Adam Clayton Powell III once described video games as “high-tech blackface,” arguing that “because the players become involved in the action . . . they become more aware of the moves that are programmed into the game” (Marriott, 1999). To take Powell’s comments seriously, the study of games necessitates inquiry into how and why games provide their primarily White creators and players the opportunity to become the other (Costikyan, 1999). In doing so, these games elicit pleasure and play on White fantasies while simultaneously affirming White privilege through virtual play.

According to historian Eric Lott (1993), minstrelsy was a “manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of ‘blackness’ and demonstrates the permeability of the color line” (Rogin, 1998, p. 35). He wrote that blackface “facilitate[s] safely an exchange of energies between two otherwise rigidly bounded and policed cultures” (Rogin, 1998, p. 35). In addition, blackface minstrelsy represented a “nearly insupportable fascination with black people.” Like minstrelsy, video games may be “less a sign of absolute power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure” (Rogin, 1998, p. 35). Video games operate in a similar fashion, breaking down these boundaries with ease given their virtual realism, allowing their participants to try on the other, the taboo, the dangerous, the forbidden, and the otherwise unacceptable (Rogin, 1998).

As of yet, the conspicuous study of games regarding race and gender has not moved beyond simple discussions of stereotypes; there has been limited analysis of issues of power, privilege, or racial common sense. More surprisingly, there has been little theoretical or ethnographic work regarding the allure of “virtual cross dressing.” Given

U.S. histories of minstrelsy and the ubiquitous current practice on college campuses to have “racially centered” powers, it seems crucial to begin to think about what it means to seek pleasure through becoming the other. What does it mean, as discourses of colorblindness dominate public and oftentimes private discourses, when virtual reality provides space and ability to transcend one’s spatial confinement and one’s own identity to enter foreign lands and othered bodies? These types of questions have been asked even as “we live in our world and play in theirs,” providing a road map to future scholarly work.

### **White Supremacist or Colorblind: In Total Agreement**

During a recent debate regarding video games and the popularity of San Andreas on Stormfront.org, a White nationalist Web site, Arische Ritter offered the following analysis of this gaming world:

But for those of you who have played it, have you seen how much of our point it stresses. You run around and you shoot people, you can go in peoples houses and steel tv’s, vcr’s, stereos, etc. . . . In my opinion, this is one of the greatest games around. It blatantly shows how the negroes have corrupted our society.

If White nationalists are celebrating video games for not only their truthfulness of representation, even as they produce their own games (*Ethnic Cleansing*, *White by Law*) that resemble mainstream games in a number of ways, we must begin to take games seriously. The fact that video game producers and scholars render games as “pure fantasy,” “explorations of space,” or “mere entertainment” amid discourses of colorblindness at the same time that White nationalists and fans praise games for elucidating the savagery of people of color, whether in South Central Los Angeles or Iraq, demonstrates a need for a serious undertaking regarding virtual gaming reality. The cost and consequence is not just the reification of stereotypes but legitimizing, normalizing, and sanctioning state violence, inequality, and despair.

Beyond the fact that “the largely white male elite owners . . . derive wealth from the circulation” of racist and sexist imagery, virtual reality and its inscription of controlling images “make racism, sexism and poverty appear to be natural, normal and inevitable part of everyday life” (Collins, 2000, p. 69). As argued by Mark Anthony Neal (2005), “The fact that these images are then used to inform public policy around domestic images that adversely affect and black and brown people”—the war on terror, policing the border, welfare reform, the military industrial complex, global imperialism, the existence of the welfare state, the prison industrial complex, unemployment, and so on—“further complicates what is at stake” for game studies (p. 51). We do not need to continue game studies if such questions and realities are ignored. So, why game studies now? Because the refusal to engage critically such “kid stuff” has dire consequences, whether with domestic policy debates—more police, more pris-

ons, less welfare—or foreign policy decisions—more bombs, more soldiers, less diplomacy. Video games teach, inform, and control, mandating our development of tools of virtual literacy to expand pedagogies of games as part of a larger discursive turn to (and within) game studies. We need to teach about games because games are teaching so much about us . . . and “them.”

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