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RIVERSIDE

Gamic Race: Logics of Difference in Videogame Culture

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Tanner Matthew Higgin

September 2012

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. James Tobias, Chairperson  
Dr. Keith Harris  
Dr. Toby Miller  
Dr. Lisa Nakamura

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2012

The Dissertation of Tanner Matthew Higgin is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Finally, this dissertation intersected with a period of personal darkness. To those struggling, I hope this project's completion provides some small illustration of a way forward. And to Dad, Chris, Sarah, Luna, and Laurel: you helped me realize that more than anything I needed to be a being beyond myself.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Gamic Race: Logics of Difference in Videogame Culture

by

Tanner Matthew Higgin

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English  
University of California, Riverside, September 2012  
Dr. James Tobias, Chairperson

*Gamic Race: Logics of Difference in Videogame Culture* makes race central to the study of videogames and videogame cultures. The project emphasizes the need for critical race theory in game studies to understand how race is informed and reshaped by the logics of gameplay resulting in the multi-layered, politically complex, and agile concept of gamic race. Displaced racialization, the project's other key concept, revises former studies of race in digital media that focus predominantly on representation, shifting interest to racialization occurring alongside or beyond bodies within game code and player experience. Moving along this trajectory, the first three chapters of *Gamic Race* explore different layers of gamic race and its formulation through displaced racialization: spatial, technologic, and discursive. The final chapter attempts to put theory into practice via an analysis of racially inflammatory raids of virtual worlds by users of the popular message board 4chan. These raids serve as a compelling but flawed model for future

progressive performative interventions in gamespace. The conclusion considers how to progressively transform videogame design by placing African American expressive traditions, indie games, ethics, philosophy, and the interaction design of Erik Loyer in conversation. It's within this nexus that the project ends, gesturing toward a future paradigm of interaction and aesthetics within videogames that handles difference productively, and does not rely solely on strategies of visual inclusion.

## Table of Contents

|                                        |   |   |   |   |     |
|----------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|-----|
| <b>Introduction</b>                    | . | . | . | . | 1   |
| <b>Chapter One: Spatial</b>            | . | . | . | . | 35  |
| <b>Chapter Two: Technologic</b>        | . | . | . | . | 82  |
| <b>Chapter Three: Discursive</b>       | . | . | . | . | 129 |
| <b>Chapter Four: Performative Play</b> | . | . | . | . | 171 |
| <b>Conclusion: A New Grammar</b>       | . | . | . | . | 218 |
| <b>Bibliography</b>                    | . | . | . | . | 248 |
| <b>Appendix A: Creative Commons</b>    | . | . | . | . | 267 |

## List of Figures

### Chapter One: Spatial

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Figure 1.1</b>                                                                                                                                                                                        | 35 |
| <i>Zork</i> map from Infocom InvisiClues booklet.                                                                                                                                                        |    |
| <b>Figure 1.2</b>                                                                                                                                                                                        | 40 |
| Dust overhead map created by a player for strategic planning. CS, however, is played in 3D space from a first person perspective.                                                                        |    |
| <b>Figure 1.3</b>                                                                                                                                                                                        | 44 |
| No Mercy introduction level map. Ferrari has identified the most efficient path making an 'S' shape through the level. Alternate paths that are less successful deviate. Image Courtesy of Simon Ferrari |    |
| <b>Figure 1.4</b>                                                                                                                                                                                        | 47 |
| Screenshot from <i>Resident Evil 5</i> trailer.                                                                                                                                                          |    |
| <b>Figure 1.5</b>                                                                                                                                                                                        | 73 |
| John Marston with a member of the 1911 Gang is his Gatling Gun cross-hairs.                                                                                                                              |    |

## List of Figures Contd.

### Chapter Two: Technologic

|                                                                                      |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Figure 2.1</b>                                                                    | 84  |
| Portraits made by Du Bois for <i>The Health and Physique of the Negro American</i> . |     |
| <b>Figure 2.2</b>                                                                    | 84  |
| Excerpt from <i>Part Asian, 100% Hapa</i> .                                          |     |
| <b>Figure 2.3</b>                                                                    | 109 |
| Creating a character in <i>The Black Onyx</i> .                                      |     |
| <b>Figure 2.4</b>                                                                    | 114 |
| Sony Home avatar, Microsoft Xbox Live avatar, and Nintendo Mii (from left to right). |     |
| <b>Figure 2.5</b>                                                                    | 117 |
| Excerpt from “How to Spot a Jap.”                                                    |     |
| <b>Figure 2.6</b>                                                                    | 118 |
| Excerpt from “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese.”                                    |     |
| <b>Figure 2.7</b>                                                                    | 124 |
| Image included with Microsoft press kit for the Kinect.                              |     |
| <b>Figure 2.8</b>                                                                    | 124 |
| Selecting a nose within Microsoft Xbox 360's avatar creation system.                 |     |
| <b>Figure 2.9</b>                                                                    | 126 |
| This is the first screen displayed when someone elects to modify his/her avatar.     |     |

## List of Figures Contd.

### Chapter Three: Discursive

|                                                                                          |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Figure 3.1</b>                                                                        | 142 |
| Sheet music cover from 1834 for “Zip Coon, a Favorite Comic Song” by G.W. Dixon.         |     |
| <b>Figure 3.2</b>                                                                        | 143 |
| Leeroy Jenkins Trading Card.                                                             |     |
| <b>Figure 3.3</b>                                                                        | 153 |
| Erudite character models from <i>EverQuest</i> .                                         |     |
| <b>Figure 3.4</b>                                                                        | 156 |
| Erudite character model from <i>EverQuest II</i> .                                       |     |
| <b>Figure 3.5</b>                                                                        | 166 |
| Player in <i>World of Warcraft</i> with a brown skinned avatar and the name “Blackcawk.” |     |

## List of Figures Contd.

### Chapter Four: Performative Play

- Figure 4.1** 172  
Black avatars gather for a raid on Stormwind in *World of Warcraft*.
- Figure 4.2** 173  
"Motivational" style graphic created using a 4chan thread and found posted on /b/.
- Figure 4.3** 175  
Initial call to arms on /b/ for a raid of WOW on August 3, 2010. Text reads: "Everyone who plays wow US side log on to Earthen Ring RP server, and make a black Human male with any sort of racist name. THEN run your nigger ass to SW and go in between old town and the trade district and jump in the canals and drown yourself. Eventually it will be a giant pool of dead niggers if enough of us do it."
- Figure 4.4** 177  
"Motivational" style image created by an anon to commemorate August 3, 2010 raid.
- Figure 4.5** 177  
August 3, 2010 WOW raid passing through Westfall.
- Figure 4.6** 178  
Player named "Nappyhair" with guild tag "Don't Lynch Me" participating in the August 3, 2010 WOW raid.
- Figure 4.7** 179  
August 3, 2010 WOW raid boat ride.

## List of Figures Contd.

|                                                                               |     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Figure 4.8</b>                                                             | 193 |
| /b/lackup raid of WOW auction house in Stormwind.                             |     |
| <b>Figure 4.9</b>                                                             | 196 |
| YouTube discussion of a video (now removed) taken during August 3, 2010 raid. |     |
| <b>Figure 4.10</b>                                                            | 198 |
| /b/ raid on <i>Habbo Hotel</i> blocking access to the pool with a swastika.   |     |
| <b>Figure 4.11</b>                                                            | 200 |
| Anons in the Stormwind throne room during the August 3, 2010 raid.            |     |

## List of Figures Contd.

### Conclusion: A New Grammar

|                                                                                                                |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Figure 5.1</b>                                                                                              | 222 |
| Player performing a loud chirp in <i>Journey</i> .                                                             |     |
| <b>Figure 5.2</b>                                                                                              | 231 |
| <i>Passage</i> .                                                                                               |     |
| <b>Figure 5.3</b>                                                                                              | 237 |
| The crucial moment of gravity reversal after the seven screen ascent and just before the seven screen descent. |     |
| <b>Figure 5.4</b>                                                                                              | 244 |
| <i>Ruben &amp; Lullaby</i> .                                                                                   |     |

# INTRODUCTION

## Cut-scenes

**1982**

It begins on the shaggy tan carpet of my living room in front of a wood paneled television flickering the image of a game I later find out is called *Missile Command*. My hands grip the rubber of the joystick and click it violently left and right, smashing the big concave red buttons in a vain attempt to stop the onslaught of lightning bolts sent from some undefined elsewhere. The bolts accumulate and splatter across the ground in fuzzy blasts of sound and flashes of light. Some time later during a street hockey game my next door neighbor peaks my curiosity when he, in a cartoonish Japanese accent, playfully raps the line "I drop bombs like Hiroshima." Years pass, and I see a documentary about the aftermath of those bombs. Scarred bodies register the violence of those flashes of light.

**1987**

Then I am a squat little character with a big mustache, overalls, and a cap hop hopping with sonic joy on mushrooms and turtles. Somehow this all makes sense. My character's iconography is other yet familiar and made more so in issues of the Nintendo fan club

magazine, via a television show with Captain Lou Albano, and through a movie I try to forget. The movie curiously stars a Brit and a Latino as the Italian plumbing duo. Years pass and in a classroom I stare at a simian picture of an Irishman and learn about the slippery category of whiteness.

## **1991**

A few birthdays pass and I am at the arcade on the second floor of the mall trying to decide who to be and my cursor lights up a face on the grid and shows me a location on the map but the location doesn't matter as much as the face. I know quickly who they are and how they fight by seeing the shape of the eyes, the color of the skin, the style of hair or clothing. I like any guy that looks like Bruce Lee or Van Damme and that's who I choose. Much later I visit the Holocaust Museum in D.C. and there's a similar grid of portraits, but this one was "scientific."

## **2004**

So this is different. I used to just select a face but now I select a skin color too. I know from the other games that no one is ever dark skinned so I choose the darkest tone possible. It's almond. Two weeks pass until I see another almond face. The player has chosen the name Nigra, a successful effort to escape the game's censors. I start writing.

The Internet as racial utopia seeks to eradicate antagonism by offering a space of virtual equality

and autonomy, and by reworking the antagonism so that domination stems from one's very body. In doing so, it makes one's body something to be consumed—it makes one's race a commodity in order to erase it. This corporate hijacking of democratic logic works to ensure inequality. Thus, effective antiracist uses of the Internet must not commodify or erase race.

—Wendy Chun<sup>1</sup>

### **Game World**

There's a moment in Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid 4* (MGS4), the culmination to a decade of dedication to the classic espionage action series, where Solid Snake, the hero, returns to the arctic island setting of the first game in the series. However, without notice or guidance, the player finds herself playing the first game in the series, *Metal Gear Solid* (MGS) (originally released two console generations prior) rather than MGS4. For the Metal Gear fan, this is an uncanny jolt of nostalgia activating sense memory of the old control scheme, graphics, sounds and conventions of play which had remained similar but revised heavily in the subsequent decade. After roughly five minutes of awkward and confusing yet joyful play, the player returns to a MGS4 era cut-scene as the aged Solid Snake awakens from a dream. The significance of this moment is overdetermined given the deep interest of the series in subjectivity, control, gaming, and the military entertainment complex.<sup>2</sup> But it has impact nonetheless, veteran players of the series are aligned both narratively and affectively with the old Solid Snake, experiencing the same nostalgic reminiscence as a player of the game as Snake does as soldier within the game—a distinction the MGS series as well as many critics see as increasingly murky given the fidelity between war and videogaming.

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<sup>1</sup> Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 158

<sup>2</sup> Higgin, “Turn off the game console right now!”

Central to the mythology of the MGS series is a secret collective of powerful individuals, the Sons of Liberty, who manipulate geopolitics and eventually build a global military network that controls and manipulates the world into a Global State of War run for profit and power. The player and game system are implicated in this system of control as the act of gameplay is characterized within MGS as one of the many tools used by the Sons of Liberty to acclimate the world to constant warfare. The lesson here is that finding an outside to this system is futile. In MGS there is no escape to the real; to beat the system is to corrupt, infect and reshape it to your own ends in a Foucauldian re-centering of power relations: to game the system. The player, aligned with and analogized to the manufactured soldier Solid Snake, is shown to be an updated tool of state control spending her free time playing at war effectively preparing for a precarious life within the war economy—a neo-Solid Snake manufactured by the military-entertainment complex. As the series has progressed, we, along with Snake, must learn to assert ourselves within the game and to reshape the rules of play to our own ends. We're placed within a system of seemingly indestructible top-down power relations, but cracks appear within this facade showing us that just as “discourse transmits and produces power...[it also] undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.”<sup>3</sup> MGS constructs a metaphor for the swirling push and pull relationship between the dominant and counter discourses within videogame culture: the call to complicity with militaristic regimes and the will to break the rules.

But let me be clear, this is not about rehashing the tired media effects debate; rather, what the MGS series exemplifies is McKenzie Wark's claim in *Gamer Theory* that “[games have] not just colonized reality, [they are] also the sole remaining ideal.”<sup>4</sup> By mapping the nexus of game and player, we can understand the complex negotiation that takes place between cultural artifacts

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3 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, 101.

4 Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 008.

and engaged players. However, this is not something unique to games, but is inextricable from discourses of power. Thus Wark's claim does need qualification and tempering: while games might not be the only ideal they are certainly an increasing point of reference given the ever-expanding market of videogames. Ian Bogost's initial contribution to videogame criticism, *Unit Operations*, similarly places an importance on the medium of videogames for understanding our world. He concludes his study by calling attention to how “videogames ask the critic to ponder the unit operations of of procedural systems.”<sup>5</sup> This perspective is a key literacy in the kind of world Bogost constructs, one full of variously complex systems full of units and processes requiring our understanding. In his equally influential book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander Galloway posits that “acts of configuration in videogames express processes in culture that are large, unknown, dangerous, and painful, but they do not express them directly.”<sup>6</sup> Like Bogost, Galloway sees videogames as dynamic and active objects, defined by their rulesets and processes, which we “configure” through play rather than passively consume. For Galloway, the result of play then is an action that is interpretable like any text. And given his claim that “video games are an allegory for the algorithmic structure of today's informatic culture,” what we're often playing aligns with the social order, and begs for disruptive player acts of “counter gaming” that reshape the text.<sup>7</sup>

We need look no further for proof of both the increasing prominence of games, and the potentially regressive effects of that prominence than the current obsession within the culture industries with “gamification,” i.e. the notion that a painfully reductive sense of what games are (e.g. machines for compulsive activity) can be applied to any number of mundane activities to increase their profitability/palatability. Thanks in part to gamification advocates we now see game

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5 Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 180.

6 Galloway, *Gaming*, 16.

7 Ibid., 17 and 107-26.

structures being increasingly used as interfaces with the world. The MGS series registers this change. The imperfections of the player-as-soldier represented by me plugged into my PlayStation in my bedroom in 1998, is perfected in the boy-soldier of Raiden, whose gaming prowess in government induced VR simulation prepares him for the corridors of the Big Shell environment in *Metal Gear Solid 2* (MGS2). This is more than metaphor: consider an eighteen year old videogame player in 2011, never having known a world without gaming, and having been acclimated to protracted conflicts in the Middle East. She has intuited the processes of militaristic first-person shooters, and now judges her world, at least in part, against that ideal as she embarks on her first tour of Afghanistan. Her ability to contextualize, interpret, and critique videogames suddenly assumes profound importance; however, critics are not in complete disagreement about what the player is actually seeing.

According to Wark, it's the task of the contemporary player to map the disjunctions populating the seam between game and reality, and to expose the myriad failures of the world to meet the austere sterile ideal of gamespace. By identifying these imperfections through critical play, the counter-player can expose how the world struggles to achieve, but never quite reaches, the smoothed over and perfectly "fair" environments, interactions, and algorithms of gamespace. Additionally, the counter-player can unpack the ideologies of videogames by understanding the ideal to which they appeal. The key interrogations being: what mess has this game ejected? What myth does it weave?

### **Avatar Market**

Race is one of the messier subjects videogames have tried to mitigate. Games smooth over the contradictions of capitalistic logics and their myriad oppressions, as a result they often

subsume valuable and significant human difference into blanket systems of consumption. Wark has diagnosed this in *Sims 2* where “external representations” such as race or gender, are “of no account”; what a Sim looks like has little bearing on how she performs. In keeping with the consumerist fantasy of the game, i.e. a world of unbounded banal material acquisition and accumulation, even “the 'skin' is...mere decoration.”<sup>8</sup> Yet this doesn't mean, as it doesn't in the Sim-less world, that these differences disappear because, as Wark explains, “Underneath it lies a code which is all.”<sup>9</sup> This coded structure, invisible but reverberant, functions as a kind of analog to a “genetic view of intrinsic nature” that undermines the colorblind representational schema of the game. In other games, like *World of Warcraft* (WOW), this code, rather benign in *Sims 2*, pronounces itself in the race-based attributes (known as “racial(s)”) intrinsic to the varied denizens of Azeroth, imbuing Blood Elves, for example, with a natural and immutable magic resistance.<sup>10</sup> So while physical difference is selectable and configurable, racial differences are maintained. Games like WOW and *Sims 2* function as utopian fantasies for anxious whites looking to diminish the significance of color, while maintaining racial separations.

This confusing and seemingly contradictory ideology is characteristic of contemporary neoliberal multiculturalism. Jodi Melamed explains that “in contrast to white supremacy, the liberal race paradigm [(of which neoliberal multiculturalism is a new permutation)] recognizes racial inequality as a problem, and it secures a a liberal symbolic framework for race reform centered in abstract equality, market individualism, and inclusive civic nationalism,” thus for the first time in U.S. history, “antiracism...gets absorbed into U.S. governmentality.”<sup>11</sup> But while the U.S. appears to function as a colorblind society dedicated to making all its citizens sovereign and

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8 Ibid., 039.

9 Ibid.

10 See Galloway, “Starcraft, or, Balance” and Langer, “The Familiar and the Foreign.”

11 Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism,” 2.

empowered consumers, race does not disappear; rather, it locates itself differently becoming more functionally fluid: “Privileged and stigmatized racial formations no longer mesh perfectly with a color line. Instead, new categories of privilege and stigma determined by ideological, economic, and cultural criteria overlay older, conventional racial categories.”<sup>12</sup> This stigmatization occurs primarily along cultural lines. A preferred national culture, most closely aligned with a middle class white value system, operates as the baseline against which deviations are judged. With this system in place, any aberrant cultural practices that violate the national norm supply “grounds for 'legitimate' exclusion of some from the wealth and freedoms presumed to be commonly available to all Americans.”<sup>13</sup> As Melamed goes on to explain, “Viewing it in this light, we can grasp radical liberalism's cultural model of race as one that actually renewed race as a procedure for naturalizing privilege and inequality.”<sup>14</sup>

We need to think against the seductive videogame logics of identity-as-commodity which procedurally replicate the ideologies of neoliberal multiculturalism. The seamless post-raciality of gamespace—where difference is akin to a new wall coloring—conceals the continued oppressions of queers and people of color. We can see through this, and call attention to the cracks in its veneer through critical play and in the development of new procedural literacies which reveal the maintenance of racial divisions through direct and indirect means beyond simple categorization. Moreover, we need to be attentive to how queers and people of color have undermined the restrictions and prescriptions of videogame culture.

### **Spoiler Alert**

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

To do so, we need to build a more robust strand of critical race work on videogames. Game studies is a relatively new critical focus rising alongside digital games in the 1970s and 80s, and the scholarly research we do have is concentrated overwhelmingly in the last ten years. Much of this work has focused on the definition of the medium and the struggle for institutional legitimacy and manufacturing of structuralist theories of play. The most well tread debates (ludology vs. narratology) and the most celebrated works in game studies almost all aim to define the field. But this is not natural. Marsha Kinder, for example, discussed games in her 1993 book *Playing With Power* using a sophisticated psychoanalytic framework tied to interests in power, production, and consumption. Work like Kinder's, not to mention the kind of critical race theory this project directly follows, spoils the fun and shifts the discussion from the spectacular newness of games to the ways games involve themselves in already existing networks of power. Consider the sobering research of David Leonard, one of the most oft-published race scholars in game studies, whose work exposes the deeply troubling representational status of non-white characters in games and the familiarity of these stereotypical representations to the history of minstrelsy and the various mutations of blackface.<sup>15</sup> Along with Leonard, Jeffrey Ow has written about Asian stereotypes and Michel Marriott has critiqued the construction of blackness as deviant and dangerous throughout game culture while Paul Barrett focuses primarily on *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (*San Andreas*).<sup>16</sup>

I would be lying if I said that I didn't want my project to be the ultimate spoiler, continuing where these scholars have left off. However, *Gamic Race* is a bit different than this body of scholarship dedicated to representational critique. I'm inspired by Stuart Hall's intervention into Black cultural politics, particularly his call for a shift from the critique of

<sup>15</sup> Leonard, "Not a Hater, Just Keepin' It Real."

<sup>16</sup> Ow, "The Revenge of the Yellowfaced Cyborg," Marriott, "The Color of Mayhem," Marriott, "Blood, Gore, Sex, and Now: Race," and Barrett, "White Thumbs, Black Bodies."

representation to a struggle over the politics of representation.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci, Hall does not conceptualize political and cultural struggle as a simple battle between ideologically unified actors obeying the suggestions of their class status. Instead, Hall's reading of Gramsci views subjects as complex, and relationships of domination to be enforced and contested on multiple social fronts.<sup>18</sup> For Hall, "Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination...it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it."<sup>19</sup> In Hall's work, we can observe a dedication to not just identifying the problem textually, but tying into particular cultural practices that are under contestation. Similarly, my interest is less in cataloging reductive racial and ethnic imagery in games, and more in seeking to understanding its roots, both technical and social, in whose interest these representations serve, and how to disrupt them. A key part of this project is then not shying away from difference, but embracing it. I try to practice what Hall proposed should be "a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses difference and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities."<sup>20</sup> A critical strategy that exposes continued racial hegemonies, as well as resistant formations of difference, is all the more important in game studies given the tendency of videogames to nullify differences within systems of consumer choice.

Working in this tradition, Irene Chien and Lisa Nakamura have each expanded the discussion of race to include larger cultural contexts, focusing on performance and labor respectively.<sup>21</sup> Their work has brought new contours to a critical race understanding of game

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17 Hall, "New Ethnicities," 442.

18 For Hall's full exploration of Gramsci's work see Hall, "Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity."

19 Hall, "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?," 468.

20 Hall, "New Ethnicities," 446.

21 Chien, "This Is Not a Dance," and Nakamura, "Don't Hate the Player."

culture, demonstrating that gamic race is not simply about visual inclusiveness or exclusiveness, but everyday life and global capital. This strain of work is a valuable step forward that places play into social and economic contexts that impact how race is not limited to what's onscreen, but how that activity is involved with bodies caught within its glare. It's a fundamental assumption of this project that videogames are laboratories of experimentation for conceptualizations of human difference. Many are noticing how wireless networks and mobile applications are making the boundaries between games and the "outside" world difficult to establish. From my perspective, this is not limited to these recent technological developments, however. Videogames are embodied and physical activities locked to particular contexts, and evoking very unique and specific affective and intellectual responses. Consequently, much of my analysis is drawn from my own physically and temporally located experiences with games, most blatantly evidenced by the first-person narratives woven throughout. These moments in time are mined within my research for larger questions, provocations, and speculations about the cultural meaning of videogames, and how this meaning is impacted by the world around them, and, in turn, impacts that world.

My project contributes to the growing body of scholarship, including the work of Wark, Galloway, and Bogost, who each claim that understanding games is critical to understanding our place within a world which increasingly bears the influence of networked and computational systems. If my work is ultimately effective, it will add new facets to this critical movement which seeks to explain how videogames derive from the world, reshape the world, and provide meditative computational systems with which we experiment to figure out their, and our, diverse ecologies. My hope is that I can contribute to this project by invigorating this debate with concerns of the cultural and political in conversation with the computational. It's my contention

that when videogames simulate, they often, if not most often, toy with different models of human interaction and difference both regressive and progressive, both historical and futuristic.

### **Choose Your Weapon: Gamic Race**

Simply put, I am interested in how meaning is constructed in videogames, what is done with that meaning by its players, and how game studies can take these lessons and use them to expose the structures of power, hinged on race, sex, gender, and class, that are operational within videogames and their surrounding cultures. To galvanize such an effort we must acknowledge, as Bogost has argued in *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, that games are not mere diversions or toys, but sites of profound cultural negotiation built upon a different kind of rhetoric. This rhetoric is not purely linguistic or visual but procedural. What he means by procedural is that when someone plays a videogame, the meaning of the game is generated in the act of play rather than in simple textual semiotics. We experiment with a game's system and its associated mechanics, exploring related systems from everyday life beyond the videogame. Since a game is a computational object that is enacted by the player, scholars must work to understand how games formulate arguments through the algorithmically defined act of play and its packaging in narrative and visuals. In turn, we must build these lessons into literacies and pedagogies that can inform and engage videogame publics, particularly those within underrepresented communities, enabling players to become critics, activists, designers, and performers.

My project extends Bogost's premise, and applies it to the phenomenon of race focusing most often on blackness. This focus is both a practical attempt at making the project more manageable as well as the effect of a lifelong personal interest in Black cultural politics born from a childhood spent on the deeply segregated suburban outskirts of Detroit. That being said, I would

be remiss not to mention that this project is inescapably shaped by my subject position as a white male born in the United States to middle class parents. While I am certainly dedicated to progressive politics and an anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-sexist, and anti-ableist agenda, I am cognizant of how my body and life limit my personal experience, not only affecting capabilities of the work, but also inevitably contributing to blind spots. I can only hope that these inadequacies provide a productive enough foundation for future work.

Significantly, much of the work I cite is not about race in videogames *specifically* but about race in digital media *generally*. But while I will draw on this work, my project serves as one of the first book length efforts to provide a descriptive and theoretical foundation for how race operates uniquely (or not) in gamespace. In so doing it also attempts to further the efforts of theorists like Nick Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter who understand games as cultural artifacts and commodities, and Tom Apperley whose sophisticated analysis of game theory is inextricably tied to the political.<sup>22</sup> All of this work sees culture and technology as deeply intertwined, and is careful not dip into technologically deterministic studies of game form in isolation from social context and cultural use.

To look at how race is put to use within technoculture, I draw from the work of Evelyn Hammonds and Wendy Chun. Both have demonstrated how technologies produce and inscribe race, but also how race is itself a kind of technology socially modifying how human beings circulate and function within culture.<sup>23</sup> In the following paragraph, Chun summarizes this perspective which looks at race no longer as an ontological condition or fictional category, but as a technology of social relation manipulated to both productive and unproductive ends:

Race as technology thus problematizes the usual modes of visualization and revelation, while at the same time making possible new modes of agency and causality. Importantly, it displaces

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<sup>22</sup> Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire* and Apperley, *Gaming Rhythms*.

<sup>23</sup> See Hammonds, “New Technologies of Race” and Chun, *Control and Freedom*.

ontological questions of race—debates over what race really is and is not, focused on discerning the difference between ideology and truth—with ethical ones: what relations does race set up? The formulation of race as technology also opens up the possibility that, although the idea and the experience of race has been used for racist ends, the best way to fight racism might not be to deny the existence of race but to make race do different things. Crucially, however, this is not simply a private decision, since race has proven key to the definition of the private and the public as such. To reformulate race, we need also to reframe nature and culture, privacy and publicity, self and collective, media and society.<sup>24</sup>

One of the goals of this project is to consider race in videogames from this perspective, and to consider how race is currently being used—whether productively or unproductively—by players and designers, and how it can be leveraged toward anti-racist aesthetics, activism, and performance.

So far much of the research focusing just on race in videogames has come from social scientists and education. Of particular usefulness to my project has been Ben DeVane and Kurt Squire's study of situated and embodied play of *San Andreas* which shows that how, where, and who is playing a game is just as important as the content in determining the effects, or lack thereof of what is being played. The meaning of race is complex and ever-shifting, and if we're to properly acknowledge its impacts we must be attentive to how it is consumed. In addition, I am grateful for "The Virtual Census" content analysis conducted by a collective of researchers across a number of institutions. This data accurately exposes the limited presence of non-white characters in videogames which we've *known*, but haven't quite had the best data to *demonstrate*.<sup>25</sup> Yet even though this work has been immensely valuable, I feel that these kinds of studies need supplementation. Science needs complication and contextualization. I recall a seminar with Lindon Barrett wherein he showed how historians had empirically determined there was no sound economic reason why whites were not used as slave labor either in place of or in reasonable addition to Africans. But the historians' work had stopped there. Barrett's point was

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24 Chun, "Introduction: Race and/as Technology," 8.

25 DeVane and Squire, "The Meaning of Race and Violence," and Williams, et. al., "The Virtual Census."

that we, the cultural critical theorists, reside in that mysterious gap of knowledge. It's our job to provide the 'why' (i.e. the phantasmatic construction of the African as negro)—difficult, unscientific, or dangerous, as those whys may be.

The same can be said for game studies. There's a vast amount of academic and marketing data on what is being played, by whom, and how but not enough attempts to describe and explain the why. It's with this purpose in mind that I carve out my own space in the field and consider race not simply as a category or identity people inhabit, and that we can chart, but as a technology itself which is used to create and change how people relate to each other. And by drawing on Hall, these shifting relations should be matched up politically, so we can understand how conceptual shifts in race from game to game are struggles between competing ideological interests.

To accomplish this analytical shift, it is necessary to update the key models for describing how race operates in online culture. Nakamura's cybertype concept, for instance, has been hugely influential in shaping how we think about race in online interaction as a revision, facilitated by the transcoding of cultural data, of common stereotypes and reductive racial representations.<sup>26</sup> Nakamura's work correctly emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the role of computer technology in reshaping racial representation. We've seen in the years since the publication of Nakamura's *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* how truly complex this nexus of racial signification and computer technology is. *Racing the Beam*, the inaugural book in Bogost and Nick Montfort's "platform studies" series at MIT Press, provides one model for understanding the multiple strata of computer technology: reception, interface, form, code, platform.<sup>27</sup> It's Bogost and Montfort's goal to expand our attentions beyond the interface to these other layers of meaning, all of which are responsible for what a game ultimately is, and, to return

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<sup>26</sup> Nakamura, *Cybertypes*.

<sup>27</sup> Bogost and Montfort, *Racing the Beam*, 146.

to Nakamura, how a cybertype is generated.

With this in mind, my goal is to explode our current perspective on race in games beyond the kind of overt representational cybertypes concerning Nakamura. There's no question some games do rely quite significantly on cybertypes, but my project is dedicated more broadly to raciological thinking in whatever form it takes, regressive or progressive, in videogames and their cultures. In order to more thoroughly track down this thinking, my analysis strays from an exploration of the purely visual to how raciological thinking is also embedded more deeply in spatial relationships, discourse, and techno-logics of difference, all of which supplement our reception of visual difference in games. I think of this multi-layered complexity that bridges the ontological, performative, ludic, and technological as *gamic race*. So while the analytic developed in this project resides primarily at the level reception and interface there's an attempt throughout, in the process of sketching out the contours of gamic race, to expand the scope of what these "surface" layers mean. That being said, there are gestures throughout the project to software and platform research, and how to perform interface level textual analysis with platform and code in mind. However these admittedly remain gestures in need of elaboration; every project has its limitations. The goal of this particular exploration is to expand our understanding of how games are politicized by excavating some examples of gamic race, and to call attention to the potential paths both well tread and as yet unembarked to progressive activism and resistance.

It can be difficult to understand the multi-layered perspective of gamic race and its impact on videogame interpretation. We have an obsession with the visual, especially when we're dealing with race, but gamic race is layered, and visuals are deeply connected to other strata like platform or software as well as less technical layers of meaning, most notably affect. Jim Rossignol's *This Gaming Life* struggles with this as well. In trying to convince his readers that videogames "are

worth taking seriously and thinking and talking about in some detail,” Rossignol focuses most intently on the experiences of videogame players instead of the content of the games: “I wanted to talk about what the gamers themselves were doing, to describe about what they were like and how the experience of gaming manifested itself in their different lives.”<sup>28</sup> Beyond the rather obvious emotional lows and highs of any good videogame experience, a crucial part of the experiential pleasure of gaming that Rossignol unpacks is in figuring out how the game works. He explains that “during video game play, we engage in processes of gradual, often rather complex experimentation” which he introduces us to this through his own experience as an avid player of *Quake* wherein he unconsciously learned to perform a distance enhancing “strafe jump” by hitting a combinations of keys during a jump.<sup>29</sup> Here Rossignol touches on a concept explored in the work of a number of theorists, all of whom posited that while playing a game the player excavates the underlying rules and algorithms governing the space.<sup>30</sup> We play with and test the simulation, marking off its boundaries and structures, twisting them to our own ends, or in the case of modders who add to and rebuild games, we remake the system.

This project began with a set of questions from my own experiences playing games, and deeply connected to the notion of gameplay as experimentation. The first-person vignettes that begin this introduction, and are laced throughout the project, attempt to inject this personal experience into my analysis, and exemplify the moments from my own life that serve as the genesis or synthesis of some key questions motivating this project. While ranging widely across time, space, and platform, they are all connected by two primary inquiries: how is race foundational to game meaning, and in what ways is race multi-layered or invisible?

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28 Rossignol, *This Gaming Life*, 12 and 43.

29 Ibid., 20-1.

30 See Turkle, *Life on Screen*, 67, Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 245, Friedman, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” and Galloway, *Gaming*, 92.

## Displaced Racialization

Videogames have always struggled with incommensurate differences between people, beings, and/or objects. It's been well documented that game technologies were developed indirectly or directly through funding from the U.S. Department of Defense, and, interestingly, often by hippies and leftists who objected to war, but whose creations nonetheless reflected Cold War anxieties. *Tennis for Two*, developed in 1958 and often cited as the first videogame, was developed by William Higinbotham at Brookhaven National Laboratory, a former Army base and, at the time, atomic energy research station.<sup>31</sup> This context played an important role in the development of the *Pong* predecessor *Tennis for Two*. Higinbotham used the ballistic missile tracking abilities of one of the lab's computers to create the ping pong style back and forth of *Tennis for Two*. In 1959, *Space War!* introduced the now done-to-death videogame trope of attacking alien others. Developed on a PDP-1 computer at MIT by Steve Russell, *Space War!* was also indirectly connected to defense funding. MIT was not only one of the central research centers within the military industrial complex, but the PDP-1 was developed by the Digital Equipment Corporation, an important creator of cutting edge defense technologies.<sup>32</sup> The first videogame console, Ralph Baer's "Brown Box," created in 1966 and perfected as the Magnavox Odyssey in 1972, was developed as a side project by Baer at the electronics defense contractor Sanders Associates. It featured a rifle peripheral that is now a common feature of consoles and arcade machines.

The deep connections between the military industrial complex and videogames most certainly affected the development of the technologies themselves, as well as their content. Early

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<sup>31</sup> Nowak, "Video games turn 50."

<sup>32</sup> For a much more detailed account of the connections between videogames and the military industrial complex see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, "Immaterial Labor."

videogames were made using technologies used or funded by various branches of the U.S. military, and were created by people very cognizant of and fluent in the business of warmaking (whether they agreed with that business or not). As a result, key tropes of gaming such as alien others, guns, tanks, doomsday scenarios, and various kinds of conflict, were a distinct obsession of early videogame productions. Out of the twelve top selling releases of the Atari 2600, at least seven (if not more depending on your rubric) adhere to these sorts of combative tropes.<sup>33</sup> Due to the rudimentary nature of these early videogame technologies, designers depended on easily recognizable iconography and/or evocative situations to justify to the player how and why they were meant to clear a screen of obstacles, or get to the other side of the level. In this way, the foundation of many early videogames were incommensurate differences across a battlefield: descending aliens or missiles, a black avatar and a white avatar in a boxing ring, brown skinned characters with feathers on their heads, a wireframe tank. Games were fixated on global extinction, a scenario rooted in complex and troubled social and cultural relationships. And the game industry's politics only got more complicated as Japanese development, and the transnational nature of videogame production, asserted itself in the 1980s and beyond.

Videogames think through race and depend on race for meaning. And, as products of media institutions, videogames racialize. That is, since race is not something inherent but manufactured, videogames are involved in the process by which racial categories and identifications get produced. And given videogames are laboratories, racialization is often contested by players through processes of playful experimentation. This experimentation takes place in character creation systems, discussions with other players, experiencing glitches, navigating space, and the infinite other ways in which players can interact with, and test a

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33 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_best-selling\\_video\\_games#Atari\\_2600](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_video_games#Atari_2600)

videogame's system of meaning. My own play, the analysis of which composes the bulk of the data for this project, attempts to do this. It tackles the trope of race as commodity or empty visual signifier in games, exemplified in Wark's *Sims 2* analysis, and attempts to expose how even when race seems to be thin as wallpaper that it continues to be foundational to human sociality and thus the logics of games. We need to see how race can be procedurally operative visually as a cybertype, and procedurally operative either along with or in the absence of the visual.

To accomplish this shift in critical strategy, I have designed the analytical concept of *displaced racialization*. Throughout this project I attempt to demonstrate how videogames, as an extension of post-racial strategies of representation, often attempt to avoid stereotype through varied character selection, detailed character creation, racial ambiguity, or the overt absence of racial difference. However, since videogames continue to depend on race for meaning, racialization does not disappear; rather it operates surreptitiously within space, discourse, and algorithm. Displaced racialization is attuned to and thus identifies and analyzes these shifts from more familiar visual racial signification and stereotype to race as a set of logics displaced across the multiple layers of computational representation and gamic experience. From this perspective, the visual becomes a symptom of a greater regime of signification often concealing or contradicting the politics present at the interface.

## Case Studies

Take, for example, *San Andreas* which Leonard derides for its narrative presentation of an outlaw blackness that needs to be policed.<sup>34</sup> While not focusing on race, Bogost claims that “the game constantly structures freedom in relation to criminality,” two competing forces.<sup>35</sup> A theory

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<sup>34</sup> Leonard, “Virtual Gangsta, Coming to a Suburban House Near You.”

<sup>35</sup> Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 157.

of displaced racialization would synthesize these two readings in an effort to get at a procedural critique that displays how the experience of playing a game, especially an open world game like *San Andreas*, is more affective than it is contemplative and textual. Thus we'd move beyond (but not replace or devalue) Leonard's focus on the visual and textual stereotype of African Americans, and instead focus on the *feeling* of police surveillance, pursuit, and violence. We'd take this and frame it with the desiring criminality Bogost exposes. By using Bogost's technicized unit operational perspective and Leonard's interest in race, displaced racialization can bring into relief how race resides predominantly in *San Andreas* at the level of the procedural; the player struggles against computational restrictions that place her in the position of a raced subject who's promised freedom, tempted with mayhem, and whose movement is ultimately bound and managed. The player experiences an affective antagonism pervasive in both urban and rural environments that involves all manner of ethnic identifications, and is tuned not at the level of visualization or story, but in the mechanics and experience of being in the world. Displaced racialization argues that the affective experience of division and variation in racial coding (architectural, gestural, musical, spatial, etc.) are more pronounced in the game than stereotype. Thus the task of the critic interested in displaced racialization is twofold: first, she must uncover how race is often operable in games outside of overt representation, and second, she must be mindful of gaming's obsession with, and disavowal of, race.

This style of critique requires some nuance, and is intended to be supplementary rather than definitive. For example take WOW, a game as popular with academics as it is with the public, which has drawn a significant amount of scholarly attention. Along with gender, race has been an important focus of the critical evaluation of the game's cultural importance. In fact, WOW seems to be begging for these readings, presenting the user with a persistent, massively

multiplayer world steeped in high fantasy, and populated with unique races whose differences announce themselves physically, culturally, and politically. It would seem strange to say this world, so overt in its confrontation with race, contains the kind of displacement of interest to this project, yet it does.

Of equal importance to the visual construction of race within WOW, and its reconfiguration or replication of various regimes of racial signification, is how a player's experience of difference occurs just as much through the *process* of character creation and, once created, through her character's positioning relative to others within geographic space. Massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs), of which WOW is a paradigmatic example, often construct worlds dependent on racial antagonism. To communicate these differences to players, races are certainly given unique physical styles and abilities, as well as narrative histories. However, just as important to the meaning of race for MMORPG players is how they generate their character's appearance. In WOW, players are presented with a menu ordering races into one of two factions: Alliance or Horde. Races are strictly determined according to shared ideology. The player's choice of race is thus dependent on her political affiliation: race is inextricable from a system of belief. Once she chooses a side, the player can then select a race which amounts to a choice of species given the fantastical array of vastly different bodies. Gender provides some dimorphic changes, but little else. Class defines one's vocation and skills.

Physical appearance makes up the bulk of choice offered to the player in character creation. Difference is broken down into a few key categories of expressive variation. In WOW we can alter most prominently hairstyle, face, and color. *What's of interest to me is less what these choices look like, and more what it's like to choose.* Arguing over option or choice (a truly endless debate) misses the more significant problem that the system pacifies us through choice.

The character creation system fixes race into clearly defined groups, then layers atop it an illusion of variation that simply emboldens the boundaries. When we focus our critique on what's available and what it looks like, we miss the point: it's the system that's the problem. It's the process of creation, so often designed as fixed choices with an illusion of variation, a system that forces us to struggle over options rather than ideologies. Race reveals itself less in the color of an avatar's skin and more in the logic of selection, and the act of selection. As we argue over whether our body is represented in a game's character creation system, we simultaneously accept the premise, posited by the game's structure, that race is quantifiable and definable. In ceding this premise, we're left only with more choice. A perspective attuned to displaced racialization works to shift this focus from the options to the system ordering these options, i.e. the site of displacement where raciology truly resides.

When first entering WOW's world of Azeroth, you're provided an intensely guided and relatively safe area, called a starting zone, from which to learn about the game and experience it in microcosm. Depending if you're Alliance or Horde and what race you choose, you're located in a particular geographic region, well guarded from members of the opposing faction. This is primarily accomplished through geography. Natural mountain or cliff blockades, or expanses of land full of powerful creatures, discourage players from venturing out of the prescribed paths from area to area as they grow stronger. The villages and cities of each faction are also guarded by high level non-player characters equivalent to automated bouncers. Clever and adventurous players are certainly capable of violating this well designed and patient progression by venturing out into enemy territory, but most, especially those new to the game, don't. As a result, players gestate with their chosen faction and its associated races. The architecture, music, environments, and people become familiar and endeared. It's where you belong. It's what you know.

This changes around level fifteen when both Alliance and Horde players follow quest lines, treasure, and good hunting into the same areas. For an Undead player like me, the most most infamous flashpoint was Hillsbrad, a contested zone in the northern area of the Eastern Kingdoms, featuring both Alliance and Horde outposts. Particularly in the first two years of WOW when I was playing most intensely, Hillsbrad was a hotbed of player vs. player conflict featuring impromptu clashes both spontaneous and calculated. The experience rewarded by the quests and monsters native to Hillsbrad were valued, and safe access to them was struggled over and defended. What made this ongoing battle for territorial so compelling was its dynamism. It felt less programmed than the rest of the world. But was it?

Blizzard, developer of WOW, certainly calculated that this region was to be an initial site of frequent conflict. No matter the side you were on, you'd receive quests at around the same level beckoning you to Hillsbrad. However, considering there was, at the time, little incentive to do so beyond pride, and perhaps peace of mind, the vehement effort to maintain control through the sustained and enforced exclusion of the enemy had to be surprising even to the developers.

This emergent phenomenon registers the power of displaced racialization. The aggressive and often hateful way players engage each other cross-faction in WOW is, in part, a product of geographical difference. The impact of entering Hillsbrad for the first time as an Orc and seeing a Night Elf crest a ridge and approach is profound precisely because the space that formerly separated you has closed. In light of this, the replication of that spatial difference through emergent gameplay can be understood as symptomatic. Players struggle to return to the environment in which they emerge. Certainly the way avatars look is important in this relationship as well, but it's not the whole picture and far from the most important site of analysis. In WOW, as in many videogames, racialization takes place beyond the body. Our task is to find

where and how this is happening.

## Method

It might be difficult to discern how exactly this notion of displaced race is different from Bogost's procedural rhetoric. On the surface, it's not very different, and it draws similarities to Galloway's method of algorithmic analysis as well.<sup>36</sup> Each perspective is dedicated to more accurately describing the level of computational influence so important to how we experience videogames. Yet while algorithmic or procedural layers of analysis are certainly a place where race is displaced and embedded, it is far from the only location. Displacement, as evidenced by this project's primary objects of study, can also be found in spatial relationships, discourse, performance, affect, and so on. The methods of Bogost and Galloway interrogate the structures and expressiveness of technologies, while I am interested in expanding the range of racial signification and content beyond computation, exploring a cultural nexus created by players participating in, and negotiating with, the coded structures of games.

There's also an important compulsory political aspect to displacement to which the term is meant to be attentive. The videogame industry has been reluctant to deal productively with race, preferring to feature predominantly white characters, best illustrated by the bald white space marine model, or multicultural assortments of trimmed and managed choice associated with the logics of character creation, or the token gesture, think Augustus Cole, aka Cole Train, the sports loving loud-mouthed Black character in *Gears of War*.<sup>37</sup> It seems that in the absence of a diverse population within design studios, and a presumed (and totally inaccurate) white player base,

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<sup>36</sup> See Galloway, *Gaming*.

<sup>37</sup> See Williams, et. al., "The Virtual Census."

developers deal with race by not dealing with it.<sup>38</sup> Videogames, and often the people who play them, defend themselves with colorblindness, denying the significance of race in online interactions.<sup>39</sup> Even though the industry, and many fans, wish to deny the significance of race, difference continues to be a prime motivator for the action of a game. As this project will explore in more detail in subsequent chapters, while race might be diminished explicitly at the interface it still haunts games, and serves as the metaphor that makes games work. This can be mapped quite accurately to a pervasive post-raciality within popular culture which denies the significance of race while reinforcing and reasserting its presence. From this perspective, displacement is a symptom of the competing forces of denial and desire. Race is refused representationally and reasserted elsewhere.

As Thomas Foster demonstrates throughout his work on posthumanism and cyberculture, the denaturalization of race evident in its understanding by users as style does not eject race but “[makes] those categories more available to the public and [makes] them circulate even more widely...”<sup>40</sup> Following Foster, displaced racialization relies on a simple assertion: race is central to the history of play in and out of videogames whether it be relegated to a simple stylistic choice or a more crucial mechanic or narrative element. Rather than a marginal or superficial feature, properly describing the functioning and cultural significance of gamic race is fundamental to understanding how we navigate daily life and identity in a world that is becoming more game-like.

Over the history of games, race has been ever-present and fundamental. Race has been

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38 An admittedly old study by the International Game Developers Association revealed that the industry, at the time, was overwhelmingly and disproportionately white, male, and heterosexual. See “Game Developer Demographics Report.”

39 For an example of this kind of rhetoric, see my blog post on Leeroy Jenkins, a machinima production made in WOW featuring a black character, and the reaction by fans to my claims that Leeroy was an example of a racialized performance: Higgin, “How I Use Leeroy Jenkins.”

40 Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk*, xxiii.

agile, moving from the self vs. other conflicts motivating *Space Invaders*, to the physical differences of Atari's *Boxing* or *Street Fighter II*, to the multiculturalism of *EverQuest*, to the genetic essence of *Sims 2*. The underlying logics of race within videogames mirror—in hyper-condensed and anachronistic form—the ever-evolving ways western culture has conceptualized race.

Methodologically, my particular practice of displaced racialization theory relies primarily on textual analysis but married to its broader context and usage. This is a result of my training within an English department, but I can imagine, and would be delighted to see, more technically inclined researchers engage, for instance, a platform studies or critical code studies approach that ties technical architectures to the representation and construction of race and ethnicity, or cultural biases.

Theoretically, I draw from Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben in order to understand game culture within biopolitical regimes of power and how race is used within this schema as an internalized externality that defines the limit point of populations. My understanding of the act of gameplay as a negotiation between player and machine that involves the player's body as a mediating presence is indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as Brian Massumi and Sandy Stone. I am also deeply influenced by Judith Butler's performativity theory, Donna Haraway's cyberfeminism, and the techno-philosophy of Bernard Stiegler. Similar to Chela Sandoval in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, I let the obvious conflicts or taboos between these various formulations of race, difference, power, and subjectivity open up spaces for my work rather than prevent the conversation entirely. And while some of these theorists are less cited in this work than one would expect, I felt it important to map this genealogy of influence to provide a road map of thought.

My work is also dedicated to acknowledging the entirety of game studies scholarship, exceeding the proposed “Year One” of game studies by Espen Aarseth which christened the journal *Game Studies* in July 2001.<sup>41</sup> In addition, I hope it will be clear that I have played games of all kinds for my entire life and often play them to completion. This is not to discount newcomers to gaming or game studies, but to encourage more rigorous play in relation to scholarship. I hope the benefits of this intensive relation to the object of study will be apparent in the breadth, depth, and quality of my analysis.

While I rely predominantly on textual analysis to design these theories I am also invested in a Cultural Studies approach similar to that of Toby Miller whose scholarship sits at the nexus of texts, readers, and institutions and whose article “Gaming for Beginners” serves as a suitable manifesto for this project. While the scope of this project does not allow me to explore political economy in depth, everything contained hereafter is very mindful of the importance of the interplay between the object, its audience, and the context in which it is produced and consumed as well as the politics of each of these sites of meaning. That being said, I do delve into these varying sites of analysis throughout this project considering the discursive life of games in the act of play and in the surrounding paratextual materials, their techno-historical development, artistic remediations and interventions, and the cultural politics of game development. It is my hope, however, that the less explored avenues in this project will be taken up in future work by game studies scholars.

## **Terms**

It's important to identify my particular understanding and use of terms that have contested

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41 Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One.”

and often varied meanings, and which I will be using quite often throughout this project. I made a decision early on to focus on race rather than ethnicity. The reason for this choice is attached to the way I see these two concepts as different. *Race*, as deployed throughout this project, refers to a historically and culturally varied social category tied to an ideology of immutable biology and leveraged to conjure or maintain human hierarchies. I see race as the more apt analytical tool given the obsession of my objects of study with color, biology, genetics, visual fetish, or particular racial histories instead of the cultural norms associated with ethnicity. In line with this focus on race and my American Studies perspective, I am most interested in exploring the black/white binary. Thus I use *blackness* to refer to the ontological condition of being labeled and understood as black—in the manifold forms that this is realized in the physical and game worlds. This includes how blackness has been circulated and managed in the visual and cultural imaginary as well as understood to be a politically constructed and biologically influenced, but by no means determined, category. I also tether blackness to its history of racial subjugation and white supremacy. In the simplest of terms, I will be using blackness as not white in the specific circumstances of the game world and as informed by culture and politics. Finally, *racialization* is simply the myriad socio-cultural processes through which race is constructed and applied to bodies.

### **Walkthrough**

This project begins with three chapters, each a potential lens of analysis for parsing displaced racialization: “Spatial,” “Technologic,” and “Discursive.” The first chapter in this section, “Spatial,” relies on space rather than bodies for its examination of race. Maps have been read historically as authored documents that carry their own biases and embed those biases in

how land and its people are organized and represented as well as sectioned, named, and envisioned through the cartographic process. This chapter extends this perspective to the cartography of videogame spaces which are explicitly coded and manipulated to order bodies and choreograph movement within space. In the same way that a body is a surface of signifiers with associated meanings, and, in turn, used as a kind of political and cultural shorthand for characterization in game design, the mapping of space in games is cleverly organized to visually and spatially diagram and communicate racial antagonisms and relationships. Zombie games like *Left 4 Dead 2* and *Resident Evil 5* which, through the metaphor of the zombie, tie themselves to the history of slavery and slave revolt, can be interpreted as creating a diagram of interaction that mirrors the spatial exclusion of impure racialized others akin to the racist rhetoric attached to recent disasters in New Orleans and Haiti. As a more critical and progressive counterpoint, this chapter also explores how *Red Dead Redemption*, a western set on the turn of century border between Texas and Mexico, places the player both narratively and spatially in the position of a white man whose American dream is conditional, reliant on the securing of private property from the indigenous.

“Technologic” excavates race at the interface through an examination of character creation engines as well as other code and tools such as population algorithms in open world games like *Grand Theft Auto IV*, or subtle lighting cues in *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Oblivion)*. Assumptions, often reifying common sense biological notions about race or privileging whiteness, are embedded within these technologies. For example, *Oblivion's* bloom lighting effect, which gorgeously illuminates fair skin but falls flat on dark skin, participates in a subtle denigration of blackness Richard Dyer has identified as operative through portraiture to photography and film. Building on the work of platform studies and critical code studies,

“Technologic,” seeks to interrogate what is responsible for generating imagery without delving into code or circuit boards, but in mindfully teasing apart the procedural nature of imagery. “Technologic” will further explore how gamic race is best understood as a deeply technical affair presented as stylistic choice which “mimic[s] both the mental structure of a normative consciousness and set of associations (often white, often male) and the logic of digital capitalism...”<sup>42</sup> Key to this analysis is an examination of videogame avatars, a key feature of the current console generation and exemplified in Nintendo Wii's Miis. Drawing on a history of racial caricature in World War II, “Technologic” draws parallels between the logics of racial stereotype and the reduction of human difference within videogame-based social networks.

“Discursive” updates arguments offered in my *Games and Culture* article “Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in MMORPGs.” Calling attention to the fact that the Leeroy Jenkins machinima video is the most consumed depiction of blackness in WOW, this chapter considers how Leeroy Jenkins, a Zip Coon for the digital era, might be the consequence of pervasive whiteness and discursive displacements of blackness in online fantasy worlds. Leeroy Jenkins exposes the often invisible or ignored privileging of whiteness of the everyday within WOW in a symptomatic burst of racial stereotype. Importantly, this analysis of WOW is compared to *EverQuest*, the previous paradigm, and this comparison is used to examine the consequences of character design on racial discourse within virtual worlds and online games.

Following the three critical lenses outlined above, the chapter titled “Performative Play” places theory in conversation with praxis by considering what a method of progressive political subversion of displacement would look like. “Performative Play” draws on theories of the performative put forth by J.L. Austin, Erving Goffman, and Judith Butler and applies those

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<sup>42</sup> Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 17.

theories to the act of gameplay.<sup>43</sup> Performativity is a theory that attempts to describe how gender and race are constructed through daily citational social practice via various utterances (linguistic, gestural, etc.) This chapter sketches a model for activists and artists to use for the design of interventions in games that highlight the vast inequities of the spaces using performativity and Rita Raley's application of Paulo Virno's virtuosity—meaning temporal and adaptable performances that cannot be easily appropriated by capital—to tactical media.<sup>44</sup> There is currently no significant work on performativity in gamespace so this chapter provides a necessary expansion of the theory. To illustrate the potential of this expansion, I analyze “raids” in virtual worlds accomplished by the underground message board community 4chan. During these raids members of 4chan all create black avatars and stage slave auctions or sit ins that disturb the natural flow of gameplay and bring forth previously invisible blackness into the space. They call attention to displaced racialization by enacting cybertypes. Even if the 4chan raiders manage to call attention to the racisms of exclusionary gamespace this performance remains deeply problematic because it maintains dominant power structures. The predominantly white men and boys of 4chan become the arbiters of racial access to gamespace. Therefore, the goal of displaced racialization theory is to identify exclusions but also fight for racial visibilities that restructure social relations and dominant power structures creating a more equitable world.

Ending with this exploration of the 4chan raids within gamespace highlights the postmodern ambiguity of racial identity and attitudes in videogame culture and the challenges of properly understanding gamic race. 4chan is a collection of middle class white men ranging from the ages of 15-35 that manage, by the peculiar affordances of virtual game worlds and post-racial America, to stage a provocative yet ultimately ineffective disruption of white racial hegemony

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<sup>43</sup> Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, and Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>44</sup> Raley, *Tactical Media*.

and black invisibility by complete and utter accident. But for the 4chan members, or anons as they refer to themselves, writing about these raids as I do is taking the internet too seriously. After all, everything on the internet is just ephemera. Bits and packets. Foster warns that the alluring posthumanistic narratives and discourses of cyberspace, to which anons fanatically subscribe, seemingly afford for a new form of self-definition, especially anonymity, but also increase the possibility of more efficient control and domination.<sup>45</sup>

For anons, real race is an absurdity, and if there is even such a thing as race it's somewhere outside of the screen and dwindling. To don avatarial blackface and shout racial obscenities is to have fun with the remnants of a hilariously antiquated and vicious racialized culture dismantled by the anonymity of the internet. Meanwhile, half a world away sits the recipient of one of these attacks, a young Chinese man finishing up the tenth hour of his exhausting and mind numbing shift “farming” gold pieces in WOW. He tends to disagree. There's a lot at stake.

As is evident in this summary, “Performative Play” discovers no easy solution to activism, and, instead, leaves us with more questions. One of the most pressing is how to design a game with a progressive or radical racial politics? One route is to look to other mediums, like film. Gladstone Yearwood distills the essence of effective black film down to a method of signification, not just the presence of a black director, producer, or subject matter.<sup>46</sup> For Yearwood, black film, at its best, employs black cultural traditions and black politics to tell stories that destabilize whiteness and engage with the experiences and subjectivities of black people. Videogames need a similar effort that does not just fight for representational equity, but a form of procedural rhetoric and signification that provides new experiences that deviate from the

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<sup>45</sup> Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk*, 244.

<sup>46</sup> Yearwood, *Black Film as Signifying Practice*.

poles of militainment and ludocapitalist white fantasies pervasive in most mass market videogames.<sup>47</sup> In order to demonstrate what this might look like, *Gamic Race's* conclusion takes inspiration from the work of James Snead, Paul Gilroy, and Tricia Rose. Each explores how Afro-diasporic expressive traditions have served as countercultural currents operating within, alongside, and outside of modernity. So how might games embody radical philosophies? I begin by looking at *Journey* as a new aesthetic and *style* of play, or a new procedural politics, that shows us a different way of thinking about time, progression, and affect beyond the push for progression and accumulation. I follow this trajectory through to an examination of repetition in hip-hop and jazz, and how games like *Passage*, *Braid*, and *VVVVVV* employ repetition anxiously and ironically through play focused on time, mastery and improvisation. I end with a meditation on the work of Erik Loyer, whose interactive art projects and mobile games, particularly *Ruben & Lullaby*, engage with issues like race and negotiating human difference in intelligent, technically astute, and progressive ways without delving into fetish or relying solely on visual representation. And he does so by returning to the black expressive tradition of music and jazz, making the game an instrument and the player an improviser. Loyer innovates at the level of interaction; he delves into the pockets of refuge where race cloaks itself, hard at work quantifying and sorting. His lamp casts a light, objects scatter, and our differences become that which unite us.

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47 “Ludocapitalism” and “militainment” are the two types of videogames Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter diagnose as intrinsic to Empire in the introduction to *Games of Empire*.

# CHAPTER ONE

## SPATIAL

1986

When staring into the mystery of the black screen, the green text appears like alien hieroglyphs. I scribble onto a legal pad, forming a crude map as I trace my way through the space. The farther I go, the more my legal pad fills with lines and notes. It's like bringing a leaf beneath a piece of paper into relief through swift scrubs of a pencil. It's an act of translation.

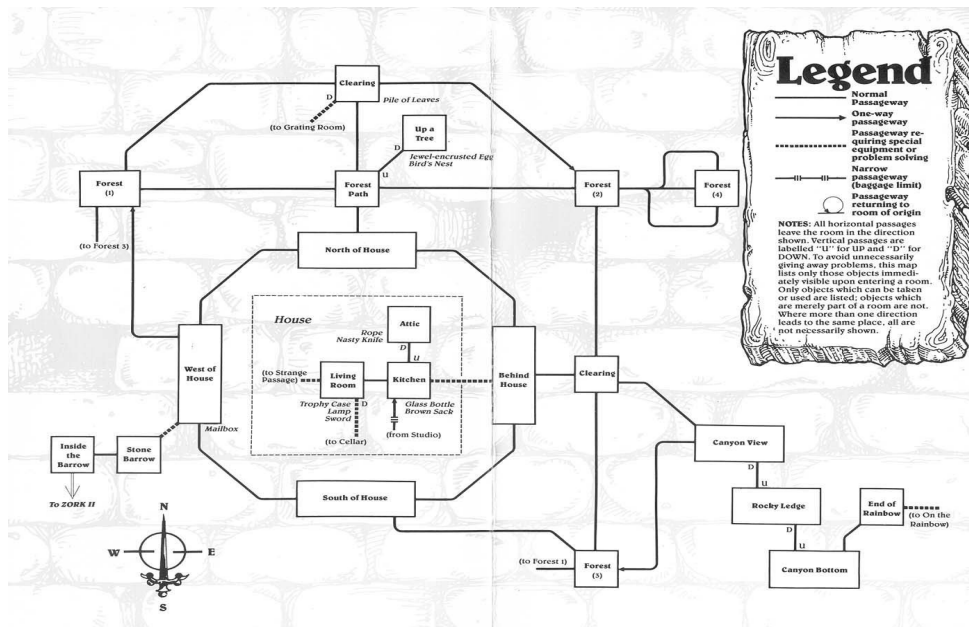


Figure 1.1: *Zork* map from Infocom InvisiClues booklet.<sup>1</sup>

1 For more images from classic Infocom booklets see: <http://gallery.guetech.org/invisiclues.html>

## Mapping Power

The notion that maps, and the cartographic processes behind those maps, are functions of power, most commonly imperial power, is the foundation of critical geography. Jeremy Black explains early on in *Maps and Politics* that “maps are selective representations of reality” with thousands of choices motivating them. Consequently, numerous selections and omissions are made at every decision point.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on Denis Wood's *The Power of Maps*, which Black attributes with being “the most powerful” critique of “objective cartography,” Black traces the assault on cartography to Michel Foucault through the work of Brian Harley who clearly influenced Wood (in fact, Wood dedicated his book to Harley).<sup>3</sup> Characterizing cartography as a rhetoric of power, Harley sought to extend Foucault's power and knowledge project which thought through how epistemological work (through the creation and definition of knowledge) was crucial to the management of power. Therefore, as Black summarizes, “power is about space” and, as a result, “spaces [are] created through the exercise of power.”<sup>4</sup> As the diagrammatic products of territorial struggles between political forces, maps are both representations of the world and constructions of that world. They are ideological imprints that actively shape the relations they purport to accurately reflect.

For Black, maps function as “plans” which, in our convergent and socialized media environment, “reflect a society that both seeks to understand and that can create, construct, and control.”<sup>5</sup> Black draws primarily on news television which increasingly presents issues through highly stylized and orchestrated infographics and seemingly ubiquitous graphics and

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<sup>2</sup> Black, *Maps and Politics*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 165.

visualizations of contest or struggle. Interactive media, a subject Black does not really broach, has only exacerbated the importance of cartography in mediated political processes. Visuals are often tied to polling, audience feedback, or trends. Maps color themselves blue or red as news breaks during elections. Pundits wave their hands over slates of glass, manipulating the data landscape. Understanding *these* maps, not just traditional maps, as plans allows us to see how they are not only informational, but products of desire and projection. Through maps we both seek to understand space and geography, as well as impress our will upon it. Whether its cable news conjuring a culture war in the midst of an election, the United Nations carving Israel out of Palestine, or even a TV sport commentator drawing Xs and Os on a football field, maps are simultaneously architect and carpenter, and always, always political.

As representations and constructions of *space*, maps seek to structure the social relations existing within that space. This quality of maps, perhaps their most powerful aspect, is most explicitly allegorized and exposed in videogames. Mapping, most commonly associated with the aspect of videogame creation called “level design,” does not only reflect gamespace, but is a process that actively manufactures it. In certain contexts, when a game designer makes a map (i.e. a level), they are also creating the space within which the game takes place. Consequently, the form this space takes, and how it is designed to choreograph social relationship and movements in games according to the desires of the designers, can be analyzed to uncover the cultural politics of gamespace, in particular how difference is not simply a matter of visual representation but located within these very spatial relationships.

But what established relationship, if any, is there between space and race? Simply: the two are inextricable. From Katherine McKittrick's perspective, “Black matters are spatial

matters.”<sup>6</sup> She sees “the history of black subjects in the diaspora [as] a geographic story that is, at least in part, a story of material and conceptual placements and displacements, segregations and integrations, margins and centers, and migrations and settlements” all implicated within spatial movement and relationships.<sup>7</sup> As a social construction in need of constant maintenance, race has been “naturalized by repetitively spatializing 'difference'” and white hegemony must employ geographies/cartography to “philosophically arrange the planet to a seemingly stable white, heterosexual, classed vantage point.”<sup>8</sup>

Craig Wilkins' work serves as an ideal summation of these processes within architecture.<sup>9</sup> Wilkins castigates architectural discourse for its lack of diversity and design practices that historically have excluded people of color structurally and aesthetically. His project is not simply about equitable access to space, but remaking the way space is constructed, because building more equitable and welcoming spaces can contribute to the transform of human relations and identities. As Wilkins explains, “The 'where' of our sensory experiences in the world have a profound influence on our ability to create individual and collective identities ... one's ability to perceive [space], access it, etc.—becomes an essential element in the construction of identity and, concomitantly, entire societies as well.”<sup>10</sup> The spaces we occupy, the people we occupy them with, and our positions relative to each other have a fundamental impact on our own sense of self

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6 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xii.

7 Ibid., xiv.

8 Ibid., xv.

9 The theoretical trajectory that Wilkins follows travels from John Locke's *An Essay On Human Understanding* which establishes space as the privileged domain of property owning whites to Henri Lefebvre's social reconceptualization of space in *The Production of Space*. Building on Michel Foucault's work on heterotopias, Wilkins argues that people of color, particularly African Americans, actively create their own heterotopic spaces that celebrate their marginal status. In this way, Wilkins, in a fashion similar to bell hooks, works to embrace marginality and establish a home within excluded or de-emphasized spaces of urban crisis. Wilkins list of work on white privilege and racial spaces might also be of interest, and is worth consulting (2007, 214-5 n. 12).

10 Wilkins, *The Aesthetics of Equity*, 7.

and the possibility for the formulation of communities, including racial affiliation.<sup>11</sup>

Space in games, and its active creation through architecture, geography, maps, and sociality, affects the negotiation of identity within gamespace in ways that mimic and exacerbate our current understandings of space and identity. If, for Black, maps are plans that simultaneously serve the ends of understanding, construction, and control, then mapping in games enacts this relationship; space is not just represented but generated. Maps bound space, guide and suggest movement, and arrange bodies; moreover, this arrangement in digital space, and its affective reception, interacts with our own understandings of racial and personal identity.

### **Videogame Map as Choreography**

Any multiplayer first-person shooter (FPS) fan has a favorite level. One of the most played levels in FPS history is Dust (or de\_dust) from *Counter-Strike* (CS) (Figure 1.2). Designed by David Johnston and released in November 1999 as part of the Beta 4 release of CS, Dust was a quick hit and continues to be played twelve years later. Johnston humbly attributes the success of Dust to luck and simplicity, as well as some inspiration from pre-release screenshots of *Team Fortress 2*. His more detailed explanation, however, reveals the delicate tuning required to make a popular FPS level like Dust. For example, prior to releasing a level, and “to ensure each team would meet in the middle at approximately the same time,” Johnston would “[run] from each side of the level into the centre and [see] how long it took.” The intention behind this testing is “to get

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11 Connections can be drawn here to Arun Saldanha's *Psychedelic White*, an important contribution to critical theory that deviates from discursivity-based social constructivism to a materialist Deleuzian conception of race as machinic assemblage, or, “a shifting amalgamation of human bodies and their appearance, genetic material, artifacts, landscapes, music, money, language, and states of mind” (9). Saldanha is not asserting the reality of racial difference but how it “emerges” within human communities “when bodies with certain characteristics become viscous through the ways they connect to their physical and social environment” (9). Race is not purely psychic, but an interaction with material conditions.

some idea of where the conflict will be focussed [sic]” and, while he does not say as much, to create sites of conflict that players will find challenging and fair.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 1.2: Dust overhead map created by a player for strategic planning. CS, however, is played in 3D space from a first person perspective.

Technically speaking, Dust is a “level,” yet it and most multiplayer levels are commonly (perhaps primarily) referred to as “maps.” Initially this might seem to be a colloquial misnomer, but the rhetorical conceit of such a term reveals an important function of the game level. Just as critical cartographers and geographers like Black have exposed how maps of physical space are not just representations but constructions of the very spaces they represent, the discursive level/map conflation shows how videogames model and idealize the multiple functions of maps described by critical geographers. When Johnston designs a level, he is simultaneously charting it

<sup>12</sup> David Johnston, “The Making of: Dust,” Personal Website, accessed February 18, 2011, [http://www.johnsto.co.uk/design/making\\_dust](http://www.johnsto.co.uk/design/making_dust).

and creating it, and he is designing it in the interest of managing player movement and conflict. This, in light of the significance of mapping and space to human sociality and difference, opens up a new avenue for the study of how difference is communicated in videogames.

It's not easy to define what a game is. Many attempts have been made and the debate continues. But as Mary Flanagan notes in her survey of "canonical" efforts at doing so, each attempt tends to emphasize that games have "rules...with varying degrees of storytelling, conflict, and competition."<sup>13</sup> Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman provide a particularly elegant encapsulation: "A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome."<sup>14</sup> Fitting within this framework, Johnston explains in his design notes that competitive shooter level design is primarily about conjuring spaces that effectively encourage and contain clashes between players. In the service of this desire, space is used to guide and facilitate movement. In his blog post "Directing the Player," Johnston exposes a few design tricks to show the player where they need to go. One example he offers draws on textures, the graphics which coat the underlying geometry of the level: "Some cues are fairly obvious but very powerful. The oldest and still one of the best has been around since Doom: you'll find that players will typically try to follow paths that adopt a similar ground style/colour/texture to the ground on which they're currently standing."<sup>15</sup> Designers use these subtle cues to shuttle players through the space, and to avoid frustrated or confused aimlessness. But while Johnston only admits to aiding the player's enjoyment, the greater motivation here is to manipulate player movement so they are efficiently guided to the challenges and obstacles of the level as well. After all, that is where the fun is found.

This design sensibility is not limited to the FPS genre. In reference to the 3D strategy

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<sup>13</sup> Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 96.

<sup>15</sup> Johnston, "Directing the Player."

game *Myth*, Espen Aarseth notes that to design a good landscape or level in *Myth*, the designer must “have in mind a detailed idea of how [he or she] wants the gameplay to commence.”<sup>16</sup> In startling similarity to *Black*, although with no stated connection, Aarseth goes on to claim that the result of these design decisions creates a “landscape” that “is a plan rather than a map.”<sup>17</sup> Henry Jenkins has also emphasized the importance of space in games, arguing that we should view “game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects” since they “don't simply tell stories, they design and sculpt spaces” rich with meaning and metaphor.<sup>18</sup>

Johnston's other more general observations on appropriate level design further reveal the key processes of map creation in level design. These processes work to bound and structure space in order to create a “fair” match. In “Keeping CS Maps Fair,” Johnston describes how he “[pictures] an overview of the map in [his] head, and [works] out the areas where both teams are likely to make first contact. Typically, if I've got the design right, both teams at this point will be in areas designed specifically for this moment.”<sup>19</sup> He then iterates on that flashpoint area, tuning it specifically to provide equal advantage to each side, i.e. if a team has more cover, he'll remove objects from their side of the map. Painstaking playtesting and iterative development, especially with bid budget, or AAA development, provides game developers with a fair picture of how players will engage with and use game arenas and space. However, players will always surprise and necessitate future fixes for exploits, bugs, and patterns of play that a game designer could have never anticipated. This is the beauty of gaming after all. In this way, the designer's intent is to set up a diagram of interaction which filters players into appropriate spaces, places them on a level playing field, and affords them freedom to improvise, innovate, and demonstrate skill. One

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16 Aarseth, “Allegories of Space,” 47.

17 Ibid.

18 Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” 121.

19 Johnston, “Keeping CS Maps Fair.”

can imagine the thrilling experience of a designer like Johnston releasing his level into the wild and seeing how it is used and experienced in ways intended or unintended through design—much like an architect after the ribbon cutting.

Simon Ferrari's close analysis of the Blood Harvest and No Mercy levels of the cooperative FPS survival horror game *Left 4 Dead* (L4D) reveals how space is cleverly designed to teach suggested pathing with each subsequent play session.<sup>20</sup> Deviating from the most efficient routes of movement, as set up through the process of level design, leaves the player in more perilous and difficult situations. Effective gaming then is about learning these paths, and then following them. Ferrari explains how trial and error spatial navigation in L4D builds a kind of literacy wherein players learn “team dynamics” and how to succeed. This is most evident, as Ferrari explains, in the introduction level of the No Mercy campaign which serves as most players' introduction to the game. The level is set up to minimize alternate routes and to provide a relatively clear path through the space (Figure 1.3). Alternate routes, which often leave players trapped and swarmed by zombies, tend to be short and easy to recover from, but clearly increase difficulty. Ferrari terms this kind of map a “track-type” since it has a rather clear path that only a few trips through the level exposes. No Mercy's track-type design is a perfect introduction to L4D because it illustrates experientially to players how they should move efficiently, in a cluster, through the space avoiding distraction, or else, as the game's title suggests, they will be left for dead.

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<sup>20</sup> Ferrari, “5.2.2 Structure as Literacy.”



Figure 1.3: No Mercy introduction level map. Ferrari has identified the most efficient path making an 'S' shape through the level. Alternate paths that are less successful deviate.  
Image Courtesy of Simon Ferrari

We can see how games, while seemingly providing sites of free exploration, often limit the movement of players in order to manage conflict. As a result, we must build on Lev Manovich's claim that in first-person shooters "navigation through 3-D space is an essential, if not the key, component of gameplay," by adding that this navigation is modulated by pathing set up by designers.<sup>21</sup>

For Manovich, games as present the "user with a space to be traversed, to be mapped out

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<sup>21</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 245.

by moving through it.”<sup>22</sup> As users move through spaces they progress the game both temporally and narratively, unraveling the story and “uncovering its geometry and topology, learning its logic and its secrets.”<sup>23</sup> In strategy games, like *Civilization* or *Starcraft*, this process of unraveling the procedural structures and ideologies of a game is explicitly mirrored by the familiar fog of war mechanic, wherein areas of the map reveal themselves as the player moves through the space. To this more literal revelatory process of play, I would add that the player, by exploring space and exposing its objects and relationships, is also revealing much more than just the game. She's exposing the logics and secrets of the world beyond the game as well. In the case of the two games discussed hereafter, *Left 4 Dead 2* (L4D2) and *Resident Evil 5* (RE5), the exposed relationships between player and the environment, its objects, and its algorithms, take shape as a metaphoric and affective experience of spatial tensions and conflict that connect to familiar divisions between the privileged and the excluded; human and zombie; white and non-white.

### **White Hero, Black Horde**

So similar in style to its predecessor, L4D2 was met with skepticism by fans who considered it more of an expansion pack than a sequel. One thing that clearly sets it apart from the first game is its setting, post-Katrina Savannah, Georgia and New Orleans. The gameplay, however, is essentially the same. You find yourself in a team of four, fighting for survival against never ending masses of zombies. As far as content goes, we're not offered much in terms of storyline. We know a bit about our characters from various lines of spoken dialogue, and we're fed some information about the overall situation—it seems a disease has appeared that infects humans and turns them into zombies.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

RE5 is the most recent release within the *Resident Evil* series. The first game in the series, titled simply *Resident Evil* (RE), was released in 1996 and pioneered the survival horror genre. In a survival horror game, of which *Left 4 Dead* is a more action packed and multiplayer-focused offshoot, the player finds herself navigating terrifying environments, solving puzzles and mysteries, and fighting for survival. RE5, following the template of its predecessor and series standout *Resident Evil 4*, maintains the essence of survival horror while deviating in order to make the game more action-oriented and accessible to a wider swath of players. RE5 deviates from the US based narratives of previous iterations and takes the series to Africa, introducing an African character, Sheva.

Since both games prominently feature black characters in geographic locations demographically and culturally dominated by the African diaspora, it's not a surprise that these games would pique my interest as a critical race scholar. But given the relatively apolitical stance of many fans and popular videogame blogs, it's a bit more surprising that they received a decent amount of media and fan attention. The brief blog based conversation devoted to racial insensitivity in L4D2 was a bit more characteristic of the dismissive attitude toward racial politics commonly found within “gamer” discourse.<sup>24</sup> The vehement and combative response by the videogame fan community to claims of racism in L4D2 was, in part, a compensatory overreaction to the much more heated and extended debate surrounding the initial preview trailer of RE5 gameplay released a year prior at the 2007 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) (Figure 1.4).

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<sup>24</sup> See Jefferson, “Racism in video games” and Sterling, “Left 4 Dead 2 is racist because 'several' zombies are black.”



Figure 1.4: Screenshot from *Resident Evil 5* trailer.

The trailer features the game's hero, Chris Redfield, a classically handsome and muscular white American action hero, entering a poor African village that has been infected with the zombie virus. Redfield gets attacked by a mob of villagers, all of whom are dark skinned, and proceeds to violently kill them and then run away. The initial reaction to the trailer was rather quiet, as N'Gai Croal, the journalist who sparked conversation about the possible racist imagery months later, recognized: "What was not funny, but sort of interesting, was that there were so many gamers who could not at all see it [(i.e. the racist imagery)]."<sup>25</sup> For Croal, the troubling othering that occurs throughout the trailer was disturbing, and the player community's argument that RE5 was no more offensive than RE4 which featured Spanish zombies misunderstood how "the imagery is not the same. It doesn't carry the same history, it doesn't carry the same weight."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John, "Newsweek's N'Gai Croal."

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

As Croal accurately points out, the imagery of the trailer representationally aligned blackness, in an all too familiar fashion, with an out of control violence that necessitates destruction:

It's like they're all dangerous; they all need to be killed. It's not even like one cute African – or Haitian or Caribbean – child could be saved. They're all dangerous men, women, and children... Again the portrayal of Africa...as sort of this dark, dangerous continent filled with people who only want to do you harm goes back a long, long way. And based on the images put up on the trailer, what else are you supposed to take from it? <sup>27</sup>

Throughout the interview, Croal returns to the problem of players who simply cannot see, or refuse to acknowledge, the offensiveness of this imagery which positions the white hero, Chris Redfield, as a human amongst a subhuman sea of violent black faces.<sup>28</sup>

Conversations like this are appearing more often within popular videogame discourse, and they are, without question, of importance. But they do not satisfy the broader, and more pervasive, ways that race functions in games. We cannot always rely on this appeal to stereotype and, even in a game like RE5 that clearly has racial stereotyping, there remains other ways in which we can uncover a spatial paradigm of representation that both supplements and moves beyond the paradigm of stereotyping. It's not simply that Redfield is killing black zombies, it's how the character is positioned in space with those black zombies that creates the kind of horrified affective response Croal and others had to the trailer, and I had while playing the game. This spatialization of race is even more potent when considered in light of the zombie genre's origin not as Hollywood fantasy, but as a Haitian folklore. While the Haitians used the zombie as a coping strategy for the trauma of enslavement, Americans and Europeans appropriated it and

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27 Ibid.

28 While Croal never mentions it, this is also an issue of white privilege and a fundamental lack of literacy. Gamers both do not know how to accurately interpret games and do not take games seriously. However, there is a contradiction within gamer discourse which Tracey John, the interviewer, identifies, “It's funny how some people argue that it's 'just a game,' but also get really upset of any criticism of it.” Gamers understand that videogames have cultural significance, but the problem is, as Croal points out, “They're by and large comfortable with the amounts of stereotypes in their games” (qtd. in John, “Newsweek's N'Gai Croal”).

invested it with a fear of slave revolt. L4D2 and RE5 fit within this lineage, leveraging the survival horror genre's focus on affect and personal experience to create a spatial metaphor for white anxieties about colonization and geographically imposed inequalities.

### **Purified Space**

All monsters function as symbolic others and non-normative bodies on which to map concerns about human difference and displace anxieties about new historical configurations of humanity. Even so, zombies hold a special significance. Consider Kyle Bishop's theory that "unlike most movie monsters of the 1930s, the zombie was sired directly by the imperialist system" or, as he succinctly puts it, "the zombie...was a new monster for a New World."<sup>29</sup> The zombie is an overdetermined metaphor for the physical and mental destruction of the human form within the horror of slavery, conjured within the folkloric traditions of the former colony and current republic of Haiti whose people viewed "the total capitulation of autonomy" associated with the zombie as "the most feared threat" to their lasting independence.<sup>30</sup> The trope of rising from the dead, psychically shackled and soulless, was an amalgamation of imagery worked through in voodoo rituals as well as witnessed within slave plantations. While the zombie resided within Haitian folklore, it made its way to the US, most likely, from anthropologist William B. Seabrook's travelogue *The Magic Island* which tells of Seabrook's encounters with voodoo ceremonies and real-life zombies who he saw "plodding like brutes, like automatons... The eyes were the worst... They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring, unfocused, unseeing."<sup>31</sup> According to Bishop, and echoed in the disconnect between zombies and voodoo tradition present in today's popular culture, Americans were "less interested in the science and

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<sup>29</sup> Bishop, "The Sub-Subaltern Monster," 145.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Seabrook qtd. in Ibid., 143.

more in the spectacle” leaving Seabrook's legacy to be the introduction of “the idea of the 'living dead' in the imagination of the West.”<sup>32</sup>

One of the places where zombie folklore germinated earliest was New Orleans. Not only was New Orleans the largest market for slaves in the US, but between 1809 and 1810 New Orleans' population doubled with the arrival of thousands of refugees who had fled the slave revolt that transformed Saint Domingue into Haiti in 1804. Today, New Orleans, much like Haiti, is a product of the mixture of French and African cultures, as well as Haiti's already vibrant blend of traditions. Zombies, as re-imagined within western popular culture, became less of an outlet for black terror in the face of slavery, and were resignified more as an anxious doomsday scenario for white culture—a slave revolt that flattens the power structure entirely. Zombies were mysterious beings, emerging from the “dark continent” of Africa and confronting the western imaginary with cultural practices incommensurate with “enlightened” rationality. They also served as reminders of slavery's horrors, haunting whites with their own moral transgressions and the possibility that they too might some day relinquish control.

But why are zombies so popular *now*, particularly in videogames? It's easy to map a crisis of consumer identity as the cause for the explosion of zombie films in 70s and 80s with the mall scene in *Dawn of the Dead* as the ultimate metaphor for these cultural influences. The 19<sup>th</sup> century white terror of slave revolt as punishment for capitalistic enterprise is replaced with a late 20<sup>th</sup> century anxiety over the tenuous tightrope of neoliberal control: mantras of personal betterment and self management through consumer capitalism. More recently, films and games such as *28 Days Later* and the *Resident Evil* series, while not innovating the premise of zombie invasions as infectious disease, have certainly refined it and made these issues, and their

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32 Ibid., 144.

associated political critiques, central to the meaning of the zombies. These films and games often, as is best evidenced by *Resident Evil*, locate zombification as the product of covert government and corporate meddling into biological warfare. Here we see the latest permutation of fear over capital's human costs and the possibility of retribution in a world, as diagnosed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, of perpetual global warfare, security, corporate empire, and the privatization of defense.<sup>33</sup>

This narrative convention takes on special meaning in L4D2 and RE5. Both games are set in regions haunted by slavery and depressed socio-economically. Furthermore, New Orleans is subject to severe environmental disaster, and Africa struggles with a number catastrophes including AIDS, hunger, and unclean water. In the racist white imaginary, both serve as sites of self-perpetuating crisis rather than products of structural spatial inequality fueled by capitalist enterprise originating in slavery, and continuing today through modern globalized corporate networks of production and exploitation. As a result of this ethical disavowal of responsibility, whites have a tendency to see disasters or hardships plaguing places like New Orleans or the Congo as disconnected from modern life and isolated—a product of an undisciplined and improperly self-actualized existence. Displaced New Orleanians are “refugees.” Genocide in Darfur is not worth helping. Why send aid to Haiti when the US (i.e. white America) has its own problems?

So while zombie fictions have the potential to incite a critical reflection on shared exploitation within an increasingly unequal division of global wealth, they often serve more as a compensatory distortion of conflict, and prey upon the anxieties of privileged majorities. Zombie invasions in L4D2 and RE5 stage a fear of infection escaping the social segregation between

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33 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.

privileged and unprivileged, white and black, threatening an exposure to the precariousness of bare life. Thus, instead of acknowledging the truth that, as Giorgio Agamben argues, “Bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being,” zombie fiction maintains a fantasy of difference by staging an invasion, across maintained socio-political boundaries between the clean and unclean (or whatever the dichotomy might be), of racialized and contaminated beings threatening economic, health, and social disaster.<sup>34</sup>

In videogames we're often presented with contested spaces which can be interpreted as simulations of what David Sibley has termed “geographies of exclusion.” Building on Mike Davis' diagnosis of Los Angeles communities as “socially purified and fortress-like, against the supposed threat posed by the poor,” Sibley describes how exclusion is embedded within structural and institutional forms which are constructed and maintained to separate the privileged from the unprivileged, the pure from the defiled.<sup>35</sup> The defiled are actively conjured “other' people,” most often “imperfect people” such as “the mentally disabled, the homeless, prostitutes, and some racialized minorities,” inhabiting “other' places” that cut across communities from “the global to the local.”<sup>36</sup> These geographies of included and excluded are necessitated by a capitalistic environment dependent on the creation of sub-classes of people in order to maintain a fiction of a social norm, and to provide a “justifiable” supply of laboring bodies. The image of the concentration camp, for Agamben, is the ideal illustration of this “state of exception” that transforms the formerly legal division of life from bare life into a “permanent spatial arrangement.”<sup>37</sup> Sibley's project can then be seen as examining the more mundane and everyday

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34 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 140.

35 Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion*, 38.

36 Ibid., 69.

37 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 169.

ways these spatial arrangements are absorbed into the very geographies of the city, town, and village. Geographies of exclusion anxiously weave a fiction of exclusive and defined sites of exception rather than the widespread conversion of all political life into bare life, as Agamben would contend.

These tensions between excluded and included are pronounced in New Orleans. According to Stephanie Houston Grey, the geography of New Orleans contributes to this perception of New Orleans, and its residents (especially its black residents).<sup>38</sup> While, as Sibley notes, various marginalized people are cast as impure and spatially excluded throughout communities across the globe, New Orleans carries with it a particulate resonance due to its unique geography: “Residing as it does at the mouth of the Mississippi River, the city of New Orleans has been historically characterized as a site of expulsion, waste, and excess.”<sup>39</sup> What results are “geographical allegories” which reiterate “a metaphorical interconnection between ethnicity and pollution.”<sup>40</sup> Continuing on, Grey explains that what this perception leads to is “a presumption that the entire regions exists in a natural state of degradation.”<sup>41</sup> Here we see, through Grey's analysis, how racialization, this time through geography, seeks to *naturalize* the other as a kind of insidious impurity that must be contained. When Katrina hit, these sentiments could then be capitalized on, as the public, media, and local and national governments contributed to a discourse of emergency and chaos, a state of exception. As a result, instead of sending aid, New Orleans, in particular poor and devastated areas such as the Ninth Ward, were left untouched for an inordinate period of time. Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, Grey identifies how a “moral panic” was manufactured. Grey's claims can be extended to identify how this moral panic

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38 Grey, “(Re)Imagining Ethnicity in the City of New Orleans.”

39 Ibid., 131.

40 Ibid., 133.

41 Ibid., 135.

was not just constructed in that moment, but had long been maintained. Katrina simply afforded a suitable moment for its elaboration and exploitation in the service of gentrification. So while Mayor Ray Nagin maintained that New Orleans would not lose its ethnic character and would continue to be a “chocolate city,” others claimed that the hurricane was a blessing in disguise that allowed the city to be cleaned up. This latter phrasing conceals two racist beliefs: first, that African American lives and communities are insignificant and, second, that non-white identity is a potentially corrosive threat.<sup>42</sup>

Zombie survival horror videogames like L4D2 and RE5 can be read in light of this diagram I am drawing, allowing the player to rehearse the collapse of spatial division. The lone zombie of slave lore, enthralled through ritual and emblematic of the master-slave dialectic, is replaced with the crowd of excluded others existing in the “margins” of global networks of production, consumption, and disposal. As the excluded, these zombies are not spellbound, but infected with disease (a product of their “impurity”); they are not slow and lumbering, but technologized—quick and specialized; the 19<sup>th</sup> century field worker is replaced with the 21<sup>st</sup> century computer assembler. The player must purify/gentrify/expel the infectious threat and return the integrity of the space. And in the case of L4D2, this is exclusively the result of spatial inhabitation.

If you've played L4D2 you might wonder how it's even possible to see the game's zombies as racialized since developer and publisher Valve clearly made an effort to diversify the zombie hordes representationally. I think this is an important provocation to respond to because it gets at the heart of a common misunderstanding of how videogames make meaning which my work hopes to rectify. What you see on the screen is not the whole story. Comprehending gamic

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42 For a transcript of Nagin's “chocolate city” speech see [http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/news/t-p/stories/011706\\_nagin\\_transcript.html](http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/news/t-p/stories/011706_nagin_transcript.html)

race as a purely visual phenomenon obfuscates how race circulates through an entire regime of signification that cuts across the various forms of displaced racialization explored throughout this project: spatial, technologic, discursive, and beyond. It's not that visual markers are irrelevant to the study of race, but they must be recognized as part of a larger constellation of meaning which often functions in the absence of, or uncertainty with, visuality, and is engaged through computational processes.

On this point, there's much to be learned from the body of theory dedicated to black film. There's an ongoing debate about what precisely constitutes a "black film" ranging from the amount or type of black characters present in the film to the amount of black filmmakers on the production crew, or the presence of a black auteur like Spike Lee or Julie Dash weaving the film's meaning.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps the most compelling argument has been posited by Gladstone L. Yearwood who argues that a "black film" is a matter of signification. In resisting "European provincialism and its narcissistic tendencies to devalue other culture experiences" within "fine art," black film is an aesthetic practice and resistant movement beyond the "indexical paradigm" that solely views the black cinematic cultural tradition as tied to the "sociocultural background" of filmmakers.<sup>44</sup> While Yearwood believes the presence of black people in film production is essential, his definition of black film relies more on the semiology of the text itself: "a definition of black film would be cinema whose signifying practices are derived from a black cultural tradition and whose mechanisms for image production use these traditions as a means through which artistic languages are mediated and expressed."<sup>45</sup> He goes on to explain how these signifying practices

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43 See Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, Tommy L. Lott, "A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema," Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film*, and Manthia Diawara, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism."

44 Yearwood, *Black Film as Signifying Practice*, 75 and 83.

45 Ibid, 120.

“cannot be isolated from other pressing issues of black experience.”<sup>46</sup> Given Yearwood's definition, while black bodies and designers are crucial to developing progressive games that disrupt the predominant semiotics of whiteness, we need to also understand how games signify race through their connection to various kinds of racial and ethnic experiences. And we need to use this knowledge to resist the systematic exclusion of the experiences and voices of non-white people.

Consider the highly mediated event of Katrina and its aftermath which showed the world a devastating and sobering picture of poor African Americans struggling to survive, seemingly, if not literally, left adrift. This event showed us how demarcations of racial groups (processes of racialization) occur through geographic and spatial divisions in addition to skin color. With this in mind, L4D2, even with its equitable representation of variously marked bodies, *positions* the zombie hordes as an encroaching mass of out of control blackness. The relative position of the zombie bodies, contra the “survivors,” within the geographic metaphor of the Katrina gulf, actively racializes the infected as a contagion associated with the excluded, and, in this particular context, the horde can also be interpreted as a figuration of blackness. Appropriate ideological critique of L4D2 thus emerges from an attentive spatio-historical, not purely representational or narratological, reading of the very personal and affective experience of play.

### **Critique Buried in Content**

While videogame design has been slow to diversify representationally, we've seen some movement toward including non-white bodies and characters, and offering narratives that tackle racism. However, game design has not effectively registered and dealt with race appropriately

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46 Ibid., 120-21.

beyond bodies. RE5 is an ideal case study for this common failure as it possesses a certain schizophrenia in relation to racial representation that shifts from a formal pole of spatial exclusion and genocide to a narrative pole that, in opposition, offers a progressive critique of this same exploitation of racial others. In fact, examining the racial content of RE5 reveals the tensions between form and content present in game studies since the infamous and mythic ludology and narratology debates (which may or may not truly have happened in the way they now function rhetorically within videogame criticism).<sup>47</sup> Beyond my subtle claims of discursive mythicism, it's certainly true that many in game studies are quick to dismiss the significance of narrative to the experience of a videogame, or its importance to the act of interpreting a videogame text.<sup>48</sup> Videogame stories, in the traditional sense of dialogue and narrative, are often ignored entirely, and usually for good reason. Storytelling is an afterthought in many videogame productions and writing, as we think of it in film or television, is a position devalued and tacked on late in the development cycle.<sup>49</sup> Without question there are videogames with superb writing, and they are increasing in number, but, from a general (and reductive) perspective, videogames suffer from poor writing and narrative development. Lack of quality storytelling results in a familiar experience: complete confusion about the particulars of a game's plot. There's no

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47 Ostensibly, these debates questioned whether videogames should be interpreted as a system of rules or narrative. I suggest turning to Bogost's 2009 Digital Games Research Association Conference keynote which very elegantly and definitively summarizes how ludology and narratology was never so much as battle for methodological supremacy, but the creation of two different kinds of dominant and inseparable formalisms. [http://www.bogost.com/writing/videogames\\_are\\_a\\_mess.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/writing/videogames_are_a_mess.shtml).

48 I use "narrative" here with reluctance because I think what is being referenced is better suited by "plot" or, to use Jesper Juul's terminology, "fiction." I rely on "narrative" due to its connection to the "narratologist" designation pitted opposite the "ludologist" designation in the mythic formalist debate of the game studies boom in the early 2000s.

49 Every few months another article appears arguing for the importance of writing in videogames. For some representative examples see Kuchera, "Why writing in games matters," Shergold, "What's the Story?," and Ferguson "The Importance of Writing." Rhianna Pratchett, a celebrated writer for videogames, also has a selection of edifying interviews she's done about videogame storytelling linked on her website ("Interviews").

question that convoluted plots abound. Yet there's also a more practical reason for this failure to communicate story effectively: players do not want to sit through cut-scenes and dialogue in order to grasp the meaning of a game's events.

Given this rather problematic relationship between games, game players, and narrative, some scholars and players fold the significance of narrative into procedurality, i.e. the creation of meaning through processes. These processes, which are defined by rules, can both restrict possibilities and, through those same restrictions, generate meaning.<sup>50</sup> Ian Bogost popularized the term “procedural,” now a buzzword within videogame culture primarily through his varied work on the procedural rhetorics of rule-based systems in games which he defines as “a practice of using processes persuasively.”<sup>51</sup> Distinguishing his position on the educational capabilities of games from James Paul Gee, Bogost explains how, unlike Gee who sees games as providing experiences that model more general problems and relationships, games “offer meaning and experiences of *particular* worlds and *particular* relationships.”<sup>52</sup> The abstract processes that underlie a game may confer general lessons about strategy, mastery, and interconnectedness, but they also remain coupled to a specific topic.”<sup>53</sup> Grounding his perspective in specifics, Bogost explains how “the semiotic domain of all first-person shooters might be similar due to the genre's common procedural model...but the meaning of individual first-person shooters vary based on the way those processes are used rhetorically, *Doom* is about saving the world from hell-spawn; *Waco Resurrection* is about the politics of religious fanaticism.”<sup>54</sup> The perspective Bogost offers is much more characteristic of how procedural approaches handle the meaning of videogames than any reduction to ludological methodology. Players make meaning from games through

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50 Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 7

51 Ibid., 3.

52 For more on Gee's perspective see *What Videogames Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*.

53 Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 241.

54 Ibid., 243.

processes that model systems, behaviors and social-technical relationships grounded in particular cultural contexts organized by the game's fiction. The perception some may have of a ludological or procedural take-over of game studies is thus a product more of the necessity of reading the narrative through the lens of the procedural in addition to the whittling away of the narrative which takes place during the act of gameplay (an often distracted and unfocused experience).<sup>55</sup> Arguments for or against narrative or rules-based approaches can be seen as moving the emphasis away from this position toward different extremes.<sup>56</sup>

RE5's ostensibly progressive narrative perspective is systematically eroded by the process of playing the game, a key aspect of which is how the player operates within the game's spaces. The story of RE5 places Chris Redfield and Sheva Alomar, the two main characters players can choose from, in the position of para-military anti-terrorist investigators in the fictional African territory of Kijuju. Redfield, a member of the Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance (BSAA), is searching for information about a possible biological weapon. As the story unfolds, the player learns that Africans have been used, by Tricell (the financial supporters of the BSAA), as test subjects for biological weapons and viruses responsible for many of *Resident Evil* series' monstrosities. It's a competent critique of the evils of neocolonialist corporate enterprise undermined by spatial antagonisms bolstered by the characterization of Africans as "malevolent and savage" prior to their infection.<sup>57</sup>

While some of the more critical narrative information is conferred through cut-scenes and character dialogue, a large portion of the more in-depth and critical story details are found in the

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55 T.L. Taylor and Miguel Sicart recently organized a course titled "Against Procedurality" as a provocative counterpoint to the perceived dominance of procedural approaches to games. See <http://www.itu.dk/en/Forskning/Phd-uddannelsen/PhD-Courses/PhD%20Courses%202011/Against-Procedurality>

56 It's also important to credit Jesper Juul's *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* for providing a workable middle ground for those befuddled by ludology and narratology.

57 Brock, "When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong," 442.

world in various readable documents. Even though the documents are often easy to find, it is difficult to devote time to reading them. Beyond the rather disruptive experience of reading while playing, if you are playing the game cooperatively it is unlikely that a player will want to slow the action down for their partner as they read. It's impossible to tell what percentage of players actually engage the story, but it's fair to say that they are a minority.

Here we discover the tension between narrative and algorithm: if videogames offer a critical perspective it often resides within the more writerly aspects of the game experience effectively sequestered from the majority of what the player experiences from moment to moment. In RE5 this is particularly problematic because of the procedural/spatial positioning of blackness as monstrous contagion. This form of blackness, as is often the case in videogames, “conflate[s] race, ethnicity, and national identity” in the interest of preserving a western notion of blackness as “deviance” and “primitivism.”<sup>58</sup> Consequently, the experience of playing RE5 is fundamentally contradictory. You read about the corporate exploitation of “expendable” native Africans in between mowing them down with impunity. As André Brock notes, rather than leverage the parasitic infection within the game as further critique of colonial corporate exploitation of life, it is instead the “tipping point for those wondering if the infected should be preserved for healing and a possible return to full humanity.”<sup>59</sup> The racial-spatial logics, bolstered by a long history of visual racisms, positions the infected black body as expendable, and beyond compassion or understanding. The player's only means of procedural expression is to destroy the black bodies, and clear out the space.

This disjunction is most pronounced in the third chapter of the game set in the backwater tribal marshlands and an oil field. The player ventures through tribal lands ravaged by the

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58 Ibid., 443.

59 Ibid.

weaponized Plagas parasite which has transformed the natives into zombified Majini. The player learns that the source of this bioweapon is harvested from a flower native to Africa and the parasites testing on the native population has caused the epidemic. The story poignantly positions the beauty and natural resources of Africa, and its peoples, as perverted toward the end of global terrorism. For all its convolution, it's a rather astringent critique of global capitalist exploitation of Africa. Even so, what is the player actually doing within this story? Definitely not playing her part well. While looting tribal settlements hunting for precious gems and artifacts, I found myself killing numerous Majini. I felt a mix of tense exhilaration and discomfort. Within the provided procedural frame that demands space be cleared and traversed, the Majini become menacing monstrous obstacles rather than victims. The story washes away and the spatial antagonism, and its associates affects, take precedence.

Admittedly, the division I am drawing here between narrative and procedure is not absolutely clean. The two inform one another and, in the best games, are deeply intertwined. However, there is a difference. The rulesets and restrictions surrounding and penetrating a game's procedures both limit rhetorical possibilities and are responsible for generating meaning. Certainly verbal and written rhetoric (what narrative is made of) is similar. Both narrative and procedure adhere to rulesets (e.g. Japanese and C++), but while the player might read a block of text giving her an interpretable back story, when she travels across the world she does so through actions and processes that are equally interpretable and unique to each game. For the player, words are replaced with something akin to improvisational partnered dance between the player and lines of codes running on a piece of hardware. Instead of writing the word "jump" we must press a button or wave a wand whose action is one of a few defined mechanics available and is instantly executed by the machine according to the restrictions defined within the game's code.

We come upon our interpretation of that action depending on the many variables involved in this process. In this way, Mario's jump signifies. It has its own unique character.

By burying progressive messages within narrative and not replicating those messages adequately in procedure, games participate in a regressive post-raciality infecting much of contemporary liberal—especially white liberal—discourse and media. Perhaps the most damaging effect of a post-racial mindset is its dismissal of racial tensions as passé, legitimating a wholesale ignorance to what racism actually is. Consequently, people are often more concerned about appearing racist rather than identifying or understanding what racism actually is. Appropriately neoliberal, the post-racial interest investment in anti-racism does not extend far beyond the protection of self-image/interest.<sup>60</sup> It's become commonplace then for people, perhaps sensing their own ideological contradictions, to preface overtly racist statements with, “I am not racist, but...” Videogames perform this same gesture trying to convince us of their progressiveness through narrative and equitable representation while sending us contradictory affective messages through the process of play, most notably the kinds of racially charged spatial antagonisms present in L4D2 and RE5.<sup>61</sup>

There's a reason for this: just as Laura Mulvey, amongst many others working in apparatus theory, identified the gendered biases often operable in a cinema organized around masculine scopophilic pleasure,<sup>62</sup> videogames, as “games of empire,” to use Nick Dyer-Witheford

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60 A conversation with my colleague Carl Walker, and his elegant phrasing, clarified this for me.

61 Some games do provide a coherent and compelling argument at the levels of both form and content. See my reading of *Metal Gear Solid 2* for what this looks like in relation to questions of ethics and power (Higgin 2009a). In a slightly different way, *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* places the player in an ethically challenging and disturbing situation both narratively and procedurally, not in the interest of indulging in violence or offensiveness, but to force an affective and intellectual reflection on the act of gameplay that is powerful and progressive. *Far Cry 2*, which is a first-person shooter set in Africa, accomplishes this as well, and serves as a productive counterpoint to RE5.

62 For a good overview of this body of work consult Philip Rosen's reader *Narrative, Apparatus, and Ideology*.

and Greig de Peuter's terminology, are “media constitutive of twenty-first-century global hypercapitalism and, perhaps, also the lines of exodus from it.”<sup>63</sup> While I am less than optimistic about the latter claim, it's evident that digital gaming is a key mode of expression within contemporary capitalism. Whereas cinema was the paradigmatic media technology of “industrial consumerism,” videogames, as products of the military-industrial complex and the computer-enabled knowledge workers' immaterial labor, “have served as incubators for the most advanced forces of production and communication, tutoring entire generations in digital technologies and networked communication.”<sup>64</sup> All together, “game making,” and I would argue gaming culture, “blurs the lines between work and play, production and consumption, voluntary activity and precarious exploitation, in a way that typifies the boundless exercise of biopower.”<sup>65</sup> Part of this contemporary globalized hyper-capitalism is a neoliberal reworking and masking of race. For markets to truly reign, and for unlimited and boundless expansion of economic interest to occur, messy political contestation characteristic of pre-Civil Rights era racism needs to be extinguished in favor of a colorblind democratic sociality. Incidents of racism are then quickly labeled aberrant and isolated, disconnected from a post-racial era in which any individual is imbued with the means to succeed. The kind of “hyper-capitalism” Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter identify is dependent on these myths because without them the reality of institutional and structural racisms which continue unfettered, and form the foundation of global capitalism, would reveal themselves to the privileged and corrode the myth of individually empowered success.

The results of North American game development, and to a lesser degree European and Japanese, are experiences which often appeal to the sensibilities of a mostly male and mostly white western audience whose neoliberal desires for exhilarating experiences of mastery, control,

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63 Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, xxix.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

and power get serviced. Challenging political content, if existing at all, is left at the surface as narrative consolation easily ignored. In opposition, the underlying structures of the game, of which space is a significant component, continue business as usual relying on a logic of othered human difference and the valorization of white masculine hegemony. Just as neoliberal society simultaneously gestures toward a post-racial future while exploiting disadvantaged, and often racialized, people around the world, games present a post-racial utopia through the ineffectual layer of narrative while displacing racialization to the procedural.

A notable exception to this rule is *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2's* (MW2) infamous “No Russian” level. Next to Bungie's *Halo* series, MW2 and the other militaristic first-person shooters developed by Infinity Ward are the industry standard for blockbuster action. Each game is notable for its graphical and technical polish and non-stop high intensity combat. MW2 places the player in control of a rotating cast of modern combat British and America military personnel across the globe. The briefing prior to “No Russian” cryptically explains that the player character, Private Allen of the US Army, is embarking on a dangerous and important mission that will “cost you a piece of yourself” but “it will cost nothing compared to everything you'll save.” All you know is your “new best friend” is a rogue Russian terrorist named Markov who has “no rules, no boundaries” and is “not loyal to a flag, country, or any set of ideals.” The mission opens with innocuous sounds and a black screen. The blackness disappears and reveals an elevator containing men in business suits, bulletproof vests, and assault rifles. The door chimes open to reveal an airport security station. Your comrades begin to shoot, and the silence turns to screams and gunfire.

Markov might be ruleless, but this mission, like the others in MW2, is strictly bound. There's a path that Markov carves through the space. You follow. You shoot or you don't. The

gamic will to conflict is explicitly laid bare. Increasingly, this is a technique deployed by developers to challenge the player's relationship with the game. We're put in a situation in which we have to be complicit with violence and take responsibility for it. The oft-cited browser based newsgame *September 12* distills this conflict to its basic elements by offering the player an overhead view of a bustling Middle Eastern city and a targeting reticule. You can either fire missiles or not. There's no other choice. Suddenly, affect's significance is revealed. We *feel* the compulsion to pull the trigger; we're conditioned. We want to make the game we work. We don't just discover a game's system, we *need* to.

This reveals an important quality of gameplay that builds on the common understanding of gaming as a process of discovering and intuiting algorithms, rules, and mechanics.<sup>66</sup> Not only do players uncover these logics but they are compelled to do so. “No Russian,” like *September 12*, exposes how this compulsion is ethically complicated given the presence of violence and destruction within war games. They force the player to step out of the action and to attach meanings to the non-trivial participation of gameplay. Suddenly playing a game is not just escapism but a political act.<sup>67</sup>

But why might players have an issue with killing the civilians in the airport scene in “No Russian” and not the Africans in RE5? The politics of RE5 is spatial and not as overtly

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<sup>66</sup> For more on this see chapter two.

<sup>67</sup> What's interesting is how games often highlight the player's complicity with violence, but not how the game positions the player within these situations. A notable exception to this is *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (MGS3). While the series is famous for its postmodern reflection on the videogame form and the relationship between player and designer, the climax of MGS3 makes this statement most powerfully. After defeating his mentor, The Boss, in a necessary but regretful one-on-one battle, Snake, the main character, listens as The Boss delivers her final sentiments. The cut-scene that shows this exchange slowly fades from letter box view to game view, and the player finds herself holding a controller as Snake holds a gun pointed at The Boss. There's no choice but to pull the trigger. The game forces the player to complete the final murderous action that the game has manufactured. Unlike *September 12* or “No Russian” which either do not have a plot to progress/more game to discover or the option of not shooting, MGS3 *must* continue. It becomes very clear that the player, like Snake, is a tool for forces beyond her control. She shoots.

representational. “No Russian” shows us fleeing people, all white, dressed in civilian clothing. We hear their screams. RE5's zombies obscure the ethical complications of positioning black bodies, within Africa, as an infectious horde of blackness threatening spatial integrity. Zombification obscures political critique and deflects the player's attention making it difficult to recognize structural differences. It functions much like colorblind discourse as a leveling of difference into a common category while maintaining the diseased roots of structural racisms.

Perhaps the better question is why does MW2 solely illicit reflection on violence during the “No Russian” mission? Because to do otherwise would be to make the player uncomfortable, and would be far too affectively challenging—like good performance art. Consequently the game provides a thrill ride of violence in the missions surrounding the momentary pause of “No Russian.” The player is comfortably maintained within a fantasy of clear antagonism and soldierly opposition which, while not creating the racialized spatial diagram of RE5 or L4D, still demands a mastery of space. Crouching in front of cover in the face of enemy fire and eliminating the opposition one-by-one is a truly endless endeavor. To make any progress territory must be conquered, and certain invisible trigger points must be reached to release the enemies from an infinite loop of spawns. Politics reemerge as the rollercoaster slows and the game reaches its conclusion. It becomes clear, through a series of double-crosses, that the player's “mission” has been a series of deceptions and manipulations by the military command who have manipulated the world into vengeful war. Thus, in the most mass market of games, there is a narrative of resistance. Soap, the player's character, is a pawn. We can only hope the player identifies.

## Manifest Destiny

*Red Dead Redemption* (RDR) does not shy away from the politics of space and territory. Both the story and processes of the game work to create a deeply spatial experience that engages with the genocidal foundations of frontier expansion. As a result, RDR's most emotional moment is not an explosive confrontation, chase, or gunfight. No one dies—well, probably not. No. It's a peaceful border crossing; a horse ride. Movement.

After the first act, you're given a task to steal across the border between Texas and Mexico. Prior to this mission you've been forced to stay within the confines of New Austin, the mythical 1911 region of south Texas that Rockstar, the developer of RDR, has fashioned as your training ground for this western epic. In keeping with Rockstar's creative funneling of player movement, the player is faced with a region that is expansive but is, according to the large game map which is empty of signifying data such as town and region names, just a slice of the broader world. We're shown, through opening exposition that offers us the main character's exodus from the modern city of Blackwater, a land of possibility that is conveniently out of bounds: roadblocks, train lines not developed, impassable rivers, etc. The brilliance here is temptation and denial. The player knows what's to come, but is gracefully shuttled through the environment as if on a tour, or theme park ride tempted, denied, and eventually satisfied.<sup>68</sup>

As a result of this, the build-up to Mexico is tangible. When the time finally comes to visit, John Marston, the hero of RDR, procures a ferry and fights through a horde of angry Mexicans before finally arriving safely ashore. Your partner leaves and it's silent except for a song, José González's stripped down “Far Away.” But there's more to this song; *it's a song you*

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<sup>68</sup> Aarseth describes *World of Warcraft's* (WOW) layout of geographical areas similarly: “the ‘world’ in *World of Warcraft* is not a proper world...but a ‘world’ in the theme park or zoo sense, a conglomerate or parkland quilt of connected playgrounds built around a common theme.” Constructing an “open world” of “free exploration” is hard work (2008, 121).

*just don't hear in videogames*. Subtle and textural finger-picked guitar with delicate vocals packed in reverb. It's there to punctuate the first and most significant border crossing of the game, a journey into foreign territory.

### **Interlude**

The sun is setting and the horizon is painted a warm orange as I hop onto my horse. The rocks here are red and rounded. They stack on top of each other with a weight and majesty wholly lacking in the brown hills and crags of New Austin. It's magical and foreign, otherworldly even. I take my time trying to look the part as the song eventually fades.

Much of the discussion surrounding RDR focused on the beautiful landscape and the sublime sense of exploration it imbibed, but, with a keen attentiveness to what this space signifies, RDR reveals itself to be not only about exploration and the achievement of a pastoral individualistic ideal, but the human cost required to maintain that myth.

Past Rockstar games were spatially expansive, but closed in and territorial with boundaries abounding. Set in urban areas, and embroiled in gangland dramas, traveling around any of the *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) games was a harrowing experience.<sup>69</sup> Depending on your affiliations you might be running or driving for your life. To aid this atmosphere of contested geography, architecture was clearly demarcated by ethnicity and class. RDR, however, is different. The landscape is open and there to be explored with comparatively little restriction. On

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<sup>69</sup> I am referring specifically to the games released after the reboot of the series with *Grand Theft Auto III*.

the surface, RDR is less about territorial expansion than GTA. And this is definitely true in terms of mechanics. Marston is not part of a gang and is not conquering territory. There's no turf war mini-game. What RDR does do, however, is signify territorial conflict. While the player is not meant to reconcile the logics of the game as a gamic quest for territorial control, that is precisely what she is doing. The border crossing that serves as RDR's emotional apex, evokes the same sentiments of exploration and manifest destiny that the entire game both narratively and procedurally symbolizes. Marston, a decent man searching for peace, is also an instrument for the desires of a nation whose existence depends on the colonial exercise of power and unhindered acquisition of property.

Marston is a pawn, just like Soap in MW2 and just like us. But unlike Soap, Marston's debt is explicit. We know early on that Marston has been blackmailed by the US government and must bring outlaws to justice. As time goes on we understand the complexities of this situation: the outlaws Marston hunts are his former associates and Marston's family's safety is dependent on his success. What makes Marston such an interesting character is his difficulty coping with how the necessities of his mission compromise his moral code. He's a reformed outlaw whose love for his family has brought clarity to the wrongs of his past. Ideally he'd retreat to his farm, as he had prior to the game's diegesis, and stay out of trouble. But the blackmail forces him to be wicked and ruthless once again. So, unlike the morally dubious or downright corrupt, main characters of Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series, Marston politely refuses all offers from prostitutes and, rather than tempted with various kinds of mayhem, he is stopped on the side of the road and begged for help with abduction or theft.

Marston's moral code wavers throughout the game as the player participates in missions ranging from helping a woman tend to her ranch, to aiding a vicious Colonel as he quells a

people's revolution in Mexico (a rebellion that Marston sympathizes with and assists while he works for the Colonel). In Mexico, Marston plays both sides doing whatever is necessary to secure his family. This individualistic philosophy of Marston's, representative of the "rugged individualism" prized within the American mythos, is put to its most disturbing test in New Austin when the Bureau of Investigation (BOI) tasks Marston with hunting down Dutch van der Linde, the leader of the outlaw group Marston ran away from. Dutch's new crew is the 1911 Gang, composed of Native Americans disgruntled with the US government's exploitation of their people and land. It becomes clear that Marston's individualistic ideology, one that fits with the prized and honored traditions of the US, is precisely the morality that affords manipulation in the service of exploitative racist policies of expansion and white institutional privilege. In order to preserve his family, Marston, and the player, must commit heinous injustices. The problem is that Marston's individualistic obsessions obfuscate the cross-cultural identification which could and should be made between Marston and the 1911 Gang, and could bring forth a poor and working class revolutionary force similar to the Mexican rebellion Marston participated in just prior to his return to New Austin.

The areas the 1911 Gang natives inhabit, Cochinay and Bearclaw, are partially explorable prior to their significance to the story. When this occurs, they are empty shells. Insignificant but for their clear deferred narrative purpose; an apt player understands they will return to these sites later. And when this happens, they are suddenly inhabited. There's an interesting parallel here to the perception of native ownership of the Americas. Tribes had no claim to the land they inhabited. They existed there but not "legally." Therefore, they were not seen as propertied.<sup>70</sup> The various other wilderness-based areas of the game follow this same principle, but given the

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<sup>70</sup> As Wilkins explains, because Locke associated property ownership with capital improvement to the land, Native Americans were systematically excluded from the colonial schema of space and property supported by the legal system (2007, 27).

exploitative history between the US government and Native Americans, these sites take on a special resonance.

Interestingly, the same goes for Marston's homestead. I assumed, perhaps like many, that we'd never see it in the gamespace. I imagined that if we were to encounter the Marston farm it would be in a cutscene. Yet, quite suddenly, when the second act comes to a close we come home. We find out the farm is called Beecher's Hope and it, like the other notable landmarks of the game, was empty until now. I had ridden past it many times taking little note. Neither did Marston.

Here the game procedurally, and in a remarkably subtle and most certainly unintentional way, best makes its parallel between the exploitation of indigenous populations and that of all propertied individuals. If it has not been sufficiently clear up to this point, Marston's return home, and the reinstatement of his farm, brings the exploitative and damaging relationship between Marston and the federal government into relief. His way of life, one which is peaceful and loving as we learn through a series of relatively mundane farm-based missions, is conditional. It can be taken away at any moment.<sup>71</sup> More importantly, Marston's journey through the game demonstrates that not only is this life a condition of the government's endorsement of his existence, but also his active participation in the doctrine of manifest destiny the BOI agents use him as an instrument of.

In order to live the "American Dream," Marston must eschew the radical politics of his outlaw past and integrate himself into the expansionist genocidal project of turn of the century America. Marston, the poor white landowner, and the 1911 Gang, the displaced outlaw natives, are manufactured as competing and conflicting segments, when, politically, they have common

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<sup>71</sup> The game's initial climax makes this statement brutally as the US Army returns, after Marston has completed what was asked of him, and destroys his farm, murdering Marston.

class affinities. Just as whites, through the process of industrialization and the labor movement, slowly distanced themselves racially from black slaves rather than solidifying the clear class affinities that existed, Marston does not recognize any political common ground with the natives.<sup>72</sup>

RDR manages to construct a narrative that engages with the politics of racial space through both story and procedure, forcing the player into an uncomfortable complicity with immoral and genocidal violence. Just as Marston is blackmailed by the BOI, the player is compelled into violence by the game; the two processes are aligned. Marston's ethical quandary between individual pleasure and collectivity, is our conflict between the fantasies of simulation and the ethics of playful violence. While RE5 places the player in a similar position procedurally, the narrative ineffectively forms this critical loop. The player is allowed to operate within a comfortable fantasy of moral satisfaction and heroic action. In RDR, all of that is revealed as self-indulgent and destructive.

One of the final missions that the BOI requires of Marston is also one of the most disturbing. The player is positioned on the back of an armored automobile with a Gatling gun and must slaughter a large amount of charging natives in order to reach the 1911 Gang's Cochinay stronghold (Figure 1.5). Compared to the overt narrative critique of racism embodied in the character of Professor Harold MacDougal, a racist anthropologist Marston encounters in Blackwater, the presence of race in Marston's encounter with the 1911 Gang is relatively subtle. Rather than murdering natives out of explicit racism, Marston's slaughter of them is due simply to his pursuit of the American dream. Racism is embedded in, and is the economic and philosophical

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<sup>72</sup> David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* is an excellent account of the fascinating history of early American history and the negotiation of race and class difference between laboring whites and black slaves. Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* also thoroughly examines how poor and working class Americans have repeatedly been placed at odds across cultural lines. These conflicts continue today as evidenced by white working class ire toward Latino/a immigrants.

foundation of, American expansionism. Interestingly, the mission, and game, downplays the questionable ethics of Marston's activities, further layering the compulsory nature of ideology. We're coaxed along with Marston, easily blinded by the game's incessant hail. Unless the player is attentive to these insensitivities, she might not even recognize the colonial causes of Marston's killing. RDR cleverly formulates a procedural system of meaning that mimics the dangers of individualistic white ideology which seeks its own profit at the expense of a properly expansive and compassionate worldview aware of, and proactively dismantling, structural racisms. We're given no choice but to be complicit. As Dutch explains to Marston: "my boys here, they already lost their families a long time ago. We aren't thieves, John, we're fighting for something. A bit like you, only we're fighting for an idea, not just for ourselves."<sup>73</sup> While Dutch might be talking to Marston, he's looking at us.



Figure 1.5: John Marston with a member of the 1911 Gang is his Gatling Gun cross-hairs.

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<sup>73</sup> Thanks to Shotgunnova's transcription: <http://www.gamefaqs.com/xbox360/957922-red-dead-redemption/faqs/60200>.

## Epilogue, or, When Gold Holds No Value

In one of the earlier, and best, studies of videogames, *Playing with Power*, Marsha Kinder explored how “the ideological assumptions implicit in software and marketing of [videogame] cartridges...encourage an early accommodation to consumerist values and masculine dominance,” while also “accelerati[ng] cognitive development.”<sup>74</sup> Watching her son Victor develop, Kinder sought to understand how videogames, given their placement in the market, were designed for boyhood power fantasy, and unfortunately so, given the potential of games to productively educate all kinds of people. In her evaluation of both games and their “intertexts,” Kinder identified a common oedipal dramatic structure geared toward boys, both in their narratives and mechanics. Many games featured masculine angst and competition, fueling violent fantasies of usurpation or achievement. Kinder's primary concern was that, instead of applying cognitive skills gained through play to other tasks, players would “lose sight of important distinctions [between games and other activities], by reconceptualizing those other activities as merely part of the same superentertainment system,” effectively seeing the world, in all its complexity, as one big videogame.<sup>75</sup>

Nearly two decades later, videogame players have grown up and diversified, but, arguably, their content hasn't adequately adjusted.<sup>76</sup> As games have grown in prominence, and our understanding of their place in global culture has expanded, views have changed on how they impact daily life. Jane McGonigal, for instance, looks to games, both digital and otherwise, as a potentially revolutionary force for promoting and enacting positive change in the world.<sup>77</sup> Bogost,

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<sup>74</sup> Kinder, *Playing with Power*, 119.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> See Williams, et. al., “The virtual census.”

<sup>77</sup> McGonigal, *Reality is Broken*.

in contrast to both McGonigal and Kinder, views games ambivalently as “complex, rusty machines built to show us that the world is so much bigger and weirder than we expected.”<sup>78</sup> Alternatively, and more in line with my views, McKenzie Wark believes games present us with an idealized vision of the world whose incommensurate perfections, excavated through critical gameplay, politicizes the world and game.<sup>79</sup> From whatever perspective, however, the deeply troubled white masculine hegemony of games is a threat to the decency of social life, and it's a problem that must be confronted, as I hopefully have accomplished in this chapter and my larger project.

So while there is certainly a long history of games counter to or on a different vector than this hegemony, a particularly vehement, vocal, and certainly profitable portion of games and game culture caters to the “hardcore” demographic of players who crave intense, competitive, technically complex, and mature titles. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* is the current exemplar of this subset of game culture which continues to deliver oedipal fantasies of power and mastery closely tied to Kinder's observations in the early 90s.

More recently, thanks to the Nintendo Wii's expansion of the videogame market beyond its previously limited demographics, the massive popularity of social gaming platforms such as Facebook, and the rise of mobile gaming through the iPhone and Android, the “hardcore” has been supplemented (or supplanted) by the “casual” market. Instead of the power fantasy of *Modern Warfare*, we are now faced with the ruthlessly addictive gameplay of *FarmVille* and *Angry Birds*, each with hundreds of millions of players, far surpassing the success of “hardcore” blockbuster console and PC releases.

For many, the increasing prominence of the “casual” market was an exciting

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78 Bogost, “Reality is Alright.”

79 Wark, *Gamer Theory*.

destabilization of what had been a masculinist stranglehold on design conventions. Suddenly, with *Angry Birds* exceeding 200 million downloads, developers needed to think about creating accessible games that cut across all types of people. Unfortunately, “casual” games replace the masculinist conventions of “hardcore” with a profoundly troubling compulsory style of gameplay that, in the case of micro-transaction style games like *FarmVille*, encourage, or coerce, players into continually making purchases, or investing more time, to propel play.

There's a parallel here to the feeding of quarters into an arcade machine so endemic to the gameplay experience, and woven into the design of videogames, in the 70s and 80s. As Scott Rettberg explains, early arcade games were designed to “deliver a quick dose of adrenaline” and then promptly make the game “progressively more difficult...until [the player] died and was prompted to feed the machine another quarter.”<sup>80</sup> With the rise of consoles, and the significant investment players had to make in the purchase of games, “the notion of replay value became even more important. The idea was to hook the player, both on the particular console system and on a particular brand of game.”<sup>81</sup> Finally, in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) “the logical goal...is to immerse players in one single game for as long as possible, without diversion to other virtual world environments, and without end.”<sup>82</sup>

“Casual,” or, “social” games seem to perform a convergence of all of these design philosophies. Providing an addictive, sustained, often virtual world-based, and monetized style of play. Even formerly “hardcore” games are increasingly hybridized, leveraging the kind of “social and economic metrics” (such as wealth, item acquisition, achievements) important as markers of success in MMOGs, and in the corporate world.<sup>83</sup> Consider, for instance, *Modern Warfare 2's*

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80 Rettberg, “Corporate Ideology in World of Warcraft,” 21.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 24.

experience based multiplayer ranking system which allows players to level up as they perform well in matches, and then use their new levels to gain various perks, items, and dynamic events.

Certainly some of this social achievement is cooperative and unselfish. Much of my time in *WOW* or *EverQuest* was focused on helping others, or simply maintaining social relationships, and the same could be said of my guildmates. However, Dutch's provocation of Marston to fight not only for himself, but also an idea, continues to sting. As games seemingly become more social, this sociality is increasingly contained within an ethic of achievement, accumulation, and competition inextricable from the logics of neoliberal capital. For Rettberg a game like *WOW* is representative of a "corporate ideology," while Julian Kücklich sees the fuzzy boundaries between play and work that often occurs in game modding and design as "playbour." Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter perhaps most usefully deploy the notion of immaterial labor, often associated with Hardt and Negri, to describe the way videogameplay and production are both forms of widespread (across classes, geographies, and cultures) cognitive and affective labor.<sup>84</sup> Social gaming has brought the laborious qualities of gaming into relief, leveraging, or rather quantifying and instrumentalizing, status, affect, and value in order to increase player time and investment.<sup>85</sup>

As has been the case in every example discussed in this chapter, space in these social games, especially the various -Villes, tends to be a geography waiting to be populated, mastered, and made productive, or, as is the case with most online roleplaying games and shooters, a space of conflict waiting to be removed of obstacles and controlled.<sup>86</sup> Using space in this way makes perfect sense within a regime of immaterial labor. Persistent social space, with a set of rules in

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84 See Ibid.; Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour"; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 3-33; Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, ch. 3.4.

85 Hence Ian Bogost's acerbic and clever anti-social Facebook game, *Cow Clicker*, which, in the process of parodying the bankrupt ethics of many social, actually became its own miniature social game phenomenon.

place that reward expansion, resource harvesting, or kill counts, modulates player activity and demands laboring activities. Games have always been competitive, and status has always been important, particularly in arcade culture, but social games have exacerbated this ethic of play via globally networked game systems designed to create laboring bodies.<sup>87</sup>

But are there other games that show us the use of space for creativity and cooperation, rather than conflict, competition, and value creation? Thankfully, yes. *Minecraft*, the indie game designed by Markus Persson, more commonly known as “notch,” is a heartening spatial paradigm.<sup>88</sup> Launched in May 2009 after a mere week of development, *Minecraft*, a randomly generated sandbox style survival game, has gone on to sell 2 million units and launch a popular culture phenomenon. While constantly evolving according to regular updates pushed out through the game's website (where players initially download the game), *Minecraft* is, at its core, about exploration, creation, and survival. Players can create a world or join an existing one, but, importantly, that world is always uniquely generated. The substance of the worlds, including the trees, mountains, water, beaches, and caves which make up the landscape, are themselves composed entirely of textured blocks. These blocks can be destroyed, harvested, deployed, and recombined into various items ranging from books to mine carts.

As night falls, the tone of the game changes from beautiful to haunting. Threatening creatures stalk you as you wait eagerly for dawn. Players find themselves burrowing deep

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86 Increasingly games feature spaces that are massive persistent conflicts with territories that must be seized and defended. *Dark Age of Camelot* was an early innovator of this style of gameplay. Many competitive online games feature less persistent but similar modes of gameplay such as capture the flag. *MAG*, a PlayStation 3 first-person shooter with a possible 256 players, is an evolution of this style.

87 I was thinking of this while playing *Pac-Man Championship Edition DX* on the PlayStation network. I challenge myself to defeat the high scores of my friends, and the global leaders, all of whose best times are reported to me. I watch the footage of top players around the world, their best runs displayed for every player to see. These recordings of play function as *free* tutorials. Naturally.

88 This discussion of *Minecraft* refers to the alpha release. In subsequent releases, many changes were patched in that would ultimately undermine many of the perspectives I offer in this analysis.

underground, gathering resources and dodging enemies, while constructing whatever they like both above and under the surface. Within this system, *Minecraft's* zombies carry none of the metaphorical baggage of L4D2 or RE5; they're clever impediments to construction, not racialized boogeyman poisoning space. Monsters in *Minecraft* are problems to be solved akin to damming a river or building a tower on a cliff face. (And they can be removed entirely by setting the difficulty to “peaceful.”)

Acquisition of the various minerals and resources the world offers is an addictive and central portion of play. The deeper one digs, the greater the chance of finding the more durable, rare, and prized materials in the game, the most coveted being diamond. But cleverly, and emblematically, gold, a rare material, possesses little value or function. New players are likely to run across it, and gasp at its discovery. But after excitedly scouring crafting wikis and message boards they will soon discover, as I did, that it is “more used for showing off than its value on items/armor.”<sup>89</sup> The decision by notch to play this clever trick is representative of *Minecraft's* progressive re-characterizing of the value and use of space in games. Nothing is produced, and no money is generated. Resources are gathered to fuel creativity, and are valued according to their uses. Space is not to be conquered or evacuated of enemies, but to be explored, marveled at, and reshaped in the image of our imaginations. And certainly this is a sublime and disconcerting fantasy of nature and industry, i.e., the world as endless supply of standing reserve (to delve into the Heideggerian). Unfortunately, within game culture this is progress.<sup>90</sup>

Ultimately, I am impressed with *Minecraft* because of what its players produce in spite of the game's troubling allegory. A simple YouTube or Google search yields breathtaking works of

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<sup>89</sup> “Gold (Ore).”

<sup>90</sup> I am referencing here Heidegger's “The Question Concerning Technology” wherein he theorizes how modern technology systematically transform the world, including humans, into a set of resources waiting to be instrumentalized and used.

creativity, ingenuity and skill on par with the most spectacular creations of similar sandbox style worlds like *Second Life*. What's most striking is how movement in the game, particularly digging underground, finds the player carving her way through space, and engaging in a productive act akin to dance. She traces a path, perhaps remaking it on the way, leaving a trail much like a jet streaking across a clear blue sky. Traversal is an act of construction, and often is quite literally, as players scaffold their way up a mountainside, or on the edge of a tower, simultaneously framing, building, and destroying. Shared servers that allow multiple players to inhabit a world at various times have a particular joy attached to them as you witness the world reshaped by players around you, the landscape littered with traces of their efforts.<sup>91</sup>

Brendan Keogh perhaps best illustrates how movement in *Minecraft* is a performance in *Towards Dawn*, a screenshot based travelogue within the game.<sup>92</sup> Keogh measures out his play sessions of *Minecraft* by in-game days, from sunrise to sunset. With each new day he presses farther out into space as the landscape generates around him; we see his experiences recounted in his blog entries. These writings and screenshots are etchings of an exotic world away marked by Keogh's path: abandoned huts, hasty digs, torches lodged into mountainsides. Keogh presses forward, the map of his game, as per *Minecraft's* extraordinary random structuring, spills forth, ever providing sublime new geographies within which to explore.

Although *Minecraft* is about building, Keogh isn't making anything but a long, long path: a geography, a road, a diary. His is a study of patience, of consequence, of the beauty of digital space, the collaboration between game engine and user, and the power of maps.

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91 Designer Jason Rohrer created a *Minecraft* server on a USB drive called *Chain World* which he introduced as part of the "Game Design Challenge" panel at the 2011 Game Developers Conference. The challenge was to create a game that was also a religion. Rohrer boiled religion down to legacy, and thus his *Chain World* USB drive and game is passed from player to player, with each player's activity building on the world the previously player inhabited. Rohrer's concept was built entirely around the extraordinary ability for *Minecraft's* space to be legible as players move through and modify it.

92 See <http://towardsdawns.blogspot.com/>.

Keogh, as of May 2011, has spent forty one in-game days as a digital nomad. He promises to continue until his character dies, returning to the place of his initial birth miles and miles of bits and blocks away. When this happens he'll blip back into existence, and a world will extend out before him. It will be a space mapped by his movements and actions, and ready to be defined again because maybe, just maybe, he'll set out once more, alone but undaunted. Whether he's the first or last person alive in this world, whether its Eden or the apocalypse, is uncertain.

## CHAPTER TWO

### TECHNOLOGIC

1994

We're not competitive; Jon, like me, hates to see a friend lose, so we turn *Street Racer*, a mediocre *Mario Kart* clone, into a cooperative game. At the beginning of each race, we instantly turn our cars around and cruise in the opposite direction of the other racers. We spend hours ramming our unwitting computer-controlled opponents, pinning them in, and laughing as they pitifully attempt to escape. We pin one car in a corner of the track on the very edge of the map. It's looks like a low wall that in the real world could easily be vaulted, but we know it is an invisible barrier that vertically extends infinitely. Don't ask us how it works; we just know.

But this time something incredible happens. The computer's car slips through the barrier and ends up on the other side. He's lost and wandering in a no man's land extending to the digital horizon. It's a a glorious impossibility.

We knew we had to get out there.

It doesn't take us long to discover an exploit and get beyond the wall too. In the vastness of off limits space, far away from the race, there's nothing to do but cruise. But that

doesn't matter. We found something out. We did it. We won.

Bodies in cyberspace are also constituted by descriptive codes that "embody" expectations of appearance. Many of the engineers currently debating the form and nature of cyberspace are the young turks of computer engineering, men in their late teens and twenties, and they are preoccupied with the things with which postpubescent men have always been preoccupied. This rather steamy group will generate the codes and descriptors by which bodies in cyberspace are represented. Because of practical limitations, a certain amount of their discussion is concerned with data compression and tokenization. As with phone sex, cyberspace is a relatively narrow-bandwidth representational medium, visual and aural instead of purely aural to be sure, but how bodies are represented will involve how recognition works.

—Allucquère Rosanne Stone (1991)

To play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to interpret a game means to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel "allegorithm").

—Alexander Galloway (2006)

### **Their Logics Against Them**

W.E.B. Du Bois was a new media practitioner and theorist. His medium: photography (which, at the time, was about as old as videogames are now). His cause: anti-racism. Du Bois wanted to de-suture photography's connection to racist ideology by undermining its false objectivity, and filling the frame with new meaning. To this end, his portraits of middle class African Americans in the first decade of the 20th century showed America a drastically different

picture of blackness, and assaulted the integrity of racial categories (Figure 2.1). As Evelyn Hammonds explains, Du Bois' portraits, which were “rendered in the style of turn-of-the-century ethnographic studies of race,” were used, along with sociological evidence including the subjects' own reports of their ancestry, to show that racial mixing was not a deviant and shameful pollution of racial purity, but the fact of every human being's genetic history.<sup>1</sup>

The brilliance of Du Bois' new media critique was how, with relatively little manipulation, he was able to take the supposed objective integrity of photography and show that, when placed in an intelligent and ethical political context, photographs reveal themselves as not an impartial medium, but deeply political, manipulable, and often discriminatory.



Figure 2.1: Portraits made by Du Bois for *The Health and Physique of the Negro American*.

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1 Hammonds, “New Technologies of Race,” 307.

Du Bois' exposure and resignification of the logics of photography continues to inspire. Hammonds uses Du Bois to enter into a critique of the continued dominance of morphological notions of race in magazine advertisement, and the rise of computer morphing technologies in the 90s. More recently, Kip Fulbeck's *Part Asian, 100% Hapa* revives Du Bois's techniques to bring attention to the indeterminacy and variation of people of hapa or mixed Asian descent (Figure 2.2).<sup>2</sup> Fulbeck's project, similar to Du Bois's, collects photos and testimony of individuals identified as hapa, in order to erode oppressive visual typologies of human difference. As opposed to the genetic trees and re-told testimonies of Du Bois's project, Fulbeck's project relies on the handwritten descriptions of the subjects themselves. These writings range from philosophical declarations of self to drawings to the scrawlings of children. All of them wonderfully assert a right to self-definition beyond traditional racial-ethnic schemas. However, Fulbeck curiously frames them beneath a typeset footer that lists a set of familiar ethnicities for the subject which often conflict with what the subjects' description.. It's unclear how these footers were determined, but they seem to undermine the fluidity and resistances of hapa identity by fixing it within a discernible and mappable logic of descent through traditional ethnic categories. The lists demonstrate a compulsion of the project to still please a desiring gaze that must seize bodies within an established grid. Fulbeck's grounding of hapa testimony within established racial categories shows the bind progressives find themselves in when having to rely on constrictive identity politics as a necessary basis for political mobilization, and as repositories of cultural histories. Fulbeck must filter their boundary crossing and breaking Hapa identity through the shared language of ethnicity in order to reveal the subject's transgressions of these ethnicities.

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2 Hapa is a Hawaiian word derived from the English word "half" and meaning a portion of. However, colloquially it means to be of mixed race. In its older form as "hapa haole" or "half white," the term carried a negative connotation.



I am a person of color.  
I am not half- "white".  
I am not half- "Asian".  
I am a whole "other".  
☒ other

chinese, japanese, german, hungarian, english

Figure 2.2: Excerpt from *Part Asian, 100% Hapa*.

Following Du Bois and Fulbeck's examples, we need to build an analytical framework for describing and analyzing the embedded politics of digital media technologies, specifically in videogame character selection and creation systems, and how they order and construct human differences. My interest is in exposing how computational systems can be interpreted as simulations adhering to various types of raciological thinking; the technologically embedded ideologies of race, that is, the technologies of race. I'm specifically interested in how the technologic of race within digital game play inform our understanding of race. This chapter

explores how gamic race can be understood as a kind of techno-logic that reshapes and reframes raciological thinking.

Hammonds' work on computer morphing programs titled "New Technologies of Race" serves as the principle influence for this direction of inquiry into the biases of technology. Hammonds analyzes a 1993 cover article in *Time* magazine called "The New Face of America," an attempt by *Time* to address issues of immigration and racial mixing through the use of morph technology made famous by *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and Michael Jackson's "Black or White" music video. Using statistical projections of the current and future ethnic breakdown of the US, engineers created computer generated photographic faces of the mixed race Americans of the future. Even though great pains were clearly taken to make the project politically correct, the results are deeply troubled. While *Time* appeals to contemporary notions of genetic differences, and acknowledges diversity beyond the black/white binary, Hammonds notes that the categories used to stage the mixing, and the experiment's results, are reliant on antiquated logics. In complete opposition to a socially constructed notion of race that would cast racial distinction as a dubious and impossible task, Americans in *Time's* calculations are split into seven distinct groups: Middle Eastern, Italian, African, Vietnamese, Anglo-Saxon, Chinese, and Hispanic. These groups are placed on a grid, reminiscent of a Punnett square, their photographs implying that "race is embodied and, even with racial mixing, the existence of primary races is as obvious as the existence of primary colors in the Crayola crayon palette."<sup>3</sup> The results of this morphological fantasy are all surprisingly similar and quite obviously Caucasoid with light shades of brown. Hammonds reads this as a "strange logic of equivalence" that proposes an answer to problems of race, diversity, and inequality through a presentation of morphological sameness. It ignores the

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3 Hammonds, "New Technologies of Race," 118.

biological logics of race that are employed in the experiment and that undermine real racial inequalities, maintained by these very logics, through an appeal to a future where distinction is impossible.

These results cannot be attributed to the random computation of a computer program but are the product of design. Hammonds reminds us that the engineers of the program made editorial decisions when creating the “morphies,” discarding anything that seemed unnatural. The result is a “preferred or filtered composite of mixed figures with no discussion of the assumptions or implications underlying the choices.”<sup>4</sup> To this end, the results of the project removed any corporealities that might undermine or disrupt dominant notions of race, gender, and sexual difference that do not adhere to the popular imaginary or raciological fantasy. As Hammonds explains, the morphies are a product of the operations of racializing desire which projects race yet erases its complexities in regards to historical reality. These same desires, what I am calling the technologies of race, structure difference within videogames.

### **"Something racist is going on here": Glitches and Seams**

Justin.tv, one of a variety of websites that allow a person to stream audiovisual content to viewers live on the internet, originated as a platform for 24/7 mobile lifecasting by entrepreneur Justin Kan. Eventually, Kan franchised the wearable lifecasting tech he employed to a select few users, most notably Justine Ezarik of iJustine fame. By mid to late 2007, the site was opened up as a platform for streaming content. Most assumed that lifecasts (slice-of-life broadcasts by regular people) would be the most popular "shows." And this was the result, to some extent. One surprisingly popular brand of content, gamecasting, necessitated its own section and continues to

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4 Ibid.

garner significant interest. Broadcasters would point their webcams at TV screens or computer monitors, or feed the footage into the computer through capture cards, and play videogames live along with an audience of chatting viewers. By far the most popular of these gamecasts has been Justin.tv's 4 Player Podcast (4PP). As of January 2012 the 4PP Justin.tv site has over 37 million views and 155 thousand subscribers. Gamecasting, and 4PP's entertaining and humorous commentary, recreate the familiar social experience of watching a friend play a game.

While browsing 4PP's archives, I noticed a video of 4PP's Brad playing *Grand Theft Auto IV* (GTA IV) titled "Brad discovers the truth about Internet Cafes."<sup>5</sup> In this video Brad, playing as GTA IV's main character Niko Bellic, enters an internet cafe populated entirely by "heavy set black men." Talking to his viewers, Brad recognizes how curious this situation is and that some kind of glitch must have occurred.

The most striking moment of the video, and certainly its comic apex, is when Brad jokingly remarks (and I am paraphrasing a bit since the audio is garbled), "I am not quite sure but something racist is going on here." Significantly, this seemingly innocuous and funny internet video records a familiar experience to players that is often lost to the ephemeral qualities of gaming. When we play, game glitches and bugs happen; they're quite common, especially in an age of impossible development deadlines. But when they do happen, we see them as violating the integrity and unity of the experience. They're mistakes that tear the fabric of the Wizard's curtain. And since gaming is often characterized or understood as escapism, this kind of disjunction is unwelcome and disruptive.

If you've played a game within the *Grand Theft Auto* series, you know that in GTA IV the

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5 While Justin.tv does backup broadcasted video it is up to the users to choose moments they would like to isolate and archive permanently. These archives can be browsed and viewed after the actual broadcast occurred.

View video here: <http://www.justin.tv/fourplayerpodcast/b/259408907>.

computer-generated non-player characters come and go based on the geographic boundaries crossed. In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, this was even more pronounced because territories were partly defined by the gangs possessing them. Since the gangs were characterized primarily by their races (e.g. Triads, Da Nang Boys, The Ballas, Los Santos Vagos, etc.) the population algorithm was responsible for calling forth the “appropriate” racialized bodies for each territory. Within this environment, bodies and their racial significations (echoed in fashion, architecture, and so on) become the equivalent of road signs and fence posts of racially contested space. The unifying thread throughout all of the 3D versions of the GTA series is an attentiveness to class difference. Whether this manifests in gang territories or simply the neighborhood divisions of an urban space, the game rather deterministically segregates space and populates it with what the logics of the algorithm, and its programmer(s), deem as realistic bodily fidelity for that socio-geographic space. From this perspective, the bodies populating each space, which have been the focus of most scholarly critique, are visual symptoms of the concealed cause of the code. This level, concealed from direct view, is where the technologies of gameplay reside.

### **Reading Code**

Wendy Chun argues that computer interfaces and the software and hardware layers beneath them construct relations of meaning that make them “ideology machines.”<sup>6</sup> Chun sees the work of scholars working within “Software Studies,” a critical tendency that views code and algorithm as the basis of computation, as ignoring the importance of hardware. The common conflation of computer interaction with pure interface, or software, rather than recognition of the interaction between software, interface, and hardware, is frustrating to Chun and, in her view, is

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6 Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 19.

what creates the ideological relation of user to computer. Drawing on Althusser's conceptualization of ideology as a "representation of the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence," Chun makes that case that "software, or perhaps more precisely OS, offer us an imaginary relationship to our hardware" that we're conscious of yet complicit with.<sup>7</sup> We manipulate icons, such as a recycle bin, understanding that complexities are happening elsewhere yet we function comfortably within the imaginary metaphor of the desktop. Chun's work on software as ideology adds another voice to a growing critical perspective that views the technology industry's push toward less technical transparency and simplification of interfaces with some skepticism.<sup>8</sup> The concern is that programmers will become an increasingly centralized and powerful profession tasked with building the environments which we all inhabit with relative ignorance to the programmatic structures of those environments.<sup>9</sup>

But how harm is there really in not knowing how a piece of software is programmed? Don't we want computers to be accessible and easy to use? We do, of course, but the issue is in ceding too much knowledge and power to too few. In Carolyn Marvin's study of the electrification of the U.S. she demonstrates how technological innovation and proliferation is always a power struggle.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand you have the attendant myths of technological empowerment, and desire by disadvantaged populations to transform social relations, and on the other you have the interests of capital seeking to leverage the technology to further solidify existing stratification. As Marvin argues throughout *When Old Technologies Were New*, these struggles are often between those perceived as experts, or invented as such, and those that lack

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7 Althusser, qtd. in *ibid.*, 20.

8 Consider, for instance, how the rise of Apple as paradigmatic in its ease of use and simplistic OS design in the 2000s is a radical literacy shift from computer use of the 1980s and 1990s dominated by Windows and DOS-based systems that required more significant (if still limited) user fiddling. I recall spending many a night with my Dad in DOS just trying to get a computer game to load.

9 See also Tara McPherson's work, especially "US Operating Systems at Midcentury."

10 Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*.

knowledge of new technological developments.

Matthew Kirschenbaum offers a practical solution to the problem of literacy: teach students an understanding of the procedural by valuing computer language as a kind of foreign language in educational curriculum. Kirschenbaum characterizes the skills students gain from procedural literacy as a "world building" knowledge. In his experience, when a student learns the logics of computer programming she begins to better understand how virtual worlds are meticulously constructed "rhetorical and ideological spaces."<sup>11</sup>

Critical code studies, a relatively recent scholarly designation, and one with which Kirschenbaum is sometimes affiliated, is dedicated to accomplishing this push for literacy within academic scholarship and teaching. Spearheaded by Mark Marino and Jeremy Douglass, Critical Code Studies (CCS), according to Marino, "is an approach that applies critical hermeneutics to the interpretation of computer code, program architecture, and documentation within a socio-historical context."<sup>12</sup> CCS casts a wide net that looks for a vast array of work which takes code seriously as a critical object worth interpreting, and makes code's social production and use important to the act of interpretation.

There's also a movement within the Digital Humanities (DH) that advocates for the adoption of programming knowledge into the scholarly repertoire of the growing body of academics affiliating themselves with DH. At a recent conference, a respected senior DH scholar even declared that you *must* be able to code if you want to be a digital humanist. While this is a debate that continues to take place, it's clear that code has a growing significance to the humanities and to critical work of digital media. Consequently, code is increasingly being considered institutionally as a foreign language replacement. Yet the acquisition of programming

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<sup>11</sup> Kirschenbaum, "Hello Worlds."

<sup>12</sup> Marino, "Critical Code Studies."

knowledge, while similar in theory to the acquisition of a foreign language, is not quite analogous according to Timothy Morton. In response to the introduction of "computer language" into the foreign language options for UC Davis and UC Irvine students, Morton argues that such a comparative equivalence is silly because, as he puts it, "If we allow computer languages, we should allow recipes. Computer codes are specialized algorithms. So are recipes."<sup>13</sup> Ian Bogost agrees with Morton that "replacing a natural language like French with a software language like C is a mixed metaphor."<sup>14</sup> From Bogost's perspective the importance of code is in its material manifestation, in the same sense that language is about its use. Thus, focusing on computer coding ability, just like foreign language acquisition, might be an antiquated way of thinking about how students should be acquiring and using knowledge. He offers the example of his program in Georgia Tech which doesn't require students to demonstrate their ability to code (although they are more than welcome to acquire those skills), but instead Georgia Tech students must make something using computers. Hence Bogost's intervention into the debate is titled "Computers Are Systems, Not Languages."

While I would contend a bit with the separation between natural language and computer language based on the notion of operations and material consequences as embodied in the recipe example, I tend to side with Bogost's conclusion about the relative importance of code knowledge vs. procedural literacy and computer ability.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, I think Kirschenbaum and many of the scholars working under the banner of Critical Code Studies would agree, in some part, as well. Certainly knowing how to code and manipulate computer systems on a basic level are valuable skills; however, it shouldn't be the barrier of access for a scholar working in Media Studies or DH

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<sup>13</sup> Morton, "Should Computer 'Languages' Qualify..."

<sup>14</sup> Bogost, "Computers Are Systems, Not Languages."

<sup>15</sup> My disagreements are primarily from the perspective of performative theory, and the similar ways in which natural and computer languages have material effects. For more on this see chapter four.

—especially considering how growing up with computers and knowing how to manipulate them is a position of privilege. Instead, we need to be aware of how computer systems work, and to subsequently use that knowledge to critique and manipulate them as necessary in order to produce our work.

This perspective, which acknowledges that successfully critical work of computer culture is not wholly dependent on access and thorough understanding of code, is particularly important when attempting an analysis of the technological basis of race in videogames.

But even if you can read code, videogame source code is extremely valuable intellectual property. As a result, access to the code of a game like GTA IV is impossible without the purchase of expensive licenses or insider information. Few mass market games ever see an open source release, and access to open source engines or games provides limited understanding of the specificities of a particular game release.<sup>16</sup> One game which has seen an open source release, *Sim City*, lives on under the name *Micropolis*. Mark Sample has used *Micropolis* to demonstrate the value of a critical code approach in evaluating the politics of games.<sup>17</sup> Sample cites the three levels of engagement, identified by Sherry Turkle, between user and simulation: surrender, rejection, and understanding. In Sample's view, the close reading of code can add a “fourth dimension” what he terms “deconstruction.” Examining the algorithm “scan.cpp” (posted below for reference with emphasis added), Sample illustrates how crime—the variable determined by the algorithm—“is a function of population density, land value, and police stations, and a strict function at that.”<sup>18</sup>

```
for (int x = 0; x < WORLD_W; x += crimeRateMap.MAP_BLOCKSIZE) {  
    for (int y = 0; y < WORLD_H; y += crimeRateMap.MAP_BLOCKSIZE) {
```

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16 For a list of current open source releases: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_open-source\\_video\\_games](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_open-source_video_games).

17 Sample, “Criminal Code.”

18 Ibid.

```

int z = landValueMap.worldGet(x, y);
if (z > 0) {
    ++numz;
    z = 128 - z;
    z += populationDensityMap.worldGet(x, y);
    z = min(z, 300);
    z -= policeStationMap.worldGet(x, y);
    z = clamp(z, 0, 250);
    crimeRateMap.worldSet(x, y, (Byte)z);
    totz += z;
}

```

Unfortunately, given the tinkering involved in open source projects, it's difficult to tell if the code Sample is evaluating is truly the preserved code present in retail copies of *Sim City*. But what Sample shows us, similar to the perspective Kirschenbaum argues for, is how close reading of code can help us understand the procedural logics of games, even if those logics are not precisely representative of those in the released game, or if we have a full understanding of the intricacies of the programming language. Sample admits this, explicitly stating that he “couldn't code his way out of a paper bag” but that “anybody can talk about code” as long as they have “procedural literacy.”<sup>19</sup>

While this is all important work, the problem of access remains, especially for scholars like myself who are interested in popular and relatively contemporary releases. Thus to supplement code studies, we need to develop a unique brand of analysis that applies computational knowledge at the level of the interface, but with an attentiveness to what might be happening out of view. This technologic perspective that I employ reveals the coded structures of videogames like a pencil frottage reveals the textures of a leaf beneath paper.

### **Ideological Information**

According to Alexander Galloway, when players uncover procedural logics through

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

gameplay, rather than through the intense study of code that Sample engages in, they are excavating “algorithms.” In Galloway's view, “videogames deliver to the player the power relationships of electronic media firsthand” through their unique allegorization of the “control society.”<sup>20</sup> This term is drawn from Gilles Deleuze's diagnosis of contemporary computerized culture which shifts the dominant regime of power from a disciplinary model focused on containment and surveillance to a control-based model subject to logics of code, access, and protocol.<sup>21</sup> Galloway argues that games “solve the problem of political control, not by sublimating it as does the cinema, *but by making it coterminous with the entire game.*”<sup>22</sup> Through videogames, players confront the realities of life within a control society by playing with simulations that allegorize, at the algorithmic level, power. In videogames, everything is quantified and measured, strict parameters are set, and systems of menus allow manipulation and control of quantities and outcomes. The player is immersed in, and learns the functions of, this system of informatic control.

To illustrate how games are “allegories of control,” Galloway relies primarily on an analysis of *Civilization*, a landmark game which defined the turn-based strategy genre. Turn-based strategy games task the user with managing, usually from an overhead perspective, a complex set of tasks related to the development and success of an army, empire, civilization, or other multilayered organization. Unlike real-time strategy which features continuous action, turn-based strategy stops game-time between a player's key choices/moves allowing a chess-like focus on measured and precise play. Developed by Sid Meier and Bruce Shelley and debuting in 1991, *Civilization* has spawned five sequels and various offshoots like the space themed *Alpha Centauri*. The series continues to garner public and critical success today.

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20 Galloway, *Gaming*, 56

21 Deleuze, “Societies of Control.”

22 Galloway, *Gaming*, 92.

*Civilization*<sup>23</sup> is particularly interesting to Galloway because “‘protocol’ is precisely the visible, active, essential, and core ingredient” of the game.<sup>24</sup> He approaches his analysis of *Civilization* from two perspectives: the ideological and the informatic. His ideological critique points out how the game reduces the diversity within “civilizations” to monolithic entities. This representational strategy effectively “conflates a civilization with a specific national or tribal identity and ignores questions of hybridity and diaspora”<sup>25</sup> Beyond the ideological, Galloway's informatic critique examines *Civilization's* menu systems which quantify all aspects of the game forcing the player to manage quantities and information flows. To be successful, the player must be a good manager, gathering and employing knowledge of the informatic qualities of the game's various units and interactions among those units.<sup>26</sup> As he unpacks his informatic critique, Galloway, in an interesting turn, comes to the conclusion that the informatic is more significant than the ideological:

But now we are at an impasse, for the more one allegorizes informatic control in *Civilization*, the more my previous comments about ideology start to unravel. And the more one tries to pin down the ideological critique, the more one sees that such a critique is undermined by the existence of something altogether different from ideology: informatic code. So where the ideological critique succeeds, it fails. Instead of offering better clues, the ideological critique (traditional allegory) is undermined by its own revelation of the protocological critique (control allegory). In video games, at least, one trumps the other.<sup>27</sup>

While this might be read as an ejection of the political in favor of a techno-deterministic view that attributes all meaning and importance to the particularities of game form, this reading would do a disservice to the potential depths of Galloway's claim. It's not that culture/politics/ideology is no longer of importance, but that politics are reshaped in light of the

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23 Ted Friedman's (1999) essay on *Civilization* is also a significant influence for Galloway and is well worth reading.

24 Galloway, *Gaming*, 92.

25 Ibid., 98.

26 Ibid., 100.

27 Ibid., 102.

kinds of digital and networked technologies of which videogames are now a key representative.

Unfortunately, Galloway stops just short of marrying the informatic and ideological perspectives leaving us instead with his gesture toward future critique that would acknowledge how the ideological has been embedded within the informatic. Videogames are “*enacted metaphors*” of informatic control certainly, but the implications of that metaphor can also be interpreted as firmly attached to particular types of raciological thinking.<sup>28</sup> It's this perspective which I am interested in developing, an analytical approach to games that reads them, and their character creation tools, allegorithmically. By doing so we can uncover a relatively consistent logic that's simultaneously informatic in its adherence to standardized flexibility and variation, as well as ideological insofar as many videogames continue to privilege whiteness. Thus the first step in analyzing the technologies of videogames requires the adoption of a perspective that sees gameplay as equally informatic and ideological. But to develop this perspective, one needs to first go beyond the obfuscations of representational critique which can dominate progressive discourse by solely focusing on issues of diversity.

### **The Trap of Representation**

When we evaluate race in games, character creation seems to draw most of our focus. And there's good reason for this: character creation appears to facilitate the kind of bodily manipulation promised by digital technologies during the mythic imaginings of the early internet. Cameron Bailey's "Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace," one of the first articles to theorize the racially expressive possibilities for cyberspace (and a good representation of this kind of claim), views networked computation as an opportunity to expand the capabilities of the body.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 105.

Sherry Turkle's equally influential work *Life on the Screen* explored the internet as a site to expose the constructed nature of gender. As a result of this strain of research in the 1990s, and a culture eager to defuse issues of race, there has been a strong investment in critiquing character interfaces within videogames, and struggling over appropriate representations of race. In some way we've been desiring a tool for identity play that lives up to the promise of the cybertopias of late 20<sup>th</sup> century sci-fi.

Brad McQuaid, co-designer of *EverQuest*, one of the first successful MMORPGs, and later CEO of Sigil Games that developed the commercial flop *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*, is one of the designers attempting to deliver on this promise. The comments below are a rare insight into the motivations of the videogame industry and are worth quoting at length:

*Vanguard* is about escapism, about being able to enter a virtual world and to leave the real world behind to a degree. To that end, we feel that one's real world financial status should have no bearing on who they are or what they have access to in-game. Indeed, one of the core principles in games like *Vanguard* is that if you see someone and the items they've acquired, you should ideally be able to assume that the person earned them in-game. This way, it really doesn't matter who you are in real life - your financial status, your race, your gender, your age, your location, etc. should all be irrelevant. And I think this is very important. Virtual worlds of this sort break down all sorts of prejudices and preconceptions that exist in the real world, and I think this is not only a good thing, but an exciting thing. Online relationships have proven to often be as real as traditional relationships.

Now, clearly, this is an ideal - a goal. It is probably not completely achievable, and no matter how hard we fight to keep the world of *Vanguard* free from real world influence, that influence will still be present. But, as with many things in life, just because an ideal cannot be totally achievable doesn't invalidate the ideal, nor mean we should just give up and accept 'fate' so to speak.<sup>29</sup>

The escapist rhetoric of this passage, and its attendant notion of leaving the body behind as the player rematerializes in gamespace, are similar to the cyber-utopias and dystopias of futurist science fiction which characterized cyberspace as a place of disembodiment and refuge in the 1980s and 90s: the "meat" of the *Neuromancer* universe. Yet this interview was conducted in

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29 Hayot and Wesp, "Interview with Brad McQuaid."

2004 and 2005. Here we see how McQuaid, and it is safe to assume many other designers, continue to see virtual worlds as a refuge from political stresses in favor of a world of ideal consumption and progress where you can be anyone you want to be, and achieve any goal you set out for yourself. McQuaid's rhetoric is startlingly similar to calls of consumer empowerment and sovereignty within globalized free markets and ubiquitous in brand slogans like Nintendo's "Now you're playing with power" or Burger King's "Have it your way." McQuaid's statements, while well intentioned, pose problems. Perhaps most obviously, the distinction that is upheld in between the world of *Vanguard* and the "real world" is untenable. He relies on a view that we are, or can be, free from social differences, particularly class, within gamespace—as if access to a game like *Vanguard* does not require a particularly advantaged class status to begin with.

Fortunately, criticism has called attention to these issues. Recognition of inequities in both technology use and in representation have shifted the contemporary attitude towards malleable identity and progressive signification through race and gender play on the internet from optimistic to skeptical. Lisa Nakamura's work has been transformative in this regard. In her study of telecommunications advertisements "'Where Do You Want to Go Today?': Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet and Transnationality," Nakamura critiques myths of internet freedom. Rather than providing the equitable slippage of global identity ostensibly communicated in ads for internet access featuring the meeting of people across the globe, Nakamura describes how the ads actually show something very different that cuts across political lines. We're faced with Nakamura's key notion of identity tourism: greater freedom of movement, both geographic and cybernetic, for the privileged, and deeper othering and exoticization for the underprivileged. It's not difficult to see the connection between the fantasy that telecoms sell in the advertisements Nakamura critiques, and the fantasy worlds of MMORPGs that are disproportionately played, in a North American

and European context, by whites.<sup>30</sup>

Using the restrictive choices available to users of MUDs and chat rooms, Nakamura characterized online identity as primarily reinforcing stereotypes. After the rise of videogame studies, and technical advances in computer graphics, animation and modeling, Nakamura revised her original claims. In her follow-up monograph *Digitizing Race*, Nakamura summarizes this change in position: "While in *Cyberetypes* I focused on the constraints inherent in primarily textual interfaces that reified racial categories, in this work I locate the Internet as a privileged and extremely rich site for the creation and distribution of hegemonic and counterhegemonic visual images of racialized bodies."<sup>31</sup>

Christopher Douglas has articulated a similar sentiment, likening the paradigmatic *World of Warcraft* to a neoliberal model of multicultural representation. As he states, the "obvious point" of "the many racial possibilities for characters in *World of Warcraft*" is the "[creation of] consumer choice."<sup>32</sup> This is obvious because, as stated above, designers such as McQuaid are actively manufacturing worlds with this design mandate. But as Douglas goes on to note, neoliberalism is a dangerous ideology for games to adhere to:

But what such market choices depend on is the sense that races are real entities, sources of actual, natural difference. In this sense, the liberal capitalist empathy experiment of becoming another race may have the consequence of naturalizing socially-constructed races. What begins as a design choice to keep players coming back unintentionally entails our training in a conceptual model of group difference as natural and innate rather than historical and environmental.<sup>33</sup>

What Douglas is getting at in his critique is central to the argument being put forth here. Rather than laboring over the stereotypical representations of races put forth in the game (which he does mention briefly), Douglas focuses on the "logic" of WOW's representational schema

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30 For example, 87.62% of *EverQuest 2* players surveyed by Williams, Yee, and Caplan in "Who Plays, how much, and why?" were White.

31 Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 13.

32 Douglas, "Multiculturalism in *World of Warcraft*."

33 Ibid.

which validates the organization of bodies by race and conflates racial and cultural differences. In order to sufficiently evaluate videogames we must adopt this perspective which does not float comfortably within traditional layers of visibility, but plunges into the depths of ideological construction which organize and distribute more subtle, but nonetheless coherent perspectives on racial difference. In Douglas's analysis, this results in an analytic that is equally attentive to the informatic aspects of culture, such as the statistical advantages afforded to particular races, as it is to what races look like and represent ideologically. Douglas demonstrates this perspective in a debate with Ducheneaut, et. al. regarding race-specific advantages in WOW. While Ducheneaut, et. al. believe that the relatively minor changes among base statistics of different races (for instance, the ability for Undead players to breathe longer underwater) are of little significance, Douglas correctly points out that "these slight differences matter to players."<sup>34</sup> As has often been pointed out, gaming, in some sense, is about intuiting and manipulating algorithmic structures which manifest in the operations of the game. Because of this, tiny advantages have great impact, and these advantages and operations that are intuited hold a lot of meaning both for the players and for game studies. It's these coded differences, attached to the meaning of race in games, that render an ideological perspective. Ostensibly antiquated notions of biological racial difference are re-inscribed algorithmically.

From my perspective, if we are to adequately describe and transform how race is communicated in videogames, we need to focus our attention on how representation is structured, and the politics of production. Without this eye to the underlying causes of inequities in representation, our critiques of stereotype, or calls for multi-racial/ethnic/cultural equity will be severely limited in effect.

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34 Ibid.

However, many fans and academics, perhaps still susceptible to the cyber-utopian promise, focus the bulk of their attention on what bodies look like and what options are available. The controversy on the popular feminist videogame blog The Border House over the limited options of character creation in a videogame is characteristic of battles being fought over the possibilities available to users in programmed environments. The debate started with a comment posted on the official discussion forum for the then yet to be released *Dragon Age II*:

Do we know if DA2 will have a better range of racial diversity? I was dissapointed [sic] that Dragon Age, a game that seem [sic] to use elves as an allegory for black slavery and the treatment of native Americans lacks any black or asian people. That and it's a fictional fantasy world that's not based on anywhere specific so it just seems thoughtless to the point of discriminaton (sic) to not include other ethnicities. Not to mention that the character creator doesn't really let you make a black or asian character with its messed up colour settings. Will this be changed for DA2?<sup>35</sup>

Tami Baribeau, who posts on The Border House as Cuppycake, begins her post, which provides an overview of the ensuing debate on BioWare's forums, with the passage above. Baribeau clearly aligns herself with the poster's sentiments and Baribeau, the original poster, and the legacy of The Border House's advocacy for diversity are correct—it is shameful that BioWare adheres to the disturbing privileging of whiteness characteristic of most high fantasy. Yet the discussion that Baribeau summarizes, and which generated a flood posts before being locked by BioWare admins, while commendable in both the attention it caused and in its ethics, is also representative of the pitfalls of representational critiques in media culture. In order to engage in critique of character creation, progressives appeal to the neoliberal structures of market choice determined by the logics of videogames which reduce differences of all kinds to pure style. The results of critique are beholden to market forces, and existing biases of game production, as opposed to ethics and politics. What we end up getting from this push and pull exchange are a few more skin colors, rather than a game which disrupts the integrity of fixed racial difference

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35 Baribeau, "BioWare on Racial Diversity."

entirely.

BioWare representative Stanley Woo's responses reveal the powerful capitalistic logic of market demand and profit which truly drive game makers. Woo argues that making games fair in representation is a “slippery slope” because there's no end to groups who would want to be represented.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in his estimation, when designers decided on what races are included in a game they should depend on the setting for guidance. (As if the setting is not itself selected, or as if geography, however fantastical, provides a clear instruction manual for racial difference.) He explains: “We've got European concepts pretty well covered, but perhaps you also want Asian to be represented? That might work, but is there an Asian equivalent in the *Dragon Age* setting?”<sup>37</sup> Woo defends the limited options of identification via an appeal to a Eurocentric setting that remains peculiarly beyond criticism—as if it exists independent of design manipulation, intention, and the pitfalls of ideology. Equally problematic in Woo's response is his appeal to the market as the ultimate arbiter of equity in representation. Continuing from his “slippery slope” line of thinking, Woo claims that the solution from a design perspective is to “appeal to a large group of people (maybe not 'the largest' or 'as many as possible') and hope for the best.”<sup>38</sup>

The discussion in this thread, and Woo's perspective as a representative of BioWare, provide a valuable lesson to progressives fighting for more equitable games. If we're to simply argue for the increase in options of visualization for various underrepresented groups of people, while sometimes appeased, we'll find our demands consistently disrupted by the protected privileging of whiteness present in the very ideological structures of game development. The “setting” of the *Dragon Age* universe, one which, like most high fantasy, fashions the world in the image of medieval Europe, facilitates an exclusion of difference which allows developers to

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36 “Lack of racial diversity.”

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

protect logics of white privilege.

And when our demands are met, they are done from the perspective of market demand, i.e. who is the “large group of people” with the most consumptive power. As a result we're left with empty gestures to diversity already familiar in more mature media forms such as TV and film. Robyn Wiegman expertly diagnoses the contemporary difficulty of fighting for racial equity within and through a regime of visibility that continues to privilege whiteness and cast racial difference as deviations. She explains how “in the frantic move toward representational integration, in both popular culture and the literary canon, the question of political power has been routinely displaced as a vapid fetishization of the visible has emerged to take its place.”<sup>39</sup> As a result “political equity” has been understood as “coterminous with representational presence, thereby undermining political analyses that pivot on the exclusion, silence, or invisibility of various groups and their histories.”<sup>40</sup> When we focus our on energies on, for example, a more diverse character creation system in *Dragon Age II*, we simultaneously disclose the possibility of analysis of how race is displaced and foreclosed through means beyond the explicitly representational.

Thus Wiegman's perspective is still relevant, but, in light of the particularities of videogames, we must modify her perspective. Racial difference, and its potential disruption of white supremacy and dominant politics, continues to be pacified under a logic of representational equity. BioWare prides itself on detailed character creation, and user dissension is met with small conciliatory gestures, but never a full scale revision of the inherent logics of the technologies. It's the game systems themselves which need to be altered and which facilitate the exclusion and silencing of racial difference Wiegman critiques in 20<sup>th</sup> century visibility. In games we must be

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39 Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 116.

40 Ibid., 117.

simultaneously mindful of traditional forms of representational management of difference as well as the less understood technological means.

Consequently, I think we need to design a critical tendency that does not just call for more representation because these representations will still fall into the system of fantasy, sporting culture, or whatever dominant ideological frame is already in place, not to mention the inherent hegemonic tendencies of Wiegman's "integrationist aesthetic." What we need is a critique of the logic and ideology of videogame systems that is equally versed in critical race perspectives as it is in the technologies of gamic racef. But beyond theory we need to establish a new regime of signification that does not comfortably fit in to the current *Dungeons and Dragons* infused paradigm obsessed with biological notions of difference.

### **A History of Character Creation**

While character creation systems have not been around for all of videogame history, avatars have. Much like *Monopoly's* familiar metal tokens, videogames invite players to assume the form of a digitized thimble, shoe, or martial artist. Arguably the first videogame, *Spacewar!*, featured simplistic graphical player proxy in the form of a triangle. Lacking the capabilities to render immersive and realistic 3D environments prevalent in first-person and third-person games of the 1990s and on, early games relied on abstract avatarial representations embodied in the triangular player-controlled spaceship of *Spacewar!* and Atari era through to the 2D sprites and raster graphics common in the mid 1980s to mid 1990s. Over the decades the geometric Pac-Man yields to the personable Mario then to buxom Lara Croft and the glistening and austere Master Chief. In just 50 years, videogame technologies have been continually and profoundly restructured, presenting designers and players with entirely new platforms, and hence more

advanced avatars. Responding to Tom Bissell's comment that the game industry has gone from "petroglyphic rock art to the Sistine Chapel in twenty years," Peter Molyneux, iconic game designer and videogame evangelist extraordinaire points out that in the last two decades characters have advanced from "sixteen-by-sixteen dots" to "daring to suggest that we can represent the human face," and all due to technology that the industry itself invented.<sup>41</sup> This is unprecedented. So what keeps development going at this extraordinary breakneck pace? According to Molyneux, "Because [the videogame industry] has this dream that one day it's going to be real."<sup>42</sup> Molyneux's utopian enthusiasm, not to mention his clean philosophical separation between games and reality, is characteristic of the industry at large (realism is without question a primary goal of AAA blockbuster titles), and certainly a section of the player base is also drawn to graphical prowess. There's also an assumption that players find greater expression, and more fulfilling gaming experiences, in avatars whose bodies near ever closer to realistic shape and gesture. But should this be the goal? Is it even plausible?

Certainly games can get better at visualizing bodies because they have already made such great strides. Even if Bissell's cave art to Sistine Chapel leap is a bit extreme, there's no doubting how impressive modern game bodies are. But even so, they bear the marks of the infamous uncanny valley, the now over-referenced interstitial period in the rendering of human forms residing in the developmental space between inferior and perfect replication. This not-quite-there stage elicits a disturbing response when, for instance, a character in a videogame looks convincingly like its real world counterpart in every way except its lifeless eyes. Those dead eyes jolt us out of the siren's trance of technology quickly revealing the digital body as other. Something similar happens with avatars in games, not just because of graphical capability, but

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41 Bissell, *Extra Lives*, 200-201.

42 Ibid., 201.

because they are never quite what we want them to be. They are always a stand-in. In this sense, the notion of a “realistic” videogame is just as problematic as realist cinema which tells the “truth” through the lens of a camera and high production value. The real is brought to bear by shutter speeds and film stock, or high resolution textures and motion capture.

Along with improvements in graphics, videogames have sought immersiveness through variety and choice. For many early games this meant choosing between preset characters like Mario, Luigi, Peach, or Toad in *Super Mario Bros. 2*. But at least as far back as the early to mid 1980s games featured customizable characters. One of these games, perhaps the first game with character creation, *The Black Onyx*, was created by Henk Rogers for the Japanese market and PC-88 computer system. It also has the honor of being recognized as the first turn based roleplaying game, a genre that exploded in popular in Japan subsequently with the Final Fantasy series. *The Black Onyx* features a rudimentary version of the kind of character creation system featured in today's most advanced games like *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* or *Madden 12*. In *The Black Onyx* customization is limited to inputting a name, choosing a head with hairstyle from fifty presets, and a clothed body from five choices. These selections are then fused together (Figure 2.3). Modern games, however, benefit from dynamic 3D modeling which enables the player to fashion relatively unique avatars given the amount of options, detail, and potential combinations. Instead of pre-built characters, these systems present the player with a menu breaking down a character into a set of characteristics (hair color, height, class, race, etc.) and attributes (intelligence, agility, tackling) each with their own options (short, medium, tall) and, in many cases, sliding scales which alter size, shape, and color in real-time and along a massive scale of variation. The options available make a systems either aesthetic or functional/statistical in nature, or a combination of the two. For instance, a virtual world based on sociality like *Second Life* allows only aesthetic

choices while the role-playing game *Skyrim* has both functional and aesthetic modification allowing a player to modify her character's abilities and appearance.



Figure 2.3: Creating a character in *The Black Onyx*.

*The Black Onyx* is heavily influenced by tabletop role-playing, the primary precursor to character creation systems. As opposed to *Monopoly's* arbitrary choice of token, much of the fun of *Dungeons & Dragons* is in selecting and designing a character. The *Dungeons & Dragons* 1<sup>st</sup> edition character sheet—which along with a set of dice and some reference books are the pen and

paper equivalent of the videogame character creation interface—breaks a character down into a set of attributes and characteristics that have become the basis for role-playing videogames: class, level, strength, hit points, weapon type, etc. What the character looks like, however, is left up to player description and not listed on the character sheet. Videogames made these visual details explicit, even paramount.

Videogames were not the only means of online interaction that featured character creation, however. Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), text and server based multi-user virtual environments popular in the 80s, are the precursors to modern Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games like *World of Warcraft* and the multiplayer evolution of text adventures like *Zork I*. Some MUDs allow players to select a gender, race, class, etc. based on the type of MUD and setting. MUDs focused on socialization or roleplaying also often ask players to describe their characters. This information is then available to other players through text commands. The mystery and openness of text-based character creation had many in the early days of MUDs viewing them optimistically. For example, Sherry Turkle's foundational *Life on Screen* considered how MUDs might facilitate a critical examination of the social construction of gender, and allow people to experiment with gender identity. But as Lisa Nakamura's study of orientalism in MUDs later revealed, progressive political interaction and identity performance were not inherent to text-based environments; MUDs and chat rooms could just as easily result in stereotypical and racist discourses.<sup>43</sup>

The graphical interfaces used in videogames remove the relatively open-ended nature of text-based character description, and introduce the far more pronounced tensions attached to the limitations of visual avatars. This is not to say users of MUDs are not working within restrictive

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43 Nakamura, *Cybertypes*.

systems; they are. Rather textual characterization provides variation limited only by the human imagination while visual character creation is constrained by production budgets and the labor time of artists and modelers. It's these constraints and the associated design choices made within them that necessitate an ideological analysis of their cultural logics. Drawing on T.L. Taylor's description of avatars as "intentional bodies" which "reflect the intentions (or lack thereof) of game designers," Celia Pearce explores the fascinating bind players find themselves in when relying on these bodies as expressive apparatuses.<sup>44</sup> Far from ideal platforms for democratized and free performance, the aesthetic and functional options of the avatar, what Pearce calls "the avatar kit," "dictate the forms of expression that occur."<sup>45</sup> Consequently, player communities push back against what they deem are exclusionary or oppressive systems of creation. Increasingly these debates have focused on issues of race and gender equity such as the fan outcry about a lack of skin tone options on the official forums for BioWare's then upcoming game *Dragon Age II*.<sup>46</sup> While the fans' critique did elicit a response from BioWare representatives, no changes were made. This is disappointing, but this case demonstrates an awareness within the fan community of the technologies of race in videogames, and an investment in progressive change.

### **Avatars and the Logics of Caricature**

Firmly informatic and ideological, and set within a clear line of descent from tabletop roleplaying and high fantasy, character creation systems engage in a boundary struggle over what it means to be human and other. By making available a set of options with which the human form can extend, each videogame presents the user with a perspective on what it means to be apprehended visually as human. And given the limitations of these systems, both technically and

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<sup>44</sup> Pearce, *Communities at Play*, 111.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Baribeau, "Bioware on Racial Diversity."

narratively, they are severely deterministic.

Some games are a bit more playful within these boundaries, however. I recall a slightly horrified friend explaining to me how he once spied his young cousins playing *Saints Row 2*. The avatar they created, an overweight black woman dressed in only her underwear, was running from the cops and dodging the burning wreckage of cars. My initial reaction was to share his concern with middle class white kids delighting in their creation of a cartoon stereotype familiarly bridging the gap between the Mammy archetype and modern sexist, classist, and racist constructions of the poor, overweight, and boisterous Black woman. However, some time later I got beyond the offensive stereotype and marveled at the fact such an avatar was even possible. While games often wish to dazzle the user with character visualization possibilities and systems of creation that are increasingly elaborate, the results are generally frustratingly restrictive to the point where being overweight, not to mention dark-skinned (beyond the usual fair shades of brown), is challenging. Yet whatever hopefulness might be gained from this example is at least partially undermined by the avatar's cartoonishness. We must question why an overweight, dark-skinned woman makes sense (from the perspective of the game industry) within the logic of *Saints Row 2* rather than in, for instance, a serious sci-fi roleplaying game like *Mass Effect*. Within the context of *Saints Row 2's* cartoonish silliness and popular culture referentiality (i.e. the infamous neon green bikini from the film *Borat* is an available costume) an overweight black woman is a Mammy archetype and thus one of the foundational characters of American popular culture. *Saints Row 2's* greater representational diversity presents a familiar quandary. No matter how many options are made available to the player, the system is still limited, and those limitations, as well as the options afforded, are chosen and painstakingly modeled. We're always left with an approximation. We manufacture stereotype.

It's increasingly important to think through the implications of character creation given that social networking is one of the key innovations of the current console cycle. For the first half of this console generation, Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3 were playing catch up, copying some of Nintendo Wii's more profitable innovations. One of these, Miis, allowed Nintendo Wii owners to create simple cartoonish versions of themselves and their friends, as well as celebrities and whatever else might be of interest. These Miis then populate games and can be shared. Microsoft followed Nintendo's example with the introduction of avatars in a major software update for the system on November 19, 2008. A month later Sony released Home, a virtual world built into its PlayStation network which allowed users to create more realistically styled avatars (Figure 2.4).

With little experimentation it becomes readily apparent which character creation system has the most and least amount of options. Nintendo's Mii system, in all its simplicity, allows for a fascinating and truly diverse range of possible creations.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, Microsoft's avatars, while attempting a Mii aesthetic, are painfully limited and prescribed. Sony's Home resides somewhere in between.

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<sup>47</sup> Miis are so versatile that many players have become virtual artisans, developing and showcasing their creations (most often famous celebrities and characters from popular culture) on the Wii's own "Mii Channel" as well as dozens of websites. Browse this channel or one of these websites and you'll quickly be impressed by the accuracy of the Miis and the ease with which they can be recognized. My favorite technique employed by the Mii artisans forces them to actively violate the planned use of certain features, combining them in strange ways to create new patterns. These bastardized amalgamations then take shape to form inhuman signifiers, for instance, the lines and shapes on Spiderman's mask.



Figure 2.4: Sony Home avatar, Microsoft Xbox Live avatar, and Nintendo Mii (from left to right).

Each of these services are representative of a logic of caricature that runs parallel with the history of technologically enabled racial differentiation. Each visual technology, from illustration and printmaking to photography and film, has been leveraged to forward an oppressive and manipulative regime of visualization that served or serves to justify a naturalized order of difference. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, subhumans were marked with monstrous and often black bodies in order to legitimize slavery and colonialism. As Michael D. Harris explains, while “slavery of some sort had been a continual part of human history for thousands of years...it was only in the face of organized opposition that slave owners constructed a series of formal arguments to justify it.”<sup>48</sup> The technology of race, enabled through elaborate caricature that equated non-white others to apes and other aberrant forms, established a “perceived difference of black people” both “physically and culturally” that explained away, in a perverse sense, the gross injustices and horror of slavery.<sup>49</sup>

Racist science worked to solidify the connections between non-white peoples and apes,

<sup>48</sup> Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

and popular media supplemented these claims through minstrel performances, illustration, film, and photography. The results of these ideologically corrupted falsities were charts of equivalence (in any number of media, styles, or forms) that often staged the Great Chain of Being in miniature. These hierarchies presented white Anglo men at the apex of intellectual and moral development, with blacks occupying the middle, and apes at the bottom. In order to establish these relationships as natural, they relied on clever manipulation of caricature within the various visualizations.

Black bodies were shown to have extended jaws, sloped foreheads, large teeth, broad noses, and bulging eyes. Often, the apes and whites were equally exaggerated with ape features being an extreme version of those thought to embody blackness, while whites were aligned with classical Greek sculpture.<sup>50</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, bodies were understood to visually affirm a host of internal qualities both biological and moral. Michel Foucault's genealogy of the medical gaze demonstrates how this racist perspective had its roots in the demystification of disease which was henceforth rendered "legible," no longer a corrupting "metaphysic of evil" but "open without remainder to the sovereign dissection of language and of the gaze."<sup>51</sup> For doctors, the body had become a text of networked signifiers that were read and interpreted, generating a bodily meaning that hitherto had been relegated to mystery. The body was legible as "a set of forms and deformations, figures, and accidents and of displaced, destroyed, or modified elements bound together in sequence according to a geography that [could] be followed step by step."<sup>52</sup> Key to this shift in diagnosis and medical practice was a switch in the 18<sup>th</sup> century from treatment

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50 Josiah Clark Nott and George R. Gliddon's 1857 book *Indigenous Races of the Earth* uses an illustration of the Apollo Belvidere sculpture's head as an example of Greek, and by extension Caucasian, physical features. The Apollo Belvidere is placed above illustrations of a "Negro" and "Young chimpanzee" effectively creating a hierarchy of development meant to be affirmed through visual differences.

51 Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 196.

52 Ibid., 136.

of symptoms to the discovery and negation of deep-seated internal causes at the organ level.<sup>53</sup> It's this way of thinking about the body that then informed both racist understandings of non-white bodies as registering deeper inadequacies or corruptions, and the corresponding visualizations which exaggerated features best thought to register these differences.

The mapping and reading of bumps on the skull practiced through the pseudo-scientific medical practice of phrenology serves as the ideal metonym for this perceptual regime. Bodies were a kind of braille. Racial caricature mapped faces according to this set of equivalences between physical features and, most commonly, inner corruptions and deficiencies. Derogatory features which were understood to define and shape the inner essence of human beings were emphasized.

These techniques of representational caricature continue far beyond the Atlantic slave trade. Few examples are as overt as the war of racialized propaganda waged between the United States and Japan during World War II. Just as whites across the globe were invested in the creation of the Negro as an exploitable and expendable laboring body for various capitalistic projects, the American and Japanese governments manufactured and circulated racially derogatory images amongst soldiers in training materials and various instructive notices. It was certainly not the first time stereotypical racial caricature had been used during war and not the last, but the images generated are some of the most illustrative given their clear discursive engagement and cartoonish appearance.

“How to Spot a Jap,” a section of *The Pocket Guide to China* issued by the U.S. Army in 1942 to American soldiers abroad, is a shocking and shameful example of state sponsored racism (Figure 2.5). Illustrated by cartoonist Milton Caniff, “How to Spot a Jap” instructs soldiers on

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53 Ibid., 122.

how to tell the difference between Japanese people and “oriental allies.”<sup>54</sup> The criteria that is covered includes skin color, body shape, foot shape, and gait, as well as a characteristic “hiss” when English is spoken, and a section detailing the various hiding spots within the traditional senninbari-haramaki, or, “thousand stitch belt.”<sup>55</sup>

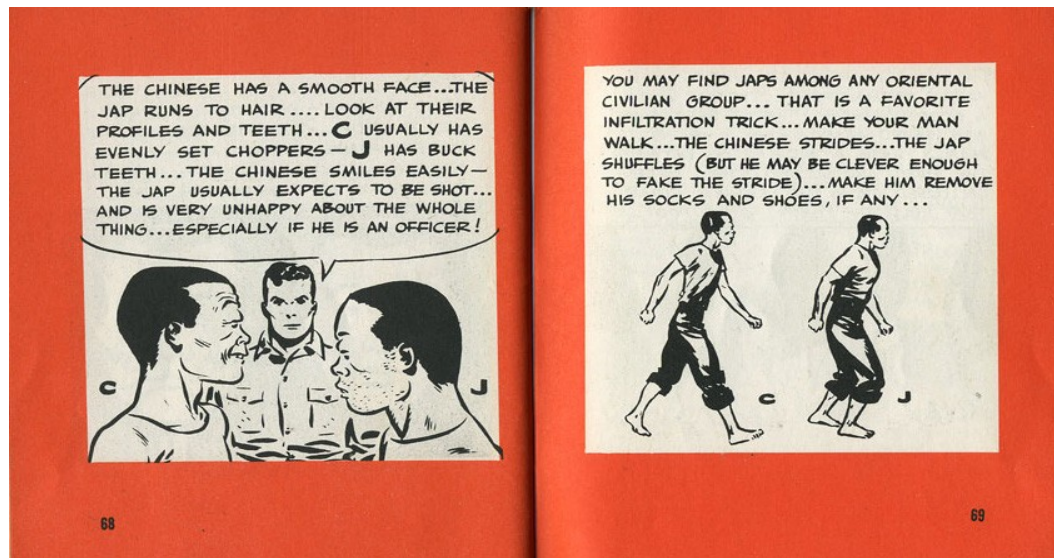


Figure 2.5: Excerpt from “How to Spot a Jap.”

A year prior, *Life* magazine ran a startlingly similar story, “How To Tell Japs From The Chinese,” along with a set of annotated images (Figure 2.6). Rather than using cartoons, *Life* deployed photographs of Chinese and Japanese men, including General Hideki Tojo. The conclusions, however, are very similar. In the interest of staving unwarranted and misdirected attacks on Chinese immigrants and nationals, the article provides readers with annotated

<sup>54</sup> Scans of this guide are available at: <http://www.ep.tc/howtospotajap/index.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Senninbari are traditional Shinto cloth adornments, often worn as belts, which were intended to confer upon the bearer courage, luck, and protection. They are decorated with 1000 stitches, each stitch to be made by a different woman, and usually overseen but a soldier's mother, sister, or wife. They were popular gifts during WWII, but originated in the Sino-Japanese War from 1894-5.

comparisons of the faces of General Tojo and Ong Wen-hao, a Chinese “public servant” as well as the body types of three northern Chinese men and two Japanese admirals. The article admits that creating and differentiating racial types has become increasingly difficult given the findings of physical anthropologists, “devoted debunkers of racial myths,” who have measured the differences between the two groups in millimeters. Yet, there is hope and a set of features is identified that can aid westerners in perceiving these differences in order to direct their scorn at the correct person(s).

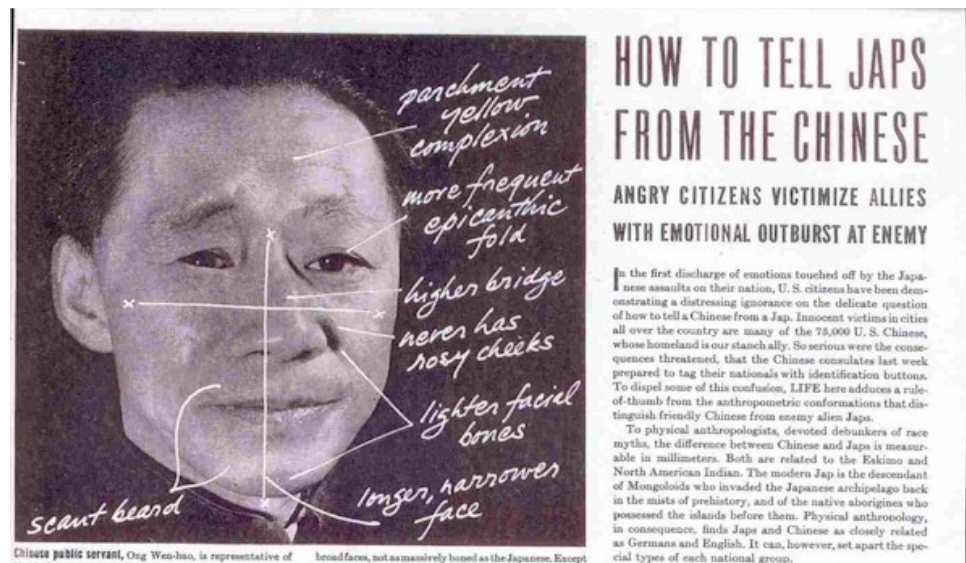


Figure 2.6: Excerpt from “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese.”

Even in the face of scientific evidence that eroded the notion of biological race, “How To Tell Japs From The Chinese” and “How to Spot a Jap” continued to offer a picture of human difference that was physically quantifiable and readable, and was endorsed by the patriotic mission of just punishment for evils endemic to Japaneseness. Similar to the Nazi characterization of Jews as an imperfect and immoral strain of human development, American

propaganda sought to dehumanize the Japanese.<sup>56</sup> The fascinating difference is in the simultaneous use and denial of science to both confirm the dissolution of race as a reliable category of differentiation, and to reinforce those differences. This schizophrenia is the natural state of mind of racism.

In order to tread this tenuous line, caricature was deployed to affirm racist beliefs. Since the *Life* article used photographs, the hand drawn annotations of the subject's faces served as the exaggeration and affirmation of features that, without such annotation, explain nothing. They elaborate and excavate a truth that does not exist except in the act of excavation. By placing the two faces next to each other, a difference can appear in the gap between the faces. This difference, which occurs whenever any two faces are compared, is reducible simply to the fact of difference and variation, but in the politicized context of the article a raciological truth is generated.

In “How to Spot a Jap” these differences are much easier to cultivate. Caniff's cartoons remove any uncertainties allowing a racist imaginary to be fully realized. The fantasy of easily distinguished difference is achieved, ejecting the anxiety over the project of racial taxonomy. And by focusing on the visual, war-time racist propaganda allayed the national consciousness of its guilt over raciological thinking. If we obsess over physical differences, which are admittedly difficult to perceive, we do not question the “truth” of the deep-seated ethnic differences which give credence to the violence of warfare. Here, in these photos, we see the biological race dissolve and national ethnic difference arise. *Sure, Japanese and Chinese are difficult to distinguish physically, but the Japanese are still the Japanese.* Marking this transition, the final instructional panel of “How to Spot a Jap,” prior to the summary, focuses on the senninburi, a

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<sup>56</sup> For more on the war of racialized propaganda in the Pacific War, see John W. Dower's *War Without Mercy*. One of Dower's central claims is that American racist propaganda would portray the Japanese as subhuman, while Japanese propaganda focused more on elevating Japanese culture as superior.

cultural artifact rather than a physical feature.

Taking this detour through racial caricature in WWII propaganda builds us a critical lens with which to understand the appeal of avatar creation within the online networks of videogame consoles. In particular, Nintendo's Mii system relies heavily on cartoonish facial features in order to facilitate perception. The complexities of a face must be reduced to a few key qualities that can be elaborated and used as a symbolic summary of a face. The range of variation that every face contains is smoothed out and rendered down into that which can be distinguished and stereotyped. The large nose or bushy brow that is, in the everyday, just one minor component of a presentation of self, becomes the key piece that defines the whole within a system of caricature. The bushy brow, even in its avatarial disproportion, *is* the person and, in turn, reflects back on the person. The caricature repopulates the face. It goes without saying that Miis are not a racist system of representation; rather, they extrapolate the same logics of facility and recognition employed throughout the history of racist visual culture. The reason Miis work so well is the same reason white supremacists in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century turned to caricature and popular culture to forward their ideologies. The familiar is isolated, exaggerated, recontextualized, and, ultimately, made into a foundational myth. The cartoon is both fiction and the hidden truth that is simultaneously created and uncovered by that fiction.

But if we accept that Miis or other console-based social avatars are forms of caricature, what precisely is their particular connection to *racial* caricature? Certainly all forms of caricature, such as the ubiquitous theme park cartoonist, utilize the same basic set of representational logics. However, what's intriguing about the use of caricature throughout videogame console-based social networking is how caricature has risen to prominence in the absence of the explicit racial categorization present in many videogame character creation systems. In lieu of explicit racial

choices like “Orc” or “Caucasian,” Miis, for instance, rely on a compensatory logic of physical stereotype. The apparatus of character creation which is so often is used as an induction into the cultural taxonomy of the gameworld, is refashioned as an engine of playful reflexive stereotype of a kind most often associated with race.

My students often discover this process of self-making by analyzing social networks not tied to videogame consoles. In some of my courses, I have students semiotically critique their Facebook or MySpace profile, or, if they do not have one, to critique the process of creating one. The goal is to have them identify and evaluate the various signs of identity selected and composed via a social network profile, e.g. photo selection, status updates, hobbies, etc., and then to encourage the students to vocalize precisely how they position themselves semiotically online, and to what end they do so. Inevitably the majority of students avoid any substantive self-critique. It's difficult for us to acknowledge our own prideful and, at times, deceptive construction of online persona.

Creating a Microsoft avatar of oneself is the reflexive inverse of a Facebook profile. The affective and aesthetic relationship between the users and system of avatar creation resonate, however subtly, with the history of racism, caricature, and double consciousness. Rather than filtering all the components of identity down to a core set of value we wish to advertise to our friends and associates, the avatar, as a visual caricature, requires us to filter our identity through a reductive lens of stereotype. We, using the restricted set of options available, render ourselves recognizable to others visually. Our notion of self becomes our notion of self as seen by others. No longer do we focus on selecting the photo that looks best, but the facial features that our friends are most likely to recognize as “Tanner's crooked mouth” or “Maria's hips.” There are exceptions of course. Many of my friends eschew the prescriptive nature of the process, creating

various monstrous forms of themselves that mock the choices available.

And the choices, especially within Microsoft's avatar system, are frustrating. Sitting halfway between the cartoonishness of Miis and the extensive customizability of PlayStation's Home, Microsoft avatars provide the user with limited default options. The fashion, hair styles, and facial features maintain a range of representation that rests comfortably within the whitewashed living rooms and hip urban lofts of Microsoft's distinctive Xbox advertisement aesthetic. Options deviating from this norm appear as token gestures. A glance at any of the short video ads deployed alongside the Kinect system, which was dedicated to broadening Xbox 360's user base beyond the white male "hardcore gamer," confirms this target demographic (Figure 2.7). In these ads, diversity equates to simple visual presence of non-white bodies; moreover, these remain firmly fixed within a hegemonic paradigm of white middle class professional identity. In this way, the white normative space of the comfortable suburban living room or hip urban loft serves as a screen of representation filtering out bodies that do not fit within a traditional logic of those spaces. The result is that these ads have a palpable peculiarity; they feature sparse domestic settings, slow moving cameras, bright lighting, and calm music as the players excitedly interact with the games and with each other. Since the ads bare little connection to how, by whom, and in what contexts games are actually played, they reveal themselves as empty marketing gestures forcefully reducing the true diversity of videogame culture into a white hegemonic consumer standard.<sup>57</sup> This is not to say that the environments, styles of dress and behavior, and all the various cultural artifacts which make up the ads are reserved solely for white identity. Culture and ethnicity are dynamic. That being said, the ads, and Microsoft's branding strategies as a whole, do not deviate from, or disrupt, a historically white paradigm of

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<sup>57</sup> They have also spawned a host of parodies. LaughPong's "GTA Kinect" is a standout because it cleverly reveals the disjunction between how Kinect is marketed, and what videogame culture actually is: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yUbzcatvCw>.

representation. Microsoft sits comfortably within it. Microsoft's avatars, as part of the overall branding strategy, are extension of these logics. The fashion, hair styles, and facial features maintain a range of representation that rests comfortably within the whitewashed Kinect living rooms. Options deviating from this norm appear as token gestures.

Reflecting on Microsoft's avatar system just prior to its launch, Michael McWhertor of Kotaku laments that “the wild liberties Wii owners took with Miis to re-create celebrities and fictional characters seems to be mostly unattainable by Avatars. My Prince [sic] Leia and Homer Simpson were rather sad doppelgangers of what they were modeled after”<sup>58</sup> The lack of variation is due to Microsoft's very distinct design direction. The avatar creation tool, and all its possibilities, are well defined and can only produce a limited range of output. Consider, for instance, that Microsoft's avatar creation tool has fourteen different noses to choose from (Figure 2.8) while PlayStation 3's Home tool has nine different preset faces (upon which an entire chapter could be written) with proportions modifiable along a sliding scale in conjunction with a more detailed nose modification tool that can change the nose's width and height as well as its angle and length. Consequently, the relatively restricted Microsoft user might notice more strongly than the Nintendo or Sony user that by creating her avatar she has filtered her identity not only through a lens of caricature, but through the sieve of Microsoft's brand strategy. A Microsoft avatar looks sterile.

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<sup>58</sup> McWhertor, 2008, para. 7.



Figure 2.7: Image included with Microsoft press kit for the Kinect.

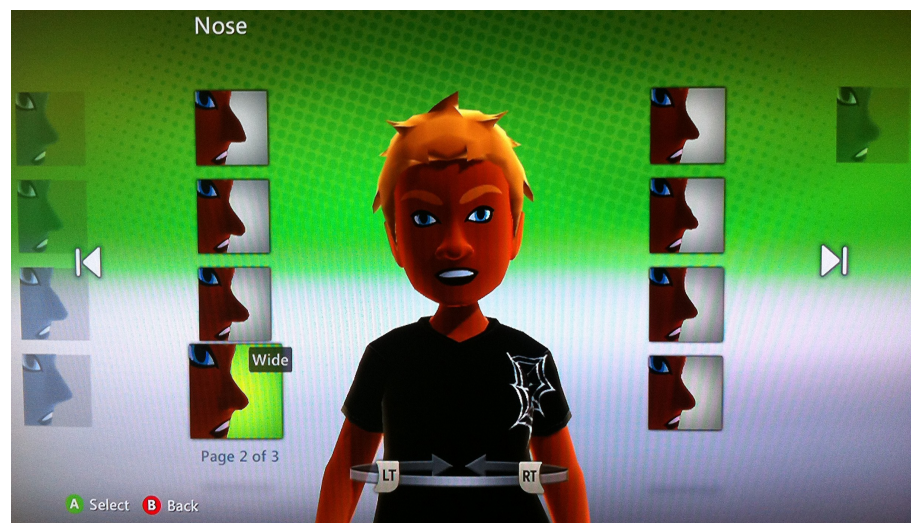


Figure 2.8: Selecting a nose within Microsoft Xbox 360's avatar creation system.

Avatars were one element of Microsoft's attempt to transform the console from game machine to socially-enabled and family friendly consumer entertainment experience. This goal had been present from the earliest days of the machine, as well as throughout the entire history of

console gaming, but Microsoft's approach has had a distinct feel. In the early days of the Xbox 360, James “J” Allard was the “Chief Experience Office” and pitch man having made a name for himself evangelizing the death of software and rise of web-based services at Microsoft in the early 90s. At 2005's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), at just thirty six years of age, he stood onstage and introduced the world to the new Xbox wearing a hoodie, blazer, orange t shirt, and tennis shoes. As I reflect on that moment now, I realize that J Allard looked like he had just stepped out of an Xbox 360 advertisement from the future (or the Facebook headquarters depicted in *The Social Network*). It would be his business cool look that would define the aesthetic of Xbox embodied in the avatars three years later.

Internet enabled consoles not only facilitate social networking, but new forms of social monetization. One of the key features of Microsoft and Sony's avatars is that users can purchase new wearable items. The Xbox 360's interface highlights this monetization strategy following the “Change My Features” and “Choose My Style” buttons with the “Marketplace” (Figure 2.9). And given the inability of users to purchase features, avatars are dynamically expressive solely through these upgrades. If you want to stand out, you need to buy some new clothes. The range of brands available in the marketplace are perhaps the most articulate example of a logic of race within Xbox Live: Burton, Billabong, Diesel, Club Football, Diesel, Gamer Chix (just to name a few). The styles skew to Xbox's key design aesthetic: young, hip, sporty, and white.

As limited as these premium options may be, the draw to this marketplace is necessitated by the even more “frustratingly limited” and “bland, soon-to-be-dated” default selection of options which McWhertor humorously holds responsible for making his avatar so “hate-worthy” that he asked himself, “Do I really look like that much of a d-bag in real life?”<sup>59</sup> McWhertor's

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., para. 8.

humorous reflection is a more astute critique than it might initially seem. His frustration registers a familiar struggle between his desires for verisimilitude and the technological constraints of Microsoft's avatar system guided by a very narrow brand identity. While he mentions the Xbox's lack of color customization and the ability to apply decals, McWhertor cannot truly pinpoint what accounts for his unsatisfactory impression so he relies on a pejorative: *douchebag*. As a white male, the excluded position is one in which McWhertor is unfamiliar and inarticulate. Even though Microsoft's avatars, and its brand strategy, are connected to a style of blazer wearing and snowboarding advantaged bourgeois class identity we associate with whiteness, the avatars don't represents *his* kind of whiteness. Caught in an unfamiliar position of exclusion, McWhertor relies on slang-based slander as we often do when rhetorically flailing. But *douchebag* has relatively clear and significant connotations in this context: someone sort of like him just sleazier.



Figure 2.9: This is the first screen displayed when someone elects to modify his/her avatar.

In the suffocating yet ostensibly politically correct and appropriately multicultural environment of the character creation system, it can be difficult to identify precisely what frustrates us or makes us uncomfortable about the options presented. Overtly stereotypical games are a rarity, and most visualization systems associated with games, Microsoft's avatars included, provide a decent range of option. For instance, Microsoft has made a concerted effort in the latest Xbox Live update to present a new user with a very diverse group of preset avatars from which to deviate. Yet even within these seemingly equitable and politically correct systems, we're left with deep contradictions that leave us at best ambivalent or at worst indignant. It's this affective dimension to which we must be increasingly attuned, because, like Brad in the GTA IV internet cafe, it's our emotional reception that intuits best the logics of race.

The proliferation of avatars and character creation, which have allowed us the opportunity to identify even more deeply with games, has also proliferated the often problematic and unsettling technology of caricature. Translating identity into avatar form is a technological process that familiarizes the user with the same reductive logics of difference applied toward the ends of prejudice and racism. Is this the cost of technologically mediated identity, or have we just not fully explored alternative forms of difference and progressive identity that fluctuate in a state of becoming rather than stagnate? Whatever the answer, the stakes are rising and the changing media landscape requires new critical literacies that both understand and appropriately contextualize avatars, as well as seek to design better systems. This journey will not be easy. Within videogame culture and other digital cultures, we're forced to negotiate our means of self-representation—whether it be an avatar or social network profile—with a select few dominant media corporations. These corporations (Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Sony, etc.) control the

tools and platforms—and associated art, algorithms, and protocols—with which we express ourselves, communicate, and organize. Thus struggling to understand, revise, remix, and dismantle the logics of race, gender, and sexuality that structure these environments is not just a matter of aesthetic pleasure, but of dire democratic importance.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DISCURSIVE

2005

*Second Life* is a mall simulator. Well, not really. It's more a user-generated virtual world, but it turns out most users want malls more than anything. The malls provide you with bodies and clothes; most are hypersexualized. It's the caricature of desire.

The clubs are the sweaty, neon beating hearts of *Second Life*. Small, pulsing blips surrounded by digital square miles of magnificently detailed, inventive, and empty spaces from city streets to rainforests. At one club the DJ streams music from her computer, introducing each song through her microphone. Her voice is all-to-real, echoing off the thinness of the bodies. It exposes the game of it all. It doesn't help when she says something seemingly appropriate like "Let's get this party started!" and it feels like a dramatic reading by someone whose notion of a party involves spinach dip and a coat room.

It's not long before I notice that my gangly and awkward looking avatar, adorned with nothing purchased or upgraded, is wholly out of place. I float around the edges of the dance floor where a mass of bodies—each more spectacularly ornamented than the next—perform discrete canned dance moves (java script routines really) that look less like

movement and more like puppetry.

Here diversity is measured by the amount of time spent in the sun. Everyone is chiseled and cartoonishly masculine or feminine. The exceptions are the robots, or the dragons, or the furies. And me: pale white, geeky as ever, and out the door in minutes. It's familiar.

Some time later I stumble on a stash of "Free Stuff for Newbies" in a rundown player generated welcome area for new players. Buried beneath dozens of files advertising tuxedos, cars, and starter homes I find a wheelchair. It's just one of many discarded and obscure pieces of crafted ephemera. I equip, do some traveling, and begin to recognize how odd it looks to be rolling around in a world where everyone can fly. It's clear this doesn't help my feelings of alienation; still it seems right. More importantly, it feels necessary. Never comfortable with shopping or sex, and not capable of creation, I find a purpose.

I teleport to the club, roll out to the middle of the dance floor, and just sit there.

The importance of seeing a face that looks like yours when stepping into a fictional universe can't be overstated. I'm a big Superman fan, but it was DC Comics' Black Lightning that piqued my interest when I was growing up. Every black superhero face I saw growing up was another signpost that said "Hey, you're welcome here. You can be larger-than-life, too." The absence of such characters doesn't make fictional constructs hostile; it makes them indifferent, which can be far worse.

—Evan Narcisse (2012)

### **Discourse and Power**

Videogames are representative of how power, from the perspective of Michel Foucault, does not repress, but actively constructs relationships both positive and negative between bodies. The object of power's ire is not crushed under its weight; rather, power “traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourses.”<sup>1</sup> These discourses then manufacture the effects we associate with oppression. One of the most adept strains of the productive form of power in media culture is colorblindness: the belief that the solution to race is to ignore it whether operative or not. Consequently, colorblind videogames and players do not wholly deny race, sexuality, and gender or adhere to explicitly hateful ideologies; rather, they diminish the imminent significance of race, sexuality, and gender by equating discussion of issues related to these categories as hateful. This allows the colorblind to appropriate and pervert progressive politics while inevitably producing damaging effects like devaluing the significance of the lived experience of being black, gay, trans, etc. The queer player, for instance, is left within a challenged position amidst this discourse where asserting his/her subjectivity is regressive, and the only means of expression is repetitious denial of the importance of queer subjectivity, and participation in an ostensibly post-political homophobia. This is what makes it possible for someone's critique of homophobia to itself be claimed as homophobic, because within the perverse discourse of videogames anti-homophobic expression is to deny that the word fag holds any political power. This is a productive form of power because even though its effects are ultimately damaging and oppressive, colorblind rhetoric positions itself as progressively ejecting

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1 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 119.

racialized thinking. But as R.W. Connell insists, lest anyone think that the post-political and its overarching ideology of neoliberalism is interested in social justice, it's not: "But if neo-liberalism is post-patriarchal, that is not to say it favours social justice. Neo-liberal politics has no interest in justice at all," all that it favors is an expansion of market dominance often best facilitated through an occlusion of political divisions.<sup>2</sup>

So as Foucault claims, power does not repress sexuality, or by extension race and gender.<sup>3</sup> Power obsesses over these valuable political concepts and proliferates discourses and their attendant resistances. Displaced racialization is one of these discourses—that is, one of these regimes of signification cutting across the seen, heard, read, and played: a measured management of race through post-racial integrationist ideology and design as well as a compulsive return to familiar racial stereotypes and histories. Normative videogame culture, of which the fantasy roleplaying games analyzed in this chapter are a key component, copes with the anxiety of an ever-diversifying player-base by governing race using the computational and deterministic logics of character creation while anxiously and obsessively rehearsing racial histories within the safe discourse of high fantasy metaphor. By looking at *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* we can see how the discourses of a game and its player community are intimately connected: the game suppresses the signifier of blackness (most often through colorblindness) and the players compulsively seeks its return. I'd like to explore this relationship by examining how blackness was effectively removed from online fantasy roleplaying games through integrationist design only to be returned to the world by the players as stereotype. That which the game makes implicit, the players make explicit.

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<sup>2</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 255.

<sup>3</sup> I am drawing here from Foucault's *History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1* and *Power/Knowledge* chapters ten and eleven.

## Boys Club

Before we dig into an examination of fantasy roleplaying games, it's first important to illustrate how videogame culture is caught within sustained processes of discursive policing, manufacturing gamespace and its surrounding cultures as masculine, heterosexual, and, in most cases, white, and meeting with continued resistances. These battles are fought across race, gender, and sexuality, and each is defined predominantly by appeals to various strands of post-politics or libertarianism. It's important to explore these discussions first, because they will hopefully provide an effective diagnosis of the prevailing design and fan culture which motivates and informs the study of roleplaying games to come.

If you've played videogames with friends, it's likely you've done some trash talking. Playful ribbing is one of the most cherished aspects of social play. But if you've played videogames in less friendly and protected environments, particularly in the relative anonymity of online matchmaking and pickup games, there's a good chance that this friendly chatter turned offensive. It's no mystery that Xbox Live in particular is rife with homophobic, sexist, and racist discourse.<sup>4</sup> However, until February 2012 it was less well known that the familiar “fag” and “bitch” filled interactions of Xbox Live were characteristic, and some would say constitutive, of the relatively isolated and esoteric yet dedicated community of fighting game players. In his editorial “Sexual harassment as ethical imperative: how Capcom’s fighting game reality show turned ugly,” Ben Kuchera of the videogame blog *Penny Arcade Report* exposed just how deeply ingrained sexism can be within videogame culture. During late February and most of March 2012, Capcom, developer of the forthcoming *Street Fighter x Tekken* fighting game (combining two of the most popular franchises within the fighting genre) teamed with the massively popular

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4 See <http://www.fatuglyorslutty.com> for examples of rampant sexism.

videogame website IGN to create a web-based reality series called *Cross Assault* featuring some of the best fighting game players battling for a \$25,000 grand prize.<sup>5</sup> During coverage of this competition, the players and coaches would broadcast matches over Twitch.tv while providing commentary or answering questions. Kuchera called attention to one of these conversations between the Team Tekken coach, Aris Bakhtanians and Jared Rea, a community manager for Twitch.tv. Since the *Cross Assault* program was ostensibly created to market the game—and fighting games more generally—to a wider audience, Rea questioned the function of the sexual harassment he had witnessed up until that point, especially between Bakhtanians and female competitor Miranda Pakozdi (also known as Super Yan). Bakhtanians' response shocked Rea and Kuchera, prompting Kuchera's editorial and igniting a heated debate: “The sexual harassment is part of the culture. If you remove that from the fighting game community, it’s not the fighting game community ... These things have been established for years.”<sup>6</sup> Bakhtanians continued his rant, claiming that Rea's push for more respectful and socially responsible discourse in the fighting game community was “ethically wrong” because it misunderstood the humor of the sexism, and was imposing a culture not inherent to the community.<sup>7</sup> Pakozdi, a victim of the supposedly playful sexism, was less than supportive. She spoke up and asserted that sexual harassment was damaging to the community, but as Kuchera notes she was quickly “shushed.”<sup>8</sup>

This is a telling gesture, and one worth reviewing for yourself.<sup>9</sup> In the post-political discourse of videogames (and media cultures writ large) everyone is ostensibly equal and the market rules all, but the system is set up structurally to maintain exclusions or oppressive patriarchal power structures. Pakozdi is allowed in the space, and she's made an equal member of

5 See <http://games.ign.com/articles/122/1221130p1.html>.

6 Kuchera, “Sexual harassment as ethical imperative,” para. 8.

7 Ibid., para. 9.

8 Ibid., para. 11.

9 See the 1:50:00 mark of this video: <http://www.twitch.tv/iplaywinner/b/309876812>.

the team, but she is systematically alienated discursively. Bakhtanians can espouse a friendly sexism and believe himself accepting while also silencing Pakozdi's claims otherwise. It's tempting to dismiss Bakhtanians as an isolated and extreme example. That's not how I see it though. While his sexism is severe and shocking it's far from extraordinary.

His sexism and defensiveness is representative of a general anxiousness within the normative videogame community; it's an anxiety over uncertain political shifts in the digital age and the feminizing character of telepresence that is compulsively allayed through offensive language and practice. Hegemonic masculinity must continually reassert itself, and mark its presence and dominance amidst this uncertainty by relying on a disavowed and ostensibly playful recapitulation of exclusionary discourses. In his reading of Amanda Fernbach's psychoanalytic theory of cyberpunk sexualities, Derek Burrill notes that "Fernbach reveals that by 'jacking in' to the matrix, the male characters are (counterintuitively) feminizing themselves by sexually uniting with cyberspace" as well as introducing themselves to an unstable subjectivity more closely associated with the feminine.<sup>10</sup> Videogames are a kind of cyberspatial interaction, allowing the player to explore fictional systems often in the form of an avatar. The feminized character of this disembodiment and hybridized identity is exacerbated by the position of the player as a nerd or geek. For Burrill, the environment of the game arcade, within which the fighting game community formed and still identifies, adds extra layers of disciplinary and psychoanalytic tension. On the one hand its "organized for purchase, consumption, and a regulated (male) visual pleasure" but on the other "players are vulnerable, backs turned to the world as they stare at the screen."<sup>11</sup> This social vulnerability, combined with the "idealized [masculine] perspective" of the player contra the videogame itself, results in an exaggerated performance of hegemonic

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<sup>10</sup> Burrill, *Die Tryin'*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 61 and 64.

masculinity. As Bakhtanians claims, “Nobody is welcome in the fighting game community,” to which I would add, “until they prove themselves appropriately masculine.”

This hostile environment, while perhaps epitomized within the devout fighting game scene, persists across many other competitive gaming scenarios. Among all the games released for Xbox Live the most popular have been in the *Call of Duty* series of famed military first-person shooters.<sup>12</sup> While typical matches might result in silence, quite often they are bound within a vulgar discourse that relies predominantly on homophobic and racist language.<sup>13</sup>

Fortunately, the videogame community as a whole is getting more diverse, and as a result more vocal. Many queer players and players of color, as well as their allies, have called attention to how players actively construct gamespace as the exclusive domain of white masculine heterosexuality. Often these critiques are focused on the player community, but progressive players are also more aware of how the games themselves are involved in exclusionary discourse. Dennis Scimeca's expressed concerns over the homophobic language he heard during multiplayer matches of *Battlefield 3*. However, instead of emanating from players, comments like “I'm getting fucked up the ass over here!” and “Fuck, I'm getting my shit pushed in here!” were pre-recorded sound triggered within the game.<sup>14</sup> His post, published on the videogame blog *Kotaku*, was met with the usual deluge of dismissive comments claiming that “people are getting too sensitive” and that Scimeca himself is homophobic because he's equating homosexuality with sodomy. Its a common appeal to a rational and distanced post-political rhetoric that is prevalent among the most vocal members of the videogame fanbase. And it's a discourse that is reinforced and perhaps encouraged by games which either overtly or covertly privilege the hegemonic norm by

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://majornelson.com/2012/01/06/top-games-of-2011/>.

<sup>13</sup> One of the most upsetting illustrations of the hateful discourse of Xbox Live can be found in the video attached to the “Disturbing Video Shows Player Homophobia at Work on Xbox Live” post on GayGamer.net: [http://gaygamer.net/2007/11/disturbing\\_video\\_shows\\_player.html](http://gaygamer.net/2007/11/disturbing_video_shows_player.html).

<sup>14</sup> Scimeca, “The Unquestioned Homophobia in Battlefield 3.”

diminishing, denigrating, or outright rendering invisible women and girls, queers, and, most relevant to this chapter, people of color.

### **Cybertypes of Absence**

Game designers, scholars, and fans have all identified that videogames deploy black characters in two extremely limited and reductive forms. Ernest Adams notes that the first of these forms is often “simply to add visual variety”<sup>15</sup> and the second form, as focused on in the work of David Leonard, depicts black characters as “extreme racialized tropes.”<sup>16</sup> More recently, Evan Narcisse wonders why, instead of these familiar tokens or tropes, there aren't any characters that he can identify with or take pride in: characters that represent a kind of “black cool.”<sup>17</sup> Since videogames both model and shape culture, there is a growing danger that videogames are predominantly functioning as stewards of white masculine hegemony. Browsing the shelves of your local Game Stop will probably validate this claim. Black and brown bodies, while increasingly more visible within the medium, are seemingly inescapably objectified as hyper-masculine variations of the gangsta or sports player tropes. These tropes reduce race to an inscription of the “fears, anxieties, and desires of privileged Western users” while ignoring any differences that could pose an unmanageable political threat.<sup>18</sup> Critiques of this nature are undoubtedly important in the struggle over social justice; however, game scholars must be continually disloyal to their methodologies in order to adapt and combat the cunning mutability of racist discourse. This is especially true when considering the work of theorists such as Constance Steinkuehler who have enlightened the academic and professional community to the

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15 Adams, “Not Just Rappers and Athletes,” para. 13.

16 Leonard, “Not a Hater,” 83.

17 Narcisse, “Come On, Videogames.”

18 Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 6.

increasing social and culture importance of games and massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) that act as “sites for socially and materially distributed cognition, complex problem solving, identity work, individual and collaborative learning across multimedia, multimodality ‘attention spaces’ and rich meaning-making.”<sup>19</sup> Without adaptive and robust studies of race within game culture we run the danger of fashioning a field incapable of adequately addressing the hegemonic proclivities of what appears to be one of the dominant emergent media forms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The consequences of such inaction are dire; it means a continued and systematic discursive exclusion of many people of color and women from videogames and digital play, and consequently the squandering of the expressive potential of games.

Lisa Nakamura’s cybertype is an indispensable tool as it seeks to describe how new media “propagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism.” As Nakamura explains, what makes the cybertype different from traditional stereotypes is that it is, borrowing Lev Manovich’s terminology, “transcoded” by the computer. Through this process the “cultural layer” or the “ideologies regarding race” that circulate in the material world are interpreted and reformatted by “computer/human interfaces, the dynamics and economics of access, and the means by which users are able to express themselves online.”<sup>20</sup> This technological translation of race has most often generated a form of pervasive blackness in videogames that honors a hyper-masculine, consumerist, anti-intellectual, and violent cybertype. By looking at the transition from character creation in two paradigmatic MMORPGs, *EverQuest* (EQ) and *World of Warcraft* (WOW), I’d like to modify the cybertype concept, pushing beyond the scrutiny of hyper-masculinization and ghettocentric representation toward a theorization and understanding of the discursive cybertypes that circulate as an effect of the large scale absence of blackness. The

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19 Steinkuehler, “The new third place,” 20.

20 Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 3.

purpose of this analysis is twofold: first, to expose how productive racial diversity in games has eroded due to systematic discursive occlusion and second, to understand why games provide spaces where minstrelsy is often the only intelligible technology of racial signification.<sup>21</sup>

MMORPGs deploy cybertypes in a more expansive manner than has thus far been theorized. Furthering the work of Nakamura in direct application to WOW, Alexander R. Galloway argues that “race is unplayable in any conventional sense for all the tangible details of gamic race (voice, visage, character animation, racial abilities, etc.) are quarantined in certain hard-coded machinic behaviors.”<sup>22</sup> The player of WOW cannot manipulate her race as she can her class and thus while she can add certain modifications through the chat channel or through naming, she cannot actually modify race substantively. In this way, the onus is on the game itself in that it “assigns from without certain identifiable traits to distinct classes of entities and then builds complex machineries for explaining and maintaining the massive imperviousness of it all.”<sup>23</sup> As Galloway explains, this cybertyping should not result in a condemnation of the supposed racist practice of the game itself, but in the understanding that the codification of race is often an effect of mediation itself and its technical requirements. Galloway’s more direct application of the cybertype to WOW is certainly applicable and acceptable. However, this version of cybertyping is not exclusive. In light of the increasing extra-mediation of online gaming via voice chat, machinima, blogs, live gameplay broadcasts, modeling software, etc., in conjunction with the performative activities of players in games (as acknowledged by Galloway),

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21 Minstrelsy is a form of performance associated with minstrel shows. These performances are considered the first form of American theater and became popular in the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and have continued in various forms to present day. They were usually comedic and musical performances involving white and black entertainers in blackface. The characters and content of these shows were often derived and, in many cases, constitutive of black stereotypes and considered offensive and derogatory.

22 Galloway, “Starcraft, or, Balance,” 96.

23 Ibid.

we must also recognize how race is just as much a discursive construct as it is a coded one.<sup>24</sup> Theories that rely solely on the interpretable logics of the game's technical design cannot adequately account for how players deal with issues of race on an everyday basis.

This is not to say design decisions are not important to this trajectory of inquiry, quite the contrary. While there are no reliable statistics on the amount of black avatars in these games, and any study attempting to track blackness would be futile (what shade of skin truly is black after all?), any player can affirm that black characters are both a rarity as player-characters and non-player characters in most every MMORPG. This is an everyday reality that is an effect of both the actions of the designers and players. Due to the relatively blackless worlds of MMORPGs, cybertypes are not entirely produced through code, text, or representation but also via a *selective* transcoding of cultural data and demarcated by the subdued discursive presence and absence of blackness. This omission of black characters from the discourse devalues the potential of videogames to provide productive racial experiences as they reinforce dominant notions of black people as incapable of being functional members of society. These games, while masquerading as progressive through a strategy of colorblindness, function instead as hegemonic fantasy by filtering the racial imagery that threatens the safety and political coherence of white dominance.

### **Leeroy the Minstrel**

The impetus for this project was the viral Leeroy Jenkins video, compounded by my own

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<sup>24</sup> I am drawing upon the conceptual foundation of the performative as developed by J.L. Austin (1976) and modified by Judith Butler (1990, 1993). There is a great distinction to be made between performance, as a set of practices in the interest of temporarily playing a character or mode of self, and the performative, a discursive production that, through various acts of the body (speech, gesture, and so on), both constructs the self and calls attention to the constructedness of identity. Gender and race performativity, when deployed radically, are denaturalizing activities that expose ostensibly fixed categories as copies without an original put in place to maintain certain power relationships. Performativity is explored in more depth in chapter four.

experiences as a player of a black avatar in WOW—both objects and methods of study not reducible to the machinic architecture of the game. This video was released in the summer of 2005 and was distributed by the WOW guild PALS FOR LIFE as a form of guild promotion. The video was a machinima parody of an often experienced mishap in group play—the abrupt slaughtering of a dungeon party preparing for battle due to an absent minded person charging into battle early.<sup>25</sup> The comedic foil of the video, Leeroy Jenkins, is a stereotypical black character that has many connections to the Zip Coon (Figure 3.1) made famous in minstrel shows. Leeroy's name is, similar to Tyrone, a stereotypical African American name. His voice, performed by a white man, is an exaggerated version of the deep and stumbling voices associated with characters from minstrel shows or their legacy in radio, television, and film. Similar to the character of the Zip Coon, Leeroy is comedic because he attempts to assimilate into the group but eventually screws everything up—proving his idiocy and by extension naturalizing a racist view of all African Americans as less intelligent than whites. Hence, after charging into the pack of monsters alone, the rest of the group can be heard cursing Leeroy for his stupidity. At the end of the video as the group is killed, Leeroy acts as if it was not his fault and exclaims, “At least I have chicken.” While notable for its status as an internet phenomenon having garnered millions of downloads and a mention on *Jeopardy*, it is even more notable as distributing the first mass-consumed representation of blackness in MMORPGs. What is striking is that this singular and widely consumed representation was a traditional cybertype like those detailed by Nakamura. However, this *representational* cybertype is also a symptomatic annunciation of the embedded and selectively transcoded cybertypes that freely circulate in the absence of blackness. These cybertypes are those of the everyday within the game world and therefore exchanged without

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25 Machinima is a form of animation recorded using real-time virtual spaces, such as videogames, and then edited and distributed predominantly over the internet.

repercussion. They are the common sense notion that blacks are not heroes, paladins, or mages; this is a fact substantiated by the incredibly low amount of black avatars populating the worlds, websites, promotional materials, and history and lore of fantasy MMORPGs. Blackness is only visible in very specific and calculated moments that enact the desires of the dominant audience and fit into their cultural imaginary, or as limited options of alternative visualization.



Figure 3.1: Sheet music cover from 1834 for “Zip Coon, a Favorite Comic Song” by G.W. Dixon.

In a strange but not unsurprising turn, the Leroy Jenkins character has been subsequently

canonized by Blizzard featured in the officially licensed *World of Warcraft Trading Card Game* (Figure 3.2) and as a miniature figure. However, each of these representations has whitened Leeroy's brown skin. Blizzard trades on the success of the Leeroy character, success in part a product of its deep seated cultural referents, but must erase race in its appropriations or risk exposing the video's latent problematic racial politics. It might also be assumed that Leeroy's face *must* be whitened, in light of the norms of the high fantasy world Blizzard created which associates humanness with whiteness.



Figure 3.2: Leeroy Jenkins Trading Card.

Given this climate of racial exclusion, very little has been said about the video's derogatory content. It has, for the most part, been embraced as harmless fun. On the discussion board for the *Wikipedia* entry for Leeroy Jenkins, one participant brings up the issue but is quickly dismissed:

*Original Comment:*

Am I mistaken, or is this whole character a giant racial stereotype? HELLO?!  
—yuletide

*First Reply:*

I'm confused. He's a character in a game. He doesn't have a race. I'm white and I love chicken. I would lord my possession of good chicken over anyone I met. I would especially use it to deflect or downplay blame. Maybe the person who is racist is you. Megan 02:24, 20 March 2006

*Second Reply:*

Maybe it is, why would that be so remarkable? The video is nothing but a bit of comedy after all.  
132.162.213.109 05:00, 13 March 2006

*Third Reply:*

I think you're mistaken. Why's it a stereotype? Because of the chicken comment? Even if it is, so what? Surely in some countries people are still free to say what they want, whether or not some folks will be offended by it. Sukiari 22:03, 14 March 2006 (Racism? section, n.d.)<sup>26</sup>

This hostility to the question is rooted in the same contemporary tendency to immediately disregard any claims of racism as unnecessary or unproductive. Perhaps the most dangerous of all the comments is made by Megan, the first replier, who states that Leeroy does not have a race because he is a character in a game. This dichotomy devalues the political importance of gamespace and is ignorant of its allegorical relationship between games and the so-called “real world.” Her comment is illustrative of the myths of liberal freedom accompanying online sociality and MMORPGs wherein race does not and should not matter because everything is just made up of pixels. Disturbingly, what this implies is that in the real world race is not made up but

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<sup>26</sup> *Talk: Leeroy Jenkins.*

verifiable and very real. Beyond the troubling implications of Megan's comment in regards to race outside of gamespace, what this also claims more directly is that in gamespace everyone finally gets to be white. The white dominance of gamespace has been recast as a racially progressive movement that ejects race in favor of a default, universal whiteness and has been, in part, ceded by a theoretical tendency to embrace passing and anonymity in cyberspace. When politically charged issues surface that reveal the embedded stereotypes at work amidst an ostensibly colorblind environment, they are quickly de-raced and cataloged as aberrations rather than analyzed as symptomatic of more systemic trends. In a recent discussion of the *Grand Theft Auto* series, Leonard identifies a similar form of selective attention given to the game's violent and sexual gameplay. Prompted by the complete lack of interest in the racist content of the games Leonard states that the *Grand Theft Auto* debate is:

not truly about violence, or even the affects of violent [sic] on youth, but their exposure to particular types of violence, with violence committed by gangsters and criminals, particularly those of color, who also seem to represent a disproportionate number of these characters, against the state identified as a significant threat against the moral and cultural fabric of the nation.<sup>27</sup>

In this passage he explicates the central issue of his article that the focus on violence without any concern for race reveals embedded and politically sanctioned assumptions that African Americans and Latinos are inherently violent and thus dangerous for white youth culture. In so doing, he brings into relief the political efforts that endorse these assumptions and the fears and desires of dominant culture that are scripted onto black and brown bodies. The same can be said for the exuberant embrace of the comedy of Leeroy Jenkins and the vehement defense and negation of any critique of the cybertypes it deploys and exposes as operative in gamespace. There are important questions to be asked about why Leeroy is one of the only significant representations of blackness in WOW and why his character depends on black stereotypes, but

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<sup>27</sup> Leonard, "Virtual Gangsta," 53.

they are buried beneath claims of comedy and the insignificance of race in the game world.

### **Unbearable Whiteness**

Ignorance of race, however, is not a pervasive trend in the community. Greg Lastowka points out how many of the races and cultures in WOW can be interpreted as appropriating cultural identity and then refashioning it within the game world. At the end of his piece he asks, “I guess what I’m curious about is how people feel about cultural borrowing in WoW, and more broadly, about the appropriate limits (if any) of this kind of thing. Is there a point where crypto-cultural references become offensive? Can they be offensive if they are not perceived by the players?”<sup>28</sup> The resulting discussion is enlightening for a variety of reasons. While no definitive conclusion was reached, a range of interesting opinions were voiced. In particular, many respondents were quick to defend the Horde races, which have been primarily under fire as appropriating various forms of ethnicity or blackness.<sup>29</sup> For example, the Trolls have pronounced and unquestionable Jamaican accents and the Tauren are a mystical and tribal culture with Native American architecture and dress among many other resemblances. Interestingly and controversially, many players, perhaps due to their comparative ugliness to the Alliance races, believe the Horde to be the more evil faction. This, in conjunction with their alleged cultural borrowing of blackness, has caused some criticism. However, as commenter Charles Wheeler points out, “we’ve learned that, contrary to early portrayals of orc [sic] as bloodthirsty savages their pre-demon corruption culture was relatively peaceful. Furthermore, we learn that the alliance races have their own fair share of unreasonable prejudices.”<sup>30</sup> In support of this claim

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28 Lastowka, “Cultural Borrowing in WOW,” para. 15.

29 WOW currently contains two separate warring factions, made up of six races each. The Horde is composed of Orcs, Trolls, Undead, Tauren, Blood Elves, and Goblins and the Alliance is composed of Humans, Night Elves, Gnomes, Dwarves, Draenei, and Worgen.

30 Ibid.

other respondents mentioned that the Human race within Warcraft history has operated internment camps in which Orcs were held. Wheeler concludes that “Blizzard [(developer of WOW)] appears to be using their fictional world’s unfolding history to mimic the dissolution of traditional (American) colonial narratives...” Other respondents echo this claim stating “the Horde [are] the ‘good guys’” and “The great secret of Warcraft is that the Horde are the heroes.”

Although this discussion is generative in terms of clearly making race an issue and for its critique of colonialism, one must be wary of judging racial representations within the Warcraft universe as “good” or “bad” and reifying dominant notions of what constitutes certain racial identities. There is a larger problem of race within MMORPGs such as WOW being ignored by this focus on whether or not certain representations are offensive. Illovich, another respondent, touches on this potentially more productive critical turn:

Great post. To add fuel to the fire, what about the construction of humanity vs. non-humanity in WoW? While we're wondering about what it means to co-opt/borrow from cultures of stereotypes of cultures, I think it's worth noticing another insidious bit of racist re-inscription (god, I love writing all radical =P) in the coding of humanity as European.

It is completely unambiguous that, even though you can pick a number of skin tones in WoW for your human character, the culture of humanity is clearly European. There is no existence of non-european humanity in Warcraft lore whatsoever.

So when you look at WoW (and frankly a lot of western fantasy) under a filter checking for racism/nationalism you can see that in general humanity is portrayed as European and other cultures are coded not only as "other" but even not quite human. That's pretty disturbing, from my perspective.<sup>31</sup>

Amidst the obsession of the discussion with evaluating the diversity of WOW against

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31 Ibid.

cultural equivalents, Illovich jolts the conversation out of that critical trajectory into the realization that “there is no existence of non-european humanity in Warcraft lore whatsoever.” David L. Eng, using the work of Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes, has theorized this type of moment as a profound revelation that facilitates a revision of dominant inscriptions of race. Eng explains that Lacan’s given-to-be-seen “is that group of culturally sanctioned images against which subjects are typically held for their sense of identity”<sup>32</sup> In a sense, the given-to-be-seen is an expectation or a cultural repository of common sense conceptualizations of racial identity. Eng is interested in how one can “look awry” at this set of assumptions and thus escape hegemonic cultural dominance of the visual. To this end, Eng deploys Barthes’ “punctum” which, as he paraphrases, “activates unconscious aspects of personal memory that allow [Barthes] to resist the cultural normativity of the studium.”<sup>33</sup> The studium is, in very simplistic terms, the visually normative, the mythic, and the obvious qualities of the visual that conceal problematic differences. In Eng’s primary example, one can look at the famous Promontory Summit photograph, which depicts the nailing of the final spike in the first Transcontinental Railroad, and be unconsciously “pricked” by a punctum (whatever that might be) into recognizing the complete omission of Chinese laborers in the photograph. In much the same way, one can play WOW and be dazzled by the rather commonplace cultural borrowing or ethnic mash-ups of the fantastical races and then suddenly recognize the more arresting situation of pervasive whiteness. The amalgams of stereotypes populating these worlds are obviously troublesome; however, allowing them to monopolize attention focuses analysis on cultural static and the given-to-be-seen rather than the more profound erasure of difference that causes these symptoms. The lack of a black race to carry the mark and burden of the cybertypes explodes racial signifiers scattering them over the

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32 Eng, “I’ve Been (Re)Working on the Railroad,” 43.

33 Ibid., 54.

fantastical races that stand-in for racial difference. In the void, new cybertypes are produced through visual absence, reinforcing the idea that blacks simply do not belong in this space.

### **Fantasy as the White Imaginary**

Why do we ignore or forgive the connection of humanity with whiteness in WOW? The fantasy genre implicitly skews, distorts, rearranges, and blends cultural signifiers to create what amounts to an entirely different world with, in many cases, its own stand alone cultures, races, sciences, languages, and so on. The tendency then is to accept as harmless any creations within a fantasy world because of its extra-dimensional construction. Such an assumption is dangerous given the fact fantasy worlds are populated by re-imagined signs with real and significant meanings outside of the fantasy. Thus, a fantasy world's products cannot be solely regarded within the internal logic of that world because the various meanings of its parts still have an original meaning that cannot be discarded without losing the decipherability of that product. To put it another way, a Human race in a fantasy world is still processed and rendered intelligible by its formations in the physical world no matter how that fantasy might manipulate it. Fantasy or not, a race is termed Human with the *specific and calculated intent* of transplanting cultural understanding of the word "human" and "humanity" so it can be modified in the fantasy world as necessitated by the diegesis of the game while maintaining a needed intelligibility. Therefore, when one sees a race called Human within a MMORPG and it is westernized as well as white with different shades of color for diversity (but nothing *too black*), a powerful assertion is made. This assertion is that humanity will only be understood within the fantasy world if it is primarily coded white. The player-base has affirmed this understanding by choosing largely white Human

avatars in order to match the discursive framework set up by these racial logics.

These games are also following established norms and expectations of the genre that have been present since its very inception. As is commonly known, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are responsible for creating the contemporary sub-genre of fantasy called high fantasy. One of the primary aims of the project of high fantasy in the 1950s was to create a form of western European mythology. Given this motivation, it is not surprising that the race the reader is meant to identify with as ancestral, whether it is the “Humans” or the “Men” and so on, are almost always white and any racial variations, while providing differences in physiology, rarely add diversity that would remove the characters from a proto-European geography. In addition, given this mythological other-Europe setting, any non-white races are often portrayed as exotic and borrow from familiar racial stereotypes. As would be expected, this has been an intense subject of discussion in *The Lord of the Rings* community as Dwarves, with their large noses, greedy behavior, and short stature, recall many racist Jewish stereotypes.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the Men of the South that appear in both the books and the end of the *Return of the King* film have troubling connections to blackness. These dark-skinned former Men have been corrupted by evil, echoing a racist understanding of blackness as revealing a dark and tainted interiority. The intention here is not to argue with or against the theory that high fantasy is inherently insensitive to racial difference, but merely to situate the ancestry of contemporary MMORPGs that rely heavily on these formative texts as points of cultural reference. Rather than modeling themselves on more contemporary conceptualizations of humanity and racial difference, MMORPGs adopt the fantasy tradition and continue to present worlds that contain Europeans surrounded by fantastical races that, inevitably, provoke discussions such as those mentioned earlier in response to Lastowka.

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<sup>34</sup> While not addressing the stereotypical Jewish characteristics, Tolkien himself admits that the Dwarves were “quite obviously” intended to draw on Jewish culture, the most obvious indicator of which is their language which was “constructed to be Semitic” (1971).

These whitewashed environments with a myriad of resemblances and specters of the Other are examples of optic whiteness, a term introduced by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* and theorized by Harryette Mullen.<sup>35</sup> In Ellison's book, the secret of the spectacular whiteness of the paint Optic White is that it is composed of ten drops of black. Theorists such as Mullen and W.T. Lhamon, Jr. have interpreted this as a metaphor for whiteness relying on a manufactured opposite for its own meaning. As Lhamon explains, "Blackness produces optic whiteness," but this relationship is obscured since "Optic white [prefers] to escape or efface; to repress or deny this past."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, blackness in MMORPGs is not only scattered and diffused through a lens of fantasy but is intentionally obscured to erase any troubling political connotations. Nevertheless, the world of the MMORPG depends on the history of blackness to provide thematic and historical meaning to its conflicts. For example, as referenced earlier in the discussion of WOW, the conflict between the races of the world of Azeroth bears similarities, amongst other things, to imperialism and colonialism. While the game can be considered productive in the sense that it problematizes notions of good and evil and corrupts the traditional virtuosity of the Human race, the visual absence of blackness maintains an optic white and depoliticized environment that depends on racial exclusion.

Significantly, what is being imagined and performed in the fantasy world can then be learned and exported into the physical world. In "Play of the Imagination: Beyond the Literary Mind," Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown discuss the ability of virtual worlds to "create the possibility of experiences which are impossible in the confines of physical space."<sup>37</sup> Using the work of John Dewey and his concept of the "play of imagination" they posit that virtual worlds represent spaces of imaginative possibility and experimentation free of the bounds of the physical

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35 Mullen, "Optic White."

36 Lhamon, "Optic Black," 113.

37 Brown and Thomas, "The Play of Imagination," 163.

world. One can assume that these boundaries are not all physical in nature, but also social, political and cultural. Within these gamespaces, we have to acknowledge how our understanding of something like humanity can just as easily be regressively re-imagined as it can be progressively expanded. In another article entitled “You Play *World of Warcraft*? You’re Hired!” Brown and Thomas explain that the unique form of “experiential learning” that takes place within a virtual world can actually provide players with job skills that can be easily translatable into the workplace. For an example they explain that “the process of becoming an effective WOW guildmaster amounts to a total-immersion course in leadership.”<sup>38</sup> What does it mean then, that this training is taking place in an almost exclusively white world? At least most workplaces now, even with the continued presence of inequality, make an effort at equal opportunity employment. Subscribing to a complacent and politically unaware stance in dealing with blackness threatens to cultivate the player population’s fear of race and a belief in the adequacy of stereotypes to articulate blackness. Once matured, these digitally reinforced anti-progressive attitudes will migrate into the outside world. Meanwhile, a focus on difference in itself is devalued as a productive point of articulation. However, MMORPGs can just as easily be engineered to represent race responsibly and engage with it in ways that both highlights its cultural significance and social injustices. Therefore, it is important at this juncture to critique the three examples of games that exemplify and chart strategies of racial representation and the gradual disappearance of race: EQ, *EverQuest II* (EQ2), and WOW. The goal of my analysis will be “to use simulation as a means of consciousness raising.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Paradigm Shift**

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38 Brown and Thomas, “You Play World of Warcraft?”, 120.

39 Turkle, *Life on Screen*, 71.

EQ, which debuted in 1999 and celebrated its thirteenth anniversary by switching to a free to play model, was not the first MMORPG released, but is credited as significantly advancing the genre into the elevated status that it experiences today. EQ continues to fascinate me because it is one of the only MMORPGs to feature an entirely black race of playable humanoid characters, the Erudite race (Figure 3.3) The result is that EQ succeeded from an empirical perspective at integrating black bodies into gamespace yet still maintained a troubling binary through the inclusion of an all white Human race. While undermined by the attribution to the race of the overly anti-stereotypical trait of highest base intelligence and the accompanying physiognomic cue of high foreheads, the Erudite race forces a confrontation with blackness in the game world and confidently discards any racial ambiguity.



Figure 3.3: Erudite character models from *EverQuest*.

Unfortunately, this confrontation was often limited by the lack of Erudite characters actually being played given the geographical position of Odus, the Erudite continent of origin. Whereas eleven of the twelve races of EQ at release were located on Norrath's (the world of EQ) two main continents of Antonica and Faydwer, the Erudites were sequestered on their own continent, a substantially smaller and less appealing collection of areas that were far less populated in response. This spatial division of blackness from the rest of Norrath has obvious metaphoric connections to the situation of black characters in videogames and black culture in the outside world. The more tangible effects that this separation had were not only a practical discouragement of Erudite players, but an exoticization of blackness. While the Erudite race had the possibility of populating blackness in the game world, their lack of functionality from the onset positioned them as more of an exotic curiosity or an interesting but not compelling alternative to the more popular races such as Humans and Wood Elves. It is worth noting the possibility that the Erudites were not constructed as an entirely black race as a political statement, but instead were pragmatically black, i.e. necessitated by a lack of technological capability to provide the customization, including colorization, of Human avatars that populate more recent games. If this were true then it would demand a revision of the common sense belief that greater graphical technology, which in turn affords the user dynamic avatar customization and personal choice increases racial presence in digital media. EQ2, the graphically advanced sequel to EQ, provides a compelling case study for why we need to rethink that diversity is best encouraged through character customization rather than offering a distinct non-white option

One of the features that Sony used to market EQ2 was the sophisticated character customization system. Customers who pre-ordered the game received the character creation tool

prior to release, allowing them to design their characters while they waited for the game's debut. Upon installing the software, fans of the original game would recognize most of their favorite races from the first installment were included with new, highly detailed renderings that held close ties to the original designs from EQ. The one notable exception was the transformation of the Erudite race from the Africanized or Moorish models of EQ into skeletal, Caucasoid, and vaguely extra-terrestrial beings lacking the high foreheads of their predecessors and washed out in shades of gray, purple, and blue with glowing tribal tattoos (Figure 3.4). Met with little dissent or objection, this change was seen as an acceptable ejection of blackness compensated by the injection of brown coloring options for the other traditionally white races such as the Human and Barbarian. This was an ostensibly, and certainly intentionally, progressive gesture: Humans were reframed as being more than just white. Unfortunately, the new ability for players to color races brown rather than enforcing a default black race resulted, in my experience with the game, in an even more pervasive whiteness.



Figure 3.4: Erudite character model from *EverQuest II*.

This suggested to me that not only are MMORPGs spaces of pervasive whiteness due to a predominantly white player base, but that design choices favoring character creation contribute to a lack of representational diversity in game content. Prior to EQ2, one could argue that the lack of Erudite players was not due to a fear of a non-hegemonic blackness or a repression of blackness but the undesirable starting continent of Odus; EQ2 disproves such a theory. Erudites, along with all of the other races, are joined together in two starting areas, necessitated by the post-cataclysmic storyline that has destroyed most of Norrath. Therefore, all players are automatically grouped together cooperatively and have access to the same resources. Lacking any geographic reason to detract from the Erudites as a choice for players, they were unfortunately also whitewashed, a decision that probably was made to avoid the challenging political conundrum for

a predominantly white development team to craft a black race as well as to improve the appeal of Erudites to players and, of course, increase profitability. Perhaps a more radical change would have been the renaming of the Human race and the preservation of the Erudite race, thus attacking the problematic identification of humanity with whiteness as well as forcing an intriguing confrontation with blackness into a space that consistently tries to escape it. But suggestions like this are why academia has a hard time interfacing with industry.

The new Erudites appear as colored in-between, casualties of the unequal struggle between black and white. Their new tattoos, apparently having developed culturally in the 500 years between the two game settings, mark their spectral bodies. These emergent body texts, given contemporary theory on the meaning of tattoos, can be read as symptomatic of the disembodiment effect of digital media and the malleability and tenuous nature of identity and the body struggled over in a medium of dynamic re-imaging capability. As Mark C. Taylor has argued, the increased popularity of tattoos reveals an attempt to “mark the body at the very moment it is disappearing.”<sup>40</sup> The tattooed bodies of the Erudites, while severed from blackness, are still symptomatic of the erasure of race from gamespace. Black bodies fade away at the interface, relegated to a mere colorization of—or should I say deviation from—a default white body. Black avatars become exotic aberrations and stylistic options, and blackness is reified as a fun diversion rather than a politically and socially occluded condition with a history that is foundational and must be preserved and engaged.

### **Transformation Not Integration**

WOW and the Warcraft universe, as has been mentioned, is devoid of a default black

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<sup>40</sup> Taylor, *Hiding*, 129.

race, but whereas EQ2 allows players to color a few different races black, only the Human race in WOW is capable of this transformation (with rather disappointing results). Given the limited options for physical customization available, as well as the lack of variety of skin tones, and exacerbated by the privileging of European culture and bodies, the task of creating black or brown equivalent bodies in WOW yields unsatisfying approximations. As with EQ2, the motivation behind limiting blackness to a variant is rooted in an ineffective but nonetheless popular integrationist policy. Merely allowing for the choice of a black avatar is considered sufficient and no attention is given to encouraging diverse world populations or perhaps dismantling the fantasy tradition of conflating race with species type. As the editors of *Race in Cyberspace* argue in their introduction, often more progressive perspectives, enlightened by a social constructivist understanding of the origins of race, want to “turn off” racial discussion because “race shouldn’t matter.” However, the editors state: “While we sympathize with the noble belief in egalitarian tolerance at the heart of such a response, we also recognized that the way the world *should* work and the way the world *does* work are two very different things.”<sup>41</sup> The multicultural discourse of new liberalism, under the assumption that race doesn’t matter as much as it used to, unproductively abides by, as Robyn Wiegman terms it, an integrationist aesthetic:

By securing the visible, epidermal iconography of difference to the commodity tableau of contemporary technologies, the integrationist aesthetic works by apprehending political equality as coterminous with representational presence, thereby undermining political analyses that pivot on the exclusion, silence, or invisibility of various groups and their histories. Given the logic of white supremacy, very little presence is in fact required for the necessary threshold of difference to be achieved.<sup>42</sup>

Operating under this logic, the designers of fantasy MMORPGs such as EQ2 and WOW use new advancements in graphics technology to represent race through shades of color that, in

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41 Nakamura, Kolko, and Rodman, *Race in Cyberspace*, 1-3.

42 Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 117.

the context of the high fantasy game world, deviate from a white norm. It is important to acknowledge that this is also a trend motivated by the interests of capital in maintaining a consumable product. To this end, the meaning of design decisions such as those of racial customization must also be looked at as driven by the market and dependent on political economy. In reference to this issue, Edward Castranova states that “in my experience, the embedded messages seem to be consistent with the norms of the society that emerges, but it is not clear that the messages actually induce the norms. Rather, since MMORPGs are profit-seeking entities, it seems likely that the embedded messages are designed to make the world comfortable to as many people as possible.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, these changes are not only politically flawed but also funded by what will be the most appealing. To rectify these problems game companies can be educated about competent strategies of racial representation, but actually disrupting what is comfortable might infringe on the all important bottom line. It is most likely be up to the indie community to offer alternatives to the often exclusionary and insensitive values and mechanics of the mainstream who maintain a “hegemony of play.”<sup>44</sup> Maintaining a position of colorblindness in MMORPG design, while done with good intention and meant to communicate the constructed and biologically dubious nature of racial distinction, is complicit in dominant racially regressive politics by not resisting the structural proliferation of white avatars—an inevitability given the historically Euro-centric nature of fantasy as well as the racist expectations and assumptions brandished in videogames.

Leonard, using a study conducted by Children Now, reports that less than 40% of video game characters are black and 80% of that small number are sports characters.<sup>45</sup> One can safely assume that a majority of the other 20% fall into versions of what Adam Clayton-Powell III has

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43 Castranova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 78.

44 Fron, et. al., “The Hegemony of Play.”

45 Leonard, “Live in Your World, Play in Ours,” *Revealing Numbers* section para. 2

called “high-tech blackface.”<sup>46</sup> Black characters within videogames almost exclusively function as synthetic sites of racial tourism and minstrelsy, wherein white fantasies and desires of hyper-masculinity and sexuality can be inscribed on the black body and performed without punishment. Almost all leading black men are sports players or gun toting gangstas and black women are completely invisible. Blackness, as it is culturally rehearsed within games, does not fit into the heroic world of the MMORPG. Furthermore, given the current proliferation of black stereotypes within games, it is naïve to think that players, when given the choice, will view blackness as a suitable identity to assume within the game world. At the very least, inserting a default black race structurally encourages a black presence. Without one, and given the current post-racial climate, blackness disappears almost completely and cybertypes are generated and freely circulated within this void. Players are left to assume that blackness no longer holds any importance or value in the type of social heroic fantasy of MMORPGs; rather, blackness instead has been exposed as a constructed white-variant and returned to obscurity. This, in effect, severs blackness from its potential to be a politically radical signifier and shuts out productive political content from the game world. Furthermore, the growing number of videogames which prominently feature various forms of commodified and “safe” blackness attest to the filtration of black characters within the medium and the very limited forms of black representation that are deemed consumable. Blackless MMORPGs illustrate that black heroes, devoid of rippling muscles, a gangsta ethic, and bling, do not fit into the needs and desires of white hegemony and are thus removed from circulation.

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46 Leonard, “High Tech Blackface,” 1.

## **The Politics of the Visible**

One of the pitfalls of encouraging the presence of blackness and other minorities within MMORPGs has been detailed in Patricia Hill Collins' research on black feminism and visibility. Her work scrutinizes the claim that the increased visibility of black women, and other raced individuals as well, within public spaces and the media is entirely desirable. Collins posits that black women entering the public sphere are facing a "new politics of containment" that has appropriated visibility to the ends of white supremacy and black disadvantage while "claiming to do the opposite."<sup>47</sup> Rather than using a tactic of segregation, as was the case when blacks were exterior to centers of power, surveillance subdues blacks that have now entered the public and private spheres that were formerly white exclusive. Given the white dominance of the technologized public sphere and tools of media, the visibility of blacks remains at the mercy of dominant culture and its disciplinary mechanisms. Consequently, the complex and surreptitious contemporary practices of racial segregation and subjugation are hidden, while their effects such as poverty and violence are emphasized and scrutinized publicly.<sup>48</sup> The result is that "black women remain visible yet silenced; their bodies become written by other texts, yet they remain powerless to speak for themselves."<sup>49</sup> More often than not, inscribed upon these bodies are the anxieties, fears, and desires of white hegemony. Obviously, one can connect this theorization to the problem of gangsta blackness and the black sports player in games. Anne Anlin Cheng, in her defense of passing as a productive escape from surveillance, echoes Collins' critique of visibility. Cheng explains how a rhetoric of visibility "elides the contradictions underpinning social visibility and remains ineffective in the face of the phenomenological, social, and psychic

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<sup>47</sup> Collins, *Fighting Words*, 13-14.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 38.

paradoxes inhering in what it means to be visible.”<sup>50</sup> In her terms then, minority players can use the game and its pervasive whiteness as a safe space to “pass.” For Cheng, passing or “‘disguise’ has become a mode of sociability” that escapes surveillance and containment and allows for, in some situations, ontological rewards.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, what must be championed is a cognizance and resistance to forms of mediated visibility in favor of more agentive, politically capable, and meaningful forms of representation. Visibility hollows out black representation and corporealizes it, projecting upon the body the desires of the dominant cultural imaginary. It is mere inclusion and presence wholly devoid of nuance and the undermining of expectation that representation allows.

In light of the work of Collins and Cheng, the character creation tools of fantasy MMORPGs can be viewed as simply enhancing visibility. Blackness is only produced within the game world as an exterior painting of the body equivalent to an aesthetic choice. It does not, for the most part, exist outside of that activity. This conflation of blackness with colorization suppresses political complications of difference in favor of the fetishization of the body. Compare this to EQ in which blackness was represented by the Erudite race instead of being a color selection. The Erudite race is not entirely dictated by player choice as they populate an entire continent and, as one of the static races of the game, are included in all multi-race environments. They also possess their own culture and history rather than assuming that of another race awarding blackness some semblance of importance. Such structural differences within the game world eradicate some of the pitfalls of visibility and invest the black body with meaning outside of fetishistic constructs of exoticism and unintelligibility. Conversely, WOW and EQ attribute no significance to differences in colorization endorsing the well rehearsed “we are all the same on

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<sup>50</sup> Cheng, “Passing, Natural Selection, and Love’s Failure,” 553-4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 554.

the inside” mantra. But this gesture is ultimately undermined by the reliance of the world on endless racial conflict articulated around incommensurate biological, cultural, and philosophical divides. Naturally, the players adopt this combative subjectivity and fully embrace the constructed and encouraged environment of racially motivated violence. Implicated in Collins’ critique of visibility-as-containment is the fact that the public sphere is a collective cultural consciousness fashioned through media text, sound, and imagery. Due to a deficiency in minority involvement in the creation of this media content, racial visibility is primarily shaped by the perspectives and desires of whites. Game worlds, while programmed and maintained by mostly white developers and publishers, are real-time media events. Although the tools of visual stylization are restricted and limited and the ability to manipulate one’s character is determined by the parameters of code, the player is still able to performatively engage his/her character as he/she sees fit without the intrusive censoring body implied in the broadcast media forms Collins studies. While this does not free the player from power, it nonetheless facilitates a far more dynamic and discursive visibility that creates a semi-autonomous form of representation. Yet all this, so far, appears to be so much hot air. Even if the opportunity is there for performative interventions that call attention to the excesses and political baggage of gamespace, Leeroy Jenkins stands as the most visible surfacing of blackness thus far.

Due to the cultural disparities between the physical world and the game world, one must acknowledge that part of the appeal of gamic fantasy for some players must be the statistically, politically, and rhetorically different cultural landscapes they present. Castranova has stated that:

going to a synthetic world may not necessarily be an exit from prison, but it is certainly an exit, and all exits are inherently political statements, according to political scientist A.O. Hirschman. Using a synthetic world can therefore be construed as a rebellious act, an exit from ordinary life, a rejection of the world that has been built on Earth.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Castranova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 76-77.

While the rhetoric of escape and asylum evident in this statement would imply that most physical world refugees are seeking greater freedom, expression, and acceptance in synthetic worlds, it must also be assumed that some are also in search of the antithesis. In the midst of bigotry, activist design and play can begin with the simplest of strategies: calling attention to the constitutive excesses of gamespace, scrutinizing the restrictions or parameters of the machine and code, and countering racist expectation of parody or stereotype. There truly are myriad unexplored possibilities available to MMORPGs, if structured properly, to become productive sites of race education. For Jerry Kang, “Cyberspace creates novel communication platforms that open up new possibilities in both individual identity and social interaction. By designing cyberspace appropriately, we may be able to alter American racial mechanics.”<sup>53</sup> What the work of Collins and Cheng teaches us then is to proceed cautiously in the political project of making race an issue in MMORPGs and to ensure that each platform is designed to allow for responsible representation rather than disciplined visibility.

One of the most promising opportunities for performative intervention can be found in the fact that digital media technologies, according to Mark B.N. Hansen, have created networked environments of social interaction where “the only way to acquire an identity is to ‘pass,’ to perform or imitate a role, norm or stereotype that is itself a cultural performance.”<sup>54</sup> This emphasis that activities like character creation place on the malleability of identity and performance situate everyone, Hansen argues, “in the position previously reserved for certain raced subjects.”<sup>55</sup> Although Hansen’s theories rely very much on online environments that do not actually call attention to and involve the material body, they still map fairly well onto MMORPGs where distinguishing someone’s identity outside of the game is difficult. What is useful about

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53 Kang, “Cyber Race,” 58.

54 Hansen, “Digitizing the Racialized Body,” 112.

55 Ibid.

Hansen's argument is that he is exploring the possibilities of passing in relation to performativity, rather than relying solely on notions of productive passing. Performatively engaged black passing has the potential to corrupt the cybertypes of discursive unsuitability by highlighting the process of passing everyone in online space engages in to some extent. In addition, reflection on this activity could expose how the real world is dependent on socially and culturally negotiated race and gender identities that must be performed correctly for fear of disciplinary retribution. Thus, a revision of the idea of productive passing in cyberspace (i.e. masquerading as an online identity different from the one you identify with in the physical world) is in order. Infiltration through passing, while presenting opportunities for subversion, has done little to combat the whitening of cyberspace. Passing may grant access to resources but has little structural or political impact. Performances of radical and progressive blackness, however, offer the potential for a full-scale alteration of the landscape of difference within these virtual spaces. As an effect, gamespace will not only become far more diverse, but a new site of performative negotiation where activists can stage projects that interface with the burdens of raced subjectivity and the mechanisms of policed stereotype and repetition that all identity hinges upon.

Although for these performances to be most effective, game design and mechanics must also support and encourage black characters from all players that do not rely on cybertype—here we return to combating hegemonic play. When a WOW player chooses an agile Night Elf or a muscled white Human, they, in many cases, are indulging in their own fantasies of altered identity. After all, it is the point of the genre to enact and perform fantasies. Obviously, not everyone who plays these games does so, but as implicated in the need to customize and create avatars and characters, everyone, to some extent, is engaging in a fantasy of identity creation. To this end, players fantasize about being an attractive and strong paladin or a quick and nimble

hunter. Importantly, however, their attributes and performances are motivated both by their own conceptualization of the character and of the attributes, history, context, and culture given to the races by the game itself. Consequently, when blackness has no preset qualities to influence role-play (as in the intelligent and elegant Erudites), the player is completely free, if not encouraged, to indulge in dominant fantasies of blackness and enact a form of virtual minstrelsy. These performance most commonly make references to slavery or mintsrel archetypes, tropes, and Black vernacular (e.g. players often use “massa” or make reference to watermelon), or they fuse race and gender together in the form of the hypersexualized and fetishized stereotypes like the “black” stud (Figure 3.5). For politically cognizant performances of blackness to proliferate within these worlds they must be supported by proper contextual game environments. Until then the onus is on activists to initiate intrusions that have the potential to suffocate cybertyping.<sup>56</sup>



Figure 3.5: Player in *World of Warcraft* with a brown skinned avatar and the name “Blackcawk.”

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<sup>56</sup> See chapter four.

## **Politicizing Representation**

Representations within games are both reflective and constitutive of culture, but the mere recognition of these stereotypes is not enough. Instead, the scholarly community must be tasked to revise critiques that judge representations as “good” or “bad” based on an essential ideal which solidifies and thus entraps raced identity. Representations must be analyzed in regards to how they are constructed as well as the structural and political circumstances that generate and support them. Only when these regimes and practices are exposed can they be systematically demolished. This is the core motivation behind this project and the displaced racialization analytic.

Reversing the trajectory of disappearing race in MMORPGs is daunting but entirely feasible if efforts are directed toward a struggle over politics from both sites of production: the game companies and the players. As Ernest Adams blatantly states, “[game] publishers follow the money” and the money continues to be in manufacturing blackless environments that feed a predominantly white audience’s desire for superiority.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, it’s of vital importance that we investigate the power structures behind games, and to devise the correct ways to actually alter this market rather than simply document and address its faults. The attention of the public, media, and academia must strive to contextualize the profit centered business strategies of game companies within racial discourse.

I am fully aware of the danger of attempting to offer practical suggestions for change, but I persist nonetheless because I feel it is a useful intellectual activity and, if nothing else, a lightning rod for debate. While I will offer a few solutions, this is not meant to be an exhaustive or definitive list. Neither is it intended to be prescriptive. Instead, it is an experiment in positing

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<sup>57</sup> Adams, “Not Just Rappers and Athletes,” para. 8.

actionable strategies for change along with my critique. My hope would be that the following suggestions can themselves be critiqued, modified, adapted, expanded, and eventually implemented rather than read as definitive assertions meant to be accepted or denied. To begin I would suggest that game companies must understand the importance of tearing fantasy from its Euro-centric and colonial roots as well as destroying the connotation of humanity with whiteness. In conjunction, races that have a fixed and recognizable connection to real world ethnicity should be recognized as a viable and productive form of representation and characterization. The industry itself must task itself to separate from an integrationist aesthetic wherein race is considered to be progressively addressed via “token” strategies of inclusive representation. Shades of color that deviate from a white norm, as part of this project, rely too much on a fictional colorblind player base. In turn, these whitewashed worlds reify common sense notions of race and exclude blackness from the discourse, only exposing it in racist spectacle. *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, while not a MMORPG, is still a massive virtual high fantasy world that implements some of these strategies. The game does not contain any races explicitly named “Human” but instead a variety of choices, some reminiscent of Europeans such as the Nords, Bretons, or Imperials, all of whom can be colorized. Most importantly, players can also select the entirely black and brown Redguard race.<sup>58</sup> The result is a game world populated seamlessly with dynamic and fair characters of all races that simultaneously creates a unique realm of fantasy while maintaining meaningful connections to the diversity of the physical world. Although *Oblivion* is still firmly fixed within the traditions of high fantasy in that race continues to be an immutable and deterministic quality of being. To my knowledge, there have yet to be any MMORPGs developed that attempt to disrupt or play with the notion of race as geographically and

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<sup>58</sup> Redguards, unfortunately, are still attributed the rather stereotypical traits of being athletic and proficient with weaponry.

biologically fixed. Such an experiment would undoubtedly be fascinating and capable of profound transformations in the way race circulates conceptually and how it is cognitively processed and performed, but difficult to introduce into a mass market obsessed with the competitive antagonism of distinct races as the condition of play.

Attention must be also drawn to inequities within the industry itself. There are few prominent game designers that are not North American, European, or Asian.<sup>59</sup> This is a reality that Raiford Guins situates as an effect of the deep roots of play in western traditions as well as the origins of game technology in predominantly upper-class white educational institutions.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, statistical evidence as to the racial composition of those who play and design games currently is limited to market or industry reporting. A Nielsen report released the relatively startlingly information that African Americans and Latinos spend a greater proportion of entertainment money on games than Caucasians.<sup>61</sup> However, the Entertainment Software Association's website contains a variety of numbers that dissect the player community by age and gender but make no mention of race. Without this type of information, especially conducted by academic sources, to identify and analyze not only who is playing games but what types of characters they are playing, conscious and unconsciously exclusionary game creation will persist. The lack of statistical data on race reinforces the notion that race continues to be considered a non-issue within cyberspace and gaming. This deference to whiteness as the cultural root of games and the subject position of the player base is in direct conflict with the rich history of black technocultural production as evidenced by the Afrofuturist movement and the cyberfantasies of hip-hop and techno. Guins excavates how the digital was a consistent source of fascination and

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59 The International Game Developers Association reports that only 2% of developers are black: <http://www.igda.org/diversity/report.php>.

60 Guins, "May I Invade Your Space?"

61 See <http://www2.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=104&STORY=/www/story/04-07-2005/0003338769>.

experimentation for black artists and how the aesthetic strategies they pioneered significantly inform the sonic landscapes of games.<sup>62</sup> Studies of race in games that are interested in cultural politics should focus on the diversity of the player population and their patterns of play and behavior, issues of democratic access, industry inequities, as well as historically tracking the relationship between black cultural production and the video game industry.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of all in examining the disappearance of race in MMORPGs and be found in their reflection of the cultural politics of contemporary America. The game world is not simply a sandbox where entirely new socio-political situations are designed and enacted and then exported into the physical world. Games are also necessitated and deeply informed by the epistemic contours of contemporaneous American culture and its history. In my opinion, Gilles Deleuze addresses this issue best in his “Postscript on the Societies of Control” when he states that “types of machines are easily matched with each type of society—not that machines are determining, but because they express those social forms capable of generating them and using them.”<sup>63</sup> For this reason, MMORPGs can be overhauled and refined infinitely and still not account for the unfinished project of racial understanding initiated by activists like W.E.B. Du Bois and the Civil Rights Movement. What game worlds can offer, however, are dynamic and exciting tools with the potential of supplying progressive discursive space for imagining and implementing new forms, methods, and strategies of equitable human community and culture, both within and without, to further the movement. As it stands, by no means is this how these worlds are functioning or how they are understood. It’s time to change that; let’s get started.

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62 Guins, “May I Invade Your Space?”.

63 Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 6.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PERFORMATIVE PLAY

2006

I'm in graduate school and playing a lot of *World of Warcraft* (WOW). One of my favorite regions in the game is a less tread and unspectacular area in the Hillsbrad Foothills containing a small camp that looks like my favorite childhood road trip destination, Fort Mackinaw in northern Michigan. Mackinaw was first a British outpost built for defense against revolutionaries and Native Americans, and then a U.S. outpost against the British and Native Americans. The camp in Hillsbrad caged only Orcs, their battered cells the only remnants. It sits on the edge of a massive, purple half sphere that protects the magical and mysterious city of Dalaran from the dangers of those same Orcs. I, however, spend my time there killing humans.

One night, perhaps a night I had spent questing in Hillsbrad, I come across a brief video posted online titled something like "WOW Slave Chase." But the video doesn't feature humans and Orcs. Instead, an old looking white Human male, clad in tan overalls and a fedora, chases a pack of nearly indistinguishable brown humans through the Dwarven city of Ironforge. It looks like a silent film as the mass of "slaves" comically spill through the blue black corridors chased by the angered "massa."

I can't betray a laugh; I think about Br'er rabbit.



Figure 4.1: Black avatars gather for a raid on Stormwind in *World of Warcraft*.

Affectionately referred to by its users as "the asshole of the internet," the 4chan.org collection of message boards has gone from an underground community of anonymous users, or "anons," looking for some laughs to a cultural trendsetter with 5.9 million monthly users and a legacy that stretches back to 2003. The dominant mode of engagement between users is trolling, especially on the most infamous board designated as "random" and known by the designation /b/. Trolling, an endemic feature of internet discourse and anonymity that /b/ has made into an art form, entails consciously baiting others into frustration or anger. To this end, /b/'s discussion threads are steeped in political insensitivity with two of the favorite troll terms, and perhaps the most frequently used terms on /b/, being "faggot" and "nigger" (Figure 4.2). The skeptical, angry,

repetitive, and depressive discourse that dominates /b/ is emblematic of a larger trend: a generational cynicism prevalent in those who have grown up with an internet that's not the promised democratic utopia of the early internet, but a banal time waster that hardly allays the drudgery of daily post-industrial western life.<sup>1</sup> 4chan copes with the ever encroaching shadow of overmediated boredom by manufacturing and endlessly re-manufacturing entertainment through elaborate inside jokes, often with the intent of trolling those outside of, or new to, 4chan and /b/. One of these inside jokes, or memes, is the virtual community “/b/lack up” raid.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 4.2: "Motivational" style graphic created using a 4chan thread and found posted on /b/.

- 1 Vincent Mosco believes the shift from a discourse of the mythic to the banal is the precondition for technologies to "become important forces for social and economic change" (2004, 6).
- 2 Derived from Richard Dawkin's theory of cultural transmission and evolution through information sharing, a meme, in its colloquial internet use, is an idea or media object, often humorous or otherwise compelling in nature, that circulates virally and proliferates in various forms and incarnations.

The raids developed organically, as with everything on /b/, through spontaneous collaboration on the message board. In the never ending quest for laughs or “lulz,” anons transformed the beloved past time of overwhelming chat rooms with various kinds of nonsense into similar raids of virtual communities and online games, most notably *Habbo Hotel*, *Second Life*, and *WOW*. While the intent of these raids is most often to overwhelm, frustrate, and infuriate the native community, they originated as organized protests of the virtual community *Habbo Hotel*. Such explicit political intent is now a rarity, but there are some carry over from those early protests in the lulz-oriented raids that continue to happen. Most notably when raids are initiated they often begin with a call for “/b/lack up,” a reference to the dark skinned avatars, or “nigras,” the anons used to protest *Habbo's* perceived discriminatory moderation policy (Figure 4.3). If the initial catalytic post is successful, anons then flood into the targeted community with dark-skinned avatars. Once gathered, they stage various sit-ins, mobs, and/or performances (i.e. slaves chasing a slave owner) which develop improvisationally given the whims of the participants. However, no matter the style of raid, whether political or just for lulz, the parade of black avatars is the constant. Black skin and its associated stereotypes are deployed for shock and comedic value in an effort to illicit anger and frustration from other users not in on the joke.

It's easy to dismiss the raids as a bunch of twenty-something white men looking for lulz or anonymously venting racist feelings, but that's not all I am interested in doing. Since seeing the slave chase video, I have been fascinated by the raids, and less so because of the racist stereotypes they deploy. Even though the raids are blatantly racist, this shocking and offensive part of the performance—the troll—obfuscates the potentially more interesting and productive nature of the raids as performative intervention. The raids, unlike anything I have witnessed

within videogame culture, successfully stage an intervention into virtual communities. In light of the pervasive whiteness of these spaces both in terms of content/representation and in terms of player-base, there's something to the use of blackness in these interventions that's worth exploring.<sup>3</sup>

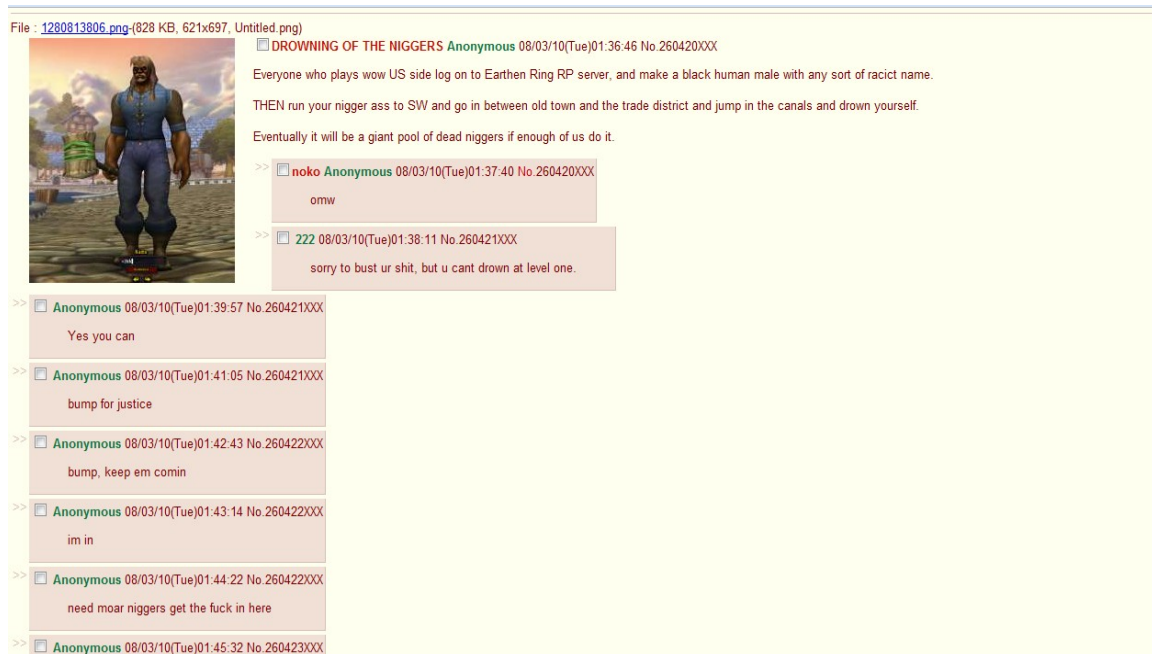


Figure 4.3: Initial call to arms on /b/ for a raid of WOW on August 3, 2010. Text reads: “Everyone who plays wow US side log on to Earthen Ring RP server, and make a black Human male with any sort of racist name. THEN run your nigger ass to SW and go in between old town and the trade district and jump in the canals and drown yourself. Eventually it will be a giant pool of dead niggers if enough of us do it.”

3 According to Dmitri Williams, Nick Yee, and Scott Caplan's (2008) survey of *EverQuest 2* players, the ratio of Asian, Black, and Latino players was less than the US Census breakdown of the population, while White players were overrepresented within the game and Native American player vs. population ratios were fairly consistent. We don't have accurate data for the virtual communities /b/ raids, but one can assume the numbers would be fairly similar. In terms of character representation, there's no way of accurately collecting data about whether humanoid characters are “black” or “white,” but my extensive observation confirms that player and non-player characters in *World of Warcraft*, *Habbo Hotel*, or *Second Life* with brown skin are rare.

## **/b/lack Up**

Prior to embarking on this research project, I had sat on the fringes of 4chan and /b/ for years, aware but ignorant of its pleasures and horrors. When I saw the slave chase video, however, I fell straight down the rabbit hole. I spent most of 2010 on /b/ “lurking,” i.e. observing silently. I sat idly at the edge of the board's depths, hoping to catch the shimmer of a thread announcing a WOW raid. In the meantime I saw the birth, death and resurrection of and nostalgia for memes. I underwent the familiar life cycle of a “/b/tard”—initial disgust seeding lingering curiosity enabled by moral numbness giving way to obsessive monitoring of favored threads/memes, ending in an aged distance and disinterested pining for halcyon days.

Finally in August—having all but given up on witnessing an actual raid—I opened a window to /b/, hit F5 to refresh the list of threads, and my luck turned. I caught the tail end of what looked to be the largest raid of WOW ever accomplished (Figure 4.4). My mouse wheel spun as the mountain of replies to the original call for participants blurred by. Most of the thread was mundane: questions about where to go, proud declarations of name selection, and exclamations of joy at finding the raid. At the end of the thread, there was much celebration over a job well done. By some counts nearly two hundred brown skinned anon avatars gathered in the city of Stormwind, and ran in a crazed mass through the world annoying and entertaining onlookers (Figure 4.5).



Figure 4.4: “Motivational” style image created by an anon to commemorate August 3, 2010 raid.



Figure 4.5: August 3, 2010 WoW raid passing through Westfall.

The raid was much like the other raids I had previously archived and studied through

video clips and screenshots. They involve a spontaneous call to arms on /b/ and then a prompt assembling of brown skinned level one humans, inappropriately named (Figure 4.6) and mostly bald, in the Alliance capital city of Stormwind. There's almost always a parade through the city with stops in areas of high player density such as the bank or auction house. Racist slurs are shouted. The bold groups embark on a cross-continental journey involving a boat ride (Figure 4.7) which doubles as a slave ship. The raid usually ends with mass deaths at the hands of monsters, other players, or simple negligence. But sometimes the lulz just run out, or, as in the case of the raid I witnessed, accounts get banned by customer service representatives.



Figure 4.6: Player named “Nappyhair” with guild tag “Don’t Lynch Me” participating in the August 3, 2010 WOW raid.



Figure 4.7: August 3, 2010 WOW raid boat ride.

A mere week after the August 3, 2010 raid it was almost completely forgotten. There was a YouTube video with just under four hundred views and thirteen comments but it is now removed. Little mention was made of the raid the following day. Its existence was limited to its happening. But this doesn't mean it's without impact. It's exactly this ephemeral, temporal experience that makes these raids compelling. They transform space, troll, and, most importantly, challenge and reveal the racial boundaries of the community and the restrictions of its moderation.

Blizzard, the developer of WOW, ended the raid I witnessed by banning the accounts of participants for racist expression; however, the distinctions drawn between offensive and inoffensive language are slippery and suspect. Consider the case of Sara Andrews who was herself subject to policing by Blizzard for recruiting members on public chat channels for her

LGBT friendly guild, Oz. Initially an in-game customer service representative, also known as a Game Master or GM, warned Andrews that her recruitment violated the Terms of Use Agreement which explicitly bans the use of offensive language:

When engaging in Chat, you may not:

- (i) Transmit or post any content or language which, in the sole and absolute discretion of Blizzard, is deemed to be offensive, including without limitation content or language that is unlawful, harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, defamatory, vulgar, obscene, hateful, sexually explicit, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable, nor may you use a misspelling or an alternative spelling to circumvent the content and language restrictions listed above.<sup>4</sup>

After significant media attention, Blizzard issued an apology to Andrews. However the incident emphasized that for Blizzard, and other videogame companies, it isn't so much the way race, gender, or sexuality is used that's the issue, but its *unsanctioned* use and, most importantly, its use in a context connected to the outside world. In the case of Andrew, words like "gay" and "transgender" are deemed offensive simply for their introduction of politics into a highly regulated space rather than any malicious intent or insensitivity. From the perspective of the GM, and many denizens of the internet, *any* mention of sexuality or politics is deemed inappropriate even if it's in the context of creating community and comfort for the excluded. Operating within this unfair and oppressive leveling of politics between the advantaged and disadvantaged and the offensive and non-offensive and the full-scale ejection of race, gender, and sexuality from gamespace, the /b/ raids are potentially dangerous to power because they deterritorialize gamespace and reterritorialize it with its shunned displacements: namely blackness. What's unfortunate is that this reintroduction of blackness is thoroughly entrenched in racist discourse that mocks the importance or significance of racial difference, and its associated histories and violence. Nonetheless, the /b/ raids open up the possibility for something more progressive which strips away the racist trolling, and exposes the real tensions between the excluded and included

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4 "World of Warcraft Terms of Service."

within virtual communities, and the corporate regulation of online discourse.

### **Performative Playing**

It's my central claim that to fight the inequitable and oppressive conditions of gamespace we cannot rely solely on identifying and categorizing stereotypical representation.<sup>5</sup> To formulate an alternate progressive vision of games we need interventions into sites of oppression. It's to this end that I think we need to focus on revising and transforming the /b/ raids into what I have termed performative play. Just as theories of gender and race performativity have revealed how identities are constructed through citational practices caught within networks of power and without any essential origin, gaming can do the same.

My vision of performative play is a form of tactical media practice that leverages a sophisticated understanding of the cultural power and functioning of computation to reveal the embedded politics of gamespace. Mindful of the intricacies of displaced racialization outlined throughout this project, performative play, perhaps under the guise of a raid, can bring forth and rework race in gamespace by exposing its exclusions, biases, and ideologies. If a game sets the conditions for race, then the performative player explores the limits and possibilities of those conditions through hyper-visible racial performance less interested in passing or escape than in confrontation and revision.<sup>6</sup> My hope is that the theory of gameplay developed hereafter through the analysis of /b/lackup raids and theories of performativity and digital media, will contribute to virtuosic tactical engagements with videogames that subvert hegemonic formations of race,

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<sup>5</sup> See chapter one's discussion of *Dragon Age II* and Higgin, "The Trap of Representation."

<sup>6</sup> See Cameron Bailey's foundational 1996 essay "Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace" for an example of early calls for productive passing in virtual space. Lisa Nakamura later complicated passing online in that it's "driven by harsh structural inequities" (2002, 31). It's my contention that these structures are actually bolstered by the practice of passing which effectively conceals the presence of non-white users of the internet and videogames.

gender, sexuality, capital, and power within videogames.

### **Freedom from Race**

Working with race is particularly challenging within the medium of the videogame because, as Wendy Chun argues in reference to online cultures, "cyberspace erases all reference to content, apparatus, process, or form, offering instead a metaphor and a mirage."<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that cyberspace or videogames do not call attention to form; rather, they do so through obfuscating metaphors and fantasies which obscure how technology and form are negotiate power relations. Hence we get within videogame discourse dazzling techno-fetishistic discussions of the power and elegance of character creation, control schemes, machine specifications, genre, and game mechanics. Any further examination is often constrained by analysis only interested in how these technologies impact the fun or enjoyment of the game. Rare are the cases outside of academic circles or conservative discussions of media effects in which games are critiqued ethically or politically, because to do so would spoil the fun and focus wastefully on something that does not impact the game's consumer value.<sup>8</sup>

The popular mirage is that games are escapist fantasies with negligible social impact or cultural importance. This, as Nick Dyer-Witheford and George de Peuter point out, is demonstrably false on many levels:

games, once suspect as delinquent time wasters are increasingly perceived by corporate managers and state administrators as formal and informal means of training populations in the practices of digital work and governability...A media that once seemed all fun is increasingly revealing itself as a school for labor, an instrument for rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced

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<sup>7</sup> Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 39.

<sup>8</sup> WOW pacifism is one of my favorite player initiated political acts within a gameworld. These players attempt to play WOW without engaging in any violence. The following article details one pacifist, Noor, who was inspired by Franz Reinisch, a German priest who was executed after refusing to serve in the Nazi army. See <http://www.wow.com/2008/01/08/15-minutes-of-fame-noor-the-pacifist/>.

techno-capital..."<sup>9</sup>

Yet many players seem ignorant, willfully or not, of the cultural and political significance of videogames. Anyone who has attempted cultural critique of videogames on the web is very familiar with the most common comment in defense of game-as-fantasy: "You're overreacting."

The psychology of such a ridiculous and reductive position could itself be a book, but of particular importance to this argument is the foundation of "you're overreacting" in a disposition towards the internet, and other digital cultures, as places of freedom and equity safe from messy political squabbles that make the game world and real world less fun. There's a connection between this attitude and Vincent Mosco's diagnosis of *The Digital Sublime*. Mosco tracks how cyberspace is "a central force in the growth of three of the central myths of our time...the end of history, the end of geography, and the end of politics."<sup>10</sup> (While Mosco attributes the proliferation of these myths to cyberspace, they are also worked through in gamespace.) These myths—if I were to reduce them down to their functional essence—serve as coping mechanisms but, more specifically, they extract meaning out of daunting complexity, solve monumental problems, and, most important to the subject of this chapter, "create in vision or dream what cannot be realized in practice."<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the unifying thread behind all three dominant myths is an illusory freedom whether it be from past violence, market borders, or cultural politics. Not coincidentally, all of these freedoms are especially desirable for free market loving white men of able means looking to escape responsibility for continued cultural oppressions.

### **Anons and Myth**

Myths of freedom within internet cultures twisted the sensibilities of equity and

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9 Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, xix.

10 Mosco, *The Digital Sublime*, 13.

11 Ibid., 14.

democracy of the aging 1960s hippies of the early internet to the chaotic, rabble rousing, and highly offensive antics epitomized by the /b/ raids.<sup>12</sup> Although still mostly chaotic, 4chan and /b/'s politics have cohered in recent years. 4chan's creation of Project Chanology, a sustained protest against notorious religious organization Scientology, has worked to clarify the investments of 4chan. These investments, as Gabriella Coleman astutely points out, amount to the exact opposite of everything Scientology stands for.<sup>13</sup> Julian Dibbell details the "war" between the two 'ologies in his article "The Assclown Offensive: How to Enrage the Church of Scientology" and emphasizes that 4chan's purposes and means are far more distributed and ephemeral than often acknowledged and should not be confused solely with Project Chanology. As Dibbell explains:

Filled with hundreds of thousands of brief, anonymous messages and crude graphics uploaded by the site's mostly male, mostly twenty something users, 4chan is a fountainhead of twisted, scatological, absurd, and sometimes brilliant low-brow humor. It was the source of the lolcat craze (affixing captions like "I Can Has Cheezburger?" to photos of felines), the rickrolling phenomenon (tricking people into clicking on links to Rick Astley's ghastly "Never Gonna Give You Up" music video), and other classic time-wasting Internet memes. In short, while there are many online places where you can educate yourself, seek the truth, and contemplate the world's injustices and strive to right them, 4chan is not one of them.<sup>14</sup>

But this picture grows ever more complex given the connections between activist hacker group Anonymous and 4chan. The name Anonymous traces its lineage directly to 4chan, whose wholly anonymous members refer to themselves as anons. Anonymous' activities have become increasingly newsworthy and powerful, spearheading Operation Payback which used distributed denial of service attacks (DDoS) to take down the websites of major corporations like Visa and PayPal. They've also been instrumental in the Occupy Wall Street movement, their signature Guy

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12 Here I am drawing from Howard Rheingold's (2000) foundational history of the WELL which serves as a illustrative example of a pronounced push in early web history by predominantly left-leaning, upper middle class, and white internet users to formulate participatory and equitable communities. Wisely, Rheingold acknowledges that this ethic is not native to the internet and that it can just as easily be used for control and exploitation.

13 See the videos of Coleman's lecture "Old and New Net Wars Over Free Speech, Freedom and Secrecy or How to Understand the Lulz Battle Against the COS": <http://vimeo.com/10837847>.

14 Dibbell, "The Assclown Offensive," para. 1.

Fawkes masks inspired by the *V for Vendetta* film and graphic novel serving as one of the most powerful symbols of the movement.

Diverse and contradictory, anons shift violently from politics to anti-politics. When browsing /b/ one can jump from thread to thread following a line of trajectory from apathy to Operation Payback to vehement and post-political denigration of sensitives based on race, gender, and sexuality. This isn't your grandmother's leftist anarchism and it isn't your grandpa's conservatism. If it can be generalized (and this is debatable), /b/ espouses a radical libertarianism with a deep knowledge base of everything from social networking to computer coding and engages that knowledge in virtuosic swarm-based tactics that overwhelm then dissipate. Anons exploit the myths of freedom (especially the end of politics) while rejecting the contradictions inherent in myth<sup>15</sup> which undermine their adherence to a de-politicized view of the net.<sup>16</sup> For instance, two of /b/'s favorite past-times are: (1) trolling cam chat rooms and toying with the malleability of identity online and (2) detailing the differences between races.

Part of the issue here is that anons are fractured on the issue of race. On one hand, you have the post-racial anons who espouse a depoliticized view of the net and consider race a funny

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15 Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* explores the elimination of contradictions within myth. He describes this process best when analyzing the spectacle of wrestling: "What is portrayed in wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction" (1972, 25).

16 As I am writing this, the most recent meme to take hold of /b/ involves a young girl (12 years old) named Jessi Slaughter who, due to her perceived transgressions of decency on her webcam site and various social networking sites, drew the ire of anons. While she was crying and complaining about her life being ruined on a webcam, her father stormed onto camera and began yelling at her victimizers. Her father's tirade, which included the phrase "You done goofed," as well as other memorable lines, has now been entered into the 4chan annals as a meme. What's fascinating about this, and many other similar incidents, is how /b/'s schizophrenic ethic is exposed. On one hand the internet is referred to ironically as being "serious business" and, on the other, people who are too public are punished for not respecting the importance of privacy. The internet is both fantasy and reality. The subtext of my argument attempts to expose how often internet users are selective about what is properly political and what is not and that often circulates around cultural politics. Race and gender do not exist and need not be respected, but privacy, particularly for white people, does. See [http://encyclopediadramatica.com/Jessi\\_Slaughter](http://encyclopediadramatica.com/Jessi_Slaughter).

antiquity. On the other hand, you have anons who believe race is real, but, due to the anonymity of the internet, struggle with an attendant anxiety over lost markers of visual and performative difference at the interface. Consequently this anxiety compels many anons, whom by all accounts are overwhelmingly white and male, to rehearse the fixity of real world racial division (without, of course, ever interrogating whiteness). Thus they reassure themselves of continued power in a medium of uncertainty which is haunted by non-white and feminine presence. Still it's these same perverse politics which make /b/ such a compelling community.

For instance, the ironic explosion of racial epithets on /b/ is worth thinking about. /b/'s compulsive and vehement use of the terms "faggot" and "nigger" transforms the terms even while it seeks to offend. By using the terms in a wholly anonymous environment, and applying the terms to just about anything including themselves, anons attempt to de-suture the term from its directed and alienating purposes.<sup>17</sup> The line between ironic satire of traditional racist language and actual indulgence is predictably blurred and perhaps not a tenable boundary. (This could even be seen as the goal.) Thus, the difficult and fascinating aspect of racism and homophobia on /b/ is that it's impossible to identify or describe. Irony abounds. Offensive and derogatory discourse is so frequent and wide-ranging that the terms begin to lose their content and are subsumed as pure form. Chela Sandoval considers this the process through which "*ideology* comes into being" wherein a "first-level Sign system" is "transform[ed] into *form* alone."<sup>18</sup> /b/ is therefore not entirely nonsensical but an ideologically driven collection of practices which paradoxically tear down operative ideologies and political systems.

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<sup>17</sup> The lack of diversity of /b/'s participants cannot be ignored when evaluating the political progressiveness of its interventions but should not discount the possibility of /b/ memes and raids to have productive power. It's also important to acknowledge that there are no definitive statistics of the composition of /b/ and 4chan and the claim that most participants are white, male, and between 15-35 is drawn from experience and the corroboration of other scholars studying 4chan.

<sup>18</sup> Sandoval, *The Methodology of the Oppressed*, 94.

Although she doesn't address /b/ directly, Lisa Nakamura's diagnosis of the excessive use of “nigger” in internet culture in general is similar to my complex perspective. According to Nakamura, the use of nigger in internet discourse is a mixture of racism, attention-seeking, trolling, and enlightened racism that sees itself as beyond racist discourse given a post-racial disposition.<sup>19</sup> None of these descriptors casts a positive light on the racial discourse of internet culture, and rightfully so. And given the wide range of tactical intentions, it's near impossible to correctly identify exactly what kind of discourse is operating at any given time on /b/ or in any other internet community. Each deployment of blackness or “fag” and so on, as I have been illustrating through my ambivalent analysis of /b/, is most likely representative of all potential ideological positions at once.

### **From New Racism to Performative Play**

That being said, the prevalent libertarian ethics of 4chan often results in a kind of New Racism, where the old racism of substantive biological difference, explicit prejudice, and segregation is been replaced by a colorblindness that conceals structural racial inequity in favor of a moralistic lack of reference to race altogether.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the *Encyclopedia Dramatica* entry for “Nigra” explains that the term is not racist because:

the Internets is largely Anonymous and because the term was invented by a /b/tard (a cyber being of indeterminate and irrelevant sex/age/heritage) in the virtual, 'colourblind' environment of Habbo Hotel as a way to say 'nigga' without alerting their dirty word Department of Habboland Security feds, any suggestion that the word 'nigra' is racist is not only completely without merit, it's racist against the inhabitants of Internets.<sup>21</sup>

Potential racism is peculiarly and illogically disproved in the case of nigra because the word was not intentionally meant to be racist (as if racism only exists when intended) and was

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<sup>19</sup> Nakamura, “Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game.”

<sup>20</sup> See Brown, *Whitewashing Race* and Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*.

<sup>21</sup> “Nigra.”

created by someone of indeterminate and irrelevant race (as if racism is the exclusive domain of specific races). Moreover, in a common tactic of colorblind deflection, any contrary claims are themselves racist because racism is conflated with seeing race.

Even so, while the raids operate under the guise of a race-less internet, they betray themselves through a determined reintroduction of blackness into pervasively white spaces. To put this claim another way, consider this provocation: if race doesn't matter then why choose black avatars? Clearly anons, at some level, understand the continued importance of race on and offline and deploy it for its arresting power. And it's this power that I think can be borrowed and reworked through performances that do not fetishize non-white bodies but create agentive subjects; that do not enable identity tourism but facilitate understanding; that do not protect whiteness but investigate it; that do not deny race but work through it.

Thus formerly invisible, disavowed, or cordoned race is introduced within and against a discourse of colorblindness and ironic racism. Strategically speaking, performative play fights against mythic mystification and depoliticization in videogames via the critical appropriation of tactics from /b/ in a manner that would undoubtedly be declared "serious business" (i.e. an improper use the wondrous resources of anonymity and political escape afforded by the internet). While /b/ might deploy race in the interest of demonstrating its supposed absurdity online, performative play would deploy race to emphasize its centrality to online interaction and games.

### **Bodies and Power**

This use of race is less interested in identity play than it is in showing how identity in games is caught within networks of power. Effective performative play is a response to

characterizations of the internet and videogames as erasing race or affording opportunities for new kinds of racial identification or configuration without grounding those fantasies with an acknowledgment of how power permeates digitally mediated bodies. Consider Mark B.N. Hansen's "Digitizing the Racialized Body or the Politics of Universal Address" which identifies great potential in the "decoupling of identity from any analogical relation to the visible body" because "on-line self invention effectively places everyone in the position previously reserved for certain raced subjects."<sup>22</sup> Given Hansen's characterization of race as an entirely fictional construction that has no grounding in physicality, when people go online they are manufacturing race in the same fashion as black minstrels darkening their faces with burnt cork. Hansen believes this presents an opportunity to play with and rework race. I agree that there is potential here but also serious limitations.

In particular, games and virtual worlds, like those the /b/ raids infiltrate, severely complicate this formula. First, bodies are not left behind but present in their social and cultural contexts, e.g. some access these spaces and others do not; some players are deaf; many players deal with children; most players' time is limited by school and job obligations, and so on. All of these factors affect the presence and movement of bodies in gamespace and /b/, like many sectors of the internet or videogame community, represent a white male hegemony. Secondly, as has been demonstrated throughout this project, race is not entirely free for the user to invent but produced and visualized. It's just as important to analyze how much is already determined before identity is created: what tools are available and how do players negotiate with those tools? To understand games and other digital cultures as presenting a blank slate is to give the interface, software, and hardware layers a pass. (And /b/ raids do a surprisingly good job, in their focus on extreme

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<sup>22</sup> Hansen, "Digitizing the Racialized Body," 112.

repetition and uniformity of character selection, in highlighting these restrictions.) Third, with the proliferation of camera and audio technology, many interactions on the internet are not without engagement with the analogic body and instead must be seen as mediations of that body. This point of analysis is less applicable to the concerns of this chapter but is of great concern as broadband adoption increases alongside the proliferation of computers and phones with built-in cameras. Finally, as Beth Kolko has pointed out, often when race is thought to be left out or altered it's being transformed into whiteness.<sup>23</sup> This is particularly pronounced in videogames where the development community is disproportionately white and the games themselves contain predominantly white heroes.<sup>24</sup> With these limitation in place, we can better understand how race might be malleable, as Hansen identifies, but only within these restrictions which more often than not privilege whiteness.

Thomas Foster's work is particularly useful in understanding the influence of whiteness on limiting the types of racial expression within digital media. He has claimed that "white people...establish the racial norms for others through 'identity tourism'" and I agree but would also extend this process of racial norming to the contexts in which the games are produced and by whom they are produced.<sup>25</sup> He's also apt to point out how the "denaturalizing and deessentializing of race" which someone like Hansen participates in, "does not prevent participants from reproducing the most traditional racist and orientalist stereotypes in performing race online" because everything is filtered through users who potentially have derogatory and racist readings of the performances.<sup>26</sup> I would once again extend this perspective to the constraints on expression

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23 See Kolko, "Er@sing Race."

24 According to a 2005 survey by the International Game Development Association only 2% of game developers are black even though 13.5% of the population of the United States is black. See <http://www.igda.org/game-developer-demographics-report>

25 Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk*, 167.

26 Ibid.

offered by the interface and code of the system.

Consequently, it's just as important, if not moreso, to explore the immense constraints and restrictions placed on racial experimentation and play as it is to explore the potentialities of new configurations. And this is not to say that experimentation is not possible, but that any progressive anti-racist intervention into gamespace needs to be aware of the playing field and to make limitations into advantages. Thus, if as Hansen argues, "the constructedness of subjectivity is exposed by the very technology that mediates it" the challenge then—in an arena dominated not by complete bodily freedom but by the schema of displaced racialization—is to first bring forth, expose, and critique the technological displacements that continue to maintain corrosive racial hierarchies.<sup>27</sup>

Since games are most often tuned to the palate of a presumed white male user base, gamic race has a calculated visibility that dances on the surfaces of games and fills up its margins.<sup>28</sup> Blizzard's WOW, for instance, protects itself with a rationed presentation of non-white bodies, but never destabilizes the centrality of whiteness. Yet the videogame public is diverse and race is legion. The fight for visibility then is not satisfied with token concessions like extra swatches of skin color, but demands a flattening of the racial power structure entirely. In step with this goal, the visibility argued for here is about a performative engagement that highlights the absurdities and biases of the current presence and absence of race in games as well as their ideologies of visibility. Performative play seeks to expose the conventions and ideologies that inform and construct gamic race and ethnicity, categories which often function surreptitiously.

The /b/ raids seized my attention because they aggressively reconfigure the politics of visibility within gamespace for the duration of the performance. The black bodies destabilize and

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<sup>27</sup> Hansen, "Digitizing the Racialized Body," 111.

<sup>28</sup> See chapter three.

assault the dominance of whiteness, even as they cloak themselves in racist trolling.

### **Interlude**

She spends nearly every day in these games surrounded by depictions of valorized whiteness, monstrous others, and few depictions of alternative racial identification. She logs on after school and follows her usually routine: checks mail, chats with guildmates, and heads to the blacksmith to make some repairs. As she exits, her chat window fills with red as the slaves and slavemaster characters, named things like "Watrmelon," "Blakcawk," and "Massaman," shout obscenities. The pack blurs brown as it rolls past the window and into the nearby auction house. There the slaves take their positions on the auction platform, blocking access to the NPC auctioneers, and presenting themselves for bidding. The slave master paces back and forth, scolding his property and soliciting the growing audience. Perhaps she'll laugh then be disturbed. But she's watching. And chances are she's thinking. Most importantly, she might realize, just as I did, that she'd never seen this many black avatars before and, my god, they all look so silly.

### **The Return of the Excluded**

In WOW, as in most MMORPGs, there's an auction house where players can buy and sell goods, by clicking on an NPC and browsing what others players have put up for auction or by putting their own items up for sale. It's usually one of the more populated areas of a major city with ten to twenty other players nearby. The popularity of the space makes it a favored target of the /b/ raids. During a raid, the number of people can easily quadruple when counting the

performers and their unwitting audience members. The raiding party fills up the front of the auction house where the auctioneers stand, and turn to face the other players shouting “PICK ME,” or “It’s a good nigra massa! I reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeal good at pickin’ me some cotton!” (Figure 4.8). Sometimes anons will stand in the crowd playing the part of an auctioneer or slave owner.



Figure 4.8: /b/lackup raid of WOW auction house in Stormwind.

In the image above, you can see the striking reconfiguration of bodies in space created by this performance. The non-participating players in the foreground are recontextualized as slave auction customers, their whiteness resignified, and the mass of brown skinned humans bringing the exclusions of the medieval setting to the surface. Skin color is crucial to this performance; brown skin is an aberration within WOW, and thus inherently interesting to passersby. A mass of white skinned humans, while worth a glance, would not be as powerful. White Human avatars, as

evident even in this image, are often seen throughout the city and surrounding areas as players congregate for guild events, general socialization or organization, or for key events like the seasonal holiday quests. Anons deploy brown skin for its attention seizing power due to its relative absence within the game world and its political baggage.

But there are errant meanings in these performances that are far more powerful. The performances might use skin color instrumentally, but they also lead, particularly within the confines of a slave auction, to a realization of the pervasive whiteness of WOW. It's a familiar feeling: you're ignorant of something until you're made aware of it, then it's seemingly everywhere. For players more familiar with the world's lore and its story of racial conflict and imperial conquest, the slave auction also makes explicit the subdued historical referents—the Atlantic slave trade, the Great Chain of Being, scientific racism, genocide, etc.—that form the foundations for the game world's allusions and metaphors. Sure /b/lackup raids troll, and they have a muddled, flawed, dangerous, and damaging post-racial politics which finds racism humorous, but they are also surprisingly similar to performance art. The raids infiltrate space, transform it, and challenge the audience. The problem is such an interpretation takes quite a leap.

Joseph DeLappe's performance piece *dead-in-iraq* doesn't require such a leap.<sup>29</sup> And while not explicitly about race (although definitely intersecting issues of race and ethnicity), *dead-in-iraq* serves as a valuable counterpoint to the /b/lackup raids because it is equally skillful in its compelling performance and in its criticism of videogame politics. *Dead-in-iraq* involves DeLappe logging into multiplayer matches of the first-person military shooter *America's Army*, and broadcasting over the chat channel the names, ages, and dates of death of American soldiers killed in the Iraq War. DeLappe started the performance in 2006, and has vowed to continue it

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29 See [http://www.unr.edu/art/delappe/gaming/Dead\\_In\\_Iraq/dead\\_in\\_iraq%20JPEGs.html](http://www.unr.edu/art/delappe/gaming/Dead_In_Iraq/dead_in_iraq%20JPEGs.html).

until the Iraq War ends. (While the war ended in December 2011, DeLappe's website offers no official statement of conclusion of the performance.) *dead-in-iraq* has garnered a lot of attention, and for good reason. Funded by the US Army as equal parts recruitment, education, and propaganda tool, *America's Army* has been controversial as it seems to equivocate the violence of warfare with the fun and exhilaration of popular shooters like *Halo* and *Call of Duty*.<sup>30</sup> But this controversy is curious, because, as Randy Nichols explains, *America's Army* is not remarkable for its association with the Army or its militarized violence as both are fixtures of videogame history.<sup>31</sup> What's remarkable for Nichols is that the game is a relatively successful “serious game” built less for entertainment than a social purpose. Given the game's purpose as an advertisement, or advergaming, for warfare, DeLappe's performance provides a powerful player-based counterpoint to the mythical world of warfare constructed by the game, one in which death is impersonal, impermanent, and, most importantly, not part of the brand message. For DeLappe, his performance is “not only a way of remembering, it's bringing reality into the fantasy.”<sup>32</sup> Just as the /b/blackup raids can be seen as introducing an excluded blackness into gamespace, DeLappe does not allow *America's Army* to maintain its fantasy of war without consequence.

Yet is *dead-in-iraq*'s solitary protest simply a form of “obscurantist and willfully monologic” culture jamming with limited impact?<sup>32</sup> According to Chan, such a view ignores how the success of the performance is less about the moment of protest than the extended dialogue with the public that has occurred on message boards and comment threads of stories and interviews covering the event. The protest itself is simply a catalyst for critical discourse post-performance. Conversely, the /b/lackup raids do not articulate themselves in a way that incites reflection (Figure 4.9) because they are designed as trolls and not political interventions.

30 See Nichols, “Target Acquire,” and Nieborg, “Training Recruits and Educating Youth.”

31 Nichols, “Target Acquire,” 39.

32 Chan, “Dead-in-Iraq,” 273.

Nonetheless, we can imagine a performance with the political acumen of dead-in-iraq levied at issues of race in virtual worlds, and utilizing the same tactical apparatus of /b/. This performance would realize a theory of performative play: a the progressive reinvention of identity within gamespace through performative reflection and coterminous exposure of the ideological apparatus underpinning games.

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Uploader Comments

(Gerbillfury3)

crzychzwngs

1 week ago

ITS IMPOSSIBLE THAT SSOOOOOO MANY NIGGERS CAN SWIM!

yourdoinitwrong.

the whole video has them SWIMMING!

@crzychzwngs bring me lil water sylvie

Gerbillfury3 1 week ago

androoo3k

1 week ago

It sucked at first, with all the healers preventing mass suicide But we gots freed in the end. That's all that matters.

@androoo3k Yea the whole idea of it kinnda changed from "LOL LETS ALL DIE IN SW" to "LOL LETS ALL GO TO ORG"

Gerbillfury3 1 week ago

All Comments (13)

see all

schrummy14

1 week ago

poop

JesusTehRaptor

1 week ago

This is a beautiful thing,

r21187

1 week ago

yes we have the time yes we have the pcs yes we hate all yes we have a will yes we hate you yes we are legion yes we are /b/ we are not you friends we are no you personal army we are not nice we dont forgive we dont forget we are the that nigger army we are the the ones that you hate

mono271

1 week ago

Lawdy youz be freed!

norinvaux

1 week ago

lawl win

I wish I was there D:

UnethicalOwnage

1 week ago

I'm so happy that the slaves escaped.

VictorEchoNovemb...

1 week ago

praise jewsus

PiloyD

1 week ago

Oh lawdz

Figure 4.9: YouTube discussion of a video (now removed) taken during August 3, 2010 raid.

### **“The pool's closed!”**

Not all /b/lackup raids are decidedly apolitical. Consider, for instance, raids on *Habbo Hotel* (Figure 4.10) which instituted the genre in which the WOW raids now function. Created by a Finnish developer, the Sulake Corporation, *Habbo Hotel* is a free avatar-based online virtual community driven primarily by teen users. Users socialize and buy virtual items within a large hotel consisting of many different rooms of varying themes such as nightclubs and tiki bars. The purpose is quite simple: socialize. *Habbo*, as it is now commonly called, boasts thousands of users at any given moment and millions of accounts created since its launch in 2000. While raids of *Habbo* have been a continuing interest of /b/, on July 12, 2006 there was what many consider to be the mother of all *Habbo* raids.<sup>33</sup>

Responding to alleged banning of black avatars by *Habbo* moderators, /b/ organized a massive disruption of the *Habbo* community. Anons entered the world and selected characters with suits, dark skin, and afros and stormed one of *Habbo's* most popular social destinations, the pool. There anons shouted racial slurs, formed swastikas with their bodies, and blocked access to the pool and other popular spaces using *Habbo's* collision detection as a way to deny access, effectively trapping other users.

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<sup>33</sup> For the /b/ perspective on this raid and its progeny consult: [http://encyclopediadramatica.com/The\\_Great\\_Habbo\\_Raid\\_of\\_July\\_2006](http://encyclopediadramatica.com/The_Great_Habbo_Raid_of_July_2006).

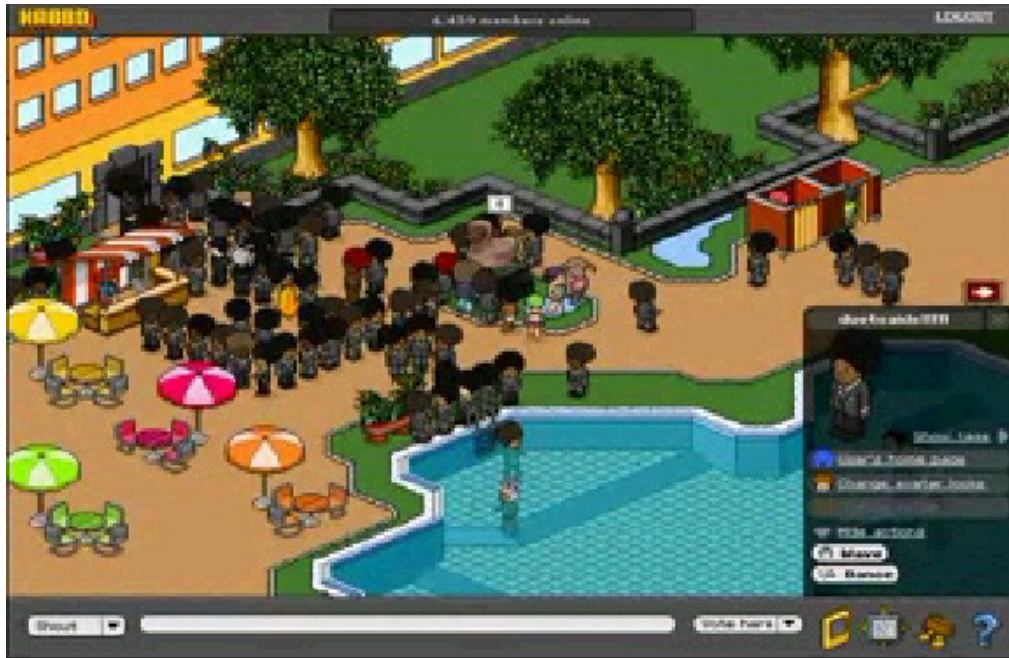


Figure 4.10: /b/ raid on *Habbo Hotel* blocking access to the pool with a swastika.

These raids, which took the motto “the pool's closed!” as their rallying cry, initiated the template from which subsequent raids, including those of WOW, iterate. Beyond the dubious earnestness and effectiveness of the protests, they certainly initiated a fascination with distributed political action that continues today in the far more powerful attacks by the hacker collective Anonymous, and which were perverted by the decidedly apolitical lulz-based WOW raids. Chris Poole, better known as moot, the founder of 4chan and beloved overlord of /b/, seemed to encourage the latter approach to raiding. During a question and answer session at 2007's Otakon, moot referred to an afro clad audience member's request for a board dedicated solely to “invasions” as “the cancer that is killing /b/.” moot implied that political action, and efforts to spread /b/'s influence outside of the message board, was ruining the lulz of the insular and anonymous community.

The /b/ raids are thus at best ambivalently political, and far more interested in deploying politics primarily as an easy trolling mechanism. But despite the best efforts of /b/ to be purely annoying and offensive, the July 2006 raid opens up the possibility for racial critique of a sort rarely seen in videogame culture. The dominant whiteness of *Habbo Hotel* is confronted by the sudden invasion of non-white avatars and virtual space is recolored using replication of bodies to visually announce the exclusions of the everyday and the alleged racism of *Habbo's* moderation. These raids thus accomplish two goals simultaneously: they protest what they intend to (unfair moderation), but they also, through the repetition of bodies in space, make an associated point about the restrictions of character creation in general. And while the *Habbo* raids seem to accomplish this best, the raids of *WOW* levy a similar representational critique at character creation. Both types of raids create semiotic maelstroms that rely on a seemingly nonsensical distribution of garbage data in order to make sense of the norms of appropriate or inappropriate imagery and/or expression in gamespace.

/b/ raids also engage directly with the technologies of control and race at play in virtual environments with character creation programs.<sup>34</sup> Character creation, adhering to myths of freedom in game design, presents users with a strict set of options ranging from pre-built avatars to detailed systems where everything from skin color and age to chin size can be manipulated. Each system carries its own biases and logics which effective performative play can expose. By opening up a critical space within the game using performance, presence and the tools of the games, performative play does not require coding, modding or the creation of a digital artifact. Yet effective performative play, like effective tactical media, "operates both at the level of technological apparatus and at the level of content and representation. It is not simply about

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34 For more on this see chapter two.

reappropriating the instrument but also about re-engineering the semiotic systems and reflecting critically on institutions of power and control."<sup>35</sup> Playful critical activities that engage productively with constructions of race in videogames are therefore not limited to reformulating common sense notions of race or attacking anti-racist beliefs or practices, but in actually reconstructing the systems of meaning within games and generating a critical discourse over the oppressive functions of videogame technologies. From the perspective of performative play, the /b/ raids of *WOW* and *Habbo* effect a critique of character creation by exposing, through the mass replication of bodies, the limited set of programmed options with which someone can manufacture an avatar other users identify as black (Figure 4.11).



Figure 4.11: Anons in the Stormwind throne room during the August 3, 2010 raid.

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35 Raley, *Tactical Media*, 16.

### **Gaming as a Kind of Speech Act**

Gaming is an inextricable part of racial identity, and this identity is shaped performatively through a negotiation between the self and machine. The /b/lackup raids provide us a crude example of how game play, like drag, can be engaged to reveal the performativity of identity within gamespace by exposing the determining systems of character creation and procedure which often privilege whiteness.

Importantly, the performative, in its usage here, is not to be conflated with performance; rather, I see the /b/lackup raids and identity creation in games more generally as engaged in a citational and iterative form of performativity that shapes race. Many associate performativity with the process of gendering rather than racialization. Drawing from the work of Erving Goffmann and J.L. Austin, Butler famously developed her theory of performativity with gender in mind. Performativity, for her purposes, extends the notion of Goffmann's performance of self within public contexts and Austin's understanding of the speech act as a kind of utterance that has material effects. Butler combined these theories with a reconfiguration of Louis Althusser's concept of subject interpellation. Butler views gendered identity as a hail that materially composes a gendered person. This hail is based on a set of western conventions, tied to a naturalized binaristic order of patriarchy. The subject is then meant to identify with this gender, viewing it as natural and always already constituted. These categories, as constructions, must be legitimized by and the performative processes that conceal their constructedness through a process of endless citation—copies without a true original.

This framework has also been applied to the iterative construction of raced subjects. The fact we even perceive of races as stable or meaningful is extraordinary given the immense diversity and complexity of human relations. From this perspective, race must be understood as a

"violence exerted on bodily life by generic categories of social intelligibility."<sup>36</sup> The only way race can accomplish this feat is through a performativity that conceals this diversity and contradiction through repetition. As Louis Mirón and Jonathan Inda clearly state, "[race] is simply a name that retroactively constitutes and naturalizes groupings to which it refers. Race, in other words, works performatively to constitute the racial subject itself, a subject that only procures a naturalized effect through repeated reference to that subject."<sup>37</sup> The repetitive nature of performative race in the case of blackness, but also generalized for all racial performance, is especially important. As Keith Harris details in his study of performativity and black masculinity, the black cultural tradition of signifyin(g), as theorized by Henry Louis Gates, is "repetition with a difference" and forms the foundation for much of black vernacular culture.<sup>38</sup> Similar to signifyin(g), racial performativity maintains its coherence through repetition, and the injected difference within the performance is the way racial others are, in a western context, always in conversation with whiteness. Harris elaborates on this process in relation to black masculinity which "is a replication of idealized norms (whiteness and masculinity) in the non-ideal field of blackness."<sup>39</sup> Thus, in racial performativity, racial norms are repeated, but in a manner that announces their deviations from the ideal of whiteness.

Performativity is primarily an *everyday* practice of gesture, speech, fashion, spatiality, and various other forms of signification that repeat themselves in a dance of citation tied to heavily policed and constructions of raced and gendered identity. Raced and gendered subjects are, on the whole, manufactured at street level and in mundane circumstances. However, popular media also engages in performative activity. Two of the primary models for understanding

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36 Hansen, "Digitizing the Racialized Body," 114.

37 Mirón and Inda, "Race as a Kind of Speech Act," 99.

38 Harris, *Boys, Boyz, Bois*, 29.

39 Ibid., 32.

performativity, drag and minstrelsy, are mediated performance based activities. Their critical use as staged negotiations of race and gender cannot be underestimated. They provide allegories for everyday performativity. However, I would also like to contend that they often are not themselves performative because of the highly theatrical auspices in which they operate. Even though drag performance places on display the full performative arsenal we carry around with us, and cleverly exposes the malleability of gendered identification, it is difficult to see an explicitly theatrical performance as involved in subjectification. Austin agrees, and argues that performative actions are nullified when parodied:

a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language.<sup>40</sup>

Austin's formulation of performativity depends on a naturalized environment within which subjects can sufficiently trust the intentions of others.

What then do we make of performance of race and gender in videogames, a supposedly disingenuous medium in which female avatars are assumed to secretly mask male players? Certainly games have many similarities to parody like drag and blackface; Sandy Stone has famously argued that "in cyberspace the transgendered body is the natural body"<sup>41</sup> and many other critics have likened virtuality and/or games to a kind of blackface.<sup>42</sup> There's no question that players often toy with various races, genders, and sexualities. But does this rule out my claim that games and even the /b/ raids are involved in the construction of race?

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<sup>40</sup> Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Stone, *The War of Desire*, 180.

<sup>42</sup> See Higgin, "Blackless Fantasy," Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk*, 134-135, Leonard, "High Tech Blackface," Marriott, "Blood, Gore, Sex, and Now Race."

Just as minstrel or drag performances or films or TV shape the conditions within which the performativity of the everyday operates, videogames too create new understandings of what race is or what it can become. Gaming is not pure performance or "magic circle" style play set apart from "real life," but an activity that meaningfully shapes our understandings of what a body is and what it can do.<sup>43</sup> As Ian Bogost has argued, the magic circle does not quite exist in the way Johan Huizinga theorized in *Homo Ludens*. Instead there is "a gap in the magic circle" and through this gap "games provide a two way street through which players carry subjectivity in and out of the game space."<sup>44</sup> As a result we can participate in spaces that are explicitly theatrical while also performatively shaping who we are. In light of this, when we play we are often playing performatively and actively constructing our gendered and raced identities. Performative play, or tactical media that engages with the performativity of gamespace, brings this hidden everyday process of gamic subjectification into relief, and does so in a way that highlights the role of ideology, the logics of computation, and design processes in limiting and governing appropriate identities.

Other explorations of performativity in games have not explicitly touched on subjectification, but have examined the performative as a doing-things-with-games. For example, Darshana Jayemanne expands on Alexander Galloway's theory of gamic action using an in-depth extrapolation of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*. Jayemanne uses this framework to move beyond an understanding "what videogames are" to "how they are used."<sup>45</sup> He determines that videogames are "image-actions" rather than more representational forms such as photography and film and that this results in "unique aesthetic effects and structures."<sup>46</sup> He breaks down the image-

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43 For more on why the notion of play as separate from daily life is problematic see Mia Consalvo, "There is No Magic Circle."

44 Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 135.

45 Jayemanne, "How to Do Things With Images," para. 5.

46 Ibid., para. 4 and para.5.

actions of gameplay into three categories: ludic, illudic, and perludic each of which describe a different semiotic performative/ludic hybrid action of player and game, of example clicking an icon. Jayemanne's study is valuable because it describes the performative at the structural level; however, he does not then examine the effects of the performative beyond the technical apparatus.

Approaching more closely the type of performative play I am theorizing, Ian Bogost's article "Performative Play" in *Gamasutra* explores how "performativity in video games couple gameplay to real-world action" as a result the "mechanics" of the game can "change the state of the world through the play actions themselves."<sup>47</sup> Bogost aptly points out that the results of performative gameplay extend to "the player's conscious understanding of the purpose, effect, and implications of her actions, such as that they bear meaning as cultural conditions, not just instrumental contrivances."<sup>48</sup> Here Bogost gestures to the type of performativity elaborated throughout this chapter: gameplay that is not just interactive or ergodic but actively shaping the outside world and the cultural conditions in which players operate both within and without gamespace.

The challenge then for a theory of performative play that can view /b/ raids both aesthetically and as involved in shaping identity is in joining processes of iterative identity creation and signification attached to performativity with cybernetic networks and feedback loops. Martti Lahti's "As We Become Machines" is an excellent study of how games, contrary to cybercultural narratives of disembodied meat at the other side of a computer terminal, "actually anchor our experience and subjectivity firmly in the body."<sup>49</sup> Similar to Hansen's centralizing of the body as the site whereupon the disembodied digital image is created and given its form, Lahti is interested in how the body is an affective and physical nexus of interaction that engages with

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47 Bogost, "Persuasive Games: Performative Play," 4.

48 Ibid.

49 Lahti, "As We Become Machines," 158.

the game through a play of affect, gesture, and sensation.<sup>50</sup>

Lahti critiques how games reduce race to a "mutable fashion statement, an adaptable task-oriented instrument, or a toy with which we can play."<sup>51</sup> This, in Lahti's words, does not "deconstruct or destabilize identities of raced or gendered belonging" but reasserts existing categorizations and provides a site for experimentation without consideration of the "social or cultural power associated with white male identity in the real world."<sup>52</sup> This characterization of racial play in character creation is correct, but it also represents key differences in focus between my argument and Lahti's. While Lahti explores the involvement of the body in game interaction and the limited political cognizance of players, I am interested in how gameplay does not just engage the players' real body as a processing unit but how gameplay reflects back onto the phenomenological apprehension of that body, effectively changing the very foundation of gameplay. Given this schematization, the depoliticization of gamespace is even more critical as it's not only an escape for white men but a laboratory for potentially reductive constructions of difference. Put simply, when players experiment with race in game worlds they are not just toying with race but altering how bodies are apprehended, perceived, and understood in the world.

Intermediation, N Katherine Hayles' conceptual understanding of embodied interaction, differs from Lahti's in that intermediation causes bodies and machines to fundamentally alter each other's composition and not just be involved in exchanges of feedback. In her characteristically cogent fashion she sums up this metaphoric process of influence as "what we make and what we (think we are) coevolve."<sup>53</sup> And given race's malleable and metaphoric nature, these technological interactions, including gameplay, are then responsible, in part, for reshaping how race is

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50 See Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*.

51 Lahti, "As We Become Machines," 166.

52 Ibid., 167-8.

53 Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer*, 216.

understood in daily life. Our notions of race have evolved along with our technologies providing metaphors with which culture then reconceptualizes difference. Computer technology, code, and videogaming have done just that. Performative play is both involved in this process and, if organized properly, critiques it.

Unfortunately most games do not encourage critical styles of play. Take, for instance, *Dance Dance Revolution* (DDR). According to Irene Chien, DDR, a rhythm dance game that requires the player to use her feet to synchronously hit icons on a dance mat as they appear onscreen, affords an exaggerated example of bodily involvement to refute the common claims of disembodiment. However, Chien's ultimate goal in examining DDR is demonstrating the multiple levels of othering that take place as we, "enjoy the pleasure of temporarily embodying the Other as represented in and by the game. We also get to embody the Other's embodiment of the Other, embodying 'Japanese'"embodiments of Asianness, whiteness, blackness, etc., that fascinate and repel to the extent that they mirror our own."<sup>54</sup> Players can thus revel in exotic constructions of racial others (represented by the characters within the game) because blame is shifted to a Japanese imaginary which itself is misunderstood through a ethnocentric conceptualization of Japanese culture as obsessed with America. Rather than limiting her analysis of the game to reductive representations that the player views, Chien exposes how those characters govern the act of dancing. Since "simulated dance contains the risk of feminine, racially other, and homoerotic self-contamination" the racial others serves as filters for the excessive activity of dance which could undermine stable notions of white masculine heterosexual identity.<sup>55</sup> The excess of the performance is thus displaced onto the racialized other and any potential "danger" is mitigated. While Chien's notion of gameplay and racial othering is similar to previous theoretical

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<sup>54</sup> Chien, "This Is Not a Dance," 30.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 32.

investigations of stereotypical racial fantasy in cyberculture and its positioning of whiteness as a normative identity, it's innovative in its exploration of performative play. As Chien explains, DDR players are often actively constructing whiteness through their engagement with racial alterity. I think this perspective can also be applied to less active and overtly performative styles of gaming. And the key for my particular brand of performative play is in adopting this play to more racially progressive ends that decenter whiteness and allow for more diverse racial expression.

### **Made Code**

Just as more familiar forms of performativity outside of digital interaction can evolve and reshape the set of norms guiding race and gender perform, performativity within and around videogames has the potential to reconfigure the games themselves. Galloway's perspective is that "the detailed forms of algorithmic interaction and play required today of the computer-using public is...so exactly akin to writing code that the division between the two must certainly be ascribed to other ends."<sup>56</sup> The player is so deeply involved and in tune with the game that we can no longer maintain an easy division between author and player. The intermediated player is not only in a feedback loop of pre-programmed activities but actively involved in recomposing the game in substantive ways. The player is, through ergodic and performative activity, collaborating in authoring an experience both inextricable from and pushing the boundaries of the game.

Most scholars who have engaged with this kind of activity have explored how cheating and modding as well as intertextual productions like machinima and artistic works negotiate with the restrictive coded worlds of games. However, player authorship should not be limited to remediation or the creation of digital artifacts. Strangely enough, I consider the claims Galloway

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<sup>56</sup> Galloway, "Language Wants to Be Overlooked," 318.

and Lev Manovich to be partly to blame for hesitancy in attributing authorship to players. Manovich states in the influential *The Language of New Media* that "as the player proceeds through the game, she gradually discovers the rules that operate in the universe constructed by this game. She learns its hidden logic—in short, its algorithm."<sup>57</sup> Ludological understandings of games like Manovich's, focus predominantly on formal criticism of rule systems and mechanics, bracketing off the reader as uncovering the logics of gameplay. This perspective downplays the player's creativity or ability to author, positioning her instead in a discourse of consumption and accumulation only able to complete content and move on to a sequel. It also disproportionately locates the meaning of a game at the level of programming and ignores how code is dependent on a player to inscribe its meaning into life activities.

Following the interventions into literary theory of Barthes and Michel Foucault and others, Janet Murray, Barry Atkins, and many other narratological theorists of early game studies demonstrated the authorial position of the player within games.<sup>58</sup> It's safe to say that these theories fell out of vogue amidst a growing interest in the unique formal qualities of games and a denigration of game narrative. It's high time we return the player's activity as central, not simply in actuating the game and learning its rules, but in composing the narrative architectures meaningful.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps it's the player's recombination and creative use of software, and the building of a toolset of performed actions and mechanics, that is truly the narrative creation of value, the authorial input. And when this activity is considered performative, or involved in a process of subjectification and citation, it's politicized and can play with race in a nontrivial way.

To understand this we must complicate the current discussion of machinic performativity which has been limited to an examination of machine operation and not what the player inscribes

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<sup>57</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 222.

<sup>58</sup> Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*; Atkins, *More than a Game*.

<sup>59</sup> Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," 118-30.

at the level of embodied interaction. Perhaps the most well known example of this perspective is from Hayles who argues, "Code that runs on a machine is performative in a much stronger sense than that attributed to language" because there is no interceding human presence that "[decides] whether an act of speech or a piece of writing constitutes a legible and competent utterance."<sup>60</sup> Her position here aligns with Galloway whose "slogan" for the "functional nature of software" is that "code is the only language that is executable."<sup>61</sup>

While this might be true, it's limiting. Locating the performative of computer interaction within the machine distracts from the dynamic cybernetic process of gaming. Machinic performativity diagrams a relationship between user and machine that appends the user to a perfectly logical and formulated machine whose processes are presented fully formed and ignorant of human influence. Chun deems this depiction of machinic performativity as "sourcery" or "a fetishism that obfuscates the vicissitudes of execution and makes our machines demonic."<sup>62</sup> Code is understood as "the self-evident ground or source of our interfaces" which "conflates an event with a written command."<sup>63</sup> The event Chun speaks of is precisely the kind of productive and interpretive processes of interest to performative play. As Chun correctly argues, "If code is performative, it is because of the community (human and otherwise) that enable such utterances to be repeated and executed, that one joins through such citation."<sup>64</sup> To consider performativity separate from human activity could be considered dangerously techno-fetishistic in that it occludes the origins of code within human productive relations and the life of code within human activities. The goal for Chun then is "to interrogate, rather than venerate or even accept, the grounding logic of software" present within an understanding of code as "source" and not a

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60 Hayles, "My Mother Was a Computer," 50.

61 Galloway, "Language Wants to Be Overlooked," 325.

62 Chun, "On 'Sourcery,'" 300.

63 Ibid., 309 and 303.

64 Ibid., 322.

manufactured and interpreted artifact.<sup>65</sup>

By creating play that is performative, players can effectively expose the constricting logics of domination within software architectures and demonstrate that those very logics can and should be circumvented. Placing these logics under scrutiny is important because, as Foster reminds us, "Cyberspace may mean that we can assume whatever form or identity we wish, regardless of whether it matches our physical embodiment, but we still cannot escape the possibility that some types of preconceptions are likely hard-wired into the people we interact with in cyberspace."<sup>66</sup> And not only are they hard-wired into people, but present within the very interfaces, character models, dialogue, architecture, and thousands of other displacements that compose gamespace. Any kind of political progress is inhibited by the tyranny of these guiding reductive logics brought in by users and bolstered by game worlds. Performative play is specifically tailored to make displaced racialization and its politics explicit by leveraging play as a critical, subversive, and authorial act.

Still there remains an aspect of race that performative play cannot reach which plays out in the space between the actions of the subject and the cultural prescriptions that make up the apparatus of signification. In reference to blackness, E. Patrick Johnson summarizes this remainder of race as follows:

blackness does not reside only in the theatrical fantasy of the white imaginary that is then projected onto black bodies, nor is it always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the "living of blackness" becomes a material way of knowing.<sup>67</sup>

Johnson makes it clear that experimenting and toying with models of racial subjectification which presume that race is pure mystification is a partially disingenuous strategy

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>66</sup> Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk*, 165.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 8.

of progressive critics and activists. Focusing solely on social constructivism and performativity ignores the importance of everyday experiences within a black body in defining what race and racial oppression precisely are. As a result, in an effort to disrupt the fixity of racial categories, race often gets characterized as simply a "discursive categor[y] that [is] subject to mediation."<sup>68</sup> This is ultimately damaging because it ignores that race "exist[s] beyond abstraction and function[s] within the realm of the 'real.'"<sup>69</sup> It is critical for Johnson that we recognize the importance of experience as a kind of reality of race in order to not "[limit] the ways in which people of color may name their oppression."<sup>70</sup> Performative play has its limitations and Johnson's mapping of race exposes how playing with racial signification in gamespace might call to attention racial discursivity and signification, and can also manipulate and potentially rework these systems in the physical space, but games cannot, in their present form, account for the myriad moments of the everyday within a raced body. This does not undermine the efficacy of performative play but emphasizes that it must be appropriately contextualized as a tactic and supplemented by activism that engages with affection in raced bodies.

### **Falling Short**

Playing games can be a critical act that brings to light how gamic race is a combination of invisibility, multiculturalism, 19th century biological racism, and modern genetic racialization all organized around a continued privileging of whiteness through the systematic displacement of non-white representation to the margins. Since games present us with this perverse idealized version of the schizophrenic and anxious way the real world handles race, it provides an opportunity for performative styles of play to critique this ideal, diagnose real world racial

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 41.

politics, and intervene in games with the intention of creating an ideal that is patently anti-racist.

In this way, performative play can be viewed as a related practice to McKenzie Wark's *Gamer Theory*. Wark inverts the traditionally diagrammed flow of cultural influence between games and the real world. In Wark's terms, games are "allegories of a world made over as gamespace" where our notions of fairness and capitalist virtues of competition maintain themselves as perfect ideals.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, "The world outside is a gamespace that appears as an imperfect form of the computer game."<sup>72</sup> Wark's gamer theory is about exposing how games are not "failed representations of the world but quite the reverse."<sup>73</sup> Gamer theory, Wark's politics of gameplay, is tasked then with exposing the disjunctions between games and the real world. Performative play has similar goals, but is focused intently on struggling over the boundaries of identity.

Just as gender and racial performativity in the traditional sense involve a citational play of signification that actively constructs subjects and identities, performative play uses citationality to rework racial identities in and out of the game world. However, while real world performativity involves the citation of a set of conventions that are as infinitely complex as human expression affords, gamic race is constructed through a limited set of programmed choices. Consequently, gamic race is less a disciplined set of conventions pulled from a massive set of expressive possibilities and more a restricted grid of possibility that functions under a mythic appearance of overwhelming freedom (e.g. an extensive character creation system as seen in *Mass Effect* or *Madden 11*).

By selecting what each game or world codes as "black" and by doing so in such a deliberate and boisterous manner, anons participating raids, in some sense, force a confrontation

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<sup>71</sup> Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 020.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 022.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

between the restrictions of software and the policing of difference within gamespace. However, the raids' visual fetishism and New Racism undermine this. More effective performative play would, instead of relying solely on the visual insertion of blackness into gamespace, call attention to issues of racial inequity along with visual performance. Imagine a performance that draws the attention of players visually, like the /b/ raids, but also advocates for, through chat channels or performance, a labor movement for gold farmers.<sup>74</sup>

Still, the distilled essence of the /b/ raids—remapping gaming environments as sites of protest—remains compelling. And they are representative of the potential diverse strategic, tactical, and affective potential of similar events. From the virtual sit-in of a *Habbo* raid to the less focused and playful spontaneity of the WOW raids, these differences illustrate some key variables and how games each offer their own contexts in which to work. *Habbo's* restrictive collision detection and pathing, as well as its limited scope, became assets and integrated into the tactics of the raid, while WOW's sprawling nature and more free form spatial navigation fortuitously necessitates more mobile activities that travel through space forming crowds much like Thomas De Quincey's mail-coach.<sup>75</sup> The transitory nature of these performances open up the possibility for rare virtuosic moments of engagement and reflection. This style of socialization only exists in the fleeting moments during and after raids.

The /b/ raids are particularly interesting when viewed through a critical lens of travesty—the dark and twisted sister of parody which seeks to imitate the most sacred cultural forms and styles. The result of travesty is a grotesque mutation that lacks the broad comic appeal of parody, but, for the few attuned to its conventions, achieves raucous comic success. /b/ is perhaps better

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74 The idea of a gold farmer labor movement is inspired by Lisa Nakamura's article on the racialization of gold farming in "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game."

75 John Plotz (2000) argues that De Quincey's 1849 essay "The English Mail-Coach" positions the mail-coach traveling through the British countryside as a momentary spectacle that manufactures a fleeting political solidarity in times of immense social change and interior and external fragmentation.

understood as a travesty of the politically correct; the raids are one component of a sustained attempt at rehearsing an end of politics and identity certainly not limited to /b/. But in so doing, /b/'s travesty demonstrates the precise opposite. It shows us that political struggles over identity issues are of paramount significance to our interactions online and in videogames. While it's difficult, if not impossible, to see these raids as intentionally anti-racist, I believe they present us with the possibility of something that is. If interpreted as travesty, the raids invite the kind of radical meta-ideologizing that Sandoval outlines in *Methodology of the Oppressed* wherein an ideological system itself is subsumed under a counter ideological system that "serves to either display the original dominant ideology as naive—and no longer natural—or to reveal, transform, or disempower its signification in some other way."<sup>76</sup> As she clarifies, "Because ideology 'robs' one of something, why not rob ideology?"<sup>77</sup>

Although /b/'s use of racist and homophobic terminology in a wholly anonymous environment baits us into a reactionary outrage, it's been my contention that the /b/ raids continue to produce their own critiques by deploying blackness tactically into primarily white environments. This intervention disrupts the possibility of purely racist play. So if we're mindful of the subversive potentialities of performative play and its ability to expose subtextual racializing forces, then even raids that visually fetishize blackness and deploy stereotypes can be re-interpreted, their errant meanings focused on. In this way, we can read against the raids, and cut through their obfuscating trollish racism.

Anons intend the raids to mock progressive politics and troll those of us dedicated to anti-racism, but, in the process, they actually open up the possibility for a counter-reading which views the introduction of displaced race into whitewashed environments as a productive act

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<sup>76</sup> Sandoval, *The Methodology of the Oppressed*, 108-9.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 108.

which citationally exposes the maintenance of race through restrictive character creation systems and white normative player discourse. In response, we can use this basic tactic in the formulation of anti-racist games or game performances that provide alternatives to the racial insensitivities of /b/.

### **The Perils of Parody**

I admit it's strange to conceptualize a form of performance and illustrate it through an example that is, from a certain perspective, accomplishing the precise opposite of my intention. But whether the /b/ raids manage to subvert or reinforce race, they provide us with, at best, a compelling foundation for future work and, at worst, an example of what not to do.

If the /b/ raids demonstrate nothing else, they shown me that performative play must be attentive to—and work diligently against—the pitfall of performative activity, i.e., that performances may bolster reductive conceptions of race. There is a fine and perilous line that must be tread. Judith Butler is careful throughout her discussions of performativity to emphasize that performative activity is not, by nature, subversive and that parody can, and often does, legitimize reductive constructions of gender. The key is to engage in "parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects."<sup>78</sup> Given these conditions for truly critical and subversive ironic parody, /b/ is ultimately unsuccessful as a true model of anti-racist performative play because whiteness is placed, in every raid or meme I have studied, beyond scrutiny and its integrity is protected. This is why the raids incite ambivalence or outright horror. The so-called “ironic” play of racial tropes and stereotypes within /b/ discourse does not adequately attack dominant culture; instead, the ironic use of race functionally operates

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<sup>78</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 186-7.

as an anxious white hegemonic response to the volatility of new unstable and fluid formations of race, sexuality, and gender. The anonymity that was once prized as a potential tool for undermining race is now used in some instances as a method to centralize white dominance and manufacture racist tropes in various meme factories like 4chan ([www.4chan.org](http://www.4chan.org)), YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)), YTMND ([www.ytmnd.com](http://www.ytmnd.com)), Ebaum's ([www.ebaumsworld.com](http://www.ebaumsworld.com)), IGN's Vesti board ([boards.ign.com/teh\\_vestibule](http://boards.ign.com/teh_vestibule)), etc. Without a tie to the subversive parodic practices and political literacies Butler outlines, ironic race simply serves to reify reductive notions of difference within the protective apparatus of anonymity and white supremacy. Business continues as usual.

Therefore, performative play must be more clever than /b/. Interventions should be designed and enacted that are mobile, spontaneous, and politically adept. This means that performative play needs to be aware of and engaged with the inherent complexities of gamic race. Performatively play must understand how gamic race deploys irony both productively and unproductively, and how it adheres to and ruptures historical narratives. We need to acknowledge that gamic race draws its power from the tactical displacement of race and deploys diversity in service of whiteness. We must identify and expose economies of disavowal and their technologies racial colorblindness. Now's not the time for passing or fantasy. For too long the fantasy has been a kind of universal passing; a safe space for hegemonic play. Now's the time for a glitch; let's flood and swarm gamespaces *with race* but not the palatable and perverse sensibilities of /b/'s post-racial ironic racism. This intervention needs to not be escaped easily with laughter or outrage. Gamespace needs a flood of difference that says something simple: we define you.

# **CONCLUSION**

## **A NEW GRAMMAR**

**1994**

There was always a forest it seems. Just after we had grown too old for our woods (a patch of woodland encasing the unromantically named Gibson drain) we noticed trees were being tagged with pink spray paint and wrapped with plastic ribbon. With every new visit, another bulldozer would show up parked at the end of a torn up stretch of mud and rock. A friend told me he had heard the woods was gonna be a condo development. Something had to be done.

Armed with fireworks, knives, and CO2 powered rifles, we called ourselves the Gibson Liberation Front (GLF). There was some irony in this, sure. We did reconnaissance on council meetings, and hired a dopey but earnest friend to be our intelligence analyst. We had a ranked hierarchy and basement briefings after school where we looked at manilla folders and struggled to keep straight faces.

GLF only ever had one operation of significance. Dressed like Navy SEALs, we camped out in the forest overnight, and shuffled through the darkness disabling the engines of construction equipment, stealing keys, and tearing down the plastic ribbon and sharpened plywood posts the workers used for guidance. Afterward we shot fireworks and started a

campfire dismissing the whine of sirens half a mile away.

The cops explained to us that someone had reported gunfire in the woods, and that's why they threw us on the ground guns drawn. The next morning they removed our handcuffs and released us to our parents with a warning. We joked about it that evening, but GLF was never just for laughs. That's something we had to tell ourselves then to save face as teenagers pressured but reluctant to mature, to grow out of it all. GLF wasn't so much a joke as a way to say goodbye. Nearly two decades later there's a new facet. The woods had engendered in our play something outside of the masculine fascination with guns and violence. Our play had found an ethics.

## **Journey**

If we understand race in videogames as spread through varying representational means like the bodies of 3D character models or the varying modalities of displaced racialization—algorithms populating worlds, bodies ordered in space, player and designer discourse, and beyond—then we must acknowledge that the task of transforming the way race is handled in games is far more complex than increasing the visual presence of non-white bodies. This is not to say diversity is not important; it's paramount, in fact. But diversity needs to be understood less as bodily representation, and more as an expansion of the full expressive bandwidth of games. To make games which undermine the authority and integrity of racialized ideologies, we need to understand and dismantle the western, white, and masculine aesthetic that currently dominates game culture.

Fortunately, this fight is already underway on two interrelated fronts. First, we need to

transform the demographics of game development. Since the overwhelming majority of game developers are white even though black and Latino/a players spend more money on games and play more games on mobile platforms, the lack of people of color in game development has nothing to do with market demographics or interest in games. Instead, we need to look to historic structural and institutional barriers of access to education and technology particularly science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education which is often the prerequisite or proverbial foot in the door for game development employment. Poor educational infrastructure and insufficient and plummeting school funding in areas that serve predominantly black and Latino/a populations have resulted in a disproportionate amount of white students (mostly white male students) with bachelor's degrees in science and engineering.<sup>1</sup> In response, we need grassroots efforts that ignite interest in young people and provide them with career pipelines including the necessary skills to develop their own games and the confidence to take those skills into college.<sup>2</sup> The second transformation is partially but significantly a result of the first: diversifying the content of games through experimental design and the introduction of new aesthetics, experiences, and expressive cultural traditions. This is a less well examined and more difficult to articulate intervention, and one which I would like to examine in detail.

Consider the downloadable PlayStation network title *Journey*. After years of avoiding the frequently inhospitable, unfriendly, and offensive cesspool of online gaming, *Journey* was a revelation in the truest sense of the word. Set in a sparkling and mysterious world of sand and snow, *Journey*, developed by the boundary pushing thatgamecompany, tasks the anonymous

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1 Chute, "Lack of diversity part of the equation."

2 A few representative efforts include the Glitch Game Testers program at Georgia Tech and Morehouse College (<http://glitchtest.com/>), The Difference Engine Initiative (<http://handeyesociety.com/project/the-difference-engine-initiative/>), and one effort that I have been involved with, GameDesk's Mathmaker program (<http://vimeo.com/28634159>).

robed player with traversing a fantasy world and experiencing its exultation and tragedy.<sup>3</sup> It's a religious experience clearly patterned on the struggles and triumphs of life, the inevitability of death, and the hope for legacy. Although my first playthrough concluded a mere two hours after having started the game, I still sat silently satisfied and a bit mystified (if not misty-eyed!). This was a game refreshingly unconcerned with fun and its associations with boredom, labor, and leisure; it was about the melancholy joy of time's passing.

Beyond simulating for me, a nonreligious cynic, something akin to seeing Jesus's face in a pancake, *Journey's* distinguishing feature is its cooperative play. Developers of the game made it clear that *Journey* does not feature any non-player characters; rather, everyone you encounter in the world—identical robed figures with scarves of varying lengths—are actual players. Making the system even more unconventional, players cannot invite each other into games. As for the stranger you're playing with, he/she remains mysterious lacking the PlayStation network handle present in just about every other multiplayer game. Most importantly, you cannot type to your partner nor use voice chat. As it turns out, all you can do to communicate with this stranger or strangers (players can drop in and out and are brought into the game subtly at the whim of some mysterious algorithm) is let off a soft or loud chirp—a “Hey!” really—with a corresponding glowing glyph briefly appearing overhead (Figure 5.1).

I noticed my first *Journey* partner a few minutes after starting the game; she had already completed half the level's challenges and was a gliding smudge of brown far off in the distance. I started pressing buttons until my character chirped. I pressed and pressed and held the button to make it louder. My partner responded. She shouted, too and started towards me. When she'd duck

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<sup>3</sup> In light of the need for both diverse design studios and experimental design, it's important to note that *thatgamecompany* traces its origins to the highly experimental and inventive Game Innovation Lab at USC directed by Tracy Fullerton. Two Game Innovation Lab alumni, Jenova Chen and Kellee Santiago were co-founders of *thatgamecompany*.

behind a dune or get obscured behind a stone pillar she'd shout, and I'd do the same. When we finally met, we twisted and swirled like ribbons together.

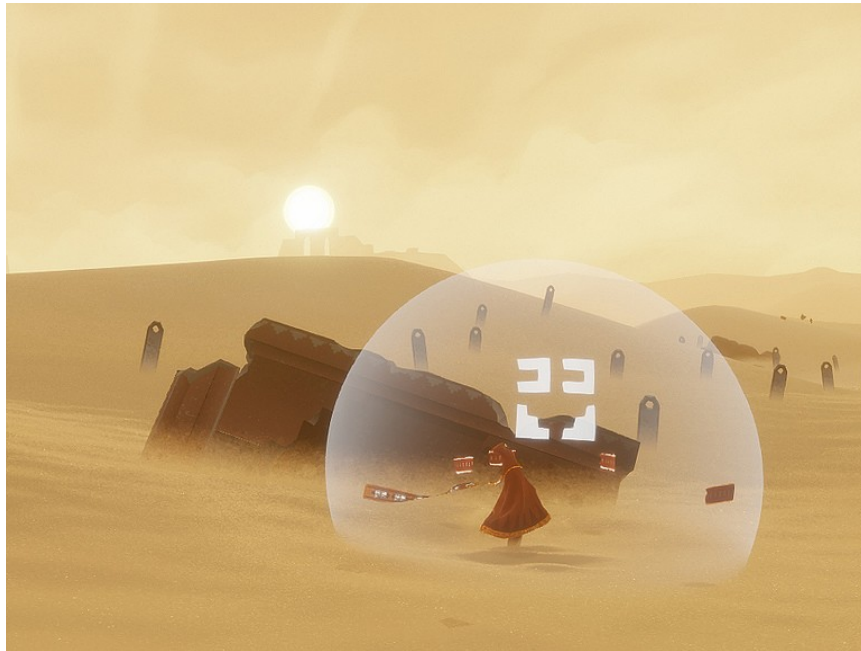


Figure 5.1: Player performing a loud chirp in *Journey*.

Jenova Chen, creative director of *Journey*, has explained that the game's anonymous encounters and stripped down communication design were an experiment prompted by the often immature discourse of players and violent conventions. As he identifies, “Social gaming is hot,” but, “In almost all games the only exchange between two players is bullets or numbers.”<sup>4</sup> In response, he sought out to create more “human” connections driven by voluntary companionship and chance. The solution was to remove cultural “baggage” that breeds judgment and segmentation:

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4 Parkin, “Jenova Chen: Journeyman.”

Say my name was JenovaChen1981. It is telling people that 'I am an Asian guy, born in 1981.' It is too much information that is not related to the game itself. It is taking you away from the exotic place we have created...The only thing that is important is that they are another human.<sup>5</sup>

For Chen removing signifiers of race, gender, and age allows for a more universal and positive experience. In his view the game designers have a massive responsibility to design interfaces, games, and interaction that encourages healthy behavior. He goes as far as to say that often "it's not really the player that's an asshole. It's the game designer that *made* them an asshole."<sup>6</sup> While this statement teeters dangerously on the precipice of technological determinism, and I do not share Chen's view that player's are blank slates before entering the world of videogames, I think he's on to something and that this something is illustrated brilliantly in *Journey*.

While designers do not determine the nature of a player's experience with a game, the work of the designer enters into a dialogic push/pull exchange with the player's performance and reception. One of the pleasures of gaming, alongside story and character, is the excavation of—and struggle against—the game's coded system of meaning.<sup>7</sup> *Journey's* stripped down player encounters might be frustrating to some players, but paradoxically I found its boundaries liberating. This is the nature of the videogame as an expressive form: the logics of computation necessarily depend on constraints to build meaning. *Journey* ejects the oppressive discursive conventions of voice chat and replaces a new means of interaction based entirely on gesture and action. The resulting player exchanges feel more like dance than debate. By surrounding this method of interaction within a world which inspires awe, reverence, humility, and joy, the player's tendency is to match this affective key through her improvisation. It's a symbiotic and sometimes

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5 Plante, "Journey: How It's An Online Game That Need Not Be Played Online."

6 Parkin, "Jenova Chen: Journeyman."

7 Raph Koster goes as far as to claim that "with games, learning is the drug" because "fun from games arises out of mastery...comprehension...[and] the act of solving puzzles (40).

dissonant relationship between rhythm section and soloist. Most importantly, it arises from the confidence and means with which to experiment, non-traditional development demographics, and a design process that privileges values.<sup>8</sup>

### **Aesthetic Intervention**

*Journey* shows us how games can adhere to particular aesthetics—constructed through the full expressive range of games from dialogue to control schemes—which themselves have a significant impact on the range of experience a player has. In turn, this could play a significant role in forging games which handle race progressively or regressively, or whether games respect diversity or suppress it. According to Ian Bogost, thatgamecompany has built an impressive and distinctive aesthetic across their three releases (*fIOW*, *Flower*, and *Journey*). In his view, this is rare within videogame development due to the journeyman nature of designers, and the heavily industrial and corporatized nature of game production. According to Bogost, thatgamecompany's aesthetic, of which *Journey* is the culmination, is about a kind of “tabula rasa” that “can mean anything we make of it.”<sup>9</sup> But as Bogost explains, this is sort of the point: “For their journey has not been one of creating *outcomes*, but of culturing a *style*, an aesthetic that defines the experience without need for their aphorisms.”<sup>10</sup> Within videogames this aesthetic of exploration and being-in-the-world is itself a statement. *Journey* eschews the compulsion to either design a deep story with definitive payoffs, or a clever game with a tangible yield and victory state.

To take this one step further than Bogost, what *Journey* is accomplishing is an aesthetic

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8 I am drawing here from Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* wherein argues that we can revise the game design process to facilitate more “meaningful play” by having design emerge out of a set of established values (e.g. equality, environmentalism, diversity, etc.) rather than an arbitrary design goal (*Critical Play*, Ch. 8).

9 Bogost, “A Portrait of the Artist.”

10 Ibid.

intervention into conventional game design which focuses on a capitalistic model of power fantasy defined by value, accumulation, and competition attached to modernity, the rise of the slave trade, and continuing today within modern global financial capitalism and neoliberal ethics. The videogame, as the quintessential medium of empire, draws heavily from the pervasive aesthetic and cultural traditions of western (white) empire.<sup>11</sup> Thatgamecompany actively resists these prescriptive conventions, creating spaces that embrace and invite a rare range of values within videogames: patience, reflection, compassion, and attention.

While thatgamecompany has been effective at destabilizing the aesthetic norms of videogames, and, in the process, working toward more diverse experiences and welcoming a more diverse player base, they still are not identifying themselves as explicitly intervening into the racializing systems of meaning which favor whiteness. Yet the choices they have made fortuitously complicate dominant design conventions which are inextricable from cultural formations privileging white maleness. Moving forward, design dedicated to expanding the expressive possibilities of games, and to whom the games speak, must look to the rich and deeply philosophical cultural productions of the indigenous, displaced, oppressed, silenced, marginal, nomadic, exploited peoples who have been cast as the countercultural excesses of modernity. It's within these traditions that we can better push videogame design and content toward the full spectrum of human experience.

### **Repetition and the Black Expressive Tradition**

The black aesthetic formulated within and beyond diaspora and slavery, is a good model to follow in that it shows us how aesthetic choices are attached to different assumptions about

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<sup>11</sup> Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*.

personhood and community. Creating a place for this aesthetic could fundamentally alter the stale and exclusionary aesthetic conventions of game culture which, in service to fun and capital, are often built upon a Hegelian dismissal of videogames as contemplative objects. There's perhaps no better example of popular resistance to dominant culture than Afro-diasporic traditions especially music, running from folk and gospel to blues, jazz, rock n' roll, and hip-hop. The various strains of Afro-diasporic music embody particular worldviews and philosophies that run counter to modernity's obsession with progression individualism, possession, and so on. Recognizing jazz as philosophical, however, has not been an entirely natural concept. Even in the wake of cultural studies, we continue to see the persistence of an Enlightenment sensibility, particularly in videogame culture, that does not see cultural production as providing any significant contribution to culture beyond entertainment. In *The Black Atlantic*, his landmark examination of the African diaspora as counterpoint to the discourses and philosophies of Enlightened modernity, Paul Gilroy explains how we need to see the “expressive counterculture” of the African diaspora “as a philosophical discourse which refutes [the] modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Tricia Rose's study of hip-hop culture centralizes how the distinguishing musical “features” of black music and hip-hop “are not merely stylistic effects” deployed simply for aesthetic appeal but “are aural manifestations of philosophical approaches to social environments.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, aesthetic choices have built within them different understandings of being and the world. From the master's perspective, slaves had no culture of value. This view was echoed within the dominant intellectual thought of the period including Hegel and other Enlightenment philosophers who saw Africans as existing in a dark continent

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12 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 39.

13 Rose, *Black Noise*, 67.

outside of history.<sup>14</sup> We see this attitude prevailing today in the oft-heard demonization or derision of hip-hop music as dumb or dangerous: “I love all kinds of music except hip-hop.” But as Gilroy explains: from the call and response folk songs on the plantation to the toasting and boasting of hip-hop verse, “blacks in the west eavesdropped on and then took over a fundamental question from the intellectual obsessions of their enlightened rulers” as they shifted from slaves to citizens they “[enquired] into what the best possible forms of social and political existence might be.”<sup>15</sup> What has resulted are expressive traditions that exceed western modernity in that they present a “dynamic refutation of the Hegelian suggestions that thought and reflection have outstripped art and that art is opposed to philosophy...”<sup>16</sup>

Since black culture has never existed outside of history, it has been one of western modernity's projects to systematically exclude and discount black cultural production. Alexander Weheliye notes how “black subjects” have been “ferociously 'recorded out’” of dominant historical narratives and canons resulting in black people need to “[forge] other means to record black history.”<sup>17</sup> Historically, these resistances gestate initially within the fringes of avant-garde production which Fred Moten describes as “social, aesthetic, political-economic, and theoretical surplus” haunting racism.<sup>18</sup> And given the relationship between black culture and dominant white culture, the folk production of black subjects within the Afro-diaspora is generally within an avant-garde, formulating modes of artistic practice which are eventually appropriated within the mainstream; blues, jazz, rock n' roll, techno, and hip-hop have all been through this process. Key to each of these genres, but most evident within hip-hop, is the use of repetition, an important

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14 See Snead, “On Repetition in Black Culture,” 148 for an elegant breakdown of Hegel's philosophical undermining of African subjectivity and culture.

15 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 39.

16 Ibid., 73.

17 Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 80.

18 Moten, *In the Break*, 31.

traditional stylistic and expressive technology that provides a philosophical counterpoint to enlightened modernity.

Rose's *Black Noise* is an essential point of reference when examining hip-hop history and theory. Her broad argument demonstrates how hip-hop and rap music is an articulation of resistance, often conflicted and contradictory but nonetheless essential as an archive of black thought and experience. But by way of illustrating how “hip hop is propelled by Afro-diasporic traditions” formulating “stylistic continuities in dance, vocal articulation, and instrumentation” between new and old genres and practices, she draws productively upon James Snead's illumination of repetition as philosophical expression.<sup>19</sup> While Rose notes that we can see African tradition within rap's “prolific use of collage, intertextuality, boasting, toasting, and signifying” (64) it's the “rhythm and polyrhythmic layering” carrying through from African music into rap and hip-hop that holds primary importance since the beat “is to African and African-derived music” as “harmony and the harmonic triad is to Western classical music.”<sup>20</sup> Here she provides entrance into Snead's positioning of the repetitious and looped musical framework familiar to any casual listener of rap and hip-hop as not just a stylistic choice but “fundamentally related to the social world” in that it “*embodies assumptions* regarding social power, hierarchy, pleasure, and worldview.”<sup>21</sup> This, for Snead, boils down to a fundamental difference between the capitalistic ethic of progress running through “European culture” and “black culture's” focus on the communal and social:

In black culture, repetition means that the thing circulates (exactly in the manner of any flow, including capital flows) there in an equilibrium. In European culture, repetition must be seen to be not just circulation and flow, but accumulation and growth. In black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is “there for you to pick it up when you come back to get it.” If

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<sup>19</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 64 and 66.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 70.

there is a goal (Zweck) in such a culture, it is always deferred...<sup>22</sup>

It 's important to acknowledge here that Snead's characterization of European culture is reductive and must be limited to a European high culture embroiled in Enlightenment sensibilities. Because when considered more broadly European culture is full of subversive elements that are aligned directly against progress. With that said, Snead provides cultural and philosophical continuity between Africa and the Afro-diaspora and modern hip-hops inherent politics embodied in the use of the cut and break, citation, and guest verses. It comes as no surprise then, given their gestation within the folk traditions of exclude cultural producers across the globe, that hip-hop as well as blues, jazz, and rock n' roll have all been viewed at one point by hegemonic white culture as incomprehensible, improper and/or potentially dangerous. While not beyond capital's grasp or influence, each has and continues to fundamentally challenge the fundamental aesthetic and philosophical conventions of western cultural production. We need look no further than how hip-hop's use of what Weheliye refers to as the "mix" has challenged stable notions of authorship and copyright in favor of a "(re)combination" of formerly disparate "components" in such a way as to "accentuate the individual parts."<sup>23</sup> (There's a direct correlation between this technique and Kwame Gyekye's work on a uniquely African moral system which grants personhood via an individual's birth into social life. In this way, the subject is both individually and socially defined.)<sup>24</sup> There's no reason that repetition and Afro-diasporic cultural traditions and a black aesthetic more generally (and other alternatives to white masculine hegemonic aesthetics) cannot be applied to videogame design. In fact, some games, while developed by white men and without the explicit intention of drawing on black traditions, have offered clever challenges to western

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<sup>22</sup> Snead, "On Repetition," 149-150.

<sup>23</sup> Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 73.

<sup>24</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*.

notions of time and progress. These games represent the encouraging potential of an intervention into game culture similar to that offered by the myriad interventions of Afro-diasporic cultural production.

### **Taking Your Time**

It's no surprise that many of the more radical experiments into critical styles and types of play experiences fall within the “indie” genre of videogames. But what is surprising, is how two of the more influential indie games also fixate on same notions of time and progress that Snead sees as contested through black culture's use of repetition.

There are few designers with more indie “cred” than Jason Rohrer. His five minute long, 100x16 pixel (display size of 600x96) game *Passage* was released for free download in 2007 after debuting at Montreal artist collective Kokoromi's Gamma 256 show.<sup>25</sup> The game has since met with critical acclaim, and is oft-referenced as one of the most emotionally powerful experiences the medium has to offer. This is all the more impressive given the game's aforementioned stripped down presentation. The player assumes control of a blond haired, blue-eyed male character standing on the far left side of a narrow expanse. Pressing the arrow keys moves the character around the screen. As you wander around the 2D world you come across various outdoor and indoor landscapes connoted by different textures. There's treasure, but it doesn't do much. There's a score too, but that doesn't seem to mean anything either. Eventually you may, or may not, stumble on a female character. She joins you on your travels and makes it a bit more difficult to maneuver, but she's there. This presences slowly increases in significance; as the five minutes elapse you grow old together. Time moves whether you do or not. The narrow band of the screen used to be compressed on the right side and it's now increasingly compressed

25 <http://www.kokoromi.org/projects/gamma256/>

on the left (Figure 5.2). Suddenly, she's gone; only her grave remains. Soon after you're gone too.



Figure 5.2: *Passage*.

*Passage* is a boring game, and that's what makes it so effective. There's not much to do, get, or see. You just wander until time runs out. Rohrer gives the player a score, treasure, and control, but none of these tropes provides satisfaction or functions as expected. All that remains of significance is the relationship between the player and his companion, a relationship built simply through being present. *Passage* is outlined by time's passing, but is filled in by our desire for love. There's a clear metaphor at work here: our obsession with achievement in videogames and in life are pointless when faced with the absurdity of death and the far more fulfilling goal of connection. But what's especially clever is the game's initial coyness. It presents you with a band of color stretching across the screen, limiting your view and demanding exploration. The number on the top right ticks upward. All the familiar pieces are in play, so you try to figure it out; you try to beat it. But time's inexorable creep kills with a smirk. *Passage* exposes the emptiness of accumulation and the tyranny of linear time. You can play again—repeat—but what's the point? There's nothing here but a plot. There's nothing here but a beginning, middle, and end.

Like Rohrer, Jonathan Blow, designer of the massively successful and acclaimed *Braid* originally released on the Xbox Live Arcade service in 2008, is dedicated to intervening into

unethical trends in game design.<sup>26</sup> But importantly Blow doesn't want to limit what kind of games are designed; rather, he wants to create a diversity of experiences:

the way we progress in anything -- in science, in arts, or whatever -- is that totally out of some left field corner, some surprising thing happens and it moves us; it causes a paradigm shift. So having a wide variety of games, I think, is the most healthy thing. I don't ever want to say, "Don't make that."<sup>27</sup>

Four years after its release, *Braid's* signature time travel mechanic could be considered paradigmatic as we can now see how it has spawned an entire sub-genre of puzzle-platform games which introduce mind-bending mechanics that drastically shift the jump and run mechanics of traditional platformers. In keeping with Blow's commitment to what he sees as a more productive game ethics, *Braid's* time traveling has a particular effect on ethics, specifically the structures of punishment and reward associated with platformers. In *Super Mario Bros.*, the standard bearer of the platformer genre and one of *Braid's* explicit influences, the challenge and enjoyment is based on progressing quickly and elegantly through the level while making jumps, avoiding and killing enemies, and finding and collecting coins. If you make a mistake, such as falling short on a jump, you might hit an enemy or fall into a pit resulting in a loss of health (i.e. losing your current status effect such as a larger Mario or fireball shooting Mario) or death, taking away one of your limited lives. Enjoyment comes from this play of risk and reward, and trying to finish the game before dying too much and exhausting your limited number of retries or lives. Without question this sort of finality and risk has and continues to be a fixture of game design, and can be traced to the conventions of arcade-style play, where games must provide a difficult challenge and fail state that encourages but does not discourage players to spend more money. *Braid* breaks from this method of punishment by allowing the player has the option of reversing

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26 Hill, "Ethical Dilemmas"; Blow "Video Games and the Human Condition."

27 Parkin, "Catching Up With Jonathan Blow," 3.

time at any moment (this mechanic is complicated and altered as the game progresses, fundamentally shifting what's possible and how to solve puzzles). As players quickly discover, they can reverse themselves out of the black pits or revive themselves after dying from contact with an enemy. As a result, the game does not punish but encourages mistakes and failure. Messing up is not feared, but a part of the process. It's hard to understate how this simple change profoundly impacts both the playing of the game and the affective experience of play.

When this mechanic is combined with the painterly visuals and orchestral soundtrack and melancholy narrative meditation of regret, loss, and death (including some explicit meditation on atomic bombs), we can begin to unravel an aesthetic perspective that is very much aligned against the traditional structures of progress, punishment, and profit that we tend to associate with videogames. Within this context, repetition reconnects with its revolutionary potential as an aesthetic convention that has and continues to disrupt the obsession of cultural production with accumulation and progress. In *Braid* time is cyclical, endlessly turning around, and any progress the player thinks she has made is shown at the ending to be a selfish pursuit. In the final stage, the main character Tim finally reaches the princess whom he is meant to save (in a play on the famous triangular relationship between Mario, Princess Peach, and Bowser). Tim and the princess flee a wall of flame before her final capture by a knight. The level then reverses and Tim is now shown to have been chasing the Princess whom is protected by the knight. Using the time mechanic, the game effectively recontextualizes and transforms the player's understanding of her efforts as progressing to some ultimate victory or reward. Instead her drive for accumulation and progress is selfish and destructive. Just as capitalistic processes of accumulation imply associated processes of destruction and reinvention, the player's progress is dependent on the exploitation of

another.<sup>28</sup>

### **Improvisation and Mastery**

So am I positing that *Passage* and *Braid* are examples of a kind of black aesthetics of repetition? Not quite. Certainly *Passage* offers an effective and astute critique of arbitrary systems of accumulation in games, but it also offers a *mournful* look at the linear plodding passing of time and the joys of hetero-normative companionship. *Braid* is a bit more interesting. It shows us the costs of our selfish desires, and, at first glance, its use of repetition is in the surface of progression and completion. However the end is actually a return to the original moment of violence—our violence—which re-frames the frustrations of the previous hours of puzzle-platforming as anxious and compulsive obsession and guilt over that moment of refused desire. Far from valorizing a western philosophical perspective, *Braid* explores the depths of its traumas and violences. In this sense, both of these games, both made by white men, focus on philosophical perspectives critical of some of the tenets of western modernity and the involvement of games within this tradition, but do so while firmly entrenched within its framework.

Neither engages the more radical qualities of repetition, i.e. circulating in a pattern of continual return initiated and re-initiated by the serendipitous “cut,” a technique Snead sees as employed in the music of James Brown, the jazz of John Coltrane, or the literary work of Toni Morrison. Rather than viewing time on a linear plane or mourning its passing, the cut “overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music, by abruptly skipping it back to another beginning

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28 See “The Manifesto of the Communist Party” for Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' description of how “productive forces...become too powerful” and cause crises which are resolved through the “enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces...[and] the conquest of new markets, and...the exploitation of the old ones” (478).

which we have already heard,” but it's not just “[take] place on the level of musical development or progression, but on the purest tonal and timbric level.”<sup>29</sup> Snead traces this tradition to African drumming and argues that one of its inherent beauties is how cutting builds the unexpected into the work, and embraces the accidental not as ruining the integrity of the piece, but injecting “magic.” In jazz this magic is “the unexpectedness with which the soloist will depart from the 'head' or theme and from its normal harmonic sequence or the drummer from the tune's accepted and familiar primary beat,” sending the piece off in an unpredictable and delightful new direction and eventually back again.<sup>30</sup> Hip-hop musical and lyrical structures practice this same essential methodology containing improvisational solo verses, often transitioning from artist to artist, sectioned off by a repeated chorus and the rhythmic center of the repeated beat and sample underneath. Hip-hop also filters in other Afro-diasporic traditions within these improvisations through citation, toasting, boasting, and, with the aid of the DJ's mixing and sampling, the hip-hop track forms a chain of signification extending through decades and genres of music. In the mix, the DJ's use of beats, breaks, samples, and cuts forms a through line from track to track, creating a continuous conversation and flow with both forward and backward motion.

It can be hard to see games as facilitating a similar kind of expression. Games are coded software strictly bound within a set of authored procedures. They lack the free-form mutability of musical performance. Yet the player as interactor and processor of the game performs within the game, or, through it. The player tests and experiments with what's given while authoring a uniquely articulated experience. We can see the player as a soloist forced to stay within a particular key or rhythm, i.e. the game's code. Games, unfortunately, do not offer much opportunity for dissonance. While the notion of “emergent gameplay,” i.e. unexpected player

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29 Snead, “On Repetition,” 150.

30 Ibid., 151.

activities, is in vogue, its equally as popular as “well balanced” “crisp,” or “perfectly tuned” gaming. Each has its appeal, but there's immense untapped potential in seeing games less as territory to be mapped, mastered and conquered and more as drum circles.

There's no room for improvisation in *VVVVVV*, a crisp, perfectly tuned masterpiece whose joy is in brutal punishment and repetition. Following other ultra-hard downloadable darlings like *N+* and *Super Meat Boy*, *VVVVVV*'s pleasure is masochistic. You live or die based on your muscle memory and the rote repetition of pixel precise platforming. It, like *Passage*, is stripped down recalling Atari era graphics and directing all attention to the sadism of the equally surprising and murderous design of the levels. To traverse the levels you need to be lightning quick, attuned to the controls and your capabilities, and, most of all, know the steps exactly. This isn't an improvisational jazz solo, it's death metal shredding.

This punishing and unforgiving style of play is encapsulated in the level titled Veni, Vidi, Vici (Doing things the hard way). In *VVVVVV* the primary platforming mechanic is gravity reversal. While you can't jump, at any time you can change the direction of gravity and send yourself sailing upward or downward. In Veni, Vidi, Vici you cruelly start on the floor next to a tiny square impeding your jumpless character's access to an item you want to obtain a handful of pixels away. To obtain the item you need to send yourself soaring upward and then downward on the other side of the block (essentially using gravity to jump). Sadistically, this then requires you to soar upside down through seven screens of spiked obstacles, reverse gravity at the very top (Figure 5.3), and come back down on the opposite side through those seven screens. It's like like playing a gravity-based racing game where the edge of the track is a minefield. While I didn't have the patience to complete it, a friend finally completed the sequence after 150 tries.



Figure 5.3: The crucial moment of gravity reversal after the seven screen ascent and just before the seven screen descent.

If done perfectly, the entire process takes a matter of seconds. But that would be prodigious. Instead you end up, like my friend, repeating the same movements—the same few seconds—for tens of minutes or maybe even over an hour on end. Like *Braid* or *Passage*, there's irony here and some humor. Cavanagh is lovingly parodying and indulging deeply in the painful joys of games—hours spent in the arcade or in the glow of the TV screen trying to land the jet in *Top Gun* or beat *Contra* without dying. By reducing the time between death and reappearance, and allowing the player to infinitely retry, Cavanagh effectively creates a play-loop where death is the DJ's cut that instantly places you at the beginning of the loops. Images and patterns flash across the screen, and with each iteration you attempt to trace a perfectly timed critical path. (I think this is the meaning of the sports cliché “in the zone.”)

Even recognizing Cavanagh's wink and nod, I still find *VVVVVV*'s valorization of mastery

brilliant, but for my tastes ultimately exhausting and unsatisfying. I need improvisation and accident. I suppose this is why I have found multiplayer first person shooters so utterly banal. They are all repetition without signifyin'. According to Henry Louis Gates, the scholar most responsible for our contemporary understanding of signifyin' practice, signifyin' is "not engaged in the game of information-giving ... Signifyin(g) turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendental signified."<sup>31</sup> Drawing upon Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Inez Hedges effectively distills signifyin' down to a kind of "ambiguity" that makes interpretation difficult due to some obscurity in "the message itself, its effect on the addressee, or the intent of the speaker."<sup>32</sup> It's a kind of intertextual doublespeak that disturbs the perceived integrity of the signifier beneath an endlessly deferring tricksterism. Importantly this is not limited to "a counterhegemonic strategy of resistance to the white oppressor." As Hedges emphasizes signifyin' is more generally targeted at "dominant culture" and the parody thereof.<sup>33</sup>

There's little room for this transformative signifyin' within the repetitious death cycles of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*. Instead you spawn with your team in a map and rush to your objective. If you're like me you're probably dead within a couple minutes at most. You wait a few seconds and respawn into the map. Every two turns you might sneak a kill before death. Rinse. Repeat. In lieu of the devious design of *VVVVVV*, you're punished by the competing currents of gunfire and vicious player chatter all packaged in banal militaristic milieu. Yet I understand completely that this is a biased and inaccurate perspective on what actually is occurring in high level shooter play. It's my experience, and I acknowledge that those on the other end of the gunights are sometimes skilled improvisers. The best players are both masters of the game's mechanics and spaces. They manipulate and violate patterns of activity to gain the upper hand on

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<sup>31</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Hedges, "Signifyin' and Intertextuality," 134.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

opponents, following set paths to predict movement or set up traps, and then deviating from those paths to surprise, confuse, and ambush. The problem is the lack of ironic reflexivity and the earnest, businesslike manner of play. It's surgical.

This is why I love Valve's *Team Fortress 2*. It's a pitch perfect multiplayer shooter with cartoonish character and personality. There's a ski-mask and suit wearing spy, a massive square-jawed Gatling gun carrying brute, and an engineer lifted straight from a construction site. This tongue and cheek thematic treatment encourages a certain playfulness; it encourages improvisation within the major key. For instance, in 2008 the 2fort2furious server participated in some memorable group performances that signified on top of the repetitive death-dealing common to shooter style play: kill stuff, die, respawn. The server admins created a karaoke modification to the game that played music and displayed the song's lyrics to all players currently logged into the server. Using voice chat, the players then sang along to the music while playing *Team Fortress 2*. The songs chosen, such as Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On" and Enya's "Only Time," each are wonderfully feminine and incongruous to the traditional hyper-masculinity of multiplayer shooters.<sup>34</sup> These songs challenge the normative discourses and behavior of the space; moreover, the song is layered on top of the violent and punishing repetitions of the play cycle. Suddenly the gameplay is recontextualized; we enter a new key. Explosions and deaths are not acts of vicious and precise retribution but humorous punctuations to a server-wide improvisation. The effect would be far less interesting if there was a disingenuousness undercutting the performance; instead, the dedication and passion with which the players stumble off-key through the songs is wonderfully uncharacteristic of the detached and cynical stereotypical hardcore gamer. True there's an irony but it's a conscious subversion of normative

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<sup>34</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3jLBiB6dzI> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbBfnqrA1OM>.

masculinity and not a disavowal of the performance itself. The karaoke *signifies on the multiplayer shooter*, exposing the subtextual homosociality of intense play with other men, and embraces the feminizing processes of disembodied digital interactivity.

### **That's the Key**

Videogames have deployed techniques we identify with—or that have directly spawned from—the Afro-diaspora. In drawing on this rich and often radical expressive tradition, games can make philosophical statements counter to the far more common aesthetic tropes of western modernity which have historically privileged whiteness. All of the examples I have explored thus far, however, do not directly identify with this confrontation. Some, like *Journey* and *Braid*, are conscious efforts to destabilize normative conventions of play but do not make an association between these conventions and racial histories or biases. Others are even less intentional and more serendipitous played based expressions of resistance like the 2fort2furious karaoke mod which was a relatively spontaneous expression of player angst and playfulness that just happened to connect to the ironic subversions of signifyin'. This is not to say that intent is required to offer progressive resistance to racial biases; nonetheless, I think it's important to cultivate and maintain a strong current of game design and development mindful of and dedicated to revising and replacing exclusionary systems of cultural production. It's also important that a significant number of these efforts emerge from designers with backgrounds distinctly outside of the dominant white, heterosexual, and male norm of the design community.

Erik Loyer, the interaction designer behind numerous award winning web-based installations and works, as well as lead designer for the groundbreaking journal *Vectors*, is an example of sophisticated avant-garde resistance to conventional game design that draws on

traditions associated with the Afro-diaspora. Lately, Loyer has worked in the mobile space developing iOS “playable stories” for his companies Opertoon and Song New Creative. Thus far he's developed two playable stories, *Ruben & Lullaby* and *Strange Rain*. Looking and feeling like an experiment, each piece carries the spirit of the avant-garde. The two pieces are different in style yet they carry a similar underlying tendency toward gestural interaction, character-based expression, and emotional attentiveness. Unlike much of Loyer's other work, most notably 2001's *Chroma*, neither deals directly with issues of identity, race or ethnicity.<sup>35</sup> Still, I think issues of technological mediation and human difference are fundamental themes running throughout Loyer's work, and *Ruben & Lullaby* draws on jazz as its expressive framework.

Beyond *Chroma* which is about “the pitfalls of virtual racial identity,” *The persistence of hyperbole* is the best example of Loyer's interest in thinking through issues of race and representation in digital media.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps one of his more personal pieces, *The persistence of hyperbole* contains a newspaper clipping of a nine year old Loyer and his mother in front of the home computer, as well as audio of Loyer narrating a play session of *Castle Wolfenstein*. We're taken through different periods of time, demarcated presumably by Loyer's age throughout the years, and presented with cryptically sourced statements touting the wonders of *Castle Wolfenstein's* interactivity or graphics along with poetry and home video transcripts. Above this text are screenshots and photos some of which can be click and dragged and crumpling them up as they move from 2 to 3D.

The piece offers an effective meditation on economies of attention and technological desire within game culture. We seem to follow along with Loyer as he remembers his obsessions with the original 1981 *Castle Wolfenstein* and more critically experiences the game's resurgence

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<sup>35</sup> See <http://www.marrownmonkey.com/chroma/menu.html>.

<sup>36</sup> See <http://www.marrownmonkey.com/hyperbole/>.

twenty years later. Loyer unpacks the techno-fetishistic tendencies of media representation of technology, and the wonder and reverence with which we consume videogames disconnected and decontextualized from the histories of violence—often racially motivated violence—that they depend on for meaning.

*Ruben & Lullaby* is less serious and less overly interested in issues of race. However, when framed within Loyer's interest in reworking alienating forms of videogame control and the philosophical expressiveness of jazz, *Ruben & Lullaby* appears as an adept injection of difference into game culture. Thus while it might not deal with race via the traditionally interpreted channels of narrative or character, *Ruben & Lullaby* is attuned to the displacement of racialization, that is how assumptions about race and difference can be articulated through styles of expression that exceed bodily representation.

On the surface, *Ruben & Lullaby* is about love, loss, and reconciliation. But from the perspective of displaced racialization and gamic race, it is also a progressive commentary on difference, understanding, and the potential for videogames to be agents of positive change. Loyer collaborated with illustrator Ezra Clayton Daniels who provided the blue and gray toned renderings of Ruben and Lullaby and the park and bench on which they sit (Figure 5.4). Beyond the establishing shot of the two on the bench, and close up renderings of each character's face experience a few different emotions, there isn't much in the way of characterization. The narrative, offered in a short description in the “How to Play” section, is similarly thin:

Ruben is a bike messenger; Lullaby works as a project manager at a non-profit. They've been dating for five months, and this is their first fight. You decide why they're arguing. Is the fight about money? Control? Jealousy? Whether they break up or make up depends on you.

The ambiguity of the narrative is supported by a complete lack of dialogue. This shifting

of narrative or story engagement from game to player supports Loyer's interest in pushing games toward the territory of the film and stage musical:

But there's something fascinating, I think, about the musical as a representation of a fully realized human being, in that both first-person and third-person consciousness are narrated simultaneously. As characters break into song, they're simultaneously doing something and expressing their point of view at that given moment. And that point of view is somehow in harmony and in time with everything that's going on around them. It's a very optimistic perspective of human experience: you can step into a moment in which you perfectly articulate who you are, what you're feeling and why, and still be taking action at the same time.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently what motivates Loyer's design is an aesthetic that facilitates the player's desire to express themselves emotionally. He recommends that interactive stories should be “driven by subjectivity rather than by plot” as well as “increasing visual inventiveness” and deemphasizing “the character-agent idea.”<sup>38</sup> But what is particularly interesting about Loyer's praxis is that it views aesthetics not just through the lens of plot, characters, visual, and sound design, but also as different means of interaction. We can see this in his other recommendations that games need to have “a more expressive interface” and for narratives to be “more literally musical.”<sup>39</sup> Music provides a model for how play can represent a larger emotional context while still facilitating deeply personal expression, and providing easier access to those normally alienated by the complexity of game controls and the assumptions made about a player's familiarity with those controls.

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37 Loyer, “Stories as Instruments,” 182.

38 Ibid., 185.

39 Ibid.



Figure 5.4: *Ruben & Lullaby*.

It's evident when looking at Loyer's work that this particular aesthetic intervention, while drawing on references to games like *Goldeneye 007* and *Super Mario 64*, is aimed at more than retreading the successes of mass market hits. Like thatgamecompany, Loyer is crafting an aesthetic that seeks to push outside of the familiar domain of fun and disposable pleasure, tackling intimate human issues. Implicit in his examination of music as an interactive model for games is Loyer's understanding that: (1) designers must make aesthetic choices which echo intended philosophical and ethical perspectives if we're to diversify game experiences, and (2) they must know how to deploy mechanics and paradigms of interaction as aesthetic vehicles for these perspectives. As has been demonstrated by Afro-diasporic musical interventions into dominant culture, there's perhaps no more effective way to facilitate expression that's equally philosophical and emotional than through the interactive relationship between human and instrument.

Reflecting on how characters in musicals are equally embedded within and reflecting on

the story, Loyer explains that for him “the best games...deliver this experience where play is expressed as a kind of double awareness, by virtue of which the story becomes expressive as an instrument.”<sup>40</sup> *Ruben & Lullaby* is a “proof of concept” for this aesthetic. The characters' story is formulated less as a plot to be followed and more as a platform for the player's experimentation which, as Loyer intended, results in play that feels most akin to musical improvisation. *Ruben & Lullaby* succeeds in creating this impression through both form and content. Instead of dialogue or narration, the story is expressed through jazz improvisation. This is accomplished by layering the player's actions atop a jazz track. Whenever the player chooses to tilt, tap, stroke, or shake the iPhone the track changes and alters. These decisions also affect the mood of the characters and how they relate to each other. Stroke the screen when Ruben appears and he calms; tilt the screen to switch to Lullaby and then shake it and she reacts angrily to Ruben's attempt at understanding.

Playing is a kinetic experience that requires equal parts improvisation, attentiveness, and openness to experimentation. The relative diversity of gestural articulations gave me the feeling, especially after a couple playthroughs, of manipulating an instrument. I began to combine moves and listen to the tune and not the characters. I tried to break the system by just focusing on shaking Lullaby's screen, coloring it a red hue. But that's just too much percussion; it breaks the tune. Eventually I settled into a rhythm, moving elegantly between Ruben and Lullaby and trying to replicate the ebbs and flows of a real disagreement. It became less about the logics of the system and more the call and response exchange between myself and the game. I drew upon my own arguments as a kind of sheet music. Rather than progressing toward some advertised reward, I just listened, played, and played again. All along, the jazz mapped the story and expressed my experience. Ruben and Lullaby's differences, and their negotiations of those differences, were

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40 Ibid.

articulated through my jazz improvisations.

Still there's nothing here dealing *explicitly* with race and that, for me, is its elegance. *Ruben & Lullaby* eschews the racially fetishistic tendencies of games and comics and instead explores difference and understanding on a personal level. Yet it maintains a clear metaphor, narrating interrelated and inseparable conflicts between man and woman, player and machine, and black and white. *Ruben & Lullaby* understands that these categories are caught within each other. Blackness is just as much a gendered condition as it is a racialized one, and it's just as much a technology as a social identity. The player, with iPhone in hand, sits between Ruben and Lullaby conscious, or maybe not, of this nexus of digital character, man and woman, white and black. Loyer adeptly employs jazz as the mediating language of these differences, and in so doing draws upon jazz's long history as an expressive tradition philosophically steeped in emotional exploration through improvisational communal exchange. Much like *Journey*, Loyer replaces the interactive language of the videogame in the interest of producing different affects and reconciling these intertwined socio-cultural conditions.

The challenge then is to break free from the compulsory “gamer” tendencies to figure out and master the system. It's easy but not very enjoyable to break Ruben and Lullaby up in a flurry of shaking and splash of cymbal. It's also just as easy to softly run your finger over the screen, calming the two into a brass accompanied reconciliation. It's over rather quickly this way, but so is the music. To keep things going in that space between end states is much harder to manage, but it feels more productive. Once you do it long enough, you start to realize that Ruben and Lullaby are not having a fight anymore, but a conversation. There's comfort and challenge in this exchange. To keep it going you've got to be responsive.

That's the key, really. You're not building but iterating. Many returns and each with a

difference. Just keep in mind that one solo slides into the next. You've got to be attentive. Soft sax arcing major. A crash of cymbal. Sax dipping minor. The beat swells, shimmers, and settles. Bouncing piano. Listen to the music. Notice their expressions. You tap your foot and offer a phrase.

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# APPENDIX A

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