

# “Live in Your World, Play in Ours”: Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other

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## ABSTRACT

As the nascent field of computer games research and games studies develops, one rich area of study will be a semiotic analysis of the tropes, conventions, and ideological sub-texts of various games. This article examines the centrality of race and gender in the narrative, character development, and ideologies of platform video games, paying particular attention to the deployment of stereotypes, the connection between pleasure, fantasy and race, and their link to instruments of power. Video games represent a powerful instrument of hegemony, eliciting ideological consent through a spectrum of white supremacist projects.

If the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the era of film, a time when Hollywood unified America through stories and imagination, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will undoubtedly be the era of video games. Video game sales reached \$6 billion dollars in 2000, and speculations put that number at closer to \$8 billion dollars last year. In 2000 alone, over 280 million units were sold throughout the world. Experts estimate that sixty percent of Americans, approximately 145 million people, play video games regularly (Children Now, 2002). Various social commentators are talking about video games on talk shows, within chat rooms, popular and obscure magazines, and even academia. With rare exceptions, these critics tend to celebrate the game industry, making only brief mention of potential problems in its promotion of violence and misogyny. Although there are some exceptions, such as Kücklich (2003), the examination of race, power, and ideology within these games has not been a central concern.

Video games offer millions (even billions) of game enthusiasts the opportunity to become a professional athlete, a United States Marine, a member of an underworld criminal organization, or even a wrestling rapper. Games, despite claims of “horse play,” offer insight into dominant ideologies, as well as the deployment of race, gender, and nationalism. From the privacy of one’s home, game players are able to transport themselves into foreign and dangerous environments, often gaining pleasure through domination and control of weaker characters of color. Video games thus operate as a sophisticated commodity that plays on the desire of individuals to experience the other, breaking down real boundaries between ‘communities’ through virtual play, while simultaneously ‘teaching’ its players about stereotypes, United States foreign policy, and legitimization of the status quo, to name only a few.

## Scope

Despite the huge popularity of video games, little work has been done on their appeal and effect. Many academics still tend to view video games as toys for kids, rather than sophisticated vehicles inhabiting and disseminating racial, gender, or national meaning. Moreover, a socially conservative agenda that focuses on the psychological links between games and violence further limits academic inquiries into video games.

This article seeks to underscore the centrality of race to the construction and reception of video games, emphasizing the ways in which games create, inhabit, transform, and challenge commonly received ideas about race, gender, and sexuality. In examining several platform games, including *Grand Theft Auto III* and *NBA Street*, I argue that it is impossible to appreciate the significance of video games without considering racial images, identities, and ideologies. Race matters in the construction and deployment of stereotypes, and it matters in legitimizing widely accepted racial cues and assumptions both in the

workplace and in leisure pursuits. In short, race matters in video games because many of them affirm the status quo, giving consent to racial inequality and the unequal distribution of resources and privileges.

### Odd Absences

Present conversations about video games are largely uncritical celebrations. Jenkins (2002) encapsulates the celebratory side of the emerging field of game studies through his deployment of historically racialized and problematic language: “Now that we’ve colonized physical space, the need to have new frontiers is deeply in the games. *Grand Theft Auto* expands the universe” (cited in Kushner, 2002, p. 64). However, the ubiquitous praise for games, which often borrows the language of glorious expeditions of past, inadvertently reveals the centrality of race within both video games as text and the surrounding discourse of reception. As with America’s history with colonization, imperialism, and exploration, the deployment of racialized images, the enactment of pleasure through the other, and the efforts to legitimize power/privilege are all present in many video games.

Academic discourse about video games has, for the most part, concentrated on the following issues: technological improvements within the industry and the expansive economic opportunities within virtual reality (e.g., Berger, 2002; Takahashi, 2002; Kushner, 2003); the power and centrality of fantasy (e.g., Jenkins, 2003; Jones, 2002; Turkle, 2003); the effects of violence on children (e.g., Jenkins, 2003); the impact of video games on learning and children (Gee, 2003); the degree to which games affect children’s attitudes toward violence, hand-eye coordination development, child obesity, and gender identity (e.g., Marriot, 2003; Ratliff, 2003); the deployment or construction of time and space (Turtle, 2003); the gender politics and presence of female-based stereotypes (e.g., Berger, 2002; Jenkins, 2003; Kennedy, 2002); and the ideology of games (e.g., Gee, 2003). Race and power are strangely absent from these analyses. The work of Gee (2003) is especially problematic in this regard, since he believes that games teach children and teenagers 36 core learning principles. Yet he makes no mention of how games perpetuate stereotypes, induce racialized fantasies, and affirm racial inequalities.

### Revealing Numbers

The work of Children Now, a community-based organization in Oakland, California, quantifies the overwhelming presence of stereotypes in video games. According to its data, 64% of characters are male, 19% are nonhuman, and only 17% are female. More specifically, 73% of player-controlled characters are males, with less than 15% female, of which 50% are props or bystanders. The problems here transcend erasure and a lack of representation. Female characters, especially females of color, serve as sexual eye-candy. Ten percent of female characters have large breasts and a small waist, with an equal number having disproportionate body types. Twenty percent of female characters expose their breasts, with more than 10% revealing their buttocks (Children Now, 2002). Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American characters are virtually absent.

Just as video games are a space about and for males, they are equally a white-centered space. Over 50% of player-controlled characters are white males; less than 40% of game characters are black, the majority of whom are depicted as athletic competitors. Indeed, over 80% of black characters appear as competitors within sports-oriented games. In addition, African-American characters are more likely to display aggressive behaviors in sports games (i.e., trash talking and pushing) than whites. More than 90% of African-American women function as props, bystanders, or victims. In fact, ninety percent of African-American females were victims of violence compared to 45% of white women (Children Now, 2002).

Stereotypes can be found in virtually any game—Cuban drug dealers in *Vice City*, muscle-bound and violent rappers in *Def Jam Vendetta*, and Arab terrorists in nearly every war game. *Ready to Rumble*, a boxing game, covers all bases, including racialized stereotypes of seemingly every community of color. The most popular character in the game is Afro Thunder, a gigantic Afro-wearing boxer, who is more adept at talking trash than fighting. The game also features a Hawaiian sumo wrestler who

speaks poor English and has slanty eyes, a heavy accented Croatian immigrant, and a Mexican boxer named Angel (raging) Rivera. The stereotypes of Asians as martial artists who speak poor English are evident in *Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven*, *Dynasty Warriors*, and *Crouching Tiger*, while violent and muscular black athletes are readily seen in *Street Hoops*, *NBA Live*, and *Madden 2004*.

### **Video Games as Racial Projects**

According to Omi and Winant (1994), racial formation takes place through a “process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized” (p. 55). Video games are one such project. They are a powerful medium in which racialized ideas, bodies, and structures are constructed, mediated, and presented through a safe medium. Given that games are fantasy and virtual, certain stereotypes and discourses are more acceptable, allowing for greater transparency and honesty. Omi and Winant (1994) also believe that “a racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular lines” (p. 56). Viewed from this perspective, video games offer “interpretations, representations and explanations” of black athleticism, female sexuality, and inner city America. They provide cues as to reality and explanations for its organization. Video games are not just games, or sites of stereotypes, but a space to engage American discourses, ideologies, and racial dynamics.

### **Grand Theft Auto and Stereotypical Deployment**

One of the most popular home video games, *Grand Theft Auto III (GTA III)* embraces racial imagery and racially based stock characters. While controversy continues to besiege this game for its glorification of violence and images of women (Freidenberg, 2003; Kushner, 2003; Napoli, 2003), the backlash has erased discussions of race, ignoring the deployment of stereotypes and its potential harm as a racist racial project. *GTA III* legitimizes white supremacy and patriarchy and privileges whiteness and maleness, all the while substantiating the necessity of law and order and reactionary social governance. You, as the only white character, are sent to Liberty City to lead and/or control the other.

*GTA III* takes you to Liberty City, the “worst place in America.” As an aspiring thug in the Leone family, you accept jobs ranging from driving the “girls” (all of whom are prostitutes) to assassinating rival gang members (all people of color). Your enemies in Liberty City consist of a number of gangs: the Triads (Chinese); Yazuka (Japanese); Diablos (“Hispanic street gang”); South Side Hoods (blacks); the Columbian Cartel; and the Yardies (Jamaican). The racial dynamics are at the forefront, with you and your white family battling a spectrum of people of color to control the streets of America.

The Leone family is described in the game instructions as a “charming, smart, traditionally well-dressed, strong Sicilian family.” They are, above all, loyal, reflecting “strong family values” despite a propensity to murder and to have their enemies assassinated with car bombs. The Triads, on the other hand, are described as “obsessively territorial maniacs.” The South Side Hoods, whose turf is “the projects,” have a style consisting of “gold chains, rings and teeth, branded street wear, hooded sweatshirts, and platinum.” In short, they are hip-hop gangsters. Members of the South Side Hoods drive “Rumpo XLS,” the Diablos drive low-riders, and those who hang with the Triads all drive around in fish vans. On the other hand, members of the Leone family drive pristine and sporty black sedans. As the heroes of the game, members of the Leone family are constructed with life-like qualities. Hollywood actors (Michael Madsen and Michael Rappaport, among others) provide their voices, and close-up shots further reveal their humanity. Your enemies, of which virtually all are men of color, have no voice or face.

The game opens with a series of shots of the self-reputed leaders of each gang. Among the leaders is 8-ball, leader of the South Side Hoods, scowling and holding an Uzi. A member of the Triads, whose sign of Asianness consists of the dragon on his shirt, is equally dangerous with his exposed gun and his “sneaky gaze.” Through the course of the game, the racialized differences between the Leone family and

the other gangs become increasingly clear from their behavior. When the Leone family participates in violence, it is always reactionary and justified. They obey the rules and etiquette of criminal behavior, further revealing their civility and humanity. The Triads, however, shoot at you just for driving in their neighborhood. They walk their turf brandishing guns and baseball bats without cause. The only rule that governs their behavior is “kill or be killed.”

The racial dynamics of *GTA III* are overshadowed by its in-your-face imagery: the heavy accented East-Indian cabbie; the poor-English speaking Chinese women walking on the street; and the purple-clad black pimps. Almost all of the innocent citizens of Liberty City are white, the majority of whom are upper class and elderly. The police are white and paragons of virtue. They, like the Leone family, only resort to violence when so forced. Taken as a whole, *GTA III* tells the story of city struggle, of whites under threat from the communities of color that surround them and eventually resorting to violence to protect themselves. The violence and incivility of the city forces a return to more primitive instincts. While you or the Leone family may seem violent or immoral, you, along with the police, are the invisible wall of protection against the criminality, deviance, and depravity of communities of color. *GTA III* clearly constitutes a battle between good and evil.

While racialized images define *GTA III*, its presentation of women is equally troubling. As with most video games, female presence is peripheral. None of the gangs has female members, except an endless supply of prostitutes, many of whom are dark-skinned and who exist to please the heroes (including the players). The prostitutes also serve you and the game in two ways. First, they improve your health. If your health points are low (if you get to zero you die), a mere moment with a prostitute raises your health score. Second, after your transaction with a prostitute has been completed, you then have the opportunity to kill her and take her money. The graphic objectification of women within this game and the sanctioning of violence further reveal the reactionary orientation of the game.

Since its release in the latter part of 2001, eight million copies of *GTA III* have been sold, generating over 400 million dollars in revenue. Despite its propagation of stereotypes and conservative ideology (or because of these facts), *GTA III* won awards from a number of industry insiders as “game of the year.” Video games thus continue to represent a unique medium where the mantra “it’s just a game” repels criticism.

### **Beyond Stereotypes: Consumption through Visitation and Cross-Dressing**

While recognizing the centrality of race through an examination of stereotypes is a corrective step, it does not allow for an understanding of video games as they relate to material reality. It is crucial to explore video games as text through analysis of stereotypes and to sufficiently examine the subtext of particular games. There is a need to go beyond stereotypes to situate this project within larger structures of domination and the longstanding practices of whites generating pleasure through the exploitation and consumption of the racialized other. A discussion that ends with stereotypes erases this relationship because it denies the pleasure garnered through the construction, deployment, and consumption of the other.

Insofar as much of the critical literature about video games links them to fantasy, “exploration and discovery,” colonization and penetrating “the virtual frontier,” it is important to connect games and their surrounding discourse to historical projects of white supremacy, based on the power of becoming and occupying the other. In attempt to push the examination of race beyond simple stereotypes, the following section will examine the racial content of games and its relationship to pleasure, privilege, and power through the perspectives of tourism and minstrelsy. Video games that situate race at their center and that deploy racialized meanings often do so by suggesting that pleasure can be derived from visiting and becoming the racialized other.

### **Consuming the Other**

*GTA III* is best understood in reference to the vast literature on tourism. Enloe (2000) argues that tourism is as much “ideology as physical movement” and that it represents a “package of ideas

about industrial, bureaucratic life . . . manhood, education and pleasure” (p. 28). Video games contribute a “package of ideas” about race, nation, and gender, generating pleasure as they transport people through imagination, virtual cross-dressing, and ethnic sampling. Just as whites headed uptown to Harlem during the Jazz era, just as well-heeled and gentrified suburbanites travel to exotic foreign lands, video games offer its players the ability to experience and try the forbidden.

Bypassing any economic barriers of travel and societal stigmas, video games provide daily opportunities to try on other bodies and experiences. Whereas tourism allows individuals to “indulge in the other” because you are only on vacation once, video games offer a similar experience without any consequence or cost. They elicit pleasure through the dangerous, unknown, sexual, and unlawful. Within video games, “ethnicity offers spice,” and in doing so “the ‘real fun’ is to be had by bringing to the surface all those ‘nasty’ unconscious longings about contact with the other” (hooks, 1992, pp. 21–22). The virtual visitation to inner city communities and strip clubs constitutes “an alternative playground where members of the dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over intimate relations with the other” (p. 23). Video games, particularly *GTA III*, represent a continuation of the Western historic project of securing pleasure through the other. As hooks (1992) argues, the longing for pleasure has “led the white west to sustain a romantic fantasy of the ‘primitive’ and the concrete search for a real primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, a dark continent or dark flesh . . .” (p. 27). One result of this is that black women are deployed through video games as exotic sexual objects and a source of pleasure for men in a way that is reminiscent of whites heading to Harlem for “a taste of something different.” In effect, video games are inexpensive version of sex tours to Southeast Asia or the Caribbean because they offer a virtual sampling of the “dark continent” and dark bodies. The popularity of video games not only reflects the ability to consume the “other,” to occupy the unknown, and visit the dangerous, but it also speaks to the power garnered through this relationship of domination.

### **High-Tech Blackface**

Adam Clayton Powell III recently termed video games as “high-tech blackface,” arguing that “because the players become involved in the action . . . they become more aware of the moves that are programmed into the game” (Marriott, 2003). The following section explores how sports games in particular reflect a history of minstrelsy, providing its primarily white creators and players the opportunity to become black (Costikyan, 1999). In doing so, these games elicit pleasure, play on white fantasies, and affirm white privilege through virtual play.

According to Lott (1993), minstrelsy was a “manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of ‘blackness’ and demonstrates the permeability of the color line” (cited in Rogin, 1998, p. 35). Blackface “facilitate[s] safely an exchange of energies between two otherwise rigidly bounded and policed cultures” (cited in Rogin, 1998, p. 35). Video games operate in a similar fashion, breaking down boundaries with ease, allowing players to try on the other, the taboo, the dangerous, the forbidden, and the otherwise unacceptable (Rogin, 1998, p. 35).

### **The Virtual Black Athletic Body**

The sports gaming industry is the crown jewel of the video games world. It is a one billion dollar per year industry. Sports games account for more than 30% of all video games sales. While *Tony Hawk* and other extreme sports games are gaining market share, the most popular games remain those sports dominated by black athletes. Since 1989, over 19 million units of John Madden football have been sold. In 2002 alone, EA sports sold 4.5 million units (Ratliff, 2003, p. 96). “Today’s gaming resides squarely in mainstream America, and for them fantasy means Tigers and Kobes” (Ratliff, 2003, p. 96). As such, sports games represent a genre in which characters of color exist as actors (protagonists) rather than victims or aesthetic scenery. It becomes quite clear through these games that blacks dominate

America's major sports do so because of genetics. Blacks make up a disproportionate number of athletes in both the real and imaginary because of what is promoted as their innate athletic superiority.

Jumping as high as the sun, knocking their competitors through concrete walls, and making unfathomable moves on the court, sports games reveal both innate black athleticism and their superhuman strength, endurance, hyper-masculinity, speed, and jumping ability. The few white players who do appear in *NBA Street* have nowhere near the athleticism or the muscles of the black players. The white player's dominance comes from their ability to shoot, which comes from hard work and long hours on the court, not good genes.

The genre of sports games represents a site of pleasure in which game players secure happiness through the virtual occupation of black bodies. King and Springwood (2001) argue that the "black athlete has been constructed as a site of pleasure, dominance, fantasy, and surveillance" (p. 101). Reflecting the real world of sports and its discourse, sports games indulge white pleasures as they affirm stereotypical visions of black bodies as physical, aggressive, and violent, while simultaneously minimizing the importance of intellectualism and hard work in understanding the supposed dominance of black athletes.

While ideas of minstrelsy and racial cross-dressing are useful in understanding *GTA III*, these ideas are most helpful in discussing sports games. Sports games represent a site in which white hatred and disdain for blackness and its love and adoration for blackness is revealed through popular culture. Video games reflect "the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency" (Lott, 1993, p. 18). In other words, these games reveal white supremacy in the form of both contempt and desire. The contempt materializes in different ways, but in reflecting an oppositional binary, sports games legitimize stereotypical ideas about black athletic superiority and white intellectual abilities. The adoration materializes in the approval and value we offer black athletes, whether through financial rewards, posters on our walls, or imitation. Video games fulfill our desire not only to emulate Allen Iverson's killer crossover, Shaquille O'Neal's thunderous dunks, Barry Bonds's homerun swing, or Barry Sanders's spins, but allow the virtual occupation of black bodies. They provide the means to experience these supposedly unattainable skills, while deriving pleasure through black male bodies. The desire to "be black" because of the stereotypical visions of strength, athleticism, power, and sexual potency all play out within the virtual reality of sports games. As Elijah Anderson observes, "Black have always been the other in this country. A lot of people living in the suburbs admire this fire and this funk they see in blacks, a kind of aggressiveness a lot of them want too. A lot of these suburban, white-bread kids hunger for this kind of experience" (Marriot, 1999). As with the history of minstrelsy, sampling the other is not liberating or transgressive: it does not unsettle dominant notions through breaking down barriers or increasing exposure. The ideas of blackness introduced through video games reflect dominant ideologies, thereby providing sanction for the status quo, legitimacy for white supremacy, and evidence for the common sense ideas of race, gender, sexuality, and nation.

### **Common Sense, Power, and Politics**

A final way to see the connection between power and the racialized images offered through video games is to examine the way in which they reify hegemonic discourses and practices. Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony underscores the connection between video games as a racial project and social, racial, and political inequalities. Gramsci argues that, as ruling groups attempt to consolidate power, "they must elaborate and maintain a popular system of ideas and practices, which he called 'common sense,'" ultimately garnering consent for their rule (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 67). Video games, in disseminating stereotypes, in offering bodies and spaces of color as sites of play, and in affirming dominant ideas about poverty, unemployment, crime, and war, contribute to the consolidation of white supremacist power. Ultimately, the images and ideologies offered through games elicit individual consent for structural policies, thereby legitimizing White hegemony.

## Virtual Playing Fields

The most popular genre within sports video games is the street basketball game. *NBA Street* and *Street Hoops* are two typical examples. The problematic nature of these games transcends their acceptance and promotion of stereotypes that emphasize the athletic power of black bodies. The ubiquitous focus on street basketball, as well as the glorification of deindustrialized spaces of poverty, contributes to “common sense” ideas of inner city communities and the constancy of play with the black community. Writing about shoe commercials, Kelley (1998) asserts that popular images of street basketball “romanticize the crumbling urban spaces in which African American youth play” (p. 197). As inner city spaces are glamorized and commodified for their seedy and dangerous elements, structural shifts continue to worsen these spaces.

The process of commodification is not limited to the generation of pleasure for players, but is evident in the usefulness of black bodies and space to the video games industry. Reflecting the hyper-visibility and glorification of the deindustrialized inner city community, *NBA Street* and *Street Hoops* reflect the commodification of African-American practices of play within popular culture. As Kelley (1998) observes, “Nike, Reebok, L.A. Gear, and other athletic shoe companies have profited enormously from post-industrial decline. Television commercials and print ads romanticize the crumbling urban spaces in which African-Americans play, creating demand for the sneakers that they wear. Marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scrawled walls, and empty buildings, these visual representations of “street ball” have created a world where young black males do nothing but play and enjoy doing so in a post-industrial wasteland” (pp. 195–196). One result of this is that those living outside such communities often refuse to engage “ghettos” at a political, economic, or social level because they are content to enjoy playing inside those spaces from the safety of their own home through video games.

Moreover, the ideological trope of limiting discussions of ghetto communities to the play that transpires within such communities obfuscates the daily struggles and horrors endured in post-industrial America. The realities of police brutality, deindustrialization, the effects of globalization on job prospects, and the fact that most parents work three jobs just to make end meet – these factors are all invisible because the dominant image of street basketball continues to pervade American discourses about inner-city neighborhoods. Video game players become tourists in the virtual ghetto. On one level, they enjoy what they experience. On another level, they come to believe that social problems are the result of community or individual failures. The constant focus on inner city play within video games, on ESPN, and within popular culture leaves the impression that, rather than working, rectifying social problems, and improving the community’s infrastructure, black males are too busy playing. Relying on longstanding notions of black laziness and athletic superiority, these games reinforce fictions about black males “kickin’ it in the hood, while simultaneously glamorizing and commodifying these spaces (Feagin & Vera, 1995).

The relationship between the black community and the video game industry is one of exploitation. Companies and players benefit through the consumption of inner-city communities, while poverty, unemployment, and police brutality run rampant. As more and more Americans “live in their world,” that world is getting poor and poorer. The video game industry prospers, making money while directing our attentions away from the depravity and sadness of inner city America towards the excitement and pleasure of street basketball.

## A Long Way from Pong

Video games exist on a number of planes. At one level, they are commodities: cultural products bought and sold for profit within world economy. At another level, games serve the ubiquitous desire of escape and fantasy. They offer its players the ability to enter a new world of excitement and pleasure. At still another level, games are about race and gender. As with much of popular culture, they offer a “safe” space to discuss and consume stereotypical ideas about race and gender. Finally, games are inherently

political and ideological. As in other forms of genre fiction, video games are places where political currents are explored in powerful ways.

The interactive nature of video games generates heightened levels of pleasure and excitement, often through the act of occupying dangerous spaces, becoming “othered bodies,” and living through fantasies and anxieties. Video games are not children’s toys or insignificant forms of entertainment. Rather, they are a powerful medium of education, propaganda, and therapy. Games disseminate stereotypes, elicit racialized pleasure, justify the status quo, and provide an outlet to deal with social anxieties. Video games are not simply about entertainment or making money. Video games, despite, or perhaps because of, their function as a source of entertainment and a profitable commodity, exist as a powerful medium to disseminate ideologies, talk through racial/gender issues, and elicit approval for the status quo. Contributing to our “racial common sense” while also justifying social policies, contemporary video games are ideological constructs that demand careful analysis.

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