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Playing with Race: The Ethics of Racialized Representations in E-Games

Abstract:

Questions about the meanings of racialized representations must be included as part of developing an ethical game design practice. This paper examines the various ways in which race and racial contexts are represented in a selected range of commercially available e-games, namely war, sports and action-adventure games. The analysis focuses on the use of racial slurs and the contingencies of historical re-representation in war games; the limited representation of black masculinity in sports games and the romanticization of 'ghetto play' in urban street games; and the pathologization and fetishization of race in 'crime sim' action-adventure games such as *True Crime: Streets of LA*. This paper argues for, firstly, a continuous critical engagement with these dominant representations in all their evolving forms; secondly, the necessary inclusion of reflexive precepts in e-games development contexts; and thirdly, the importance of advocating for more diverse and equitable racialized representations in commercial e-games.

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Race matters in e-games. The overt racism in games like *Ethnic Cleansing* made by white supremacist groups for online distribution have come under scrutiny for their promulgation of racially motivated in-game killings. These games offer obviously problematic treatments of racial identities, however race based themes are arguably evoked in subtler but no less insidious ways in a broad range of commercially available e-games. This paper argues for the inclusion of questions about the meanings and effects of racialized representations as part of developing an ethical game design practice. I use the term 'racialized' here to emphasize the subtle ways in which race may be perceived or inflected within different game-world settings. How, indeed, do we play with race in e-games today? What are the possibilities for developing ethical referents for critically engaging with racialized representations in commercial e-games?

The onus is consequently on developing a critical attentiveness to the constituencies of racialized difference, especially the varied ways in which these differences are structured and re-presented in game-world contexts. The attendant question of ethical accountability in e-games design arises due to the persistent and increasingly prolific circulation of the types of problematic representations that are identified and examined in this paper. An ethical critical awareness in this sense hinges on the consideration of cultural inequities and interrogates the complicity of these e-games in reinforcing hegemonic notions of power, privilege and inequality. The emphasis in this paper is therefore on fostering a sense of ethical accountability that involves a continuous reflexive understanding of the inequities inscribed in unequal social exchange, cross-cultural negotiation and inter-cultural representation.

Introduction

In 2004, the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) formally acknowledged the importance of advocating for diversity in games development, but it has not yet instituted a programmatic plan for initiating cross-sector discussions or drafting industry guidelines for culturally inclusive games design. The fact that e-games are increasingly being consumed by a broad cultural cross-section of gamers underpins current discussions. In the United States, for example, discussions centre on the need to cultivate more ethnically diverse development teams with the aim of creating games that go be-

yond racially typecast characters and stereotypical narratives.¹ At the same time, the prospect of enhancing profit margins comes into focus, especially given a recent study by Nielson Entertainment that identifies black and Latino players as "*an emerging market*" for the games industry.² While the diversification of development teams is a laudable goal, it is no guarantee of the consequent creation of more equitable racialized representations. As Henry A Giroux cautions, limited diversity-management models have elsewhere "*not only failed to link difference to issues of power, parity, and equality, they have also failed to challenge the Eurocentric biases that figure in their notions of history, marginality, modernity, gender, and transformation.*"³

At any rate, concerns about the racialized representational politics in e-games are increasingly being raised. As Jason Della Rocca, IGDA's executive director, concedes, "*We're seeing, to a large extent, that the games that are being designed unconsciously include the biases, opinions and reflections of their creators.*"⁴ In 2001, the United States based children's media advocacy group Children Now conducted a study on videogame characters and reported on the disproportionate paucity of non-white characters, as well as the narrowly stereotypical and arguably problematic portrayals of Blacks, Hispanics and Asians in videogames. For instance, African-American males typically appear in sports-oriented games, while 90 per cent of African-American females are victims of violence (twice the percentage of white females).⁵ Recent writings by academics and commentators such as David Leonard and Gerard Greenfield offer trenchant critiques of some dominant, but apparently taken for granted, e-games tropes including the re-inscription of unequal racial power relationships and the fetishized commodification of minority group cultures. These tropes are symptomatic of the ways in which racial

¹ The Associate Press: Video game industry seeking minorities.

² Kilman, Carrie: Video Games – Playing Against Racism.

³ Giroux, Henry A: *Impure Acts*. 67

⁴ Cited in The Associate Press: Video game industry seeking minorities.

⁵ Cited in Leonard, David: 'Live in your world, play in ours'

otherness is configured paradoxically as both a source of anxiety and pleasure. Such broad critiques will be discussed in closer detail in this paper to understand the subtle and myriad ways in which race is represented in three thematic case studies, namely war, sports and action-adventure games.

War Games and the Contingencies of Historical 'Authenticity'

The present proliferation of war games – that are variously based on the Vietnam War, Gulf War and Iraq War – offers a situated context for analyzing the ways in which game developers' quest for historical 'authenticity' and graphical 'realism' are collusive in re-circulating dominant constructions of racial otherness. Critics such as Henry A Giroux, Nick Turse and Nina Huntemann have examined the present trend for war themed games as a symptom of the contemporary militarization of the public sphere.⁶ They are especially critical of increasing collaborations between the games industry and the military in the United States, which have resulted in e-games such as *America's Army*, *Kuma War*, *Full Spectrum Warrior* and *SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals*. As Turse writes, "*The new military-entertainment complex's games may help to produce great battlefield decision makers, but they strike from debate the most crucial decisions young people can make in regard to the morality of war – choosing whether or not to fight and for what cause.*"⁷ At the same time, however, discussions on the ethics inherent in blurring the lines between war and entertainment need to include the concurrent promulgation of racialized meanings in war games.

As Gerard Greenfield argues, "*Reinforcing the racism that justifies domination and mass killing becomes a key part of the authenticity of historically accurate war gaming. This is how we find players killing 'gooks' in Nam and 'towel heads' in Libya...and thus the 'civilizing mission' as a battle between good and evil is recreated.*"⁸ Greenfield acknowledges that some games like *Battlefield Vietnam* allow players to

choose to take sides with the North Vietnamese Army, but he also notes that "[c]hoosing to be the 'enemy' adds no objectivity, it just makes it harder to win". The context for war remains a given, re-staged from a hegemonic perspective. Furthermore, as Huntemann notes, "[t]here is no moral or ethical questioning of the specifics of the historical context".⁹ At issue here is the problematic privileging of 'authentic' histories that exclude other histories. David Leonard provides an illustration of this concern: "*Conflict Desert Storm is an attempt to rewrite history in very specific ways. For example, despite the fact that militaries from all over the world, including many from Arab nations, participated in the Gulf War, the game chronicles the war as if it was a battle between American/British forces and Iraqi soldiers.*"¹⁰ In addition, he points out that *Call to Duty* and *Medal of Honor*, which are both set during World War II, contribute to a form of historical amnesia in which conscripted black soldiers are completely absent. Historical re-presentations in games do matter, as evident in the strike in 1997 by workers at Japanese game publisher Koei's manufacturing plant in China. The Chinese workers went on strike when they realized that the game they were producing contained scenes glorifying the Nanjing massacre in China in 1937. As Greenfield observes, "*The massacre of civilians by the Japanese imperial army in Nanjing is depicted as another battle, led by war heroes (complete with biographical data on their heroism) and counted up as another high score.*"¹¹

The question of how to accommodate ethical design precepts within industry practices remains paramount. Dean Takahashi's discussion of pre-development arbitration over the use of racial slurs (as markers of 'authentic' and 'historically accurate' combat experience) in the *Men of Valor* series provides a case in point.¹² While the original decision to include profanity passed muster with the game publisher and retailers, nevertheless the development team opted to substitute outright racial slurs with "*profanity laden stereotypes and creative*

⁶ See, for example, Giroux, Henry A: War on Terror; Barron, Michelle and Huntemann, Nina: Militarism & video games; and Turse, Nick: The Pentagon Invades Your Xbox.

⁷ Turse, Nick: The Pentagon Invades Your Xbox.

⁸ Greenfield, Gerard: Killing Games.

⁹ Barron, Michelle and Huntemann, Nina: Militarism & video games.

¹⁰ Leonard, David: Unsettling the military entertainment complex.

¹¹ Greenfield, Gerard: Killing Games.

¹² Takahashi, Dean: Ethics of Game Design.

curses, which they considered to be less offensive than the hot-button words of racial prejudice." The team also decided against the depiction of drug use and prostitution because such elements would not have "*truly enhanced the vision of a realistic depiction of combat.*" On the other hand, the possibility of a battleground scattered with health packs was considered by the developer to be a "*dishonor to the war*". Although I am not necessarily endorsing these design decisions, this example demonstrates that there is at least some scope for reflexive decision-making on the part of game developers. In the end, these predeterminations belie the utterly constructed nature of the game-worlds presented in these war games, as well as the ideological dimensions of realist narratives.

Sports Games, Urban Spaces and 'Pixilated Minstrelsy'

Sports games provide another context for examining the ideological dimensions of manufactured realism. According to Children Now, 83% of male African American characters in videogames are represented as athletes.¹³ These characters demonstrate a propensity for taunting, trash-talking and physically aggressive behaviour. 80 per cent of African-American males are shown as verbally and physically aggressive, compared to 57 per cent of white males.¹⁴ Questions about the delimited representation of blackness, and black masculinity in this particular instance, need to be extended to the present trend for 'urban street games' like *NBA Street*, *Street Hopes* and *NFL Street*. These games recontextualize traditional sports such as basketball and football so that they are played in a variety of largely urban 'ghetto' locations and often set to hip-hop soundtracks, thereby staging a convergence of discourses on athleticism, blackness and commodified 'ghetto cool'. According to David Leonard, these game-world settings function to romanticize impoverished inner city spaces while simultaneously commodifying a narrow black cultural aesthetic. For Leonard, "*[t]he problematic nature of these games transcends their acceptance and promotion of stereotypes that emphasize the athletic power of*

black bodies."¹⁵ The focus on inner city play "*contributes to 'common sense' ideas of inner city communities and the constancy of play with the black community.*"¹⁶ Thus, these games further play to preconceived 'common sense' understandings of the ghetto, blackness and the black community's work ethic. A racialized politics is being enacted in the process of supposedly telling it like it is.

The virtual stage sets in urban street games do not come with an accompanying socio-cultural backdrop. As Leonard argues, "*the ideological trope of limiting discussions of ghetto communities to the play that transpires within such communities obfuscates the daily struggles*" of poverty and unemployment.¹⁷ Robin DG Kelley's description of televisual representations of 'street ball' (used in advertisements for sports shoes) might well be also describing the game-world settings for urban street games; and his attendant critique likewise provides a resonant interpretive cue. He observes: "*[M]arked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted net[-]less hoops, graffiti-scrawled walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play.*"¹⁸ The staging of such scenarios are potentially complicit in "*the circulation of representations that ultimately undergird racist ideologies or 'success' narratives that take racism off the hook by demonstrating that 'hard work' in the realm of sports or entertainment is all one needs to escape the ghetto.*"¹⁹ Moreover, as Leonard notes, "*[t]he ubiquitous levels of poverty, the conditions that give rise to chain-link fences and net-less hoops are lost to the 'virtual ghetto tourist.'*" These games rely on longstanding notions of black laziness and athletic superiority to reinforce representations of black males 'kickin' it in the hood, while simultaneously glamorizing and commodifying these urban spaces.²⁰

For Leonard, urban street games are akin to digital versions of cross-racial minstrel shows; and they are

¹³ Cited in Marriot, Michael: *The Color of Mayhem in a Wave of 'Urban' Games*.

¹⁴ Cited in Leonard, David: *High Tech Blackface*.

¹⁵ Leonard, David: 'Live in your world, play in ours'.

¹⁶ Leonard, David: 'Live in your world, play in ours'.

¹⁷ Leonard, David: *High Tech Blackface*.

¹⁸ Kelley, Robin DG: *Playing for Keeps*. 196, original emphasis

¹⁹ Kelley, Robin DG: *Playing for Keeps*. 197

²⁰ Leonard, David: *High Tech Blackface*.

constitutive of a form of 'pixilated minstrelsy'.²¹ Pleasure is derived *through* black male bodies. This is a form of "high tech blackface" in that "[t]he 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." Tellingly, "[t]he few white players who do appear within NBA Street, NFL Street, and several other games have nowhere near the athleticism or the muscles of the black players." There is therefore a gameplay incentive to 'be black'. Nevertheless, "[a]s with the history of minstrelsy, sampling of the other is not liberating or transgressive: it does not unsettle dominant notions through breaking down barriers or increasing exposure."²²

Action-Adventure Games, *True Crime* and 'Other' Narratives

The most recent iteration of the *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) series *San Andreas* mines a similar narrowly racialized vein. The shift in the choice of protagonist from Italian-American Tommy Vercetti (in *GTA III* and *GTA: Vice City*) to African-American CJ (in *GTA: San Andreas*) marks a parallel shift in narrative focus from 'mob' to 'gangsta', without necessarily transcending or subverting staid archetypes. Michael Marriot, for instance, remains critical of the cultivated sense of "place, peril and pigmentation" in *GTA: San Andreas*.²³ Despite the game developer's maintenance about their intentional use of parody and tongue-in-cheek witticisms, and that their M-rated products are intended for consumption by adult audiences,²⁴ the iconic *GTA* series is arguably still complicit in the pathologization and fetishization of race. After all, there is a fine line to (t)read between parodic critique and discursive reinscription, especially in relation to the deployment of racialized archetypes and the persistent linkage of these archetypes with criminal elements. The series

has in fact become a design paradigm for other 'crime sim' action-adventure games such as *True Crime: Streets of LA*, *The Getaway* and the forthcoming *The Godfather*. The *GTA* series has already generated considerable media and academic debate, however it is equally important to broaden the field of critical inquiry and examine attendant issues in other comparable games. A close textual analysis of *True Crime* may be suggestive of how specific racialized meanings are constructed and narrated through game design elements.

True Crime features a gaming first: a diasporic Chinese protagonist in a naturalistic contemporary setting. In this cross-platform (PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube and PC) title, gamers assume the role of Nick Kang, a Chinese-American cop, who attempts to unravel the mystery of his father's disappearance, while going about his daily job of ridding the City of Angels of Chinese triads and Russian gangs. Given the questionable orientation of the latter premise in this third-person action-adventure game, it could be asserted that Luxoflux, the North American developers, proved to be canny in their choice of the main character. This selectivity also extends to the choice of the two main supporting characters. Kang's work partner is the Hispanic reformed ex-gangster Rosie Velasquez, and the Chief of Detectives to whom Kang reports is African-American Wanda Parks. This multicultural ensemble of characters seems calculated to deflect possible accusations of ethnic profiling, or of unduly targeting particular stereotypical ethnic crime groups. The game appears to endorse the view that this is fine as long as the ethnic policing is facilitated by other ethnics. The problematic sub-text of ethnic or diasporic community self-surveillance and self-disciplining within the multicultural nation-state nevertheless remains. In other words, you guys take care of your own, please.

The game uses a distinct West Coast hip-hop soundtrack, featuring music by well-known African-American performers such as Snoop Dogg, WestSide Connection, Ice-T and Coolio, to name but a few. Thus, Kang's activities on the streets of Los Angeles are complemented with a pulsating and identifiable urban sound-scape. Snoop Dogg even features as an un-lockable, playable character in the game. This once again poses questions about the ethics inherent in the representational politics of the game. The act of foregrounding minority representation and visibility in an American setting may be potentially productive or empowering, particularly in American game development contexts that has until recently seldom featured Asian-Americans or African-Americans as central characters in action-adventure

²¹ The term 'pixilated minstrelsy' is derived from an interviewee who is critical of gaming trends for "pixilated minstrel shows" in Marriot, Michael: *The Color of Mayhem in a Wave of 'Urban' Games*.

²² Leonard, David: *High Tech Blackface*.

²³ Marriot, Michael: *The Color of Mayhem in a Wave of 'Urban' Games*.

²⁴ See, for example, Marriot, Michael: *The Color of Mayhem in a Wave of 'Urban' Games*.

games. Nevertheless, I would contend that the game appears too self-consciously resolute in its audio and visual presentation of a sense of perceived difference. That is to say, it pro-actively cultivates a sense of relative cultural 'otherness' to the point of deleterious effect, especially when considered in relation to the overall storyline. In sum, it constantly reminds the gamer that this is the 'other' side of Los Angeles.

Much of the plot is anchored in urban realism – at least by conventional e-gaming standards anyway – until the second half of the game when it completely degenerates into battles with demons and a dragon supposedly lurking below the streets of Chinatown in Los Angeles. Even worse, these 'baddies' are at the service of arch-villain Ancient Wu. While fantasy elements are in and of themselves not too much of a contentious issue in gaming contexts, the positioning of such elements in *True Crime* is problematic in their fantastical coding of 'Asianness' as that which has to be ultimately exorcised by the diasporic subject. In much the same fashion, the game leads Kang to a final confrontation with General Kim, thereby purging Los Angeles and by extension Kang himself of the perceived enemy within. Such narrative closure offers limited scope for diasporic subjectivity apart from domestication and assimilation to perceived dominant and normative ideals.

True Crime offers a surfeit of currently marketable – and racialized – e-game signifiers, ranging from hip-hop through to the use of racially marked urban locations such as Chinatown; and it ultimately inscribes highly specific versions of cosmopolitanism and urban multiculturalism that normalize unequal racial power relations. The choice of an Asian-American central character and the use of neo-Orientalist tropes in this game further demonstrate how racial difference may be simultaneously fetishized and demonized, and how hegemonic whiteness is positioned as the taken for granted racial norm in game-world environments. A sequel to the game is already in development. *True Crime: New York City* features a male African-American protagonist. Marcus Reed is a former street thug who has turned into a rogue street cop seeking to take down four major criminal organizations. The game's producer provides an enthusiastic account of these organizations:

"There's the Italian mob. There's the President's Club, which is an urban gang, then there's the Magdalena Cartel, which is Columbian, and the Shadow Tong, which is Chinese. They all operate around the city but they definitely will have

higher concentrations in certain parts of the city – for example the President's Club is more prevalent in northern Manhattan up near Harlem, whereas the Shadow Tong's base is Chinatown and the Italian mob are in Little Italy."²⁵

It would seem that true crime does pay well after all, especially when you keep mining from a narrowly racialized vein.²⁶

Conclusion: On The Ethics of Racialized Representations

In conclusion, this paper has explored some of the dominant ways in which e-games are complicit in re-enacting race based pedagogies. At issue here are the cultural narratives created by the ideological premises and racialized representational politics inherent in mainstream games. Since in-game representations do not circulate in a ludological vacuum, there are broader social consequences to consider. Recent criticisms have been directed at *GTA: Vice City* and *Hitman 2* for their in-game treatment and alleged vilification of Haitian and Sikh characters respectively. These two games received considerable media attention; and they were the targets of successful protests organised by minority lobby groups in the United States.²⁷ It would be unfortunate, however, to dismiss such social phenomena as isolated 'special issue' incidents relevant only to minority interest groups, and that any potential objections to in-game representations can be simply addressed either by the public relations team or subsequently edited re-issues of the game. The addition or subtraction approach to game design practice does not adequately provide a grounded ethical basis for understanding and confronting the social, symbolic and ideological dimensions of in-game representational politics. Moreover, as Jeffrey A Ow suggests, the mantra "*if you don't like it, don't*

²⁵ Cited in Stead, Chris: *True Crime – New York City*. 19

²⁶ The titles of other so-called "hip-hop games" that are in production speak for themselves: *Crime Life: Gang War*, *50 Cent: Bulletproof*, *25 To Life*, *Urban Reign*, *Fear & Respect*, and *187 Ride or Die*. See Babb, Pete, et al.: *Hip to the Game*. 22-25

²⁷ See, for example, Diaz, Johnny, and Medina, Eddie: Game maker apologizes to Haitians; and The Sikh Coalition: Eidos Petition.

buy it" often used by game publishers and gamers alike in defence of indicted games is overly cavalier and constitutes an elision of the attendant concerns.²⁸ E-games need to be situated as part of a bigger social picture and broader cultural conversation about race and racialized representations. This paper argues for a continuous critical engagement with these representations in all their evolving manifestations, as well as the necessary inclusion of such reflexive precepts in e-games design and development contexts, while underscoring the importance of advocating for more diverse and equitable racialized representations in commercial e-games.

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²⁸ Ow, Jeffrey A: *The Revenge of the Yellowfaced Cyborg Terminator.* 60