Gaming Representation

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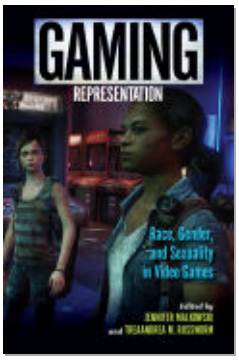

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INTRODUCTION

Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies beyond the Politics of the Image

JENNIFER MALKOWSKI AND TREAANDREA M. RUSSWORM

OF WHAT SIGNIFICANCE ARE QUESTIONS ABOUT IDENTITY (ESPECIALLY RACE, gender, and sexuality) to the evolution of video game studies? Has the trend toward code analysis and platform studies inadvertently worked to silence, marginalize, or dismiss representational analysis in the field? Are there ways in which the often-violent protection of video games as a masculine playspace has affected academic approaches to games—particularly when some voices are taken for granted as natural experts on the medium while others are decentered and naturalized as less proficient in the assumed boys' club of gaming? More pointedly, are we at a moment when "representation," "diversity," and "identity" have become dirty words in game studies? These are just a few of the questions that animate *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, a collaboration born from and nurtured by a new energy around questions of identity and representation that has been building in game studies over the past few years.

The discipline itself has grown rapidly, with an ever more significant presence in the programs of various disciplinary conferences, outlets for article publication in places like *Games and Culture* and *Game Studies*, and the enthusiastic support of academic presses releasing dozens of new books on the medium annually. Yet for most of game studies' history, conversations about identity have only ever happened on the margins—a dynamic that became particularly apparent to us because of our backgrounds in fields in which such conversations have secured more prominence (film and media studies, queer studies, feminist studies, literary studies, and African American studies). To make a comparison to the disciplinary history of film studies, for example, where is this field's Laura Mulvey moment?[1] Film studies enjoyed a long post-Mulvey period when explicitly feminist

topics and methodologies were not just accepted but dominant—when, to hear our senior colleagues tell it, work that neglected to account for gender, where relevant, struggled for acceptance for the first time. In game studies, a selection of publications has productively adapted theories of identity, politics, and representation from the broader world of visual culture studies or—in the most exciting cases—has used games to challenge and reshape those theories. But, until very recently, there has not been sustained or prominent attention to these subjects in the discipline's mainstream. There has not been a critical mass of scholars asking the kinds of questions we and our contributors found ourselves asking of the medium. That critical mass has finally emerged with a new wave of scholarship that we are grateful to be part of—one that might just guide questions of identity and representation into the central current of game studies.

We return to both the existing and new work in these areas ahead, but we first want to address this question: Why *has* game studies, until this recent flourishing, pursued questions of identity and representation so infrequently and incompletely?[2] Given academics' penchant for critique, the endless supply of "bad objects" that video games offer in relation to identity makes it even more surprising that scholars have not explored this terrain more fully; as Adrienne Shaw puts it, "In many ways, digital games seem to be the least progressive form of media representation, despite being one of the newest mediated forms."[3] Coming to prominence, for the most part, during and after the successes of the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, and the gay liberation movement, the video game industry has nevertheless been less willing, overall, than other media industries to pursue meaningful diversity or refrain from egregious stereotyping. And yet there exists only sparse academic scholarship that addresses either the medium's long history of failures in this area or its sparks of progress that have appeared more recently.

Some reasons for this neglect may stem from the particulars of game studies' formative years. Anna Everett well summarizes in the foreword that analyses of identity in video games were effectively displaced in the narratology-versus-ludology debates, the focus on procedural rhetorics and "interrogations of gaming's structures of play and affective engagement," and, more recently, "the neoformalist tech turn to platform, software, and code studies." A casualty of these ideological battles and shifts in game studies' affections, representation has been treated, as Braxton Soderman asserts in chapter 2, like "the casual element ('casual' here defined as the contingent) while the mechanics became the hard-core essence of the game form." Viewed in this way, representational analysis becomes the less rigorous, less medium-specific way to approach video games, compared to a focus on "hard-core" elements.

But these attitudes misunderstand both the nature and importance of representation in the medium. It is both possible and essential to study representation productively in video games, even as this pursuit might initially seem poorly aligned with the ontology of video games (built as they are on processes and actions) or with disciplinary trends toward areas like code and platform studies.

Throughout this collection, we and our contributors are guided by three central beliefs about representation and game studies. First, representation is not fully separate from the implicitly hard-core elements of games: it is achieved through and dependent on player and machine actions, on code, and on hardware, not just on surface-level images and sounds. Second, games still prominently include images and sounds (and plot, characters, language, etc.); having code underlying these elements does not negate their existence or impact, and game studies should be comprehensive enough to welcome their analysis. And third, the field would prove itself dangerously out of touch if it did not attend meaningfully to representation in this moment when representation, identity, and their intertwined relationship in games and game culture have become (or, rather, have been revealed as) such high-stakes matters. The social, political, and cultural context of the #Gamergate era, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and fan-created campaigns like #INeedDiverseGames make this a unique and urgent time for game studies to develop better critical proficiencies for representational and identity-based analyses.

With these three premises in mind, we assert that there is much to say about representation and identity in games and gaming culture that goes beyond flat assessments of good and bad objects, code versus image, and form versus content. In fact, it is our understanding that a focus on race, gender, and sexuality need not exclude other factors of production, and we believe that such analysis must be accountable to the medium-specificity of video games. Representation and identity have often been sidelined in game studies with the implicit justification that the discipline should focus instead on the richer objects of code and of game platforms as complex systems—not audiovisual surfaces. Yet, as we argue throughout *Gaming Representation*, representation and identity are similarly complex systems that are always relevant to the ways in which games, codes, platforms—indeed, all technologies—are constructed. Representation in game studies must be viewed as a system that functions as akin to—rather than as a distraction from—the discipline's more celebrated, hard-core objects of study.

Our thinking on representation here is inspired by cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall's meditations on the various politics of representation. Hall conceives of the politics of representation as a way of approaching media analysis that pushes beyond the politics of the image or a focus on the distance between and image and reality. He argues that "the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflective, after-the-event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation—subjectivity, identity, politics—a formative, not merely expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life."[4] Hall continues, "Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time."[5] Although Hall never wrote about video games during his prolific career, we find more than a passing significance for the present collection's aims in his reference to the "machineries" of representation and its "codes." For there exists in the realm

of games not just one kind of code; alongside computational code, there is representational code. And as much as game software creates complex systems of play, so too is identity itself a complex system—one whose potential ontological affinities with the medium of video games have not yet been fully grasped by academics in this field. This book imagines a critical blueprint for what it might mean to treat representation as "a formative, not merely expressive" system in game studies.

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In our preceding speculations on the lack of prominent, sustained work on identity in the history of video game studies, we do not want to imply that our collection is charting wholly unexplored territory, neglect the authors who produced excellent scholarship in these areas in the discipline's earliest years, or underestimate those who have quite recently added their voices. As it turns out, in embarking on this project when we did, we were adding our energies to a powerful wave of scholarship on identity and games that was beginning to take shape. The volume of submissions we received in that initial call, combined later with enthusiastic interest in the collection from many presses, evinces one way issues of identity in games has built up more and more momentum during the years of our manuscript's formation. This new scholarly enthusiasm certainly owes thanks to those outside of academia—journalists, bloggers, vloggers, podcasters, and the like—who for years have been attending to this intersection of identity and games and proving why it matters. Their efforts have inspired many of us to help game studies catch up with and build on what has already been written online and in the popular press (indeed, some of their work figures prominently in the chapters that follow). But within academia, too, we have been keenly aware of the growing number of scholars who have worked to make identity and representation relevant to game studies—a community that includes, to name just a few, Aubrey Anable; Samantha Blackmon; André Brock; Derek Burrill; Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins; Shira Chess; Mia Consalvo; Anna Everett; Kishonna Gray; D. Fox Harrell; Tanner Higgin; Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jennifer Y. Sun; Alex Layne; David J. Leonard; Lisa Nakamura; Laine Nooney; Adrienne Shaw; T. L. Taylor; S. Craig Watkins; and, of course, the fourteen scholars contributing chapters to this book.

Of the growing list of inspirational approaches to games and identity, we delve into only a few here that have particularly shaped our own thinking and our approach to *Gaming Representation*. Anna Everett and Lisa Nakamura, who have contributed the foreword and afterword, respectively, are two pioneering voices in this area—particularly in the fairly recent practice of writing about race and gaming.[6] Everett's *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace* (2009) has been instrumental in disrupting the commonly held notions of a digital divide, where minority communities have been erroneously perceived as lagging behind white (usually male) early adopters in technological use and innovation.[7] Her work on games evolved concomitant with her written histories of black participation in

online communities, a history that has become essential to understanding some of the many complexities of community participation and racial representation in video game culture. In "Serious Play," while exploring various "representational casualties" of the medium, including the persistence of "high-tech blackface" and "black skins" in games like *Ready 2 Rumble: Round 2* (2000, Midway), Everett also offers close textual analysis of the racist ideologies and representational codes that inform video game strategy guides and user manuals.[8] Her groundbreaking work on race and games has sought to both expose and problematize "the still unbearable whiteness of being in mainstream media's . . . vision and . . . conceptualization of new media technologies and gaming cultures' increasing cultural power and much-lamented societal influences."[9] Additionally, her theorization of the terms "Afrogeek" and the "black cyberflaneur," which stress agency, radical cooptation, and uplift remain useful for thinking about minority gaming communities' formative—and continued—active engagement with the medium.

Likewise, in *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (2002) and *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (2008), Lisa Nakamura's broader interventions in internet studies and digital culture has had an early and lasting impact on how we have come to think about video games. By dispelling the notion that race, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity, like gender and nationality, do not matter in online and digital spaces, Nakamura's equally transformative contributions to cyber-cultural studies established the conceptual precedent for her later work on identity and games. In bringing a cultural studies critical approach to environments that were being taken for granted as "race-neutral," Nakamura argued that race is "cybertyped" in digital culture, as ideology that is both reconceptualized and decontextualized, and importantly, that "digital systems . . . operationalize and instrumentalize race."[10] Not only do race and ethnicity matter when it comes to studying digital systems, argues Nakamura, but the digital and media formats are themselves "bumpy, layered, and pitted with the imprint of contact with other cultures; none avoid the mark of imperialist power relations."[11]

Although Nakamura was writing about digital culture more broadly when she discussed "cybertyping" as a more applicable term than "stereotyping" to thinking about the "'cultural layer' or ideologies regarding race" that are evident in the complex relays between people and machines, the concept retains promising potential for moving the discursive focus on representation in video games beyond the surface politics of the image.[12] Since these contributions to digital cultural studies, Nakamura has worked on games and identity in a variety of contexts, from the labor practices in *World of Warcraft* (2004–2014, Blizzard) to the gender politics of *The Sims* (2000–2015, Maxis), and she has written passionately about the need for film and media scholars to both play and write about video games in ways that explicitly prioritize close readings of image and aesthetics.[13]

During this same period (2003–2009), work from S. Craig Watkins on minority youth and gaming communities, David J. Leonard on politicized racial

representations in games, and Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter on the complexities of gendered game spaces complemented Everett's and Nakamura's work and further established some early precedent for studying identity and representation in games.[14] For example, Leonard persuasively argues that popular discussions on games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* reactivate US racial ideologies that pathologize blackness. Leonard specifically calls for prioritizing a "complex level of media literacy" within game studies that might serve as "part of an antiracist praxis and ideological formation."[15] Meanwhile, Bryce and Rutter contributed early work on gaming culture that debunks the myth of the average gamer as white, antisocial, and male. Their research argues against "fetishizing gaming texts or technologies" as they remind us that game worlds "are created within and incorporate specific cultural values but these values are open to resistance, negotiation, rereading, ironicising, reproduction or valorization only through their use."[16]

Mia Consalvo has also been a consistent voice in these areas since the early years, with a particular (though not exclusive) focus on gender. Often grounded in social science methodologies (both quantitative and qualitative), her scholarship on games tackles large-scale questions, such as whether women and men behave in the same ways as game players and how the game industry can attract and retain female developers. Although it represents only one thread of work in her prolific career, Consalvo's published work on identity and games dates back to 2003 with her contribution to *The Video Game Theory Reader*, "Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games." Several of her coauthored articles have productively investigated the gendered actions and attitudes of players—especially female players—in online games, including "Women and Games: Technologies of the Gendered Self" (2007), "Looking for Gender: Gender Roles and Behaviors among Online Gamers" (2009), "The Sexi(e)st of All: Avatars, Gender, and Online Games" (2009), and "The Strategic Female: Gender Switching and Player Behavior in Online Games" (2014). Her coauthored article "The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games" (2009) has been especially useful to researchers working on identity and games, as it performs a broad and well-structured content analysis of recent games to meaningfully determine which demographic groups are under- and overrepresented in video games (spoiler alert! males, whites, and adults are systematically overrepresented). But what particularly distinguishes Consalvo's work is its breadth, contributing research on identity and gamer behavior, textual analysis of identity in games themselves, gender issues in game industry employment (2008's "Crunched by Passion: Women Game Developers and Workplace Challenges"), and big-picture perspectives on sexism in game culture (2012's "Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars").

Most recently, we have been influenced by two important books that have expanded the discourse about identity, representation, and games: D. Fox Harrell's *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (2013) and Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the*

Margins of Gamer Culture (2014). Through an invigorating discursive shift, Harrell argues that computer technology is inherently culturally biased because it is informed by cultural "phantasms": elements of human imaginative cognition that include understandings of self, other, social ills, everyday experiences, and "narrative imagining" or human poetic thought.[17] In an approach to games that blends cognitive science with social theory, Harrell argues persuasively that gaming and computing technologies necessarily include "polymorphic poetics—an expressive set of possibilities centered upon the contingency and imaginative nature of even the most entrenched social identities, such as those of gender and race."[18] It is the lack of "critical computing," says Harrell, that "has resulted in software that at best ignores opportunities for empowerment, and at worst results in perpetuating longstanding social ills of discrimination and disenfranchisement."[19] We find Harrell's work instructive not only for theorizing representation as a system but also for imagining critical bridges between humanities, social science, and computer science approaches to games analysis and development.

Following several years of influential article publication on sexuality and games, Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge* became the first book-length study of that topic (among other topics) in 2014.[20] Using an ethnographic approach to study "those placed at the margins of the constructed center of gaming," Shaw unfurls a nuanced reading of how and why representation matters to marginalized gamers.[21] By observing that issues of identity and representation were much more complicated for queer gamers than just wanting to be able to play as queer characters, she also challenges game developers and game studies scholars alike to rethink the goals of better representation. In addition, Shaw calls for an understanding of diversity founded on "hybridity, intersectionality, and coalitional politics" rather than more traditional identity politics.[22] And in one of her sharpest insights, she recognizes the neoliberal attitude game studios have largely taken to increasing diversity in their titles by allowing players to choose the gender, race, and sexuality of their characters: "Players are made responsible for making their game characters go against male, heterosexual norms in game representation . . . put[ting] responsibility for diversity onto audiences. If the player needs to push a 'gay button,' as game designer Anna Anthropy has termed it, to see same-sex relationships in games, then anyone who doesn't know . . . that the button exists can continue to consume the heteronormative-dominated texts."[23]

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The important work on identity and representation in digital culture and games that we have sampled in the previous section demonstrates not only that there is a cresting interest in these areas but also that there are vibrant discursive communities in place to receive work like this. Yet, since we have always intentionally sought out these perspectives, we are also aware of the extent to which our training and research interests place us in the proverbial choir. That is, we have

known where to look to have the conversations about games that bring humanist discourses prioritizing representational analysis to game studies—critical approaches that necessarily obliterate a computational-representational divide. But we are much less sure that there are obvious go-to places for other scholars—and, indeed, engaged video game developers and fans—to find the discursive threads in game studies about identity and representation.

Gaming Representation centralizes some such perspectives in a single volume. The chapters collected here are interdisciplinary by design, as our contributors have backgrounds in African American studies, American studies, art history, communication, comparative literature, digital art, digital humanities, digital media studies, English, film studies, gender and sexuality studies, Japanese studies, journalism, media studies, television studies, and women's studies.

A note about the games analyzed in the chapters that follow: at the time of publication, many of these are newer while a few others date back to the mid-2000s (*Max Payne 2*, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, *Jade Empire*). With this collection, we want to attend to influential or notable representations of identity from an extended span of recent game history and resist the temptation to write about only the newest games (a tricky proposition, anyway, given the speed of academic publishing and what we hope will be a long lifespan for the book).

Because technologies change so quickly, one might assume a game developed several years ago would be outdated in terms of its representations of race, gender, and sexuality. But we know that representations actually change slowly in digital media, just as they have in more traditional forms of media. Further, individual games used to be subject to a rapid cycle of mainstream obsolescence as soon as their consoles were replaced by the next generation. Today, this dynamic has changed through rampant porting and remastering of old games for current consoles (as with *The Last of Us* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*), and heightened nostalgia for the titles of yesteryear. Streaming services that bundle and sell games in flash sales at significantly reduced prices—like the services PlayStation Now, Steam, and Amazon Games—have also ensured that popular titles from each platform generation will remain relevant to new and old gaming audiences alike. While streaming and subscription services continue to flourish as the Netflixes of the gaming world, players can access ever-expanding archives of "old" games to revisit or play for the first time. The same can be said for the way both YouTube and Twitch have capitalized on the spectatorial pleasures of watching other people play. Some of the most popular YouTube content creators and Twitch streamers often select games based on audience recommendations and feature play-throughs of retro games as part of contests, challenges, and completionist fan agendas. Finally, the developers and franchises of some of the oldest games we analyze here—BioWare, Rockstar, *Grand Theft Auto*, *BioShock*—remain highly relevant to current gaming culture, as do our contributors' insights about them.

We have organized this book into three parts that connect in some way to the broad categories of "race," "gender," and "sexuality." Although we are mindful of

the fact that organizing the book as such may seem to discourage intersectionality, we have done so for two main reasons. First, although these identity categorizations are certainly not comprehensive and are at times rightly problematized, we have used them here as an organizational rubric because the terms make it possible for readers to establish a quick sense of topics, games, and issues the book covers at the chapter level. Second, we felt comfortable organizing the book around these particular categories because our contributors' multi- and transdisciplinary training meant that connections and intersections between and among multiple aspects of identity were already hardwired into the individual chapters.

Gaming Representation's opening part, "Gender, Bodies, Spaces," is its broadest, acknowledging what a pervasive—in addition to explosive—topic gender has been within video game culture in recent years. The authors in this part explore many corners of the medium's universe, writing about gender in game genres, casual games, industry employment, game culture online, cosplay, conventions, and paratexts. While each chapter assumes a deep misogyny present in the medium's culture as a premise, these authors also push beyond simply identifying and condemning this gender trouble. Instead, they trace it back to its cultural and historical roots and/or imagine ways forward for video games and their fraught relationship with gender.

Jennifer Malkowski opens this part with "'I Turned Out to Be Such a Damsel in Distress': Noir Games and the Unrealized Femme Fatale," positing the ludic femme fatale character as one potential salve for the industry's inflamed gender relations. Despite this character's long-standing popularity in film and her promise for adaptation to an action-based medium, Malkowski observes that among video games' remediations of film noir, the femme fatale rarely occupies a meaningful role and is even more rarely a playable character. Through close readings of the two games that have most fully rendered playable femmes fatales—*Max Payne 2* (2003, Remedy Entertainment) and *Heavy Rain* (2010, Quantic Dream)—Malkowski argues that these iterations of the character are ultimately disempowered through regressive strategies from the classic film noir period. "Too *fatale* to let live—too *fatale*, even, to be simply killed," each woman "must reveal her essential, feminized, emotional weakness and be undone by it." An analog for contemporary game culture's paranoid fantasy of the "fake geek girl"—"conning her way into male spaces through deception and sex appeal"—the femme fatale, unfortunately, proves too threatening in today's cultural climate to manifest in games in a truly empowered form.

Like Malkowski, Braxton Soderman also relies on close reading, but turns this collection's attention to casual games in "No Time to Dream: Killing Time, Casual Games, and Gender." Soderman examines the temporality of casual games—both within their texts and externally, in terms of how players fit them into their daily schedules—through analysis of *Diner Dash* (2003, Gamelab), "an urtext . . . [whose] gameplay mechanics and design fundamentally model and

self-reflexively interrogate [the] idea of interruptibility" that is so central to casual games. He links *Diner Dash*'s themes of the temporal demands on women and the fragmentation of their time with broader issues about the quality of women's leisure and the anxious, hostile, gendered devaluation of casual games by a vocal subset of self-identified hard-core male gamers. Seeking in part to redeem casual games and acknowledge their potential ideological richness, Soderman also historicizes the gendered hostility toward them as simply a new chapter in a long modernist history of the aggressive safeguarding of men's leisure time at the expense of women's.

Continuing Soderman's theme of women's marginalization and video games, Jennifer deWinter and Carly A. Kocurek perform a broad analysis of this marginalization within the medium's culture and industry in "'Aw Fuck, I Got a Bitch on My Team!': Women and the Exclusionary Cultures of the Computer Game Complex." The authors begin by challenging the assumption that women are underrepresented in the game industry primarily because girls never get interested in this masculine medium and because of a gendered education gap in the required fields. DeWinter and Kocurek demonstrate instead that "antifemale policing in video game culture"—grounded in harassment, isolation, and the threat of rape—"create[s] an aggressively exclusionary culture of gaming with no space for women, their participation, or their voices, as players or as makers." The authors document and analyze this misogynist hostility in both game culture and the game industry, noting that its toxicity sadly leaks into video game studies, as well, in a different form: as women game scholars, "producing these records and doing the work of these interventions becomes demoralizing, a job that we clock into instead of the safe magic circle of play."

Narrowing down from deWinter and Kocurek's overview of women's marginalization in game culture, Nina Huntemann examines a single site of this marginalization in "Attention Whores and Ugly Nerds: Gender and Cosplay at the Game Con." Huntemann explains that for many women who have felt unwelcome in the gaming community, cosplay has represented "an alternative path . . . [that is] often the difference between public participation in game culture and playing alone." As that culture shifts closer to the mainstream and greater gender inclusivity, though, highly visible women cosplayers have become prime targets for harassment, ridicule, and dismissal at game conventions and beyond in what Huntemann identifies as an attempt to use women's bodies "to reinstate male dominance in video games." Huntemann focuses on the twin accusations that cosplayers are either attention whores or ugly nerds: "Women whose bodies most closely resemble the bodies of video game characters may meet the industry's beauty norms, but because they are attractive, they are suspected of faking their fandom. Women whose bodies do not measure up are rejected regardless of their knowledge or devotion to games." This double bind, Huntemann argues, creates a hostile environment where legitimacy within the dominant game culture may elude any woman cosplayer because of her body's—not her costume's—appearance.

Concluding this part, Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin's "Video Game Parodies: Appropriating Video Games to Criticize Gender Norms" turns this book's attention to game paratexts, in the form of internet video parodies. While accounting for the different affordances of basic machinima and animations that use more complex modeling software, Trépanier-Jobin analyzes video paratexts of *Super Mario Bros.* (1985–2013, Nintendo) and *World of Warcraft* (2004–2014, Blizzard Entertainment) that engage with gender in these games. She finds, though, that despite the subversive potential of their format, these game parodies remain largely "surface-level efforts to modernize the damsel in distress figure" or denounce conventional beauty standards for avatars "without being entirely progressive." Trépanier-Jobin advocates for parody producers to signal their gender critiques more strongly—using interpretive clues, direct criticisms, and reflexive devices—lest they end up reproducing sexist tropes for audiences already primed to accept these by an often-misogynist game culture.

Each of the authors in the book's second part, "Race, Identity, Nation," discusses images of racial identity in video games in ways that dynamically situate those images in conversation with the codes and systems inherent in other ideologies, social practices, and cultural histories. Fittingly perhaps, many of the games analyzed in this part are of a dystopian, apocalyptic, or anti-utopian nature. Examining these, our contributors take various cultural-studies-inspired approaches in exploring the degree to which the games are reflexive about their objects of critique—whether tropes of blackness, white masculinity, or the subordinated status of women and children. The part's final chapter problematizes the very notion of identification (self-identification through racialized avatars) as something we might take for granted.

TreaAndrea M. Russworm's "Dystopian Blackness and the Limits of Racial Empathy in *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*" begins the part by challenging the game industry to do better than simply populating virtual worlds with racially diverse characters. She uses the explosively popular genre of dystopian games—with their tremendous potential to function both as objects of catharsis and critique—to argue that even as the medium moves toward including more black characters, it is largely still failing to do so imaginatively or progressively. Most often, video games instead fall back on an established pattern of "conflating black identity with the pathos of sacrifice and suffering." Using the tools of postmodern theory and film and media criticism, Russworm reveals how *The Last of Us* (2013, Naughty Dog) uses blackness "to shore up white character agency" and how *The Walking Dead: Season One* (2012–2013, Telltale Games) limits the player's control in embodying a black character, forcing the narrative toward sentimentalism, empathy, and—again—obligatory sacrificial blackness. Russworm calls for game designers to develop an awareness of the historical tropes of blackness and, with that, use a "dialogic process . . . not just a procedural or algorithmic [one]" as they integrate blackness into dystopian games—an awareness she believes could help fulfill the considerable promise of what she theorizes as "critical racial dystopias" in video games.

With Irene Chien's "*Journey* into the Techno-primitive Desert," the collection shifts from dystopian rubble to an adjacent space of the primitive, postapocalyptic desert and the way its metaphor constructs ethnicity and nationality. Using literary history, cultural theory, and games criticism, Chien provides a cultural and historical framework for understanding how the art game *Journey* (2012, thatgamecompany) evokes the strong emotional responsiveness for which it has been so widely praised. Chien frames *Journey* as a "techno-primitive" racialized fantasy set in an implicitly Middle Eastern desert's open landscape, whose literary associations as a site of spiritual regeneration contrast with its video game associations as a chaotic, terrorist-ridden wasteland and common backdrop for first-person shooters. Exposing a tension in *Journey* between the desert as a primordial blank slate, on the one hand, and a reservoir of "soft" feminized technologies and exotic resources, on the other, Chien's skilled reading of the game, its mechanics, and cultural contexts encourages us not to take *Journey*'s departure from the way other games have depicted the Middle East as confirmation that the work is entirely progressive or resistant. Rather, "the desire for the desert apocalypse is therefore also a racialized, imperial desire" that provides an imaginary space for "the besieged white Western male subject" to problematically "recover from the corruptions of modern technologized existence."

Soraya Murray expands on the theme of besieged, beleaguered, and dysphoric white masculinities adrift in a Middle Eastern topography with "The Rubble and the Ruin: Race, Gender, and Sites of Inglorious Conflict in *Spec Ops: The Line*." Set in a fictitious Dubai's ecological apocalypse, *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012, Yager Development) graphically renders the emotional consequences of military conquest and humanitarian missions. Murray's method of analysis—a fusion of postcolonial, psychoanalytic, and cultural studies modes of critique—prioritizes the game's proximity to cinematic and literary history, putting *The Line* in conversation with existing touchstone texts about the emotional toll of military occupation such as *Heart of Darkness* (1899, Joseph Conrad) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979, Francis Ford Coppola). Though the game is deliberate about representing a destabilized white masculinity, in Murray's eloquent assessment, it is much less critical about its subordination of women and children or its nihilistic portrayal of Dubai, since both are needed to service the game's depiction of wounded American men. "The pleasure in the game," argues Murray, "comes from tapping into a deeper American cultural imaginary of the Arab world as regressing into calamity and mired in extreme poverty, reinforced through continual media representation." The chapter concludes with an open reflection on how games might create works that are geopolitically significant without also succumbing to nationalist rhetoric and propaganda.

In "Representing Race and Disability: *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* as a Whole Text," Rachael Hutchinson encourages gaming scholars to consider racial tropes and stereotypes in relation to a game's entire narrative and overall investment in social satire. Using cultural studies methods, Hutchinson asserts that the

fantasy of the racial other as we get to know it in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004, Rockstar North) through CJ, the lead black character, is indeed stereotypical. But moving beyond that, her chapter demonstrates that characters like CJ are best understood through a nuanced analysis of how player-character interaction, embodiment, and identification function across the full story campaign and also in the free-roaming play of the game's vast "sandbox." Hutchinson's reading concludes that the black and Latino characters in the game actually "negotiate racial prejudice and overcome biased attitudes" in complex ways. Yet the overlooked aspects of the game's racial politics converge around the Orientalist portrayal of Wu Zi Mu, an important secondary character, and his physical disability. By more deeply exploring some of the ways in which "narrative, representation, and gameplay dynamics are intertwined and interdependent," the chapter offers a critical approach to representation in video games that transcends white-black racial binaries.

Lisa Patti's contribution, "Entering the Picture: Digital Portraiture and the Aesthetics of Video Game Representation," concludes this part by tracing themes of diversity in video games beyond the borders of individual games or even the main currents of game culture and analyzing its manifestation in the art world's digital portraiture. Patti examines three projects that create portraits of gamers and/or their avatars: *Alter Ego* (2007, Robbie Cooper), *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* (2006, Eva and Franco Mattes), and *Immersion* (2008– , Robbie Cooper). Reading these comparatively alongside Andy Warhol's *Thirteen Most Beautiful* (1964–1966) screen tests, Patti reveals how, for example, *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* explores the notion of beauty in virtual space and the way avatar embodiment can "simultaneously resist and reassert social realities," or how the video portrait of Drew Hugh—a child who cries when he plays video games—challenges assumptions about the relationship between black masculinity and the medium's frequently violent content. Through analysis of these portraiture projects that "establish a new census of representation" for video games, Patti contends that "the virtual world is neither a utopian space where the expression of different gendered and racial identities can proceed free from scrutiny or harassment nor an industrially codified sphere that neatly replicates off-line structures of power."

Finally, our third part, "Queerness, Play, Subversion," turns to sexuality. Its three chapters are linked not only by this shared focus but also by their mutual challenge to the notion that queerness in games is primarily about seeing LGBT characters on-screen. The authors here avoid performing "'straight' queer reading[s]" of games and simply "bird-watching for queer characters," as Edmond Y. Chang puts it. Instead, they establish new frameworks for thinking about what "queer" means to video games as a medium—how it combines with the notion of play and exists meaningfully beyond the realm of representation.

Bonnie Ruberg's "Playing to Lose: The Queer Art of Failing at Video Games" leads off this part with a theoretical approach. Putting two recent works of game studies and queer theory into conversation, Ruberg mines the intersection of

Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* and Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* to establish a foundation for her own notion of queer failure in video games. Challenging the assumption that failing in games is always undesirable—an unpleasant obstacle on the path to success—Ruberg posits that "failure might be its own success, its own pleasure, its own art," and a queer art, at that: "a spectacular, masochistic mode of resistance that disassembles normative expectations in and out of the game world." Through readings of "straight" fighting and racing games—most prominently, *Burnout: Revenge* (2005, Criterion Games)—Ruberg explores the queer practice of failing "for failure's sake," develops a dichotomy of failing either toward or against the game system, and untangles the paradoxes that queer failure generates (e.g., how do you fail at a game that positions failure as success?). Her wonderfully incendiary aim in unearthing the queerness of failure is to claim all games as queer: "to the extent that no game can exist without failure, no game can exist without queerness."

Jordan Wood's approach to finding queerness in video games is similarly broad in "Romancing an Empire, Becoming Isaac: The Queer Possibilities of *Jade Empire* and *The Binding of Isaac*." His essay concentrates on the meaningful affinity between queer theory's notions of time and space and video games, "a medium that works by generating a sense of alternate embodiment and temporality via simulation . . . [and] can reject linearity, contain multiple unresolved narratives, and offer a space-time that rejects reproductive norms." Games and queer space-time share a ludic core, and Wood teases out the potential of this shared playfulness through Jack Halberstam's theory of the archive, as well as a Deleuzian ethic of becoming. Finally, Wood applies these ideas and flips conventional styles of analyzing identity and games by exposing the underlying ideological conservatism of *Jade Empire* (2005, BioWare)—generous as it is in its inclusion of LGBT characters and romances—and celebrating the more radical queerness of *The Binding of Isaac* (2011, Valve), which features no explicit LGBT content.

Edmond Y. Chang completes this trio of chapters with a focused analysis of one game's queer potentials and shortcomings that reflects on the broader potentials and shortcomings of the medium itself for "queergaming," with its "ways of playing against the grain, against normative design, and ways of designing gamic experiences that foreground not only alternative narrative opportunities but ludic ones as well." In "A Game Chooses, a Player Obeys: *BioShock*, Posthumanism, and the Limits of Queerness," Chang contemplates video games' "technonormative matrix," asserting that "the tyranny of the binary, of the Boolean, of the matrix" makes the medium technologically and fundamentally conservative and ill-suited to the creation of truly queer texts, which require an embrace of uncertainty and ambivalence. In performing a close reading of *BioShock* (2007, Irrational Games), Chang reveals a game whose potentially substantial queerness—through its posthuman themes, character of Sander Cohen, and seeming critique of the medium's rhetoric of player agency—is subverted by its underlying reliance on the binary logics so ingrained in video games. Despite his disillusionment with *BioShock*,

though, Chang does use it to imagine the medium's largely unrealized capacity to queerly embrace "the gaps and glitches, the overlaps and undertexts, and the dissonances and resonances of play, player, and program."

Lisa Nakamura closes *Gaming Representation* with an afterword, "Racism, Sexism, and Gaming's Cruel Optimism." Here, she identifies and critiques the common belief that gaming can solve its inequality problems through the mechanisms of "procedural meritocracy," wherein players outside the dominant straight, white, male culture can "create habitable spaces for themselves by displays of superior skill . . . proving their worth by dominating other players." Nakamura reads this belief against two recent disruptions of meritocracy in relation to difference in the United States: the game-specific case of the misogynist crusade against developer Zoë Quinn, and the more general case of Michael Brown's death at the hands of police.

* * *

Gaming Representation, to return to the metaphor of the choir, is about moving the choir out from behind the pulpit—or moving perspectives on race, gender, and sexuality from the margins of game studies to the center of an emergent canon. The book represents an attempt to bring together voices from multiple fields into one volume and demonstrate that the discussions about women and masculinity, racial and national identities, sexuality and queerness are not only relevant to other ways of studying games (like the focus on platforms and systems) but can also make the study of games more relevant and accessible to other fields and broader audiences.

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Notes

1. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published by *Screen* in 1975, made a tremendous impact in the young discipline of film studies, ushered in an era of robust feminist film scholarship, and became one of the discipline's most cited and most taught essays.

2. We previously discussed some of the following ideas about representation as maligned in game studies with the online discussion group empyre, in a week on games and representation convened by *Gaming Representation* contributor Soraya Murray. See "Welcome to Week 2 on empyre: Games and Representation," April 8–15, 2015, http://empyre.library.cornell.edu/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=829.

3. Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 6.

4. Stuart Hall, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 443 (emphasis in original).

5. Ibid., 446.

6. The practice spans only about as far back as 2002, and book publishing on race and games is an even newer development, less than a decade old. Early approaches to race and games were typically only peripherally about games, as most of these were internet/cyberspace studies. See, for example, Lisa Nakamura, Beth Kolko, and Gilbert Rodman, *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Anna Everett, "The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 125–146.

7. See Anna Everett, *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009).

8. Ibid., 109–146.

9. Ibid., 142.

10. Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 209.

11. Ibid., 92.

12. Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

13. See Lisa Nakamura, "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in *World of Warcraft*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009): 128–144. See also Lisa Nakamura, "Digital Media in *Cinema Journal*, 1995–2008," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 1 (2009): 154–160.

14. S. Craig Watkins, *The Young and the Digital* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

15. David Leonard, "Young, Black (and Brown) and Don't Give a Fuck: Virtual Gangstas in the Era of State Violence," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 9, no. 2 (2009): 252. Also see David J. Leonard, "'Live in Your World, Play in Ours': Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other," *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 3, no. 4 (2003): 1–9.

16. Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter, "Killing Like a Girl: Gendered Gaming and Girl Gamers' Visibility," in *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*, ed. Frans Mäyrä (Tampere, Finland: Tampere University Press, 2002), 253.

17. D. Fox Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

18. D. Fox Harrell, "Toward a Theory of Critical Computing: The Case of Social Identity Representation in Digital Media Applications," *CTheory*, May 13, 2010, http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=641.

19. Ibid.

20. See, for example, "Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and LGBT Content in Video Games," *Games and Culture* 4, no. 3 (2009): 228–253; and "Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity," *New Media and Society* 14, no. 1 (2012): 25–41.

21. Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 38.

22. Ibid., 5–6.

23. Ibid., 33–34.