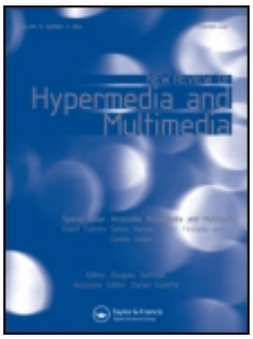

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Deviant bodies, stigmatized identities, and racist acts: examining the experiences of African-American gamers in Xbox Live

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The purpose of this article is to illustrate how minority gamers, particularly African-American males, are subject to the label of deviant within the virtual gaming community of Xbox Live. They are labeled deviant based on the stigma of their physical identity – blackness, through a process of linguistic profiling. By employing virtual ethnography, the author identifies a process that leads to racism based on how the black gamer sounds within the space. The act of racism emerges through a process involving questioning, provoking, instigating, and ultimately racism. Many black gamers have normalized these racist experiences and have accepted the label of deviant placed upon their bodies.

Keywords: Video games; Virtual gaming; Virtual ethnography; Race; Racism

Introduction

Video game culture has evolved from a simple entertainment outlet into a massive mediated environment catering to a variety of users beyond gamers. Video game culture includes more than just the gamer or audience, it is also inclusive of game developers and game journalists (Loporcaro 2012). This trifecta of video game culture constitutes the multibillion dollar industry that video game culture has become. Scholarship on video games and video game culture has continued to grow over the past decade. Much of the critical scholarship focuses on violence in video games and its impact on children (Anderson 2000, Anderson and Bushman 2001, Sherry 2001, Ward 2010) and gender representations and sexualized violence (Kennedy, 2002, Burgess *et al.* 2007, Dill and Thill 2007, Jansz and Martis 2007, Miller and Summers 2007, Downs and Smith 2009). Limited in the academic discussion are examinations of race and ethnicity although this scholarship is emerging (Kolko 2000, Leonard 2003, Chan 2005, Barrett 2006, Nakamura 2009). With the continued

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convergence of mediated environments, it is imperative that scholarship stays abreast with this ever growing technology.

One aspect of video game culture that literature is lacking has yet to focus on tracking social interactions among diverse gamers within the massive environments of virtual gaming. Specifically, the current research examines how social interactions among gamers can lead to the label of deviant being placed upon the gamers who are not the default or norm within one such virtual gaming community, Xbox Live. I posit that video game culture has privileged the default gamer, the white male, leading to the maintenance of whiteness and masculinity in this virtual setting; furthermore, this default setting has led to the marginalization of many minority gamers forcing the label of deviant upon their virtual bodies.

Racialized video gaming culture

Video games "as socially organized phenomena" are implicated "in both the production of social meanings and the power relations expressed by and sustaining those meanings" (Ewick and Silbey 1995, p. 200). From this standpoint, video games have the ability to articulate and reproduce existing ideologies and hegemonic relations of power and inequality (p. 212). Race, as a hierarchical structure, has manifested itself in video games. Specifically, by employing Omi and Winant's conception of racial project, we can see how many popular video games fit within this theoretical schema where "racialized ideas, bodies, and structures are constructed, mediated, and presented through a safe medium" (Leonard 2003, p. 3). Omi and Winant 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).

This understanding of a racial project means that video games have the ability to interpret, represent, and explain female sexuality, inner city life, black athleticism, among others in that they provide cues to racialized and gendered realities. As Leonard (2003) further explains, "video games are not just games, or sites of stereotypes, but a space to engage American discourses, ideologies, and racial dynamics" (p. 3).

The Children Now organization has quantified gender and racial depictions within console video games. The researchers found that video game spaces are mostly white and male and when women and people of color are present, they are depicted in stereotypical manners. For instance, 80% of all African-American characters are depicted as athletic competitors in sports-oriented games and are much more likely to display aggressive behaviors such as trash talking and pushing than their white counterparts (as cited in Leonard 2003). In sports games such as *NBA Street*®, *Street Hoops*®, and *NFL Street*®, they are situated in ghetto, urban locations and set to hip-hop soundtracks "thereby staging a convergence of discourses on athleticism, blackness, and commodified ghetto cool" (Chan 2005, p. 27). These examples of blackness, hyperphysicality, hypermasculinity, and hypersexuality have

long been ideologically linked to black masculinity as early scholars noted (Davis 1983). Outside of the sports genre, racial depictions in video games are even more pronounced. For instance, games such as *Grand Theft Auto*®, *True Crime*®, and *Street Fighter*® all portray racial and ethnic minorities in stereotypical manners (Gray 2011).

Just to provide a description of the racial landscape of *Grand Theft Auto III*®, almost all of the innocent citizens in the fictional Liberty City are white, and "the police are white and paragons of virtue" (Leonard 2003, p. 3). *Grand Theft Auto*®, as a racial project, "legitimizes white supremacy and patriarchy and privileges whiteness and maleness" (p. 3). In this sense, white hegemony is legitimized through the process of othering and "pixelated minstrelsy" by depicting racial minorities singularly (Chan 2005). The danger of this "single story," as author Chimamanda Adichie (2009) explains is not that they are inaccurate, but rather, this narrow account is the only one visible situating them as the only possible narrative.

The term "pixilated minstrelsy" (Chan 2005) is appropriate in understanding the deployment of race and racialization in these genres in that race, racial imagery, and identity depicted in this manner lead to the deployment of hegemonic whiteness and masculinity by cybertyping the other. This allows for continued racial inequalities within games and virtual gaming communities. As Nakamura (2009) suggests, gender, class, and race hierarchies have been carried onto the Internet, and video games are inclusive of this phenomena. Beth Kolko (2000) rightly points out that there is an inherent desire to ignore race and ethnicity in virtual worlds. She notes that the default ethnicity on most MUDs[1] is set to white creating a default whiteness for virtual worlds (p. 216), replicating real-world spaces where unmarked whiteness is the cultural norm. In addition, MMORPGs[2] such as *EverQuest II*® has actually seen the disappearance and omission of blackness from these kinds of virtual fantasy worlds.

Beth Kolko (2000) found it surprising that in a space that dramatized other aspects of identity such as gender and class, ethnicity was shockingly absent from most MMORPGs. Debunking utopic assumptions of virtual space, Kolko argues that the Internet is far from liberatory but rather a space that continues a "cultural map of assumed whiteness" (p. 225). Kolko rightly points out that when there is an attempt to make race and ethnicity present, it is met with colorblind resistance. As Higgin (2009) explains:

> the White dominance of gamespace has been recast as a racially progressive movement that ejects race in favor of a default, universal whiteness and has been ceded, in part, by a theoretical tendency to embrace passing and anonymity in cyberspace. (p. 7)

This hegemony of play, as Fron *et al*. (2007) term, perpetuates the exclusion of communities as is seen in the offline world, a manifestation of real-world inequalities. Importantly, this deployment of "white supremacy instills in many whites the expectation of always being the center of attention" (Fernandez 2003, p. 36).

It is no accident that these games are being created with this stereotypical imagery. Games are created based on the biases and opinions of their creators although video game developers contend no offense is intended. They suggest that their games are "simply parodies or a reflection of a sort of browning of popular culture that transcends race and sells to all in a marketplace captivated by hip-hop styles, themes, and attitudes" (Marriott 2004). This exploitation of Asianness, blackness and hip-hop, women, etc. still creates the single narrative of the "other" because there are few, if any, other images deployed in video games. On the other hand, whiteness is often depicted in an opposing manner with multiple narratives. This hegemonic vision of masculinity and whiteness only exists in relation to other forms of masculinity and femininity allowing for the dominant – white male – to construct himself in a certain way, hence the continued othering of women and people of color in video games (Bucholz 1999, p. 445). The same ideological structure is present not only in video games, but also in the virtual spaces that many gamers now occupy. Women and gamers of color have been constructed as the nondefault based on how they sound within these virtual spaces leading to the label of deviant placed upon their virtual bodies.

Deviant identities

Sociological theories and empirical studies suggest that deviant identity is the result of being formally or informally sanctioned by social audiences. The process by which an individual develops a deviant identity is linked to the performance of some identified deviant behavior. Although deviance is mostly a socially constructed concept, deviant behaviors in most real-world settings have been agreed upon by a consensus. In virtual settings, identifying deviant behavior is more difficult to determine. In the broad sense, deviance is a term that refers to behavior that does not conform to socially accepted norms established by rules. As Howard Becker (2000) explains, rules are the products of someone's initiative and these individuals who exhibit the initiative are referred to as moral entrepreneurs. There are two categories that comprise a moral entrepreneur, rule creators and rule enforcers. These individuals negotiate who and what may be labeled deviant within a space.

The rule creator is interested in the content of rules. If existing rules are not satisfactory to the rule creator, this moral entrepreneur will exercise his abilities to have those rules changed. The end result of the rule creator is ultimate rules being changed. And with the creation of a new set of rules, there are often a new set of enforcement agencies and officials to ensure these rules are followed. Since rule enforcers rarely share a stake in the content of particular rules, they often develop their own private evaluation of the importance of various rules and those who violate them. Their set of priorities may differ considerably from the viewpoint held of the larger public. Enforcers then respond to the nature of their role as an enforcement entity in their own selective way. For instance, when a person commits a deviant act,

whether or not this person is labeled a deviant depends on many factors outside of the behavior or act. Much of it depends on characteristics person committing the deviant act as well as the enforcers' motivation for enforcing the rules at that time. Although Becker explains that the enforcer's lack of consistency in enforcing the rules may get the person in trouble with the rule creator, this does not always occur. So the process of negotiating what deviance is or who a deviant actor may be is not always clear. Although the entrepreneurs make it their task to create and enforce rules that eventually result in identifiable categories marked and labeled deviant, this may not lead to all persons engaging in specific behavior being labeled deviant. The social composition of the group significantly influences how the negotiations surrounding deviance occur.

Stigma, although similar to deviant, varies slightly. To reiterate, deviance exists because social groups react in a condemnatory, punitive, or simply disapproving manner to any individual's behavior(s) and/or characteristic(s) that are in violation of the social standards prevailing in those groups (Clinard and Meier 1998, p. 7). Stigma, on the other hand, has been defined as a sign or a mark that designates the bearer as "spoiled" and, therefore, as valued less than "normal" people (Goffman 1963). An important similarity between the two is that both deviant and stigmatized individuals are perceived as individuals who failed to conform to normative standards in society. However, stigma involves perceptions of deviance that relate more to an individual's character and identity. Stigmatized individuals are not considered to be legitimate participants, but instead are considered deviants; alternatively, deviant individuals will be stigmatized only when their deviance is associated with a negative attribute that "discredits the bearer" (Dovidio *et al*. 2000). This is the aspect of deviance that this article concerns itself with.

As was previously mentioned, not all who deviate from societal norms or who possess stigmatized attributes will be labeled deviant, confirming the social construction of deviance. Although much of who is labeled a deviant depends on the effort and initiative of the moral entrepreneur in the space, there are four very important factors that influence and determine whether stigmatized individuals will elicit negative social sanctions: (1) the visibility of the deviant attributes, (2) the social context where the social actors are immersed in, (3) whether the deviant characteristic or behavior disrupts social interaction, and (4) the decoding capacity of the audience (how aware the people are of the individuals' deviant behavior or characteristic).

The type of deviance a person exhibits will affect the type of sanctions that person will get from others. For instance, undesirable physical characteristics such as obesity tend to attract stigma not only from the deviant's peers but also from his/her family members (Brownell and Puhl 2003). Physical disability, on the other hand, might elicit negative reactions from others, but emotional support from family members (Low 1996). Within the context of the current community, Xbox Live, the undesirable perceived characteristic of blackness elicits negative reactions from the default gamer within the community.

As Terry and Urla (1995) explain, deviant social behavior "manifests in the materiality of the body" (p. 2). However, not all bodies within Xbox Live are subject to the label of deviant. Most often, blackness and any association with blackness are punished the most violently within social spaces. As Radhika Mohanram (1999) explains, "blackness is a discursive practice exercised by the confluence of history, economics, geography, and language" (p. xiv) and these spaces continue to expand. Blackness has been constructed in a manner that enables and is enabled by its counterpart – whiteness (Mohanram 1999). She writes: "first whiteness has the ability to move; second the ability to move results in the unmarking of the body. In contrast, blackness is signified through a marking and is always static and immobilizing" (p. 4). As the relativist view of deviance would confirm, this embodiment is a process rather than a given and in order to sustain this meaning, it must constantly and continuously be articulated and performed – "inequitable power relationships between various spaces and places are rearticulated as the inequitable power between races" (Mohanram 1999, p. 3).

Methodology

To examine the process that leads to minority gamers being labeled deviant within Xbox Live, virtual ethnography was employed. This method proved the most useful because it allowed the researcher to interact as an observer and participant within the community. These observations led into a more narrative, open-ended format of interviewing where the participants could tell their stories as well as provide direct evidence when the labeling, stigma, and deviance process would occur. Ethnography provides a descriptive account of cultural practices grounded in data. Robert Prus (1996) outlines three primary sources of data in which ethnographers rely upon: observation, participant-observation, and interviews (p. 21). All three were employed in this study. Interviewing and observations took place over an 8-month period. I created a semi-structured interview schedule to allow for more conversational dialogue. International Review Board (IRB) approval and consent were obtained prior to conducting any interviews. The taped interviews (some occurring within the Xbox Live space using the private chat option, others in Skype, and others by ooVoo) were then transcribed and coded for a more detailed analysis.

Participants

To locate gamers to participate in the study, I employed snowball sampling. Xbox Live terms of service restrict the soliciting of gamers for any reason so I had to rely on this method to reach gamers to participate. I identified a clan of Xbox Live users to participate which totaled four. Compared to the millions of registered users in Xbox Live, this number may seem insignificant. However, studies have not yet been conducted examining the experiences of minority users in Xbox Live or other virtual gaming communities (although

some do exist on female gamers). And because I was unable to solicit to the larger Xbox Live community, I had to rely on the members who agreed to participate through snowball sampling. This exploratory research will provide a baseline for future studies on the experiences of minority gamers in Xbox Live.

Locations

The location of the study was Xbox Live and several games were identified as field sites for the study: *Halo Reach*®, *Gears of War 2*®, and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*®, and *Call of Duty: Black Ops*®.

The participants' demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Each participant's gamertag was replaced with a pseudonym.

Silentassassin321, *ChrisIsNice*, and *LightzOut* are all from the southern region of the USA and *xxRobotechxx* is from a large city in the Northeast. *Silentassassin321* was the only participant currently residing in an area where he was not originally from – a large metropolitan area in the Southwest. All four have been members of Xbox Live for more than six years, and they have witnessed numerous changes within the community.

Results and analysis

The process leading to racism

What I identified from my observations and preliminary interviews is that there is a process that leads to racism, and my participants recognized when it would occur. This is important to highlight because the deviant act within the space is not the racism or the racist actors, but rather the individuals that the racism is directed toward – in this case, the African-American males who sound Black within the space. To illustrate the process that occurs, read the following excerpt from this gaming session in *Gears of War*®:

> *NewbSlayer:* They got your ass with that torque. Right in the face. That's the same thing I'm going to do to you. You fucking Newb (Speaking in Standard American English)
> *silentassassin321:* Whateva man. Shut the fuck up.
> *NewbSlayer:* Wait. Are you black?
> *silentassassin321:* Why? Are you white?

Table 1. Participants demographic summary.

Gamertag	Age/gender	Ethnicity	Sexual orient	Clan name
silentassassin321	27/M	African-American	Hetero	NA
xxRobotechxx:	22/M	African-American	Hetero	NA
ChrisIsNice	32/M	African-American	Hetero	NA
LightzOut	24/M	African-American	Hetero	NA

(*xxRobotechxx dies and enters the room*)
xxRobotechxx: Man dats some bullshit. Fifty fucking shots. Fake bullets. I gotta have fake bullets.
NewbSlayer: Is that another fucking nigger? I'm gonna kill your black nigger asses.
xxRobotechxx: What the fuck man? Here we go wit dis shit. Get yo' white ass out dis room. Let me boot his ass.
silentassassin321: Get yo' short dick out the room. Fucking honky.
NewbSlayer: Your mom sucks nigger dick. Nigger Nigger Nigger
(*NewbSlayer leaves the room*)
(*TubeTastic101 leaves the room*)
silentassassin321: Got dayum I get tired'a dat shit. Fucking white short dick honkey.
xxRobotechxx: I see they bringing dat shit to Gears. Wish dey would keep dat fuck shit in Call fa' Duty.

This excerpt illustrates what happens when trash talking becomes racialized within the space. *NewbSlayer* asks if the users within this particular game happen to be black. He bases this off of how *silentassassin321* sounds. To reiterate, there are only linguistic cues within this space not unless one employs video chat (which did not occur within this study). This excerpt also shows the racialized response of *silentassassin321* as well as *xxRobotechxx*. These two gamers in return acted in a racist manner toward their offender.

From what many gamers suggest and from what I observed, there is a process that leads to racist speech in Xbox Live. The racism observed followed this traditional format: questioning, provoking, instigating, racist speech, and either diffusion or a virtual race war.

Questioning is the first step that may lead to racism. The simple question asked is "are you black" attempting to confirm the sound of blackness. Almost every instance that I witnessed in my observations and previous gaming experiences did in fact begin with this question or another similar racial inquiry. The second step in the process is provoking. This provoking takes the form of harassment similar to griefing.

Griefing has been defined as the intentional harassment of players (Foo and Koivisto 2004, Smith 2004, Lin and Sun 2005, Warner and Raiter 2005, Myers, 2007), or as a "source of deep mental anguish, annoyance or frustration" (as cited in Foo and Koivisto 2004). Griefers are players who derive their enjoyment not from playing the game but from causing other gamers to become distracted during game play (as cited in Foo and Koivisto 2004). In an MMORPG in Taiwan, grief players are referred to as "white-eyed" and are considered deviants in gaming societies because they violate the codes, rules, and etiquette of the communities (Lin and Sun 2005). Additionally there is the concept of flaming which is similar to griefing. It refers to negative antisocial behaviors, including the expression of hostility, the use of profanity, and the venting of strong emotions (Thompsen 2003, p. 331). The only definition from the vast literature on flaming that comes close to what is experienced within Xbox Live comes from Dorwick who defines flaming as the spontaneous creation of homophobic, racist, and

misogynist language during electronic communication (cited in Thompsen 2003, p. 331). However, racism should be understood independent from flaming and griefing. The difference is that this harassment is always linked to the body, an aspect out of gamers' control. Returning to provoking, many gamers who used racist language recited offensive black and/or immigrant jokes, challenged the penis size of black men, challenged citizenship of Latino sounding gamers, explained disgust for big lips, criticized the use of Ebonics, and even disrespected black mothers. The purpose of this provoking seemed to be a means to situate blackness as inferior which confirms the domination of whiteness over the other within the space.

Most of the time the provoking would lead into instigation but oftentimes, instigating preceded provoking. Either way, instigation was the only step that sometimes would not occur. But when it did, gamers using this racist speech would enter a game room with friends and this group of friends would fuel the "flames" of the offending gamer. Oftentimes the friends will ad lib the statements of the offender or just joke and laugh at the comments made. This provoking and instigation leads to the ultimate act of racism which is the black sounding gamer being called "nigger." No matter what the previous responses of the gamer of color was, the offending gamer would eventually say "nigger." Once this word was uttered, either diffusion or a virtual race war followed. If diffusion occurs, either the offending gamer or the gamer of color would leave or get removed from the game by the host of the gaming session. If there was no diffusion, then the black sounding gamer would enter into a heated argument using profanity and racist language as well.

When any of my participants engaged in equally racially offensive behavior, I would ask why. The response from *silentassassin321* was very problematic but interesting nonetheless:

> *Silentassassin321:* Are you joking? I aint hurtin his feelings. What could I possibly say that would hurt this muh'fuckah. He white. Aint' shit I can say that will equal the word nigga.

His justification raises an interesting point. The term "nigger" seems to be the pinnacle of hate speech and when used toward this victimized gamer creates a great deal of emotional anguish that could lead to violence if he was able to locate this offender.

> *Silentassassin321:* If I could find this bitch I would whoop his ass. On some real shit. But they do this behind they TV screen. Tough guys. Internet tough guys. You know how many times I've been called nigga to my face?
> *Mzmygrane:* How many?
> *Silentassassin321:* None. You know how many times I've been called nigga online?
> *Mzmygrane:* How many?
> *Silentassassin321:* Too many ta' count. You know what that tells me?
> *Mzmygrane:* What?

> *Silentassassin321:* Of the dozens of white dudes I see everyday, most of them I call friend, at least two ah' three wanna call me nigga.

This elaboration was extremely problematic for me to fathom and made me question even more why Microsoft had not created a better system to ward off verbal abuse resulting from linguistic profiling.

Normalizing racism

A second issue associated with the occurrences of racism is that the speed at which the racist events occur and quickly expire. Gamers have normalized these discriminatory events as everyday occurrences and rarely if ever file complaints within the Xbox Live system. Ponder the conclusion of the above excerpt:

> *NewbSlayer:* Your mom sucks nigger dick. Nigger Nigger Nigger
> (*NewbSlayer leaves the room*)
> (*TubeTastic101 leaves the room*)
> *silentassassin321:* Got dayum I get tired'a dat shit. Fucking white short dick honkey.
> *xxRobotechxx:* I see they bringing dat shit to Gears. Wish dey would keep dat fuck shit in Call fa' Duty.
> (*Streetdreamer dies and enters the room*)
> *Streetdreamer:* Dat muthafuckah snipin his ass off.
> *(Cog victory)*
> *xxRobotechxx:* Good shit blade.
> *vxvBladeRunnervxv:* Man I had one bullet left. That was a miracle right there. (Laughing)
> *silentassassin321:* Hell yea it was. Do dat shit again. Go head get dat snipe. I'm laggin so damn bad I can't do shit wit it.
> *LightzOut:* Fuck that. Rush to snipe. I'll get grenades.
> *ChrisIsNice:* We got sunnin' fa dat ass dis round . . .
> *LightzOut:* Oh my homeboy just got on. I'll send'a invite.
> *(next round begins)*
> *xxRobotechxx:* Dat's wussup. Rushing low side . . . watch the flank.

I am not sure if this was a good sign that they brushed off this act of ignorance or a bad sign – a gamer such as *silentassassin321* might harbor his feelings of being victimized which may explain his hostility. Many males of color I encountered normalized this behavior as something that constantly occurs within Xbox Live.

> *ChrisisNice*: Man this happens all the time. It ain't nothing new. And Xbox don't care. We just expect it. Sometimes it can happen e'er day. That's what if I'm not playin' wit my boys, then I aint even on the mic.

This normalization process can best be discussed through labeling theory, which is where much of the research on stigma and deviance are situated. This

labeling approach posits that the individual is a constantly changing actor who responds to others' reactions. Labeling theorists place a great deal of importance on the official labeling process. They contend that a formal response by the criminal justice system forces the individual to re-assess his or her personal identity, in this case, the institutional structured is Xbox Live. Similarly, those who are aware of the official label re-evaluate their opinions about the labeled individual (Brown *et al*. 2004). Hence, this theoretical perspective suggests that individuals become (increasingly) deviant as a result of people placing that identity upon them and adopting the identity by exhibiting behaviors and attitudes associated with the label (Titus Reid 2006). Black gamers in Xbox Live do not feel welcome because they differ racially from the default gamer. Their deviance is ascribed in their linguistic inabilities to adopt Standard American English, and this is made obvious when the default gamer hears the black sounding individual and attempts to confirm their blackness through questioning.

But, dude, I'm not racist

The gamers who engage in this racist speech do not view their actions as racist and their justifications are interesting to note. When offending gamers are asked why they engage in this behavior, many of them actually view their behavior as annoying – not racist. As Nakamura (2009) identified in her discussion of Chinese gold farmers, the gamer of color is not only undesirable, but also presumed absent; as she uncovered, this resulted in the oppression of Asian players in *World of Warcraft*®. When this absent gamer does emerge, so does the racialization of the gaming space. But some players who negatively view Chinese farmers do not believe their feelings constitute racial discrimination (Nakamura 2009), and the same pattern exists within Xbox Live.

When asked why offending gamers engaged in acts of racism, most of them fit within the following thematic schemes: (1) I'm not racist, (2) it's just a game, or (3) I say it to White people too. Ponder the following excerpt:

> *Silentassassin321:* Why do yall feel the need to say dat stupid shit? Get yo' ass out tha room.
> *GoState88:* I'm not going anywhere cuz your mom is sucking my dick. Your nigger mom loves white cock.
> *RicanPapi:* Ey yo I got it dawg. I'll boot his ass.
> (*GoState88* leaves the room)
> *Mzmygrane:* Hey assassin, I wanna talk to him. Hold on.
> (I send GoState88 a private chat)
> *GoState88*: What the fuck dude. What do you want?
> *Mzmygrane:* Hi State. I am conducting interviews for a research project and wanted to ask you about your last gaming session. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions.
> *GoState88*: Is this a joke? (laughs and makes a comment to someone else that I can't make out).
> *Mzmygrane:* No it's not a joke but feel free to leave the private chat at any time.

I will only ask a couple questions.
GoState88: Am I'm gonna get paid?
Mzmygrane: I apologize but no. This is strictly voluntary.
GoState88: Alright. What are you gonna ask me? Why I called that guy a nigger?
Mzmygrane: Actually yes. That's exactly what I want to know.
GoState88: What are you some kind of nigger lover?
Mzmygrane: What do you mean?
(I knew exactly what he meant. He thought I was white. Virtually, I do embody white femininity. I thought if I let him know I was actually African-American that he would leave the private chat and not answer the question. But I couldn't lie. So I told him)
GoState88: ARE YOU A NIGGER LOVER? (he repeats very slowly and loudly)
Mzmygrane: Well actually I am African-American myself.
GoState88: Oh shit, nuh uh? I'm not making you mad saying nigger?
Mzmygrane: Actually it is a very offensive term but I'm not mad. I wanna know why you use it. Have you ever called anyone in person that word?
GoState88: Well actually my best friend is black. I say it around him all the time. It's just a stupid word. I just say it to fuck with people. Well, especially to people that make me mad.
Mzmygrane: Did those guys in the last room make you mad? Is that why you said it to them?
GoState88: Yeah they were camping and they just happened to be black.
Mzmygrane: Oh ok. I understand. But do you think that makes you racist?
GoState88: Dude I'm not fucking racist. I told you. It's just a stupid word. It doesn't mean anything anymore.
Mzmygrane: Oh ok. Thank you so much. Sorry for taking up your time.
GoState88: Alright bye nigger (laughs as he leaves the private chat)

The offending gamer, *GoState88*, justified his use of this racist word is straightforward and three important points emerged from our dialog. First, he justified the use of the word as a response to gamers who had annoyed him regardless if the gamer was a person of color or not. In this instance, the antisocial, griefing behavior of camping is cited as the origins of the use of the word. Secondly, this gamer removed the historical context of this word stating it was a stupid word that no longer carried the same meaning. This gamer seemed to be well aware that the word previously meant something to people of color, but given the "post-racial – colorblind" ideology he has adopted, it must be another word free to use. The last important point that I want to highlight surrounds his use of the word around his African-American best friend. I've witnessed this on several occasions where a white gamer and a black gamer will use this word in the sense that many African-Americans use it with one another.

Deviance, stigma, and norms in Xbox Live

As has been explained, social interactions in Xbox Live are extremely racialized due to linguistic profiling based on how nonwhite and/or nonmale

users of the space sound privileging the white male as the default gamer. Specifically, I argue that minority gamers, African-Americans specifically in the context of the current study, have been constructed as deviant bodies, as they fail to conform to the default norm. The four factors that influence and determine whether stigmatized individuals will elicit negative social sanctions will be examined below.

The first is the visibility of the deviant attributes which suggests that deviant characteristics that are visible convey information about the individuals' social identity at all times throughout the interaction. This is most evident in the process that leads to racism. Many African-American individuals are unable to separate their virtual identities from their physical bodies. As many internet utopians claim, we are unable to leave behind our real-world selves in virtual settings. Women and people of color are not always afforded this privilege leading their real bodies to still infiltrate virtual spaces.

Secondly, the social context where the social actors are immersed in is extremely important to discuss. This factor suggests that any specific deviant characteristic (race in this case) may be regarded as deviant in place A, but may be normal in place B. My participants were adamant in explaining that they have never experienced racism in the real world, but they experience it on a daily basis in Xbox Live. The deviant identity of blackness is severely sanction and punished in a space that has been deemed a white male space. Specifically, the industry targets and caters to the white male constructing him as the default gamer. McQuivey (2001) suggests that as games are developed, they continually aim to fulfill the perceived desires of the young, middle-class male who is supposedly the market's target consumer (p. 197). Everett (2009) also confirms from her work on video game cover art, those invested in the gaming industry, including popular media, not only depict the typical gamer as male but also as white (p. 111). This could be due to the power structure of the gaming industry being a predominately white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominated elite (Fron *et al*. 2007). This hegemonic elite has excluded and alienated minority players who in numerical terms actually constitute a majority (Fron *et al*. 2007). This majority consists of female gamers, people of different racial and cultural backgrounds, and gamers of varying ages.

The third factor highlights an important point – does the deviant characteristic or behavior disrupt social interactions? I contend that the deviant characteristic of blackness within the space does in fact disrupt normal social interactions and has thus created a norm of racialized interactions within the space. Normal interactions within a virtual gaming community should entail in game discussions of tactical strategies. The presence of the deviant body disrupts this normal process. By behaving in this manner, the moral entrepreneur has identified the deviant and reacts in a manner consistent with one who breaks rules within a society.

Lastly, the decoding capacity of the audience is a bit more challenging to observe and document given my limited access to more users within Xbox

Live. To further explain, this factor looks at how competent the people are in the space and their level of awareness of the individual's deviant behavior or characteristic. In modern, real-world settings, the identity of blackness is not punished in a manner that it used to be in the pre-Civil Rights era, although subtle racism still exists. The overt racism that used to permeate our society has been introduced in this virtual community. I cannot quantify the extent of racism that exists within the space. And from my observations, this is a significant problem but may not be a general norm among the Xbox Live community (I witnessed my participants experience racism on a daily basis). But I contend that there is a limited audience that assigns the label of deviant upon black actors within this space and in turn reacts racially toward them.

Much of what happens to the participants in my study stems from the myth that black people are not gamers. The gaming industry has also perpetuated this myth. The problem arises from the gaming industry only targeting a specific demographic leading to the belief that black people do not game, women do not game, older people do not game, etc. This is a dangerous myth to disseminate because video games have the power to deploy stereotypical imagery and hegemonic ideologies and the virtual gaming communities have adopted these same exclusionary practices.

Notes

[1] MUD is the acronym for multiuser domain/ungeon that are real-time virtual worlds and are mostly text based.

[2] MMORPG is the acronym for massively multiplayer online role-playing game. These virtual worlds have huge numbers of players interacting with one another in a virtual gaming setting.

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