

Racial Formation in Games: Race's Failure to Appear in Video Games

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Although race does appear in some games, I want to consider how and why race fails to appear in video games. Race is a structured absence, an element regularly missing from games.

There are many things that are regularly missing from games, there is no dirt under the fingernails of game characters, so to speak. Games make reductive simulations of a world in order to provide mechanics that animate fantasy. *Tetris* is a game about falling blocks. *Sim Ant* lets you do a lot with the ant colony, but doesn't let you look up from the ground where they live to see the larger world.

The mechanics of games involve player action. Alexander Galloway suggests action is the primary distinguishing characteristic of games. In video games, the player does things. Actions can be diegetic or not, and can be player initiated or taken by the computer. There are many different contexts for actions, and every game is made up of innumerable situations that are, in this respect, like mini-games. Save and load the game, set brightness, jump from log to log, mash the B button as fast as you possibly can, talk to a survivor about where a dragon came from. Actions taken both by the system and its operator make the game interactive. By interactive, I mean only that there exists a mechanical relation between the player and game, or more often between the player's fingers and character action.

This interactivity in games tends away from representing the world's social, economic, and historical realities. Race forms over time through events and patterns that are often identifiable. Immigration policies, the corporate government of early American colonies, urban segregation, TV shows and print ads that socialize us to race. Race is neither an essence nor an illusion; it is a generality of bodies that forms over time through processes and actions of many kinds. In scholarly writing, we try to be true to the things that make the present world what it is. We hope to remember what has been and develop worthwhile understandings of the world as it transpires. We do this because we are always in conversation, writing for others, reading from others, developing a voice that, while one's own, is appropriate for use by others. In a video game, it's very difficult to be sure of the history of the game's fictional world, or of what lies beyond the realm of player perception and action.

There's no necessity to inferring a particular racial formation in games. Insofar as gameplay is concerned, most games could be played without reference to the punctuated genocide of Native Americans. The interactive world changes as you play as a result of your play and this gives it the incompleteness of fantasy. Games evoke wonder, encouraging players to imagine what the game does not specify. So, games leave something up to players. It is here that we see the power of colorblind thinking.

Tanner Higgin argues that MMORPGs deny meaningfulness to race even while these worlds tend to be saturated by racial signification that we can see in the game's races and the historic struggles between them. In many of these games, human characters have automatically

been white characters. When race is a skin freely chosen, race gains visibility but those of a race gain no power to speak. This inclusion of color without any of the social, economic, or historical reality to race echoes neoliberal colorblindness, wherein race is considered a meaningless personal detail that does not excuse or explain anything.

Let the player set the skin, it changes nothing. One menu in the character engine for FIFA 2006 selects ethnicity and skin tone, another sculpts the face, and totally separate menus determine factors that influence gameplay such as endurance, weight, and ball control. Phenotype without consequences.

This is a bad thing when games repeatedly demonstrate for players that race doesn't matter, or, more specifically, that the significance of race is only voluntary and aesthetic. When we act as if race comes from nowhere and has no lived reality other than style. Higgin adds that when blackness does appear in games, it almost always connotes hypermasculinity and violence, and that when players perform race, it is usually minstrelsy or racist caricature. This is the basic pattern: race is only a skin OR race is a negative trope. Designers defend the first option. Diversity of skin colors and facial features can be a good thing, they argue. The game is a comfortable place where players aren't judged by the color of their skin. More players can play as avatars that look like them than before.

Developers aim for diversity because that's the best way to keep making money on games without taking a beating from negative press. Theirs is not an enviable position.

When EA made The Godfather into a game, they had to decide whether this would be a game with a bunch of white people (who are

mostly Italian and male) or a game with other races too. There is a franchise to capitalize on and support, there is the huge importance of the story in American culture and abroad to consider, and there is perhaps less work required in the homogenous game. On the other hand, there probably should have been people of color in the original movie, and there's no reason the game couldn't explore this. In the end, EA went for the all-white game, and took some heat for it. Ultimately, however, the biggest problem with the game was not about race. The real problem is that it was a boring GTA clone.

Lest we forget, the Grand Theft Auto 3 series was wonderful. The gameplay was good, the scenarios were, at the time, original and a relief from both the sunshiney world of Nintendo style games and the overcaffeinated brutality of first person shooters scored with Industrial music. GTA games felt real, somehow, and GTA 3 was easier, funnier, and more relaxed than the earlier two games. The appearance of race in GTA: San Andreas was a significant part of the fun, and drew criticism for the game's outrageous stereotypes of black men with guns and women of color as prostitutes. The developers did it wrong, but, in this case, took that controversy all the way to the bank.

In its defense, I would point out that San Andreas was a nice break from stereotypes about white or un-raced characters who live in an overwhelmingly white world. Let's not remember it as a bad thing when a game came out engaging directly with race. Games shouldn't shy away from race. It is unfair to the game to say that it simply repeated stereotypes because it changed the meaning of freeways, gang territory, and urban entertainment, and because it included a much wider range of dynamics in a black street gang than we often

see. At the same time, it feels disingenuous to hope that the game subverted stereotypes. I would rather point out that the most important thing about stereotypes is that they function pervasively, and this depends on people's familiarity with them. Stereotypes are considerably less static and clear in situated social life than in the vision of critics who chastise distortions of what they say is the way the world really is. The game certainly teaches about race, but not how a teacher should teach about race. It's more like the way a racist uncle teaches about race. We don't mistake its claims for truth, or, if possible, we don't even hear its more ridiculous blather as claims.

Outlaw Volleyball is a good example of a game reveling in outrageous caricature. Here is Shawnee. As we can see, she, and perhaps Native Americans generally, live harmoniously with animals but also decorate themselves with warpaint and sit Indian style regularly. It's like Professional Wrestling. Now compare this with gameplay. If we come to the game looking for how race appears in the game, we watch a cutscene, but if we look for how race fails to appear we see gameplay. Is race still operational in gameplay? Is it lurking just outside the frame?

What we see when playing a game is a very important question and I don't mean to say that critics don't understand games and players do. We all understand some things, and no one understands a game in its technical and cultural entirety. What players see in games, the way play encourages one to understand a game, is often a reason race fails to appear in games. Race may not be a conceptual level to which players are attuned while gaming.

Consider Street Fighter 2. Different characters come from different places and are of different races, genders, nationalities, and cultures. Does the game suggest that Brazilians are half-human monsters who live in the jungle and do backflips? Or shoot lightning?

The depiction of Dhalsim's yoga is ridiculous, he blows fire, levitates, and stretches his legs for extra-long kicks. Yoga is not a fighting art, but the game suggests that it is. We could say that the game makes racial claims that are false and misleading. It's my impression that most players would see this as a game about a few very exceptional characters that teach us nothing about the country they come from nor embody traits common to people of their race. Many players are willing to believe that race does not determine anything about these exceptional individuals, and the game does not deny this.

Race is an inappropriate level of generality in this game; it has no impact on gameplay. Two characters of the same race are still unique. The differences within such a group are clearly larger than they are between different groups. It is more meaningful to talk about fighters who are fast and light or who are better at ranged combat. These groupings have obvious significance to the player, while race may not.

If Street Fighter 2 is a case where individuals are so unique that race seems to have no meaning, many other games offer the opposite situation, a situation where race is so fully determinative that race seems an inappropriate word for understanding difference between characters in a game. In these cases, race functions as a class. All members of this class are identical instances of the class, varied by level or size from the standard model, or are equally affected by known, specific traits of the class. Consider a game like *Secret of*

Mana, where each enemy the player faces will be another instance of a short list of baddies. Race determines absolutely everything about these individuals, making this relation of class to individual obviously quite unlike race. If they really are exactly all alike, it's hard to see the meaning of calling this commonality by the name "race."

A closely related example, however, has been the subject of endless essays addressing its codification of race as a characteristic with constant influence. Sid Meier's *Civilization*, in its many forms, has made race meaningful by giving each national group an advantage. These differences are all equivalent, so there is no best race, just a race most advantageous to a specific play-style. These national groups are highly abstract, treating India, Japan, and America as if they were single groups that could appear in any world and in a new history. The specific traits of each group are based on what "they" did in history, as Sid Meier knows it. Given how abstract these groups are, special traits seem to have nothing to do with race, and that is one interpretation of the simulation. Another perspective is that the traits are a contemporary way of locating the outcomes of historical events as inherent properties of entities that clearly do claim to represent groups in a racially specific way. Again, neither gameplay nor the game's fiction settles this uncertainty. An open question about the importance of race in games is most easily resolved by avoidance and benign ethnocentrism that sees race as an unnecessary point of conflict in a world where race is supposed to somehow not really matter.

Christopher McGahan argues in *Racing Cyberculture* that this is a common move in the digital world from eBay to search to online pornography. Great efforts are made to cater to a presumptive first

world consumer interested in fun, tourism, and shopping. Search engine hits for Jamaica are about resorts, hits for Haiti are about disaster and politics (this is before the Earthquake too). The only time race gets acknowledged, in most cases, is under a rubric of offensive content, where it is discussion of race that is considered a problem, rather than the grave inequalities of societies where cyberculture actually flourishes.

In the examples I've discussed here, race fails to appear in games because gameplay emphasizes other things than race, developers want to avoid getting race wrong, and many players don't consider race important. Each of these components is noteworthy, because players could make race appear (and sometimes do, as friends talking about a game might) and because some games do engage directly with race, though only with some perceived risk to sales.

Games seem to be race-neutral spaces, fantasy worlds where race simply does not need to appear. Developers can thus avoid programming simulations where race affects how characters can act in a world. Players feel racism is a problem of the outside world, and everyone can concentrate on the aspects of a game that they find more fun.

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