

Games of/against Racial Privilege and Marginalization

A Research Synthesis

Research Team

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How to cite this report

Voorhees, G., McLaren, J., & Oropeza, E., Whitson, J., Bird, A., & Gray, K. (2024). *Games of/against Racial Privilege and Marginalization: A Research Synthesis*.

Knowledge Synthesis Grant Final Report

Submitted to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

April 2024

Executive Summary

Background

As an increasingly ubiquitous media form, games are not only an index of existing inequities but also shape public knowledge of privilege and marginalization. As cultural and artistic objects, games can perpetuate harmful constructs or advance positive representations that become embedded in institutional and political decision-making; delimiting for the public what futures and solutions are considered reasonable, sensible, and even possible. As an industry, game development replicates these beliefs in the norms and patterns of hiring, retention, and promotion, directly reproducing and further contributing to inequitable conditions. In short, games have both material and symbolic importance for the changing dynamics of privilege and marginalization in Canadian society.

Objectives

Game studies is an interdisciplinary field of academic research that draws insights from across the humanities, social sciences, and arts to bring attention to the issues outlined here. As a Knowledge Synthesis project, “Games of/against Racial Privilege and Marginalization” gathered together and summarized games scholarship concerning the representation of race in games, the experiences of racialized players and game makers, and how racial dynamics shape the game development industry and games scholarship as a field of inquiry. The project aimed to:

1. Survey and synthesize current scholarship in the humanities and social sciences that focuses on the relationship between games, race, and the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of privilege and marginalization;
2. Identify the topics and areas of this research that are well developed in terms of quantity of scholarship and breadth of approaches; and,
3. Identify gaps in knowledge and emerging areas where further research is warranted.

Key Findings

Uneven uptake of research on race in games. Scholars have been researching how race is implicated in games for nearly thirty years, with the work of Lisa Nakamura on race and cyberspace standing as an early beacon for scholars. This topic has gained momentum with the publication of monographs, anthologies, and journal special issues since the second half of the 2010s. In particular, there has been an increased focus on Black game studies, including: representations of Blackness, Black game makers, and Black player’s experiences while gaming; postcolonial studies of games about the role of games supporting neocolonialism, empire, and the playing experiences of South Asian audiences; and scholarship on the role of whiteness in game development and gaming cultures. Each are key to effecting this rise to prominence. The great majority of this research is based on US American contexts, though a significant portion originates from Canada and other Commonwealth nations. Research on how Indigenous, East Asian, Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) and LatinX peoples are represented in games, as well as their experience in games cultures, playing games, and the games industry is not emerging to prominence at the same pace in games and new media venues. However, some

scholarship on these topics can be found in area studies journals and other forums. The work of Chris Patterson and Tara Fickle, including Patterson and Fickle's monographs and their co-edited 2024 anthology on Asian-American game studies with Duke University Press, may indicate greater uptake is imminent. Indigenous representation, experience, and game making has been a consistent subject of work by LePensée, Bird, and others since 2010, but the uptake and citation of this literature has been slow and uneven. Carlos Kelly's (2023) monograph on LatinX masculinities in games, as well as work by Ortiz (2019) and others signals a potential change in the works.

Racism, exclusion, and marginalization. Racialized videogame players experience disproportionate levels of harassment in online gaming, ostracization from mainstream gaming communities, and feelings of alienation from the characters and stories featured in games. This can be seen in Kishonna Gray's groundbreaking 2015 book on *Race, Gender, and Deviance on Xbox Live*, in which Gray catalogs the many ways that Black players are targeted for abuse, and the then nonexistent safety tools available to players whose existence is a deviation from the norms of mainstream gaming culture. More recent work in this area by Stephanie Ortiz (2018) has tracked the continued normalcy of racist hate speech in online gaming as well as coping strategies enacted by racialized players, while Akil Fletcher's (2020) analysis showcases how esports communities construct both skill and labour in order to justify the continued exclusion of the Black players. Furthermore, racialized game makers working in the commercial entertainment games industry feel pressure to adopt professional and cultural norms characteristic of the predominantly white and masculine communities of game developers and their target audience. As Srauy's (2019) interviews with developers reveal, "game developers operate under an internalized pressure to create game narratives that are quickly understandable and, thus, sellable," which means that market forces are used to both justify racism and to pressure game makers to assimilate with the norms of whiteness characteristic of studios and audiences. Racialized game makers in independent studios experience stress and burnout associated with the smaller markets for these games.

Racialized players and developers' joy and resistance. Despite these overwhelming negative conditions and contexts, racialized individuals find joy in their gaming experiences through the creative reinterpretation of games and in solidarity with heterodox gaming communities. Again, Ortiz's (2018) study of racialized players and their strategies for making these experiences meaningful is instructive (though in her analysis the oppositional community developed in response is a masculinist and chauvinistic one). Fletcher's (2022) work on intermediality and Black community also points to how racialized players are able to come together using social networking and other venues outside of games, though it also points to the precarity of these communities. Shifting the context to game makers, Gray and Leonard (2018) document more of this work in their anthology on *Woke Games*, and LaPensée, Lauti, and Longboat (2022) talk about it in the context of Indigenous game makers, most of whom are independent developers, though they do note some industry inroads too.

Nascent reflexivity about racialized approaches to studying games. The marginalization of research and writing on race has been critically tied to racial privilege and the social location of

game scholars themselves, particularly in regards to early "canonical" works in the field.. While reflexivity about the role of racial privilege shaping the conduct of the field and contributing to the continued marginalization of research and writing on race has not been entirely absent, it is only in the last five years, since the late 2010s, that these meta-analyses have been taken up in leading venues and by prominent voices in the field. Tara Fickle's 2019 monograph, *The Race Card*, discusses the Orientalism at the heart of Huizinga's conceptualization of the relationship between play and culture, and Aaron Trammell's 2023 monograph *Repairing Play* critiques the anti-Blackness of hegemonic theorizations of play (that, again, find their origin in Huizinga). These, and other efforts to rethink the racial biases of academic understandings of play, set the groundwork for decolonizing existing frameworks and advancing approaches emerging from racialized experiences and epistemologies.

Final Report

Background

53% of Canadian adults are regular videogame players who average 7.5 hours of play per week (Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2022). What are the implications of so many Canadians playing digital and analog games for the shifting dynamics of privilege and marginalization? How do game representations, game industry practices, and the norms of game cultures impact different social groups for better or worse?

We know that representation matters, and that repeated popular media images influence consumers' perceptions of the world and the people they share it with (Morgan et al 2014; Williams et al, 2009). Studies of other media forms show that marginalized social groups tend to bear the brunt of negative representation as they accumulate and bleed over into social behaviors (Gray et al, 2017; Aspler et al, 2022). While game studies has a long tradition of examining representation, in the main these studies have focused on gender (Kennedy, 2002; Gray, Voorhees & Vossen, 2018; Taylor & Voorhees, 2018) and sexuality (Shaw 2015; Ruberg & Shaw 2017), and only sporadically centered race and ethnicity (Voorhees 2009; Voorhees, 2012; Gray, 2018b). We also know that industry norms impact the health and well-being of professionals, and that the game industry has a negative history of exploitative and extractive labour conditions (Dyer-Witheford & Peuter 2006; Peticca-Harris, Weststar, & McKenna 2015). Problematic labour practices and white, masculine cultures are the norm for North American developers (Johnson, 2014; Whitson, 2019; Bulut, 2021) and constitute barriers to entry, retention, and advancement for women and racialized professionals (Perks & Whitson, 2022). And we know that media is the basis for community, and that gaming has birthed a plethora of communities both online and offline (Taylor, 2006; Pearce, 2011). However, like the game industry, these communities are often dominated by the norms of masculine technoculture, which either deter diversity (Fisher, 2015; Fron et al., 2007; Ivory, 2006) or actively exclude members of marginalized groups (Cameron, 2019; Shaw, 2012).

We do not yet have a clear understanding of how these factors compound or their combined consequence for the shifting dynamics of privilege and marginalization in Canadian society. Games scholarship has an ambivalent record attending to these issues, which are typically marginalized while questions about game aesthetics, design, and storytelling are centered. Players and developers alike mobilize the cultural presumption that games are frivolous and thus the ways race is represented are not worth studying. This sentiment shuts down “thoughtful and thereby useful discussions of racism in gaming’s representational economies and narratives” (Everett 2014, p. 3). And when game studies research has examined representation, the industry, and gaming communities, these studies predominantly focus on women and sexual minorities.

Objectives

While research in the adjoining areas noted above enables an understanding of the stakes, our understandings of the relationships between videogames, race, and shifting dynamics of privilege and marginalization in Canadian society are nascent and evolving. The field of study has only recently shifted to these questions.

In this context, this literature review gathers and assesses game studies scholarship in order to: 1. Survey and synthesize current scholarship in the humanities and social sciences that focus on the relationship between games, race, and the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of privilege and marginalization; 2. Identify the topics and areas of this research that are well developed in terms of quantity of scholarship and diversity of approaches; and, 3. Identify gaps in knowledge and emerging areas where further research is warranted.

Methods

This project was imagined and designed as an exploratory literature review focused on identifying concentrations and gaps in game studies scholarship examining race. Per the mandate of the Knowledge Synthesis Grant, the literature review did not account for grey literature. It worked outward from abbreviated bibliographies based on Kishonna Gray's work on Black player's experiences in games and gaming culture, Philip Penix-Tadsen's work in Latin American game studies, Tara Fickle's work on Asian American game studies, and the works of Ashlee Bird and Elizabeth LePensée on Indigenous game studies, as well as a bibliography provided by Jennifer Whitson on race and the games industry. Starting from this set of initial bibliographies, the researchers identified the key terms assigned by the authors and/or publications of these sources (e.g. 'race,' 'representation,' 'industry,' and 'indie games'), and coded them with additional key words (e.g. 'Black representation,' 'MENA representation,' 'Asian representation' and 'LatinX representation') to account for the granularity of the literature review's focus on race. Influential works and influential figures in the field that had shown up on multiple citation lists were noted to inform the later analysis. These key terms and codes were then used in subsequent searches through both scholarly databases (e.g. EBSCO and Project Muse) and Google Scholar, which produced further search terms, in an iterative process. This was followed by a hand search for any literature on key terms found in adjacent fields (e.g. media studies) to ensure that scholarship on emerging topics that was not cited elsewhere could be included. Over 175 publications were added to the bibliography and indexed by key terms and codes to identify a core set of scholarship that includes both influential and broadly cited work as well as more novel forays into less-well-trodden lines of inquiry. The research team read most these works to prepare this report, though in some cases, excerpts and book reviews were read in lieu of complete books.

A qualitative review of the literature followed, starting from clusters of key terms and codes identified by the PI and RAs. In most cases, key terms and codes were combined to identify larger themes as outlined below (e.g. 'games industry' and 'indie games' combined to produce the theme 'game development'; 'Black representation,' 'MENA representation,' 'Asian representation' and 'LatinX representation' combined in the broad theme of 'representation'; and 'Eurocentrism,' 'colonialism,' and 'presumed player' combine in the theme 'whiteness'). Of course, a number of works contribute to the development of more than one theme.

Results

We collected and examined the most relevant and cited academic literature related to games, game development, and gaming cultures as they intersect with race, including representations of race, the experiences of racialized players and game makers, and how these racial dynamics shape the game industry and game studies scholarship. Through our exploratory literature review, we developed the following key themes, each of which we will explore in more detail below. The first theme encompasses scholarship that examines the pervasive whiteness of videogame texts, technologies, and cultures, and the whiteness of most academic approaches to researching videogames. The latter of which includes

theoretical and methodological interventions emerging from racialized experiences and ways of knowing. The second theme focuses on research that demonstrates how videogames contribute to processes of racialization, the social construction of race - both in terms of how people inhabit and embody their avowed racial identities and performances -, and how people develop and act upon their perceptions of other racial communities and identities (Hochman 2019). This work includes scholarship considering how race is represented visually, as videogames are “platforms for multiple modes of visuality, including video and computer generated animation, as well as still images in the form of computer generated art and digitized photographs and drawings” (Voorhees 2012, p.3), and procedurally through the processes modeled in gameplay, as “procedural systems like computer software actually represent process with process” (Bogost 2007, p.14). Through these two types of representation, videogames ascribe attributes and actions to people who look a certain way and suggest winning strategies for relating with people from different backgrounds. This theme also includes studies of how players are racialized in their social interactions within gaming communities and games culture. Finally, the third theme includes work examining how the representational and social dynamics of race in videogames intersect with broader social and political fields, including how race is implicated in game development and how race is understood in conjunction with gender. Below, we provide an overview of each of these thematic areas in the literature, discussing the relative strengths and shortcomings in the current research on race in games and game studies.

Whiteness in Game and Game Studies

By all accounts, research and scholarship that is not specifically focused on the representation or experience of racialized players or developers is studying whiteness in games. As Fron et al. (2007) argue, the unexamined default assumption that developers and researchers work through is a construction of the typical game player as a white male. To this day, many scholars argue that game studies is framed and influenced by whiteness, and whiteness oftentimes is assumed to be the normative standard that exists unnamed.

This is because, as Brock (2020) argues, most computational technologies are developed and designed with white users in mind. Daniels and Lalone (2014) argue that there is “ample evidence to suggest that game design, like the high-tech industry as a whole, is a white and male-dominated industry...this means that from user interface design to hardware design, it is predominantly white males who design, test and distribute video games” (pp. 88-89). Bulut (2021) expands on this, theorizing how white masculinity, specifically, is coded into games. Bulut explores the concept of “ludic religiosity,” noting that it is a “strong belief system that measures everything against the commensurability of ludic and technical pleasure in a supposedly neutral technological system...this ludic function is related to game content but even more deeply connected to the capacities of technological machines, which game workers push for pleasure” (p. 334). This belief system is influenced, framed, and embedded by and within white masculinity. As Bulut (2021) argues, this serves to reinforce “whiteness as the universal arbiter of what counts as escapism...[and] it simultaneously erases whiteness in shaping production cultures in the gaming industry” (pp. 335-336). In other words, ludic religiosity is a concept and framework to demonstrate “the racialized and gendered discourses and practices” and desires encoded into games (p. 329). Russworm (2018) similarly muses how white supremacy and videogames intersect, as “every inflection of the digital can service white supremacy just as the ideology of white supremacy is itself a technology of capitalism...game culture’s proximity to these things is widely apparent when doxxing, trolling, and overt threats of violence are the ready-made tactics of online hate campaigns” (para. 7-8). In this call to action, Russworm wants game studies to examine how games and gaming culture are

marked and intersect with white supremacy (para. 8). Ultimately, Russworm also argues that whiteness is a defining feature of game studies (para. 11), and that scholars need to reckon with that fact. These critiques of whiteness are the basis for efforts to retheorize the relationships between games and society and explore new approaches arising from the local knowledge of racialized players and researchers.

At base, this is seen in calls to reexamine the presumptions of whiteness that frame studies of games and players, particularly the body of work on the so-called “digital divide,” as well as work on digital technological use, which tends to start from normative uptake and use of technology as defined by white communities of users (Brock 2020). This is a key theme in Anna Everett’s (2009, 2014) work, which aims to disrupt the idea that minority communities lag behind in terms of being early adopters in technology use and innovation. Everett (2009) focuses on African diaspora communities and their interaction with technology, and what they term the “overlooked and unacknowledged fact of historical and contemporary black technolust” (pp. 6-7). She thus seeks to correct the notion of a digital divide, noting how the “structured absences of black bodies that have marked most popular imaginings of the brave new world” are premised on observations that Black technology users are not adopting and using technology in the same manner as white users, and thus are “in danger of reifying an updated myth of black intellectual lag or black technophobia” (p.20). Both Brock and Everett insist on, instead, studying how Black individuals and communities actually use technology for their own ends and to support their own pleasures, “to suggest an alternative scenario—a fact of black technophilia” (Everett 2009, p.20). Trammell’s (2023) retheorization of play, starting from Black experiences and the local knowledge of Black communities of play, extends this critique and continues to develop new frameworks. In *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology*, Trammell reexamines and challenges the root definitions of play, arguing that narrow definitions of play as voluntary, constructive, and positive have been complicit in the systemic erasure of Black, Indigenous, and racialized people from leisure. By expanding the definition of play to account for involuntary, dangerous, and harmful activities, Trammell challenges the white, European thinking at the foundation of contemporary games research and considers ways to reconcile already existing theories of play with the fact that, for racialized people, play has always contained hurtful and toxic aspects (e.g. demeaning representations and cultural erasures).

Both Murray (2017) and Malkowski and Russworm (2017), however, contend that there has been too much focus on technological aspects when studying games, and too little application of cultural lens and approaches, which reifies the unexamined cultural biases of the technology. Murray’s work, in this regard, is an intervention in how representation is studied in games by arguing for an understanding of games as visual culture (p. 2). Murray sees videogames as a crucial site for “negotiating unresolved cultural, social, or political frictions” as to “play videogames is to engage with the myths of a constituency whose access, agency and ability to wield the technology allows them to communicate within their wishes, fears, dreams...through a form of interactive entertainment” (pp. 2-3). Murray makes a convincing argument that cultural studies is an important approach to studying games as a “site of contestation in the struggle for recognition” (pp. 20-22). Related to Murray’s cultural studies framework, Patterson utilizes a timely and creative approach by analyzing games using the methodologies that center affect and erotics. Patterson (2020) argues that an erotic reading of videogames as Asiatic playthings enables scholars to identify how gaming “affords new pleasures, desires, and attachments” that confront our positions in the world as complicit imperial subjects” (pp. 226). In addition, Patterson’s emphasis on pleasure and erotics articulates with queer approaches to game studies, finding that “by centering erotics, we problematize the violence of our desires and chase more seductive, creative, and queer pleasures, which reveals how ‘power operates alongside pleasure practices’” (p. 25). Like Murray’s argument that videogames are forces of cultural influence, Patterson’s

focus on affect, erotics, and pleasure, similarly calls attention to the power dynamics shaping and shaped by play.

Whiteness not only structures how games and gameplay is studied, it is also maintained and perpetuated in and through games. In the literature on race and games we found a relative abundance of scholarship that examined and challenged whiteness, though often as a starting point to justify the study of race rather than the primary concern and object of analysis.

Whiteness tends to appear most often in the context of inquiry about representation in games, both procedural and visual. On the procedural level, Brock (2011) explores how White privilege is embedded within the social structure of play (p. 429). For instance, Brock finds that *Resident Evil 5* reifies the “civilizational power of Whiteness to control the savagery and inhumanity of Blacks and non-Whites” (p. 449). Voorhees (2009) comes to a similar conclusion in his analysis of the *Sid Meiers’ Civilization* series of strategy games, highlighting how the ideas about technological progress underwriting the games’ systems for progression and advancement are organized by white, Western values. Brey (2023) argues that whiteness even structures efforts to resist designer intention for and cultural norms of playing. Whiteness is also the norm for the visual presentation of game characters. The “virtual census” conducted by Williams et al. (2009) accounting for 150 commercially successful games from nine platforms points to the systematic over-representation of white male adults. Beyond preexisting game characters, whiteness also shapes player’s avatar creation as the assumed “normative” character model for players to inhabit. Dietrich (2013) found that the vast majority of games do not allow players to create avatars with non-white appearances, which creates all-white virtual spaces. As Dietrich argues, the problem with this is that it creates virtual “hypersegregation” with the “potential to structure ideas regarding race in a way that privileges whiteness and denigrates racial others” (p. 85).

Whiteness also characterizes the communities and cultures of videogame play. Other scholarship broadly explores the intersection of white supremacy and videogames. Daniels and Lalone (2014) argue that the ways that systemic racism is implicated in video gaming culture has been unexamined, so they address this gap by looking at how white supremacist groups use videogames. Daniels and Lalone thus “illuminate the connections between extremist and more mainstream forms of white supremacy” (p. 86). An overarching problem with technology writ large, as Daniels and Lalone explore, is that “dominant white culture claims to be ‘colorblind’ and dismisses concerns about racism as irrelevant...added to this is an Internet culture, also predominantly white, in which humor is the highest value and charges of racism are regarded as the purview of the humorless and the overly serious” (pp. 96-97). It is thus very difficult to tackle problems of both overt and subtle racism in gaming spaces, as they are ignored or dismissed.

Racialization in Games and Play

A good deal of literature explores race and representation generally without focusing on any one specific racial identity or experience. Instead, this work looks at how race operates in a broader sense, such as in different game genres (Chan, 2005; Leonard, 2003), game series (Young, 2016), various iterations of racial logics across time (Fickle & Patterson, 2022) and virtual representations of race online (Kafai et al., 2010). Scholarship in this area highlights the importance of researching games generally, examining how games act as cultural reflections and thus recreate problems that occur in the world around us. Murray (2017) interrogates how “games work as cultural reflections and tools of cultural production through their representations of social systems,” underscoring the importance of studying

how game systems represent the world around us (DeAnda 2018, p. 243). Murray argues that videogames “create and uphold value systems and hierarchies of one constituency,” often the dominant class, at the expense of another (p. 46, quoted in DeAnda, 2018).

Complementing this, there is a variety of work focused on specific racial identities and experiences. Research on Indigenous representations and ways of knowing largely focuses on the ways Indigenous folks and culture are represented in games, how game makers can incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, and processes of sovereign game making. Research in this area is particularly influenced by the work of Ashlee Bird and Elizabeth LaPensée, among others. Scholarship on Indigenous representation in games is quite often tied to analysis of games made by Indigenous game makers, such as LaPensée and Longboat, and is covered in more detail later in this document. There is a growing constellation of research that focuses on Black representation and experience within and with games. Some work in this area critically examines the representations of Blackness in games (c.f Brock 2011) and the experiences of Black players (c.f. Gray 2014) while others still curate and catalog the experience and work of Black game makers (c.f. Grace, 2021). Important inroads exist in the areas of Asian-including Middle Eastern and North African- and LatinX representation and experience in gaming, though inquiry in these areas are not as numerous or sustained as examinations of other racialized peoples.

To better organize this significant body of literature, we first discuss racialization through the visual and procedural representations of race in games, secondly, in the experience of play and then, finally, turn to racialization in the social dynamics of game players, communities, and culture. In each of these instances, we try to differentiate literature on representations and dynamics rooted in white supremacy and those emerging from racialized worldviews.

Representation

Racialized and racializing representations in games have been studied both quantitatively and qualitatively, but until the last decade were relatively marginalized in a field that focused on delineating the essential components of games and how they structure play. Malkowski and Russworm’s (2017) edited book *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality* is a watershed moment for qualitative analyses of representation in videogames. This edited volume pulls together a variety of work on this topic, with Malkowski and Russworm starting with the premise that “questions around representation in game studies have been neglected” in favour of a focus on game systems, including hardware, software, game structures, and game design (pp. 1-2). In response to this gap, they argue that representation and identity are also complex systems that are very relevant to “the ways in which games, codes, platforms...all technologies...are constructed” and therefore should be studied as a system like other dominant areas of game studies (p. 3). Their volume is split into three parts—Part 1: Gender, Bodies, Spaces; Part 2: Race, Identity, Nation; and Part 3: Queerness, Play, Subversion. As they describe it, their ultimate vision for this book is a “critical blueprint for what it might mean to treat representation as a ‘formative, not merely expressive’ system in game studies” (p. 4). As such, this book argues for the importance of and lays the groundwork for further examination of race in representation. That said, it did not begin the critical interrogation of racial representation and games but, rather, marked a critical moment as this line of inquiry became more prominent in game studies.

Content analyses by communication scholars working on games, including Williams et al. (2009) videogame census and Shaw (2015), helped legitimate game studies of representations, but these have focused primarily on gender and only incidentally on race. However, Everett (2014) writes about the symbolic annihilation of racialized people in games, noting the absence of racial and ethnic diversity in

terms of Black, Indigenous, LatinX and Asian main characters, or must-play-characters (MPCs), and the dearth of racialized characters who fall outside of familiar and demeaning stereotypes. Everett acknowledges that “efforts to expand gaming’s revenue stream in a transnational global media ecology have resulted in the industry’s... nod to racial and gender diversification in the creation and development of MPC characters outside of dominant white masculinist heteronormativity” (p. 3). While this diversification is sometimes seen as a breakthrough, Everett points out these characters often cleave to popular stereotypes and familiar companion, helper, or side-kick character types.

This is, in part, due to the conventions and tropes associated with different kinds of stories and contexts common in videogames. Certain game genres, such as war games like the *Call of Duty* franchise, fantasy themed games like those based on the work of JRR Tolkien, sports games like the *NBA* series, and action adventure games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series rely on settings that foreground racialized characters in marginal or ancillary ways.

While focusing on adventure games such as *Grand Theft Auto III (GTA III)* and sports games like *NBA Street*, Leonard (2003) outlines how games offer “interpretations, representations and explanations of black athleticism, female sexuality, and inner city America” such that “video games are not just games, or sites of stereotypes, but a space to engage American discourses, ideologies, and racial dynamics” (p. 3). He argues that these games embrace racial stereotypes, imagery, and stock figures and tropes, which depict Chinese, Japanese, Hispanic, African-American, and Jamaican street gangs engaging in violent turf wars. According to Leonard, “the racial dynamics of *GTA III* are overshadowed by its in-your-face imagery: the heavily accented East Indian cabbie; the poor-English speaking Chinese women walking on the street; and the purple-clad black pimps. Almost all of the innocent citizens of Liberty City are white, the majority of whom are upper class and elderly” (p.4). Thus, race ultimately matters in games because the way race is constructed there ultimately affirms the “status quo, giving consent to racial inequality and the unequal distribution of resources and privileges” (p. 2). Like Murray (2017), Leonard demands that we take seriously the racial logics and representations that videogames perpetuate.

Chan (2005), while also examining sports games and action adventure games, focuses on war games. War games are often linked to arguments around historical authenticity and perpetuate “dominant constructions of racial otherness” while certain ‘authentic’ histories often exclude and overwrite the history of other groups (p. 26). It is in the context of war games that the Middle East and North Africa are most commonly represented. Høglund (2008) notes how much the Middle East has been the focus of both American economic and military interest since the Cold War, and examines “how a set of military computer games construct the East within its virtual game space” (para. 3). The game space in these military games such as *America's Army* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* “reveal the architecture and the iconography of a (usually generic) Islamic nation and the people the gamer, playing as an American soldier, encounter are dressed as the stereotypical Arab” (para. 12). Høglund further argues that Western military games seem to be concerned with “dramatizing the necessity of continuous military violence in the Middle East by describing this space as a site for perpetual war” (para. 24). Furthermore, Šisler (2008) observes that games that include the Middle East tend to reinforce “stereotypical notions of arbitrary cruelty and barbarism” (p. 207). In these games, the player usually controls American forces and is never given the chance to play as or with Arab or Muslim characters. The enemy, always depicted using stereotypical signifiers, such as wearing headcovers, is linked via in-game narrative to international terrorism and/or Islamist extremism (p. 208). As such, these games are premised on dehumanizing and/or anonymizing those in the Middle East. This is not unique to games as Šisler (2008) connects these in-game representations to how Arab and Muslims folks are represented in news and popular media—which involves both stereotypical generalizations and clichés (p. 204). This affirms Chan’s (2005)

observation that games are oftentimes guilty of “re-enacting race based pedagogies” (p. 29) and reusing and reinscribing racial representations and logics rather than refusing or challenging them.

Šisler also examines representations of Muslims and the Middle East beyond military and war themed games and discovers both more Othering and some positive representation. He notes that many action adventure narratives set in the Middle East start with a woman being kidnapped by an evil character, therefore setting up a story about a damsel in distress from a demonized Other (p. 207). But Šisler also notes that strategy games such as *Sid Meier's Civilization* and *Age of Empires* contain both factual historical information about Arab rulers and kingdoms, as well as sympathetic stories. Overall, however, Šisler argues that because videogames are “usually produced with their consumer base in mind, they tend to incorporate and reflect the general imaginations of the Middle East prevalent among the western public, as well as the audience’s expectations of particular genres” (p. 214). Importantly, Šisler also examines game production in the Middle East, noting that while it is in the early stages of development, it is critical to producing games that accurately represent the lived realities of Arabs and Muslims and counter the misrepresentation and distortion in Western media productions (p. 211).

Representations of Blackness, while more common in some genres, can be found across a wide variety of games and have caught the attention of more scholars. Notably, Brock (2011) explores how Blackness stands in for cultural evil in *Resident Evil 5* through its usage of Africa as a location and its depictions of African people as savage and malevolent (p. 442). As Brock argues, the “combination of narrative, game mechanics, and cultural rationales of primitive strength and genetic susceptibility yield this result: an electronic rendition of savage, deformed, colored bodies that build upon long-standing stereotypes and in-game mechanics to power the player’s revulsion and justify their extinction” (p. 443). Significantly, while Brock and others have argued that Whiteness operates as the default in games, here Brock grounds this by analyzing how players “articulate their practices and beliefs with...the games they play...discourses about videogame practices and genres can serve as a structure for the representation of identity” (p. 444). The combination of critical technological discourse analysis with analysis of the game’s representations Blackness enables Brock to highlight connections between racialized representations in-game and white supremacist beliefs among players. Looking primarily at massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs), Higgins (2009) argues that “Black and brown bodies, although increasingly more visible within the medium, are seemingly inescapably objectified as hypermasculine variations of the gangsta or sports player tropes, which reduce race to an inscription of the ‘fears, anxieties, and desires of privileged Western users’” (p. 3). Russworm’s (2017) chapter on Blackness in dystopian and apocalyptic fantasies points to similar representations that devalue Black lives and experiences, leading her to argue that the game industry needs to do better than just simply adding racially diverse characters. She contends that “even as the medium moves toward including more Black characters, it is largely still failing to do so imaginatively or progressively” (p. 11).

In addition to these trivializing and vilifying portrayals, Blackness is also sometimes omitted entirely. Extending Nakamura’s (1995) work on cybertypes, or the ways that “new media propagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism,” Higgins (2009) examines the “ostensible absence of blackness in fantasy-based MMORPGs” (p. 4). Describing these worlds as relatively blackless, Higgins (2009) argues that the “omission of Black characters from the discourse devalues the potential of videogames to provide productive racial experiences because they reinforce dominant notions of Blacks as incapable of being functional members of society” (p. 6). Higgins (2009) ultimately argues that this omission from a game’s representational economy makes negative and harmful play practices more likely. That is, when “blackness has no preset qualities to influence role-play...the player is completely

free, if not encouraged, to indulge in dominant fantasies of blackness and enact a form of virtual minstrelsy” (p. 20).

Research on Indigenous, LatinX and East Asian representation is less prominent. However, Legace (2018) writes about the common appearance of the savage and nobles savage tropes and Bird (2021a) about the preeminence of sexualization, white revenge fantasies of killing Natives, and the “vanishing race” trope in narrative representations of Indigenous people and cultures. Bird (2021b) also notes the tendency to homogenize Indigenous peoples in games, resulting in the erasure of “Native American characters whose regional attachment might stand in the way of that” (p. 249). Kelly (2023) describes how LatinX characters are, when they do appear, often sidekicks and comic relief, but most often they are just props to establish mood and setting. Kelly describes an “amalgam of tropicalized Anglo viewpoints that deploy stereotypes structuring how we are seen by global audiences, not just people within the United States” (pp. 11-12). Patterson (2020) shares this concern for how race is used to establish a tone or sensibility, arguing that games draw upon Asian discourses to “create an ‘Asiatic’ space of racial otherwise” (p. 27). As Patterson (2020) elaborates, Asiatic is a “style or form recognized as Asianish, but that remains adaptable, fluid, and outside of the authentic/inauthentic binary” (p. 27). Rivera (2014) takes up both this aesthetic as well as the prevalence of techno-Orientalism in games featuring Asian characters and settings. Taken together, these important works represent some of the forays into Asian, LatinX, and Indigenous representation in videogames.

At the edge of both representation and gameplay, Blackmon and Terrell (2007) interrogate how race is read by players in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. Researcher Samantha Blackmon collaborated with 16-year-old male player Daniel Terrell to investigate whether games-based learning principles can be applied to “critical thought about the game environment itself” and to explore the impacts of representations in the game (p. 204). Blackmon and Terrell explore how the portrayal of African Americans, Hispanics, and women stand out for him as a facet of the game in the context of significant interactions with members of these groups based on his background and lived experience (p. 210). They note that the game’s representation resonated with him, but mostly in ways that further stereotypes around Black and brown representation, and argue that the way that games are “written, drawn, and marketed is the problem” (p. 211). They add that the way that these representations exist in videogames also tell us how game developers see these groups of people, and that this can perpetuate stereotypes. Ultimately, they note that all games come with embedded biases and assumptions and so it is critical for players to interrogate these representations as they may offer a “teachable moment” for folks who have never interacted with these underrepresented groups and are therefore more prone to uncritically accept these stereotypes (p. 214).

Play Experience

The experience of play is multifaceted and hard to define, but in the context of videogames play describes a users’ action or interaction with the game. This gameplay has variously been described as the “configurative performance” element of games (Eskelinen & Tronstad 2004), an assemblage of multiple human and nonhuman actors (Taylor 2009), and the dynamic economy of the push-and-pull of motivating factors, desires, actions, and responses (Caldwell 2000). Importantly, play is widely accepted as the interactive element that differentiates the experience of a videogame player from a cinema viewer, as it involves the player in the material unfolding of the text. Unlike philosophical conceptions of play as a free and voluntary activity, in games play is always shaped by the game’s affordances and constraints. In this way, gameplay can contribute to racialization as players virtually embody ideas and perform actions within the procedural logics of the game.

Early research in this area tended to focus on the free and voluntary aspects of play, notably, how white players might embody racialized characters in videogames. For instance, one example of this is Higgins' (2009) examination of how blackless fantasies enable and even encourage players to engage in digital minstrelsy, discussed above. This line of inquiry can be traced to Nakamura's work on cybertypes and identity tourism, but first entered games research in Leonard's (2003) study of *Grand Theft Auto III*, in which he borrows Adam Clayton Powell's notion of "high-tech Black face" to describe how non-Black players inhabit the game's Black main character (p. 4). Building on Leonard's work, Chan (2005) argues that sports games engage in pixelated minstrelsy where the focus on inner city play contributes to "preconceived 'common sense' understandings of the ghetto, blackness and the black community's work ethic...a racialized politics is being enacted in the process of supposedly telling it like it is" (p. 27). Pixelated minstrelsy occurs when white players' "pleasure is derived through black male bodies" (Chan, 2005, p. 28).

Beyond the representations of characters and environments fabricated by game developers, games delimit how players can construct their own in-game representations. Kafai et al. (2010) explore how race, identity, and virtual representation come together in the process of avatar designs on *Whyville.net*. Unlike characters designed by developers, avatars are customized by users and it is typically thought that these player-generated avatars from virtual communities may "lend themselves to meaningful considerations of race" because they enable a form of autoethnography where players can explore relations of power and culture (p. 46). Kafai et al. analyzed avatar creation in *Whyville.net* to show that opportunities to create racialized avatars are constrained by limited options for skin tone, hair, and facial structure, much as Dietrich (2013) would find in the context of massively multiplayer online role-playing games. However, Kafai et al. argue that this problem presents an opportunity as "changing simple features such as the default avatar assigned to all new players...may seem trivial but can be very significant when these design features leave the player more choice of whom to become" (p. 58). By showcasing how discussions about race can emerge from small changes in virtual contexts, they point to the ways we can create educational opportunities for discussions of race for younger players.

While research about how playing specific characters is implicated in racialization is still invaluable, games scholarship now tends to look at how the overarching operational logics of videogames racialize players. Fickle and Patterson (2022) offer an examination of racial logics across three decades, from the 2000s to the 2020s, to suggest that "diverse casts" are often seen as a win condition for games researchers and developers alike. However, within these increasingly diverse representational economies in games, they identify different roles that the player is placed in, including what they term the racial empath and divine avatar. The divine avatar is the most commonplace and involves playing as a specific racialized avatar. In this role, the player inhabits a racialized character, and by experiencing the game and its story from that racialized position is made aware that other perspectives and experiences exist. The racial empath describes when the player is encouraged to voyeuristically play with the pain of racialized marginalization. Fickle and Patterson argue that this may lead to the fetishization of marginalized people and their experiences, while still engaging in racist acts (through the sorts of minstrelsy discussed above). Other procedural logics may challenge normative racializations. Young's (2016) examination of the constructions of race in the "*Frodo Franchise*," the series of games based on Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films, finds that these games both reproduce and subvert problematic racial representations and logics (p. 344). While fantasy themed games most often regurgitate racial stereotypes, "Narrative and visual elements—which are derived directly from the franchise—of [these] games... impose racialized differences, however, ludic elements demonstrate the arbitrary and superficial nature of those same racial groupings" (p. 358). In short, the relationships between visual

representation and game mechanics creates opportunities for players to recognize the problematic essentialism of many representations of race. By pointing out the procedural implications of how diversity is designed into games and seen as a win condition, these works reinforce Everett's observations that more representations of racialized people is not necessarily a good thing, but carry this argument into the operationalization of a game's representational economy.

The small body of work on multiculturalism, which tends to examine the cultural politics of racialized representation and procedural logic in games, also interrogate the operationalization of the representational economy of games. Voorhees' (2009) work on the *Final Fantasy* series offers an approach to game criticism that takes into account the narrative, visual, and procedural aspects of representation in games. Voorhees argues that not only do videogames allow players to experiment with different responses to racial differences, games also shine a celebratory spotlight on liberal multiculturalist ideology. In practice this means that to beat the game, players must assemble or manage a cast of playable characters and nonplayable helpers of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Voorhees (2012b), Patterson (2015), and Callahan (2019) take up similar questions around multiculturalism as a social and political strategy to manage difference in relation to the *Mass Effect* series, while Douglas (2010) finds the immensely popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft* does similar ideological work. Patterson and Fickle (2022) also discuss how some games position the players as a multicultural manager, as the disembodied authority over NPCs who are often racialized or others as aliens, elves, or hobbits (p. 213). Player who want to win must therefore "learn and reinforce the rules of tolerance" (p. 213) which aligns closely with the liberal multiculturalism of North America, and Canada in particular (Callahan, 2019).

A methodologically similar line of analysis is extended in Indigenous games research. Bird (2021a) argues that "not only has the actual, physical removal of Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands created intergenerational trauma, grief, and displacement, but within the digital spaces of videogames that feature Indigenous peoples, these violences are being perpetrated once again" (p. 246). Analyzing *Minecraft*, in which the land is consumable as players dig up resources and use them to craft other game components, Bird explores how this game mechanic encourages players to consume resources and engage a fantasy of domination and control of the natural world. This game logic works "to mollify the majority of the player populace who would view the earth as a consumable object for them, not a living, meaning-making being that is bound to them and them to it" (p. 252). In this sense, these operational logics are incompatible with Indigenous worldviews.

This incompatibility has spurred the work of Indigenous game developers, including Bird and LaPensée who, respectively, stress the importance of sovereignty and survivance in and through videogames. In doing so, they point to the importance of involving Indigenous people in game development and design processes. LaPensée (2014) uses the Indigenous crafted game *When Rivers Were Trails* to showcase how it engages in Indigenous survivance, which is not simply survival and endurance but "a way of living and creating that nourishes Indigenous ways of knowing in the context of our self-determination in the world today" (p. 264). In this and other games, LaPensée argues, Indigenous storytelling, values, and worldviews persist and find new expression. Bird (2021) explores how games such as *Never Alone* require players "to enact and embody cultural values and knowledges of the community," centering Indigenous representation in meaningful ways and thus offers a way for Indigenous communities and creators to convey their culture (p. 255). Indeed, LaPensée et al. (2022) argue that putting Indigenous people in lead roles in game development can lead to "dynamic spaces of self-expression through code, design, art, and sound" (p. 329). Bird (2021) terms these spaces sovereign digital spaces but highlights the challenges of instantiating them. Still, as LaPensée et al. (2022) argue, "sovereignty can be enacted

in how games are developed, with consideration for who is involved and in what roles, how funding is gained and distributed, how intellectual property rights regarding Indigenous knowledge are managed, and how decisions are made regarding who can access a game and in what ways” (p. 329).

Socialization

Communities of play shape how players experience games and make meaning from their play (Pearce 2011). And the white, masculine character of mainstream North American gaming culture, and its impact upon women and gender-nonconforming players, is well documented (Shaw 2012; Vanderhoef 2013). Work by Daniels and Lalone (2014), discussed above, illuminating how white supremacists utilize online games provides important context for understanding the social experience of racialized players. Ultimately, communities of play, the influence of mainstream gaming culture, and the presumed normative standard of whiteness play a part in how socialization through interaction with other players impacts racialization in gaming spaces.

Nakamura’s influential work on race in digital spaces is foundational in this line of inquiry (as well as inquiry about representation and minstrelsy). In her research on the racialization of the work-play dialectic in MMORPGs, Nakamura (2009) notes how specific forms of gamic labor and styles of play “have become racialized as Chinese, producing new forms of networked racism that are particularly easy for players to disavow” (p. 130). She explores how gold farmers, players who acquire and sell in-game resources and credits for out-of-game currency, are particularly hated in MMORPG’s, resulting in anti-Asian sentiment that comes through in examples such as anti-farmer memes and overtly racist machinima (Nakamura, 2009, p. 136). At the same time, Nakamura (2009) thoughtfully explores how Asian worker players are “economically unable to accumulate avatarial capital and thus become ‘persons’...they are the dispossessed subjects of synthetic worlds” (p. 142). Nakamura’s work, which is preceded by Steinkueler’s (2006) discussion of Chinese currency farmers in *Lineage*, is key to seeing how the gold farming style of play becomes synonymous with Asian player workers, and how negative sentiment against those players becomes “common sense.”

Most scholarship interrogating racialized players’ experiences in gaming is focused on Black players across various gaming platforms. Gray’s (2014, 2018) prolific and well cited work documents the experience of Black women gamers on *Xbox Live* in order to “examine how they resist the toxicity of *Xbox Live* spaces.” Gray (2014) centers the experiences of Black women gamers, and explores how these players are linguistically profiled based on auditory cues that signify Blackness, and then targeted for harassment. A particular strength of Gray’s (2014) work is her articulation of how marginalized users and players can build their own spaces online, spaces that, as Gray (2014) argues, “have the potential to foster the development of a group standpoint, negating the impact of dominant ideology” (p. 76). Gray (2018) identifies the development of Black lesbian networks on *Xbox Live*, “paying particular attention to the ways the space influences their identities and aids in community building because of their marginal status rooted from their intersectional standpoint and expressed in digital gaming” (p. 286). Here, Gray centers the experiences of lesbian Black and Latinx women to “document... women’s use of a digital gaming community to navigate their racialized, gendered, and sexual identities and create a community that sustains them” (p. 282). Gray (2018) found three dominant themes: (1) the contentious role of anonymity, (2) isolation and the utility of digital connectivity, and (3) transgressive play (p. 287) and argues,

“the private spaces within gaming culture that many marginalized groups inhabit are the few spaces that value the articulation of marginalized interests and viewpoints...in the small community that these lesbians of color have established, they build social cohesion, and

establish alternative and equally valuable interpretations of what it means to be Black, Woman, Lesbian, Poor, and geographically isolated in many contexts” (p. 293).

In short, Gray found that Xbox Live and its private party chat capability actually fostered a supportive gaming environment that facilitated identity and community development among Black lesbians (p. 294). Ortiz (2019) explores how racialized men negotiate racist trash talk in the gaming space and how this process shapes and is shaped by masculinity (p. 573). Ortiz argues that “overtly racist interactions within Xbox Live operate as processes of gendered race-making,” and that men who experience this learn to navigate “navigate racial boundaries online in ways that encourage strategies of silence and emotional desensitization to racism, but only after experiencing stigmatization from peers and family” (p. 573).

Social and Political Intersections of Race in Games

In addition to shining a light on how whiteness is a critical framework in games and game studies, and how race is represented, played/performed, and experienced in the social engagements in and around games, research on games and race also highlights several social and political intersections.

Race and Games Development

Questions about how racialized folks are included in game studios, game making, and the commercial industry are prevalent in related scholarship. Everett (2014) explores how “issues of industry economies and practices, labor, space, cognition and affect are also longstanding areas of concern and critique” and are bound up with issues of representation (para. 4). Everett (2014) continues by arguing that “race and gender assumptions still operate as functional structuring presences underlying too many of games’ ‘procedural rhetorics’ and tropes of mastery” (para. 4). Starting from the assumption that Western society, and therefore the products that come from them, rely on the assumption that whiteness is the “standard,” Srauy (2019) explores how North American developers understand and craft representations of race, suggesting that the “pressure that developers face is an internalized pressure to create texts that are quickly understandable and sellable” (p. 479). This, Srauy argues, results in designers defaulting to the lowest common cultural denominator and centering white cultural knowledge and experiences, borrowing themes and narratives from previously successful games to “quickly clue the player into the setting and rules of the game” (p. 479). Srauy (2019) makes a compelling argument for game studies scholars to focus more on the informal, cultural inaccessibilities and impediments, often described as casual racism, “within culture that affects the industry and the social and economic structures that maintain racism” (p. 480). Bulut (2021) extends studio studies of race, considering how white masculinity is coded into games themselves, concluding that the “desire that runs the game industry is racialized and gendered” (p. 331). Bulut argues that white masculinity ultimately “shapes how game workers desire, informs how they imagine escapism, and ideologically structures how they relate to technological work” (p. 331). The scholarship in this area importantly points out how game production is racialized, especially by assuming certain player positions and, at times, uncritically recycling racialized logics in game design that privilege the position of white, straight, cisgender men.

Another important line of scholarship in this area aims to center the voices of Black, Indigenous, and racialized game makers, or showcase how certain racialized communities are representing their communities in games (Grace, 2021; Bird, 2021a; LaPensée et al., 2022; LaPensée, 2014; Nakamura, 2009; Chan, 2005). Artists, activists, and (to a lesser extent) development studios are increasingly

making games that both reflect the lives, values, and experiences of racialized players and engage in advocacy for social change. Grace both catalogs and curates the work of Black game makers in order to understand their experiences and to highlight the “cultural, artistic, and educational value of such games” (p. 3) and include makers from racialized backgrounds that are generally left out of wider conversations around game production. Evidence for this trend includes independent developers Momo Pixel’s acclaimed game *Hair Nah*, NuChallenger’s *Treachery in Beatdown City*, and *Thirsty Suitors* from Outer Loop games, as well AM Darke’s work at University of California at Santa Cruz building the Afro Hair Library, a resource for developers to access 3D models of typically “Black hair.” Similarly, Bird, LaPensée, and LaPensée et al showcase how Indigenous frameworks (Bird 2021b) and involving Indigenous folks in game design (LaPensée et al. 2022) can help center Indigenous ways of knowing in game design and in-game representation. In some ways, this is a corrective for the way Indigenous makers have been left out of representing their community in games and negative representations. Still, much of the academic energy and work around Indigenous games focuses on game making practices in the context of cultural development and storytelling, such as the Skins workshops in Canada (Lameman et al, 2010) and the Sami Gam Jam in Sweden (Laiti et al, 2020). Chan (2005) offers recommendations for how game studios deal with race, stating that games “need to be situated as part of a bigger social picture and broader cultural conversation about race and racialized representations” and that studios need to be reflexive about including more equitable racialized representations (p. 30). As Srauy’s research suggests, without this reflection, diversifying the industry will only result in assimilating racialized game developers into the narrative and representational conventions of whiteness.

Race Intersecting Gender

The intersection of race and gender is well represented in the literature and suggests fruitful ground for further investigation. Prominent work in this area includes Gray’s (2018) work on Black lesbian community-building on *Xbox Live*, Kelly’s (2023) examination of Latinx masculinities in games, Leonard’s (2003) work on hypermasculinity of racialized representations in sports and action adventure games, and Williams et al. (2009) well cited study on the representation of characters. Williams et al. helped establish a baseline measurement of race, gender and age of characters across more than 150 games on several different platforms. They found that men, white characters, and adults were overrepresented compared to the US population at the expense of women, Latinos, Native Americans, children, and elderly characters (p. 828). Williams et al. (2009) also point out how the most popular games are even less representative, “indicating that players also play a role in the cycle of creation and consumption” (p. 828). Leonard (2003) underscores the intersection of gender and race to the construction and reception of videogames, arguing that videogames are often constructed both as spaces for and about men and as white-centered spaces (p. 2). Ultimately, Leonard (2003) shows how race is always gendered, or about gender.

Gray (2018, 2020), Russworm and Blackmon (2020), and Ortiz (2019) all look at the intersection of Black identity and gender. Gray (2018) explores how Black lesbians on Xbox Live navigate their identity development, paying attention to “the ways the space influences their identities and aids in community building because of their marginal status rooted from their intersectional standpoint and expressed in digital gaming” (p. 286). In her 2020 book, Gray explores the intersection of Blackness and masculinity in one chapter while dedicating another chapter to the “misogynoir” that Black women face in digital gaming. Russworm and Blackmon’s (2020) mixtape of feminist thought importantly focuses on the experiences of Black women who have been portrayed as absent or silenced in and digital media histories and aims to showcase how Black feminist thought “has always informed the ways in which Black women have interacted with the industry” by offering a discursive cultural remediation (p. 2). Ortiz

(2019) importantly makes space for the experiences of Black men who deal with racist trash talking online while playing games. Ortiz (2019) specifically focuses on how these men navigate hearing the racist trash talk in relation to the support, or lack of support, they receive from those around them. Ultimately Ortiz (2019) finds that “racist interactions within *Xbox Live* operate as processes of gendered race-making...in confronting racist trash talk, respondents also confront and negotiate meanings of race and masculinity, which shape their coping strategies in response” and then generally become desensitized to it (p. 573). Ortiz finds that “men of color learn to navigate racial boundaries online in ways that encourage strategies of silence and emotional desensitization to racism, but only after experiencing stigmatization from peers and family” (p. 573). Also at the intersection of masculinity and race, Kelly (2023) focuses on how Latinx masculinities are portrayed in videogames, showcasing how the Latinx community is not well represented in gaming production or in game representation. Focusing in on Latinx masculinity, Kelly argues that such characters only exist as the tropes or stereotypes and points to the relative absence (only seven) of playable Latina characters over the past twenty years, two of which “continue the trend of oversexualizing Latinas” (pp. 8-9).

Race, Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition

Another area of scholarship relatively well-represented is colonial and postcolonial scholarship on games. Work by Harrer (2018), Magnet (2006), Martin (2018), and Mukherjee (2017, 2018) thoughtfully explores the insights offered by these theoretical traditions and research, beginning from the premise that videogames are part of the colonial and/or postcolonial condition. Mukherjee tackles colonialism, focusing on the treatment of empire and colonialism in games through the lens of spatiality, political systems, ethics, and society (2018). In Mukherjee’s (2017) book, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*, he argues that while there is a good amount of global scholarship critiquing colonialism, there is “very little scholarship if any at all on postcolonial perspectives on gaming in the now almost two decades of game studies research” (p. 2). The aim of his book is thus to “carry forward whatever existing conversations there are and to introduce postcolonial thought among the newer perspectives in Games Studies research” (p. 2). One of Mukherjee’s (2017) important arguments in his book includes exploring how the “culture of the ex-colonies has been portrayed in videogames through lenses that privilege Eurocentric accounts of history and progress” but that certain modded versions of empire-building games are examples of games that play against the grain of imperialism (p. 103). He thus considers postcolonialism in game studies by exploring “how the video game might become a medium of subalternity” (2018, para. 3).

Harrer (2018), meanwhile, looks at the “dynamics of fun and innocence in game-specific remediations of imperialist ideology” (p. 2), arguing that the term “casual game” is actually an ideological category which helps render the problems of empire invisible (p. 2). In other words, by seeing games and their content as casual, this undermines the critiques around them as “too serious” for a playful commodity, and this aura of fun leaves us with a “notion of the ideology-free entertainment product, whose incidental narrative of colonial domination is reduced to a single genre label: adventure” (p. 3). Harrer ultimately finds that the concept of casual empire perpetuates narratives of an “omnipresent white male ruler” through the procedural logics of play (p. 23). Focusing on the game *Tropico*, Magnet (2006) explores “gamespaces” as spaces of colonization for players and notes that the game invites the players into a colonizing framework through the power and spatial logics of *Tropico* (p. 143). In this game, the player is positioned as a mix of dictator and god, incorporating the players into the game “through the historically male paradigm of colonizer” (p. 146). Voorhees (2009b) makes a similar argument about the slow, contemplative pace, mapping of cause and effect relationships, and isometric overhead perspective

featured in the *Sid Meier's Civilization* series, which involves founding a civilization in *terra nullis* and managing it to the space ages, producing a colonialist sensibility.

Conclusion: Research Gaps and Future Directions

As an exploratory effort, these conclusions are premised on the largely qualitative analysis of a substantial body of scholarship. A systematic review of the literature that quantifies and traces the citational web of research on race and games beyond the humanities and social sciences may suggest further refinement of the themes identified, or entirely different themes altogether. The remit of Knowledge Synthesis Grant to focus on social sciences and humanities scholarship resulted in the exclusion of a large body of public-facing writing and gray literature produced by game makers, non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups, journalists, and critics. Indeed, most of the empirical data about the experiences of game developers is produced by industry organizations like the Entertainment Software Association and the International Game Developers Association. This also excludes a good amount of writing by racialized developers and critics for whom traditional scholarship may be structurally or culturally inaccessible. Indigenous game makers and advocates, in particular, seem to self-select out of academic venues to pursue more community-oriented practices and knowledge building. Expanding the review by scoping beyond humanities and social sciences literature and and/or including grey and public-facing works are important next steps to developing a comprehensive picture of this research area.

Within its limitations, this research synthesis of social sciences and humanities scholarship at the intersection of race and games revealed several key themes in the literature, notably work on whiteness, racialization, and some social and cultural connections. But this is still very much an emerging area and there is much work to be done.

Confront and Pursue Alternatives to the Whiteness of Game Studies. Critiques of whiteness in games are a well-established line of inquiry, but critiques of and *alternatives* to the whiteness that characterizes approaches to doing game studies are only just emerging. Recently, the discipline of communication studies engaged in a period of self-reflection as a result of the #CommunicationSoWhite hashtag movement, though it's an open question about the degree to which the outcome can be considered successful (Ng et al, 2020). Can we build from Trammell and Fickle's work highlighting how foundational works to the field are rooted in white, hegemonic conceptualizations of play and games to the point of recognizing and reflecting on the fact that #GameStudiesSoWhite? Not only the subjects and objects we study, but the ways we study them and how we conceptualize the knowledge this study produces? Future work should keep these important questions in mind, and continue to confront the whiteness that pervades game studies.

Linking decolonization, Indigenization, and Blackness with Post-colonialism. Game studies scholarship on Blackness and Indigeneity is largely disconnected from the more established study of post-coloniality in and around games. This may be because of perceived tensions between postcolonial and decolonial theory. Certainly, the postcolonial approach of identifying the trace of the colonizer or colonialist logic in the aftermath of the colonizers' exit could be seen as being in conflict with theories that center Indigenous sovereignty through decolonization. But, in fact, scholarship on decolonization and Indigenization doesn't suggest that these processes entirely eliminate or eject colonialist ideology and practices. That is to say, research pursuing decolonization tends to recognize the process is ongoing; that decolonization is not a task so quickly and completely accomplished. It is more likely that the periodization of decolonization processes and the postcolonial condition is the crucial factor; as the work of decolonization and Indigenization are prerequisite to the emergence of postcolonial conditions. In the North American context, Blackness is not (as far as we found) linked to coloniality outside of the historical context of the African diaspora in North America via the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Nevertheless, making explicit the linkages and disjunctures between these theories and approaches would be an asset to the larger project for social justice they contribute to.

Examine and interrogate community interventions. There have been multiple community interventions to diversify the games industry, such as organizations that provide marginalized individuals the opportunity to learn more about game-making software such as Unity through Code Coven, as well as organizations that engage with high-school age students to encourage a love and enjoyment of computer science as a creative tool, such as Girls Who Code. It is necessary to further study these organizations, their relationships with industry, and to what extent they challenge or reproduce the imperative to assimilate racialized and otherwise marginalized people to the norms of androgyny and white supremacy (Srauy, 2019). Alternatively, Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) has been hosting the Skins Workshops to introduce Indigenous youth to the tools and techniques of game design since 2006 (Lameman et al, 2010), Russworm's Radical Play Lab connects UCS games faculty and students with high-school students in the local community, and Gray's annual Camp Kiki introduces secondary school students to positive social influences through games and esports. While we might study the impact of these and other like efforts at community intervention, we also need to move, as a field, to recognize this kind of community engagement as a form of scholarly practice and creative making (and not the making of novel objects but of engaged political subjects).

Further non-trivial exploration of race and Intersectionality. Despite the body of work on the intersections of race, gender, and occasionally sexuality, there has been less focus on other dimensions of intersectionality, such as how class, caste, religion, age, disability, queerness etc. intersect with race. For example, the intersection of race and disability is rarely touched on in scholarship around race, and is usually a secondary or even tertiary focus when it is. For instance, Gray (2020) briefly discusses inclusive game design and the different accessibility issues that disabled players face in videogaming in chapter five of her book and Hutchinson (2017) briefly takes up race and disability in discussing blind Triad boss Wu Zi Mu in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. Sexuality and queerness are also not often combined with concerns around race, though Gray's (2018, 2020) work on Black lesbian gamers is cited in other scholarship on race and Brey's (2023) thesis on queer play of *Skyrim* focuses on how queering the game involves the performance of white, colonialist subjectivity. However, there is a notable dearth of research linking race and caste, religion, or age in game and gaming, though age, religion, and caste have been studied independent of race. Additionally, it is vital that future studies on intersectionality meaningfully interrogate how race and other social locations contribute to the representation and experiences of marginalized communities, players, and game makers. There is a real danger in superficial analysis that highlights intersectionality without careful consideration of how each social location is implicated.

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