

Chapter LIV

Can the Subaltern Play and Speak or Just be Played With?¹

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines and responds to the silencing, resistance to any intrusion of questions about race and racism, and overall erasure of race from the debates and broader discourse concerning video game culture. It not only provides insight into the nature and logics guiding claims of colorblindness, but also connects the ideologies and culture of denial to the broader racial discourse of post-civil rights America. Hoping to inspire debate and transformative knowledge sharing, this chapter additionally offers a textually-based racial analysis of Outlaw Volleyball as an example of the type of critical examination required to move beyond a culture that often reduces bodies and voices of people of color to objects of gaze, ridicule, and consumption while denying any sorts of criticism and questions regarding the racial meaning and texts evident within much of today's gaming.

INTRODUCTION²

Among some of my students, friends, and even neighbors, I have been known as the professor—the guy—who plays (studies) video games. It is not unusual for students and kids in the neighborhood to inquire about a particular console game, leaving me to wonder if I am a peddler of virtual reality. Although these exchanges often take place outside of a formalized educational setting, I try, as difficult as it is, to treat these encounters as teachable moments, challenging them to think about games as more than entertainment and as

not simply just a game, but rather cultural projects saturated with *racialized*, *gendered*, and *sexualized* meaning. Despite subtle resistance, evident in many of these instances, and the commonplace erasure of *race* from the overall discussions of video games, my focus on teaching and learning about contemporary racial discourses through examining video game culture guides these formalized and informal interactions. As a teacher and researcher of **race**, racism, and **stereotypes** I often wonder how I could not study video games, learning and teaching about some many of life's paradoxes and questions.

With this in mind, this chapter works to initiate a conversation about the denials that race matters within video game culture, reflecting on the broader implications of claims of colorblindness, while also offering a “how-to-do” example of racially-based (centered) textual analysis. The inclusion of a discussion of *Outlaw Volleyball* is not meant to provide a definitive picture of race and video games; nor do I claim it to be representative of the broader racial logics and ideologies that find their way into a spectrum games. It is most certainly extreme in nature, in terms of its construction of race, gender, and sexuality. Through this chapter, I argue that, despite assumptions otherwise rather than representing an aberration, the racial theories and representations animating from/within *Outlaw Volleyball* push mainstream formulations of race to their accepted, naturalized, and logical place within dominant discourse. Consequently, it is my attempt here to offer a critical reading of the representations, ideologies, and textual signifiers evident within this game not simply as an illustration of the racial meaning within this lone game, but as a means to bring into focus the power and importance of racial analysis within video game discourse. As part of both an effort to push conversations about race within video game culture and because of what this game (and the broader silence regarding race within video game culture) teaches us about the networks of racialized power in the 21st century, I use this space to reflect on the broader cultural silence in the face of a game such as this as well as the possibilities of an increased conversation about race and racial imagery among scholars, programmers, and players. Moreover, following a discussion that expounds on a post-civil rights or new racist discourse and the dialects between video game culture (production, reception, commentary) and broader societal forces, I use this space to demonstrate the importance of examining games in a way that moves beyond binaries and a focus on stereotypes/simple textual utterances toward analysis that situates images and repre-

sentations within a broader historical, cultural, and social context that reflects on ideologies, discourse, and power.

DENIAL AND ERASURE: VIDEO GAMES AND THE PROFESSION OF COLORBLINDNESS

In a recent online article, entitled “That’s Racist! The Unjust Crusade against Video Games,” *Chris Mottes* (2007), CEO at Deadline Games, lamented the supposed widespread criticisms directed at the video games industry regarding *racism* and *sexism*. He forcefully defended the industry, arguing that: “Members of the media often attack video games for being racist, sexist, mean-spirited, callous, unpleasant, insensitive, or just generally nasty. As a developer, I find most of these claims not only a touch insulting but also extremely tenuous, and in the majority of cases unfounded.” Rightly arguing that the majority of game critics have focused their attention on violence, (for discussion, see Gee, 2003, 2005; Jenkins; Leonard, 2003) as the basis of condemnation, he further claims that criticism regarding racial prejudice within gaming culture have become ubiquitous. Likewise, *Mottes* refutes these critiques, noting that, “Games with minority characters, and especially minority *stereotypes*—even tongue-in-cheek characters not meant to be offensive—are torn down by accusations of intolerance.” Arguing that a double standard exists, that other forms of “media receive significantly less criticism when they portray racist characters—even racist, morally questionable protagonists”, *Mottes* concludes that: “*Racism* is a terrible, awful thing; there is no doubt about that. And while games that are patently, intentionally racist do exist, most games with racist characters do not reflect the mindset of their developers.” His column, which sparked debates on a number of game Web sites, requires a certain amount of unpacking not simply to

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