

## **The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games**

Anna Everett

University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Film Studies

S. Craig Watkins

The University of Texas at Austin, Department of Radio-Television-Film

### **Introduction: Young People, Games, and Learning**

The growing presence of games in the lives of young people creates perils and possibilities. Games have been a constant source of criticism and alarm among parents, researchers, child advocacy groups, and elected officials. The potential harmful effects of gaming have been linked to society's understandable concerns about the increasingly sedentary lifestyles of youth and childhood obesity, addiction, gender socialization, poor academic performance, and aggressive behavior.<sup>1</sup> An area of growing concern is the role of games in the learning experiences and environments of youth.<sup>2</sup>

While there is growing consensus that learning takes place in games, the question we ask is: "What kinds of learning?" In this chapter we shift the focus on youth, learning, and video games generally to consider the extremely significant but often overlooked matter of race. Specifically, we address the following question: In what ways do young people's interactions with video games influence how and what they learn about race? We present a critical framework for thinking about how popular game titles and the professionals who design them reflect, influence, reproduce, and thereby teach dominant ideas about race in America. Engaging with an assortment of media—books, animation, television, home video, video games, and the Internet—children as young as three years old develop schemas and scripts for negotiating perceived racial differences.<sup>3</sup> Research suggests that by the time children are five years old they have already started to develop strong ideas about race and difference. Historically, the popular media examined in this context have been television.<sup>4</sup>

In their discussion of the role television plays in the multicultural awareness and racial attitudes of children and adolescents, Gordon L. Berry and Joy Keiko Asamen write that "fact or fiction, real or unreal, television programs create cognitive and affective environments that describe and portray people, places, and things that carry profound general and specific cross-cultural learning experiences" for young people growing up in a media-saturated culture.<sup>5</sup> As digital media forms like video games compete with television for the time and attention of young media users, researchers must examine rigorously how the shift to digital and more interactive forms of media influences how and what young people learn about race.

We, therefore, direct these questions and issues toward video games to increase our understanding of the rapidly evolving ways in which young people are exposed to and learn

---

The authors would like to thank Katie Salen for carefully reading earlier drafts of this chapter and offering both her academic expertise and generous thoughts that helped to refine the structure of the chapter and our argument.

racial narratives, representations, and belief systems. Parents and critics readily discuss the potential negative social outcomes associated with exposing young people to violent or sexual content in video games. But, as Anna Everett has asked elsewhere, “‘When and where does the racial problematic enter in contemporary culture’s moral panics about gaming’s potential dangers?’ Society’s moral outrage over video game culture’s gender troubles (to borrow Judith Butler’s fecund phrase), especially its sexist and misogynistic constructs of women and girls, has not found a parallel in terms of race.” This leads us to ask, “What are the consequences of exposing youth to content that renders racist representations, beliefs, and attitudes playable and pleasurable?”<sup>6</sup>

The chapter sets out to demarcate some of the specific ways in which race resonates throughout the culture and industry of video games. We begin by examining the design of one of the most heavily marketed categories in the video games marketplace, what we call “urban/street” games. Specifically, we consider how these games, and the richly detailed and textured urban landscapes they present, establish powerful learning environments that help situate how young gamers understand, perform, and reproduce race and ethnicity. Next, we focus on the aesthetic and narrative properties of one of the most controversial yet successful video games franchises in America, *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)*. More precisely, we consider how *GTA* teaches dominant attitudes and assumptions about race and racial otherness through what we term “racialized pedagogical zones” (RPZs). In other words, these games draw heavily from racist discourses already circulating in popular and mainstream culture and arguably intensify these messages and lessons of racial difference through the power and allure of interactive gameplay. Essentially, we argue that by striving to locate players in what are often promoted as graphically real and culturally “authentic” environments, urban/street games produce some of the most powerful, persistent, and problematic lessons about race in American culture.

In the final section of the chapter, we shift from discussing race as representation, simulation, and pedagogy to considering race as an important dimension in the ongoing but steadily evolving public conversation regarding the digital divide. Here, we advocate expanding the discussion of race and video games to include concerns about access to and participation in digital media culture, communities, and user-generated content.

### Learning Race

Recent theories on digital games and learning argue that games represent a dynamic learning environment.<sup>7</sup> Marc Prensky has argued that games encourage learning and challenge the established conventions in more formal spaces of learning, such as in schools. He notes, for instance, that games demand parallel versus linear processing. Additionally, Prensky maintains that games promote problem solving in the form of play versus work.

Similarly, James Paul Gee believes that games offer good learning principles. For Gee the genius of games is their ability to balance the delivery of overt information and guidance (think of the manual that offers instructions for a game) with “immersion in actual context of practice” (think of the process of trial and error that is involved in mastering a game). Games, unlike conventional schooling, effectively combine “telling and doing.” Good video games, Gee notes, require gamers to “learn from the bottom up” and master the technical and logical aspects of games.<sup>8</sup> This, he argues, is accomplished via experimentation, exploration, and engagement. What games ultimately accomplish, according to both Prensky and Gee, is the creation of environments in which active (doing) rather than passive (telling) learning

takes place. It is this aspect of video gaming—the act of doing—and its implication for both learning and performing race that we address here.

Still, while advocates of video games as learning spaces argue that they provide a new means to engage young people by producing rich educational experiences, we would like to caution that not all forms of learning that take place in the immersive world of video and computer games are socially productive. Thus, we ask a slightly different set of questions regarding video games as learning tools, namely, “Can video games facilitate learning that is anti-social?” Put another way, “Do the entertainment and interactive aspects of video gaming reproduce common-sense ideas about race and gender?” Ideas, that is, which can enliven long-standing and problematic notions of racial difference and deviance.

### Portraying Race

At least some of the absence of discussions of race in public and policy dialogues about video games can be attributed to the fact that the use of racially marked characters, themes, and environments, historically speaking, is a relatively recent development in video games. That is not to say that video games, even during the earliest periods of development, were necessarily race neutral but rather that efforts to build explicitly raced characters and worlds were limited by the styles of games being produced, screen resolution (4-, 8-, and 16-bit), and processing speeds. Indeed, as Steven Poole maintains, the early attempt to design characters for video games was limited by technology.<sup>9</sup> “In the early days of video games,” Poole writes, “technological considerations more or less forced designers into exactly the same style.”<sup>10</sup> That style typically led to one-dimensional blocky characters such as *PacMan* that lacked few, if any, truly distinguishing features or marks.

The first, and most famous, humanoid character in a video game was the moustached hero, Mario. Poole notes that because of the low resolution offered at the time, character designers had a limited number of pixels to play with. That period, described by Japanese game designer Shigeru Miyamoto as the days of “immature technology,” imposed certain technological constraints on both game design and representation.<sup>11</sup> But as the rendering power of video game engines evolved, artists and designers benefited from the ability to produce characters who were more lifelike in appearance and motion. Whereas the ethnically marked features of Mario, the Italian plumber, were limited primarily to relatively innocuous phrases like, “it’s-a me, Mario” or, later, his love of pasta and pizza, games like *GTA: Vice City*, and *Godfather: The Game* benefit from enhanced technology and software that portrays the markers of race and ethnicity—skin color, gestures, voice, music, and setting—in a much more explicit and powerful manner.

Though technological changes have opened the way for upgraded representational depictions, and a more diverse range of themes and characters, the portrayal of race in video games remains remarkably narrow. In an examination of racial diversity in the top-selling console and computer games, an important study by the Children Now organization concluded that black and Latino characters were often restricted to athletic, violent, and victim roles, or rendered entirely invisible.<sup>12</sup> Since that report, the state of race in games has, paradoxically, changed and stayed the same due, in part, to the rise of “urban/street” games. The arrival of this generic category has led to a discernible growth in the number of black and Latino-based characters and themes in some of the most heavily marketed games. But urban/street games also reproduce many of the representational problems identified by Children Now.

Games within the urban/street category cut across a variety of genres: for example, third-person action/shooter games like hip-hop star *50 Cent's Bulletproof*, action/adventure titles like *Saints Row*, sports games like *NFL Street 3* and *NBA Ballers: Phenom*, fighter games like *Def Jam: The Fight for NY*, and racing games like *Midnight Club 3: Dub Edition Remix*. Despite the range of genres represented, the games tend to share similar types of characters, narratives, environments, and gameplay elements. For instance, earning street credibility or respect is a recurrent theme across these games as is the emphasis on building and playing hyper-masculine characters who use street slang and aggressive behavior to navigate the urban world boldly and effectively. More importantly, they demonstrate the degree to which game developers are moving toward recreating culturally specific and racialized environments that are packaged and marketed as authentic expressions of the social world. Significantly, these games, and particularly their questionable claims of authenticity, establish compelling learning environments that help facilitate how young gamers develop their knowledge of and familiarity with popular views of race and urban culture.

### Can You Feel It? Simulating Blackness

The successful development and marketing of urban/street games is based on the idea that these titles represent culturally authentic spaces. Claims of authenticity in the sphere of cultural production are, of course, always fraught with tensions. As we explain in great detail below, the aspects of urban/street gaming that are often presented as authentic—the characters, environments, music, and language, just to name a few—are, in reality, deliberately selected symbolic materials that draw much of their appeal and believability from representations of urban life in other popular media cultures.

Like the gaming landscape in general, the evolution of urban/street games is shaped by an increasing emphasis on photorealistic environmental designs, recognizable stories/plots, compelling character ensembles, and dramatic action sequences that work to achieve greater verisimilitude in overall gameplay design and presentation. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska maintain that “the history of video games is one that has been dominated, on one level, by investments in increasing realism, at the level of graphical representation and allied effects.”<sup>13</sup>

But the commitment to designing games that are more realistic points to the need not only to capture more honest character portrayals, human motion, and environments, but also and perhaps more importantly, to capture the cultural sensibilities of a particular racial or ethnic group's world experience. This aspect of a video game's design is a constant selling point in the marketing positions staked out by some of the video game industry's most prominent players. For instance, in its promise to offer sports game enthusiasts a powerful and engaging gameplay experience, Electronic Arts' (EA) tagline asks, “Can You Feel It?” Likewise, Microsoft's Xbox 360 invites gamers to “jump in” to their online gaming world. And Sony PlayStation encourages gamers to “live in your world, play in ours.” In games studies, the idea of creating a world that feels real is referred to as “presence” or a “sense of being there.”<sup>14</sup> This represents the degree to which developers strive to create gaming environments that deepen the sense of engagement in the game world through simulation, leading to what some argue is a richer sensory experience.

Part of achieving a believable simulation includes maintaining fidelity to what we already know or expect from a specific world and those who are likely to people it. Consequently, the design of gaming environments that look, sound, and feel real is critical in order to

achieve high degrees of “perceptual” and “social” realism. The former refers to how closely the characters, environments, objects, and other in-game elements match popular perceptions of urban street life and culture. The latter refers to the extent to which the events and activities in a video game resonate with those in the real world. The quest by the designers of urban/street games to immerse gamers in culturally specific or authentic spaces also offers insight into the ways in which these games become powerful learning environments that construct informal yet effective spaces for teaching, or in many instances, reproducing particular ideas about race, ethnicity, and difference. More significantly, if video games portraying urban life and culture are perceived as authentic, then they become effective and, in many cases, uncontested devices for transmitting certain kinds of ideas about race, geography, and culture. For example, Children Now asks game developers to “think about the messages they deliver to youth when characters of color often are found at the business end of a fist, club, or gun or competing in a sports arena.”<sup>15</sup>

What makes urban/street games feel “authentic?” More precisely, what is it about these titles that enables gamers to experience presence, a sense of urban culture? First, many of the titles in this category feature a rarity in entertainment games: visually recognizable black lead characters. Children Now’s analysis of the ten top-selling games for each of the six video game consoles available in the United States found that the characters populating the virtual world of video games at the time were predominantly white.<sup>16</sup> White males, for example, represented 52 percent of the male player-controlled characters compared to 37 percent for black males and 5 percent and 3 percent, respectively, for Latinos and Asians. According to the report, when black and Latino characters did appear in video games, it was often as supporting rather than lead characters and oftentimes in stereotypical roles (i.e., athletes, urban outlaws, violent offenders, etc.). Unlike the bulk of commercial video games, black and Latino characters appear throughout urban/street games both as primary and secondary characters, thus establishing the genre as a gaming space distinct in its representational focus.

In his discussion of *True Crime: Streets of LA*, Chan notes that while the game offers a first in a North American designed game—a Chinese antagonist—the game’s digital cast of characters and setting reinscribe popular notions of racial otherness and exotica.<sup>17</sup> In addition to the representation of racially marked spaces like Chinatown, Chan notes that the game’s Asian American central character and the use of neo-Orientalist motifs demonstrate “how racial difference may be simultaneously fetishized and demonized, and how hegemonic whiteness is positioned as the taken for granted racial norm in game-world environments.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the hypervisibility of black and Latino characters, the environments in urban/street games are marked as racially specific story-worlds. Above, we suggested that the first humanoid character, Mario, did not bear many explicitly recognizable racial markers besides white skin. This also holds true for the game environment in the first game in which Mario appeared, *Donkey Kong*. Gameplay typically took place in brightly lit fun spaces, or an occasional dimly lit place that signified heightened danger. Rarely, however, did these game environments evoke racial and/or culturally specific spaces like an urban ghetto *Saint’s Row* or an elite boarding school as in *Bully*. As designers strive for greater cultural authenticity, the spatial environment itself, where the characters live, play, fight, and compete, also becomes a culturally specific location that animates ideas about race, class, and gender.

The elaborately textured environments in urban/street games feature a wide range of objects associated with socially and economically marginalized communities. *NBA Street Volume 2*, for example, uses digitized photos from many urban playgrounds around the country, including Harlem’s legendary Rucker Park and Oakland’s Mosswood. In Mark Ecko’s

*Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure*, several of the game's key action sequences take place in dark underground subways where graffiti artists once "tagged" their way to local fame. Other objects typically appearing in these video games include graffiti-covered buildings, dilapidated housing, trash-filled streets, candy-painted low riders (customized cars), and background characters engaged in petty crimes, drug deals, and prostitution. The selection of these objects works ideologically to invigorate dominant ideas that construct poor urban communities as deviant, different, and dangerous.

EA hired urban street artist Bua as a consultant and artist for *NFL Street*. His work, along with the work of other hand-selected street artists, was incorporated not only to give the game an "urban feel," but also to provide credibility among young gamers as an authentic engagement with urban culture. The environments in urban/street games are not only racially coded as black and brown spaces, they are also built to simulate dangerous and exotic spaces. Many of these video games take players into the center of illegal street activities, drug-infested neighborhoods, street gangs, and rampant gun violence. In instances like these, game design labors to simulate an authentic environment in order to deliver a more compelling gaming experience.

Along with immersing players in a world that *looks* urban, designers of urban/street games also strive to immerse players in a world that *sounds* urban. In many urban/street action and shooter games, police and emergency vehicle sirens, rounds of gunfire, and screeching tires from drive-by shootings, and other ambient noises, establish—via sound design—a place and mood. As the games have grown more cinematic in tone and style, developers have also employed carefully selected voice actors. The makers of *Saint's Row* worked with street gang members to help script dialogue and gang-related slang. Hip-hop-based sound tracks are pervasive, and it has become common practice among developers to hire hip-hop producers and performers to select music that evokes the ethos and energy of urban ghetto life. In many ways, the rise of urban/street games illustrates how hip-hop has influenced young people's media and cultural environment by projecting meticulously packaged images of "urban realism" into a media mix that includes video games, film, music, and other sources of entertainment.

The design of urban/games is a vital aspect of how learning takes place. But equally important are the repertoires of cultural knowledge that players bring to their gaming experiences. In other words, whatever forms of learning that take place in video games happens not only because of meticulous game design elements, but also because of the social schemas, scripts, and beliefs players develop from the larger cultural and ideological environment.

### Learning to Reproduce Race

Learning in urban/street games is based on multiple competencies—technical and cultural. In his argument explaining what games can teach us about learning, Gee emphasizes the technical aspects of the learning process in games. The technical aspects involve learning how to navigate and, eventually, master the challenges and obstacles that structure the gameplay experience. Indeed, the open mode design of many urban/street games demands that players progressively build their technical mastery by "adapting and transferring earlier experiences to solve new problems."<sup>19</sup> But mastery of urban/street games also requires a great degree of cultural competency and knowledge. In this case, we are referring to the familiarity with certain racial themes, logics, and commonsense ideologies that make urban/street gaming a resonant, entertaining, and, ultimately, powerful learning experience. Part of the payoff in

urban/street gaming, that sense of accomplishment and immediate reward gaming provides, is understanding, though not necessarily subscribing to, the racial cues, assumptions, and sensibilities embedded in these games. For instance, if urban/street gamers are already predisposed to believe that “authentic” poor urban neighborhoods are violent and drug-infested, then these games go a long way in confirming those views.

The selling and marketing of urban culture is premised on notions of difference that, ultimately, reproduce rather than contest racial hierarchies. Discussing this very fact, S. Craig Watkins writes that “certain types of representations of blackness are more likely to be merchandised, not because they are necessarily real but rather because they fit neatly with the prevailing commonsense characterizations of black life.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, hip-hop-oriented video games, like other hip-hop-oriented media, establish the ideas, values, and behavioral scripts that facilitate how young media users make sense of blackness.

Urban/street games rely on subject matter and gameplay elements that construct authentic urban culture as ultraviolent, hypersexual, exotic, and a repository of dangerous and illegal activity. The content descriptors for urban/street games support this representation. *Def Jam: Fight for NY* and *True Crime: New York City* carry descriptors like “blood and gore,” “realistic violence,” and “suggestive themes.” *Def Jam Vendetta*, a game rated T for teenagers, contains “strong language,” “strong lyrics,” and “suggestive themes.” Mature (M) rated titles, *GTA: San Andreas* and *Saint’s Row*, add descriptors like “strong sexual content” and “use of drugs and alcohol.” These descriptors not only describe games; they also illuminate the narrative and thematic conditions under which black and brown bodies, cultures, spaces, and styles are simulated and rendered visible in the world of video games.

These narrative and thematic conditions are visible in sports-themed video games that also simulate black urban bodies, culture, spaces, and styles. Titles like *NFL Street 3* and *NBA Ballers Phenom* bring urban/street gaming to the sports category in video games. According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), sports titles (17 percent) were second only to action games (30 percent) in terms of market share in 2005. Overall, seven of the twenty top-selling games belonged in the sports genre. In 2000, a new generation of sports games entered this highly competitive niche with EA release of *NBA Street*. The publishing giant marketed *NBA Street* as an extreme sports game complete with state-of-the-art graphics, over-the-top character animation, and street-tough attitude. Shortly after developing *NBA Street*, EA released *NFL Street*, a football video game that looked to create characters, sounds, and environments that simulated an urban culture that was familiar to young media audiences.

Unlike previous sports titles, however, this new generation of video games had little interest in simulating the strategic and tactical aspects of basketball and football. Rather, like many of the urban/street games discussed previously, the cultural and lifestyle aspects of the modern sports world came to the fore. *NBA Ballers*, for example, represents a digital articulation of the classic “hoop dream” phenomenon that teaches many poor and working-class black boys that athletic celebrity, despite impossible odds, is an attainable goal.<sup>21</sup> One of the primary incentives for mastering the different challenges and sequences in *NBA Ballers* is to acquire status conferring symbols that include, among other things, palatial homes, luxurious cars, expensive jewelry, designer clothing, and, most problematically, women. The pursuit of these goals establishes a seductive learning environment, one that enlivens hegemonic notions of black masculinity and urban social mobility. For many young black males the power and pervasiveness of these representations can often skew their values and thus profoundly influence the lifestyle choices and behaviors that impact their life chances.

In addition to privileging hegemonic ideas about race, urban/street games privilege hegemonic ideas about gender. In their analysis of the top-sixty selling console and computer games, Children Now's gender results are instructive. Not surprisingly, they found that video games are an overwhelmingly male-dominated universe. Of the 1,716 characters identified in the study, 64 percent were male, 19 percent nonhuman, and 17 percent female. The racial dimensions of the gender patterns are equally revealing. More than two-thirds of the female player-controlled characters, 78 percent, were white. African Americans made up 10 percent of the female player-controlled characters, whereas Asian and Native American women constituted 7 percent and 1 percent, respectively. Not one of the 874 player-controlled characters in the study was identified as Latina. The characterization of women in urban/street games is also consistent with another Children Now's finding. "African American females," Children Now reports "were far more likely than any other group to be victims of violence."<sup>22</sup> Many titles from the urban/street category resist some of the notable changes that have labored to make the video games industry more receptive to women.

Whereas the industry, historically, has relegated women to the periphery, there has been a movement to make games much more gender-inclusive.<sup>23</sup> But whereas recent game protagonists like Lara Croft and Jade (*Beyond Good and Evil*) break away from some of the strict gender norms of games, the heavily marketed urban/street games in which black women and Latinas are likely to appear are much more restrictive.

In games like *GTA: San Andreas*, *Def Jam Vendetta*, and *Saint's Row*, women remain marginal and generally figure as props, bystanders, eye candy, and prizes to be won by the male protagonists. Like other background visual elements—street signs, graffiti art, cars, buildings—women are presented as accessories and used to enhance the presentation of the environment, not the core action. The fact that black women and Latinas are also portrayed quite casually as sexually available bystanders in fighter games like *Def Jam Vendetta* and as street-walking prostitutes in action/adventure/shooter games like *GTA: Vice City* reinforces lessons about race and sexuality, especially the sexual mores, appetites, and behaviors of women marginalized by race and ethnicity.

What makes these elements in urban/street games prominent sites and sources of learning? First, urban/street games represent the first concerted effort by developers of entertainment-based video games to create characters and worlds that presumably draw from black American life. Moreover, the developers of these games hire artists, music producers and performers, voice actors, and highly skilled designers to build worlds that resonate with popular perceptions of urban culture. Ultimately, these video games bring the popular notions of blackness circulating in the cultural environment to the world of video games and interactive media. This enables young game players not only to experience powerfully rendered representations of urban culture but also to immerse themselves in environments that encourage active ways of playing with and learning about race. Urban/street gaming does more than present urban life in photorealistic ways or immerse gamers in racially designed environments. These titles also establish dynamic environments for performing race and gender.

### Digital Minstrelsy: Doing and Learning Race in the Urban Game World

In his assessment of urban/street games, Adam Clayton Powell III characterizes them as "high-tech blackface."<sup>24</sup> David J. Leonard has also explored the notion of digital minstrelsy in games.<sup>25</sup> The idea that games constitute a form of minstrelsy compels us to think carefully about how learning about race takes place in video games. Powell and Leonard note that

the articulation of the minstrel tradition, for example, is visible in the digitally manipulated black caricatures that populate urban/street themed games—distorted body types and facial features, clothing, voice acting, and over-the-top behaviors and movements that reflect a design ethos that mobilizes certain notions of blackness for popular consumption.

As we have seen, in the action/shooter variety of urban/street gaming, blacks and Latinos are portrayed as brutally violent, casually criminal, and sexually promiscuous. Blacks are typically characterized as verbally aggressive<sup>26</sup> and extraordinarily muscular and athletic<sup>27</sup> in sports action games. Minstrelsy, from this perspective, refers to how blackness is configured as a racialized body (albeit virtual) and commodity. Our focus, however, is on gameplay and what we believe is another manifestation of minstrelsy in gaming—performance. How, we ask, do urban/street games establish a powerful learning environment for not only *portraying* but also *performing* race in the form of blackface?

Many historians of minstrelsy allude to the complex social and psychological aspects of the tradition, the fact that it embodied whites' fear of and fascination with black bodies, what Eric Lott calls racial insult and racial envy.<sup>28</sup> At its most basic level, historians note, minstrelsy became a means for white men to occupy and play out fantasized notions of black masculinity, but in ways that were entertaining, nonthreatening, and committed to sustaining racial hierarchies. The same dynamics, in many respects, are at play in the case of urban/street gaming.

In this context of play and entertainment, distorted notions of blackness are rendered consumable and desirable, playable and accessible for young gamers. Referring to the growing inventory of urban/street-based sports titles, Leonard writes, "the desire to 'be black' because of the stereotypical visions of strength, athleticism, power and sexual potency all play out within the virtual reality of sports games."<sup>29</sup> In the immersive environment of urban/street gaming, young people not only interact with photorealistic environments, they also have the opportunity to interact with and perform fantasy-driven notions of black masculinity. Hence, when we talk about young people and video games marketed as authentic depictions of urban culture, the performative and interactive aspects of video games facilitate learning race by "doing" race. Video games represent another distinct development in young people's rapidly evolving media environment: the movement of racial image production into the terrain of "new media."

While the term *new media* should be used cautiously, it is often deployed to refer to technologically mediated conditions like interactivity, convergence, genre hybridity, and nonlinearity.<sup>30</sup> Take, for example, the shift from portraying blackness on television (the equivalent of telling about race) to performing blackness in video games (the equivalent of doing race). Historically, critical media scholars have examined how television projects racial imagery and narratives. In one of the most productive analyses of race, representation, and television, Herman Gray carefully explores how the textual, narrative, and aesthetic properties of television facilitate how we "watch race."<sup>31</sup>

Video games, however, have a way of allowing players not only to watch the action, but to participate in and drive the action. Consequently, in the context of video games, players are not only watching race; they are also performing and, as a result, (re)producing socially prescribed and technologically mediated notions of race. The rise of digital media culture demands that we modify "old media" derived terms like audience and text.<sup>32</sup> Audience, for instance, conjures up the image of someone who is positioned primarily to receive a one-way source of narrative/information transmission passively. But in video games, *players* supplant audiences and imply a much more dynamic engagement with media. Similarly, text can

suggest that narrative and representational forms are static, fixed, and redundant. The scenes in a favorite television program or classic film never change. But in video games, the process of narration and representation is dynamic, contingent, and variable. Video games respond to player choice; as a result, it is possible—and even likely—to have a different experience with a game each time you play it.

No title epitomizes urban/street gaming more spectacularly or problematically than the *GTA* franchise. Like many of the urban/street games, this franchise is populated by a host of black and Latino characters, located in culturally specific and photorealistic environments, and purports to immerse gamers in authentic black and brown urban spaces. The bold and imaginative gameplay elements in *GTA: San Andreas*, for example, greatly expanded the technical and representational parameters for urban/street gaming, as well as the means by which blackness and Latinoness are rendered playable, pleasurable, and knowable in the burgeoning world of video games.

### Understanding Race and Ethnicity in Games' Racialized Pedagogical Zones (RPZs)

Haitians have been protesting *GTA*, calling it racist. Funny, but I thought Haitians were a nationality, not a race. Besides, the game portrays everyone negatively regardless of race, ethnicity, and so forth. I mean, "HELLO, ITS CALLED GRAND THEFT AUTO!!!"  
—Paul Gonza

Please bear in mind that I'm a huge fan . . . Sure the game portrays everyone negatively. But Haitians are the only nationality being explicitly referred to in the game . . . The statement . . . "Kill all the Haitians"—could be replaced with, say the name of that Haitian gang, in which case probably no one would have raised an eyebrow . . . There is a big difference between reading about killing members of a group or culture, or watching a movie portraying slaughter of said group, and actually doing the slaughtering in a game.  
—Nickelplate

To explore the racial discourse in the *GTA* game franchise, we want to propose a consideration of what we term the games' racialized pedagogical zones. RPZs refer to the way that video games *teach* not only entrenched ideologies of race and racism, but also how gameplay's pleasure principles of mastery, winning, and skills development are often inextricably tied to and defined by familiar racial and ethnic stereotypes. In working through these ideas, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's<sup>33</sup> influential work on the rules and subsequent meanings of gameplay is quite instructive, especially their fitting return to Johan Huizinga's<sup>34</sup> key metaphors of childhood play: the "playground" and the "magic circle." Following Salen and Zimmerman, we see Huizinga's powerful metaphors of childhood play and rules as productive for analyzing ways that contemporary game designers and players/users often reflect, rehearse, reenact, and reaffirm culturally familiar and highly problematic discourses of race in gaming space. It is Salen and Zimmerman's own articulation of games' "framing systems" that addresses more precisely the present discussion. On the matter of games' cultural connotations, and formal systems of play, and utilizing the game of *Chess* as one exemplar, they write:

[T]he system of play is embedded in the cultural framing of the game. . . . For example, answering a cultural question, regarding the politics of racial representation would have to include an understanding of the formal way the core rules of the game reference color. What does it mean that white always moves first? Similarly, when you are designing a game you are not designing just a set of rules, but a set of rules that will *always* be experienced as play within a cultural context. As a result, you will *never* have the luxury of completely forgetting about context when you are focusing on experience, or on experience

and culture when you're focusing on the game's formal structure. . . . it is important to remember that a game's formal, experiential, and cultural qualities *always* exist as integrated phenomena [emphasis added].<sup>35</sup>

The cultural framing of the *GTA* games within hegemonic or dominant structures of race and class systems is exactly what this study evaluates through a formulation of the *GTA* trilogy's RPZs. More specifically, *GTA* game designers and players understand, expect, and desire these games' formal structures to participate in our culture's "integrated phenomena" of urban crime literature, films, and TV shows, hip-hop and other musical idioms, street fashion/costuming, slang and profane speech/dialogue, and hyperviolent as well as hypersexual activities. Rather than bracketing the real world's racist logics or subverting them through the artificial construct of the game world, "[for] better or for worse, kids use video and computer games as a filter through which to understand their lives" and the role of race therein.<sup>36</sup>

### Mapping RPZs in *GTA* Games

This interrogation of race in the production and consumption of gaming poses a challenge to our collective understanding of video games as powerful, next-generation learning tools increasingly celebrated for being easy and pleasurable lead-ins to computer literacy and advanced placement in colleges and universities.<sup>37</sup> This analysis is about seeing how they also can be equally pleasurable tools for teaching racism and other modes of social intolerance. In mapping some pertinent contours of RPZs in the *GTA* games, we easily recognize familiar discourses of race and racial stereotypes from print, film, TV, radio, music, and other cultural productions at play within *GTA*'s video game spaces.

We have seen that the portrayal of race is embodied in many aspects of a video game's design, from its visual and audio stylings to the world space, narrative context, and play mechanics. Similarly, RPZs emerge from a range of intersecting features. In the *GTA* series, for example, RPZs are established through (a) its hyperviolent genre norms—a hybrid first-person shooter and adventure game; (b) its aesthetics and formal structures—realism, cinematic look, and function (especially the cut scenes)—and its hip-hop music and other youth culture influences; (c) its narrative structures: open-ended and mission driven; (d) its settings: urban locales, ghetto environments; (e) its dialogue: street and ethnic slang, thug and gangster-speak; (f) its star discourses: racially and ethnically diverse celebrities from the film, TV, and music industries; and (g) its marketing iconographies online and in print.

The significance of this tentative schematic is to locate precisely where we can expect to encounter, interact with, and indeed learn the RPZs in the *GTA* trilogy's carefully crafted and "incredibly immersive" game worlds. As Marc Prensky points out, a most effective game technique for transmitting contextual information is immersion. "It seems that the more one feels one is actually 'in' a culture," he elaborates further, "the more one learns from it—especially non-consciously . . . Kids will learn whatever messages are in the game."<sup>38</sup> The veracity of this observation will be supported by some gamers' postings to online game fora, excerpted below.

We should note briefly several obvious film and TV crime genre markers that contextualize and render race in the series meaningful and intelligible: for example, the 1970s and 1980s Italian mafia films—*Scarface*, *Goodfellas*, and the *Godfather* series; the 1990s black 'hood films—*Menace II Society*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, *New Jack City*, among others; and the 1980s-era procedural crime dramas par excellence the *Miami Vice* TV series. Each became the

standard after which the *GTA* games were modeled. In terms of aesthetics, we call attention to the games' interactive functions that mimic cinema's moving camera perspectives, mise-en-scène constructions, gangster and other underworld costumes, pervasive semiautomatic assault weapons, drug and alcohol paraphernalia, and voyeuristic strip club settings. All this is coupled with the games' reliance on recognizable celebrities who are cast as the central character voices in the *GTA* games. Indeed, the actual voices of film and music stars Ray Liotta, Samuel Jackson, Dennis Hopper, Burt Reynolds, Phillip Michael Thomas, Deborah Harry, James Woods, Ice-T, George Clinton, Louis Guzman, and others enliven the dialogue in the games' crucial mini-filmlike scripted sections or "cut scenes" as they are more familiarly known. It is within the games' effective and affective remediation of these already meaningful cinematic and televisual conventions that we find *GTA*'s RPZs.<sup>39</sup>

### RPZs in *GTA: San Andreas* and *Bully*, Toward a Discourse Analysis

It is telling that as the controversy surrounding Rockstar Games' "Hot Coffee" bonus segment (an encrypted pornographic cut scene in the *GTA: San Andreas* game) waned, the company released a sort of mea-culpa game entitled *Bully* in late October 2006. *New York Times* columnist Seth Schiesel described the game as "a whimsical boarding-school romp."<sup>40</sup> Based on screen grabs from Rockstar Games' *Bully* Web site (in advance of the game's release), the game trailers, the preliminary game description, and other information provided by Schiesel, and gameplay observations prior to and shortly after the game's release, this game represents an important corollary to our consideration of RPZs in the *GTA* series.<sup>41</sup> As a result of *Bully*'s setting in an upscale environment denoting white privilege and nonlethal juvenile pranks, the game arguably provides certain counternarratives and iconic visuals representing racial difference and otherness unavailable in the highly controversial *GTA* games. For example, *GTA* games seem to reproduce dominant messages about the rampant dangers of black urban/street life, and *Bully* simultaneously contests and affirms social ideas about race and ethnicity through its rendering of abusive teen life in an affluent school not restricted to an urban setting. Although it is interesting that some of *Bully*'s outdoor settings suggest an urban feel, its sprinkling of black and white athlete characters, who are bullies, complicate somewhat notions of the two games' essential racial discourses (figures 1 and 2).

Comparing the representational economies of race and difference in *GTA: San Andreas* and in *Bully*, it becomes clear that meaningful play in these games is predicated on Rockstar Games' appropriation of mainstream cinematic and televisual taxonomies of contemporary youth cultures and their specific environmental dangers. The urban 'hood versus the upscale prep school setting clearly demarcates relative zones of danger triggered by gamers' racialized points of reference, real-life experiences, peer group composition, and degrees of actual interracial contact and interaction on all sides of the racial-ethnic divides. Coupled with these powerful, photorealistic digital renderings of socially constructed environmental spaces and neighborhood dangers are equally compelling representations of dangerous game characters, and racially situated narratives or gameplay missions.

While a one-to-one comparison of RPZs in *Bully* and *GTA* games is beyond the scope of this study, several screen shots provide useful—if limited—points of contrast between the varied depictions of violence in black and white contexts as imaged by the company's game designers. Regardless of the company's rationale and timing for introducing *Bully* (on the heels of the June 14, 2006, Senate hearings on sexuality and violence in *GTA: San Andreas*), the fact remains that these comparable constructions of masculine power and action convey



Figure 1  
Screen shot from *GTA: San Andreas*—Digital Boyz-N-the San Andreas Hood.



Figure 2  
Screen shot from *Bully*—Menacing Digital Bullies in the Bully Schoolroom.



**Figure 3**

CJ, the *GTA: San Andreas* game's star avatar.



**Figure 4**

Jimmy Hopkins, star of *Bully*.

incomparable messages about the game characters' use of their powerful actions. Both games present an antihero lead character playing through a series of missions. For gamers playing as Carl "CJ" Johnson (figure 4),

*GTA: San Andreas* provides big guns and bigger firepower to effect drive-bys and targeted shootings in the 'hood. Conversely, for gamers playing as Jimmy Hopkins (figure 5), *Bully* provides big CO<sub>2</sub> canisters to extinguish even bigger fires in the school. Nothing about these two RPZs contests dominant culture's socially constructed messages/lessons about race, masculinity, and class in America. Instead, everything about CJ, *GTA's* black protagonist, conforms to America's hyperviolent and superpredator black male stereotypes, and the racially codified violence that defines success in the gameplay missions undertaken throughout the virtual ghetto environment. Similarly, Jimmy Hopkins, *Bully's* white protagonist, comports with our stereotypical expectations about white males' moral superiority and demonstrations of social responsibility even though "he's been expelled from every school he's ever

attended, left to fend for himself after his mother abandons him at Bullworth to go on her fifth honeymoon."<sup>42</sup>

One professional review of *Bully* posted on YouTube characterizes the game's narrative departure from the *GTA* games rather adeptly. According to RockstarAl:

The story is nowhere near as raunchy as any of the *Grand Theft Auto* games and ends up playing out like a slightly scandalous Nickelodeon cartoon. There is little to no swearing and the violence only adds up to a few black eyes here and there. But there's still plenty of laughs to be had from the conniving and emotionally imbalanced characters Rockstar writes so well.<sup>43</sup>

Contrast *Bully's* rather benign story description to its *GTA* counterpart, also on YouTube. In a review entitled "The History of *Grand Theft Auto*," the game world and gameplay are defined as amoral and forbidden digital spaces of danger and hyperviolent performance:

These missions would take you all over the city and varied from simple taxi jobs to assassinations and even car theft rings. A big part of the fun was exploring each city and finding the secret missions to do, or just causing general mayhem while eluding the police and using weapons like machine guns, rocket launchers, and flame throwers ("The History of *Grand Theft Auto*").<sup>44</sup>

As these game reviews make clear, on the one hand, *GTA: San Andreas* positions CJ as a digital simulation trading on the cinematic tropes of the endangered, as well as dangerous, black male protagonists delineated in John Singleton's 1991 film *Boyz N the Hood* and the 1993 Hughes brothers' film *Menace II Society* (outlined above), or the *de rigueur* menacing black youths who dominate newspaper headlines, TV and radio news shows, and other mainstream media texts. On the other hand, Jimmy Hopkins is Rockstar Games' innovative digital persona simulating a troubled-yet-heroic white teenager verging on juvenile delinquency, whose cinematic alter ego could easily have been expelled from the privileged schoolyard of the wildly popular *Harry Potter* films, or TV's charmingly angst-driven coming-of-age narratives found in *The Wonder Years* and *Boy Meets World* shows, for example.

What many video game theorists and critics agree upon, and what matters most to our inquiry, is the fact that video games teach—they are pedagogical—and that "what we're learning from them bears no resemblance whatsoever to what we think we're learning."<sup>45</sup> It is precisely the learning "about life" in America with its entrenched racial problems that is at issue here. As the foregoing examples demonstrate, and as Ian Bogost points out elsewhere in this volume, it is difficult, if not impossible, for games not to have a pedagogical function. Given the increasing number of hours youths today spend playing—fourth-grade boys spend about nine hours per week playing and eighth-grade boys log nearly five hours per week at play<sup>46</sup>—young people are spending a great deal of time immersed in the kinds of RPZs discussed here (figure 6).

### Reception and Fandom Contexts

Any foray into the online fan culture of the *GTA* games quickly reveals an alarming reality: the video game playground on- and offline too often replicates racist attitudes, values, and assumptions found in larger social structures. As contested a site as actual children's playgrounds often are, some online fora are notorious zones of contestation and violent speech acts when race and issues of diversity surface.<sup>47</sup> In evidence was the racial diversity of the online gamers, whose debates about race often bordered on flame wars. The majority of gamer-respondents freely self-identified along racial lines. They were African American, Asian, Arab, black, Mexican, Jewish, white, or racially mixed. Overwhelmingly male, these



**Figure 5**

Screen shot from *GTA: San Andreas* illustrates familiar criminalized image of black male youths with guns.

gamers used screen names and expressed sentiments, which ranged from racial inclusion (or color blindness) to outright racist rants, with some featuring both. Exchanges also ranged from a sort-of free-speech, Habermassian public sphere ideal to condemnations of the system administrator for permitting such a topic to appear on the forum at all. In some instances, posts to the threads were censored or replaced with a note that read, “This message was deleted at the request of a moderator or administrator.”<sup>48</sup>

The rhetorical rough-and-tumble in these discussion threads began largely with assertions that many white gamers boycotted *GTA: San Andreas* because the lead character, CJ, was black and the game protagonist’s digital skin could not be modified to present as a white avatar. Reviewing the emotional content on various user fora dedicated to the *GTA* games and their fan bases reveals much about the complexity of gamers’ racial attitudes and belief systems, at least those posting to the sites under consideration here. While these sites are worthy of more detailed analysis than time or space permits here, a few select quotes can illustrate quite convincingly the need to think seriously about the lessons video games teach and how we can fairly, honestly, and effectively address and assess games’ potentially harmful—as well as beneficial—RPZs.

In his recent historical analysis of modern boy culture in formation, E. Anthony Rotundo’s insights are useful for framing the selected quotes. According to Rotundo, “Rivalry, division, and conflict were vital elements in the structure of boy culture.” He added that “the boys world was endlessly divided and subdivided” and split into groups by residence, ethnicity, and social status, with daring and bravado as a “ritual expression in boy’s games.”<sup>49</sup> We

culled the following quotes from three separate discussion threads. The first set of quotes are direct responses to a discussion entitled “What the hell is everyones [sic] problem?” The fracas in this discussion concerns a new video game (not identified in this thread, but likely the game is *GTA4*). The postings concern gamers’ attitudes about the possibility of another black protagonist in this next *GTA* game.

#1: The thing is that in *SA* [*GTA: San Andreas*] you played someone who dealt drugs and is in a gang . . . you know your average black guy. Now you have someone who upholds the law and is black???? People need to realize that this game is in no way trying to emulate reality like *SA* was. I believe it is cel-shaded so people won’t lose themselves in it and believe it’s happening in the real world.<sup>50</sup>

#2: ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Oh \*\*\*\*!!! Wait. Your average black guy???? Okay, obviously you live under a rock in a small hik [sic] town because the average black in Houston, TX or at least my friends are in college. I have braids but I’ve never been in a gang and neither has my family or friends. Just because 50 Cent raps about detailed stories that he fabricates, America thinks ALL black guys are gangsters. Your ignorance is hilarious because 50 used his proceeds from his album to make a sports mineral water and cheaper version of Apple computers. People like you should not be allowed to reproduce.<sup>51</sup>

#3: Well one of my big gripes with *GTA* and one of the main reasons why I don’t [sic] play the franchise, except at friends houses is because they don’t let you customize your character. Im mexican and I have yet to see a mexican protagonist in a game, except that stereotypical under the border game. I just want to be able to make the character look like me, or how I want.<sup>52</sup>

Discussion thread number two is entitled “Is the main character black again?”

# 1: BobbyQt [a pseudonym] is right!!! I don’t wanna play as a black character. Ever since the 8 bit era, the characters have been white, why change all that. I’m pretty sure black people don’t mind playing as white characters. There are already enough games with black characters, NBA live, Madden, Fifa and San Andreas of course isn’t that enough?!?!<sup>53</sup>

#2: Well that was pretty interesting why aren’t you ok with playing as A character (oh and by the way I am capitalized [sic] ‘A’ because that is exactly what game characters are, simple, not specifically white, male, american, 18–34). It does matter what they look like they are a character I think its great that there are different ethnicities in games but I think that shouldn’t turn a logical person away from a game because of an individuals race or gender. If you have a problem playing with an african american character then you have a problem with people in general not just video game persona’s. END<sup>54</sup>

The third and final discussion topic is “So, what minority character should the new character be?”

#1: I don’t care what the character is, but I wouldn’t mind a Hispanic character or another White character. Maybe a Jew. Like me 😊

#2: with the current situation in the states [sic] Im leaning towards the mestizo character also, granted I am a White bigot but I wouldn’t mind playing as a salvadoran or mexican killer, those dudes are ruthless, plus they sound cooler than ol cj

#3: Are you for real?

#2: Me? Yeh im “for real” flame me all you like I really don’t care if your gonna say something homophobic its your own problem

#4: I’d like a white or Italian guy. I’m black but for some reason, I don’t like playing video games as black people. Playing as a white guy makes the game feel more normal. And Italian guy makes it more mafia like and mafia=good.

#5: asian. so I can finally connect with a character in *GTA*.<sup>55</sup>

The expressions here range from blatant racism to racial tolerance or inclusion, and provide an interesting feedback loop for some of the concerns outlined above. We wanted to juxtapose some feedback from *GTA* gamers themselves to comments of these games' designers and industry critics, to balance out our own considerations of industry practices and player response. While this study is not arguing that *GTA* fandom represents a racist community, it does suggest, however, that there is much food for thought here.

It is our aim to explore and better understand how usefully and effectively to study young people's increasing interaction with discourses of race in video gaming culture. This formulation of RPZs sketches out directly, if not fully, gamers' readings and likely enactments of game scenarios such as those found in *GTA*. These are scenarios told in racial terms and in alluring role-playing game structures, where gamers are said to have more choice and freedom in producing, as well as consuming, the video games' narratives or story lines.<sup>56</sup> Our inclusion of such frameworks is intended to encourage the monitoring of how these games' various missions depend upon the mastery of established mainstream codes of meaningful play bound by racially suspect cultural scripts.<sup>57</sup>

The significance of this project is contextualized quite convincingly by Salen and Zimmerman's reminder of Huizinga's truism, that "all play means something."<sup>58</sup> It is also important to recognize one of gaming's welcome unintended consequences—how it alters the familiar descriptive trifecta of nonwhite youths as poor, minority, and illiterate. For one thing, as the above quotes from *GTA* gamers bear out, these video games require a certain amount of computer and other cultural literacies simply to play the games well. After all, there are manuals, onscreen instructions, and community fora devoted to improved gameplay and social networking that require basic-to-exceptional literacy competencies.

### Want to Play? Some Final Thoughts on Race and Games

Our focus in this chapter on the simulation and representation of urban culture in video games, and the consequences for learning, does not intend to be exhaustive in the effort to illuminate the rising significance of race and ethnicity in the ecology of games. In the final section of this chapter, we move away from discussions of representation, game design, and pedagogical zones to identify and cautiously map what we believe are additional, yet underexplored matters related to race, video games, learning, and young people. As we stated in the opening, public dialogue about race and video games has been marginal at best. In addition to the issues addressed above, we want to identify some other ways in which race matters in the video game world. Specifically, we consider video games in the context of a rapidly evolving digital media environment.

Any analysis of the relationship between video games, young people, and learning must also seek to understand the larger context in which these issues began to take on their complex shape. One of the more notable transformations taking place in the rapidly evolving digital media landscape is the extent to which young people have gained access to tools and skills that enable them to produce as well as consume cultural content. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2005), more than half, 57 percent, of the teens aged 12–15 create and share content online.<sup>59</sup> Many scholars celebrate the sense of freedom and empowerment that young people gain from "participatory culture."<sup>60</sup> Salen and Zimmerman argue that a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach to cultural resistance, most notably reskinning and modding, has made video games a form of culturally transformative play.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the brave new world of digital media culture—modding, world-building,

user-generated content, and file sharing—has the potential not only to build new learning environments and modes of digital literacy, but equally importantly to empower young people to cultivate actively practices that resist the once-taken-for-granted hegemony of corporate produced and preprogrammed media into their lives.

Young people are not passive consumers of media and cultural content. Increasingly, they are producing and sharing content with their peers, thus altering their media and cultural environment in unprecedented ways.<sup>62</sup> Video games, for example, can no longer be viewed as merely a source of leisure and entertainment, but also as a site of cultural resistance and empowerment.<sup>63</sup>

However, as we begin to understand more thoroughly the lively ways in which digital media enables young people to assert greater control over their cultural environments, we must also be mindful of the fact that this does not hold true for all young people. We ask then, what are the consequences for young people whose access to digital technology is either limited (i.e., accessed at school or the local library) or essentially nonexistent? As video games evolve into a dynamic form of cultural production, personal expression, and social capital, we see, once again, how the divide between the “technology haves” and “technology have-nots” continues to matter. Elite gaming communities usually, though not always, involve a high degree of involvement in online digital publics that cultivate very specialized bodies of knowledge and expertise. Deep participation in elite video gaming also demands more than casual or occasional access to digital media, that is, the ability to access gaming environments from wired homes, offices, college dormitories, and public spaces—environments that are not universally available to all. In this case, we draw attention to multiple forms of access—physical access to the hardware and broadband connections, as well as access to the mentors and learning environments that cultivate digital forms of literacy, skills, and social capital.

Poor and working-class youth play video games, but primarily on consoles rather than on the personal computers, that foster more transformative gaming practices like modding and world-building. According to Roberts et al. black and Latino youth are *more likely* than their white counterparts to live in homes that own a television or video game console.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, black and Latino youth are *less likely* than their white counterparts to live in a household with a personal computer. And while computer ownership among the poor and working class continues to increase, these households are still unlikely to have access to high-speed Internet connections.<sup>65</sup> Young people who have limited access to advanced computing technology are less likely than their more affluent counterparts to participate in digital media culture as producers and distributors of content.

In addition, overcoming the barriers regarding content creation in games poses tough challenges. In his analysis of how Asian Americans are portrayed in games, Dean Chan urges scholars and cultural critics to “remain steadfast in the call for more diverse and equitable representations in commercial games.”<sup>66</sup> However, before game content becomes more diverse, the industry will have to cultivate greater racial and cultural diversity in its workforce. This is especially important given that video games which simulate culturally specific environments require designers to be not only technically literate, but socially and culturally literate as well.

So, what do we know about the makeup of the video game development community? In a 2005 published report titled “Game Developer Demographics: An Exploration of Workforce Diversity,” the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) set out to answer one question: “who makes games?” Whereas the Children Now report found that the

overwhelming majority of player-controlled characters in games are white, the IGDA found that an overwhelming majority of the personnel creating games is also white. According to the IGDA, the “typical” game development professional can be described as white, male, young (median age 31), and college educated. If high degrees of learning and education are essential for gaining meaningful employment in the video games industry, the future prospects of black and Latino talent finding a secure place among programmers, design artists, writers, and designers seem limited.

One interesting avenue of intervention involves the creation of digital learning environments that work to close the participation gap. As debates about the digital divide have been refined, technology activists note that successful intervention requires more than providing the technology-poor access to hardware. The technology-poor also need access to mentors and environments that enable them to cultivate the skills that lead to greater forms of agency. Addressing the participation gap, researchers claim, is the next great challenge in closing the digital divide. Nichole Pinkard, principal investigator of the Center for Urban School Improvement, writes, “the new divide will not be caused by access to technology but rather by lack of access to mentors, environments, and activities where the use of digital media is the language of communication.”<sup>67</sup> Community technology centers like this one are not only making technology accessible to poor and working class youth but also, as Pinkard notes, developing programs that “enable urban youth to become discerning new media consumers and fluent media producers.”

In short, we believe that future discussions about race and games should be twofold. First, we must continue to document and analyze what the racial content, themes, and design elements in video games teach young people about race. Second, we believe that future discussions about race and video games should engage broader debates about the rise and diffusion of digital media technologies and the educational pathways that lead to greater forms of new media literacy and participation in the digital media sphere, particularly as they pertain to race and ethnicity. Empowering young people on the social and economic margins to create content not only diversifies what content they consume; it also holds the promise of expanding how they learn and reproduce race for public consumption for generations to come.

## Notes

1. Elizabeth A. Vandewater, Shim Mi-Suk, and Allison G. Caplovitz, Linking Obesity and Activity Level with Children’s Television and Video Game Use, *Journal of Adolescence* 27 (2004): 71–85; Carol A. Phillips, Susan Rolls, Andrew Rouse, and Mark D. Griffiths, Home Video Game Playing in School Children: A Study of Incidence and Patterns of Play, *Journal of Adolescence* 18 (1995): 687–91; K. Roe and D. Muijs, Children and Computer Games: A Profile of Heavy Users, *European Journal of Communication* 13 (1998): 181–200; and Jeanne B. Funk and Debra D. Bachman, Playing Violent Video and Computer Games and Adolescent Self-Concept, *Journal of Communication* 46 (1996): 19–32.
2. James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
3. Gordon L. Berry and C. Mitchell-Kernan, eds., *Television and the Socialization of the Minority Child* (New York: Academic, 1982).
4. Gordon L. Berry and Joy Keiko Asamen, Television, Children, and Multicultural Awareness: Comprehending the Medium in a Complex Multimedia Society, in *Handbook of Children and the Media*, eds. Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer (London: Sage, 2001).

5. Ibid.
6. Anna Everett, *Serious Play: Playing with Race in Contemporary Gaming Culture*, in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, eds. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 311–26.
7. Marc Prensky, *Digital Game-Based Learning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001); and Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, 136–37.
8. Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*.
9. Steven Poole, *Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Video Games* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000).
10. Ibid, 152.
11. Poole, *Trigger Happy*.
12. Children Now, *Fair Play? Violence, Gender and Race in Video Games* (Oakland, CA: Children Now, 2001).
13. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Video Game Forms and Contexts* (New York: I. B. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
14. Alison McMahan, *Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games*, in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003).
15. Children Now, *Fair Play*, 23.
16. The six consoles included in the study were Dreamcast, Game Boy Advance, Game Boy Color, Nintendo 64, PlayStation, and PlayStation 2.
17. Dean Chan, *Playing with Race: The Ethics of Racialized Representations in E-Games*, *International Review of Information Ethics* 4 (2005): 24–30.
18. Ibid.
19. Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, 127.
20. S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 228; see also S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).
21. Richard Lapchick, *Five Minutes to Midnight: Race and Sport in the 1990s* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1991).
22. Children Now, *Fair Play*, 23.
23. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds., *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000); and Diane Carr, *Games and Gender*, in *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play*, eds. Diane Carr, David Buckingham, Andrew Burn, and Gareth Schott (London: Polity, 2006).
24. Michel Marriott, *The Color of Mayhem in a Wave of "Urban" Games*, *New York Times*, August 12, 2004.
25. David J. Leonard, *High Tech Blackface: Race, Sports Video Games and Becoming the Other*, *Intelligent Agent* 4 (2004): 1–5.
26. Children Now, *Fair Play*.

27. Leonard, High Tech Blackface.
28. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
29. Leonard, High Tech Blackface, 2.
30. Sonia M. Livingstone, *Young People and New Media: Childhood and the Changing Media Environment* (London: Sage, 2002).
31. Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
32. Martin Lister, Jon Dovey, Seth Giddings, Iain Grant, and Kieran Kelly, *New Media: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
33. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, Game Design and Meaningful Play, in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, eds. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 59–80.
34. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
35. Ibid., 68–9.
36. Marc Prensky, Computer Games and Learning: Digital Game-Based Learning, in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, eds. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 106.
37. Henry Jenkins, “Complete Freedom of Movement”: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces, in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 262–97; and Aphra Kerr, Non-Entertainment Uses of Digital Games, in *The Business and Culture of Digital Games* (London: Sage, 2006).
38. Prensky, Computer Games and Learning, 107.
39. While this comparative media framework does provide useful parallels to understanding and mastering gaming’s racialized *meaningful play*, to borrow Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s term, it is not a reductive exercise that fails to recognize the raging debate in game studies between theories of narratology and ludology, with other emergent critical paradigms in the offing. Narratologist Janet Murray correctly cautions that “one cannot use old standards to judge the new formats,” while acknowledging that “games are always stories,” with a specific type of interactivity unique to games’ cyber-dramas (Janet Murray quoted in Kerr, Non-Entertainment Uses of Video Games, 24). Ludologists, mainly building upon the seminal works of Johan Huizinga and Espen Aarseth, to name two, posit the necessity for moving games studies “away from representation towards simulation semiotics or ‘simiotics.’” Moreover, their largely formalist critiques pivot on the “shift from narrative to ludic engagement with texts and from interpretation to configuration,” as Stuart Moulthrop sees it (quoted in Kerr, Non-Entertainment Uses of Video Games, 33–4). And while such ground-clearing critical approaches to game studies constitute a necessary move forward for the nascent field, they do recall the infamous realism versus formalism debates of classical film theory that remain generative and productive to established cinema and TV studies even today. And for our purposes, Aphra Kerr is on target with the observation that “[g]iven both the diversity of narrative theories and the diversity of games, some of which are clearly more narrative driven than others, it would be unwise to dismiss narrative theory outright” (ibid., 26). When we contextualize the RPZ idea within the *GTA* metanarratives and interactive modes of engagement, we feel the need to retain narratology and embrace ludology, though not always in equal measure. After all, game theorists correctly emphasize that games position players as the spectator and protagonist simultaneously (Kerr, Non-Entertainment Uses of Video Games, 38; and Mark J. P. Wolf, Genre and the Video Game, in *Handbook of Computer Games Studies*, eds. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein

[Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005], 193). Thus, it seems that we can benefit from both critical approaches.

40. Seth Schiesel, Welcome to the New Dollhouse, *New York Times*, May 7, 2006, Sec. 2: 1f.

41. Anna Everett acknowledges the superb assistance she received from her graduate students at UCSB, Noah Lopez and Dan Reynolds, especially, and the entire group of students enrolled in her New Media Theory seminar in 2006. Noah Lopez was her summer research assistant with whom she spent numerous thrilling hours playing *GTA: Vice City* and *GTA: San Andreas*, and the *Sims 2* games. They embarked upon an odyssey of exploration into these games' depictions of race, gender, and class politics, and specific treatments of the game genres and other aesthetic features. She thanks Lopez for helping to lower the learning curve of *GTA's* mission structures and logics. Dan Reynolds was instrumental in presenting some of *Bully's* game details immediately after that game's release. Reynolds played (actually finished) the game within a few weeks and discussed many of its racial dimensions with her during the course of their New Media Theory seminar that focused particularly on games theory and practice. She hopes to revisit the wealth of information they provided as avid gamers and critically aware graduate students of film and media study.

42. Rockstar Games, *Bully*: "Overview." <http://www.rockstargames.com/bully/home>. Accessed October 20, 2006.

43. Rockstar AI, "Bully Gametrailers Review." YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ioKpSb6AEO>. Accessed October 20, 2006.

44. While the production date of this video review of *GTA* ran initially on GameSpot.com, a user posted the review to YouTube on May 6, 2006.

45. Ralph Koster, quoted in Jane Avrich, Steven Johnson, Ralph Koster, and Thomas de Zengotita, Grand Theft Education: Literacy in the Age of Video Games, *Harper's Magazine* 313 (2006): 31–40.

46. Sandra Calvert, Cognitive Effects of Video Games, in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, eds. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 125–32.

47. In a sampling of representative gamers' thoughts on race in the gaming firmament, the forum at GameSpot.com proved to be one of the most popular, prolific, and useful, followed by the user fora at the IGDA Web site and at Gameology.org.

48. Is the Main Character Black Again? *Gamespot.com*, Forums, 2006. [http://www.gamespot.com/ebox360/action/crackdown/show\\_msgs.php?topic\\_id=1-31063566&pid=930144&page=0](http://www.gamespot.com/ebox360/action/crackdown/show_msgs.php?topic_id=1-31063566&pid=930144&page=0). Accessed October 20, 2006.

49. E. Anthony Rotundo, Boy Culture, in *The Children's Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 337–62.

50. "What the hell is everyones [sic] problem?" [http://www.gamespot.com/xbox360/action/crackdown/show\\_msgs.php?topic\\_id=m-1-31063566&pid=930144&page=0](http://www.gamespot.com/xbox360/action/crackdown/show_msgs.php?topic_id=m-1-31063566&pid=930144&page=0).

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Is the Main Character Black Again?

54. Ibid.

55. So What Minority Should the New Character Be? *Gamespot.com*, Forums, May 18, 2006. [http://www.gamespot.com/pse/action/grandtheftauto4/show\\_msgs.php](http://www.gamespot.com/pse/action/grandtheftauto4/show_msgs.php). Accessed May 18, 2006.

56. Avrich, Grand Theft Education, 31–40.

57. Anna Everett, P.C. Youth Violence: What's the Internet or Video Gaming Got to Do with It? *Denver University Law Review* 77, no. 4 (2000): 689–698.
58. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, Game Design and Meaningful Play, in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, eds. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 59–80.
59. Pew Internet & American Life Project, *Teen Content Creators and Consumers* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2005).
60. Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
61. Salen and Zimmerman, Game Design and Meaningful Play.
62. Pew Internet & American Life Project, *Teen Content Creators and Consumers*.
63. Salen and Zimmerman, Game Design and Meaningful Play.
64. Donald Roberts, Ulla G. Foehr, Victoria J. Rideout, and Mollyanne Brodie, *Kids and Media in America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
65. U.S. Department of Commerce, *Computer and Internet Use in the United States: October* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).
66. Chan, Playing with Race.
67. Nichole Pinkard, Developing Opportunities for Urban Youth to Become Digital, 2006. [http://spotlight.macfound.org/main/entry/nichole\\_pinkard\\_developing\\_opportunities\\_for\\_urban\\_youth\\_to\\_become\\_digital/](http://spotlight.macfound.org/main/entry/nichole_pinkard_developing_opportunities_for_urban_youth_to_become_digital/). Accessed June 16, 2007.