MEDIA FIELDS
J O U R N A L

Race, Space, and Digital Games

An Interview with Anna Everett

Interview by Alex Champlin and John Vanderhoef

A significant portion of your work centers on issues of race in media, especially in video games. What are the prevailing rhetorics around race and identity in games with which media scholars must contend today?

As I have written elsewhere, I rediscovered video games as a graduate student, and I took to the pleasures of mastering gaming's meaningful play protocols nearly as much as I did the heavy intellectual work of mastering theories and histories of film and television at that point. Of course, in the early to mid 1990s new media studies were in their infancy, and I am proud to have contributed to their emergent and ongoing development at that pivotal moment, especially in areas of race in gaming studies. What I realized during those days was that playing video games not only provided a creative outlet for improving my hand-eye coordination skills, but it also led me to the discovery that race and identity were integral elements in what Ian Bogost asserts are gaming's "procedural rhetorics" that undergird their ludic and narrative structures or rules of play.

That said, 'the prevailing rhetorics,' as you put it, around race and identity in

gaming remain too muted, still, especially at this contemporary moment as troubling proliferations of racist hate speech, racially motivated acts of violence and intolerance in 'civil' society, in law enforcement and in politics writ large continue to menace so much of our everyday lives. So despite present-day claims that America has arrived at some post-racial, post-civil rights state premised largely on the 2008 election of our first bi-racial or black Commander-in-Chief, President Barack Obama, it is evident that race and ethnicity problematics persist no matter vocal denials to the contrary in some circles. And while the implications of structural racism are wide ranging, I will focus my remarks specifically on the implications for identity politics where race, gender and gaming transect. Any cursory survey of user comments on gaming sites easily uncovers troves of racist rants that betray how deep-seated racial antagonisms are among gamers and trolls who occupy popular games' message boards. Now, such utterances too often manifest racial animus beyond the usual griefing performativity that typify most de rigeur hyperbolic discourses on gaming websites. Of course, this rhetoric of intolerance obtains equally for misogynist rants and downright violent threats targeting women and girl gamers—simply look up Anita Sarkeesian's and Jay Smooth's revelations explored on her *Feminist Frequency* and on his *ILL Doctrine* blogs respectively, two high profile cases that make the point.

Jay Smooth and Anita Sarkeesian

Now, to your question more directly, prevailing rhetorics of race in gaming today include: 1) attempts to shut down any thoughtful and thereby useful discussions of racism in gaming's representational economies and narratives often succeed with mere claims or assertions of 'playing the race card' leveled against anyone daring to raise the issue; 2) the dearth or complete absence of racial and ethnic diversity in terms of black, red, brown, and yellow must-play-characters (MPCs) outside of familiar and demeaning stereotypes in marquee name game franchises and brands such as *Super Mario Brothers*, *World of Warcraft*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Resident Evil*, and *Assassin's Creed*, among others. Clearly, some underrepresented minority characters do appear in contemporary games. The problem inheres in their discursive functions as villainous archetypes reinforcing tropes of evil incarnate, dangerous criminality and unredeemable moral laxity (i.e., gangsters, prostitutes, hordes of undead-zombies, and other underworld and undesirable types); 3) efforts to expand gaming's revenue stream in a transnational global media ecology has resulted in the industry's genuflection or nod to racial and gender diversification in the creation and development of MPC characters outside of dominant white masculinist heternormativity. Here, Capcom's zombie-fighting, s/hero-scientist Sheva Alamar and Ubisoft's s/hero assassin Aveline de Grandpre of the *Resident Evil* and *Assassins' Creed* brands respectively, represent important if limiting moves forward in terms of addressing gaming and society's black and woman double-oppression problematic; 4) 'diversification' in gaming where male MPCs are concerned has been a longstanding practice, although recent decades have seen breakthroughs in the number of underrepresented minority male MPCs, but often within the constraints of popular stereotypes and familiar buddy character designs and mission quests alluded to above. I am thinking here of *Donkey Kong*, *Grand Theft Auto*'s C.J., the real-life star-athlete avatars comprising the MPCs in the *Madden*, *Tiger Woods Golf*, *NBA Ballers*, *FIFA*, and *EA Gameplay Series: Bruce Lee* games, among others.

Sheva Alomar from Resident Evil 5

How have these discussions changed and how have the questions scholars ask moved beyond representational economies?

For those of us who study gaming's racial politics at the level of representation, issues of industry economies and practices, labor, space, cognition and affect are also longstanding areas of concern and critique. I believe I can speak for many who regard them as inextricably bound to representational matters. For example, when Douglas Thomas writes about western gamers expressing explicit racism targeting Korean gamers who often are professionals exhibiting exceptional skills and playing networked games on superior technology, we understand how these discussions exceed matters of representation. Another young scholar-gamer, Kishonna L. Gray calls our attention to how racist and sexist scripts play out online in Microsoft's Xbox Live networked game spaces. As a participant observer of the games *Gears of War* and *Call of Duty* on Xbox Live, for example, her analyses do not focus on gaming's representations but on how race and gender biases structure networked play among gamers. And Diana Pozo's developing scholarship has touched on how race informs gamer complaints about globally networked games' problems with lag and glitches. My own

longstanding concern about the significant lack of black, brown, and women game designers still needs alleviation, apparently, although successful designer Manveer Heir, himself of Indian descent, suggests that mainstream game designers are becoming more interested in diversifying gaming heroes and heroines beyond the white heterosexual male ideal. At the same time, we are well aware that race and gender assumptions still operate as functional structuring presences underlying too many of games' 'procedural rhetorics' and tropes of mastery.

Where do new industrial tactics fit within this schematic?

Following Heir's lead, we see that the gaming industry has become more attentive to the desires and purchasing power of its diverse player bases throughout the global marketplaces. The gaming industry accordingly recognizes that just as with film, television and other popular media texts, consumers tend to desire narratives and characters that are relevant to themselves and their cultural referents, at least to some degree. While the idea of Western narratives as 'universal' stories still dominates mainstream and blockbuster game titles and genres, games that draw on other cultural traditions are gaining market share, as the comeback of the *Mortal Kombat* series, and EA Sports' introduction this year of the new *Bruce Lee UFC Gameplay Series* clearly illustrate. Of course, the mixed martial arts genre is an industry mainstay. Nonetheless, certain titles, genres, and styles go in and out of favor depending on generational preferences among other imperatives and pressures. Also, it is too early to know whether or not Ubisoft's experiment with African Diasporic shero character Aveline de Grandpre, developed exclusively for the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, was a success for the handheld PlayStation Vita system. That she was a black woman must-play-character (MPC) motivating the story for such a high profile game title represents a major shift in gaming design and race and gender intersectionality.

Starting with the premise that space is raced, and recognizing your work, along with the work of David J. Leonard regarding the consuming of the other through the occupation of digital game space, I want to ask how you think the deployment of race and racialized spaces in games has changed, if at all, over the course of your career?

Maybe we can rework that premise slightly by saying that 'space gets raced' according to organized social structures that are often racially inflected or codified. It is not surprising, then, that digital game space often mirrors or replicates the racialization of physical and material space as it has evolved and devolved over time. And although I am not familiar with Leonard's work on "consuming the other through the occupation of digital game space," I do recognize in this idea something similar to Lisa Nakamura's concept of "racial tourism," and my own exploration of the practice I am calling "a politics of transracial play." I draw upon such cinema frameworks as Laura Mulvey's concept of transgender identification, which Manthia Diawara follows for his formulation of transracial identification, both of which proffer effective explanations of how non-white and female spectators might derive visual pleasure when viewing respectively sexist and racist film texts. For me, the notion of toggling between spectatorial identities by merging what I regard as transformative and transitional nodal points of identification between the racial and gendered self and the racial and gendered other makes perfect sense. When I played *GTA*, for example, affectively I enacted CJ's masculine gender, temporarily; when I played *Bully*, similarly, I enacted "Jimmy" Hopkins whiteness and maleness in that game. How else could I "win" or "master" these games' procedural rhetorics or engage with the "meaningful play," to use Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's useful terminology, of these games' racialized and masculinist-determined play designs?

You asked what has changed. Over the course of my career I can say much and not enough change has ensued to alter fundamentally the deployment of race and racialized spaces in gaming. It is true that there is more racial and gender diversity in games' MPC constructs. Non-Western game designers -- in Lebanon and Syria, for instance -- have contested the West's Orientalist logics in its racialized and frequently racist game depictions of Arabs; women gamers are challenging male privilege and power in networked gaming communities, as I mention above.

Again, any cursory internet search bears out these existential realities as far as how identity politics routinely get articulated, rehearsed, mastered and played out in any number of gaming scenarios and platforms, especially in online discussion groups and fora, and other games related networked digital spaces.

In addition, abstract, simulation, cute, and other games, such as *Tetris*, *Angry Birds*, *Candy Crush*, and others provide non-hardcore gamers an entry point to recognize that gaming has something to offer everyone. This also helps to convince a wider public that gaming should not be reduced to what Alexander Galloway discusses as the "Columbine theory," of gaming's putative causal relationship between gameplay and violent behavior.

Networked gaming has collapsed space and generated new contexts for encounters between players. In these spaces what are the understandings of identity that are opened?

As I mention above, and the statistics bear out, gaming's underrepresented minority, girl and women players account for a significant growth in the industry, especially in networked games. In fact, the increased popularity in networked gaming has evinced a number of problematic encounters between gamers of different races, genders and national origins. For example, the seminal works of Donna Haroway's telling study of Western technology companies' oppression of women and girl workers in Asian countries, and Chela Sandoval's formulation of the potent "methodology of the oppressed" resistance strategies of groups involved in struggles at U.S. and other Central and Southern American borderlands have influenced a new generation of gaming scholars to situate the industry's economic racism alongside other racist practices driving new formations of online gaming engagements. For instance, some Western gamers buy non-Western gamers' labor and superior skills to power-up their own competitive gameplay in online games. I already alluded to emerging scholars' investigations into Western players' problems with supposed difficulties encountered in transnational online gaming on Korean and other non-Western servers or with non-Western professional game players. Also, playing out in digital space are heightened tensions and scary hyperbolic rhetorics exchanged between Xbox Live's gamers. Racial and ethnic minorities as well as females engaging in Xbox Live's game offerings often confront racist and sexist harassment while engaging in gameplay online. Such experiences manifest the limitations of America's post-racial ideal and multicultural cohesion. These bullying conflicts betray the growth of what some scholars have identified as an almost uniquely American hyper-multiculturalism: conflicts between racial and ethnic groups competing for social, economic, and political sway or power amid dwindling resources.

It seems part of the allure of network gaming is being able to assume a new identity or remain anonymous. However, such anonymity can also obscure the faces of digital labor.

It is true that network gaming affords gamers the opportunity to role-play across the identity spectrum anonymously. But where one would hope such play would encourage some sort of empathetic identity politics and racial and ethnic sensitivity the opposite seems to be more prevalent. Racist gamers instead largely engage in what I am calling 'gaming race' to act out racial hatreds in online gaming spaces as Lisa Nakamura, Douglas Thomas, Kishonna L. Gray, myself and others critique in our video game scholarship.

Alternatively, scholar Brian Carter's "Virtual Harlem" project represents an effective model of how *Second Life* could be used to bring America's history of race relations alive for contemporary gamers. Briefly, "Virtual Harlem" permits users to experience the Harlem Renaissance virtually by flying through 3-D models of the Cotton Club, and strolling down Lenox Avenue in a virtual recreation of the 1920s and 1930s historical moment that makes this history spring to life in ways different from traditional print means. And while Carter's "Virtual Harlem" project captured a particular era of *Second Life*'s popularity and promise, it suggests a constructive model for engaging global and local histories of racial understanding and empathy. I am reminded of the promise that console multiplayer and singleplayer SIMs RPGs hold out. But, given the deep-seated racial and sexual biases so engrained in our cultural DNA, I am not too optimistic when white gamers use SIMs to create white-skinned Run DMC machinema characters and music videos, rather than exploring new expressive capabilities of black-skinned SIMs characters. This is not to say that color-blind racial casting in amateur gaming such as in machinema texts cannot be productive, but it does make me wonder.

Questions about race, ethnicity and labor persist in media and cultural studies. How has networked gaming changed the parameters of these debates and what new fissures have been exposed?

I think I broached this in my previous remarks. What I can add is that networked gaming constructs several gaming communities of practice

wherein different racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and differently abled groups interact in real time, and often are able to confront, challenge and even modify hate-inflected commentary and attitudes. Whether or not changes in attitudes and perspectives are modified in the digital gaming space are yet to be studied, it seems to me.

How do you see race and gender dynamics playing out in online communities and fora where players gather to discuss digital games?

As I said, groups are confronting one another, rejecting online racism, sexism and other 'isms' as well, and that represents progress of sorts. After all, the answer to racist and sexist speech and play is more speech and counter-play. Censorship is not a real option, no matter the egregiousness of the affronts, because censorship is a slippery slope we must avoid—although Xbox Live's admins are often called upon to revoke gamers' access for policy violations, including bullying and other failures to honor Microsoft's terms of participation.

How does the architecture of these online spaces contribute to certain kinds of discourse or performance, particularly that of toxic culture?

This is a particularly rich question, and I don't think I can offer a fitting response at this moment. Nonetheless, I do want to ponder its implications for my own critical race analysis of gaming culture and industrial practices. In 2004 Alexander Galloway wrote about realism and social realist aesthetics in gaming, and in 2007 S. Craig Watkins and I wrote about race and sports games, and both projects proffer insights that can be extrapolated to online game spaces even though these texts do not deal with the topic in these exact terms - although with the emphasis on sports games, there is a race and space component to such games as *Madden*, *NBA Ballers*, etc.

What these explorations offer are ways to historicize prevailing and persistent belief systems and hegemonic views about how race governs meaning and thus meaningful play designs that make sense to gamers playing within American and by extension larger Westerns contexts where identity politics do factor in gaming's ludic practices and structures. Consider what beneficial studies could be done of *World of Warcraft* fan communities and deconstructions of the game's Alliance and Horde factionalism structure,

especially for critiquing its parallels to or metaphors for America's actual existing racial politics. I am sure some scholar has tilled this discursive terrain by now, I just have not encountered it as yet. Again, Kishonna Gray's work on race and gender problematics on Xbox Live is a great starting point for such a discussion.

Code and platform studies have emerged in the last decade to ask specific questions concerning the underlying systems that subtend software and games. How have these fields engaged with critical questions of race? What is your assessment of these emerging fields, and what kinds of questions should scholars be asking?

I am convinced that code and platform studies will be quite productive for engaging critically with issues of race and other identity politics as they pertain to gaming. Right now, though, it does not appear to be a priority, if it is an issue at all. Although, I believe some of the theoretical and methodological frameworks or ground-clearing work being done today have implications for critical race and gender studies in gaming. For me, it is wrong-headed for scholars to reject or put under erasure, if you will, the idea that race and identity politics are incompatible or irrelevant to code, platform and software studies.

As a matter of fact, I believe some of your own works, Alex and John, could be compatible along these lines. John, your work on age and physical abilities encoded in gaming designs can be extrapolated for matters of race, for example. And Alex, I am enthusiastic about your interest in apparatus theory's usefulness for code and platform studies and its alignment with what Lyotard, in the book, *The Inhuman*, calls the "tyranny of the bit," which could offer some insights into how gaming software and code are not as race neutral as we might want to imagine.

Of course, this is such an exciting time in the growth and expansion of video game studies within the ambit of film and media studies. While our field seems to strive for a particular purchase on interrogating gaming's technological and industrial changes and developments, other fields have been studying video games assiduously for decades, especially social sciences, psychology, and education. It is time for our field to embrace gaming's sociological and psychological aspects as well. We ignore issues of

race in gaming in media studies at our own peril, a caution that holds true in our everyday actually existing civil societies. There may only be a few of us insisting that race has a place in our interrogations of gaming, but -- stay logged on with me at this contested discursive site, and we will see how it all plays out.

Dr. Anna Everett is a Professor of Film, Television and New Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Her former administrative positions include: Acting Associate Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity and Academic Policy; Chair of the UCSB Department of Film andMedia Studies, Director of the UCSB Center for Black Studies. Dr. Everett is a two-time recipient of the Fulbright Senior Scholar Award (2005, 2007), among other honors and awards. Her many publications include the books *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949*; *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media* (for the MacArthur Foundation's series on Digital Media, Youth, and Learning); *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*; *AfroGeeks: Beyond the Digital Divide*; *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace*; and *Pretty People: Movie Stars of the 1990s*. She is finishing a new book on President Obama, social media culture and the Where U @ Generation.