Interpretations on the Racialized Experience of Video Games

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Abstract

This research seeks to explore how participant video gamers' cultural capital impacts their interpretations of the racial content in video games. Having cultural capital on the video game world mediates interpretation of video game racial semiotics showing complexity in the reproduction and contestation of race in media. The project seeks to supplement grounds that show complexity in how people interpret racial content from a growing video game industry. Data were collected through personal interviews where participants played the racialized game Grand Theft Auto: The Ballad of Gay Tony for 30-50 minutes. A sample of 23 participants covering gender, gaming experience, and race answered questions assessing racial lens, then played the game introduction, and finally answered questions assessing interpretations of game content. Results indicate two major frameworks in game interpretation. One mode consisted of dismissing racial content as mere jokes or aesthetic game elements which borders colorblind racial notions. The second mode consisted of rejection and criticism of game content. Gamer respondents interpreted through media reference modes while non-gamers, by and large, were critical of game content. Respondents draw from their experiences and knowledge to interpret racial semiotics and do not passively accept content, as content analysis and psychology literature assumes.

Introduction

The video game industry is one of the fastest growing businesses of this century with sales of at least $6 billion in the year 2000 (Leonard 2003, 2006) and $25 billion in the year 2010, outselling the music and film industries in the United States (digitalbattle 2010; vgchartz 2011). Likewise, video games have also made their way into the classroom with the use of educational video games, software, and interactive curriculum that uses alternative methods of teaching (ESA 2011; Everett & Waitkins 2008). In addition, this form of entertainment has evolved from simple pixelated caricatures to more photo-realistic games that sport a large gamut of genres and involve the dynamic use of strategy, music, and wireless global communications (IGN 2009). As a result, on the one hand this has contributed to the creation of a massive community of gamers from varying ages, nationalities, and income levels in which the average gamer is of age 41 (ESA 2011). On the other hand, the rise of this industry has also created controversies by game developers such as Resident Evil 5, accused of racist depictions of black men as zombies in a supposed rape scene against a white woman, 6 Days in Fallujah, which received critical acclaim regarding the simulation of the Iraq occupation, and finally, Grand Theft Auto IV regarding the sexualized and racial content in the game's open city of Liberty City, a spoof on New York City (IGN 2009; Leonard 2003).

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, along with many other games in video game franchises spurred research and debate in academia on the impact of video game content on audiences, primarily children. Most notably from the American Psychological Association, research was conducted that sought to establish a causal relationship between violent video games like Grand Theft Auto and violent behavior (Anderson & Dill 2000; DeVane & Squire 2008; Leonard 2003; Barrett 2008; Mou & Peng 2009). The racial and gender content in video games has been extensively studied across video game titles spanning generations, from the Nintendo Entertainment System to more contemporary titles such as the Grand Theft Auto series and Bully, both from the same developing company, Rockstar North (DeVane & Squire 2008; Dietz 1998; Everett & Waitkins 2008; Leonard 2003, 2006; Mou & Peng 2008). The racial content in video games speaks to a large degree to Omi and Winant's concept of "racialization" in the application of racial constructions to video games (Omi & Winant 1994). Building from racialization, Everett and Waitkins argue that the racialization in video games is a reflection of the current racial order in modern society and a form of modern minstrelsy, similar to the Blackface archetype used in past media (Everett and Waitkins 2008). From this previous assertion, race becomes an important factor central to this research. Most social

scientists agree that race is a socially constructed term that plays a significant role in society (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Gallagher 2003; Winant 2000; Wise 2010) and that US society is now in a "colorblind, post-racial society", an assertion argued against by Gallagher, Bonilla-Silva, and Wise in their works. Furthermore, Gallagher posits that race has become commodified and that it can be something to be consumed like ethnic products (Gallagher 2003). Building from that thesis, and adding in Omi and Winant's concept of racialization, Leonard primarily argues about racial consumption in video games through interaction with the video game (Leonard 2006). I will be further expanding on race and video game content analysis in the review of literature.

An aspect in the research literature that needs to be explored is how video game knowledge impacts interpretation of racialized content. In other words, does having technical and cultural knowledge of the video game world mediate the racialized experience of video games in combination with players' racial perspectives? Video game racial content reproduces race as a lived experience (Leonard 2003; Everett & Waitkins 2008), however this reproduction is often contested through various interpretational modes that involve video game experience or lack thereof. This research project focuses on addressing these questions by obtaining respondent perspectives on the content of a racialized video game they will play. In particular, I will use the game Grand Theft Auto: The Ballad of Gay Tony as a source of content and explore the variety of interpretations and their relationship, if any, to respondent video game knowledge and racial lens. Results discuss the different modes of interpretation of content and how that relates to video game experience. By analyzing these relationships, we can understand how race is both reproduced and contested in video games; this shows complexity in player interpretation of content and how video game experience mediates the reception of racialized content.

Review of Literature

The controversy of video games like Grand Theft Auto (henceforward GTA) that are situated in racialized (Leonard 2003) and gendered (Dietz 1998) content has become part of a larger debate regarding the impact of these games on audiences. Academically, this has become part of literature that seeks to establish a causal link between violent video games and violent behavior primarily coming from psychology. Among that body of work, Anderson and Dill are known for their study that concluded that violent content in video games "increase violent and aggression-related thoughts and feelings" and decreases "pro-social behavior" (Anderson, Berkowitz et al 2003; Anderson & Dill 2000; Bensley & van Eenwyk 2001). Their instrument of measurement was noting the intensity and length of noise that participants directed at a fictional character when told that said character was competing against them. This was compared to a control group who was not told of competition and the study found that participants playing competitively made noises quicker than that of the control group. One limitation in Anderson's study is whether he can generalize to much broader social contexts outside of the game-competition mode; in other words, do violent attitudes associated with competition and playing remain in the context of playing? Anderson is known within the psychology field for studying violent video games and asserting that such games cause more violent thoughts and behavior than movies due to their interaction with players and that the games reward violence (APA 2004).

On the other hand, other studies have become more skeptical as to whether such a causal link exists. One study by Dunkin and Barber concluded that there was "no evidence obtained of negative outcomes among game players" and that gamers received higher scores than non-gamer participants in the areas of school involvement, mental health, family relationships, and friendship networks (Dunking & Barber 2002). This result speaks to some degree that players do not passively receive messages in game content as is often asserted in psychological studies like Anderson and Dill, but rather that a process of interaction takes place between the players and the game and other social factors that play a role in interaction.

Regarding video game racial content, literature from the field of game studies has analyzed the content of video games and provided different theories of interaction between players and the game as a text. Among these studies, games that contain military content such as Call of Duty and Rainbow Six have been studied by scholars regarding the possibility of the games as a form of military propaganda (Andersen 2009; Gagon 2010; Huntemann 2010; Shaw 2010). Huntemann and Shaw used Winnicott's concept of transitional space (Winnicott 1971) to assert that video games allow players to dialogue with in-game messages that to some degree can manufacture consent as in the case of military First Person Shooter games for which their studies are centered upon (Huntemann 2010; Andersen 2009; Gagnon 2010; Shaw 2010). Studies have been conducted through content analysis on the effect of military war First Person Shooter (FPS) video games on attitudes of militarism and foreign policy (Gagnon 2010; Huntemann 2010; Andersen, Kurti 2009; Šisler 2008) and similar studies on the racial content of games like the

Grand Theft Auto series and other games are also growing (Dietz 1998; Leonard 2003, 2007; Everett & Waitkins 2008; Šisler 2008).

Likewise, the study of gender roles and to some extent race is growing with the works of David Leonard and Mou Peng. Peng's study analyzed content of a sample of 19 of the most popular video games regardless of console and analyzed the role of characters, gender, race, attire, character position, and body type. The results demonstrated that characters in these video games were predominantly white male with built bodies and demonstrating heroic masculine acts; female characters were minimal and were given side roles or used as trophies. Peng and Mou conclude that these content characteristics reinforce gender roles that can impact the identity and social development of teens playing the games (Mou & Peng 2009). The authors assert that since males are predominant in the gaming development, video games and the hobby become gendered due to male developers operating from a limited gendered lens. These social factors cause females to lose interest in video gaming (*ibid*), which is a form of marginalizing females from a hobby that has grown over the past ten years (*ibid*). The latter assertion speaks to an implication from feminist standpoint theory that situates females in a position of marginalization in the case of the video game franchise which also allows females to critically observe the male dominated franchise (Degler 1956; Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis 2002). Regarding these studies, to what extent are video games a reproduction of the current social order and are video games a causal medium of gender and racial socialization for audiences? (Mou & Peng 2009)

Another example of racial content in GTA is the study by Everett and Waitkins who analyzed the content of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, the most controversial game of the franchise (McLaughlin 2008) and compared it to Bully, another game developed by Rockstar. This was done by observing elements in the game such as character depictions, story of the game, agency available in the game, and interactions between characters. Their results demonstrated that in San Andreas the main character is a black man who delves in gang criminal life while Bully's main character is a troubled white youth who seeks moral redemption in a boarding school. Everett and Waitkins also asserted that games like Grand Theft Auto reproduce the current racial order and are a form of modern minstrelsy, similar to the blackface archetype used in past media (Everett & Waitkins 2008). David Leonard is another scholar who analyzes racial content in video games from sports games to military shooters to Grand Theft Auto (Leonard 2003; 2006). His main conclusions are similar to those of Everett and Waitkins as he asserts that "Video games, despite, or perhaps because of, their function as a source of entertainment and a profitable commodity, exist as a powerful medium to disseminate ideologies, talk through racial/gender issues, and elicit approval for the status quo. Contributing to our 'racial common sense' while also justifying social policies, contemporary video games are ideological constructs that demand careful analysis" (Leonard 2003). Similar to Leonard and Everett & Waitkins, Barrett asserts of black body commodification through Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas in which players can alter the body of the main character CJ by making him muscular, thin, obese, or of any type to which Barrett asserts is a form of racial minstrelsy and objectification of the black body (Barrett 2006). Underlying the studies of Leonard, Everett, Waitkins, and Barrett are the concepts of racialization (Omi and Winant 1994) and a lack of explanation regarding player reception of racial semiotics in the games. A limitation in these content analysis studies is that inferences are made on the effects that the game semiotics have on players without empirical evidence showing player interaction with game semiotics. The former is demonstrated in that video games are taking a racial meaning through the use of racial stereotypes, semiotics, and language (Leonard 2003, 2006; Everett & Waitkins 2008).

In providing literature to the question of how players make sense of racial and violent content in video games, a study by DeVane and Squire is from a curriculum and instruction lens. Their study utilized focus groups of youth of different gaming, age, and racial backgrounds who were interviewed on what they made of the violent and racial content in GTA: San Andreas. Results demonstrated that players utilized their own knowledge, expertise as gamers, identities, and discourses to make different meanings from the game which suggest that players do not necessarily passively take racial content at face value and often contest such content (DeVane & Squire 2008).

This study also reviewed different modes of meaning-making from texts and asserted that video games be seen as a dynamic text and that "this open reading of a text as a social practice takes place through the interplay of the text and the players' discourse models, or cultural models" (*ibid*) as in the culture of gamers and their own personal identities and backgrounds. A limitation in this study is that it racially focused only on white and black respondents when it came to racial semiotics without understanding how other racially identified groups made sense of the content. Another limitation in DeVane's study is that it did not account for gender in their sample since the GTA games are known for gendered content and depictions of women. Females represent 42% of the gaming population in the United States (ESA 2011) which demonstrates a growing female gamer population with important perspectives, not just on race, but on gender and violence. With new video game consoles, upgraded technology, and more agency in the new Grand Theft Auto games such as GTA: IV and Episodes of Liberty City, it is important

to consider how racial content differs for the newer GTA games. DeVane's study served as a major foundation for this project in understanding racial content and whether it is a reproduction of society's racial stratification or whether players make different meanings out of them in relation to their experiences and their views of race and racial inequality in society.

It is important then to understand how race operates on this society and how a structural racial system and race depictions can be reinforced through the media and entertainment (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Gallagher 2003). One study in particular, performed by Judith N. Martin et al, used Bonilla-Silva's tool of the 15 racial groups to see which one is whitest and create a spectrum of whitest to not-whitest groups. The study used those tools along with the seven dimensions of race to assess a sample of hundreds of students' attitudes and results showed that skin color, culture, and nationality played a major role in defining race among other factors (Martin et al 2010).

Martin's study is based on the contact theory framework of race that asserts that racial prejudice reduces when coming into contact with other racialized groups (Martin et al 2010). Contact theory in race theory has been challenged on many aspects and raises questions as to whether coming into contact with racial groups in a medium like video games reproduces racialization or contests it (Martin et al 2010). Much of the current racial dialogues taking place in contemporary US society include white privilege (Macintosh 1988), domestic race-based policies—Affirmative Action—and white racial resentment (Tuch and Hughes 2011), as well as the denial and rationalization of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Davidio et al 2002; Tuch & Hughes 2011). Reviewing this body of work gives a sense of how participant discourses and socially situated experiences on race can demonstrate the complexity of race and how this understanding shapes interpretation of content. The purpose in reviewing these works is to provide theoretical and empirical grounds for the use of racial lens in participants for this study and to also address that literature on analysis of games like GTA reflect social dynamics in real life and can serve as a means to direct attention away from real social issues on racial inequality and institutional racism. In other words, while players may interact with racial semiotics, it is only a small aspect of a much larger structural societal issue on race (Bonilla-Silva 1997).

Hypotheses

I provide my hypotheses to the research question of how do respondents interpret the racial semiotic content in GTA: BoGT in relationship to racial lens/awareness. These are as follows:

- H1: If video games are to be seen as a dynamic text with an open reading of interplay between the text and players' discursive and cultural models (DeVane & Squire 2008), then I hypothesize that respondents that have extensive experience in video games are more likely to interpret the game's racial content through a video game technical lens than participants with little to no video game experience.
- H2: People with a systemic racial lens are more likely to be cognizant of racial content in game than participants with a more mainstream or colorblind racial lens. The reasoning behind this is that if people with a systemic understanding of race can note the implicit and explicit attitudes of people in society (Dovidio et al 2002; Yamato 1988), then they can be more cognizant of the content and behaviors of characters in GTA.

Methods

Operationalization of terms and variables

In order to assess the racial lens of the participant, it is necessary to put into operation on what constitutes racial lens. A racial lens is the understanding and awareness of race in society, which is supported by the reviewed literature above and by Katz and Hass in their study assessing racial attitudes and their connection to American values (Katz & Hass 1988). To supplement this further, I supply some racial lens classifications that will be used for this project. These classifications of racial lenses and frameworks have been derived from the works of past sociologists and they constitute different views of race and racism in society. The frameworks or lenses have been reviewed by Bonilla-Silva in his work *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* and are provided as a means to classify respondents regarding their views on race and racism in US society.

Mainstream/colorblind. This view of race and racism posits that racism is an ideology or set of ideas that affect individuals and behavior. This view relegates the study of racism to psychology and that as an idealist view, ideas

influence behavior and attitudes towards different groups in society (Bonilla-Silva 2001). Persisting racial inequality then owes to lack of responsibility and cultural deficiencies of minority groups (Brown et al 2003; Wise 2010) and that we now live in a post-racial society (Bonilla-Silva 2003, p. 28-30). Racism still exists, but when it is mentioned, skinheads and the Ku Klux Klan are the groups usually associated with the term. Building from these assertions, racism is individualized and little attention is paid to the system of advantages provided by institutions in a society that privileges one group over others (Bonilla-Silva 2001; McIntosh 1988; Yamato 1988).

Systemic. In this lens, racism and racial inequality are seen primarily as a system of advantages that favors one race over other racial groups (Bonilla-Silva 2002; McIntosh 1988; Yamato 1988). In this framework, white privilege is also recognized where whites benefit from institutions such as government, housing, and income, and people of color lag behind whites regarding these institutional factors (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003; Gallagher 2003; McIntosh 1988; Wise 2010). While aware that racism is beyond skinheads and Archie Bunkers (Winant 2000), this framework recognizes that discrimination takes place in more systemic ways (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Yamato 1988).

Marxist. This lens holds as its main tenet the system of class and exploitation of the working class under the bourgeoisie. Racism and race are viewed as secondary to class interests and the concept of race is used as a means to exploit marginalized groups in a capitalist society (Bonilla-Silva 2001). Much of this framework is derived from Marx and holds as its main tenets the conflict of class in the United States. For example, poverty and uneven distribution of resources in a class-based society are appeals that correspond to this lens.

Participant responses to questions on the topic of race were assessed to find fit within these lenses. That is not to say these frameworks are mutually exclusive since overlap can occur in different areas of social life; for example, somebody can have a Marxist lens and see race as secondary to class while also espousing colorblind racial beliefs. While issues regarding identification of racial lens may arise, a lens will be assigned based on responses to race questions on white privilege, institutional racism (education, justice system, and housing), the race and wealth gap, distribution of resources, personal racial identity, and stereotypes of racial groups in society, and what these evoke in participants.

Game selection

Among the diverse gamut of video game genres that contains racial content, I utilized GTA: The Ballad of Gay Tony, the most recent game from the Grand Theft Auto franchise, which has a history of controversy regarding the content on racial, gender, crime, and sexual grounds (Barrett 2006; DeVane & Squire 2008; Everett & Waitkins 2008; IGN 2008). Prior to interviewing respondents, I familiarized myself with the GTA franchise by reading online articles about GTA from popular gaming websites such as IGN and the official GTA website from Rockstar North. I played GTA: The Ballad of Gay Tony and completed the story while taking note of content and themes within the game that were pertinent to the research. Among those themes, the franchise's trademark theme of the American Dream and a crime-filled notion of meritocracy were present in this installment (McLaughlin 2008). The reason this game was chosen was because the game's contextual setting is situated in a fictional yet close reflection of today's contemporary society which reproduces racial group depictions such as Asians, Latinos, and Blacks and continues the same racial dynamics of past GTA games (Everett & Waitkins 2008; Rockstar 2009).

Participant recruitment

In order to obtain this information, a sample of 23 participants were gathered and asked to be part of the research project. The sample covered different backgrounds such as video game experience. There were participants that considered themselves gamers and had played video games for at least six or more years; likewise, there were participants that had no experience with video games and had no interest in the industry or culture whatsoever. Geographically, my participant sample resided in Idaho, mainly the Boise area, with a small degree of respondents from Nampa and Meridian, Idaho. The Boise State campus helped me obtain a geographically and racially diverse sample in that there were international students and students from out of the state that attended the campus for summer classes. In order to recruit participants, I utilized snowball sampling from informants and made announcements to Boise State University student organizations about the project. I also extended my outreach to communities outside of Boise State and to staff from student affairs departments on campus such as Promotions and the Student Diversity and Inclusion. Through snowball sampling I was able to obtain potential participants that had

different racial backgrounds such as black, Asian, Latino, and biracial respondents. The reasoning for my sampling method to be snowball and non-random is due to Idaho's racial demographics. Idaho lacks much racial diversity with whites representing over 85% of the population, Latino/Hispanics representing at least 10%, and other racial groups between 1-3% (US Bureau of the Census 2010). To draw a random sample would mean that I would most likely have an over-representation of white racially identified people. For the purpose of my research, I needed people from different racial backgrounds which prompted me to search for racially diverse participants through snowball sampling. My sample of 23 participants is broken down as follows in terms of racial, gaming experience, and gender backgrounds.

Table 1. Sample Demographic by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity*	
Asian/Pacific Islander	5
Black or African American	2
Hispanic or Latino	11
White	5

*Racial classifications obtained from the US Census Bureau.

Table 2: Gaming Hobby and Gender Frequency in Sample

Gender and Gamer Type	Female	Male	**Totals**
Gamer	4	9	**13**
Non-Gamer*	6	4	**10**
Totals	**10**	**13**	

*Note that I included former gamers in the non-gamer category.

Data collection

In order to obtain data, I used personal in-depth interviews to assess the racial lens of participants and to debrief participants after playing GTA: BoGT in order to obtain their interpretations of the game. Using face-to-face interaction with participants and open-ended questions allowed me to have a more personalized and dynamic conversation, which also allowed respondents to share stories and to express what they felt in response to the interview questions. As a result, it allowed me to better glean perspectives and the context that surveys would not have been able to capture (Babbie 2010). Interviews were also necessary because the process involved having participants play GTA: BoGT and then be debriefed after the experience in order to see how they made sense of the content and of the game experience, especially for non-gamers who may have never played a video game before. I used an XBOX 360 gaming system and I tutored non-gamer participants throughout the gaming session. Interviews took place in one of two areas: the first was in the homes of participants; the other area was in the Student Diversity Center located on the Boise State campus where I was provided with a television and a comfortable space to conduct interviews and provide refreshments. The interviews were then recorded, transcribed, and analyzed through memoing and the constant comparative method (Babbie 2010; Glaser & Strauss 1967) in order to find emergent themes and frameworks of interpretation.

The interview process consisted of three major parts. The first part consisted of obtaining participant demographic information pertinent for this project such as gender, age, racial/ethnic identification, and video game experience. This included questions about the video game industry, culture, demographics, and types of games that participants have played. If participants did not play games, I further inquired as to why they didn't and if they would if given the opportunity. In this part of the interview process, questions assessing participant racial lens were also asked. These questions addressed respondent attitudes on race and their racial views to see correspondence with the racial frameworks provided in the previous section. Questions addressing institutionalized racism, white

privilege, inter-personal racism, distribution of resources, stereotypes, as well as an inquiry into their own view of race and racism in this society were asked.

After the first set of questions, we proceeded to play GTA: Ballad of Gay Tony from the beginning until the end of the first mission. Players play as Luis Lopez, a Dominican man released from prison who dedicates himself to building a better life in Liberty City working as a business partner for Tony Prince. A mishap with authorities gets Luis sent to prison for years where he learns to not be involved in the drug business despite his friends cajoling him back into it. In working as a business partner for Tony, Luis is torn between facing people from his past like his friends that continue delving in the drug dealing business or working for Tony legitimately and risk being called a sellout by his family and friends. As the story progresses, Luis engages in under the table jobs for Tony in business dealing and must also mediate Tony's drug addiction problems during the game's situated economic hardship. Luis also experiences racial issues as he deals with people in power over him calling him by racial slurs.

During gameplay, players enter one of Tony's nightclubs. They are given the options to dance, drink, or partake in a drinking game. As part of the procedure, I had participants partake in the dancing game where depending on their performance one of two things occur. If players do well, they can take part in a group dance, otherwise Luis and the woman with whom he dances make out and go to a bathroom stall for sex. Participants can see the outside of the stall slightly shaking and hear the sex moans of the woman and Luis. I had participants experience this in the game so as to demonstrate an aspect of the portrayal of women and to help them elicit reactions that they can then talk about in the third part of the interview; this was also the earliest sex scene they could witness. Participants then step outside the club to help the club bouncer deal with two people causing trouble. As part of the introduction, players experience Luis' interactions with his childhood friends and how they delve in the drug dealing business. Players complete the introduction after dropping Luis' friends off and arriving in Luis' apartment. What players did next varied since some chose to explore while others ended the game session.

When the gaming session finished, I proceeded to follow up with participants to talk about their experience of the game and in a sense let them debrief about the game. I asked questions about game content, what they made of it, what they felt the game was telling them about certain groups such as women, Latinos, and gays. Other questions also involved discussing how much of reality the game portrayed and I gave them the opportunity to relate any other aspects that I did not cover that they felt compelled to discuss. While participants cannot obtain the most content and story out of the introduction of the game, it was during this part of the interview process that I supplemented participants with the synopsis of the game from the instruction booklet and in-game information. The information I provided included description of missions, plot twists, background stories on Luis, Tony, and what it is they do under the table in the game. This helped participants contextualize the events that transpired in the game.

Once I collected the interviews, they were transcribed and analyzed through memoing and coding for search of themes, or rather, frameworks of interpretation of GTA's racial content. I analyzed through memoing by noting respondent answers to interview questions and how their answer corresponded with the beliefs in each of the racial lenses. In terms of interpretation of the game content, I noted certain keywords used that suggested references to other discourses and cultural knowledges as well as words that showed opinions about the content. I focused on interview questions in the post-gaming session addressing the game's portrayal of certain groups like women, Latinos, and other racial groups. Some words noted as I coded were words like "disagree," "false," "objectify," "stereotypes," "similar," "crime genre," and "story of the game," among others. Personal experiences were noted as well and codified in the transcripts as were words that dealt with references in the game which were subsequently codified under "elements of the game;" likewise, words and phrases not dealing with video game knowledge from interpretations of content were codified as "personal knowledge." Through analyzing the data, I was able to codify these modes of interpretation as I will show in the results.

Results

Two major frameworks of interpretation emerged that demonstrate the different ways that respondents make sense of the racialized experience of video games.

Frameworks

Game Criticism. In this framework of interpretation, participants expressed concern regarding the racial depictions of characters, use of stereotypes, language, portrayal of women and Latinos, and the setting in which the game took place. Of the participants whose responses fit this framework, non-gamers were predominant with some

that used to play video games but stopped altogether. Participants in this mode of interpretation drew from their own personal experiences, identities, and knowledge to interpret the game's racial content and provide perspectives on the game's use of race, gender, and violence.

Media Cultural References. This framework consisted primarily of gamer respondents, those who have played video games for years and continue to do so as their hobby. There was some variation regarding racial lens, but primarily it consisted of mainstream lens with a small amount of systemic racial lens. A major factor here is that unlike in the Critical Reflection framework where most respondents were not gamers and did not know much about the video game industry and culture, being a gamer impacted to a large degree how racial content was interpreted by respondents because many of them possessed the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) about the gaming culture and what goes into making a video game. As a result, respondents here were able to interpret racial content in the context of game development, aesthetic, and media reference archetypes from other forms of entertainment.

Respondents were tabulated in a 4x2 table reflecting the modes of interpretation and respondent racial lens/video game background as shown below.

Table 3: Respondent Game/Racial lens and Mode of Interpretation

	Game Criticism	Media Cultural Ref
Gamer Systemic	1	3
Gamer Mainstream	0	7
Non-gmr Systemic	6	0
Non-gmr Mainstream	3	3

The table demonstrates that by and large non-gamer respondents interpreted racial content in GTA through the mode of Game Criticism, while gamer respondents interpreted content in a Media Cultural Reference mode. The non-gamer mainstream racial lens respondents were evenly split in terms of interpretational mode which is something that will be further addressed in the discussion. To better demonstrate how gaming cultural knowledge and lack thereof impacted interpretational mode, I provide cases for each type of respondent background.

Non-gamer systemic. One respondent who has a systemic racial lens and is a non-gamer is Caz. He is a former gamer who stepped away from the gaming industry due to what he believes is the industry's use of controversy to sell such as foreign military conflict with Call of Duty or sexual content as in GTA. He identifies as biracial being half white and half Mexican, but feels more close to white. His responses drew from his own experiences and critical racial lens knowledge when asked about racial content in GTA. He mentioned a critical point regarding the larger perspective portrayed in the game and whose it reflects.

> Interviewer: *Few more questions. In the narrative and things taking place, like whose reality do you think is being projected in that game?*
>
> Caz: *The media's, I'd say, I guess, what I mean by that is how the media projects these people of color. On the news you know, you hear about criminal activity and next thing you hear is black man, Mexican Hispanic, so I think it's giving you that reality right there.*

Although Caz makes a reference to the media, his view is more critical in that he is cognizant that the game reproduces media representations of people of color and suggests that the game further reinforces those views of people of color. He is aware of the bias in society towards people of color as he mentioned during the interview how racism not only persists but is reflected in much of the institutions but that poverty also plays a role in

perpetuating much of the inequality. Caz was one of the six respondents in this category who took issue with the game and found the content to be of concern when used for propaganda and further cementing racial stereotypes of people in society. Among the six, most took note of the portrayal of women and expressed concern for impressionable audiences like children. This suggests that racial content is contested through lived experiences and knowledge and not accepted at face value since respondents in this category did not find anything funny regarding racial content in GTA.

Non-gamer, mainstream lens. A case of this mode that interpreted content in a media reference way, albeit not in a gaming sense, but based on his experiences and perspective is Mib. He is a white, former gamer with a colorblind racial lens overlapping to some degree with a mainstream lens who responded by drawing from his own knowledge and experiences to the question of Latino depictions in the game. When asked about the portrayal of Luis, his friends, Luis' mother, who borrowed money from a loan shark, and the social and physical actions taking place in the game, he responds:

> Interviewer: *How much of it do you find true of Latinos in society?*
>
> Mib: *Um, if I took those four and try and extrapolate their personalities, their traits and lives and put it on to all the Latinos that I've met, um, it does seem to be a good representation when you add all four of these up because there's a lot of Latinos that I've met that are like the mother, there's a few that I've met that are like Luis who kind of recognizing their situation, they're not stuck by, I guess we don't have the best life right now, we're immigrants so we have to like—it takes like a couple generations to make money and get jobs and kind of learn how to live in America so Luis is trying to take some further steps.*

Mib's response found personalities and characteristics of the characters, in other words, physical attributes to be true to his experience with Latinos. Socioeconomically, it is worth mentioning that Mib used a similar reasoning to the question of Latinos regarding their immigration and socioeconomic status. He mentioned that rather than being systemic stratification and discrimination that worked against Latino immigrants (Durand & Massey 2001), it was rationalized to be that since Latinos are recent immigrants, it would take generations to move up the economic ladder much like whites did in the past. While this response is an appeal to meritocracy that racial realists often use to blame people of color for persisting racial inequality (Brown et al 2003), the game content reinforced his experiences with Latinos and illustrated a case of race as a lived experience that was reproduced in the game.

Gamer, mainstream lens. Among gamer respondents, the mode of Media Cultural References was predominant. Knowledge of the video game world played a major role in mediating interpretation of the racial content in GTA. A case in point is Pog. He is a white male who has been playing video games for at least 30 years and follows the industry still. Although he is aware of how race plays in society, his views align with those of mainstream regarding racism, and his views are largely shaped by his hobby as a video game player. Pog's knowledge of the video game industry and culture is extensive as he expresses how much goes into making a game; he also believes games don't drive people to aggressive behavior since he mentioned he has yet to see a study that shows detrimental long term effects of games. When asked about the use of racial slurs in GTA, particularly the scene where Rocko and Vince confronted Luis by calling him a spic and having a verbal altercation that erupted at gunpoint, he expressed the following:

> Interviewer: *What do you think about the use of racial epithets in the game? Especially with one of the characters, Rocco at the opening scene?*
>
> Pog: *Yeah, I, um, I definitely, well, I definitely did not seem to be the protagonist of the story, he didn't seem to be the hero, and I don't think the game was trying to glamorize or encourage what he was saying. In fact, I think the game was really using that to paint him in a negative light, and I think that again in the genre that the game is which is the crime and heist and gang genre, that type of language and those types of epithets are pretty common...especially with characters throwing insults at each other and that's pretty common dialogue in movies.*

Rather than making a connection to impact of the use of racial slurs in real life society, Pog dismissed the use of it as more of a game story element by making references to crime genre films. He recognized that the racial depictions were necessary for the game to be more realistic in its setting and making it reflect many of the current social dynamics. Like Pog, other gamer respondents in this category drew from their technical knowledge of video games and kept the depictions of racial groups inside the game. This mode of reference situated racial content under a cultural media and gaming context that while a reflection of reality, it is limited in such context.

Gamer, systemic lens. Among the respondents who fit this category were half the number of gamer respondents with a mainstream racial lens. This group, despite demonstrating a sharp awareness of the role of race in society and how race is embedded in social institutions (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Brown et al 2003; Yamato 1988), interpreted GTA's racial content within a gamer cultural mode drawn from media references and technical aspects in a game. To illustrate this case is a Latino male gamer pseudonymed Cor; he has been playing video games for at least 10 years and is interested in the art aspect of video games. He expressed how much art and music goes into games and that story is a necessary aspect to make a good game. Regarding his racial lens, he is very aware of systems of racial inequality like white privilege, institutional racism, and has a keen awareness of race in society though he takes it in a parody manner by often making comical and witty remarks on race. Cor played through the introduction of the game and then proceeded to simply drive around a stolen firetruck hosing people down and causing traffic accidents until his death by the in-game police. Cor made connections to other forms of media and focused on the story aspect of the game, what he considered to be the game's main intent, as shown:

> Interviewer: *In what ways does the game reflect the dynamics, in a sense interactions for minority groups?*
>
> Cor: *I don't think that's the game's intent. The game's intent is to tell a story that's, I mean, something important to think about when you're making a game because that way is more realistic…*
>
> Interviewer: *In how much of the game do you find a reflection of reality? And that can be open minded so it can be about cars, traffic, anything. Does that make sense?*
>
> Cor: *Well in life there are people, buildings, there are cars so that was realistic. But other than that it was more like a movie than real life. Like a bad movie…*
>
> Interviewer: *How do you see power reflected in the game? Power can be anything from owning guns, running clubs, property, anything?*
>
> Cor: *It's usually saying it's supposed to be an edgy game, but it's still got white people in power and their little ethnic servants (laughter) which is a very traditional type of archetypal sort of thing. Race and power.*

Cor's responses speak to how he is able to integrate his own racial lens and his expertise as a gamer to make sense of the semiotics in the game and to identify them with other forms of media. While he is deeply aware of how race plays a role in society structurally (Bonilla-Silva 2001; McIntosh 1988; Yamato 1988), he is also aware of racialization in the game (Omi & Winant 1994) which he interprets as just another traditional use in game story. Another thing to note is that Cor makes a reference to who has access to the game and the intended audience which speaks of accessibility to games with strong explicit content like Grand Theft Auto. Cor is also able to distinguish the racial dynamics in the game, but sees it as secondary to his standards as a gamer like story, gameplay, music, and art; this to a large degree reflects a separation between what is fantasy and what is real since he only saw the depictions of Latinos in the game as mere elements in the game and kept those depictions within the game context only.

Discussion

In analyzing the results of this study, both frameworks of interpretation of racial content demonstrated interaction between respondents' racial lens and their socially situated knowledge of the racial semiotics that GTA: Ballad of Gay Tony exhibited. Speaking to content analysis literature, these results help add a level of complexity regarding reception and interpretation of GTA's racial semiotics and what roles modes of discursive practices play as in the case of video game knowledge. The Media Reference mode saw the game as a form of satire laden with

references to other forms of media that utilized stereotypes within the context of the game. Knowledge of the nuances of video games played a role with racial lens in interpreting content. In other words, respondents within this framework integrated their technical expertise of video games with their racial lens to view racial content.

On the other hand, respondents that were more critical of the game interpreted the game content by drawing from their personal experiences and knowledge of the groups portrayed. The Game Criticism mode comprised primarily of non-gamers with systemic and, to a small degree, mainstream racial lenses. In support of this framework, DeVane & Squire found a similar result when interviewing black youth who played Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas which showed that "participants from socially and economically marginalized groups—African American, working-class, or working poor—used the game as a framework to discuss institutional racism in society" (DeVane & Squire 2008). By drawing from their experience and knowledge, these respondents contested the racial content and saw them as another reproduction of the racialized system in society. It is also worth noting that the number of non-gamer mainstream lens participants is equal in interpreting content from both modes. This speaks to further research on participants with these backgrounds because other factors besides video game knowledge affect interpretation, such as personal identity and other forms of cultural knowledge not addressed in this research.

Speaking to the hypotheses presented for this project, the results demonstrate that how participants interpreted content involved more than just racial lens and demonstrated complexity of interpretations within these frameworks. I hypothesized that gamers would interpret racial content through a gamer lens only, but my results demonstrated that these participants were able to integrate their understandings of race into their technical knowledge of video games to make sense of depictions; however, the hypothesis is partly correct in that respondents who identified as gamers kept the interpretation within the context of the game and media, and did not see it as something that would be real for all groups depicted. In a sense, video game cultural knowledge mediated interpretation of the game's racial semiotics.

Respondents with a systemic racial lens comprised a significant number in the Game Criticism mode while those with more mainstream and colorblind comprised a large number in the Media Cultural References mode. It is also important to note that respondents with mainstream and, to some degree, colorblind lens used non-racial factors to interpret content which can be a form of colorblind racist appeal (Bonilla-Silva 2003). This result reflects my hypothesis on racial lens and how it plays a role with interpretation of GTA's racial content.

The results in terms of modes of interpretation and its relationship to gaming knowledge suggest that respondents see the racial content in video games like GTA, but how they interpret such content is mediated by many factors such as racial lens and video game experience. Video games contain symbolic content that reproduce racial dynamics in society (Everett & Waitkins 2008; Leonard 2003, 2006; Mou & Peng 2009), but respondents do not accept them at face value since interaction takes place between the player and the game's semiotics; how players draw from their experiences, socially situated knowledge, and various cultural capital impacts interpretation of the messages. These go from accepting the content based on personal experiences, as in Bim's case, to contesting the racial content by situating the content in relation to experiences, knowledges, and contexts, as in with Cor or Pog. These modes of interpretation address the literature of psychology and content analysis in terms of reception and interpretation of the games's racial content. Rather than passively accepting the depictions as true, both modes demonstrate that respondents "create their meanings by using their situated experiences" (DeVane & Squire 2008) in which case it involves participant gaming experience (or lack thereof) and racial lens. While these depictions are a modern form of minstrelsy, reinforcing racial imagery of non-dominant groups (Barrett 2006; Everett & Waitkins 2008), video games both reproduce and contest race showing complexity in how race operates in society.

Due to a lack of equal representation in my sample regarding racial demographics, I run the risk of *tokenizing* my participants and as such this paucity of other non-Latino racial groups is a limitation in this project. Regarding Latino respondents, my sample contained an over-representation of the Latino population; this limitation, while preventing me from generalizing, has some valid reasons as to why my sample contained more Latino respondents. Latinos constitute approximately 48% of my sample of respondents in comparison to the other racial groups (Asians: 22%, Blacks: 8%, Whites: 22%). A reason that this is the case is that the game GTA: Ballad of Gay Tony is centered around the life of Luis Lopez, a Latino man whose life revolves around other Latinos and where cultural content pertinent to Latinos such as the use of the Spanish language and the choice of music in radio stations is apparent throughout the game. Obtaining responses and interpretations from Latino respondents was a way to see how respondents from the target racial group which the game depicts would interpret the content in relation to their own racial lens and experiences as Latinos in the United States, and more precisely, in the state of Idaho. The study by DeVane and Squire utilized black and white respondents to obtain interpretations and meanings from GTA: San Andreas that utilized cultural elements in black life such as hip hop, gangster attire, ebonics, and black bodies and representations (DeVane & Squire 2008). Their study did not include other racial groups and what they made of the

content, which was something this research project sought to do despite running into its own limitations in sampling and generalizability.

Concluding Remarks

In this preliminary study I sought to explore the relationship between participant video game knowledge and how they interpret the racial content in the video game Grand Theft Auto: The Ballad of Gay Tony. The results of the interview process, which involved playing the game introduction, demonstrated two major modes of interpretation of the game's content. Racial lens played a role in interpreting content along with video game experience, which together impacted interpretation albeit with limits. One way content was interpreted was through the use of media references and technical knowledge of video games. This was done by drawing from technical aspects in a game such as story, aesthetics, how "real" the game can be, and from their own understandings of race through experiences and knowledge. In addition, these respondents, by and large, held a mainstream and colorblind racial lens to integrate with their gaming experience; there were gamers with a more critical Systemic lens that interpreted content through media references, but were smaller compared to the number of mainstream racial lens gamer respondents. This mode can also serve as a means to rationalize racial content as non-racial, making a reference to one of the frames of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Gallagher 2004).

On the other hand, respondents who were by and large non-gamers expressed criticism of GTA's racial content and interpreted said content through their own experiences with race and from their own knowledge. A trend of concern was apparent among this group regarding children and access to this sort of content. By and large, respondents in this group possessed a Systemic racial lens and were keenly aware of how race and racial inequality operates in society, as was reflected in questions about white privilege, institutional racism, and their meanings of race and racism. There were non-gamer respondents with a mainstream lens that interpreted content through media references which serves as ground for future research on further analysis of their views as to what other factors beside racial lens and lack of video game experience can influence their interpretation of racialized content from media like video games.

In addition to these results to the research questions, this project raised other questions that can provide points of departure and directions for future research. One way to conduct this research in a much more systematic fashion is to utilize focus groups for the interview process. Instead of gathering participants one by one and conducting personal interviews, it may work to have a group of similar folks that share common variables such as race, gaming experience, or gender. Doing focus groups is more likely to keep consistency in sampling and help address issues of representation in racial diversity. Another departure point is to what extent does my own identity as a Latino with a linguistic accent affect respondent answers to questions pertaining to race and racial stratification? Would responses differ if the interviewer was white? Would quality of responses be affected if I ask the same question to different racial groups and how would they respond to me? This preliminary study may serve as a launching point to a much larger project regarding respondent attitudes, reactions, and responses to questions of race asked by different interviewers and whether respondents would say anything pertaining to say, Latinos, in front of a member of said group. A second point of departure for future studies is to also analyze the depictions of LGBT characters in these types of games and explore how that is interpreted by heterosexual and LGBT respondents under a similar theoretical framework as this study.

In addressing the larger body of literature, I sought to address how players interpret the video game racial content that reproduces the current racial order (Barret 2006; Everett & Waitkins 2008; Leonard 2003) through their own experiences, lenses, and knowledge. Video games like Grand Theft Auto reproduce race and create spaces of interaction where factors like video game experience mediate the semiotic content and both reproduce and contest racial meanings that come about from the experience. This brings complexity in that actors can both accept and contest the meanings from a medium that is racialized (Barrett 2006; Everett & Waitkins 2008; Leonard 2003, 2006), as supported by DeVane and Squire, "Not only can players contest the dominant meanings in the space, they can also continually reconstruct the game as text through their choices in play" (DeVane & Squire 2008).

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