

The Racialized Experiences of Video Games

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Abstract

This research explores the ways different people experience the racial content of video games. Building on DeVane and Squire, this research speaks to content analyses literature that shows games as modern minstrelsy. Using Bonilla-Silva's definition of Racial Ideology in conjunction with Winddance-Twine's concept of Racial Literacy, I examined racial ideology and its role as an interpretive framework. I also used Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to account for video game cultural knowledge. Data were collected through personal interviews where participants played the video game Grand Theft Auto: The Ballad of Gay Tony for 30-50 minutes. A sample of 31 participants covering variation in gender, gaming experience, and race answered questions assessing their racial ideology, then played the game introduction, and finally, answered questions assessing interpretations of game content. Racially aware people with little gaming experience echoed the content analysis minstrelsy findings while colorblind racist non-gamers believed the content accurately represented the world. However, deeper familiarity with gaming and other mass media opened up a new interstitial space for challenging the racial status quo. Racially aware gamers saw the franchises as lampooning the shallow stereotypes in mainstream society. More importantly, with a more sophisticated media context, many colorblind racist gamers also saw racial representations as intentionally offensive. Gamers herein create inventive, non-threatening, but meaningful ways to address racialization across a spectrum of racial literacies. As a result, content analyses need a richer understanding of the experiences of video games for consumers.

The Story Thus Far

The video game industry is one of the fastest growing businesses 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 the film industry 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 curricula that use alternative methods of teaching (ESA, 2011; Everett & Waitkins, 2008). However, the rise of this industry has also created controversies in game content. Some famous titles include Resident Evil 5, which was accused of racist depictions of black men as zombies in a supposed rape scene against a white woman, and Grand Theft Auto IV, regarding the sexualized and racial content in the game's spoof on New York City (IGN, 2009; Leonard, 2003; Rockstar 2007).

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, along with many other games in the video game franchise, spurred research and debate in academia on the impact of video game content on audiences, primarily children. Most notably, members of the American Psychological Association conducted research that sought to establish a causal relationship between violent video games 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 also 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 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 contend that 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). In addition, 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 order," an ideology that frames discourse on racial inequality and is a major dominant ideological framework today

(Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Furthermore, Gallagher posits that race has become commodified and that it can be something to be consumed such as ethnic products (Gallagher, 2003). Building from that thesis and incorporating Omi and Winant's concept of racialization, David Leonard primarily posits that race is commodified in video games through interaction with the game (Leonard, 2006). I will be further expanding on race and video game content analysis in my literature review.

An aspect in the existing 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 content of video games in combination with players' racial ideology? While video games reproduce race as a lived experience (Leonard, 2003; Everett & Waitkins, 2008), I posit that racial lens and video game cultural capital create innovative ways to engage racial content. In other words, players' particular positions in racial lens and video game cultural capital create different experiences as they immerse themselves in the game's racial semiotics. Bourdieu (1986) describes cultural capital in three forms; they are embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. As such, cultural capital in video games is embodied by knowledge of the industry, developed video game skills through particular genres of games, and assimilated knowledge of the aspects of games such as plot, graphics, game controls, and aesthetics vis-à-vis mass media (Bourdieu, 1986).

Similarly, the racial lens of players plays an important role since it provides racial discursive frameworks from which to experience the game content. These racial frameworks are informed by socialization, dominant ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2003), lived experiences, and the micro-cultural processes that develop racial literacy such as supplementary education (Winddance-Twine 2004). As such, players can repress the racial content as offensive and not engage with it or see the stereotypes as reflecting reality for people of color. Likewise, players can engage with the content by seeing it as lampooning the stereotypes and demonstrating that content is not necessarily accepted at face value (DeVane & Squire, 2008). I will explore these dynamics in this research project and trace these engagements in relation to racial lens and video game cultural capital and lack thereof. This project engages content analyses and potentially opens up new grounds to explore the way games and similar media provide spaces with which to engage racism. If developed further, these inhabited spaces can begin conversations on race and other notions that tend to engender discomfort and negative feelings (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Tadem, 1998; Winant, 1990).

I perform this research by interviewing participants before and after they experience video games with racial content. In particular, I will use the game *Grand Theft Auto: The Ballad of Gay Tony* because it best operationalizes the racial and sexual content addressed in content analyses. By analyzing how players experience the racial content in the game, content analyses can get a better understanding on the sophisticated process of consumption and how racial lens and video game cultural capital influence this consumption in novel ways.

Situating the Theoretical Stage

Multidisciplinary approaches to video games

The controversy of video games like *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA henceforth) that are situated in racialized (Leonard, 2003) and gendered (Dietz, 1998; Mou & Peng, 2009) content has become part of larger debate regarding the impact of these games on audiences. Academically, some literature coming from psychology seeks to establish a causal link between violent video games and violent behavior. Among such bodies of work, Anderson and Dill are known for their study that concluded that violent content in video games "increase[s] violent and aggression-related thoughts and feelings" and decreases "pro-social behavior" (Anderson, Berkowitz, et al 2003; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Bensley & van Eenwyk, 2001). By measuring noise frequencies during competition, Anderson correlated the measurements as promoting pro-violent behavior. However, a major limitation in Anderson's study is that video games are not the only forms of competition that increase pro-violent behavior since video games are a product of the social norms by which we live (Everett & Waitkins, 2008; Leonard, 2007). Anderson asserts that such games cause more violent thoughts and behavior than movies due to their interaction and the reward for violence (APA, 2004). In contrast, studies have become skeptical as to whether such 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 (Dunkin & Barber, 2002).

On the other hand, 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, scholars have studied military games such as *Call of Duty* and *Rainbow Six* and connected them to a form of military propaganda (Andersen, 2009; Gagon, 2010; Huntemann, 2010; Shaw, 2010). Similar studies on the racial content of games like the GTA series and other games are also growing in this field (Dietz, 1998; Leonard, 2003, 2007; Everett

& Waitkins, 2008; Šisler, 2008). While gender role socialization has been studied in content analysis literature (Mou & Peng, 2009), race is a growing area of study in that field, which provides great background for sociological analyses of the video game subculture and the ways members experience a social concept as pervasive and volatile as race (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Winant, 1990).

A more in-depth example of racial content in GTA is the study by Everett and Waitkins who analyzed the content of GTA: San Andreas, the most controversial game of the franchise (McLaughlin, 2008) and compared it to Bully, another game developed by Rockstar. This was done through content analysis by observing elements in the game such as character depictions and interactions between characters. Results demonstrated that in San Andreas, the main character is a black man who delves into 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 GTA 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 GTA (Leonard, 2003, 2006). Leonard's 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).

Similarly, Barrett demonstrates the black body commodification through GTA: San Andreas in which players can alter the body of the main character CJ by altering his body type, 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 & Winant, 1994) and a lack of understanding of player reception of racial semiotics in the games. As such, these studies need a deeper understanding of how players experience racial content in video games. While games take a racial meaning through the use of racial stereotypes, semiotics, and language (Leonard, 2003, 2006; Everett & Waitkins, 2008), players experience these based on their own experiences with race, racial knowledges, and video game cultural expertise thereby creating new meanings and engaging with racism in non-contentious ways (DeVane & Squire, 2008).

Providing literature to the question of how players experience racial and violent content in video games is a study by Ben DeVane and Kurt Squire. 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 socially situated discourses to make different meanings from the game, which suggests that players do not necessarily 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" (DeVane & Squire, 2008) 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 male respondents when it came to racial semiotics without understanding how other racially identified groups and women experienced the content. With new video game consoles, upgraded technology, and more agency in the new GTA 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 serves 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 viz-à-viz their experiences and their views of race and racial inequality in society.

Racial frameworks and meaning making

In situating this research, it is important to understand how race operates in US society and how a structural racial system and dominant racial ideologies can be reinforced through the media and entertainment (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Gallagher, 2003). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) describes racial ideology as "the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo" (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Furthermore, these ideologies are learned socially and as such, the ways on how to speak on race are a result of socialization. As Stuart Hall (1984) points out, "we all constantly make use of a whole set of frameworks of interpretation and understanding, often in a very practical unconscious way, and those things alone

enable us to make sense of what is going on around us, what our position is, and what we are likely to do” (Hall, 1984). This means that these explanations on race frame discourse and representation of racial groups in society through various means such as the media and entertainment like video games (Gallagher, 2003). Furthermore, as Gallagher (2003) and Bonilla-Silva (1997) assert, the dominant racial ideology in the United States is that of colorblindness, which is central in framing discussions on race for actors both dominant and non-dominant alike. This ideology necessarily ignores racial inequality by assuming an ideal of racial harmony and by relegating racism to individual pathology, not systems that sustain inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). As a result, racial inequality persists due to non-racial factors like lack of work ethic or cultural deficiencies.

Relatedly, France Winddance-Twine’s research into the concept of Racial Literacy provides a strong framework for seeing indications of an anti-racist ideology. Winddance-Twine’s conceptualization of Racial Literacy consists of the practices and resources that people use to learn about racism and to combat it (Winddance-Twine, 2004). These practices include supplementary education on the history of marginalized groups and resources that develop a cognization of racism and its continuing influence in social inequality (Winddance-Twine, 2004). In other words, Bonilla-Silva describes racial ideology as “like wearing a piece of clothing. When you wear it, you also wear a certain style, a certain fashion, a certain way of presenting yourself to the world” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

Reviewing this body of work on race and video game content gives a sense of how player discourses and video game experience inform the ways racial content is experienced. Given the frameworks described in content analyses, those of DeVane and Squire, Bonilla-Silva, and Winddance-Twine, I posit the central research question that informs this project and addresses the issue of consumption. Experience and consumption are two processes hardly addressed in content analyses and recently incorporated by DeVane and Squire. That is, how do players experience the racial semiotic content in video games? In other words:

- How does the racial ideology of respondents inform the way race is presented in the game?
- To what extent does video game experience and knowledge inform the ways participants make sense of the game’s content?
- What particular racial lenses and game cultural capital enable sophisticated engagement with racial content beyond passive consumption?

Set Design and Operations

Capturing racial ideology

In order to identify the racial ideology of participants, it is necessary to find out what constitutes racial lens. Racial lens is rooted by an ideology that is defined by Bonilla-Silva as “the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). This is supported by Katz and Hass (1988) in their study assessing racial attitudes and their connections to American values when the American values of meritocracy and individual agency are used to justify the persisting racial inequality in the US (Katz & Hass, 1988). As mentioned previously, these ideologies are socially learned, and they frame discourse on race and inequality (Bonilla Silva, 2003; Hall, 1984). As a result, indicators of a particular racial ideology constitute frameworks, “linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies, to the technical tools that allow users to articulate its frame and story lines” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). In other words, to situate participants’ racial lens, I will be using two major ideological frameworks as reference points, and I will find indicators in participants’ discourse on race and racism. These two major ideologies are as follows:

Racially 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 says that, as an idealist view, ideas influence behavior and attitudes towards different groups in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Persisting racial inequality then owes to the lack of responsibility and cultural deficiencies of minority groups (Brown et al., 2003; Wise, 2010) and to the idea 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 maintains racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; McIntosh, 1988; Yamato, 1988). Furthermore, the frameworks that comprise this ideology use Abstract Liberalism, as in equal opportunities and free agency; cultural racism, where culture is used to explain inequality; naturalization, where racial phenomena are natural occurrences; and minimization, where discrimination is no longer a factor and it is anything but race (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 28-29). These non-racial explanations of racial inequality are a non-racial way of blaming

the victim. As such, semantic references such as “I’m not racist but...” or references that speak to any of the central frames of colorblindness will be operationalized as racially colorblind.

Racially aware. This ideology is the underlying narrative behind Winddance-Twine’s Racial Literacy, in that, actors learn how to cope and combat racism through formal and informal micro-practices that socialize people to understand race (Winddance-Twine, 2004). As Winddance-Twine posited, one of the dimensions of Racial Literacy is supplemental education such as a black school where cultural knowledge and history of blacks is taught, unlike in most public schools; these also include courses and resources where race is discussed and literacy developed (Winddance-Twine, 2004). Underlying this view is the anti-racist ideology that claims racism and racial inequality are 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 systemic and interpersonal ways (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Yamato, 1988). For analytical purposes, references that speak to the continuing significance of race, as well as personal experiences, and references to supplementary resources that teach about race are indicators of a racially aware ideology.

It is worth noting that these frameworks are not mutually exclusive and binary since they overlap in different areas of social life. As a result, it is possible to have streaks of colorblind ideology while being racially aware. This owes to the looseness of an ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2003, p. 10), which, as a result, “allows for contradictions, exceptions, and new information.” Furthermore, as asserted by Bonilla-Silva, subscribing to an ideology is similar to wearing clothing which comes with its own fashions (p. 53). This means that each of these two major ideologies come in different styles or flavors, so to speak. An example is the Internal Colonialism framework that sees race and racism as part of an enduring colonial enterprise, as reviewed by Bonilla-Silva (2001). While this framework acknowledges the significance of race, the way it tells the role of race differs from the way a Marxist ideology describes race. The same applies to Racially Colorblind, in that, actors use its frames in different fashions and in complex ways (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Finally, while issues regarding identification of a racial ideology may arise, situating the ideology is based on responses and discursive patterns to race questions on white privilege, institutional racism (education, justice system, and housing), and the race and wealth gap (Dovidio et al., 2003; McIntosh, 1990; O’Connor, 1999; Tadem, 1998), the methodology of which is not without any challenges.

The scene: game selection

Among the diverse gamut of video game genres that contains racial content, I utilized GTA: The Ballad of Gay Tony (BoGT henceforth), the most recent game from the GTA franchise that 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). More importantly, I chose this game because the game’s content best operationalized the racial and sexual dynamics so present in video game content analysis literature (Everett & Waitkins, 2008; DeVane & Squire, 2008). Prior to interviewing respondents, I familiarized myself with the GTA franchise by reading articles about GTA from popular gaming sites such as IGN and the official GTA website from Rockstar North. I also played GTA: BoGT and completed the story while taking note of pertinent content and themes in the game. 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).

Summoning the cast: participants

In order to investigate the ways people experience racialized content in video games, I recruited 31 participants through snowball sampling and the use of social media. The sample covered different backgrounds such as video game experience, which included participants that considered themselves gamers and had played video games for at least six or more years, and participants that had no experience with video games and had no interest in the industry and culture whatsoever. I included former gamers in the non-gamer category because of the cultural disconnect and the lack of embodied cultural capital development (Bourdieu, 1984) needed in the gaming culture. 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 University 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 summer classes. 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 University and to staff from student affairs departments on campus such as Promotions and Student Diversity and Inclusion. Through snowball sampling, I obtained potential participants that had different racial backgrounds such as black, Asian, Latino, and biracial respondents. The reason I used a non-random, snowball sampling method was because of 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% and 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 participant sample is broken down in terms of racial, gaming experience, and gender backgrounds.

Table 1: Sample Demographic by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity*	
Asian	7
Black or African American	2
Hispanic or Latino	12
White	10

*Racial classifications obtained from the US Census Bureau.

Table 2: Gaming Hobby and Gender Frequency in Sample

Gender and Gamer Type			Totals
	Female	Male	
Gamer	5	10	15
Non-Gamer	11	5	16
Totals	16	15	

The missions: interview process

To collect data, I used personal in-depth interviews to assess racial lens of participants and to debrief participants after playing GTA: BoGT in order to obtain their experience 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 being 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 might have never played a video game before. I used a PlayStation 3 gaming system, and I tutored non-gamer participants throughout the gaming session. Interviews took place in one of two areas: in the homes of participants or in the Student Diversity Center located on the Boise State University campus, where I was provided with a television and a comfortable space to conduct interviews. The

interviews were 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 had 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, I asked questions assessing participant racial lens. These questions addressed respondent attitudes on race and their racial views to see correspondence with the racial frameworks provided in the previous section. As such, many of these questions were derived from previous studies on contemporary attitudes on race on issues such as the distribution of resources, stereotypes, and white privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Dovidio et al., 2003; McIntosh, 1990; O'Connor, 1999; Tadem, 1998).

After the first set of questions, we proceeded to play GTA: BoGT from the beginning until the end of the first mission. The gameplay lasted approximately 40 minutes. During gameplay, participants 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 into 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 informal jobs for Tony and must also mediate Tony's drug addiction problems during the game's situated economic hardship. Luis also experiences racial and sexual issues as he deals with people calling him racial epithets and uses his promiscuity prominently in the game.

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 would occur. If players do well, they participate in a group dance, otherwise Luis and the woman with whom he dances make out and go to a bathroom stall to have sex. Participants 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 elicit reactions that they could 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 into 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 have participants talk about their experience of the game and let them debrief about it. 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, and how they related such content. Other questions also involved discussing how much of reality does the game portray, 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 all of the 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 descriptions of missions, plot twists, background stories for Luis, Tony, and the informal jobs they do. This helped contextualize the events that transpire in the game for participants.

Once I collected the interviews, I transcribed and analyzed them through memoing and coding in search of themes and frameworks. Through the use of qualitative analysis software, I analyzed by memoing respondent answers to questions and how their answers corresponded to the beliefs in each of the racial ideologies listed. As asserted by Bonilla-Silva, "ideology, racial or not, is produced and reproduced in communicative interaction" (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). This means that I compared responses on race to established discursive patterns and frames in the literature on colorblind racism and anti-racist ideology to help me situate participants' racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Twine, 2004). In terms of interpretation of the game content and the post-gaming questions, I noted certain keywords used that suggested references to other discourses and cultural knowledges as well as words that showed opinions about the content. In other words, I worked inductively, building from the data to create frameworks and organize the worldview of the participants (Babbie, 2010; Basit, 2003; Burnard, 1991). 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 codified these keywords and references to create domains which then constituted two major frameworks, as I show next.

Player Interpretative Styles

Two major frameworks of interpretation emerged that demonstrated how video game cultural capital and racial lens influenced the different ways respondents experienced the racialized content in GTA.

Literalists

In this framework, participants expressed little to no embodied cultural capital in video games with a few exceptions. As such, they experienced the racial content in GTA based on their own racial knowledges, experiences, and beliefs. One of the ways players experienced content was through expressing concern regarding the racial depictions of characters, use of stereotypes, language, and the setting in which the game took place. This critical stance stemmed from a racially aware lens developed through critical education and racialized experiences (Winddance-Twine, 2004). In addition, this critical reading of the content mirrored content analysis literature that sees race representations as modern minstrelsy (Everett & Waitkins, 2008) by questioning why racialized characters committed certain actions and were positioned in certain ways, such as Luis' Latino friends as drug dealers. Another way players experienced the content was by drawing parallels between the game's depictions and reality. This means that those with colorblind racist lens believed racial depictions to be true in reality. Players then see Latinos delving into underground work, crime, and in their power position as justified based on the colorblind racist discourse, which appeals to meritocracy and abstract free agency (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). The literalist style of interpretation is contingent on reality, experiences, and players' own racial discourses. As such, players experienced the content in a literal sense. Participants in this framework drew from their own personal experiences, identities, and racial knowledge to interpret the game's racial content and provide perspectives on the game's use of race, gender, and violence. Racial lens played a role in interpreting the racial tropes and language used in the game. In other words, a racially aware lens played a role in participants criticizing the content and repressing race, which still reproduces it. Relatedly, racially colorblind players saw the racial content as reflecting reality and used their own frameworks, such as personal experience and knowledge, to explain such content. Finally, a common sub-theme that emerged was that of access to children and impressionable minds that may imitate and learn from the content in GTA.

Gamer technicians

This framework consisted primarily of gamer respondents, those who have played video games for years and continue to do so as their hobby. A major factor here is that unlike in the Literalists, where most respondents were not gamers and did not have solid embodied cultural capital, having video game cultural knowledge mediated how respondents experienced racial content. As a result, players here were able to interpret racial content in sophisticated ways through a mediated context of game development, narrative, realism, and media reference archetypes from other forms of entertainment. In other words, this framework opened an interstitial space where players re-situate race and engage with the issue in inventive, non-threatening ways. As such, video game cultural capital serves as a mediator that mitigates tension and volatile feelings associated with race in public discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Tadem, 1998; Winant, 1990). The variation of racial lens here was diverse in that it included colorblind as well as racially aware players. As such, racially aware players saw the game as lampooning stereotypes that mainstream society relies upon and situated race as a game element with references from other media. More importantly, with a deep embodied cultural capital, colorblind racist players saw the racial representations as inaccurate and only part of the game, a simulation so to speak. Like the Literalists, a theme that was prevalent was that of access to the wrong audiences. However, this theme asked whether it was appropriate to have the wrong audiences play the game in spite of the existing mechanisms that prevent children from obtaining games rated Mature like GTA. To understand how gaming cultural knowledge as well as racial ideology influenced the way players experienced the racial content in GTA, I provide cases that illustrate these diverse and racialized experiences.

The literalists

This framework relied extensively on real life based knowledge such as academic knowledge, life experience, identity, and critical inquiry into the game's content. As mentioned previously, players showed little to no video game embodied cultural capital, and even those with such knowledge had limited connection or interest due to other life experiences and similar factors. Racial lens varied in this aspect with racially aware players echoing content analysis, and racially colorblind players situating racial representations as real per their own racial frameworks.

Racially aware players. To illustrate racial awareness in the way players experience content, I present the case of Eli. As a Chicana non-gamer, her racial views have been informed through her experiences with racial discrimination in Idaho, through her involvement in supplemental educational opportunities like MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlan), and critical coursework on race. During the pre-game interview, she expressed staunch criticism against the gaming industry and the content displayed regarding race and gender. At the same time she stressed the importance of education and used it as a discursive resource to interpret the racial baiting in GTA. During the post-game interview, when asked about the way Latinos were portrayed in the game, she responded based on her awareness of media representations.

Interviewer: In regards to Luis, Henrique, and Armando, who are all Latinos; what does the game tell you about them?

Eli: That they're criminals and that they're always below the white culture, and mainly that women don't have any sort of role in society cuz as you saw there was practically no women in there except the ones dancing in the club who were seen as the ones more sexual and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Now how do you interpret that? Do you see that as true, false?

Eli: I personally say that's false. I just think that's what society wants you to think and that's what the stereotypes have gotten people to think...I would see all the misinformation that was incorrect, but if you have like a kid or someone who is not aware of all the issues in society, they're obviously gonna believe and they're gonna think that's how it is so that's what I'm saying, they need to—I personally don't play that.

This case demonstrates how her awareness of race and stereotypes informs her interpretation of the way Latinos are portrayed in media. During the interview she expressed her experiences as a Chicana in Idaho and the discrimination she underwent growing up in a white habitus like Idaho (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 124), which in turn provided her with a frame of reference to compare the criminal portrayal of Latinos in the game to her own lived racialized experience. While demonstrating concern for children accessing the game, the last phrase speaks explicitly to how her racial literacy provides her with a discursive lens from which to make sense of the game's representation, further speaking to DeVane and Squire, where players created their meanings contingently on their own situated experiences and knowledges (DeVane & Squire, 2008). Eli's case is similar to participants with a racially aware lens in that they illustrate how their experiences with the game mirrors content analysis literature. During the post-game interview, Eli asked why Latinos are placed in a criminal position while whites are in suits, which further illustrates the assertions of content analysis that discuss race as a commodity and modern minstrelsy (Everett & Waitkins, 2008; Gallagher, 2003).

While players demonstrated little to no embodied cultural video game capital, there was at least one exception to this. The case that illustrates a racially aware lens and use of identity in spite of embodied cultural capital is the experience of Ned. Ned is a white male gamer who has played video games since the age of five. Despite coming from a predominantly white residence, his experiences in the public university in Boise and his involvement with some of the supplementary educational resources like the Jane Elliott blue eyed/brown eyed training and Tunnel of Oppression developed his racial ideology to that of an anti-racist. As such, he is actively involved in community and campus organizations seeking to address issues of inequality, and video games have become less important in his life. When asked in what ways the game reflects reality, his responses demonstrated the active role of racial literacy in his meaning making.

Interviewer: In what ways does this game reflect reality?

Ned: There is oppression within different communities and oppressed communities against other oppressed communities so that definitely happens...the black people sell drugs, the Latinos sell drugs, and the, the Latinos have his friends who are trying to come back into drugs. I mean there is like very stereotypical to me...same with the gay Tony, it's like there's a big stereotype out there that gay individuals do a lot of drugs, but I mean that doesn't—that's not necessarily true. For one thing, everyone does drugs, you know what I mean, and then the bar, bodyguard Luis was that his name?

Interviewer: Dessie

Ned: Yeah, Dessie. He was just, stereotypical person of color as a body guard outside the club, it just played on a ton and tons of stereotypes, so it didn't represent reality; it represented reality in the way the media portrays it, but as far as reality really goes, I would say not a whole lot maybe to what people think, maybe like a privileged white individual face, yeah, but not reality.

Ned's responses mirror those of content analysis, just like Eli; however, he demonstrates an intertwined use of his racial literacy, identity as a gay man, and his experience with community work to contest the racial representations. One way he shows this is by recognizing the racial stereotypes in the game but also making note of a stereotype of gay individuals since the portrayal of Tony involved dealing with drug addiction issues. In addition to mentioning the intersections of oppression across different communities, Ned shows awareness that what the game portrays is not reflective of reality but a product of the media-industrial complex. These discursive frames speak to some of the ways racial literacy and knowledge situates race and media as part of a much larger system of racial domination (Leonard, 2007; Winddance-Twine, 2004). In spite of having gamer cultural capital, it is striking to see Ned draw from more realistic facets of his experience to make a different meaning in the game's semiotic domain, the likes of which begin to open new avenues of research as to the extent of racial literacy and its role in constructing meaning (DeVane & Squire, 2008; Twine, 2004). The lack or low priority of video game embodied cultural capital, along with various racial literacies, inform the way these participants contest and also reproduce the racial representations in GTA.

Racially colorblind players. While racially aware players took a critical stance on GTA's racial semiotics, mirroring content analysis literature, racially colorblind non-gamers experienced the content differently, albeit in the same literal sense as racially aware players. A case in point is Mib. He is a white former gamer who expressed colorblind racial views primarily in the area of meritocracy and free agency in that Latinos and blacks are poor due to their own culture and that it would take generations for them to catch up to whites economically, which speaks to naturalization of racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). He 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, including 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. Rather than being systemic stratification and discrimination that worked against Latino immigrants (Durand & Massey, 2001), he rationalized 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. In other words, race was reproduced based on his experiences growing up in a white habitus, which guided his interpretation of Latinos in the game.

A striking feature of the literalists is their commonly shared belief that children should not access the game due to children tacitly accepting the racial content and not relating it to real life. As such, a solution proposed by players, particularly racially aware players, was to not allow children to play GTA. In so doing, how does the repression of this content reproduce racism and racial representations if race is found in more than just video games? (Everett & Waitkins, 2008; Gallagher, 2003; Leonard, 2003, 2007). This contradiction in repressing racial content as a solution to the issue still reproduces race and leaves it unaddressed, similar to colorblind ideology that necessarily ignores race to maintain inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Gallagher, 2003). The complex ways players experience the racial semiotics add to DeVane and Squire's insight that participants use their identities, socially situated discourses, and experiences to experience the content and not necessarily consume such content at face value (DeVane & Squire, 2008).

The gamer technicians

Racially aware. The approach of these participants relied extensively on media and video game knowledge. This sub-cultural discursive frame created an interstitial space where players can engage with racial content in non-threatening, inventive ways. While the experience of the racial content was mediated by media and video game cultural capital, there was variation in racial lenses. Among these respondents, there were those who were gamers and expressed racially aware lenses. 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 the game's racial content within a gamer cultural mode intertwined with media references and technical aspects of a game. A case in point is Cin. He is a biracial Asian/White male who identifies primarily with his Asian background and who has been playing video games for at least 15 years and centers his career on video game business and development. Although he is aware of the pervasiveness of race in social institutions and how they sustain material inequality, he holds some streaks of racial colorblindness primarily in making appeals to the free agency clause of Abstract Liberalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Katz & Hass, 1988) in matters of wealth disparities and economic mobility. Cin's knowledge of the video game industry and culture is extensive. He follows gaming news and statistics and is aware of the extent of market stratification in the video game subculture by companies like Sony, Nintendo, and Microsoft. When asked if he saw any media references influencing the game, he responds as follows:

Cin: This is goes back to GTA III when it started as a sandbox game, it kind of wants to be in itself a movie and it wants to do all the great things that you see in crime movies, and you definitely play as an anti-hero...but you definitely have the morality left to you. You can either mow down innocent people or you can drive around them...it's really, it really is a mobster kind of crime and drug related.

Cin: Stereotyping for me is a tool to use, to use that as a conversation starter, and it really does, and it really does work when you don't point fingers and judge and discriminate using stereotype...relating that back to the game, gay as bar owners or Latinos as drug dealers, that's just something that they put together because it makes a good story, and it drives the story further, and it makes characters come alive, and I just see Rockstar using it like that. I don't see them like generalizations.

Interviewer: You mentioned that you use it as a way to start a conversation about stereotypes. Do you think that this game can start conversations about race?

Cin: Absolutely...don't fool the way I perceive stereotypes as someone else would because in all likelihood most people would use stereotyping as a way as negativity, and it's sad but true, and it's sad because in the end you're gonna think Latinos are gonna be in drugs, and I would never think that, but it's happening.

Cin's assertion of moral agency in the game, crime film influences, and use of stereotypes for narrative purposes, illustrate the depth of his cultural capital in video games. Furthermore, Cin's knowledge of past GTA

games gives him an in-depth frame from which to compare the current game and asserts that Rockstar is not afraid to use any type of social group in their games, as he later mentions the use of Latinos, blacks, and Asians in other Rockstar games. Like Cin, other gamer respondents in this category drew from their technical knowledge of video games and kept the depictions of racial groups inside the game. In other words, racial depictions and interactions in the game served more as an element of game virtual realism than anything being realistic. However, Cin's approach to the game also raises questions about the influence of his racial ideology in situating the racial content, especially in the matter of agency as a way to de-racialize the racial tropes used in the game. Nevertheless, Cin's case demonstrates the way his extensive knowledge in video games situates racial representations as lampooning stereotypes in society and of his ability to use these representations as conversation starters. This case illustrates a dimension in the consumption of racial content that is not tacitly accepted at face value.

Another case where a racially aware lens and a particular aspect of video game cultural capital intertwined is a Latino male gamer pseudonymed Cor. Cor has been playing video games for at least 10 years and is interested in the artistic and creative 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 ideology, he is very aware of systems of racial inequality, like white privilege and 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 fire truck, 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 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: Anything on Luis?

Cor: He didn't really have that much personality. It's probably a reason for it so you can inject your personality into the character since you're playing as him.

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 views and his expertise as a gamer to create a sophisticated approach to the game's semiotic domain and identify them with other forms of media, as in the case of Luis' lack of personality and the elements of storytelling. In other words, he saw the game as lampooning stereotypes and saw their purpose as only adding realism to the experience. Through this media-mediated context, Cor engaged with racial content by seeing it as an exaggeration of stereotypes whose purpose is to give realism to the game, similarly to what Cin asserted previously. While Cor 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. Cor is also able to distinguish the racial dynamics in the game but sees it as secondary to his standards as a gamer, standards like story, gameplay, music, and art. These particular game standards reflect a separation between what is fantasy and what is real since he only saw the depictions of Latinos in the game as mere visual elements and kept those depictions within the game context only. These media-mediated discussions on race allowed for racially aware players to engage with content in inventive, non-contentious ways. Similar dynamics take place with racially colorblind players, as I demonstrate next.

Racially colorblind. Similarly, racially colorblind players experienced the racial content on GTA in a media-mediated discussion that illuminated the use of stereotypes and saw them as not true to real life. Yet these players expressed racially colorblind views during the interviews, especially in questions relating to real life situations like housing and the justice system, discussions that are often volatile in public racial discourse (Winant, 1990; Bonilla-

Silva, 2003). A case in point is Wes. He is a black male gamer adopted by a white family who grew up in a white habitus like Idaho for most of his life. He has extensive video game knowledge and has played the GTA series and kept up-to-date with current video game news, strategies, and updates. These video game experiences illustrate the extent of his embodied cultural capital. In the interview, Wes appealed to the naturalization and minimization frames of colorblindness in explaining the income gap between whites and people of color by asserting whites dream of being in power, whereas people of color dream of working in restaurants. In spite of this, when asked in the post-game session about the use of Latinos in the game and how true he thinks this is to his experience, he responds as follows:

Interviewer: I asked what game tried to tell you about Latinos. Now what I ask is how to you interpret that? Do you see it as true, or not true?

Wes: I don't see it as true. If there's a drug dealer, it's probably white, black, any. There's probably thousands of them, you know, black, Asians; they're basically every ethnicity...in a video game, even though it points towards them, you can't just think "Oh, that's how life is, so all Asians are huge crime lords.. and they're good at math."

Interviewer: So like, there's a lot of stereotypes in there.

Wes: Yeah, basically the whole game is a stereotype. And itself, everything in it.

Wes' experience with video games and his embodied cultural capital created an interstitial space for him to engage with content in a non-contentious way. This is more so considering that he got heated up when talking about immigration during the pre-game interview. When put in a gaming context and relating racial representations to media references, Wes engaged with the racial content by situating the game as a stereotype of stereotypes. Furthermore, Wes was surprised to see racial epithets used in the game and did express concern about children accessing the game in spite of game store mechanisms that filter underage access to GTA. By situating racial representations in a media context, Wes contested the racial representations in a non-threatening way.

A final case that illustrates the use of media references and how video games are not the only type of media that reproduce race is Ric. He is a white male gamer who has been playing video games for at least 30 years. As a programmer in marketing and promotions, he expresses some racial awareness in discrimination and inequality, but there are colorblind streaks in his discursive lens, especially in seeing race and racism as something individual and isolated and not part of a systemic structure that perpetuates racial inequality. When asked about the use of racial epithets and the type of reality portrayed in the game, Ric drew parallels to other media as follows:

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?

Ric: That type of language and those types of epithets are pretty common in, you know, especially with characters throwing insults at each other, and that's pretty common dialogue in movies from the genre so I didn't think it was out of place...as much as I dislike that type of dialogue in people who use that kind of language and throw those kinds of insults, I understood where they were drawing that from.

Interviewer: Whose reality is being portrayed in this game?

Ric: I think it's fantasy. I think it's, it's a world that's been, it's kinda a genre defined by crime genre of movies, you know, and the stereotypes have been defined in those movies.

Ric's reading of the game is influenced by other media and uses such media references to situate the game content so as to give the game an element of realism. His comment on crime films defining stereotypes implies that the game borrowed from these genres and created a movie where there is agency from the players. Furthermore, his understanding of film references situates his reading of racial epithets as part of the game derived from movies, and he sees such content as intentionally offensive.

The Gamer Technicians' experience of the game content demonstrated creative, media-mediated ways of engaging racialization across a spectrum of racial literacies. From the game lampooning stereotypes to seeing such

use as intentionally offensive, the gamers did not tacitly agree with content displayed. This aspect speaks to DeVane and Squire's insight that:

The Gamers' discourse about race is shaped by mass media discourses about racial stereotypes and representations; however, far from exemplifying the uncultured White media consumer who tacitly accepts biased portrayals of minorities, the Gamers actively identified stereotypes with regard to race. Again, a larger conversation about race that is remediated through the mass media provides the discursive lens for the Gamers' discussion, one which here centers on representations and stereotypes (DeVane & Squire, 2008).

As a result, content analysis literature needs a richer understanding of the sophisticated issue of consumption and how media cultural capital and racial literacies influence this process.

Tying Strings and Challenges

In analyzing the results of this study, both interpretative frameworks illustrated sophisticated engagement between respondents' racial ideology and media cultural capital to the racial semiotics that GTA: BoGT exhibited. Speaking to content analysis literature, these results add a level of complexity regarding consumption and interpretation of GTA's racial semiotics and which modes of discursive practices play a role, as in the case of video game knowledge. The Gamer Technicians saw the game as a form of satire laden with references to other forms of media that intentionally utilized stereotypes within the context of the game. Knowledge of the nuances of video games and racial lens mediated players' consumption of racialized content. In other words, respondents within this framework integrated their technical expertise on video games with their racial views to view racial content as lampooning stereotypes, as in the case of Cor and Wes.

On the other hand, the Literalists experienced the game content by drawing from their personal experiences and knowledge of the groups portrayed. In support of this framework, DeVane & Squire found a similar result when interviewing black youth who played GTA: 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 it as another reproduction of the racialized system in society. However, the Literalists suggested avoidance of GTA to impressionable audiences lest they tacitly accept such racial representations. The repression as a solution to racialized content, on the other hand, reproduces race since racial baiting is present in other media (Everett & Waitkins, 2008; Gallagher, 2003; Leonard, 2003). In addition, the case of Cin revealed a particular instance where racial baiting is used as conversation starters on race. However, Cin does warn about his unique approach to stereotypes as conversation starters, in that, players may not make use of stereotypes in the particular manner he uses them. This observation speaks to DeVane and Squire, in that, players use these representations as a means to discuss race and situate it in a media-mediated context (DeVane & Squire, 2008). Interestingly enough, such discourse mitigates tension and volatile reactions associated with race in public discourse (Winant, 1990; Bonilla-Silva, 2003), as in the case of Wes.

The complex ways players consume racialized content across a range of racial lenses and video game cultural capital suggest that players see the racial content in video games like GTA, but how they interpret such content is mediated by racial lenses and other socially situated discourses and identities. Video games contain symbolic content that reproduces racial dynamics in society (Everett & Waitkins, 2008; Leonard, 2003, 2006; Mou & Peng, 2009), but respondents do not accept them at face value since players situate such content through a different context, which allows them to engage with race in inventive non-threatening ways. How players draw from their experiences, socially situated discursive frameworks, and various cultural capital influences the experience of racial semiotics. These experiences in consumption range from accepting the content based on personal experiences, as in Mib's case, to contesting the racial content by situating the content in relation to experiences, knowledges, and contexts, as in with Eli or Wes. Rather than passively accepting the depictions as true, both modes demonstrate that respondents "create their meanings by using their situated experiences" (DeVane & Squire, 2008), which involves participant gaming experience (or lack thereof) and racial ideology, among other factors not addressed in this study. While the racial depictions in the game are asserted to be 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 the complexity of how race operates in society. However, in exploring these dynamics in consumption, this study was not without its challenges.

Due to lack of equal representation in my sample regarding racial demographics, I run the risk of “tokenizing” my participants, and as such, the paucity of other non-Latino racial groups is a challenge in this project. Regarding Latino respondents, my sample contained an over representation of the Latino population; this challenge, while preventing me from generalizing to larger populations, has some valid reasons as to why my sample contained more Latino respondents. Latinos constituted 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: BoGT* is centered on the life of Luis Lopez, a Latino man whose life revolves around other Latinos, and cultural semiotics pertinent to Latinos such as the use of the Spanish language and the choice of music on 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 the game depicts would interpret the content in relation to their own racial ideologies and experiences as Latinos in the United States, more precisely in the state of Idaho. Similarly, 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, cultural attire, Ebonics, and black bodies and representations (DeVane & Squire, 2008). Their study did not include other racial groups and what those groups made of the content, which was something this research project sought to do but ran into challenges in sampling and by extension generalizability.

Ending and Possible Sequels

In this preliminary study, I explored the relationship between participant video game knowledge and racial lens and how this relationship influences the way players experience the racial content in *GTA: BoGT*. The results of the interview process, which involved playing the game introduction, demonstrated two major interpretative frameworks of the game’s content. Racial ideology played a role in interpreting content along with video game experience, which together impacted the overall experience, albeit with limits. One of the ways players interpreted the racial content was by seeing the representations as “window dressings only to facilitate game play” (DeVane & Squire, 2009) that lampoon stereotypes society relies upon. This was done both by drawing from technical aspects of a game, such as story, aesthetics, and how “real” the game can be, and from their own understandings of race through experiences and knowledge. In addition, the Gamer Technicians held a range of racial lenses, from the racially aware types like Cor to the racially colorblind like Wes or Ric. These literacies integrated with players’ gaming experience to creatively engage racialization across a range of racial lenses, which opened up a greater avenue of work. As such, to what extent can individual gamers engage racial content in a profit-minded video game industry? In other words, what particular aspects of the market nature of the media industrial complex limit these novel ways of engaging racialization? Furthermore, what particular media cultural capital allows these novel forms of engagement to metastasize? Video game cultural capital is embodied differently by every player due to their own particular genres, standards, and knowledge on particular game genres. This is exemplified in the case of Cor and Ric, whose game interests are different than sandbox games like *GTA*. As such, future studies can expand on these particular dynamics and trace the emergence, use, and limits of these novel ways of engagement. On the other hand, to what extent can this framework serve as a means to minimize racial content as non-racial, making a reference to the minimization frame of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Gallagher, 2004)?

The Literalists were by and large non-gamers whose experience with the game mirrored content analysis literature and also reproduced race as it spoke to their particular experiences. A trend of concern was apparent among this group regarding children and access to this sort of content. Respondents in this group expressed racially aware views 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 Literalist respondents with racially colorblind lenses that interpreted content through their own experiences and knowledge and saw such representations as mirroring reality. Interestingly enough, the racially aware Literalists offered repression of such content to anyone playing the game, and while they noted the racialization in the game's virtual space, their solution to the issue continued to reproduce race not just in video games but in other media (Gallagher, 2003). As such, the lack of an in-depth media cultural context situated racial representations on critical discourses and maintained many of the tensions associated with racial public discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Winant, 1990). This contradiction coming from a critical racial standpoint begs questions that generate new research on the issue of consumption and the parameters of racial discourses. One of those questions is what is the role of racial identity development as a factor in interpreting racialized content? Drawing from Janet Helms’ work on racial identity development, the stages in which racialized actors are situated inform the way they interpret the world and by extension content (Helms, 1990).

As a result of the complex framework of gamers, this research project begs the question of how race is interpreted in a subculture stratified by market forces and by different game genres. The approach to the content informed by video game cultural capital differed significantly from those who did not possess such capital. As such, a more improved version of this project would be to focus specifically on video game players and find more variation regarding racial ideology and the ways such ideology interplays with gaming cultural capital to interpret racial content, or perhaps, as in the case of Cin and Ned, open conversations about race. The gaming culture can allow for creative ways of engaging with social and political notions, as in the case of the game Bioshock, which critiques the Objectivist philosophy of Ayn Rand and critiques notions of capitalism and individualism (Packer, 2010). This case illustrates one of the ways in which video games have the potential of infusing political and social concepts along with entertainment; however, this still does not change the fact that video games, much like the media, reproduce many of the social concepts and racial views representative of those who own such modes of production (Everett & Waitkins, 2008; Leonard, 2007). This study then, begins to set opening grounds for further exploration into the video game culture and the ways both race and meaning are reproduced and contested. In addition, the video game subculture and inhabited virtual spaces speak to Baudrillard's notion of social simulacra and the ways society is reproduced and meaning is transformed through a medium that is contingent on social forces for its virtual creation of these interactive spaces (Baudrillard, 1994; DeVane & Squire, 2008; Everett & Waitkins, 2008; Leonard, 2007).

In addition to these results in the research question, this project raised other questions that provide further points of departure and directions for future research. Another way to conduct this research in a much more systematic fashion is to utilize focus groups for the interview process. Instead of gathering participants individually 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 samples consistent 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 asked the same question to different racial groups, and how would those groups have responded to me? This preliminary study may serve as a launching point to a much larger project on qualitative methodology and the role of social identities in data collection, particularly in the area of critical race theory and methodology.

In speaking to the larger body of literature on this particular intersection of race and video games, I sought to address how players experience the video game racial content that reproduces the current racial order (Barrett, 2006; Everett & Waitkins, 2008; Leonard, 2003) through their own experiences, lenses, and knowledge. Video games like GTA 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 accept and contest the meanings by situating them as satirical, window dressings, and creating novel ways of engaging with racialized content (Barrett, 2006; Everett & Waitkins, 2008; Leonard, 2003, 2006). As DeVane and Squire contend, "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). This insight opens up new avenues for research that will illuminate the ways in which race is metastasized in different subcultures and highlights one of the many ways actors engage with larger social systems in such symbiotic ways, albeit with limits in a market dominated franchise. As such, content analyses literature needs a deeper understanding of the parameters, limits, and means of these sophisticated ways of engaging racialization.

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