Gaming Representation

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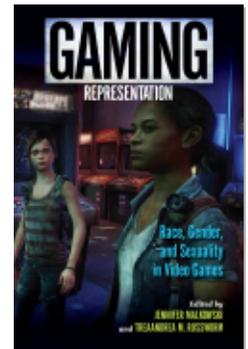Published by Indiana University Press

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AFTERWORD

Racism, Sexism, and Gaming's Cruel Optimism

LISA NAKAMURA

The future of the culture wars is here, and it's Gamergate.
—Kyle Wagner, "The Future of the Culture Wars Is Here,
and It's Gamergate"

I HAVE BEEN LUCKY ENOUGH TO TEACH UNIVERSITY-LEVEL COURSES ON VIDEO game studies for several years. While my other digital media courses have a good mix of female and male students, my game courses have attracted very few women. In their earliest iterations, a full class of thirty students might enroll only one or two women, making me dreadfully afraid that they might drop the class; the numbers have improved but are still unbalanced. My game classes have, however, been quite racially diverse. These classes have been a laboratory for learning about what students really think of racism and sexism in video games and gaming culture. My students readily admit that racism and sexism are pervasive, that these issues are serious obstacles to equal participation, and that gamers and the game industry can be brutal to women, people of color, sexual minorities, and anyone who signals difference online. These students care about gaming, enough to devote serious thought and attention to this problem both during class discussion and in their written work.

Over the years my students have been extremely consistent in advocating two strategies to address gaming's racism and sexism. The first is to rehabilitate games by diversifying game makers; they believe that hiring more women and programmers of color is the only way to teach the industry how to make diverse

games. This strategy imagines that the games themselves and their industries produce racist and sexist games and cultures, and that different games can solve this problem. This argument has a long tradition in media studies: the notion that the presence of more female and racialized bodies will immunize the media products that they help to produce from inequality can be found in debates about diversity in film and television as well.

The second and more chilling strategy is to posit that it is "bad" female and nonwhite gamers themselves who are the problem. My students certainly don't mean this in a moralistic sense; what they mean, rather, is that if marginalized gamers become elite players they can rehabilitate other gamers' race and gender problems. They agree that the best strategy for creating social justice—the freedom not to be harassed while playing games—is for stigmatized players to create habitable spaces for themselves by displays of superior skill, by proving their worth by dominating other players, in other words by using procedural meritocracy. They believe that rights accrue to those who can leverage the mechanics of the game to create a win-condition for themselves and by implication for their gender, race, and sexuality.

This strategy invariably comes along with a story, and the story is always a variation of the one that follows. If from a man: "A buddy of mine was playing *Halo* once, and a bunch of other players were hassling a female player really bad, calling her a cunt, telling her to make them a sandwich. And she was a really good player, and she pwned all of them, and that totally changed the way that I view women in gaming now. It also shut them up." If from a woman: "I was playing as a female, and other players could hear my voice over the chat, and I was getting catcalled, but when they found out that I was a girl but that I knew how to play, it stopped because I earned their respect and showed I was a real gamer."

As Carol Stabile found in her study of gender-swapping as a form of "making gender" in *World of Warcraft* (2004–2014, Blizzard), some of the female players she interviewed saw their skillful play as a form of gender uplift within the game. One player explained that "she thought it was important to play the game and play it well as a female toon because it communicated a positive message about female identity; that women could be powerful, strong, and excellent players."[1] Helen Kennedy's writing about female *Quake* (1996, id Software) players notes the same: her informants reveled in beating male players as women. Though they disavowed the term "feminist" to describe themselves, Kennedy defined them as such since their labor within the game helped to make the space more diverse.[2] The satisfaction that comes from talking softly and carrying a big stick is real. However, it perpetuates meritocratic ways of thinking about freedom from racism and sexism within games that make these things seem not rights at all but rather privileges to be earned.

Believing in meritocratic play as the path to acceptance and respectability for minorities and women in sexist and racist gaming cultures is the cruelest kind of optimism.[3] In an interview about her book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant writes,

> Why is it so hard to leave those forms of life that don't work? Why is it that, when precariousness is spread throughout the world, people fear giving up on the institutions that have worn out their confidence in living? . . . In all of these scenes of "the good life," the object that you thought would bring happiness becomes an object that deteriorates the conditions for happiness. But its presence represents *the possibility of happiness as such*. And so losing the bad object might be deemed worse than being destroyed by it. That's a relation of cruel optimism.[4]

What are games but the "possibility of happiness as such"? Women, minorities, and queers who play in this way are doing "social justice" the right way. They are embodying liberal virtues: self-reliance, unfettered competition in unregulated space, in short, a neoliberal fantasy of the entrepreneurial self's power in precarious times. They are not breaking the game by seeking to changes its rules, customs, or its liberal contract. Gaming's cruel optimism exploits minority gamers' fierce attachment to the medium and sutures it to a notion of social justice that can only be earned, not given.

Instead of advocating for procedural meritocracy—earning the right to question or change the rules by excelling at the game, I agree with science-fiction writer John Scalzi, author of the viral blog post "Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting There Is."[5] As he writes, the "game" is stacked against many of us, and life is already on the highest difficulty setting for queers, for women, for people of color. Becoming the gamic model minority by outperforming others within the game is not going to change that. Leveling up in-game isn't a path to social justice; instead, as Berlant reminds us, believing that it is exemplifies a uniquely technocratic form of cruel optimism.

As Berlant writes, the period between the 1990s and the present in the United States is characterized by the development of a new "historical sensorium" that reflects the "frayed fantasies" of "postwar optimism for democratic access to the good life."[6] As opportunities for this life recede, the very idea of fairness seems to recede as well. Berlant explains that the desire for this idea, for a "meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a process of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment," drives unproductive, even painful attachments to objects that can't satisfy it.[7]

Thus it is that games are particularly cherished during our economically precarious times; not only do they let users feel what a particular vision of "the good life" is like—acquiring and owning the trappings of hyperconsumptive luxury such as rare and exotic cars, extravagant houses, and virtual women that look like models or porn stars—they produce these things as a consequence of ones' own behavior or play. Players can have that elusive and satisfying feeling of having earned privilege, of engaging in a meritocracy that works the way that it should.

As game scholar Ian Bogost writes, video games are procedural media; they fundamentally index user activity to the computer's programmed responses to

that input.[8] They are algorithmic. And while the algorithms or set of rules that many Americans believe have governed access to the good life—defined as job security, a comfortable retirement, the right to be safe and secure and free from violence—have proven themselves broken, games appeal all the more because they embody this very promise.

Thus, gamers' intense attachment to games reflects the opposite of guilty pleasure, much less time wasting. In a viciously neoliberal economy, gaming feels like a virtuous pleasure, for games reward player labor, while, in contrast, labor in the real world is often undervalued, treated as surplus or even as worthless.

Though Berlant does not write about video games at all in her work, the period of US culture she examines in *Cruel Optimism* overlaps with the rise of video games as a mass medium, and her description of cruel optimism describes gaming's dynamic in interesting new ways. As she writes, "optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the *expansive transformation* for which a person or a people risks striving."[9] Games make vividly visible what transformation might look like. The strict procedurality of games both satisfies and ignites desires for fairness in the context of a US culture that is patently unfair, particularly for racial minorities and women. The attachment to games can be a cruel one for all players, but especially for those who are subject to even more unfair proceduralities and forms of systematic discrimination in real life.

What can we learn from queer theory and critical ethnic studies as practiced by scholars such as Berlant, who do not study games but are centrally concerned with questions of nation, desire, attachment, feeling, and identity? There is much at stake in bringing this kind of work to bear on the state of video games and race, especially as moments of racial and gendered violence coalesce around the cultural debates surrounding gaming's famously uncivil cultures.

Gaming is a bellwether medium. And in 2014, it became more apparent how the two are related. The summer of 2014 saw two major cultural crises in the United States involving violence against women and minorities. These crises brought together racial violence, gendered violence, and gaming within the same chronological framework, and looking at them together reveals how rule-based systems such as the law and algorithmic ones such as gaming share a similar dynamic. The first of these centered around protests against shootings of young black men by white police officers, and the second, dubbed Gamergate, showed the world the extent of gaming's misogyny and internal conflicts over death threats made against female gamers, critics, and game developers by a cadre of male gamers.

A black teenager, Michael Brown, was shot by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri. This incident dominated both the traditional media outlets and social media as intense protests, vigils, and public anger proved that black and white people held strongly differing opinions about the majority white police department's lack of respect for black lives. A viral media campaign would ensue and travel along social media such as Twitter. The ferment

continued into November, when a grand jury decided not to indict Wilson for the murder of Brown. The #BlackLivesMatter movement, which started in 2012 to protest the killing of another young black man, Trayvon Martin, by a police officer, trended during this period. It served as a channel for users' frustrations that widespread institutional racism made it such that the good life, indeed the possession of life at all, might be unattainable for young black men in the United States.

Another incident that proved the precariousness of the good life for those who are not white males surfaced almost exactly at the same time. In early August 2014, game developer Zoë Quinn received a number of death threats from members of the gaming community who had read claims from a former boyfriend that she had slept with a writer for *Kotaku*, a popular gaming blog, in order to receive positive reviews for her game *Depression Quest*. Quinn was subjected to a campaign of harassment so virulent that she was forced to flee her house. A few months later games critic Anita Sarkeesian received (a new round of) death threats as well for her video series *Tropes vs Women in Video Games* that critiqued misogyny in video games and was also forced to flee her home.

Both Gamergate and the Michael Brown case made it abundantly clear that the United States does not offer a level playing field to women and people of color. Players of color must negotiate intense and sometimes painful attachments to a dream of equality and respect earned through good play both within and without games. It is precisely because games are such important sites of attachment for players that they merit the nuanced critique and careful research from scholars such as those whose essays appear in this book. Much of the writing produced on games appears in ephemeral media such as blogs, written by gamers with varying amounts of interest in questions of identity who do not have the time or mandate to produce carefully researched game scholarship. This is precisely the moment for games scholarship originating from ethnic studies, women's studies, queer studies, film studies, and cultural studies to intervene in this ongoing conversation, and to strategize about the future of race, gender, sexuality, and digital media.

For strategy is central to many forms of race critique. For example, the foundational woman-of-color feminist anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, is about tactics and strategy, two notions at the heart of gamic structure.[10] This book's shared vision shows the reader how to make another world when the one you're in excludes you. It has a radical vision for letting go of the things that may have given you joy—the faith in meritocracy, for example, that if we work twice as hard we can get almost as much—because they are not only false but very harmful to the self. Games are far too valuable, and pleasurable, to let go. The chapters in this book bring together an appreciation of these pleasures and an analysis of their politics that we badly need.

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Coordinator of the Digital Studies Program. She is the author of four books on race, gender, and digital media.

Notes

1. Carol Stabile, "'I Will Own You': Accountability in Massively Multiplayer Online Games," *Television and New Media* 15, no. 1 (2014): 43–57.

2. Helen Kennedy, "Female Quake Players and the Politics of Identity," in *Videogame, Player, Text*, ed. Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007), 120–138.

3. Kyle Wagner, "The Future of the Culture Wars Is Here, and It's Gamergate," *Deadspin*, October 14, 2014, http://deadspin.com/the-future-of-the-culture-wars-is-here-and-its -gamerga-1646145844.

4. Lauren Berlant, "Lauren Berlant on Her Book *Cruel Optimism*," *Rorotoko*, June 5, 2012, http:// rorotoko.com/interview/20120605_berlant_lauren_on_cruel_optimism/ (emphasis in original).

5. John Scalzi, "Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting There Is," *Whatever*, May 15, 2012, http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting -there-is/.

6. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

7. Ibid.

8. Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

9. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2 (emphasis added).

10. Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, and Toni Cade Bambara, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings of Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983).