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## The Texts We Play: Avatar Creation and Racial Invisibility in Role-Playing Video Games

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## ABSTRACT

This project sets out to address problems of racial inequalities in role-playing video games as part of a growing field of video game studies in literary criticism. As these games are an increasingly popular form of entertainment in contemporary culture, their potential effects on players cannot be ignored. If these games continue to reflect society in a way that perpetuates racist stereotypes, social progress will halt. In order to study these games from a literary perspective, then, this project combines both narratological and ludological approaches to video game studies in order to bring about new insight from two strong perspectives. This method results in an in-depth analysis of selected role-playing games as texts as well as a survey of college students and how they approach the avatar creation process in video games as well as whether or not they perceive any racial imbalances.

The study finds that most players do not consciously experience any racial imbalances and that roughly a third of the players surveyed have a conscious attachment to the avatars they create. In addition, the games analyzed are found to contain racially problematic elements, though some of these are more blatantly displayed in some games than in others. Overall, this project sets out to bring together two different approaches to game studies in order to legitimize projects like these for future use in the English discipline.

The Texts We Play: Avatar Creation and Racial Invisibility in Role-Playing Video  
Games

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of English

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

English

By

Daniel Luis Archer

May 2016

To mom, dad, and Andrea.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the English and Digital Entertainment Technology faculty at ACU for supporting me through six years of education. Thank you for being the mentors I needed to become the person I am today. Thank you also for being the friends I needed in order to know that even when I did not believe in myself there were those of you that never doubted me for a moment. There are too many of you to name in this short section by name, which itself is telling of how blessed I am by all of you.

I would like to thank my closest friends and colleagues in my graduate cohort. The five of you have been integral to my success, invaluable to my experiences these last two years, and will forever be irreplaceable in my heart and in my memories. Thank you for seeing me mostly at my worst and rarely—if ever—at my best and still pushing me to keep trying, to keep laughing, and to keep being the best I could be. Thank you for the fellowship and the treasured memories. Thank you for making me dread graduation if only because it means saying goodbye to the lot of you.

I would like to thank my parents for being immovable sources of encouragement and understanding. Thank you for the support over the years that cannot be put into words. Thank you, most importantly, for teaching me the value of play that I now want to pass on to others.

Finally, I would like to thank my gamer friends whose friendship has far surpassed the games we play together and whose support has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated. Thank you for the community you have shown me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	iv
I. INTRODUCTION: STUDY DESIGN AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	1
Necessity of Case Study.....	1
Purpose of Study .....	2
Design and Procedures.....	3
Review of Literature .....	3
Film vs. Video Games.....	4
Narratology vs. Ludology .....	9
Critical Race Theory .....	12
Thesis Outline .....	16
II. THE GAMES WE PLAY: PROBLEMATIC AVATAR CREATION AND ROLE-PLAY IN VIDEO GAMES.....	20
Purpose.....	20
Theoretical Framework.....	21
Importance of Popular Culture.....	21
Critical Race Theory .....	27
Approaches to Game Studies .....	34
Video Game Genres .....	37
Video Games as Texts .....	39
Analysis of Role-Playing Video Games .....	40

	<i>World of Warcraft</i> .....	41
	<i>The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim</i> .....	50
	<i>Grand Theft Auto</i> .....	58
III.	METHODOLOGY OF ROLE-PLAYING AVATARS AND GAMING CASE STUDY .....	64
	Introduction.....	64
	Problem and Purpose Overview.....	65
	Research Questions.....	66
	Population and Sample .....	66
	Rationale for Case Study .....	67
	Data Collection .....	68
	Data Analysis .....	68
	Summary.....	69
IV.	PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA OF ROLE-PLAYING AVATARS AND GAMING CASE STUDY .....	70
	Introduction.....	70
	Data Analysis .....	71
	Population and Sample .....	71
	Data Collection Instruments .....	71
	Survey .....	71
	Interview Protocol .....	71
	Research Questions.....	72
	Summary.....	77

V.	ROLE-PLAYING AVATARS AND GAMING: SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	78
	Introduction.....	78
	Purpose of Study.....	79
	Design and Procedures.....	79
	Findings of the Study .....	80
	Limitations .....	84
	Implications for Practice.....	84
	Recommendations for Future Research .....	85
	Conclusion .....	86
VI.	CONCLUSION: WEAVING NARRATOLOGY AND LUDOLOGY .....	87
	Study Goals and Focus Restated.....	88
	Avatars and Waggoner’s Work.....	89
	Implications for Players .....	91
	Problematic Games .....	93
	WORKS CITED .....	98

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Representation of the Ethnicities Among Respondents in the Preliminary Survey..... 67
2. Measure of How Much Time Respondents Invest in Avatar Creation Process..... 73
3. Respondents' Conscious Attachment to In-Game Avatars ..... 74
4. Players' Preference in Avatar Appearance in Role-Playing Video Games..... 75
5. Players' Conscious Perceptions of Racial Imbalances in Role-Playing Video Games. 76

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: STUDY DESIGN AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Necessity of Case Study**

One of the main goals of this study is to analyze video games in a way that combines two prevalent approaches to game studies—narratology and ludology—in order to test a potential method of video game criticism that could perhaps offer some new insight to the process. The narratological aspect coincides more with literary studies as a whole, thus narrowing the scope of the project in this section to examining the games in question under the scope of critical race theory. The ludological portion of the project focuses on player interaction with in-game elements outside of the storyline, thus analyzing how conscious these players are of the mechanics of the game rather than how the storyline affects them. Thus, a study that encompasses both of these points of view could prove helpful in furthering scholarship in this field of study.

Perhaps one of the strongest influences on the undertaking of this project was a study of a similar scope administered by Zach Waggoner. Outlined in his book, *My Avatar, My Self*, Waggoner's study engaged participants of varying amounts of experience with video games in an extended observation of how these players approached avatar creation and investment as a whole. Though Waggoner's work had a mixed design, the time constraints of this particular project limited it to merely quantitative data for the time being. However, where Waggoner's approach focused primarily on ludological components of gaming, this study will work toward a combination of both of

the predominant theoretical approaches to game studies in order to maximize the benefits of the two methods and provide insight from more than one theoretical source.

In its infancy, the field of video games studies has met with several challenges regarding how this particular medium should be approached. As will be covered in more detail later in the project, most adults consider video games to be a waste of time despite the amount of people that actually play these games. A medium of entertainment this popular, whether it is truly a waste of time or not, certainly has things to say about the people that engage in its products. Does the existence of in-game avatars as a vehicle with which gamers can move through storylines mean that players have a conscious sense of identity in the avatars they create? This study sets out to try to understand the extent of the conscious effects of video game avatars on players, as well as to determine if this degree of relatedness between the player and his or her in-game avatar means there is more of a sensitivity to the problems in gaming environments.

### **Purpose of Study**

Video games that require players to create their own avatars in order to begin their gameplay experience have grown in popularity over the last two decades. For this reason, we begin to question the impact this relationship between player and avatar has on a player's ability to perceive the world around them, both real and virtual. In experiencing games through the eyes of another character, players are exposed to a new sort of association when controlling the protagonist of the games they play.

This study examined participants enrolled in a private, 4-year, liberal arts Christian university using a survey designed to help the participants think of their own gaming experiences and avatar creation processes. Also examined in the survey was a

player's recognition of potential ethnic imbalances in gaming environments. In determining a player's conscious realization of their attachment to their avatars as well as this relation to how they perceive their game environments, we can begin to project how this might relate to the players' perceptions of real-life situations.

### **Design and Procedures**

The population for this mixed design study consisted of students enrolled in a private, 4-year, liberal arts Christian university in Texas. Seventy-six college students participated in this investigation.

Quantitative data were gathered using an online survey platform, SurveyGizmo, that presented the participants with the survey questions needed to move forward with the research. The data were then compiled into a report created by the survey platform in order to properly interpret the data collected. Four of the five research questions were evaluated based upon the quantitative data with further information being provided from the qualitative data.

### **Review of Literature**

With the rise in popularity of video games in recent years has also come a recognition of some fundamental flaws in video game storytelling. There have been numerous video games in the past decade alone that have sparked discussion regarding racist undertones, and the problem of whitewashing has spread beyond—and perhaps, though slowly, away from—cinema and into video game protagonists. Certainly, it is a challenge to produce from memory the names of video game titles that have featured non-white protagonists. Whitewashing and culture erasure in movies has troubled film critics for quite some time, and we see now the same pattern occurring in video games.

The amount of academic response to this emerging problem in video games is almost negligible. Notable journal articles outlining this problem include Anthony Sze-Fai Shiu's "What Yellowface Hides: Video Games, Whiteness, and the American Racial Order," which outlines racism and yellowfacing in *Duke Nukem 3D* and *Shadow Warrior*, and David R. Dietrich's "Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expressions in Video Game Characters" that highlights the process of avatar creation in role-playing video games as a mechanism that reinforces a notion of normative whiteness in the minds of players. In addition, there are games that benefit from and embrace racial stereotypes in creating their fictional worlds and—by extension—"playgrounds" as an arena for gamers to enter and submit themselves to the challenges before them. These games masquerade as a portrayal of reality when, really, these situations do not tell the whole story and certainly cannot speak for an entire race. Conversely, there are also games that create fantastic worlds within which exist no minorities, a problem that we have seen in fantasy literature and film (in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, for example). While these circumstances have not gone fully unnoticed, the implications of these problems are not to be taken lightly.

### **Film vs. Video Games**

The establishment of video game research requires—at least to some extent—a comparison to its pop culture predecessor: film. Understanding the effect of film on its audiences brings us closer to being able to understand the effect of video games on their audiences, particularly considering there are video games that may be more widely "consumed" than some movies. Both of these mediums are transmitted through moving images and sounds playing through screens and thus share a certain link in terms of how

they are delivered to their respective audiences. In a sense, the growth of video games in the last decade has come to resemble a consolidation of literature and film, combining the feeling of turning pages of a book—performing actions in a video game to progress through the storyline—with a more visually-oriented way of storytelling using cinematic cut-scenes. The relevance of film as a comparison in this discussion comes predominantly from the fact that both of these forms of entertainment are more contemporary iterations of popular culture than is literature.

There are limitations, however, to the assertion that film and video games are similar enough to be studied as similar elements. The comparison between these two mediums can only be drawn so far and the image breaks down when assessing the interactivity of video games as compared to film. When viewing a film, the audience is still a relatively passive receptor of information as they watch a protagonist move through the plot of the movie. Video games, on the other hand, generally provide some sort of avatar for the player to use to navigate the story or virtual world. Formal acknowledgments of a player's attachment to their avatar may not be present, but there is a sense of connection between the actions the avatar performs in the game world and the actions the player is performing in pressing the buttons necessary to overcome the various obstacles in the game. As a player presses buttons and watches their character move and act in a virtual world, they are—consciously or not—connected to their avatar through cognitive actions being made in the process. This is where the comparison between film and video games breaks down, but my research in this project sets out to fill that gap by addressing the effect of a player's avatar on the gaming experience in the fourth chapter of my project. Using film studies as a foundation upon which to study

video games still holds some sway in this context, regardless of the point at which the comparison breaks down, due to the sheer prevalence of film in contemporary popular culture.

In her research, bell hooks discusses the formative power of popular film, mentioning that she brings it into her classroom in order to be able to better identify with her students. In *Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, hooks mentions, “Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. . . . Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these changed issues” (2-3). For hooks, movies are not simply a medium of entertainment; movies are a pedagogical tool that can aid in higher education of students in terms of complex theories that can be better understood using movies as examples or comparisons. The premise of hooks’ argument here is that regardless of the presumably fictitious nature of most films, audiences tend to subconsciously associate them with lived experiences. Even if the movies are based in fantastic environments, there will still be a certain sense of association present in how audiences take their film experiences into their real-life interactions and judgments. In addition, hooks mentions that moviemakers base their films on some sort of reality, whether intentionally or not; in doing so, audiences receive a film experience that reinforces or challenges what they already know. The movies hooks deals with in her critical work are generally movies that establish stark positions regarding gender or race. As such, it is hard to ignore the role of film in the establishment of ideas among students in university settings. Particularly in a college setting, movies as a form of popular culture are an accessible medium through which to

begin discussing complex issues and discourses regarding sex, race, and class. As a form of discourse, video games have the potential to be even more powerful and engaging than film in trying to elicit discussions from students or individuals wrestling with new ideas. Video games as a pastime are more engaging and immersive than their predecessors—literature and film—because of a simple distinction between literature (as a whole, including film and games) that is passive and literature that is active.

In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth enters a discussion regarding the distinction to be made between ergodic and non-ergodic (or stationary) literature. According to Aarseth, ergodic literature is that which makes the audience become more than just a passive receptor of information and instead forces the reader into a more active role that may or may not have an impact on the story itself. Aarseth lists such examples as books that must be read out of order and books that include puzzles and riddles to solve throughout that help to move the story along. Most importantly, however, Aarseth comes back to the idea that video games are perhaps the most advanced form of ergodic literature, and thus require an enormous amount of audience involvement in order to further—or, in some cases, shape—the storyline. In this sense, we can begin to understand the impact of video games compared to film. If an audience is forced to invest in a medium in order to further the storyline, they will be more attentive to what is going on in this setting and will thus be more receptive to ideas found in these games. Furthermore, if students can engage in discussion regarding complex feminist theory after connecting it to a film they received as members of an audience, the impact of video games that demand more attention from an audience will likely have more of an impact than anything else.

Though the case for the immersive nature of video games and their impact on audiences is certainly important to this discussion, it is of equal importance to acknowledge the difficulty of broaching studies in such a new field without truly established terminology or methodology. Theorists like Mark J.P. Wolf, Bernard Perron, Ken S. McAllister, and Ian Bogost readily admit in their texts that the area of video game criticism in its infancy is one that includes many obstacles either previously not encountered in studies of other mediums or insufficiently explored as of yet within this new medium of entertainment. As Wolf explains in his introduction to *The Medium of the Video Game*:

The main reason for the [theoretical] neglect of the video game is that it is more difficult to study than traditional media. Admittedly, the video game as a ‘text’ is much harder to master. . . . Instead of fixed, linear sequences of text, image, or sound which remain unchanged when examined multiple times, a video game experience can vary widely from one playing to another. . . . Mastery of the video game, then, can be more involved (and involving) than mastery of a film; in addition to critical skills, the researcher must possess game-playing or puzzle-solving skills, or at least know someone who does. (7)

McAllister bolsters this statement in his introduction to *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture* by asserting, “As artifacts, computers games are extraordinarily difficult to study because they are so socially complex; recollections of how they were inspired and of the myriad collective and negotiated decisions that gave them their final form . . . are difficult to identify and reconstruct” (viii). Many of these

theorists contend, and rightfully so, that video games cannot be studied only as text, and must instead be taken holistically as a *process* made up of various components. Thus, theorists like McAllister and Bogost make efforts to try and study these games in all of their components. Bogost's *How to Do Things with Video Games* delineates the role of video games as several components of an ever-changing culture. Bogost informs us in his introduction that the goal of the book "is to reveal a small portion of the many uses of videogames, and how together they make the medium broader, richer, and more relevant.... I suggest we imagine the videogame as a medium with valid uses across the spectrum, from art to tools and everything in between" (7). These theorists help form an approach to video game studies that provides ample space for continued development in terms of terminology and refining how these games are analyzed. From these theorists a rudimentary approach to game studies can be pieced together that delineates its place in an ongoing debate between two opposing schools of thought: narratology and ludology.

### **Narratology vs. Ludology**

Before establishing the premise of the present debate between narratological and ludological scholars, we must first understand what each of these schools of thought are comprised of. Narratology is a theoretical approach primarily applied to literature that began to take root in 1928 with Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, but is better known through the work of Joseph Campbell and his works including *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. The narratological field of study focuses primarily on narrative structures and their effect on audiences throughout the years. Furthermore, theorists like Propp and Campbell assert that all myths we tell have followed the same structure for centuries; they then proceed to outline some of these features in order to illustrate their

points. Narratologists tend to focus extensively on narrative structure, of course, but in doing so tend to ignore many other factors surrounding the story such as cultural context, historical background, and the conversations being had between readers and the story as a whole.

Ludology, on the other hand, is the study of games and play, and predates video games by a few decades. Theorists like Johan Huizinga—author of *Homo Ludens*—work to outline the importance of play and gaming in civilizations throughout history. This theory has since evolved to adapt to the growth of video games, and thus includes scholars that believe games should be studied as individual components that make up a whole instead of taking the overarching ideas of narrative that are woven throughout the product. Individual components that are analyzed by ludological theorists include game level design, avatar creation, and music choices. While the general consensus among the aforementioned theorists is that games should be studied as the parts that make up the entity that is the game, there are also numerous theorists in the humanities that instead devote their time to the analysis of the content and storytelling techniques of video game plotlines themselves. Among these theorists, Aarseth is a staunch defender of using narratological theory in addition to a ludological approach toward video game studies. As he asserts in *Cybertext*, “to claim there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories” (5). I believe there is truth in this statement, and it is important to recognize this stance as it works to reconcile two valuable and insightful schools of thought that tend to operate independently of each other. In making an effort to bring these approaches together, we stop limiting game studies to a single method of study and instead bring more to the table with which to

deconstruct these games for academic purposes. Another prominent game studies theorist, Jesper Juul supports Aarseth in chastising theorists for limiting themselves to only ludological perspectives in *Half-Real*: “We can also treat the fictional world as a fixed set of signs that the game presents, and we can treat the fictional world as something that the game cues the player into imagining and that players then imagine in their own ways” (2). Juul’s intent, then, is to “integrate these disparate perspectives into a coherent theory of video games” (3). The debate between the use of narratology and the use of ludology has been drawn out over several years at this point, considering Aarseth’s work was compiled in 1997, nearly twenty years ago. While there are supporters of both sides of the debate, there are also theorists that take it upon themselves to create a theory that supports both avenues. In this manner, my examination of the video games in question will attempt to do the same in incorporating both aspects of game studies developed so far.

When embarking upon the study of video games in the field of literature, it is necessary to incorporate some form of literary theory in order to validate the efforts spent analyzing video games as texts. Though the field of video game studies is fairly interdisciplinary, this analysis in particular stems from a background in literature and thus necessitates some form of theory that will support the endeavor. As literary theories traditionally focus on the objects being analyzed as texts, a narratological approach to video game studies is not out of the question. However, the school of narratology in literary studies is only one theory among a number of theories; this variety in literary theories allows for identification with the narratological side of the aforementioned debate while still contributing something to the conversation that is not necessarily

strictly narratological. In this, the study ceases to hold any pretense of partisanship and enters into a more liberal joining of literary theory and reader-response assessment. To this end, another incorporation of theory into this examination will be that of critical race theory, which, coupled with narratological and ludological approaches, should prove to be of interest in the field of game studies.

### **Critical Race Theory**

As mentioned previously, academic writing that combines a lens of critical race theory with game studies is almost negligible, and in fact rarely focuses around known critical race theorists. Instead, these analyses set out to point out problematic parts of games without doing much else. This project sets out to fill the void present here by presenting an argument regarding not only some inherently questionable parts of role-playing video games, but also the implications of these components and their effects on gamers. The current body of research in this area addresses problems in the games, but does so from either a narratological or ludological perspective—mostly ludological—but never both. This study will analyze narratological elements in the second chapter followed by ludological characteristics in the third and fourth chapters in order to aptly present an argument regarding the state of video games in the current entertainment industry. Until now in the field of literary studies, critical race theorists have normally critiqued literature with some dabbling in film. In order to transfer this particular skillset to video games, we must recognize video games as texts. However, we must also recognize that video games are not merely narrative text, and thus embrace a scholarship that addresses texts in a way that will be able to move beyond just words on a page and into gaming environments as a whole.

Prominent contemporary critical race theorists such as bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Cornel West decry the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of blacks in film (in addition to literature and politics), a medium of entertainment that has had over a century to cement its place in society and to continually advance its techniques and storytelling decisions. Though movies as a whole have made progress toward the inclusion and representation of minorities, video games still lag behind in terms of adequate variety of protagonists and avoiding stereotypical portrayals of minorities. For example, one of the most infamous and perhaps most studied video game series of the last ten years is the *Grand Theft Auto* series, which will be discussed in further detail in the third chapter of this project. Briefly, however, the game establishes racist stereotypes to the point of angering specific communities (in particular, the Haitian government). Furthermore, role-playing video games of the last two years alone have been unabashedly dominated by white, male protagonists.

In considering the lack of minority representation among video game protagonists, we must also consider the liberties that can be taken in creating personal avatars in role-playing video games. Among these liberties is the ability to choose one's appearance, and the customizability of this part of experiencing a video game varies from product to product and company to company. There are some games that allow for multiple race choices in their avatar selection and others that simply allow you to change minute details that revolve around the same, tired facial structure we see in many of the protagonists of the most current video games being produced. Still other role-playing video games completely eliminate the player's freedom in choosing what their avatar looks like in favor of providing their audience with a character that is already a

recognizable part of the game franchise or a character whose appearance is locked for the simplification of the game development process. Overall, it is interesting to formulate theories regarding a player's attachment to avatars of their own creations compared to those provided by the game. Out of this interest stem possible studies on the extent of investment on the behalf of players in terms of their avatars, which produces projects like this one. Similar to this project, Waggoner's study depicted in *My Avatar, My Self* included a number of different people of varying amounts of experience with video games in an attempt to make connections between how much a player invests in their avatar and how it applies to their gameplay. Thus, because of texts like this we come to realize the role that avatars play in the experience of the players. Naturally, we can assert that these avatars are the vehicles through which the story moves at the hands of the players, but they also represent an obstacle in understanding the game as a text. In producing a static avatar—static in the sense that their interactions with other characters in the virtual environment are set in code and thus cannot change—game developers thus create a lens for the player to experience the game before them. Therefore, a player's avatar can be an aid or a hindrance in how they experience the game, depending on what they want to see (or what they need to see) in order to fully understand the gravity of the game before them.

Other game theorists have taken to studying how widespread video games have become as a medium of entertainment and the trend of growth in this area over the past couple of decades or so. Understanding the growth of video games will help in moving forward with this project. In order to defend video game studies, there must be some sort of an understanding of why the study of video games may or may not be necessary. Thus,

it is helpful to bring in ideas from theorists that set out to try and explain why this explosion in popularity of video games recently has a lot to say about our values as a society. Theorists like Tom Chatfield and Jane McGonigal go to great lengths to evaluate the popularity of video games and what this could mean for our society moving forward. According to McGonigal, the dramatic growth of the gamer demographic holds significance in how we approach our values as a society. McGonigal argues that this increase in the demographic of people who play video games for a significant amount of time reflects on a “broken” reality from which people feel they must escape. This escapism has certainly not been limited to video games in the past, however, as novels and films have served much of the same purpose. McGonigal chooses to embrace the gamer demographic as different in this case; however, she argues that it is the resiliency and innovative nature of these people that drives them to solve the problems before them regardless of how long it takes or how difficult it is. For these theorists, the priority is to embrace the immersive nature of video games; for this project, the priority is to understand its repercussions. For McGonigal and Chatfield, video games as immersive narrative are a vehicle for social change, or at least a way to reach out to gamers using a method they will understand. To these theorists, harnessing the power of these games to grip audiences in the way that they do is the key to making social progress. However, there is certainly another side to the coin that expresses this amount of optimism, for with the amount of riveting content that games provide for gamers comes a certain degree of repercussions that follow the very same logic of the theorists writing on immersion. Fully capturing an audience in this manner implies that there is a level of investment by gamers into these games that certainly does not ignore the environment at hand; quite the

opposite, in fact, as it is far more likely that gamers immerse themselves in these virtual realities to the extent that many of the seemingly fictional things in these games become reality. From this comes the contrast between studying the immersive nature of video games and attempting to understand the repercussions of this very facet: optimism against realism.

Though the work of critical race theorists in film studies tends to be perceived as merely pointing out flaws in these products in terms of portraying minorities or even simply lacking strong, accurately portrayed minority characters, I believe there is more to our responsibility as scholars than to simply point things out. As academics, we are called to wrestle with the things in front of us that we do not understand in order to create a new understanding stemming from the knowledge we have gained from those that came before us. In this field in particular, it is challenging to come up with such prior knowledge due to the infancy of the theoretical framework in question. However, through utilization of theoretical frameworks established by previous authors we can come to a sort of compromise regarding the intersection of game studies and literary theory, which is partially the purpose of the project from this point onward.

### **Thesis Outline**

The second chapter of this project will address issues of whitewashing and racist portrayals of characters in role-playing video games. By identifying this significant problem, the aforementioned critical race theorists will play a key role in their ideas regarding minority portrayals in film in order to tie them into the very same depictions we see in video games. Additionally, I will explore particular role-playing video games to analyze themes of racism and whitewashing with a particular focus on *World of Warcraft*

and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* while drawing examples from other games such as *Grand Theft Auto*. This chapter will explore the power structures set in place by these video games, the limitations of avatar creation, and details in the game environments that are questionable in terms of perpetuating stereotypes or racism.

The third chapter of my thesis will consist of a methodology for the study to come in the fourth chapter of the work. This chapter will introduce the necessity for this study as well as provide the research questions, population and sample size, rationale for the case study, data collection methods, and data analysis.

The fourth chapter of my thesis will consist of a presentation and analysis of the collected data. In this chapter, the data findings of the quantitative survey will be examined as pertaining to the research questions outlined in the third chapter. Following this section, the chapter will summarize the data in preparation for the fifth chapter's discussion of the data.

The fifth chapter of my thesis will present a reflection of the data gathered in a way that addresses the implications of the collected results. This chapter will include an introduction to the topic at hand, the purpose of the study, design and procedures of the study, and a more in-depth conversation revolving around the results collected. Following these sections will be a concession of limitations surrounding the study, implications of the results on game studies, and recommendations for future research. This chapter will set out to explore players' perceptions of avatar formation as an extension of identity formation and racism in role-playing video games after drawing on their opinions with the quantitative survey. Furthermore, the fifth chapter will outline my findings in the study and connect them to possible conclusions regarding how players regard the games

they play and how much attention they pay to the environments they are exposed to. Video games are considered an extensively immersive form of recreation, as addressed by theorists like Espen Aarseth who brand these games as “ergodic literature,” which requires a greater amount of investment from audiences than static literature like books or film. Furthermore, I will use explorations of avatar formation in role-playing video games as a connection to personal identity using the research of Zach Waggoner as a foundation.

The last chapter of my thesis will draw conclusions based on the research in the previous chapters. I will state possible directions this research can take, as well as possible effects of the circumstances being researched. In order to adequately embrace both the ludological and narratological approaches in this project, the last chapter will draw from the chapters that focus on each of these aspects in order to provide results that cover the strengths of both approaches. After analyzing the data collected from the survey as well as the study of the aforementioned games the concluding chapter of my thesis will provide potential interpretations of these data as pertaining to human nature and the implications of the effects of video games and racial imbalances on society.

The games included in this study fit the scope of the project due to several factors. First and foremost, the games being discussed are enormously popular, featured on many lists of most popular video games of their respective years. This, alone, will account for the sheer ability of these games to permeate popular culture in a way that makes it challenging to ignore their possible effects on the gamer demographic. In addition, these games all have some sort of problematic representation of races and racial relations within the structure of their narratives. Whether these are expressed purposely or not remains to be analyzed, but there is a stark difference between games that present these

sorts of conflicts in order to create morally gray areas that challenge gamers and games that take advantage of minority stereotypes in order to create a darker sense of humor that appeals to the subconscious constructions of race in the minds of the average gamer. Lastly, the inclusion of role-playing video games over other genres presents a category of games that is simply more demanding than other genres of games in terms of having to pay attention to the narratives and environmental situations at hand. Taking advantage of a type of literature that is ergodic in its efforts to involve its audiences in its storylines results in an analysis of games that are far more appealing in their storytelling devices. This alone speaks volumes to the narratological approach that asserts that the same storytelling structures we have used for centuries are still appealing to a broad audience.

This outline is constructed in this manner to streamline discussion on these role-playing video games by establishing the groundwork that is within the video games themselves. This foundation will then transition into how the players' experiences with these games and in their lives affect how they choose to create the avatars that will become visual representations of their movement through these virtual worlds. In doing so, we are able to apply both the narratological and the ludological approach to this study, thus combining the two prominent methods of game studies into a more effective hybrid that should yield optimal results.

CHAPTER II  
THE GAMES WE PLAY: PROBLEMATIC AVATAR CREATION AND ROLE-PLAY  
IN VIDEO GAMES

**Purpose**

In trying to establish effective methods for applying theoretical approaches to the growing field of game studies, two relatively separate schools of thought have taken up opposite sides of the discussion of how to analyze games. The narratological approach to video game studies focuses predominantly on the narrative aspect of games in order to bring some concrete application of theory into the analysis of this medium. The ludological approach to video game studies, on the other hand, chooses to discuss the components of games that create the gaming experience for the audience, whether this be game mechanics, avatar creation, or even game environment layout. More often than not, these two perspectives on how to approach video games exist as separate entities with little to no intersection. However, to ignore the benefits of a combined approach is to detract from the value of games both as text and as strict coding. After all, the presence of a story is as important as how the story is delivered.

In choosing to undertake this project, one of the primary objectives was to analyze video games in a way that brought together the two different, yet relatively established, theoretical approaches of ludology and narratology in order to produce a method of video game criticism that could perhaps expand on existing theoretical groundwork laid out so far. The narratological aspect thus corresponds more with the field of literary studies in

this case, thus allowing for the introduction of critical race theory as a lens through which the games in question can be analyzed. The ludological half of this particular part of the project sets out to examine the games beyond just their storylines by critiquing both the avatar creation processes and the inherent problems in the delivery of the games' content. Thus, the following section is, in large part, speculative. However, this approach is necessary as a way to provide a foundation for future game studies. By bringing together narratological and ludological approaches into an analysis of problematic video games the benefits of this combined method of study become increasingly evident. In examining games both as stories and as interactive constructs we are able to come closer to an understanding of how these games may or may not affect players in terms of how the game designers have portrayed the characters in these games, both playable and otherwise. As an integral part of contemporary popular culture, video games have much to offer in terms of insight into both the products we create and the media we consume as entertainment.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Importance of Popular Culture**

Various serious critics and academics often dismiss popular culture as an object of study. However, this is most assuredly a mistake. One of the most telling parts of a culture, regardless of historical time or location, has always been the value it places on diverse forms of entertainment. According to scholars like Johan Huizinga, the desire for play is almost as embedded in nature (even observable among animals) as are survival instincts. Thus, to analyze what it is people find entertaining is to discover intrinsic connections between these media and the workings of human nature. According to *The*

*Sage Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, the term “popular” has been exposed to a range of connotations since the 14<sup>th</sup> century “from the neutral sense of ‘belonging to the people’ to the negative meaning of low, vulgar, and common on one end and the more positive sense of having general appeal, being widespread, and being well liked on the other” (“Popular Culture”). Though the more positive spin on the word began to take root in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the term “never shed the taint of the vulgar” (“Popular Culture”). To elaborate on this definition a bit further in terms of historical contextualization, *The Sage Glossary* does mention, “The gradual acquisition of the more positive meaning of popular and the emergence of popular culture must be understood in light of the changing structure of society and the economy. Capitalism, urbanization, and industrialization increasingly legitimated bourgeois tastes as the middle classes expanded and became wealthier” (“Popular Culture”). Particularly in the post-industrial era—where products can be made and distributed on a scale exponentially larger than in previous times—means of entertainment have developed that are not necessarily considered high art in the same sense that literature or art would be but are still consumed on a massive scale by the general populace. This concept materializes most noticeably in industries like sports, fashion, and television in which audiences are able to passively fulfill a basic desire for entertainment. In contemporary terms, the products these companies offer in terms of their entertainment value compose what is widely consumed and accepted. In other words, these components of cultural expression that do not fall under a category of “high art” but are still widespread (due, in part, to the rise in mass media in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) comprise the idea of “popular culture.”

Popular culture in this context ordinarily exists outside of high art, which is generally considered a mutually exclusive relationship. This is not always the case, as can be seen in popular adaptations originating in literature, but popular culture is commonly dismissed as superficial or sensational by non-mainstream critics. Regardless, popular culture generally yields information regarding a society's values and desires; were this not true, popular culture would not be what it is: popular. From this truth stems a benefit of the study of popular culture that delineates both what a culture values and what a culture is persuaded or attracted by. The latter of these two delineations creates the purpose for this project, which is to understand the popularity of an increasingly popular part of the entertainment industry and why this may or may not be problematic to a significant audience.

In terms of popular culture, the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by the rise of film and television as additions to the global entertainment industry. From this rise eventually also came an academic interest in this new entertainment phenomenon that captivated audiences with moving images coupled with sound. As technological advancements progressed, however, the first video games began to find their places in arcades around the world, eventually spreading further to home console systems. Arguably one of the more pivotal points in recounting the origins of video games, the 1980s witnessed the rise of classic video game franchises like *Super Mario Bros.* and *Pac-Man* that would later become staples of the video game industry. Popular culture gradually shifted over the next three decades in a way that has firmly cemented video games near the top of the popular culture industry charts, theoretically speaking; video games, in other words, now dominate the entertainment industry.

According to research released by the Entertainment Software Association in 2015, “more than 150 million Americans play video games” with 42 percent of Americans playing at least three hours a week (“Press Releases”). In this case, the prevalence of video games as entertainment in the culture of the United States may be indicative of the reception of games on a global scale, thus strengthening the contention that video games do, in fact, dominate the current worldwide entertainment industry. Regardless, one of the most prevailing mentalities toward video games even in contemporary society is one that contends video games are a waste of time. The Pew Research Center found that 59 percent of American adults surveyed consider video games “a waste of time,” with almost half of these adults applying this belief to *all* video games while a slight majority apply this to some, but not all video games (Duggan). It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that some of these adults may form part of the academic body, and may therefore extend this research to academic endeavors. In so doing, these academics snub video game studies occasionally as wasted effort. Popular culture as a whole tends to receive this treatment, though the mentality does soften up over time as these forms of entertainment assimilate more effectively into society, as can be seen in the recent growth and validity of film studies.

One of the things that popular culture does well is its ability to demonstrate what it is that a population values or finds enticing. Furthermore, it is fair to assert that because these games are consumed on such a massive scale, there must be a significant spread of ideas throughout these populations. Because the presence of popular culture is so prevalent, there must be, to some degree, a spread of ideas that mirrors this popularity. Regardless of an audience’s investment in a game—or lack thereof—there is still some

consensus among academics regarding how much an audience receives from the entertainment it consumes. As a prominent critical race theorist, one of bell hooks' assertions in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* is that "While audiences are clearly not passive and are able to pick and choose, it is simultaneously true that there are certain 'received messages' that are rarely mediated by the will of the audience" (3). Though hooks is referring in this case to audiences experiencing film, this generally holds true for most elements of popular culture, including video games. In fact, audiences are far less passive when engaging video games as entertainment—and even less so when engaging them as texts—and thus there is more likelihood of absorbing messages being broadcast by these games. Thus, hooks is not arguing that these media are unavoidable because of how widespread the discussion of them may be, but instead posits that the media we are exposed to communicate ideas and concepts that we receive whether we consciously accept them or not. In this way, these media work in much the same way as literature: whether we are passive audiences or invested audiences, there will be some degree to which we subconsciously receive knowledge from what we take pleasure in.

In trying to understand the messages conveyed by video games we must acknowledge that in recognizing games as texts we must attempt to formulate a framework of theory that is based in the study of texts. The continuing development of video games in terms of how sophisticated a gaming experience they offer has created an increasingly in-depth system of narrative that is worked into these games. In other words, the way these games are telling stories is in a state of constant growth: the more avid gamers find the best games to be the ones that have the most compelling storylines. This growth has been propelled by the increasing demand in writers entering the game

development industry in order to create higher-quality storylines to meet the standards of the most devoted gamers. Video games have thus reached a point where the storylines are woven in a complex enough way in combination with the actual game mechanics (control schemes, layout of game environment, character interactions, to name a few) that it is worthwhile to examine video games as texts; complicated and multidimensional texts, but texts nonetheless. These texts comprise a new body of stories that combine interactive elements not seen before in other media. Video games bring to the table an experience that demands both the ability to be able to read texts closely and the ability to be able to overcome challenges and obstacles provided by a video game. As Mark J.P. Wolf explains in his introduction to *The Medium of the Video Game*:

The main reason for the [theoretical] neglect of the video game is that it is more difficult to study than traditional media. Admittedly, the video game as a “text” is much harder to master. . . . Instead of fixed, linear sequences of text, image, or sound which remain unchanged when examined multiple times, a video game experience can vary widely from one playing to another. . . . Mastery of the video game, then, can be more involved (and involving) than mastery of a film; in addition to critical skills, the researcher must possess game-playing or puzzle-solving skills, or at least know someone who does. (7)

Even though the difficulties presented in Wolf’s introduction are valid, there is an increasing number of scholars that are able to navigate through games of this caliber while still critically examining the content of the games themselves as texts. In trying to

engage these games as texts, we create a need for theoretical framework that has historically dealt with texts on its own.

### **Critical Race Theory**

The perspective of critical race theory is fundamentally important to this discussion because of the extent of its dealings with marginalization and underrepresentation. Thus, critical race theory holds particular sway in discussing the potential effects of video games as popular media in this case. These theorists have subjected literature to their critiques and have since moved on to films as well in order to demonstrate the inequalities present in more than one element of the American lifestyle. Some of the predominant critics in this school of thought include Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Cornel West, all of whom speak out against injustices of misrepresentation or underrepresentation of blacks in American art as well as white oppression of other races in society as a whole. Morrison writes occasionally on the subject, though her renown stems mainly from her work as a novelist. Included in Morrison's critical work is *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* in which she asserts that, despite the deliberate efforts of some critics, the American canon is shaped in no small part by the presence of African American characters and traditions. Morrison brings another perspective to the table, however. She highlights the importance of addressing how literature is impacted by the presence of minorities, but her priority in this particular section is to analyze how a narrow-minded canon can affect not only the colonized, but also the colonizer. In fact, Morrison asserts, "The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior

of masters” (11-12). Morrison’s efforts to explore the minds of white writers in order to delve into the concept of “Africanism” is mirrored to some extent by the efforts made in this project to understand the minds of game developers creating video games that perpetuate a system of injustice as well as the minds of the general populace that are exposed to these games.

Morrison does mention that scholarship that sets out to point out injustices and black erasure is fairly rare; she then proceeds to explain why she believes this is the case:

One likely reason for the paucity of critical material on this large and compelling subject is that, in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. . . . It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. According to this logic, every well-bred instinct argues *against noticing* and forecloses adult discourse. (9)

For Morrison, the main reason there is a lack of scholarship regarding the imbalance of race treatment is that it is perceived as sensible to keep quiet about the situation, as though for fear of offending members of minority races. However, one of the main problems plaguing popular culture in the United States as of right now is an underrepresentation of minorities, which will only be perpetuated by a constant silence regarding the matter. In breaking this silence, this project sets out to address some of the issues of representation of minorities in popular culture. An examination of some of the

most popular video games of the last few years should be telling of just how much game developers “enforce [race’s] invisibility through silence” and how much we can learn from video games in terms of the inequalities present in their narratives.

Most of hooks’ criticism that is relevant to this study comes from her work on film studies and critique, offering this project a method through which to read popular culture—in this particular case, moving pictures—as text. Even in her collection of essays *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, hooks mentions the allure of using popular culture as an educational tool. According to hooks, “students are much more engaged when they are learning how to think critically and analytically by exploring concrete aspects of their reality, particularly their experience of popular culture” (*Yearning* 6). She takes these ideas further in depth in another collection of essays, *Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* where she asserts, “Trying to teach complicated feminist theory to students who were hostile to the reading often led me to begin such discussions by talking about a particular film. Suddenly students would be engaged in an animated discussion deploying the very theoretical concepts that they had previously claimed they just did not understand” (2-3). For hooks, films are a pedagogical vehicle not only due to their ability to “provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class,” but also because “they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these changed issues” (*Race* 2-3). In order to be used pedagogically in this manner, film must be able to be taken as a text, which can then be extended to video games. Through this application of established theory to the narrative of video games we begin to treat them as texts, which is conducive to academic study in a new field.

Though similar to hooks and Morrison in their attempts to point out inequalities and deficiencies in how minorities are perceived and portrayed, West's criticism is more political and concrete. In other words, West concerns himself with the state of things in the country not only with race, but also with economic inequalities as a whole. As pertaining to race, however, West does have several ideas to offer. In "The Role of Law in Progressive Politics," West asserts that American society is "a *chronically* racist, sexist, homophobic and jingoistic one. The complex and torturous quest for American identity from 1776 to our own time has produced a culture in which people define themselves physically, socially, sexually and politically in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation and 'anti-American' activities" (270). Popular culture participates in this sort of process, as well. In creating media that will spread most effectively among masses, popular culture must cater to the most current American identity. For West, this obsession with establishing identity in a way that automatically delineates unique factions in American society is one of the most problematic aspects of American society and one which is conducive only to racism and injustice overall. West in particular speaks out against affirmative action when he articulates his ideas in "American Progressivism Reoriented" regarding racial discrimination in stating that this racial antagonism can "hurt American democracy in two ways: first, by the evils of racial discrimination and segregation and, second, by the obstacles they create to the redress of class injustice. Working Americans remain divided by race, struggling under the injustices of racial oppression and resentful of what often seem to be the unjust effects of policies designed to right racial wrongs" (322). According to West, then, there is a strong resistance to ideas regarding redress of wrongs committed against African Americans (or other non-

white races) due to the fact that they generally create an atmosphere of resentment; the good in this case strongly outweighs the bad in terms of reparation and coming to a more congenial relationship between races. By calling on West's ideas in this case we begin to nuance a potential call to action in terms of how we deal with popular culture. Through understanding that the current process of reparation is ineffective and necessitates an alternative approach we can start to discuss the potential for the inclusion of a more organic variety in video games that truly does reflect reality instead of a perceived one where racial inequalities are the norm.

Though these three scholars all write out of a desire for justice and equality for African Americans, there are disconnects between their ideas of how we should arrive at reparations. In his writing, West heavily advocates a reexamination of an economic system that for so long has worked against African Americans. Though he condemns affirmative action, West is in favor of a redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor, particularly considering this would help minorities as a whole that may be struggling in the current system. Of the three scholars, West is most involved in the American political system. Morrison's call for reform, on the other hand, focuses more on literature and the place other cultures should hold in the literary canon. For Morrison, literary recognition for world literature is a priority, and thus differs from West's push toward financial equality. Lastly, hooks is perhaps the most versatile of the three theorists. There are several concerns that hooks chooses to address throughout the span of her works, though the majority of her writing concerns inequalities in both race and gender. As part of her upbringing, hooks learned to use the struggles she faced as a foundation for her work. According to *The Encyclopedia of World Biography*, "[hooks] later explained how this

community turned the hardships created by racism (the idea that one race is superior to another) into a source of strength. The neighborhood where she grew up provided young [hooks] with her resistance to racism, but it also provided her with the negative and positive experiences that would shape her feminism” (“Bell Hooks”). The approaches these three critics take toward writing about racial inequality may differ—and perhaps they would disagree on the means to the end—but the problem they see is still the same.

In establishing this critical framework, we discover ideas concerning the importance of film in pedagogy, the benefits of studying texts from the imperialist perspective rather than that of the colonized, as well as the idea that the United States as a chronically racist society has failed in its attempts at reparation. Though these ideas spread across a multitude of platforms, they can all be tied back to the concern at hand. Morrison’s examination of texts from the perspective of the colonizers, for example, grants us the tools necessary to be able to analyze video games as texts from the perspective of game developers and of those members of society who are able to partake in these video games in a way that implies a middle- or upper-class standing. In sharing Morrison’s interest in trying to understand these texts from the perspective of the “colonizers,” we come to understand the appeal game developers have to make to general audiences in order to sell their products. Whether the minds the products are sold to belong to those who could be considered colonizers or colonized, the end result is the same: gamers are exposed to games that present storylines that can influence how they regard real-life interactions as parallel to some interactions in virtual reality.

Regarding bell hooks’ take on film as a pedagogical tool, we can apply this same sort of philosophy to video games as texts. Where film tells a story to a passive audience,

video games present narrative to an audience that is, by design, more invested due to its necessary participation in the game and the obstacles presented throughout. One of the shortcomings of this approach, however, is that video games tend to require a certain skillset that limits the number of people who can play them as opposed to the number of people able to sit through a movie and passively receive all the information being conveyed in that manner. This alone limits the amount of scholarship that can exist on video games due to a more limited scholarly audience being able to participate in the activity. Despite this, there are still ample benefits to examining video games as texts even beyond just a pedagogical perspective. To imply that video games can be taught assumes that there is something to be taken *from* them, thus creating the need for an understanding of what exactly it is we can take from these games as an invested audience. To take this a step further, hooks asserts that it is not merely film that speaks to students in a more relevant manner than outright literary theory, but popular culture as a whole, of which video games are an integral part. A medium that is consumed on so massive a level is one that almost necessarily has some sort of message to be conveyed and interpreted by its audiences.

West's take on America's chronic racism and the afflictions brought about by affirmative action bring about another concern regarding video games. Affirmative action is a policy that is not present in video games; there is no policy that states there must be a certain number or percentage of minority characters in video games. Thus, game development becomes a sort of outlet for these frustrations of the American population in terms of having to accommodate for other races not because of a basis on skill or merit but because of a need to meet a quota, to contribute to a diversified population regardless

of the skillset. Because affirmative action was brought about due to this problem of chronic racism, aspects of American life where affirmative action is not present may act as an outlet for frustrations held by the American people regarding this policy. If we are to read into the overall whitewashing of video game protagonists using this lens, the problem begins to make more sense.

### **Approaches to Game Studies**

Analyzing the games themselves involves an understanding of how to approach these games as texts. One of the predominant debates in this area is between ludologists and narratologists, two distinct schools of thought in game studies. This debate stems from a disagreement between ludologists that prefer to study games as components that make up the games themselves—game level layout, avatar creation, character progression through the game—and the narratologists that believe games should be studied by their narratives alone. This analysis will attempt to combine both approaches in an effort to take the best things from both approaches to gain a better understanding of how these games communicate their messages.

Among game studies theorists, Espen J. Aarseth asserts that adequate game studies necessitate a combination of both of the aforementioned approaches. More importantly, however, Aarseth expresses a distinction between literature that is ergodic and nonergodic in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*: “In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1). On the other hand, nonergodic literature is that which requires very little effort from the reader in order to get through the text aside from some eye movements required to scan the pages and the occasional turning of these pages (Aarseth 2). In this case, video games fall under

the former category, one that involves a higher level of effort from its audiences in order to traverse the storyline at hand. This is not to say that undertaking the reading of literature is not a worthwhile endeavor, as it has generally proven an intellectually stimulating one. This statement sets out to prove that video games in general require a higher level of investment in terms of progressing through the storyline, which does not always have a direct correlation to the depth or quality of the storyline itself. Moving through obstacles and challenges in order to progress a storyline does not necessarily create a storyline that provides enough depth to be satisfying in a scholarly sense. In fact, the level of these stories told in video games generally varies by genre, meaning there are some genres that are more beneficial to academic study than others.

Like Aarseth, Ian Bogost draws from his background in comparative literature to present his own theoretical perspective on how to study video games in *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Bogost argues that Aarseth presents an interesting concept in the form of ergodic and nonergodic literature, and that Aarseth carefully extends the ergodic label to some unconventional literary works such as the I Ching and Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (Bogost, *Unit* 51). Bogost laments the establishment of a study of video games as their own discipline as being "essentialist and doctrinaire," a discipline that, at its core, "still privileges the material at the cost of the expressive" (53). In working through his objections with the current direction of video game research, Bogost suggests that in place of focusing on how games work, "we turn to what they do—how they inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity" (53). Bogost then reaches a conclusion regarding the direction he wants to take video game studies: "Such a comparative videogame criticism would focus principally on

the expressive capacity of games and, true to its grounding in the humanities, would seek to understand how videogames reveal what it means to be human” (53). Though Bogost falls on the ludological end of the spectrum based on *Unit Operations*, his ideas regarding an approach to videogame criticism still focus on the value we place on aesthetic pleasure, even if this conclusion comes from a focus predominantly on the components of video games themselves. Furthermore, Bogost’s approach prioritizes a focus on shedding light on how video games reveal what is encompassed in the definition of “humanity.” In other words, Bogost’s prioritization of the study of games as related to the human condition lines up with the focus of this project: understanding what video games say about our own culture and its values.

In trying to establish a means for studying the video games at hand using literary theory, the underlying assumption is that we should be treating this work as comparative literature; in essence, this is what our analysis becomes. Though Aarseth—and, to some extent, Bogost—leans away from what he perceives as a traditional need to apply current theories to new media, I believe that this approach is, in fact, necessary in order to contribute to the efforts of constructing a foundation from which to study video games in the context of comparative literature. The concern presented by these theorists is that applying older methods to newer media downplays the unique value these new texts can offer by neglecting to consider how these new texts require new approaches. Certainly, this is a concern that holds sway for a more established field of study. Film studies, for example, have begun to come into their own in terms of how we study film. Film directors provide insight into the process of filmmaking, which leads to the creation of filmmaking tropes and techniques that are a basis for most contemporary film studies.

The lens of literary theory applied to films is still valid—and, in fact, fairly widespread—but film theory on its own is developing into a distinct field. The same concept applies to videogames, where other lenses are applicable to a growing medium, but until the growth videogames are currently experiencing in terms of sophistication and appeal begins to settle, there is no real reason to attempt to create a new theory for game studies based on aspects of game development that may or may not be outdated in the next five years. Thus, the application of established theories to video game studies is a worthwhile endeavor in the establishment of video game scholarship, and it is important to recognize that the research can still highlight the value of games by their components while remaining within established schools of thought for the time being.

### **Video Game Genres**

The study of video games as texts in this manner assumes a number of genres within games to be studied, though some genres may be more suitable than others in terms of literary examination. Video game genres differ about as much as those in literature or film, though these genres generally entail unique gaming experiences in terms of both storyline and game mechanics. Though it is not immediately apparent in many cases, most—if not all—video game genres tend to have storylines to some degree. In sports games, the player takes control of a team that must defeat an opposing team; sometimes a rival team is involved, sometimes playing games results in more in-game currency or status that allows the player to move up in the ranks. Though the story is not sophisticated, it still exists as a driving force to propel gameplay forward and create incentives for gamers to continue to make progress regardless of the genre at hand. Another genre of video games that tends to not be story-oriented is that of the music or

rhythm genre including games such as the famous *Guitar Hero* franchise. However, even in these games the player must perform against a rival musician in order to prevail and move on in the levels. Furthermore, completing one of these challenges grants the player more in-game currency with which to buy more equipment or new venues or other such incentives that are not necessary to the enjoyment of the game, but do add an extra dimension to the experience. These genres, however, are not focused on establishing solid storylines but merely use them as tools with which to propel gameplay forward.

One of the video game genres that generally relies heavily on storyline in order to be successful is that of the role-playing video game. This genre of video game revolves around having a certain sense of storyline for a player to progress through. A player controls an avatar, a feature not necessarily unique to this genre, and embarks on some sort of adventure or quest system in order to complete the game. Whether this quest or adventure takes place in a fantastic realm can vary, but there is generally some sort of mission or quest-oriented system that dictates where a player should be advancing in the game. In other words, there are sets of tasks the player must complete as set before them by the game in order to progress. Again, this is true of some of the other video game genres, but role-playing video games tend to be unique in how far they take these quests to progress their storylines. In pushing gamers to take these quests seriously, then, game developers create an environment in role-playing games that is most conducive to a more interactive and immersive experience. Thus, role-playing video games are perhaps most telling of how video games as a whole might impact a player's perception of the world around them in relation to the virtual worlds they experience recreationally.

Some role-playing video games are set in an open world environment where the player can explore and undertake missions at their leisure. Some of these quests are fundamental to the progression of the main storyline while others contribute to mini-stories that are not part of the game's main framework but make up another part of the game environment. Though there are many more details that nuance this particular aspect of role-playing games, the presence of these many stories within games in the genre create a new way of telling stories that is far from the linear structure of literature and film. In this genre, players can choose to fulfill these quests in practically any order they desire—outside of each quest branch's chronological progression—and thus can choose how to formulate their own stories within their personal gaming experiences. This particular part of games impacts the study in its ability to draw players into an immersive gaming—and storytelling—experience. By creating a quest system that emphasizes extended efforts to complete a story, players will almost naturally be more willing to devote some sort of investment to the content at hand.

### **Video Games as Texts**

In order to properly conceive of role-playing video games as texts, we have to gain a sense of what kind of texts these games are. As mentioned before, Aarseth creates two characterizations for literature: ergodic literature, which requires more effort from the audience to understand the narrative, and nonergodic literature that requires less effort from its readers aside from eye movements and page turning. Role-playing video games form part of the former distinction, for they demand a certain amount of effort from their “readers” in order to fully understand the storyline. This concept seems to contradict the part of human nature that seeks to reduce the difficulty of things experienced. Overall,

there are several works of literature that are more welcoming due to their ability to be understood easily, while some other canonical pieces of literature are more challenging to the reader. This is quite possibly one of the most indicative factors toward the unpopularity of what is considered “classic” literature. Many novice readers will complain that this literature is too difficult to understand, and thus will make efforts to keep away from it. Role-playing games are challenging, yes, but in quite a different way than what we think of as classic literature. Where classic literature is engaging in an intellectual manner that challenges preconceived notions, assumptions, and reading abilities, RPGs—in addition to performing the aforementioned functions—are challenging in a way that tests problem-solving abilities, perseverance, and hand-eye-coordination in order to overcome obstacles and advance through the game. This is not to say that RPGs are not intellectually stimulating; on the contrary, they push the limits of many gamers in terms of ability to overcome challenges, more so than many real-life activities. Increased engagement in this case means players are far more likely to subconsciously, or even consciously, wrestle with the ideas presented in video games.

### **Analysis of Role-Playing Video Games**

In attempting to understand the impact of video games on their audiences, we must first analyze the gaming environments created by game developers. Examining the games that follow requires an understanding of how these games are constructed in terms of avatar creation, storyline, and even, in some cases, critical reception. Thus, though the discussion of surface level elements of gameplay are extensive in the following section, this will prove beneficial to an overall understanding of how the games we play relate to the values we hold as a society and as people.

### *World of Warcraft*

One of the most overwhelming—and exceedingly popular—role-playing video games in terms of sheer volume and content is Blizzard Entertainment’s *World of Warcraft*. *World of Warcraft* is classified as a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), a game where players interact with thousands of other real players by means of virtual avatars as part of their gaming experience. Set in a fantasy environment, players are thrown into a world rife with conflict between two warring factions: the Alliance and the Horde, “good” and “bad,” respectively. To say “good” and “bad” is to oversimplify the conflict at hand, but the predominant issue that stems from the game is based in this perception of the two factions. However, exploring this idea further first requires a discussion about the factions and races in the game themselves.

In *World of Warcraft*, the Alliance is comprised of humans, night elves, dwarves, gnomes, draenei, and worgen. The Horde, on the other hand, is made up of orcs, trolls, tauren, undead, blood elves, and goblins. Additionally, the last playable race, the pandaren, can join either side of the conflict. Outside of that exception, these races are locked into their respective factions and in combat with the races from the opposing factions. Though the conflict between the two factions is not a simple one, the way the races are split between factions has tended to be fairly straightforward from the time of the game’s release in 2004 until the end of 2010 with the introduction of the *Cataclysm* expansion to the game. Even now, the split is fairly evident in terms of marginalized populations being on one end and more aesthetically pleasing or identifiable ones being on the other. In Christopher Jonas Ritter’s dissertation, *Why the Humans are White: Fantasy, Modernity, and the Rhetorics of Racism in World of Warcraft*, Ritter discusses

these differences between the races and attempts to place all of the races in terms of a historical equivalent in the real world. After all, fantasy generally has some real-life model upon which it is based, even if several of its components are taken from drastically diverse times and locations throughout history. In this regard, fantasy role-playing video games are no different. As an academic interested in studying video games as texts as well, Ritter's extensive knowledge of *World of Warcraft* is significant in this context due, if nothing else, to the sheer amount of experience Ritter has had with the game in question. Though there is some amount of scholarship on *World of Warcraft* in particular, Ritter's work analyzes potential racial issues in the game that are in line with the focus of this project. Thus, this section will draw heavily on Ritter's work for the discussion of the playable races in *World of Warcraft*.

Ritter uses the architecture and lore of each race in *World of Warcraft* (up to May 2010, prior to the *Cataclysm* expansion to the game) in order to draw historical connections upon which each race is based in order to support his theory of marginalized races constituting the Horde and conquering races making up the Alliance. First, the architecture of the humans in *World of Warcraft* is "decidedly European: Medieval in style, with some Romanesque elements to the main buildings of interest" (Ritter 55). Though based in a medieval style, this race represents white America in several ways. Humans in this game are a young civilization immensely proud and patriotic in their self-perception, choosing to focus only on their "noble" deeds throughout their history—much like American history textbooks—rather than point out less honorable deeds such as helping the Elves settle in Troll territory and obliterating Troll resistance in the area (Ritter 58). Thus, in this manner, the "default" race that a player can most identify with is

debatably the most problematic in *World of Warcraft*. By putting in the hands of a player a white avatar that is known for conquering other races, the player is, by extension, participating in a continued tradition of colonialism that hinders a mentality of racial equality. As the player controls a human avatar in the game, they are told that white skin is the norm and that anything not resembling that is to be looked down on or conquered. The rest of the Alliance is decidedly non-human, but the resemblance most of the races have to the human race tends to outweigh the animosity players might feel toward Horde races.

The dwarves in *World of Warcraft* boast industrialism in their architecture through the use of raw steel and ironwork in the framework of their buildings. Ritter asserts that this race is most reminiscent of Western Europeans, following in the tradition of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films where the dwarves speak in Scottish accents (61). The night elves in this world are, according to Ritter, a combination of the "Mysterious Elf" and "Mysterious Asian" portrayals, both of which romanticize the cultures they are describing (69). Ritter points out that this is mostly benign on the part of Blizzard Entertainment, but that it still comes across as fairly ambiguous. Regardless, these elves are the lesser of the two elvish evils in *World of Warcraft*. The gnomes in this game are mostly used for comic relief; Ritter classifies them as an illustration of geek culture, with a presentation of technology as good in this version of fantasy (where in other iterations of "high fantasy," such as Tolkien's work, technology is unequivocally bad) (74).

From these examples, the dwarves and gnomes are not particularly problematic. Since dwarves in *World of Warcraft* adhere to the portrayal of dwarves in other

foundational fantasy works like *Lord of the Rings*, players are still inclined to accept them as sufficiently human compared to the other races. The same can be said of gnomes in this case, though the lore we commonly associate with gnomes leans more toward the cheery figures we place in gardens and on lawns. This particular depiction of gnomes allows for a representation of a demographic of *World of Warcraft* players that more closely identifies with geek culture. Though this culture has experienced some stigma in the past—and does still, to some extent—it has never been as troublesome as with issues of race. The night elves, on the other hand, are a bit more complicated. The “Mysterious Asian” trope that Ritter calls on in his work seems to accurately sum up a particular trope of Asian culture that American content creators have exploited for years. In American entertainment, Asians are constrained to representations of being adept in hand-to-hand combat as well as occasionally possessing some mystical knowledge that is foreign, yet helpful, to the protagonist. Asian characters generally do not play much more of a purpose than this, which *World of Warcraft* seems to reinforce rather well in combining this particular trope with the concept of the “Mysterious Elf.” In portraying night elves in this way, the creators of *World of Warcraft* have essentially continued to propagate this idea of Asians that is glorified in one sense, but still frustratingly limited in terms of how fleshed out the characters themselves might be beyond a propensity for mystical knowledge and hand-to-hand combat.

The draenei are an interesting culture in *World of Warcraft*, as they are an introduction of sci-fi elements into an otherwise fantasy-based world. This makes their lore interesting, as it ties closely to that of Russian Jews when combining their accents with their stories. The draenei speak with Russian accents (even making jokes alluding to

Russian comedians, as Ritter points out) and come to this world from their own having made two mass exoduses after two genocides occur on their home world (79). With the draenei, there is some sense of marginalization as proven by the utilization of Jewish background to construct their lore. However, their ties to sci-fi in a fantasy world tends to overshadow their background, and thus players do not construct this race as one that has necessarily been marginalized in a way that is in any immediate danger in the current world. On the contrary, this race is a powerful tool in aiding the struggle against the “othered” races seen in the Horde.

*Cataclysm* brought about the worgen as an addition to the alliance, one that could certainly create an exception to the guidelines typically established by members of the Alliance, predominantly physical attractiveness. The worgen are essentially werewolves, which are already “monsters” in the minds of audiences that have been exposed to other popular culture that includes these particular beings. However, cultural relevance may have played a part in this move by Blizzard to include the worgen. At the end of 2010, the *Twilight* saga was beginning to reach the peak of its popularity with the release of the third film in the franchise, *Eclipse*, having occurred earlier that summer. The newfound popularity of—and sympathy toward—werewolves may have contributed to this decision to include the worgen not on the side of the Alliance but on the side of the Horde. In addition, Ritter points out that the initial inclusion of the blood elves on the side of the Horde was so that players could have an attractive, playable Horde alternative, which will be discussed later. Regardless of the rationale, the inclusion of the worgen as part of the Alliance further diversified the options in the game, perhaps proving in a way that game developers are indeed conscious of the decisions they make in terms of character

diversity. Whether or not this was purely a business-driven move is hard to determine, but the inclusion of this race on the side of the Alliance is certainly one that questions established structures of power within the gaming environment.

As part of the Horde, the orcs' architecture represents a medieval style that differs from that of the humans in its allusion to the more contemporary brutalism style of architecture that tends to incorporate features like rough, unfinished surfaces, unusual shapes, heavy-looking materials, massive forms, and small windows in relation to the other parts (Waters). To Ritter, these orcs are "reformed sinners" as part of an effort by Blizzard's game developers to present a race typically associated with evil—again, as established by works akin to Tolkien's—as one that is just shooting for a fresh start instead, regardless of their war-centric culture (84). The marginalization of these orcs, then, comes not from in-game content but from other popular portrayals of the same creatures in other media. In addition, aesthetics also play a part in this perception of orcs at the hands of the players, though this immediate dismissal of anything simultaneously non-human and visually displeasing is not new to *World of Warcraft*.

Ritter's analysis of the undead is interesting in pointing out that the undead in *World of Warcraft* are predominantly just a countercultural representation of humanity, evidenced by their sharing of a common foe with the humans in one of the expansions of the game as well as their similar architecture styles (88-89). Even though high fantasy has its share of undead warriors and walking skeletons, this particular brand of undead is more based in horror than high fantasy. These undead, then, are another example of Blizzard not being afraid to blend genres in their game development, thus providing a rather unique gaming experience for the players. However, either portrayal of the undead

will result in a sense of “other” in much the same way the orcs might be. Though formerly human, players will not associate the dead as equal to the living and thus the undead are, of course, decidedly not human.

Perhaps the most stereotypically racist portrayal of a species in *World of Warcraft* is that of the trolls. Ritter tells us that the trolls “exhibit many of the characteristics of primitivism and Orientalism,” artistic movements that rose at the height of European imperialism (95). Physically and culturally weak, the trolls’ appropriation of Caribbean speech tied with their in-game lore is, if nothing else, fairly offensive. This appropriation of such a specific culture is unmistakably racist and does nothing to benefit a player’s worldview except to create an incredibly limited perspective on other cultures. Again, if white is the norm, then the Caribbean culture in this case is reduced to voodoo and broken English. This then creates a troublesome depiction of Caribbean cultures in the minds of players that may or may not carry over into their real world interactions.

The tauren in *World of Warcraft* most closely tie in to Native American culture. Based predominantly on a minotaur-like appearance, the tauren are a dignified culture in the game world and represent the opposite of the troll culture: the noble savage (99). Recently, Native Americans have been represented with slightly more reverence in popular culture than in the past where Western films were formidable players in the film industry. Nevertheless, the cultural appropriation of these people continues, and we see only a primitive people stuck in the ways of the past. In *World of Warcraft* players perceive the tauren as a dignified race, but still apart from the human norm. The automatic marginalization of things that are not human is associated with the

characteristics of these non-human races, thus creating a subconscious stigma for things like voodoo (as with the trolls) or Native American traditions.

The blood elves were one of the newer additions to the Horde partially out of a need for a playable Horde character that was more visually appealing (in this case, contemporary American definitions of beauty: athletic builds, fair skin, green eyes, blond hair) than the rest of the Horde species. Their architecture is also fairly medieval, though it includes Islamic influences as a driving property of its appearance. Though visually they are, in fact, appealing, the blood elves as a culture are still definitively “other” for two reasons. First, the lore of the blood elves establishes that they are addicts. Their society has crumbled out of an insatiable addiction to magic, and thus this portrayal of addiction shows the darker side of an otherwise appealing race. Second, the blood elves are homosexual, which is a characteristic that is fairly “other” in terms of real-world ideas, and perhaps even more so in virtual worlds. Even though these races can be judged by appearances alone for the most part in terms of how players construct their perceptions of them, there are a few exceptions that require a deeper look into their in-game cultures in order to determine why exactly these divisions are so inherently problematic.

Despite these portrayals of the races in the game, to label *World of Warcraft* a purposefully racist game would be a mistake. The game developers that were behind the process of character creation in this universe did not set out to intentionally perpetuate existing real-world structures by any means. That being said, the limitations placed on race representation by traditional fantasy are not negligible. Fantasy of this kind in the past has always been dominated by a white presence and a lack of anything “other.” Thus, Blizzard’s need to adhere to the established mold for fantasy in order for their

game to succeed superseded any racial concerns. *World of Warcraft* does not exploit minority stereotypes for its own gain like the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise might, but instead relies on traditional fantasy for its success. As such, Blizzard came to the realization that without a race like the blood elves, players were simply not choosing to play as Horde characters nearly as often as they were choosing to play Alliance characters, perhaps due to a lack of whiteness. As Ritter mentions, “the Blood Elves were designed to give the Horde an attractive race, presumably to boost the number of players in that faction, according to WoW’s former lead designer, Jeffrey Kaplan” (109). Players’ reluctance to play characters that were “other” or not human is disconcerting in this case, particularly when thinking about how much a player identifies (or does not identify) with their virtual avatar. There are multiple examples of role-playing video games that present characters in these dichotomies, even though the characters’ stories in the games may or may not be so clear-cut. Most games are not malicious in this presentation and aspect of game development, though there are games that set out to exploit racist stereotypes for their own benefit. As shown above, some role-playing games present the players with a number of options from the very start of the game regarding what kind of character they may choose to control. The amount of information players must take in from the outset of the game is, in some cases, incredible and overwhelming. In this regard, there will be players that choose to spend more time than others on the avatar creation process (as I will discuss in a later chapter). For those who choose to spend little time on this process, however, characters that are familiar or pleasing to the player will be the ones they turn to in most cases. In this situation, those characters include Europeanized depictions of cultures that are seen as inherently “good” with an explicit removal of most non-white

racism in the grand scheme of the races within the Alliance. By creating a gaming experience in which the “good guys” are almost completely white, game developers engender a culture of gamers that will perceive anyone that does not fit these criteria as “bad,” therefore associating them with qualities they view as inferior to their own. This sort of gaming experience perpetuates a society that values white over non-white, thus fostering an unchanging mentality among players that this is the way their society is constructed.

### ***The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim***

Another example of a role-playing video game similar to *World of Warcraft* in terms of character creation is *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Bethesda’s fifth installment in the series takes the player to an enormous open-world environment where they are to undertake several quests in order to progress through the storyline. Similar to *World of Warcraft*, players are allowed to choose an avatar for themselves from a variety of races and appearances at the beginning of the game. Though the races differ from those of *World of Warcraft* to some extent, the overall concept of each race having unique strengths and weaknesses applies in this context, as well. *Skyrim* is also slightly more story-driven rather than focusing on the multiplayer aspect, and thus may instill more of a sense of attachment for a player’s avatar. Furthermore, the player can choose either a first-person or third-person view of their character, which can also shape how much the player sees things from the perspective of their avatar (sometimes literally). Since *Skyrim* is not played as an online game with multiplayer capabilities, the players also need not worry how others interact with them based on how their characters look. Overall, the avatar creation system in *Skyrim* is more welcoming in terms of allowing a player several

options for creating a character unique to their own tastes and allows for more choices to be made within a “safe” environment free from prying eyes.

In *Skyrim*, the player is able to choose from ten playable races at the beginning of the game that not only determine the background story of the player’s avatar, but also determine key characteristics surrounding the player’s avatar that serve to either aid or hinder development of a number of skills the avatar can learn as the game progresses. From these ten playable races, the player can then choose from thousands of unique combinations of how they want their avatar to look. Though the level of immersion in a player’s gaming experience will vary, the game still presents each race as having its own history with respective triumphs and struggles. For example, there is the cat-like race known as the Khajiit, one of two beast-races in *Skyrim*. Due to their appearance, they are generally perceived as inferior and have garnered a reputation in the world of *Skyrim* as thieves and cheats. Thus, choosing a Khajiit at the beginning of the game provides bonuses in sneaking and thievery, further reinforcing the social stratum this race is forced into. On the other hand, the player can choose to be part of the Redguard race, a human race that most physically resemble African Americans most closely. This race represents the sheer persistence of humanity in battling the tyrannical forces of the Aldmeri Dominion attempting to take over their lands. Due to their athletic strength, choosing to be part of the Redguard grants the player’s avatar multiple bonuses relating to hand-to-hand combat.

Needless to say there is much history behind the races in *Skyrim*. The game provides the player with a world that allows for varying levels of immersion: a player can choose to seek out information regarding the political situation of *Skyrim*, the strife

between the races, and other matters that can be read in lore books scattered throughout the game. However, the tidy categories into which the characters are split according to what bonuses they grant seems to limit the characters to what they can do from the beginning of the game. Fortunately, with games like *Skyrim*, players can choose to “level up” any skills of their choosing, and thus are not wholly limited to the preconceptions of the cultures of *Skyrim*.

As mentioned previously, however, playing through *Skyrim* is an endeavor that causes the player to focus more on storyline-related aspects of the game. In addition to the main storyline, there are several “side quests” the player can choose to undertake in order to be exposed to other storylines within the game. Though this was addressed in an earlier section, mentioning the availability of these quests bears repeating as it is the main premise upon which the analysis of *Skyrim* depends in this case. One of these optional storylines that can be completed by the player causes him or her to have to choose between two sides of a conflict that is taking place in the gaming environment, one that calls into question a player’s morality and willingness to sacrifice some values over others. In this storyline, the player is asked to choose between two factions: the Stormcloaks or the Imperials. The Imperials consist of a people who believe that *Skyrim* should submit to the rules laid before it by the empire, and thus oppose the uprising that seeks to overthrow the current hierarchy. The Stormcloaks, on the other hand, push for religious and political freedom from the tyrannical rule of the Aldmeri Dominion and thus are at odds with the Imperial Legion in order to create their own regime.

As the game begins, the player is about to be wrongfully executed by members of the Imperial Legion until a member of the Stormcloak Rebellion saves them. Thus,

*Skyrim* is structured in a way that biases the player toward joining the Stormcloaks from the beginning of the game. Not only does the player owe their life to the Stormcloaks from the start, but there is also the desire to rebel and overthrow what they perceive as unjust forms of government. As the player continues to play through this particular storyline, however, they come to realize that the distinction between the two factions is a lot less clear-cut than the introductory sequence suggests. The Stormcloaks may want to overthrow the government, but they are essentially a group of white (Nord) supremacists that do not hesitate to exploit other races for their own purposes.

The prime example and centerpiece of Nord racism can be found in the city of Windhelm, where the rebellion against the Imperial Legion is centered. Most of the racial tension that can be found in the city of Windhelm occurs between the Dunmer and the Nords that inhabit the city. The Dunmer are a race of darker-skinned elves than the High Elves that constitute the Aldmeri Dominion. Given the name “gray skins” by the Nords, these Dark Elves were forced out of their home in Morrowind when a volcano erupted, leaving the place uninhabitable. The Dunmer then moved north in hopes of finding a new and better life. This they found at first in Windhelm, where they were initially given their own section of the city: the Snow Quarter. Until Ulfric Stormcloak assumed the throne in Windhelm, the Dunmer lived in relative peace with the Nords in the city. However, tensions rose as Ulfric Stormcloak came to power; the Snow Quarter began to fall to shambles, unattended by any sort of Nord aid from a higher authority. This part of Windhelm soon became known as the Gray Quarter, which coincided in part with the derogatory name “gray skins” given the Dunmer by the Nords and also because of the horrid conditions found in the Quarter. Such conditions in the game have been found

comparable to those of the Jewish ghettos of Nazi Germany. The Dunmer's pleas to the Jarl Ulfric concerning the Gray Quarter are ignored for years, leaving the Quarter in the condition the player finds it in when visiting the city of Windhelm.

In addition, the Nords ensure that the Dunmer are not only isolated in an "othered" environment, but they go out of their way to place the Dunmer that want to help the Stormcloak Rebellion in disadvantageous positions. In fact, the Dunmer are always the front lines of a Stormcloak battalion, which helps in explaining why the player never meets a "Stormcloak Dunmer" in their travels. Although Ulfric is never explicit about his racist preferences, we learn that not only Nord troops are sent to help Nord caravans that meet trouble, but also that Dunmer caravans that find themselves in danger and send for help are completely ignored. Furthermore, the first interaction the player witnesses upon entering Windhelm is a scene in which two Nords are harassing a female Dunmer: "You come here where you're not wanted. You eat our food. You pollute our city with your stink, and you refuse to help the Stormcloaks." After letting the scene play out, the player may approach the Dunmer; after some conversation, she declares, "Windhelm's a haven of prejudice and narrow thinking."

Though perhaps an optimistic strain of thought, *Skyrim* potentially challenges players to find problematic aspects in the stories it tells. For the most part, players are meant to wrestle with dilemmas presented to them by the games they play or at least be able to observe unfair situations and react accordingly. What "react accordingly" might mean from player to player certainly differs, but there is a sense that games are appealing to some sort of morality within players. If this is true, then we are meant to question what kind of morality we bring into the games we play and what kind of morality we draw

from the games we play. If there are games that purposefully problematize racial tensions, then the popularity of these games speaks to the fact that players want games that challenge them not just in terms of ability to navigate the game but in the way they question the world around them, virtual or otherwise. In this respect, *Skyrim* continues to present racial tensions and problems throughout its narrative that might challenge players to think about how they interact with the real world in relation to the virtual one.

Though the Dunmer are easily one of the most hated races from a Nord perspective, the Khajiit do not have it any easier in some cases. In fact, it is rare to find a Khajiit in many of the cities around *Skyrim*, not just Windhelm. Khajiit caravans tend to stay outside of the cities, selling their merchandise and making their business there. Having chosen to side with—and deeply admire—the Aldmeri Dominion, they are shown little mercy by the Nords, who have been essentially enslaved by the Aldmeri Dominion. After all, if there is one thing the Imperials and Stormcloaks can agree on, it is that the Thalmor of the Aldmeri Dominion are the true tyrants in the story. As a result, the Khajiit are duly mistreated and exiled by the Nords as a way of projecting the helplessness felt by the Stormcloaks and the Imperials in their efforts to resist the Thalmor.

Though we have focused primarily on racism from the Nord side, it is clear in the game that other races deal with this issue, as well. Part of what makes *Skyrim* such a culturally rich game is the fact that each culture and each race is rife with different struggles and histories and aspects of their races that make them unique and able to interact with other races in different ways. For example, prior to the Red Mountain explosion that forced the Dunmer to flee to *Skyrim*, the Dunmer had enslaved the other beast-race in *Skyrim*: the Argonians. However, after the explosion that killed thousands

of the Dunmer population, the Argonians were able to rally under an organized banner and overtake the remaining Dunmer in Morrowind. Thus, Dunmer-Argonian relations have been strained for decades, despite the fact that the Dunmer abolished slavery years prior. This part of the lore is a mirror to reality in its portrayal of the unavoidable post-slavery tension between races regardless of the actions taken to end slavery. At this point, there was probably still some form of segregation between the Dunmer and the Argonians that made the Argonians resentful enough to want to conquer the Dunmer in their moment of weakness.

In addressing a handful of race and class disparities in Skyrim, we arrive at several important questions regarding our identity as players and how we take responsibility for how we play the game. Most importantly perhaps, how do we process and act on these issues of racism within this fantasy role-playing game? For some, there are external prejudices that come into play when experiencing a game. As an example, since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States has been home to an unnerving amount of xenophobia particularly toward Middle Eastern cultures. In addition, tensions between law enforcement and minorities began to increase in severity in the last two or three years alone. Racism and xenophobia are all-too-real issues that are nigh impossible to ignore in the United States. In this sense, there may be cases where gamers enter these fantastic environments with a certain sense of prejudice beforehand. Optimistically speaking, we could assert that these environments that were created purely out of a desire for fantasy and escapism fulfill their purpose entirely, and that we “leave our prejudices at the door” when engaging video games. Realistically, though, these prejudices could have an effect on how gamers perceive what is happening to their avatar. We rarely

hesitate to “other”—as a verb in this case—creatures we consider inhuman to the point of perversion; in this case, the best example is that of the Orcs. Most fantasy-based games or stories will portray these creatures as vile and full of bloodlust, and thus we do not hesitate to other them without finding out potentially problematic bases for these creatures.

Though there are discrepancies between *World of Warcraft* and *Skyrim* in terms of how the games are played, there is still a certain amount of responsibility placed on the players in terms of how they handle their efforts to traverse the storylines of the games in front of them. Players can choose to bring their own sense of morality into the game environment, or they can choose to adopt a new one that will stay within the confines of the virtual world. Regardless, players make conscious decisions regarding how they handle parts of the stories that are thrown at them. For a game like *World of Warcraft* there are not many choices to be made in terms of how the storyline unravels beyond choosing which faction to pledge their allegiance to at the beginning of the game in the avatar creation process. In *Skyrim*, on the other hand, the player is asked to make several decisions concerning which side of the conflict they would rather be on. Granted, these choices in *Skyrim* tend to be made outside of the game’s “main” storyline, but there are still a number of choices to be made that test the players’ morality and prioritization of values. The degree to which players are forced to participate in the racial dynamics of a gaming environment may be telling of how much the players actually take notice of their surroundings. In *World of Warcraft*, for example, the lore can be somewhat negligible in terms of the gaming experience. Though most in-game quests will incorporate a sense of animosity between the Horde and the Alliance, this does not particularly play into a

player's decision-making process. The player will complete a quest for a reward or will move on. In this regard, the game is fairly clear-cut. In *Skyrim*, on the other hand, the player's involvement in choosing sides of the various conflicts throughout the realm of *Skyrim* allows for a more sophisticated thought process in terms of choosing a side to which their avatar should pledge their loyalty. In this case, then, games that allow for more freedom in choosing sides of a conflict are likely to allow players to think more consciously about the values they are ascribing to when choosing a side, particularly when some of these values involve race relations.

### ***Grand Theft Auto***

One of the main things to consider when speaking of race in video games is that there are video games that choose to portray races as fairly equal—with perhaps some inequality present throughout the story or inherent in their appearances—but there are also games that perpetuate racist stereotypes in order to profit from the endeavor. One such franchise is the *Grand Theft Auto* series, which presents players with unapologetically racist depictions of minorities in real-life American settings. The game has received critical backlash in several countries; the latest installment was banned from Target and Kmart retail chains in Australia and Rockstar Games, the company that released the game series, issued an apology to the Haitian community in Florida after the *Vice City* installment in 2002, a game that allegedly contained content offensive to the Haitians (“Sexually Violent”; “GTA: Vice City”). One of the most interesting parts of the apology to the Haitian community was at the point that the company said, “Contrary to what some may believe, it must be recognized that video games have evolved as an adult medium, not unlike literature, movies and music” (“GTA: Vice City”). Even as

early as 2002, video game companies were beginning to assert the legitimacy and maturity of the content they produced, even if the content may not have matched their assertions. In this case, the *Grand Theft Auto* series makes no attempt to conceal the racism and stereotyping in the game; in fact, it is this storytelling technique based in a world of crime that makes the game as popular as it is.

In *Grand Theft Auto V*, the player controls a series of criminals performing a number of heists and robberies as part of the progression of the game's storyline. In addition, the player is also able to explore the open-world environment of the game, where they can execute crimes of their choosing provided they are able to escape from or defeat any law enforcement that arrives to counteract them. Of the three protagonists the player controls throughout the progression of the storyline two are white (Michael De Santa and Trevor Phillips) and one is black (Franklin Clinton). Though the protagonists of the game do not necessarily present racist portrayals, the game is still filled with controversial content from stereotypically racist portrayals of characters, objectification of women, and even graphic torture scenes. Overall, the reputation of *Grand Theft Auto V* is preceded by previous games in the series. This is not a game that players engage in without knowing that there is a disturbing amount of troublesome content. Though normally a reassuring thought, we realize that not only do players realize that this content exists, but the company also uses this to their advantage in order to market the game. The game's popularity stems from its graphic content, which perhaps is indicative of how much responsibility we place on the shoulders of game developers to create games that are of good quality while also not relying on racist content for their success.

In this respect, game developers are not being held up to any sort of standard regarding the content they create beyond just audience reception. Though there is backlash to the content in *Grand Theft Auto*, the series still continues to thrive. This kind of success can even be seen in offensive films like *The Interview* or *Exodus: Gods and Kings* that either appropriated a culture for the sake of humor or perpetuated the cycle of whitewashing present in filmmaking. According to bell hooks, there is a discrepancy in the way black and white filmmakers are received when creating material. In *Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, hooks asserts that “most filmmakers do not have to deal with the issue of race” (69). She says:

When white males make films with all white subjects or with people of color, their “right” to do so is not questioned. No one asks a white filmmaker in the United States or Britain who makes a film with only white characters if he or she is a white supremacist. The assumption is that the art they create reflects the world as they know it, or certainly as it interests them. However, when a black filmmaker, or for that matter any filmmaker of color, makes a work that focuses solely on subjects exclusively black, or white, they are asked by critics and their audiences to justify their choices and to assume political accountability for the quality of their representations. (69)

It is certainly interesting to make note of this observation on the part of hooks regarding the current state of film, particularly considering video game storylines may not have reached that point yet. In addition, because game development teams are so enormous, there is normally no single individual upon which the game’s decisions can be attributed.

There are lead designers of games, but even they are not always widely known by audiences as much as film directors might be, which can lead to a lack of accountability.

Because there may be no sense of accountability, among white developers or otherwise, there is also no sense of having to make excuses or justifications about decisions made in game development. There is, to some degree, a level of accountability to which game developers are held in terms of what kind of content they release. Some companies are stricter in this regard than others, but the standards tend to still be there. That being said, the predominant criticism game developers may receive comes from the higher-ups in game companies that dictate how a game should look or be played. This backlash sometimes comes out from the public but is generally far too unnoticeable or unfounded in its criticism. A lack of accountability in this sense can also encourage the creation of products that do not necessarily push the envelope in terms of how deeply these stories are told instead opting merely to push the boundaries of aesthetic presentation and gameplay mechanics that are innovative to the players. While this is certainly not all bad, these advancements being made in the way of graphics and gameplay are seemingly being made without much of a sort of similar advancement in terms of how people are portrayed. In fact, the more games continue to evolve in this way, the more attractive they will be to more people, thus expanding the audience for games without necessarily making adjustments to the messages they may or may not be receiving.

Thus, while it is challenging to extrapolate what a player gleans from a game in terms of how they understand the real world, it is of some benefit to be able to point out problematic parts of the games being played on such a massive scale. Though the

questionable aspects of these games tend to differ between games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Skyrim*, there are still elements present in both games that submit images to the players that reflect how they view the real world in comparison to a fantastic one. As stated before, even fantasy has some basis in reality, as the stories we tend to tell come from some idea we have about the world around us. There are theories rooted in this belief—literary and otherwise—that all of the things we fabricate as stories have to have some basis in a real-life experience, which is a view also communicated to the readers of the stories being told. In this respect, artists cannot necessarily avoid presenting a view of how they believe the world works that in turn resonates with their audiences, creating a sort of bond between audience and artist out of a shared experience or worldview. This is certainly a frustrating thought since it encourages a dissemination of ideas between like-minded people that is not likely to progress. However, even with this consideration, there are still works of literature, film, and even video games that challenge commonly held notions concerning the way the world works, which implies the artist has some sort of insight to offer that is wholly their own. Perhaps all we need with the games we play is an understanding that we are not passive audiences in receiving information. Instead, we must understand that with this sort of play comes a reflection of the values we hold as a society, and that if we are to attempt to change this then we must become more critical readers of not only the higher arts, but of the forms of popular culture that more adequately reflect widespread ideas of our time.

Thus, we return to the original claim of this project: analyzing games as stories and as interactive constructs in order to understand the power of games over players and the popularity of video games as an indicator of societal values. As mentioned

previously, the extent to which games allow freedom of movement and choice within the gaming environment more than likely affects the amount of investment a player might have in the game's underlying storylines and conflicts. The most popular role-playing video games are those that either have a compelling storyline or have ample freedom of choice for players in what they can do in the virtual world, with some games combining both of these characteristics relatively seamlessly for an even greater gaming experience. However, because game developers are not being held to the same standards that filmmakers have recently been subjected to, many of the popular games we play are problematic at their core. Through this we learn that, as a society, we prioritize the power of play over the content of the games themselves. Even if all we get are games that are relatively shallow in content, we will still play them because of this need for play. If the need for play continues to outweigh the dangers of not questioning the stories we are exposed to, then social changes are not likely to be a concern of the general public any time soon. Because of this, video games are still not necessarily taken seriously as a medium. If all they accomplish is a fulfillment of a need for play, then they certainly do not belong in academia. However, because these games' stories have such an impact on the gaming generation, we cannot help but examine these games in light of these very narratives. If we begin to take the games we play seriously, then we can also begin to take seriously the impact of these games on our society. Once that happens, and once game developers begin to shoulder the responsibility of creating games that allow for social growth, we will begin to experience the beneficial influence of such a widespread form of entertainment.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY OF ROLE-PLAYING AVATARS AND GAMING CASE STUDY

#### **Introduction**

With the prevalence of video games as a pastime for young adults and teenagers, many academics have turned to examining the possible effects of these games on an age demographic that represents a stage of life during which the assimilation of ideas and morals is most active. The studies dealing with this area have so far been used to either attempt to correlate teenage violence with violent content in video games or to find some relationship between games and problem-solving abilities or other positive traits. Less common at this point are studies that set out to analyze a player's potential attachment to their virtual avatar and their level of awareness regarding potentially harmful stereotypes in these games.

The purpose of this study was to determine, first of all, the popularity of video games among the population surveyed and to make a connection between varying levels of commitment to this activity and the players' relationship with their avatar and understanding of game environments. In *My Avatar My Self*, Waggoner defends his use of the term "phenomenological research approach" to describe the research he undertakes to investigate players' connections to their avatars (49). According to Waggoner, "If phenomenological approaches suspend judgment on 'reality' and refuse traditional dichotomies, then my study (exploring the tensions and connections between virtual and real identities via videogame play) is certainly phenomenological in nature" (49). By

employing a quantitative study that will determine these tensions between connectedness of players to the games they play and their awareness of the gaming environments they are in, this project will also take on characteristics of a phenomenological approach as outlined by Waggoner and supported by other theorists in his work such as Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln, and John Creswell.

### **Problem and Purpose Overview**

Virtual worlds and avatars are a fundamental part of many members of contemporary society. These environments can foster a belief system that may or may not carry into our non-virtual realm. Could these games have a conscious impact on the players that decide to invest time into their completion, or is there a sense that these effects are relatively subtle? Since this medium has become so widespread, as addressed in the literature review, the researcher utilizes a qualitative study in order to better understand players' ideas through specific questions regarding their gaming experiences. By identifying potential connections between the frequency of gameplay, avatar connectedness, and awareness of the gaming environment around them, the research will allow for conclusions to be drawn based on these links.

Even though Waggoner's extensive case study on three subjects has broken some ground regarding player attachment to virtual avatars, there is still a largely untouched area of research that connects this very attachment to more problematic issues. If it is noticeable that players have a sort of attachment to their avatars, then it is increasingly feasible that they would have noticed problematic material in the games they play.

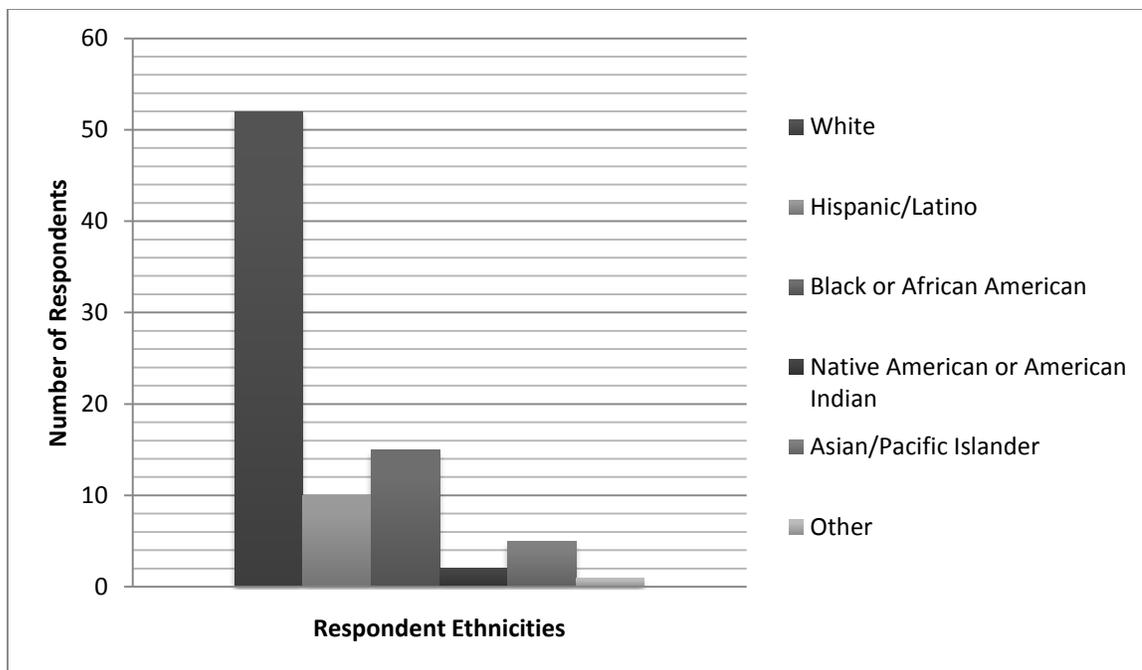
### **Research Questions**

The primary research questions that guided this investigation are

- 1) How much time do gamers generally spend on creating their avatar?
- 2) How much attachment do players feel to their avatar?
- 3) When creating their avatar, how much do players work to make the avatar physically resemble them?
- 4) Are gamers consciously aware of problematic parts of their gaming environments?
- 5) To what extent do gamers consciously bring their own morals and value judgments into the games they play?

### **Population and Sample**

The sample for this quantitative study was drawn from a population of 76 attending a private, four-year, Christian university. Within this sample, 44.7% were male and 55.3% were female. Out of the 76 participants, 68.4% were white, 19.7% were African American, 13.2% were Hispanic/Latino, 6.6% were Asian or Pacific Islanders, 2.6% were Native American or American Indian, and the remainder identified as “Other.” As of Fall 2011, ACU’s student body was 57% female and 43% male with 24% of the students being minorities, which the sample size aptly represents (“University Profile”). During the middle of the semester, students completed a survey from which sufficient results could be gathered to project some discussion and potential conclusions.



**Figure 1. Representation of the Ethnicities Among Respondents in the Preliminary Survey**

### **Rationale for Case Study**

According to R.C. Bogdan and S.K. Biklen in *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, direction in qualitative research is determined by open-ended questions (*Qualitative Research*). In *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, M.Q. Patton notes that quantitative research provides us with the opportunity to measure “things that can be counted,” while qualitative data seeks to capture an experience and what it meant to the participants (273). As Patton states, “Numbers are parsimonious and precise; words provide detail and nuance” (273). While the research begins with a quantitative study in order to gather some information regarding general sentiments of a population toward the subject matter as well as the extent of their involvement, a qualitative study allows for the questions in the research to evolve, providing greater insight into the topic of research. Due to the nature of the qualitative study, questions and assumptions may change during the iterative process of data

collection and review. In this case, following up on the survey distributed to this population can result in more nuanced data that can more adequately serve the purposes of the research as a whole.

### **Data Collection**

During the course of this research, a survey was employed to gather results from the selected college students. This survey was created by the researcher and was distributed to participants in the middle of the spring semester. The survey provided multiple-choice questions, generally on a scale of least to most applicable to the question at hand. In this manner, the researcher is able to glean information regarding students' ethnicities and majors in regard to their experience with video games and their awareness of the gaming environment.

Following the distribution of the survey, the researcher selected seven of the participants from the previous population to contact regarding a follow-up interview via email. This interview provides open-ended questions to the participants that allow them to more adequately express their answers and opinions in a way that contributes to the research project. The seven participants selected were chosen based on their background in gaming as a whole and have also taken notice of ethnic imbalance in the games they play. In addition, these seven participants are chosen from different ethnic backgrounds in order to diversify the answers as much as possible for unique insights.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data in this study was analyzed using reports put together by the survey platform (SurveyGizmo). Mean, frequencies, and standard deviation for the age groups were provided. The data were used to gain an understanding of how much

familiarity participants had with both video games in general and, more specifically, role-playing video games. In addition, the data were analyzed for connections to how much time participants spent creating their avatars as a way of connecting how attached they may or may not have felt toward these avatars. Lastly, the data concluded with an examination of players' observations regarding ethnic imbalances in video games.

The data compiled was used to select participants for a follow-up interview process that would produce more qualitative data that would grant more in-depth answers to questions the researcher may have had coming into the project. These subjects were then interviewed in a process that allowed for the gathering of data that might not have been captured in the previous qualitative data.

### **Summary**

The research design and methodology were presented in chapter three. An overview of the research problem and purpose were articulated, followed by the research questions. The sample selection and interview protocols were reviewed. A rationale for the use of a case study mixed-design study was presented along with the study design.

The process and utilization of quantitative data and qualitative data was identified. This included the methodology of gathering the data and how it would be analyzed. Included in chapter four are the presentation of data findings and an analysis of the findings. In chapter five, the results of the study are summarized and implications for further research presented.

CHAPTER IV  
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA OF ROLE-PLAYING AVATARS  
AND GAMING CASE STUDY

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine connections between players' familiarity with video games and their connections to their in-game avatars as well as their perceptions of any ethnic imbalances in the games they play. A mixed-design case study was employed to better qualify the quantitative data provided by the participants in the study. This approach helped the research by allowing for extensive responses concerning perceived imbalances in game environments. The following research questions guided this study:

- 1) How much time do gamers generally spend on creating their avatar?
- 2) How much attachment do players feel to their avatar?
- 3) When creating their avatar, how much do players work to make the avatar physically resemble them?
- 4) Are gamers consciously aware of problematic parts of their gaming environments?
- 5) To what extent do gamers consciously bring their own morals and value judgments into the games they play? Quantitative data collected in this study was analyzed using tools within the survey platform, SurveyGizmo. Data gathered in this way came directly from students' responses to the

surveys distributed to this population and was used to determine potential ties between player backgrounds and their familiarity with video games, their investment in avatar creation, and their observation of the game environment around them. Finally, interviews were conducted with roughly 10% of the sample population size, or 7 of the participants.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Population and Sample**

The population and sample for this study consisted of 76 college students. The sample was drawn from a private, Christian university campus in the south-central region of the United States of America.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

**Survey.** The beginning of the study consisted of a survey that contained five (5) Likert-style questions and two (2) multiple-choice questions. Each of the Likert-type questions consisted of a five-point scale denoting answers ranging from (1) Never or None to (5) Daily or Extensive. The multiple-choice questions were designed to have players give answers regarding their preferred gaming platform as well as offer three options regarding avatar creation: (1) Look like myself, (2) Customization, (3) Both. The survey was designed to measure how often participants play video games, how much time is spent on creating their in-game avatars, and their personal observations of racial imbalances in gaming environments.

**Interview Protocol.** To further answer the research questions and to elaborate on the data gathered from the survey, interviews were conducted as a strategy to gather further descriptive data. According to Bodgan and Biklen, this allowed the researcher to

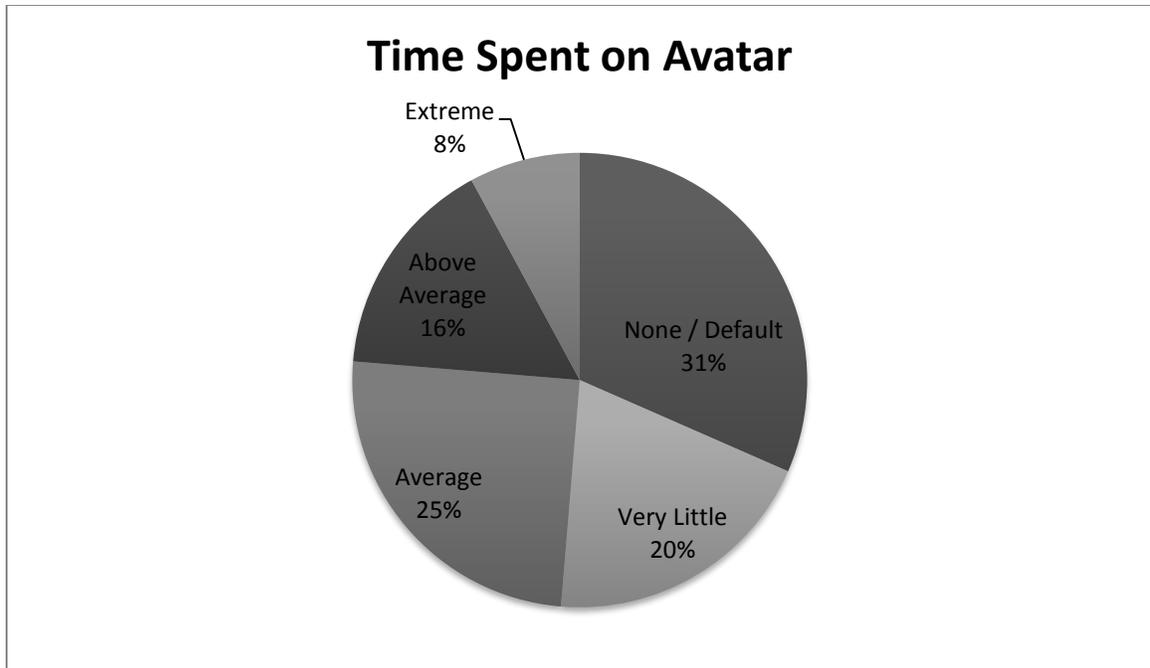
gather additional insights and interpretations from the participant's perspective. Since the purpose of this study was to examine participant familiarity with games, the questions centered on the participants' experience and background with the games they play sought to answer those research questions. Interviews were conducted via email, giving the participants the opportunity to verify or qualify the answers given in the surveys.

### **Research Questions**

Five research questions guided this study. While the data that responds to each of these questions may be presented independently in order to facilitate distinctions, the responses are connected and concur with one another. Four of the research questions could be answered to some extent using quantitative data provided in the initial survey, but the follow-up interview created more concrete data in response to these questions. The last question was answered using participants' responses to the follow-up interviews.

*Research Question 1: How much time do gamers generally spend on creating their avatar?*

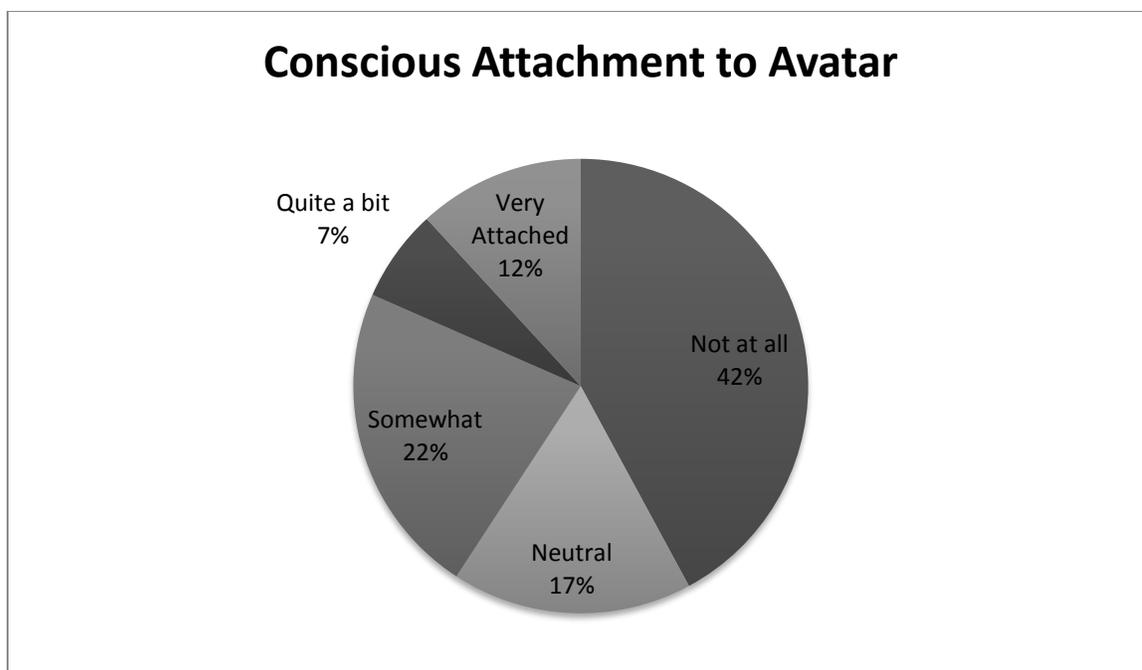
Of the 76 participants asked how much time they spend creating their avatar, twenty-four (24) reported that they spent "None" or went with a default character, fifteen (15) reported they spent "Very Little" time on their avatars, nineteen (19) stated they spent an "Average" amount of time on the process with twelve (12) reporting an "Above Average" amount of time and six (6) reporting an "Extensive" amount of time spent.



**Figure 2. Measure of How Much Time Respondents Invest in Avatar Creation Process**

*Research Question 2: How much attachment do players feel to their avatar?*

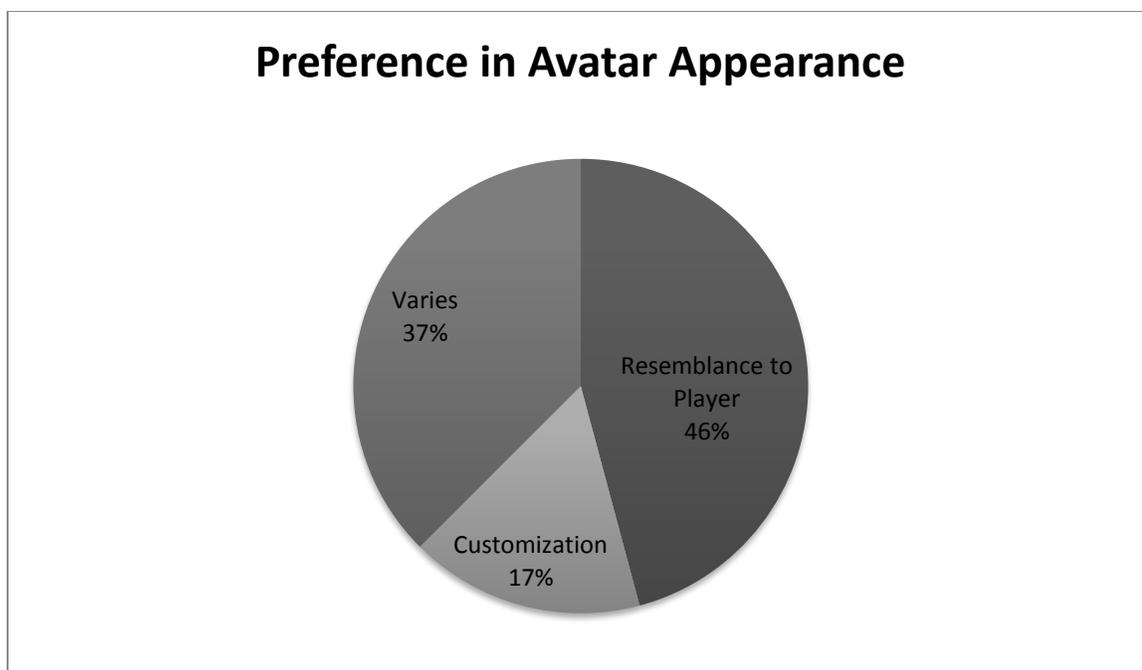
From the survey results, 32 respondents out of the 76 reported they felt they were “Not at all” attached to their in-game avatar, thirteen (13) of the respondents were “Neutral,” seventeen (17) of the respondents were “Somewhat” attached to their creation, five (5) felt “Quite a bit” attached, and nine (9) were “Very attached.”



**Figure 3. Respondents' Conscious Attachment to In-Game Avatars**

*Research Question 3: When creating their avatar, how much do players work to make sure their avatar resembles them?*

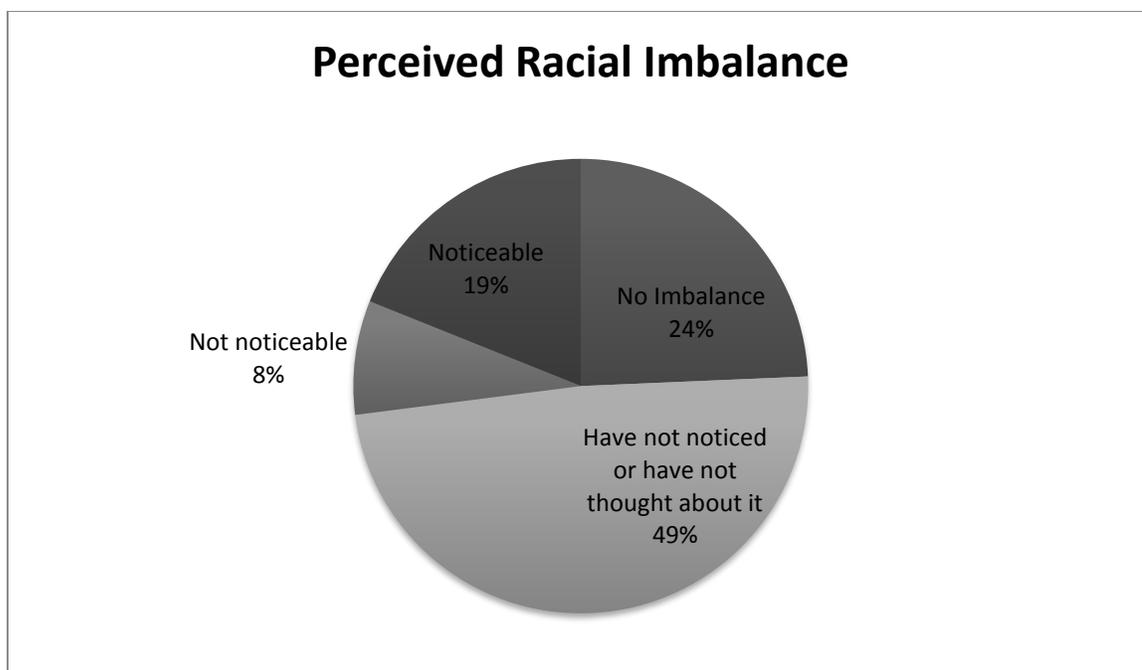
Out of 72 responses to this question on the survey, 33 students chose to make their avatar physically resemble them, twelve (12) tended to lean toward customization, and the remaining 27 stated they preferred a combination of the two, presumably across different games or playthroughs of the same game. From the follow-up interview, one of the respondents in particular mentioned, "I do usually tend to make my characters look like me in games where I have the option of customization. I don't look through all of my options, because once I find the ones that look like me, I move on." Thus, there are cases where the gamer is satisfied with a certain appearance before moving on to explore all of the other options in the avatar creation process.



**Figure 4. Players' Preference in Avatar Appearance in Role-Playing Video Games**

*Research Question 4: Are gamers consciously aware of problematic parts of their gaming environments?*

From 74 responses regarding imbalances in character ethnicities in the games they play, 18 students asserted that they saw “No imbalance” in the games they played, 36 had either “Not noticed” or “Had not thought about it,” six (6) stated it was “Not noticeable” and fourteen (14) reported as “Noticeable.” One of the participants in the follow-up interview also stated that the racial imbalances they noticed in the games they played were “Mostly white characters and if there is [sic] other races their [sic] is [sic] usually just black people and sometimes Asian people.”



**Figure 5. Players' Conscious Perceptions of Racial Imbalances in Role-Playing Video Games**

*Research Question 5: To what extent do gamers consciously bring their own morals and value judgments into the games they play?*

Both of the responses received from two out of the seven participants interviewed showed that these particular gamers were, in fact, conscious of their morals they brought into gaming environments. The respondents answered that their own morals played heavily into their gaming experiences. One of the respondents stated, “My morals and values do carry into my gaming. If I play the game again, I do try to make decisions contrary to my first so I can see both sides of the story, but when I generally play RPGs, I do what I would do in my real life.” The other respondent answered, “I find myself using my morals heavily in gaming and sometimes have to convince myself to do anything different than my morals allow.”

## Summary

Provided in Chapter Four is a description and analysis of quantitative data derived from the seventy-six (76) participants in the survey distributed as well as qualitative data gathered from a follow-up interview given to seven (7) participants selected following the survey. An analysis of the data showed the amount of player involvement in the avatar creation process, attachment to their in-game avatars, and perceptions of the gaming environment around them. In this respect, the participants tended to not spend much time creating avatars, leaned toward making their avatars resemble them, and for the most part did not perceive any imbalances in character ethnicities.

In the next chapter, the researcher will present an overview of the study including the purpose of the study, the design and procedures chosen, the research questions, and a review of the research findings. Additionally the chapter will include a discussion of the findings, the recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

CHAPTER V  
ROLE-PLAYING AVATARS AND GAMING: SUMMARY AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS

**Introduction**

In its infancy, the field of video games studies has met with several challenges regarding how this particular medium should be approached. Mentioned earlier in this project was the fact that most adults consider video games to be a waste of time despite the amount of people that actually play these games. A medium of entertainment this popular, whether it is truly a waste of time or not, certainly has things to say about the people that engage in its products. Does the existence of in-game avatars as a vehicle with which gamers can move through storylines mean that players have a conscious sense of identity in the avatars they create? This study sets out to try to understand the extent of the conscious effects of video game avatars on players, as well as to determine if this degree of relatedness between the player and his or her in-game avatar means there is more of a sensitivity to the problems in gaming environments.

For this project, a review of related literature was shared in the first chapter to show the foundations and reasoning behind this study. In doing so, the researcher presented an argument regarding the necessity of both ludological and narratological approaches to video game studies. The second chapter of this project addressed the latter of these two approaches through an analysis of avatar creation options in games as well as existing power imbalances in these games in order to examine them through a literary

lens. An introduction to this study was provided in the third chapter of the project followed by a review of the methodology of the study. The analysis and presentation of the data was included in the fourth chapter. Lastly, this chapter will establish an overview of the purpose of the study, the research questions, the design and procedures used, a discussion of the findings, as well as conclusions drawn from those data sets. Additionally the chapter included a review of the limitations, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

### **Purpose of Study**

Video games that require players to create their own avatars in order to begin their gameplay experience have grown in popularity over the last two decades. For this reason, we begin to question the impact this relationship between player and avatar has on a player's ability to perceive the world around them, both real and virtual.

This study examined participants enrolled in a four-year private, Christian university using a survey designed to help the participants think of their own gaming experiences and avatar creation processes. Also examined in the survey was a player's ability to recognize potential ethnic imbalances in gaming environments. In determining a player's conscious realization of their attachment to their avatars as well as this relation to how they perceive their game environments, we can begin to project how this might relate to the players' perceptions of real-life situations.

### **Design and Procedures**

The population for this mixed design study consisted of students enrolled in a four-year, private, Christian university in Texas. Seventy-six college students participated in this investigation.

Quantitative data were gathered using an online survey platform, SurveyGizmo, that presented the participants with the survey questions needed to move forward with the research. The data were then compiled into a report created by the survey platform in order to properly interpret the data collected. Four of the five research questions were evaluated based upon the quantitative data with further information being provided from the qualitative data.

Qualitative data were derived from a follow-up email interview sent to 10% of the study participants, seven in total. The research questions were further strengthened based upon the combination of quantitative and qualitative data of this study. The fifth research question was exclusively answered by responses to this part of the study.

### **Findings of the Study**

The results of this study carried some interesting implications regarding how players regard the avatars they play in conjunction with how much time they spend playing games. The results of this study demonstrated a relative lack of interest in avatar creation and game environments among the sample population. Each of the findings is addressed in turn below.

Research question 1 measured the amount of time most players put into creating their in-game avatars. Based on the quantitative data, half of the participants spend little to no time in creating their avatar. Another quarter of participants reported spending an average amount of time on this process, with the remaining participants spending above average or extensive amounts of time making these characters. Since the avatar creation process can sometimes be fairly overwhelming, it comes as little surprise that most gamers would choose to skip this part of the process for the sake of starting the game

itself. Particularly considering 66% of participants only play video games on occasion or not at all, this reflection of how much time these participants spend on creating a character with which to navigate a medium of entertainment that holds little interest for them seems adequate. Establishing one's own virtual identity in this context was rather unimportant to most of the participants in this study, which means that some of these players are not invested enough in the games they play to make a character with which to navigate it, or they feel this is an irrelevant part of the gaming experience overall.

Research question 2 attempted to measure each participant's own conscious attachment to their avatars using both quantitative and qualitative data from the study at hand. Almost half of the participants in this particular section stated that they felt no attachment to their avatar while only fourteen of the participants showed a significant relationship with their virtual creation. Though the numbers still lined up with the previous question, there were still players that mentioned they spent more-than-average amounts of time making their avatars only to confess that they did not feel all that attached. This could mean that the players simply found the process of playing with physical attributes part of the fun of the gameplay experience and proceeded to detach themselves from this projected identity in a way that allowed them to continue playing through the game without conscious attachment to the very thing they were controlling.

Research question 3 set out to make a connection between how much players feel attachment to the avatars they create and how often they make these avatars physically resemble themselves. Respondents in this section predominantly either made their avatars look like themselves or chose to "mix it up," presumably across games and playthroughs. The connection between how players feel that they are not attached to their avatars and

the fact that most of the players choose to make their avatars look like themselves was an interesting, albeit somewhat counterintuitive, one. In general, one might believe that players would feel more of a sense of attachment to an avatar that physically resembled them, though in the case of this study this did not hold true. Perhaps this sense of detachment is a strategy on the part of players that want to keep their virtual experience separate from their real ones. After all, if their lookalike were to come upon unfortunate circumstances in the game, then the player would likely feel some sort of emotion outside of the game as well. In this way, even though players tend to create avatars that look like themselves, there still comes this sense of needing to remain detached from the experience as a whole in order to keep pleasure in reality in their distinct spheres.

Research question 4 was a direct examination of how players consciously perceive (or do not perceive) social issues in the gaming environments they are placed in. Though the question was undeniably forward, players were thus forced to think about whether or not they believe there are problems in the environments they “play” in. Only fourteen of the 74 responses in this section revealed any sort of realization on the behalf of players that there might be problematic structures in the games they play. The remaining sixty respondents stated that there was no imbalance, said it was not noticeable, or had not thought about it. This was perhaps the most troubling of the five research questions because it presented a reality that, at least within this population, only one out of every five people are able to experience games critically enough to wonder about power imbalances or social issues present in the environments they frequent. These answers may not be as surprising when taking into consideration that players do not play games to actively seek these problems, and thus are not necessarily drawn toward

observing them. After all, most people will go to a film simply to enjoy what is in front of them instead of analyzing the commentary the film may or may not be making.

According to bell hooks, this process is not entirely plausible. As hooks mentions, “While audiences are clearly not passive and are able to pick and choose, it is simultaneously true that there are certain ‘received messages’ that are rarely mediated by the will of the audience” (*Movies* 3). Games work in much the same way: there are certain received messages that are seldom received consciously by these audiences, which might explain the results seen above.

Research question 5 set out to examine the extent to which players bring their own values and morals into the games they play and the decisions they make in these virtual environments. At present, two out of seven participants responded to the email interview distributed by the researcher, which contributes to the answers to this research question. Both respondents admitted that they consciously adhere to their real-life morals when making virtual decisions, though one of the respondents mentioned that they sometimes play through these games a second time using morals completely opposite their own in order to fully experience the different outcomes and paths in the games. Though the responses are limited at this point in time, the answers still point to what we can assume is a general sentiment among gamers regarding personal morality in video games. Because of this personal set of moral values being carried consciously into the virtual world, we can assume that there is a subconscious link between player and avatar. Were this not true, the player would have no qualms making their avatar perform actions contrary to their own morals, which one of the respondents admitted they have trouble with when traversing game storylines. Thus, we can infer that there is some sort of

relationship between player and avatar in these games. One of the respondents mentioned they spend an extensive amount of time on avatar creation while the other respondent said they only spend enough time finding an avatar that physically resembles them before moving on to the actual gameplay. This difference in conscious connection to avatars reinforces the notion that this connection might lean more toward the subconscious.

### **Limitations**

As with any research, this study was subject to limitations. Every effort has been made to limit the effects of these limitations on the findings.

- 1) The study was limited geographically to college students in one Southern state during one academic term.
- 2) The case study was limited in size, with 76 individuals participating in the study.
- 3) It is assumed that participants were honest in communications and participation.
- 4) Validity and reliability of qualitative data was limited by the researcher's own bias.
- 5) The time constraints of the study did not allow for adequate in-person interviews following the distribution of the survey

### **Implications for Practice**

With the recent and continued rise of video games as a medium of entertainment, it is imperative that we begin to try to understand what these video games are saying about our cultural values as well as what the players of these games are experiencing and consciously taking away from these games. By showing that there is some link between

players and how connected they feel to their avatars, opportunities arise that allow for research into this relationship between player and avatar. Additionally, the demonstration that there is generally a certain detachment from player to avatar among less experienced players is telling of the fact that video game audiences that are less invested in the games they play prefer to keep a certain distance between their created and real identities.

This research has proven that there is potential in analyzing players' understanding of how attached they may or may not be to their avatars and how this relates to the way they experience the games in front of them. Further, the findings of this research directly impact previous studies that present exclusively narratological or ludological approaches to video game criticism without combining the two approaches to generate new conclusions and information. Through the use of existing literary theory and player involvement in the games being played on such a large scale, we begin to understand the multiple layers through which video games can be studied. This kind of study can be used to influence how games are interpreted both by audiences and by academics.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Though this study had several constraints, it opens a number of doors to future research that could prove beneficial to the field as a whole. For example, extensive time devoted to a study similar to this one could gauge gamers' real time reactions to the games they are playing through use of approved observation techniques. Do gamers see more problems in games if they know that there is the possibility beforehand? Is a player's attachment to their avatar fully a conscious one, or are there subconscious elements that a player may not be aware of?

Furthermore, avatar creation seems to be dominated by a desire to have avatars that physically resemble a player. What about games that do not offer these options? Are players still likely to try to make avatars that closely resemble themselves even in the absence of these options? Are these processes influenced by whether or not a player's avatar is visible to other players?

More research in this area would require studies that take more time than the one presented here, but the preliminary nature of this study establishes groundwork from which future studies can build. Since this study in particular was fairly limited in its population size, the application of this research is limited in trying to make generalizations that apply to the general population as a whole. Undertaking research on a larger scale and with more time than this one will help reinforce the legitimacy of the current study and its overall impact on this field of research.

Lastly, research regarding only the significance of avatar importance to the participant could prove useful in trying to extrapolate other details about a participant's gaming experience. Since most of the participants of this study reported little to no attachment to their avatars, this could be indicative of a more subconscious attachment to avatars that could prove more interesting than the results found in this study.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to gauge player attachment to their avatars and to see if there was any relation between this connection and how they perceive the games they play. By showing that, in a small population, participants generally do not feel attached to their avatars and do not perceive of any ethnic imbalances in the games they play, this study provides evidence that further studies in this area are necessary. In order

to truly determine if these data apply to the general population as a whole, more data are needed. However, the last chapter will outline the connections that can be made between the data gathered here and the analysis provided in the second chapter of the project in order to make some sort of statement regarding the combination of ludological and narratological approaches to video game criticism.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: WEAVING NARRATOLOGY AND LUDOLOGY

#### **Study Goals and Focus Restated**

One of the main goals of this study was to analyze video games that combined both ludological and narratological approaches in order to create a method of video game criticism that could perhaps offer some new insight to the process. The narratological aspect coincided more with literary studies as a whole, thus narrowing the scope of the project in this section to examining the games in question under the scope of critical race theory. The ludological portion of the project focused on player interaction with in-game elements outside of the storyline, thus analyzing how conscious these players were of the mechanics of the game rather than how the storyline would have affected them. Bringing together theoretical and practical approaches in this manner is conducive to further discussion concerning intersections and discrepancies between the two, which will be what is addressed in this chapter.

The focus of this project centered, in part, around the avatar creation process and how some games shape these processes in a way that might cause a sense of imbalance to be present in how the players perceive the characters they are able to choose for their avatars. Though this is not something most players may consciously think about, players do bring subconscious social expectations and norms into their gameplay experiences, which might explain why there was an initial imbalance *in World of Warcraft* between players that chose Alliance characters and those that chose to play on the side of the

Horde prior to the introduction of the more humanoid—and certainly more attractive—blood elf race to the Horde. Fantasy settings in particular engender certain stereotypes regarding which races are “good” and which ones are “evil,” a dichotomy that tends to be visualized in terms of “white” and “non-white.” If it is not made that simple, then the representation of “evil” is certainly non-human, which also creates a product of marginalization due to the fact that most fantasy-based games do not include darker-skinned human figures. Therefore, the absence of dark skin on the “good” side of the spectrum carries over into real life expectations. We come to see that *Grand Theft Auto* and *World of Warcraft* may not be all that different in terms of exploiting stereotypes for their games, one of them for the sake of dark humor and one for the creation of a good/evil binary.

### **Avatars and Waggoner’s Work**

In *My Avatar, My Self*, Zach Waggoner talks through his own findings in his project that sets out to try to understand the identity connection between player and avatar. Waggoner asserts, “Our real-world identities are molded by social pressures and limitations: we live in a world not entirely of our own creation, bending to laws and ethical conventions that were discursively established long before we ever entered the conversation. So too are our virtual identities bound by discursive conventions” (161). In this context, Waggoner argues that as our identities in the real world are formed by the social conventions set in front of us, our in-game avatars act as a vehicle for the same kind of process when we, as players, start to learn the rules of the gaming environment in front of us. Traversing the game requires knowledge of how the game works in terms of what actions bring success (measured concretely by the defeat of enemies or “leveling

up” and gaining skills) and which ones bring failure, or death. Waggoner argues that as the player learns these mechanics and conventions of the game, their identity begins to meld more with that of their avatar due to a joint learning process that guides them through the remainder of the game; this process is fairly continuous for the duration of the game, as games tend to progressively increase in how challenging their obstacles and trials are.

The fact that most of the respondents of the survey had little to no experience playing video games, let alone role-playing video games, caused the other statistics to make more sense. In order to understand the complexity of the avatar creation process as well as to feel a sense of attachment to one’s own avatar, these games must actually be experienced to some extent. There is an interesting crossover between this particular revelation and the fact that Waggoner also uses participants in his project that were not necessarily “videogame-savvy.” Waggoner finds in his study that even though one of these participants claimed no attachment to her avatar, there was, to some degree, a connection between the player and the avatar. Though the participant was immensely turned off by the game’s mechanics and thus could not get invested, she still chose to pick a female character over a male one, answered all the questions at the beginning of *Fallout 3* (the video game in question) in the same way she would have answered them in real life, and then felt the experience of watching her avatar be physically attacked was “traumatic” (156). Even though the last word choice from the participant may have been a bit of an overstatement, there is still evidence that there is some connection to the avatar. When asked to explain why she felt the experience was horrible, the participant answered, “Well, I mean, it is your character, and so you don’t want to be destroyed”

(157). By the end of the sentence the player had equated the character with “you,” which is indicative of a projected identity onto the avatar that was on the screen in front of her.

Waggoner’s study had a fairly small sample size, but he did make an effort to try and make it varied in terms of player experience, much like my project attempted to do. I believe that if Waggoner had distributed the survey from this project to his participants, similar results would have appeared. In terms of identity, players may not consciously feel like they are connected to their avatars in every case, but there is almost always some part of the game that causes a player to want to project their own feelings and morals onto the character on the screen in front of them. This could be due to a combination of being able to visually experience everything the character is experiencing and the character’s actions on the screen matching the buttons a player presses on a controller or keyboard. This application of hand-eye coordination could easily translate into a sense of identification with the player’s avatar on its own, whether the player realizes it or not. However, consciously it seems most players—at least the inexperienced ones—do not feel much of a shared identity with the avatars they create.

### **Implications for Players**

The results of this project communicate that players less experienced in playing video games as a form of recreation are, of course, not going to be as invested in completing the storylines of the games in front of them. Therefore, there will not be much thought put into a player creating their own avatar, and if there is more time put into this process it may stem more from enjoying the process of creation more than actually wanting the avatar to mean something to the player. According to the data, then, most of the players that play these games are not critical readers of the texts in front of them; nor

should they be, since these games are meant to be recreational and not necessarily as an object to be studied. Though these players are not wholly passive in how they receive content from the games they play, they are also not critically analyzing the data that is put in front of them. Again, while this is a natural reaction to these games, it does not mean that it is without its problematic aspects. After all, if we are to passively accept a medium of entertainment that presents ethnic imbalances and power structures that reflect real-world structures in a way that perpetuates existing conventions, then we are creating a generation of gamers that will not be able to actually enact any change in the real world's structures and organizations.

It is unfair, however, to accuse players of being completely passive in terms of how they deal with the imbalances in front of them. After all, games like Bethesda's *Skyrim* and *Fallout* franchise present moral dilemmas in terms of what factions can be joined by the players and what each faction stands for. In these games, the conflicts at hand are hardly ever clear-cut and thus force the player to evaluate what kind of values they are willing to sacrifice in order to prioritize others. Furthermore, another dimension to this particular observation is the fact that because the worlds created in this manner are completely virtual, players can choose whether or not to bring in their values and identity from the real world with no real repercussion one way or another. This choice may or may not change the game experience the player receives, and so some players choose to go completely against what their own morals and values are in order to fully experience every option the game has to offer. It is fair to assume, then, that these players that want to experience both sides of the issues presented to them would also be willing to exercise the same sort of open-mindedness to real world quandaries.

Thus, we can be optimistic about how the more “hardcore” gamers are choosing to handle in-game environments simply because of the amount of effort they invest into the games they play recreationally. Whether or not this translates into their real world interactions is another matter entirely, but knowing that the capability exists is more reassuring than thinking of all gamers as passive audiences that do not have any sort of investment in moral complications or existing injustices. It is more difficult to extend this optimism to the less invested gamers, though we cannot say that people that do not play games extensively are incapable of questioning problematic social structures. The way people handle the imbalances they perceive tends to differ from person to person, but it is the problem-solving dimension that games present that tends to offer more of an outlet for the gamer demographic to be able to develop these skills in order to apply them to real-life situations.

One of the concerns that some scholars (such as Jane McGonigal) tend to have regarding this particular element of gaming is that while gamers tend to work fairly hard to solve problems in virtual worlds, the same effort is not extended to real world situations. Though it is outside the scope of this project to try and determine how exactly these gamers are supposed to make these skills transition from the virtual environment to the real world, this is a valid problem to address.

### **Problematic Games**

While we understand that some games are not intentionally racist in how they choose to deliver their products, we must call to question what effects these games may or may not have on the people being exposed to them. One of the concepts brought into the conversation earlier was that no matter how hard artists may try to disguise it, there

are always real-world influences on their work and their product thus ends up becoming a reflection of what they believe the real world is like. What this means from artist to artist differs, but if game developers are not critically thinking about the world around them then there is a chance that the game environments reflect this very way of thinking. If game developers are creating games that appeal to the public on such a massive scale, what this says is that they are choosing to create games that mirror the way the world currently is in order to cater to players in a way that helps them subconsciously identify with the games they play. In other words, if a game is based on racist structures that are familiar to the player—whether or not they realize these are racist or imbalanced—the player will likely identify with this product in a way that creates a feeling of comfort to the player due to the familiarity of the setting. Comfort in this context then breeds complacency. Complacency leads to no changes being made. The stereotype of games being a waste of time, then, comes to full fruition upon the realization that these popular games may be generating complacency among gamers in a way that will not cause any meaningful impact on the world around them. Instead, the perpetuation of these familiar but unfair cycles can continue to exist without any sort of interruption.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison argues for a more inclusive canon of literature that is more welcoming to literature created by cultures outside of the current European or White American canon. While this certainly applies more to higher forms of art like literature, there should still be a similar call to inclusiveness from game developers. One of the most glaring problems in current role-playing video games is that there is an almost exclusive dominance of white male protagonists, regardless of game setting. There has already been a call for a change of whitewashing in film, and this

problem is starting to be fixed by filmmakers who are incorporating more minority roles into their films. However, this does not hold true for video games where there is little to no call for more diversity in the protagonists. As of right now, game companies do not have much of a reason to diversify the casts of the games they create, thus propagating the idea that being white is normal and anything else is out of the ordinary, and therefore possessing characteristics classified “abnormal.” If other perspectives are not introduced in this genre and the medium continues to be as widespread as it currently is, there will be no change in how society perceives the races in these cultures. The progress being made by film and literature can only carry these ideas so far, particularly considering the audiences of these media may not be as inclusive as those that play video games.

The data provided from the survey earlier could be a counterargument to this sort of thinking, considering most of the participants stated they spend little to no time playing video games. If this is true, then there should not be as much of a concern for how widely these ideas are propagated. However, this particular way of thinking breaks down when realizing that one need not necessarily play the video games in question to realize that they all are dominated by white male protagonists. This is not an element that must be unlocked via progression of the game; this is an element that is not hidden from the public eye. In advertising their games, these companies put their protagonists at the forefront of their advertising endeavors, wanting to propagate the “action hero” image that is so attractive to such a massive audience. Video game companies, however, perceive the “action hero” as exclusively white, and thus the games being created reflect that. This alone causes problems when it comes to people experiencing the games,

whether it be by playing them or merely by being exposed to the advertisements surrounding them.

If minorities are to play as white avatars, this creates some disconnect between the identity they feel in the real world and the identity they create for themselves in these role-playing games featuring white protagonists. If they are not allowed to play as a character that accurately represents their identity, then there may stem from this some introspective questioning regarding how their own identity plays a part in the real world when the heroes of all of these stories look differently than they do. The same occurs in film, which is what critical race theorists like bell hooks and Toni Morrison decry in their theory writing. Cornel West, however, suggests that affirmative action is not the solution in most cases, and that it essentially does more harm than good. We cannot force these kinds of “reparations” on game developers. If the people putting out this content believe that the costs of creating minorities as protagonists outweigh the benefits, then it simply will not happen. If affirmative action were to be applied to game development, more bitterness would be created toward minorities in a way that would more than likely reflect in the games created. Game developers must come to realize that equal treatment of these races needs to happen organically, but that it is a change they must make without any sort of intervention from higher authorities. In this case, “organically” does not presume that we should adopt a sense of complacency with the way things are. On the contrary, developers and their games, out of both financial and ethical necessities, must evolve with the tastes of their audiences. If society reaches the point where it is no longer content to stand for racial discrepancies in popular culture, then the financial and ethical interests of game developers begin to align and game content starts to evolve accordingly.

Overall, role-playing video games have failed to adequately capture diversity in the cultures they reflect, thus perpetuating systems of racism inherent in these same cultures instead of attempting to break them. Future research might address even more effects this may have on gamers, particularly minority gamers, but based on the results of this particular study, there is no conscious effect on the participants. More than likely, just because there are no conscious effects does not mean that there are no adverse effects whatsoever. On the contrary, this perpetuation of the familiar only serves to reinforce any notions players may already have regarding how races should be treated. Unfortunately, this treatment is wholly in the hands of game developers who have the power to produce games in ways they see fit. Though a player's identification with their avatar will only continue to grow stronger through progress made in how games look and how they are played, this may be an unwelcome factor of gaming if the perpetuation of racial injustices continues in these games. Avatar identification is a powerful tool, and we can only hope that game developers realize that this can be a vehicle toward social change if they let it be one.

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