

Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins

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Studies of race and ethnicity have focused largely on the real world, skimming over the virtual spaces that people of color populate. Kishonna L. Gray remedies this with a knowledgeable analysis of Xbox Live, a virtual video gaming community, and the gamers of color within this space. Building on previous research regarding race and technology, this book provides a much needed intersectional approach to virtual gaming communities. Drawing from a wide breadth of sociological scholarship and interviews with gamers of color, this book provides an overview of the virtual oppressions these individuals navigate.

In part 1, Gray focuses on video games as a media, illustrating how both race and gender stereotypes continue to be perpetuated. In chapter 1, Gray draws from racial formation theory and conceptualizations of hegemony to explain how video games are ideological projects that provide stereotypical accounts of minorities and women, while reinforcing white, male dominance. Chapter 2 follows up with in-depth examples of the commonality of racial and gendered stereotypes across multiple video game genres. These examples all point to the consolidation of race and gender narratives into exaggerated stereotypes, painting these groups in a specific light while leaving nuance only in the realm of white characters. These stereotypical representations, Gray argues, perpetuate a “single narrative of ‘other’ life because there are few, if any, other images deployed in video games. Meanwhile, whiteness is often depicted in an opposing manner with multiple narratives” reinforcing the white hegemony (p. 31).

Part 2 shifts perspectives from the games to the players and structures of interaction online. Chapter

3 illuminates the construction of deviance in Xbox live and argues that virtual spaces disinhibit gamers from performing racist or sexist acts because of perceived distances between the virtual and the real world. Voice communication enables this through linguistic profiling, which uses verbal cues to identify minority gamers. Because video games are constructed as white, male spaces, as argued in previous chapters, anyone who is linguistically profiled outside of this category is labeled as deviant and treated accordingly. Importantly, the resulting racist and sexist comments are not considered deviant but proper punishment for anyone violating the assumed white, male default. Chapter 4 explains that once gamers are linguistically profiled, they are immediately subjected to minority stereotypes. Gray emphasizes that (1) Black gamers were seen as inherently deviant and thus punishable; (2) racist acts transpired swiftly, were not reported to Xbox, and were thus normalized; and (3) racism occurred based on linguistic profiling. Being female exacerbated these inequalities for women of color, and interview data are presented to distinguish the experiences of Black and Latina women.

Part 3 of the book highlights minority gamers’ resistance efforts within Xbox Live and the specific methods through which they oppose domination. Chapter 5 outlines the connections between Internet communication technologies and social movements to discuss the importance of advocacy, organization, and action within digital activism. Providing examples from interview data, gamers of color reappropriate in-game resources (i.e., glitching, Xbox clans, filing complaints) for their resistance. Gray also states

that gamers of color face inequalities as the result of real-world habitus “because our virtual bodies bring physical world manifestations into virtuality—gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, education, etc.—we begin to replicate real-world inequalities into virtual space” (p. 71). Finally, chapter 6 argues that because video games have been constructed as a white, male space, gamers of color have largely been overlooked. As discussed in the previous chapter, these gamers have come up with various resistance tactics, which, although they may not be as effective as the gamers would like, are important in gaining visibility and acknowledging the uniquely intersectional struggle faced by female gamers of color. Instead of succumbing to “natural” images of inequality as part of everyday life, gamers of color use a variety of tactics to fight dominant media representations of themselves.

This book’s broad scope is simultaneously its biggest weakness and its greatest strength. On one hand, the range of theories presented may overwhelm readers, as each chapter incorporates new,

and often multiple, theoretical considerations. For instance, separate works could have been constructed on video games as ideological projects or the transfer of habitus from the real world to virtual worlds alone. On the other hand, Gray’s combination of theories provides an extensive understanding of the compounding oppressions these gamers traverse, each building on the last to provide a convincing argument.

Overall, this book provides a concise explanation of the hegemony of white, male dominance within Xbox Live and is a theoretical contribution to studies of gaming, intersectionality, and the sociology of race/ethnicity. Gray expertly assesses inequality in gaming communities, highlighting the contributions of games and players alike to the layered oppression of gamers of color in Xbox Live. An enlightening and accessible read, this book underscores the importance of technologically enabled discrimination, and provides a groundwork for future inquiries into the racial dynamics of virtual spaces.