

Discussing “Race, Gender and Deviance in Xbox Live”

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“Race, Gender and Deviance in Xbox Live” (Gray 2014) is an important contribution to the sociology of race in the digital era. The significance is clear from the outset. The first chapter’s epigraph is a story about CJ’s violent everyday life in “the hood”. There are gangs, criminals, corrupt police officers and murder. I am not a hardcore gamer. I’m a casual gamer. That’s what those of us who played *Sorority Life* and spent an hour on *Bejeweled* on the flight here today are called, I believe. Because I’m not a hardcore gamer, I wasn’t familiar with the popular game featuring CJ. When I read the epigraph I didn’t know it was from a video game. I had a moment where I thought it was an excerpt of interview data or a quote from an academic book. When I realized it was from the video game, I had to unpack why I couldn’t tell the difference. I immediately thought of recent ethnographic studies of black violence and the carceral state. If you go back and read Alice Goffman’s 2009 *American Sociological Review* article the narratives in her paper and those in this game are very similar. The article, by the way is titled, “On The Run: Wanted Men in a Philadelphia Ghetto”. Goffman talks about being “on the block” where children “learn at an early age to watch out for the police and to prepare to run” (2009:343). Compare that with the game titled, “Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas”, as told in Gray’s first chapter. The game’s main character, Carl Johnson or CJ, “left the hood to start a new life, or rather, a new life of crime. But the death of his mother in a drive-by shooting beckoned him to return to the Grove”. Their narrative structure, characterization, and imagery are remarkably similar. What does it mean when black lives and communities are gamified in popular culture and, I would go further to ask, in scholarship? Gray argues that in popular culture it means normalizing the idea that deviance is raced and gendered. I’ll leave the discussion of what it means

to gamify black lives in scholarship for another day (but see: Christina Sharpe's "Black Life: Annotated").

Gray argues that these narrative structures in video games are consequences of social inequality *and* have consequences for inequality. Using data from gamer interactions on X-box live, Gray argues that ideological narratives about race, class and gender constrain gamers who are not white men. In turn, gamers who are not white men experience gaming and game platforms in very specific ways. By narrativizing our social-psychological experience of social institutions and inequality, games are mediating interconnections between social institutions. How do we understand what deviance is? What is criminal? And, in the case of contemporary research on "the hood", what place and persons and groups are inherently criminal – living criminality, in criminal conditions and embodying a criminal condition? I think that's Gray's argument here – that digital media are not just reflections of the "real world". They are also part of how we construct meaning of our real worlds in so far as they provide us common sense narratives that make racial hierarchies real while also obscuring those hierarchies beneath a veneer of naturalness. This is why we see outrage in gaming communities when recent experiments have "forced" users into a female or black or Hispanic character in point-of-view games (Newman 2016). The outrage suggests that there is something about our common sense understandings of race, gamers' immersive relationship to game narratives, and our racial hierarchy that makes this forced othering in games a social norm violation.

Gray makes two important moves in this book. First, she situates video game research in race, class and gender literature. This is important because much of the research on games and gaming culture has occurred in sociology of culture, cultural studies and internet studies. These subfields bring important lenses to the study of gaming. But, sociology of race and intersectionality contribute frameworks for studying the structural "conditions of power" (Gray 2014: 4). Gray responds to the structural imperative of sociology of race by situating games as a narrative devices,

with ideologies and logics. Gray argues that given the political economy of the U.S. racial hierarchy, gaming narratives will use and co-create racialized ideologies and logics. This argument draws on Omi and Winant's racial formation theory's articulation of ideologies. There's also finer point here about the structure of video games. Because users become immersed in games, the ideologies in video games may be different from how we traditionally understand audience participation in other popular culture narrative forms, e.g. television. Here, Gray uses Gramsci to study new media forms. Finally, Gray argues that video games perpetuate narratives that rationalize the racial hierarchy, obscuring "real world" inequalities through immersive experiences of those inequalities as real, natural, and unseen.

Gray attends to several things that are important to future research. She interrogates the social construction of whiteness as much as she does the social construction of blackness. She does the same with the role of gender in gaming narratives, i.e. she considers the construction of both masculinities and femininities. Choo and Ferree (2010) argue in their article, "Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities" that the study of race, class, and gender become theoretically and empirically stronger when they attend to both marked *and* unmarked categories. Mutually constitutive intersectional power relations are dynamic – they exist through their relationship to each other. To study one in isolation of the other is to reify hegemonic hierarchies. Choo and Ferree give four examples of really good sociology that nonetheless reifies hegemonic constructs by not interrogating unmarked categories ("Sidewalk", "Promises I Can Keep", "Unequal Childhoods", and "Dignity of Working Men"). Gray passes this litmus test with flying colors. Reading her interrogation of whiteness and masculinity made me consider how the "wanted man" ideal type in Goffman's "On The Run" might benefit from understanding "wanted" vis-a-vis "un wanted", i.e. not entangled in the criminal justice system; man vis-a-vis woman; ghetto vis-a-vis non-ghetto; and black and poor vis-a-vis not black and not poor. Gray builds on a host of theories in this

text to mind the gap between race theory and internet studies. That's a good model for research that I hope will build on Gray's work.

This book uses data from online gaming community interactions to build a typology of gaming behaviors that are rooted in power relations, i.e. race, class, and gender. Gray also develops a useful framework for common discursive practices among gamers. I am interested in Gray's thoughts on how these typologies might be useful in other media contexts like Internet comments, pundit discourse, online education forums, etc. There is the new study of internet comments at Guardian out this week, which uses large scale textual analysis to track abusive comments by race and gender. I was sad to see there wasn't a more theoretically grounded approach to understanding those comments in context, to develop useful heuristics as Gray has done in this book. Granted, that work wasn't done by sociologists and we should be glad because it means we haven't completely ceded to journalists all critical analysis of media, culture, and structural inequalities. Are these behaviors specific to immersive technologies or gaming subcultures or do we think there's something more universal to them in media, discourse, or institutional settings? Is it about gaming or about digitally-mediated interactions and platforms?

Those questions matter in what sociologist Patricia Clough et al have called social's "datological turn" (2015). They argue that algorithmic market arrangements and predictive organizational logics present a real challenge for social theory. I agree. It presents a particularly pressing problem for the social theory of race and intersectionality. Gray's book is one of a growing subfield moving towards understanding how digitality reconstitutes racialization. I will shout out papers in a forthcoming volume, *Digital Sociologies*, edited by myself with Jessie Daniels and Karen Gregory (2016). We were very keen on shifting the sociological study of technology and technological change to the sociological imperative of stratification. Kishonna has a paper in that volume. As it relates to gaming, this datological turn means more than cultural production. Games are also markets. They aren't just produced by markets – although they are and I would read more on the political

economy of videogames. Games are also marketplaces. The explosion of microtransactions, or commodity exchanges within gaming platforms, link markets to gaming in intimate ways. These intimacies encourage some of the behavioral archetypes that Gray fleshes out in this book. The datalogical turn is ultimately about consumerism and capital seeking but the particularities are specific to algorithms, digital cultures, structural inequalities, and the given racial hierarchy. Gray's book is an example of how we can theorize and study these new iterations of capital formation and exploitation. There is a great deal more work to be done theorizing social processes when space and place cannot necessarily be operationalized the same. There is also work to be done among those in the sociology of race: black social movements like Black Lives Matter dominate the small subfield here of race and digital sociology. But, there is also room to consider structural inequality in access and returns from digitally-mediated labor arrangements, educational attainment, and public goods. This work should, as Gray does here, consider race as a social construction that is mutually constituted by gender and class. In closing, this book builds on Choo and Ferree's imperative that intersectionality become process orientated and attend to unmarked categories. It extends classic social theory into the age of datafication. And, it is in conversation with trends in stratification and inequality that are studying race and racism after the datalogical turn.

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