

chapter

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## Race and identity in digital media

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Race can be an extremely difficult and uncomfortable subject. And it is especially difficult to analyse images and discourses of race in popular media, as their viewers and particularly fans may feel defensive about their pleasurable experiences with television programmes, films, websites and video games which contain images of race that are both inaccurate and stereotyped. There is admittedly a tough spot to occupy – interactive media in particular such as digital games afford their users extremely immersive environments that provide such intense and enjoyable experiences that critical distance can be difficult to maintain. It's hard to critique and notice power imbalances in terms of race and gender when one is having such a good time. Video and computer game fans and players in particular have had to face much social critique of their chosen and beloved media forms as games have come under attack as addictive, time-wasting and possibly conducive to violence.

It's not just video game or digital media users who have difficulty identifying race or racism within their favoured media, or admitting its prominence and importance. Sociologist Bonilla-Silva has found that discomfort when talking about race and racism is the norm in social life, as 'the dominant view among whites ... was (and still is) that whites have become more tolerant than ever and that racism, though still a problem is not as central a factor as it was in the past' (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. xiv). Racism has taken a new form in contemporary times; he found that almost none of the white students he studied used racist language in public, but many did in private. Public expressions of racism and racist language are thus far less common than they were, and have instead taken on new, more subtle forms, such as 'semantic moves' that avoid direct discussion of racism (2006, p. 53). Bonilla-Silva dubs these and other forms of less direct racist language and behaviour racial 'microaggression,' which can nonetheless have a harmful effect on recipients. While computer-mediated communication and digital telecommunication have been praised for their ability to let users experience a 'colour-blind' social environment, hate speech, racist imagery and other anti-social behaviours that are found in virtual worlds and other online

social spaces are surely forms of electronic microaggression. Online racist microaggression is disembodied and occurs in an easily escaped form, on a computer that can be turned off or walked away from, and is 'micro' as well in that it is enabled by digital means such as microprocessors, which are getting smaller, cheaper and more powerful every year. Yet digital micro-racism is symptomatic of larger tendencies. Though overt forms of racism, xenophobia and gender oppression in the 'real' world are still far too common, micro-racism and sexism tend to be discounted as not real, but rather part of a virtual world.

The internet has been widely and rapidly adopted over the last two decades, and scholars are still assessing its impact upon social life and the media landscape. While in the past mass media reached large numbers of readers simultaneously and created, as Benedict Anderson famously phrased it in his influential book, *Imagined Communities*, the internet has resulted instead in *virtual communities*, created by individuals who are multiply distributed across several types and styles of digital media practice (Anderson, 1991). While imagined communities brought individuals together through shared media experiences and gave them a common sense of national identity, virtual communities are electronically mediated and create a sense of immediacy through interactivity. Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, virtual worlds like *Second Life*, *Gaia Online* and *World of Warcraft*, video sharing websites like YouTube, and social awareness tools like Twitter create a sense of ambient awareness between users which many experience as community. These sites and worlds are becoming part of a public sphere, where ideas and intimacies are exchanged, relationships formed and maintained, and identities are constructed and sometimes policed.

The notion that digital communications might produce an intimacy borne of the transcendence of space and time is reminiscent of Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan's predictions that electronic media technologies would create a 'global village'. This idea that electronic communication technologies would gift users with an intimate yet cosmopolitan experience of the world figured prominently in print advertisements from the 1990s: campaigns such as IBM's 'Where Do You Want to Go Today?' and MCI's 'Anthem' print and television advertisements represented a world where exotic places and people are made immediately accessible to the 'wired' consumer. Images of rainforests, elephants, camels and ethnic costumes were employed in these ads as a means to sell computers as the 'global' medium. 'Anthem' took this a step further, depicting people of colour, the elderly and the handicapped using the internet and declaring it a 'utopia' where 'there is no race, there is no gender'. As Chun writes, this strategy represented the internet as a raceless, genderless, disembodied space (Chun, 2005). If the effect of earlier media like newspapers was to produce a new sense of a national self, imaginary as it might have been, the internet was shown in these discourses to produce a sense of a self that seemingly *transcended* nation, race and gender.

The validation of a supposedly race and gender-free self enabled by digital communication technologies reflects a *neoliberal* ideological position. Neoliberalism celebrates 'freedom, progress, and individualism', and defines citizenship as 'the

civic duty of individuals to reduce their burden on society and build up their own human capital – to be “entrepreneurs” of themselves’ (Ong, 1999, p. 266). Digital profiles and avatars that are produced by users encourage the sense that one is producing one’s ‘self’ without any type of constraint or limitation, such as gender, size, body shape or skin colour – thus avatars have often been celebrated by scholars and users alike as ideal entrepreneurial spaces for identity formation. However, avatars are often constructed from a fairly narrow range of faces, bodies and features. This creates a normative virtual body, one that is generally white, conventionally physically attractive, as well as traditionally gendered, with male and female bodies extremely different in appearance. The crucial role of designers, industries and social conventions in deciding which types of bodies and images are available to users has been explored in accounts such as White’s and Hillis’s (2009) work on avatars in virtual spaces. As White writes, even user-generated avatars created within online social environments such as VP, a web-based graphical communication setting that was supported by Excite in the 1990s, are organized into ‘types’. These types are organized into groups that reflect ‘mappings of skin and hair color’, and ‘too easily invokes a history of racial and ethnic intolerance in which the charting and mapping of bodies were used as scientific proof of differences’ (White, 2006).

Utopian perspectives about the power of digital media to include everyone and produce a world without the old social hierarchies or inequalities are reflected in works like Clay Shirky’s *Here Comes Everybody*. The seemingly decentralized structure of digital social media permits users to organize in new ways, ways that Shirky dubs ‘organizing without organizations’ (Shirky, 2008). Shirky claims that the structure of digital social media is inherently non-hierarchical socially as well as structurally. This dream of a flat, democratic, media landscape in which everyone is an equal participant and social inequalities can be eliminated or at least ignored is an extremely utopian perspective, one that envisions each digital media user as an equally empowered contributor.

As David Harvey puts it, under neoliberal social systems ‘individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly enough in one’s own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property (such as the class exclusions usually attributed to capitalism)’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 65). The neoliberal position maintains that social disadvantage is a result of an individual’s failure to ‘make themselves’ correctly, and that inequality is due to this poor personal choice rather than other people’s prejudices against particular races, genders, sexualities or class positions. Thus, neoliberalism is a ‘colour-blind’ ideology, one that discounts race as a factor in life choices. At first glance, virtual communities would seem to be tailor-made to produce an ideal neoliberal space, where each participant is free to produce a virtual self in exactly the way that they choose in an anonymous, disembodied space where gender and race cannot be seen.

Race and gender, both of which are embodied states of being, are imagined as optional items that can be altered at will, and that will is not lacking: much quantitative research on digital games finds that users of colour and women shed

their gender and race in order to adopt more normative ones in game. The desire to do this demonstrates that race and gender matter online, just as they do offline. As Williams, Martins, Consalvo and Ivory found in an empirical study or ‘virtual census’ of digital games and game players, ‘males, whites and adults are over-represented in comparison to the actual US population. These overrepresentations come at the expense of women, some minority groups – chiefly Latinos and Native Americans – and children and the elderly’ (2009, p. 17). And in a related empirical study of the popular massively multiplayer online (MMO) game *World of Warcraft*, Yee found that many female players adopt male avatars to avoid sexual harassment. With so many female players ‘passing’ as males online to avoid the anti-female gaming culture that Yee describes, maleness becomes the default identity. Even female players who play using female avatars and are willing to brave the game’s hyper-masculine culture find themselves unable to convince others that they are ‘real girls’ – as he puts it, ‘players are often assumed to be men unless proven otherwise’ as they are ‘severely underrepresented in MMOs’ (Yee, 2008, p. 84). Yee attributes women’s reluctance to adopt MMO games as quickly and enthusiastically as men have to a games culture that is unfriendly to women rather than to a given game’s mechanics or other inherent properties. Thus, gender and race identity choices and the reception of difference within gaming, be it warm or cold, are strongly shaped by interface styles, player culture and stereotypes from both social life and other media.

It is especially important that critical attention be paid to digital games, for as Williams asserts, they have begun ‘to displace prior media as the dominant symbol sets for many Americans’ (Williams et al., 2009, p. 7). Some game scholars have approvingly noted digital media’s potential for eradicating social inequalities: Castronova writes that avatars within virtual worlds like the MMO *Everquest* ‘erase, at a stroke, every contribution to human inequality that stems from body differences’, and that ‘anyone wearing a skin tone or a body shape would be wearing it voluntarily’ (Castronova, 2005, p. 258). The fantasy of being able to create one’s own body in any way one chooses is represented here as a radically democratic possibility, and as one of the primary social benefits of digital media. Clearly, there is no such thing as perfect freedom when one creates an avatar, yet the illusion that a user can become an ‘entrepreneur of the self’ through digital means reflects a technologically deterministic perspective, one that looks to technology to solve social problems. When a user creates an animated image of themselves, such as a cartoonish and cute ‘Mii’ using the Nintendo Wii’s character creation engine, or makes a hulking, dark and brutish orc or dainty and pale elf avatar in a virtual-world *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft*, they are exercising their ability to choose their gender, race, body shape and many other aspects of embodied identity, but their choices are highly constrained by the images on offer. It is easy to forget how constrained these choices are, when they seem so numerous within the limited confines of interactive menus. Possessing an ‘immaterial’ body lets one engage what seems like a purely voluntary form of self-representation; the implication is that many of us would, if we could, wear a skin tone or body shape that is not our own.

As is the case in older media, the world of digital games does not look like the real world. Television and film's tendencies to underrepresent and misrepresent racial minorities in starring roles or as main characters, and its failure to represent them at all at times, are reflected in digital games as well. Digital media are no different: as Everett writes, race in digital cultures of gaming has been either a 'structured absence or specious virtual presence' (Everett, 2009, p. 146). She notes that public concerns over video games have centred around violence and media effects, to the detriment of race analysis, and that the depictions of racial minorities in games such as *Shadow Warrior*, *Ethnic Cleansing* and *Ready to Rumble: Round 2* are specious at best, terribly racist at worst. It is because these and other new media texts are 'hot wir[ed] to existing racist discourses and negative racial stereotypes' that they must be studied carefully (Everett, 2009, p. 115). Thus, games can be seen as symptomatic or expressive of existing racial discourses, or more alarmingly, formative of them. The Williams study notes that the world of game characters is 'highly unrepresentative of the actual population and even of game players', and that a lack of media representation 'can have identity and self-esteem effects on individuals from these groups' (Williams *et al.*, 2009, p. 8). Thus, while black and Latino youth are the 'heaviest users' of video games, Latinos in particular are underrepresented as characters in games. The scarcity of gendered and non-white bodies in digital games fails to reflect the demographic reality of race and gender, instead creating a social fiction of a falsely homogeneous world. Oftentimes users of colour and women feel at odds with the avatars offered to them since they cannot find bodies that reflect their own in the limited and mostly white and male world of digital games. As Tracey John wrote in an article for the MTV *Multiplayer* blog,

It all started with 'Carnival Games,' which I played last August. When I went to create my character, it gave me a variety of choices for pants, shirts, shoes, accessories, hairstyles ... you name it. But when it came to skin color, it only offered different faces in one pale hue. In other words, as a minority (I'm a Chinese woman), I could not replicate my skin color for my avatar within 'Carnival Games' (much less if I were African-American or Hispanic). I found that a bit offensive. (Johns, 2008)

Games and other digital media technologies of embodiment, which include virtual-world games and virtual communities, create a social fiction of race and gender that looks much like that evident in older media, where the relatively rare images of women and minorities rarely map onto demographic or cultural realities.

Michael Kane's account of a year in the life of two elite computer gaming teams details how gaming 'gets racial' despite the relative anonymity that online interaction can afford. In his book *Game Boys: Professional Videogaming's Rise from the Basement to the Big Time* he describes how Cuban-American Danny 'fRoD' Montaner encountered racial harassment from other players while playing the popular first-person shooter game *Counter Strike* on the internet. Montaner told Kane, 'When I was coming up in the scene ... everybody would down-talk me. First it was, "you're a cheater". Then it turned racial. "Go cut my grass you fucking spic". Trouble found me' (Kane, 2008,

p. 157). Kane writes, 'Once in an online match [Montaner] got into it with a Canadian gamer who called him a Mexican. fRoD, who is Cuban not Mexican, called his opponent a Canadian and an asshole. The league suspended them both for two weeks for unsportsmanlike behavior. "Nobody gave me any respect. I had to prove myself over and over"' (Kane, 2008, p. 157). Antagonistic discourse, or 'trash talking' is part of the culture of sport for young men as well as a part of gaming culture, so this was not surprising – what was surprising is that this occurred in an online game, when the players could not see each other. Theoretically, race should have been unavailable for comment – a non-issue, since *Counter Strike* avatars are racially uniform. However, Danny Montaner was not just one of the many young Latino men who are the 'heaviest users' of games according to the virtual census: at that time, he was the best *Counter Strike* player in the world, and a member of the US championship team in 2005–6. As an elite player, he was known to be Latino by many of the game's fans, players who did not hesitate to use this information to try to rattle him online and disrupt his play. Race did not disappear in this networked space. In addition, terming Montaner a 'Mexican' and a 'fucking spic' and ordering him to cut grass invokes a complex of racial stereotypes that envision Latinos in America as low-skilled and disenfranchised agricultural workers rather than as elite gamers. Thus, one world of racialized work – Latinos as marginalized and unassimilable aliens and permanent foreigners condemned to low-wage, low-status labour – bleeds over into another, the world of professional gaming. Montaner earns his living playing *Counter Strike*, and is paid a salary as well as prize money by his team. In this example, the scarcity of positive images of Latinos in computer games recedes into relative unimportance compared to the racism and xenophobia that can be found in many gaming cultures.

In 'The Labor of Fun', Yee notes, 'video games are blurring the boundary between work and play very rapidly' (Yee, 2006b, p. 70). Though every player has to work or engage in effortful and practised behaviour in order to play well, there are some for whom gaming is more work than others. For example, as he writes, 'there are companies such as IGE whose business model revolves around accumulating and selling virtual currency' or gold (p. 70). The employees of these companies play games for twelve-hour shifts in order to earn virtual goods within them, which are then resold to other players. The majority of this new form of digital production, dubbed 'gold farming', occurs in Asia, specifically China. Thus, race and nation come into the picture again, in a different form. While Montaner is part of an elite but growing group of gaming stars who support themselves playing games, much more common are players who perform repetitive tasks for much, much lower wages in games like *World of Warcraft* or other MMOs.

Gold farmers were a fairly mysterious, almost mythic group until 2005, when a surge of information about them became available in the popular press as well as online. These players or 'gold farmers' are really workers in the game; they are poorly paid, semi-illegal labourers who are unable to mingle or socialize with leisure-players due to language differences, racial prejudice and lack of time for 'play' rather than work. In addition, they are routinely victimized by other players who

believe they are 'ruining the game' by providing leisure-players with the ability to buy accomplishments and items in the game rather than earning them.

Dibbell writes quite sympathetically of the gold farmers' plight, noting that while players complain vociferously about the way that gold selling has plagued or 'ruined' the game economy,

as a matter of everyday practice, it is the farmers who catch it in the face ... In homemade *World of Warcraft* video clips that circulate on YouTube or GameTrailers, with titles like 'Chinese gold farmers must die' and 'Chinese farmer extermination,' players document their farmer-killing expeditions through that same Timbermaw-ridden patch of WoW in which Min does his farming – a place so popular with farmers that Western players sometimes call it China Town (Dibbell, 2007).

Constance Steinkuehler's analysis of *Lineage II*, a Korean MMO, uncovered some of the ways in which the condemnation of virtual currency buying is far exceeded by a visceral hatred of gold sellers or farmers. This hatred is strongly articulated to race and ethnicity: since many, but not all, gold farmers are Chinese, there is a decidedly anti-Asian flavour to many player protests against 'Chinese gold farmers'. As Steinkuehler notes, hatred of gold farmers has given rise to polls querying players on North American servers if 'Is it OK to Hate Chinese Players?' (32 per cent of players responded 'yes', and the majority, 39 per cent, replied 'I don't hate China, just what they stand for in L2', and 10 per cent checked 'I am CN and you should mind yourself, you racist pig') (Steinkuehler, 2006, p. 200). Though she notes 'calling someone "Chinese" is a general insult that seems aimed more at one's style of play than one's real-world ethnicity' (2006), the construction of Chinese identity in MMOs as abject, undesirable and socially contaminated racializes the culture of online games, a culture that scholars such as Castronova have claimed are unique (and valuable) because they are exempt from 'real-world' problems such as racism, classism, 'looksism' and other types of social inequality.

Though, as T. L. Taylor notes, MMOs are distinguished by their 'enormous potential in a fairly divisive world', the 'fact that people play with each other across regions and often countries' as often as not results in ethnic and racial chauvinism: 'as a tag the conflation of Chinese with gold farmer has seemed to come all too easy and now transcends any particular game' (Taylor, 2006, p. 319). Robert Brookey expands upon this claim; in his analysis of US gaming blogs, he discovered 'overt racist attitudes' towards Chinese farmers; most importantly, that 'some players, who harbor negative feelings toward Chinese farmers, do not believe that these feelings denote racial discrimination' (Brookey, 2007). Thus, though it is the case that players cannot see each others' bodies while playing, specific forms of gamic activity and labour, such as gold farming and selling, as well as specific styles of play have become racialized or identified as Chinese, producing new forms of networked or micro-racism. As one Chinese worker-player stated in a videotaped interview, 'when we first heard of the term "Chinese farmer" referring to the kind of job we did, we felt very sensitive about it. We were uncomfortable about this term and unable to speak of it' (Ge Jin).'

Microaggression or micro-racism in virtual worlds still engender shame, just as do other forms of mediated racism.

In an essay on social life in *World of Warcraft*, Williams asks, 'How is race being managed within the anonymity of avatar space?' (Williams, 2006, p. 258). Race is indeed 'managed' in MMOs, both by the affordances or 'rules' of the game and by the game's players. Player resentment against Asian 'player-workers' results in a continual process of profiling other avatars to determine their status as 'legitimate' leisure-players or as unwanted 'farmers'. Player class (as Yee notes, 'rogues' and 'hunter' class avatars are often chosen by player-workers because they can accumulate saleable property without needing to 'group' with other players) (Yee, 2006a, 6 October 2007) language use or unwillingness to speak to other players, equipment type and repetitive behaviours are noted by other players as evidence that a player is a 'Chinese gold farmer'. Harassment is often the result. Though these behaviours, player classes, uses of language and equipment types are often employed by other leisure-players, there is much prejudice against 'farmers' who are 'ruining the game'. A player who speaks either Chinese, ungrammatical or 'broken' English, or refuses to speak at all, or who repetitively harvests the game's prizes or mobs, is often assumed to be a 'Chinese gold farmer' and may be targeted for ill-treatment or even virtual death. Though gold farming is not a form of labour that is exclusively practised by Chinese player-workers, it has become racialized, as have many other forms of labour, both digital and pre-digital. This has been well documented in other MMOs as well; as Steinkuehler notes, the player class of female dwarf was tainted by its association with Chinese gold farmers, and thus became an 'unplayable' class because female dwarfs became racialized as Chinese. As she writes, because gold farmers often played female dwarfs,

they have become the most despised class of character throughout the game ... girl dwarves are now reviled by many players, systematically harassed, and unable to find anyone that will allow them to hunt in their groups ... it seems as if a whole new form of virtual racism has emerged, with an in-game character class unreflectively substituted for unacknowledged (and largely unexamined) real-world differences between China and America. (Steinkuehler, 2006, p. 208)

As most gamers already know, 'coming to own the avatar, psychologically, is so natural among those who spend time in synthetic worlds that it is barely noticed'. Filiciak's psychoanalytically informed scholarship on avatar creation and ownership asserts that there is an intimate relation between a player's real-life bodily identity and their avatars. He writes, citing Reid, 'avatars are much more than a few bytes of computer data – they are cyborgs, a manifestation of the self beyond the realms of the physical, existing in a space where identity is self-defined rather than pre-ordained' (Filiciak, 2003, p. 91). However, while Chinese gold farmers create and deploy avatars, they are unable to benefit from them since their jobs consist in selling 'level ups' as well as gold and equipment. When their avatars become very powerful or 'levelled up' through continual play, they can be sold to other players,

often for very large sums of money; one elite player sold his night elf rogue for €7,000 (\$9,700 US) in 2007 (Sebastian 'gosey' Selin, 2007). Thus, the notion that avatars are 'manifestations of the self' when applied to gold farmers neatly sums up the power imbalances evident in virtual worlds and digital media generally. Though 'emotional investment' is an unavoidable side effect of avatar usage, the luxury of capital accumulation is denied player-workers in virtual worlds. In other words, poor players can't afford to keep their own digital 'selves' or avatars – they often must sell desirable player accounts in order to make ends meet.

Users' affective and emotional investment in their avatars is an unavoidable effect of virtual embodiment. However, there are digital projects and games that exploit this effect to positive ends. While digital media can't eradicate social inequalities, they can expose users to new experiences that can help them gain both information and empathy about race and gender inequality through virtual embodiment. Digital media games that put users in the position of a refugee, guest worker or health aid worker as part of game play permit and at times even force users to experience the perspective of a foreign and gendered subject. The United Nations has circulated several 'edu-tainment' games of this sort, such as *Against All Odds*, and *Deliver the Net!* (Nothing but Nets.com). Many of these games use interactive narrative and avatars to virtually embody the player in culturally and linguistically unfamiliar situations in order to teach cross-racial and cultural empathy. *Against All Odds* – a Flash-based game developed by Paregas AB for the UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency for the express purpose of educating young people in developed nations – can be played in Danish, Finnish, French, German, Icelandic, Greek, Spanish, Norwegian, Swedish and English. The 'Teacher Introduction' page that accompanies the game explains that while playing the game 'students follow a young person's flight from oppression in his or her home country to exile in an asylum country. The game is intended to increase students' awareness and knowledge about refugees – where they come from, what situations they have faced and how they adapt to their new lives'. The game works to teach players 'the importance of treating refugees with tolerance and respect' by 'letting you experience what it is like to be a refugee'.

Like many digital games, this one situates the player in virtual space by embedding them into an avatar or virtual body, and placing them in situations where they must make choices, and then visualizing the consequences of those choices. This exemplifies the *processual* nature of new media – the game responds to each input with a set response or encoded process or output which behaves the same way every time, and which simulates cause and effect in the world. The algorithmic structure of digital media helps the user experience the constrained sets of choices available to refugees, and asks them to 'imagine if this were you'. The programmed nature of the game reflects the programmed or institutionalized social response to foreigners, racialized others and refugees. The player is required to choose a name, and then is given three choices right away: the start screen depicts three modules entitled 'War and Conflict: Running from Persecution', 'Border Country: Can I Stay Here?' and 'A New Life, Loss and Challenge'. In the first module, the avatar is picked up by military police on the street and put in front of a set of papers to sign. The player views

the papers from the perspective of the avatar, in the first-person position. The first piece of paper reads, 'I give up the right to vote!' with two blank lines below labelled 'yes' or 'no'. If you move the cursor to sign 'no', your avatar is hit over the head with a sap, emits an agonized groan, drops of blood fall on the paper and a new page pops up that reads 'Many take the right to vote for granted ... but here are many who don't!' along with links to 'web facts' containing articles about Polish, Chilean and Chinese refugees and student protesters, and links to Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If you hit the 'back' button and try to answer the same question with a 'yes', your avatar is spared a violent blow from an unseen weapon, but the pop-up informs you 'no right to vote, no democracy!'

The bright drops of blood accumulate on the paper as the player answers more questions in a way that asserts their right to travel, to form organizations, and to write and speak in their own language, graphically representing the lack of choice that confronts refugees, minorities and those living in repressive regimes. As you play through the game you attempt to find shelter in a strange city, encounter xenophobia and prejudice against 'your kind', negotiate refugee reception centres and search for an interpreter as you attempt to communicate in a foreign context. The game employs your avatar's chosen name as you fill out job applications and negotiate other aspects of life in a foreign and often hostile environment. Though there is no time pressure to finish the game, the game keeps track of the player's progress through each module, scores and evaluates 'right' answers, and rewards a finished game and correct answers with praise.

*Deliver the Net* is a Flash-based game that requires the player to 'drive' a virtual scooter using a computer keyboard's arrow keys in order to deliver mosquito nets to African families before dark. As your avatar, an African man, delivers insecticide-treated bed nets to various huts and individuals on a wide open plain surrounded by mountains, the player competes to finish the deliveries before dark, when the mosquitoes come. After completion of the game the player is asked to click a button to donate \$10 to purchase actual nets for African families. This strategy has been quite successful; the game, which is linked to the [Nothingbutnets.net](http://Nothingbutnets.net) site, notes that players have donated over 2,820,700 nets to people in need. The experience of virtual net delivery makes the reality of 'saving lives' more real through game play. In addition, the experience of being embodied as a black man on a mission to deliver mosquito nets acts as a corrective to other images of black masculinity in much more popular digital games such as *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City* and *Saints Row*, which depict African-Americans engaged in stereotyped criminal and sexualized behaviours.

Games such as these reclaim a vision of what interactive digital media could do for social justice. In addition, they simulate the experience of gendered and racial difference in more politicized and relevant ways than do most commercial video game narratives. Though the user's avatar is often invisible during game play in *Against All Odds*, the user must engage with the game as a refugee or unwanted foreigner. Bodies with blond hair and blue eyes are depicted as having more privilege

than darker folk, highlighting the role of race in refugee politics, nor can you choose to be anything other than black in *Deliver the Net!*

There is much at stake in the structure and programming of these digital media that consume so much of our time, capital and attention. Indeed, part of digital media's legacy is that attention has itself become a form of capital – advertisers are willing to pay top dollar to companies such as Google in order to get even a fleeting moment of an internet user's attention. As we navigate our way through the myriad and rapidly proliferating array of new virtual worlds, social networks, telepresence applications, games, operating systems and mobile devices that enable an experience of the computer which is ubiquitous and ambient, we would do well to remember that these too provide users with strong messages about identity, class and power. As Manovich writes, 'software interfaces ... privilege particular models of the world and the human subject' (Manovich, 2001, p. 16).

## Note

- 1 Translation by Alice Liao.

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