

ROLE-PLAYING GAME STUDIES

Transmedia Foundations

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REPRESENTATION AND DISCRIMINATION IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

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Lisa Nakamura's 1995 essay "Race In/For Cyberspace" offers a good starting point for understanding representation and discrimination in role-playing games (RPGs). The text unpacks a problematic form of play on Lambda MOO (an early, text-based multiuser dungeon) that Nakamura calls "identity tourism". Simply put, identity tourism refers to assuming an often exotic identity on the Internet for leisure purposes.¹ The design of Lambda MOO allowed players to describe their characters in a paragraph of prose. This led to a game world populated by predominantly white male players, enacting almost comically stereotypical Asian characters, with handles like AsianDoll, Miss_Saigon, Bisexual_Asian_Guest, Geisha_Guest, or MaidenTaiwan. In doing so, players reproduced toxic stereotypes that make the virtual world an unwelcome space for ethnically Asian players; subtly displayed and reinforced white supremacy; and essentialized identity and race, portraying them as simple, fixed categories. Despite such problematic dynamics, Nakamura concludes that RPGs could also be a space for players to experiment with performing Asian-ness or other categories in ways that explore, make them aware of, and challenge fixed notions around race and identity. In this, she draws on Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Using examples of people who don't fall into neat categories like "male" and "female", Butler shows how categories like race, gender, and identity are socially constructed, not biologically determined, and best understood as performed, multiple, and moving fluidly along several continua. However, as Nakamura points out, the design of a game can render such categories invisible or fixed – or offer spaces for exploration and deliberation.

In summary, Nakamura's essay establishes three basic tenets that still hold today: (1) representation and stereotypes matter; (2) players can enact and reproduce stereotypes or subvert them and explore different representations, and (3) this player agency is afforded and constrained by the design of the game played. Along these lines, one can distinguish two main angles of studying representation and discrimination in RPGs. A *player* angle looks at how identities, discrimination, and representation are actively constructed and negotiated by players. A *procedural* angle looks at how game design embodies certain representations and, with them, potential bias and stereotypes.

The present book explores RPGs as a transmedia phenomenon across forms like live-action role-play, tabletop RPGs (TRPGs), computer RPGs (CRPGs), or multi-player online RPGs (MORPGs), each of which comes with a multitude of local communities in different places and around different games. This diversity makes general statements about “RPGs as such” difficult. For this reason, the present chapter will focus on the US American TRPG industry and community. This is not to say that US TRPGs are any “less” or “more” discriminatory than other RPG forms and communities. Rather, they serve as an exemplary case study to illustrate the larger dynamics and problems of discrimination and representation in RPGs. After introducing key concepts, the chapter will first provide a player angle on the construction and negotiation of identity and representation by players to then analyze how the design of RPGs as rule systems prefigure these processes.

Key Concepts

The term “representation” is used in many different ways across disciplines and theories, usually to describe how one thing can stand in for another (Hall 1998). Politically, representation refers to whether and how a given social group has a say in political processes, for instance, via individual representatives. In cultural and media studies, *representation* as a process describes the production of meaning, while *representations of* refer to what kind of meanings media and communication circulate about a certain subject, like a social group or category, e.g. “representations of blackness”.

Such representations often entail *stereotypes*: oversimplified ideas about groups of people that don't take individual differences into account (Dyer 1999). Stereotypes can be positive or negative. They are formed when the characteristics of an individual are used to stand for the characteristics of a group of similar individuals: the stereotype that all black men are athletic is a generalization of the fact that some black men are athletic. For Stuart Hall (1998, 258–9), stereotypes reflect the attitudes of the dominant social group and order and work both consciously and unconsciously. Subjects of stereotyping, for instance, often unconsciously perform one stereotype to resist another. The dominant stereotype of black men as infantile leads black men to perform machismo in resistance, which, in turn, reinforces another stereotype: that black men have large sexual appetites (262–3). According to Hall, the only way to combat a stereotype is to dissolve it by embracing and producing diverse representations in the media.

Apart from simplifying, stereotypes often *essentialize*. This means that they reduce the complexity and diversity of individuals of a social category into a set of defining attributes that is assumed to be an underlying, unchanging “essence”. For instance, an essentialist view of “Asian-ness” would be that all people called Asian share some unchanging essence – maybe “in their genes” – that makes all of them smart, collectivist, polite, etc.

Indeed, *race* is a prime example of a social category that, particularly during the rise of eugenics in the 19th century, was essentialized: people (wrongly) assumed that there were different human races, like biological species, with clear and stable differences in traits, like intelligence or self-control. In contemporary cultural research, race refers to dividing humans by observable physical characteristics, like skin color, while *ethnicity* refers to dividing humans by shared culture. Race is not a fixed biological property but the outcome of *racialization*: people construct race categories based on superficial physiological properties, like skin color, and count individuals into them (Little 2013).

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Similarly, contemporary research makes a clear distinction between sex and gender. *Sex* refers to physiological differences between males and females, such as the reproductive system or height. *Gender* refers to social or cultural distinctions and understandings of masculinity and femininity that are ascribed and performed. For example, by wearing pink, one performs femininity as there is a commonsense cultural association between femininity and the color pink.

To conclude our tour of concepts, *discrimination*, on an abstract level, is the recognition of difference. In common and sociological parlance, discrimination consists of the unequal treatment of individuals based on their belonging to particular social groups, such as race, ethnicity, religion, or gender.

A Player Angle

Discussions of discrimination reach back to the very beginning of TRPGs. In a 1976 issue of the fanzine *Alarums & Excursions*, Samuel Edward Konkin III published an article depicting Gary Gygax (co-creator of *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*), Tim Kask (editor of the *D&D* magazine *Dragon*), and Len Lakofka (a key voice in the game's fan community) being hung by a party of women. Konkin reacted to a *Dragon* article by Lakofka, which suggested rules for ("obviously" female) characters of female gamers in *D&D* that today seem almost comically misogynistic. Lakofka suggested that female characters should have a "beauty" score that connects to unique abilities like "charm men" or "seduce", while women in combat should fight at the level of "man-1" (Trammell 2014).

Change has been slow to come. In 2016, the world's largest TRPG convention, *Gen Con*, finally reached gender parity in featured speakers, compared to only 6% female featured speakers in 2011 (Strix Beltrán 2016). This is the result of a conscious recent initiative of *Gen Con* towards a more inclusive role-playing community, which reflects the degree to which the TRPG community has historically been a site of struggle and ignorance over representation and discrimination. Founded by Gygax in 1968, *Gen Con* looks back on a history of over 40 years of predominantly white male invited speakers. Take Ajit George's (2014) experience of *Gen Con* as recently as 2013:

For all that GenCon offers, it lacks in minority gamers. Last year was my first GenCon, and as I explored the convention, I saw almost no one who looked like me. By far, the most visible minorities at GenCon were the hired convention hall facilities staff who were setting up, serving, and cleaning up garbage for the predominantly white convention-goers. It was a surreal experience and it felt like I had stepped into an ugly part of a bygone era, one in which whites were waited upon by minority servants.

Gen Con made the decision to produce a more inclusive space for gaming because many outspoken fans, like Ajit George, critiqued the lack of diversity in the industry. Yet while high-profile industry bodies like *Gen Con* are making some headway, discrimination of women and people of color is still commonplace in today's TRPG community, if in forms that are sometimes hard to notice for the unaffected. Take contemporary TRPG designer Julia Bond Ellingboe and her game *Steal Away Jordan*. The game deals specifically with issues of intersectionality – how the experience, status, and identity of a person is construed by the intersection of multiple categories, like ethnicity and gender (Collins 1990). In a recent interview (Jones 2016), Ellingboe relates the difficulty she's had as a woman of color instigating

meaningful dialogue around race in the indie TRPG community. Many white people, she explains, avoided playing her game for fear of “getting it wrong”. As a result, she moved from race to gender as a narrative theme:

Although I can find other women game designers in the scene, I see a scant few black designers. It’s hard to be the unicorn. In my day-to-day life I’m one of the only African Americans in my workplace. I unpack that in different ways, I don’t want to unpack that in my game design.

(Ellingboe in Jones 2016, paragraph 32)

As Ellingboe observes, the mere absence of people with similar intersectional experiences and people’s unwillingness to play her game due to its racially charged topic is enough to discourage and silence more diverse perspectives, such as hers.

George’s and Ellingboe’s experiences are exemplary of the invisible and often unstated discrimination in the TRPG community, which is mirrored, for instance, in #1ReasonWhy, a conversation started on Twitter in 2012 when a user posted the question “Why are there so few lady game creators?” (Ochsner 2017). Although most participants were women in the so-called AAA video game industry, describing the sexism they encounter at work, Shoshanna Kessock (2012) reports that a number of TRPG developers were involved as well. Notable RPG designers, such as Avery McDaldno, Lillian Cohen-Moore, Emily Care Boss, and Jess Hartley, joined the conversation (McDaldno 2012). Following a recent content analysis of #1ReasonWhy (Ochsner 2017), women in the game industry are (1) often evaluated on different standards than men and with criteria other than professional accomplishments; (2) denied the recognition of status and expertise; and (3) silenced, dismissed, and made invisible. This is all the more problematic as the values and experiences of game designers directly and indirectly inform the representations of social categories of the games they produce (Flanagan, Howe, and Nissenbaum 2008, 324). Homogenous development teams develop homogeneous games and are often blind to the racial, ethnic, or gender stereotypes they reproduce in them. Discrimination in production and consumption mutually reinforce each other: racist, sexist, and homogeneous games chiefly attract relatively homogeneous player communities, who reproduce their stereotypes and police their notions and norms of “normal” identity. Thus, Zek Cypress Valkyrie (2011) found that although MORPGs would allow players to explore alternative sexualities in “safe” pseudonymous cybersex, players often restrained and sanctioned any nonheterosexual interaction. This hostile environment keeps minority groups from buying and playing games and seeking positions in the games industry, which perpetuates the homogeneity and stereotyping of produced games.

That said, Adrienne Shaw (2015) offers evidence of game players from marginalized groups who continued to play games despite stereotypical representations of race, class, and gender. She also reports on new trends of diversity within the industry that have broadened the representational palette within games to include more women, people of color, and LGBTQ people. Although these efforts to diversify games are a step in the right direction, Shaw finds them to often still be couched in the logic of neoliberalism – players try on identities as if they were trying on clothes. Also, counter-movements like #gamergate show how far gaming fan communities are from embracing diversity as a positive value or recognizing that how games represent social categories like race, class, or gender and who gets to play and make them has deep societal and cultural relevance (Mortensen 2016).

A Procedure Angle

With their rich storytelling, open worlds, complex rules, and player freedom, RPGs have a unique opportunity to present complex and multifaceted portrayals of identity, race, ethnicity, and gender and to allow players to explore identity in new ways. This section explores how many TRPGs have made good on this opportunity and what kinds of representation are embodied in their design.

TRPG design in the *D&D* tradition generally follows a three-part formula (→ *Chapter 18*). They are organized by a rule set, which is documented in a set of manuals. They involve a referee who maintains the dramatic action of the world. And they involve groups of players who take on the roles of characters and decide how these will interact with the world that has been presented by the referee. Player actions are structured by the rules, although referee and players can choose how strictly or loosely to follow them. Thus, understanding representation in TRPGs means recognizing how the open-ended nature of player interaction is set against the structural elements established by the game's rules.

Take how the rules of *D&D* implement race as a category. Players select one of many fantastic races for their character. Early *D&D* editions offered the staples from *Lord of the Rings* (human, elf, half-elf, dwarf, and halfling/hobbit), but the fifth edition has expanded the list to include dragonborn, gnome, half-orc, and tiefling (Wizards of the Coast 2014). Characters are defined by a set of six main attributes: strength, dexterity, constitution, wisdom, intelligence, and charisma. Depending on which race players choose, character attributes are modified. Where early editions would modify some attributes negatively for some races, the fifth edition now rewards players for choosing a nonhuman. A half-orc, for example, now only gains a two-point bonus to their strength, which, in previous editions, was balanced by a two-point penalty to intelligence and charisma.

Be that as it may, the *D&D* rules model race as a fixed biological species with fundamental bodily differences – some races are *inherently* stronger, smarter, more charming, etc. than others. This reproduces an essentialist understanding of race found in eugenics (Fisher 1918), which sought statistical evidence for inherited traits linked to race in humans. Although long disproven by research, this biologicistic concept of human race is the primary way in which race has been modelled in TRPG rules, from *D&D* to many other influential and current games, such as *Empire of the Petal Throne*, *GURPS*, or *Pathfinder*. It is exacerbated by the fact that RPGs often rely on *archetypes* in their content (Bowman 2012), which, again, have a tendency towards stereotyping and essentialism. And many games present a white European fashioning of “humans” as the most “normal”, “familiar”, and “default” race (Higgin 2009).

RPGs inherit these fantasy races from neoromantic if not anti-modern writers, like J.R.R. Tolkien. That races are then modeled as fixed statistical differences is arguably due to the game mechanics TRPGs inherited from wargames. If everything is game mechanically expressed as statistical attributes, how could race not be? Or put differently, if race doesn't make a statistical difference, why bother choosing one? The focus on faithfully reproducing tropes of fantasy worlds and providing players “meaningful choice” in character creation overlooks how these rules reinforce outmoded notions of race.

Where TRPGs allow players to negotiate whether and how they might want to enact these rules, CRPGs and MORPGs “hardwire” them into their source code. The science fiction game *RimWorld* is a good example of such algorithmic stereotyping (Lo 2016). Much

like Lakofka's *D&D* rules for female characters, *RimWorld* uses categories like gender, age, or disability to determine attraction and whether characters will make or accept romantic moves, embodying numerous stereotypes in the course: men are eight times more likely to make a romantic advance; people with disabilities are always less attractive; attraction is affected only by physical beauty; there are only bisexual or gay women, gay men (who find all women unattractive), and straight men (who find all men unattractive), no bisexual men; etc. (Lo 2016).

All this is not to say that *all* RPGs treat social categories like race and gender in the same way. Using Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric, Gerald Vorhees (2009), for instance, shows how in their character configuration systems, different games in the *Final Fantasy* CRPG series embody very different conceptions of race, which interact with surrounding cultural context. Earlier versions present "classes" that encompass race, ethnicity, and occupation, and game success almost requires players to assemble a party of diverse, complementary classes, valuing difference. Later versions do away with classes, presenting a fictional world in which social difference doesn't exist and every individual is in control of their own fate and makeup by learning abilities.

Also, stereotyping can be reinforced through an *absence* of representation (Higgin 2009). On the surface, MORPGs like *World of Warcraft* lack any representation of different human races and ethnicities or reduce them to choosing character skin color during character creation, creating a space presumably free of race or racist stereotypes. However, this lack of positive, diverse representations of human race is betrayed by the game's giving "humans" stereotypically white Caucasian attributes and stereotypical black attributes to other races, e.g. dark-skinned, brutish, and aggressive orcs or stoic and spiritual tauren. And it opens the space for players to freely act out their own racial stereotypes – as Lisa Nakamura already observed in early Lambda MOO.

Summary

The problems of representation in RPGs described in this chapter are intended to be a conversation starter and not an endpoint. Players and designers of RPGs face discrimination and stereotypes on both a community and representational level. A player-oriented angle considers a player or designer's experience of discrimination when interacting with a community or game. Analyzing the US TRPG community, we found ample evidence that fan communities and industry were until very recently excluding and reproducing stereotypes of racial, ethnic, and gender minorities. A procedure-oriented approach to discrimination considers the degree to which a game's rules and design embody stereotypes and create a hostile space for minority players. RPGs in the *D&D* tradition inherit essentializing and stereotypical notions of race from fantasy authors like Tolkien. RPGs are almost inevitably discriminating and essentializing because they abstract bodies through statistical rules that mirror 19th-century eugenics. This is especially the case in CRPGs that need to model and produce individual difference with underlying fixed categories in code, which is often not made transparent or malleable to players. Designers must consider how to best address this inescapable kernel of discrimination and stereotyping. Is it used to prompt meaningful dialogue about the role of race in RPGs, or does it reinforce problematic stereotypes? Does playing a black character allow players an opportunity to understand the complexity of black experience, or do the playable black characters in a game simply serve as shallow vehicles of identity tourism?

Representation in games should not be looked at as a problem to be solved but rather as a problem to derive more problems from. And from these problems, we might challenge ourselves to imagine a world where all forms of representation become equally problematic and our understandings of race, class, gender, and sexuality become decreasingly myopic.

Note

- 1 Identity tourism isn't necessarily problematic. Nakamura's discussion of identity tourism keys in to its most problematic overtones – appropriating the racial identity of another more vulnerable, person – but many instances of identity tourism, such as exploring the role of a unicorn soaring through the sky, less rooted in the struggle of race in modern American society have significantly less problematic connotations.

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