

Post-Racial Post-Apocalyptic Narratives?: Navigating Player Character Identity in Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us*

Adrienne Domasin

Claremont Graduate University
150 E. 10th Street
Claremont, CA 91711
909-621-8000
adrienne.domasin@cgu.edu

ABSTRACT

The most efficient way to kill a Clicker in hand-to-hand combat is with a shiv. Clickers, formerly human, are the third stage of the infected in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013). I know that the room has at least two Clickers in it because I have been unsuccessful in clearing this room in the Downtown building during previous attempts. Therefore, the first thing that I need to do is craft a shiv out of a broken pair of scissors and a roll of tape. I become anxious as I stare at the PS4 analog controller and prepare to enter this multisensory zone of experience. I do not want to put Joel, my playable character, at risk in the post-apocalyptic world of *The Last of Us* in which humans mutate into violent, cannibalistic creatures upon infection with the Cordyceps fungal virus. As my anxiety prior to gameplay demonstrates, *The Last of Us* allows the player-character the opportunity to become immersed in the storyworld through sustained character identification, elongated narrative construction, formal aesthetics, and generic conventions. As an African American woman, however, it is quite another experience to take on the identity of a violent, White male character in a game in which gratuitous violence against other humans is necessary for the playable character's survival. There is a distinct uneasiness associated with embodying Whiteness as a White character, which I suspect is due to my subjectivity in relation to White males' history of imperialism and colonialism in the name of progress and survival. It is worth mentioning that there is also a certain pleasure attained, while playing with a character that is unquestionably destined to achieve his goals based on the aforementioned histories. Accounting for diverse experiences is problematic for me as a Black woman in the U.S. This project is an attempt to understand these disparate emotions in an era of transmedia storytelling in which post-apocalyptic narratives such as *The Last of Us* inevitably utilize the themes and mythologies associated with the Western genre to promote White masculinity, White privilege, and exceptionalism. Players from underrepresented communities must navigate their identities, while playing as White characters as a result of the hegemonic discourses in these narratives. The experience of embodiment and immersion that video games promote is more insidious than denigrating stereotypes that are observed through traditional passive forms of media.

W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of 'double consciousness' has been applied to experiences of African Americans' oppression in a White hegemonic U.S. society. Black women, however, may see themselves through the additional lens of womanhood that engenders a 'triple consciousness' as a consequence of White patriarchy and Black hyper-masculinity. The inability to choose the race and gender of my playable character in *The Last of Us* necessitates that I embrace a White identity associated

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

with power and privilege, but also violence and oppression. The ‘triple consciousness’ to which I am referring relates to the feelings generated from embodying a White heteronormative character as an African American woman. This ‘triple consciousness’—simultaneously empowering and unsettling—has led to this project on how identity is formed, constrained, and delimited for video game players from underrepresented communities. The concept of immersion concerning character development and narrative structure are central to this project, which addresses the manifestation of double and triple consciousness within video games. I am interested in how identity is formed, constrained, and delimited for video game players from underrepresented communities. The concept of immersion and identity formation concerning character development and narrative structure in video games will be explored during my ongoing gameplay as a Black woman. This project integrates both ethnographic and autoethnographic methodologies to understand the uses, gratifications, and pleasures of players from underrepresented communities who temporarily embody Whiteness during gameplay.

Keywords

identity, hegemony, culture, ideology, representation, patriarchy, narrative immersion

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bakels, Jan-Hendrik. “Steps towards a Phenomenology of Video Games—Some Thoughts on Analyzing Aesthetics and Experience.” *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 11, no. 1 (2020): 71-97.

Boylorn, Robin M., and Mark P. Orbe, eds. *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*. Routledge, 2020.

Du Bois, W.E.B., 2006. Double-Consciousness and the Veil. *Social Class and Stratification: Classic Statements and Theoretical Debates*, 203.

Foucault, Michel. “The Subject and Power.” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777-795.

hooks, bell. “Theory as Liberatory Practice.” *Yale JL & Feminism* 4 (1991): 1.

Fron, J., T. Fullerton, J. F. Morie, and C. Pearce. 2007. “The Hegemony of Play.” In *DiGRA Conference*.

Joyce, Stephen. *Transmedia Storytelling and the Apocalypse*. Springer, 2018.

Kivijärvi, Marke, and Saija Katila. “Becoming a Gamer: Performative Construction of Gendered Gamer Identities.” *Games and Culture* 17, no. 3 (2022): 461- 481.

Murphy, S.C. 2004. “‘Live in Your World, Play in Ours’: The Spaces of Video Game Identity.” *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, no. 2: 223–38.

Murray, S. 2017. *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*. New York, NY, USA: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Pearce, C. and Artemesia. 2007. “Communities of Play: The Social

Construction of Identity in Persistent Online Game Worlds.” In *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, eds. N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan, 311–318. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Welang, N. 2018. “Triple Consciousness: The Reimagination of Black Female Identities in Contemporary American Culture.” *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no.1: 296-306.

LUDOGRAPHY

Naughty Dog (2014). *The Last of Us (Remastered)*. [PS5] Sony Computer Entertainment.