

Playing with Identity: Racebending in the *God of War* Series

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INTRODUCTION

AAA games have reached an interesting crossroads where the amount of diverse representation has been increasing, but that representation is influenced by the hegemonic structures AAA games are rooted in. These diverse representations are often problematic, spreading harmful stereotypes or putting marginalized characters through intense trauma and horror (Malkowski and Russworm 2017). Additionally, the majority of games still represent and cater to dominant cultures (Gardner and Tanenbaum 2018; Williams et al. 2009). Despite this, marginalized people still play AAA games, and in doing so have created strategies of resilience. Resilience is used here instead of resistance to highlight the practices that marginalized communities use to continue existing in spaces not meant for them (Gray 2020) and to acknowledge that these practices resist some norms but uphold others (Cavalcante 2018; Pande 2018; Bailey 2021). One such strategy is racebending, in which characters who are commonly understood to be white are reinterpreted as different races (Jenkins 2018). Racebending often occurs in fan creations such as fan fiction and fan art. In video games, however, racebending can happen in the moment of play and involves the player racially experiencing the game. One example of racebending in AAA games is the interpretation of Kratos from the *God of War* (Santa Monica Studios) games as Black. How then, does the encounter between players engaging with racebending in moments of play and the game alter the game and challenge normative whiteness? Using racebending practices surrounding Kratos as my case study, I argue that racebending is a form of play that fundamentally alters the game and challenges the centering of whiteness.

RACEBENDING AS RESILIENCE AND PLAY

Understanding how strategies of resilience exist in relation to games can challenge ideas surrounding who games are for and the proper way to play games. Kishonna Gray (2020) addresses this in her examination of the vast networks that Black gamers have developed and the reimagining/destabilizing practices rooted in them that allow for self-definition. Gray highlights how Black gamers redefine Black narratives and create spaces where they can engage in storytelling and draw attention to issues that affect the Black community. Gray's work can be expanded by examining fan practices that Black gamers use to racially engage with games that seemingly contain no racial diversity. Racebending is a particularly useful practice because, as Daniel Gardner and Theresa Tanenbaum (2018) found in their census of playable characters, though the default interpretation of characters skews towards certain norms, such as whiteness, how characters are read can depend on who the person interpreting them is. Even though there is often an assumption that a character is white, even when there is no evidence, there is potentially more variability in the interpretation of characters' race than is often

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assumed. These different interpretations are often rooted in evidence in the game and different racial interpretations can change the positioning of a character within the world they are in and the narrative they are experiencing (Fu 2015).

Racebending has the potential to be an especially effective strategy of resilience because it is a form of play. One of the purposes of play is to allow players to change the game so they feel satisfied, accomplished, and fulfilled (De Koven 1978; Sicart 2014). Racebending involves altering a character's race, and thus their engagement with the game world, based on the player's racial experiences. This racialized way of playing the game creates a more satisfying experience for players. Understanding racebending as a form of play also situates the interpretations that emerge from it as something inseparable from the game as opposed to existing outside of the game. This means that the interpretations from racebending were always possible and an intrinsic part of the game, thus challenging who games are meant for and the idea that there is a proper way to play the game.

PLANNED RESEARCH

I plan to analyze the practice of racebending characters in games as a form of play to determine how the game is altered and how normative whiteness within games is challenged. I will be focusing on Kratos in the *God of War* series and the players who interpret him as Black. Kratos is often assumed to be white given his Greek ancestry and pale white appearance, however, a large contingency of players have provided evidence for his character being Black. I will be utilizing a mixed-methods approach which involves first analyzing Reddit posts discussing Kratos' race. From these I will establish themes around arguments for and against Kratos being Black, thus providing a general context for how players understand Kratos' racial identity. I will follow this up with an analysis of 2-3 VODs from Twitch streams of Black streamers playing through any of the *God of War* games with the interpretation of Kratos as Black. This analysis will provide a deeper understanding of the narrative that is created when Kratos is understood to be Black and how this narrative relates to the hegemonic structures in the game. I expect that this research will reveal the unique ways that players are using racebending to challenge normative ideas around whiteness in games. However, as Moya Bailey (2021) found, even in works of resistance certain norms are upheld. By understanding these practices as forms of play, these racial experiences and interpretations of Kratos were always present, challenging ideas about who games are meant for. However, it is important to attend to what norms are being supported in this form of play and who is still being excluded. As game scholars try to reconcile efforts to diversify games with how those efforts manifest in hegemonic structures, it is important to attend to the strategies of resilience that marginalized communities create to continue engaging with AAA games and spaces. Understanding these strategies as forms of play allows for a critical understanding of how they both challenge and adhere to norms in games.

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