

**Review: *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*, by Kishonna L. Gray. 2020. Louisiana State University Press. xiii + 195 pp.**

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In *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (2020), Kishonna L. Gray unpacks Blackness in gaming alongside other intersections of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Gray coins “intersectional tech” as a framework to explore these intersections, questioning the distinction between the physical and the digital, and reimagining the possibilities technologies can afford us. Sherry Turkle (1996) speaks on the distinction between the physical and the digital, referencing the adage that “nobody on the internet knows you are a dog.”<sup>1</sup> Gray and other scholars (Nakamura, 2007) disagree with this type of sentiment, arguing that real-world oppressions still manifest online, as Gray has shown in her work on misogynoir<sup>2</sup> on Xbox Live (Gray, 2014). Among Gray’s re-imaginings are Black users in digital gaming who are creating countervisuals and counterpublics to the hegemonic idea of what gaming looks like. The assumed cisgender heterosexual able-bodied White male gamer is far from representative of the full intersectional picture of gaming, and Gray’s framework and analysis both seek to tackle and tear this down.

Early in the introduction, Gray introduces readers to the concept of “transmediated engagement,” referring to how the lines between producer and consumer have been blurred so that Black users are not just one word or in one place; they are both everything and everywhere, constantly producing text that travels over different technologies (p. 2). Gray then situates intersectionality in digital gaming culture in Chapter 1 and historical narratives of racialized experiences in contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> The adage stems from the caption to a cartoon drawn by Peter Steiner for *The New Yorker* on July 5, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> The intersectional oppression of misogyny and racism that Black women face, coined by Moya Bailey.



games in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 through 6 explore various intersections of identity through the frameworks of intersectional tech and Blackness. In Chapter 3, Gray speaks on Blackness and masculinity in digital gaming. Chapter 4 examines the misogynoir Black women face in digital gaming. Chapter 5 addresses inclusive design and the accessibility issues disabled people face in digital gaming. Chapter 6 analyses the queering of intersectional narratives and how Blackness and queerness intertwine within digital gaming. Finally, *Intersectional Tech* concludes by reiterating the potential Black users have in shaping the future of digital games and technologies.

*Intersectional Tech's* analysis speaks to the history of Blackness, games, and technology, both historically and now, from the plantations of slavery to Jim Crow to this new age of a digital Jim Crow. In this new age, there is an argument of post-racialism and neoliberal assertions that racism does not happen anymore. Instead, Gray asks how we can acknowledge the racist and ableist histories of historical and contemporary technologies. This relies heavily on critiquing and controlling narratives, while creating subversive and revolutionary content to counter the long history of oppression and exclusion in gaming and technology. *Intersectional Tech* asks: Who created these games and technologies? Who are these games and technologies created for? Are we collectively okay with the answer to both questions?

Gray uses the book as a guided manuscript with what she calls "narrators" sprinkled throughout. In an ethnography, these narrators may be called participants, but Gray centers them and their stories both in how she structures her chapters and her choice of naming them narrators. She methodologically "walks the walk," counteracting the othering that these narrators experience by including them as central to her overarching narrative. The book also includes autoethnographic accounts from Gray herself, which grounds us in Gray's position as a Black queer female scholar in these spaces. However, the book is mostly taken from the perspective of Gray, writing about these concepts intertwined with the narratives and stories of her narrators through over a decade of work. It never feels like this is solely Gray's research or story to tell, but the research and stories of an entire community of underrepresented and excluded Black users.

Gray engages with multiple fields and disciplines within this book, as she comments on in her conclusion, saying,

In complicating the social constructions of technological systems, it becomes essential to explicate the need and possibility of synthesizing ideas and methods from traditional disciplines and use a more multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary approach. (p. 164)

Whether it be critiquing algorithms through work such as *Algorithms of Oppression* (Noble, 2018) or explaining and examining the digital

practices of the Black Internet (Brock, 2019), *Intersectional Tech* is an interdisciplinary addition to the literature on race and technology and game studies overall. Gray adds to the literature on race and technology by showing readers the importance of analyzing the extremes of anti-Blackness in all its forms within the realm of digital gaming, notorious for a history of rejecting ideas of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism (Massanari, 2017). As for games studies literature, Gray asks readers to interrogate the racist and ableist histories of games so that we may reshape digital gaming to center the voices of the most marginalized.

Where *Intersectional Tech* could be improved is within Chapter 6, where Gray focuses on accessibility and disability in digital gaming. In other chapters, Gray mostly acts as an ethnographer, not sharing her own experiences, but acting as a community member and facilitator. This allows the stories of the narrators to truly shine, but in Chapter 6, Gray gives an autoethnographic account of her experience watching an Xbox Kinect trailer. While the account itself is important and worth speaking on, it feels disjointed from the rest of the narrative being told in this chapter. Gray's previous autoethnographic account in Chapter 4 makes sense, as her experiences with misogynoir intertwine with the misogynoir her narrators face as well. Here, however, it does not intertwine as well. Using the Kinect with her disabled narrators, readers see where this technology succeeds in accessibility, but later in the chapter, readers learn about how the technology fails Black people, as it struggles to recognize darker skin. Gray attempts to speak on the misrecognition of darker skin by technology as a type of disability, but speaking on it in terms of affordances and disaffordances instead may have strengthened the argument. Her autoethnographic analysis of the Kinect trailer does not feel like it fits in well, as it interrupts the narrators' stories and fails to contribute the connection that is sorely needed in disability literature.

In an age where we are seeing organizations and academia try to make up for failing marginalized and historically oppressed people, *Intersectional Tech* is a refreshing and necessary step forward. Patching up floods with band-aids will not solve all the -isms in the world, and too often DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) work in academia focuses on liberal reform and assimilation of the Other into the world of the privileged. We must move beyond "add diverse bodies and stir" (p. 169) to not only include marginalized perspectives but also transform the cultural practices that render these populations isolated, invisible, and obsolete. Gray's arguments are rooted in Black feminist thought, drawing from the likes of bell hooks' concept of radical black subjectivity (1992, pp. 177-187) or Patricia Hill Collins' questions to access the efficacy of Black women addressing oppression in *Black Feminism at the Crossroads* (1998, as cited in Gray, 2020). All the work Gray cites and contributes revolves around questioning the academic canon and the

hegemonic norm. Gray situates us in a dark history of trauma and exclusion from online and offline gaming and technologies, shows us the problems that are still happening today, and theorizes a future where Blackness is centered in our games and technologies.

Academics reading may start to ask themselves: Does our work truly have an impact? Will the ivory tower create change in the residences below and outside of it? Are we just propagating the inequities and injustices that we write and research about? Based on her writing, Gray seems to advocate that we, as academics, producers, and consumers of media, should improve our current conditions while also transforming them into something new. Gray is not a perfect exemplar of the storyteller who can bridge the gap between academia and the communities we strive to better and include in our work, but she acknowledges this and keeps herself accountable. As a non-Black scholar of color, I understand there are limitations to my perspective of this work. However, the discomfort around realizing these limitations for any of us is the beginning of the work Gray suggests throughout *Intersectional Tech*. The work for bettering the realm of digital games and technologies for Black people is uncomfortable, and any scholar, producer, or consumer of media must be willing to keep themselves accountable through it all.

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