

# Default Characters and the Embodied Nature of Play: Race, Gender, and Gamer Identity

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## Abstract

This paper examines several recent controversies in the gaming and popular culture fandoms that revolved around issues of sexuality, race, and gender. It uses these examples as a means for examining which roles and identities are privileged when it comes to talking about gamers and gamer identity. The paper argues that a shift toward play as an embodied process allows for more inclusive games and forms of play which would allow for the expansion of who both sees them self in videogames and is able to play like a character of their own identity. Drawing on videogames such as *Mass Effect 3* and *Grand Theft Auto V*, this paper uses visual rhetorical strategies to analyse and identify how specific cultures and identities have been excluded from the tag of gamer. Additionally, it examines canonical videogames of the past to establish how feminine characters have been treated under the male gaze. Finally, it provides a glimpse of the possibilities for videogames to be aware of their embodied nature and potential for inclusivity.

## Keywords

gamer; identity; race; gender; cultural projection, embodiment



## Introduction

In the wake of the release of *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013), a slew of stories emerged focusing on controversies arising from the game's immersive, sandbox style of play. *GTA* and *Rockstar* were no stranger to controversy, nation-wide bans, and protests, but these stories, appearing in publications ranging from *Kotaku* (Hernandez, 2015) to *Metro News* (Hooton, 2013) to *Buzzfeed* (Bernstein, 2013), weren't focused on the acts of violence and sex perpetrated by players. In place of the usual stories about young children getting their hands on a copy of the violent game were stories concerning the way the in-game police treated Franklin, the game's only African-American protagonist. Story after story came out from players all attempting to show how the in-game police were racist and involved in racially profiling Franklin. Anecdotal reports emerged that Franklin was assaulted for being black in affluent neighbourhoods or received greater levels of perceived threat (the game's star rating system) for committing the same acts as his white counterparts. The cry became so loud and so common that *Rockstar* was forced to address the complaints. They released a statement that the in-game police were programmed to treat each of the three player-controlled protagonists in the exact same way. With the announcement, the controversy and conspiracy was silenced.

But perhaps another should have risen in its wake. As videogames, science fiction, and fantasy have moved from their specific niches to greater cultural awareness and participation, there have been moves to be more inclusive of fans and players who identify with the non-dominant hegemony. This shift has created more spaces and roles in popular culture for women, the LGBT community, and people of colour, but it has also wrought problems with representation and accuracy. In particular, whitewashing and gender-blindness in regards to the perspective and assumptions of audience have allowed for changes to exist only on the surface. The genres popular in western culture, such as first-person shooters and western-style RPG's, present their default character in most games as straight, white, and masculine. The term gamer then is seen to reflect this default audience and becomes exclusionary when alternative protagonists or play experiences are merely palette swaps from male to female, white to black. This phenomenon is also one not solely relegated to videogames. While it is a common problem, one of the more prominent recent examples took place in a galaxy far, far away.

In *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, Captain Phasma is an elite soldier for the First Order, a commander of the white clad Stormtroopers. Captain Phasma is also a woman, the first female Stormtrooper to be depicted on the silver screen. With a few exceptions, critics and fans alike praised the gender diversity of the newest *Star Wars* movie, even if Phasma's role in the film was quite small (Buchanan, 2015). Leading up to the movie's release, it was revealed that Captain Phasma

was originally conceived of as man, and it was only three weeks before shooting for the film began—after all the scripts, storyboards, and most of the casting was complete—that director J.J. Abrams decided to cast Gwendoline Christie as Captain Phasma.

In *Ways of Seeing*, art historian John Berger examines the distinction between a picture of a nude and a picture of a naked woman. Naked, Berger argues, is simply a state of undress. An individual becomes naked when they take off their clothes. Nude, however, is something a naked person becomes when objectified or displayed in a way that is to cater not to the person posing but the person viewing. A naked woman becomes nude when an outside audience, in the case of Berger the wealthy patron or the male painter, depicts the woman as being viewed by “the ideal spectator” who is “always assumed to be male” (Berger, 1977, p. 64). While Berger’s analysis focuses on the history of painting, it is relevant to all forms of display, including videogames.

What the recent examples of Franklin in *GTA V* and Captain Phasma in *Star Wars* show us is that any change to representation has been strictly cosmetic and has attempted to avoid the systemic nature of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and white supremacy. In film, television, literature, and pop culture these acts are insidious and damaging, and in videogames the effect is even more deleterious because videogames operate in the realm of play and represent an embodied way of being in the world. In addition to the ludonarrative dissonance which often accompanies these gender-blind palette swaps, this state of being and playing inevitably alienates a diverse group of players. In order to be truly inclusive, videogames must begin to understand both the ways in which play is embodied and how the sense of embodiment affects the experience of the player both within and outside of the particular game being played. This article will first explain the significance of the ubiquity of a white, cisgendered male gaze and then will delve into the particular effects this way of seeing shapes both the play of videogames and the culture that surrounds them. After establishing the hegemonic view of most videogames, I put forth an argument for grounding play and games as embodied experiences which recognize the importance of both the physical body of the player as well as the politics of the spaces in which play takes place. Finally, I offer several examples for how play experiences have changed and could continue to change to become more inclusive.

In Victoria J. Gallagher’s (2006) article “Displaying Race”, she uses political scientist Richard Merelman’s theory of cultural projection to explain how the process of a gendered, and racially based way of seeing works and how the dominant hegemony becomes the default in a culture. The simplistic swapping of gender and race in an attempt to create diversity and inclusivity ends up reinforcing this hegemony. A male soldier (Stormtrooper) has the same experiences a female soldier has – a statement that almost all would deny – yet that is the argument

the writers and creators of *Star Wars* are trying to make. In an example similar to that of Trevor in *GTA*, a black man experiences a routine traffic stop in a very different way than a white man. This has led to the term "driving while black" denoting an instance where a black person is pulled over for superficial or fabricated reasons because of their assumed criminality. These examples erase difference in an attempt to present the ubiquity of a common experience, endemic of those that consider themselves to be straight, white, and masculine. In effect, they are attempting to control "the flow of cultural projection" that proceeds from those in power to those who are oppressed and subjugated by the hegemony (Gallagher, 2006, p. 178). The ultimate end goal is that "the dominant group's cultural imagery becomes the 'common sense' for all groups" (Gallagher, 2006, p.178). Despite shifting demographics and more accurate recorded data on fans, videogames are still viewed as a male dominated activity. Merelman's projection happens here as an appeal both to the "core" or "traditional" audience of *Star Wars* or *GTA* while also attempting to bring in new consumers. It does not seek to disrupt the system or call attention to itself. Rather, because it is constituted by and constitutive of the hegemony, the viewpoint, in this case patriarchal and white supremacist, is shown as immutable.

The history of hostility to women in videogame subcultures has been well-documented. Similarly, the horrific responses by some men in the form of revealing women's personal information online, rape and death threats, and a general barring of women from the spaces—both virtual and actual—where videogames are produced and consumed have been noted. This long, systemic trend has been analysed by game scholars such as Mia Consalvo (2012) who has pointed out several ways feminist media studies scholars can enact change beyond the surface level. Her suggestions include documenting and compiling examples of online harassment, as well as the application of research and empirical studies to the ways in which gamers use hateful speech and their motivations for doing so (Consalvo, 2012). In a similar manner, media studies scholar Adrienne Shaw (2013) has looked at the ways in which focusing on a White/Anglo-Saxon audience has limited both the creation of videogames and influenced their marketing. This disclusion of non-white gamers in marketing materials has further contributed to the assumptions of both the average gamer and avatar being a white male (Shaw, 2013). Therefore, in addition to Consalvo's suggestions for a more inclusive future for gamers, I would like to complicate things and suggest that play should always be understood as embodied as a way to make gaming more inclusive and representative of its players.

In approaching any form of media studies, including game studies, attention must be paid to "our bodies—our primary media" and the way the body allows us to experience the world (Wysocki, 2012, p. 4). An understanding of the ways in which much of the media we experience is

filtered through the body sheds light on the reasons why certain gamers experience the same game in very different manners. Scholars Kristin Arola and Anne Frances Wysocki (2012) use the idea of embodiment to highlight the various ways our bodies allow us to relate to the world in a contextual way—one that is continually grounded in the realities of place, time, physiology, and culture (Wysocki, 2012, p. 3). The lack of attention paid to this sense of embodiment has contributed to a simplification of seeing, one that assumes “everyone sees in the same ways and so will be affected in the same ways by what they see, everywhere and at all times, ahistorically, aculturally, apolitically” (Wysocki, 2012, p. 5). This lack of embodiment has led to the construction of an immutable sense of vision grounded in the patterns, emotions, and experiences of the largely white masculine audience that first surrounded gamer culture in the West. Approaching play and game studies in an embodied way allows for the inclusion of perspectives and cultures that have large been excluded from discussions of gamers.

The question then arises of what is gained by forcing considerations of embodiment onto videogames and specifically onto play. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman note in their book *Rules of Play* (2003) that imposing rules does not suffocate play, but rather that they make it possible in the first place. Play then becomes a way of moving and navigating around a set of rules (Salen, et al., 2003, p. 4). Astrid Ensslin (2014) traces the academic study of play through Kant, Schiller, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein to arrive at a definition of play that is focused on the way in which spaces are marked off and allow for the interaction and creation of new forms of meaning and expression. These new forms are created through the ergodic–non-trivial but also non-utilitarian movement (Ensslin, 2014, p. 22). It is clear that movement is a central aspect of play, whether it is the swing of a foot to kick a soccer ball or the tap of a button to make Mario jump, but movement and use of the body as a medium do not immediately make play embodied. After all, we would hardly consider something such as breathing—the process of pushing air into our lungs and dispersing it through our lungs—as being embodied.

Play becomes embodied because in addition to the requirements of physical movement, play is always contextual. It is “enmeshed” in the culture, time, space, and places in which it is created. In his book *Play Matters* (2014), Miguel Sicart writes, “Play too is a contextual appropriation of a situation with the purpose of creating new values, expressions, or knowledge” (p. 67). Play, whether in physical or virtual worlds, is always aware of both the medium of play—the body—and where the play takes place. In addition to the need for rules to be established in either a social or formal manner, play can take over spaces—virtual, actual, and/or social—and depends on those spaces. An example of the way play is contextual can be found in the simple game children play where the floor is lava. The players of the game depend on

the social creation of the expectation that no one will want to touch the lava. They use their bodies to jump and manoeuvre around the “lava” and depend on their senses as feedback to see if they have touched the floor. The penalties for touching the lava are dependent on the players and their expectations. Some children may writhe in pretend pain when touching the lava while others may be deemed “out” and barred from playing for a short time. Whatever the specifics of the game may be, the play is established in an embodied way that relies on the physical movements of their body in cooperation with the social, physical, and cultural context in which the game is being played. In this way, we can speak of play as being embodied and contextual.

But why is the contextual, embodied nature of play important to gamer identity? By excluding the body in the process of playing a game, the designers stress the equality of all bodies. This stands in stark contrast to the way those who are differently abled, non-white, and/or non-male experience their day to day life. Rhetoric scholar Nedra Reynolds (1998) calls attention to this fact in her examination of the intersection between spatial literacy and feminism. Reynolds highlights the work of feminists to affect policy by addressing how public space is used and lit and encourages “feminists to resist ‘transparent space,’ which is a particularly dangerous notion for women and other minorities because it denies differences or neglects the politics of space” (Reynolds, 1998, p. 19). Space becomes transparent in video games when its presence is continually neutral and not dependent on any social, political, or cultural understanding—in the game or outside of the game—of place. Whether play takes place in the virtual or physical world, the lack of attention to, and awareness of, the contextual nature of those play spaces signifies a failure to understand the diverse participants in those games. One does not need to look far in both the virtual and physical world to see how certain spaces—*4chan’s /b/* and dark alleyways for example—are experienced differently by persons who identify with different genders. Games and play experiences that facilitate and communicate difference rather than ignore it are necessary. If we are to truly broaden the definition of what it means to be a gamer, or at the very least, resituate what constitutes a gamer, then the creation of games and possibility spaces that acknowledge difference in play worlds must be a priority. Failure to do so results in game spaces where one identity reigns supreme.

No matter who is on the other end of the controller, the player is forced to leave whatever identity they embody in the real world as they navigate the fictional world of the game. This can be powerful, but it becomes oppressive when, as Merelman originally points out, the only role to be inhabited is that of a member of the dominant hegemony, a power structure many are excluded from based upon their bodies. Additionally, the experience of those bodies across different contextualized spaces draws from a uniformity of experience that stands

in contrast to the lived experiences of those outside of the hegemony. Postmodern geographer Doreen Massey noted this in her book *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), identifying both the failure of the patriarchy to recognize the differences in experience and the reasons the patriarchy actively pushes a false-platform of ubiquity. She writes, "The degree to which [women] can move between countries, or walk about the streets at night...is not just influenced by 'capital'. Survey after survey has shown how women's mobility is restricted—in a thousand different ways from, from physical violence to being ogled at [...] not by 'capital,' but by men" (1994, pp. 147-148). Because videogames have long been seen as part of the masculine domain, it is easy to see how the contextual nature of play and the importance of place have been entirely ignored. Gamer identity has been assumed to be white, straight, and masculine, and place has been treated as decoration instead of as the political and social dimension Reynolds argues it is (1998).

The role of avatars and the attachment players feel to their characters has been well documented, and Katherine Isbister (2006) has identified several ways in which players relate to their playable characters, most notably in the realms of the emotional, social, cognitive, and fantastical. Isbister argues that players look to the physical appearance of their avatar in order to understand the character's role in the game. If play is understood as embodied and a player chooses to represent themselves or their identity via their character, it is easy to see how the universal experience offered by most games denies their experiences as a non-white, non-cis player. This leads not only to a feeling of ludonarrative dissonance but also a complete disconnect from the immersive nature of games.

This exclusionary action can best be seen in the robust character creation systems in games such as *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Softworks, 2015) and *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012). These games allow for millions of combinations of facial features and body compositions. However, these alterations all operate on a cosmetic level. Whether the character created is dark skinned or light, male or female, they will be treated the same by the in game non-player characters. This means the games become implicit in whitewashing and the reification of patriarchy via gender-blindness. An excellent example of this is shown in Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon's (2013) analysis of feminist modding in post-play narratives. They examine the ramifications of playing as a female version of Commander Shepard in *Mass Effect 3*. In the game, the alien Krogan race values females for their ability to reproduce above all other characteristics. The game strives to prove this point in all interactions except those with your character, the female Commander Shepard. Here, the game reinforces "that FemShep is simply a female-skinned BroShep" which furthers the argument that "the gaming industry believes the default player, and thus the default character, is and should be male and indicates a perspective that gender-blindness is the key to

equality" (Layne et al., 2013, pp. 8-9). With an understanding of play as an embodied experience, one that is entrenched in the way we view not only our corporeal selves but also our social and cultural identities, it is easy to see why the tag of gamer has been exclusionary. Players may be able to see themselves in the game world, but they are unable to truly experience that game world because of the disconnect between their own embodied experiences as a woman or as an African-American and the embodied experience presented by the game.

There is no clear solution to this problem. In the past, game designers have attempted to approach this problem in several damaging, asinine ways. The most infamous of these attempts to differentiate between the experiences of different genders in play spaces comes from the *Street Fighter* series (Capcom, 1987-2016). In the original conception of the female Chun-Li character, her health bar was to be shorter because one of the designers wanted to show that "women are not as strong" as men (Demby, 2014). The designers eventually decided to give everyone the same size of health bars but still designed the game (and subsequent games in the series) to allow for Chun-Li to have less health even though her health bar was the same length as the male characters. This example of bias and discrimination toward women is not what is meant when I argue for the consideration of play as an embodied experience. Because an embodied sense of play is one that is grounded in social and cultural contexts, it is the social and cultural contexts that should shift depending on the play experience the designers are attempting to achieve. The closest this has come to being actualized is in MMOs and other similarly social games where avatar depiction has a gender-based component. The recent example of the way the designers of the game *Rust* (FacePunch Studios, 2013) have approached gender can help to illustrate the importance of social systems in constructing embodied play experiences. This example can be used to reconfigure how designers create play experiences for female-identifying characters and not just re-skinned masculine characters. It has led to masculine and feminine characters in game experiencing different social and cultural behavior from other players, a mark that the default character has shifted (Grayson, 2015).

*Rust* assigns all physical characteristics, including race, sex, and size of sexual organs, on a random but permanent basis. This means that when a player first begins their game, they will be randomly assigned an avatar that will remain theirs as long as they own the game. This decision, of course, leads to some players being forced to play as a gender different than their own. While the change is strictly cosmetic and thus problematic in the same way the FemShep/BroShep example is, *Rust* plays out in a large, social space where players encounter other human players. Because of these social interactions, the perceived sex and gender of an avatar often determines the attitude and reaction to the avatar by other player characters. In a sense, the social dynamics



from the real world are carried over into the virtual world. Women, in the world of *Rust*, must face many of the same social stigmas and challenges that exist in the real world. This is an example of embracing the embodied nature of play. Though it exists independent of the game's procedural rhetoric and design, the social factors of the game allow for its inclusion. One need only to do a Google search for *Rust* to see how the decision of permanent, random character creation has affected the community. Many men, and some women, were upset by the decision (Demby, 2015).

Their reactions, justified or not, are the result of embodied play. The male players felt a disconnect between their own identity and the play experience the game provided. This illustrates how the identity of gamer, one that is firmly associated and entrenched in white, masculine identity, is exclusionary (Shaw, 2011). To truly change the definition of what it means to be a gamer, the default characters in videogames must change to allow for the embodied experiences of both character and player.

If a game or play experience is to allow for gender, race, or sexuality swapping, then it needs to be attentive to the problems, joys, and experiences that are a result of those identities. To treat each and every formulation of race, gender, and sexuality as equivalent to the default experience of a white, masculine, heterosexual is to ignore the long history of oppression faced by subjugated populations. As games become more complex and more integrated into our social routines, they must reflect the diverse, embodied experiences of the people who play them.

The tag of gamer has a contentious history, one grounded in exclusion and discrimination. As both players and designers begin to understand the connections between play and their embodied experiences, the identity of gamer will be able to expand and include those who are already playing and creating games, but often find themselves excluding from true participation in the games community.

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