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Young, Black (& Brown) and Don't Give a Fuck

Virtual Gangstas in the Era of State Violence

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The popularity and visibility of video games within American popular culture is prompted debates within from a spectrum of institutions, ranging from the media and the academy to Main Street and the political sphere. Erasing the complexity, much of the discourse focuses instead on questions of violence and the impact of gaming culture on (White) American youth. While focusing on *Grand Theft: San Andreas* specifically, this essay explores the culture wars surrounding American video game culture, arguing that the moral panics directed at video games and the defenses/celebrations of virtual reality operate through dominant discourses and hegemonic ideologies of race. Erasing their racial content and textual support for state violence directed at communities of color, the dominant discourse concerning youth and video games rationalizes the fear and policing of Black and Brown communities.

Keywords: culture wars; video game violence; race; *Grand Theft Auto*; state violence

Over the past few years, I have written extensively on the *Grand Theft Auto* series, additionally speaking¹ at several national conferences. While in most cases writing and talking about racial representations, state violence,² and the ways in which these games work from and disseminate dominant logics regarding race and racism, it is without question that public discourses have focused on the issue of violence and youth. Although the debate concerning violence and the affects of such games on children is outside my level of interest or focus, the questions and comments ostensibly focus on this issue, in the narrowest sense, guides this essay.

In an attempt to enter and disrupt the simplistic debates regarding video game violence and the celebrating discourses (Gee, 2003; Berger, 2002; Wolf & Baer, 2002) that tend to scoff at such questions (for the wrong reasons), this article offers an examination of the relationship between learning, pedagogy, and video

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games, thinking about the ways in which virtual reality provides a space of education for its players and critics about race and the ways in which games teach White supremacy³ and state violence. Challenging the widespread celebration of the technological possibilities that games hold for its youthful players, the discussion here will elucidate the necessity of exploring video games as a teaching tool for youth and adult alike.

While critically moving beyond this literature, which focuses on games as teachers of values, fine motor skills, conflict resolution, and other functionalist skill sets, and the political debates that construct (ghettocentric) games as a corruptive force, this article will focus a significant amount of attention to the ways games teach race and racism, offering representations of youth of color as dangerous criminals in need of societal regulation and control. In fact, the nature of and logics behind this virtual reality and the media and political debates concerning the affects of ghettocentric games on America's (read: White) youth mirror one another as each constructs or imagines youth of color as criminals, as a pollutant to the national fabric. Each seeks to control and regulate inside virtual reality and through the criminal justice system and other institutions of disciplinarity.

It is within this context that this article seeks to examine the public debates concerning violent video games, the case of Devin Moore, and the racial content of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. In examining the racialized representations and content of this game and the surrounding discourse, this article goes beyond flat discussions of representation—it uses this textual interrogation of racial meaning as a nexus for discussing the meaning and constructions of race, gender, and sexuality within the popular imagination, linking these cultural productions to larger structural adjustment programs, increased levels of state violence, and the prison industrial complex. Challenging discourses that see the fetishization of Black urbanness as progressive or a departure from classic racist representations, this article acknowledges the changes available with video game technology and those evident with the focus on “urban culture.” Yet it sees these shifts as part of the ideological, political, cultural, and material consequences of White supremacist discourses.

Within virtual reality and within its surrounding discourses, Black bodies are “treated as ‘throwaways’; they are bodies contained in the name of justice,” writes Ronald Jackson in *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*. “By apprehending power via policing and legitimate authority, and by controlling public perceptions about these bodies, negative discursive representations of them become paramount” (Jackson, 2006, p. 80). Better said, the calls for legislation and protection of White youth from virtual gangstas, the demands for policing of virtual- and real-life ghettos, and the celebration of play within urban spaces not only legitimize a conservative White supremacist hegemony but also jointly serves as vehicle of lynching, one that offers prohibitive and sociocultural penalties to those racialized bodies that are not in “alignment with what it means to behave normally” (Jackson, 2006, p. 56). As Robyn Wiegman argues, “Lynching is about the law . . . the site of normativity and sanctioned desire, of prohibition and taboo. . . .

Lynching figures its victims as the culturally abject” (Wiegman, 1995, pp. 81-83). Arguing that the ghetto-centric imagination of virtual reality and the debates concerning the affects of video games on American represents another instance of lynching, whereupon Black bodies are imagined as abject and dangerous and necessity, requiring as a spectrum of control and regulation, this article focuses on the dialectics of discursive and representational fields.

In the end, I argue that games such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, like the prosecution of Devin Moore, the celebration of a virtual ghetto-centric imagination, and the efforts to police, certain games work from identical logics of blackness as “violent derelicts that must be tamed” (Jackson, 2006, p. 80). The opportunity to control virtual gangstas, whether playing, regulating the availability of games, reducing ghetto spaces to ones of play and consumption, or prosecuting those youth who perform virtual gangsta identities in the real-world, reflects the White supremacist orientation of gaming culture.

Virtual Reality and the War Against Youth

Before tackling the widespread debates regarding video game culture and American youth, as well as the ways in which these discourses and the games themselves naturalize violence and serve as a powerful pedagogical tool of a new racist hegemony, it is important to reflect on the historical moment of production and consumption, as one of widespread attacks on youth, particularly youth of color, in a spectrum of institutional and cultural formations.

Of equal importance to exploring America’s virtual ghettos, game play and the ongoing debate is uncovering the significant ways in which these representations constitute a war against youth of color. The textual and narrative efforts to demonize and pathologize youth of color is not only limited to the games themselves but also finds resonance within both panics and celebrations, which similarly construct and disseminate dominant racialized ideologies and justifications for repressive policies and state violence that continues to plague communities of color. Amid an expanding system of mass media and reflective of new racism, Black bodies have become increasingly defined as synonymous to criminality, welfare, cultures of poverty, and degenerative values. The representations of blackness, even as Black celebrities have reached new financial and cultural heights, perpetuate these inequalities and aid in the establishment of White supremacist hegemony. The historical moment of study here is one of increased visibility and commodification of blackness, alongside heightened levels of poverty, surveillance, and state violence. Henry Giroux describes the late 1990s and early 21st century as being a war against youth of color:

Schools increasingly resemble prisons and students begin to look more like criminal suspects who need to be searched, tested, and observed under the watchful eye of administrators who appear to be less concerned with educating them with policing their every move. Trust and respect now give way to fear, disdain, and suspicion. Moreover, the perception of fear and disdain is increasingly being translated into social

policies that signal the shrinking of democratic public spheres, the hijacking of civic culture, and the increasing militarization of public space. (Giroux, 2003, p. xvii)

These games are not an assault on White youth or dominant cultural values, but rather efforts to legitimize White privilege and the current power structure; whether with those games that naturalize and demonize America's ghettos as dangerous war zones or those which normalize violence as something specific to youth of color, contemporary video game culture contributes to and reflects this ongoing war against youth of color.

Our task and that of any critical observer of virtual reality/popular culture is not merely to understand the narrative of these games or even the ways in which ghettocentric virtual play deploys longstanding stereotypes of people of color but rather to analyze their politics, their function within a White supremacist hegemony, and the ways in which they either aid or tear down the walls of racism, inequality, and poverty. The stakes are certainly high, and the challenges are immense given that although video games and popular culture in general are sources of entertainment, they are sites of education, where common sense ideas of race and dominant discourses of racism are constructed and disseminated for mass consumption. Understanding these functions and developing media literacy is thus crucial in a struggle to secure freedom, equality, and justice for all as well as achieving a true democracy.

All youth are targets, especially those marginalized by class and color. This is a war waged by liberals, conservatives, corporate interests, and religious fundamentalists against those public spaces, goods, and laws that view children and youth as an important social investment, and includes a full-scale attack on children's rights. . . . The war against youth can, in part, be understood as part of the fundamental values and practices of a rapacious, neoliberal capitalism; moreover, the consequences of this complex cultural and economic assault can no longer be ignored by educators, parents, and other concerned citizens. (Giroux, 2003, p. xvi)

Beyond the fact that "the largely white male elite owners . . . derive wealth from the circulation" of racist and sexist imagery, the importance of the video game industry and its increasing obsession of representations of ghetto life rests with its inscription of controlling images that "make racism, sexism and poverty appear to be natural, normal and inevitable part of everyday life" (Collins, 2004, p. 69). As argued by Mark Anthony Neal, "The fact that these images are then used to inform public policy around domestic images that adversely affect and black and brown people"—the war on terror, policing the border, welfare reform, the military industrial complex, global imperialism, the existence of the welfare state, the prison industrial complex, unemployment, etc.—"further complicates what is at stake" within this public discourse (2005, p. 51). If such questions and the dialectics of new racism, persistent inequality, and contemporary virtual reality are ignored at the expense of celebrations of commodification and racialized moral panics, the consequences are significant in the perpetuation of the current racial politics. So why study video games, especially as it relates to youth of color?

Why develop a complex level of media literacy as part of an antiracist praxis and ideological formation? The reason is that the refusal to engage critically in “entertainment,” “sources of pleasure,” and “games” has dire consequences, whether with domestic policy debates—more police, more prisons, less welfare—or common sense discourses about racial progress, the American Dream, racial differences as culture, the intersections of race and class, and the meaning of race in the 21st century. As will be argued here, ghetto-centric video games are teaching, informing, controlling, and mandating our development of tools of media literacy to expand virtual pedagogies as part of a larger discursive and organizational response to persistent injustice. We need to talk and teach about video games since these representations are teaching so much about us and them. We need to think about representations and discourse, given the power of those who celebrate and those who identify blackness as a source of danger, and the ways in which these moral panics and celebrations each perpetuates violence. Together, these discourses erase the textual inscriptions of racism, misogyny, and xenophobia offered within games like *San Andreas*, turning the victims of commodity popular culture and White supremacy into the perpetrators. Likewise, the parameters of the discussion and the limited scope of inquiry results in a failed engagement with the symbolic and representational legitimacy provided to state violence and its real-life manifestations.

Ultimately, the commodified images of the racialized Other and ideologies offered through virtual reality garner individual consent for structural policies, thereby legitimizing White hegemony, White privilege, and persistent inequality. The power in analyzing representations, and the debates that remain fixated on whether video games teach children valuable or dangerous life lessons, rests with the importance of denying consent and processes that naturalize and erase the immense contradictions of post-civil rights America where color lines and inequality determine life outcomes each and every day.

Political Debates

Year 2005, among other things, was the year of antivideo game legislation. In Illinois, Governor Rod Blagojevich (D—Illinois) led the first and most successful effort to regulate virtual reality, calling for legislation that would make it illegal for anyone under the age of 18 to buy violent or sexually explicit games: “This is all about protecting our children until they are old enough to protect themselves,” the Governor stated in an issued statement. “There’s a reason why we don’t let kids smoke or drink alcohol or drive a car until they reach a certain age and level of maturity.” “**This is all about . . . and level of maturity**” (“Blagojevich Pulls out the Stops on Video Game Bill,” 2006). In the aftermath of Blagojevich signing into a law that prohibited the distribution, sale, rental, and availability of mature video games to children younger than 18, similar legislation was introduced in California, Michigan, Oklahoma, and Indiana, in less than 18 months.

Then, in wake of the reports concerning the “hot coffee modification,” which allowed players to simulate sex with naked characters within *San Andreas*, the House of Representatives voted 355 to 31 for a resolution demanding an investigation of Rock Star, the game’s publisher, and the entire industry. Within the U.S. Senate, Joe Lieberman and Hilary Clinton introduced the Family Entertainment Protection Act. Hilary Clinton (D–NY) called on the government “to make sure their kids can’t work into a store and buy a video game that has graphic, violent, and pornographic content.” Joseph Liebermann (D–CT) concurred, emphasizing the importance of protecting children from “a silent epidemic of media desensitification” and “for stealing the innocence of our children” (McCullagh, 2005; Slevin, 2005), pointing to the dangers of violent and overly sexualized games:

We are not interested in censoring video games meant for adult entertainment but we do want to ensure that these video games are not purchased by minors. Our bill will help accomplish this by importing on those retailers that sell M-rated games to minors. (Loughrey, 2005)

The Clinton and Liebermann legislation would prohibit the sale of “mature” games to anyone below the age of 18 and order the FCC to investigate “misleading” ratings and solicit complaints about video games. It additionally required “an annual independent analysis of game ratings,” which along with their successful call for an investigation of Rockstar and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andras* as a result of “hot coffee controversy, demonstrating the level of interest and outrage emanating from political circles. Others such as Evan Bayh (D–Indiana) and Ted Stevens (R–Alaska), further elevated the debate about the impact of video game play on American youth. With each intervention, the focus remained on the availability of games, which allowed youth to enter into virtual ghetto spaces, places defined by hypersexuality, violence, criminality, and a disregard for the rule of law. Such exposure was seen as a threat, necessitating state intervention. Although targeting the games themselves, the efforts of Lieberman, Clinton, and others was yet another example of the state policing and controlling Black bodies - yet another lynching.

Teaching Violence: Panics and Debates

Amid a series of lawsuits and retailer decisions not to sell certain games (e.g., *San Andreas*) the efforts of politicians to regulate the gaming industry is not surprising. More than being a response to the “hot coffee” modification controversy, a reaction to the widespread media reports about a game that allowed players to simulate the assassination of JFK or little more than political posturing by Democrats in search of red state votes, the calls for legislation reflect a continued, albeit heightened, (scientific) debate regarding the effects of violent games on children. In introducing their legislation, Senator Lieberman captured this focus by emphasizing the existence of scientific evidence that demonstrated the need for governmental intervention: “There is a growing body of evidence that points to a

link between violent video games and aggressive behavior in children” (Loughrey, 2005). Lieberman, like David Walsh, Jack Thompson, Clinton, and a number of organizations (The Lion and Lamb Project, The Media Family Guide, and MAVAV), ubiquitously cites studies conducted by the National Institute of Health, the American Medical Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics, as the justification for legislation action and the basis concern regarding health consequences for youth who play violent video games. Each of these studies, while different in orientation and conclusion, found that repeated exposure to violence affects a teenager’s brain, activating “the anger center.” Moreover, such studies have found a clear link between prolonged play in a violent virtual reality and real-life aggression, describing the phenomenon as “garbage in, herbage out” (Aldrich, 2005). Dr. David Walsh agreed, claiming that repeated exposure to violence through video games will likely damage the impulse control center within the human brain, which enables people to think, manage urges, and consider consequences. More important, the fact that the brain of a teenager is “under construction” and the importance of gaming within youth culture further reveals the dangers of video game play. Commenting on the Devin Moore case, Dr. Walsh makes clear the scientific link between science, video game play, and real-life violence: “And so when a young man with a developing brain, already angry, spends hours and hours and hours rehearsing violent acts, and then he’s put in this situation of emotional stress, there’s a likelihood that he will literally go to that familiar pattern that’s been wired repeatedly” (“Can a Video Game Lead to Murder?”, 2005). Similarly, a study at the Harvard School of Public Health concluded that video games teach children aggressive behavior. Kimberly Thompson, a researcher there, linked video game play to broader social problems, questioning the long-term societal impact of gaming culture. “I fear we are growing a society of alienated, aggressive, untrusting adults,” to which she attributes these developments to the popularity of video games amongst American youth (Mundell, 2005).

In spite of the popularity and resonance of such studies within popular discourses, these works have found little legitimacy within scholarly sources (Piot, 2003, p. 354). Professor Jonathan Freedman, in a lengthy literature review of those psychological studies concerned with video games and youth violence, concludes that although there is some evidence that people who enjoy and regularly play video games tend to be more aggressive than those who don’t play or like them, there is no evidence of causation—at best, the evidence reveals an association between violence and video game play. John Luik surmises Freedman’s assessment of the literature in the following terms:

As for the effects, both short and long term, of playing certain violent video games, Freedman concludes that there is minimal evidence that this is a short term increase in aggressiveness and not the slightest evidence that playing violent video games causes any long term or lasting increased in aggressiveness or violence. (Luik, 2005)

The research reveals some level of association and that in the immediate minutes after game play there is some change in the human brain that can lead to increases in aggressive behavior but in no way does that help explain crime or violence.

Much of the literature (both academic and popular), however, seems less engaged with the specifics of these studies and their methodological/analytical limitations, focusing instead on the veracity of their claims and conclusions with questions, analogies, and challenging claims (Anderson, 2000; Berger, 2002, Costikyan, 1999; Gee, 2003, 2005; Fridenberg, 2003; Funk, Buchman, Jenks, & Bechtoldt, 2002; Harmon, 2003; Jenkins, 2007; Jones, 2002; Napoli, 2003. For example, David Kushner, in *Rolling Stone*, concludes that *GTA III* is ultimately not a threat to America's moral fabric given player agency. Although a player can steal, rape and murder, a player can just easily do good deeds throughout liberty city. "It's the player, not the developers who dictates the morality of the game," writes Kushner. "You can take a baseball bat to innocent bystanders and leave them in a pool of blood, but you're just as able to spend the whole game earning money by driving injured civilians to the hospital in an ambulance" (Kushner, 2002, p. 62, 64). Such reclamation projects are central to the literature, silencing all critique in their efforts to challenge the reactionary rhetoric of the Right, while erasing race from the discourse. Likewise, James Paul Gee dismisses the hypervisibility of race within discussions of video games, describing it as "widely overblown" and "silly" (2003, p. 10; 2005, p. 5). Rightly indignant to those who have made careers on panics and hypocritical condemnations of virtual reality, Gee offers the following assessment of the public debates regarding violent video games:

If you want to lower violence, then worry about those contexts, which all extend well beyond just playing video games. Politicians who get hot and heavy about violence in video games usually don't want to worry about such contexts, contexts like poverty, bad parenting, and a culture that celebrates greed, war, and winning. Too expensive, perhaps. (2005, p. 5)

Similarly, Bittleheim (1987; Sexton 2007) concludes that positing a causal relationship between video game play and youth violence is like linking childhood play with blocks to a possibility of a career in architecture. Both scholars, as well as Henry Jenkins, question the suggestion correlation between incidences of violence and video game play, wondering why video games rather than television, toys, movies, the evening news, schoolyard play, or nature documentaries explain school shootings and other examples of youth violence. Focusing on the hypocrisy of those who criticize video games yet remain silent about institutions and cultural practices that expose children to violence and the failure of these studies and their proponents to consider a myriad of factors from class and upward mobility to divorce rates and school instability, much of literature scoffs at the mere premise of virtual play facilitating violence.

While provocative and instructive, the literature falls short in a number of ways, remaining trapped inside its own assumptions and liberal colorblind (yet racially

informed) discourses. Beyond its acceptance of common sense understandings of criminality and violence with its constant mention of social ills being the result of poverty or single-parented homes, much of the literature denies the correlations between video game play and violence by focusing the positive attributes of gaming culture. In other words, scholars such as Gee, Henry Jenkins (2007), and Soraya Murray (2005) reject claims of Lieberman and Walsh because such claims undermine their celebration of gaming or, better said, their vision that gaming offers “positive lessons” of life and learning. Henry Jenkins, director of Comparative Media Studies at MIT, not only encapsulates the celebratory side of game studies, but also the use of racialized language and tropes in his praise for *GTA III*: “Now that we’ve colonized physical space, the need to have new frontiers is deeply in the games. Grand Theft Auto expands the universe (quoted in Kushner 2002, p. 64). As the literature connects the popularity of video games to fantasy, “exploration and discovery,” colonization and penetrating “the virtual frontier,” as if each were raceless projects, it is important to link games and the surrounding discourse to historical projects of White supremacy, based on the power of becoming and occupying the other (Gee, 2003; Jenkins, 2003; Rheingold, 2000). Likewise Gee, emblematic of this “new” direction, argues that video games can teach “values and ideology,” as well as 36 core-learning principles. He celebrates the ways in which games allow players to transgress their own location and limitations, experiencing worlds and obstacles otherwise unavailable to them, not only fostering critical thought and engagement with issues/things beyond normal scope of engagement but also inspiring imagination and critical thought:

Video games hold out immense economic opportunities for business and for careers. They hold out equally immense possibilities for the transformation of learning inside and outside of schools. They hold out immense promise for changing how people, think, value, and live. . . . The Wild West and space were seen [as] new frontiers. Video games and the virtual worlds to which they give birth are, too, a new frontier, and we don’t know where they will lead. It would be a shame, indeed, not to find out because, like any frontier, they were fraught with frisk and the unknown. But, then, I have already admitted that all of us in the complex modern world, are frightened of risk and the unknown. (Gee, 2005, pp. 5-6)

The existence of a discursive binary that positions those who denounce video games for exposing children to sex and violence in opposition to those who celebrate gaming for its imagination, creativity, and technological innovations that open up new possibilities to its players obscures the powerful ways to which video games contribute to our racial “common sense.” They function as a construction site and vehicle of those racially informed sincere fictions, as a space through which we learn about race, which has consequences within and beyond virtual reality—or better said, the space where we use and abuse race in avoidance of the real world. Video games, whether those recreating historic or contemporary war zones, or those working through a ghettocentric imagination, outline the dominant ideological preoccupations and presuppositions, articulating the social problems and moral panics projected on virtual reality and our own social, political,

cultural, and racial fabrics, each of which is erased through the reactionary focus on particular instances of violence and sexuality and the celebratory joy of praise bestowed on games for their pedagogical possibilities.

It's Racial, Stupid

Despite the centrality of race within the textual inscriptions of ghettocentric games, all of which plays on sincere fictions of blackness while legitimizing increased levels of state violence embodied by the prison industrial complex, persistent instances of racial profiling and police brutality, as well as shrinking social programs, there has been limited academic and popular inquiry into the ways in which these games teach race and foster White supremacist ideologies and practices. Rather, the public discourse has remained focused on whether or not such games promote violence among American youth, and whether or not virtual ghetto tourism represents a corruptive element to the values and mores of future generations. At its core, these public debates remained concerned with the impact of virtual reality on its primarily White suburban game playing population. Whether attributed to a natural affinity to violence, or a result of a culture of poverty, single-parented homes, or the absence of role models, the discourse presumes these individuals to be beyond help (or harm) during discussions of video game violence.

These presumably violent games, defined by their ability to transport players from the safety of their own homes into ghetto spaces and a world defined by hip-hop culture are conceived as threats to the morals and values of American youth, inducing a series of moral panics. The introduction of an imagined Black aesthetic, especially within an interactive virtual reality, connotes danger and a threatening pollutant. Herman Gray writes, in *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*,

The discourses of regulation and the moral panics that they helped to mobilize worked for a time in the 1980s to consolidate a neoconservative hegemonic bloc. This bloc routinely used media images of black men and women, the poor and immigrants to represent social crisis. Gendered and racialized images of poverty and disenfranchisement became the basis for a barrage of public policies and legislation intended to shore up this hegemonic position and to calm and manage the moral panics construction around race in general and blackness in particular. (Gray, 2005, pp. 24-25)

Simultaneous to the racial panic that such games induce as threats to American values, as potential pollutants to White suburban youth, discourses concerned with the effects of violent and immoral video games have also wondered about the effects of these games on those youth—read: Black—already predisposed to violence. Before exploring the ways in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* which teaches state violence toward the perpetuation of new racist ideologies and practices, it is important to look further at ways in which the panics and ideological fervor concerning

video games reflect processes of racialization. Such was evident in the ways in which race and white supremacist ideologies permeated in the media coverage of Devin Moore, who from 2003-2005 was cited over and over again by media pundits, politicians, and academics alike as evidence of the dangers of video game play. While concern about video game play by white suburban youth remained central to public debate, given their corruptive nature, the public and legal lynching of Moore clearly illustrates the centrality of race to those debates concerned with video game play among American youth and systemic efforts to police gangsters within both virtual reality and a neighborhood near you.

A Real-Life Threat: When the Virtual Gangster Becomes Devin Moore

In June 2003, Officer Arnold Strickland picked up Devin Moore, a 16-year-old Black youth from Fayette, Alabama, on suspicion of stealing a car. Moore had no criminal history up to this point. Initially cooperative, his arrest and processing went according to plan, at least until he “snapped.” In his statement of the events, Moore said that while inside the jail he lunged at Officer Strickland, grabbing hold of his .40 caliber Glock automatic pistol, shooting him twice, one being a fatal shot to the head. In the midst of his escape, he shot and killed two more officers, ultimately stealing a police car as part of his effort to evade the authorities. Unsuccessful, he was captured a short while later.

Although initially a major local story, his attorney’s defense strategy, which focused on his video game addiction and his resulting bout with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), propelled his case into national prominence as it was swept up by a culture war and those ongoing debates about the effects of certain types of games on America’s youth.

At the time of his arrest, Moore reportedly told the police, “Life is like a video game. Everybody got to die sometime” (“Can a Video Game Lead to Murder?”, 2005). Citing his addictive play of *Grand Theft Auto III* (*GTA III*), his defense attorneys emphasized how Moore, an otherwise law-abiding young man with a bright future, was driven or even programmed to commit these crimes by the repeated exposure to the violent and pathological worlds offered within *GTA III*. More specifically, his attorneys claimed that Moore merely acted out a scenario he learned and practiced while playing *GTA III*: In this instance, a player enters a police station inside Liberty City, steals a police uniform as part of his plan to free several prisoners from jail, eventually escaping by stealing the keys to a squad car but not before the character shoots up the station, killing multiple officers (it has to be noted that this mission is an option and that the actual killing also reflects player choice, which brings into question causation).

While the jury found little merit in his defense, convicting Moore of three counts of murder after 1 hour of deliberation and sentencing him to the death penalty, attorneys for the victim’s families and antivideo game crusaders seized on the Moore defense as part of their own efforts to rid American youth culture of

such games. Attorneys for two of the victim's families (the third would eventually join the suit) filed a 600-million-dollar lawsuit against several companies for "training" Moore to kill. According to Jack Thompson, the lead attorney in the case, and a long time crusader against (certain) video games, Moore "was given a murder simulator. . . . He bought it as a minor. He played it hundreds of hours, which is primarily a cop-killing game. It's our theory, which we think we can prove to a jury in Alabama, that, but for the video game training he would not have done what he did" ("Can a Video Game Lead to Murder?", 2005). Targeting Wal-Mart and Game Stop for allegedly selling *GTA III* to Moore, who at the age of 16 should not have been allowed to purchase this game with its "M" rating, and Take 2 Interactive, the creator of *GTA III*, and Sony, which makes the device that runs the game, for providing him with "a cranial menu that popped up in a blink of an eye . . . offering him the split second decision to kill the officers" ("Can a Video Game Lead to Murder?", 2005), the lawsuit prompted widespread attention from the media and within other public debates, even if it and other similar suits have proven to be unwinnable within the legal system.

The ample coverage that the Thompson lawsuit received, especially compared to the actual shooting or even Moore's video game induced insanity defense, is revealing, demonstrating its racial dimensions (Moore's blackness complicated his usefulness to those reactionary video game crusaders) and the power of particular ideological tropes. As part of the civil lawsuit, Jack Walsh and the victim's families ubiquitously emphasized the anti-law and order and antipolice aspects of *GTA*, which according to them had grave effects, with Moore shooting three police officers. "The question I have to ask manufacturers of them is 'why do you make games that target people that are here to protect us, police officers, people that we look up to—people that I respect—with high admiration,'" stated Reverend Steve Strickland, the brother of one of the victims. "Why do you market a game that gives people the thoughts, even the thoughts of thinking its OK to shoot police officers? Why do you wanna do that?" ("Can a Video Game Lead to Murder?", 2005). The efforts of the lawsuit to emphasize the denigration of America's police forces within virtual reality, especially in a post-9/11 context, proved especially powerful in this case and relatively powerful within the larger backlash against video games.

Clive Thompson describes the outrage directed toward video games as being based in critics opposition to violent games involving criminal elements and thus their acceptance of cultural projects that represent state—military and police—violence:

In *True Crime* . . . you wander the city on patrol, you're allowed—hell, you're encouraged—to break the law and enrich yourself. . . . hen one day, as I was running over an innocent pedestrian during a car chase, I had an epiphany. Family-values types often deplore the brutality of today's action titles. But have they ever closely examined who's committing this carnage?

Nine times out of 10, when you're blowing people's chests open with hollow-point bullets, you aren't playing as a terrorist or criminal. No, you're playing as a cop, a soldier or a special-forces agent—a member of society's forces of law and order.

Consider our gaming history. In *Doom*, the game that began it all, you were a Marine. Then came a ceaseless parade of patriotic, heart-in-hand World War II games, in which you merrily blow the skulls off Japanese and German soldiers under the explicit authority of the United States. Yet antigaming critics didn't really explode with indignation until *Grand Theft Auto 3* came along—the first massively popular modern game where the tables turned, and you finally played as a cop-killing thug.

Why weren't these detractors equally up in arms about, say, the Rainbow Six series? Because games lay bare the conservative logic that governs brutal acts. Violence—even horrible, war-crimes-level stuff—is perfectly fine as long as you commit it under the aegis of the state. If you're fighting creepy Arabs and urban criminals, go ahead—dual-wield those Uzis, equip your frag grenades and let fly. Nobody will get much upset. (Thompson, 2005)

Although Thompson offers a powerful assessment of the current discourse concerning video games, he fails to consider the racial implications here, with a vast majority of outrage directed at ghettocentric and hip-hop games. The *Family Media Guide's* top 10 most violent games for 2005 includes six games that focus gang narratives and inner-city crime. Not only reflecting the focus on protecting children from ghetto violence in ways beyond formal segregation (you can't protect inner-city kids since they are already exposed to violence and “cultures of poverty”) and the supposed lack of values available in “those communities,” this discourse ultimately reifies common sense understandings of blackness as the source of moral indecency and cultural decay. Herman Gray notes the power in popular culture in mobilizing and consolidating racialized fear in maintaining White supremacy:

So often media narratives presume and then fix in representation the purported natural affinity between black criminality and threats to the nation. By fixing the blame, legitimating the propriety of related moral panics, these representations (and the assumptions on which they are based) help form the discursive logic through which policy proscriptions for restoring order—more jails—are fashioned. (2005, p. 25)

In his estimation, “the production of media representations of blackness (along with those of sexuality and immigration) as threatening the natural fabric and policy proscriptions for reimagining and consolidating a traditional vision of the American nation” defines contemporary representations of blackness (Gray, 2005, p. 25). The values and morals—hypersexuality, drug use, violence, criminality, etc.—offered through playing *San Andreas* or any number of games pose a threat to the national fabric, just as those who inhabit those real-life communities pose an equal danger. The legal and public lynching of Moore and by extension of the gangstas who inhabit San Andreas sought to protect those otherwise innocent youth (read: White middle class) from the dangerous and criminal elements of both *San Andreas* and those communities marred by poverty, criminality, and single parents (read: Black).

The deployment of rhetoric emphasizing the ways in which video games put police officers in harm's way, especially alongside those deployed frames concerning

Black criminality, was not the only reason the lawsuit received so much coverage. The specifics of the case and Moore's blackness actually provided legitimacy to arguments offered by Clinton, Walsh, Thompson, and others. Continually questioned why all kids who play *GTA III*, *San Andreas*, or any number of ghetto-centric games, don't go out and rob, rape, kill or otherwise engage in lawless criminal behavior, a number of anti-video game crusaders continually concede that most games don't affect most youth, but rather certain games will likely have an impact (at least in terms of facilitating violence and other anti-social dangerous behavior) on those whom are otherwise predisposed to criminal behavior. "You know not every kid that plays a violent video game is gonna turn to violence. And that is because they don't have those other risk factors going on," argued Walsh. "It's a combination of risk factors, which come together in a tragic outcome" ("Can a Video Game Lead to Murder?", 2005). As video games are seen as a catalyst or a "training simulator," rather than the direct cause of violence, video games opponents engage the question of violence through a paradigm that links criminality to Black bodies—it is only those who are otherwise likely to commit crimes who will be pushed into violence through game play (those not likely to commit crimes—White suburban youth—may adopt problematic cultural attributes: sagging pants—but not pathological behavior). With poverty, single-parented homes, exposure to violence, and rates of unemployment—blackness—representing those assumed risk factors, this line in the discourse constructs video games as a mere facilitator of violence, as opposed to its cause or the reason for a shooting, at least not in most cases. Such casual arguments have been made regarding Kip Kinkel and the shootings at Columbine High School, further the reveal the racial implications. Interestingly, the focus on risk factors and the effects of certain violent video games on some youth represents a point of agreement for much of the discourse with Hilary Clinton, Jack Thompson, and David Walsh advocating a similar position to that of James Paul Gee, and Douglas Lowenstein, who represents the video game industry. In response to Moore's lawsuit, Lowenstein told *60 Minutes*, "Look I have great respect for the law enforcement officers of this country. . . . I don't think video games inspire people to commit crimes. If people have a criminal mind, it's not because they're getting their ideas from the video games. There's something much more deeply wrong with the individual. And it's not the game that's the problem" ("Can a Video Game Lead to Murder?", 2005). Likewise, James Paul Gee, one of the most prominent game scholars, dismisses questions about the violent implications of video game play, calling instead for greater focus on the desperate "economic and social contexts" of players and murders. "The Japanese play video games more than Americans do, as, indeed, they watch more television, but their society is much less violent than America's. No, as we said above, video games are neither good nor bad all by themselves, they neither lead to violence or peace. They can be and do one thing in one family, social, or cultural context, quite another in other such contexts" (Gee, 2005, p. 5). While disagreeing whether video games serve as a catalyst or exist as part of the problem of youth violence, the vast majority of participating voices agree about who is likely to commit crimes. The presence of this racialized common sense

within the Moore case and the deployment of such rhetoric, thus, fed its usefulness within this larger panic.

Of course, the timing of the lawsuit, as opposed to the shooting (as well as the other Thompson-initiated lawsuits) propelled its place within a national spotlight. Amid congressional investigations into *San Andreas*, significant media coverage surrounding *San Andreas*, and a national conversation regarding the impact of games like *San Andreas*, it is not surprising that the Thompson lawsuit/Moore case received ample coverage. Interestingly, in several media reports, it was *San Andreas*, with its gang and ghetto narratives, and Black protagonists, rather than *GTA III*, with its story about a White protagonist and his efforts to move up the ranks of an Italian mob family, that served as the background for the discussion of the Moore case, even though Moore committed his crimes long before the release of *San Andreas*. The merging of Devin Moore and *San Andreas*, both as signs of blackness and cultural decay/violence, reveals the powerful ways in which race feeds the backlash against video games and youth of color. The questions regarding the effects of video games, the media coverage/public debate concerning Devin Moore, the textual and narrative offerings of ghetto-centric games, and even its defenders offer similar racial lessons, “reinscribing the pathologizing ‘line drawn between the good and bad’; the normal and the deviant, the cerebral and the physical, the controlled and the violent, the healthy and the diseased, the white and the black” and the moral and immoral (Andrews, 2001, p. 113; Gillman, 1985, p. 25). Likewise, the discursive field demonizes and celebrates American inner cities “as a zone of difference coded with racial fear, fascination, and the construction of black youths who populate the urban environment as signifiers of danger and social decay” (Andrews, 2001, p. 117; Giroux, 1996).

In exploring the effects of video game violence through Devin Moore (Black/Brown bodies) and questioning the effects of a virtual space such as *San Andreas*, the Moore case reveals the power of race inside this moral/cultural panic. Discourses of race and criminality collide in this panic, as hegemonic notions of (young) blackness (inherently deficient, thus corrupt) challenge the liberal rhetoric surrounding the danger of video games. While games like the *GTA* series celebrate inner-city spaces—allowing gamers to safely engage in dangerous scenarios—while simultaneously demonizing the people of color who live in these spaces, these games ultimately serve to further the political ideology of the White majority.

It's Racial, Stupid: Take 2

What is unique and revealing about Moore and the limited (beyond a *60 Minutes* story and an array of online discussions) coverage afforded to his defense is that video games and the exposure to virtual reality did not serve as a useful frame within media reports and widespread debates regarding the effects of violent, ghetto-centric games on America's children. His blackness precluded such an inclusion in that this racial signifier served as the explanation for his violent

behavior. Ronald Jackson concludes, “The Black body is consistently scripted as an inherently violent, irresponsible, and angry street urchin, while the White male body is scripted as a young, innocent, and immature individual” (p. 82). Amos Wilson concurs, powerfully illustrating the ways in which an essentialized, criminalized Black body serves as a binary to a pure, innocent whiteness:

In the eyes of White America, an exaggeratedly large segment of Black America is criminally suspect. This is especially true relative to the Black male. In the fevered mind of white America, he is cosmically guilty. His guilt is existential. For him to be alive is to be suspected, to be stereotypically accused, convicted and condemned for criminal conspiracy and intent. On the streets, in the subways, elevators, in the “wrong” neighborhood. (1990, p. 37)

Whereas Moore’s blackness (and that of the virtual gangsters invading the White suburbs), and his single-parented upbringing, provided a clear explanation to his violent behavior, notwithstanding the efforts of his defense attorneys, the national debate regarding youth violence and video games have ubiquitously focused on the video game obsessions of Kipland Kinkel, Eric Harris, and Dylan Klebold, each of whom was involved in highly publicized school shootings.

Keyed by reports in the press that recent child killers—like the 15-year old Kipland Kinkel in Springfield, Oregon, or Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold in Littleton—were avid players of violent video games, media pundits and parents across the country have argued that there is a direct relationship between video violence and the culture of violence that is so widespread in American society today. (Piot, 2003, p. 354)

As noted by Charles Piot, in “Heat on the Street: Video Violence in American Teen Culture,” the sensationalized media coverage of suburban school shootings fueled fears about the effects of video games on otherwise obedient and law-abiding citizens. Given their whiteness and their suburban middle-class status, something or someone had to be responsible for their turn to violence. Whereas racialized and cultural explanations provided the required frames to explain Moore’s behavior, rendering questions about his video game play superfluous, the culture of violence, hypersexuality, and thuggery within virtual reality helped explain why these (white) boys committed these unthinkable crimes. And given the reduction of violent video games to those narratives of ghetto life or hip-hop within the popular imagination, a clear message is left: the cultural intrusion of blackness, ghetto violence, and moral indecency into America’s suburbs posed a threat to the America’s social fabric. Both in the ongoing debate about violence and video games and the actual ghetto-centric games, contemporary video game culture fulfills longstanding White supremacist projects in reducing blackness to “a problematic sign and ontological position,” as well as a symbol of “cultural degeneracy” that poses a threat to dominant values (Williams, 1998, p. 140). With Moore, his behavior and lack of

obedience to the law, which results from a dysfunctional culture and set of values, poses a threat to the national fabric; yet White exposure to these same dysfunctional cultures and values facilitating violence and moral decay embodies an equally powerful threat. Blackness—as body (Moore) and cultural influence (hip-hop; ghetto-centric video games)—to whiteness, necessitating control and surveillance of black bodies within and beyond virtual reality.

Ghettocentric Games and Pedagogy: Teaching State Violence

While a discourse of saving White suburban youth from the polluting entry of Black cultural styles, aesthetics, and bodies remains louder than those criminalizing young Black men for their inability to distinguish between the virtual and real (as in the case of Moore), the ways in which games teach and sanction state violence that devastates communities of color remains absent from public conversations regarding youth and virtual reality.

Reflecting the logics of White supremacy (as evidenced by the presumed causal connection between violent behavior amongst White youth and exposure to blackness through video games), these same discourses show little concern for the impact of such games (and realities) on communities of color beyond the ways in which video games exacerbate an already scary predisposition to violence. None of this is to argue a casual relationship but rather that the various commentaries concerning ghettocentric games erase the ways in which *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* or *25 to Life* contribute to common sense notions of race, criminality, and American race relations. “The production of media representations of blackness (along with those of sexuality and immigration) as threatening the natural fabric and policy proscriptions for reimagining and consolidating a traditional vision of the American nation is challenged with alternative representations” (Gray, 2005, p. 25). Henry Giroux concurs, noting that “in this racism, the Other’s identity warrants its very annihilation because it is seen as impure, evil, and inferior,” while “whiteness represents itself as a universal marker for being civilized and in doing so posits the Other within the language of pathology, fear, madness, and degeneration” (Giroux, 1996, p. 75). Games, particularly ghettocentric ones read alongside the commentaries of Hilary Clinton, David Walsh, and James Paul Gee, offer these powerful lessons regarding both whiteness and otherness, collectively rationalizing the symbolic and actual lynching of youth of color.

These games don’t teach kids how to be violent or how to solicit a prostitute—in fact there is little scholarly evidence that substantiates such a claim—but contributes to an understanding of how to thwart violence through increased policing and state control of the dangerous Other. Ultimately, the games themselves and the public debates and legislative efforts reify notions of the Other, legitimizing policies of law and order, naturalizing state violence, and otherwise giving sanction to the cultural and actual demonization of communities of color.

Virtual Gangstas—Coming to a Suburban House Near You

The release and subsequent success of *GTA III*—which garnered several gaming awards and the entire series of which has amassed sales numbers surpassing 44 million units—as well as the increased popularity of hip-hop and other ghetto-focused popular cultural productions has promoted the gaming industry to produce an overwhelming number of urban-centered video games. Offering players the opportunity to travel into an uncharted ghetto experience, with all the trappings of hip-hop life, all the while reinforcing hegemonic understandings of law, order, and security games like *Notorious: Die to Drive*, *Bulletproof*, and *True Crime LA/ NY* have been financially and ideologically successful over the past several years. *Notorious: Die to Drive*, as described by its developer, Ubisoft, is emblematic of the genre, featuring “gangsta-style car combat” with players seeking to “rule the streets of four West Coast neighborhoods.” Ubisoft’s Web site describes the payoff succinctly: “High-priced honeys, the finest bling, and millionaire cribs are just some of the rewards for the notorious few who can survive this most dangerous game. Once you go Notorious, there’s no going back.” Others, such as *25 to Life* or *Fear and Respect* offer narratives less focused on the glitz and bling of a hip-hopped ghetto life and instead providing an entry way into danger and violence that defines contemporary urban America. The previews for *25 to Life* describe it in the following way:

25 to Life is the game the streets have been waiting for. Play as either cops or gangsters, in this urban action third person shooter. The game delivers intense online game play for up to 16 players, as well as a rich single player experience. Set in the heart of today’s cities, experience the gritty lifestyles of police task forces or as a gangster survive the local neighborhood thugs while fighting your way up the ranks. Bust out of prison, or infiltrate the inner sanctum of the drug lord’s mansion, your knowledge of the streets will be put to the test because 25 to Life IS the streets! (“Video Games and PC Games,” 2006)

The subsequent wave of ghettocentric games not only sought to capitalize on the popularity and profitability of inner-city virtual narratives established by the success of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, but have built on the ideological orientation and pedagogical implications of this important game.

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas brings a heightened level of racialization and virtually inscribed White supremacy. Set in a gang-ridden, war-like 1990s Los Angeles, *San Andreas* features an array of Black and Latino men, all with braids, bandanas and guns. The game allows players to form gangs to rob, commit drive-by shootings, and even commit rape. Michael Marriot of *The New York Times* describes this game in the following way: “The sense of place, peril and pigmentation evident in previews of the game, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*,

underscores what some critics consider a disturbing trend: popular video games that play on racial stereotypes, including images of black youths committing and reveling in violent street crime” (Marriot, 2004).

A defining characteristic of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is the ability to commit home invasion robberies, on top of the usual murders, pimping, car theft, and other missions. Carl Johnson—the player-controlled character—along with his crew can sneak into “innocent people’s” homes in search of goods and cash to steal. At some points in the game, home invasions allow you to sneak up on sleeping families, holding them at bay with a shotgun or another weapon of your choice. During one game playing session, Carl breaks into a house, only to find an unsuspecting White couple. As the White male resident attempts to protect his blonde wife by challenging Carl to a fight, he states “you probably can’t read,” linking civility and intelligence to both blackness and criminality. As with the rest of the game, this stand off with Carl murdering these two individuals further solidifies hegemonic visions of the ghetto as a war zone inhabited by Black gangstas that not only prey on Black residents but also on those White families living outside its virtual ghetto center.

Another important element of *San Andreas* is how this game disseminates dominant ideologies and common sense ideas of race toward the sanctioning of state violence. Beyond playing on hegemonic visions of people of color and criminality, *San Andreas* equally deploys reactionary visions of communities of color through its narrative and virtual representations. For example, as you drive throughout and between the game’s various cities, the radio not only blasts a spectrum of jams, all of which further reflects the commodification of an imagined urban Black aesthetic, but a series of reactionary public service announcements, which embody a virtual moral panic and contribute to those efforts outside this virtual urban space. Paired with the deployment of racialized images of criminality (even Black cops are corrupt), dysfunctionality and danger, these radio spots highlight the game’s reactionary political orientation, playing on hegemonic myths of race, class, and nation. “Notice food lines are getting too long. Wonder why? 19 million illegal aliens are in this country. Most are in San Andreas.” The violence and mayhem that define this virtual reality reflect the number of illegal aliens that view America as a place of handouts. Obviously playing on White supremacist mythology of immigration and welfare, such representations justify increased spending on the war against immigrants—decreasing the social welfare budget while increasing the power of the state to police borders would be productive in solving this problem. In another instance, the game reflects on the state of poverty and welfare inside this virtual America. “Those of you, who are poor, should just stop whining. Enjoy it and sit back to do what you do best: watch TV.” In a third moment, a talk radio show further articulates the racist orientation of the game and its effort to link representation and state violence. Amid a talk show debate concerning immigration into San Andreas, one contributor noted how Asian immigrants were flooding the area with drugs while those from South America brought nothing since “South America has less culture than a toilet bowl.” In each

instance, the game gives voice to White supremacist ideologies legitimized by the game's narrative and racialized representation, sanctioning the current course of state violence. *San Andreas* is not simply teaching kids to be violent but eliciting consent for the ways the state enacts violence on communities of color.

Whether participating in an urban colonial project of taking territory or merely engaging in random acts of virtual violence, a core element of *San Andreas* is the murder of people of color. While this premise is a defining character of this genre of games, *San Andreas* elucidates the role (or lack thereof) of the state in protecting and serving communities of color. Throughout the game, the police ignore the murder of other "gang members," often intervening only in moments where violence is directed at the "innocent." In other words, Carl can, at times, kill rival gang members in front (or close to) police without consequences. Killing an innocent citizen brings the police swiftly and with the full force of the law. Furthermore, as these individuals lie in the street in virtual wait for medical attention, the paramedics rarely arrive. The murder of the innocent in the game frequently leads to not only a quick ambulance response but also the resuscitation of these characters. *San Andreas*, thus, concretizes hegemonic ideologies regarding criminality and the state's role in only protecting the "innocent."

A second illustrative example here occurs early in the game as Carl is confined to the borders of San Andreas. Attempts to enter San Fiero are illegal and met with force. An attempt to swim to these unknown lands of promise is met with military force, often leading to a state murder of Johnson—shoot now, ask questions later. The efforts to virtually police borders within and outside San Andreas replicates U.S. efforts throughout the globe, legitimizing state power (violence), as it illustrates the needs for increased policing and surveillance through images of criminals of color, all while the real-life politicians and leaders who enact violence throughout the globe condemn the violence of virtual reality without recognition of race or self-reflectivity of this inherent contradiction. The unmarked messages of *San Andreas*, which remains outside a national discourses overwhelmed by panics concerned with sexuality and violence within virtual reality and its effects on youth as well by the obsessive redemptive project of many game scholars to which the ideological effects and pedagogical implications of these games are erased from the public discourse. While the focus continues to be with controlling Black bodies/communities and protecting White youth and (White) civic culture, a conversation is needed regarding how a ghetto-centric gaming functions within a larger war on youth.

A War on Video Games or a War on Youth (Virtual and Real) of Color

The widespread war between gamers (players, designers, industry supporters, academics) and the "haters" (politicians, media critics, conservative cultural groups, and the religious right) have successfully erased the racist, patriarchal, heteronormative, and xenophobic representational and textual utterances of the entire series. From its reification of blackness as the ontological sign of decay and moral indecency to its demonization of Latino immigrants as economic parasites,

the manner in which these games uncritically give life and voice to “concrete practice and other banalities of national evil,” is elided from the discourse (Berlant, 1997, pp. 8-9). Likewise, the dialectics between the virtual and the real, whether in discourse (culture of poverty; the racialization of communities of color) or in practice (police brutality; the war on drugs), is further obscured by the discursive focus on sex, violence, and the efforts to protect the purity and innocence of (some) children.

Notwithstanding the rhetoric of protecting children from harmful representations of Black men, or the virtual erasure of women of color, none of these officials have publicly denounced or called for regulation of racist or racialized games. These same legislative bodies have not elucidated plans to insulate “our children” from White supremacist narratives promulgated by the video game industry. None has questioned the racial content of games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. There is no discourse concerning the dissemination of racial stereotypes or the affirmation of the racist status quo. Outrage remains in a discourse of children, its focus being violence and sexual content, rather than the effects/significance of these games in society, especially as spaces of racial meaning and state violence. The nature of *Grand Theft Auto* reflects this fact, as does the silence of politicians, cultural commentators, and antiracist proponents regarding racism, state violence, and the racialized war against youth.

While the motivations of profit and appealing to a marketplace driven by the allure of hip-hop and Black cultural styles with White consumers drive the continued production of games like *San Andreas* or *Gang Wars*, its gaming dimensions and its surrounding discourse of reception (celebration and condemnation) must be understood within a racial context. “The black other occupies a complex site, a place where fears, desires, and repressed dreams are lodged,” argues Norman Denzin (2002, p. 7). More than fears and repressed dreams, the Black body and those racialized spaces exists in virtual reality and the national imagination as “a site of spectacle, its blackness” existing as “a potential measure of evil, and menace,” necessitating containment and control (Gray, 1995, p. 165). The representation of blackness or inner-city communities through a hegemonic ghettocentric imagination, the celebrations of adults becoming gangstas, and the fears caused by the appearance of hypersexual and violent ghetto games follows longstanding White supremacist logic that “focuses, organizes, and translates blackness into commodifiable representations and desires that [can] be packaged and marketed across the landscape of American popular culture” or otherwise confines it outside the dominant racial order (Gray, 1995, pp. 68, 165). In other words, Black bodies will continue to be marketed and commodified by a global video game industry just as those same bodies will be subjected to the rules and logic that emanate from White supremacy.

Dr. Dre, one of the “godfathers of rap,” once noted, “People in the suburbs, they can’t go to the ghetto so they like to hear what’s goin’ on. Everyone wants to be down” (quoted in hooks, 1994, p. 152). bell hooks, however, complicates this celebratory reconstitution of hip-hop, situating processes of commodification, and fetish and the pimping of a corporate ghettocentric imagination, arguing that “the

desire to be 'down' has promoted a conservative appropriation of specific aspects of underclass black life, who in reality is dehumanized via a process of commodification wherein no correlation is made between mainstream hedonistic consumerism and the reproduction of a social system that perpetuates and maintains an underclass" (hooks, 1994, p. 152).

As politicians focus on video game violence and the absence of moral offerings within gaming culture, thereby eluding the racial and ideological dimensions of these games and ignoring broader societal problems, and its defenders obscure similar dimensions and their connections to virtual reality, it is important to remember that the *GTA* series, *San Andreas* in particular, and a ghetto-centric virtual reality matter because racism kills—the celebrations and demonizations of blackness jointly facilitate the hegemony of new racism, which in the end maintains color lines and white privileges, whether manifesting in the perpetuation of the prison industrial complex or systemic poverty that reared its head in wake of Hurricane Katrina. It matters because social justice—the ability of all people to live their lives free of oppressions based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and ideology—is a goal that U.S. society has long forgone for profit at all—any—cost. It has never been “just a game.” It has always been lives, livelihoods, injustice, and a desire for much, much more.

Notes

1. This essay builds on these prior works.
2. This term is used to understand the ways in which the state and ideological state apparatus (ISAs) normalizes and rationalizes violence, carries out inhuman treatment of its citizenry and those throughout the world, facilitate the subjugation of people through laws, policies, cultural formations, etc.
3. In eschewing muddled definitions of racism that lets Whites off the hook, this project understands racism in terms of White supremacy. George Fredrickson, defines White supremacy as “the attitudes, ideologies, and policies associated with the rise of blatant forms of White European dominance over ‘nonwhite’ populations . . . making invidious distinctions of a socially crucial kind that are based primarily if not exclusively characteristic and ancestry” (Fredrickson, 1982).

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