

“Unless she had implants, she must be Chinese”: A feminist analysis of players’ responses to representations of Chinese and Japanese female video game characters

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Abstract

This article examines the portrayals of Chinese and Japanese female video game characters in a purposive sample of video games and how users of online discussion forums understand these representations. The majority of game studies scholarship lacks an intersectional component regarding gender and race. As such, this analysis addresses this gap by focusing on the relation between gender and race in the construction of problematic stereotypes existing in gameplay and gaming communities. Drawing on a feminist theoretical framework, I employ the concept of “the gaze” to draw a connection between character image and interpretation and their relation to the intersections of gender and race. These intersections are analyzed in both visual and textual form in order to explore alternative methodological approaches and establish the relationship between a character’s image and dialogic interpretations of these images by players. The findings identify how video games and players support stereotypes, and conversely, how player dialogue that challenges oppressive concepts of gender and race may be a means by which to consider alternative approaches to gendered and racialized character design.

Author Keywords

Video games; Critical Discourse Analysis; Gender, Race; Stereotypes

“Unless she had implants, she must be Chinese”

“Hitomi is the LEAST Asian of the four, so she's automatically more slutty”

“DAT JAPANESE SCHOOLGIRL ASS”

These quotes are examples from among the statements collected in reference to radicalized feminine figures in video games for this research. The focus of the commentary suggests the gender and race of a video game character makes a significant impression on video game players. Character portrayals can affect the perception of a video game, as well as impact players’ interpretations of gender and race. This article examines the ways in which Chinese and Japanese female video game characters are portrayed in a purposive sample of video games, and how users of online discussion forums understand these representations. The majority of game

studies scholarship lacks an intersectional component, regarding gender and race. As such, the analysis addresses this gap by focusing on the relation between gender and race in the construction of problematic stereotypes existing in gameplay and gaming communities. Drawing on a feminist theoretical framework, I employ the concept of “the gaze” to draw a connection between character image and interpretation and their relation to the intersections of gender and race. This article examines the relationship between a character’s image and dialogic interpretations of these images by players. Identifying how video games and players may support stereotypes, conversely, I also draw on player dialogue that challenges oppressive concepts of gender and race as a means to consider alternative approaches to gendered and racialized character design.

Game Studies Literature and Feminist Theoretical Approaches

The study of digital culture often reflects historical social issues (e.g. gender, racial, class, sexuality, and language inequities) also present in media and technology (Flanagan, 2009, p. 13). In particular, several studies have explored gendered and racialized character portrayals in video games, paying close attention to a character’s appearance, their role in the game, and/or the demographic ratio of the characters. The majority of this research suggests that women and racial minorities are underrepresented and that, of the female characters represented, they are often shown to be subordinate to men and/or appear in a hyper-sexualized manner (Dietz, 1998; Beasley & Standley, 2002; Burgess et al., 2007; Downs & Smith, 2010). For example, Downs and Smith (2010) examine 20 popular video games from 2003 from three console brands: Nintendo Game Cube, Xbox, and PlayStation (60 games total). The results indicate female characters appear in video games less frequently and have a more sexualized appearance than male characters. Similar results were found in a study by Burgess et al. (2007) that examined 225 video game covers. The video game covers demonstrated male characters were portrayed twice as many times as female characters, 33.8% of the female characters portrayed did not have active roles, and female characters were more often portrayed in a sexually suggestive manner (47.4%) than male characters (13.5%) (p. 425).

Such findings have prompted researchers such as Janzs and Martis (2007) to inquire whether female characters’ roles have changed in more contemporary video games. In particular, these authors are interested in the so called “Lara Phenomenon” (p. 147). Jansz and Martis (2007) assert the rise in popularity of the *Tomb Raider* protagonist, Lara Croft, has contributed to the emergence of a number of dominant female characters in video games. Although their results reveal that male characters are represented more than female characters, the main characters of the games were equally composed of males and females (p. 145). They also comment that despite the marked changes in the female characters’ roles, the characters’ physical appearances remain highly sexualized. For example, male characters have over-exaggerated muscles and on average female characters are extremely thin with large breasts and buttocks (p. 146).

Compounding the problem of character portrayals with respect to gender, many studies also indicate an overwhelming ratio of white to racial minority characters in video games (Dietz, 1998; Janzs & Martis, 2007; Dickerman et al., 2008; Leonard, 2006; Downs & Smith, 2010). Despite these findings, relatively little research has explored representations of ethnicity in games. Mou and Peng (2008) conclude that white male characters saturate video game form,

while female characters are featured less (and often sexually stereotyped) and racial minorities are least represented. However, their study does not qualitatively inform how gender and race are exhibited and contextualized within video games. Work by Lisa Nakamura (2002) brings attention to the ways in which virtual spaces adopt racial stereotypes. Nakamura (2002) coined the term “cybertypes” to “describe the distinctive ways that the Internet propagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism” (p. 3). A study by David Leonard (2006) criticizes the tendency for video games to employ racial stereotypes, maintaining that video games are a “white [male] centered space” (p. 84). Leonard argues that sexualized portrayals of female characters and racialized tropes reflect stereotypical and hegemonic ideas of gender and race (p. 85).

As Leonard (2006) suggests, video games frequently employ racial and gendered stereotypes, however, the literature lacks a discourse on the intersection of these stereotypes. Understanding the relationship between these aspects of identity is critical. As Lisa Lowe (1996) asserts, “the conceptualization of racism and sexism as if they were distinctly opposed discourses is a construction that serves the dominant formations; we cannot isolate ‘race’ from ‘gender’ without reproducing the logic of domination” (p. 74). In response to the need for an intersectional lens, this analysis approaches racialized gender portrayals in video games using the feminist theoretical frameworks of the gaze and intersectionality.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey (1989) employs a feminist psychoanalytic approach to film analysis demonstrating the subordination of women and the upholding of patriarchal, phallogocentric values. This is called “the gaze”. Mulvey (1989) theorizes that film’s ability to direct our way of seeing (directly through the camera lens and the ideological construction of the filmic image) illuminates the binary between men, who control the gaze, and women, who are the object of the gaze (p. 190). Game studies (Dietz, 1998; Beasley & Standley, 2002; Downs and Smith, 2010) suggest that video games replicate Mulvey’s conceptualization of an active/male and passive/female binary through pervasive representations of hypersexualized women with limited agency. Mulvey posits the male protagonist directs the gaze (onto the woman) and through him the spectator may also gaze at the woman as an erotic spectacle. In the context of gaming, the gaze of the male character, in collusion with the observer’s (i.e. player’s) gaze, relegates the female character to the role of object, something to be looked at or even admired, but without any subjectivity of her own.

Though Mulvey’s theory presents an early interrogation of women’s representation in cinema, her notion of the gaze takes a narrow view of film that limits itself to sexual difference, with an assumption of heterosexuality. Mary Ann Doane (2004) remarks on this limitation, which scholars have since addressed by incorporating a focus on difference that includes analyses of race, class, and ethnicity and alternative theoretical frameworks, such as queer theory and transnational feminisms (p. 1229). However, equally important is the need to address multiple facets within difference. For example, Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) warns against feminist analyses of identity politics that aim to transcend difference but results in the conflation of intragroup differences (p. 1242). Crenshaw argues that analyses of either gendered (often read as white women) or racial (often read as men of color) oppression neglect to grasp the complex forms of oppression experienced by women of color (p. 1252). Crenshaw (1991) has employed intersectionality to indicate the ways in which gender and race interact to shape the experiences

in Black women's lives. Considering Doane's critique of early feminists' use of the gaze, and Crenshaw's argument for intersectional analyses, bell hooks' "oppositional gaze," which shifts the gaze to a critical reading of images can be useful in the analysis of the representation of gender and race in video games.

hooks (1992) argues that how people "look" or gaze is paramount to how people interact with stereotypical representations (p. 116). To gaze does not have to imply an agreement with the objectification of a female or racialized character. For example, a player's gaze does not necessarily imply an objectifying gaze. The gaze can also be what hooks (1992) terms an "oppositional gaze" wherein "one learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (p. 116). hooks states that Black women, by employing an oppositional gaze, have been able to critically identify the cinema's representation of the white woman as the object of the phallogentric gaze. hooks (1992) argues that the oppositional gaze allows the Black woman to take up a position that deconstructs the binary Laura Mulvey describes as existing between the woman as the object of the gaze and the man as the source of the gaze (p. 123). In a similar manner, a player may employ an oppositional gaze or reading of a stereotypical character as a method of critiquing problematic portrayals. This way of looking becomes a method of resistance when the gaze "resists the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking" (hooks, 1992, p. 128). Furthermore, hook's oppositional gaze incorporates an intersectional lens, missing in Mulvey's critique.

Statement of the Problem and Scope of the Study

In the same way that representations of women are limited to that of an object through the male gaze, a non-critical player's gaze can lock characters into gendered and racialized stereotypes. Mulvey's concept of gaze suggests that there is a connection between image and interpretation, while hooks' adaptation of the gaze acknowledges that ways of seeing and being have strong implications across the intersections of race and gender, because of the power relations implied in the gaze. Applying these frameworks to game analysis has two benefits: first, the gaze and the oppositional gaze address the gap in game studies literature which has tended to isolate issues of gender and racial representation; second, because the problematic representations of racialized females in games also pervade player discourse, the gaze's emphasis on the relationship between sign and signified as well as image and interpretation is useful. Accordingly, this study looks at two sources: dialogue found within video game content and online discussions forum threads, while also considering the physical representation of the bodies on screen.

Drawing from in game and extra-game sources provides the opportunity to identify how race and gender present themselves in multiple dialogues. I am also able to determine if Chinese and Japanese female character's representations (both playable characters and supporting characters) remain consistent or experience disparities between their representation in the video game and a player's conceptualizations. I explore these concepts through the following questions:

1. How does gender and race play a role in dialogically defining the representation of Chinese and Japanese female characters in video games?
2. How are Chinese and Japanese female characters portrayed in video gameplay dialogue and online discussion threads and what is the relationship between these two discourses?

In order to answer these questions I selected “popular” game texts, operationalizing popularity as the level of user activity in online forum discussion threads. The games¹ and characters chosen are as follows:

1. *Street Fighter X Tekken* review (2012), Asuka Kazama, Chun Li, and Ling Xiaoyu, 1691 discussion thread pages.
2. *Resident Evil 6* (2012), Ada Wong, 1661 discussion thread pages.
3. *Dead Island* (2011), Xian Mei, 503 discussion thread pages.
4. *Dead or Alive 5* (2012), Kasumi, Ayane, Hitomi, Kokoro, Leifang, 320 discussion thread pages.
5. *Portal II* (2011), Chell, 264 discussion thread pages.
6. *Mirrors Edge* (2008), Faith, 187 discussion thread pages.
7. *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (2010), Knives Chau, 199 discussion thread pages.
8. *Sleeping Dogs* (2012), Not Ping, Sandra, Vivienne Lu, Inspector Teng, Mrs. Chu, Ms. Jiang, 250 discussion thread pages.
9. *Muramasa: The Demon Blade* (2009), Momochime, 149 discussion thread pages.
10. *Binary Domain* (2012), Faye Li, 35 discussion threads.

For each of these games, I collected dialogue that pertains to the Chinese or Japanese female character’s gender or race. In a number of video game studies, the data extracted from the sampled games consists of only a fraction of the actual game play for each included game, e.g. only introductory videos (Jansz & Martis, 2007), the first 20-30 minutes of game play (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Downs & Smith, 2010; Martins et al., 2009), or the video game trailers (Mou & Peng, 2009). Many of these studies note this as a limitation and acknowledge that characters may change in appearance, skill, and/or role type and this may not be accounted for when analyzing only a portion of the game (Downs & Smith, 2010; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Martins et al., 2009). I address this limitation by viewing each video text from start to finish, collecting dialogue and taking observational notes regarding the character’s background and appearance during gameplay. I am able to view the entire game by watching “Let’s Play” (LP) online videos; LPs are player made videos created to share commentary and exhibit gameplay to viewers². Observations of the above-mentioned characters (e.g. their appearance, role, and interaction with other characters and any changes in these conditions throughout the game) strengthen the understanding of how in game dialogue contributes to the representation of the character and gives needed context to online discussion threads regarding the characters. In addition, similar to the Bechdel Test³, an examination of the character’s dialogue and roles facilitate an evaluation of the overall presence of female characters. The Bechdel Test has been used to measure the presence of women in media. For example, video game critic and scholar Anita Sarkeesian has used the Bechdel Test to critique the lack of female presence in media⁴.

A second sampling of dialogic data is derived from online discussion forum threads. The forums of the websites ign.com, gamespot.com, and gamefaqs.com were queried for conversations between users that refer to the gendered and racialized representation of the characters selected for the study. Though the dialogues obtained from the online discussions are most likely conversations between video game players, I acknowledge that not all forum users may be players. Nevertheless, discussion forum thread posts offer insight into the attitudes and opinions held by facets of the gaming community. Together, the data derived from online discussion

forum threads as well as the gameplay dialogue provides for a comparative analysis between the two sources of data regarding how characters are represented and interpreted. The method of collecting player discussions from online sources is related to virtual ethnographic methodology and shares similar ethical concerns. According to scholars working in virtual ethnography (Garcia et al. 2009; Hine, 2000), the use of the Internet requires ethnographers to adapt their approaches to the unique situation of an online environment. Garcia et al. (2009) note that the division between public and private is less clear than in offline environments (p. 75). In addition, the privacy of human subjects should be regarded carefully, since online pseudonyms may be as recognizable as the subject's real name (p. 76). To address concerns regarding public/private spheres and maintaining subjects' anonymity, this analysis draws only on forum threads that are open to the public (i.e. one is not required to register as a member to view the discussion posts). These were accessed and their embedded comments analyzed and identified by the forum title (i.e. the video game) rather than the subject's online handle.

Given the dialogical nature of the research, I draw on a form of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) developed by Norman Fairclough (2003, 2006, 2009; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Fairclough employs a dialectical-relational approach to analyzing social problems that exist within social structures and examines social "wrongs" from two angles (Fairclough, 2009, p. 16). The first angle, or "negative character," examines how semiosis⁵ is partly responsible for the "establishment, reproduction and change of unequal power relations (domination, marginalization, exclusion of some people by others) and in ideological processes, and how in more general terms this bears on human 'well-being'" (p. 163). In the present study the negative character is constituted by gendered and racial stereotypes found in video games. The investigation of the negative character of the social problem (stereotypical representations of Chinese and Japanese female video game characters) prompts an examination of gendered and racialized hegemonic ideology in the discourse found in video game content and in online discussion forum threads. In contrast, Fairclough (2009) proposes an analysis of the "positive character," to reveal the ways people confront dominant ideologies and find methods to "overcome obstacles to address 'wrongs' and improve well-being" (p. 164). In this analysis, the positive character is operationalized by the ways in which, in online discussion forums, video game players resist and speak out against gendered and racial stereotypes found in video games and other forum user comments.

Analysis: Representations in gameplay content

The representation of a video game character cannot be viewed solely as a work of fiction that has no bearing on reality. Instead, a character can give insight into certain facets of the social conditions in and from which it is created. As Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach indicates, if the products of a social structure are problematic then an analysis of the semiotic aspect of the social problem is the first step to locating possible resolutions. In other words, and in the context of the current analysis, if the representations of Chinese and Japanese female video game characters employ gendered and/or racial stereotypes, then the solution to stereotypical portrayals may be found in an analysis of the dialogue that is in part responsible for creating such stereotypes. I argue that in addition to the semiotic aspect of racial and gendered stereotypes found in the video games analyzed, a consideration of the visual appearances of the characters is necessary to contextualize the dialogical data and to serve as a point of comparison between the visual and textual aspects of the female characters' representations. The examination of different

modes of representation is related to the notion of “intracategorical approach,” which Leslie McCall (2005) discusses in her analysis of intersectional methodologies. An intracategorical approach resides between the extremes of an anticategorical approach and an intercategorical approach; the former deconstructs all analytical categories while the later uses categories strategically (p. 1773). According to McCall (2005), early examples of intracategorical approaches are found in work by feminists of color who investigate overlooked intersections of identity through in depth examinations of social categories, which are often presented in detailed descriptions of identity and experiences (p. 1782). Thus, an examination of both image and text allows for multiple perspectives valuable in intersectional methodology.

In both the visual and dialogical components of the current analysis, I find that the characters are more defined by their gender than their race. The majority of the female character’s appearance also denotes their race, with what may commonly be identified as Chinese features (dark hair, olive skin tone, and dark, almond shaped eyes). The few exceptions are Ada Wong of *Resident Evil 6* and Hitomi and Kokoro of *Dead or Alive 5*, who appear to be mixed race. Instead of playing a significant role in defining a character’s representation, race is typically used to contextualize the character’s origins, in the case of *Dead Island* character Xian Mei (a Chinese spy), or where the characters reside, such as the women of *Sleeping Dogs* who live in Hong Kong. Ethnic costumes are employed to indicate the characters’ race, but serve more so as a method to draw attention to the women’s bodies. For example, Momohime of *Muramasa: The Demon Blade* is dressed in a kimono that is cut very short, revealing much of her legs, which are adorned with thigh-high stockings and geta⁶ shoes. In *Street Fighter X Tekken*, Chun Li is an Interpol agent who is dressed in a long dress with a mandarin style collar and side slits that run up her hip; her attire is tightfitting and accentuates her large breasts, thin waist and large thighs.

The tendency for female characters to be portrayed in a hypersexualized manner also occurs in Western-style clothing. For example, the main character in *RE 6*, Ada Wong, wears tight black leather pants, tall, black, high-heeled boots, black leather gloves, and a low-cut red blouse. Her sexualized outfit is also accentuated by certain postures she assumes during the game. Often, Ada must crawl through tunnels and passageways during which the camera focuses on her buttocks. *Binary Domain* character Faye Li’s sexualized appearance (a military uniform consisting of tightfitting armour that emphasizes her breasts) becomes more emphasized when contrasted against fellow squad member, the white British soldier Rachel Townsend. Rachel, in contrast to Faye Li, is portrayed as more masculine; she has short brown hair, no make-up, and her armour is looser fitting and more closely resembles the men’s uniforms. The difference in the women’s appearances serves to polarize the two female characters, making Rachel more like the male characters while Faye in comparison becomes more sexualized. The distinction between the two female characters is reinforced through character dialogue. When Dan and Big Bo meet Rachel they introduce themselves and their rank, much the same way they introduce themselves to other male characters. However, when Dan and Big Bo first see Faye they comment on her sexualized appearance through the following exchange:

Dan: “File photo doesn’t do her justice”

Big Bo: “She looks familiar. Reminds me of an actress or something”

Dan: “Come on Bo, you know the only movies you watch are porn...”

[They nod to each other in understanding]

Big Bo: "Oh yeah. Right, with the..."
 SEGA, n.p. (2012)

The conversation between Dan and Big Bo distinguishes Faye as a character to be sexually objectified and differentiates her from the rest of the team. Furthermore, Faye is valued for her sexualized appearance; near the end on of the game Big Bo sacrifices himself to save Faye from the final opponent's attack. As Big Bo is dying he tells Dan that "[it] Ain't right to hit a pretty woman," explaining why he has chosen to save Faye, later Big Bo emphasizes his point by telling Dan, "Take care of her, brother, she sure is pretty" (Sega 2012).

In comparison to gender, race is rarely discussed; the only discussion of a Chinese or Japanese female character's race occurs in *Binary Domain*. Race is more significant in *Binary Domain* and is an identifying feature for Faye. In a conversation between Faye and Dan, Faye's origin as the daughter of rice farmers is discussed:

Faye: You're not bad. For a Yankee.
 Dan: You're not bad... for a rice farmer.
 Faye: Is that all I am to you. Just a dumb Chinese Peasant with a rifle?
 SEGA, n.p. (2012)

The term "rice farmer," which Dan uses to refer to Faye on multiple occasions, denotes her race as well as her working class background; however, Faye's character is more strongly defined visually and dialogically by her gender than by her race.

In three of the games analyzed, neither gender nor race is a significant contributor to the female character's portrayal. Rather, the female character is defined by her personality, physical or mental ability, or her relationships with other characters. For example, the main protagonist in *Portal 2*, Chell, is tasked with completing a series of puzzles created by robots intent on seeing her fail. There is very little dialogue in the game; when there is dialogue the comments tend to be insults from the robots directed at Chell with the intention of weakening her resolve and/or performance in the series of tests. By overcoming the obstacles put before her, Chell is able to define herself through her successes rather than by her gender or race. In a similar fashion, *Mirrors Edge* main character Faith is also defined by her accomplishments as a "runner" - an illegal courier. In addition to her occupation, Faith's character is also defined by her willful personality and strong bond with her sister, Kate, who she must save in the later portion of the game. In *Dead Island*, playable character Xian Mei is briefly described in terms of gender and race. Xian is a former female police officer of the Hong Kong Police; however, during gameplay she is defined by her ability to aid other survivors, her immunity to the zombie disease, and her skills with sharp weapons. Interestingly, these three games are played from a first person perspective; in first person perspective the player does not see their character, instead they see the game world through the character's point of view. The difference in emphasis on a character's gender and race in the first-person perspective games may indicate further research should be conducted to ascertain any differences between first person and third person perspective games. Specifically, further inquiry into how minimized visual presence of a primary character may lead to a higher significance of other forms of non-visual representation (e.g. personality or ability). Furthermore, it may be fruitful to examine how a player's gaze may

change in first person perspective games when it is directed through the gaze of the character they play.

Analysis: Representations in forum user comments

In terms of the relevance of the dialogical elements that make up a character's gendered and racialized portrayal, the comments in discussion forum threads are rarely connected to gameplay dialogue. For example, in a few cases users criticized Ada Wong's monologues⁷, saying, "[she] brings nothing but eye tearing monotone sarcastic remarks written by some kid who probably jotted those lines at the back of his maths book" (RE6-20) and "Seriously, she seems to be completely incapable of having a normal conversation with anyone [...] Throughout her whole campaign she's constantly spouting off amusing anecdotes when there's no one else around" (RE6-17). Comments such as these demonstrate that Ada's dialogue affected how some users' perceive her social abilities, though their criticisms do not directly pertain to gender or race.

In comparison to the sparse comments related to character dialogue, the overwhelming majority of commentary pertains to the character's appearance. The data indicates a significant link between a character's appearance and gendered and racialized stereotypes echoed in forum discussions. In addition, female characters that are portrayed as hypersexual are more likely to be sexually objectified in discussion forum threads than non-sexualized female characters. Generally, sexually objectifying comments are based on visual assessments of the women's bodies; for example, a user expresses their attraction to the RE 6 character, Ada Wong, saying, "Ada is hot. She actually has some wicked curves and a wonderful ass" (RE6-28), while in the SFXT forum a user states, "If Asuka had bigger boobs I would use [play as] her" (SFXT-21). While these topics sexually objectify female characters, other discussions go further in sexually degrading a female character. One forum user crudely responds to the thread "I want Ada Wong everywhere I'm at" by saying "Bent over gaping with her cheeks apart" (RE6-165) while another user replies, saying, "If you are going to do Ada it has to be with the red dress still on and the top of it pulled down" (RE6-114). References to forum users desiring to have sex with the female character are also found in topics regarding *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* forums. In a thread titled "Knives, Ramona, Envy, or Kim" the topic creator offers their opinion, saying, "Who would you rather be with? Knives was HOT i'd tap that Kung pow pootang all night long :D Secondly i'd choose Envy, she looked delicious..." (SP-1). In this instance the user combines references of Kung Pow, a parody of Hong Kong martial arts films, and the term "pootang", urban slang for female genitalia, thus drawing on racial stereotypes and sexist language to identify the character Knives. In comparison, a character that is not overtly sexualized, e.g. Inspector Teng of *Sleeping Dogs* and Faith of *Mirror's Edge*, garners fewer lewd and degrading comments regarding the character's body or appearance. In the *Sleeping Dogs* discussion forum, Inspector Teng is mentioned once; she is chosen by a user as the "Hottest female character" based on her voice while other more sexualized female characters are chosen based on their appearance. In the *Mirror's Edge* discussion forums some users remark on Faith's appearance, saying "She's hot" (ME-20) and "I WaNt tO SeX hER uP So BAd!!!!!!" (ME-22); however, more often players discuss strategies to complete missions or to avoid using weapons. Though the degree to which a female character may be sexually objectified or degraded ranges, what remains constant is the connection between the frequency of said comments and a female character with an overly sexualized appearance. In some cases these objectifying comments focus on the character's gender while others locate sexual desire in the character's position as a Chinese or Japanese

female character.

The tendency for forum users to sexually objectify a female character is sometimes recognized by other users. In a topic called “God Damn Xiayou!!” the topic creator begins by stating, “Dat ASS!!!!!!” (SFXT-57) to which another user responds, “I completely expected the post to be about her perfectly chiseled underage ass. It’s the only thing that gets her noticed” (SFTX-4). In other instances forum users may begin to analyze a character based on her personality rather than her appearance, only to be derailed by another user’s sexually objectifying comment. In one *RE 6* discussion thread a user states, “I found Ada very stereotypically one dimensional. Kinda delusional, always talking to herself” (RE6-80), thus, beginning an analysis of Ada’s personality only to have the next user comment, “She has boobs...she is excused” (RE6-81). The second comment serves to subvert the preceding users’ conversation aimed at discussing the limitations of poorly developed characters, turning the topic into a discussion privileging a woman’s body over her personality.

Compared to many sexually objectifying comments, topics focused specifically on a female character’s race are less frequent but more often employ stereotypes. For example, rather than distinguishing their specific race, forum users tend to employ the term “Asian” when referring to a Chinese or Japanese female character, in particular their appearance. The usage of the term “Asian” is not unusual so much as problematic. “Asian” is a generalized term that was used after the Civil Rights Movement as a means of coalition building between Americans of Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Korean origins (Nakamura, 2008, p. 75). Nakamura (2008) asserts that though a “‘panethnic’ identity intended to bridge people with different nationalities, ethnicities, and languages”, the term “Asian” “also tended to assume the notion of race as ‘real,’ as both a visual and subvisual or genetic code shared among people that were otherwise quite different” (p. 75). Thus to judge a Chinese or Japanese female character’s appearance against what are thought to be “Asian” characteristics ignores the specificities of her cultural difference, drawing on the cliché that Asians “all look the same” (p. 75). This is an example of how, in comparison to gender stereotypes and sexually objectifying comments that are primarily prompted by portrayals of the characters in the video game, the forum users comments on race draw on stereotypes that exist inside as well as outside of the game. Further illustrative of this phenomenon, in a thread topic titled, “how tall is Faye?” the thread creator asserts, “She looks very tall for an asian,” drawing on stereotypes that dictate the normal height of an “Asian” person (BD-1). In another comment made in response to the topic “Does Ada look too young?” a forum user remarks, “Man, being Asian is nice,” implying that “Asians” biologically retain their youth longer than people of other races (RE6-55). This ideology is taken up by another user who attempts to bring credence to the stereotype by saying, “Yup...Asians age a lot slower than Caucasians. I am half Chinese myself” (RE6-58).

In other instances forum users specifically discuss the gender and race of the character, eliciting stereotypes to disparage a character. For example, one forum user assesses Ada Wong’s appearance, saying, “Unless she had implants, she must be Chinese,” thus correlating large breasts with Chinese women (RE6-151). In a comment regarding the personality of Ada Wong one forum user asserts, “and to make matters worst, she’s Chinese. Man, I know there are woman like her in other parts of the country, but some Chinese ladies will mess with your mind” (RE6-40). RE6-40’s responds to the topic “Do you consider Ada a hero(ine) or a villan? (RE2&4

SPOILERS)” demonstrates how racial and gendered stereotypes are used to vilify the character based on her position as a Chinese woman. In another instance, gendered and racial stereotypes intersect to infer sexual promiscuity. In the *Dead or Alive* discussion topic titled “Xian’s backstory” a user draws on Xian’s position as a Chinese woman to fabricate an alternative occupation for the character as a massage therapist, saying “She’s also a part time lazy-eyed masseuse who gives you happy ending massages. Luv you long time” (DI-5) insinuating that her profession extends to sexual services.

Another theme that emerges in race-specific comments regards the authenticity⁸ of the female characters’ race⁹. Forum users’ conversations indicate there are strict boundaries defining how a female character should physically appear if her name or background defines her as Chinese or Japanese. If a character’s appearance is perceived to possess what the user defines as Chinese or Japanese characteristics then she is perceived to be more authentic. In the SFXT discussion forum, one user posits, “I agree. Asuka is hot. I also think she is one of the few Japanese characters that resemble a Japanese person to some degree” (SFXT-7). SFXT-7’s comment indicates a preference for characters to adhere to a stereotypical set of physical characteristics in order to more faithfully represent their race. If a female character’s appearance is thought to deviate from stereotypical racialized features, the character is criticized for not adhering to the norm. For example, in a topic titled “Xiaoyu has some of the biggest eyes in this game” the topic creator begins the conversation by stating, “They’re adorable” (SFXT-11). This topic prompts another forum user to post, “which is quite hilarious seeing as how she’s supposed to be Chinese,” indicating the enlarged size of Xiaoyu’s eyes makes her appear less Chinese and compromises her racial authenticity (SFXT-12).

The tendency to question a character’s race is prevalent in the *RE 6* and *Dead or Alive 5* forum discussions. In *Dead or Alive 5* characters Hitomi and Kokoro are of mixed race. Rather than identifying these characters as both white and Japanese forum users argue as to with which race the characters should be identified. In a thread topic entitled “Do you group Hitomi and Kokoro with the Asian girls or white girls?” one user comments,

Kokoro looks the most Asian of the two, but even she looks whitewashed next to Lei Fang, and the ninjas. She is basically a watered down Asian chick. Hitomi on the other hand can go from exotic Asian to ambiguous white girl depending on the angle. But even with her blue eyes and dirty blond hair she still looks out of place next to the full white girls like Sarah, Tina, Christie, Mila, and Helena. (DOA5-21)

This user’s comment alludes to the importance physical appearance has in determining a character’s race. Posts regarding Ada’s race tend to express sentiments that Ada possesses less (or no) stereotypical Chinese features in comparison to her appearance in earlier *Resident Evil* video games. The users are critical of Ada’s altered appearance; they question Ada’s race based on generalized concepts of “Asian” features that serve to uphold hegemonic ideologies and exclude the concept of diversity within individual racial groups. For example, in a thread titled “Ada is not a Chinese name. Ada also doesn’t look pure Asian” the thread creator opens the discussion by saying, “Besides, she never really looked pure Asian. In RE2 she looked like half European. In RE4 she looked Spanish. RE6 she looks Canadian” (RE6-136). Posts of this nature have the potential to interpret Ada’s appearance (in comparison to earlier *Resident Evil* games) in

terms of the lack of racial minorities in the *Resident Evil* series, expressing concern that one of the few minority characters physically appears to have what may be considered predominantly white features. In a topic titled “Ada isn't really Chinese just like how Sheva isn't really black”, the topic creator posits, “Both are mixed. They have features that are neither black or Chinese like N'gai Croal¹⁰ suggested could be interpreted as racist. Sheva is very light skinned and Ada's facial features are not asian” (RE6-140). Although the title of the topic undermines the critique by stripping the characters of their race, the content of the post calls attention to racialized characters that appear more white than Black or Chinese. In response a user challenges,

Do you want a cookie? What's your point, exactly? Is it now racist to be white? The Japanese are not bound by western rules of political correctness, so they can design characters however they want, and have those characters shoot whomever they want, and there's nothing that anyone can do about it, RE6-147, n.p. (2012)

Though comments such as this may operate to shut down conversation and inhibit further discussion of gender and racial stereotypes, RE6-147 also demonstrates the reading of the characters’ representation through the oppositional gaze. As discussed in detail below, viewing character portrayals using an oppositional gaze or reading, players critique the social structures and issues operating within character portrayals.

The Oppositional Gaze: Players’ Resistance to Gender and Racial Stereotypes

This analysis has presented evidence that over-sexualized portrayals of Chinese and Japanese female characters are often the basis for gendered and racialized stereotypes as well as sexually objectifying comments within online discussion forum threads. Despite the sexism and racism that exists in online discussion forums, there are also forum users that speak out against sexual objectification and racially offensive commentary, drawing attention to the unrealistic character representations often found in video games. In the online discussion forums, users resist gender and racial stereotypes by criticizing offensive commentary as well as initiating discussion topics aimed at analyzing problematic character portrayals in specific video games. Similar to commentary that reinforces stereotypes, the responses challenging stereotypes also tend to focus either on gender or race; very few comments examine the character’s position as a racialized female character. In the responses of forum users who challenge the status quo, two themes emerge that prompt users to speak out against the portrayals of Chinese and Japanese female characters in video games; these themes include an appeal for realism in the games and a contestation of offensive content found in the discussion forums and in the games.

Fantastical qualities in a video game are not inherently oppressive to Chinese and Japanese female characters. In worlds not bound by social or scientific laws such as our own there are possibilities for characters (both female and male) to be more empowered (physically and socially) than would be possible at the present. Though fiction may offer this opportunity, video games can also replicate contemporary society’s oppressive structures, e.g. sexual objectification. Recognizing problematic structures in a video game, users voice their concern and draw attention to oppressive conditions. In a topic titled “why all female RE characters physically attractive?” the topic creator suggests

I would be more realistic and throw some lesser attractive females in the game. It's impossible for every woman to be fine as wine especially most law enforcement [sic] jobs. Heck, my neighbor is a police officer and she pretty much ugly. I mean, I would smash because here body nice, but her face look like special herb goolash. the re [sic] males dont seem interested at all. Piers should be caught hammering one of the females. And chris should be all like, "this is not why we are here," RE6-125, n.p. (2012)

Another user responds, saying, "I find this topic funny when you look at Chris, Leon and Piers. They are hardly "ugly". So it's hardly an issue just with female characters. They are all designed to be attractive and appealing to the eye" (RE6-129). Another forum user adds to the discussion, saying, "Name an ugly character, male or female, from any game It's difficult. Unless they're deliberately made to look ugly, most characters in video games are always decent looking" (RE6-130). Though the topic creator's offensive remark against women in law enforcement in general and one woman in particular diminishes the force of their initial thoughtful question regarding the attractiveness of the RE female characters, the comments by other forum users serve to deepen the critique, pointing out that the tendency to portray only "attractive" female characters is not bound by gender lines (male characters are also portrayed as physically attractive), nor is this tendency limited to RE video games.

It should be noted that the structuring of "attractive" and "ugly" as oppositional concepts creates a dichotomy that reinforces the notion that only a certain type of female character is considered attractive. A more productive term such as "realistic" has the potential to move past subjective ideals of beauty to concepts of the plausibility and practicality of a character's appearance. For example, the difference in uniform between *Binary Domain* characters Rachel and Faye can be understood as a difference in realism rather than attractiveness. Rachel's uniform is more practical and appropriate for her position as a member of the rust crew, while Faye's more sexualized uniform is impractical for an identical role. By employing terms such as realistic and practical, opportunities are created to re-evaluate female character portrayals, revealing often unnecessary sexualization (e.g. excessively large breasts and revealing clothing) as well as highlighting more suitable depictions of female characters.

Forum users also offer critiques of the overemphasis of a character's physical appearance. In a response to a user's complaint that *Binary Domain* characters Rachel and Faye differ in their physical attractiveness, user BD-14 posits,

I think your making too much of it. I think character matters more then [sic] appearance in games now. Well they should if the characters are going to be taken at least with some depth and seriousness in the context of the game. If anything I'm hoping some games will get past the idea that every stereo type has to be exploited to appeal to make sales and actually stand out from the pack, n.p. (2012)

BD-14's comment not only identifies the gendered stereotype (female characters should be physically attractive) at work in both *Binary Domain* (in the case of Faye's character) and in the topic creator's comment, but also posits that video games should focus more on a character's

personality than their outward appearance.

While many comments are concerned by the manner in which video games have created unrealistic character portrayals and privileged some characters over others, other forum users focus on reproving offensive content in the video games and in player commentary. For example, users will criticize online discussion posts that reinforce gender stereotypes responsible for reducing a female character to an object. In the topic “Ada's A** Is The Greatest Use Of 3D Technology To Date” a user reprimands the content of the thread saying, “Typical... i guess you guy's just simply cant help your "one-track-minded nature" but for gods sake, cant you at least see more to a woman instead of only focusing on ther're breasts and posterior. C'mon at least show a "little" decency. I know its just a game, but "Really"?!” (RE6-38). RE6-38's comment demonstrates a resistance to sexually objectifying behavior; however, it fails to connect offensive user comments with the over-sexualized appearance of Ada's character. Forum users also speak out against racial stereotypes, for example, in response to user's critique of Ada's non-Asian appearance, one user comments, “And how would an Asian look like? Lol or are we going to stereotype this one,” identifying the problematic use of the term “Asian” to define a character's appearance (RE6-27). In response to a thread regarding Xiaoyu's eye size, one user states, “Firstly, eye shape isn't the same thing as eye size (that's what a lot of people don't seem to understand). Secondly, the term "slanted eyes" is pretty damn offensive” (SFXT-15). In SFXT-15's opinion racial stereotypes have no place in video games, nor video game discussion forums.

As the above comments suggest, similar to Mulvey's concept of the oppressive male gaze, a player's gaze that is not critical of gendered and/or racial stereotypes can serve to reinforce and perpetuate sexist and racist ideology. On the other hand, forum users have and do in fact seize the opportunity to adopt an oppositional gaze, pinpointing sites of oppressive content and discussing methods of righting social wrongs. Taken individually, the comments cited above do not fully analyze the entire problem, for example comments either criticize the character's portrayals or the user's responses to the portrayals, but never simultaneously examine both sides of the problem. Nevertheless, if the forum users' comments are viewed collectively, suggestions can be derived that address the social wrong of gendered and racial stereotypes in video games, which is significant for the development of future video games.

An analysis of the forum users' comments that challenge gendered and racial stereotypes found in video games can offer recommendations that may reduce such stereotypes in future video game development. As hooks advocates,

the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making the space for a transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking. (1992, p. 4)

A first step that adopts a new way of looking is the alteration of character portrayals, including

both the physical appearance and the personality of the characters. As the forum user comments cited above (and much games studies research¹¹) illustrate, female characters are often unrealistically portrayed; they are physically attractive (according to dominant positions) and have improbable body proportions emphasized through revealing clothing, which often results in an over-sexualized depiction. If female characters are portrayed more realistically (i.e. average body proportions and clothing that is not excessively revealing) the characters may be less likely assessed as objects of desire.

Further development of a character's personality and personal history, in tandem with a realistic and less sexualized appearance, would serve to draw attention away from the visual aspects of the character to instead focus on her role in the story (as seen in *Portal 2*, *Mirrors Edge*, and *Dead Island*). In addition, if there is more effort put into fleshing out the personality and background story of a character there may be a reduction in the confusion over a character's race. If the *RE* games incorporated information on Ada Wong's family or personal history, her culture may establish her race more effectively than her physical appearance. An expansion of a character's persona and a reduction in the emphasis of her appearance is an initial step in breaking down structures that perpetuate gender and racial stereotypes within video games. Additional alterations or deletions may also be made to gameplay dialogue that serves to reinforce the sexual objectification of a female character's. For example in *Sleeping Dogs*, comments¹² made by Dogeyes regarding the main character's sister, Mimi Shen, need not have been sexually degrading. Rather, Dogeye's comments may have been equally insulting but not gender specific if he had commented on her addiction to drugs (though attacking someone for this is also problematic). The elimination of sexist and racist comments in the gameplay is necessary if video games are to reinforce non-oppressive language concerning gender and race.

The final recommendation for future considerations in character design is that a female character be depicted as possessing agency and as effective in accomplishing tasks on her own, rather than being dependent on male characters. For example, in *Muramasa: The Demon Blade*, main character Momohime's may still have possessed by the male spirit Jinkuro; however, if Momohime could demonstrate more resistance to his ownership of her body and attempt to have more control over the situation she would appear as a more active female character. In effect, Momohime would be the main character rather than an attractive shell for the actual main character, Jinkuro.

Although each of these recommendations can be viewed as individual steps, in order to effectively dismantle the gender and racial stereotypes found in video game, and in related player discourse, these steps should be considered and undertaken as a whole. If one recommendation is addressed while another is ignored, this will most likely undermine any positive changes and problematic portrayals will not be fully addressed. For example, if a character is portrayed as an empowered female character but also depicted with an over-sexualized appearance, her physical presence will draw attention away from her strong character. By presenting a strong female character with a developed personality and a more realistic physical appearance, supported by non-sexist and non-racist in game dialogue, the video game industry can begin to respectfully and more accurately represent racialized women.

Conclusion

The analysis offers evidence that gendered and racial stereotypes exist in video games as well as in conversations in online discussion forums situated around these games. Players' interaction with stereotypes are highly dependent on the type of gaze they adopt; players may collude in gendered and racialized stereotypes through a noncritical gaze, or players may choose to challenge stereotypes through an oppositional gaze. In addition, the use of an intersectional approach has highlighted the unique ways Chinese and Japanese female characters are represented in terms of race and gender. Furthermore, the blending of visual and textual data has proved productive in demonstrating the ways in which a character's representation is understood in the gaming community. Despite the sexism and racism illustrated in the analyzed commentary, there is also present a strong opposition to oppressive and objectifying ideology. Players engage with oppositional readings in order to challenge problematic character portrayals, as well as offer suggestions for alternative forms of character representation. Considering the value of players' voices, particularly in respect to their oppositional readings, future games studies research has the potential to benefit from closer examinations of and engagement with the gaming community.

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¹ Some of the games have multiple games in the series and a particular character may be in multiple titles. For example, Ada Wong is a character in Resident Evil 6 and has appeared in many of the previous Resident Evil games. However, only the most recent title was included in the sample and only discussion threads on the specific title listed will be analyzed in this studies sample.

² LP's are not without limitations. LP's may enable the viewing of an entire game, the sampling technique is limited to the choices of the player creating the video. For example, Binary Domain and Jade Empire employ a dialogue tree mechanic that allows the player to choose the character's responses which affect certain outcomes of the game. Thus, one LP cannot account for all possible dialogue and events.

³ The Bechdel Test is derived from a comic strip by Alison Bechdel. The test consists of three criteria for evaluating film: 1) The movie must have at least two women in it, 2) The women talk to each other, 3) The women discussions involve topics besides a man.

⁴ See "The Oscars and the Bechdel Test" video on [feministfrequency.com](http://www.feministfrequency.com). Published February 15, 2012.

⁵ In a dialectical-relational approach the term semiosis is used to describe an “element of social process which is dialectically related to others” and furthermore, “social relations, power, institutions, beliefs and cultural values are in part semiotic” (Fairclough, 2009, p. 163).

⁶ Traditional Japanese shoes.

⁷ In most of RE6 Ada is not accompanied by another character, thus, her dialogue to herself serve to inform the player of Ada’s thoughts that would otherwise be expressed during conversation with another player.

⁸ Lisa Nakamura argues that cybertypes “work to preserve taxonomies of racial difference,” therefore, notions of racial “authenticity” maintain strict categories of race and perpetuate us/them ideology (29).

⁹ Although the examination of players’ conceptualizations of racial “authenticity” for both female and male characters’ is beyond the scope of this analysis, future inquiry on a comparative analysis of the intersections of gender and race may prove valuable to game studies.

¹⁰ N'gai Croal is a video game critic and consultant.

¹¹ As indicated by the following studies: Beasley and Standley, 2002; Burgess et al., 2007; Dietz, 1998; Downs and Smith, 2010; Jansz and Martis, 2007, Martis et al., 2009; Miller and Summer, 2009.

¹² Dogeyes recalls Mimi, saying “Hho Mimi! Oh yeah! First girl ever suck my cock;” later responds to the main character saying ““Hey, tell your sister to give me a call, huh? I wouldn't mind giving her a mouthful” (United Front Games and Square Enix London Studios 2012).