

# Reexamining Avatars of Whiteness: Changes in Racial Presentation of Video Game Player Characters

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## Abstract

Video games have become a mainstay of popular culture and entertainment. Within many online games, particularly MMORPGs, players are represented in the virtual game world by "avatars," graphical representations created and designed by the player. But players are constrained in how they can customize their avatars, with limitations placed on hairstyles, skin color, facial features, height, body mass, etc. This means that it may or may not be possible to create an avatar that looks like or represents the player, including their race. In 2009, I conducted a study that examined the ability of players to create non-white avatars in MMORPGs, where I found that, out of 65 MMORPGs, only four had sufficient options to allow for the creation of a distinctly non-Anglo avatar. But the world has changed significantly since then. I argue the time has come to reexamine the ability of players to create nonwhite avatars in MMORPGs. Has the ability to create nonwhite avatars broadly improved, perhaps due to technological improvements, the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, or other factors? Or have gaming companies largely continued to omit nonwhite features in their avatar creation processes, maintaining the status quo of normative whiteness in online worlds?

Keywords: Normative Whiteness, Video Game, Avatar, White Spaces

Publication Type: Original research article

Preferred Citation: Dietrich, David R. 2023. "Reexamining Avatars of Whiteness: Changes in Racial Presentation of Video Game Player Characters." *Sociation* 22(1), 21-31.



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## Introduction

Video games have been a mainstay of popular culture and entertainment for decades. In 2020, there were more than 214 million video game players in the United States alone (Entertainment Software Association 2020), and the global revenue of the video game industry in 2020 was nearly \$180 billion, more than the global movie and North American sports industries combined (Witkowski 2021). Contrary to the outdated stereotype of gamers as "loners," games are now a major way many people connect with others. Sixty-five percent of game players report they play games with other people either online or in person (Entertainment Software Association 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdowns and social distancing made in-person interactions difficult and potentially deadly, online gaming often became a social lifeline (Lufkin 2020). Within many of these online games, particularly MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games), players are

represented in the virtual game world by "avatars," graphical representations created and designed by the player. These avatars are usually the sole representation of the player within the game world and are the nexus of all interaction between a player and others. However, players do not have unlimited freedom in crafting their avatars. Due to technical limitations and design decisions, players are constrained in how they can customize their avatars, with limitations placed on hairstyles, skin color, facial features, height, body mass, etc. This means that, depending on the game, it may or may not be possible to create an avatar that looks like or represents the player, including their race.

In 2009, I conducted a study that examined the ability of players to create non-white avatars in MMORPGs (Dietrich 2012). I found that, out of 65 MMORPGs, only four had sufficient options to allow for the creation of a realistic "black" avatar that included appropriate skin color, hair texture and style, and facial features. Consequently, most online game

worlds were essentially all-white virtual spaces, creating a sense of normative whiteness (Brekhus 2015, Garner 2007) in online gaming. But the world has changed significantly since then. In particular, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement has forced politicians and corporations to confront issues of racial inequality long neglected, and companies producing games have been no exception. Many game companies pledged to support racial justice in 2020 in multiple ways, including monetary donations, re-evaluating company policies, and confronting racism in their online communities (Smith 2020). These efforts included avatar creation, such as the release of *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition*, an updated re-release of the *Mass Effect* trilogy of games originally released in 2007, 2010, and 2012. Environment and character director Kevin Meek stated that improving character creation options for non-white avatars was "one of its top priorities" (Farokmanesh 2021). Similarly, *World of Warcraft* game director Ion Hazzikostas stated that they've been "trying to improve representation more broadly," which includes greater options for nonwhite avatar creation (Parrish 2020). Nevertheless, despite the pledges by corporations to support racial justice, there is evidence that many corporations have not lived up to their promises, donating only a tiny fraction of the money originally pledged (Peters 2020).

Given the technological improvements that have allowed for greater graphical complexity in gaming over the past ten years, I argue that the time has come to reexamine the ability of players to create nonwhite avatars in MMORPGs. Has the ability to create nonwhite avatars broadly improved, perhaps due to technological improvements, the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, or other factors? Or have gaming companies largely continued to omit nonwhite features in their avatar creation processes, maintaining the status quo of normative whiteness in online worlds? In this paper, I will analyze avatar creation in current MMORPGs, comparing these results to those of my earlier project over a decade ago.

## Theoretical and Empirical Background

A large body of literature exists examining race in the media, concentrating primarily on the presentation and perpetuation of racial stereotypes (e.g., Berry 2020, Lind 2019, Goodwill et al. 2019, Bramlett-Solomon and Carstaphen 2017, Adams-Bass et al. 2014). While most of this literature has concentrated on older forms of non-interactive media, including movies, television, and print media, the past 15 years has seen the emergence of scholarship examining similar racial themes in video games. Jahn-Sudman and Stockmann (2008) analyzed the portrayal of

African American characters in the *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, concluding that these characters, particularly those of black men, were portrayed almost exclusively as violent criminals. DeVane and Squire (2008) examined players' interpretations of racial presentations in the same game. They concluded that players' views of race in the game were situational, and shaped by their own experiences and cultural understandings. Examining a different game in the same series, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, Blackmon and Terrell (2007) reached similar conclusions about racial interpretations. Sisler (2008) examined how Muslims and Arabs are presented in games, arguing that the diversity of the Islamic world has been compressed into a largely monolithic presentation focused on terrorism and hostility. Thomas (2008) looked at a player group within the game *Diablo II* known as KPK, Inc., or the Korean Player Killers. The goal of the players was to "kill" Korean characters because they blamed them for perpetuating perceived negative practices in the game, including "farming" (repeatedly killing a creature or creatures to harvest rare and valuable items) and real money trading (trading in-game items for actual money).

Scholars have also begun to examine how experiences with racial stereotypes in games may affect real-world behaviors and attitudes. Dill and Burgess (2012) conducted an experimental study that measured the effects of exposure to stereotypical depictions of Black characters in video games. They found that stereotypical depictions influenced how the players subsequently viewed other members of the same racial group in real life. Behm-Morawitz and Ta (2014) found that people who spent more time playing video games, in general had fewer egalitarian views of Blacks.

In addition, an emerging body of research examines the link between online avatars and identity. These avatars represent the first thing that most people will see when they meet another player in an online game, which sets the initial standard that will influence subsequent interactions, consistent with Goffman's concept of the initial stages of the definition of the situation (Goffman, 1959). And despite the ability of players to create characters with unusual or fantastical features, there is evidence that most players tend to create avatars that resemble themselves. Mia Consalvo and Todd Harper (2009) examined how female players represented themselves in terms of their avatars and found that most players chose avatars that looked like them. Messinger et al. (2008), in their examination of the game *Second Life*, similarly found that people usually create avatars that resemble themselves (though somewhat more

attractive). Therefore, many, if not most, players desire an avatar reflecting themselves.

Beyond issues of identity, there is evidence that the presentation of avatars can affect the players themselves in other ways. Merola and Pena (2010) argue that avatar appearance, including clothing, height, and general attractiveness, can influence the player in both positive and negative ways. For instance, players of avatars dressed in black robes were found to be more aggressive than those wearing white robes. There is evidence that the racial appearance of avatars similarly influences players. Peck et al. (2013) conducted an experiment where players were put into a virtual reality environment and embodied by either light or dark-skinned avatars. They found that light-skinned players who played dark-skinned avatars in a virtual reality environment showed a reduction in implicit racial bias. Yang et al. (2014) found that white players who played black avatars in a violent video game, *Saints Row 2*, displayed stronger negative attitudes toward blacks afterward.

Similarly, Hawkins et al. (2021) found that white individuals playing black avatars in a violent game showed greater aggression toward real-world white individuals. While these findings are potentially at odds with each other, they speak to the importance of avatar appearance and presentation on the players themselves. This is consistent with what is known as the Proteus Effect (Yee and Bailenson 2007, Yee et al. 2009), that the social identity cues of avatars, such as race, influence real-world behavior. Hence, avatars are more than just pixels and polygons manipulated by the player to interact in the game world. Rather, players identify with their avatars; consequently, their in-game experiences may have longer-lasting real-world effects outside the game. While much of this existing research focuses on negative racial stereotypes and their impacts on players, it largely ignores how media representations, including those in video games, create and perpetuate normative whiteness. Whiteness scholars argue that whiteness has been rendered the "default" in contemporary racial ideology (Brekhus 2015, Garner 2007, McWhorter 2005, Ward 2008). As such, whiteness ceases to be a racial category and exists, becoming the "nonracial" standard against which other races are compared (Morris 2016). Whites, therefore, are individuals, while non-whites are part of racial groupings (Farough 2004). By "deracializing" whiteness, it is rendered omnipresent and thus invisible, concealing the racialized mechanisms that maintain existing power relations (Garner 2007). One example of this effect is to delegitimize accusations of white privilege--as whites are just individuals and not a group--while at the

same time reinforcing stereotypical perceptions of the behaviors of racial minorities (Phoenix 1996). Consequently, when it comes to racism, whites are absolved of all group-level responsibility, with instances of racism viewed instead as resulting solely from individual prejudices (McKinney 2005). The general lack of minority representations in the media reinforces this idea of whiteness as "the" race (DeLuca 1999, Moon 1999, Levine 1994). If whiteness is the default, then seeing nothing but white people in movies, on TV, or in games is perfectly normal. For instance, in a large-scale content analysis of gender, race, and age representation of characters in video games, Williams et al. (2009) found a systematic overrepresentation of white males. The problem with the lack of diverse representation of video game characters is that a game player is not just a passive observer of the world, as with someone watching a movie or a television show, but an active participant (Taylor 2003). The player "existing" within the virtual world, interacting with others, and this world is almost always vastly white. Such "worlds of whiteness" may reinforce "white habitus," defined by Bonilla-Silva (2010: 104) as a "racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites' racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters." Bonilla-Silva argues that a critical factor in the creation and perpetuation of white habitus is the state of residential and social hypersegregation in which most whites live throughout their lives, which leads "them to develop positive views about themselves and negative views about racial others" (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2006: 229). Virtual spaces are similarly hypersegregated, as the inhabitants are vastly majority white.

When it comes to the racial composition of single-player game worlds, the onus falls on the game designers, who explicitly decide who does and does not exist within that world. But for online games, such as MMORPGs, the choices of other players will also determine what these worlds "look like" in terms of racial representation, assuming nonwhite players can represent their identities within the game world, such as with the appearance of their avatars. Multiple studies, however, have found a lack of non-white avatars in online games. In 2011, Rosa Mikeal Martey and Mia Consalvo examined avatar appearance in the game *Second Life* and found very few non-white avatars. They noted that the default avatar selection had few non-white racial options, concluding that "Caucasian face and hair characteristics are normative in *Second Life*." Similarly, Kafai (2010), who examined avatars in the game *Whyville*, also found players struggled to create

non-white avatars because, like in *Second Life*, there was a relative lack of non-white avatar creation options.

These studies suggest that design decisions by gaming companies reinforce normative whiteness by essentially mandating these virtual worlds be white spaces. Hogan (2010), in examining the presentation of self in social media, argues that social media requires exhibitions and activities expressed through status updates and photos. The same can be said to be true of online games. Here, one's primary exhibition is one's avatar, a (virtually) living, breathing entity "physically" representing the player in the game world. But Hogan makes another key observation: there is always a virtual "curator" of these exhibitions in social media in the form of algorithms that privilege certain kinds of exhibitions. Pearce (2009) makes a similar claim regarding game avatars. He explains avatar identities as the interactional products of a three-way conversation between the individual player, the community of other players, and the designers of the game world. The game itself is the medium through which all interactions occur; consequently, how the game world is set up, including the options the game designers allow for avatar creation, functions as a key part of this interactional process. In online games and avatar creation, it is not algorithms but the base capabilities of the game engine that "curate" the appearance of one's avatar. The game's designer chooses which skin tones, facial options, hair colors, and hairstyles are available to the player, thereby placing strict limits on the variability of avatar appearance. When non-white options are absent from avatar creation capabilities, the world is populated only by white avatars. Hence, not only are avatars "curated" to allow only whiteness, but the game world is also curated to create a white space. Consequently, it behooves scholars to critically examine the limitations placed on creating avatars, one's virtual online identity, by these curators of online games. In 2009, I found that out of 65 MMORPGs, only four had sufficient options to create a realistically "black" character. But things have changed considerably since that time. Technology has improved, allowing for more detailed character models. In addition, American society itself has changed, most notably in the renewed conversations about race inspired by the Black Lives Matter Movement. This study aims to reexamine the world of MMORPGs to determine if avatar creation capabilities have significantly changed over the past decade or whether these virtual spaces are still curated white spaces.

## Methods

To enable direct comparisons to the data from my 2009 project, I reproduced the method of my previous research. As in 2009, I conducted a comprehensive survey of the avatar creation capabilities of currently operating MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games). Specifically, I set out to examine all MMORPGs available for the Windows operating system (including browser-based games) that were available in English and accepting players from the United States during the Spring of 2021. As in 2009, there is no authoritative listing of all current MMORPGs, so I constructed a list from two online sources: *Gamespot* ([www.gamespot.com](http://www.gamespot.com)), a major online gaming website providing news and reviews of games of all kinds, which I also used in 2009, and *MMORPG.com*. This similar journalistic website concentrates specifically on news and reviews of MMORPGs. From *Gamespot*, I used their list of "MMOs." From *MMORPG.com*, I used their games list, filtering to include only MMORPGs on the Windows platform that were either in release or early access status. I compiled a list of nearly 300 currently operating MMORPGs from these two sites.

While gathering the data from these games, I found some were no longer in operation, had websites or servers that were not operational, or had clients that were either nonfunctional or triggered virus warnings. Additionally, just as in 2009, I limited my analysis to games where the player could create a visible human avatar. For example, games where the player controlled a vehicle or whose avatar was an animal were excluded. I also excluded those games whose graphical fidelity would not allow for the determination of the racial characteristics of the avatar (for example, many so-called "retro" games displayed at simulated low graphical resolutions). Finally, I excluded games that did not allow for some degree of customization of the physical features of avatars, so games that only offered premade avatars were not included. After excluding the above games, I analyzed a total of 86 games.

I used the same means of evaluating the racial representations made possible by each game's avatar creation system as in my original study. As before, this was challenging due to several factors. First, MMORPGs can vary wildly in graphical style and quality, from highly detailed and realistic three-dimensional modeled characters to highly stylized, hand-drawn two-dimensional images. Second, one rarely chooses the "race" of one's avatar. In none of the games I examined was there ever a menu or check box for "Caucasian," "Black," "Asian," etc. Instead, the player can choose various aspects of their avatar's

appearance, including skin color, hair style and color, and height.

Regarding facial appearance, some games offered a selection of premade faces, while others allowed for the customization of individual facial features. Where facial customization was allowed, some games gave players a selection of premade noses, lips, eyes, and other features. In contrast, other games used what is commonly known as a "morphing" system that allows for detailed customization of individual facial features--for example, one might be able to choose the angle of the nose, the width of the nostrils, placement of the nose on the face, etc. Many games, however, limit the selection of facial features, so it is not uncommon for a game to allow several non-white skin tones while offering no non-white hairstyles or facial features.

In my 2009 study, I examined to what degree it was possible to create a "Black" avatar in each game. I focused specifically on the ability to create Black avatars for several reasons. First, differences in graphical fidelity, artistic style, and game presentation makes subtle comparisons impossible. For example, the art style in many games, particularly games using hand-drawn characters, renders Asian and Caucasian character indistinguishable from one another. In other cases, objectively measuring subtle facial features is not possible due to the low graphical detail offered by many games. Thus, to compare a broad array of games I had to limit my analysis to those phenotypical features of avatars that are both present in most of the games and are sufficiently conspicuous, specifically skin color, hair style and color, and specific facial features, namely the nose and the mouth. Skin color is present and measurable in all games that have human avatars, regardless of graphical fidelity. Thus, dark skin color serves as the most easily visible and identifiable phenotypical feature available in all games. Second, all but one game had distinct hairstyles for their avatars. Since there is a set of hairstyles specifically associated with coarse African hair, these hairstyles were also easily identifiable, even in games with low graphical fidelity. Third, while not true of all games, most games also provided a minimal level of graphical detail to make basic determinations regarding the nose and the lips. Even games with only a moderate level of graphical detail allowed for an examination of the size and shape of the nose and lips, which was sufficient to distinguish between Caucasian and African features.

To determine the ability of the player to create a realistic "Black" avatar, I examined four readily visible racial markers: skin color, hairstyle, hair color, and facial features. As in 2009, I again used a collapsed version of the Von Luschan chromatic skin color scale (see Weller et al. 2008) to code for skin

color, which defines six categories of skin tones from very light to very dark. For each game, I coded for the darkest skin tone available for avatar creation. In 2009, I noted that most games did not offer sufficient graphical detail to determine hair texture. Thus, I concentrated solely on hair styles typically associated with coarse (African) hair, such as "Afros" or dreadlocks (Erasmus 2000). Although several games in this recent study provide sufficient graphical detail to determine hair texture at a basic level, I found that in almost all cases coarse hair textures were exclusively associated with the above hairstyles. As in 2009, I coded for the number and type of hairstyles that individuals with coarse hair could wear. In the case of ambiguous hairstyles (those that could be reasonably worn by individuals with either coarse or straight hair), I included those hairstyles if the graphical details were sufficient to determine that the hair itself was coarse. Ambiguous styles (e.g., shaved) were not included. In addition, I coded for the darkest available hair color as well.

In contrast to 2009, when several games lacked the graphical detail to allow for the examination of avatar facial features, most of the games I examined in this most recent study allowed for full evaluation of such features, including the eyes, nose, and mouth. Like the 2009 study, I coded for the ability of the player to create a face with African facial features. In the case of games that offered a selection of faces, I coded for the number of realistically African faces. For games that offered a selection of individual facial features, I coded for the number of realistically African faces that could be constructed from the available options. Finally, for games using facial "morphing," I coded whether the degree of morphing options allowed for the creation of a realistic African face. In addition, I noted cases in which the creation of Asian faces was possible as well.

## Results

**Table 1: Skin Color for MMORPGs**

None	15	(17.6%)
Category VI	43	(50.6%)
Category V	23	(27.1%)
Category IV and below	4	(04.7%)
Total	85	(100.0%)

### *Skin Color*

Of the 85 games examined, 16 had no options for avatar skin color (about 18% of the total games), and in all cases, the unchangeable "default" skin color was

white. While this is a significant improvement over the 2009 results, where 40% of games defaulted to white skin tones and did not allow customization, this still means that nearly one out of every five currently active MMORPGs explicitly disallows the creation of a character with a non-white skin tone. Of the remaining games that allowed for some degree of skin tone customization, most allowed the player to choose the skin tone of their avatar from a set of pre-generated skin tones or a limited color palette selector. Overall, just over half of the 85 games enabled the player to select a skin tone that rated a VI, the darkest category on the collapsed Von Luschn scale. An additional 23 games allowed skin color selection, but the darkest available only reached a V on the scale. Only four games significantly limited skin color selection to IV and below on the Von Luschn scale. One of those games, *La Tale*, possessed an in-game description of their darkest skin tone as "Dark Peach," while the game *Arcfall*, despite possessing several skin color presets, had none that could be described as non-white. A few games explicitly linked skin tone with other feature selections, such that only characters with certain other features (e.g., facial selections) would have a darker skin tone. The game *Eldevin*, for example, linked skin tone with selection of premade faces and did have options that allowed for the selection of skin tones that rated a VI on the collapsed Von Luschn scale. These skin tones were still weighted towards whiteness, however. Out of a total of 16 total faces, 5 were labeled in-game as "pale," 5 as "light", 4 as "medium" and only 2 as "dark." The game *Saga of Ryzom* has the player select from four fantasy "races," none of which are explicitly human, three of which has a fixed skin tone that ranges from white to brown (a V on the collapsed Von Luschn scale) and one possessing a nonhuman blue skin tone. *Lord of the Rings Online* employs a similar system, where the player first selects their fantasy "race" (human, elf, dwarf, etc) then selects their "origin," with only certain origins offering darker skin tones. *World of Warcraft*, the largest and most successful MMORPG in history, improved their avatar creation process in a 2020 update to allow for greater diversity in character creation. Their new system provides a set of 36 faces, 12 of which are associated with white skin tones, 12 with brown skin tones (V on the collapsed Von Luschn scale), and 12 with dark skin tones (VI on the collapsed Von Luschn scale). And the game *Mortal Online* had a unique method of choosing an avatar's skin tone. The player chooses the base appearance of their avatar by specifying their ancestors, specifically their grandparents. The game has multiple human-like races, one of which is "black" (that is, possessing a skin tone that rates a VI on the collapsed Von Luschn scale), and by selecting the

grandparents of one's avatar as members of this race, one's character will have a dark skin tone. One's skin tone, however, is limited to characters of that in-game ancestry.

As in 2009, a handful of games that linked skin tones to in-game fantasy races appeared to draw upon racial stereotypes in how they associated the traits of those darker-skinned "races." For example, in the game *EVE Online*, one of the few games that was operating in 2009 and is still in service today, improved their avatar creation process to allow for darker skin tones among all their in-game races. Nevertheless, the only race to have a default appearance with a nonwhite skin tone is the "Brutor" race, who are former slaves within the game's lore. Brutor, furthermore, is described as a "swarthy" race that favors "physical prowess." *Rohan: Blood Feud* also limits skin tones to certain in-game races. In this game, the only race that allows even a mildly dark skin tone is the "Giant" race, who possess horns on their heads and are described primarily in terms of their strength. The game *Shaiya*, described as a "massive war between the forces of Light and Darkness," allows the player to select a fantasy race belonging to either of these forces. However, the selectable races for the "good guys" have notably lighter skin tones than those of the "bad guys." *Pirates of the Burning Sea* offered four default characters, and the only one with darker skin was the pirate. In each of these cases, we see existing racial stereotypes regarding physical and athletic prowess and negative personality and moral traits reinforced by the way these games have implicitly associated certain in-game "races" with darker skin tones.

**Table 2: "African" Hairstyle Options for MMORPGs**

None	50	(59.5%)
One hairstyle	11	(13.1%)
Two hairstyles	8	(9.5%)
Three or more hairstyles	15	(17.9%)
Total	84	(100.0%)

#### *Hairstyle/Color*

All games offered the ability to select hair color and hairstyle without exception, although one game, *Combat Arms*, lacked the graphical detail necessary to evaluate the hairstyles. All but six games provided a relatively comprehensive set of hair colors, from very light to very dark. Most hairstyles, however, involved straight hair. Almost 60% of the games I examined

offered no hairstyles that could be naturally worn by those with coarse "African" hair (which, for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to as "African" hairstyles). Compared with the 65% of games in 2009 that offered no African hairstyles, there has barely been an improvement in the overall number of games offering such hairstyles. For the 2021 games that did offer African hairstyles, however, they offer a greater variety of African hairstyles with short-cropped natural African hair, Afros, dreadlocks, and "cornrows" appearing in multiple games. Furthermore, 15 games in this study offered three or more African hairstyles (almost 18% of the games analyzed), compared to only 9% of games in 2009. What is more, several of these games offered far more than three hairstyles, such as *Grand Fantasia*, which offered over a dozen "African" hairstyles. *Champions Online*, a superhero-themed game, offered six distinct hairstyles; *Star Trek Online*, based on the sci-fi television and movie franchise of the same name, offered nine variations on cropped natural hair; and *Mabinogi*, an anime-styled game based loosely on Welsh mythology, offered five variations on the Afro.

**Table 3: Facial Feature Options for MMORPGs**

Face Selection	
White faces only	25 (39.1%)
Non-white faces	15 (23.4%)
Morphing/Feature Selection	
Non-white faces impossible	9 (14.1%)
Non-white faces possible	15 (23.4%)
Total	64 (100.0%)

#### *Facial Features*

It was not possible to evaluate the existence of options necessary to create realistic "African" faces for all games due to graphical limitations. This was a larger problem in this study compared to the 2009 study, with 20 games having to be excluded for lack of sufficient facial detail this time as compared to just four games in 2009. This is possibly due to the proliferation of free-to-play browser-based MMORPGs, which typically offer less graphical detail than standalone applications. A total of 64 games offered sufficient graphical detail to determine the details of facial features. One notable change from 2009 was the fact that, of all the games that did offer sufficient detail to examine facial features, all offered some degree of facial customization, even if it was just a selection of premade faces. This contrasts with 2009, where nearly

17% of games that had sufficient facial detail offered no facial customization.

Games in this most recent study also offered more options and complex methods for selecting facial features. Of the 64 games analyzed, three methods were offered to select facial features. Some games, such as *World of Warcraft* mentioned previously, offered the player a selection of premade faces. Others offered the player a selection of individual facial features, enabling the player to choose from a set of eyes, noses, lips, and other features from a premade set to "assemble" a face. Still others offered what has generally been known as "morphing," which allows for manual adjustment of fine details of the face, including things such as eye size and angle, nose width and height on the face, and lip height and width, among many others. In comparison with the games from 2009, there were many more games offering the more complex methods of facial selection (feature selection and morphing), presumably due to improvements in game engine complexity over the past decade.

Of those games that only offered a selection of premade faces, 25 (nearly 40%) offered no faces with noticeably non-Anglo features. However, four of these games offered faces that could have been classified as Asian but were too ambiguous in appearance to offer any conclusive classification. Fifteen games with premade faces offered noticeably non-Anglo faces. Of these 15, however, three offered no faces with African features or Asian features, and only four games offered a selection of faces that included faces with both African and Asian features. As in 2009, most games that offered a selection of faces offered only a handful of non-Anglo faces to choose from, often just one or two, with a few significant outliers like *World of Warcraft* which, as detailed earlier, offers 12 "black" faces and 12 "brown" faces.

A common problem with several of these games was how the characters and their faces were customized. Most games, especially those only offering a selection of whole faces, do not place a great deal of detail in the faces of characters. Accurate modeling of the human face would require very complex geometry for each character's face, creating resource management issues for players and game servers. A common "shortcut" to facial variation is to create just one face using "generic" geometry and then to apply different "textures," which are essentially surface-level graphical overlays, to those faces. While this method can arguably produce moderately realistic facial features in some cases, including the appearance of eye shape, wrinkles, scars, and so forth, it is nearly impossible to use only textures to realistically modify some facial features, such as the size and shape of the nose, which is highly dependent on underlying facial geometry. Hence, games that only alter facial textures

can generally not offer realistic "African" faces due to this limitation. While there were far fewer such games in this most recent data, there were games, such as *Anarchy Online*, that offered purportedly "African" faces but lacked the geometry changes to make them truly believable. A total of nine games had faces that differed by texture only, and of those only two attempted to offer non-Anglo faces. One game, *Combat Arms*, was unusual in that it offered a single male head that that allowed noticeably "African" features, but the corresponding female head, while it had dark skin, had the same geometry as the standard Anglo head. While this is just a single case, one wonders if racialized standards of beauty (Silvestrini 2020) were involved in this design decision, favoring Anglo facial geometry even for the dark-skinned female head to make it appear more "attractive." In many ways, facial morphing seems like an obvious solution to the problem of overly restrictive facial selections. After all, if the player can modify minute facial features exactly to their liking, then theoretically any kind of face should be able to be constructed (although it's also possible for the game to lack corresponding skin tone and hair options, as detailed above). Unfortunately, however, even facial morphing systems often have restrictions placed on them that make it impossible to create a face with realistic "African" features. In 2021, 24 games offered facial morphing, more than twice as many as in 2009. Of these 24 games, 15 of them had sufficient latitude in their capabilities to create realistically "African" facial features, while nine did not. Therefore, while facial morphing technology is not a panacea for the problem of lack of non-Anglo facial options, most games in 2021 that offered facial morphing did allow the player to create a realistic "African" face for their avatar. Several games with facial morphing offered preset faces to start with, which the player could then customize. It is notable, however, that only one game analyzed, *Guild Wars 2*, offered several presets for "African"-looking faces.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In this study I examined to what degree it is possible to create nonwhite avatars in contemporary MMORPGs, specifically in contrast to the capabilities of such games in 2009. My findings show that while there has been a marked improvement in games offering the features necessary to create a realistically Black avatar, primarily improvements in skin tone and facial feature selection, most games do not have sufficient options for players to create Black avatars. Only 13 of 85 games offered a combination of skin tone, hair style, and facial selection options to create

an avatar with realistic "African" features, though these games did include several of the most populous MMORPGs operating today. While this does offer hope for the diversification of the virtual worlds of these popular games, the fact remains that most games offer only superficial features, usually skin tone adjustments, for players to represent nonwhite avatars. As Nishi et al. (2015) argues, the creation of white avatars "maintains and justifies" white hegemony, which has grave implications for game worlds where the only avatars that are allowed to exist are white.

This study establishes the capabilities of players to create nonwhite avatars and hopefully will serve as the foundation for other studies to pursue these themes further. While my data shows what kinds of avatars may inhabit online game worlds, it does not address what kinds of avatars do inhabit those worlds. Even when players can make nonwhite avatars, to what degree do they do so? For games like *World of Warcraft*, which only added the capabilities to create nonwhite avatars in 2019, did significant numbers of players create nonwhite avatars or alter the appearance of their existing avatars to be nonwhite? Future research could involve a virtual census of sorts to gauge the actual nonwhite population of various game worlds and address the implications of such.

Additionally, these findings raise several questions regarding the actual reactions of players to nonwhite avatars. Are there significant differences in interactions with players embodying visibly nonwhite avatars? What about avatars in games where the creation of a realistically nonwhite character is impossible? If one creates a character with a dark skin tone but otherwise Anglo features, how do other players perceive that avatar? An examination of player attitudes and behaviors towards those playing nonwhite avatars offers great potential for future research.

An aspect of avatar creation and representation not examined comprehensively here is the issue of nonhuman avatars. Many if not most, MMORPGs have their own fantasy "races," including Orcs, Elves, and Dwarves, among many others. What is more, scholars have noted how, in some cases, the described characteristics of these races draw from stereotypical portrayals of real-world racial minority groups. Aleiss (2005) noted that Native American stereotypes were used to characterize both the Tauren and Orc races of *World of Warcraft*. Also, Monson (2012) argues that *World of Warcraft* is a race-based society, reinforcing the idea of biological essentialism about race through the establishment and portrayal of its fictional races, linking cultural behaviors to biology. It does so by drawing upon these stereotypical representations of real-world racial and ethnic groups, which results in the game becoming "part of an ever-expanding



hegemony that propagates racial mythologies" (Monson 2012: 68). A more comprehensive survey of nonhuman races in MMORPGs, with comparisons to stereotypical minority depictions, could be a fruitful avenue of research.

I do not claim that the designers of these games decided to exclude nonwhite avatars from being created in their game worlds due to any explicit racist intent. Rather, the patterns of avatar creation features suggest that game designers did not think about nonwhite avatars, reflective of the dominance of normative whiteness throughout most of the world. Nevertheless, the consequences of the inability to create nonwhite avatars, namely the creation of white spaces online and the perpetuation of white habitus within these spaces, exist regardless of the designers' intent. In 2009, I wrote that we live in the nascent era of online communities and virtual spaces. This is no longer the case, especially after the COVID pandemic. Online communities, such as Facebook, have matured into highly effective and vital means of communication and connection for some. Online gaming, similarly, has become the norm rather than the exception, with the stereotype of the "lone gamer" long forgotten in the wake of long-running MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* and other forms of online gaming. The increasing importance of online gaming and online interaction, in general, underscores the need for further research into issues of race and whiteness in virtual spaces, as these spaces are rapidly becoming one of the dominant ways, if not the dominant way, of people communicating and organizing in the 21st century.

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