High tech blackface: Race, sports, video games and becoming the other

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At 20, Jeremy Deberry surely is the best football player at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, N.V. He practices six days a week, plays both ways and is generally regarded by his peers as among the nation's elite performers, having earned the moniker the Champ. Few address the sophomore as anything but.

The accolades above were not directed at a high school all-American or even a finalist for the John Wooden award, but a video game player. Jeremy Deberry is one of many talented virtual athletes, caching in on hand-eye success with fame and fortune. Donning jerseys, taking trash, and working from excessive levels of testosterone, these virtual sporting competitions are a rip off source of critical inquiry. Whether examining the performativity of masculinity, heterosexuality and whiteness, these emerging public competitions replicate the ideologies and nature of nineteenth century minstrelsy. The resemblance to minstrelsy transcends the fact that white cyber athletes primarily compete, but with the ideologies, images and power that define this high-tech form of blackface.

The sports gaming industry is the crown jewel of the video games world. It is a one billion dollar per year industry; sports games account for more than thirty percent of all video games sales. While Tony Hawk and other extreme sports games, all of which deploy race (whiteness) in particular ways, are growing increasingly popular, the most popular games remain those sports dominated by black athletes. Since 1989, over 19 million units of John Madden Football have been sold. In 2002 alone, EA sports sold 4.5 million units. [2] "Today's gaming resides squarely in mainsteam America, and for them fantasy means Tigers and Kobes. [3] As such, sports games represent a genre in which characters of color exist as actors (protagonists) rather than victims or aesthetic scenery. Eight out of ten black male video game characters are sports competitors; black males, thus, only find visibility in sports games. Just in larger society, the video game industry confines and controls through image and ideology black men to the virtual sports world, limiting the range and depth of imagery. It is our task to examine briefly the range of images, in terms of both individual and communal representations, demonstrating the ideological and representational connections between minstrelsy and the virtual sporting world.

High-Tech Blackface

In a recent interview, Adam Clayton Powell III referred to video games as "high-tech blackface." arguing that "because the players become involved in the action ... they become more aware of the moves that are programmed into the game." [4] With this in mind, this paper explores the ways in which sports games reflect a history of minstrelsy, providing its primarily white creators and players the opportunity to become black. [5] In doing so, these games elicit pleasure, playing on white fantasies as they simultaneously affirm white privilege through virtual play.

According to historian Eric Lott, minstrelsy was a "manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of blackness and demonstrates the permeability of the color line." He writes that blackface "facilitate[s] an exchange of energies between two otherwise rigidly bounded and policed cultures." Like minstrelsy, video games may be "less a sign of absolute power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure." [6] Video games break down these same fixed boundaries with ease, given their virtual realism, allowing its participants to try on the other, the taboo, the dangerous, the forbidden and the otherwise unacceptable. [7]

A Return to Minstrelsy: Sports in its Purest Form

Imitation, in both the real and virtual worlds, is not the highest form of flattery. Norman Mailer, in his often cited, 1957 piece entitled "The White Negro" asserts, "It is no accident that the source of hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries." Video games reflect this cultural reality, bespeaking black cooshness through its ubiquitous articulations of white supremacist ideologies, grounded in a belief of black savagery and animalism (athleticism). These powerful ideologies emanate through these games, and reflect their connection to minstrelsy. Elijah Anderson, a professor of sociology at University of Pennsylvania, argues that abundance of racial stereotypes reflects longstanding fascination with blackness as mysterious and cool, while simultaneously playing to deep-seeded desires and needs of white game enthusiasts. "Blacks have always been the other in this country. Many people living in the suburbs admire this fire and this funk they see in blacks, a kind of aggressiveness a lot of them want too. A lot of these suburban, white-bread kids hunger for this kind of experience." [8] As with the history of minstrelsy, sampling of the other is neither liberatory nor transgressive – it does not unsettle dominant notions through breaking down barriers or increasing exposure. The ideas of blackness introduced through video games reflect dominant ideologies, thereby providing sanction for the status quo, legitimacy for white supremacy and evidence for the common sense ideas of race, gender, sexuality and nation.

Sports games represent a site in which white hatred and disdain for blackness and its love and adoration for blackness is revealed through popular culture. In borrowing from Eric Lott's work on minstrelsy, video games reflect, "the dialectical thickening of racist insult and racist envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterpoint and currency." [9] In other words, these games reveal white supremacy in the form of both contempt and desire. The contempt materializes in different ways, but in reflecting an oppositional binary, sports games legitimize stereotypical ideas about black athletic superiority and white intellectual abilities. The adoration materializes in the approval and value we offer black athletes, whether through financial rewards, posters on our walls, or imitation. Video games fulfill our desire to not only emulate Allen Iverson's killer crossover, Shaq's thunderous dunks, Barry Bonds' homerun swing, or Barry Sanders spins, but allow the virtually occupation of black bodies. It provides the means to experience these supposedly unattainable skills, while deriving pleasure through black male bodies. The desire to be "black" because of the stereotypical visions of strength, athleticism, power and sexual potency all play out within the virtual reality of sports games. As Janis Joplin once noted, "being black for a white, will make [you] a better white." Video games, like hip-hop and Malcolm X had, provide this opportunity, facilitating a process of racial cross-dressing in which a primarily white game playing population sample the other, experiencing an imagined coolness associated with America's vision of blackness.

The Virtual Black Athletic Body

It becomes quite clear through these games that blacks dominate America's major sports and do so because of genetics. In each of the sports games, the emphasis lies with black male bodies, whether physically and musculature, or pure athleticism. The cover of NFL Street embodies the racial test of sports video games. A muscle-bound Ricky Williams, who bulges out of the box, is breaking free from a tackle of Shannon Sharpe. While the emphasis on their muscles (ten times their life size), and tattoos plays to authentic visions of blackness, the depiction of each man as virtual gorillas situates this game within the larger project of black minstrelsy.

Beyond the images, black virtual athletes invariably reflect dominant visions of blackness as it relates to athleticism. Whereas white athletes succeed because of hard work, the mastery of black athletes emanates from their God-given/genetic talents. The discerning articulations within both the virtual and the real worlds that positions black athletes as genetically athletically dialectically reinforce one another, articulating and disseminating this widespread racial project.

Jumping as high as the sun, knocking their competitors through concrete walls, and making unattainable moves on the court, sports games reveal both innate black athleticism and their superhuman strength, endurance, speed, and jumping ability. The few white players who do appear within NBA Street, NFL Street, and several other games have nowhere near the athleticism or the muscles of the black players. The white player's dominance comes from their ability to shoot, which comes from hard work and long hours on the court, not good genes.

The genre of sports games represents a site of pleasure in which game players secure happiness through virtually occupying black bodies. G. Richard King & Charles Springwood argue that the "black athlete has been constructed as a site of pleasure, dominance, fantasy, and surveillance." While certainly not writing about video games, they further argue, "African Americans have been essentially inverted, politicled and literally (re)colonized through Euro-American ideas such as discipline, deviance and desire." [10] Idioidal to real the world of sports, and its
surrounding discourse, sports games indulge white pleasures as they affirm stereotypical visions of black bodies, as physical, aggressive and violent, while simultaneously minimizing the importance of intellectualism and hard work in understanding the supposed dominance of black athletes.

A majority of sports games, from those based in real life to the extreme fantasy, depict black males as physically and verbally aggressive and having unusual body types. Black men are excessively muscular and hyper-masculine, talking trash and crushing bodies with sheer force. Black players trend to engage in verbal assault with greater frequency as well. A study by Fair Play Football, an initiative of African American sports competitors engaged in verbally and physically aggressive behavior, compared to fifty-seven percent of white characters. The proliferation of hip hop / street games has further led to the exaggeration of blatant racialized stereotypes and tropes.

Given the dominance of black men within virtual sporting events, there lies a necessity of control and surveillance. The performativity of sports video games and their popularity, in fact, reflects a desire to reclaim and control the world of sports, sanctioning, and ultimately controlling black bodies. As blacks supposedly control sports in the real world, video games allow white players not only to control the other, but to discipline and punish. While there are a number of potential examples, I want to talk briefly about NFL Street.

While encouraging taunting, through bonus points and rewards (“stylin is what separates the players from the Playa”), the game seems to police this practice as well. As you showboat, you run the risk of fumbling or otherwise stumbling in the game – there are consequences for playing streetball. After your first fumble, I fell ten on the ropes, landing 52-34 (on the street) to play NFL Street. All I needed was a touchdown. With a tinge of nervousness, I launched a pass across the field, completing it through a sea of defenders. As my man marched toward the promise land, I decided to hold the ball back over my head as to rub my imminent victory into my imagined opponent’s face. I started to half-cough the ball up right on my way to a touchdown. I could hear Chick Hearn screaming “the mustaf is off the hot dog” or the voice of any number of announcers that habitually condemn and demonize black athletes more than any other group. Hence, the game encourages the exploitative pleasure of cruel behavior and the perpetuation of stereotypes.

The exploitative relationship with the black community and the video game industry continues to pervade American discourses. Moreover, the players benefit through the consumption of inner-city communities, which is imagined as black. As games glamorize inner city spaces, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play the game. Blacks are positioned as consumers of street games and their popularity, in fact, reflects a desire to reclaim and control the world of sports, sanctioning, and ultimately controlling black bodies. The ubiquitous focus on street basketball and the glorification of de-industrialized spaces contribute to common sense ideas of inner-city communities and the constancy of play with the black community. For example, NFL Street takes traditional football gaming into both the streets and realm of hip-hop. As you start against the NFC and AFC West, the initial battles take place on the EA Sports campus, a nice brick wall for out-of-bounds, and the Pacific Ocean, littered about, and a Tradition Park, where waves prove to be the only obstacles to a touchdown. Upon defeat of all eight teams, you are able to unlock the other conferences, battling on the dangerous streets of Detroit or New York rooftops. Interesting, and not surprisingly given its namesake, the goal of the game is to be able to play on the streets, within America’s ghettos, rather than on a sports field.

The popularity of the game has less to do with its gameplay, but its emphasis on an imagined street (black) culture. Whether the never-ending hip-hop soundtrack or the numerous shots of graffiti art, the game plays America’s love affair with urban America, particularly that which is imagined as criminalizing them seedy and dangerous places. As the suburbanization continues, it worsens these spaces of life. Reflecting the hyper-visibility and glorification of de-industrialized inner city community, games like NFL Street and Street Hopes reflect the commodification of African American players and street culture, as life-sized play with the black community. For example, NFL Street takes traditional football gaming into both the streets and realm of hip-hop. As you start against the NFC and AFC West, the initial battles take place on the EA Sports campus, a nice brick wall for out-of-bounds, and the Pacific Ocean, littered about, and a Tradition Park, where waves prove to be the only obstacles to a touchdown. Upon defeat of all eight teams, you are able to unlock the other conferences, battling on the dangerous streets of Detroit or New York rooftops. Interesting, and not surprisingly given its namesake, the goal of the game is to be able to play on the streets, within America’s ghettos, rather than on a sports field.

Virtual Playing Fields

The most popular genre within the sports game the street basketball game, as evident in both NBA Street, Street Hopes and NFL Street. The problematic nature of the commodification of stereotypes that embarks on various forms of sports video games is quite remarkable; marketed by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scarred walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play the game. These televisual representations of “street ball” are quite remarkable; marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scarred walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play the game. Thus the commodification of black urban aesthetics, in the form of trash-talking, taunting, showboating, tattoos, earrings, violence and aggressive behavior signifies patterns of minstrelsy given the pleasure of becoming the or becoming part of an imagined black body, community, or aesthetic.

Writing about shoe commercials, Robin Kelley argues that popular images of street basketball “romanticize[s] the crumbling urban spaces in which African American youth play.” Such “representations of street ball” are quite remarkable; marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scarred walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play the game. “[The] process of commodification is not limited to the generation of pleasure of black bodies and ghettoes within the sport, but also extends to common sense ideas of inner-city communities and the constancy of play with the black community.” These televisual representations of “street ball” are quite remarkable; marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scarred walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play the game. These televisual representations of “street ball” are quite remarkable; marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scarred walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play the game.

In other words, those living outside these communities often refuse to engage “ghettoes” at a political, economic or social level, but enjoy playing inside those spaces from the safety of their own home.

Moreover, the ideological role of limiting discussions of community to the play that transpires within such communities obfuscates the daily struggles and hardship in the lives of the poor and working class in the US. To make the sport available to all, the NFL and EA have created a world where young black males do nothing but play the game. “[The] process of commodification is not limited to the generation of pleasure of black bodies and ghettoes within the sport, but also extends to common sense ideas of inner-city communities and the constancy of play with the black community.” These televisual representations of “street ball” are quite remarkable; marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scarred walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play the game.

Nike, Reebok, L.A. Gear, and other athletic shoe conglomerates have profited enormously from the production and sale of athletic shoes. The use of hip-hop and rap music in advertisements is quite remarkable; marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scarred walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play the game. The process of commodification is not limited to the generation of pleasure of black bodies and ghettoes within the sport, but also extends to common sense ideas of inner-city communities and the constancy of play with the black community.

NBA Tonight has become commonplace in the world of sports to blur reality with the virtual through the deployment of video games. Whether on TNT’s NBA Tonight or ESPN’s College Game Day, the sports are increasingly relying on video games technology as a tool of imagination and fantasy. By playing virtual game footage, critics are now able to force sports to be played even if the big city star is injured, or see a pass play despite the coach’s decision to run at the end of the game. Whether on ESPN.com or within sports telecasts, the last five years have thus witnessed a merging of the virtual and the real within the sport.

Beyond the fictitious desires or that of spectators, sports video games increasingly serve as a tool of prognostication. If you are curious about the outcome of a game or are planning to make wager, video games exist as a pedantic source of information. This was no truer than during the pre-game festivities for the 2004 Super Bowl. As the teams prepared in the locker room, the CBS pre-game show provided viewers with a preview using virtual technology – EA Sports Football. As to further obfuscate the divide between virtual and real, their homage to video games allowed not just representations of game and players, but a virtual reincarnation of the announcers as well. Upon completion of the simulated scenarios that might present themselves after kickoff, the coverage fluidly shifted from the virtual conversations of Jim Nantz, Boomer Esiason,
Today, video games make up a $100 billion global industry, and nearly two-thirds of American homes have household members who play video games regularly. And itâ€™s really no wonder: Video games have been around for decades and span the gamut of platforms, from arcade systems, to home consoles, to handheld consoles and mobile devices. Theyâ€™re also often at the forefront of computer technology. The Early Days.Â Atari settled and became an Odyssey licensee; over the next 20 years, Magnavox went on to win more than $100 million in copyright lawsuits related to the Odyssey and its video game patents.Â And despite being technologically inferior to the other two systems, the Wii trounced its competition in sales. Blackface refers to the use of theatrical makeup by non-black actors to parody black characters onstage. It has a long history in America, particularly from the 1800s to the 1960s, and helped white performers profit off of black stereotypes while denying actual black performers a place onstage. Supporters of blackface compare it to other types of play acting and claim that it can heal racial divides through a celebration of racial diversity. Hereâ€™s a video of Hides performing a parody of â€œDiamonds Are a Girlâ€™s Best Friendâ€:}

References:
[3] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid. [2]
[12] Ibid., p. 195-196
[13] This term was initially offered by Joe Feagin and Hernan Vera in White Racism: The Basics (New York: Routledge, 1995) to refer to white myths about race and communities of color within contemporary America.

Bibliography