Queer female of color: The highest difficulty setting there is? Gaming rhetoric as gender capital

Author(s): Lisa Nakamura

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Lisa Nakamura
University of Michigan - Ann Arbor

On May 15, 2012 popular science fiction writer John Scalzi published a post to his blog *Whatever* entitled "Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting That There Is." I learned about Scalzi as did many non-fans, through John Schwartz's admiring New York Times piece published July 6, 2012, which cited two influential and eloquent blog posts he had written that had gone viral: "Being Poor" and "Straight White Male." (Read "Being Poor." It will break your heart, as will the hundreds of comments from readers who share their personal narratives of the unique humiliations of poverty. Here's one: "Being poor is fighting with someone you love because they misplaced a $15 dollar check.")

As Schwartz writes, Scalzi posts to *Whatever* almost every day, and the blog gets over 50,000 hits a day. Scalzi covers a huge variety of topics, but these two posts on poverty, race, class, and gender have reached the widest audience and generated the most commentary and controversy because he writes from a position of absolutely unassailable white geek masculinity as a popular science fiction writer. Media fandom has taken on a newfound social currency as an indicator of masculinity in the post-internet age, and producers of sci-fi "canons" such as Scalzi have correspondingly become bigger dogs in the popular culture sphere. Scalzi skillfully deploys the cultural capital he enjoys as a much-admired and widely read science fiction writer as a means to assert a new form of patriarchal power -- geek masculinity -- and he employs the rhetoric of gaming to solidify his authority with male readers, for whom digital games have become a form of social capital.

Scalzi exercises a great deal of thoughtful and expert control over reader participation; he has an elaborate commenting policy, in which he reserves the right to delete or "mallet" posts that he finds offensive, and he has been known to shut down comment threads when they get too long or feel unproductive to him. However, even he expressed surprise at how controversial the "Straight White Male" piece proved to be. He published two follow-ups to the piece responding to the thousands of mostly-angry responses he received specifically from white male readers. In the second of these he wrote that it has "been fun and interesting watching the Intarweebs basically explode over it, especially the subclass of Straight White Males who cannot abide the idea that their lives play out on a fundamentally lower difficulty setting than everyone else's, and have spun themselves up in tight, angry circles because I dared to suggest that they do."

The "Straight White Male" piece is short, sweet, and eloquent. It's easy to see why it went viral. It employs the discourse of video gaming, one assumed to come naturally to "dudes," Scalzi's stated intended audience, as a metaphor for explaining how race and gender confer automatic, unasked-for, mechanical advantages on players who are lucky enough to be born white and male. Just like the difficulty level one chooses while playing a game, these advantages gradually become *invisible* as the player becomes immersed in the game. What does become noticeable are deviations from this norm--when a quest is "too hard" the player may become aware of the

difficulty setting that they chose, but otherwise that decision *as* a decision fades into the background. This is, indeed, how privilege works in "real life."

The term "game mechanic" doesn't appear in the piece but it underlies the argument throughout, explaining how points that a player can spend on advantages like "talent," "wealth," "charisma," and "intelligence" are distributed by "the computer," and that players must "deal with them," just like they must in real life. This argument makes racism and sexism seem socially neutral, mechanical, structural, and not a personal act of aggression or oppression perpetrated upon one person by another. In short, they are institutional, invisible, "mechanical," always business, never personal. Indeed, as Scalzi states at the beginning of the piece, his purpose in using gaming as a metaphor for life was to avoid the use of the term "privilege" altogether, since straight white men react badly to it. As he writes, "So, the challenge: how to get across the ideas bound up in the word "privilege," in a way that your average straight white man will *get*, without freaking out about it?"

Indeed, Scalzi's argument is successful because it allows his privileged readers to abstract themselves from the equation and see understand racial and gender privilege not as something that they are "doing," but rather as a structural benefit that they receive without trying. All gamers understand that the ludic world is above all *constructed*, in the most literal sense. If a boss or a monster kills you, you cannot take it personally -- likewise, if you pick up a rare epic weapon, you cannot really claim credit for having "earned" it since it's a programmed part of the environment. Scalzi understands above all that his readers cannot tolerate the feeling of being blamed for their privilege. Explaining race and gender as a structural advantage, an aspect of a made environment that was designed to reward some types and punish others, lets white male readers hold themselves blameless for their own advantages.

Many of Scalzi's critics object that his metaphor isn't perfect, since some games do let players choose many aspects of their identities, and game mechanics and difficulty settings work differently in different games. Nonetheless, the basic premise -- that difficulty settings create a pervasive experience of ease or hardship and affects every aspect of a gamer's experience, just as do race and gender -- certainly help us understand how privilege works in "real life."

However, the way that this argument works perpetuates the notion that men are *automatic* members of geek and gamer culture (which many men are not) and that women aren't. As a man, Scalzi employs the discourse of gaming--leveling, "points," dump stats--as a technique to appeal, specifically, to straight white men like himself, who "like women." (And presumably don't want to see them oppressed; cranky women just aren't as fun for men to be around!). Heteronormative white masculinity is equated with expert, fan knowledge of gaming mechanics, structures, discourses--what Mia Consalvo has dubbed "gaming capital" in her [excellent study of games and cheating](). Scalzi employs this language's value as a system of signification marked as inherently masculine. Gaming discourse becomes a male backchannel.

This technique is very effective because gaming capital is in fact *aspirational* for many young male players, as much a goal as it is a reality. Masculinity is performed by the display of technical knowledge, and gaming is the most recent iteration of this form of social display. Gaming itself becomes a mark of privilege within symbolic discourse. Even men who have no idea what "dump stats" are hailed by this argument because gaming capital is assumed to be

intrinsically masculine. As George Lipsitz, another white male critic of white male privilege, puts it in his writing on the possessive investment in whiteness, the "dump stat" of gaming discourse is difference itself.

In an example of publishing on the lowest difficulty setting, Scalzi's essay got much more play on the Interwebz than postings on this topic by any female games or science fiction blogger. While digital media and publishing have definitely changed the way that feminist scholars work by giving us more and faster outlets to publish for a public audience, there is no doubt that we are working at the *highest* difficulty setting. Most of us don't have 50,000 readers, and are not popular science fiction authors with ties to the television industry: not that most men are either, but some men are, and no women are. Scalzi would be the first person to acknowledge this.

As Scalzi puts it, "the player who plays on the "Gay Minority Female" setting? *Hardcore*." Women of color gamers who publicly identify with the culture of gaming find themselves shunned, mocked, and generally treated in ways that are far worse than one could find in almost any other social context. Aisha Tyler, an African American actress who has appeared on television programs like *24*, found out what it meant to be perceived as an intruder to "gamer culture." After she emceed the Ubisoft demo at the Electronic Entertainment Expo more commonly known as E3, the largest and most important gaming industry conference, the backlash against her presence on social media like NeoGAF, YouTube and Twitter started with the terms "annoying fucking bitch" and went on in a similar vein. As *Kotaku* noted in "Aisha Tyler Rants ['I've Been a Gamer Since Before You Could Read,'](#)" The trollery directed at her exemplifies a troubling problem at the core of nerd culture. A hardcore base wants respect and recognition for the merits of whatever they love, be it comics, games or something else. But when someone they perceive as an outsider professes to share this love, the pitchforks come out.

Tyler responded with a [beautifully written essay](#) (not a rant!) on her Facebook page. She writes

"I go to E3 each year because I love video games.
Because new titles still get me high.
Because I still love getting swag.
Love wearing my gamer pride on my sleeve.
People ask me what console I play.
Motherfucker, ALL of them."

Aisha Tyler's presence at E3 presenting for Ubisoft constitutes a black, female claim to gaming capital. It is hardcore, to use Scalzi's term, and immensely threatening. It is abundantly apparent that the more gaming capital becomes identified with white masculinity, the more bitter the battle over its distribution, possession, and circulation will become. As gaming culture becomes more heavily capitalized both economically and symbolically, it becomes both more important for women to gain positions of power as critics, makers, and players, and more likely that it will be denied.

Gaming space is part and parcel of what George Lipsitz calls the "white spatial imaginary," and the stakes for keeping women and people of color out are the same as they were during

redlining, blockbusting, and other techniques to police movement and claims to space in America. As George Lipsitz writes in *How Racism Takes Place*, "because whiteness rarely speaks its names or admits to its advantages, it requires the construction of devalued and even demonized Blackness to be credible and legitimate. Although the white spatial imaginary originates mainly in appeals to the financial interests of whites rather than to simple fears of otherness, over times it produces a fearful relationship to the specter of Blackness." (37). Google Books categorizes this book under "Business and Economics." Word.

Feminist scholars have been at the forefront of giving scholarly legitimation to the existence of virtual community through their ethnographic and theoretical academic writing. T.L. Taylor, Sherry Turkle, Sandy Stone, Lori Kendall, Tom Boellstorff, and Bonnie Nardi have wonderful monographs to this end. Most traditional anthropologists and sociologists were hostile to this idea when these works were published, yet today there is wide agreement that online communities create real affective environments with real economic value. The battle to legitimate online community as an area of study has been won; today we know that online community is real by the sound of keystrokes and game controller buttons as players enter their credit card numbers into their computers or consoles to purchase time in *World of Warcraft* or Xbox Live. However, though most agree that racism and sexism absolutely permeate game culture and the online and offline communities and narratives that constitute it, few seem to care, and even straight white males like Scalzi who write about it publicly are castigated. (For an antidote to this, Mary Flanagan's book *Critical Play*. Seriously).

Though some of his thousands of readers may have violently disagreed with him, Scalzi was read and taken seriously. When a woman of color gamer like Aisha Tyler appears in public to talk about games, she is not taken seriously. She has to defend her credibility as a gamer, something that Scalzi is not asked to do. While commenters argued with his interpretation of how game mechanics worked, nobody claimed that he had never played them, a charge with which Tyler, despite her very public profile as a gamer, had to contend.

It's one thing to say that women and non-whites are playing "the game of life" in hardcore mode -- woman of color feminism has been telling us this for years. (See Grace Hong's work on the Combahee River Collective in her powerful and rigorous monograph *Ruptures of Capital*). And even the popular press has taken note of the egregious state of gaming for women and minorities: this August the *New York Times* published an article entitled "In Virtual Play, Sex Harassment Is All Too Real." I wish that there were both more outrage and more analysis as to the causes, practices, and effects of games in the white spatial imaginary, but I don't fault the *Times*. Journalists are good at describing problems more quickly than academics are (though in this case the *Times* is many years late: even NPR beat them to this story by two years, which is saying something), but they don't have the luxury of time to devote to deeper and more detailed writing. Journalists are good at bringing public awareness to problems like gaming's pervasive racism, sexism, and homophobia, but awareness isn't enough. It's our job as feminist scholars, teachers, writers, and gamers to document, analyze, and theorize the white patriarchy that is so vigorously resurgent in games while never forgetting who profits here.