

## **Racial Whiteness in *Silent Hill***

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### **Abstract**

The *Silent Hill* videogame series is explored as reflecting on constructions and conceptions of racial whiteness. Richard Dyer's work is used to argue a discourse of white ethnicity runs across the series in terms of aesthetics, genre, gameplay and objectives. *Silent Hill*'s American small town location, as depicted in popular culture, reflects many themes of racial whiteness. Neatly lined houses, white picket fences, immaculate lawns, represent a façade of order and civility masking dark primeval forces bubbling beneath the surface. To this spatial whiteness, *Silent Hill* adds an aesthetic whiteness in the ever-present fog permeating its streets and alleyways. Recurring locations might also be understood as imbued with visual, symbolic and racial whiteness. Concerning the games' status as survival horror, Dyer sees the horror genre as resonant with a whiteness defining both adversaries and protagonists. Gameplay draws on whiteness' conceptual association with light, evident in the significance of illumination within the *Silent Hill* series. Evil dimensions in *Silent Hill* are characterised by the absence of light, walls and floors falling away into darkness, suggesting anxieties about the fragility of white civilisation. The flashlight, together with a transistor radio playing nothing but 'white noise', is an essential possession. Goals in *Silent Hill* illustrate connections Dyer observes between racial whiteness and death. Tasks involve players re-arranging morgue gurneys, deciphering notes pinned to hanging corpses, or leaping into their own grave. Games begin with players dreaming of dying, while one ending constructs the entire game as a post-death hallucination. Finally, the problematics of considering the *Silent Hill* series in this way are discussed, given the games' Japanese authorship.

**Key words:** ethnicity, race, *Silent Hill*, whiteness

This paper explores the *Silent Hill* videogame series, produced by the Japanese company Konami, as reflecting on constructions and conceptions of ethnic whiteness. The *Silent Hill* series consists of seven console games, from the Playstation One's *Silent Hill* released in 1999, to *Silent Hill Shattered Memories* on the Wii in 2010. These are action adventure games – or more specifically,

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survival horror games – in which players direct various caucasian characters around the streets and houses of the small American town of Silent Hill. This town is shrouded in mist and darkness, is populated by grotesque monsters and other confused caucasian people. With academic reference to Richard Dyer's *White*,<sup>1</sup> it will be argued that a discourse of ethnic whiteness runs throughout these games, identifiable in terms of aesthetics, genre, gameplay and objectives.

There is considerable debate concerning the significance of representation and identity in videogames. Characterising the perspectives and respective approaches to understanding videogames as a subject of analysis, the ludological argument is that character and avatar design are irrelevant to core videogame experiences. A frequent example is chess. It is possible to buy versions of the game where all the pieces resemble members of The Simpsons family, or *Star Wars* characters, or Marvel superheroes and villains. But, as Jesper Juul points out the basic game is still the same, unaltered by the design of the figures.<sup>2</sup> Avatars are counters on the arcade screen, no more imbued with identity politics than disks on a Go board. Videogames are about spatial progression across blocky landscapes where mimetic representation is replaced by abstract iconography. Videogame protagonists are not characters, James Newman argues, but merely collections of abilities, and to misunderstand them as such is to fail to grasp the principles of this new medium. Consequently, Newman points out, nobody chooses to play *Super Mario Bros* as Princess Peaches, the only female avatar, because of her gender as gender is irrelevant in videogame worlds. Instead, Princess' ability to float through the air is her main, functional distinction from the male avatars, who also have personalised special abilities.<sup>3</sup> Considering the symbiotic relationship between videogame player and avatar, Helen Kennedy struggles to place Lara Croft in a traditional media studies feminist framework. Once the player begin to play as the videogame heroine, Kennedy argues, the figure on the screen becomes a cybernetic extension of their own self, confusing any fixed or stable notion of identity.<sup>4</sup>

Discussions about avatars' tactical functionality, the player/avatar symbiotic relationship, and the insignificance of identity to videogame play underline the difference between videogames and more transparent representational or narrative media forms. Outside of cut-scenes, avatars do not signify gender, race and sexuality in quite the same way as characters do in novels, films and television. Nevertheless, this does not mean that videogames are devoid of such dimensions, but rather that identity politics in videogames is not solely a matter of avatars' mimetic dimensions. Avatars are functional, but that functionality – the actions they perform and facilitate for the player – is not divorced from issues of identity. The fact that it is Princess who floats is not

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unconnected with her gender; rather the gameplay her avatar performs draws upon traditional constructions of white, upper class women as light, dainty, and graceful. The cyborgian relationship between avatar and player, does not dissolve issues of identity, but rather creates an unstable union between the two; and in a subsequent collaborative work with Jon Dovey, Kennedy asserts the importance of the game apparatus, a dimension they argue is often lost in approaches to game analysis focussing on player agency. Dovey and Kennedy emphasise that while the avatar is dependent on the player's interaction, "the capabilities, the limits and the possibilities coded into our avatar... determine the range and form of our activities,"<sup>5</sup> activities which can be understood in identity politics terms, unchanged by the social formation of the individual player. The design of Lara Croft, as Espen Arseth famously stated,<sup>6</sup> may well be irrelevant, but the gameplay circulating her avatar is not, embodying as it does a colonial disposition identified by Barry Atkins<sup>7</sup> – travelling the world, killing natives and plundering treasure – which is compatible with, if not grounded in, the avatar's design as white and upper class. Gameplay and avatar design, in a coherent videogame experience, go hand in hand, and a fit between the identity of the avatar and the identity of the gameplay - in terms of gender, class, sexuality and race - is often central to this process.

Shifting focus from the videogame avatar and its representational dimensions to the processes of gameplay which the avatar facilitates allows an engagement with issues of identity construction and formation more suited to the videogame medium. This engages with the two tier process of identification discussed by Christian Metz in relation to the cinematic apparatus.<sup>8</sup> Applying Metz' distinction, identification with the avatar, the subject of much discussion and debate, represents only secondary identification. This contrasts with primary identification, which includes identification with the game world, the goals and objectives of the game, and the way these objectives are achieved. Clearly the formation of avatars is significant here, and Julian Kücklich<sup>9</sup> suggests that becoming a successful videogame player does involve a form of identification with the avatar. But primary identification takes priority over secondary identification, in some instances, goals and objectives running counter to the identity formation of the avatar. For example, the fact that several first person shooters allow the player to perform as a female character does not diminish the masculinity of gameplay, involving aggressive use of firearms and conquest of space in what Klein et al term the dominant "military masculinity" of videogame play.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, a game like *My Sims*, where players are offered a male or female avatar, maintains a gameplay evoking traditionally feminine qualities: caring for the town's residents, decorating homes, designing furnishings and

fixtures. If such activities are gendered, it might be considered to what extent they are also classed, sexualised and raced.

What follows is a tentative exploration of the various ways in which white ethnicity can be seen as inscribed within the videogame texts of the *Silent Hill* series, not only through the design of the avatars as Caucasian characters, but through the more-significant inscription of white identity into the series' gameplay and game design. White racial identity has received relatively little attention within videogame studies. More commonly authors, such as Jessica Langer in her analysis of race in *World of Warcraft*, focus on characters 'othered' by non-white racial signifiers.<sup>11</sup> In a brief yet rare observation, Christine Ward Gailey touches upon the function of Caucasian ethnicity, noting the extent to which gender stereotypes in games are "tinged" with racial dimensions: "'Tough' women are rarely blonde; 'princesses' are rarely anything else"<sup>12</sup> - yet this aside is not developed into an exploration of digital caucasian identity. Given the problematic theoretical nature of identity in videogames, the distracting presence of the avatar and the integral cybernetic role of the player, it is unsurprising that more visible and critically established identity formations have more often been the focus of videogames scholarship. The ubiquity of white avatars in games, as in much popular culture, renders whiteness invisible. However, an analytic methodology exploring the identity dimensions of videogames through the more diffused operation of gameplay is compatible with an identity formation which, as Dyer writes, "does not reside in a set of stereotypes so much as in narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception."<sup>13</sup> Dyer's argument that "the viewpoint of a text (how, in its formal organisation, it sees its subject matter) may legitimately be characterised as white"<sup>14</sup> corresponds with an approach to videogame identity analysis concentrating on the structural organisation of the text, rather than the design of the protagonist. As argued in relation to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,<sup>15</sup> what makes *Silent Hill* such a white text is not just that its main characters are caucasian people.

Nevertheless, this represents a good starting point for an analysis of the series. All *Silent Hill*'s central protagonists are indeed caucasian: Harry Mason, James Sunderland, Heather Mason, Henry Townsend, Travis Grady, Alex Shepherd. Throughout the series' seven installments, the only notable non-white characters are Cynthia Velasquez, a sexually suggestive Hispanic woman who dies at the beginning of *Silent Hill 4*, and Deputy Wheeler, a black policemen in *Silent Hill Homecoming* who lives or dies depending on the player's actions. More than just being caucasian in race, the whiteness of the main characters' skin in cut-scenes is exaggerated by the game's aesthetics. The pale, grainy, bleached-out pallet of the series gives its characters' skin a blanched, sickly, colour-less

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appearance. This extends to supporting characters such as Lisa Garland, the nurse from *Silent Hill*, Laura, the young girl from *Silent Hill 2*, Claudia, the religious fanatic from *Silent Hill 3*, and Elle Holloway from *Silent Hill Homecoming*, who, as blonde haired blue eyed women, represent the whitest of whiteness within caucasian discourse, according to Dyer.<sup>16</sup> The games' American small town location, as represented in popular film and television, reflects many themes of racial whiteness. Blue Velvet's Lumbertown, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Sunnydale, *Desperate Housewives's* Wysteria Lane, and *Silent Hill* are characterised by rows of identical houses, white picket fences, immaculate lawns, and nice middle class white folk. To this spatial whiteness, *Silent Hill* adds a visual whiteness in the ever-present mist which shrouds the town's streets and alleyways. Recurring locations across *Silent Hill* - school, church, hospital - might also be understood as imbued with visual, symbolic and racial whiteness, representing education, Christianity, science, institutional authority and sterility. A *mise en scene* of whiteness consequently pervades the series, extenuating the ethnicity of its protagonists through their surroundings. Not only is the small town characterised by the predominance of caucasian residents, it embodies themes associated with white narratives, such as repression, secrecy, and guilt about the past. A recurring theme is that the seemingly-idyllic small town represents a façade of order and civility masking dark primeval forces hiding beneath the surface. When James descends the impossible passageway down from the *Silent Hill* Historical Society, he is uncovering the cruel and violent past which underpins white American culture, a symbol of white guilt and discomfort at its own history.

The *Silent Hill* games are clearly of the horror genre, one which in the West, Dyer argues, has a particular relationship with white people.<sup>17</sup> As King and Krzywinska observe, survival horror games seek to produce sensations of vulnerability resulting from the comparative weakness and physical limitations of the player-characters.<sup>18</sup> In *Silent Hill* the ethnicity of the characters - whiteness being associated with bodily weakness - facilitates these tensions. The games' monsters are also characterised by a white aesthetic. These include the blanched limbs of *Silent Hill 2's* mannequins and *Silent Hill Origins's* puppet creatures, the blubbery Carrion and Insane Cancer of *Silent Hill 3*, *Silent Hill Homecoming's* bleach-skinned Lurkers, Needlers and Schisms. The games' recurring nurses are dressed in white with featureless bandaged faces. While clearly 'othered', it is hard to see the monsters of *Silent Hill* as anything other than racially white, characterised by their bleached and colourless skin. This is not entirely surprising, Dyer observing that "white people chomping away at white people" is an abiding image within the horror genre.<sup>19</sup> Dyer also writes at length about white

people's special relationship with light.<sup>20</sup> Illumination is central to the *Silent Hill* series. Evil dimensions are often characterised by the absence of light, with walls and floors falling away into darkness, suggesting anxieties about the fragility of white civilisation. Moreover, gameplay draws on white people's conceptual association with light through the flashlight which, together with a transistor radio playing nothing but 'white noise', is an essential possession within many games. Protagonists characteristically move through space casting light on their surroundings in an expression of caucasian ethnicity's affinity with technologies of light and discourses of 'enlightenment'.

Finally, Dyer speaks of whiteness's association with death, a theme which resonates throughout the *Silent Hill* games and the tasks players perform. These involve re-arranging morgue gurneys (*Silent Hill 3*), deciphering notes pinned to hanging corpses (*Silent Hill 2*), or inscribed on the bloody shirt of a dead prisoner (*Silent Hill 4*). In *Silent Hill Homecoming*, the task where Alex must place different emotion-signifying masks on a corpse symbolising his mother reflects white identity's associations with death, surface appearances, and lack of feeling. Several games begin with players dying, only to be resurrected as they wake. One ending to the original *Silent Hill* constructs the entire game as a post-death hallucination, while *Silent Hill Shattered Memories* is ultimately revealed as the imagined adventures of a young girl's dead father. *Silent Hill 2* suggests that many of the game's characters are dead. This game opens with James staring at his reflection in a toilet mirror, considering the futility of his quest: the search for his dead wife, Mary. James finds a room containing a body resembling his own avatar, while a telling piece of graffiti advises James to just die if he wants to meet Mary, but warning, he may end up going to another place to her. At one point James must jump into his own open grave. The game's characters' pallid complexions, their disorientated behaviour, the ethereal, misty, deserted streets of Silent Hill contribute to an impression, supported by the *Silent Hill* feature film, that the town represents a kind of limbo or afterlife, where dead white people come to relive the pain of their guilty past.

All these elements combined, the *Silent Hill* series might be regarded as a text about racial or ethnic whiteness. However, this reading is problematised by the games' Japanese authorship. Understanding *Silent Hill* in this way may be to impose an inappropriate critical perspective on a series of texts originating, in many significant ways, from a very different ethnic position. Nevertheless, despite their authorship, these are conspicuously American texts. *Silent Hill* is unambiguously an American town, and the games make reference to much American popular horror and suspense culture – Stephen King, David Lynch, Alfred Hitchcock. It may be that in *Silent Hill* we have a text critically engaging

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with the meanings of white ethnicity from the distanced perspective afforded by a national culture in which whiteness has not the all-pervading, normalised, invisibility with which it is privileged throughout Western society.

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> R. Dyer, *White*, Routledge, London, 1997.
- <sup>2</sup> cited in E. Aarseth, 'Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation', in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan (eds), The MIT Press, London, 2004, p. 48.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Newman, *Videogames*, Routledge, London, 2004, p.129.
- <sup>4</sup> H. W. Kennedy, 'Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis', *Gamestudies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, vol. 2, issue 2, December 2002, viewed on 14 May 2010, <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/>>
- <sup>5</sup> J. Dovey, and H. Kennedy, *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*, Open University Press, Oxfordshire, 2006, p. 105.
- <sup>6</sup> E. Aarseth, 'Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation', in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan (eds), The MIT Press, London, 2004, p.48.
- <sup>7</sup> B. Atkins, *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, p 59.
- <sup>8</sup> C. Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*. Macmillan, London, 1990.
- <sup>9</sup> J. Kücklich, 'Perspectives of Computer Game Philology', *Gamestudies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, vol. 3, issue 1, May 2003, viewed on 14 May 2010, <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0301/kucklich/>>
- <sup>10</sup> S. Kline, N. Dyer-Witthford, and G. de Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, McGill-Queen University Press, London, 2005, p. 247.
- <sup>11</sup> J. Langer, 'The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in *World of Warcraft*' in *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Hilde G. Corneliusen and Jill Walker Rettberg (eds), MIT Press, London, 2008, pp. 87-108.
- <sup>12</sup> C. W. Gailey, 'Mediated Messages: Gender, Class, and Cosmos in Home Video Games', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 27, issue 4, 1994, pp. 81-97.
- <sup>13</sup> Dyer, p. 12.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 39
- <sup>15</sup> E. Kirkland, 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer and constructions of Whiteness', *Slayage: the Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*, vol. 5, issue 1, July 2005, viewed on 14 May 2010, <<http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage17/Kirkland.htm>>
- <sup>16</sup> Dyer, p. 124.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p. 210.
- <sup>18</sup> G. King and T. Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts*, IB Tauris, London, 2006, p. 216.
- <sup>19</sup> Dyer, p. 211.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid*, Ch3.

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