

# Symposium

## Game over: Asian Americans and video game representation

Thien-bao Thuc Phi

*Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States*

[0.1] *Abstract*—Even video games by Asian creators tend to depict primarily white characters or reference Asian stereotypes such as kung fu fighters or yakuza thugs. Games depicting the Vietnam war are particularly troubling for Asian players expected to identify with white characters. As the game industry continues to expand, its representation of Asians and Asian Americans must change.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Pop culture representation; Race

Phi, Thien-bao Thuc. 2009. Game over: Asian Americans and video game representation. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 2.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0084>.

---

### 1. Introduction

[1.1] In 2004 I was playing *The Suffering* when I stopped in shock: a character in the video game, the ghost of a white bigot prison guard, blathered on about how it was justifiable to intern Japanese Americans during World War II.

[1.2] It was, and still is, the only reference to an Asian American racial experience that I've encountered in the many years that I've played video games. Of course, I don't play video games for a history lesson or to become enlightened about systematic oppression. But it was refreshing to see a game attempt to tackle an often overlooked and controversial period of American history, and it was refreshing to me as an Asian American to finally see an important issue from our community acknowledged in a video game.

[1.3] But even as other social issues are being explored in the increasingly sophisticated world of video games, such attention to or even acknowledgment of Asian American concerns is, unfortunately, rare. Video games have become a multimillion-dollar industry, outgrossing Hollywood films, and as they strive to become more and more sophisticated and reach broader audiences, thorny issues of representation will invariably come up, as race remains among the most dreaded issues, if not the most dreaded of all. And yet as I made my way through video games I'd played and loved, as well as ones I might not have ever picked up except to get a

broader understanding of the role of Asians and Asian Americans within video games, I became more and more disheartened to see my sense of limited representation, negative stereotyping, or simple exclusion repeated again and again.

## 2. Race issues gone global

[2.1] The international character of video game creation and production means that project leads, game and character designers, and programmers can be of any race, ethnicity, nationality, and gender. Clearly, then, the fact that throughout the gaming world nearly all characters, settings, and concerns remain white cannot be explained with the ready cop-out that "no, that character isn't a racial stereotype, it was designed by a [insert token person of color] guy and it was based on someone he actually knew."

[2.2] After all, race issues aren't just about stereotypes, but the institution of and reinforcement of beliefs regarding people of color. So if you have a company—say, a video game developer—that is made up mostly of whites in a field that caters to an audience that they perceive as overwhelmingly white and male (like the video game market), it doesn't really matter if you have a couple of token people of color doing some of your design and programming; the world that they operate in is already Eurocentric.

[2.3] For example, you would think, given that some of the world's greatest and most inventive video game developers and designers are Japanese, that there would be a wider proliferation of Asian characters. Yet the most popular and critically acclaimed Japanese franchises and characters (*Mario*, *Zelda*, *Final Fantasy*, *Resident Evil*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Dragon Quest*, *Castlevania*, etc.) all feature primarily European/white characters or characters with white features. One could argue that these franchises—though created and designed by the Japanese—feature white characters because their stories are based in America or European-themed fantasy settings. But this reasoning is flawed, because it assumes that American equals white, and it ignores the question of why Asians may be so interested in creating imaginary fantasy settings where everybody looks white. Even games like *Project: Snowblind*, *Far Cry*, and *Killer 7*, which take place in Asia or Asian-themed worlds, do not feature any Asians as playable characters.

[2.4] What this suggests is that video games, no matter where they are produced and by whom, are created with a Eurocentric bias. No matter what game genre you play, from sports games to kung fu games to fantasy role-playing games to futuristic sci-fi first-person shooters, chances are the main playable character that you control (and can relate to and identify with racially) is a white man. For those of us who are

people of color and indigenous, it's rare that we are presented with a main character that we can identify with racially.

### 3. Everybody was kung fu fighting

[3.1] Though video games have come a long way in terms of graphics, control, accessibility, and sophistication, racial representation remains predictable. The Black, Pacific Islander, and Latino characters are usually in sports games or urban-themed games, the indigenous characters are usually only in the Western-themed games, and the Asian characters are usually only found in the kung fu games. Meanwhile, white characters can of course be found in abundance in every genre, both as primary and supporting characters. Asian men in particular are difficult to find in roles outside of martial arts games or historical period games such as the *Dynasty Warriors* series, *Tenchu*, or *Genji*. This seems to suggest that Asian men only exist in the mainstream imagination if we're in the feudal days of China or Japan, thus erasing our/my existence from present-day America. In fact, the one place where Asian American men regularly make appearances are as yakuza or triad thugs in some urban-themed games with contemporary settings, restricting these characters to background at best and stereotypical villainous at worst.

[3.2] It is especially perplexing and disappointing that Asian male characters are lacking at worst and foreigners at best in the "authentic" import racing game genre, even though Asian Americans had a large part in starting the import street racing culture here in America in the first place. Games like the *Midnight Club* series and the *Need for Speed: Underground* series boast about the authenticity of their product. Yet these games, developed in Canada and the United States, tend to feature white, Chicano, and black men and some Asian female models. When these games feature Asian men, they are actually Asians in Asia, specifically Japanese, not the pan-Asian American community of racers here in the United States. This is hardly surprising, given the racial stereotype that Asians are forever foreigners—a stereotype that has deep roots in the exploitation of Asian male labor while denying Asians the right to become legalized citizens.

[3.3] The representation of modern Asian women is a bit more prolific and diverse in video games than that of Asian men, yet just like their male counterparts, Asian women remain restrained to several stereotypical roles. They are usually supplementary to white men (for example, *Syphon Filter*, *Metal Gear Solid*) or romantic interests to white men (for example, *Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb*, *Extermination*, *Resident Evil 2* and *4*). Asian women in video games usually fall in line with typical Western notions: mysterious, exotic, sensual—and partnered with any race of man except Asian. Even Kimora Lee Simmons, appearing as a digital version of

herself in the urban fighting game *Def Jam: Fight for New York*, is mostly relegated to the role of a prize to be won and, later in the game, a damsel in distress in need of a rescue. And you would think that a modern-day New Yorker like Kimora would wear modern clothes just like anyone else, but in the game, she's decked out in the Western man's wet dream embodiment of an Asian woman's outfit: a kimono.

[3.4] Many Asian women in video games symbolize the Western idea of the East as inherently feminine. When there needs to be a token character to represent Asia, it is usually a woman—for example, in the Japanese game *Killer 7*, the primary character is a morphing assassin named Harman Smith who can transform into seven different people of different races and abilities, all of them men—except for his Asian persona, wherein he morphs into a woman named Kaede. Likewise, in *Urban Reign*, the gamer plays white guy Brad Hawk, hired and brought to town by the female leader of a Chinatown street gang named Shun Ying Lee—a somewhat surprising scenario, given that she is Chinatown's brawling boss. But Asian characters ultimately must remain subservient to the desires of what is perceived as the typical game audience, namely white men, so that women are only allowed specific roles that will not threaten the basic righteousness or masculinity of such a player.

---

## 4. War: What is it good for?

[4.1] I love first-person shooters such as *BioShock*, *Halo 3*, and the *Half-Life* series. But shooting aliens, cyborgs, or demons is one thing. Shooting at people who look like you, and who curse at you in your mother tongue, in a game that is supposed to reenact an actual war that happened in your lifetime that tore apart your country and your people and your family, is quite another. I actually found that out the hard way when I started renting Vietnam War-themed video games for the purpose of writing this essay. Honestly, as a Vietnamese refugee child of a 10-year Southern Vietnamese soldier, it was not a video game genre that I really wanted to explore. But at the time I started on this project, there were no fewer than a dozen Vietnam-themed games on the shelves or in production, and as grotesque and perverse as the idea was to me, I started to play them.

[4.2] The first game I rented and completed was *Shell Shock: 'Nam 67*. Of the three characters I was allowed to pick as my avatar (none of them Asian), I chose an African American soldier. He and his platoon are stationed in a dusty camp ringed by barbed wire and sandbags, and as a player you can bring your money to the nearby prostitutes who solicit you with cheesy "me love you long time" accents, and you are treated to an in-game cut scene (gamer speak for a noninteractive movie within the video game) where your chosen prostitute leads you into a hut and closes the door—then the window shutters start to shake from your assumed boom-booming. In a level

where my unit was moving toward a village through a foggy rice paddy, we were ambushed by Vietcong wearing the black-pajama-and-rice-picker-hat ensemble that has come to symbolize Vietcong. One woman shouted at me in Vietnamese and opened fire on me with her AK-47. I turned and pulled the trigger on my controller, and the rifle roughly but realistically bucked and climbed as I fired a burst of bullets her way and her head exploded in a bright red gush. Later we got to a village, where I executed a bunch of Vietnamese and shot one escaping Vietcong soldier in the back. Later in the game, after some of my crazy platoon mates executed some Vietnamese civilians for fun, our Southern Vietnamese guide tortured a Vietnamese woman who is revealed to be a spy for the Vietcong, and as if to suggest that Asian men are even more brutal than any other race of man, he tortured her breasts with his knife before cutting her throat.

[4.3] You can see that although I might be a desensitized American, the Vietnamese in me was horrified and feeling sick at this point. Yes, horrible acts were done during the war, but there is something disturbing about portraying such graphic and realistic horrors in an interactive medium like a video game. And though this game and the glut of others like it were informed by Hollywood's interpretation of the war in films such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Hamburger Hill*, there is a visceral and psychological difference between sitting through a 2- or 3-hour movie, and playing through a 9- to 20-hour video game where you yourself are pulling the trigger and getting shot at. And if you're Vietnamese, it really complicates these issues, as you are basically forced to choose to identify against your real identity, to fight and kill those who are, effectively, you.

[4.4] What's surprising to me is that there is little discussion regarding the portrayal of wanton and malicious violence toward Asians in these games. Moreover, the portrayal of the Asian man as ultimately cruel, woman hating, and almost inhumanly evil is never discussed. I'm not trying to suggest that these games make it more likely that a person regardless of their race will act violently toward an Asian person. What makes me curious is that video game companies were able to take a racially loaded and traumatic event in our recent collective history into interactive entertainment with very little discussion or debate about it. Would video game companies have been able to make realistic, disturbing video games about a traumatic historical event so soon after those events took place if all the people involved in it were white? You may argue that there were even more games made about white people killing each other in the World War II game genre than there are games about Vietnam, but then again, those wars are farther away in our collective memory and in our history. More importantly, those games don't involve soliciting hookers and torturing civilians. Finally, these games are effectively the only games that feature Vietnamese people, yet again

reinforcing the same old roles that the West has for Vietnamese people in popular entertainment: hooker, or gook who gets shot.

[4.5] The lack of press surrounding Asian representation is not solely delegated to games about the Vietnam War. Garnett Lee (<http://www.1up.com/do/reviewPage?cId=3144682&p=2>) writes that the "over-played Hispanic culture references" could be seen as "offensive" in his *1UP* review of *Total Overdose*, yet I couldn't find a single review that mentioned the offensive, tired Orientalist clichés found in *Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb*. Likewise, members of the Haitian community argued against the violence toward Haitian characters in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. However, there was no discussion about the racial politics of a Chinese Triad boss hiring a black man to kill off Vietnamese gangsters in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. Most of the preview pictures for LucasArt's *Mercenaries* featured hapa character Jennifer Mui pointing her rifle at the head of various subdued Korean men, and the subtitle for the game is "Playground of Destruction." I sincerely doubt that many Koreans or Korean Americans would favorably see any of the conflict or tension in Korea, real or imagined, as being a playground. Would the video game industry make a game called *Columbine: Playground of Death*? This is not to suggest that African Americans and Latinos have it better than Asians, or that we should make a mockery out of Columbine. But I think it is relevant to ask, if other issues are being raised regarding what is offensive to whom, why isn't there a discussion when it involves Asians?

---

## 5. On the bright side

[5.1] I'm not calling for an end to video games, nor am I saying that the outlook is completely bleak. Games like *The Sims* series, the *NBA 2K* and *NBA Street* series, and *Fallout 3*, already offer vast character customization options, including a wide range of genders, appearances, and skin colors. In the popular game *Mass Effect*, not only can you fully customize your character's race, appearance, and gender, but the game's story line also boasts an opportunity for a queer relationship—though the game's insistence that the queer relationship is between two female entities, and the othering of an entire alien species as feminine and exotic certainly remains problematic. *Halo*, the critically acclaimed and commercial blockbuster series, features a lead protagonist, John, who is never seen without his helmet: he could be of any race—at least until the future Hollywood *Halo* film casts a white actor and ruins the racial ambiguity.

[5.2] In fact, maybe we are at the beginning of better and more varied representations of Asians and Asian Americans in video games. *Enter The Matrix*, despite being a painfully mediocre game, sold a lot of copies and may be the first big-budget game in which the two sole playable main characters are a black woman and an Asian man: Niobe (Jada Pinkett Smith) and her right-hand man, Ghost (Anthony

Wong). I was surprised when I was playing *Indigo Prophecy* that an elderly Japanese character who was speaking in stereotypical broken English started speaking in a husky Brooklyn accent, saying that he only put on the accent for show and that he had never been farther than Long Island. The critically acclaimed *Prince of Persia* series features a compelling Persian protagonist and a female Indian warrior. Jeremy Zoss, associate editor of the popular magazine *Game Informer*, reports that the sequel to *The Suffering*, titled *The Ties That Bind*, is "the only game [he's] ever seen that features an Islamic character that isn't a terrorist or villain"

([http://www.gameinformer.com/NR/exeres/A953FB4A-997D-4933-8163-E99099ADBAE8.htm?CS\\_pid=210826](http://www.gameinformer.com/NR/exeres/A953FB4A-997D-4933-8163-E99099ADBAE8.htm?CS_pid=210826)). And though *Jade Empire's* neo-Orientalist fusion of Asian cultures is often annoying and predictable, and they don't feature enough Asian American voice actors, the game does offer a wide choice of Asian male and female characters to choose from, and it provides opportunities for a romantic story between Asian characters, which is seldom seen in any form of Western popular entertainment.

[5.3] As the game industry continues to grow and expand, its representation of Asians and Asian Americans must grow more sophisticated and varied if it wants to keep up with its audience. We're not all straight white guys shelling out \$60 a game. We're not all content with white heroes, Asian men as cannon fodder, and Asian women as dragon ladies or damsels in distress. The game audience has become older, we're of every race and gender and sexual orientation, and we live (and play) all over the world. The game industry can't afford to neglect us forever. As Asian and Asian American consumers and gamers, we could stand to be more critical of racial stereotypes and demand a variety of characters who are more like us.