

Pedagogical Encounters with Structural Whiteness in Games: Tales and Reflections from a Game Studies Classroom

Hong-An (Ann) Wu

Abstract

This article reflects on my pedagogical encounters with structural whiteness in games as the instructor. Since 2017, I have had the privilege of teaching Game Studies I for seven semesters in an interdisciplinary higher education games program in the United States. As the only required course focused on criticism, students in this course were not only hostile towards critiques of games informed by critical game studies scholarship introduced in class but also dismissive of engaging in criticism for the supposedly purely technical field of game production. To make sense of these encounters, this article narrates my pedagogical encounters with students' hostility, and this article situates these encounters in the classroom as structural whiteness at work. In relation to the material, discursive, and affective traces of white supremacy functioning as an episteme, I draw on past critical game studies scholarships to contour the ways in which structural whiteness undergirds what kinds of games and gaming experiences are worthy of consideration and how they ought to be investigated in academia. Specifically, I trace the manifestation of structural whiteness to the prioritization of digital games in research, the emphasis on game production over criticism, and the centering of digital games' default white male user and their experiences. In connection to this knowledge, I proceed to reflect on my pedagogical experiences of encountering structural whiteness in my higher education Game Studies classroom, and I argue that the commonly encountered expressions of doubt, contempt, and undermining towards games criticism works to maintain the hegemony of structural whiteness through classroom discussions. By making explicit the ways in which whiteness intersected with my Game Studies I classrooms, this article attempts to emphasize the pedagogical openings for confronting, surviving, and moving past structural whiteness in games.

Since 2017, I have had the privilege of teaching Game Studies I for seven semesters in an interdisciplinary higher education games program on the land of the Caddo, Wichita, and Comanche peoples, also known as Richardson, Texas in the United States. As the only required course focused on criticism, students were not only hostile towards critiques of games informed by feminist, Indigenous, critical race, postcolonial, queer, and disability studies introduced in class but also dismissive of engaging in criticism for the supposedly purely technical field of game production. As Geysler (2018) argued, the pedagogical processes of games programs in higher education desperately needs to be “critically addressed both from within the greater fields of game studies and game design; and from within curricular studies and pedagogy” (p. 2). Taking up Geysler’s call, this article reflects on my trying pedagogical experiences teaching Game Studies I. By centering my teaching practices and experiences, this article narrates my pedagogical encounters with students’ hostility, and this article situates these encounters in the classroom as structural whiteness at work. Specifically, I begin with an overview of past critical game studies scholarship that detailed how whiteness animates games. Then, I move on to provide some context for my teaching practice that intersected with whiteness in games. With this context in mind, I describe the common expressions of doubt, contempt, and undermining that I encountered in the classroom, and I explore the gatekeeping function of those expressions. By harnessing my emotional labor in the form of pedagogical reflections, I hope to affirm other game-scholar-designer-pedagogues making new worlds while grinding away as feminist killjoys in similar contexts (Ahmed, 2017). At the same time, by making explicit the ways in which whiteness intersected with games in my Game Studies I classrooms, this article attempts to emphasize the pedagogical openings for confronting, surviving, and moving past whiteness in games.

Structural Whiteness in Games

To contextualize my pedagogical encounters with structural whiteness in games, I begin with an explanation of what I mean by structural whiteness in games in this paper. Structural whiteness is the material, discursive, and affective traces of white supremacy functioning as an episteme disciplining and structuring popular discourses of digital game cultures, the development and distribution of gaming technologies, practices of games criticism and production in educational settings, and games research and studies as institutionalized

Author Biography

Hong-An (Ann) Wu is an arts educator, media artist, and interdisciplinary researcher that seeks critical, playful, and careful pedagogical approaches with and through technologies, such as video games and Tarot, for social justice. She received her B.A. in Sociology from the National Taiwan University and Ph.D. in Art Education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her work sits at the intersection of game and play studies, feminist science and technology studies, and media and arts education, and her published works can be found in the *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, *OneShot: A Journal of Critical Games and Play*, among others. Currently, she serves as an assistant professor in [the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication](#) at the University of Texas at Dallas, a co-director of [the Studio for Mediating Play](#), and a co-director of [Situating Critical Race and Media](#).

knowledge production in academic institutions. Here, white supremacy refers to a “*logic of social organization* that produces regimented, institutionalized, and militarized conceptions of hierarchized ‘human’ difference” (Rodríguez, 2006, p. 11, as cited in Schultz, 2019, p. 60) through racialization. Under this logic, whiteness is unstable but invokes “the historically constituted and systematically exercised power relations” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 302), whereby “race is something only applied to non-white peoples” (Dyer, 1997/2017, p. 1). Under this logic, whiteness, as bodies and practices of bodies, has been normalized as common sense, read: hegemony, and institutionalized in social structures as the default and universalizing category of *human* against which all bodies are classified, measured, and un/ marked. Under this logic, bodies and practices of bodies are assessed, sorted, and racialized based on their proximity to “hegemonic whiteness” (Gray, 2014, p. 8) for the distribution of privilege. Under this logic, the default operating system of our educational institutions socializes us to “learn subtle coding of a normalized racial hierarchy and in turn support the reproduction of institutions that uphold white supremacy” (Schultz, 2019, p. 60). Under this logic, hegemonic whiteness as lived practices of hierarchical racialization manifest as “ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and acting (cultural scripts) that function to obscure the power, privilege, and practices of the dominant social elite” (Lea & Sims, 2008, p.2, as cited in Acuff, 2019, p. 8). Thus, I emphasize that I am speaking of ‘white’ in an ideological sense, given that to reify the structures of hegemonic whiteness “does not require that one be ‘white’—discursively or scientifically” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 304).

The ways in which white supremacy as an episteme intersects with gaming as situated cultural practices have been made abundantly apparent in critical game studies scholarship that dared to ask critical questions of *what*, *how*, and *who* in relation to games. What kind of games are produced, studied, and acknowledged? How are games developed, discussed, and celebrated? Who manufactures, plays, and design games? In the following, I trace the ways in which structural whiteness effectively organizes what kinds of games and gaming experiences are worthy of consideration and investigation, namely digital games for the default user and their experiences, by weaving together previous critical game studies scholarship on this topic.

What is the “Game” in Game Studies?

As Fickle (2019) poignantly cautioned us, gaming itself, broadly construed, is a complex conceptual technology for systematic classifications. While games are often warged metaphorically “as a means of justifying racial fictions and other arbitrary human typologies” (p. 9), what game exists in our imaginations and what game is being practiced simultaneously reconfigure this conceptual technology. Albeit that the diverging politics, cultures, and histories of games, play, games criticisms, gaming technologies, and players’ experiences have been studied across disciplines, fields, and contexts for decades if not centuries, the establishment of game studies as a distinct and separate field of study with academic funding and scientific attention coincides with the emergence, popularization, and increased devel-

opment of digital games as an entertainment and media form in the Global North, such as North America, Europe, and Japan, and later in parts of the Global South. Particularly, in an affective history of the field carefully traced by Phillips (2020b), the move to establish game studies as a distinct field of study apart from other existing disciplinary formations was “built on precarity and anxiety about its standing in the academy, partly because it imagined a zero-sum game of academic funding in which the new field’s access to the riches of the academy are directly threatened by other disciplinary claims on the object of study” (p. 25). By extension, I would argue that this zero-sum game of academic funding for which the field interpolated and projected onto the world is “the white game” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 302), whereby its aim is to reproduce the logic of resource scarcity across racial lines as well as the preferred games that embody this logic.

In effect, the establishment of the field of game studies in the academy legitimated some of the adored digital game objects of the early practitioners that labored in and benefited from this field as distinct experts. Specifically, even though many of the European scholarship that was foregrounded and drew upon to build the foundation of this distinct field of study was predicated upon analog forms of play and games, such as Caillois’s *Man, Play and Games* (1961/2001) and Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1938/1955), digital and computational-based games became the privileged subject of study. As Trammell, Waldron, and Torner (2014) described in the founding issue of *Analog Game Studies*; a journal that sought to refuse the narrowing towards digital games, “computer games suddenly became that which—above all else—exemplified radical new directions in scholarship” at the expense of other media forms. In other words, the ‘game’ in game studies became predominately understood as and equated with digital games, and unrestricted access to and experiences of digital games became the prerequisite for the privilege to labor in game studies; “to earn ‘game studies capital,’ one feels pressure to earn ‘gaming capital’: to be a gamer or a game creator, whose (re)production of games proves one’s allegiance to the future of video games” (Phillips, 2020b, p. 14).

And yet, let us not forget that not all digital and computational-based games nor their players are equally worthy of attention under white supremacy as an episteme. Consalvo and Paul (2019) argued that the rhetorical claim that something is “not a real game” (p. xx) in the context of scholarly and popular discourse carries the currency to discount and delegitimize something as worthy of attention, and this claim is often wagered towards games that fall outside digital gaming culture’s habitual orbit either by way of the developer’s pedigree, the game’s formalistic qualities, or the game’s payment structure (p. xxxiv). But what’s at the center of this habitual orbit? As Gray (2020) succinctly articulated, digital gaming culture is a “racial project whereby social dynamics are distinguished by one’s positionality in relation to the default user—the white male” (p. 27). Specifically, by paying attention to the practices of African-American gamers in Xbox Live that subverted the foundational logic of the field, Gray (2012) argued that “this default setting has led to the marginalization of many minority gamers forcing the label of deviant upon their virtual bodies” (p. 262). Relatedly but specifically paying attention to women gamers and game studies scholars, Vossen (2018) developed

the term “cultural inaccessibility” to refer to “the various cultural barriers that either deliberately or unconsciously exclude people from certain subcultures, or that make them feel unsafe in these subcultures because of their identities” in gaming spaces, particularly towards women (p. 13). Taken together, these scholars denaturalized male-centric whiteness as the universal common sense and made visible the ongoing racial-gatekeeping work of structural whiteness in games. In other words, structural whiteness in games configures the default user and games situated in the wider field of institutions, material possessions, and cultural references related to, and only to, hegemonic whiteness as worthy of attention.

How are Games Researched in Academia?

Beyond delimiting what kinds of games matter, structural whiteness efficiently disciplines what kinds of conversations and discussions about games, specifically digital games, are possible and encouraged through material incentives. Namely, conversations centered on and presuming the objectivity of technological production and innovation are encouraged. As illustrated above through the field of game studies, games are predominately equated with specific kinds of digital games in academic scholarship. However, this hyper attention towards these digital games is not unique to the field of games studies. Instead, it reflects more broadly academic institutions’ continual monetary, resource, and energy investment towards extending the life of these “technocultural forms” (Crogan, 2011, p. xiii) through scientific research as part of the larger constellation of “military-academic-industrial complex” (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009, p. 7), for which game studies as a field of study centered on criticism is relatively marginalized.

As Murray (2018) argued, “the overwhelming priority given to games within the academy has been in technical training, development and innovation” while “critical cultural interventions in games have been so thoroughly excluded from what is considered legitimate to their proper study” (p. 12). As opposed to prioritizing practices that generate incisive critiques and compose detailed analyses of these technocultural forms that risk unmasking their values, the academy predominately legitimates research programs and encourages the development of gaming technologies that presume the value-neutral-ness of technological development through continued financial support. But this is no accident or unintentional consequence. As Nakayama and Krizek (1995) have illustrated, whiteness is thoroughly intertwined with the project of Western science and technology, whereby whiteness is naturalized in discourses of science and technology to “mask irrationality and contradictions with a rational image possessing cultural currency” (p. 300). In other words, “the invocation of science serves to privilege reason, objectivity, and masculinity, concepts that have long been viewed in the Western tradition as stable, and therefore more trustworthy, poles in the dialectic relationships that exist as reason/emotion, objectivity/subjectivity, masculinity/femininity” (p. 300).

Here, then, to invoke digital games is to invoke technological progress. To invoke technological progress is to invoke scientific objectivity, rationality, and masculinity. To invoke scientific

objectivity, rationality, and masculinity is to invoke the belief in hegemonic whiteness as the natural and universal truth. On the topic of belief and through an ethnographic study on a prominent digital game development studio, Bulut (2021) conceptualized the contemporary form of this ingrained belief and commitment towards the Western masculine whiteness by way of technological development as “ludic religiosity,” whereby everything is measured “against the commensurability of ludic and technical pleasure in a supposedly neutral technological system” (p. 336). When the technical is believed to be rational, objective, genderless, odorless, colorless, read: white, “the possibility of an institutional critique of the game industry’s racialized and gendered production logics is diminished” (p. 336). As such, discourses that are not in alignment with those belief are seldom funded, and research programs centered on critiquing the supposed neutrality of technology are discouraged.

Who Makes and Plays Games?

In combination with the previous two sections, structural whiteness elaborately scaffolds what kinds of bodies are allowed to interact with digital games and in what way, as evidenced in who must manufacture those games, who gets to play and talk about those games, and who receives authorship credit for making those games. Namely, “men hold higher-skilled and higher-paying game development and programming positions, while women occupy the majority of lower skilled and lower-paying manufacturing positions” (Huntemann, 2013, p. 48). Namely, the materialities of gaming technologies begin their life in the hands of peoples in the Global South mines and factories, travel to the Global North to spend their active years by being of use and service to the peoples there, and end their life back in the Global South to be broken down, buried, and/or burned (Jackson, 2014; Navarro-Remesal & Pérez Zapata, 2018). Namely, non-white bodies namelessly labor over the material production for white bodies and institutions to author the immaterial products (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009; Nakamura, 2014). Namely, rich people and nations play digital games for leisure while poor people and nations play digital games for work (Tai & Hu, 2018, p. 82). Namely, non-default players’ presences and bodies are refused and rejected by games communities and gaming technologies while default players demand digital games be made even harder for technical pleasure (Vanderhoef, 2013; Keogh, 2018; Gray, 2020). Taken together, structural whiteness elusively collocates what kinds of gaming knowledge and knowledge about games are left to rot, ravage, and die, which I *try* to refuse, again and again, through my pedagogical encounters recounted below.

Pedagogical Encounters with Structural Whiteness in Games

“Why do we need to rethink the definitions of games and play when we have a perfectly working one? We know what games are, and they are supposed to be fun” (student, personal communication, August 28, 2018). Implying that certain games are not games, not fun for them, and thus not worthy of consideration, these are the words that haunt me from my classrooms, semester after semester. While the sentiments and value statements are

repeated by different students in my course every semester, these most vocal students share a similar structural position of white, male, and able-bodied with disposable income and leisure time for accessing digital gaming cultures and accruing specific kinds of gaming experiences as cultural capital. While these students are not all the students I have ever encountered in this course, they are the overwhelming majority of my students each semester, and they make their presence known despite my efforts to decenter. As a Taiwanese woman that came to digital games from a relatively divergent path and settled on the same land as them with the hope of practicing critical pedagogy, our desires, lived experiences, and living conditions share minimal resonances. My favorite games are *Tarot* and 麻將 (Mahjong), whereas they love *Call of Duty* and *Dark Souls*. My first encounter with a digital game was mediated through a digital Chinese-English translation machine, whereas their common experiences recounted a dedicated gaming console or desktop computer. I did not incur debilitating amounts of debt as the result of pursuing a public undergraduate education in Taiwan, whereas they need to find a job ASAP to pay off their schooling debt as they graduate from this public higher education institution in the United States. I was appointed as the instructor for the course, whereas they were positioned as students subject to my assessment. In short, we did not share the same kind of relationship to power, cultural capital, nor experiences of the epistemic violence of structural whiteness, in and beyond games, at the moment we met and during the times we shared.

Pedagogies through Personal Experiences

The differences and distances between everyone in the classroom, and especially between my students and I, are fruitful pedagogical grounds for interrogating how structural whiteness animates in/through games and, more importantly, imagining how we might move away from it. Following critical pedagogue hooks (1994; 2010) and Freire (1970), I engage in pedagogy as a practice of community building through dialogs, and I approach my classroom as a community of practice centered on making knowledge that matters politically, culturally, and personally within the time and space that we shared. To that end, our desires, lived experiences, and living conditions that we found ourselves in alongside the subject area of game studies become rich ingredients that we must draw from and reconfigure to make knowledge that matters to us, to those that we hold close in our hearts, and to the extended communities that we are in debt, accountable to, and care for. In practice, we read critical scholarship, such as those cited earlier, and played games, including both digital and analog games across various genres and regions. We shared personal stories, while I tried to facilitate and model active listening as “an exercise in recognition” (hooks, 1994, p. 41). We used these stories alongside the scholarship and games as materials from which to build knowledge.

As hooks (1994) emphasized, “more radical subject matter does not create a liberatory pedagogy” by itself automatically, and often “a simple practice like including personal experience may be more constructively challenging” (p. 148). Indeed, including personal experiences is

challenging. It is challenging because hegemonic whiteness permeates in the crevices of our stories, confines the limits of our interpretations, and disrupts our ability to recognize each other. As Schultz (2019) described, “in the classroom, white supremacy takes its place somewhere in the constellation of iterative cultural expressions that preserve and remake hierarchical racializing processes” (p. 60). It appears in what experiences get affirmed. It appears in what metaphors we use to describe and make sense of our reality. It appears as common sense. I can’t speak for how my students interpreted our encounters and what these encounters might have meant for them, but I can speak to the layered interpretations I had of our encounters and what they meant to me. As our stories laid bare on the table, so did our ignorance of, wounds from, and participation in this process of hierarchical racialization. As I told my stories, I also made apparent my commitment to games, broadly construed, primarily as systems of knowledge and interest in digital games insofar as it is “a space to engage American discourses, ideologies, and racial dynamics” (Leonard, 2003, para. 10). As I invited their stories, I also invited their affective responses of love and commitment towards digital games and its varied subcultures. As we used these stories alongside our course content as materials to build knowledge, emotions were all over the place. Sometimes, the dialogs would flow, and I felt like we were able to recognize each other, hold our limitations tenderly, and move past these stories to make different ones. At most other times, “confrontation, forceful expression of ideas, or even conflict” (hooks, 1994, p. 39) were not only a possibility but a common occurrence. Expressions of doubt, contempt, and undermining would appear throughout our conversations to signal and register their hostility towards the critiques raised in the texts assigned and the oppositional interpretations of the stories told. As other critical pedagogues have noted in their own pedagogical encounters, it is common to encounter student hostility towards dialogs that critiqued the objects from which they derive pleasure (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Gainer, 2007; Laughter, 2015). With how my students’ identities were so intricately and intimately connected to digital games and their related bodies of knowledge, incisive critiques toward digital games were seen as an assault on their personhood, and they responded with defensiveness. Given, “it is difficult to find a language that offers a way to frame critique and yet maintain the recognition of all that is valued and respected in the work” (hooks, 1994, p. 49).

For my classroom, including personal experiences was challenging because it was hard for me as the pedagogue to practice the idea that we are more than our stories, that we can make different stories, and that we are making different stories. As students passionately shared their stories and debated with me and each other, I was comforted. I was comforted that they participated in and bore witness to the dialog. I was comforted that they trusted this community we’re building enough to share their stories and felt comfortable enough to have conversations that challenged who we were before we were in this community. I was comforted that we might be dismantling the diametric of student and teacher relations that presupposed the teachers as the knowledge landlords and the students as knowledge renters. As I was comforted, I was also deeply unnerved. I was unnerved by how whiteness contributed to the ease in refiguring our student-teacher relation. I was unnerved by how instinctually

dismissive they were towards stories and arguments different from theirs. I was unnerved by how viscerally aggressive they were towards announcing the illegitimacy of anything illegible to them. I was unnerved by how nonchalantly easy it was for them to withdraw when the conversation gets difficult and the work of writing different stories begins. I couldn't help but recognize how my body communicated as much as, if not more than, what stories and arguments came out of my mouth. As Phillips (2020b) eloquently put it, "when women's bodies, nonwhite bodies, disabled bodies, queer bodies, and other nonnormative bodies occupy a space that was not meant for them, they can't help but become aware of the ways that the space feels unsuited to them" (pp. 17–18). I couldn't help but feel out-of-place in a teaching and learning environment that were setup to sideline my stories. I couldn't help but feel inadequate in a knowledge production factory that presumes the value of AAA games and the necessity of their related knowledge. I couldn't help but enact specific code-switching tactics to protect my vulnerabilities, safeguard my stories, and survive. I couldn't help but recognize how structural whiteness reproduced in front of me. But, I want to write different stories. I want to live in a different story. I want to write and live in a different story with them.

To do so, I needed to stop projecting "the students as equal to their cultural identity" (Emdin as cited in Acuff, 2018, p. 176) of whiteness and incapable of rigorous interrogation and transformation. I needed to constantly affirm myself and my reality while holding them kindly through their affectively charged responses and defenses. I needed to figure out a way to move beyond structural whiteness' constant demand for justifications as mediated through students' hostility and get to the point of talking about and making games beyond whiteness. As you might have guessed, this work was and is emotionally exhausting, and I don't think I'm fully there yet. However, as many feminist writers before me, I recognize the power exercised in naming incommensurable experiences, and I consider the reflective exercise of placing language on painful experiences an important process towards moving beyond them. As such, in the following section, I reflect on the commonly encountered hostility as expressed through doubt, contempt, and undermining. I unpack the functions of these expressions, and I situate these encounters as the ideological gatekeeping work of structural whiteness in games. Here, I want to emphasize that the students are not the problem. Instead, structural whiteness in game is the problem. The purpose of including students' expressions is to illustrate the ways in which white supremacy as an episteme is so totalizing that structural whiteness in games often becomes the only way we know the world and can know the world. At the same time, I also want to emphasize that the purpose of composing this article is not to justify hegemonic whiteness' demand for reasons nor attempts to fulfill its demand, as those demands to justify the legitimacy of straying away from whiteness constitute an endless black hole. Instead, this article attempts to place language on experiences that are otherwise unintelligible and illegible. In doing so, my desire is to add another layer and texture to the narratives of feminist pedagogues teaching in similar contexts, and my hope is that someone out there feels seen by and find resonance with the language used here.

Expressions of Doubt, Contempt, and Undermining

In my pedagogical encounters, one of the main ways that structural whiteness in games manifested to reproduce itself but simultaneously made its boundaries visible for erasing was through expressions of doubt, contempt, and undermining directed towards discourses, experiences, and critiques that refuse to maintain hegemonic whiteness. Recall the repeated questioning from my students mentioned earlier: “Why do we need to revise the definitions of games and play when we have a perfectly working one? We know what games are, and they are supposed to be fun” (student, personal communication, August 28, 2018). Earlier in the semester when I encountered various variations of these questions, I used to feel excited and eager to explore the lines of thought opened by such inquiry. For example, I would suggest that fun is never universal, and I would caution that claims to universality often elide unstated power relations. I would draw on my own experiences of fun, and, by contrast, not fun. I would borrow from Ruberg’s (2015) work to explain that “‘fun’ is never ‘just fun.’ Fun is cultural, structural, gendered, and commonly hegemonic. Fun as an experience is deeply personal, yet fun as a construct is unavoidably political” (p. 112). I would also borrow from Chun and Lison’s (2014) work to describe how fun “has always been an economic relation. Etymologically, to be ‘funned’ was to be cheated, the victim of a joke. One ‘funned’ another out of money. Fun, in this sense, is always ‘more’ – an illicitly generated surplus” (p. 175). And I would ask them: How does this understanding of fun reshape and interface with your current understanding of fun? How might you qualify the fun that you thought and spoke of to make it more precise and specific? Under what context is that fun and for whom? And what implications do these fun have and for whom? Although these lines of questions are opened, they are rarely followed through. Despite my sincere attempts to address the initial question they posed and directing it to the new questions it opened up for an investigation of the weekly topic at hand, their same exact original questions would be repeated, over and over again, every class session that followed. I used to wonder, is it that I’m not communicating precisely, given English is not my first language? Am I not making my questions and argument clear enough? Or is it something to do with my affect? Why does it feel like I am not and cannot be heard?

It was in the consistency of these encounters, the after-class reflections, and the discussions with colleagues teaching in similar contexts that I come to recognize that these repetitions are not genuine questions posed with the purpose of opening a conversation that has the potential to satisfy a sincere puzzlement and expand understanding. Instead, these repetitive questions are statements. They are statements of doubt, contempt, and undermining expressed to take up space and time. By dwelling in circles, these statements prevent the dialog from carrying forward, and specifically forward towards the assigned content of the course. What is this supposedly perfect definition of games and play? What is fun, anyway, and for whom? And why is this supposed universally agreed upon and commonsensical meaning of games and fun the metric for which all other experiences must be measured against? Similar to my own three sentences above, many sentiments and value statements are disguised as

a rhetorical question. Specifically, these are questions that assert an implicit argument and demands the opposition to justify its existence, which in effect displaces the burden of justification away from the question poser's own implicit argument. In other words, by appealing to the presumed common sensical logic of hegemonic whiteness, expressions of doubt, contempt, and undermining were ushered to avoid the responsibility to respond to the critiques made by critics in the scholarships we read or to recognize the illegible experiences for which specific critiques were built upon. These expressions redirected the center of attention away from the criticisms towards the legitimacy of those critiques and those critics. Structural whiteness in games as manifested through students' common sensical expressions sought to redirect the attention because the presence of careful and detailed criticisms threatened its dominance and façade of coherence. Specifically, as I explore in the following, these expressions of doubt were often directed towards the premise of the class as centered on criticism and the assigned materials for class.

Undermining the Craft of Criticism

As mentioned earlier, structural whiteness efficiently structures what kinds of conversations and discussions about games, specifically digital games, are encouraged. Under the logic of structural whiteness in games, production is inherently valuable as an objective pursuit while criticism is presumed worthless as a subjective interpretation.

For example, students have said, "I feel like all we do in class is to complain and look at the negatives. If you don't like it then don't play it. These readings all just want to take the fun out of games and be negative about it. They're not doing or making anything" (student, personal communication, October 1, 2020). Similarly expressing contempt for the craft of criticism, other students have said, "Did they [the critics] make games themselves to address this [criticism]? Criticizing what other people made all day but not actually taking action to do something about it is the problem" (student, personal communication, February 13, 2019). Strongly echoing the encounters that Ahmed (2010) articulated about how when feminist killjoys point out the problems they become the problem, these sentiments expressed by students implied multiple things. First, it implied that gaming as a technoculture is a neutral configuration, whereby everyone has the same autonomous agency in choosing how they come into contact with it and in maneuvering around its consequences. Namely, it presumes that we all, regardless of our intersecting identities, share the same proximity and access to digital games and the technologies required to make/play them, which is exactly the premise that many of the critical scholarship we read in class challenged and proven to be false with their research. Two, it implied that critique is not actively producing some tangible technological artifact, hence worthless. Furthermore, it positioned game production as the center and commanded respect for the ability to engage in production under the framework of 'those that can, do, and those that can't, complain.' Three, by extension, the critic's expertise in crafting a critique is rendered valueless, and their commitment towards the object of engagement is considered insufficient. As Phillips (2020b) articulately explained, "To be a

gamer, one must love video games, in the right way, or run the risk of ridicule, harassment, and rape threats that will ruin your emotional health and put you under threat of direct physical harm” (p. 14). Taken together, sentiments expressed by students rely on and redirect to, again and again, the common sensical notion that technical knowledge centered on game production is more valuable and the only *real* way to talk about games, which manifests the boundaries of structural whiteness.

However, students’ insistence on game production as the metric for assigning worth was not the result of their own making. Specifically, the larger institutional configuration of our games program, and I imagine many others across the country as well, privileges production to be in alignment with the vocational demands of a digital economy, the research directives of higher education expansion, and the material incentives of funding bodies. Our games program is intentionally interdisciplinary in the sense that our curriculum features courses on games criticism alongside game production. While interdisciplinarity is the program’s aim and long-term goal, the political and disciplinary tensions between the priorities of production and criticism that Malazita and LaPensée (2020) characterized bubbled up daily through my pedagogical encounters with students as described above. Given, out of the nineteen required courses for our major’s curriculum as it currently stands, only one course, namely Game Studies I, explicitly and directly addresses games criticism. And only two courses, including Animation Studies, addresses criticism. In other words, the current curriculum structure already built in an understanding that criticism is less valuable and needs less time to practice in comparison to the other technically-focused courses. Furthermore, with games as the primary focus of our program, most students that enroll in the major and find themselves in my course identify as long-time gamers and aspire to become professional game designers. With these desires alongside the current degree structure that emphasize production, it may be no wonder that our pedagogical encounters unfolded the way it did. I’d like to think that their doubt, contempt, and undermining are misdirected and that the anger underpinning these expressions is the result of being confronted with structural whiteness’ inconsistencies. But, I can only speculate, as that is for them to reflect and theorize.

Doubting the Experiences of Others

Also mentioned previously, structural whiteness effectively organizes what kinds of games and gaming experiences are worthy of consideration and investigation. Namely, worth is assumed for “real games” (Paul & Consalvo, 2019, p. xx), as a particular kind of digital game, and its “interpretive community” of gamers “partly defined by its resistance to the dissenting opinions offer by those who also share a love for video games (often women and frequently feminist women)” (Phillips, 2020a, p. 29). Under the logic of structural whiteness in games, anything and any experiences that deviated from the above are defaulted as valueless and subject to doubt.

For example, I would often include one piece of English writing from Lin (2008; Lin & Sun,

2011; Lin & Sun, 2016), a respected researcher on gaming practices in Taiwan and the scholar that introduced me to the field of game studies during my undergraduate studies. With her work on free-to-play game debates among players as well as gendered gaming experiences across different geographies, I included her work in class to help complicate the imagery of the default player and expand the attention towards different player experiences. In one class among other readings, I drew on Lin and Sun's work (2016) on in-game contacts between Chinese and Taiwanese gamers to facilitate a discussion about the discursive politics of identity formation in games. In response, students have said, "But why does it matter? Obviously, I think this kind of thing would happen in developing countries. But I don't think this applies in the United States" (student, personal communication, March 13, 2019). In this expression of doubt, the logic of American exceptionalism and the common sense of a developmental model of social progress based on Western morality became justification to ignore the need to examine similarities across transnational contexts, as these other contexts are deemed 'behind' and playing catch up to hegemonic whiteness. Simultaneously, it served to announce the irrelevancy of Taiwanese player experiences. After class, a supportive student came up to me. Sensing that I was having a hard time gathering interest and facilitating dialog with the students, the student offered me their take on our class session: "To be honest, I think the issue [of people not engaging] is because we don't care [about that case], really. I suggest replacing these readings [in future classes] with something more relevant to *our* gaming culture" (student, personal communication, March 13, 2019). With gratitude towards the student offering their help for our collective learning, I took to heart their honest observation and assessment that they generously shared. I recognize the need to meet students where they are by drawing on materials that are relevant to their specific contexts, but I continue to wonder and struggle to answer: to what extent do I go in terms of our specific pedagogical context? I cannot stop questioning the logic of centering 'our gaming culture,' especially when the gaming experiences of myself and the scholars that inform my understanding of the world doesn't count.

As another example, I would often include *Second Life* as a game for investigation in class. With its problematic colonial ethos of pioneering a new world, the intense scholarly investment towards it as an educative tool, its died down hype in current times, and the lively queer and furry subcultures that continue to populate it, I included it as a case study to examine the contradictions that simultaneously exists in one malleable boundary object. "But is this really a game? Like a game, game." Students would question me repeatedly from different classes, even though we began the course weeks ago on the topic of defining games that sought to problematize the idea that there is one universally agreed upon, satisfactory, and applicable definition or even the idea that having a definition is useful for analyzing gaming as situated practices. This refusal to engage with a game until it satisfies a common sense definition of a game extends towards various analog games, such as collaborative exquisite corpse drawing games, as well as queer digital games that plays with the idea of a game, such as Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013). Perhaps in annoyance with my refusal to center and prioritize popular digital games, one student wrote on

their course evaluation: “Any person who has played video games for more than a year would find little value in the class” (student, personal communication, December 15, 2019). These encounters embodied Geysers’s (2018) words: “Students coming into games courses with extensive gameplay experience, believing that they are already experts in the field, make little attempt to grapple with new ways of thought” (pp. 8–9). In both examples, the expression of doubt functions to assert the dominating presence of gameplay experiences with closer proximity to hegemonic whiteness and the naturalized presumption of any other experiences’ illegitimacy until proven otherwise.

Surviving Structural Whiteness in Games in the Game Studies Classroom

In the preceding pages, I drew on previous critical game studies scholarships to contour the ways in which structural whiteness undergird what kinds of games and gaming experiences are worthy of consideration and how they ought to be investigated in academia. Namely, I traced the manifestation of hegemonic whiteness to the prioritization of digital games in research, the emphasis on game production over criticism, and the centering of digital games’ default white male user and their experiences. I proceeded to apply that knowledge to reflect on my pedagogical experiences of encountering structural whiteness in my higher education Game Studies I classroom, whereby expressions of doubt, contempt, and undermining worked to maintain hegemonic whiteness in classroom discussions.

With immense support from many generous colleagues that offered their sustained emotional and intellectual labor to help me process and think through teaching in this context from where I stand, I made several adjustments to the course over time in response to students’ responses. In this last section, I offer some of these tactics we’ve developed, and I’ve used, to survive these expressions of doubt, contempt, and undermining that sought to maintain structural whiteness in games. In the following, I use *we* in relation to the tactics for teaching Game Studies to emphasize their contributions to my pedagogical practices. Hopefully, these tactics may be of use to the collective of feminist killjoys slaying away in similar pedagogical contexts.

For one, instead of starting with the contested definitions of games and the historical debates surrounding digital games that foregrounded the establishment of game studies as a field, we foregrounded play as the central focus of the course, whereby games and digital games are included but not all of the ways in which play is experienced. Following Sicart’s (2014) approach towards play as playfulness, we would start the course by considering all of the varied technologies for which we engage in play and play with them, including the analog and the digital, the local and the global, the old and the new. This move to center play as opposed to games as the conceptual basis of the course preemptively instituted a distance towards digital games as the privileged and defaulted object of analysis in our field called game studies.

For another, following the move to center play, we draw heavily from the field of science and technology study at the beginning of the course readings to emphasize the political dimensions of technological artifacts as embodied through their design. By looking at bridges, search engines, and other assumed neutral technologies instead of games directly (Winner, 1980; Noble, 2017), students were able to engage with the political dimension of these designs without resorting to their affective defenses. And it is only after this understanding is established that we then proceed to explore the political dimensions of digital games as one particular kind of technology.

Last, but not least, we would emphasize the labor, craft, and skill that it takes to produce a piece of criticism, and we would draw attention to the time and energy it required as evidence of care and expertise. Specifically, we introduce criticism in the context of our courses as an act of care (Fernando, 2019), where we take time to closely take in, process, and consider all that the object of our attention has to offer for the purpose of offering something back. This something that we offer back is our critique, which in turn fuels, extends, and gives life to the object of our attention so it has the chance to grow and flourish. Critiques point out where something needs work, and in so doing it also provides the direction for work to be done. With the direction outlined, revisions, improvisation, and different forms can be and are made, for which new critiques could be extended. This endless cycle of making and critiquing characterizes the continuous and iterative process of production, whereby critique and creation cannot exist without the other. In this sense, critique is play, a dance between construction and destruction, as enacted by us as critical players (Flanagan, 2009).

In sum, under structural whiteness in games, I happen to exist in a space and engage in practices presumed valueless. Under the logic of structural whiteness, the gaming capitals that I was able to afford were the ones that don't carry much currency and worth. At the same time, the craft of games criticism that produces the possibility for peoples like me to exist and be seen is invalidated. Although expressions of doubt, then, must have been expected, it didn't make each encounter with these expressions less painful, disappointing, nor threatening. But, thankfully, the communities of peoples, activists, and interlocutors, including but not limited to the many scholars cited earlier, that taught, fed, and surrounded me intellectually, emotionally, and physically didn't build and depend their worth based on structural whiteness to survive and thrive. Through their life and work as praxis, a different logic existed and is continually being extended. And it is through their praxis that I am here and can continue to be here. Under this logic that I orient towards, the gaming capital that I inherited and brought with me in each classroom carried a tremendous wealth of knowledge, which is why I continue to share and insist upon them with my students.

References

Acuff, J. (2018). Confronting racial battle fatigue and comforting my blackness as an educa-

- tor. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 20(3), 174–181.
- Acuff, J. B. (2019). Whiteness and art education. *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, 36(2), 7–10.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). Killing joy: Feminism and the history of happiness. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 35(3), 571–594.
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Alvermann, D. E., & Hagood, M. C. (2000). Critical media literacy: Research, theory, and practice in “New Times.” *The Journal of educational research*, 93(3), 193–205.
- Anthropy, A. (2013). *Queers in Love at the End of the World* [Digital game]. Retrieved from <https://w.itch.io/end-of-the-world>
- Bulut, E. (2021). White masculinity, creative desires, and production ideology in video game development. *Games and Culture*, 16(3), 329–341.
- Caillois, R. (1961/2001). *Man, play, and games*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Chun, W. H. K., & Lison, A. (2014). Fun is a battlefield: Software between enjoyment and obsession. In Goriunova, O. (Ed.), *Fun and software: Exploring pleasure, paradox and pain in computing* (pp. 175–196). New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Consalvo, M., & Paul, C. A. (2019). *Real games: What’s legitimate and what’s not in contemporary videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Crogan, P. (2011). *Gameplay mode: War, simulation, and technoculture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dyer, R. (1997/2017). *White: Essays on race and culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dyer-Witheford, N., & De Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fernando, M. (2019). Critique as Care. *Critical Times*, 2(1), 13–22.
- Fickle, T. (2019). *The race card: From gaming technologies to model minorities*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Flanagan, M. (2009). *Critical play: Radical game design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press.

- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Gainer, J. (2007). Social critique and pleasure: Critical media literacy with popular culture texts. *Language Arts*, 85(2), 106–111.
- Geysler, H. (2018). *Decolonising the games curriculum: Interventions in an introductory game design course*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1).
- Gray, K. L. (2012). Deviant bodies, stigmatized identities, and racist acts: Examining the experiences of African-American gamers in Xbox Live. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 18(4), 261–276.
- Gray, K. L. (2014). *Race, gender, and deviance in Xbox live: Theoretical perspectives from the virtual margins*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gray, K. L. (2020). *Intersectional tech: Black users in digital gaming*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.
- hooks, b. (1994/2014). *Teaching to transgress*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching to critical thinking*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Huntemann, N. B. (2013). Women in video games: The case of hardware production and promotion. In *Gaming Globally* (pp. 41–57). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Huizinga, J. (1938/1955). *Homo ludens: A study of the play element in culture*. Boston, MA: The Beacon Press.
- Jackson, S. (2014). Rethinking Repair. In *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, edited by Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot, 221–39. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Keogh, B. (2018). *A play of bodies: How we perceive videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Laughter, J. (2015). ELA teacher preparation 2.0: Critical media literacy, action research, and mashups. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 15(3), 265–282.
- Leonard, D. (2003). “Live in your world, play in ours”: Race, video games, and consuming the other. *SIMILE: Studies In Media & Information Literacy Education*, 3(4), 1–9.
- Lin, H. (2008). Body, space and gendered gaming experiences: a cultural geography of homes, cybercafes and dormitories. *Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat: New perspectives*

on gender and gaming, 67–82.

Lin, H., & Sun, C. T. (2011). Cash trade in free-to-play online games. *Games and Culture*, 6(3), 270–287.

Lin, H., & Sun, C. T. (2016). A Chinese cyber-diaspora: Contact and identity negotiation in a game world. In *Transnational Contexts of Culture, Gender, Class, and Colonialism in Play* (pp. 179–209). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Malazita, J. & LaPensée, E. (2020). Critical Game Design Call for papers. *Design Issues*. Retrieved from <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa-jisc.exe?A2=CAS;de3c1805.2010>

Murray, S. (2018). The work of postcolonial game studies in the play of culture. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1).

Nakamura, L. (2014). Indigenous circuits: Navajo women and the racialization of early electronic manufacture. *American Quarterly*, 66(4), 919–941.

Nakayama, T. K., & Krizek, R. L. (1995). Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric. *Quarterly journal of Speech*, 81(3), 291–309.

Navarro-Remesal, V., & Zapata, B. P. (2018). Who Made Your Phone? Compassion and the Voice of the Oppressed in Phone Story and Burn the Boards. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1).

Phillips, A. (2020a). *Gamer trouble: Feminist confrontations in digital culture*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Phillips, A. (2020b). Negg (at) Ing the Game Studies Subject: An Affective History of the Field. *Feminist Media Histories*, 6(1), 12–36.

Ruberg, B. (2015). No fun: The queer potential of video games that annoy, anger, disappoint, sadden, and hurt. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 2(2), 108–124.

Schultz, H. (2019). Disrupting White Vision: Pedagogical Strategies Against White Supremacy. *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, 36(3), 59–73.

Sicart, M. (2014). *Play matters*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Tai, Z. & Hu, F. (2018). Smart play: Social stereotypes, identity building, and counter narratives of gold farmers in China. In *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Justice* (pp. 82–98). Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

- Torner, E., Trammell, A., & Waldron, E. L. (2014). Reinventing analog game studies. *Analog Game Studies*, 1(1).
- Vanderhoef, J. (2013). Casual threats: The feminization of casual video games. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, No.2. [doi:10.7264/N3V4oS4D](https://doi.org/10.7264/N3V4oS4D)
- Vossen, E. (2018). *On the cultural inaccessibility of gaming: Invading, creating, and reclaiming the cultural clubhouse (Doctoral dissertation)*. University of Waterloo.
- Winner, L. (1980). Do artifacts have politics? *Daedalus*, 109(1), 121–136.