High Tech Blackface -- Race, Sports Video Games and Becoming the Other

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At 20, Jeremy Deberry surely is the best football player at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, N.V. He practices six days a week, plays both ways and is generally regarded by his peers as among the nation's elite performers, having earned the moniker the Champ. Few address the sophomore as anything but. [1]

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

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

High-Tech Blackface

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

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

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A Return to Minstrelsy: Sports in its Purest Form

Imitation, in both the real and virtual worlds, is not the highest form of flattery. Norman Mailer, in his often cited, 1957 piece entitled "The White Negro" asserts, "it is no accident that the source of hip is the Negro for

he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries." Video games reflect this cultural reality, bespeaking black coolness through its ubiquitous articulations of white supremacist ideologies, grounded in a belief of black savagery and animalism (athleticism). These powerful ideologies emanate through these games, and reflect their connection to minstrelsy. Elijah Anderson, a professor of sociology at University of Pennsylvania, argues that abundance of racial stereotypes reflects longstanding fascination with blackness as mysterious and cool, while simultaneously playing to deep-seeded desires and needs of white game enthusiasts. "Blacks have always been the other in this country. Many people living in the suburbs admire this fire and this funk they see in blacks, a kind of aggressiveness a lot of them want too. A lot of these suburban, white-bread kids hunger for this kind of experience." [8] As with the history of minstrelsy, sampling of the other is neither liberatory nor transgressive -- it does not unsettle dominant notions through breaking down barriers or increasing exposure. The ideas of blackness introduced through video games reflect dominant ideologies, thereby providing sanction for the status quo, legitimacy for white supremacy and evidence for the common sense ideas of race, gender, sexuality and nation.

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

The Virtual Black Athletic Body

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

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

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

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

A majority of sports games, from those based in real life to the extreme fantasy, depict black males as physically and verbally aggressive and having unusual body types. Black men are excessively muscular and

hyper-masculine, talking trash and crushing bodies with sheer force. Black players tend to engage in other forms verbal assault with greater frequency as well. A study by Fair Play concluded that eighty percent of African American sports competitors engaged in verbally and physically aggressive behavior, compared to fifty-seven percent of white characters. The proliferation of hip hop / street games has further led to the exaggeration of blatant racialized stereotypes and tropes.

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

While encouraging taunting, through bonus points and rewards ("stylin is what separates the players from the Playaz"), the game seems to police this practice as well. As you showboat, you run the risk of fumbling or otherwise stumbling in the game -- there are consequences for playing street. After several attempts to defeat the mighty 49ers, I had them on the ropes, leading 32-24 (on the street, you play to 36) with ball in hand. All I needed was a touchdown. With a tinge of nervousness, I launched a pass across the field, completing it through a sea of defenders. As my man marched toward the promise land, I decided to hold the ball back over my head as to rub my imminent victory into my imagined opponent's head. Unfortunately, I started my victory stride a bit early coughing the ball-up right into the hands of Terrell Owens, who ran it back for a touchdown. I, of course, went on to lose the game. As I slammed down my controller as any male video game player might do, I could hear Chick Hearn screaming "the mustard is off the hot dog" or the voice of any number of announcers that habitually condemn and demonize (black) athletes for excessive celebration. *NFL Street*, like the NFL Rules Committee, and the NBA with its ban on baggy shorts, visible trash talking and hangin' on the rim, polices those actions see outside the spirit of the game. It reveals the consequences of becoming street, compelling obedience to the hegemonic vision of sportsmanship and etiquette. *NFL Street* thus embodies America's simultaneous love and hate of black urbanness, reflecting dominant desires to both police and become the other.

Virtual Playing Fields

The most popular genre within the sports game is the street basketball game, as evident in both *NBA Street*, *Street Hopes* and *NFL Street*. The problematic nature of these games transcends their acceptance and pro-

motion of stereotypes that emphasize the athletic power of black bodies. The ubiquitous focus on street basketball and the glorification of de-industrialized spaces of poverty contribute to common sense ideas of inner city communities and the constancy of play with the black community. For example, *NFL Street* takes traditional football gaming into both the streets and realm of hip-hop. As you start against the NFC and AFC West, the initial street battles take place on the EA Sports campus, a pristine field with a few trash cans littered about, and a brick wall for out-of-bounds, and the beaches of the Pacific Ocean, with waves proving to be the only obstacles to a touchdown. Upon defeat of all eight teams, you are able to unlock the other conferences, battling on the dangerous streets of Detroit or New York rooftops. Interesting, and not surprisingly given its namesake, the goal of the game is to be able to play on the streets, within America's ghettoes, rather than on a sports field.

The popularity of the game has less to do with its game playability, but its emphasis on an imagined street (black) culture. Whether the never-ending hip-hop soundtrack or the numerous shots of graffiti art, the game plays America's love affair with urban America, particularly that which is imagined as black. As games glamorize inner city spaces, commodifying them seedy and dangerous places, structural shifts continue to worsen these spaces of life. Reflecting the hyper-visibility and glorification of de-industrualized inner city community, games like *NFL Street* and *Street Hopes* reflect the commodification of African American practices of play within popular culture. This process of borrowing is not limited to the generation of pleasure for players, but is evident in the usefulness of black bodies and ghettos within *NFL Street*. The commodification of black urban aesthetics, in the form of trash-talking, taunting, showboating, tattoos, earrings, violence and aggressive behavior signifies patterns of minstrelsy given the pleasure of becoming the or becoming part of an imagined black body, community, or aesthetic.

Writing about shoe commercials, Robin Kelley argues that popular images of street basketball "romanticize[s] the crumbling urban spaces in which African American youth play." Such "representations of 'street ball' are quite remarkable; marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted nettles hoops, graffiti-scrawled walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play." [11] The process of commodification is not limited to the generation of pleasure for players, but is evident in the usefulness of black bodies and space to the video games industry. From the phenomenon of And-1 streets tours to ESPN's street diaries, street basketball has become increasingly popular over the last five years. Robin Kelley, again, demonstrates the power of consuming the racialized other's space in both an ideological and capitalist project.

Nike, Reebok, L.A. Gear, and other athletic shoe conglomerates have profited enormously from postindustrial decline. TV commercials and print ads romanticize the crumbling urban spaces in which African American youth play, and in so doing they have created a vast market for overpaid sneakers. These televisual representations of "street ball" are quite remarkable; marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scrawled walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play. [12]

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

Moreover, the ideological trope of limiting discussions of ghetto communities to the play that transpires within such communities obfuscates the daily struggles and horrors endured in post-industrial America. The realities of police brutality, deindustrialization, the effects of globalization on job prospects, and the fact that most parents work three-jobs just to make end meet, are invisible as the dominant image of street basketball continues to pervade American discourses. The ubiquitous levels of poverty, the conditions that give rise to chain-link fences and net-less hopes are lost to the "virtual ghetto tourist." Enjoyment is not only garnered through this process, but these games serve an ideological / political function within contemporary America. Social problems are, thus, the result, of community or individual failures. The constant focus on inner city play, within video games, on ESPN and within popular culture, leaves the impression that rather than working, rectifying social problems and improving the community's infrastructure, black males are too busy playing. Relying on longstanding notions of black laziness and athletic superiority, these games reinforce sincere fictions [13] about black males "kickin" it in the hood, while simultaneously glamorizing and commodifying these spaces.

The exploitative relationship with the black community and the video game industry is significant within these urban sports games. Companies and its players benefit through the consumption of inner-city communities, while poverty, unemployment, and police brutality run rampant. As more and more Americans "live in their" world, that world is getting poor and poorer. The richest one percent of the population in the US controls over half of the nation's wealth; the richest ten percent controls nearly eighty-five percent. The poorest twenty percent of the population, some sixty million people, are sharing less than one-half of one percent of the wealth. Currently there are nearly forty million people living in poverty in the United States; another forty million people are one paycheck away, a 200% increase

from thirty years ago. As many as ten million people are homeless or near homeless, most are women and children and half are black; twenty-five percent of Americans do not have basic health care. With each of these social problems, communities are not surprisingly over-represented. Blacks and Latinos make up nearly half of all those in poverty. While politicians and news media lament the strength of the economy (by which they usually mean the financial speculations of those wealthy enough to play the stock market), unemployment for some groups is almost fifty percent. One out of five kids is born into poverty in the US, one out of two black kids and American Indians, one out of three Latinos. Under such worsening conditions, the video game industry prospers, making money while directing our attentions away from the depravity and sadness of inner-city America towards the excitement and pleasure of street basketball. A critical literacy that bespeaks to both the power of sports video games, in their articulation of stereotypes, and the affirmation of racialized stereotypes is necessary. A willingness to engage games not purely as toys, but vehicles of ideological meaning and cultural products affirming contemporary hegemony, is needed for understanding color-blind racism in the 21st century.

It has become commonplace in the world of sports to blur reality with the virtual through the deployment of video games. Whether on TNT's *NBA Tonight* or ESPN's *College Game Day*, the sports are increasingly relying on video games technology as a tool of imagination and fantasy. Bypassing actual game footage, media outlets are now able to force Yao to battle Shaq, even if the big Aristotle is injured, or see a pass play despite the coach's decision to run at the end of the game. Whether on ESPN.com or within sports telecasts, the last five years have thus witnessed a merging of the virtual and the real within the sport world.

Beyond the fantastical desires or that of spectacles, sports video games increasingly serve as a tool of prognostication. If you are curious about the outcome of a game or are planning to make wager, video games exist as a pedantic source of information. This was no truer than during the pre-game festivities for the 2004 Super Bowl. As the teams prepared in the locker room, the CBS pre-game show provided viewers with a preview using virtual technology -- EA Sports football. As to further obfuscate the divide between virtual and real, their homage to video games allowed not just representations of game and players, but a virtual reincarnation of the announcers as well. Upon completion of the simulated scenarios that might present themselves after kickoff, the coverage fluidly shifted from the virtual conversations of Jim Nantz, Boomer Esaison, Dan Marino and Deion Sanders to their actual (real) bodies, leaving Primetime speechless. Without hesitation, Sanders lamented the absence of realism in their virtual treatment, exclaim-

ing, "It looks nothing like me. It looks like something from the planet of the apes." Pulling out his cell phone, Primetime continues telling his silent white peers, "I am calling Johnny Cochran to get this straightened out." As one researches sporting video games, it is clear that the racialized representation of Deion Sanders reflects the guiding ideologies and image of the virtual sports world, given the preponderance of gorilla-like images, and jungle settings. The hegemony of whiteness as both producer and consumer of such games, as well as the longstanding pleasure / power generated through becoming the animalized black man or playing within dangerous black spaces, places sporting video games within the history of minstrelsy.

References:

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[11] Robin Kelley, "Playing for Keeps: Pleasure and Profit on the Postindustrial Playground" in: Waheema Lubiana (ed.), *The House that Race Built* (Vintage Books: New York, 1998), p. 198
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[13] This term was initially offered by Joe Feagin and Hernan Vera in *White Racism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 1995) to refer to white myths about race and communities of color within contemporary America.

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