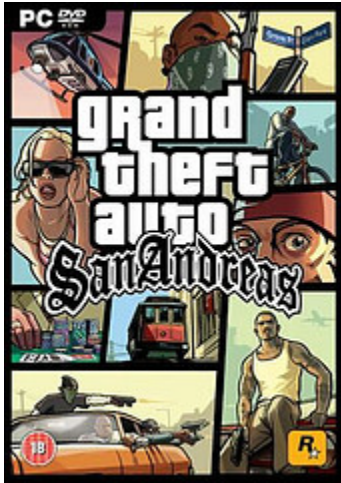


DENIAL AND DELUSION - WHY PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE FAIL BEFORE THEY BEGIN

by Special Correspondent [Latoya Peterson](#)



I am done, done, done.

I intended to work on my follow up to [Internalizing Stereotypes](#).

Key word: intended.

However, the sequel is not happening this week.

The sequel is not happening because my mind is cluttered with two articles that came to my attention in the last half of the week.

The first was a blog post on GameDaily Biz, a site and blog dedicated to the video game industry housed on [Game Daily](#). I peruse GameDaily Biz every few days to find news and trends to discuss in the online gaming magazine [Cerise](#). In addition to writing first person and opinion pieces about gaming, I also write their [Gaming in the Media](#) column. So, when I came across a “Your Turn” first person post on GameDaily Biz by Chris Mottes, CEO of Deadline Games, I was intrigued to see what he had to say.

Particularly because the post was titled, [“That’s Racist! The Unjust Crusade Against Video Games.”](#)

The article begins:

Members of the media often attack video games for being racist, sexist, mean-spirited, callous, unpleasant, insensitive, or just generally nasty. As a developer, I find most of these claims not only a touch insulting but also extremely tenuous, and in the majority of cases unfounded.

Fascinating. The majority of these cases are unfounded? As a black, female [console](#) gamer, I can definitively say that many of the video games I play (and enjoy) can be considered both sexist and racist. Sexism is rampant, particularly when you consider character design, costuming, and forced gender roles in play. Most female characters are designed for maximum sex appeal, relegated to damsel in distress roles, or physically limited and/or forced to contribute to the game in a limited capacity. Major female characters in [RPGs](#) tend to be healers or magic-users, normally devastated in battle by a few hits from a stronger male character. While there are a few standout exceptions - Samus

from [Metroid](#), Joanna Dark from [Perfect Dark](#), and the oft-debated [Lara Croft](#) - most women in video games are side characters.

To illustrate the issue of racism, let's play a little game. Off the top of your head, name 5 black video game characters. Now, exclude any characters that were not main characters. Now exclude any that appear in a sports game or hip-hop based game. Finally, exclude any characters that embody stereotypical representations of African Americans. (Yes, that means excluding CJ from [Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas](#).) How many are left in your list?

Or, let's look at Asian Americans in video games. Again, off the top of your head, name five Asian video game characters - you can use both side characters and main characters. (For this one, we will exclude RPGs from the discussion since character ethnicity a murky subject). Now exclude fighting games. How many are left on your list?

Name five Latino game characters. Can you? I cannot - I have a vague memory of heavy accents in certain video games, but I am not able to bring up one latino character that wasn't in a historical game like [Age of Empires](#) (which technically means I remember playing the game as an Incan and as a Spaniard). For those who can, what stands out about these characters?

Hold that in your mind for a moment, while I continue with Mottes' post:

Games with minority characters, and especially minority stereotypes—even tongue-in-cheek characters not meant to be offensive—are torn down by accusations of intolerance. A surprising number of critics condemn video games as blatantly racist, and we're not merely talking about mainstream celebrities. We're talking about game reviewers and other members of the enthusiast media. We're talking about an astonishing majority of online columnists, bloggers, and forum posters who persistently speak out against any game that contains what they believe to be racial stereotyping.

Total Overdose and Chili Con Carnage, titles I helped develop at Deadline Games, were both targets of this type of criticism. When we designed these games, our goal was to provide a well-rounded, entertaining experience on many levels. We wanted exciting gameplay, but we were just as interested in having a compelling story, cast of characters, and setting, which is why we invested a great deal of energy towards researching the culture of Mexico, so we could produce an experience that was drawn from accurate source material.

When researching for Total Overdose, we spent a great deal of time in Mexico, taking over 6,000 photos—photos that were the basis for the vast majority of the textures that appeared in the game.

Leaving aside the “tongue in cheek characters not meant to be offensive” line, it appears that Mottes really put a lot of thought into what he was doing. Cultural research is a great thing, and working to have a compelling story and cast of characters is a goal that more game designers need to take into consideration. However, Mottes goes astray with his next few lines:

We visited a variety of nightclubs to influence the settings and humor of the game, and we spent time in the company of self-styled gangsters to get a flavor for how they spoke and what they said.

Do you see where this is going?

Mottes manages to get past this blip by explaining other steps he took in the creation of the game:

When recording dialogue for both games, we employed Mexican-American voice actors to ensure that we would be providing accurate representations. And when it was time to decide on the soundtrack, we chose to include music from several acclaimed underground Mexican bands, including Molotov, who enjoyed the game to such a great extent that they offered to record unique tunes for a sequel.

Employing Mexican-American voice actors? Great job! Promoting underground Mexican bands? Even better. I was so impressed by Mottes' initiative, I was completely blindsided by his next statement.

However, in reviews, forums, and blogs following the releases of both games, some people slammed Deadline for being bigoted towards Mexicans. While we did employ stereotypes we considered lighthearted and humorous, our intent was most certainly not to cast Mexican individuals in a derogatory light...But despite our best efforts, critics still slammed us for being racists.

...

Why, Chris, why? Why would you throw away all your hard work for a couple cheap, race based humor shots?

The reality is that no stereotype can be considered light-hearted and humorous. A stereotype is defined as "an often oversimplified or biased mental picture held to characterize the typical individual of a group." Stereotypes are negative. Even "positive" stereotypes are ultimately detrimental to the groups that struggle to find a sense of self within the narrow parameters of society's vision.

I'll touch on this more in next month's *Cerise*, but I have to say I was blown away. The tone of Mottes' piece is unmistakably clear - this is how game designers think. This is how they justify their characters. It is as if the thought never crossed their minds that maybe, just maybe, the industry is sending a very powerful message out to minorities by saying that we do not exist outside of our stereotypical roles. If there were five or ten games with a multi-faceted, modern latino protagonist, maybe slipping in a few "light-hearted" stereotypes in one third person shooter would not be such a huge deal. It is still ill-advised, but you would have enough positive images on the market to balance out the negative images broadcast into the homes of every person who purchased this one game.

However, there is no balance. Stereotype after stereotype abound in the virtually crafted console world, with very few characters of color to provide an alternate perspective. Mottes argues that "most games with racist characters do not reflect the mindset of their developers." I would argue that they do. It

reflects the developer's mindset in dealing with the world and in dealing with minorities. If the developer was not holding on to this mindset that minorities can be categorized with one or two main characteristics, we would have multi-faceted characters of color to play.

Remember the game we played a little while ago? Let's expand on it.

Try naming five characters of color in a major video game release that get to transcend stereotypes.

How many characters of color are allowed to have a personality? How many characters of color are allowed to exist outside of the ghetto, the realm of fighting games, or stereotypical shoot-em-ups?

When will we see a brown-skinned person trying to save the world?

Why don't game developers understand that we want to be heroes too?

...

After all this discussion, I am actually not angry at Chris Mottes. His post reveals some anger, but also notes of confusion. I think he truly may not understand the problem. After all, most people do not spend their time thinking about the implications of living in a racist society, particularly when you are a part of the majority. Maybe he can come to understand the issue in the broader context.

My anger (which is driving this post) started around the time I checked out the [MultiCultClassics](#) blog. In [Essay 4076](#), HiJive posts a dialogue (and I am using that term loosely) between [Hadji Williams](#) (who was on [an ATR podcast](#)) and Bart Cleveland.

Cleveland wrote about allowing hires to move on and rise within the industry as a way to retain and encourage new talent. Williams fired back a provocative response to the shortcomings in Cleveland's article, ending his comment with:

You can talk all you want about what agencies can do to get the "cool kids," but until we accept the fact that we have to want the cool kids so bad that their educational background and ethnic background won't be held against them, then this industry will continue to deserve the 92% white rosters and homogenized clutter-creating ideas that it continues to turn out. —Hadji Williams, Chicago, IL

Cleveland responds:

Whoa, you are on a rip and all I can say is, calm down and get some perspective. The guy who I mentioned in my piece who left to work for Mother didn't go to one of the "four" schools, he went to the University of Texas. I can assure you as a CD looking for talent I welcome it from anywhere. As far as your race rant, you've obviously had a bad personal experience, but it doesn't mean it's the norm. Many agencies are hiring people from all over the world. Thanks to the ad schools like MAS we have that option. Different backgrounds and cultural diversity are a plus in a creative industry. Talent is at

too much of a premium for agencies to do as you say we're doing, hiring based upon race. Are you sure that your problem is your race and education? Could it be your book? Give it some thought. I hope you feel better now that you got your frustration off your chest. Best of luck to you. —Bart Cleveland, Albuquerque, NM

Calm down and get some perspective?

Are you fucking kidding me?

I admire Hadji Williams for his restraint because I started seeing red flashes.

Different backgrounds are a plus? Williams' experience is not the norm?

WHERE THE FUCK HAVE YOU BEEN?

You write for AdAge! They published five major articles on the issues in diversifying the ad industry in 2007 alone! You're a fucking journalist! Don't you fucking read?

I really need to compose myself.

I stewed over this all yesterday.

I suppose what upsets me the most is the differences in tone. Mottes is coming from a perspective I can appreciate. While there is discussion of race in the gaming industry, it has never been a key topic. Race in gaming often takes a backseat to more hot-button topics like video game violence or the console wars. While [some bloggers](#) tackle the subject with remarkable aplomb, video games are still finding their place in society, and are still working to be recognized as cultural influences on par with novels and movies. Hopefully, as gaming begins to mature, more avenues for discussion about the social issues in video game design and development will open.

However, Bart Cleveland epitomizes what is wrong with the advertising industry. The reality is laid bare for all to see. The New York City Commission on Human Rights has gotten involved. 15 major ad agencies have pledged to increase minority hires.

This is major industry news.

How dare you close your eyes to it, and keep promoting some bullshit "it isn't us, it's you" perspective?

I know that race (and racism) is an uncomfortable topic to discuss.

But that discomfort is not a compelling enough reason to hide from the truth.