

Hispanics and Blacks missing in gaming industry

Written by New America Media, Damion Packwood
Wednesday, 28 September 2011 13:01



Synopsis: With studies showing blacks and Hispanics accounting for a majority of gamers, why do video game characters and story lines lack diversity?

The pixelated elephant in the room of the multi-billion dollar gaming industry: African Americans and Hispanics play and purchase video games more than any other ethnic group in the U.S., yet the overwhelming majority of characters in games are young white males.

According to the video game industry, we don't need another hero

A recent study by University of Southern California Professor Dmitri Williams found an overwhelming lack of diversity in video game characters. Williams, a social psychologist by training, compared the ethnic diversity found in his survey of 150 games across nine platforms and all ratings to categories contained in the American census. He found that fewer than 3 percent of video game characters were recognizably Hispanic and none were playable. Native Americans and biracial characters were non-existent. African Americans enjoyed a rate of 10.74 percent, with a big caveat; they were mostly athletes and gangsters.

What's the big deal, right? So what if people are unequally represented in video games? As impressive as the study by Williams is, it seems like a topic best suited for water cooler conversation, and not discussions over coffee and bagels in the boardroom.

As columnist Owen Good opined in Kotaku, a popular video game blog, "In an American games industry dominated, marketed to and consumed mostly by white males, discussions of race and class can quickly hit a wall, blocked by insistence that the subject is inappropriate for a pursuit that should be colorblind in basis."

Good's assertion that people in the gaming community are disinterested in talking about race in games is correct. Take, for example, what followed the sharp critique by then-Newsweek blogger N'Gai Croal in 2008 of a Resident Evil 5 trailer that featured images of a white protagonist killing African zombies. "Wow, clearly no one black worked on this game," was re-quoted in every popular video game news publication. It was honestly like pouring honey on the poor man and sitting him beneath a beehive.

"But it wouldn't be racist if it was a black guy shooting a lot of white people right? This is dumb, people just look for things to bitch about," was one reader's reaction to Goods' commentary found on the game site Destructoid.

Hispanics and Blacks missing in gaming industry

Written by New America Media, Damion Packwood
Wednesday, 28 September 2011 13:01

Who are the gamers?

Good's assertion, however, that whites constitute the majority of consumers in the gaming industry is inaccurate. According to The Kaiser Family Foundation, African American youth between the ages of 8 and 18 play games 30 minutes more per day than white youth, while Hispanics play an average of 10 minutes more.

Nielsen studied the same cultural groups, with ages ranging from 18 to 49, and also found that African Americans consistently spent more time playing video games than whites. Hispanics, on the other hand, dipped slightly below whites, while Asians -- who make up the second most recognizable ethnicity as video game characters -- showed up fourth.

And while both studies examined home console trends, another report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project showed that even in the area of portable gaming, which given the ubiquity of smart phones and tablets has become the most lucrative arm of the industry, African Americans and Hispanics still outranked whites.

One of the arguments used to justify the lack of diversity across the video game eco-sphere -- its media, marketing efforts and characters -- is that gaming is, like lacrosse or tennis, a pastime of the privileged. On the contrary, Reuters reported that low-income families who make less than \$35,000 play more games than families who make over \$74,000 in a study that also found little difference in their purchasing habits.

The overwhelming evidence vs. the underwhelming effort

Each year the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences puts on a video game conference in Las Vegas called the DICE Summit. Last year's event featured a panel discussion on diversity in games featuring Williams of USC and a host of other industry insiders. "What population do [the video game characters] reflect," Williams queried. "The shocking result's of our survey... is you make games that look like you. So, it's really just a reflection of the industry."

Another panelist, Navid Heirs of Raven Software, offered his own view, insisting the problem has more to do with risk management. "No real data exist that... shows that this works or doesn't work. We just don't know because no one's really tried." Publishers and developers, in other words, are not willing to take the creative risks of depicting unfamiliar characters with explicit cultural differences.

Navid Khonsari of New York-based Ink Stories, however, blamed industry ineptitude. Currently working on a game centered around the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Khonsari insisted during the panel discussion that developers are perfectly capable of bringing in cultural consultants, citing the example of the classic PlayStation 2 title Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. For that game, developer house Rockstar Games reached out to DJ Pooh -- who wrote the movie Friday -- to help them with the rags-to-riches story of the gangster character CJ in 1990's Los Angeles.

Until research is done on the motivation of video game developers and the publishers they work for, we can only make educated guesses as to the overwhelming lack of diversity within the industry. We can be certain about one thing, however. From the press to the games they cover, the absence of black or Hispanic characters is limiting its fan base, its narrative potential, and its

Hispanics and Blacks missing in gaming industry

Written by New America Media, Damion Packwood
Wednesday, 28 September 2011 13:01

creative ideas.