SPEAKING ABOUT RACE: BIOPOWER AND RACISM IN THE VIDEOGAME LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how discourses surrounding race and economics inform the way in which videogame creators understand their world and use that understanding to create content. Employing a Foucauldian discourse analysis, the content of two videogames, *Skyrim* and *Max Payne 3*, were analyzed. The analysis of *Skyrim* revealed that race is constructed as an inherently biological phenomenon. Moreover, culture is constructed as emerging from biology. The analysis of *Max Payne 3* revealed that capitalism grounds the construction of race so that biology and culture serves to justify the economic position of light-skinned and dark-skinned Brazilians. These constructions come from various sources such as the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and film noir. The dissertation also interviews videogame developers using semi-structured interviews to examine the extent to which content creators are aware of these discourses and how industry norms and economics affect those discourses. Videogame developers revealed that these discourses stem from a market pressure to make videogame narratives understandable and sellable.
I dedicate this work to my brilliant and wonderful wife, Amanda, and to our amazing daughter, Madeline. You never cease to inspire me.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

MCI’s commercial, *Anthem*, is seductive with imagery and voiceover that declares the Internet as a utopian space where racial, gender, age, or disability inequity does not exist (as cited in Nakamura, 2002, p. 87). This notion is echoed in the *New Yorker* cartoon that states, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (Steiner, 1993). Undergirding this belief is the promise of an easy technological solution to reboot and fix troubling and persistent offline racial inequality.

Yet, what is now apparent is that race-based inequity offline and in various forms of media followed societies into the new media environment. The Internet utopia, it seems, is no utopia after all. Media such as videogames depend on users’ ability to access the Internet with sufficient speed and reliability to view trailers, participate in game forums, and, in some cases, actually play the games. Looking beyond videogames, all media are online in the contemporary world. For instance, television programs often have webi-sodes (e.g., L. S. Miller, 2009), radio stations stream their content, and apparently offline media have at least a website.

What complicates this utopian dream is that whites are still more likely than non-whites to have broadband Internet, which is critical for bandwidth intensive content such as streaming video, Skype, and online videogames (Smith, 2010; Washington, 2011). On the other hand, 46% of blacks and 51% of Latinos rely on mobile technology such as smartphones for Internet access (as cited in Washington, 2011). By contrast, 33% of whites rely on cellular networks for Internet access (as cited in Washington, 2011). This
division of different online spaces constitutes a de facto digital divide that demarcates a curated online space that poor people of color occupy (King, 2011; Washington, 2011).

Income disparity is a factor that is associated with access to this larger, mainstream Internet (Smith, 2010). For instance, whites are far more likely to have regular access to the Internet at home than minorities and poor people in general (Smith, 2010). As Smith (as cited in Washington, 2011) pointed out, "Research has shown that people with an actual connection at home, the ability to go online on a computer at home, are more engaged in a lot of different things than people who rely on access from work, a friend's house, or a phone" (para. 23). Smartphones are limited in comparison to a computer. For instance, mobile browsers are designed for smartphone screen sizes that are smaller than computers. Using someone else's Internet connection puts one at the mercy of the other person's kindness. Moreover, employers often use technology to limit access to certain sites. However, disparity in access is only part of the story.

Mirroring the offline world, digital media such as videogames have become racially divided spaces. As Chow-White (as cited in Washington, 2011) argued, "The Internet is not a separate space from the world, it's intricately connected to everyday life and social institutions" (para. 28). This dissertation is situated from the standpoint that so-called new media spaces are, in practice, racialized similarly to offline social spaces. Institutions surrounding videogames, for example, are thus racialized.

This dissertation seeks to extend the discussion of race in videogames, a form of new media or digital media, by investigating the role of organizations in shaping and rearticulating the discourses around race. Presently, the vast majority of media
scholarship that deals with race or racism on the Internet examines specific instances of racism (see Bostdorff, 2004; Campbell, 2006; Chow-White, 2006; Daniels, 2009a; Nakamura, 2009), and only a few books deal broadly with the construction of race or racism in general (Daniels, 2009b; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012; Nakamura, 2002, 2007). These books shed important light on how economics contribute to the construction of race and racism online (Daniels, 2009b; Nakamura, 2002, 2007). Yet, economics and racism in the United States are interconnected in such a way that they are impossible to disaggregate (Conley, 1999; Feagin, 2006; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994; Roediger, 2007), and the intersection of race and videogames is enough of a fertile ground to warrant more theorization. With the media landscape changing so that digital media take a more prominent role in our lives, it is critical to understand this interplay and its implications. This study, thus, seeks to move towards communication and media companies as the locus around which the economics of race revolves.

However attractive the idea might be that the Internet is a utopian space where we are free to construct our own identity without the oppression of racial structures, racism still persists in online spaces and in allied media, such as videogames (Daniels, 2009b; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012). Part of this may be that, as humans, the way we make sense of the world is through our ability to tell stories and relate phenomena to other narratives that we know (e.g., Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994). Of course, we also depend on narratives to help us make sense of our experiences in the digital world. Media companies, which are particularly adept in storytelling, have made their way into this space. New media formats such as videogames become sites of storytelling, and thus
meaning making, par excellence. Since this study is concerned with how race is
constructed online, this begs the questions: What do those stories tell us about race? How
do content producers dream up those stories? And, what normative industry practices or
financial considerations incentivize those specific stories about race? Since online media
companies are still companies that need to sell content, can we make conjectures about
how economics plays into the creation of those stories?

Such questions are broad, and we can only hope to understand those questions by
asking smaller, answerable questions. Thus, this study poses the following research
questions:

**RQ1.** As corporations produce videogames, how might the content of
videogames contribute to racial discourses?

**RQ2.** To what extent do videogame developers perceive that they contribute to
racial discourses?

**RQ3.** How does economics incentivize those discourses?

It is my hope that by answering these narrow questions, a broader picture of how racial
discourses and economics inform content creation in videogames will emerge.

For this dissertation, I chose to examine the economic, institutional, and
discursive factors that play in videogame development. This is because, as the
videogame industry trade group Entertainment Software Association states, the
videogame industry was worth about $25 billion USD in 2010 (Entertainment Software
Association, 2011). It is a large industry with players spanning a wide spectrum of races
and ages. For instance, Lenhart et al. (2008) found no significant difference in the rates
of videogame playing among different racial groups. Indeed, the main variable associated with videogame use is age (Lenhart et al., 2008). Younger people are more likely to play videogames than older people (Lenhart et al., 2008). Yet the racial encoding in videogames is strikingly white-dominated, with racial minorities playing stereotypical roles or acting as props for white characters (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012).

Why, then, would videogame companies create content that might marginalize a portion of their consumers? In a sense, I mean to question and doubt the rhetorical argument that racism will go away naturally because it is not profitable to marginalize potential customers. Is marginalizing potential customers not profitable? Or, could there be some economic logic where marginalizing some people (at least subtly) could be profitable? This question is really the larger crux of this dissertation. What is clear is that discourses about race in videogames constitute a complex tableau.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

I am concerned with the role of economics in how media companies construct worlds in videogames. Therefore, this dissertation adopts several theoretical perspectives to justify its analysis. This dissertation is situated in the view that stories are ways in which people articulate an understanding of reality. In those narratives, claims get articulated about the world.

In practice, videogames tell a story, and in doing so, articulate discourses (in the Foucauldian sense) that circulate in society. This is because game companies are commercial entities that seek to make a profit (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2009; Jones, 2008). But, in order to make a profit, the products (i.e., narratives of these games) must be understandable by the consumers who purchase and play them. In order to make them understandable, game developers must use those discourses that circulate within the target audience’s society, the same ones they use to understand reality (Bateson, 2000; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009; McLuhan, 1994). Of course, that begs the question: Do discourses precede game developers, or do game developers create discourses? In a sense, I do not believe that this is a question that is answerable. But, what is likely is that there is a recursive co-construction where game developers construct stories and past commercially successful stories influence developers to rearticulate those stories.

How certain discourses are made “true” or at least tested as true is through the “truth telling” function of the market (Foucault, 2008). In the context of the United States, specifically, markets are presumed to operate naturally and autonomously
(Foucault, 2008; Friedman, 2002; Vigo De Lima, 2010). The presumption by many companies is that if one were to “let the market decide,” then one can perceive what people generally perceive as true or normal (Beckert & Streeck, 2008; Foucault, 2008; Kapp, 2011; Vigo De Lima, 2010). In the context of videogames, at least, large sales numbers are understood by game developers as indicative of public desires (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2009). Of course, markets are by no means “natural” spaces (Beckert & Streeck, 2008; Beckert, 2009a, 2009b; Foucault, 2008; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995; Kapp, 2011; Schumpeter, 1942/2008; Vigo De Lima, 2010). They are often spaces where power relations discursively affect production and consumption (Foucault, 2008; Vigo De Lima, 2010). Among those discourses that markets test, circulate in society, and are present in media, such as games, are discourses about people’s bodies (Foucault, 1990, 2008; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995). Many videogames feature bodies of human or non-human people. Therefore, by working backwards from games, this dissertation seeks to examine what discourses are used to construct people’s bodies and what claims those discourses make. And, therefore, this dissertation can examine how economics motivated that selection by asking game developers about their development process and what market pressures influence them.

The framework that I adopt for this dissertation is the notion of the culture industries, biopower, and institutional economics. Each theoretical framework has its own strengths and weaknesses. Taken together, they offer a powerful complementary way to examine the role of economics in media industries such as the videogame industry. Because videogames, are a form of corporately produced media, the culture
industry\(^1\) provides a way to see the sociological and anthropological factors that influence videogame designers. Biopower, the notion that discourses about bodies are justified in markets, allows me to demonstrate how and why bodies are constructed in particular ways in culture industries. At the same time, institutional economic theories allow me to explain how biopower serves the economic interests of videogame development corporations.

**Defining race: The indelible link between race and economics**

Race is a term that draws out complicated issues surrounding social inequality, discrimination, and identity politics. Part of the reason may be due to confusion about whether race is a biological or a social phenomenon (Duster, 2003, 2005, 2006; Hall, 2004). For instance, medical studies often employ race as a variable to investigate differences among groups (Duster, 2003, 2005, 2006; Roberts, 2011; Selvin et al., 2011). However, other scholars have argued that this use in scientific research is both outdated and problematic (Banks, 2011; Duster, 2003, 2005, 2006; Fausto-Sterling, 2008; Roberts, 2011; Zuckerman, 1990). This is because race is often used to stand in for other variables such as socioeconomics (Banks, 2011; Duster, 2003, 2005, 2006; Fausto-Sterling, 2008; Omi & Winant, 1994; Zuckerman, 1990). Despite its continued use in fields such as

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\(^1\) The culture industry is a term coined by the Frankfurt School that denotes how mass media commoditize culture by mass producing cultural artifacts (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995). By convincing media consumers that these mass cultural artifacts are representative of our collective culture, media producers can market, buy, sell, and manipulate social consciousness (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995).
medicine, the consensus that race is a social construct and not a biological fact traces back as far as the eighteenth century (Omi & Winant, 1994).

For the purpose of this study, I define race as a social construct rooted primarily in labor markets where social standing is ordered and justified by economic practices. It is a social practice because race is formed in a “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi & Winant, 1994). Skin color then becomes the primary outward sign of individual and group characteristics that reifies white supremacy because skin color becomes the way that groups of people are ordered as “better than” or “worse than” others (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Omi & Winant, 1994). Of course, I do not wish to imply that whites by their very existence necessarily continue white supremacy. Nor do I wish to imply that one must be white to reify white supremacy. As Bonilla-Silva (2009) found, some non-whites also reified white supremacy because it is intrinsic to the social environment. These categories are constructed through the competition of social movements and counter movements (referred to as racial projects by Omi and Winant) that define who belongs in which racial group and what socially relevant abilities, or lack thereof, various races supposedly have (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Race (and racial ordering specifically) is justified in economic practices because the social statuses of races are inextricably linked to labor markets (Conley, 1999; Feagin, 2006; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994; Roediger, 2007; Shim, 2000). For instance, early Irish immigrants struggled to include themselves in the definition of white at the expense of blacks in the United States (Roediger, 2007). Early
Irish immigrants did this because they realized that in order to gain better economic opportunities, they had to distance themselves from black slaves, with whom the Irish had a close early solidarity (Roediger, 2007). By distancing themselves from blacks, Irish immigrants were able to articulate themselves as working class and therefore better than slave labor (Roediger, 2007).

Roediger (2007) found that despite meager wages, Irish immigrant believed their labor at least warranted pay. Slavery, of course, was unpaid labor. Roediger noted that the abandonment of close social ties that early Irish immigrants had with black slaves allowed Irish immigrants to point to the labor market and argue that they were at least not black. Because they did not do the same work that blacks did, they deserved work opportunities that would eventually allow them to become white (pp. 133–153). In short, they used labor markets to “prove true” a discourse they found more favorable.

In another justification of race through economic practices, Feagin (2006) noted that slavery was discursively used to construct blacks as unfit for paid labor; as such, the accumulation of wealth by blacks was systemically inhibited. Feagin also found that when blacks were no longer legally enslaved, market practices justified poor pay for black labor. This labor market exploitation was significant because it resulted in the inability to accumulate wealth and pass on that wealth and the associated economic advantages to subsequent generations. Those with economic advantages passed on wealth generationally while those in poverty were doomed to pass on debt (pp. 13–46).

Race is a social construct that can also be seen in economic practices other than the labor market, though these economic practices are rooted in labor markets. For
example, economic practices of home loans and education loans increased disparity and solidified the social ordering of races (Conley, 1999; Feagin, 2006; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). In 1934, the Federal Housing Authority was developed to grant special loans with the explicit intention of bringing home ownership within reach of those who would otherwise be unable to buy a home (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). Until the housing crisis of the latter 2000s, home ownership was the main way that Americans accumulated and passed on wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). But early FHA authorities adopted loan criteria, known as redlining because they drew “red lines” around districts on the map that represented the poorer areas, which judged loan seekers from poorer areas (often predominantly occupied by blacks and other non-whites) as risky borrowers regardless of their actual ability to repay loans (Conely, 1999; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006).

Moreover, this practice of “redlining” exacerbated the economic disparity between whites and non-whites, especially blacks (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). This practice resulted in a situation where non-whites are relegated to underperforming schools because of, in part, a lack of property tax revenue and school district boundaries that limit student access to the opportunities provided by more affluent schools (Crone, 1998). Ultimately this leads these students to suffer as they compete for spots at universities and jobs (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Again, race is implicated in these examples and the disparity is justified by appealing to market forces.

Racism is defined as practices or social structures that sustain a racial ordering, white supremacy in this case (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000).
The key in this definition is the set of practices and social structures. Again, I do not wish to imply that being racist requires one to be white. Nor do I wish to imply that it is impossible to practice racism towards whites. Rather, because race is constructed through economic discourses, affluence and skin color in tandem constitute the marker of white supremacy. But one cannot end racism by ordering whites as inferior to non-whites because racial ordering itself remains.

But, how else is racism put into practice, and how does one know racism when one sees it? What “theoretical apparatus [is] necessary to describe how this structure operates” (Bonilla-Silva, 1997)? Bonilla-Silva (1997) offers a solution to this shortcoming with his concept of generalized “racial social systems,” specifically what he calls “color-blind racism”2 (p. 469). These generalized racial social systems describe a process that intentionally or unintentionally happens within societies in which races are constructed, ordered, and material advantages are distributed accordingly (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). It is, therefore, the ordering and distribution of material advantages among various groups according to skin color that makes a practice or social structure racist.

This set of practices, or color-blind racism, is justified by appealing to labor markets. This means that color-blind racism is what Foucault (2008) calls biopower. This assumes that markets are “natural” and beyond human sociality. Considering what

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2 Bonilla-Silva (2009) argues that “color-blind racism” is the practice of talking about or maintaining racism, intentionally or unintentionally, by explaining disparity as a function of cultural differences, biological differences, abstract liberalist arguments, or by minimizing disparity altogether. Abstract liberalist arguments, Bonilla-Silva (2009) contends, are arguments that attribute disparity as solely a reflection of “natural” market forces.
institutional economists tell us, markets are clearly not natural spaces but rather socially mediated spaces (Kapp, 2011; North, 1990; Rothstein, 2009). Color-blind racism appeals to the belief that disparities among different groups are not racist because those disparities are natural occurrences found in markets.

Let us define social structure more clearly. Bonilla-Silva (1997) defines social structure according to Whitmeyer (1994), Bourdieu (1979/1987), and Sewell (1992) as the ways that humans interact with one another and the aggregate characteristics of those interactions. By material advantages, Bonilla-Silva (1997) means “the economic, social, political, or ideological rewards or penalties received by social actors for their participation (whether willing, unwilling, or indifferent) in social structural arrangements” (p. 469). In the context of videogames, these material advantages are found in the content produced by organizations because of commercial pressures.

Racism, thus, is “seen” in the various social institutions of human society. In the United States, the practices of racism have historically been used to recreate white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Feagin, 2006, Omi & Winant, 1994). Institutions are “any form of constraint that human beings devise to shape human interaction” (North, 1990). Institutions can be “formal constraints—such as rules that human beings devise” and “informal constraints—such as conventions and codes of behavior” (North, 1990, p. 4). Racism is, thus, an informal constraint. It orders people typically through skin color and presumed characteristics that supposedly indicate their economic potential (e.g., Omi & Winant, 1994). This ordering is further concretized by the distribution of economic gain, opportunities for economic gain, and the ability to claim advantages for oneself.
through one’s position in that racial ordering. The key to identifying racism seems to be that racism is enacted through the distribution of material advantages according to races or discourses that normalize such unequal distribution. Therefore, the “generalized racial social system” on which Bonilla-Silva (1997, p. 469) argues racism is enacted is a type of non-economic institution that North (1990) describes.

The implication here is that human communication is a fundamental part of how we understand what we mean by race and racism. If race is constructed by social practices that are rooted in economics and labor practices, then the social side of that argument implies that communicating those practices is important. Indeed, what is implied by social-historical practices and racial projects is that communicating discourses that justify those practices is essential. Moreover, Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) argument that racism is a generalized racial social system implies that there is a process of communicating and maintaining that social system. Of course, since we rarely hear or see the terms of that racialized social system explicitly articulated, it follows that the explication is, in effect, a narrative articulation.

*Narratives and discourses as ways of articulating reality and identity*

Previously, I mentioned that as humans, we draw from common narratives so that we can understand each other and the world around us (Dodge et al., 2008; Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994). How humans understand race and how that understanding of race gets articulated in narrative forms such as videogames is also through those common narratives that circulate around us (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009; Fisher, 1984; Torfing, 1999; Vila, 2000, 2003). In this section, I will examine how narratives form an important
way that humans understand the world, and how that way of knowing the world becomes sources of discourses that are articulated in the way we understand race and racism. Moreover, I will examine the ways that these narratives can be mass produced and circulated beyond their geographic and social environment through the culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995; Vila, 2000). Therefore, the discourses and narratives that humans use to understand race may be specific to particular geographic and social spaces (Vila, 2003). Those spaces are crossed because the culture industry turns those discourses and narratives into commodities that are easily mass produced and circulated (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995). It is possible then to examine those discourses and narratives about race because they can be found in these culture industry products, such as videogames.

Stories are ways in which people articulate reality (Fisher, 1984; Vila, 2000). To do so, it is necessary for all people to know the discourses that circulate around their social environment, if for no other reason, than so they can communicate these ideas (Bruner, 1997, 2004; Vila, 2000). For instance, the idea of the Lifeworld itself implies a phenomenon whereby people understand their world as bounded by time, geographic space, and the social environment (Gadamer, 2004; Husserl, 19703). In many cases it is through narratives that people discuss, argue, and advance ideas concerning their understanding of the Lifeworld; the social world is innately a narrative one (Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994; Mouffe, 2000; Ricoeur, 1995; Vila, 2000). Indeed, the metaphor that

3Husserl (1970) originally wrote The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy in 1936. However, it was not published until 1970.
humans are an economizing species (i.e., homo oeconomeus) is equally met by many scholars who argue that humans are also a story telling animal (Bruner, 1997, 2004; Fisher, 1984; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Perinbanayagam, 2000; Taylor, 2005; Vila, 2000, 2003). Fisher (1984) argues that humans communicate their understanding of the way in which the world functions through reasoned and rational arguments that often take the form of stories. The reasonableness and rationality of these stories are, in turn, dependent on other stories that we know, which we learn by being a member of a society (Fisher, 1984). The following narrative from Kenneth Burke describes this process:

Imagine you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion… In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for awhile [sic], until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers you; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you… The hour grows late; you must depart… with the discussion still vigorously in process. (as cited in Fisher, 1984, pp. 6–7)

Not all forms of human communication are rational formal arguments; narratives are a way through which humans make rational claims about the world (Fisher, 1984).

What this implies for this dissertation is that the fictional narratives found in videogames are more than merely fanciful stories (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009; Jones, 2008). These fictions are articulations of the way videogame designers view various aspects of the world around them from their social world to their professional world and its practices. This is because, as I will discuss in a moment, stories emerge from other stories and ideas that circulate within a social environment (Butler, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Perinbanayagam, 2000; Redman, 2005; Ricoeur, 1995; Vila, 2000, 2003). More specifically, the subtle ideas about race in these games say much about how
developers understand their world because in order to dip one’s “oar,” one necessarily needs to catch the “tenor of the argument.”

Narratives can be a form of rational arguments because within the text of narratives are kernels of ideas that are the rational claims about the world (Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994; Perinbanayagam, 2000; Redman, 2005). These claims constitute a notion that Foucault calls discourses (Foucault, 1981). He argues that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures … to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events” (Foucault, 1981, p. 52). Foucault is arguing that when discourses emerge, carefully controlled acts always accompany them so that their claims about the world can be made concrete and specific. That’s not to say that these discourses are so fixed that we cannot re-imagine their meaning. Rather, they are fixed enough so that a dominant understanding of those discourses can emerge. Discourses are therefore spoken and enacted. Those discourses’ meanings are made concrete when they are placed into an understandable narrative.

*More than words: Discourse as the concretization of ideas*

But what is the difference between narratives and discourses? What is it about discourses that allows their meaning to be fixed in the first place? Discourses and narratives inform each other so that narratives are stories that help us contextualize the world; and discourses are ideas that make up the parts of the story that illustrate power relations among people in the social world (Perinbanayagam, 2000; Redman, 2005; Vila, 2000, 2003). Discourses are talk that become practices (Foucault, 1981). For instance,
Redman (2005) gives an example of an informant who tells a story of a perfect day he spent with his girlfriend. In doing so, the informant used narrative to relay information about the day; he also used discourses to make a claim about romance, love, and gender roles (Redman, 2005). While narratives contextualize the world and explain discourses, discourses are claims and relationships of power that can be enacted.

Discourses are fixed by the practices of the social world that surrounds us (Foucault, 1981). Earlier I mentioned Foucault’s argument that discourses are fixed by social practices, laws, and norms that emerge to solidify meaning (Foucault, 1981). Foucault (1993) was specifically concerned with the way these practices, laws, and social norms help create people’s identities. In other words, he was concerned with how the social world helped to make a human being into a person. He found that people and social institutions that possessed knowledge or physical might that allowed them to coerce people were able to set the rules of how a human being can express and understand who she or he is as a person (Foucault, 1982, 1995). Foucault (1981, 1995) called this power-knowledge. Laws that delineate illegal or legal actions, social practices that define what it means to be a member of any given society, behaviors that the society considers “normal,” “deviant,” “healthy,” “sick,” “sane,” or “insane” became ways that those with this power-knowledge communicate this version of reality.

*Constructing identities through storytelling*

Through these articulations of power-knowledge, a person’s identity, or subjectivity, was limited to a certain set of socially acceptable norms (Foucault, 1982, 1993). In that sense, narratives and discourse can be thought of as different and co-
constructive things. This is, of course, one useful way of thinking through these phenomena for the purpose of this dissertation. In practice, it is likely that the distinction is a blurry one. Certain narratives can become antiquated just as certain social norms may change.

The idea that memories recall events accurately because they are static events imprinted in people’s minds has yielded to a more dynamic and fluid view of memory (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Gilbert, 2006). Fields such as narrative psychology contend that memory is always constructed during recall, and that these constructions are dependent on narratives that circulate in our social world particularly when it comes to understanding ourselves as individuals and individuals in relation to others (Bruner, 1997, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Vila, 2003). For instance, Barbie Zelizer (1993) found that journalists constructed themselves as eyewitnesses to the Kennedy assignation whether or not they were actually in Dallas, Texas during the event. It is not that the journalists were being dishonest, but the discourse behind the idea of a journalist is, to a large extent, a reporter of first-hand experiences (Zelizer, 1993). The journalist writes himself or herself into the narrative of that day because of the discourses of being a journalist (see Breed, 1955). That does not mean that those discourses do not change. Quite the contrary, they do change. But discourses change over time when we establish other discourses that force us to rewrite meaning or by narratives that challenge the boundaries that those discourses imply for identity.

Another example comes from the field of criminology. In that field there is an observed phenomenon whereby multiple witnesses to an event have vastly different
recollections of what happened (Waubert de Puiseau, Aßfalg, Erdfelder, & Bernstein, 2012). It is not that each of these witnesses recalls things differently because she or he is willfully being dishonest. Rather, criminologists and psychologists argue that they are recalling the detail to the best of their abilities, but recall is notoriously poor (Davis & Loftus, 2012). The details are then filled in with elements from their social world (Morgan III, Southwick, Steffian, Hazlett, & Loftus, 2013; Osborne & Davies, 2012; Steblay, 1997), sometimes under the influence of leading statements from other eyewitnesses (Thorley & Rushton-Woods, 2013).

Lifeworld is not a static set of experiences. Husserl’s (1970) metaphor that the Lifeworld is the set of experiences that constitute the horizon from which people understand their world seems flawed because the Lifeworld is implied to be in the past and static. Intersections of people’s Lifeworld seem destined to be immune to the recontextualization that narratives imply. Here Foucault’s (1981) description of discourse is an appropriate addendum to the idea of the Lifeworld because those discourses serve as shared social norms, practices, laws, and also allow narratives to form from and rearticulate those discourses. In this manner we can say that discourses can transcend time and geographic space because they can always be slowly rearticulated. Power-knowledge, therefore, circulates.

*Co-constructing corporate identity through individual narrative identities*

These arguments are particularly relevant for institutional discourses. For one, corporations consist of people who run them. These people have their own Lifeworlds that provide specific discourses that they bring to the day to day activities of the
organization. Practices and norms ensue that make up the foundation of the corporate “culture.” Moreover, corporations are also members of larger industries. They compete with various companies with their own corporate culture made up of their own people. Those discourses circulate throughout the organization and the various industries, and conceivably other discourses get concretized. Thus, for our examination of videogames, it is important to remember that like any organization, videogame development companies all exist within their own cultural sphere with norms and practices. Moreover, these cultural spaces are also within the larger Lifeworld of the industry.

Foucault’s (1981) notion of discourse is also important to the Lifeworld because it brings our attention to the idea that discourses are also ideological claims about the Truth. Because discourses are both spoken ideas and ideas solidified as practices, discourses necessarily depend on a certain amount of authoritative power (Mouffe, 2000; Torfing, 1999). For instance, claims that those who cross the border between the United States and Mexico are “illegal” depends on the authority to pass laws that dictate what type of border crossing is legal or illegal (not to mention the very border itself) (Vila, 2003). Moreover, that the US/Mexico border is the border that matters (as opposed to the US/Canada border) in the illegal immigration discussion also implies an authoritative power (Vila, 2003).

Discourses also construct a constitutive outside and inside (Butler, 1993; Laclau, 1995; Mouffe, 2000). That is, the practices, social norms, and laws all serve as ways in which those who belong to the “in” group are demarcated from those in the “out” group (Foucault, 1995; Laclau, 1995). To return to the previous example of illegal
immigration, discourses in the United States focus on the abstract legal process of immigration, safety and terrorism, crime, and employment as ways to delineate who is an “illegal” immigrant (Vila, 2003). Moreover, since the discourses that surround the discussion feature a constellation of practices and laws that squarely target immigrants entering from Mexico, and since discourses of nationality and racial identity are so often conflated in the United States, illegal immigration is itself a discourse surrounding race that demarcates who is an insider and who is an outsider. Even the phraseology of “illegal” and “immigrant” denotes who legitimately belongs inside the borders of the United States (Vila, 2003).

Of course, my point should not be read to mean that the discourses that exist about the border region of the United States and Mexico are necessarily unique to the United States or indicative of some exceptional racism in the United States. Rather, what I mean is that there are discourses (e.g., practices and laws) that surround the topic of the US/Mexico border that, taken as a whole, denote who “belongs” and who is “illegal.” In the same way, discourses about bodies in videogame narratives also demarcate groupings of bodies even if those bodies are imagined bodies made of pixels and code. More importantly, these discourses demonstrate the ideological potency of discourses that divide people into outside and inside groups (Butler, 1997; Laclau, 1995; Mouffe, 2000; Vila, 2003). They constitute a complex constellation that creates ways of “suturing” people into narratives (Torfing, 1999).

In regards to videogames, specifically, these discourses of a constitutive outside and inside also appear. For instance, in the massively multiplayer online game, *World of
*Warcraft*, characters on the constitutive inside and outside are denoted through the use of factions (i.e., the Alliance or the Horde). Furthermore, discourses that demarcate these statuses are also furthered by other discourses that connote sociopolitical identifications. Alliance cities, for example, feature large buildings and evidence of more advanced economies than the Horde counterparts (wowhead.com, 2010). Hairstyles, clothes, and mounts all serve to further this distinction between who belongs in one’s in-group and who does not (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006).

Discourses found in videogames are created to serve the larger narrative of the game. Yet, they come from the offline world such as television, cinema, literature, and the society at large to be recreated in-game and serve the game’s narrative (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009; Gonzalo, 2003). For example, the idea that dwarves speak with a Scottish accent and are master craftsmen comes from J. R. R Tolkien’s “Middle Earth” mythos and its various popular interpretations (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Fimi, 2009). The Tolkien mythos itself made its way to tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (Fine, 2002). *Dungeons and Dragons* then made its way to videogames such as the classic “goldbox” games of the 1980s and 1990s (Gold Box Wiki, n.d.; Harris, 2009). Another example of this fluidity is the example of Joseph Campbell’s idea of the “hero’s journey.” The hero’s journey, the archetypical narrative of the young hero from meager means who rises through a series of tests to change his or her world, is found in folklore and made its way to cinema and videogames in the form of George Lucas’s *Star Wars* franchise (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009). This demonstrates the fluid nature of
discourses. Discourses of these videogames serve the narrative of the game while simultaneously serving to reify offline discourses in the social environment.

Still, the fluid nature of discourses only explains that discourses can easily slide from one medium to another. While Foucault’s (1981) notion of discourse accounts for its fluidity, his idea is still rooted in a particular social environment. To put it another way, Foucault’s notion of discourse is still predicated on the older notion of the Lifeworld, which is itself an idea that assumes situatedness in a particular cultural moment in time. Even if we assume that these discourses “survive” by being rearticulated in various media, through what mechanism does that happen? To answer this, we turn towards the notion of the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944/1995) idea that media companies create products that commoditize culture. Using this framework, we see that discourses survive and are rearticulated because they can be commoditized. This commoditization makes them analyzable through economic theories.

The culture industry and the transmission of ideology

There are likely some videogame developers who harbor racist views. It is likely that if one looks carefully, explicitly racist content can be found. That is outside the scope of this dissertation. What this project is concerned with is the ways in which corporations subtly reproduce discourses that deal with race. It is not that media companies have some powerful way of making society believe their content without question. Remember, Fisher’s (1984) argument is that stories are a form of rational human argument. It matters if corporations subtly reproduce discourses that deal with
race because corporations are able to efficiently tell those stories. Therefore, corporations have a powerful voice in telling stories. Intentionally or not, those narratives are a form of argumentation (Fisher, 1984). And, sometimes those stories argue much about what it means to be part of a race or a race’s culture.

Still, “race” and “culture” are nebulous terms. For example, social scientists have pointed out that race and culture are often problematic concepts because regional discourses of race and cultural norms exist in the United States (e.g., Vila, 2003). Yet, some discourses about race are nationwide. Media companies tell stories about the social world. While people do not unquestioningly accept the stories that they tell, media companies do act as one institutional force in the social world. The concept of the culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995) gives a powerful institutional view because, from that perspective, media content is seen as the vehicle through which beliefs are transmitted, which explains why some discourses resonate nationally.

The term culture industry denotes the resulting mass media industry that emerged with the advent of “film, radio and magazines” that “make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995, p. 120). The argument is that all motion picture, broadcast, and print media companies are part of a monolithic industry whose only interest is in making money (instead of solidifying class consciousness, for example) (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995). To do this, the companies that comprise the culture industry adopt a discourse that they are the curators of our collective culture (Horkheimer & Adorno 1944/1995). By doing so, the culture industry shows people “a model of their culture: the false identity of the general and the
particular. Under monopoly all mass culture is identical” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995, p. 121). Therefore, according to Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1995), the culture industry strips people of individuality by commoditizing people and portraying a manufactured view. This manufactured view is an easily packaged and sold set of discourses about how the world works, how one should behave, or what’s normal.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944/1995) argument, the culture industry is so pervasive that it is able to confuse people into ignoring genuine class or group interests by manufacturing cultural norms and presenting capitalistic interests as the society’s interests. All the while, these interests are hidden behind the argument that its products merely answer consumer desires. Consumption of goods and media content, which directly benefits corporations that produce those commodities, is articulated as normal. With consumerism articulated as the driving social goal, alienation from other forms of human interaction is constructed as normal (pp. 120-167).

What are the interests of game companies specifically? The main interest of game companies is to make money. While that may not be the driving force for individual game developers, it is the main reason for game companies as a whole (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009). Their business is selling games for various gaming consoles and computers, selling subscriptions for massively multiplayer online games, and selling virtual goods to players. And, their stock-and-trade is storytelling.

Selling games and virtual goods also means that the game companies must make their content (e.g., stories) understandable. In order to set a game in a virtual world, enough of the world must be explained to make sense. And, that sense-making is
possible only by utilizing discourses and narratives that circulate in the social environment because the alternative is to explain an insurmountable amount of detail. For example, in games such as *Guild Wars 2*, players have the ability to purchase virtual goods for real money (Guild Wars 2 Official Wiki, 2013b). The setting of the game takes place in a fantasy medieval world. Yet, some of the items that players can buy violate that setting. For instance, players can buy a headband with Playboy-esque rabbit ears (Guild Wars 2 Official Wiki, 2013a). This is possible because the stated intent of the game developers is that these goods are for social interactions and will not affect game mechanics such as combat. The discourse of a social item that does not affect game mechanics such as combat allows for something as out of place as Playboy-like rabbit ears because the discourses open the possibility for something that is outside the game world. If it is “just for fun” and does not affect game mechanics, then it follows that it does not need to be consistent with the logic of the game world. But, the rabbit-ear headband itself would not make sense unless it exists in the real world with all of the discourses that are associated with it.

Of course, the culture industry, as Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1995) envisioned it, seems impossibly overwhelming because any resistance imaginable would be appropriated (Bottomore, 2002). As Bottomore (2002) pointed out, movements such as the counter culture student movements in the 1960s would be impossible if the culture industry were as totalizing as Horkheimer and Adorno suggested. Furthermore, the culture industry argument suggests that media corporations are acting with a unified intent (Bottomore, 2002). This is, of course, an oversimplified notion of how
organizations operate. Videogame companies operate in competition with each other over consumers’ attention and money. Nevertheless, the value of Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of the culture industry is as an ideal argument. It is a useful concept to consider the interests of the media industry and the interests of media consumers in a general sense.

However, the Frankfurt School’s notion of the culture industry does not adequately theorize how race could be constructed at the level of the firm. On one hand, the argument behind the culture industry tells us that the goal of these media companies is to unify a view of society so that people can be exploited for economic gain (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944/1995). On the other hand, when race enters the picture, the picture becomes more convoluted. How can the culture industry exploit different populations for economic gain when they speak discourses that might marginalize those very same groups? Furthermore, the interests of videogame companies, as an aggregate, are not necessarily the same as any individual company.

While the culture industry can account for the way discourses are circulated nationwide, it falls short in explaining why racism would persist for individual corporations. This is because the Frankfurt School’s notion of the culture industry is grounded in Gramsci’s thinking about hegemony and generally avoided economic explanation (Bronner, 2011). Simply put, if racism is irrational as some contend (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1993/1950), then why would market rationality not eliminate racism that might exist in corporate products?
To answer this question, the culture industry’s goal of exploiting populations for economic gain is either incorrect, or there is indeed an economic benefit to continuing the existing discourses of race. For the most part, Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944/1995) central tenets of the culture industry hold true. It follows then that there are some economic benefits to rearticulating existing discourses about race. Paraphrasing the oft-cited rhetorical argument, if racism is ideological with no market incentives (that is, economic mechanisms), then racism would be economically disadvantageous and would not survive market forces. Yet racism persists even in online spaces (Consalvo, 2009; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012; Nakamura, 2009).

Economics incentives at the micro-level of the firm and the individual

Despite an expansive geography and various regional Lifeworlds, the culture industry offers a powerful conceptual framework for understanding how discourses of race are disseminated and maintained. However, because of its de-emphasis of economics in favor of “anthropological and existential elements of human misery” (Bronner, 2011, p. 35), the Frankfurt School’s theoretical framework does not offer tools to see how color-blind racism is articulated in markets. Biopower, Foucault’s (2008) notion that discourses about the bodies of people (wherever they originate) are justified by market forces, offers the economic tools to extend the anthropological insights presented by the concept of the culture industry. In order to do so, the theoretical lens provided by Foucault’s (2008) notion of biopower has to be seen in tandem with an economic view at the level of the firm. This is why I propose that the best way to examine how videogame developers may contribute to discourses of race is to use
Foucault’s notion of biopower as a general framework to understand the process of how bodies are politicized, the culture industry to examine the role of corporate actors that politicize those bodies in society at large, and institutional economics to understand the motivations of those actors at the firm level. By examining videogame texts through the lens of biopower, how discourses that politicized can be made clear. By interviewing videogame developers about these discourses, the motivations at the level of the firm can be seen. Both of these analyses can be seen through the lens of the culture industry to reveal a larger social context.

Institutional economics, a category of economics, offers a framework for understanding the economic incentives that motivate organizations, such as corporations and governmental regulatory bodies (Adorno et al., 1993; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Santa Cruz, 1975; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). However, institutional economics does not adequately offer anthropological insights as it articulates the economic incentives of firms. How those economic incentives in turn play into the construct of race is best understood by further examining them through Foucauldian and critical lenses. For institutional economists, incentives are formal or informal structures that promote or discourage people who operate firms (or firm managers) from taking certain actions (Nye, 2008). For instance, anti-trust laws discourage collusion among firm managers of different corporations because regulators are empowered to punish such activities (Rothstein, 2009). Yet these incentives can also be informal, cultural level incentives (Kapp, 2011). Merging insights from Foucault’s idea of biopower with the insights from institutional economics provides a powerful vantage point.
I also draw from institutional economics to define the incentives of organizations and explain in greater detail how they function, generally speaking, in contemporary markets (Arrunada, 2008). Institutional economics also allows me to explain how biopower serves to incentivize practices in the videogame industry, specifically. Institutional economics argues that the reduction of uncertainty in market transactions (in the service of making money) is a dominant motivating factor affecting the decision-making of organizations (Brousseau & Glachant, 2008). In the absence of regulatory or other structural forces that help reduce uncertainty, organizations turn to prevailing norms in the society regardless of the rationality of those beliefs (Brousseau & Glachant, 2008). This happens because organizations are made up of humans who reiterate and disseminate ideas that eventually make their way to company level decision-making (Brousseau & Glachant, 2008). Those beliefs then become a part of the rational decision-making of organizations (Brousseau & Glachant, 2008).

Notably, the discussion of market incentives is useful because of institutional economics’ strong ties to the Frankfurt School (Berger & Steppacher, 2011). Kapp (2011) argues, for example, that classical economics suffers a fallacy in its notion of “consumer sovereignty” (2011, p. 23). That is, institutional economics rejects classical economic theory’s doctrine that what consumers purchase is itself adequate data and devoid of any cultural or social influence.

By declaring consumers’ ends the only ultimate ones, by treating them as data in a world in which consumer wants are increasingly subject to manipulation, by refusing to examine the genesis of wants and make distinctions between important and less-important human needs, and by assuming … that all wants, no matter how they have come into being, are economically relevant as long as they express themselves in market demands and generate market sales, the neoclassical
In addition to supply-and-demand, social norms and practices inform the way in which people and organizations conduct transactions.

While institutional economics deals primarily with inter-firm alliances and enforcement costs of contracts, examining transaction costs allows an analysis that extends to the level of exchange between videogame players and videogame companies. For instance, institutional economists point out that in order to reduce the uncertainty (e.g., whether or not a player will buy the game or feel that the game was worth the purchase), organizations rely on contracts such as “terms of service” as well as informal enforcement mechanisms such as norms of player behavior. Moreover, institutional economics affords the possibility that the beliefs people bring to the decision making process of institutions may be irrational by classical economic standards (see Arrunada, 2008).

To clarify, Consalvo (2009) found that despite gold selling, or the selling of virtual goods and money for real currency, being prohibited in the terms of service of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOs), the prevalence of gold selling creates a system in which the activity is beneficial to the game producers. Thus, there is a transaction cost to enforcing the contract in that some players would not continue to subscribe to the game if gold selling negatively affects the in-game economy; and, there would be uncertainty for players if there were no explicit prohibition in gold selling because of a normative belief that gold selling would unbalance game play (Consalvo, 2009). On the other hand, there would be fewer transaction costs by turning a blind eye
to such violations of a game’s terms of service because game companies would have to spend less capital in enforcement costs. In an economic sense, the meaning of Consalvo’s findings is that game companies were able to reduce player uncertainty by declaring that gold selling was against their terms of service and reduce transaction costs by only enforcing that prohibition enough to keep players happy.

Gold selling implicitly brings race into the discussion as well (Nakamura, 2009; Scholz, 2012; Taylor, 2006). Nakamura and Chow-White (2012) call *World of Warcraft*, a long running and popular multiplayer online role-playing game, a sweatshop because of the perceived abusive practices associated with Asian (and specifically Chinese) gold sellers, who play games to exchange online currency for real money (Nakamura, 2009). Selling online currency, responding slowly to messages, or typing in broken English is enough to provoke other players to assume the player is a gold seller and Chinese (Nakamura, 2009).

Simultaneously, these game companies depend on and reject the practice of gold selling (which is often also referred to as gold farming). These studies of gold selling illustrate that game narratives, offline discourses, and economics form an interwoven fabric. On one hand, racism is illogical (Adorno et al., 1950/1993; Bonilla-Silva, 1997). On the other hand, according to Marxists there must be some economic logic to racism for racism to persist.

The central goal of this research is to investigate the role of videogame companies in shaping and rearticulating discourses around race. The hope is that this study will help push communication and media companies towards a more prominent place in the
scholarship of race. As a scholar, I believe the best way to understand the interlocking phenomena of race, economics and discourse within media is to examine them through the lens of biopower, Foucault’s notion of how markets and social practices discipline bodies of populations, while still employing what was learned through institutional economics and critical theory.

Race has become a nuanced notion that is often hidden behind other discourses on the Internet (Nakamura, 2008; Taylor, 2006). In spaces such as videogames, race also has an economic and political aspect as evinced from discourses surrounding gold selling (Consalvo, 2009; Nakamura, 2009; Taylor, 2006). Biopower helps us identify these discourses because it shows how discourses become norms and practices in a society. While a central perspective, that biopower gives us only partial understanding unless we bring in theories that detail how media corporations as economic players act (e.g., institutional economics) and how those acts (and media content) affect society at large (e.g., critical theory).

*Biopower*

The ways that race is interwoven with economics are often invisible (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Conley, 1999; Feagin, 2006; Scholz, 2012; Taylor, 2006). Moreover, when presented with examples of this, people tend to deny, minimize, or blame minorities for these economic disparities (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2009). This is because the link between race and
economics is made invisible through a process that Foucault (1995) argues “normalizes” any economic disparity. At an abstract level, biopower specifically addresses how markets play an integral role in the way the bodies of populations are governed. In that sense, Bonilla-Silva’s generalized racial social system gains even more explanatory power when it is viewed as an extension of Foucault’s notion of biopower.

For Foucault (1995, 2003, 2007, 2008), when institutions in everyday life such as markets are talked about as being free from value judgments, they influence people into behaving and thinking in certain ways that appear to be natural. When economic practices disadvantage certain groups of people through market competition, for example, that disadvantage is presumed to be a natural result of fair-market competition and the underlying causes of that disparity become invisible. That presumption of normality is memorialized through discourses that get repeated and further ingrained and concretized as practice and artifacts (Foucault, 1981, 1995).

Markets are particularly interesting and powerful institutions because markets become the place where the discourse of natural market competition becomes a meta-discourse that is used to determine the truthfulness of other discourses (Foucault, 2008). When discourses about groups of people get justified by this market discourse, that process is called biopower (Foucault, 2008). Foucault (2003, 2007, 2008), defines biopower as a form of discourse that shapes the way society understands the bodies of individuals and groups and how the biology of those bodies act as outward signs of social standing (i.e., a political strategy) that get justified in markets.

By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the
human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is roughly what I have called biopower. (Foucault, 2007, p. 16)

Furthermore, biopower arises out of the economic and political environment of a society and serves a political strategy by constructing meaning (Foucault, 2007, 2008). I will explain this further in a moment, but keep in mind that discourses are both spoken and practiced.

The political strategy of “truth-testing” through markets

As an evolution of the Foucauldian concept of power, biopower also articulates relationships that oppress and produce meaning among groups (Foucault, 2008; O’Farrell, 2005). To clarify what is meant by the “oppressing” and the “producing” meaning, let us view biopower (and power in general) as ascribing what a Self can be and what it cannot be (Butler, 1990). By oppressing meaning, Foucault (1982) means that some discourses restrict what a person can be. Statements such as, “I am too old to keep up with the Internet,” imply that there is a biological affinity that younger people possess towards the Internet that older people lack. Of course, age per se is immaterial to a person’s ability to learn and use the Internet. The statement is oppressive in that it implies that older people are generally inept at learning to use the Internet. Similarly, the statement is productive in that some discourses imply a natural affinity that does not necessarily need to be (Foucault, 1982). For instance, statements such as “Asians are good at math” imply that being identified as Asian marks an individual as generally excelling at mathematics. It is easy to see how these statements are not necessarily true. However, some discourses are much more subtle.
The Self in question in this dissertation is the construction of groups of people as races. The notion of biopower is important to this study because it brings into view how discourses about race are used online and how those discourses organize power relations among groups. Moreover, biopower also pulls into focus why and how those discourses benefit certain groups.

Biopower gets practiced and justified specifically through markets (Foucault, 2008). Why are biopower discourses justified in markets? Moreover, why are biopower discourses a political strategy? People understand the world through narratives (Dodge et al., 2008; Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994), and those narratives affect how humans understand themselves and larger groups as subjects (Foucault, 1982, 1976/1990). In order to determine the truth of these narratives, these narratives must be tested by something that is believed to be rational where cause and effect can be seen (Foucault, 2008). Foucault (2008) calls this practice of truth testing “veridiction.” Markets become the place of veridiction because biopower developed from two older types of power, which are still found within examples of biopower, called pastoral and sovereign power (Foucault, 1993, 2008; O’Farrell, 2005).

The most important part of this discussion of biopower is that biopower is a form of discourse about people’s bodies that becomes “normalized.” These normalized discourses circulate throughout society and become truisms that get appropriated into content that media, such as videogames, use to sell as cultural artifacts (Gramsci, 1971; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995; Perinbanayagam, 2000; Torfing, 1999). In other
words, the culture industry creates artifacts using discourses that circulate in that social environment.

Sovereign power

The form of biopower known as sovereign power is traced to feudal societies in which all individuals and objects within the realm become considered the extension of the sovereign’s body (Foucault, 2008). Naturally, subjects of the realm didn’t literally think of themselves as extensions of the sovereign’s body; rather, this discourse was the justification of how feudal governments were organized (Foucault, 2008). As such, the sovereign was the sole source that assured the fairness of trade within the realm because all trade was considered indirect trade with the body of the sovereign (Foucault, 2008). Since the body of the society was considered an extension of the sovereign, any aberration or transgression was punished by death in the way that one might cut off an ill-groomed fingernail (Foucault, 1982, 2003).

The sovereign’s power to punish is rooted in the logic that any transgression “of course wronged some people, but above all had struck the sovereign in the very body of his power” (Foucault, 2008, p. 46). In other words, transgressions wronged the realm, which is the metaphorical body of the sovereign. In a contemporary context, sovereign power (a form of biopower) evolved into a power to deny or oppress (Foucault, 1982, 2008). To put it another way, sovereign power was a type of discourse (both speech and practice), such as laws and norms, that prohibited certain acts (Foucault, 1993; Vigo De Lima, 2010).
However, as societies moved from feudal societies toward more democratic forms of governance, markets became the site of veridiction (i.e., truth-testing) (Foucault, 2008). Markets became the site of truth testing because, as the state took on the regulatory role of the sovereign, it also took on the role of protecting markets (Foucault, 2008; Lindblom, 1980; Polanyi, 2001; Vigo De Lima, 2010). But, without a sovereign’s claim to divine right or force of violence, states needed some way to justify actions as truthful or correct (Foucault, 2008; Vigo De Lima, 2010). At the same time, markets existed only because states protected them (Lindblom, 1980; Polanyi, 2001).

The market constitutes a site of veridiction … of verification-falsification for governmental practice… The market now means that to be good government, government has to function according to truth… (Foucault, 2008, p. 32) Sovereigns were able to define fairness by force; on the other hand, states were bound to the idea of distributive governance, and as a result, markets were constructed as a place where supply and demand was thought to ensure fairness (Foucault, 2008; Vigo De Lima, 2010). So, one can understand the idea as a belief that a government is a good government because it protects fair and free markets. Things that happen in these free and fair markets are, by definition, natural and true. If something happens to people through these markets, it must also be natural and true.

The truthfulness and fairness of markets is, to an extent, illusory because markets are susceptible to manipulations (Foucault, 2008; Lindblom, 1980; Rothstein, 2009; Schumpeter, 1942/2008). For example, regulators who are supposed to have the society’s greater good in mind may instead have a corporation’s greater good in mind. Corporations can band together unofficially to create scarcity and drive up prices. To put the idea another way, markets are not mechanistic spaces where consumption and
production happen naturally without the influence of human sociality. Indeed, markets are often influenced by unfounded beliefs and manipulations (Foucault, 2008; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995; Kapp, 2011; Schumpeter, 1942/2008). Thus, when Foucault (2008) called markets the site of veridiction, what he meant is that markets are the contemporary source of biopower. This forecloses the possibility that content creators are merely creating content that sells well because behind the idea of markets themselves lies an implicit belief of how the world supposedly works. Moreover, a corporation’s profit motive is a discourse of biopower.

While biopower sounds like an oppressive force, it is also productive (O’Farrell, 2005). Biopower is oppressive in the sense that fear of unsuccessful sales and risks to investment in production costs may induce content creators not to create certain kinds of content that they believe might not be saleable in the market. At the same time, however, biopower is productive in the sense that beliefs and fears of market performance encourage the creation of certain types of content. For instance, content creators might be induced to produce content that they believe is saleable which leads to a homogenizing view of society that, in turn, leads content creators to produce the same type of content. All of this would be done by content creators while hiding behind the rationale of market preference (Foucault, 2008; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995).

Not all discourses about race restrict what groups of people supposedly are (e.g., Latinos are no good at…). Some discourses seem to laud groups of people, yet these discourses are also problematic because they presume a characteristic that is normalized
(e.g., Latinos have such great…). To understand how some discourses produce meaning about people’s bodies, we turn to the concept of pastoral power.

_Pastoral power_

   At the same time that sovereign power developed, another form of power called pastoral power developed (Foucault, 1993, 2008). As the sovereign regulated populations by denying life, clerics regulated populations by giving life (Foucault, 1993, 2008). That is, clerics used their religious authority in feudal societies to articulate what constitutes a good or meaningful life (Foucault, 1993; O’Farrell, 2005). Likewise, in the present era, medicine, social norms, education, and other apparatuses of civil society are implicated in articulating what it means to be a person within a society (Curtis, 2002).

   This meaning making ability for populations is the key to this “governmentality” of populations (Foucault, 1993). In feudal societies, how individuals related to different classes (e.g., clergy or aristocracy) and people from different societies (i.e., citizens of different countries) mainly came from the clergy (Foucault, 1982). For instance, while the political powers such as the sovereign determined against whom war was declared, it was the clergy that articulated why the war was just. Feudal societies were not strictly arranged in this manner, but they were generally mapped in this arrangement.

   As societies moved away from a feudal form of government, social institutions that came to be known as civil society became the source of pastoral power (Foucault, 1993). Schools, professional organizations, social clubs, political parties, and, of course, churches all serve this pastoral function in contemporary society in that they articulate for their members what it means to be a member of a group (Fukuyama, 2000; Portes, 1998).
In some cases, this form of biopower is exercised by these organizations by setting membership criteria (e.g., who can or cannot be a member). In other cases, this form of biopower is exercised by these organizations by articulating norms for members to define who they are. In that case, these organizations are exercising a productive power.\footnote{I am purposefully shying away from describing pastoral power as “culture.” I would like to avoid discussing culture as much as possible. As Cohen (2009) pointed out, defining culture is problematic because it is so nebulous. Nevertheless, there is much slippage between what Foucault (2008) calls biopower and the constellation of what we mean by culture (Cohen, 2009). Namely, biopower is normative in the religious and economic sense (Foucault, 2008). Frustratingly, so is culture (Cohen, 2009). How culture and biopower are connected (or not) is outside the scope of this dissertation.}

If this sounds like the concept of base and superstructure (Marx & Engels, 1978), it is because Foucault (as cited in Curtis, 2002) meant it as such. He argued that his analysis was an elaboration of Marx’s second volume of Kapital (Curtis, 2002). Yet, where Marx’s analysis is focused on the physical technologies of production, Foucault extends this logic to the discursive technologies that produce bodies of populations (Curtis, 2002).

Power is neither oppressive nor productive exclusively. Foucault (1982) later speaks about discourses in terms of power relations. However, for this project, returning to the ways in which power is oppressive or productive (sovereign or pastoral) is necessary to examine how discourses may contribute to the ways we understand race.

\textit{Color-blind racism as a form of biopower}

As a reminder, biopower is a form of discourse that shapes the way society understands the bodies of individuals and groups and how the biological characteristics of those bodies act as outward signs of social standing (i.e., a political strategy) which get
justified in markets (Foucault, 2003, 2007, 2008). A concrete example of biopower is found in Bonilla-Silva’s (2009) notion of color-blind racism. Bonilla-Silva (1997, 2009) defined color-blind racism as a generalized racial social system. For the purpose of this dissertation, color-blind racism is used to identify biopower found in the sample. While he does not use the words specifically, Bonilla-Silva (2009) focuses on the oppressive and productive power of discourses. Color-blind racism is defined as a way of understanding and talking about the world as if the economic disparities caused by a white-dominated social order no longer contribute to racism, and any disparity that non-whites suffer is talked about as resulting from “market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and … imputed cultural limitations” of minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 2).

Bonilla-Silva (2009) argues that this new discourse of color-blind racism has been widely adopted by the American public as a result of the social and legal changes brought about by the Civil Rights Movement. The result is that color-blind racism allows people to discuss race, intentionally or not, behind the protective guise of other topics (see Bernasconi, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2006, 2009; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; see Emerson, Smith, & Sikkink, 1999). For example, Bonilla-Silva (2009) found that his research informants spoke about phenomena, such as residential segregation and school segregation, as if they emerged naturally. These phenomena are influenced intricately and subtly by how people talk about race (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Color-blind racism normalizes, or makes things appear normal, by claiming certain disparities occur naturally, through market forces, by cultural practices, or minimizing disparity outright (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Essentially, Bonilla-Silva is
describing Foucault’s (2008) notion of biopower. That is, disparities appear natural because they get verified through market forces. In my reading of Bonilla-Silva, market forces also seem to be the locus of color-blind racism.

Thus, Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) notion of a generalized racial social system, which he calls color-blind racism, gives us a good tool to examine the discourses about race that exist. But, its explanatory shortcomings stem from its silence on how that social system came to be in the first place or why, given that it exists, people are compelled to adhere to it. Such questions are outside the scope of his research. Still, because he argues that these discourses have an economic underlayment (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), viewing color-blind racism as an extension of biopower (Foucault, 2008) answers those shortcomings while maintaining a theoretical consistency across both theorists.

Furthermore, color-blind racism deals with the way people understand and talk about the bodies of various groups. If we consider how color-blind racism is a form of pastoral and sovereign biopower, then it becomes clear why and how people use those discourses to maintain white supremacy. People adopted those discourses because it allowed those with privilege to maintain power and justify the existing racial order because the existing racial order appears normal (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Foucault, 2007, 2008). In the past, laws that regulated who may or may not intermarry were justified as a social welfare (Bernasconi, 2010) that ultimately sought “to harness the strength and development potential of human bodies and put them to use in industrial production” (McWhorter, 2004, p. 40). In the present era when explicit racism is generally frowned upon, the industrial productivity or non-productivity (e.g., the
bodies) of minorities is seen, for instance, as resulting from “harmful” affirmative action laws (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). As such, by using those biopower discourses, we can speak in a racially problematic way without ever referencing race (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Color-blind racism becomes a discursive way to talk about these laws as sources of disparity instead of attempts to ameliorate disparity (Bonilla-Silva, 2009).

**Biopower in digital spaces**

Returning to the discourse of the gold seller once again, Nakamura and Chow-White (2012) also call *World of Warcraft*, “a minstrel show” (p. 8). Again, it is a sweatshop because the discourse of a gold seller is an Asian person, most likely Chinese, who works for slave wages (Nakamura, 2009). It is exploitive in that sense. However, *World of Warcraft* is a minstrel show in its stereotypical portrayal of "trolls and Tauren" as Caribbean exotic and Native Americans" (Nakamura and Chow-White, 2012, p. 8).

Whether or not Asian gold sellers are in fact Asians who work for slave wages is beside the point in a sense. After all, abused people anywhere constitute a problem. The game does not prohibit Asians from playing. Moreover, the similarities between trolls and Tauren and real world stereotypes do not directly harm people. (And, there are no such things as trolls or Tauren.) Nevertheless, these discourses in videogames do matter because they circulate in society. As Foucault (1995) argues, discourses are powerful because they articulate what is supposedly normal in society. And, in this sense, what is

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5 A Tauren is a character species or race that a player can play in *World of Warcraft* that resembles a minotaur—a species that resembles a bovine and a human.
made normal is the repetition of the structures of difference rather than any actual difference.

In the offline world, skin color tends to be the sign that discourses about race circulate. To put it another way, the “otherness” of bodies is marked by skin color (Feagin, 2006; Fredrickson, 2002). However, skin color is not necessarily visible online. Yet, skin color is still a focal point for defining race online. Granted, the idea that people who sell game currency for real money are Chinese is not written into the game like a Caribbean sounding troll. Texts, games included, can only be understood in the context of the society that reads (or plays) them (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1995). Therefore, the skin color of players selling game currency and the Caribbeanness of trolls is read into existence by the players only because of the narratives within the players’ social environment.

Foucault’s (2008) notion of biopower tells us that the norms of society are forged in the political economy of markets with civil society institutions (such as religions organizations) serving to reify those norms. From this perspective, things that may seem like a question of market forces can be understood as discourses that help make sense of the world whether or not these worlds are offline or online in a videogame. Markets, after all, are social spaces, as well (Beckert, 2009b; Kapp, 2011; Nye, 2008; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Rothstein, 2009; Schumpeter, 1942/2008).

In a study that highlights the way discourses of inner-city blight and urban decay configure bodies and what spaces they ought to occupy, boyd (2012) found phrases associated with economics and race were used to describe MySpace. She found that
white teenagers left MySpace for Facebook because the presence of blacks made MySpace *ghetto* (boyd, 2012). These white teenagers made sense of the online world (i.e., the social network) through those market discourses. That is, MySpace was constructed as real estate with less market value than Facebook. Black teenagers, she found, are more likely to use MySpace while white teenagers are more likely to frequent Facebook (boyd, 2012). While this may be seen as one market segment choosing a particular space while another segment chooses something else, boyd (2012) insightfully uncovers that this is not necessarily the case and refers to the exodus of whites as a type of online “white flight” (p. 218). This is because implicated in this demarcation was the practice of homophily, where friendship networks are formed around similarities such as race or the perception of race, however it may come about, (boyd, 2012) and its role in market decision. However, in this instance, homophily is “rooted in a history of inequality, bigotry, and oppression” and “the political economy and structural constraints of American life” (boyd, 2012, p. 208).

Moreover, boyd's choice of the phrase *white flight* recalls the practice of “redlining” in the middle of the 20th century when home loans kept blacks in the inner cities and enabled whites to move out to suburban locations (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). One participant states, “I’m not really into racism, but I think that MySpace now is more like ghetto or whatever” (boyd, 2012, p. 203). In that particular case, the white teen’s use of the word ghetto evokes the spatial segregation of race and “a set of tastes that emerged as poor people of color developed fashion and cultural artifacts that proudly expressed
their identity” (boyd, 2012, p. 204). But it also evokes the intermingling of race and redlining in the value of those virtual properties.

boyd (2012) concludes that “[n]either social media nor its users are colorblind simply because technology is present. The Internet mirrors and magnifies everyday life, making visible many of the issues we hoped would disappear” (p. 220). boyd's teenage informant is probably honest and accurate when he or she claims not to be racist. When given the choice of Facebook over the MySpace ghetto, the market rationality is clear. Who would want to live in a ghetto? Nevertheless, that choice is rooted in biopower discourses—abstract liberalist, in this case—that refer to race without needing to be explicitly about race.

So while choosing either Facebook or MySpace may seem like merely a market based choice between two social networks, embedded in that choice is the need to make sense of the world. (The sense making, in this case, was rife with discourses of race.) It is this sense-making function of biopower that Foucault (2008) argues markets took on after sovereigns and clergy no longer defined the world for the realm.

In regard to the question I posed earlier: Why would videogame companies create content that might marginalize a portion of their consumers? It is because what makes sense comes from the discourses available in a society. It seems that prior to selling anything, everything must be understandable. Since what we find understandable concerning various populations depends on relevant biopower discourses, it appears that videogame developers risk marginalizing some of their customers because they must draw from the discourses around them so that the games make sense, and it just so
happens that those discourses of race (i.e., biopower) marginalize a portion of their customers.

**The collective act of identity construction**

In sum, the ways we understand race emerge as discourses about abilities, and characteristics get attributed as essential characteristics of various groups (Fredrickson, 2002; Omi & Winant, 1994). The way discourses about bodies of different groups come to be seen as normal and true is rooted in the logic of markets (Foucault, 2008). Foucault (2008) calls these discourses biopower (Foucault, 2008). These biopower discourses are used for the construction of our identities, how we view our bodies, and the bodies and identities of others through narratives (Althusser, 1989; Appiah, 2000; Bruner, 1997, 2004; Butler, 1990; Fisher, 1984; Foucault, 1982, 1990; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Perinbanayagam, 2000; Redman, 2005; Taylor, 2005; Torfing, 1999; Vila, 2000, 2003). Parts of the Self, such as gender and race, are also performed online (e.g., Nakamura, 2008). When the Self is performed online, pseudo-bodies such as avatars and social networking profiles serve as performative canvases (boyd, 2008).

So why did black teens allow their bodies to mark MySpace as ghetto in boyd’s study? After all, a body, whether digital or physical, is not the totality of our identity (Butler, 1990; Nakamura, 2008). Why did black teens not offer a counter narrative? They probably did. But an individual’s identity is co-constructed by the person (or persons) and others in his or her (or their) social environment (Bruner, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Vila, 2000, 2003). That is, a person’s identity is not static; it is constructed from the discourses available at each moment or interaction with other people.
Because of this, the social world and the discourses in the social world matter, and discourses and “normal” practices (i.e., biopower) matter. That is the true power of biopower. It floats discourses, which it marks as true, that construct the identity of people and populations.

Discourses serve as “nodal points” into which the identity of the individual is “sutured” (Torfing, 1999, p. 303) so that the individual becomes a character in a larger narrative with others (Torfing, 1999; Vila, 2000, 2003). As I discussed earlier, it is through these narratives that meaning emerges about the individual and his or her role in the society (Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994). We are compelled to participate in this co-construction because we seek to exist and to have our existence recognized (Althusser, 1989; Butler, 1993; Mouffe, 2000; Torfing, 1999). We are compelled to be understood.

Biopower tells us that the co-construction of identity allows an individual to construct his or her identity from the available discourses present in society; however, these discourses also limit the possibilities (Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997; Foucault, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Vila, 2000, 2003). While there are examples of groups that have struggled and successfully constructed themselves as white, for example, others are denied this self-construction (see Roediger, 2007). Indeed, there is a foreclosure of meaning, what Derrida would call a constitutive outside, which constructs the identity of non-whites as other than white (e.g., Butler, 1993; Mouffe, 2000).

For instance, words used to describe Irish immigrants in the antebellum United States were similar to the ones used to describe blacks (Roediger, 2007). Roediger (2007) pointed out that conventional wisdom at the time “held that an Irishman was a
‘nigger’, inside out” (p. 133). To be accepted as white, Irish immigrants in the 1800s struggled to construct themselves by actively articulating how they were not like blacks, often using against blacks the same discourses levied at them (Roediger, 2007). Irish immigrants used this strategy to articulate blacks as the constitutive outside in the Irish/black dyad so that they could be included as white.

Because people’s understanding of themselves affects how they understand discourses surrounding race, I wish to address briefly a problem of temporality and narrative identity that narrative psychologists have identified in the process of remembering. Narrative identity construction is a continuous process whereby memory is constructed on the spot (Redman, 2005). Because interviews are a part of the methodology of this study, this warrants a brief discussion. Redman (2005) points out that a person recalls memories from the standpoint of the individual, in the present, making sense of experiences that she or he had, in the past. Because identity is continuously constructed, the individual’s identity has changed between the time of the experience and the time of the memory (Redman, 2005; Vila, 2000).

I interviewed videogame developers about their experiences producing content. It may seem that interviewing content creators about how they remember past productions is akin to asking someone about someone else’s experiences making an artifact. That is, content creators create artifacts with one set of experiences. They remember the creation process with a different set of experiences. It might seem futile. However, it is not. Because the meaning of an identity, self, memory, race, or racism is bounded to the discourses by which it is surrounded, asking a content producer about her or his
experience producing an artifact is indirectly examining those discourses. One “remembers” a videogame avatar into being, reading into the text (i.e., avatars) the discourses that surround the social environment in order to make sense of these texts.

Gadamer (1975/2004) argued that one cannot read the meaning of the original author of a text; one can only read into a text what one believes the author meant. It appears that meaning in any text is, by definition, unstable. Although, Gadamer was speaking specifically about his conception of the hermeneutic circle, the core idea of reading discourses from texts is applicable to the purposes of this dissertation.

Furthermore, it is precisely this instability of texts and memory that allows discourses to circulate into different spaces. Otherwise, discourses such as those of race that surround a physical human body could not be read onto an animated character on a computer screen. Discourses flow as each person reiterates, enacts, or embodies those discourses that surround his or her social world in new ways (Butler, 1997). Therefore, each person reconstructs those discourses anew.

This is precisely how a body becomes a digital body (boyd, 2008). Players who trade game currency for real money become Chinese (Nakamura, 2009), a person’s body becomes black (Fredrickson, 2002), and a social networking site used by people of color becomes a ghetto (boyd, 2012). There is a recursive co-creation of people’s notion of identity and discourse (Butler, 1997).

Once again, I am concerned with the role of economics in how media companies construct worlds in videogames. More precisely, I am interested in how those worlds narratively construct the bodies of different groups of people. But, as I discussed in this
chapter, markets are more than merely places where we exchange currency for goods and services (Kapp, 2011). Markets are also a reflections of the social world (Foucault, 2008). This is because, as humans, we communicate and understand the world through narratives and discourses that emerge from sovereigns, governments, creative industries, social practices, laws, and the like that surround our social world (Bruner, 2004; Fisher, 1984; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Perinbanayagam, 2000; Ricoeur, 1995). But for these narratives and discourses to have purchase, they must be acknowledged as true, verified, and made to appear normal so much so that as we repeat them, we understand and circulate their meanings without realizing that those meanings are made normal by appealing to those very same market forces.

Therefore, this dissertation adopts several theoretical perspectives to justify its analysis. This dissertation is situated in the view that stories (i.e., narratives and discourses) are ways in which people articulate an understanding of reality. Those stories are created by entities that speak from a position of power whether or not they realize that they are doing so. This power is made invisible by a meta-discourse of market rationality. When these stories are made about the bodies of people, ideas such as race circulate. And, when those stories are repeated in popular forms of media such as videogames, they circulate widely.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This study is concerned with the role of economic forces in the way videogame companies construct narratives of race online. Because of this concern, this dissertation asks: What do those stories tell us about race? How do videogame developers dream up those stories? And, how does the profit motive incentivize those specific stories about race? Since these companies still need to sell content, can we make conjectures about how economics plays into the creation of those stories?

Such questions are broad, and we can only hope to approach understanding those questions by asking narrower, answerable questions. To that end, the following research questions are posed:

**RQ1.** How might the content of corporately produced videogames contribute to discourses about race?

**RQ2.** To what extent do content creators perceive that they contribute to discourses about race?

**RQ3.** How does economics incentivize those discourses?

It is my hope that by answering these narrow questions, a broader picture of how race and economics inform videogame content will be created. In a broader sense, my hope is that this work will contribute to understanding how race operates in a capitalist society, how media offer spaces for biopower to circulate, and how markets (and human sociality of markets) offer a false conception of naturalness. While this work is narrowly focused on
the videogame industry, its utility comes from the way it contributes to these larger discussions.

As I stated in the previous chapters, this dissertation centers a Foucault-inspired perspective to study these discourses. One of the challenges to any Foucault-inspired study is that Foucault left us minimal information regarding what such a methodology should look like. Since Foucault's *genealogical* and *archeological* studies endeavor to uncover how power structures and power relations organize and determine truth, any explicit methodology that he could articulate would necessarily be another form of power-knowledge (pouvoir-savoir) that disciplines subjectivities (Graham, 2005). As one scholar puts it, "If Foucault had 'prescribed' (as in systematized) a way in which one must go about doing genealogy in order for it to be authentic, then … it would be hypocrisy of the highest form" (Graham, 2005, p. 5). Instead, as O'Farrell (2005) pointed out, Foucault himself argued his work is best understood as a toolbox from which research can be conducted.

As such, the methodology employed in this dissertation is a discourse analysis from a critical perspective that is informed by Foucault’s analysis of power. To contextualize what I mean by “discourse analysis,” I argue that my method is an analysis of the videogame text (such as narratives, cut scenes, text, et cetera) to illuminate how social structures, economic pressures, and practices of the videogame industry exert an influence on videogame narratives that developers choose. In this way, my analysis is in line with the work of Teun Van Dijk (1991, 2008, 2013). Van Dijk (2013), paraphrasing Harold Lasswell, argues that within the text we can see “who can/may/must say what, to
whom, in what circumstances and with what effects” (p. 102). For the purposes of this dissertation, the question of “who can” speak is assumed to be videogame developers and publishers. They are, after all, the ones who create the contents of the games themselves. But, critical discourse analysis is also concerned with “a detailed description, explanation, and critique of the ways dominant discourses (indirectly) influence… knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies, namely through … the manufacture of concrete models” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 258). In other words, this dissertation accepts the argument that media contents or “concrete models” also contain the ideas, attitudes, and perceptions of content producers (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 258). By a careful analysis of what the game texts say, we can extract how these content creators understand race. This is the same method that Van Dijk used to understand how race is constructed by news producers (Van Dijk, 2013). And, this is what I mean when I say biopower discourses are “embedded” in videogame narratives.

Thus, I will examine how videogames, and those particular videogame companies by extension, may contribute to discourses about race. For the purpose of this dissertation I selected two videogames as case studies followed by a series of qualitative interviews of videogame developers. The first game is *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (*Skryrim*), a single-player game developed by Bethesda Games Studio. The game is the fifth game in the *Elder Scroll* series of videogames. I chose this game because it achieved critical acclaim as well as commercial success. Metacritic (2011), a website that assigns a game score based on an aggregate of various game critics’ reviews, scored the game in the 90% range. *Skryrim* also garnered several game-of-the-year awards from
various game websites and game industry publications (e.g., Kohler, 2011; The Escapist, 2012). Furthermore, the game was a commercial success with approximately 10 million copies of the game sold as well as pay-to-play downloadable content (DLC) that extended the main storyline (Yin-Poole, 2011). I chose a game with both commercial success and critical acclaim because I wanted to ensure that the game was not a niche game with a smaller following.

Like many contemporary single player games, the game features an online component in the form of downloadable content (DLC). DLCs are content that players can purchase to increase the game play in some way. For *Skyrim*, the DLCs increased the amount of story in the form of side quests and additional mechanics such as the ability to ride dragons. I did not include these DLCs in the analysis of the game because DLCs are released months after the initial release of the game. Therefore, these contents do not necessarily reach the same breadth of audiences as the main game. Moreover, DLCs rarely, if ever, change the main storyline drastically. This is the case for *Skyrim*.

The second case is *Max Payne 3*. I chose this game because, like *Skyrim*, it is critically acclaimed. Moreover, *Max Payne 3* is one of the few contemporary videogames that take place primarily in South America and features untranslated Portuguese dialogue. (Although much of the game is in English.) Metacritic (2012), a game review aggregation site, scored *Max Payne 3* as 87 out of 100 points. While it’s not as commercially successful as *Skyrim*, it is received quite well by audiences (Metacritic, 2012).
Both games have immersive narratives. *Max Payne 3* has a more cinematic quality. Each part of the game is presented as chapters that moves the plot and tells the story of Max’s efforts in São Paulo. To this extent, *Max Payne 3* paces like a movie with constant action that leads to a violent climax and conclusion. *Skyrim*, on the other hand, is more of an open world where the player is encouraged to make her or his own path through the narrative. *Max Payne 3*, therefore, feels like a narrative cinema.

Unlike games such as *Tetris* where narrative is not important to the experience, narrative is fundamental to *Skyrim* and *Max Payne 3*. For *Skyrim*, race and racism was consciously included in the game’s universe specifically as a part of the game’s overall lore (gameswelt.tv, 2011). For many role playing games that take place in a medieval setting, “race” tends to take the Tolkien definition. That is, race is used incorrectly, by today’s understanding, as a synonym for species (Fimi, 2009). Yet, the way that Tolkien used the concept of race indicates that he understands that sentient, humanoid creatures are distinct species. But, this is problematic. As I will discuss in the next chapter, because these races signify both species and groups of people for Tolkien, the implication is that race in *any* context represents biologically incompatible (and reproductively, culturally, and socially) people. For *Max Payne 3*, the developers did extensive research into Brazil and Brazilian culture, where the bulk of the game narrative takes place, in order to recreate São Paulo (Denton, 2012). Because *Max Payne 3* is a videogame, it is necessarily a textual expression of how the developers understood their experience in Brazil (and not the “real” Brazil or how Brazilians understand Brazil). It is a “concrete
model” of what developers think of Brazil given to us by content developers (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 258).

I chose to interview videogame developers because it answered RQ2 as well as demonstrated the extent game developers were conscious of the role they played in reifying discourses about race. As I mentioned in previous chapters, the literature suggests that people often reify discourses of race unconsciously (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Gilbert & Gregory, 1991; Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Passing blame on who is or is not a “racist” is a problematic, frustrating, and probably unhelpful exercise. On the other hand, examining the social norms and structures that may influence these discourses is another matter. This is what the qualitative are interviews intended to explore.

The explicit addition of “racism” in *Skyrim* and the extensive research in representing São Paulo in in *Max Payne 3* indicate that discourses concerning the body are important to both set of game developers. For *Skyrim*, the body is fundamental to the game narrative (gameswelt.tv, 2011). Even though game developer Todd Howard indicated in an interview that there would be no significant narrative changes regardless of what race the player chooses to play (gameswelt.tv, 2011), the game’s purposive inclusion of in-game racism indicates that it is a significant aspect of the game universe. Moreover, because games set in a Tolkien-esque universe tend to feature special abilities that stem from race (which is often used interchangeably with species) and because players must always opt into a specific race during the character creation phase of
gameplay, race always plays an important role in the game universe (Ducheneaut et al., 2006).

In regards to *Max Payne 3*, while it is clearly an in-game representation of São Paulo instead of the “real” city, the game developers took great lengths to research various locations in order to capture the tenor of the people who live there and recreate a version of São Paulo that players will believe (Denton, 2012). Of course, no matter how accurately the developers recreate São Paulo, the game is still only a representation of the city. Therefore, the environment, bodies of various people, depiction of the social space and political environment is necessarily created from discourses that developers believe represent the city.

*Disclosure of scholarly identity*

Scholarly research in any field, no less the social sciences, is inevitably an exercise in power because all researchers make truth claims as well as claims about the object of study at some level (Said, 1979). Therefore, it is critical for researchers to disclose aspects of their identity that are pertinent. I identify as a critical scholar whose training is in the field of communication. I am an avid gamer, and I am a fan of both of these game franchises. Moreover, I am a person of color who also identifies as a scholar who studies race.

My analysis is concerned with biopower in videogames and, thus, the power relations that those discourses represent. I draw from what O'Farrell (2005) argues are the five main philosophical principles that represent Foucault's toolbox. My analysis of these videogames and interviews with videogame developers draws from these
principles. The first principle is that discourses can be ordered in such a way as to facilitate analysis (O'Farrell, 2005). One purpose of my analysis is to illuminate injustices in online spaces so that they (as well as this dissertation) may be scrutinized. Second, "[t]he best tool to examine and dismantle existing orders is history" (O’Farrell, 2005, p. 54). While this research is not a historical study, I do ground my analysis of discourses in historical context. For that historical context, I depend on the previous work of scholars such as Bonilla-Silva, Roediger, and Omi and Winant. Third, the best way to analyze social phenomena is through a non-Cartesian approach (O'Farrell, 2005). Therefore, I argue that to perceive social phenomena is to understand them from one’s social standpoint or Lifeworld (in the sense Husserl used it). While I cannot hope to speak from everyone’s Lifeworld, I can speak from the way my Lifeworld intersects with others. Fourth, "Foucault holds that knowledge is always shaped by political, social, and historical factors—by 'power'—in human societies" (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 54). Because this dissertation is concerned with biopower, these factors are central to my analysis. Fifth, the struggle for social justice is the purpose behind Foucault's work (O'Farrell, 2005). Indeed, along with the work of the Frankfurt School, social justice is the driving force

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6 What Foucault (2009) meant by non-Cartesian is that he rejects Descartes’s epistemology. To simplify, Descartes’s “scientific” approach presumes the existence of a universal Truth that can be understood through reason (Foucault, 2009). Descartes makes this argument by suggesting that this Truth lies outside of “madness” and therefore to question the assumptions (i.e., reasons) that bring one to this Truth is to be insane (Foucault, 2009). In that sense, Descartes discounts any threats to those assumptions as insanity. Of course, Foucault’s project is precisely to examine how we come to understand those assumptions and, therefore, those assumptions themselves. For Foucault, Truth is discursively constructed rather than an objective thing that exists outside of human sociality.
behind critical scholarship (Bronner, 2001). Because this study examines biopower in videogames, I absolutely seek to join other voices in exposing social injustice. As a communication scholar, I do not seek to portray myself as a detached social scientist studying racism; I seek to join with others to dismantle it.

*Operationalizing race*

Earlier, I noted how scholars in the past have defined race and noted how I define race for the purposes of this study. Race is a social construct rooted primarily in labor markets where social standing is ordered and justified by economic practices. Skin color has historically been the outward marker of those differences (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Omi & Winant, 1994). Those differences are constructed through discourses called biopower (Foucault, 2008).

In my cases, sometimes race is explicitly stated. Either the character’s species (i.e., race) or racial differences are a part of the narrative. Other times, race is not explicitly stated, but it is implied in the social interaction among characters. For instance, in *Skyrim*, the race of a character is always present. It is explicitly stated in the game’s narrative. For *Max Payne 3*, race is not explicitly stated. However, it is implied in the biological (skin color) differences between the protagonist (the white, male, American Max Payne) and other characters (brown Brazilians).

*Operationalizing biopower*

In this dissertation, I use biopower as a form of discourse that shapes the way society understands the bodies of individuals and groups and how the biological characteristics of those bodies act as outward signs of social standing (i.e., a political
strategy) which get justified in markets (Foucault, 2003, 2007, 2008). These discourses construct what groups (races) can be (e.g., productive phrases that take the general form: “Black/Asian/white/Latino people are good at …”) and what groups cannot be (e.g., oppressive phrases that take the general form: “Black/Asian/white/Latino people are no good at …”). While these types of biopower (sovereign and pastoral) seem to serve two separate purposes, they often operate in concert with one another.

The notion of biopower is foundational to this dissertation. But, the very premise of biopower is that it is often a discourse that hides its effect on populations by appearing to be articulating something else (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Foucault, 2007, 2008). Biopower, like all discourses, “(indirectly) influence[s]… knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies, namely through … the manufacture of concrete models” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 258).

As I argued in the previous chapter, Bonilla-Silva’s (2009) concept of color-blind racism is a form of biopower. Those discourses are “abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 26). These forms are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, not all instances of biopower, whether or not they involve race, take these forms. While color-blind racism is a powerful set of discourses to examine race, it is not an exhaustive set. However, for the purposes of this study, color-blind racism was the set of discourses used.

Discourses that take the form of abstract liberalism use “ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., ‘equal opportunity,’ the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 28). This type of biopower is
used, for example, to ignore structural inequality in general in order to maintain racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2009). It short, abstract liberal biopower decontextualizes people’s social standing from the social world. (Again, I include economics as part of the social world.)

Discourses that take the form of naturalization “explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 28). For instance, the disproportionate reporting of crimes by certain racial groups or the preference in reporting victims that fit a particular profile or look a certain way are argued to be the result of natural occurrences in the practice of journalism instead of a pre-existing racial bias (Lundman, 2003). Other times, these discourses are presented as the result of biology (Bernasconi, 2010).

Discourses that take the form of cultural racism depend on “culturally based arguments … to explain the standing of minorities in society” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 28). In the popular massively multiplayer online game World of Warcraft, for example, Gnomes are a race of creatures that supposedly have a superior racial ability to engineer machinery. It could be argued that intelligence, gender, or other problematic concepts ground the idea of a Gnome. However, in the narrative that emerges from the game, Gnome culture is argued as the source of the superior engineering ability. That is, Gnome culture emphasizes engineering; therefore, all Gnome characters are represented as having superior engineering ability. Whether or not a particular person plays a Gnome as a good engineer depends on a variety of factors that have to do with that player. Of course, Gnomes do not exist in real life, and discourses about game characters per se do
not exist. However, cultural racism is applicable because it is a meta-discourse. Statements that root the superiority or inferiority of Gnome abilities in culture connote very real biopower discourses that root human differences that supposedly exist among different races in culture. For the purposes of this dissertation “cultural racism” can be identified if the discourse implies that a particular group’s culture helps or hinders some learnable ability and applies that discourse to all members of that group.

Discourses that *minimize racism* suggest that “discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances (‘It’s better now than in the past’ or ‘There is discrimination, but there are plenty of jobs out there’)” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 29). This form of biopower takes two related forms: minorities use racism as an excuse and racism must be explicit (Bonilla-Silva, 2009).

While Foucault defined what he meant by biopower and gave general examples of it, he never explicitly situated race into his discussion of biopower. There are suggestions that he made some subtle observations in his lecture series at the Collège de France (see Taylor, 2011). Moreover, tying the concept of color-blind racism to biopower allows me to see how these types of discourses contribute to the way we may understand race.

*Discourse analysis*

My methodology for this dissertation is a discourse analysis in the same way that Teun Van Dijk (1991) and Linda Graham (2005) describe. Van Dijk (1991) argues that “media ‘messages’ are specific types of text and talk,” and discourse analysis presents a “systematic study of the structures, functions, and processing of text and talk” (p. 108). Van Dijk (1991) further describes discourse analysis as analyzing
text and talk in terms of theories developed for the several levels or dimensions of discourse. Thus, whereas classical linguistics and semiotics made an overall distinction between the form ... and meaning ... of signs, ... discourse analysis recognizes that text and talk are vastly more complex, and require separate through interrelated accounts of ... other structures and strategies... Note that such a complex analysis of discourse is not limited to “textual” analysis, but also accounts for the relations between structures of text and talk, on one hand, and of their cognitive, social, cultural, or historical “contexts,” on the other hand. (pp. 110–111)

For the purposes of this dissertation, I focused on the social context and the actual discourses (“text and talk”)⁷. By analyzing the actual text of the videogame, I gained insight into how the developers construct race within the game’s narrative. By analyzing the social context, I uncovered the way in which the construction of race coincides with the way race is constructed in the offline world.

Because I adopt a Foucauldian perspective, there are some limitations to what I mean by discourse analysis. Graham (2005) argues that a Foucauldian discourse analysis is best “read as an exercise in explicating statements that function to place a discursive frame around a particular position” which “present[s] a particular reading of social texts” (p. 10). I agree with this characterization. Thus, this dissertation seeks to explain and contextualize the discourses uncovered in videogames. I do not argue that my analysis is the only correct reading. Rather, this discourse analysis seeks to be convincing in its analysis of the game discourses.

⁷ I will explain how I selected texts to analyze in a later section of this chapter. For now, please consider that the sampled texts were read to uncover what institutional and social practices were assumed. As Foucault (1981) argued, practices are discourses made real. Moreover, as discourses continuously circulate, there is continuous rearticulation (Butler, 1997).
In regards to videogames, many contemporary videogame narratives (including both of the cases in this study) offer a solid structure from which discourses about race can be seen. That is, the discourses can be analyzed in the context of the game’s central narrative. Indeed the games in my sample both have an “emergent” narrative where the story is discovered by “the player that does the exploring” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009, p. 199). Through this environment, the player is able to experience those discourses first-hand. Moreover, as the discourses about race emerge, they are understandable because of their context within the game narrative and the social environment of the player.

Thus, I see discourses as ideas that are spoken and put into practice that can be understood by analyzing the context and structure of the statements and the way they may function in society. For the purposes of this dissertation, I examined the text of two single-player games. The meanings uttered in these texts and their connections to the political and social practices that emerge from those discourses were uncovered. In order to determine what texts to sample, I limited my analysis to items that constitute “color-blind racist” statements, which I argue is a form of biopower (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Foucault, 2008). Of these biopower discourses, I will analyze how they may incentivize behaviors in organizations (i.e., culture industry and institutional economics) that may contribute to what Bonilla-Silva (1997) calls a generalized racial social system.

Discourses are “concrete models” of power (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 258). By keeping in mind that these games are ultimately commercial products that need to be sold and by reading these discourses from an institutional economic framework, I am able to see how
the game’s content may serve or be incentivized by the economic forces in the videogames industry.

As per my discussion earlier, I will also include social, organizational, and economic practices as forms of discourse. I should note that my understanding of what constitutes discourses diverges here from Foucault’s understanding. I see social, organizational, and economic practices as forms of discourse. Foucault makes a distinction between the "order of discourse" and the "order of reality" (O’Farrell, 2005, p. 78). I argue, in contrast, that the “order of reality” (O’Farrell) emerges out of discourse. Therefore, I include institutions, organizational practices, and economic practices as discourses because they represent power relations in practice.

*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Max Payne 3*

Videogames are an example of a new medium that is produced by a corporation. As such, videogame corporations are part of what Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1995) called the culture industry. For RQ1, I studied the videogame *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (*Skyrim*) because as a game created by a major game company, Bethesda, *Skyrim* allowed me to study the discourses about race employed by the game developers and writers of a game that many people play. *Skyrim* features a cast of characters and a setting that takes place in a fantasy medieval setting with Tolkien-esque monsters, magic, and mythos. Furthermore, *Skyrim* was chosen because it was awarded game of the year by Game Developers Choice Awards, a major award in the game industry (Game Developers Choice Awards, 2012).
To further answer RQ1, I examined *Max Payne 3*, a sequel to the *Max Payne* franchise developed by Rockstar Games Studio Worldwide. I chose *Max Payne 3* because the series is so highly regarded. One industry website that calculates a score from an aggregate of scores ranks the entire series highly and *Max Payne 3* at 85% (CBS Interactive Inc., 2012). In addition, unlike *Skyrim*, *Max Payne 3* takes place in an imagined modern day São Paulo along with guns and vehicles. Since the setting of *Max Payne 3* is real-life São Paulo, this offered a unique look into how the game developers chose to imagine the city. As I mentioned in a previous chapter, the game developers took great length to capture what they considered a realistic game representation of the city. While the game narrative includes a gangland or organized crime characters, how and where the developers choose to use that narrative device informs what discourses they find significant enough to represent and normalize in-game. Of course, I do recognize that I needed to walk a fine line between what might be the game developer’s construction of “real” São Paulo, and what elements are there only because of the game’s genre. In order to do that justly, I also examined game texts such as forum posts and related fan websites. The idea is that while there is no doubt an element of fantasy in the game’s representation of São Paulo, because the game developers spent so much time trying to capture an “authentic” representation of the city, there is a conscientious presentation of realness in the portrayal. Moreover, since RQ1 is concerned with how the discourses in the game may contribute to discourses about race, how those discourses are adopted by players of each game (or at least how they are repeated by players) is telling.
I performed a discourse analysis of the game texts including the terms of service, game manuals, website, fan website such as blogs and user forums, and in-game texts and videos. My analysis noted the emergent themes and contextualized what those themes say about race and racism. I did this by identifying the color-blind discourses and explaining how those discourses could contribute to the understanding of race and how they are maintained.

**Sampling texts**

Like many contemporary videogames, *Skyrim* and *Max Payne 3* have narratives with plot twists and an expansive amount of content. For this dissertation, I sampled the main story of both games. For both of these games, there are downloadable content or multiplayer content that extend the games. As such, there is playable content after the main story arc ends, and the story arc will likely be extended in the future. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, only the currently playable main story arc that came with the game’s original release was examined. I supplemented the sample with game manuals, fan websites, as well as play-through videos of the games on YouTube.

Data collection started by purchasing the game, gathering online and printed game guides, and play-through videos. Watching the play-through videos allowed me to view how an actual player played the game. Because the videos I chose for both *Skyrim* and *Max Payne 3* demonstrate players playing the game through from beginning to end, I was able to analyze the overall narrative of the main mission and side missions. But, most importantly, this allowed me to review segments of game play as I needed. Because I was not concerned with analyzing the experience or sensation of being a gamer
specifically, it was not necessary for me to play the games myself. However, for *Skyrim*, there are multiple ways to achieve any particular goal. For those instances, where the game guide suggests that alternative in-game choices might reveal insight, I played through those choices myself. In those cases, I used FRAPS, a gameplay recording software.

For this dissertation, I define game guides as printed books like ones published by Prima Games and player produced guides freely available online. As far as the actual collection of in-game texts, screen captures were used whenever necessary. But, otherwise, I used the video player available with MAXQDAplus, the qualitative data analysis software that I used. I chose Prima Game guides because they are the major publisher of game guides. I also sampled online guides developed by other gamers. Most importantly, these guides helped to examine discourses that might not be obvious because of branching.

Branching is a concept in game design that affords the player a choice in how the game is played (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009). In some instances, branching serves as an illusion because some games resolve the story arc in a set manner; however, in other instances, the player’s choices may affect one of several possible story resolutions (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009). In *Max Payne 3*, the narrative unfolds sequentially. While the player feels like she or he is playing in an open world, in fact the game forces the player to follow a set path. In contrast, *Skyrim*, allows a player’s choices to affect how the main narrative and side quests unfold. For *Skyrim*, the game guides were
indispensable. When it was needed, the text was hand copied into a separate file. Screen captures were used to save images during gameplay.

The data were analyzed using MAXQDAplus, a qualitative data analysis software package. This software package facilitated coding and analysis. I started my analysis by coding the types of biopower that I was looking for (i.e., color-blind racism). Next, I watched each of the game play videos and noted incidences that appeared to involve race. That is, I noted whenever the game characters explicitly indicated race or when differences between Max Payne, a white American male, and “brown skinned” Brazilians are emphasized. (For example, there are two bar scenes in Max Payne 3. In the American bar, there are no prostitutes or soccer memorabilia. In the Brazilian bar, prostitutes and soccer memorabilia are everywhere. Because the game developers explicitly sought to capture the “authenticity” of São Paulo and because the game narrative consistently constructs Brazilian culture as preoccupied with drugs, sex, parties, and greed, the scenes can be read as instances of race because the “Brazilian” nature of the second bar is implicated.) I noted the events surrounding the incidences, how the game narrative portrayed what the incidences mean about and to the in-game characters, and how each incidence might be perceived by the audience.

Context is an important aspect of understanding events in the games. Therefore, I analyzed each game independently of the other. At no time were the data from each game read together. This way, I did not decontextualize each of the incidences. By noting the events surrounding the incidences, I was able to note the context in which the incidences appeared in their respective games. By reading how the game narrative
portrays those incidences, I was able to determine what those incidences mean for the games. Keeping in mind that the games are a product of a company and are thus the company’s voice, how the games narratively treat those incidences demonstrated what the game developers (and by extension the game companies) “spoke” about those incidences.

Following the initial data gathering and coding, I examined my notes about each incidence to uncover what common themes emerged and collated those incidences into similar groups. Each group was then compared to determine whether or not they constitute the forms of biopower in my codebook (i.e., color-blind racism). The data were entered into the software package. As a discursive analysis, this dissertation is concerned with how the texts are tied to the larger social environment. Because qualitative analysis situates the researcher as the analysis, I necessarily performed my analysis from the standpoint of an American encountering these games.

While the software facilitated data gathering, organizing codes and data, and uncovering the forms of biopower, I noted the context in which the discourses lie. For example, in the comparison of the Brazilian bar and the American bar, it is how the bar scenes are used in service to the narrative that offers the context. After I uncovered what those discourses meant in context to where they appear in the game text, I drew conclusions of what they might mean in the context of contemporary American society and how they might serve to reduce transaction costs for those game companies. To clarify, I asked a series of questions to determine whether or not an incident in the gameplay videos constitutes a discourse about race (i.e., forms of biopower that Bonilla-
Silva identified) relative to the larger text, how it functions (pastoral/sovereign power), and what it means in context of contemporary American society. These questions appear below:

- In context to the larger passage, is the discourse a form of biopower that Bonilla-Silva identified? To what extent is the discourse oppressive or productive?
- How does the discourse appeal to a larger social institution to be normalized?
- How may these discourses be understood? How might they help construct race?
- How do these discourses reduce transaction cost and market uncertainties?

By doing these things, I was able to determine what the game narratives say about the bodies of these characters, how each character’s subjectivity was constructed, and what it may mean to an American audience.

Qualitative interviews

Because biopower is a type of normalizing discourse that is often invisible and governs populations to which these game developers also belong, the extent that game developers are aware that they are participating in this process is not clear. Therefore, this dissertation also seeks to examine the extent to which game developers perceive that they contribute to discourses about race.

In order to triangulate my findings and lend more weight to my analysis, I conducted a series of qualitative interviews with game developers. The qualitative interviews answer RQ2. These qualitative interviews were analyzed from a critical perspective. Therefore, for these interviews, the main thrust was not how videogame developers purposely embed racism in content. Rather the interviews sought to
illuminate how content creators make content that makes sense when their content includes anything that might involve race. From that, the biopower discourses that make up the generalized racial social system (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) were uncovered. I do not mean to judge who is or is not a racist. What I am interested in are the discourses in society that game developers choose when they must address race and the reasons behind those choices, what Bonilla-Silva (2009) calls color-blind racism.

RQ2 asks: As corporations produce videogames, how might the content of videogames contribute to racial discourses? RQ3 asks: How does economics incentivize those discourses? Beyond answering RQ2, interviewing game developers also helped answer RQ3. While the analysis of the game content goes far into answering RQ3 by uncovering how audiences may understand the content, I can only speculate how those discourses may reduce uncertainty for game companies. Moreover, those discourses may be idiosyncratic to the respective games. Interviewing game developers, therefore, allowed me to determine how game developers address uncertainty in a more generalizable manner.

Interview participants were recruited by snowball sampling, a Twitter post directed at industry professionals, and directly emailing requests for interviews to developers. All of the interview participants were professionals involved in videogame design. I have received clearance from the institutional review board at Temple University. The questions follow below.
Questions to be posed to game developers

- If I had been following you as you and your team were designing quests, what would I see or hear? What are some of the things that you talked about?
- Tell me more about how you create characters and non-player characters. How do you decide how they look, behave, sound?
- Tell me how you decide what role these characters play in the main storyline.
- What do you like or dislike about the quests that you and your team designed?
- Tell me how you decide what non-player characters are present in quests. When race is involved, how do you decide?
- Can you tell me more about the stories that you draw from to design the quests? Where do you get your inspiration?
- How do you represent race? Is it a major part of the design process? If so, how? If not, why not? Should it be?
- How do you make sure that players can enjoy and understand the stories presented in the game? How do you address that in the development phase?
- How do you make sure players relate to non-player characters?
- Please tell me what you think about quest designs in your industry in general? Are there common story themes that industry game developers use? And, what do you like or dislike about those stories? How do you think race gets depicted in the design process for the industry as a whole?
- If you had full control over the story content, what additional story arcs or types of stories would you include or exclude? Why?
Analyzing the interviews

After obtaining consent forms, I solicited AAA videogame developers and large independent videogame developers for over a year. However, due to a general reluctance to speak with researchers, I recruited only six interview participants. I recorded and transcribed the interviews. While I used the questions listed above as a general guideline, I did allow the conversation to unfold organically as a semi-structured interview. My thinking is that by allowing the interviews to flow naturally instead of adhering strictly to a set of questions and the predetermined order, I was able to reduce the likelihood that my own views and presumptions affected the discussion. Furthermore, letting the interview participant largely guide the discussion allowed for information to emerge that I did not expect. These emergent data increased the validity of the interviews.

After I transcribed the interviews, I used MAXQDAplus to analyze the data. I read the interviews and noted the statements that answered my research questions. Furthermore, I asked for clarification frequently during the interview. This allowed me to read the interview participant’s statements in the context of his or her professional experience as well as draw more nuanced conclusions. I then reanalyzed the interviews and noted the common themes that emerged from each of the interview participant’s statements. These themes served as a check on the analysis of the games. If the themes or statements by the developers contradicted the analysis of the games, then that served to question my conclusions. Moreover, the themes allowed me to verify that the developers’ experiences were not idiosyncratic.
Analysis of the interview transcripts also employed a Foucauldian discourse analysis perspective. This way, the findings were comparable to the findings from the videogame case studies. I took what the participants told me at face value. In the common themes that were present in interview transcripts, I analyzed how biopower could influence the industry’s professional practices. Because the interviews are intended to give me insight into the professional norms of their field, I only considered what the interview participants told me about the profession or the development process.
CHAPTER 4
PUTTING SKYRIM INTO CONTEXT

This chapter details the results that my case study of *The Elder Scroll V: Skyrim* uncovered. My analysis found that, like many games and role-playing games before it, *Skyrim*’s main economic activity is violence. Also like other role-playing games, *Skyrim* builds on high-fantasy or sword-and-sorcerer tropes that Tolkien’s work inspired. *Skyrim* blurs the line between biological explanation of racial difference and cultural explanations of racial difference. In fact, culture for *Skyrim* seems to both emerge from biology and is indelible from biology. Moreover, while the game’s developers have stated that inclusion of racism was purposeful so that players would be confronted with racial intolerance (gameswelt.tv, 2011), the game’s depiction of racism implies that what might be considered racism is limited to blatant examples. Instances between in-game characters that might be understood as racist in a contemporary context are not constructed as such in the game.

As a reminder, my research question (RQ1) asks: How might the content of corporately produced videogames contribute to discourses about race? To clarify: I recognize that what I am looking at in this chapter is how make-believe characters are racialized. This is important to examine because the logic by which these characters are understood (and not necessarily the way these characters are understood) represents a “concrete model” of the way imagined, real, or perceived differences among real people are understood in the real world (Van Dijk, 1993, 2008, 2013).
I include a quick summary here. In my analysis of *Skyrim* I found that biopower discourses about natural differences and cultural differences are treated as the source of group differences. Moreover, these biopower discourses are blurred together so that culture is treated as dependent on and emergent from biology. This blurring constitutes the dominant biopower discourse throughout the game. But, because the developers stated they wanted players of *Skyrim* to deal with racial intolerance (gameswelt.tv, 2011), I conclude that these biopower discourses (which tend to be problematic) are included because of the market imperative to reduce uncertainty. This imperative led to the use of these biopower discourses, which have their roots in the stories of Tolkien and *Dungeons and Dragons*.

The remainder of the chapter is divided into several sections: *Background of the Game and Game’s “Races”*, in which I describe how the concept of race in *Skyrim* is a biopower strategy; *Biopower: The Strategy and Practice of Race Construction in Skyrim*, in which I detail how specific types of biopower are deployed to articulate races; and *The Economic Pressures of Narrative Construction*, in which I articulate a possible explanation of how depictions of race in *Skyrim* may be a response to economic pressures in the videogame industry.

*Background of the game and the game’s “races”*

*Skyrim*, set in the northern region of the continent, Tamriel, on the planet Nirn, is a medieval inspired, swords-and-sorcerers world. The game bills itself as an open world game where the players are able to choose what order to undertake the main storyline and side quests. *Skyrim*, like many games that employ the swords-and-sorcerers setting,
inherited the literary trope from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* books (Fine, 2002; Gold Box Wiki, n.d.; Harris, 2009). Prior to Tolkien, elfs (or elves) were understood in Victorian and Edwardian era literature as interchangeable with fairies and were described as “flower-fairies and fluttering sprites with antennae” (Fimi, 2009, p. 13). After Tolkien, the depiction became one of tall, waifish humanoid creatures with a natural affinity toward nature, magic, and archery (e.g., see how elves are treated in *Dungeons and Dragons* and various games) (Fimi, 2009). Yet, when Tolkien’s published the *Silmarillion*, what eventually became the “canonical” reference to his *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* mythos, he abandoned the Victorian and Edwardian view of elves for his unique depiction (Fimi, 2009). This view persisted, and in *Skyrim*, elves are depicted in similar ways.8

Also known as “Dunmer” in their homeland of Morrowind, dark elves are noted for their stealth and magic skills. They are naturally resistant to fire and can call upon their Ancestor’s Wrath to surround themselves in fire.

Also known as “Altmer” in their homeland of Summerset Isle, the high elves are the most strongly gifted in the arcane arts of all the races. They can call upon their Highborn power to regenerate Magicka quickly.

The clanfolk of the Western Valenwood forests, also known as “Bosmer.” Wood elves make good scouts and thieves, and there are no finer archers in all of Tamriel. They have natural resistances to both poisons and diseases. They can Command Animals to fight for them.

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8 The following descriptions are copied from the character creation screen in *Skyrim*. In this screen, players are able to select the character’s species (race). Note that each species (race) has its own unique natural ability. Also note, in the character creation scene, all of the elves are depicted as tall humanoids with pointy ears and slight builds by default. In comparisons, the humans are all broad chested with large muscles.
One exception is the marketing mascot of the Keebler elves. This imagery is different than other contemporary depictions of elves. These tiny fairly like elves seem to be remnants of pre-Tolkien elves.

Similarly, dwarves prior to Tolkien were commonly depicted as a synonym for evil woodland spirits like “brownies” (Fimi, 2009). After Tolkien, dwarves became short and stout humanoids who commonly lived underground and were renowned for the species’ innate ability at mining and fabrication (e.g., *Dungeons and Dragons*, Disney, etc.). This influence is seen in how *Skyrim* depicts dwarven armor and weapons as both of higher quality and more difficult to fabricate than the human equivalent. Moreover, Tolkien’s usage of the word “race” to refer to these different species of humanoid creatures is seen in many modern games such as *Skyrim*. For the sake of clarity, I will use the word *species* followed by parentheses with the word *race* enclosed when referring to these sentient creatures, which is what Tolkien meant by race (see Fimi, 2009).

This does not imply that *Skyrim* inherited the Tolkien mythos directly. Indeed, there are departures from Tolkien’s fantasy world. For example, there is no unified human species. Instead, *Skyrim* features multiple species (race) of humans—each with its own species specific abilities. For examples the Redguard, humans that exist in the desert lands in the south, are depicted conspicuously as Arabic and as being natural warriors with a natural talent for physical stamina.

The most naturally talented warriors in Tamriel, the Redguards of Hammerfell, have a hardy constitution and a natural resistance to poison. They can call upon and Adrenaline Rush in combat. Because the Nords, the dominant group in *Skyrim*, are depicted as an imaginary representation of Vikings, the implication might also reflect a flawed belief in a
biologically determined ability to withstand cold and warrior ability by real medieval Vikings.

Citizens of Skyrim, they are tall and fair-haired people. Strong and hardy, Nords are famous for their resistance to cold and their talent as warriors. They can use a Battlecry to make opponents flee.

The Bretons, a mystical people whom the game seem to construct as an analogue for ancient British/Celtic people, are depicted to be able to resist hostile magic due to their mystical blood.

In addition to their quick and perceptive grasp of spellcraft, even the humblest of High Rock’s Bretons can boast a resistance to magic. Bretons can call upon the Dragonskin power to absorb spells.

These abilities all exist “in the blood.” (All of the previous descriptions were copied from the character creation screen.)

This notion of race as ontic and “in the blood” is precisely Foucault’s (2008) conception of biopower. Biopower is a discursive practice, which emerged in the 19th century, in which race is believed to be a biological reality that demarcates and orders people into groups along economic lines (Foucault, 2008). Those economic considerations appear because of the belief that blood-borne differences among groups led to different natural abilities that benefited or hampered the economic productivity of a society (Foucault, 2008).

While race has been viewed as a discursive phenomenon as early as the 18th century, the belief in race as a biological reality persists largely through economic justifications (Foucault, 2008). There are no such groups of people called the Redguards.

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9 While there were discussions of “race” as a socially constructed phenomenon a full century earlier, the emergence of evolution as a scientific construct gave cover to proponents of social Darwinism (Duster, 2005, 2006; Hall, 2004; Omi & Winant, 1994).
or the Nords. There is, however, a real group of people known as Bretons found in the Brittany region of France (Koch, 2006). However, all similarities with Bretons of Brittany and Skyrim’s Breton people end at the name. Moreover, I found that violence is the main economic activity in Skyrim, not trade. I will explain this finding in more detail in the next section. But, since the key to biopower’s ability is the discourse of ordering abstract bodies through presumably biological differences that appear in economic activity and Skyrim’s main economic activity is violence, the propensity for violence is the biopolitical demarcating line. Redguards are identified because of their natural stamina. Nords are identified because of their natural resistance to cold and their natural fearsomeness. Bretons are identified because of their natural resistance to magic.

Skyrim is eponymously named for the northern region of Tamriel. With its alpine climate of snow and evergreen trees, the game depicts this region’s inhabitants as a romanticized game version of Vikings. Indeed, real Viking titles, words, and aesthetics are included in the game to evoke this connection. For example, chieftains and governors of autonomous city-states employ the title “jarl” or “earl,” which are actual titles (see Arthur, 2002). In fact, early in the main story line, the player’s character earns the title “thane” and receives a lieutenant called a “housecarl”—actual concepts borrowed from the Vikings (Arthur, 2002).

While the majority of the characters in the game are Nords (the group of people modeled after Vikings), many different people from different parts of the continent are present. Moreover, the game shows examples of immigration and travel. It is not uncommon to see Khajiit or Argonian inhabitants of Skyrim. The player, therefore,
interacts with a wide variety of different groups of characters. Because the game’s setting employs different species (races) of people who originate from different regions of the continent and actively trade with the Skyrim region, these different people with their different cultures are present. Players can and must interact with these non-player characters (NPCs), who are computer controlled characters pre-scripted with appropriate responses to player choices. Because of these interactions among the game’s references of “races” (species of people), racism is a conscientious element that the game developers included. The game conscientiously tackles racial conflict and seeks to coerce the player into thinking about his/her interaction in a nuanced manner because her/his actions affect the way the main storyline unfolds for these groups of people, as we will see below.

At its core, Skyrim is a progressive game with laudable ambitions. However, as I uncover and demonstrate in this chapter, progressive and laudable intentions are often foiled by biopower discourses that are present within society—specifically within the narratives we use to describe the world. On one hand, the developers have stated publically that they wanted to present racism for the player to tackle (gameswelt.tv, 2011).

The racism you saw in Morrowind [a previous Elder Scroll game], Cyrodiil gets less of it because it’s kind of a melting pot of the races in where it is. You know Skyrim, you’re getting back to—this is the province of the Nords. Even though the other races make appearances, they don’t like elves. They’re [in] the original home of men. They think men versus the elves, the Mer—men are the ones that should rule Tamriel not elves. And so there is conflict between that. So some of that comes into play. Some of that leads into quest. Some of that is the theme for quests. But, a lot of it, depending on the race you pick—it’s flavor more than it is locking you off from one thing or another. (Howard as cited in gameswelt.tv, 2011)
On the other hand, that intentional racism is blatantly portrayed, suggesting that what constitutes “racism” is not the subtle social ordering that biopower inflicts.

What this chapter demonstrates is the unintentional reification of biopower discourses that are problematic. Again, the types of biopower I examine are the forms that Bonilla-Silva (2009) refer to as color-blind racism. The definitions are listed in the table below.

*Types of Color-Blind Racism:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Color-Blind Racism</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naturalization</td>
<td><em>Naturalization</em> “explain[s] away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Racism</td>
<td><em>Cultural racism</em> depends on “culturally based arguments … to explain the standing of minorities in society.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimization of Racism</td>
<td>Discourses that <em>minimize racism</em> suggest that “discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances (‘It’s better now than in the past’ or ‘There is discrimination, but there are plenty of jobs out there’).” This form of biopower takes two related forms: minorities use racism as an excuse and racism must be explicit (Bonilla-Silva, 2009).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract Liberalism</td>
<td><em>Abstract liberalism</em> … uses “ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., ‘equal opportunity,’ the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters.”</td>
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</tbody>
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(Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 29)
This chapter and the next chapter directly answer RQ1 and RQ3. I will answer RQ1 and RQ3 in turn for both chapters. To reiterate, RQ1 asks: How might the content of corporately produced videogames contribute to discourses about race? In order to protect the internal validity of the study, I did not simply look for things that might appear “racist” to me. I detailed my methods in the previous methods chapter; however, I will give a quick summary here. I coded the gameplay video by coding every event that might demonstrate racial ordering (e.g., either race is explicitly stated or skin color is referred to as a marker of difference). Then I divided those instances into groups according to how they employed racial ordering. These groups represented my dataset, which either confirmed or contradicted Bonilla-Silva’s types of biopower. Bonilla-Silva (2009) argues racism is articulated through different discursive strategies such as “abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism” (p. 26). Because these strategies behave exactly like Foucault’s (2008) conception of biopower, I argue that what Bonilla-Silva found were types of biopower. Then I analyzed the common characteristics in those groups and collapsed them into larger groups where appropriate. I then compared each of these smaller groups and determined how and if they matched the biopower types that Bonilla-Silva (2009) calls color-blind racism. The game’s main storyline was examined through a gameplay video and analyzed to determine what biopower discourses were present and which ones were dominant.

By race I mean the ordering of groups of people (predominantly by skin color) rooted primarily in labor markets where social standing is justified by economic
practices. In this game that sorting appears as words, phrases, images, and visuals of bodies that order the bodies of different groups of people into presumed abilities and characteristics, predominantly by skin color and bodies but also by explicit descriptions in the game. Similar to other swords-and-sorcerer videogames, the way characters attain wealth is tied to the character’s ability to do violence. So, the game explicitly demarcates people of different species (race) and describes each of the innate abilities and characteristics of these “races”. Next, I sorted each incident into different groups by examining the context in which these incidences appear in the game. Then, I examined the group’s common characteristics and determined if and how they followed Bonilla-Silva’s color-blind racism types of biopower.

I found that many of the instances I initially noted did not seem to belong to Bonilla-Silva’s grouping—groupings that I argue are forms of biopower. Sorting these instances seemed to reveal more groupings than Bonilla-Silva predicted. However, upon further inspection, I noticed that after the context of those instances was examined, many of the groupings in my dataset were able to be collapsed into other groups. The table below gives some examples of how instances fit into the biopower groupings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of Biopower (i.e., color-blind racism)</th>
<th>Coded Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naturalization</td>
<td>In the character creation screen, Redguards are depicted as dark-skinned humans, who are the “most naturally talented warriors in Tamriel.” Redguards are constructed as having “a hardy constitution and a natural resistance to poison.” That is, their talent for combat</td>
</tr>
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and resistance to poison is the result of their biology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Racism (in <em>Skyrim</em> is constructed as emerging from biology)</th>
<th>Kahjiits are renowned for creating Moon Sugar, a narcotic. Their culture is depicted as the source of this ability.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimization of Racism</td>
<td>“Farm work is hard work. It’s good to relax when I can, but I still have to listen to my brothers harping about “injustices.” … My sister and I both work for the Nords. Our brother is ashamed of us, but at least we can afford to eat.” This bit of dialogue by Faryl Atheron dismisses the effect of the inequality as “not that bad.” Faryl suggests that the inequality is just something that is to be expected because it is natural, normal, and, thus, not a big deal and dismissible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract Liberalism</td>
<td>(None coded)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They all aligned with Bonilla-Silva’s (2009) color-blind racism form of biopower. For instance, when the player first enters the town of Whiterun, city residents and guards demonstrated a mistrust toward the player because she or he is not a resident of the town. This would not be coded as an instance of race. However, in another instance in Whiterun, Redguards, a subgroup of humans, were regarded with distrust by the town guards by the virtue of their species (race). How the town guards spoke about or justified their distrust is coded for race because it orders the distrusted species (race) as less desirable than the dominant group and refers to the group as a “race.”
The game explicitly states that Nords, the race of the town guards in Whiterun, and Redguards are different races and in their comments, the town guards justified their behavior due to the characteristics of the Redguard visitors—an example of racial ordering.

Whiterun Guard: Look, you’ve already been told you’re not allowed here. Turn around and go back the way you came.
Alik’r Warrior: We’re causing no trouble. All we ask is to look for her.
Whiterun Guard: I don’t care what you’re doing, after what happened [the dragon sighting] you’re lucky I don’t toss you in jail. Now get lost.10

In the narrative of the game, the player observes this encounter after a dragon sighting that terrifies the residents. Despite having no connection to the dragon’s appearance, the guard refuses to let the Redguards, the Alik’r Warriors, enter.

While these groups of instances aligned with the forms of biopower (i.e., “color-blind racism”), they did not align cleanly. There was much overlap among the groups. At first, I thought that this is a result of a flaw in Bonilla-Silva’s forms of biopower. However, upon further analysis, what appears to be a better answer is that instances of racing are polysemic. They fit multiple descriptions of Bonilla-Silva’s forms of color-blind racism (what I argue are really forms of biopower). In the example of the Redguards (i.e., the Alik’r warriors), they are denied entry into Whiterun by the gate guards because the Redguards are outsiders and, therefore, culturally different and suspicious. This difference is concretized by their appearance (i.e., dark skin and

10 The player encounters this exchange in Whiterun after accepting the quest, *Dragon Rising*. During that quest the player is sent to defeat the dragon with a small group of city guards and Irileth. It is an automatic encounter, so no extra steps are needed to be taken by the player.
“exotic” clothing, and that appearance further denotes the unique power (i.e., their ability to resist poison, run for a longer duration, and fight for a longer duration) that they have because of their biology. And, indeed, as I demonstrate below, this polysemy leads to a conceptual slippage between “naturalization” and “cultural racism” biopower discourses. *Skyrim* seems to treat culture and cultural explanations of group differences as the product of biology (i.e., naturalization). This tells us that differences are natural, biological, and exclusive to various groups of people. Moreover, because culture is depicted as emerging from biology, one can never be “truly” a part of a culture that isn’t of one’s race (species).

In *Skyrim*, some species that venture further from the “typical” humanoid physical description (i.e., elven, human, Argonian, or Kahjiit) while still having culture and sentience are no longer described as races. For these entities, the game narrative refers to them as creatures. Confusingly, this division implies a difference between “creatures” and race.

Hagravens are a horrific cross between an old crone and a bird. They are extremely dangerous and equally hostile up close or when casting various Destruction [*sic*] spells from afar, usually preferring area-of-effect spells such as Fireball. They can often be found in the company of the Forsworn, or dwelling in secret groves and lairs in the wilderness with other witches and hags. They will sometimes be found summoning Forsworn Briarhearts. The Forsworn revere hagravens as their matriarchs and leaders. Few creatures match the cunning, depravity and the repulsiveness of the hagravens. They will take through savagery what they cannot win through guile.

Hagravens were once witches that have undergone a ritual, as seen in the quest Repentance. According to *Herbalist's Guide to Skyrim*, these creatures have traded in their humanity for access to powerful magics, and the transformations they undergo infuse their entire beings with some element of that power. (The Unofficial Elder Scroll Pages, 2013d)

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11 In the game, the Forsworn are a faction of Bretons who live on the outskirts of society.
Interestingly, while the hagravens are described as once being people, they are now considered creatures. But, while they have some humanoid features, they have feathers. That seems to be sufficient difference to mark them as creatures.

Giants are enormous humanoids with a primitive, albeit very artistic, culture. They are very territorial, and will raise a club above their head and shake it at you if you walk too close to their camps. If you continue to approach they will stomp on the ground and become hostile. Giants are normally seen herding mammoths; if you hurt their mammoths or threaten them in any way, the giants will attack. Without provocation, giants are passive creatures. (The Unofficial Elder Scroll Pages, 2013c)

Giants are also considered creatures by the game and one of the wikis. While they share basic features as human, player “races” are dwarfed by their physicality. What this difference is and how it is constituted is unclear. As a guess, it seems that the game’s lore distinguishes between creatures and races by implying that creatures are less humanoid than any of the races. Furthermore, the game wikis and the strategy guides do not illuminate this distinction. This seems to imply two different possibilities. First, the meta-discourse about races/species/creatures may be suggesting that sentience may not be a requirement to be considered a “race.” Second, this may suggest that entities that are “races” might be best understood as a grouping of “people” while creatures, which may be sentient, may be best understood as intelligent “non-people.” This second possibility seems to be the meta-discourse in the game. All of the entities that the game refers to as “races” socialize and inhabit cities and cultures among each other. Thus, Altmer, a “race” of elves; Khajiit, a “race” of cat-like humanoids; and Redguards, a “race” of humans, all occupy the same social world. The meta-discourse of people is analog to what we refer to as races in the real world. In that sense, this notion that certain racial abilities are carried “in the blood” is precisely what Bonilla-Silva (2009) refers to as a

This finding is consistent with what the literature suggests. For instance, Bernasconi (2010) documented real life instances during the 19th century when laws concerning who may or may not marry were justified by races’ presumed inherent abilities honed in the blood. The idea was that by passing laws that regulated marriage and presumably reproduction, the best of each race’s characteristics could be represented in successive generations. Of course, what was meant by “best” was the offspring’s ability for economic activity (Bernasconi, 2010). The main economic activity found throughout the game (and in many role-playing games in general) seems to be violence. Therefore, looking at the differences in each species (race), the economic activity should be situated around combat. In *Skryim* this is the case as each of the species (races) have different abilities to do violence.

Of course, in many role-playing games, combat tends to be a prominent characteristic. In that regard, violence as the main economic activity may not be a significant finding. However, I do believe that since there are other forms of economic activity that the player can do, violence is not a necessary activity. Regardless, what is important is that the proficiency and quality of the player’s violent potential is attributed to a species’s (race’s) biological makeup. It is in that regard that I argue violence (or the player’s character’s economic potential) is constructed “in the blood.”
Through the lens of the Dragonborn, the Dovakin sees clearly

*Skyrim’s* main story centers on the player’s special status of being a Dragonborn or Dovakin. Essentially, a Dragonborn is a person who is born with “the blood” of a dragon, and therefore a dragon’s power, coursing through her/his veins. Note again, here is the discourse of species (race) based abilities as stemming from the blood and reproduction. When the player starts the game, he/she is tasked with selecting a “race” (i.e., species). While selecting a species (race) has no bearing on whether or not the player is a Dragonborn, this process of selecting a species (race) comes with “racial bonuses” that are associated with each species (race) of people. The player gains this ability in addition to gaining the power of the Dragonborn. This means there are lenses through which all activities must necessarily be seen. First, species (race) and its associated power, ability, shortcoming, nature, et cetera are wholly treated as a natural process. One may choose many things in the game, but race/species always undergirds the story. Second, the player is the first Dragonborn in centuries. Therefore, the player is always an outsider despite being narratively written as a resident of the Skyrim region—an Other either by species (race) or by being a Dragonborn, which renders the player an Other by blood and orders the body of the player.

I point this out to call attention, as Nakamura (2002) found, that “race is ‘written’ in role-playing cyberspaces as well as read by other players” (p. 36). In Nakamura’s research, this reading of race involved interactions with others. For our purposes, the interaction is with computer controlled others and players in the abstract. After all, what is needed are “bodies—or rather, ‘visual perceptions’ that readers can take as bodies”
(Nakamura, 2002, p. 34). And, in *Skyrim*, bodies are plenty. For this research, Nakamura’s (2002) point means that the logical meaning of “race” is written into the text of *Skyrim*. Moreover, that understanding of race as an odd synonym of species and the source of culture is read by players.

**Minimization of Racism**

One of the biopower discourses that Bonilla-Silva (2009) argues is that people speak in ways that do not acknowledge the extent that racism affects people’s lives and tend to try to minimize those effects. As a reminder, the idea is that inequality is something that is rooted in the past. Any remaining inequality is the result of the individual’s inaptitude because racism is “in the past.” I found only one instance of this type of biopower in the game. This instance was also coded as naturalization and cultural racism.

Because the developer’s intention was to ask players to confront racism and the nuance that goes along with it (gameswelt.tv, 2011), it seems that biopower discourses that minimize the effect of racism is outside the game’s intent. Yet, this form of biopower still seemed to sneak into the narrative.

For instance, Windhelm is an especially racially problematic city in the game. Non-player characters of different species (races) are outwardly discriminated against by the majority Nord population. This is one city that the developers seemed to include explicitly to feature racial inequality. While the explicitly cruel words and statements the majority Nord population lobbed at the minorities illustrate the racial tension, it is
especially interesting that in the face of this discrimination, there is still a minimization of racism.

In one instance, Faryl Atheron, a Dunmer (i.e., a species of elf with dark skin frequently considered sinister) who lives in Windhelm, states that

Farm work is hard work. It’s good to relax when I can, but I still have to listen to my brothers harping about “injustices.” Of course working for Bolfrida isn’t my first choice. But what else can a Dunmer do out here? My sister and I both work for the Nords. Our brother is ashamed of us, but at least we can afford to eat. This bit of dialogue by Faryl dismisses the effect of the inequality as “not that bad.”

Faryl suggests that the inequality is just something that is to be expected because it is natural, normal, and, thus, not a big deal and dismissible. This can also be read as a form of minstrelsy where the “happy black” character is employed to waylay any guilt of her or his poor treatment (Pilgrim, 2012).

Of course, the Faryl example is interesting in another aspect. Because this character appears in Windhelm, an area which the developers purposefully designed as a racist area, Faryl can serve as an example of minorities that internalize racial inequality. This is interesting because this does happen in real life. Bonilla-Silva (2009) noted that blacks even articulated the same biopower discourses that serve to oppress them. He argues that this is because that process of normalization keeps those discourses invisible. Because Skyrim is a game and there is no such thing as a real life Dunmer, Faryl’s statement becomes visible.

Abstract Liberalism

Abstract liberalism is the type of biopower discourse that Bonilla-Silva (2009) contends is the form of so-called color-blind racism, a rhetorical tactic and ideology that
permeates society and constitutes a general racialized social system. Bonilla-Silva (2009) contends that when people employ (whether intentionally or not) an abstract liberalist discourse, they are in fact arguing that racial disparity, inequality, and ordering are results of simple market principles. The idea is that certain races occupy a particular racial position, and are economically disadvantaged, because of that individual’s inability to compete successfully in the society’s economic environment. Implicit in this assumption is that markets themselves are necessarily places where human sociality is trumped by a “natural” economic force. This is the very logic of biopower; markets serve as places of “veridiction” or truth-telling (Foucault, 2008). Thus, the argument goes, a particular race’s inability to sell goods in a particular location is not the result of racial bias. Rather, that inability is the result of that market’s inability to sustain that activity.

It may seem peculiar to speak about market forces in a videogame. After all, this is a game. There is no real shopkeeper behind the in-game virtual shopkeeper. But, because the buying and selling of goods through in-game shops does exist and because the game is presented as a virtual world, the suggestion is that players ought to assume that shopkeepers and other NPCs are part of an economy.

I did not find many instances of abstract liberalism in *Skyrim*. The nine instances total that I did find were more appropriately read as moments of naturalization and cultural racism. Therefore, I did not code any instances as abstract liberalism. It is also possible that the in-game mechanics treat in-game economics as something that “just is”—perhaps a necessary component of this genre’s gameplay.
I do not want to imply that abstract liberalism is not useful. In fact, in the next chapter, which analyzes *Max Payne 3*, abstract liberalism is important to understanding the findings. Because *Skyrim* takes place in a feudal fantasy world, the assumption seems to be that non-player characters do work (e.g., farming, trade, manual labor, and military service). But, the representation of that work is implied. It is in the background and understood, in part, because in our daily lives, we have no real conception of work life in the Middle Ages except for in film and other popular media. As such, medieval work life necessarily needs to be assumed. *Max Payne 3*, on the other hand, takes place in contemporary Brazil. Here, too, we have popular media representations of work from which we can draw. But in addition to those representations, we have our own real-life experiences and discourses of work from which we can draw conclusions. To put it another way, abstract liberalism is less prevalent in fantasy texts because medieval labor practices are outside our Lifeworld. Abstract liberalism is more prevalent in modern text because contemporary labor practices are within our Lifeworld.

The literature does not suggest which of these forms of biopower ought to be more prevalent than others. Nor does the literature suggest that biopower discourses ought to appear alongside other biopower discourses or singly. The literature only suggests that they exist. Moreover, discourses in general fluctuate and appear in context with other discourses in the social environment. That any particular discourses appear frequently or infrequently does not really matter; what matters is how those discourses can be read in relation to other discourses. Thus, the frequency of any particular biopower discourse matters only inasmuch as what that frequency tells us about that
interplay. Admittedly, there are very few instances to draw any meaningful conclusions concerning the game’s treatment of abstract liberalism.

What might be considered a form of abstract liberal discourse that does appear is the common notion of violence justified as a part of economic activity and questing. For *Skyrim*, the main source of economic activity is violence. For instance, players can chop wood, sell goods, collect herbs, craft equipment, mine ore, burgle, and so forth to earn money. However, these ways of earning money yield such a low return on the player’s time investment, it is all but dissuaded. Instead, violence against enemies, monsters, and undergoing side quests for non-player characters (NPCs) yield larger returns of money. Violence is, therefore, the main economic activity. This is, of course, a staple trope in sword-and-sorcerer games.

In *Skyrim*, violence against a non-player character is justified because that character “had it coming.” For instance, monsters will attack the player unprovoked. NPCs will attack the player for numerous reasons, and violence is the only solution possible. I hesitate to call this a form of racial ordering because all game races are subject to this form of violence. Moreover, many role-playing games feature violence in the very same way. Therefore, this would not be consistent with Bonilla-Silva’s abstract liberalist form of biopower. However, the take away is that violence is the main economic activity, and the extent that species (races) have different potential for violence is the extent of the abstract liberalism form of biopower.
The intersection of Naturalization and Cultural Racism

The most illuminating finding of *Skyrim* is that “naturalization” and “cultural racism” forms of biopower discourses tend to blur together. Of the 77 times that naturalized discourse of race-based differences occurred, 45 of those instances also refer to cultural racism. Viewing the association another way, of the 58 instances of cultural racism, 45 of those instances are also naturalized biopower discourses. My sampling procedure consisted of a particular play through of *Skyrim*. It is likely that a different play through would yield different results. I included these numbers not to imply any statistical association; rather, I included them to illustrate that I found, to a point of saturation, a blurring of these two distinct types of biopower. For example, the Khajiit are a species of cat-like people and Irileth is a dark elf. The game states that one can never adopt Khajiit culture unless one is born a Khajiit. Likewise, Irileth, despite having spent years living in Nord society, can never truly understand Nord culture because she is the wrong “race.”

This does not diverge with what we find in the real world. In fact, Bonilla-Silva (2000; 2009) noted a few instances where informants “code switched” and spoke about the nature of groups when they spoke about that group’s culture. Roediger (2007) noted that discourses about early Irish immigrants tended to attribute supposed cultural inferiority to a biological origin.

Naturalization, a form of biopower, is described by Bonilla-Silva (2009) as a way to “explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences” (p. 28). It is a biological view of racial difference. Therefore when a Redguard character is able
to withstand poison, or a Khajiit character is mystical and exotic because of its race, or an Argonian character is a natural thief—all of which are examples from *Skyrim*—those ideas are biopower discourses that say biology predicts behavior and people are so different that races might as well be different species. Redguards are noted as resistant to poison in the character creation screen. In the in-game book titled: Ahzirr Trajjazaeri, which the player can find in various locations, the Khajiit are described:

The Khajiit mind is not engineered for self-reflection. We simply do what we do, and let the world be damned. To put into words and rationalize our philosophy is foreign, and I cannot guarantee that even after reading this, you will understand us. Grasp this simple truth—“q'zi no vano thzina ualizz”—“When I contradict myself, I am telling the truth.”

I acknowledge there is no such thing as a Khajiit, Argonian, or Redguard. However, the idea that groups of people have different natural abilities that are transmitted in the blood is what is important. Again, what typically comes to mind when we say “race” is rooted in a belief that has no reality in biology (Duster, 2005; Hall, 2004; Omi & Winant, 1994). We are as likely to find more genetic variance between members of the same so-called race as we are to find between members of different “races” (Hall, 2004).

This form of biopower (i.e., naturalization) may function similarly in the game and the real world because they both depend on us believing that something that looks different might be fundamentally different biologically. The differences of these in-game people are demarcated by their skin (i.e., their ectodermal tissue) as well as the game skin (i.e., the graphic element of game characters overlaid on wireframe skeletons). The irony is that both of these “skins” are only superficial. The different game species (races) can
all interchangeably wear each other’s armor, use each other’s weapons, and adopt the same professions. In fact, whatever in-game species (race) players adopt, the differences are so small that there are no pragmatic advantages or disadvantages to how players choose to play the game.

One might argue that the game’s discourse is really that differences do not matter. However this would be a misreading of the gameplay. In fact, species (race) does have some demonstrable effect on gameplay however miniscule, and those differences exist as fact in the game and are demarcated along these racial (species) lines. This along with the fact that the player must choose a species (race) prior to being able to control the character (i.e., the character creation phase of the game), emphasizes that the choice of “race” is fundamental to the game.

Still, for Foucault (2008), what distinguishes biopower from other discourses that discipline the body of people is biopower’s indelible connection to the political economy. Indeed, what makes any form of biopower so effective is its “veridiction” in market activity (Foucault, 2008). For *Skyrim*, this is also true. Violence is the main economic activity. As such, the whole foundational aspect of choosing a race is made evident immediately. The first time the player has control of her or his character is during an attack by a dragon. While the character is not necessarily using its martial abilities to dispatch monsters for loot, the character’s (and therefore race’s) violent/economic potential is emphasized during the ensuing combat. The character is flexing its potential for violent activity, its natural ability, and its eventual money maker.
As far as culture is concerned, the form of biopower called cultural racism that Bonilla-Silva (2009) articulates, explains the ordering of various groups of people by articulating that the groups’ culture is responsible for its social standing. Culture is found to be one of the dominant biopower discourses in *Skryrim*. However, culture is viewed to emerge from nature so that, in *Skryrim*, a cultural explanation of differences among species (races) is almost always accompanied by a biological explanation. For example, the Khajiit, the species of cat-like people in the game, are known for their stealthy nature and their thief-like behavior.

Hailing from the province of Elsweyr, they are intelligent, quick, and agile. They make excellent thieves due to their natural stealthiness. All Khajiit can see in the dark at will and have unarmed claw attacks. Moreover, the game amplifies this alterity by depicting Khajiit not only as thieves but as drug dealers. To emphasize this social ordering, the Kahjiit’s culture is attributed as the reason that they are renowned for producing Moon Sugar, a narcotic. One load screen states, “Khajiit are a feline race native to Elsweyr. It is infamous for producing Moon Sugar, which can be refined into Skooma.” Elsweyr is the ancestral home of the Khajiit. For the Khajiit to have such a social ordering, there must be the implication that the “dominant” social environment does not see their behavior as acceptable; thus, the marginalization of the Khajiit is acceptable. And, because culture and behavior is described as emerging from biology, the Khajiit is biologically deserving of marginalization. Narratively, the dominant culture is described to be the Nords and the Imperials (a group of humans that have a more centralized political allegiance). Again,

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12 This is the description from the character creation screen.
what is important in my finding is that nature informs culture so that culture seems to emerge from nature.

The Khajiit are Orientalized in that they are constructed as a mysterious Other to the Nord and Imperials. The Khajiit’s biology and culture are blurred. For instance, human racial groups (i.e., Nords, Redguards, Bretons, and Imperials) in Skyrim are depicted as sometimes having an accent and sometimes not. The Khajiit are always depicted as having an accent that evokes a real life Middle Eastern accent. Moreover, the game lore forecloses outsiders from participating in a Khajiit society. One cannot join the Khajiit; one is born Khajiit. For example, the Ahziir Trajijazeri, the in-game book I cited earlier, states, “The Imperials feel that everything must be written down for posterity, but every Khajiiti kitten born in Elsweyr knows his history, he drinks it in with his mother's milk.” Because of that, one is born with the mysterious ancient knowledge that informs the ability to be proficient “thieves and thugs, smugglers and saboteurs.”

Another example of cultural racism (that emerges from this biological view of race) are the Argonians, a species (race) of lizard-like people. The 

*Skyrim* character creation screen describes the Argonians as

This reptilian race, well-suited for the treacherous swamps of their Black Marsh homeland, has developed a natural resistance to disease and the ability to breathe underwater. They can call upon the Histskin to regenerate health very quickly. The Argonians are considered excellent slaves. For one, their homeland consists of a warm climate and swamps, much like equatorial climates in the real world. The game suggests this climate and its harsh environment are precisely what made the Argonians suitable for slavery. To further emphasize this, in-game texts describe Argonian society
as “backwards” and mostly a subsistence living without advance economic trade (The Unofficial Elder Scroll Pages, 2013b). This is the same logic that was mirrored in the real world with such cases as the African slave trade in the Middle Ages when “[i]nterest in African slaves grew rapidly given their reputation as able workers with strong backs capable of enduring intense heat. This made them ideal for hard work on sugar, coffee, or cotton plantations or in gold mines, and other hostile environments” (Hall, 2004, p. 19). The view of Africans as good laborers extended to a view of African cultures as “savage and barbaric … not a conclusion drawn from fact but from choice by Europeans who sought some means of justifying African enslavement” (Hall, 2004, p. 21). The same logic follows for Argonians in *Skyrim*. The description of their society as primitive and their bodies suited to labor in hostile environments served as justifications for their slavery. That is, instead of defining the nuance of cultural space as separate from biology, the game uses biology as the lynchpin of culture.

In the real world, supposed biological differences among race and judgments of cultural superiority and inferiority are flawed at best. Real world medical views of race-based differences are problematic because race, although often treated as a biological distinction in medicine, serves as a meta-variable for social environment, economics, community norms on health, education, access to health care, and only possibly biology (Banks, 2011; Fausto-Sterling, 2008; Omi & Winant, 1994; Roberts, 2011; Zuckerman, 1990). In fact, “in the opinion of biologists and medical professionals, race is scientifically meaningless… According to the latest research, any race in comparison to any other will reveal as much genetic diversity within each as between the two” (Hall,
2004, pp. 38–39). Yet, among the different species (races) in-game there are significant biological differences and abilities. Even among in-game subgroups of “humans” there are race-based differences. For example, the differences described in the character creation screens shows race-based differences among Bretons, Redguards, Imperials, and Nords. Put another way, race-based differences in the real world are ideological. Race-based differences in-game, on the other hand, are actual. The inclusion of long held role-playing game tropes such as actual racial differences and slippages of culture and biology, the game reifies the flawed historical Tolkien logic.

This slippage plays out in other ways as well. Rather than culture existing as a socially co-constructed sphere where different groups interact and form a habitus, biology becomes a firm demarcating line. As a reminder, *Skyrim* adopts real titles from ancient Viking society. In *Skyrim*, a jarl, or earl, is a title given to chieftains of independent city states. In this case, the city-state is Whiterun. A housecarl is the title of the jarl’s primary confidant, bodyguard, and steward. In that situation, the housecarl has a lot of power. Moreover, the housecarl lived with the king and participated in the social life of the king’s world.

In *Skyrim*, Irileth, a Dunmer or dark elf, is a prime example. She serves as the housecarl for Balgruuf the Greater, Jarl of Whiterun. Despite the fact that Irileth is characterized as having spent many years with the Jarl Balgruuf and living in Nord society, her nature (i.e., her “race”) is sufficient to prohibit her “complete” understanding of Nord culture. For instance, the first time the player defeats a dragon is alongside Irileth and a handful of city guards from Whiterun. After the dragon is defeated, the
player is depicted as surrounded by swirling lights that seem to travel between the corpse of the dragon and the player, which is meant to indicate that the soul of the dragon is being absorbed. It is this event that has the city guards convinced that the player is Dragonborn, a person born with dragon blood. Irileth is skeptical, which one of the guards attributes to the fact that Irileth is a Dark Elf and not a Nord. The impossibility of understanding the Nord’s social world and beliefs is because she is a different race. This example demonstrates the slippage between race as a cultural and biological identity.

The exchange follows below:

Guard 1: That’s right! My grandfather used to tell me stories about the Dragonborn. Those born with the Dragon Blood [sic] in ‘em. Like old Tiber Septim himself.

Guard 2: I never heard of Tiber Septim killing any dragons.

Guard 3: There weren’t any dragons then, idiot. They’re just coming back now for the first time in … forever.

Guard 1: But the old tales tell of the Dragonborn who could kill dragons and steal their power. You must be one!


Irileth: Hmph. Some of you would be better off keeping quite than flapping your gums on matters you don’t know anything about. Here’s a dead dragon, and that’s something I definitely understand. Now we know we can kill them. But I don’t need some mythical Dragonborn. Someone who can put down a dragon is more than enough for me.

Guard 3: You wouldn’t understand, Housecarl. You ain’t a Nord.

Irileth: I’ve been across Tamriel. I’ve seen plenty of things just as outlandish as this. I’d advise you all to trust in the strength of your sword arm over tales and legends.

Again, there is a possibility that the developers intended this interaction to emphasize that racism exists and allow the player to decide her or his own stance.

However, instances like this tend to be full of interactions that suggest an explicit form of
racial ordering that emerges from a “real” biology. In the real world, scholars have asserted that race is a social construct because there is no biological difference (Banks, 2011; Fausto-Sterling, 2008; Omi & Winant, 1994; Roberts, 2011; Zuckerman, 1990). In *Skyrim*, race is a social and a biological construct.

In Windhelm, one area of the game where developers have explicitly stated that they want players to tackle the nuance of racism, the player encounters an exchange with Suvaris Atheron, a female Dark Elf, and two human men. The men accost her and tell her that she’s “not wanted” because of her race. They justify their prejudice because Dark Elves “eat our food, you pollute our city with your stink and you refuse to help the Stormcloaks.” (Stormcloaks are Nord rebels trying to overthrow the multi-racial Empire of Tamriel.) Suvaris claims that Dark Elves do not join in the rebellion because it is “not [their] fight.”

Angrenor, one of the men: Hey, maybe the reason these gray-skins don’t help in the war is because they’re Imperial spies!

Rolff, the other man: Maybe we’ll pay you a visit tonight, little spy. We got ways of finding out what you really are.

When the player approaches Suvaris and affirms that he/she does not hate the Dark Elves, Suvaris states, “You’ve come to the wrong city, then. Windhelm’s a haven of prejudice and narrow thinking.” This interaction demonstrates an explicit racial ordering. In this case, however, the explicit racial ordering is intentional. Rolff and Angrenor’s accusations appear simplistic and problematic because they are assuming that skin color and race are sufficient to determine where someone’s loyalties lie. The intent seems to be to highlight the illogical and hateful reaction of Rolff and Angrenor because biology does not account for social view. Yet in the example of Irileth, biology *does* account for her
social view. In Irileth’s case, biology accounts for her social view precisely because the social view in question is rooted in culture. In the case of Suvaris, the racial ordering is intentional and revealed to be illogical and solely discursive. For Irileth, it seems to be unintentional because of the slippage between culture and biology.

Another example of the slippage between biology (i.e., naturalized racism) and culture (i.e., cultural racism) is the Altmer. The game depicts Altmers, the tallest of the elven “races” with golden skin and a biological affinity toward magic, as having a culture that disciplines their breeding practices to maintain a purer Altmer species (race). Game wikis noted that Altmer culture views them as better than other species (races) because they “descended from divinity” rather than being created by divinity, similar to how some real world cultures understood royalty (The Unofficial Elder Scroll Pages, 2013a). This is resonated in their biology in their proficiency towards magic, golden skin, and physical height.

*Skyrim* is a game in a series. As such, there are other games and sources of lore. I did not examine all of the lore book in the entire series. However, one in-game book refers to the Imga. Upon looking into the lore presented in other games, I found the following piece noted in the in-game text, *Pocket Guide to the Empire*.

The Great Apes, or Imga, are native beastfolk of Valenwood. They see the High Elves as their lords and masters, and as a portrait of an ideal, civilized society. Great Apes go to desperate measures to emulate the High Elves: they wear capes, practice with the dueling sword, and attempt to speak with perfect enunciation and courtly manners despite their gravelly, baritone voices. Each Imga bears some kind of title, be it Baron, Duke, Earl, or the like, which they use when addressing the members of the Thalmor (needless to say, there are no landowning Great Apes). More extreme Great Apes shave their bodies and powder their skin white to seem more like the High Elves. They often cut themselves in the process,
creating the truly pathetic picture of a naked white Ape, skin dotted pink with blood, strutting around the trading posts of Valenwood with mock nobility. The Imga feel that humans are beneath them as lesser beastfolk, and pretend to find their smell exceedingly offensive—a Great Ape holds a perfumed corner of his cape to his nose when Men [sic] are around. The reference demonstrates both the blurring of biology and culture as well as the imagery of ape-people in subordination to blonde-haired superiors. For one, the Imga’s depiction as intelligent apes is problematic because of the history of referring to black people as “apes” and “uppity Coons” in the United States (Pilgrim, 2012). Furthermore, there is the explicit racial ordering of High Elves, who are constructed fair-skinned and blonde-haired, as being of a higher social status than the dark-skinned, white powder wearing, ape-like Imga. While this in-game text is not present directly in *Skyrim*, it is in past *Elder Scroll* games. This reminds us is that games, like all narrative forms, do not live in a vacuum. They live within a narrative context. Therefore, the passing mention of the Imga in *Skyrim* is enough to evoke the narrative of the Imga from past game texts.

Dragons are another example of this blurring of race and culture. However, it is difficult to see how dragon culture is depicted in the game. For one, dragons are not humanoid, and the game never explicitly refers to them as creatures or “races.” Moreover, dragons are always described from the standpoint of Nords. Even when the player is able to communicate directly with a dragon, the dragon speaks as if it is also a member of the Nord culture. This may be inconsistent with the other findings. For one, it can be argued that the dragons demonstrate that culture and biology do not blur conceptually in *Skyrim*. A dragon’s biology did not keep it from speaking as if it is an insider to Nord culture. On the other hand, it can also be argued that since dragons and
Nords are depicted as having a common creation story, their culture is informed by each other because the species evolved by interacting with each other.

Granted I am speaking about the cultural and biological evolution of non-existent creatures. I do so for the sake of reading the game within its context. Thus, the second possibility is likely the most accurate reading. Take “the Voice” for example. For dragons the Voice is the ability to evoke magic-like powers using only their voice. This is described as an innate ability that dragons have by virtue of the power of their blood. As the character Arngeir, a Greybeard, explains to the player, “Dragons have always been able to Shout [sic]. Language is intrinsic to their very being.” However, the religious order of Nords called the Greybeards is able to evoke this ability despite not having dragon blood. This is inconsistent with how the Voice is treated throughout the rest of the game. For example, when the player first kills a dragon, a Whiterun guard notes that the he thinks the player is a Dragonborn. The guard states, “If you really are Dragonborn, like out of the old tales, you ought to be able to Shout [sic]. Can you? Have you tried?” For the guard, the definitive evidence that the player has dragon blood is this ability to Shout. I must note this inconsistency. However, because the role of dragons is specific to this area and Nord culture, I do not believe that it affects my findings.

*From a slippage of biopower discourses toward race wars*

The blurring of the lines between biology and culture also takes a combative turn. One of the dominant narratives of the game is the idea of race wars. While the Nords and Imperial soldiers are written to be both groups of humans, their cultural differences are made concrete by differences in racialized abilities. For instance, the Nord’s racial
abilities consist of a battle cry that forces enemies to flee for thirty seconds and the ability to resist damage from sources of extreme cold.

Citizens of Skyrim, they are tall and fair-haired people. Strong and hardy, Nords are famous for their resistance to cold and their talent as warriors. They can use a Battlecry to make opponents flee.

The Imperials, a human political and national affiliation that *Skyrim* treats as a racial group, have the ability to calm nearby hostile enemies and acquire more gold.

Natives to Cyrodiil, they have proved to be shrewd diplomats and traders. They are skilled with combat and magic. Anywhere gold coins might be found, Imperials always seem to find a few more. They can call upon the Voice of the Emperor to calm an enemy.

These abilities are noted as emerging by the racial blood of these groups.

It should be noted that unlike other human groups, Imperials are explicitly constructed as a national identity in the same way that we understand it in the real world. One can be born in one country and become a citizen in another. Irileth, the Dark Elf housecarl of Jarl Balgruuf, is still a Dark Elf and not a member of Nord culture despite her political allegiance to and position in Whiterun. To be a Nord, one must be born a Nord. Contrast that with Imperials who can be racially an Imperial or a member of the Empire regardless of race. This blurring of the lines between nationality and race is not new. And, perhaps this is the source of the discursive conflation of biology, culture, and nationality—a conflation that finds its roots in historic anti-Semitism (Fredrickson, 2002). I do not mean to accuse the developers of *Skyrim* of harboring racist or anti-Semitic beliefs. Rather, I mean to point out that despite a progressive intent to address racial difference, the developers, like all of us, are burdened with the historical legacy of racism.
In *Racism: A Short History*, Fredrickson (2002) traced the evolution of the notion of “race” in the real world. Fredrickson (2002) found that while the notion of race as something that is passed along in the blood is common today, this was not the case in its early inception. Historically, it was nationality and, to a lesser extent, religion instead of biology that demarcated the key feature of social ordering that we now call racism (Fredrickson, 2002). Any person born within a national border was considered to belong to that society, but that meant that this social ordering was not necessarily inheritable from parent to child (Fredrickson, 2002).

According to Fredrickson (2002), the notion of national identity as the demarcating characteristic of social ordering took a sinister turn when Christian mercantilists began directly competing with Jewish mercantilists during the Middle Ages. As Fredrickson explained, Christian mercantilists used the notion of being born into the Jewish identity as the mechanism of passing on the sins of deicide. The argument is that because Jewish identity, like national identity, is something that one is born into and the supposedly Jewish crime of killing Christ or God is so heinous, the sin is passed along from parent to child. Fredrickson points out that, unlike national identity, religious identity was not restricted to a place of birth, which was considered the center of one’s political allegiances. However, Jewish identity is unique because one is a member of the Jewish faith and a citizen of the symbolic Jewish homeland. The idea was that Jews were Jewish first (in faith and nationhood) and a member of a nation (aside from the symbolic Jewish homeland) last. Thus, a Jewish person’s blood is tainted not only with the crime
of deicide, but their allegiances are questioned as they are considered more loyal to the idea of a Jewish homeland than the country of their birth (pp. 18–26).

In *Skyrim*, this idea plays out in the case of the Imperial. Like Jews, one can be born into the political homeland, but there also exists a racial identity that is passed along in the blood. This notation makes it clearer why Imperials are both a national identity and a racial identity. For Imperials, the identity is both a species (racial) identity and a nationalistic identity in the same way that Jewish was both a racial and nationalistic identity. The description in the character creation screen constructs Imperials as a group with a unique biology. Yet, an empire is also a political body.

Beyond Nords and Imperials, the notion of a race war is also present in the way elves and humans relate. For instance, during the confrontation between Suvaris Atheron and two human men, Atheron’s assertion that the war between the Stormcloaks, who fight for Nord independence, and the Imperials is a civil war between two human races. The humans’ hatred for Atheron is indicative of the idea of a race war because their statements imply that Atheron is, by virtue of her species (race), a traitor. Atheron’s statements further reify race as concrete. To the accusation that she is an Imperials spy because she has not taken a side in the civil war, she exclaims, “But we haven’t taken a side because it’s not our fight.”

We also see the concept of race war between a type of human, specifically Nords, and elves. In Whiterun, Heimskr, a priest of the Nord god Talos preaches against elves. Talos was once a Nord that achieved divinity and is now worshiped by Nords. He argues that Nords are being oppressed by elves, and therefore Nords should rise up against them.
Even as man, great Talos cherished us. For he saw in us, in each of us, the future of Skyrim! The future of Tamriel! And there it is, friends! The ugly truth! We are the children of man! Talos is the true god of man! Ascended from flesh, to rule the realm of spirit! The very idea is inconceivable to our elven overlords! Sharing the heavens with us? With man? Ha! They can barely tolerate our presence on earth! Today, they take away your faith. But what of tomorrow? Do the elves take your homes? Your businesses? Your children? Your very lives? And what does the Empire do? Nothing! Nay, worse than nothing! The Imperial machine enforces the will of the Thalmor! Against its own people! So rise up! Rise up, children of the Empire! Rise up, Stormcloaks! Embrace the word of mighty Talos, he who is both man and Divine! For we are the children of man! And we shall inherit both the heavens and the earth! And we, not the elves or their toadies, will rule Skyrim! Forever!

The quote shows the purposeful undercurrent of racial conflict between elves and Nords.

This is similar to the myth of Ysgramor in the game. In that myth, Ysgramor travels to Tamriel to escape a civil war on his home continent of Atmora. When he settles in the “new land” of Tamriel, he notes the Mer, elves that inhabited the continent. With the influx of humans, the myth states that the elves slaughter the humans in fear of being overrun. Ysgramor returns to Atmora and assembles an army of humans and hunted the elves in “a genocidal slaughter.” Lydia, a companion that the player first acquires even if the player is an elf, shouts during combat that “Skyrim belongs to the Nords”—a further concretization of this race war.

When the player encounters elves, they are by and large constructed as evil. Every High Elf (i.e., Altmer) is written as an agent of the Thalmor, the political body of the Altmer. Because the game is in a Nord setting, the game constructs the Altmer as necessarily evil. Even though the player can be a High Elf, the context is nevertheless that the Altmer are evil. This slippage of a biological (naturalized) justification of
differences and cultural (cultural racism) view of differences provides further space for this notion of race war.

*The economic pressures of narrative construction*

My third research question asks, “How does economics incentivize these biopower discourses?” Or, to ask it another way: Why does a game that hopes to sell to a wide audience such as *Skyrim* fall into a trap of depending on problematic biopower discourses of race? And, why did it slip to centering on race wars? It seems that as humans, we need to depend on previous narratives and discourses to explain stories. As Alisa Lynn Valdes (2013) laments in her Kickstarter page regarding her efforts to get her novel turned into a film:

Alisa was "encouraged" to make the characters stereotypical, to conform to the very insults she poked fun of in the novel, in order to get the film made. The familiarity of the old downtrodden nonsense was comforting to the executives, because they'd seen it all before. For instance, she was told by one major network producer to get rid of all the Afro-Latino characters because "black Latin Americans will confuse America, [and] no one wants to watch black people on the screen." Another network executive suggested Alisa rewrite the plots so that the women were dating men in prison, "because that's what your people do."

We tap into that institutional history in an attempt to be understandable even if the institutional history is problematic and hurtful to others (Dodge et al., 2008; Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994). And, for industries like the videogame industry, which depend on storytelling as their main product, there is an economic imperative to connect with narratives that have come before even if those narratives are problematic. This is because products that venture too far from narratives that are tried and true market sellers face backlash from game publishers who are concerned with whether or not these products will sell. I explore this in more detail in a subsequent chapter.
What appears as central to this question then is that this game, along with games of this genre, draw largely from Tolkien’s mythos and eventually *Dungeons and Dragons* (Fimi, 2009; Fine, 2002; Gold Box Wiki, n.d.; Harris, 2009). In those texts, there is a large emphasis on race war and racial conflicts. Because these texts’ central story arch is an “eternal conflict” between opposing forces (e.g., good versus evil) (Fimi, 2009) and because certain species (races) are constructed as naturally being good or evil (Fimi, 2009), the basic narrative of the “eternal conflict” plays into the discourses that *Skyrim* uses regarding race. *Skyrim*’s game developers stated that they wanted to include race and racial conflict into the game so that players would be able to tackle the nuance of such issues (gamewelt.tv, 2011).

True to their intention, the developers included characters such as Irileth and Suvaris Atheron. These characters problematize the reductionist notion that a certain race is “good” or “evil.” In that sense, the game developers’ purposeful inclusion of racial intolerance might be considered a progressive act. In fact, the total narrative of *Skyrim* can he read as a way to gain sympathy for the oppressed. The Khajiit are forced to encamp outside Nord walls. Even human groups such as Bretons, a group that descriptively resemble Celtic people during the medieval period, and Redguard, a group of human warriors that resemble medieval Arabs, are depicted as the victim of Nord intolerance. Again, this intolerance is demonstrated as a blurring of the line between race and culture.

The game also demonstrates the offensive behavior of each faction in order to create a gray moral area from which the player must choose. The Stormcloaks are
constructed as fighting for their homeland against an oppressive empire—an empire that is oppressive because it welcomes Othered people. On one hand, because the game begins with the player’s character being captured along with other Stormcloaks, there is a solidarity that is created in the beginning. On the other hand, if the player chooses to be anything other than a Nord, the player is quickly given reasons to side with the Empire, despite the fact that the player immediately begins the game imprisoned by the Empire and sentenced to be executed.

Because the player begins as a prisoner of the Imperials, the sole reason the game gives for players to be sympathetic towards the Empire is by being an Othered person in the Nord dominated north. Of course, *Skyrim* is a game and there are no such things as elves, Khajiit, or Argonians. Yet, the *Skyrim*’s storyline depends on what Nakamura (2002) calls “identity tourism.” Nakamura (2002) contends that new media spaces where the individual’s body is rendered invisible offers an opportunity for individuals to experience a subjectivity other than then one afforded by the individual’s real world body. That is, the story depends on the player’s willingness to suspend her/his normal identity and adopt a fictitious one. It is precisely this borrowed subjective lens that the game developers depend on to tell the complex racial story of *Skyrim*.

While *Skyrim*’s project of portraying the racial nuance and experience of being a marginalized person is quite noble, this identity tourism is distorted by the Orientalism inherent in the representation of non-human (and more precisely, non-Nord or Imperial) races trouble the effort. *Skyrim* is still at its core a story about the conflict among two
races who occupy and contest the center (i.e., Nords and Imperials) while an evil, savage, and exotic Others (i.e., elves) pull the strings of power.

This story trope is not a new one. Species (race) conflict traces its origins back through *Dungeons and Dragon*’s use of racial contest to Tolkien’s representation of races that occupy the center’s struggle against the marginalized (and therefore evil) races (Fimi, 2009; Fine, 2002; Gold Box Wiki, n.d.; Harris, 2009). Moreover, older stories such as Johnathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travel* feature strange species of people. Nevertheless, as I describe in chapter 6, videogame developers attribute their conception of race in videogames to the legacy of Tolkien. Why does this story trope occur in this particular text? In a larger sense, it is precisely because there is an economic need to make the narrative make sense so that the game can make money (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995; McLuhan, 1994). Because this is a game, there is an economic incentive for large game publishers to create games that sell well. To sell a product, corporations must ensure that all factors that might impede the game’s sales must be reduced. The economic term for these unknowable or unnamed impedances is uncertainty (Beckert & Streeck, 2008).

Roughly defined, uncertainty is the catch-all phrase for all considerations in any economic transaction that cannot be determined beforehand and accompany all economic transactions (Beckert & Streeck, 2008). Economic actors, such as game companies and game consumers, come to engage in an economic exchange whereby the actors seek to maximize their respective gain while limiting risks (Beckert & Streeck, 2008; Beckert,
For game companies, the desire is for consumers to be able to purchase the game, enjoy it enough to recommend it to others to ensure additional sales, and purchase value-added products such as downloadable content (DLC). Some questions can be answered with certainty. For instance, how can the game get into the hands of players? Games can be sold through brick-and-mortar retail outlets or online retail providers. The same infrastructure can be levied to enable downloadable content sales. For instance, Sony’s Playstation 4 and Microsoft’s Xbox One as well as future consoles include Internet connectivity and a platform infrastructure that enables those DLC sales.

Of all the factors that game companies must control, the one factor that is most important to this study is the content. In short, the game’s content is the one factor that is directly under the game company’s control (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009). Or, more accurately, the game’s content is one area where uncertainty can be reduced. For a player, the uncertainty is in the quality of the game. An infrastructure has evolved around gaming audiences to reduce the player’s uncertainty. For instance, many websites now feature reviews by game journalists and by players (e.g., Gamasutra). Entire YouTube

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13 The concept of risk is actually a distinct concept from uncertainty (Beckert & Streeck, 2008; Hall & Soskice, 2001). Risk is usually defined as foreseeable problems that an economic actor may encounter during transactions such as sales. However, as I am concerned only with the narrative content of games and game developers’ thinking in designing content, our discussion of risks is limited to the uncertainty that the game content is saleable. To put it another way, I am not concerned with marketing, packaging, distribution. Whether or not the delivery of the physical game medium to retailers will arrive on time regardless of inclement weather, for example, is outside the scope of this discussion.
channels are devoted to videogames and gameplay. There are even sites that aggregate these reviews and give an average score so that players can determine if the game is “good enough” to purchase. Here the push for a wide variety of stories appears as game consumers express their desire in forums and review comments. Stories that are “typical” or “overplayed” are often the subject of derision by both game critics and audiences. We will explore this in future chapters.

Yet, despite this push for story innovation, many games follow familiar story arcs. For *Skyrim*, a role-playing game, the story arc is similar in both its relationship to other games in the *Elder Scroll* franchise (which is a certainty what gamers expect because it is a part of that franchise’s cannon) and the Tolkien and *Dungeons and Dragons* universes. Here we can see an economic explanation of the findings in this study.

I found in analyzing *Skyrim* that the game’s discourses depend on violence as the main economic activity in the game narrative. Moreover, the *Skyrim* does not minimize racism as Bonilla-Silva argues contemporary American society does, but rather embraces racial differences and blurs biology (i.e., naturalism) and culture (i.e., cultural racism). Bonilla-Silva (2009) argues that discourses about the bodies of different groups of people will minimize racial differences and attribute differences to other factors or deny racial inequality exists outright. To do otherwise, he argues is to speak in ways that are distasteful for our present era (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Yet, for the narrative of *Skyrim*, racialized differences are precisely “front and center” to the experience. From an economic perspective, to express a view that may be onerous to gamers such as explicit
racism is prohibitive to selling games to a large audience. This is precisely the narrative arc that *Skyrim* features.

There are many conflicting interests at play. For one, if the game is too similar to the Tolkien mythos, then the game may come off as tired and overplayed. Second, if the game comes off as blatantly offensive, then the game might alienate a large swath of its fan base. Yet, there is also a need for the game’s story to be immediately understandable, playable, and resonate with audience expectation (or, what developers perceive is audience expectation). In order to get the “tenor” of the story (Fisher, 1984), one must either observe for an extended period of time or rely on cultural frames, common narratives in the social world (Dodge et al., 2008; Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994). Tolkien’s general mythos sets up the frame for sword-and-sorcery games. While the game developers would not want to create an exact clone of the Tolkien universe, borrowing from Tolkien as a framework and adding those elements into an original game storyline allows for it to be both fresh and immediately comprehensible. The game developers do not have to ask players to trust in the uncertainty of what the game’s experience will be like; there is already a frame of reference in a Tolkien like universe. For the game company, the uncertainty of whether or not players would find the game enjoyable, to a degree, is addressed by using a popular narrative frame (see Beckert & Streeck, 2008; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009; Valdes, 2013).

But, biopower discourses, like what Bonilla-Silva (2009) articulate, are found in the Tolkien and *Dungeons and Dragon* canon; therefore, since game companies (and media companies for that matter) are compelled to gravitate towards ideas, products, and
narratives that have a proven track record, these ideas are repeated. This reifying happens not necessarily because of a willful racially based intolerance, but rather because the economic compulsion to do anything possible to reduce uncertainty compels these media corporations. Additionally, I am not naïve enough to believe that willful racial intolerance is not present in the videogame industry as it is in any industry. Nevertheless, all media companies and specifically media companies that sell narratives are beholden to Walter Fisher and Kenneth Burke’s (Fisher, 1984) view of humans as a “narrative animal” specifically because narratives are a media companies’ fundamental product (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995).

However, this brings up another question. Why these specific narratives? Surely, since the days of the Civil Rights movement, narratives about groups of people have become more nuanced, haven’t they? Of course they have. Again, what I found in \textit{Skyrim} is an attempt (an in many ways, a remarkably successful attempt) at nuanced story telling about groups of people. Yet, what the Frankfurt School’s exploration of the culture industry tells us is that mass culture is appropriated, commoditized, and sold back to consumers (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995). In other words, even when developers attempt to create nuanced stories about groups of people, these stories must be commoditized and simplified as much as possible so that they can be sold as a product, which means a constant appeal to oversimplified discourses about groups of people, discourses that Foucault calls biopower.

The notion of the culture industry is not without criticism. Among the critiques is the argument that this view of culture as a commodity is over-simplistic because it leaves
no room for resistance, and the theory flies in the face of real life examples of resistance (Bottomore, 2002). The answer to this weakness is that the fundamental pressure for corporations is to reduce uncertainty by any means, even if those means are institutionalized discourses that form biopower.

I do not want to imply that *Skyrim* is a racially insensitive or problematic text. The findings tell us that because videogames like *Skyrim* are dependent on a strong narrative, and that narrative has to be understandable to audiences, games end up using themes from older source materials. By virtue of being a videogame, there is an economic imperative to reduce uncertainty as much as possible. And, one uncertainty that is directly under the control of developers is the narrative. *Skyrim*, like many games, needs to be both understandable and salable; therefore, it relies on discourses from materials such as Tolkien and *Dungeons and Dragons*. These materials, unfortunately, were written in a social environment where their own need to be understandable resulted in discourses that we would now find racially problematic.

For *Skyrim* and games like *Skyrim*, we cannot make any inferences about intent other than what the developers tell us. And what the developers have stated is that the game’s intention was to force the players into tackling these racialized topics and think about them in a nuanced way. This intention is laudable. Yet, its narrative ties to Tolkien and *Dungeons and Dragons* led it to what mostly likely was an unintentional reification of various biopower discourses—the most important discourses being what Bonilla-Silva (2009) calls “naturalization” and “cultural racism.” It is likely the intention is not to imply that there are race-based differences that are transmitted in the blood.
Moreover, it is not likely the intention to imply that the social standing of different groups are the results of their culture. But those implications happened, and the boundaries between them blurred.

I also do not wish to imply that role-playing games are generally more racially problematic than other types of videogames. Indeed, the extension of Walter Fisher and Kenneth Burke’s (Fisher, 1984) view is that racially problematic discourses exist in media text because humans depend on past texts and discourses to make sense of the narratives we engage or create. When those past texts and discourses feature problematic ideas, those ideas are unintentionally written into these present narratives. In the next chapter, we see this phenomenon in a different style of videogame. *Max Payne 3*, unlike *Skyrim*, is not an open world game where players take the role of a character in a fantastical world. Instead, *Max Payne 3* is more akin to a film. The aesthetics are more cinematic, and the player is taken through the narrative from beginning to end in a linear fashion.
CHAPTER 5

“THE GREAT AMERICAN SAVIOR OF THE POOR”

*Max Payne 3* is a much different game than *Skyrim*. *Skyrim* is a fantasy sword-and-sorcery game set in a mythical universe with dragons and magic. *Max Payne 3* features a hard-boiled film noir game with an ex-detective who, years later, still mourns the loss of his wife and daughter with a bottle of pills, alcohol abuse, and a self-destructive need to right whatever wrong he sees. All the while, he chooses a female character that he seeks to save regardless of any potential injury to himself.

The developers have positioned all three *Max Payne* games stylistically as film noir (Fierro, 2012; Rezaee, 2012; Rockstar Games, 2003). The developers even explicitly called the franchise “film noir” (Rockstar Games, 2003). The game features a flawed hero, Max, who, mourning losses in his life, seeks redemption from his personal demons by taking a bodyguard job that Raul Passos, a friend from the police academy, offers. Max is contracted to protect Rodrigo Branco and his wife Fabiana Branco, wealthy capitalists from São Paulo, Brazil. The surname Branco is the Portuguese word for “white.” Moreover, Fabiana is blonde and speaks with no accent in English. While her sister is dark-haired, works in the favelas (i.e., inner-city slums of São Paulo), and speaks with an accent. Quickly, Max and Passos find themselves embroiled in an organized crime conflict that leads to the kidnapping of Fabiana Branco. Fabiana becomes the “damsel in distress.” True to the genre tropes, Max saves Fabiana while metaphorically saving himself (see Fluck, 2001). Eventually, Max finds out that they are betrayed by Victor Branco, the brother of Rodrigo and brother-in-law of Fabiana, in an
attempt to steal the family wealth. Along with the noir narrative, *Max Payne 3* depends on moody dialogue associated with film noir and gritty cinematic flashbacks to move the plot and evoke a sense of despair.

In the analysis of *Max Payne 3*, I found that the game, much like *Skyrim*, depends on biopower discourses for sense-making. Moreover, the sense-making is predicated on biopower discourses serving multiple purposes. That is, these biopower discourses do not cleanly fall into what Bonilla-Silva (2009) predicts, but rather they are polysemic. Like *Skyrim*, there is a blurring of “naturalization” and “cultural racism.” Unlike *Skyrim*, there is also a significant blurring between “abstract liberalism” and “cultural racism.” There are two reasons for this blurring. The first reason is the need for a sense-making through a rearticulation of past narratives and discourses (Dodge et al., 2008; Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994). This rearticulation of crime, greed, and Othered cultures finds echoes in past noir texts; and thus, situates this text in that genre (Fluck, 2001; Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998; Nakamura, 2002). Unlike *Skyrim*, this text takes place in a modern day setting. In that sense, the game does not draw on the biopower discourses available to a Tolkien-esque world and must depend on other texts, to which it is similar, to explain bodies of different people. Thus, similar to race considerations in contemporary noir (Nakamura, 2002), the game treats bodies of different groups as originating from “culture” and economics as well as biology. The second reason is that this game is a product of the so-called culture industry and is a product that needs to be sold, the economic imperative to reduce uncertainty that appears in the case of *Skyrim* also appears to discipline the narrative choices.
The title, *The Great American Savior of the Poor*, comes directly from one of the game’s levels (i.e., what the game refers to as chapters). The level by this name is where the various parts of the narrative start to come together to begin the climax of this crime drama. Interestingly, the title also points to the way in which the game positions America, capitalism, and whiteness as superior to Brazil, which is imagined as a not-quite-capitalist society inhabited by dark-skinned Others. In the dynamics hinted at by this title lies film noir’s racial logic of the white savior in the dark spaces (which signify dark-skinned people) and the game’s biopower discourses of economics and culture.

**Findings RQ1**

As in the previous chapter, I directly answer RQ1 and RQ3 in turn for this text. To reiterate, RQ1 asks: How might the content of corporately produced videogames contribute to discourses about race? In order to protect the internal validity of the study, I did not simply look for things that might appear “racist” to me. I detailed my methods in the previous methods chapter; however, I will give a quick summary here. I coded the gameplay video by coding every event that might demonstrate racial ordering. That is, I coded instances that delineated differences among people according to skin color or when characters explicitly brought up racial differences. Then I divided those instances into groups according to similar themes, and I analyzed the common characteristics in those groups and collapsed them into larger groups where appropriate. I then compared each of these collapsed groups and determined if or how they matched the biopower types that Bonilla-Silva (2009) calls color-blind racism. Again, I argue that because of how color-blind racism is theorized, it constitutes what Foucault (2008) calls biopower. The game’s
main storyline was examined through a gameplay video and analyzed to determine what biopower discourses were present and which ones were dominant.

Once again, by race I mean the ordering of groups of people with skin color as the dominant marker of difference which is justified in the political economy. In this game that ordering appeared as words, phrases, images, and visuals of bodies that sort the bodies of different groups of people into presumed characteristics, skin color, economics, and references to culture. So, the game explicitly demarcated people of different races and described or implied each of the innate characteristics of these “races.” Next, I sorted each incident into different groups by examining the context in which these incidences appear in the game. Then, I examined the group’s common characteristics and determined if and how they followed Bonilla-Silva’s color-blind racism types of biopower. They all aligned with Bonilla-Silva’s color-blind racism forms of biopower.

Like many games, Max Payne 3 has an online multiplayer component as well as downloadable content (DLC). However, I did not examine the online gameplay, nor did I examine the DLCs. The online multiplayer component consists mainly of “e-sport-like” competitive matches not unlike offline paintball. The players choose avatars and try to achieve the competitive goals of the map. As a result, the multiplayer component does not advance or clarify the narrative of the game in any way. The DLCs only provide additions to the multiplayer component, and as such, they also do not advance the narrative. There are many fan-created and maintained wikis and websites. I did not analyze these sites except when reviewing them gave context to my analysis.
I did not find any instances that specifically use biopower discourse to “minimize racism.” To minimize racism, Bonilla-Silva (2009) argues that there needs to be a dismissal of racial ordering as something that is “in the past” and therefore not a current problem. Race, while it is ever present in Max Payne 3, is never explicitly stated. Instead, nationality, culture, economics, and skin color become metaphor for race. My analysis suggests that this is because Max Payne 3 is part of the film noir genre, which makes race invisible while implicitly speaking about race (Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998; Nakamura, 2002).

This game heavily depended on an “abstract liberalism” form of biopower, but abstract liberalism tends to be blurred with biopower discourses of “cultural racism.” Cultural racism appears so frequently with abstract liberalism that it seems to imply that culturally based explanations of difference, at least in part, result from people’s ability to perform in market places and vice versa. Abstract liberalist discourses explain racial differences in terms of the effort one puts into the economy without considering other barriers that may impede economic performance. For example, in the opening scene, Max drinks a scotch at a cocktail party hosted by the Brancos, his charges, and other wealthy São Paulo elites. The party venue is at Rodrigo Branco’s high-rise apartment in a wealthy part of town overlooking the poor slums (or favelas) below. Everyone at the party is light-skinned. We eventually find out that most of them are white-collar criminals. They have jobs such as chief of the paramilitary police, surgeon, and politician. At that party, Raul Passos and Max Payne share small talk about the favela below and the implications of the event they are protecting.
Passos: Man, that favela is big.
Max: Yep, nothing like the view of extreme poverty to make a penthouse cocktail party really swing.
Passos: I guess they call it trickledown economics.
Max: Ha ha. That’s funny.
Passos: It’s supposed to be a charity thing, drink and give money, I don’t know, something for the kids.

This scene happened at the beginning of the game and blamed the presence of wealth inequality for the ensuing trouble. The narrative also problematized the constant construction of Brazilians (regardless of skin color) as criminals. As Nakamura (2002) points out, in this genre of fiction, the hero is always a white, middle class male struggling against dark-skinned Others who are in control of corrupt corporations. Moreover, while “naturalized” explanations did not appear as centrally as they did in *Skyrim*, the clear implication is that the dark-skinned bodies of favela residents signified an indelible link between biology and culture. Thus, for favela residents, all of whom are dark-skinned, their bodies necessarily marked poverty.

It is possible to view this as a result of the genre. After all, the film noir genre emphasizes the role of crime in the story. And, in many cases (organized) crime is closely tied to economics (see Fiorentini & Peltzman, 1997). Moreover, race itself is implicated in the noir genre (Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998). For instance, Murphet (1998) pointed out that to understand how race factors into the genre, we must consider the time period in which film noir came into being. During that time, social pressures of the Second World War and public programs (such as Federal Housing Administration loans) led to a bifurcation of urban and suburban spaces into dark-skinned and dangerous city
centers, and white-skinned and safe suburbia (see Conley, 1999; Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). This dynamic solidified the notions of poor dark-skinned bodies and wealthier white bodies—blurring the lines between what Bonilla-Silva (2009) calls “naturalization,” “cultural racism,” and “abstract liberalism.”

It is this bifurcation that is problematic. It is the absence of dark-skinned bodies in the “safe” spaces and the absence of light-skinned bodies in the favelas that constitutes this bifurcation in Max Payne 3. We see this bifurcation with the previous example. The Brancos live comfortably in their high-rise penthouse (with white occupants) above the sprawling favelas (dominated by dark-skinned Others). Of course, crime finds its way into these “safe” spaces in film noir. Moreover, even the quality of the criminality is demarcated. In the favelas, the Commando Sombra, a dark-skinned prison gang from the favela who kidnap Fabiana Branco for ransom, rule. Sombra is Portuguese for “shadow.” Compared with Branco, the surname for the victims and Portuguese for “white,” the contrast between whiteness and shadow also emphasizes this bifurcation. In the rest of São Paulo, the light-skinned (and yet still corrupt compared to white American Max Payne) special-forces run a more “sophisticated” organ-harvesting campaign.14 These special-forces units are part of a larger criminal empire that require Max Payne, the white American “savior of the poor,” to dismantle.

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14 The extent of this dynamic is made clear towards the end of the game when the player infiltrates the São Paulo police headquarters and examines the in-game documents there.
Film noir, urban spaces, and (invisible) bodies

Film noir’s historical context depends on the racial tension between minority coded spaces and white heroes (Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998). In that sense, likely it is not the possible racial insensitivity of the developers that is at the crux. Rather, it is the genre and its popularity that is of interest. Film noir came into popularity during the end of the Second World War (Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998). During this time, returning citizens began taking advantage of Federal Housing Administration home loans (Conley, 1999; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). These loans made homes within the financial reach of people who would otherwise not be able to afford one. All citizens would be entitled to these loans; but, in practice, minorities—especially black residents—would be denied these loans through “redlining” (Conley, 1999; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). Redlining was the practice whereby a metaphoric red line was drawn around city centers that were predominantly inhabited by minorities (Conley, 1999; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). These minorities were denied loans, which prevented them from leaving the city and resulted in a “white flight” towards suburbia—a flight that included white residents’ tax dollars (Conley, 1999; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). This resulted in an increased impoverishment of the city center, and created a discourse of the dangerous urban areas (Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998).

It was these supposedly dangerous urban areas that film noir came to embrace as its iconic setting (Fluck, 2001; Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998; Nakamura, 2002). Problematically, there was an absence of minorities in the movies, especially black people, that led to a symbolic erasure of minorities’ urban plight (Lott, 1997; Murphet,
1998). This supplanted the economically-induced urban decay with a discourse that articulated urban spaces as dangerous poor spaces in the abstract (Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998). In *Max Payne 3*, the favelas mark the dangerous spaces abandoned by capital for the high-tech commercial or gentrified spaces in which the Brancos operate. In the game, the favelas lack sufficient toilets while the Brancos have multimillion dollar security systems at work and fly to nightclubs in helicopters. Moreover, this discourse of the dangerous urban space came to signify metaphorically dark-skinned bodies and shadowy, often poorly lit, urban spaces as one and the same (Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998).

Urban spaces became dangerous in the abstract, and dark bodies that implicitly lurked in the shadows became the rhetorical boogeyman despite the near absence of actual dark bodies in film noir (Murphet, 1998). The protagonist, usually a hard-boiled white man, serves as the flawed yet necessary white savior struggling against the dark spaces and its forces (Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998; Nakamura, 2002). Max’s job of protecting the Brancos directly mirrors this film noir trope. Rodrigo Branco is a capitalist who faces dangers from people who supposedly are jealous of his wealth. Because “branco” is Portuguese for “white,” quite literally Max is protecting the white symbol of capitalism from the dark film noir constructed Other. Eventually, Fabiana Branco, the socialite wife of Rodrigo whom Max endeavors to save, is captured by dark-skinned poor street thugs of the São Paulo slums. Fabiana is blonde, speaks English with no Brazilian accent, and is rich. Compare this with Giovanna, Fabiana’s sister who has dark-hair, speaks English with a Brazilian accent, and does non-profit work in the favela. Capitalism is valorized by its association with whiteness and wealth while poverty is
thematically tied to urban São Paulo. Fabiana Branco constitutes another example of Max saving a (blonde) “white” symbol of capitalism from poor dark-skinned street thugs and dangerous dark spaces.

This representational move was apparent in *Max Payne 3* during the favela scenes and also in the ghetto scene of Hoboken, New Jersey. In the favela scenes, instead of a purely racialized *space*, the bodies of dark-skinned Brazilians are reintroduced. Moreover, these bodies, dark and gyrating to the sound of Latin percussion and hip-hop, decorate the favelas along with clapboard, rusted corrugated metal sheeting, and plywood decaying under the tropical sun. In the chapter titled, *A Hangover sent Directly from Mother Nature*, Max enters the favela, Nova Esperança, to see impoverished residents, scantily dressed. Max remarks, “I had no idea where I was gonna [sic] go, so I decided to head straight for the street party that seemed to be raging. Either that or some other fool had gotten there before me and now was being ritually sacrificed.” The soundtrack that plays during the scene features hip-hop and Latin percussion. For emphasis, the words “ritually sacrificed” flash on the screen. Max is quickly greeted by a young dark-skinned boy who leads Max to the block party. When shown a picture of Fabiana, the boy states, “I know lots of girls. Sexy. Come on, come on, this way.” At the party, gang members stand around with AK-47s. The young boy has led Max into a trap. Three older men, all dark-skinned and tattooed, hold Max at gun point and rob him. All of these elements are included to create a supposedly authentic representation of São Paulo and the poverty of the urban spaces, according to the developers (Denton, 2012; Rockstar Games, 2012). Of this “authentic” representation, Max remarks:
All things considered, I was gonna [sic] have to look on this as a good outcome. I was deep in gang territory. These kids were raised hating clowns like me—middle income ass-kickers who protected the rich by shooting kids like them.

The implication of Lott’s (1997), Murphet’s (1998), and Nakamura’s (2002) work and the preceding scene is that the location per se does not mark it as a racialized space as much as how the location is represented. Even places in New Jersey can be racialized by the film noir genre. For instance, in Hoboken, New Jersey, Max had an altercation with the Italian mafia. While some circles may consider people of Italian ancestry “white,” that was not always the case (Guglielmo & Salerno, 2003; Roediger, 2005). In much the same way that visible Brazilian bodies came to represent the dark and dangerous film noir spaces, so too did Italian bodies, here portrayed as other-than-white, embody the violent decay of Hoboken, New Jersey.

Max Payne (internal monologue): These pricks had been annoying me for days. They were typical Jersey rich kids. The ring leader, I think his name was Tony. His dad was some well-known hood. Drug dealer. Racketeer. Pillar of the New Jersey community.

Tony: Hey, let me ask you a question, where the fuck are your donuts?

Max Payne (internal monologue): This kid had a well-developed sense of humor for New Jersey.

Tony: Seriously, I thought I told you to get out of here, old man.

Tony’s friend 1: Yeah, old man.

Max Payne: That’s a nice echo. Do gorillas have personalities of their own, or do they just agree with everything you say?

Tony: Very funny, old man. Very fucking funny. This guy’s hilarious. Yeah, has-been washed up old cop. Should go on TV. Tell some jokes about how you got your wife killed, or some shit.

Tony’s friend 2: Yeah, where’s the little old lady?

Tony: Or how you got involved with killers. I own this town, amigo.
Max Payne: That’s a good line. Do you practice that in front of the mirror in your underwear? Your father owns this town. Yeah, dear old Dad. Well-known drug dealer and murderer. You’re nothing but a chump.

Tony: Hey, don’t you disrespect my family. You ain’t got the right.

If Max Payne is meant as the white protagonist with whom we are to relate, Tony is the stereotype of the dark Italian mobster, the Other, that we are to fear.

It is true that instances like this might be considered elements of the genre. However, these instances are surrounded by other biopower discourses that are problematic. The son of the New Jersey mob boss with whom Max has a direct altercation is modeled to look very much like Paul “Pauly D” DelVecchio from MTV’s Jersey Shore. The inclusion of the DelVecchio-like character seems to be an evocation of a New Jersey Italian twenty-something “cultural racism” biopower discourse (see Kugel, 2011). In a sense, Max Payne 3’s inclusion of a Pauly D like character is an appropriation of the “Guido” sub-culture sensibility while appropriating it as a spectacle for the purposes of selling it back to the player (see Roediger, 1995; Tricarico, 1991).

While the game relies on film noir tropes, it also uses biopower discourses for sense-making in much the same way as Skyrim in the previous chapter appropriated real world biopower discourses for sense-making. In this case, it is the discourse of the Italian mobster, a culturally or naturally violent Other.

In no other place is this confluence of abstract liberalism, cultural racism, and naturalization (Bonilla-Silva’s types of biopower) more apparent than the scenes that take place in the favelas of São Paulo. To further expand on the “dangerousness” of these wild and dark places, the developers included a cast of minor street gang characters that further decorated the environment. Street gangs that, of course, target Max Payne, the
white film noir ex-cop protagonist. Of course, this is not new. Lisa Nakamura (2002) argued that in cyberpunk, a genre similar to film noir that incorporates film noir sensibilities, Asian bodies are present, but they serve only as props to the narrative of the great white savior. In this case study, the dark-skinned bodies of the favela residents, the street gangs, and the favelas themselves served as props for the hero’s quest and as props for the blurring of the biopower discourses. These discourses state that culture and biology (i.e., naturalization and cultural racism) inform the economic performance of those people and, thus, their wealth (i.e., abstract liberalism). For example, in one scene, Max Payne and Raul Passos infiltrate a Comando Sombra harbor off of the Tietê River in the hopes of rescuing Fabiana Branco. In that scene, the Comando Sombra and the favela harbor strictly serve as obstacles through which Max must run, shoot, and overcome to the soundtrack of Latin percussion. It is not necessarily that the developers developed this “racist” narrative and scene that is problematic. Rather, it is the existence, easy understandability, and normalization of these biopower discourses in film noir that is problematic.

Compare that with outside the favelas where light-skinned bodies are shown holding jobs other than petty crime. These bodies are shown as holding corporate jobs as well as wealth. In the chapter titled A Dame, a Dork and a Drunk, Max and Raul enters Fábricas Branco Global Headquarters, the corporate offices of Rodrigo Branco. We see a sprawling office complex with high-tech equipment and furnishings that exudes wealth. Coincidently, Fábricas Branco may mean “white factory” or “Branco’s Factory” in Portuguese. This setting served the same function as the Comando Sombra harbor. In
Fábricas Branco, Max faces off against light-skinned government paramilitaries in a high-tech environment. Because film noir assigns races to spaces as well as bodies, these scenes are appeals to the discourse that Latin America and Latin American culture, by extension, necessarily are dangerous (see Vila, 2003). The only difference between the two scenes is the occupation of the people involved (i.e., unemployed prison street gangs in the favela, and office workers and corrupt paramilitary in the other). One’s amount of wealth, of course, is never as simple as a function of performance in the job market. Other factors such as social capital and structural inequality affect one’s ability to accumulate wealth that are unrelated to one’s ability to land a good paying job. Necessarily, it is impossible to articulate all of the reasons for the wealth disparity between the residents of the favelas and the upscale areas. It is, after all, a game. Games can only contain so much information. However, what does stand out is the difference in the residents’ skin color.

*Max Payne 3* also features a corrupt paramilitary police force who are almost all (except for a few dark-skinned people) light-skinned. Dark-skinned criminals are part of street gangs. Light-skinned criminals are part of a corrupt state paramilitary police. In total, skin color, the dominant marker of racial ordering (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Omi & Winant, 1994), ordered these bodies and orders Brazil itself as the problematic shady society compared with the purer whiteness of Max Payne and the United States.

These bodies are props because while they are present, they are only articulations of stereotypes associated with South America (e.g., gyrating, dark-skinned, sexualized bodies, violent drug criminals, and soccer fanatics). But, these Othered bodies and slums
also serve a discursive move to solidify the abstract liberalist biopower discourse. Because abstract liberalism orders bodies using the tautological belief that market places are necessarily “veridictory” places (i.e., places that are so naturally true, they can “test” the truth value of things within their auspices) (Foucault, 2008), it necessarily demarcates poor bodies (and in our case, dark-skinned bodies) as poor because they are not apt enough (culturally) to compete in the job market.

This biopower discourse is demonstrated in one scene during a motor-boat chase where Passos and Max try to chase down another boat carrying Fabiana Branco, who was captured by a favela-based street gang. During that chase, Max comments on the seemingly inexhaustible number of gang members attacking them. “This place is crawling. How many guys they got?” asks Max Payne. Raul Passos responds, “How many poor kids want nice sneakers? It ain’t hard to hire.” Passos’s rhetorical question uses the phrase “poor kids” instead of anything more incendiary (e.g., punk kids or assholes). This phrase tells us that for Passos, the extreme poverty of the favela and the promise that joining up with a street gang is one way that these “poor kids” can escape poverty. The street gang members are not naturally criminals who are attacking them out of a violent joy; they are simply performing their jobs. For these “poor kids” violence is the only job opportunity they have.

Moreover, sneakers, as markers of status, have a distinctive place in hip-hop culture (Chang, 2006, 2007; Perkins, 1996), which the game marks as a major influence on life in the favelas. Sneakers are, themselves, a mark of identity and resistance in hip-hop culture (Chang, 2006, 2007; Perkins, 1996). However, hip-hop’s nascent years
“transformed sneakers and sweats from proletarian utility to high fashion,” often with high-fashion prices (Perkins, 1996, p. vii). Since the dark-skinned Brazilians are marked in-game by hip-hop, so too do sneakers mark status for them.

However, the people attacking Max Payne and Raul Passos are not “poor kids.” They are, rather, adult members of the local street gang. “Poor kids” also demonstrates the paternalistic view that Passos, Max’s sidekick, has towards them. Because these adults, who might have joined during childhood, presumably joined for strictly material gains, the “poor kids” can, to some extent, be excused for their behavior. Outside the favelas, lighter-skinned models are used to mark people who have not resorted to crime. Or, at least they are criminals of a “higher quality.” Yet, that’s precisely where the abstract liberalist biopower discourse comes into play. Because these “poor kids” are unfit to work in any manner other than crime, and specifically street crime, their culture is also depicted as flawed. These “poor kids” do not sell themselves for money or power; rather, they sell themselves for “sneakers”—the stand-on for consumer goods. This is the logic of the neo-liberal interpretation of the culture of poverty argument (Goede, 1996). This interpretation argues that poor individuals share a cultural outlook that cannot sustain anything but subsistence level economic activity (Goede, 1996).

This use of Brazilian bodies as props is also found in antagonists with more significant roles. Here, too, the characters are reduced to nothing more than mere props. It is possible that this is purely an element of the genre. After all, Max Payne 3, along with being a film noir-inspired game, is also a game with stylistically over-the-top action.
However, even among the antagonists, lighter-skinned quasi-capitalist enemies have more nuanced roles than darker-skinned street gang members.

Take, for example, the boss of the favela street gang: Serrano. While Serrano is an actual surname, it is also the name of a variety of chili pepper, itself named for the region from which it originates. In that sense, the character Serrano is a dual signifier of Latin America because of his name and hot-tempered violence that recalls his name’s association with the pepper. Because he is dark-skinned and violent, taking the name of a chili as his name evokes the imagery of the “hot” tempered and erratic black man/Latino, a common stereotype (Bretón, 2000; Spigner, 2009). In another favela scene, Seranno receives the ransom money. Despite this, he shoots Fabiana Branco for no other reason than to antagonize Max. Along with the fact that major characters in the genre appear as embodiments of the setting, the hot-tempered, dark-skinned, and violent Serrano is further attributed to the dangerous favela. Seranno’s compound is literally depicted as the top of a hill in the poverty stricken favela through which Max must climb and shoot.

The other side of the signifier is the name itself. Serrano is an actual name. Of course, whether the name was chosen for its association with the pepper or if that association is a coincidence is beside the point because the association is still there. What can be said with more certainty is that Serrano is the signifier of the imagined “authentic” Latin America because it is easily recognizable as a South American name. Compare this with another antagonist that Max has to contend with: Becker. While he is also Brazilian, and Becker is a name that is found in South America, its origin is in Germanic languages and thus less “authentic.” Becker is also a criminal, but he is a criminal of a “higher
caliber.” He is not the boss of a street gang in the favela. Rather, he is the boss of the corrupt para-military police force of São Paulo. Becker is light-skinned, portrayed as sophisticated and contemplative, and has a surname that feels less Latin American than Serrano.

Comparing these two criminals highlights the differences and reveals the role of “abstract liberalist” and “culturally racist” biopower discourses. Serrano is more violent, poorer, and darker skinned with a “more authentically” Latin American name. Becker is less violent, wealthier, and lighter skinned with a “less authentic” Latin American name. Seen through the logic of film noir, Serrano’s name becomes the marker of the apparently more authentic São Paulo: darker, violent, and poor. Serrano’s portrayal enunciates the culturally based biopower discourse. At the same time, his economic activity as compared to Becker enunciates the abstract liberalist biopower discourse. Becker was able to climb the paramilitary police ranks. Serrano was only able to climb the ranks of a street gang.

Of course, the other side of the equation is Max Payne. How is he depicted in the game? How does his whiteness and American culture play into the game’s narrative? Nakamura (2002) argues that in cyberpunk, a derivative genre of film noir, there is always a character that serves as the idealized “white” hero. Likewise, in *Max Payne 3*, Max serves not only as the ideal white hero, he also serves as the ideal capitalist. He is the ideal white hero because he is frequently willing to act against his own self-interests to fulfill the requirements of his job. And, while he is depicted as flawed, typical of film noir, he is able to boot-strap himself to “get the job done.” He was paid to protect the
Brancos, and he will do so to deliver that promise to the best of his ability. Even at the end of the game when he finds out that he was really hired as a patsy for a political ploy by Rodrigo’s poorer politician brother, Victor, Max begrudgingly, albeit cynically, obliges that capitalist bargain. Max saves the Brancos (or the “whites”) from the dangerous São Paulo slums by executing Becker and arresting Victor.

This was it. It was almost over. So I guess I’d become what they wanted me to be. A killer. Some rent-a-clown with a gun who puts holes in other bad guys. Well, that’s what they had paid for, so in the end that’s what they got. Say what you want about Americans, but we understand capitalism. You buy yourself a product and you get what you pay for. And, these chumps had paid for some angry gringo without the sensibilities to know right from wrong. Here I was, about to execute this poor bastard like some dime store angel of death, and I realized they were correct. I wouldn’t know right from wrong if one of them was helping the poor and the other was banging my sister.

In his cynicism, Max reveals another way that abstract liberalism and culture blurs in this game and in film noir. Despite failing save the literal whites, the Brancos, from the dark urban areas and dangerous dark-skinned thugs, Max proceeds to save the metaphoric white symbol of Americana from the corrupt darkness of urban São Paulo: himself and his (flawed) American ideal of rightness.

In the end, the Brancos, the symbolic figures of whiteness that Max is originally contracted to protect, die. For Max, the attempt to save Fabiana from the urban spaces is also an attempt to redeem himself from the loss of his family. This is the representation of the American ideal of “pulling one’s self up by the bootstraps.” He could not save his family, but he could save someone (who is conveniently white) from the dark Others. But, Max fails to save either Fabiana or Rodrigo. In the wake of their deaths, Max turns to other ways of redeeming himself. He fights the corruption of the Southern
Hemisphere. He alone becomes “the only thing protecting American democracy” and the American way of life, coded in Max Payne 3 as an abstract Americanism, and “individualism from total destruction by the rhizomatic ‘evil empire’” (Nakamura, 2002, p. 68).

Max can also be seen as the white savior of the poor in his interaction with Giovanna, Fabiana’s sister. Giovanna, dark-haired and accented, turns out to be pregnant with his sidekick’s, Passos’s, child. But, because of Passos’s involvement with Max, Giovanna finds herself in danger from the favela street gangs and the corrupt paramilitary government agents. Because of her work in the non-profit sector and her portrayal as more “Latina” than her sister, Giovanna is symbolized as a poor and abstract Latina American who needed saving. Where Fabiana is blonde and speaks with what may be construed as an “American” accent, Giovanna is brunette and speaks with a “Latin American” accent. She is literally the darker (in hair color) and exotic (in accent) sister. Where Fabiana stands in for whiteness, Giovanna stands in for Latin America. Where Max’s attempt to save Fabiana can be read as an analogy for saving “whiteness” from the dark-skinned Other, Max’s work of protecting Giovanna can be read as an analogy for the West saving Latin America from itself. Recall, one of the chapters is entitled The Great American Savior of the Poor. It is the metaphor of Max as the white male knowing what’s best for the supposedly vulnerable population of Latin America (Said, 1979, 1989).

Of course, there are other concrete examples of the white Western savior of Latin America. During an attack at a São Paulo nightclub where Fabiana is eventually
abducted, Max encounters Anders Detling. Detling, a retired police officer from Steele, North Dakota, is constructed as a “light-hearted alternate version of Max if his wife and daughter had lived… Both made their way down to São Paulo for different reasons, though both end up attempting to make a difference throughout the game” (Max Payne Wiki, n.d.). Despite the narrative presence of Brazilian aid groups (as represented in Giovanna’s occupation), Max and Anders Detling are both constructed as necessary saviors of the Brazilian favelas. Max cleans up the corruption by fighting the street gangs and corrupt paramilitary forces in the favelas. Anders enters the favelas and inoculates the innocent “children.”

Anders Detling (AD): Hey are you lost?
Max Payne (MP): In more ways than I can possibly explain.
AD: I know you, at the disco, with the gun. Yeah, you had hair back then and better clothes. Anders Detling from Steele, North Dakota. Why on earth are you here?
MP: Well, I’m looking for someone or some people. What are you doing here?
AD: Oh, we we [sic] came to help the cause. See, after I retired my wife… She said I had to do something. And well you know, I always loved kids, so I got involved in Angels of the Hill. Oh, it’s a great cause, and they’re really great folks. And well, now we come down twice a year to help inoculate the children of the favelas. Yeah, oh simply wonderful giving back. Whole family does it. Like my little girl is coming in a couple of days [sic].
MP: Aren’t you afraid?
AD: Ah, I was a cop for twenty-five years and granted, Steele ain’t no São Paulo, but you know I seen things and people are the same everywhere… Good, bad, indifferent…
MP: Listen, have you heard anything about a woman, about twenty-eight, rich? She was kidnapped. I heard she’s being held around here.
AD: No
MP: Alright, well good luck.
AD: Alright, you too. You look like you need it. I gotta [sic] get back at it. I— I’ll say a prayer for ya [sic].

This interchange between Max Payne and Anders Detling is telling for a variety of reasons. First, it demonstrates two “great American [white] saviors of the poor” in two different situations. For Anders, saving the poor meant using medicine. For Max, salvation required a gun. In both cases the characters intervene in the dark-urban spaces of the exotic Brazilian favelas in order to “give back.” Second, Anders tells Max that “people are the same everywhere,” suggesting that the violence that Max encounters may not be a Latin American phenomenon. Yet, in the next line, Max asks about the kidnapping of a young and rich woman by “poor favela” residents (whom Max suggests are all violent). This forecloses the possibility that Max is wrong about the violent favelas. Anders’s optimism is countered and destroyed by Max’s next statement and the bullets that are immediately directed towards Max after the encounter.

If any more evidence is needed in the confluence of “abstract liberalism” and “cultural racism” biopower discourses, the succeeding scene offers a powerful example. After the encounter with Anders Detling, Max continues through the favelas, the urban spaces where the poor of São Paulo live, and finds himself in a brothel. Except, there is no marker of where the residents live and where the brothel begins. All of these spaces are blurred together so that they are both one and the same. Inside the brothel, the ties of culture and poverty come into view. Not only is the brothel constructed as the extension of the favelas, the occupants are naked prostitutes turning tricks on dingy uncovered twin mattresses and broken institutional bedframes; drunken dark-skinned Brazilian men who all possess firearms and potentially belong to street gangs; and bartenders, also armed,
dark-skinned, and dangerous potential gang members. The exception is Max, the “great American savior of the poor.” This space and its occupants become the embodiment of the favelas. They are the “dark-skinned urban Others threatening the American way of life” of film noir made real. Max’s only way of “saving” them is to cleanse in violence and fire.

The idea of cleansing in violence and fire is a direct reference to Rudy Brewer, Max’s neighbor who saved Max from Italian mafia thugs by blowing up himself and the thugs with a homemade bomb. This act is one that Max ruminates might be his own someday. Italians in Hoboken, New Jersey are narratively constructed as not-quite-white mafia occupants of the dangerous urban New Jersey. As with the dangerous urban occupants of urban New Jersey, the São Paulo favelas thugs are best dealt with through violence.

When we take the example of what Max Payne’s body stands for and what the bodies of Serrano and Becker illuminate for us, we see that within the biopower discourse of “cultural racism”, there is also the discourse of “naturalization.” This is congruent with what I found in the previous *Skyrim* chapter. In that chapter, culture and biology blur to suggest that biological differences are the source of immutable cultural differences. While that overt framing is not apparent in *Max Payne 3*, Max, Serrano, and Becker reveal to us that the biological explanation of difference is still used, albeit much more hidden within the cultural explanation. Max is flawed, but he is naturally a good man *because* of his whiteness. Serrano is not a good man *because* of his dark skin. Becker, the not-quite-white Brazilian, can be placed between the two. As Bonilla-Silva
(2009) points out, the biopower discourse of “cultural racism” is in a way a neo-liberal reinterpretation of the “culture of poverty” argument. The original culture of poverty argument is that racial minorities develop a culture to adapt and survive oppressive poverty (Lewis, 1982). In the neo-liberal interpretation, the culture of poverty is the cultural orientation that emerges from the naturalized differences of poor racial minorities (Goede, 1996). The idea is that poor minorities naturally gravitate towards poverty; therefore, poverty is the cultural orientation that naturally emerges (Goede, 1996). This is the same neo-liberal logic towards poverty that emerges from the dual symbols of Serrano and Becker.

Findings RQ3

RQ3 asks: How does economics incentivize these biopower discourses? In short, the answer is in order to sell well, the text must make sense to the consumers. Humans make sense of the world through past narratives because they are how we understand the world (Dodge et al., 2008; Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994). As my analysis of the Skyrim chapter suggests, a least part of the reason that these problematic biopower discourses persist is the economic pressure to create a text that will sell well. This economic pressure manifests itself as a pressure to reduce as much uncertainty as possible. For the game publisher, the uncertainty that is easy to control is the type of narrative content present in the game. Notice, I do not suggest that the form of control that publishers and developers have is the popularity of the content. That is an uncertainty that I am not sure can be anticipated. The reduction of uncertainty is in the type of narrative content. Or, more accurately, this control lies in the genre.
As I mentioned in the previous chapter, there is an economic need to make the narrative make sense so that the game can make money (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995; McLuhan, 1994). The incentive for large game publishers is to sell as many games as possible. To sell a product, corporations must ensure that as many of the uncertainties as possible are ameliorated (Beckert & Streeck, 2008). Given that we understand the world through narratives (Dodge et al., 2008; Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994), there is also an economic incentive to create games that take aspects of our social world, commoditize it, and sell it back to us (see Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995). Because we are used to certain tropes in our media, abiding by them and staying close to genre mainstays seem to be methods of reducing that uncertainty (see Miller, 1984).

Seen through this lens, genres serve as a limiting force to the ways stories can be told. For Max Payne 3, the game is still “film noir” if the game takes place in the Brazilian favelas instead of an American inner-city, assuming the game adheres to those elements that make a text “film noir” (e.g., the dark urban spaces and the great white hero). This answers a couple of key questions: How would Max Payne 3’s attempt to be a film noir text be presented? Why would Max Payne 3 necessarily need to be a film noir text in the first place? Because this section is about the economic, the central question is how economics influence these biopower discourses. Max Payne 3 is made noir by attending to the tropes of film noir, such as the alienation of whiteness from urban spaces and the flawed, moody, and white savior (Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998).

What makes these tropes so critical for film noir and why film noir is a genre in the first place is documented by Murphet (1998), Lott (1997), and Nakamura (2002).
What these scholars illustrated is that because of the historical moment when film noir came into being, (e.g., the end of the Second World War, white-flight, and fear of urban spaces), film noir coded dark and dangerous urban spaces as stand-ins for dark-bodies that threatened whiteness and created the concept of the white savior. Put in another way, for players to be certain to understand the game’s film noir narrative, the game needed to adhere to a particular genre even as lots of things can be free for the developers to reimagine (e.g., the game can be set in Latin America so long as the relationship between urban spaces and the protagonist is maintained) (see Miller, 1984).

Thus, Max Payne 3 needed to be a film noir text because of its own history. Max Payne 3 is, of course, the third game in a series (Fierro, 2012; Rezaee, 2012; Rockstar Games, 2003). The other two games in the series are distinctly film noir in their settings. Max Payne and Max Payne 2, both take place in dangerous urban and mafia-controlled spaces typical of film noir. Players expected that Max Payne 3 would continue to be film noir even if developers reimagined the setting.

But, Max Payne 3 did play with the conventions of film noir. The very location alone demonstrates this. Film noir traditionally takes place in urban American spaces that stand in for dark bodies. So, to have the setting momentarily in New Jersey, but mostly in São Paulo means that the game developers violated a central trope of film noir. Economic forces demanded that the game needed to remain truly a film noir text to be certain that players believe that it is a part of the series. How the developers did this seems to be explicated in the presence of the dark-skinned bodies. The film noir genre made the setting the signifier of dark-skinned bodies. Yet, Max Payne 3’s design choice
demanded a more “authentic” representation of São Paulo. São Paulo is nowhere as dangerous or sexualized as the game depicts (Romero, 2013). Because the setting of São Paulo might not necessarily stand for dangerous dark-skinned Others, the developers needed to include actual dark-skinned bodies to satisfy the requirements of the genre. Moreover, the genre requirements needed to be fulfilled in order to meet the economic pressure to reduce uncertainty of being both a film noir text and a text in the Max Payne franchise.

It could be that the developers of Max Payne 3 harbor racially problematic biopower discourses. In truth, as Bonilla-Silva (2009) points out, we all do. But that does not necessarily mean that we or the developers are “racists.” What it really implies is that biology, culture, and abstract liberalism are blurred in Max Payne 3 because biopower discourses discipline all of our bodies through market logic. As the culture industry proponents and narrativists pointed out, those discourses are always an artifact of past narratives and the culture industry’s drive to turn people’s experiences into a commodity (Bottomore, 2002; Bruner, 1997, 2004; Dodge et al., 2008; Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995).

I analyzed two different videogame texts in this chapter and the previous. In this chapter, the videogame we analyzed, Max Payne 3, plays like a movie. It has a cinematic feel with a linear gameplay. In the previous chapter, the videogame we analyzed, Skyrim, gives the player a “sandbox” in which to play. That is, the player is able to play through the main narrative at his or her own pace with side narratives that she or he can choose to undertake. These chapters give us an analysis of the videogames’ content. They
necessarily are a view from the outside looking in. The next chapter examines the
practices of videogame developers through semi-structured interviews. Moreover, the
interviews highlight the normative and economic pressures that videogame developers
face as they create content. As Kapp (2011) argues, trade always takes place within a
social context. The semi-structured interviews presented in the next chapter are designed
to interrogate this socioeconomic context. In doing so, we are able to have a view from
the inside of the videogame development process.
CHAPTER 6
A VIEW FROM THE INSIDE

In the previous chapters, I examined how content from two videogames exemplify how videogame developers may contribute to the biopower discourses of race. I chose that tactic in part because it gave me an opportunity to examine finished products that were critically or commercially successful. Yet, that necessarily meant that I was examining those discourses from the outside in. That is, if I was successful, I was examining the discourses in the product, which was a result of developers, publishers, and retailers, to some extent. This is problematic because I am interested in the perceptions of videogame developers and not necessarily these ancillary actors.

To ameliorate this, I conducted in-depth interviews with six North American videogame developers. These developers were recruited through a Twitter post requesting participants, a webpage that solicited participants, and through personal contacts. Two of them were developers from larger independent game companies in the United States. The remaining were from North American AAA game studios. The large game studios create large blockbuster games commonly referred to as “AAA” games. To reiterate, my second research question (RQ2) asked: To what extent do game developers perceive that they contribute to discourses about race? My third research question (RQ3) asked: How does economics incentivize those discourses?

Throughout the recruitment phase of the research, one common phenomenon was the nearly universal hesitation to speak with a researcher. When prompted, a few participants responded that there is a normative fear of talking to scholars. The names of
all my participants are pseudonyms. I chose to do this to protect their identity and to help them feel comfortable responding to my questions. All of their responses are cited verbatim. They cited a fear of being misquoted and “burned” by researchers. I asked Preston, a developer for a large company who, at the time of our conversation, had recently finished a game involving representations of space aliens, for help recruiting participants in my study. Although he never was able to help me recruit participants, his response was telling.

[My company’s] culture can be very interesting at times. Even though this is not a public interview—this is a research interview—there’re a lot of people who don’t really like talking about their stuff. Whether it’s just the person they are or the perception that it causes. (Preston)

This seemed understandable since addressing race and racial representation is a difficult topic in American society given our history of racial intolerance and inequality.

Moreover, Preston’s statement suggests that the industry tends to be very insular. And, indeed, this is what people told me when they declined to be interviewed. They cited fear of reprisals for speaking about a risky topic. This suggested they feared reputational repercussions that might affect their careers if their identities were revealed. Of course, I assured them that their participation would be held in confidence. My assurances did not mollify many concerns. As a result, after approximately 13 months of recruitment, I was able to gather only six interview participants. All of my participants are North American developers. I reached out to many other developers whose contact informations I found on the Internet. Many never replied. However, several developers returned my emails to decline. This is also, perhaps, a reasonable explanation of why nearly all of my
participants are “AAA” game developers. It seems established developers believe they have less to fear from possible exposure.

Still, I might have been better served to recruit developers from the games, *Skyrim* and *Max Payne 3* themselves. However, this was not possible given the seemingly insular and protective nature of the industry. This is why I chose the next best thing—videogame developers who actively produce videogames. My thinking was that if I interviewed game developers who have experiences in similar *types* of games, I would be able to get a rough idea of the development process, the extent developers perceive that they contribute to the discourses of race, and the economic incentives that led to choosing those discourses.

I will give a summary prior to going into more detail with empirical support. I found that North American videogame developers did perceive they contributed to discourses about race. However, they did not perceive the full extent of how they contribute to biopower discourses. They understood that they need to be mindful of racially problematic story elements. However, that mostly constituted a vague notion of race that centered on skin color. They made games by drawing inspiration from various existing narratives such as works by J. R. R. Tolkien, *Dungeons and Dragons*, cinema, television, and books. To the extent that the narratives contained problematic discourses about race, the developers all pointed to the twin imperatives of making content understandable (thus sellable) and respecting publishers’ low tolerance for “risky” content—content that veers outside those frequently used narratives.
What my findings suggest is that industry norms and market pressures and not necessarily developers are responsible for the presence of problematic discourses. These findings are consistent with Foucault’s (2008) characterization of biopower and the Frankfurt School’s notion of the culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995). As I mentioned in the second chapter, for Foucault (1981), problematic discourses about various groups or bodies of people are made invisible through normalizing what we say and the ways we express those beliefs. This normalization of discourses is justified by appealing to the effects in markets without the realization that the discourses themselves may be the root cause (Foucault, 2008). Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944/1995) conception of the culture industry suggest that discourses, problematic or not, would be commoditized in media industries for mass audiences as media content. These contents would be reproduced in various ways and in various forms to meet the culture industry’s capitalist drive to “massify” culture in order to aid the accumulation of profits. The economic literature suggests that part of this capitalist drive is due to market pressures to reduce uncertainty. My findings support this argument. Videogame developers and publishers reduce uncertainty through the control of the narrative content by recycling narratives and using various tropes in their games.

One finding that was not expected from my review of the literature is the role that the independent videogame market plays. Independent videogames (indies) constitute an imagined panacea to all of the frustrations that my informants articulated such as problematic racial depictions as well as sexism and homophobia. By their description, my informants (both indie and AAA developers) view independent games as a
revolutionary force—what Schumpeter (1942/2008) called creative destruction. Creative destruction is the idea that large companies in established industries eventually stop innovating and become stagnant because of uncertainty (Schumpeter, 1942/2008). What is meant by uncertainty is the market pressure from fear that an innovation would be unpopular in the market (see Brousseau & Glachant, 2008). The idea is that if one is at the top of one’s industry, there is little market share to gain compared to greater potential market losses if a risk proves detrimental. Thus, a reduction of uncertainty, such as by maintaining the status quo by publishing games that are similar to past successful games, is a rational strategy. Whereas, a smaller game company with little market share risks losing less and potentially has more to gain from taking risks. Thus, unpopular games would mean losses or reduced sales that would lead to shareholder revolt or market losses for larger games. In this stagnation, there is an opportunity for smaller companies—that tend to be less fettered by market performance and might not have shareholders—to innovate, revolutionize, and reconstruct the industry around them. For the developers, their description points to large AAA game companies as these old guards, and independent game companies as the vanguards of change.

I analyzed this articulation by developers, and I believe that this view is an oversimplification of the industry dynamics. Schumpeter (1942/2008) also points out that the vanguard companies eventually risk becoming stagnant large companies themselves because the socio-cultural (and economic) dynamics that were at the root of the stagnation remain. Thus, market pressures and industry norms and not developers per se are responsible for the prevalence of narratives that contain problematic biopower
discourses. Indie developers “taking over” the market suggest little to change these
dynamics.

Methods and recruitment

While I gave a more detailed description in the previous methods chapter. I will
give a quick summary of my method and recruitment technique here. My analysis was an
in-depth semi-structured interview. The interviews were structured with several
questions that gave a roadmap to the conversation. While all participants were asked
each question and they answered, they were not asked them in a specific order. For the
comfort of the participants, I asked each of the questions throughout a free flowing
conversation that was directed in a large part by the interview participants. My thinking
is that by allowing the participants to control the conversation, the interview would be
more fruitful by maintaining the context of what they were saying, and I was less likely
to influence what they said by my presumptions. I wanted my participants to be able to
“offer new meanings to the study focus” (Galletta & Cross, 2013, sec. 460). As Galletta
and Cross (2013) argue, a “key benefit of the semi-structured interview is its attention to
lived experience while also addressing theoretically driven variables of interests” (sec.
471). My study participants were all interviewed over Skype, a proprietary video-calling
application, and digitally recorded as per the intuional review board disclosure packet.
Participants consented to being recorded, and I recorded all of these conversations.

Afterwards, I transcribed all of the interviews and employed a Foucauldian
perspective in a discourse analysis. In essence, I took the literature at face value and
interpreted the transcripts from the lens that what people say contains meaning as well as

On a practical level, that meant that I coded the transcripts for statements that explicitly stated or suggested biopower—statements that indicated differences among videogame characters are attributable to cultural differences, biological differences, abstract market forces, or minimized character differences altogether. I found Bonilla-Silva’s (2009) model of color-blind racism (biopower) in all of the interviews. Interestingly, my participants stated that most of the choices in videogame design was an economic decision—what Bonilla-Silva calls an “abstract liberalist” explanation. Repeatedly, my informants suggested that race based discourses were chosen because they fit a presumed economic model of the industry. Again, since the discussion did not involve actual “races” of people, but computer characters, when we spoke about race, we spoke about the character creation process of humans of different races, races as differing species of people, or in some cases alien species.

I also coded the transcripts for what I call “existing narratives.” That is, in accordance with the Frankfurt School’s notion of the culture industry, I expected to find that developers developed characters and scenarios using various narratives that existed in past media. Following what I found in Skyrim, I was particularly interested in instances where developers attributed differences among species (races) to stories by J. R. R. Tolkien, Dungeons and Dragons, or popular media.
Videogames are a form of media. All media are commodities. Thus, the institutional economics literature suggests that videogames would be subject to economic pressures that affect commodities. Specifically, these developers attribute the inclusion of race-based differences among characters in order to reduce market uncertainty. That is, racially problematic content was included because of the belief that the market expected such differences. The following quote by Trent, a developer for a AAA game company, exemplifies this point.

"It's giving the player something you know they can relate to. Um, I mean, you can see threads from Tolkien all the way to, like, Harry Potter. You know, it's all kind of relatable stuff. You want that core there that says, "Hey I'm a fantasy game. If you like fantasy games, you're going to like this." And, around that core you put all your special sauce kind of stuff. So it's really just a combination of that. And, a lot of us grew up reading that stuff and love that stuff. So, that's the kind of stuff we want to make ourselves. And so, it just is a major influence."

(Trent)

Yet, because I was also interested in economic pressures that might be present, I kept in mind that other economic pressures might also be implicated by the interviews.

This conversational and open approach to the interviews also allowed me to see patterns that I did not expect to see. For instance, all of these developers saw the explosion of independent videogame developers, or so-called indie developers, as the saving force of an ailing videogame industry. I will expand on this later in the chapter, but my participants universally attributed the prevailing industry model where developers develop videogames beholden to the risk tolerance of publishers as a main reason of the inclusion of problematic discourses about species (race).
Videogame developers and the perception of race discourse

RQ2 asks about the extent to which game developers perceive they contribute to discourses about race. During the interview, my findings suggest that these videogame developers are aware of and accept the possibility that videogames are a possible place where discourses about race are rearticulated. Of course, because of the nature of videogames, this gets expressed in different ways. One informant, Johnathan, who develops games for a AAA game company, understands race, in one sense, as a method of reflecting the player base.

[W]hen you build something for yourself, your own—people react easily to people who are [like] themselves, right? So, if you're a bit more introverted, then you're more comfortable with other people talking to you in a more introverted fashion. If you're a certain race, then you don't even think twice about making a character that race. Right? And, it's because you're being self-reflective—building it for you, not necessarily looking at the outside world as consumers. Now that's changed quite a bit where now we've put in all the sliders [for skin color and physical features] and all of the other things. From the conversations I've seen over the years, it was never any one isolating [thing] or anyone even putting thought into it. It was just thoughtless.

(Johnathan)

What he points to is that players expect and build their identity and worldview (Lifeworld) into their game experience. What is also notable is the reference to race as skin color and physique. This reference is telling because it confirms Bonilla-Silva’s (2009) finding that people tend, by virtue of their culture, to attribute race to biology and culture or inequality to abstract liberalist explanations of market forces or simply to minimize inequality. These strategies, what Bonilla-Silva (2009) calls color-blind racism, are forms of biopower. Continuing on this theme of self-reflection, Johnathan
also told me of one of his games where the internal company statistics pointed out that
game characters are directly a form of self-reflection.

On big open world games I've worked on, we went out of our way—we actually
had to go out of our way to make sure that what you look like had no bearing on
your abilities at all. So, male/female, big/small, whatever. Now the players went
in—and the percentages of which players choose which creatures, directly
correlated, regardless of power—directly correlated to how handsome or how
beautiful that character was all the way down. So the ugly characters were played
the least and the beautiful characters were played the most. … That's your entity.
You don't want to be ugly. I mean, it's speculation. But, we have the numbers to
show there were much more powerful ugly creatures that were played much less.
This was your representation in the world. How do you want to be seen? Do you
want to have a bunch of moles and be big? So, it's up to you. (Johnathan)

What Johnathan meant was that ugly characters, who became powerful were frequently
abandoned to created “beautiful” characters.

Johnathan’s statements are telling. On one hand, he is points out that
identification with a character is important. This is similar to what Nakamura (2002,
2007, 2009) and boyd (2012) point to in their respective research about race in online
spaces. Race is implicated within the larger context of users’ representation of their
body. We all want to be beautiful so prettier characters get played more than uglier but
powerful characters. We all want to be able to self-identify, so sliders\textsuperscript{15} for skin color get
included. On the other hand, the issue of skin color itself is central. For many of these
types of games, skin color gets imbricated in the context of the game’s depicted culture.

Johnathan’s statement also highlights the desire to self-identify with the character
as far as skin color is concerned. As Omi and Winant (1994) tell us, skin color is the

\textsuperscript{15} These sliders appear as virtual controls or faders that are commonly found on audio
equipment and software. They are included so players can lighten or darken character
skin color.
dominant marker of race in the United States. However, the character’s skin color becomes secondary, to a large degree, because the character will always be a part of the logic and narrative of the game. Skin color becomes the dominant way in which our offline conception of race is brought into the game world by game developers consciously. However, the beliefs, practices, and norms—the codes we use to speak about different groups in Western society—are not necessarily consciously introduced into game world by these developers. Nevertheless, these codes do flow into these spaces whether or not anyone is conscious because humans tend to fill in the blanks of any narrative with information found in their own lived experiences—experiences that are often clouded by racism (Bruner, 1997, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Redman, 2005; Vila, 2000, 2003).

Johnathan’s statement also shows how some developers may understand race. Developers may understand race as demarcating difference among groups according to skin color. This is what Omi and Winant (1994) argue is the primary indicator of race. Moreover, Omi and Winant (1994) argue that racial projects—competing attempts to redefine race by various groups—are always in play. Skin color sliders are an example of this competition. Because discourses must always be rearticulated to maintain power (Butler, 1997), cultural artifacts such as videogames become sites of contestation. Players and developers who desire greater diversity in character representations gain “victories” such as the ability to construct various skin tones. Yet, players and developers who have more hegemonic power still get to define race as skin color. Therefore, skin color sliders become important to the way the game connects with the
player’s presumed understanding of identity and race, yet that character ultimately gets
subsumed into the racial logic of the game.

Moreover, my game developers suggested that developers understand the impact
of videogames in society. They recognize that videogames are a medium where
messages about society are rearticulated and contested. They do not view games as “just
play.” Of course, this belief is not necessarily true of all videogame developers. I only
suggest that my developers express this view. Hiram, an indie developer who started his
own small development company, states

[Y]es, videogames shape social views, albeit sometimes in an indirect way. That,
in my mind, is the bottom-line what pop culture is. If we weren't looking to be
changed in some way—and maybe that change is merely to entrench existing
frameworks—we wouldn't be looking.

What Hiram described is the very notion of the culture industry. Media products by the
culture industry are never “merely a thing.” Likewise, videogames, as the newest
incarnation of culture industry products, function the same way. Mass culture or
“popular culture,” as Hiram states, “shape social views,” whether to entrench prevailing
views or offer a space to contest. However, while the idea behind the culture industry
articulates a strategy whereby culture is commoditized, Hiram does recognize a potential
for contestation. If we view videogames as narrative products with multifaceted
discourses as the literature suggests, then contestation takes place in the creation of other
videogames—a form of continuous borrowing, or rearticulation, from existing narratives
(Butler, 1997). Moreover, videogames are interactive, and these developers view this
interactivity as the space where contestation by the player may be possible.
I think games are primed better than most media, because they can put you slap dab in the middle of it and make you interact with the broken systems that you want to comment on or have the player reflect on. They can use the interaction loop and feedback as commentary. (Preston, a developer for a AAA game company)

Perhaps one explanation of this view can be seen on one informant’s statement.

Clancy, a AAA game developer, explained that, in the past, oversimplified representations of bodies was mostly because of how videogames were understood—as a technical exercise where the narrative was an afterthought.

So, when I was working on [name of game redacted], it was much more rare for someone with a film degree to work on a game at all. Most people come from computer science or architecture having no formal knowledge of how to write or create a formal character. For instance, what you're doing now in university programs studying this stuff. That was unheard of. Nobody expected this. So now there is a generation of people being taught how to do this stuff and how to do it well. I think it's [representations of race] starting to improve dramatically already. This is very emblematic of the kinds of thinking that will be pushing the next wave of what games become. (Clancy)

What Clancy’s statement tells us is that there was an unintentionality and a naiveté in early games. It was not until the inclusion of more liberal arts trained developers in the industry that there was enough of a critical lens for developers to recognize the role of media in society.

As a result, these developers expressed that they understand that limiting race representations in many videogames to largely white male protagonists is problematic. Allen, a developer for a large independent game studio, argues, “[I]f I were making a game, I would say, from my own standpoint—If the story behind the character doesn’t require it to be a white male, then why is that the default?” Trent, a developer for a AAA game company, expressed exasperation as he indicts the videogame industry in general for not being thoughtful enough about race representations.
So in terms, of racial depiction? I don't know. Most of what I see is not—I don't think people really engage with it that much, on a general level. I think the main question that comes up is like, "What race is our main character going to be?" Well, usually it's a white male. Every once in a while, you get a black male. Every once in a while, you get a white female. (Trent, AAA game developer)

As the quotes (and Trent’s dismay) suggest, these developers seem to view the prevalence of white male protagonists as both a normative starting point and the default race. The problems of minimizing the dearth of representation of Othered bodies, conflating biology and culture, or abstract explanations of race-centered wealth (biopower) seem to be invisible.16

In the examples, above the focus is strictly on in-game representation of a character’s skin color. In this way, the centrality of white male protagonists has come to represent a boogeyman. Thus, the discourse from my informants suggest they understand ameliorating racism in videogames as entailing the inclusion of characters of different races, species, and in many cases gender. But, this also means the biopower roots of racism are not understood by my informants because race is limited to whiteness and maleness. That the white male protagonist represents a western capitalist masculine ideal (such as biopower) does not seem to be recognized.

This all makes this finding even more perplexing. In one sense, these developers understand that their medium has an impact on the larger cultural context. As a result, they actively try to diversify the representation to not just white males and even recognize that human races are represented in non-human beings. For instance, Preston states, “I think we need to see that dark elves are the black people of every fantasy world.” On the

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16 In the previous two chapters I noted how Bonilla-Silva’s (2009) color-blind racism form of biopower gets represented in videogames.
other hand, the discourses that make up real world structures that centers whiteness and maleness is not questioned. This is perplexing unless, of course, we remember that these videogame developers, too, are born into our society—a society that normalizes the centrality of whiteness and maleness.

If we accept that media have the ability to influence our understanding of our society then we must accept the role of narrative in how we understand ourselves and society. This is what narrative psychologists, narrative theorists, and narrative identity scholars argue when they claim that narratives function to create identity though the roles played in the narratives about events (Bruner, 1997, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Redman, 2005; Vila, 2000, 2003). People understand reality as a narrative because it is though the logic of narratives that phenomena are understandable. Thus, it might seem that game developers must explicitly tell narratives about race in their games to implicate race. Those stories must explicitly be racially problematic to be “racist.” Yet, the biopower argument explains that some narratives have discourses that are problematic because they mask a larger social structure whose effect disadvantages people according to race.

*Color-blind racism (biopower) in the development of videogame narratives*

Games are narratives that necessarily include what Bonilla-Silva calls a generalized racial system or “color-blind racism” which is rooted in the logic of market capitalism. I explained this earlier in the dissertation. As a reminder, the premise behind color-blind racism is that while explicit statements regarding superiority or inferiority of races in any regard is considered abhorrent to a large extent, ideas that maintain a social
configuration that orders races and appeals to different market-based justifications are still expressed (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). This is the same idea that Foucault (2008) calls biopower. Therefore, I argue that Bonilla-Silva’s notion of color-blind racism is a form of Foucault’s biopower.

As the literature suggests, it is impossible to “opt-out” of biopower discourses completely. The very argument of biopower is that discourses about groups of people, after being established through the justifying powers of markets, become normalized. Normalization, by Foucault’s (1981, 1982, 2008) definition, implies a disciplining by these discourses so that they are invisible. Of course, the normalization of discourse also requires that the discourses are continuously rewoven into daily life (Butler, 1997). This is true of all discourses, including biopower. In this space people can choose to contest discourses if they are aware of them (Butler, 1997).

Yet, this contestation is limited. Normalization implies that because other people in our society are also rearticulating these biopower discourses we can only temporarily contest them. We may be blind to the ways other people rearticulate biopower discourses. And, if we are blind to them, we cannot contest them. But, in the space of constant rearticulation, there is the possibility of change.

Naturally, then, this biopower discourse is not understood by these developers even though they try to make their games inclusive. The narratives in the sampled games (previous chapters) tend to conflate biology and culture. That is, while species (race) is understood as a biological construct (naturalization), culture appears to emerge from race so that the difference in biology necessarily dictates unbridgeable difference in culture or
that skin color naturally implies a certain degree of wealth. Preston worked on the third game in a popular franchise involving space aliens. Although, he indicated that the conflation of biology and culture did exist from the previous games, the third installment (on which he directly worked) tried to represent a more nuanced depiction of biology and culture to limited success.

So it felt like a lot of that stuff was set up in [the first game] with how the races would be. And, of course, it grows and gets more nuanced. But that framework was done early on, and again, I think the writers did a really good job in [name of first game in the series redacted] knowing that this race is going to be the militaristic race and this race is going to be kind of the more barbaric race, and this race is going to be the science and technology race. I think they set that up very specifically—this is a guess on my behalf, by the way. I feel they specifically set it up that way—very specifically—to reflect all those aspects of humanity. Now when you get into [game 2 and 3] a lot of that stuff is set. We can't really change that. What we can do is start getting a little more nuanced in there. As humans, some of us are interested in all those different things. I think one of the flaws in our game, and many games that have multiple races, is it becomes all the [members of one specific alien race] are barbaric. Well that's probably not true. There's probably a pacifist [supposedly “barbaric” alien] somewhere, and maybe I haven't come across him, right? And so when you start painting races with these broad swaths, I think sometimes you do a disservice to the nuance. But, I think that's all in respect of because you're trying to reflect humanity, it's necessary at times. And, it's a delicate balancing act. So, I think that it's a major part of the design to continuously check assumptions and maybe push the assumptions that the player has about a race with a character that might have a slightly different view or might slightly disagree with what you know about that race. And, we've certainly done that at times in our sequels. However, I think we can go further. I think it would be interesting if the [members of one specific alien race] are as nuanced as we are as humans in terms of their beliefs … Those could be introduced in a game world like [redacted] and they’re not in most games that I know of. So, it can be a major part of the design. But, yeah, it should be more, to me. (Preston)

It appears that my game developers adopt these discourses, at least initially, in their games not because of malice but partially out of a lack of recognition of how complex

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17 Please see the previous chapter on *Skryim* and *Max Payne 3*.
discourses about race can be and because they, too, are totalized by the culture industry. Although, like Bottomore (2002) argues, the “totalizing” effect of the culture industry is not complete. There is still space for resistance. But that resistance does not necessarily mean that one can resist all of the time. In Preston’s statement, the depiction of different game species (race) as specific stereotypes was eventually recognized as too essentialist when developers were able to “opt-out” and create more nuanced representations of varied alien species (races).

Likewise, while these developers understand that featuring only white protagonists is problematic, they did not recognize that how characters interact and the roles characters play in the narrative has implications for how race is understood in the context of the game. And, because these roles and character interactions rearticulate real-world biopower discourses, these game developers unintentionally imbricate racially problematic ideas even as they conscientiously try not to. Jonathan, a AAA game developer who has worked on about six role playing games and over 40 games overall, stated:

[W]e'll put things in to be even-handed. Oh if you're going to put in that, then we need a slider for skin tone so that you're even-handed and create yourself. But that's all usually an afterthought to what we are doing and we don't pay much attention to it. As far as—like I said, you can't underestimate how much we use stereotypes, though. If you want some guy messed up in a hoodie in the corner—he could be black, he could be white. It doesn't matter. But some guy that's all messed up in a hoodie that's carrying a bat or whatever—that adds the feel that he might attack you or [is] more dangerous. And we'll do that. Because you're trying to build that environment. You're trying to build that environment where they can associate with it. "Oh, I'm in somewhere more dangerous, now."

(Johnathan)
Recall, this is the same point that Nakamura (2002) points out in the use of Asian-ness as a marker for a futuristic rhizomized corporate-dominated environment, and *Max Payne 3*’s use of film noir spaces as a racial symbol for non-white dangerousness. While it may not matter that a bat-wielding enemy may be white, settings, too, can be used to mark spaces as non-white because of the historical context (Fluck, 2001; Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998). In Johnathan’s example above, when they wanted to indicate that the player is in a “dangerous” place, a character with a hoodie was used. This means that the social structure, the existence of which is not dependent on the narrative, can be reified.

Of course, what this also implicates is that we bring our existing understandings and beliefs into any narrative we encounter, such as videogames. We do this to “fill in the gaps” in the narrative (Bruner, 1997, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Redman, 2005; Vila, 2000, 2003). Some of the materials we use to fill in these gaps come from our experiences and existing narratives—especially narratives that come from the culture industry. Thus, when *Skyrim* conflates biology and culture, the developers are likely drawing from tropes and ideas from other sources of media. Since there is no such thing as an elf or an Orc, developers are clearly not drawing from personal experiences.

Indeed, when asked, these developers state that they draw heavily from existing media sources. They state that content from television, film, other games, and books are often sources of ideas that developers use to help design characters. This is so audiences can quickly grasp the game world, understand the game characters, and deduce the logic of the game mechanics.
All of us are very savvy game developers. We play a lot of games, and we make
games. So we're used to seeing a lot of things come over and over again.
Whether we're pulling our experience from movies or other games, there a lot of
things we see always. Like someone trying to get revenge for being wronged.
The star-crossed lovers. The father that would do anything to protect his daughter.
Some of the easy identifiable and common scenarios that we familiarize ourselves
with in all forms of media so when presenting a new character so that you'd say,
"Oh I know how this is going to come out." Because this is basically Romeo and
Juliet. So, this isn't going to work out between the two of them. So there's a lot
of signs that we're used to seeing within our culture that we play to. (Allen)

It brings you into the world that you're dropping into. I mean, you want to have
this fantastic mystical unbelievable world so you can see that. But, if you can't
relate to the characters, you can't relate to the characters. You can go out there
and do an alien game where the aliens are from [the Alien franchise with
Sigourney Weaver]. That series with the multiple mouths, right? And those are
kind of—they're still humanoid in shape, roughly. But, they're less associable
than other ones that have cultures and whatnot. But even then you had a mother,
and she's protecting her young. They're still tying in to what's associable.
Because if you can't associate, it's foreign, and you lose it. (Johnathan)

Movies and television are one of the biggest [sources of inspiration]. You get a
lot of character archetypes from there. That's probably the main one that we see.
You also find people who pull from books. We look for people in terms of
developers who can speak to a broad range of influences. Like who are widely
read, who've seen lots of TV or lots of movies or lots of comic books and that
kind of thing. That tends to be the primary source. (Trent)

But other reasons also exist. Sometimes, existing sources are adopted in order to create a
setting in which the developers can play with the conventions.

Yeah, I think we all know that there's a certain types of stories. There's the joke
that all the stories that can be told have been written. But, I do think you use
archetypes for a reason. For one reason, you use them because people grasp them
and understand them better. So, it lets you play in that scope. So, again, in my
[redacted description] game, I'm using an archetype for a reason because I know
that could sell and people understand that. I'm just adding a little twist to it to
make it more interesting to me instead of saying I'm going to come at this from a
completely new angle, which can also work. I think it's important to know when
you should use an archetype and when you should change the thing a bit or
challenge the expectation. Because, if the player knows the formula of what's
going to happen, then it's not going to be interesting. If you change it for a moment—if you follow an archetype but the ending doesn't go the way you'd expect, I think that can be really interesting. I think you see this in TV and stuff. There're shows like Louis which are really challenging what a sitcom can be by at times doing very sitcom-y things and then have a super dramatic moment that's not funny at all and it's really heartbreaking or heartwarming and it resonates. At least it resonates critically. Like for me, I think that's the best comedy show on TV currently. So, I think archetypes are good when used; but, you have to know what you're doing. You have to understand how this has been used in other media. You have to understand the preconceived notions people are going to have because of that. And, you're going to have to know when to push and pull with it. (Preston)

In short, my game developers use existing sources of media to create content quickly and easily that is understandable and relatable by audiences. Sometimes this is so they can play with the narrative, and other times so they clue in the audience. But it is always in order to make the game saleable and understandable.

In regards to the conflation between biology and culture (which appeared so frequently in Skyrim), what emerged is that there is an unspoken norm that suggests role-playing games ought to employ Tolkien’s understanding of race. As I mentioned in the past chapters, what Tolkien meant by race was the result of his time and social world. For Tolkien, the word “race” served as a synonym for species. While this is not the common understanding of the word today, the way it is commonly used in role-playing games reflects this. For example, I highlighted in the previous Skyrim chapter the ways in which each race is depicted as having an ability “in the blood” for characters in the game.

**Biopower discourses about race, economic pressures, and industry practices**

My third research question (RQ3) asked how economic pressures incentivized those problematic discourses about race. I found that the economic pressure to sell as
many games as possible and industry practices in which games are expected to gross huge amounts of sales increased publishers’ sensitivity towards uncertainty. As a result, my informants suggested that publishers, generally speaking, coerce videogame developers to create videogames that can feature problematic discourses about race. At the same time, social pressures from a changing culture and personal beliefs among these videogame developers suggest that they seek to advance their art form and challenge problematic discourses about race (to the extent that they recognize these discourses).

This social pressure manifests itself as a squeeze from publishers on one side (who seek assurances of sales through the use of past narratives that may contain problematic discourses about race) and gamers on the other side (who seek new and innovative narratives where problematic discourses about race might be changed). These developers express discontent towards this industry dynamic. As a result they perceive the indie game development world as the savior of the industry from troubling industry dynamics.

Let us consider *Skyrim*’s notion of species (race) differentiated power being “in the blood.” Of course the reason for this notion might be purely a homage to Tolkien’s influence to the swords-and-sorcery fantasy world. Other forms of media such as novels or cinema also seem to defer to Tolkien’s understanding of species despite how differently “race” is usually understood today. This may also explain the adoption. But, the implication behind what these developers expressed was that the use of “race” in the Tolkien sense is, in large part, due to economic pressure to reduce uncertainty by making
these fantasy “races” immediately understandable. This is what my analysis of *Skyrim* suggested, and this bears out in the analysis of the interviews.

[T]hey [the publishers] want a game that's 95% Tolkien—right?—and 5% your basic stuff. They don't want something that's super risky and is going to try to tackle big questions or anything. They're just looking for stuff that sells. (Trent)

As much as I love him, I think Tolkien is one of the worst things to happen for fantasy games because every fantasy game—OK, most. Most fantasy games—and I'm talking about "high fantasy" not sci-fi fantasy—end up using the same archetypes—the dark elves are the evil elves, there's high elves, and dwarves and they're all Scottish. They have all these same archetypes. Everyone knows dwarves get drunk, [kill] things, and Orcs are bad, right? And that same thing is done in every high fantasy game. It becomes not interesting to me. It becomes too similar. And, the only difference between these games ends up being the background—all the backstories that's happening. Whereas you look at *Game of Thrones*—I've only watched the TV series, I've not read the novels. *Game of Thrones* still has a lot of these tropes of fantasy. I can understand and grasp it. I'm grounded and I understand this world. It's kind of medieval, but it's a different world. As far as I know, I haven't seen any dwarves hanging around. There are no hobbits. There's not a lot of those races that I see. But there are lots of human looking races that are like that, right? There are the more savage clans across the sea. There's the wealthy ones holding King's Landing. And, that really feels like a world I know and live in a very different fantasy setting. So, it kind of blends these things a little more interestingly. And it still does very fantasy things—hey we've got dragons. But hey in this world, dragons are mostly dead, and we're going to talk about how maybe one person's bringing the dragons back. So, I think that we represent race, too often, in the same way. We do that high fantasy thing. And, frankly, you could probably say that [name of game redacted] has very direct parallels to the Tolkien archetypes to races at times. I think that can be a detriment. I think it'd be more interesting to not only draw from that. I think we need to see that dark elves are the black people of every fantasy world. Or, if you're going to do that, actually go into depth on it in an interesting way other than everyone gives you a funny stare and swears at you once in a while. That's not really enough to make me understand why it's weird and different to be this kind of character. So, yes, for me D&D and Tolkien have, at times, hampered our creativity. (Preston)

While these statements specifically apply to fantasy games like *Skyrim*, what it means for games like *Max Payne 3*, cinematic games in a contemporary setting, is less obvious. For
games like *Skyrim*, use of these tropes can be part homage to Tolkien and part pressure to comply with conventions of a particular genre of videogames so that they are immediately relatable. Yet, if we consider the pressure to be relatable, what this means for games like *Max Payne 3* is that the discourses of everyday life, the discourses from media or from our social environment, become critical for understanding. They are critical for understanding because as humans, we use past narratives and discourses to understand our world and the narratives we consume (Dodge et al., 2008; Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994). Because of this, understandability (and relatability) is critical to these companies’ ability to sell videogame content. When past narratives, for whatever reason, contain ideas about race hidden in biopower discourses, they may become rearticulated into newer videogame narratives. Again, if these objectionable discourses are hidden in biopower discourses, the main intention may very well be to reduce economic uncertainty rather than indicating malice. Regardless of intentions, the harm from these objectionable discourses remain.

Another part of the economic pressure, beyond creating content that is quickly understandable, is the pressure placed on these developers by publishers. It is the pressure to reduce risk and increase profits.

For big companies that are not indie companies, what we would do is take the top selling lists, and then we'd take the top 10 from all the top selling lists. And, you break down how much numbers three through seven are making. Because you can find two titles in any genre that are making a lot of money—it's pretty easy to do. But, you won't find 10 in that genre that are making a lot of money. So the ones that are three through seven are making a lot of money. That means that's the hot genre right now. That's where the money is being spent. ... So that's a better target. And, in our industry, we tend to not avoid competition. We're a little egotistical and go, "I can make a better game." Or at least a different game.
that can attract people, right? So, yeah—you look at that, and that's where you want to go make a game. Because at the end of the day, you've got to pay the bills. There's a lot of love in it; there's a lot of passion for it. It's not just money-grubbing-I'm-looking-for-money-and-that's-it-be-darned-to-everyone-else. But, you want to maximize your potential and have some fun while you're doing it. So to do that, you go where the money is. So, yes. We specifically build certain games. They're the ones people buy. If you're buying them, we'll make them.

(Johnathan)

Johnathan’s statement highlights the drive to reduce risk. But, it is also highlights the power the profit motive. When he states that publishers will strategically seek to produce games that are similar to other popular titles, he is referring to the reduction of uncertainty which would ensure an increase in profit. When organizations become profitable and top companies in their industries, the tendency is to protect the existing profitability and that position at the expense of innovation (Schumpeter, 1942/2008).

Innovation always requires a risk in time, money, labor, and other opportunity costs that large companies are reluctant to undertake because often the risks to their profitability or market position outweigh the potential gain (Schumpeter, 1942/2008).

That's really the hard question. Because that's almost saying, "If money doesn't matter." Which is what's most important for these games, I mean, even [to] the independent game developers who tell stories they want to. But, at the end of the day, they need to sell their games regardless of the message they're trying to say. But for me, I would really try to break down the stereotypes and try to bat down the games and the stories—We kind of dug ourselves into this hole as gamers where this is what they expect out of you. They expect you to make the next Call of Duty or the next soccer. There's a lot of things that are expected, but they don't want you to challenge the status quo, almost because it's not a practical business decision. And, that's really what's hindering games. (Allen)

The suggestions by these developers suggest that they believe the economic model of the AAA videogame world is one where large blockbusters are pursued as a sort of hedge against market uncertainty. Hollywood blockbusters also apply this model where “films with minimal character complexity or development and by-the-numbers plotting
(especially male action pictures) are the most readily reformulated and thus the most likely to be parlayed into a full-blown franchise” (Schatz, 2003, p. 35). Film franchises are used as a hedge against market uncertainty (Schatz, 2003).

I think the second you work for a publically traded company, you are beholden to a whole different world of different market conditions. Look at Zynga. Zynga used to be a successful company. They reduced their guidance from 25 or 29 cents to 5 cents for the next year. And, their stock dropped overnight. They went from a market cap from, I think, $5 billion to $2.3 billion. They dropped 70% since [their initial public offering]. Are investors not confident? Here's what happens if you're Zynga. EA just filed a lawsuit against you for copying a game. So you lose a lot on lawyer fees, right? You're being investigated by five different firms for insider trading because before that 41% drop, it turns out that a bunch of insiders dropped a whole lot of stock. Oh, you need to get your numbers up, so you're investigating international gambling, because it's a good way to make money. And, then you need to get your next set of games out that makes lots of money because you're behind. You need to make games that make a lot of money because you're behind. So, if you work at Zynga, is anyone going to take a risk on the next game? Is anyone going to dump a little bit of money on 30 games, or are you going to use metrics to figure out what's going to make the most amount of money and put all your resources into that? The *Call of Duty* series individually makes over $1 billion every cycle. So, you're probably spending $100 - $200 million, including marketing, right? If you're making a billion dollars, a hundred million dollars isn't a big deal. So the return on investment is huge. So you might get a higher return on a $1 game, but that one dollar game isn't going to make you a billion dollars. So, these companies look at raw numbers instead of a return on investment. I think the quarterly cycle of earning reports can be really damaging to this industry because you get into a situation where this game—I’ve heard this story so many times—this game needs two more months of polish and it'd be amazing. It'd only be slightly over budget if we did that. But we can't because the quarter ends March 31. And, the game needs to be out in that quarter because we need to realize a profit in that quarter to be able to write off any losses. So then you're not making your decisions on what to release on merit. You make it too much on the business side. And I, as a creative, have a giant problem with that. It does not lead us to have great games. It leads to a lot of copycatting. Because people are worried. But, the interesting thing is, if you look at the games that are making all the money. You look at *Call of Duty*, you look at *Assassins' Creed, Gears of Wars*—these are games that in their initial cycle were pioneers of their genre. *Call of Duty* was basically the *Medal of Honor* guys that were the first to do that cinematic shooter. Now it's done to hell now, but that was original when it came out. *Assassins' Creed*, nobody had
played that kind of open world in the middle ages in the Middle East. … So, actually the most creative ones are the ones that you see get rewarded because they're executed well and had an original idea that people gravitated towards. … However, other companies see that and they don't have the know-how, or the talent, or the management or the inability to be hands off to make that awesome game, right? So instead what they do is they go: Well, I want to make a game like Grand Theft Auto because it makes a lot of money. And then you get Saints Row. You get these "me too" games; and, they're usually—I can think of very few exceptions—you expect a clone to be a very pale imitation of the original. … I think that's all coming from this "we need results now, we can't worry about the long term, and it’s quarter to quarter". So back to the original question of what harm that the public sector [publically traded videogame companies who act as publishers] is doing? It's making us less creative. As a result we're going bigger because we can't miss too often. We start over analyzing what makes the money and put all of the chips in that basket and try to make money off of that. (Preston)

Because of the role these large blockbuster games play to the publishers, the tendency is to further reduce uncertainty. And, for my developers, the belief is that this hedge is through the use of the familiar narratives.

Yeah, so the publishers that exist like EA or Ubisoft—they exist to make blockbusters. They want the "Summer Blockbuster". They don't want the indie drama. Even if something like that might blow up and do really well. They don't want to take a risk on it—it's just too much of a risk. So they mitigate their risks by taking on licenses, so you've got Star Wars games, you've got Lord of the Rings games, stuff like that. Very low risk. You know what you're going to get. (Trent)

Moreover, as I found in my analysis of Skyrim, these discourses that publishers prefer are discourses that reify what the bodies of groups of people supposedly mean. These discourses are biopower embedded in the economics of AAA videogame development, and ironically, sometimes in the logic of the game’s economy as we saw in Skyrim. As Allen explains, how characters are developed and whether or not a more reasonable representation emerges is dependent on the publisher’s perception of the economics because of the pressures from past successful games.
[Sam] Do you think the publishers help or hinder how game companies design different races or species?

[Allen] I think they hinder. I think they definitely hinder. But I only say that from a business point of view. I don't know how savvy you are or what you keep up with in the industry news? But did you see the announcement about *Call of Duty: Ghost* yesterday?

[S] No, I didn't.

[A] OK. So for the first time since 2004, it's making the game news pretty big—you can now play as a female character in *Call of Duty*. Or you will be able to play it in the next rendition of *Call of Duty*. And, even if it's something as simple as a binary choice—whether you're going to be a male or female—the business excuse behind it was that they're only introducing it now is because now they have the technology that supports the physics in a multiplayer engine for you to be able to see the other player characters jumping around whether it was a female or male. As a human rights activist and as a game developer, that doesn't sound like they're really coming forth to make a statement—It sounds more like they're trying to even the playing field, but it's really not rooted in any kind of message for equality in games for races or gender or anything like that.

[S] So it's a business decision?

[A] It's a business decision.

But, this also begs the question of why these particular narratives and not others are used. The developers interviewed stated that this is merely because of the history of the videogame development world. Because videogame development was treated as a technical exercise in its early history, the nuance of the narratives and what those stories can communicate to the audience outside the context of the game was not recognized until people with a more liberal arts background entered the industry. And, after that, problematic depictions were replaced if they were noticed and if the economics did not stand in the way. But, the subtle ones hidden in biopower discourses remain.

While there were narratives of fantastical creatures and worlds that exist prior to Tolkien, Tolkien’s influence is undeniable in literature, fiction, and the fantasy genre (Fimi, 2009). And, because the videogame world in its early days largely produced
games that narrowly targeted young white heterosexual males, the game narratives also targeted that demographic. Put another way, North American developers did not know any better until humanities trained writers and producers from areas such as cinema joined the industry. As a result, the games from the 1980s and 1990s tended not to have narratives that are sensitive to the inequality that many of us see today.

Two conflicting economic pressures

We can also see here two economic pressures at odds in the videogame industry. On one hand, the game developers I interviewed are under pressure by publishers to produce content that have a “proven track record” of success and make use of narratives that have been sales successes in the past. On the other hand, my game developers are also under pressure by audiences and their own convictions to push the boundaries of games as a narrative form.

The publishers [are] the ones responsible for releasing the games. So they feel like they’re the ones making the game. Even though they’re just the front for funding the games, marketing the games, getting the ratings. They apply almost all the attributes to getting the game made. But, the gamer culture has been saturated with clones and repetitious games. I mean, a new Call of Duty has come out for the past six or seven years. So it's almost like, if we can capitalize on this market and sell 30 or 40 million copies of the same game for $60, they can turn it around and say, "That definitely sold. Let's do it again." And, because they are—the cycle becomes faster. They don't put that much effort into putting out the quality. They just want to put it out before someone else takes their customers away. Which is why you see things—not necessarily the console wars—but the first person shooter wars—you have Call of Duty versus Battle Field versus Medal of Honor. The developers that do that—they design to the multiplayer aspect of those things. That's where it comes from. That's what gets people to buy those games. Nobody says, I buy Call of Duty for the campaign because the story isn't there. They do it for the multiplayer. Games sometimes don't get the credit that they need to. It's really an interactive medium that allows the user to have control over an experience that they might not normally be subject to. Right now is an amazing time for games as we are putting down the weapons and we're
opening up our eyes to see what else we can really use this medium to tap into the human elements of our players. And, I think that's where the future is going to go. (Allen)

Moreover, as we saw in the above examples, these developers also express the frustration of not being, in a sense, “allowed” to produce these more nuanced narratives.

Of course, while this seems like an opportunity to contest problematic biopower discourses in videogame narratives, this probably is not so easy. As the literature suggests, biopower is made invisible to us because it is normalized in our social environment. In that sense, it is almost beside the point whether or not large publishers really insist on problematic narratives (even though they’d likely understand that they face an increasingly diversified audience). Since the developers I interviewed believe this pressure from publishers exists, the developers that I interviewed seem to have foreclosed the possibility that publishers might see things differently.

Idealizing the indie game world

Of course, developers I interviewed enjoy their work. My informants stated that while there are frustrations, they are afforded a lot of freedoms. Nevertheless, I am interested in the social component. For nearly all of us, the social structures of our professional, personal, and public lives are often invisible; yet, we are beholden to them (Foucault, 1981, 1982; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995; Husserl, 1970). Videogame developers are no exception. My informants stated that videogame developers recognize public criticism from academics and the public about racial representations in games. And, they are to an extent free to challenge and play with narratives that depict race problematically. Yet, this freedom is tempered by social structures that are invisible
(Foucault, 1981, 1982; Husserl, 1970). They are, like all of us in fact, inheritors of discourses from the culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995). Some of these discourses are what Foucault (2008) calls biopower. And, some of these biopower discourses are what Bonilla-Silva (2009) calls color-blind racism.

This explains the idealization of the indie game world that my informants unanimously express. The developers I interviewed saw the explosion of independent videogames as a saving force for an ailing AAA videogame industry. The industry is ailing in the sense that AAA games tended to use similar basic narratives with similar characters that tend to be white heterosexual males. For my informants, the belief is that while the economic realities of the AAA game world may hinder narratives that may be deemed too risky—narratives that might question the dominant white, male, heterosexual narrative—the indie game world offers an avenue to further play with and problematize discourses in a way that AAA game companies do not afford. Of course, the extent that the indie game world may actually “save videogames” is to be seen. The demographics of indie developers and the progressiveness of their videogames may not justify my developers’ belief.

My informants’ belief stems from the economic pressures of being industry leaders (Schumpeter, 1942/2008). Being at the top of the market makes these companies more risk averse and hesitant to innovate even though innovation is what helped these companies become market leaders in the first place (Schumpeter, 1942/2008). But that belief is ultimately an expression of the idea that sales are a natural metric. Sales are important, but that importance is always tempered with social attitudes, norms, and
discourses that affect sales (Foucault, 2008; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995; Kapp, 2011; Vigo De Lima, 2010).

[A]n indie developer can go: What do I want to make that's interesting? And, make what they think is cool and not care, for the most part, what other people are thinking about it. Because they do that, they are able to, at times, make more interesting games. Now I actually think the failure rate of indie games is probably the same as percentage wise as big budget games, right? We're like 10%-20% max of games that are successful. The rest are failures commercially or critically. I think that's actually true of indie games. For every Braid, there're probably dozens of games that no one played or heard of or bought, right? But, when they do get their breakthroughs or when they do something that is different or unique, it's very personal. Or at least, it feels like it's more personal. I think it's because of the smaller teams that it can be more personal. That I think it's appealing to the rest of us. And, they're trying new things. So, for those of us that are tired of the same old thing, it gives us a new style of game play or a new theme that's more interesting. So I think it's the nature of their cavalier attitude of: Well, I want to do things my way, so I'll do whatever I want. I'm not constrained by what system I work in. Like, I'm constrained at times—and I'm OK with the constraints because I have tons of freedom—and more importantly, I'm working on games that I want to work on. (Preston)

Preston’s point is that the freedom from industry norms and economic pressures allows indie game companies more latitude in developing narratives on which AAA game companies may be compelled to pass. The advantage smaller companies have over larger companies is the reduced cost of innovation (Schumpeter, 1942/2008).

[S]ome guys—like Papers Please, which is the work of one guy. You play a border guard in a fictionalized 1980s Soviet Union. You have to approve or deny people entry based on their passport and materials and stuff. So, you'll get a directive from your commanding officers, “Don't let people in from this country.” And, then someone will come in and be like, “Hey I'm from this country. I know I can't get in, but my husband's really sick and he's in your country so I need to get in.” So, you're like—what do I do? That's just an example. That's not specifically race. But, there's a lot of that stuff going on. And, I think that comes more out of the indie scene then it does from the major publishers these days. (Trent)
Trent holds *Papers Please* as an example of a game that publishers would not likely allow AAA game developers to produce. It is too risky because its game play is too different from games with a proven trackrecord of market success.

I think you're seeing the old industry explode—the old games industry as we've previously seen it. No matter how it happens, I guarantee it'll look very different four years from now. The traditional package model [the current dominant way that games are developed and sold] won't work anymore. I think what you're going to see in the next couple of years is a tremendous explosion of independent game productions through crowdsourcing and through Xbox Live Arcade. As far as how it will go with representation of characters, I think it will improve. A lot of people are doing this work now where this is much more of an art form. Where I came into it in the 90s, it was still a largely a technical exercise. At that time it was really technical. So someone with a film background was unheard of. So a lot of the earlier stereotypes you’ve seen in older games arose from a naiveté. People really had never dealt before with the prospect of representing a character and didn't know how to do it. So, they tended to do it in naively broad strokes. I don't think they deliberately tried to offend someone, but I think they didn’t have anyone in the room to think through it. I think racial stereotypes will go away because of the global market place. (Clancy)

What is interesting in Clancy’s statement is his belief that the market will address racism in videogames. Here is another example of the belief in the “veridictory” power of markets. Clancy’s statement indicates that he believes the market’s truth-telling function will cause videogames to take on a more progressive racial representation in the future.

What should be noted by these statements is my developers’ belief that we are on the cusp of a transformative moment in the North American videogame industry where indie developers can potentially challenge the dominance of the North American AAA game world. In many ways, because of the size of the videogame industry, the industry is dominated by large AAA videogame companies that are tantamount to a hegemonic force (O’Donnell, 2012). If my participants’ view about the role of indie developers is accurate, then we are at a moment where indie developers may present a way to tear at
the dominant narrative of race in North American videogames—what Omi and Winant (1994) call a hegemonic racial project. What these statements express is a belief in what Schumpeter (1942/2008) calls a moment of creative destruction. The idea is that, in any industry, some companies rise to the top, become large, and dominate the market (Schumpeter, 1942/2008). But, this increasing size and market dominance comes at a cost to innovation—the very thing that allowed them to dominate the market in the first place (Schumpeter, 1942/2008). This cost is incurred because as companies become larger, they gain investors, shareholders, and expectations of larger profits (Schumpeter, 1942/2008).

Yet, my informants express the belief that the rise of indie game companies is enough of a force to open more space for differing discourses about race. And, that may be the case. However, what may hamper this change are the social structures that are in place. Again, our beliefs about race—especially the subtle ones that seem not to be about race—make their way into our social view about other groups. Biopower becomes normalized and invisible through the commodification of culture by the culture industry. As my participants suggest, indies might be a changing force in the videogame industry. As far as race discourses are concerned, that changing force might not be as transformative as my informants suggest because narratives are a part of our collective social environment, which tell us what race “in the blood” ought to look like from Tolkien or what film noir says “bad guys” should look like. Commoditizing culture means many past ideas are appropriated for new games. Because many problematic ideas about race are hidden in biopower discourses, they are invisible. A global market with
diverse gamers may be important for North American developers to address racially problematic discourses, but that only goes so far in addressing hidden ideas about race.

What Bonilla-Silva’s argument about color-blind racism tell us is that these forms of color-blind racism (i.e., biopower) are quite hard to see and contest.

I propose the more general concept of racialized social systems as the starting point for an alternative framework. This term refers to societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races. Races typically are identified by their phenotype, but … the selection of certain human traits to designate a racial group is always socially rather than biologically based. (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p. 469)

This generalized racial social structure is justified in markets precisely because the discourses that form them are a form of biopower. And, all biopower finds its “veridiction”—its evidence of truth—in markets.

By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is roughly what I have called biopower. (Foucault, 2007, p. 16)

Because these normalized ideas about race are justified in markets, and the insurgence of indie game developers in the North American market does nothing to change that social structure.

The developers’ statements suggest that market pressures placed on developers by publishers hamper North American AAA developers. But what might not be apparent are the social scripts that exist in the AAA development world. These narratives come from the fact that they too belong to a culture where how we talk about race can be hidden in
past culture industry products—products like the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, film noir, or *Blade Runner*—that have racially problematic discourses.

Change in market actors only changes the *actors*. It does not necessarily change the *sociality* of the market actors or fundamental market forces. North American Indie developers may be more willing to take risks in what type of discourses they are willing to include. But, this does not mean that they operate with a different understanding of race than the AAA game companies. Moreover, the very freedom that indies enjoy that allows them to take risks exists because they are *not* AAA game developers. Indies do not have large shareholders to whom their developers are accountable. Nor do indies have a large market share that they would risk losing by an unpopular title. When they do, they too may fall into the trap that my interview participants attribute to publishers.

I do not mean to imply that change is not possible. What I believe the real opportunity that “creative destruction” offers the North American videogame industry is a chance for indie developers to question those problematic biopower discourses *before* indie game companies become the market leaders. Power, after all, exists and circulates because it is rearticulated in different spaces and times (Butler, 1997). Therefore, the potential for resistance is in the rearticulation (Butler, 1997). But, that is only possible if indie game developers are made aware of how biopower discourses depend on market influences to justify and structure how we understand race. In that way, they may contest them.

Of course, this does not mean that indie game developers are the only ones who can resist these problematic biopower discourses. There is nothing to suggest that AAA
game developers are not able to resist these discourses when they are made aware of them. They can; but, they have economic pressures from publishers and industry norms. I argue that because indie developers are not beholden to the same publisher pressures and industry norms that AAA developers are, they are better apt to resist these discourses. Like many phenomena, color-blind racism, a form of biopower, in videogames is a subtle and difficult problem to address. But, it is one that can be addressed. My research suggests that North American videogame developers are open and prepared to hear these concerns. Moreover, because indie games have less economic pressure to reduce uncertainty, developers do have a means to address these problematic biopower discourses. This will only be possible if a larger conversation about biopower and its role in videogame narratives takes place. In the next chapter, I offer a few ideas on how this conversation can take place.
CHAPTER 7
SUMMARIZING THE POINTS AND FINDING SOLUTIONS

In the preceding chapters, I have demonstrated that videogame contents from corporately produced videogames—the so-called AAA games—contribute to notions of race by using past popular media narratives. Many past narratives are blatantly offensive. I do not mean those. Rather, I mean the narratives that, at first glance, seem innocuous but have a problematic side. These narratives feature discourses that are problematic because they promote essentialist ideas about race rooted in past injustices. However, because today’s cultural climate is not one necessarily conducive to blatant racism, these discourses are articulated as ideas that describe ideas other than blatant racism. Yet, because race is implicated in economic, cultural, and biological explanations of difference as well as discourses that minimize the legacy of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), these types of discourses still remain present in the narratives that North American videogame developers use. These discourses are forms of biopower, a way of understanding groups of people that appeals to markets as a justification for those beliefs (Foucault, 2008).

I also demonstrated that North American videogame developers do recognize that they contribute to discourses about race. My interviews demonstrated that my videogame developers believe that videogames—like all forms of media—contribute to the way society understands controversial issues. In that way, media are not “just” entertainment. Likewise, videogames are not “just” games. Videogames have the ability to reflect and reinforce ideas that percolate in society. And, by doing so, those ideas become part of
our collective culture. Universally, the videogame developers that I interviewed take this power seriously and actively seek to create positive change by creating more diverse narratives, including ones that feature race. At least, they attempt to do this to the extent that they are aware of discourses that need to be changed. Yet, they run into economic and industry practices that hamper their ability to make those changes. videogame developers do not create content in a vacuum. While North American videogame developers create content, they are under pressures by publishers who provide financial, promotional, technical, and market support to create content that is salable. My interviewees state that it is through these supports that publishers are able to inject their influences and fears (of market uncertainty) into the videogame development process. These industry practices and economic pressures also explain why past popular media narratives find new life in videogames.

In many cases, past popular media narratives serve as a safe bet for videogame publishers because the uncertainty of whether or not the narrative and gameplay will sell can be controlled. It is not that the videogame developers I interviewed necessarily want to choose narratives from the past that may include problematic racial discourses. In fact, I also found that these developers believe they are under seemingly contradictory pressures by audiences, critics, and their own love for games to push the envelope of what game narratives can contain—including more progressive notions of race. Yet, these videogame developers are still products of their social world. As such, industry norms, such as the adoption of Tolkien’s use of the word “race” to implicate species, often have a limiting effect on the type of narratives developers choose.
So, what should we make of all of the findings? At first glance, it seems the biggest take away is that racism is justified by economic structures, hidden in the everyday discourses we use to communicate, and even embedded in our media despite the good intentions of content creators. What we should take away is that discourses we might justifiably call racist are often hidden. This, of course, calls us to try harder in our language to create a more just world. This also calls us to recognize that often injustices are embedded in social structures and institutions—like media—that we depend on on for context. And, to make meaningful change towards ameliorating racial injustices, we need to see those social structures—structures referred to by Bonilla-Silva (1997) as a generalized “racial social system”—and, whenever possible, contest those meanings (p. 469). As Foucault (1981) argues, how we talk about things becomes normalized and concretized as practice.

If we follow Foucault’s (1981) logic of how talk becomes practice, then we cannot separate the social world from videogame narratives. Our ability to make sense through stories and discourses from our social world (e.g., Fisher, 1984; Gerbner, 1994) is how we understand worlds presented to us in videogames.

Past narratives in videogames: How videogame developers contribute to discourses about race

In this dissertation, I used two AAA games as case studies. One videogame takes place in a fantasy medieval world with magic and dragons similar to the tales of J. R. R. Tolkien. The other videogame is a gritty, gangland, film-noir game that takes place in the Brazilian city of São Paulo. In *Skyrim*, the medieval fantasy game, there is a confluence
of biology and culture. Race is treated as a biological construct to which culture is unalterably tied. The game treats characters of different species (races) as different forms of “people.” To use Bonilla-Silva’s language, the game conflates discourses that “naturalized” racism and discourses that rely “cultural” explanation of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). *Skyrim*, in that sense, talks about culture as something that emerges from biology. It is in this sense that the game rearticulates the false notion that race is a biological construct from which skin color operates as a marker. Culture is regarded as an extension of biology so much so that characters who belong to differing groups are depicted as having exclusive species (race)-based cultures that cannot be adopted by a person of a differing species (race).

In *Max Payne 3*, there is a significant blurring between abstract liberalist discourse—the discourse that Bonilla-Silva (2009) argues justifies race based inequality as the just result of a group’s performance in a market economy—and culture. The reason for this is that while *Skyrim* draws its racial logic from Tolkien, *Max Payne 3* draws its logic from film noir. Film noir, a genre of cinema, has a racial logic whereby the dangerous, dark, and gritty inner city both symbolically obliterates the presence of minorities and the nuances of their lives and represents the bodies of minorities (Lott, 1997; Murphet, 1998; also see Nakamura, 2002). Yet, *Max Payne 3* does display Othered bodies. The logic of film noir means that the game operates under a framework where skin color symbolizes culture, place, and danger. The darker-skinned Brazilians are “criminals” as a result of their flawed culture and poverty. The lighter-skinned Brazilians (and Italians when the scene takes place in New Jersey) are marked as
criminals of a higher caliber. All of whom need the white, Max Payne, to intervene and save them. The biopower logic, in this sense, is that biology structures culture, which in turn structures the economic performance of these Othered bodies and necessitates the help of the benevolent white savior. For all his flaws—and Max Payne has many—Max is still a better specimen of humanity than the Others who live in Brazil by virtue of his narratively constructed whiteness.

Of course, it would be easy to simply write off these findings as “reading too much” into a game’s narrative. Likewise, it would be easy to view my findings as the product of racist developers in the AAA game development world. However, those would be incorrect readings. My findings are reasonable because, beyond my methodology, the literature and past studies by scholars predicted as much. We make sense of our experiences of the world (and of the digital world) through narratives that we know (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2009; Fisher, 1984; Tomffing, 1999; Vila, 2000, 2003).

Media companies (such as videogame companies) are very adept at telling stories because their very business depends on it. In fact, all culture industry companies depend on commoditizing stories (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995). My interviews with videogame developers demonstrated that videogame development is a collective activity that happens within a social setting. I argue these biopower discourses make their way into videogames because these developers face conflicting economic pressures from publishers (who pressure them to create profitable games and, therefore, games that feature similar stories to past games) and critics and audiences who pressure North American developers to create content that pushes the boundaries of the art form.
In response, the videogame developers that I interviewed expressed a universal belief in the indie game world to revolutionize the social and economic pressures of videogame development. In this sense, what my informants suggested amounts to what Joseph Schumpeter (1942/2008) called creative destruction, an economic force where upstart companies, who have little market share to lose and much to gain, are willing to innovate and take risks from which entrenched companies shy away. Those risks allow smaller companies to potentially outmaneuver entrenched ones and upturn the distribution of market share (pp. 81–106). Thus, these AAA game developers believe that normative industry practices and economic pressures, which coerce them to adopt problematic discourses that we might consider racist, could be avoided by nurturing indie game development.

I believe that this is a problematic belief. What is more likely, the literature tells us, is that indie game developers would also fall victim to the same economic pressures and normative industry practices that AAA game developers encounter. These norms and pressures are at the root of the problem from which there seems to be no real escape. In turn, today’s innovative indie developers can become tomorrow’s industry leaders who are prone to reject innovation and rely on problematic discourses about race in order to ensure understandability and salability.

I do not mean to argue that my findings are unique to the videogame industry. When Schumpeter (1942/2008) described creative destruction, he was not referring specifically to media organizations. Indeed, he referenced Standard Oil and the aluminum industry in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. As all businesses get
larger, they eventually suffer this conservatism in their strategies (e.g., product designs, for the purpose of the present discussion) because of the social world (Schumpeter, 1942/2008). “Practically any investment entails, as a necessary complement of entrepreneurial action, certain safeguarding activities such as insuring or hedging” (Schumpeter, 1942/2008, p. 88). To protect their investments in existing products and business strategies, business “can and will fight progress itself” (Schumpeter, 1942/2008, p. 96). Adopting a tried-and-true strategy, such as recycling successful narratives from past games, is a form of hedging. If we believe Foucault’s (1981, 1982, 1994) assertion that talk becomes concretized and Butler’s (1997) belief that discourse must circulate to other areas of life, then the continued use of conservative discourses about race in videogames increasingly runs the risk of becoming concretized and reproduced.

*Tumbling out: A small proposal for fixing race discourses*

Of course, what I have been concerned with is the “talk” of race in a medium. To be sure, there are real world impacts from discourses. Foucault (1981) never meant that all things are talk. What he meant was that talk has a way of creating objects, practices, norms, laws, customs, beliefs, and other “technologies” that turn that talk into real world things that affect us (Foucault, 1981, 1982, 1994). This is the same thing that the Frankfurt School meant with its notion of the culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995). Culture gets commoditized because of media’s profit motive; and, in the beginning of that process is talk. So, discourses are important because talk becomes practice.
I do believe that there is one possibility, at least, to improve how discourses about race are depicted in videogames. Butler (1997) argues that discourses must find their way into different spaces and must be maintained by a constant cycle of rearticulation whereby the discourses are understood and reified. The “hearer” of the discourse hears it and rearticulates it anew (Butler, 1997). In that moment lies the potential for resistance (Butler, 1997). Rearticulation is seldom perfect; in the act of repeating, there is potential for change (Butler, 1997).

I do not believe that simply adding skin-tone sliders, for example, is the correct response to problematic racial discourses in videogames. As Shaw (2012) argues, to increase the inclusion of Othered people in videogame narratives, there needs to be a concerted effort to increase the “everydayness” of people in order to normalize positive racial discourses in videogame content instead of merely attending to superficial properties such as skin-tone (p. 40). My interviews demonstrated that my AAA videogame developers do recognize this, but they are hampered by economic pressures to reproduce “less risky” games.

What I suggest is that since the AAA game world is in many regards frozen by economic pressures to repeat certain discourses about race (whether it is aware of it or not), indies offer a unique chance to change those discourses. However, it is not the mere presence of indie developers that might spur positive change. Rather, it is the flexibility of indie developers to adopt progressive discourses that might affect this change. This is similar to what Casey O’Donnell (2012) found. He found that because of the dominance of North American videogame companies in the global market, there tends to be much
volatility due to the large sums of money at risk (O’Donnell, 2012). His finding suggests that the size of the market spawns conservative products (O’Donnell, 2012). O’Donnell’s (2012) finding can be understood as a Schumpeterian example of creative destruction. Large markets bring about large market leaders whose corporate cultures shy away from risky innovations for “proven” products (Schumpeter, 1942/2008). Indie companies, therefore, offer a relief from this conservatism, but only insofar as they are small nimble companies that are less constrained by market pressures.

The intoxicating influence of ever increasing profits, a result of larger market share, induces companies unknowingly to view progressive talk about equality or justice as risky. It is important, then, to reveal the hidden ways that race is implicated in our discourse. Especially since many of these ways reify injustice towards Othered groups (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2009). While indie developers are still relatively free from the pressure of being market leaders, they can create a catalogue of more progressive discourses about race from which they can draw when they become the new AAA developers. In that way, when indie developers become larger, they have a catalog of discourses that may be free from these problematic discourses (i.e., color-blind racism). Again, one of my informants self-identified as a developer in a large indie videogame company. His company is large enough to be risk averse. His company became too large to ignore market share. Having a catalogue of alternative progressive discourses that also have a proven track record of successful sales might mollify this uncertainty.
Strengths, weakness, and future research

My solution may seem too simplistic. This is because this dissertation is concerned with diagnosing an issue in the videogame development world and not offering nuanced solutions, *per se*. My possible solution is only meant as a starting point for discussion. In no way should it be read as complete. Likewise, this dissertation is situated among a (thankfully) growing body of research that addresses race and racism in videogames and videogame narratives. As the medium becomes a more integral part of the society, this issue becomes more important to address. One weakness in my study is that I was only able to interview six informants. I sought to recruit videogame developers for over a year to participate in this study. The informants that did participate pointed to a general hesitation to talk to researchers in the videogame development world for fear of reprisal. For future studies, I intend to continue to interview developers for more insight.

One strength of this study is that the majority of my informants come from AAA videogame companies. Their experience and historical insight into the industry is invaluable. Yet they also constitute a potential weakness. I speculate that established developers may not be as tuned in to pressures that new or more vulnerable developers face. To put it another way, the protections that their extensive résumés afford them might also blind them to subtle disciplinary forces in the industry. Future studies should also seek to recruit newer industry professionals.

Another limitation of the study is that I did not recruit any videogame publishers. This was by design. I was interested in the beliefs of developers and not publishers. Yet
including the views of publishers might have provided another fruitful view. Future studies should examine the discourses that publishers perceive.

This study was also concerned with the role of biopower discourses present in videogame narratives. To examine them, I examined two cases in-depth. It would be enlightening to have a larger view by including a wide variety of different games. Of course, case studies are time consuming, and it is often impractical to analyze a number of cases in-depth. But, future studies should keep textually analyzing or discursively analyzing games as a larger body of work would be fruitful. Moreover, it might be useful to see how other culture industry products have changed. The videogame industry is perhaps one of few media industries that developed after the Civil Rights era, it might be useful to examine how narrative discourses of older media changed and the forces that brought about those changes.

This study also has many strengths. This is the first study of which I am aware that examines how biopower discourses govern bodily depictions in videogames. Biopower itself is a widely used theoretical construct and has found its way into many fields, such as medicine (which is intimately concerned with bodies). Biopower is still underutilized in games studies, media studies, and communication. This is unfortunate since biopower offers a framework of how talk becomes practices, becomes economic pressures, and construct meaning out of populations (Foucault, 2008).

This dissertation is also an attempt to empiricize Foucault’s (2003, 2007, 2008) concept of biopower. How the bodies of groups are discursively constructed is a powerful concept. However, it is one where there is insufficient empirical work. Other
scholars such as Bonilla-Silva (2009) have demonstrated concepts that can be construed as biopower. I complement this work by empirically tracing how discourses in one particular videogame market become concretized in the actual videogames it produces.

Closing remarks

This dissertation implies much for theory building. For instance, this dissertation pulls together a diverse set of literature that explains some of the sociologic and economic rationality of the videogame industry. By seeking to describe the social and economic environment in which my videogame developers work, this dissertation connected narrative theory, Foucault’s notion of biopower, the notion of the culture industry, and institutional economics. Drawing from narrative theory (Bruner, 1997, 2004; Fisher, 1984; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Perinbanayagam, 2000; Taylor, 2005; Vila, 2000, 2003), I argued that narratives are essential to the way we understand other people and the world around. These narratives need to be tested by some mechanism in order to be understood as “true.” To do this, I pointed out the process of “veridiction” that markets play (Foucault, 2008). Markets are discursively constructed as a space where market forces are assumed to decide what commodities and ideas are “true” outside the influence of human action (Foucault, 2008). I connect this idea to the Frankfurt School’s notion that mass culture artifacts are false representations of culture (e.g., media products such as television, cinema, or videogames) which are commoditized and sold to consumers (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1995).

My work does not tackle whether or not videogames ought to be considered “legitimate” forms of cultural artifacts. That discussion is outside the scope of this study.
Rather, my inclusion of the discussion of the culture industry is to point out that videogames are forms of discourse made concrete (see Foucault, 1981). They are commodities. Commodities are traded in markets. Markets are not “natural” spaces; but, markets serve as agents of verification (Foucault, 2008). In this regard, I also contribute to theory building. I use institutional economic theory’s examination of market forces (Kapp, 2011) to explain how a certain market force can serve as a partial explanation of why some racially problematic discourses are maintained.

This dissertation benefits the study of videogames as a medium by providing an entry into examining the ways in which North American videogame developers’ (and potentially publishers’) narrative choices are influenced by market forces. By tying in economic theory, this dissertation brings a theoretical view of videogame developers as market actors. By doing so, this work also extends the literature of videogame research by including institutional economic theory as a way to describe phenomena in the videogame world.

My work also contributes to race scholarship. By including an economic perspective and a view from videogame scholarship, my work continues the work of other authors (e.g., Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012; Consalvo, 2009) in investigating how race is constructed in videogames. By tying in the notion of biopower (Foucault, 2008), I offer an explanatory tool for understanding why certain discourses about race remain in videogames.

Videogames have come a long way from a mere curiosity and toy to a powerful medium and subject of research. Media and things we call “new media” form a backdrop
to our cultural world. Like all media, videogames also reflect our social world. Chow-White aptly stated (as cited in Washington, 2011) that, "[t]he Internet is not a separate space from the world, it's intricately connected to everyday life and social institutions" (para. 28). As videogames become a larger portion of consumers’ media diet and our social consciousness, they warrant further inquiry. Moreover, videogames are a new space where power, discourses, and narratives are created and contested. It is in this contestation that lives can be affected and discourses changed.
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