Fair Play

Confronting Racism and Coloniality in Games

A Media Education Handbook

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Co-funded by
the European Union

Anti-Racism Media Activist Alliance

Der Wissenschaftsfonds.

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Acknowledgements

This book is an outcome of a profound, inspiring, and ongoing conversation between the authors. We would therefore like to start by thanking each other for going through this process together, for offering each other space and support during more difficult times, for making each other laugh, and for helping each other develop and deepen ideas together.

Introduction

From the moment we're born, games and play are a part of our worlds. Whether it's through playing around with words or make-believe, playing games matters in how we see ourselves, others, and the world.

This isn't a new idea. Since ancient times, people have used games for education, therapy, and even spiritual training. This history continues with the rise of digital games and online play. But in addition to growth and learning, the close connection between history, social life and play also raises concerns: How might games keep problems from history alive? How might they accommodate unfair and violent behaviours? How can games reinforce social exclusions? What can we do to confront these problems?

In this book, we talk about these questions in relation to race and racism, a topic that is often considered difficult, complicated, and awkward. However, we believe that if we want to play fair, we first need to understand what is not fair. And racism is one of the many ways in which unfair play manifests itself. This might not seem obvious at first. After all, isn't the point of games and play to have fun? However, we believe that we need to talk about "old" problems, such as racism, to successfully confront and overcome them.

Racism is an uncomfortable topic, but in order to play fair, we first need to understand what is not fair.

Engaging with racism in games matters for everyone who loves board games, video games, casual games, role-playing games, and other forms of play. No matter our background, our location in the world, or our interests, we can all become more respectful players. Our goal with this book is to provide anyone making, playing, or teaching with games with a tool to start critical conversations about the structures, emotions, and expressions of racism in games and play. The idea is that if we understand the rules and mechanics of racism and how it affects play, we can start challenging them and building a more respectful future playing with each other.

About this book

We wrote this book for players, educators, and game designers who are interested in getting started on one or more of the following questions:

1. How are (video) games connected to racism?
2. How can we spot and confront racist behaviour in gaming and play?
3. How can we imagine respectful, anti-racist games and play?

The book explores these questions throughout five chapters. Each chapter includes critical reflections about practical experiences. They also include ideas for activities you can use to start conversations about racism in games.

- Chapter 1 is about *structural racism*, where it comes from, why it exists, and how it has influenced society on a whole.
- Chapter 2 explores how racism can slip into game contents through *media representation*.
- Chapter 3 looks at ways racism can show up in playful interactions.
- Chapter 4 is about game design bias and the problem of the white norm.
- Chapter 5 imagines anti-racist perspectives on play and games.

As authors, we make sense of these topics from our different research and personal backgrounds, but also as human beings who enjoy play.

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1

Racism and Coloniality

If play, games and racism are somehow connected, how can we start to understand this connection? We would like to start by sharing some brief memories from our childhoods. We grew up in different parts of the world, Brazil (Leonardo) and Austria (Sabine), as Black (Leonardo) and white (Sabine) children with different genders. While this makes our experiences very different, we both encountered racism in play very early in life.

Leonardo:

The first set of stories happened as little Leo grew up in a small town in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I remember that even as a small child I experienced racism. I didn't know the term at the time, but I remember feeling very hurt.

For instance, when Black boys like me made mistakes in football, teammates would shout, laughing, "Damn Princess Isabel for freeing the slaves!" This referred to Princess Isabel signing the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888.

In the 1980s, after the video game Donkey Kong came out, "Donkey Kong" immediately became a nickname for Black kids like myself. Donkey Kong is an ape with human features, so kids used that image as an insult.

Later, the first-person shooter video game Counter Strike was a big sensation in Brazil when it created a map of poor neighbourhoods. In this game, my friends and I played white police officers who shot at 'criminals' who actually looked like us Black and Brown kids.

Sabine:

Little Sabine grew up surrounded mostly by white family and friends. I remember a popular game we would often play in the garden, named "*Who is afraid of the Black man*?" In this game, one of us played the 'Black man' and chased the rest of us around in a little ritual. I remember being really afraid of this 'Black man', because in the game he was really dangerous: when he touched you, you immediately lost the game and had to chase your friends.

We also often sang songs in our family. One of them was a song about three Chinese men sitting on the road with their contra basses. The lyrics made no sense, all found it funny how we had to sing it: We had to choose one vowel, 'a', for example, and sing the lyrics using 'a' only. This sounded like a strange language, a bit like how we imagined in our minds Asian people would sound.

When you consider our stories, you can see that they are different, but perhaps you can also spot some similarities. For instance, both stories feature some ideas around Blackness as something to be feared or rejected. In Sabine's memories of the 'Black man' game, this fear is a part of the game's fiction: the 'Black man' is a threatening game character, and he is also a symbol of failure. What the game taught Sabine and their friends is that they are 'safe' if they stay away from Blackness. That they must stay in the 'white zone' to win.

In Leonardo's memories, his own Blackness was commented on through insulting nicknames and hurtful references to slavery. On the other hand, Leonardo's Counter Strike example shows that even at a young age, Black kids and kids of colour understand that playing as white means playing as powerful.

So overall, we learned roughly the same lesson: White people are normal, heroic, and born winners; Black people and People of Colour, like the Chinese contrabass players, are considered either dangerous or strange. White people deserve to have fun and get to be protected. Non-white people suffer from bullying and discriminatory stereotyping. These are lessons of racism – the idea that people have different human values based on their backgrounds and skin colours.

STOP AND THINK: Your childhood memories

Think about your own childhood memories playing games: Can you think of any examples similar to Leonardo's or Sabine's?

What songs, games, or other playful activities can you remember that showed white people as normal, heroes or winners, and Black people, Indigenous people, or People of Colour as dangerous, strange, or primitive?

But how come we both learned this exact same lesson in very different places in the world? Science today knows that there is only one race, the human race. We also know that children are not born with racist mindsets. So how come even kindergarten kids are able to separate the world into 'Black and white' and use these ideas to potentially hurt each other, even during play?

One answer is that racism has a long history; we are born into a racist world and are now swimming in racist waters (DiAngelo 2018). This means that any of us can spot racist elements in games and other playful activities. We invite you to give it a try.

Now that we have explored the racist landscapes of our own stories and memories of play, we will look at how these landscapes were formed in the first place. This requires us to briefly review the history of colonialism, more precisely European colonialism. This is because European colonialism has had a big part to play in the 'invention' of racism as we know it today. Ways of thinking and acting racist grew during that time. But how and why?

Do you remember that European explorers ventured out to sea to 'discover' the so-called 'New World' and bring back natural resources and profits to finance their empires? You might have heard about this period in history class, often referred to — from a European perspective — as a 'Golden Age'.

What is often left out of our history books is the violence afflicted by European powers (including Portugal, Spain, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and France) to occupy territories, destroy natural resources, and enslave Indigenous populations in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

There was very little interest or care for those living in the 'discovered' lands. A good example is King Leopold II of Belgium, who talked about Africa as a "magnificent cake" of which Belgium wanted a piece. At a conference in Berlin in the late 19th century, several European countries and the US indeed decided to divide Africa like a cake and declared themselves the new rulers of these territories.

This caused long-lasting harm on economic and cultural life which is still visible today. Many of the structural problems former colonial countries experience today, including poverty, wars, and refugee crises, are a consequence of European colonialism. But how could Europeans do this? How could they have such a big impact? And why did they continue to violently exploit other places and peoples?

One explanation is the **racist worldview** that became popular in Europe (and was exported to the Americas) during colonial times. This worldview included the idea that Europeans could be classified as the 'white' race, a human race thought to be stronger, more intelligent and more advanced than any other 'races' in the world (Saini 2019).

RACIST WORLDVIEW

is the discrimination of non-white people based on skin colour. A racist worldview was 'invented' to justify colonial exploitation, but still exists in today's world even though the European 'colonial age' is over.

Many scientists, religious leaders, artists, and other authorities in Europe jumped on this idea, for instance by using pseudoscientific skull measuring tools and by making pictures of Jesus Christ more European-looking (Dyer 1997). Famous thinkers like Carl Linnaeus (Sweden), Immanuel Kant (Germany), and Paul Broca (France) claimed that biological differences 'proved' white superiority. For them, especially Indigenous and Black people were primitive whereas white Europeans were civilised.

Today we know that many of these ideas are wrong. Biologically speaking, races among human beings do not exist. There is only one human race. However, the colonial idea that there are 'better' and 'worse' races still shapes the world. (Kendi 2016). And how could it not? The colonial age lasted for centuries. It would be very strange if that had absolutely no effect whatsoever on our world today.

Nowadays, we have a common belief that racism is about someone's bad character or intentions. That is probably why people get defensive, sad, and angry if others call them "racist". From their perspective, 'racist' is a terrible slur, an insult. Most of us do not want to be associated with the racist worldview of the past. As a consequence, constructive conversations about racism tend to turn into endless exchanges of accusations.

That is why we think of racism in relation to acts and behaviours. Not all expressions of racism are intentional. Racist ideas are so naturalised that many racist actions are unconscious. For us, it is more constructive to talk about racist *actions* rather than intentions. First, actions and behaviours can easily change. Second, by focusing on racist actions we can shift conversations from feelings and intentions to the ways to respect people who suffer from racism.

> It is more constructive to talk about racist actions rather than intentions.

After all, it is racist acts, not intentions, that have deep consequences in the lives of those treated as inferior for centuries: Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Colour.

One way of thinking about the connection between past and present regarding racism is to talk about 'coloniality'. For many people colonialism is a thing of the past, because most former colonies are now independent countries. But 'coloniality' refers to the lasting effects of colonisation in the present (Maldonado-Torres 2007). We see these effects in feelings and emotions (e.g., what bodies we consider pretty or ugly). We see these effects in the world economy (e.g. who are the business owners, and who are the under-paid workers). We also see them in games and play. Coloniality

COLONIALITY

refers to the long-term effects of European colonialism on the world today, including our everyday lives.

shapes what we consider 'entertainment' today, what we expect to see in a game, and who we expect to design those games for us. But before we dive more into the effects of colonial ideas in games, consider doing activities 1.1. and 1.2 to get a clearer picture of what we mean by coloniality.

In addition to the psychological, physical, social, economic, and political impact of Europe's invasion of other territories, **coloniality** is also about who we remember as 'great people' in history and who we associate with the world's problems. Although differences between rich and poor are real, they are also human-made and maintained by a combination of history and storytelling.

ACTIVITY 1: What is coloniality?

1.1 "Great people in history": Put a timer to 1 minute. Take a piece of paper and write down as many "great people in history" as you can. When the timer has stopped, look at your list:

– How many names on your list belong to Black, Indigenous or people of colour?

– How many of them are not from Europe or North America?

– What do you think makes the names on your list "more great" than others? Why do you think this is?

1.2 "Media catastrophes": Take a look at today's newspaper or a news site. Try to find a report about a problem in the world, such as poverty, war, hunger, violence, crimes, or refugees.

– Who is the article about?

– If there are pictures, what do the people look like? Is there a difference between how the media reports about people in crisis who are white and who aren't white? What is different?

This is where games come in: Games are celebrated as a powerful storytelling medium. But they are also a growing global market. This means that games, like other things in society, are affected by coloniality and racism.

In this book, we focus on three ways in which games, coloniality and racism are connected. The first one is the **themes, stories, and ideas included in games**. In our personal stories earlier, we talked about how games may present whiteness as something good or heroic while presenting Blackness as something dangerous or animal-like. In many games, we see 'colonial' stories where players take the roles of European kings, conquerors, and settlers (Puerto Rico, African Star, Catan, and the Civilisation series to name only a few). In many video games, we take the sides of white American soldiers or freedom fighters (America's Army, Resident Evil). There are also games in which we can fight with 'good' white magic and 'evil' black magic (Magic: The Gathering). These fantasies come from colonial ideas that white European people are civilised and morally advanced, while Native peoples of the South are inhuman creatures, beasts, and savages (Marks 2017). We go into details and give examples of how colonial history and ideas relate with games in chapter 2.

The second reason why we should think about the relationship between coloniality, racism and play is the **playful situation** itself. Who gets to play in peace? Whose play is interrupted by harassment and discrimination? Unfortunately, games are not equal when it comes to these questions: Racist acts happen through play and gaming. For instance, many Black gamers on online platforms like the XboX Live universe experience regular discrimination based on the sound of their voices (Gray 2012). More often

than not, people pick up and repeat racist language, deliberately or unconsciously. Therefore, the question is how we can become conscious of racist acts when they happen, learn to prevent them and, that way, become fairer players. Chapter 3 looks at these questions in more detail.

Third, besides affecting us as individuals, coloniality and racism also relate to inequalities in the **games industry**. We often imagine a 'game developer' as a white male nerd from somewhere in the US or Europe. Our imagination is not far from reality. Most of the well-paying jobs in the games industry, like programming, design, and investment tend to be done by white people in the global North. At the same time, the production of gaming consoles, computers, and smart phones is mostly done by low-skilled workers of colour in countries such as China and Brazil (Huntemann 2013). This division between high-paid and low-paid workers exists because racism is an institutional and structural problem. By institutional, we mean racism that happens at the levels of political, governmental, economic, cultural, and other types of social and political institutions (Ture & Hamilton 1992). By a structural problem, we refer to how racist ideas stay strong in the social order we have historically created and made appear natural (Almeida 2019). This means that we tend to consider it normal that most leaders in big game companies are white, while most poor people recycling electronic waste are not. Chapter 4 will unpack this theme.

These examples show how games are part of a system which keeps and recycles racist ideas in society. Games play a big part in our social development and human growth. But they also carry some old baggage from colonial times. This is why we still need to keep talking about 'race' and 'racism' today, even and especially regarding fun and entertainment. Refusing to do so would not change history, nor would it necessarily help us understand how we can become more respectful and invested in fair play.

We know that talking about race and racism can be uncomfortable. These conversations require some hard emotional work from all of us. We need to examine our feelings and reflect about how and why racism might have affected us and our actions even in our most joyful or intimate play activities. But this discomfort is exactly why we need to stick with it. Serious conversations and hard work can help us overcome troublesome legacies of the past. In the end, this is not about ruining our fun with games but doing the work so that everyone can enjoy games equally.

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2
Representation

In the previous chapter, we described how coloniality and racism are consequences of racial categories white colonizers created to divide people into superior (themselves) and inferior (all others). We also demonstrated how coloniality and racism affect the way we think about the world, our place in it, and the opportunities we have in life.

We also stated that a **racist worldview** affects games and play by creating and keeping inequalities alive. As a solution, we argued that talking about how racism has affected us is crucial for respectful play. But we also described how these conversations for learning together can be uncomfortable and often emotionally exhausting. They require us to shift perspectives, and to question things that feel natural.

Nowadays, it is common that people question the existence of coloniality and racism in games. For instance, they may think that colonies are a thing of the past. Or that true respect means that we overcome our differences and no longer look at 'race'. Perhaps, they might think that there are already enough characters of colour in games, or that change will happen automatically if we just wait a bit. We think it is worthwhile thinking a bit more critically about these points, at least if we believe that our history matters.

Take the idea that "racism is in the past", for example. We don't seem to have a problem accepting that Ancient Rome has positively shaped how Europeans live today. Roman civilization existed over two thousand years ago, but we still recognise and celebrate the effects of Ancient Roman technologies, politics, arts, music, and religion on European lives. We know and still learn so much about the Romans because of the statues, buildings, writings, tales, and many other artefacts representing what life used to be two millennia ago.

Colonialism isn't so different from Ancient Rome in this respect. In a similar

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way, coloniality and racism have been kept alive through the circulation of racist symbols in science, culture, arts, literature, music, photography, cinema, TV programmes, memes, social media, and games (Maldonado-Torres 2007).

So instead of debating if coloniality and racism exist in games, it's more constructive to ask: How do historical ideas and prejudices remain alive in games? For example, why are white characters often presented as heroes, adventurers or saviours? Are

Black, Indigenous, Asian, or mixed-race characters presented at all? And if so, are they presented mostly along the lines of stereotypes?

You can think of asking such questions as if you were in an archaeological expedition of **media representations**: The point is to excavate missing links and meanings in games that have been hidden under layers of dust for a long time. Some people want them to remain hidden – the dust might hurt their eyes, or other demons might be unleashed if you crack open a secret door. For you to move forward in the expedition, you need to ask questions.

There are at least two ways to start excavating media representations. The first set of questions is about **quantity**, and you can apply them to any game of your choice:

- How many playable characters are there? What's their skin colour?
- How many characters are there in total? How many of them look white, Black, Indigenous, Asian, mixed-race, or racially ambiguous? (For non-human characters, decide the race they resemble the most.)
- Can you create a character? If yes, how many options of skin tones are there? When you enter the menu, what is the first option you see?

Answers to such questions can give us a good idea how game numbers differ from real-world numbers. For instance, while there are many players with different skin tones, many games only have white playable characters (Dietrich 2013). In games with character creators, the first option is often a white character.

The second set of questions is about **quality**. This goes into more detail with what characters look like, what world they live in, and what we can do in the game:

- What skin colour do kind, evil, supportive, helpful, dangerous etc. characters have?
- What can white characters do? What can non-white characters do? Is there a difference?
- What motivations or back stories do white/non-white characters have?

Answers to such questions can give us a first idea how racist, colonial ideas show up in a game. Are white characters presented as morally good, heroic, and civilised while non-white characters are presented as corrupt, miserable, evil, or primitive? We now invite you to do activities 2.1 and 2.2. as a first step.

It is important to remember that the goal of excavating racism and coloniality from representation is not to find 'proof' that games are 'actually' racist. The goal is to become aware of content which can harm players because they are experienced as racist. This happens because games – together with other media products, platforms, and technologies – can create, circulate and reinforce **racial stereotypes**.

Stereotypes are fixed, generalised beliefs about people which present their 'essence' as if it were a simple category. Racial stereotypes make it seem as if someone is a certain way because of their race: they are criminals because they are Latinx, they are good at sports because they are Black, they are spiritual and wise because they are Asian, they are terrorists because they are Arab, and so on. Almost any game contains such stereotypes (Leonard 2003).

ACTIVITY 2: Excavating racism in game representations

2.1. Quantity: Choose a game you know well (we recommend a digital game with a human central character for starters, although this exercise works with any game). Try to answer the following three questions:

– How many playable/important characters are there, and what's their skin colour?
– How many characters are there in total? How many of them look white, Black, Indigenous, Asian, mixed-race, or racially ambiguous? (For non-human characters, decide the race they resemble the most.)
– In games where you can create characters, how many skin tone options are there?

Write your answers on a piece of paper. Then reflect on the following questions: Are there more white characters than non-white characters in your game? Why do you think this is? How did you feel about being asked to classify your characters into different races? How easy or difficult was this exercise for you? What do you think are the uses and limits of this method?

2.2. Quality: Now have a look at the same game and answer the following three questions:

– What roles do the game's characters play? (E.g. hero, villain, friend, side kick). What racial features do they have? Why do you think this is?
– What can white characters do? What can non-white characters do? Is there a difference?
– What motivations or back stories do white/non-white characters have?

Write your answers on a piece of paper. What are some examples of how white characters act vs. how non-white people act? Do you see any traces of the colonial hierarchy of white (= good, heroic, civilised) versus non-white (= bad, suffering, barbaric) in your notes? How is this different from task 2.1? Was it harder or easier? What did you learn?

The problem with racial stereotypes is that they make us think of people (sometimes including ourselves) through discriminating categories. That's why it's important to recognise stereotypes and be aware of the problems and limitations they bring.

While the examples above might be easy to spot, things get more complicated when racial stereotypes are hidden in symbols and metaphors. Symbols are important because

they touch our emotions. Think of a drawing that represents a heart, for example. When we receive a heart emoji on social media, we tend to feel relaxed or happy because we have learned that that symbol means love, joy, and affection. Likewise, there are other symbols that can make people feel bad due to racist meanings infused in them.

In the previous chapter, Leonardo shared a memory of the game Donkey Kong when he was a child in Brazil. In his friend group, this game character was used as a racist slur against Black kids. How come? The main character in the game is a gorilla, but not one in the wild. This gorilla dresses up and behaves like a human being. For some people, this might simply look like a funny game character. For others, who have shared Leonardo's experience, this human-like monkey symbolises something else.

At least since colonial times, white people have called Black people 'monkeys'. 'Donkey Kong' has given a new face to this old racist idea. Even if the game developers didn't mean any harm, they have created a character that matches the racist characterisation of a monkey. Again, it is important to dig deeper to see how symbols get meanings over time.

Like archaeologists looking for Ancient Roman artefacts, we can start excavating the history of the representation of Black people as apes. As it turns out, the roots of this image go back hundreds of years in European history. The first version of this image comes from Antonio Torquemada in 1570. He reports that a Portuguese woman has been exiled to Africa, been captured by an ape and had his babies.

This report is a fantasy story that dehumanises Black men by comparing them to apes. This phenomenon has a name: 'simianisation'. Simianisation is the view that Black people can be compared to wild beasts. In the centuries that followed Torquemada's fantasy story, simianisation has been made popular in the media, through literature, arts, entertainment, advertising, and even science. A popular example is the film King Kong (1933). Like Donkey Kong (1981), it features a huge ape kidnapping a white woman. In a world without racism, King Kong might be an innocent fantasy. However, in our history of coloniality and racial hierarchies, 'simianisation' can fuel racist acts against black people in the form of name-calling, harmful stereotypes, and even physical violence.

Let's get back to the Donkey Kong character and its various incarnations across the games series. At first glance, there are a lot of details that don't seem to make sense:

• Why would an ape be interested in kidnapping a white woman (Pauline) and throwing barrels at a white man with a moustache (Jumpman)?

• How did this ape get from his home, possibly a jungle, to a place where white people live just to bother them?

• Why does Donkey Kong start wearing a tie in later games?

• Why are Donkey Kong and his friends the subjects of a rap song?

• Why does he use a 'coconut gun'?

 While everything is possible in games, no matter how little it makes sense, let's try and dig a bit deeper: What ideas is Donkey Kong's story based on? How might they be related to what we called simianisation, the stereotyping of Black men as wild animals?

STOP AND THINK: Spotting stereotypes in game characters

1. Look at the questions we asked about Donkey Kong. Additionally, you may look up images of the Donkey Kong character online: What human features can you spot? Make a list of feelings, motivations, actions, appearance, and anything else which seems human to you.
2. Think about what kind of human Donkey Kong is. For instance, are the feelings you noted positive or negative? What about actions, appearances, anything else? Be as precise as possible when describing the features you collected.
3. Have you seen this specific combination of features before? Is there a racial or ethnic group that you immediately think of when you look at the features?

You can repeat points 1–3 of this exercise for any fantasy, animal, or human game character of your choice.

Donkey Kong is based on a number of stereotypical features which have been repeated in history to build a tradition of prejudice which puts Black men in a box: physical aggression, rap music, and impulsiveness are all part of this box. Since Donkey Kong combines all these traits, a well-known image is repeated and can be used as a slur against black male bodies.

In Leonardo's childhood, *Donkey Kong* was used as an instrument for racist bullying because of the history of the 'monkey' symbol. The friends who were using this slur were not necessarily aware of this history, but they knew their words could hurt.

In contrast, as a white kid, racist stereotypes didn't affect Sabine. This is because there is no history around stereotyping white people for their race. Sabine has indirectly benefited from this history because it has meant that no-one bullied them for being white. If now Sabine was to say, "I am white and people call me names too!", the name-calling would have been about something other than race. Of course, bullying and harassment are never okay! But it's important to name different types of bullying for what they are (Sabine experienced discrimination for their gender and their height, not for their race). Looking at how characters, stories, and images in games are connected over time and across media helps us understand this difference.

Let's not forget that the point of creating games is for players to have fun. Based on what we already know about racism and coloniality and how they developed over time, we can expect these themes to show up in our most beloved and most popular games. The most fun ones, in fact.

Many well-designed board games, for example, use **colonialism as a game theme**. Some of these board games are even set in real world places, like *Puerto Rico*, *Mombasa*,

and *The Star of Africa*. You can perhaps think of other titles! You might know some of these games from fun game sessions with your family and friends. Taking a critical look at those games is not about destroying those precious memories but about adding a new perspective.

Let's take *The Star of Africa*, a very popular Finnish board game from 1951 designed by the 19-year-old Kari Mannerla. In the game, we play the role of adventurers in Africa. In the adventure, we receive funds from a fictional bank and move a game piece on an outdated map of the African continent as we look for the diamond called the 'Star of Africa'. This is done by rolling the dice and moving towards the many round tokens scattered over the map. Each treasure we find belongs to us and can be exchanged for money needed to dig for more diamonds or travel faster across the continent.

During this entire expedition, no African peoples are anywhere to be found. Even the robbers who occasionally hide under a token to steal our money look like white cowboys from American Western movies. Many names of places are outdated or inaccurate, and the illustrations on the original game board show some rough caricatures of Black people as primitive hunters of wild animals.

In this game, Africa appears as an empty, exotic place waiting for players to enter, move around, and grab what they find. Although the meeples come in all kinds of colours, there are hints that we are supposed to imagine ourselves in the roles of historically white European explorers: We start and end the game in the most Northern parts of Africa, where we take the Star of Africa to 'safety'. Note that the 'Star of Africa' is an actual diamond which was stolen from South Africa and taken to London where it is still part of the Queen's sceptre. This was done during the 'scramble for Africa', a period during the late 19th century and early 20th century, where several European countries, including Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, exploited the African continent for resources.

When we look at how we actually have fun when we play *The Star of Africa*, our attention is on the competition with the other players: the counting of money, the joy when we outrace other players, and the relief of making it back up North to safety. Africa is just a background image to this kind of fun we have with each other. Whether intended or not, this matches the way white Europeans thought of themselves during colonial times: Europeans imagined themselves as competition to each other, and in charge of culture, while they violently looted other places, and denied the humanity of peoples outside Europe.

Of course, neither *The Star of Africa's* designer nor players who still enjoy this game today have ever meant any harm. The question is, now that we see this link between games, racism, and colonial history, what are we going to do next? One possibility would be to acknowledge that this connection is real and that it has been having real, often harmful, effects on people's lives. A next step would be to look at other games that you suspect have similar contents and mechanics. That way we slowly learn to see how games, besides providing entertainment, have also been shaped by racism and coloniality.

Some questions to guide your next game excavations…

1. In as much detail as possible: What is the appearance of your character? How would you describe their race? (If they are non-human, what race do they remind you of?)
2. What does the game define as good or bad about your character?
3. What activities or themes does the game present as fun for players?
4. Try to come up with a player profile: What kind of player might enjoy these activities and themes? What kind of player might feel excluded by the game?

Colonialism has divided people into superior/white versus inferior/non-white. When you look at your answers from 1–4, how many connections can you find?

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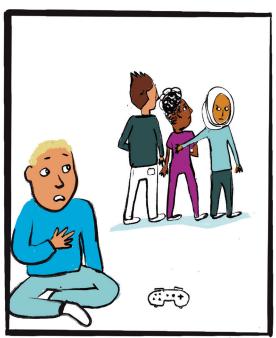
Playful interactions

In the previous chapter, we explored how racial representations and stereotypes can show up in games. Now we will move to the question of how racism can come into the picture while we play.

Our social interactions – the way we talk, act, and enjoy games together – are connected to culture and the world around us. Take language, for example. The words we use when we talk to each other are technically not 'our' words, but symbols and codes we learn and share with other people. As we use them, they become ours. It is almost automatic.

The same happens when we learn about race. Sometimes, we're not even aware of what kind of images, ideas, or beliefs float around us. Language works through symbols, which we pick up even if we don't know what some of them mean. We do this to be social, to be accepted, to belong. Unfortunately, along with learning new things, we also pick up old racist ideas that are still present in our culture. Remember our discussion of coloniality in chapter 1? The idea that white people are 'good' and Black people are somehow 'dangerous' made it all the way to Leonardo's and Sabine's childhood games. Because of history, we can hardly avoid learning these and other racist ideas. The question is then: *How can we reflect on and change ideas when we play?*

We would like to distinguish between two ways in which racism can express itself during play: *being racist* and *acting racist*. We briefly touched on this in the first chapter, but here we want to take a look at it in the context of playing with each other.

The difference between players who *are* racist and players who *act* racist has something to do with the way players see themselves.

Players who *are* racist openly identify with a racist worldview that claims white people are the 'most valuable' humans. Such players embrace and act on racist ideas. They

> The difference between players who *are* racist and players who *act* racist has something to do with the way players identify.

sometimes express their views on the internet, often in hostile attacks. This behaviour is part of what is referred to as **toxic gamer culture** (Consalvo 2012). One common idea in toxic gamer culture is that games are and should remain a space for white people only. Players of different racial backgrounds are seen as a threat to 'their' space. Therefore, self-identified racist gamers consider their harmful behaviours as self-defence. The most extreme and most visible types of gamers who are racist even organise targeted

harassment campaigns and 'hate raids' on streamers, journalists, developers, and players who are not white. These openly racist gamers are the minority.

By comparison, it is much more common for players to *act* unintentionally racist. In this case, players need not actively identify with racist ideas. Nor do they have to be aware that they are acting racist. For example, a white player might use a Black avatar to look 'cool' and 'athletic', or an Asian character to look 'mysterious' or 'magical' without knowing that such ideas are based on racist stereotypes (chapter 2). They might even say racist slurs 'as a joke', not because they want to be racist, but because they have heard other people make racist jokes and have picked up this habit themselves. Now remember that because of colonial history, racist behaviours and images are all around us. Unfortunately, repeating such behaviours can still be harmful even if no harm is intended. Luckily, there is always the option to unlearn the things we have mindlessly picked up from our surroundings.

But how can we *un*learn racist ideas? The first step is to listen to people who might feel hurt by some of our words and actions. Listening to such feedback can be hard, but it can also lead to a deep process of growth through self-reflection.

How can we unlearn racist ideas? A first step is to listen to people who feel hurt by our words and actions.

A second step is to invite others around us to unlearn racist ideas with us. If you believe someone close to you (such as a friend, relative, or teacher) is talking or acting in a racist way, you might be able to help them reflect on their actions.

Remember that the difference between *acting* and *being racist* is important. If you call out someone's bad behaviour by yelling "you're a racist", for example, you will probably receive a negative or dismissive response: perhaps the other person will get angry or not take you seriously. This might be different if you tell them that they *acted* in a racist way. Chances are better that they will listen. Talking about what people *do instead of* what they *are* can lead to more constructive conversations.

However, a word of caution is necessary: you don't always have to seek dialogue with people who act racist, especially if you suffer from racism. Anger and frustration are perfectly normal responses when one suffers discrimination. That said, if you want to go for dialogue and learning, focusing on *acts* rather than a person's *essence* can be an effective strategy.

If you are a white player and someone calls you 'a racist', stop and think: How well does this person know you? Have they observed you for a while and have come to the conclusion that you are, indeed, a bad person? Or is this person frustrated by something you did or said? Chances are that they are calling you 'a racist' because of something specific you did or said, not because of something you essentially *are*. Instead of getting defensive about the fact that someone is calling you 'a racist', try to reflect on how you might have *acted* racist.

Keep in mind that if a person feels harmed by you, it is not their job to tell you. If they tell you, they don't have to do it in ways that you immediately understand or

feel comfortable with. When feeling discomfort, a great first step would be to think about what you did, how it might have harmed someone else, and what you might do differently in the future.

Overall, your experience and background makes a difference in how you enter the playing field. Factors like race, but also gender and ability, matter to what you can do, and how risky the experience in play can be for you.

ACTIVITY 3: How does racism come into play?

Read the following description of a situation and think about what is happening. Then try to answer the three questions below.

Lasse is playing a tabletop strategy game with his friends Jasmine and Jacob. Lasse and Jacob are white, Jasmine is half East Asian and half white. When Jasmine makes the winning move, Lasse says, "That's unfair, Asians are so much better at maths." Jasmine and Jacob laugh.

– What is happening in this situation? Think about Lasse's comment: What is racist about it? Would you say Lasse *is* a racist or *acting* racist? How?
– Why do Jasmine and Jacob both laugh at Lasse's comment? Are they having fun? Why (not)?
– Think of other ways to react to Lasse's 'joke'. What could be done to help Lasse understand racism? Do Jasmine and Jacob have different options?

In activity 3, we asked you to think about a fictional play situation which might happen in real life. Even among good friends like Lasse, Jasmine, and Jacob, racist ideas can come into play. Lasse certainly only had the best intentions when he made a joke about Jasmine's race. Jasmine laughed it off not to make a big fuss, but there's a chance Lasse's joke actually hurt her feelings. So why didn't Jasmine just speak up? Why didn't she confront Lasse?

This might have to do with **privilege**, "an advantage or a set of advantages that you have and that others do not" (Oluo 2018, 59). You can imagine privilege as a backpack of goodies, clothes, tools, and maps that you are given at birth (McIntosh 1989). Unfortunately, not everyone gets to have the same amount of goodies in their backpack of privilege, and this is deeply unfair.

For instance, Lasse's and Jacobs backpacks are filled with white and male privilege. These are things that will help them get ahead in life because society puts value on them. Jasmine's backpack doesn't have these goodies, but she might have different ones. For instance, she may have had a good education, a wealthy family, or good health.

However, because Jasmine isn't male and white, she is probably going to have to work harder than Lasse and Jacob, just because her backpack doesn't have the same privileges and because she suffers types of discrimination that the boys don't.

Remember that none of the friends has *decided* to be privileged in particular ways, but it has happened to them, just by being born into a society which values different lives differently. Carrying a backpack with advantages and disadvantages means that society decides how much respect each of us gets, whose opinion and experience matter the most, and who gets to have the most fun during play.

So what does the backpack of privilege mean for play? There are two things which are good to remember. First, privilege makes the world less fair, so we might not want to see it. When we play, we want to feel like we're on the same playground. The rules of a game should be the same for all of us, right?

WHITE PRIVILEGE

is a set of unearned advantages white people are given by society. Peggy McIntosh (1989) has described white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious".

Unfortunately, it's not that easy. Because when we play games, we will bring our backpacks of privilege anywhere we go. We might even use our privileges against others. Lasse probably made his joke because he felt bad about losing against Jasmine. In this moment, he used his **white privilege** against her in order to make himself feel a bit less like a loser. He didn't make the joke to hurt Jasmine, but because white and male privilege have given him permission to express his feelings however he wants in most situations.

Not everyone gets to express their feelings whenever they want without consequences, and this has to do with privilege, too. The fewer provisions you have in your backpack, the more difficult it will be to express yourself freely without getting into trouble.

For example, if you are *not white* and you share your feelings about racism, you might get accused of being 'angry' or 'unreasonable'. If you are *not male* and you share your feelings about being treated unfairly, you might get pushback as well.

You might rightfully think that it's not worth bringing up unfair treatment when it happens. Just like Jasmine decided to laugh and let Lasse's comment go.

It gets even more complicated. What kind of advantages you have can be different depending on the social situation: Jasmine might be the only non-white girl in her group of friends, but among her siblings she might be the most white-passing person. This means that the provisions in our backpacks are not that straightforward. They can shapeshift depending on the situation, and they can only be 'half-privileges' that protect you from *some* forms of harm but not others.

Consider Ijeoma Oluo's statement, "a privilege has to come with somebody else's disadvantage – otherwise it's not a privilege" (Oluo 2018, 63). In other words, privilege

and fair play cannot exist at the same time. So what can we do to challenge privilege and make games an equal playing field?

Oluo (2018) has suggested that we start by **checking our privileges**. What she means by this is that we look inside our backpacks and reflect on all the things that might be putting us at an unearned advantage in life, as compared to someone else. How do our advantages shape our opinions and actions? How are they keeping us from fully understanding the experiences and struggles of others? How does your privilege matter in play? Let's start by checking our own privileges.

Sabine

My white privilege has given me many advantages, such as seeing people of my race widely represented in games, on TV, and in history books. Unlike people with darker skin, I don't really have to worry that my value as a human being is questioned, that my history is erased, or that there won't be people of my race in positions of power any time soon.

I also come from a family that was able to protect me, offer me a safe home and a good education. The social system in my country allowed me to get a university education without going into debt. Although I was broke at times, and doubted my ability to study because I'm from a non-academic home, I never faced serious threats like homelessness or war in my country.

My European passport has allowed me to access social and medical support services in the countries I've lived in so far. When travelling, I have never been stopped or treated suspiciously because of the colour of my skin. Because I'm white and look European, no-one has ever questioned my ability to integrate in other European countries, even if I don't speak the country's language.

When I get upset during a gaming session, I can expect to receive more attention than a person of the same gender with darker skin would. Because I don't have male privilege, my opinions will sometimes be labelled 'unreasonable', and given less importance than those of white men.

Because of my white privilege, I will sometimes act in racist ways without being aware that my behaviour might hurt others. When someone calls me out on acting racist, I can expect to be comforted and protected by other white friends, family members, and colleagues. While I don't always feel that games represent my gender as a non-binary person, I can still find games that take this part of me seriously.

Leonardo

Some of my circumstances have protected me against racist situations throughout my life. One of these circumstances is gender. As a cisgender heterosexual able-bodied man, I have not suffered from racism as it is manifested when combined with sexism and homophobia. When playing as a child in Brazil, other children bullied me with racial slurs, but it was never physical as it was for Black girls – whose humiliation included people constantly touching and belittling their hair and body – and Black

gay boys, who endured beatings and other forms of physical violence meant to "teach them how to play as men".

Like Sabine, I have also benefited from a stable home. In the unequal Brazil where I was born, both of my parents had permanent jobs. That gave me multiple benefits. In a stable home, I could fully live my childhood. I studied in good schools, I had time to rest, and I could play as much as I wanted without worrying about finding a job to support the family (as some of my friends did). I also had access to video games, which created possibilities to play safely when urban violence made it dangerous to play outside.

However, these circumstances cannot be understood as racial privileges. Gender and economic stability have not given me advantages over white people. The goodies in my backpack softened the impacts of racism in relation to other Black kids, whose backpacks were even emptier, but I never really lived a racism-free life. That is why it is difficult to think of these aspects as privileges: none ultimately prevented me from being exposed to racist ideas or dealing with racist acts.

And it can get worse: because gender and economic stability create a sense of benefit in relation to other people who suffer from racism, there is a risk of one acting racist against the other. I remember, for example, that there were many times playing games that I would transfer a racial slur to someone who had darker skin than mine. 'I'm not a monkey! Look at his skin! His ears! He is a monkey!'

We do have to check our privileges – the advantages we might have over others, but we also have to question if they are actually privileges or complicated nuances of racism in our interactions with one another.

ACTIVITY 4: Check your privilege

Consider Sabine's and Leonardo's reflections about privilege. Now start unpacking your own backpack by answering three questions (adapted from McIntosh 1989). You can do this in a group or by writing your answers on a piece of paper:

– What are one or more ways in which you've had unearned disadvantages in your life?
– What are one or more ways in which you've had unearned advantages in your life?
– How have these advantages and disadvantages played out in gaming? How have they shaped the way you interact with others?

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4

Race in the games industry

Understanding how coloniality and racism affect our experience playing games also requires a critical look at how games are created. For something like a 'games industry' to exist, many people must work together to design, develop, produce, and distribute the final products.

But who are these people? And who is most likely to see themselves as a prospective game developer? With these questions in mind, we would like to propose an exercise for reflection. Who do you imagine when you hear the words 'game creator' or 'game designer'? If you know some game creators or designers personally, who do you think of? If you don't know any, how do you imagine them?

STOP AND THINK: What does a game developer look like?

Think of a person who would represent a 'game developer', 'game creator', or 'game designer'. What does this person look like physically? How old/young are they? What gender and race are they? Where are they from? What do they like and dislike?

It's likely that the person you think of looks something like the pictures we often see in the media: a young, shy-looking white man in casual clothes. Even though anyone could be a game developer, we are often presented with this image, for example through 'nerd' or 'geek' characters in popular TV series or in comedy sketches on YouTube (Kendall 2011; Lane 2018).

Take the HBO TV series *Silicon Valley*, for example. Running for six seasons between 2014 and 2019, *Silicon Valley* was a critically acclaimed satire about the culture at the heart of technological development and innovation in the US. However, one problem is that the cast of the TV series was predominantly white and male, with few non-white characters. In response to criticism of the lack of diversity in the cast, one of the show's creators, Mike Judge, said:

"Well, if you're doing a movie about Nazi Germany, you can't [cast 50 percent people of colour] [...] And if you're doing a TV show about tech that's satire, you can't do it. [...] I don't think you do any service by pretending [Silicon Valley] is half female or half black[...]"[1]

In other words, he argued that the series represents reality as it is. This kind of thinking is very problematic. First, the fact that white people are the majority in game creation and design is not natural. Few Black people work in the real Silicon Valley because of racism and discrimination (Franklin 2022), not because Black creators and designers don't exist (they do!). Second, with a predominantly white cast, the TV series reinforces the colonial idea that power and success in creative work – like game design – is white instead of showing how the studios could be more diverse.

If game creation and design were more diverse, maybe whiteness would not be a problem in the games either. According to the Turkish games researcher Ergin Bulut, developers contradict themselves when they deny that games are white while filling game characters and stories with white masculine ideas (Bulut 2021). In his study, Bulut talked to a group of predominantly white and male game developers working at a medium-sized triple-A studio in the US. When asking the developers how they perceived the connection between whiteness and their games, they responded by focusing on games as objects of fantasy and escapism. There seems to be a desire by game developers to prioritise technical over social issues and to avoid the question of race. This prompted Bulut to ask:

> What is it about technology and white masculinity that enables game developers to forcefully invest their desires in creative work, claim mastery over technology, and a neutral position regarding ideological meaning? (Bulut 2021, 6).

What Bulut suggests is that creatives can experience their products as neutral, even if they are very passionate about creating something that would appeal to their own social group – in this case, white men.

Bulut's study is about what happens in game creation and design, but coloniality and racism are even more visible far away from the studios, where the physical, often underpaid work to build the technologies happens. Paraphrasing Bertolt Brecht's poem "A worker reads history", we could ask: Who builds the smartphones and video game consoles? Do the studios triumph alone? On whose labour force does a multi-million industry profit?

With these questions in mind, let's do a second exercise in reflection. Instead of imagining game creators and developers, imagine who builds microchips, assembles devices, tests software, and packs them for retail. Again, if you don't know anyone doing these jobs, you might have an idea based on what you have seen about them

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1 The quote is from a Digital Spy article (2018). You can read the whole article here: https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/ustv/a851718/silicon-valley-female-black-asian-representation-season-five-mike-judge-alec-berg/. Last accessed on 5 May 2022.

in the media. People who physically build technologies don't appear so much in TV series, but rather in news reports of bad working conditions of often poor, Black and Brown workers from mineral mines to factories across Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Wan 2019; Hammar 2020).

The situation both in the studios and in the factories indicates how colonial ideas and racist dynamics deeply affect the games industry. How can these problems be fixed?

Perhaps a good way to start answering this question is identifying who cannot fix the industry: workers who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour. A common belief is that more diversity in game creation and design will automatically solve the problem of racism in games. However, this belief, at this point in time, is unrealistic and unfair.

It is certainly positive that companies increase diversity and act against inequalities[2]. When employed, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour in the studios often act for change by speaking up and denouncing racism at the workplace. However, while many companies react with solutions, employees' protests can also create more problems.

For example, in some cases, companies may claim that Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour – who often have limited resources and administrative power to make decisions – are the ones responsible for fixing the problem of racism in the games industry. This is unfair because, as we have tried to show by looking at the studios and the factories, coloniality and racism make the games industry very unequal.

With the objective of practising a little empathy with racial minority workers in the games industry, imagine you are a new pupil at a school. There, bullies never let you play on the swing at the playground. One day, the bullies break the swing. After that, the bullies apologise for bullying you and finally invite you to the playground. However, for everyone to play on the swing again, they say you have to fix the broken equipment by yourself. Considering that you don't have money for spare parts, tools for the job, or, most importantly, authorization by the school to touch broken equipment on the playground, the conditions for you to play don't sound fair, do they?

This illustrates how problematic it can be for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour to fix the games industry. The pressure to educate or inspire their colleagues creates mental health risks for those employed in game creation and design. Because coloniality and racism are often connected to lifelong personal traumas, being unfairly charged with the responsibility to provide solutions to the racist experiences they suffer can add up to exhaustion, burnout, and other issues.

Most importantly, we believe that demanding Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour to solve the problem is denying the responsibility of those who 'broke' the industry in the first place. Just like white creators and designers, minority professionals

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2 PC Gamer, one of the most traditional gaming magazines in the world, reported (in February 2021) on the challenges companies have faced to make game creation and design a more diverse and respectful environment. Read the article here: https://www.pcgamer.com/has-the-games-industry-lived-up-to-its-black-lives-matter-promises/ Last accessed 13 May 2022.

want to do their jobs safely and in peace without necessarily even being interested in or needing to act against racism and injustice.

It is worth asking why companies expect initiatives for change from non-white people instead of demanding the same or more from their white executives, managers, and studio workers. For instance, companies rarely ask white staff to speak about their racist ideas or about their everyday actions to prevent their own racist acts while proactively organising to make their workplaces fairer for their minority colleagues. In other words, we believe that for the future of game creation and design to be fair, everyone in the industry has to act according to the power they have to change things.

For instance, executives and directors have the power to create better working conditions and wages for factory workers. They can also promote diversity in studios through zero-tolerance policies to all forms of workplace discrimination. Managers can act to ensure that minority creators and designers feel they can work and create in peace, including the freedom to create games that have clear anti-racist storylines if they wish. White creators and designers have to respect the presence and the creative decisions of their minority colleagues. They also have to learn to avoid involuntary racist acts at the workplace.

How about us? What can we do, as players, to contribute to the reduction of the consequences of coloniality and racism in game creation and design? In this chapter, we have proposed one first step: to learn and talk about how inequalities affect the ways companies build the devices we use and create the games we play. In activity 5 (see below), we invite you to think about the traces of colonial legacies in your favourite digital games. With that knowledge, we can use our individual and collective power as players to pressure companies to support and adopt measures that can improve work conditions for minorities in studios and factories. In addition, as we discuss in the next and final chapter, we can also look for and create alternative game experiences that promote anti-racist ideas and fair play.

ACTIVITY 5:
Excavating colonial traces in our favourite games

The objective of this activity is to read manuals and use online search engines to seek as much information as possible about the production of our favourite electronic and digital games as well as the devices we use to play them. Individually or in groups, use the questions below (a) to check for elements of coloniality in the game production and (b) to verify if the companies are taking measures to fix problems of racism in their factories and studios.

1. Write down the name of one game and the device you use to play it (e.g., Grand Theft Auto, XBox).

2. About the game creator/designer: Who (person, company) created the game? Where in the world is the creator located? If you can find public information about the company's staff, how diverse (race, gender, country) do you consider it to be? What public information can you find about the creator's policies or views on 'diversity' and 'racism'? If the game was made in a majority non-white context (for example, Japanese games), how might this affect the dynamics of coloniality and racism within the studio and in the product?

3. About the device you use to play: What company produces the device? Who created and designed it? Where is the creator of the device located? Where in the world is the device built? If you can find public information about the factories' workers, how diverse (race, gender) do you consider them to be? What public information can you find about the work conditions (such as pay, hours, holidays, or safety) in those factories? How fair or unfair do you evaluate these conditions to be? What public information can you find about the company's policies or views on 'work conditions' and 'fair trade'?

Based on your reading of chapter 4, you can also come up with additional questions. In case you cannot find public information on these topics, ask yourself why not. This is an exploratory exercise, so there are no right or wrong answers.

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5

Fair play and anti-racist action

In the previous chapters, we explored the origins of racism and coloniality, and how they come into play through game contents, interactions between players, and the games industry. In each chapter, we also proposed exercises for you to think about these topics from your own perspective. Now, we turn to the importance of thinking about fair play through the lens of *anti-racism*. In this final chapter, we look at how you – as a player and perhaps even a future game designer – can take anti-racist action. In general, our goal is to reflect on two questions: Is the seriousness of anti-racism action incompatible with the playful nature of games? Can anti-racism games be fun?

Let us start by making a distinction: To be *anti-racist* is not the same as saying "I'm not racist". People who say "*I'm not racist, but…*"

> How can we unlearn racist ideas? A first step is to listen to people who feel hurt by our words and actions.

or "*I don't see colour…*" are focusing on 'racist' as an identity rather than potential acts that everyone can, and often does – deliberately or unconsciously – engage in (see Introduction and chapter 2). Their denial means that they refuse to admit the fact that stereotypes, histories of discrimination, and racist media representations affect all of our lives, thoughts, and behaviour.

In contrast, to be anti-racist is to act against racist ideas and actions that shape our everyday lives and the way we interact with one another (Kendi 2019). Being anti-racist requires constant proactive efforts against racist ideas and acts that surround and affect all of us.

Anti-racist action is more than talk. As Ijeoma Oluo puts it, "While many people are afraid to talk about race, just as many use talk to hide from what they really fear: action" (Oluo 2018, 227). In many ways, this fear or reluctance to act is understandable, because it is difficult work. Anti-racist action does not happen automatically once someone becomes aware of racism and coloniality. Anti-racism requires permanent learning, constant vigilance to prevent our own racist acts, and involvement with multiple initiatives meant to understand, identify, denounce, prevent, and stop racist behaviour, social relations, and policies.

In other words, anti-racist action can be very uncomfortable, physically tiring, and emotionally exhausting. Most importantly, acting against racism feels different to people in different social groups. If, like Leonardo, you have felt the pain of racism against you, anti-racist action will also include dealing with and healing from a lifetime of

trauma. If you are white, like Sabine, anti-racist action demands learning how whiteness both protects you from the violence of racism and has been benefiting you in many aspects of your life since childhood. In addition to dealing with deeply personal issues, anti-racism action is also collective. So, it is important to remember to respect other people's journeys and actions as much as you would like them to respect yours. That is why we also need to be aware of the impact of our words and actions on others.

If we play games to have fun and relax, can this be compatible with the demanding and uncomfortable nature of anti-racism? If anti-racist actions are meant to stop serious problems in society, can they be playful and fun like the games we play? By asking these questions, we want to reflect about and demonstrate how game culture can contribute to anti-racism in our everyday lives.

In fact, some game creators and designers have tried to make games about serious topics, like oppression and discrimination. However, despite their good intentions, their efforts have received some criticism. Some creators have made games to teach empathy by putting players in the shoes of oppressed people. One example is *Darfur is Dying* (2006), a game in which players select a displaced family member in the midst of a conflict in Western Sudan[3]. However, some game researchers argue that instead of making players care more, simulating minorities' pains can make people more indifferent than empathetic (see Fan et al. 2021; Ruberg 2020).

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Instead of focusing on pain, what might anti-racist action in games look like? There are several strategies with different levels of involvement. We'll introduce four of them as recommendations here: (1) seek games which actively confront coloniality and racism in their design; (2) act to push for changes in problematic games; (3) change a game through critical modding; and (4) make your own anti-racist game.

1. Seek games which actively confront coloniality and racism

One possible starting point for anti-racist action in games would be to seek out games made with an anti-colonial or anti-racist perspective. One example is *80 Days*, a narrative game by Inkle Studios, which adapts the famous novel *Around the World in Eighty Days* by Jules Verne. In *80 Days*, we play as Passepartout, the French valet of Phileas Fogg, making decisions about travel routes, social interactions, and trading deals. Although the game is very clearly inspired by Verne's novel, the 1900s historical setting is remade to include steampunk and anti-colonial elements.

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3 You can read about Darfur is Dying here: https://games4sustainability.org/gamepedia/darfur-is-dying/ Last accessed 16 May 2022.

One important concern for the *80 Days* game writer, Meghan Jayanth, has been to remove the global power imbalance created throughout colonialism. In the game, this shows through small encounters, like the Zulu Federation in South Africa who, through the use of sophisticated technology, prevented the *Scramble for Africa* (the invasion and division of African territory starting in the late 1800s). According to Jayanth, the idea was to give all characters in the world agency, instead of making the story revolve around the two main characters (Joho 2014). That way, the players learn that other people beyond white European explorers also have causes to fight for.

2. Act to push for changes in problematic games

We all know game creators and designers ultimately make games for players to enjoy. Likewise, most game studios are not interested in oppressing or discriminating players. That means that some game developers and studios are open to criticism about potentially discriminating contents in their games and are also willing to change some designs to make them more respectful.

In 2018, Amanita Design[4] in the Czech Republic designed a game named *Chuchel*. In the game, the main character is a black dust bunny. Chuchel's black woolly body, bulging white eyes and thick red lips, as well as his behaviour as a lazy goofball have reminded some players of well-known blackface stereotypes (Goodall 2018). In reaction to the criticism, the creators made a small adjustment and changed Chuchel's colour from black to orange. They also released a statement explaining the change: "As a team of peace-minded creative people, we simply do not want any of our games and characters even remotely associated with racism or any other form of hate crime."[5]

This relatively cheap redesign of Chuchel shows that it is possible for studios to change their designs even after a game's official release, when they take players' push for change seriously. In the end, avoiding racist stereotypes was more important to the studio than insisting on a character that might cause discomfort and pain especially to Black players.

3. Mod an existing game

Another way of taking anti-racist action in games is through *modding* (that is, modifying) existing games.

One example is *First Nations of Catan*[6] (Loring-Albright 2015), a mod of the popular German board game classic *Settlers of Catan*. The author of the mod, Greg Loring-Albright, noticed that in *Settlers of Catan*, the players are invited to harvest

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4 https://amanita-design.net/
5 You can read the complete statement by Chuchel's creators here: https://amanita-design.net/chuchel_change.html
6 Read more about the First Nations of Catan here: https://dofdmenno.org/first-nations-of-catan/

crops and build roads on a lush island, but are never told whose land they are settling on. This, he thought, was quite similar to the way white European settlers treated lands overseas during colonisation. Therefore, he decided to modify *Settlers of Catan* by introducing Indigenous peoples who resist the settlers. *First Nations of Catan* uses the same game pieces as the original but changes the rules for interaction. These new rules are critical about the idea that settlers can just come in and take over Catan from Indigenous people.

Another example is *Equality Street*, a mod of the famous *Frogger* game created by students in Amanda Phillips's class (Phillips 2013; Wilcox 2014). In the original game, players must help a frog cross a busy street. In the mod, they help one of four friends to get back to their dorm after a party. The game has four levels, one for each friend. These levels present different challenges depending on their racial and gender identities (white male, white female, non-white male, non-white female). For instance, the women have to avoid stalkers on the street while the non-white characters have to dodge patrolling police officers who might arrest them (Phillips 2013).

Rather than trying to be perfect, mods can be an opportunity to take a critical look at complicated systems and start contesting them. What are the logics fuelling coloniality? Who is visible, who is invisible? What challenges does racism impose, for whom, and how is survival possible? Modding won't bring about final solutions, but it may help come up with exciting and respectful perspectives.

4. Design your own anti-racist game

Finally, it is certainly possible to take things into your own hands and try designing your own anti-racist game from scratch. You could start by making a board game, but there are also quite a few programs out there which allow you to make a digital game without getting excessively technical. Check out the pixel game maker Bitsy[7], or the text adventure tool Twine[8], for example.

Besides choosing the game platform, the most difficult task will be to figure out what your game should be about. When we, the authors, talked about the question of what an anti-racist game might be, we couldn't come up with a straightforward answer. However, we found some possible starting points.

For example, Leonardo suggested making a game which teaches the players about the system of colonialism and slavery without representing human bodies (to avoid the 'empathy trap' we described earlier in this chapter). In this game, your goal would be simply to open cages of enslaved people, but in order to do so, you would need to go through legal and illegal routes in a system which keeps the cages shut. The point of such a game would be to show how slavery as a system was created and maintained

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7 https://ledoux.itch.io/bitsy
8 https://twinery.org/

to keep a certain order, and how difficult it was for abolitionists back then and it is for anti-racists today to challenge racism.

Besides developing the topic, another important thing to figure out is your experience and perspective as a creator. The first step is to check your privileges (chapter 3), and to make yourself aware what experiences with racism you have or don't have.

Are you white and have you never thought about yourself in relation to race or racism? You can take this as a starting point to question your relationship with whiteness and ask critical questions. For example, Sabine made the Bitsy game The Stars Are Beautiful Tonight[9], which is about 'discovering' white privilege after reading Peggy McIntosh's (1989) work (see chapter 3). In the game, a small white pixel character admires a beautiful night sky until McIntosh's spirit appears and invites them to look more closely. It turns out that each star in the night sky stands for an unseen privilege in Sabine's life. By moving from seeing 'neutral' protective pretty stars towards seeing unearned advantages, the game character goes through what it has felt like for Sabine to learn about their privileges.

No matter where you are on your journey towards anti-racist awareness, or what kind of experiences you have of racism, you can use game design to explore where you are. How might you be able to understand what's going on in a way that models it through play?

Keep in mind that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. If you are part of a racial minority, it is not your obligation to make anti-racist games. In fact, it can be fun to build a game which has nothing to do with race at all but just focuses on something you enjoy, like solving tricky puzzles or getting high scores. However, if you are trying to make an anti-racist game, there is useful advice from gaming experts available on what to do and what to avoid. Here are six recommendations, adapted from Fan et al. (2021) on how to avoid some of the "worst practices":

1. **Don't share other people's stories without consultation.**

2. **Don't ask Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour whether your game is 'realistic'.**

3. **Don't make others verify your anti-racist message.**

4. **Don't design characters or role-play that relies on painful or harmful performances of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.**

5. **Don't design games that are meant to 'save the world' and fix all problems related to racism.**

6. **Don't criticise game design by Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour for designing content which does not involve racial politics.**

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9 You can play The Stars Are Beautiful Tonight here: https://enibolas.itch.io/the-stars-are-beautiful-tonight

These six principles are useful to keep in mind as you go about designing a game story, mechanic, or character. Let's try to break them down with some examples.

Points 1, 2, 3, and 6 are all concerned with how we approach other people when we design games. Before we design our game, it is important to think about what stories we are 'allowed' to share. For example, if you want to design an Indigenous character who suffers from discrimination, you should only do so if you are Indigenous yourself or if you pay an Indigenous consultant or developer to collaborate. These are ways of preventing stereotypes (chapter 2) when we tell stories from the history of coloniality that has shaped and surrounds us (chapter 1). In game design and beyond, staying close to our own stories instead of assuming that we can know those of others is a way of taking this history seriously. We can neither speak on behalf of someone else nor ever 'walk in their shoes', no matter how realistic our graphics or sophisticated our game engines might be.

A second common trap arises if we want the game we design to capture racial experiences *realistically*. This is problematic for several reasons. While racism and coloniality are structural (chapter 1), people experience them differently. In this sense, asking Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour if a game content is 'realistic' puts pressure on them to make a general statement about something personal. If they answer personally, we cannot assume their answer to represent 'reality'. A game might seem innocent to one player of colour but may feel inappropriate and traumatising to someone else. Therefore, getting approval from one person cannot ultimately 'protect' your game from potentially offending players.

Point 3 cautions against the problem of asking others to verify the anti-racist 'quality' of the game. Earlier in this chapter, we have discussed anti-racism as a difficult but much needed way of taking action. This includes actions against the racist dynamics in our game design world. Taking action in this context also means taking responsibility for what we design. Asking others to verify our message, as if asking for their approval, is to hide from the deeply reflexive and proactive process of taking responsibility for our design.

When it comes to game design as a form of anti-racism action, points 4 and 5 are essential. They advise on how we might design game characters and worlds in respectful ways. It is an understandable impulse that when addressing discrimination and pain, we would want to represent this pain in our games. However, role-play which relies on harmful or painful performances can also be a way of repeating stereotypes and trauma, especially when we design such experiences from an outsider perspective.

Similarly, point 5 addresses another common impulse, which is to empower characters – and by extension players – to save the world from structural racism. Stories of lonesome heroes who save the world from peril are widely known in video games. Since they are often white, they are linked to what is called **white saviour complex**. The idea behind this complex is that white people, if they try really hard, can save the world from danger, ironically, often without consent, and by killing those classified as danger. In the context of gaming, Meghan Jayanth has also written about this as

"white protagonism" (Jayanth 2021), a pattern which associates superhuman powers with white Western characters. The problem is that this simplifies the complexity of racism and coloniality in society and suggests that simple interventions are enough to 'fix' pervasive problems. When it comes to making anti-racist games, creating simple power fantasies like these is simply not enough.

Luckily, designing games is an activity which can also inspire deep, critical thinking about structural issues. It can empower you to think outside the box, and create worlds and characters that only you could think of. In designing games, we can create systems which reflect our current understanding of the world and which allow us to invite others to think and act in anti-racist ways with us. This is why we would like to conclude this book by inviting you to do activity 6 and design your first anti-racist game.

ACTIVITY 6: Designing your first anti-racist game idea

1. Think about how you would make a game which teaches your player(s) about systemic racism. Grab a piece of paper or a sketchbook and write down answers to the following questions.
2. Think about your designer position: What is your race and experience related to racial discrimination? (For example, are you white and have no experience with racial discrimination? Are you Asian-Finnish and have experienced racism?)
3. What do you know about coloniality and racism? Based on what you know, how does coloniality work? Think of possible mechanics, rules, and goals.
4. What roles do the players take in your game? What is their mission? Who should play your game and why?
5. Who are the protagonists? Are there other characters in the world?
6. What are the setting and game-world like?

After you have defined points 1–6, take a look at the "worst practices" list; especially items 1, 4, and 5. After that, reflect on the questions below.
– Are you telling a story that is not your own?
– Does your game put non-white characters in harmful or painful situations?
– Does your game try to "save the world" or fix all problems related to racism?
– If the answer to any of these questions is yes, what could you do to change your design?

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