Skins for Sale: Linking Player Identity, Representation, and Purchasing Practices

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Abstract. Although understudied, microtransactions are becoming widespread in games, especially for the purchase of aesthetic variation in-game. In this paper, we review literature around representation in games and purchasing practices tied to player racial identity to provide insight on how in-game racial representational options and microtransactions may impact purchasing practices of players of diverse racial backgrounds. We selected articles which articulate racial identity, representation in games, and purchasing practices in ways that could be applied to the in-game purchases of non-white character representation in the form of "skins." The diversity of both players and game characters is steadily increasing in the US. Several of the sources we review here examine this theme and how it is *felt* by players of color. In this review we thread together research that has focused on the state and effect of representation in games, with research considering the role of racial identity in consumer practice to better examine how players of color feel about purchasing self-representation in games.

Keywords: Microtransactions · Representation in games · Diversity in gaming

1 Introduction

According to the Electronic Software Association, the United States video game industry generated 36 billion dollars in revenue in 2017 [5]. Although exact numbers are difficult to come by, a growing percentage of the industry's revenue is driven by microtransactions, a term simply referring to "the processing of transactions involving small monetary amounts" [23], often "a one-time transaction that in some cases can be repeated" [24]. Microtransactions are increasingly common in games, especially so-called "Free to Play" games [1]. Microtransactions in games generally fall into two high-level categories. The first allows the acquisition of in-game practical items, such as weapons and power-ups, which directly affect game-play. The second allows the

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acquisition of cosmetic items, which may change the appearance of game items and/or characters. In this review, we are concerned with the second category, specifically the purchase and use of cosmetic "skins." In the context of video games, the term "skins" derives from the application of visual surface detail to otherwise featureless 3D character models (a literal, virtual, epidermis). Skins are cosmetic, offering no in-game mechanical advantage or player-performance enhancement. It may take hundreds of transactions and cost upwards of thousands of dollars to acquire all skins even in a single game [2, 11, 15, 25, 26]. Additional research is required to understand the amount players are willing to spend, and their motivations for doing so.

As an example of how these microtransactions may function consider the game *Overwatch,* which allows players to purchase "loot boxes" containing five randomly generated in-game items. Although not always literally called "loot boxes," as in *Overwatch,* this practice of selling virtual containers that randomly award a selection of in-game items and rewards is widely used. Skins are often highly sought after items from a larger pool of possible selections [26]. Other forms of micro-transactions are more direct. *Fortnite: Battle Royal,* for instance, allows players to buy skins directly, either with in-game currency acquired through gameplay or with actual money. While they can be purchased directly, skins in *Fortnite Battle Royal* are not always available to players, as the shop rotates daily or weekly. While both games are notable for their relatively diverse casts, diverse "skins" in games *like* these may only be available through microtransactions—meaning that players from underrepresented communities may have to either play more or pay more just to obtain a "skin" like their own in-game.

In her article "Race in/for Cyberspace," Lisa Nakamura found many white Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) players donning Asian "performances" to *play* at identities other than their own [16]. While the popularity of MUDs has mostly declined, in the current microtransaction scenario, white players may be able to more literally acquire "other" skins or simulations, whereas players of color may be required to pay extra just to play a character that looks like them—an evolution of the situation that Nakamura describes.

Though the industry has grown immensely in recent decades, and its customer base has diversified along axes of race, gender, and socio-economic background [3, 18, 21], the playable characters in these video games have not achieved the same diversity [7, 8, 12, 17, 27]. Census data shows that African American and Hispanic youth play video games at higher rates than players of any other race [19], but are grossly underrepresented as main characters in games [7], and in games more broadly [27]. Default player characters commonly conform to outdated assumptions of audience demographics (i.e. white, male). Characters of different races or genders are increasingly available, but may only be accessible through microtransactions.

With the growth of micro-transactions and in-game purchases as a central revenue stream for the games industry, research is required to understand their impact on players of color, especially when these microtransactions may be the only way to acquire "skins" like theirs. In this paper, we review literature around representation in games as well as purchasing practices tied to racial identity to investigate how in-game representational options tied to microtransactions may impact purchasing practices of players of diverse racial backgrounds.

2 Methods

Our primary goal in this review is to thread together research that has charted the domain of representation in games [7, 8, 12, 17, 22, 27] and those who have described the broader stakes of representation in media and games [10, 14, 16, 18, 21], with those who have considered the role of racial identities in consumer practices [6, 13, 20]. It should be noted that our focus is on commonly and academically defined discursive racial categories and identities that may signify cultural, ethnic, regional, or cultural heritage. While no publications, case studies, or other research could be found that have discussed the intersection between all three of our areas of interest, to provide a basis for our future work we needed to identify scholars and research that helps frame a discussion at the intersection of these themes (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Illustration of our literature categories.

We conducted keyword searches through the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), Illinois Digital Environment for Access to Learning and Scholarship (IDEALS), the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) digital libraries, and Google Scholar when very little was found in the first three. Our keyword search comprised different single-word uses and combinations of the following words (at times with additional prepositions such as "in" and "of," or conjunctions such as "and" or "&"): color, consumerism, consumption, digital, games, identity, media, play, players, purchasing, race, racial, representation, video, and video games. We did not include search terms for broader cultural or national identities, as these often exist apart from racial identity, and outside the scope of our research question.

Although we initially sought recent work, our search needed to be expanded, eventually resulting in only twenty-three sources, some of which we ended up leaving out of the final review because they proved to be less relevant and eight we highlight here in the paper to varying extents. Sources published in non-peer reviewed venues, master's theses, or sources whose analysis didn't appear to address the intersection of our broader categories of interest based on title and abstract were ignored.

All articles or books found to be relevant to the subject were uploaded to a shared Zotero library and divided amongst authors for closer screening. We focused on literature that addresses intersections of our three categories: player identity, representation in media, and purchasing practices. Each author identified the primary arguments and concepts related to our broader research question. Scholars such as Passmore et al., Shaw, Nakamura, Hart, and Higgin, address the intersection of players' identities and representation in media and games. Lamont and Molnar, Gandy, and Shankar et al. address the intersection of racial identity and consumption. We found a lack of literature addressing the intersection of representation in media and purchasing practices.

3 Findings

While the scope of this paper makes detailing every article we reviewed difficult, in this section we outline the arguments of some of the sources we consider significant for our topic and future work. These include Passmore et al. [18] and Hart [9] —whose work suggests the *kinds* of data we are likely to collect in future research—and Nakamura [16], Higgin [10], Shanker et al. [20], and Gandy [6], who provide possible lenses for analyzing that data.

Passmore et al. stress the fast growing buying power of players of color. Although, they also find a general agreement between white and non-white developers and players that more diversity in games is needed [18]. Passmore et al. observe a discrepancy between this desire and the incorporation of diversity in games. They argue racial and ethnic representation in games has become "a social and moral demand" [18].

In his article, "Getting into the Game," Casey Hart researches the way that players design and present their avatars in the gaming world, bringing to light a core relationship between player and character. Hart argues that players use avatars to "explore alternate versions of themselves" or what he calls "anti-projections" of themselves, as opposed to reflections of themselves" [9]. Though he is chiefly concerned with correlations of personality and performance, Hart's analysis raises questions around the relationship between players and diversity.

Nakamura describes the "the cybernetic world" as a unique social space where people may easily perform identities other than their own [16]. Nakamura is an early scholar to highlight that performativity—especially how people use speech and mannerisms to present their identities—is as important in cyberspace as it is in "real life." She evaluates textual performances in online communities and develops the concept "virtual tourism," to describe (white) participants in her observations performing "personae" other than their own, especially "asianness" [16]. Nakamura states, "programming language and internet connectivity have made it possible for people to interact without putting into play any bodies but the ones they write for themselves" [16]. That is, regardless of their real-world identities, players may choose to rewrite their virtual identities through the ways they choose to represent themselves online.

While Nakamura expands our understanding of the complexities of race in virtual spaces by examining performances of participants, Tanner Higgin's "Blackless Fantasy" highlights the exclusion of non-European narratives in many fantasy games [10]. Higgin critiques the erasure of black characters from many games which seems to also apply to the difficulty of obtaining diverse skins in other games; by putting diversity behind a paywall, developers are hindering potential diversity within their games, and forcing many players of color to settle for white male avatars.

Although there is a lack of literature directly addressing the intersection of racial identity and consumption in video games, there is literature that discusses how players often seek to "reproduce their identit[ies]" in economic terms [20]. Shankar et al. argue that purchasing material possessions, such as music albums is a practice that aligns with consumer identity and a sense of belonging to their social groups [20]. Lamont and Molnar argue the black community utilizes consumption as a means to create a collective identity that pushes against negative stereotypes about black purchasing

power [13]. Oscar Gandy presents a contrasting argument that troubles attempts to identify the influence of racial and ethnic identities on media consumption because of obvious variation within ethnic groups [6]. These scholars help us consider the various ways players may use microtransactions to express their identities.

4 Discussion

It is clear that there is more to the purchase of in-game skins than it would seem on the surface. How players of color engage with these skins is a critical consideration as these players are an ever growing portion of the game industry's customer base [3, 4, 18, 21]. We expect that players of color will choose skins similar to their own at a higher rate than those that do not, as these characters may be more appealing to them.

In line with Passmore et al., if players and developers alike want more diversity in games, then players—especially players of color—are more likely to pursue or purchase more diverse skins. By Hart's analysis however, players may choose skins based on how they want their "anti-projection" to appear, rather than how it relates to their demographic category. This would suggest, somewhat counter to Passmore et al., that there may not be a significant difference between the quantities or qualities of skins purchased by players of color and skins purchased by white players, as their goals may not be to simply create or acquire avatars similar to themselves.

Regardless of our hypothetical outcome, scholars like Nakamura and Higgin suggest ways the data may provide insight. While Nakamura studied a community where players performed with only "keystrokes and mouse-clicks," visual representation adds complexity to her phenomenon of "identity tourism" [16]. With the presence of "skins" players may virtually change their appearance to reflect a racial or ethnic performance they choose to adopt. Regardless of whether our future results contain participants who are "trying" a visual representation other than their own, claiming one similar to their own, or something else, however players portray themselves in-game, examining the details and privileges of how or why they choose to purchase skins or play games that allow them to portray the identities that they desire is clearly an important topic.

The relationship between racial identity and purchasing practices is another intersection that has been studied more generally, or in other contexts [6, 7, 13]. However, the relationship between representation in games and purchasing practices has not been studied, especially tied further to racial identity. Gandy writes that, although Black players' often criticize representations of black characters in media, they are still some of the highest consumers of them [6]. Despite this, black players are often left with the a choice to either spend more time or money attempting to obtain an avatar that looks like them, or simply accept that their character will never be representative of their racial identity. The 'loot box' system becomes a prime example of one way players interact with skins in the games they buy. That these players pay for the *chance* of obtaining desired items, with the probability of receiving their desired "skin" often being low further indicates the importance of our topic and future work.

The intersection between representation in games and the purchasing practices of players is an important aspect of the relationship between games and players, and their wallets. Studying this intersection may illustrate the extent to which players are willing

to go in order to represent themselves in the games they play, especially when they may require extensive play or payment to obtain more diverse cosmetics. Skins may not affect gameplay but, as Adrienne Shaw argues in her book *Gaming at the Edge,* views, behavior, and experience can be highly influenced by many elements of games, such as the diversity of characters [21]. Since players and developers widely agree that playable characters are lacking in diversity [18, 21], it is important that we take steps to understand how that lack of diversity may influence players of color beyond the games they play, to include the cosmetic purchases they make in those games.

5 Conclusion

There has been limited research on how players of diverse backgrounds interact financially with character diversity in games. The purchase of skins through microtransactions is one clear, observable example of this interaction, which we have chosen to focus on here. It is already clear that these microtransactions have a substantial, yet growing impact on players, developers, and the digital games industry itself more broadly, and we want to highlight their potential effect in this specific context.

Purchasing skins through microtransactions may give players the benefit of choosing a character appearance that is more diverse than the default. This allows for a greater possibility of self-expression and social belonging for players. However, it also creates a space where the commodification of character appearance may contribute to psychological burdens on players of color. Passmore et al. discovered in their work that racism and discrimination present in video games left negative psychosocial effects on players of color [18]; this additional financial component stands to increase those effects. Gandy notes that although marginalized groups are the most critical of their own portrayals in media and they are still the most common consumers of such media [6]. Should microtransactional purchases of "skins" become a primary method for players of color to self-represent, it literally becomes more expensive to be a player of color.

In our future work, we will conduct surveys directed at physical and online gaming communities in order to examine trends in player purchases of cosmetic skins and features in various games. As earlier stated, underrepresented players whose own skins are not the 'default' may be given the option to acquire skins that represent themselves, but only through additional costs in time or money. When players of color *must* pay more or play more to be represented in their games, it begs questions of an industry willing to put a premium on diversity.. Our future work will include U.S.-based players from a variety of racial identities in order to identify trends and opinions regarding the acquisition of cosmetic skins. With the pervasiveness of gaming in our present culture, the phenomenon we describe in this paper is one that warrants attention, and numerous future projects, especially concerning other types of diversity such as gender, sexuality, and class.

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