Acosta, M. M. and Denham, A. R., (2018). Simulating oppression: Digital gaming, race and the education of African American children. *The Urban Review, 50(*3), 345-362.

Abstract: Educational game designers and educators are using digital games as a platform for teaching academic content, including multicultural curriculum. However, it is unclear how well digital game-based learning can coexist with the goals of multicultural education for the purpose of meeting the needs of African American children. In this essay, we raise serious questions about the use of digital games to teach about social oppression in ways that privilege the psychological well-being of African American children. We argue that digital games that intend to recreate histories of racial oppression can be harmful to African American children if they reproduce popular and problematic notions of indigenous lives and experiences. We illuminate some of the dangers of such digital games through a preliminary exploration of one digital game designed to teach about facets of African American enslavement. Our essay concludes with recommendations for culturally relevant digital game-based learning design and instruction.

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Opening

The article opens with a vignette from the first author's experience as a *motherscholar.* (This relatively new body of scholarship (CohenMiller, 2016; Lapayese, 2012) seeks to acknowledge the inextricable ties between motherhood, academic life, and advocacy for social justice.) The first author's daughter stated, "Mommy, we played that video game about slavery again, and I got caught so I got sold." This spurred an internal dialogue for the first author regarding the use of digital game-based learning platforms and their efficacy in teaching about the complexity of racial oppression with Black children as the primary audience.

> *Objective:* Through an analytical discussion, the authors seeks to "raise important questions at the intersection of digital gaming, race, and the representation of socially oppressive histories from a critical race perspective that can be helpful for those involved in the education of African American children."

Key Terms and Issues

Digital Game Based Learning (DGBL) - is a computer-based learning environment in which instructional content is embedded in the structure of a game.

Racialized Pedagogical Zones (PDZ) - are "the ways that video games teach not only entrenched technologies of race and racism, but also how gameplays pleasure principles mastery, winning and skills development are often inextricably tied to and defined by familiar racial and ethnic stereotypes" (Everett and Watkins, 2008, p. 150).

Review of Relevant Literature

The authors review three key areas of relevant literature:

Pedagogical Benefits of DGBL: There are several pedagogical benefits to DGBL, including "increasing motivation and engagement, supporting active learning, providing instantaneous feedback, allowing players to learn from mistakes, providing multiple routes for success, encouraging learning by discovery, and inherently supporting master learning" (p. 347).

Racialized Aspects of Digital Games and Gaming: Issues of race and racialization emerge in games and gaming in a variety of ways, including the underrepresentation of diverse *must-play characters* (MPCs), the reliance on stereotypes and racist tropes in depicting diverse characters, the overrepresentation of Black MPCs as violent and aggressive, as well as equally problematic colorblind design strategies within fantasy contexts which effectively eliminate race. Digital games also provide opportunities for players to assume identities of the *Other*, which again rely on stereotypic constructions.

How Games and Gaming Teach Race- Using the concept of racialized pedagogical zones (RPZs), the authors explore how games and gaming teach race--its meaning, its performance, and its general reproduction in society. As previously mentioned, games and gaming rely on **representations of race**. Though such representations are increasing in number, they are relatively narrow in their depiction of Black and Latinx characters and space. Relatedly, gamer experience is thought to be enhanced by **a high degree of social realism**, i.e., "characters, environments, and objects [that] mirror perceptions of social life," (p. 350-351). So, to some degree the believability of a game is based on the extent to which the environment reproduces (within the majoritarian imagination) pejorative race-based characterizations, themes, and environments of Black and Latinx life and culture. Finally, race is taught through repetition of certain actions and storylines that **privilege a set of racialized competencies** and allow users to **perform race** in the first-person while playing the game.

The Text

Flight to Freedom (FTF) **-** is a web-based computer game that is designed to immerse learners into the role of Lucy, a fourteen-year old slave girl in Kentucky during the passage of the *Fugitive Slave Act* (1850). The game is driven through a set of options that the user/player must make to advance the narrative of Lucy's story--a choose-your-own-adventure book.

The Critique

The authors make three critiques of *Flight to Freedom* as an instructional text for teaching of the institution of U.S. slavery in the South prior to the Civil War.

Framing. First, the authors argue that the narrative of Flight to Freedom is framed around White, middle-class version of the time period and maintains aesthetic qualities that users/players expect of the pre-Civil War South. Several examples are provided that frame Lucy's work as "chores," her actions as being "obedient," or "wasting time," or being "careless." While badges are earned in the game for being persuasive (i.e., lying) or resistant (i.e., being lazy or disobedient), the underlying function of these "choices" is not made explicit to the user. The frames or authorship of *Flight to Freedom* serves only for Black children to "rationalize their own subordination, victimization, and oppression, which is a consequence with reverberating negative impact."

Authenticity of Choice. Second, the authors argue that good learning games allow the learner to fail and make sense of their mistakes and re-evaluate their trajectory as a function of their decisions. Based on their gameplay, the authors argue that the narrative branches do not allow for authentic choices, insofar as irrespective of user/player choices Lucy will be blamed for the burning down of the smokehouse and force to run away alone. Furthermore, there are not multiple opportunities to play.

Implications for Black Student Learning. Third, when taking Black children as the primary learners, the authors argue that Flight to Freedom appears to do more to "perpetuate ideas of racism as an individual, not a systemic and institutionalized social construct" (p. 356). The gaming experience only allows for the learning, accepting, and replicating of dominant notions of Black life, which can be harmful to the "psychosocial, academic, and emotional development of young, [Black] learners" (p. 356).

Recommendations for Developing and Teaching with Racialized DGBL

The following recommendations are made based on the critique of Flight to Freedom.

For Developers
- Reject colorblindness in digital games
- Research digital games with a critical eye
- Field test for instructional fidelity, then demand fidelity from users
- Keep the dialogue going

For Educators
- Keep African American students' needs front and center
- Get involved in the DGBLE experience
- Question the digital game, and teach your students to question it as well

Cited References

CohenMiller, A.S. (2016). Artful research approaches in #iamwritingwithbaby: Qualitative analysis of academic mothers on Facebook. *LEARNing Landscapes*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Spring 2016.

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