

# Prosthetic Metaphors, Rejection, and Representation in Games

Daniel Gardner, PhD

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Dang.page

@contrariousrex

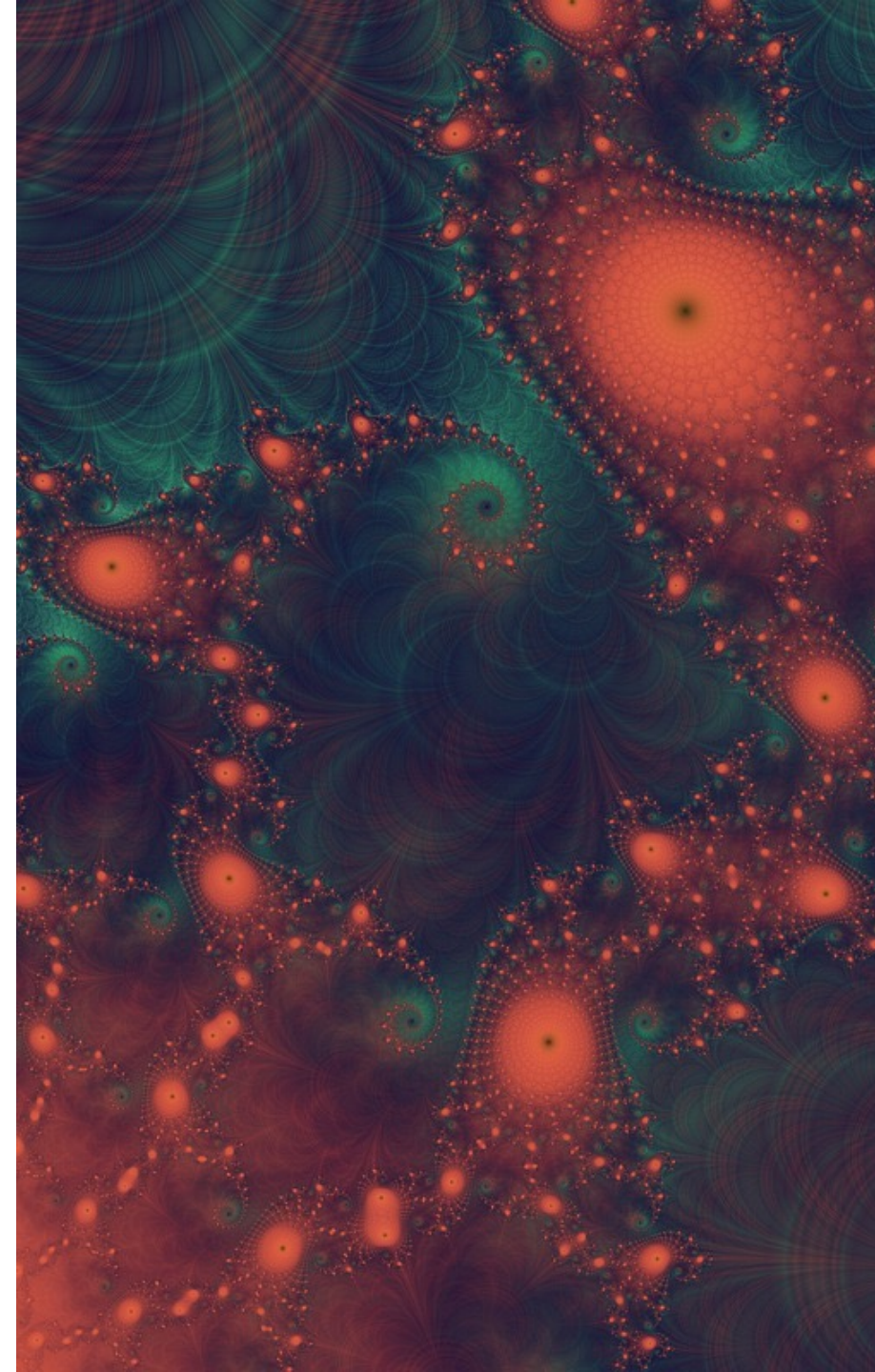
Kelly Hacker

Independent Researcher



# Positionality Statement

1. Neither of us have lived experience with prosthesis in a traditional sense
  - (Kelly's reproductive system is technologically augmented)
2. Dan is a cis-gendered, heterosexual, white, guy
  - Background: HCI, STS, Media Studies, Anthropology
3. Kelly is gender-nonconforming, heterosexual, white, gal
  - Background: Medical Anthropology



Revisit/expand how we use “prosthesis” when discussing digital bodies

Explore the potential value of assessing who might possess a *privilege of rejection*, when regarding digital embodiment.

# Prosthesis

- “addition” or “replacement of a missing part of the body” (Smith and Morra, 2006)
- “An extension of *my* will, of my *instrumentality*, that’s a prosthesis alright” – (Allucquere 1994, p2, emphasis added)
  - Prosthesis are boundary debates made material
  - In prosthetic sociality, the medium of *connection* defines the meaning of community” (p.6, emphasis added).



# Metaphor

- A type of analogy
- (conceptual) “understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another” (Kovecses, 2010)



A pile of legs?

# Other terms:

- **Attachment** – Practical or emotional connection
- **Fit** – appropriateness or comfort of connection
- **Articulation** – clear utterances, or jointed movement

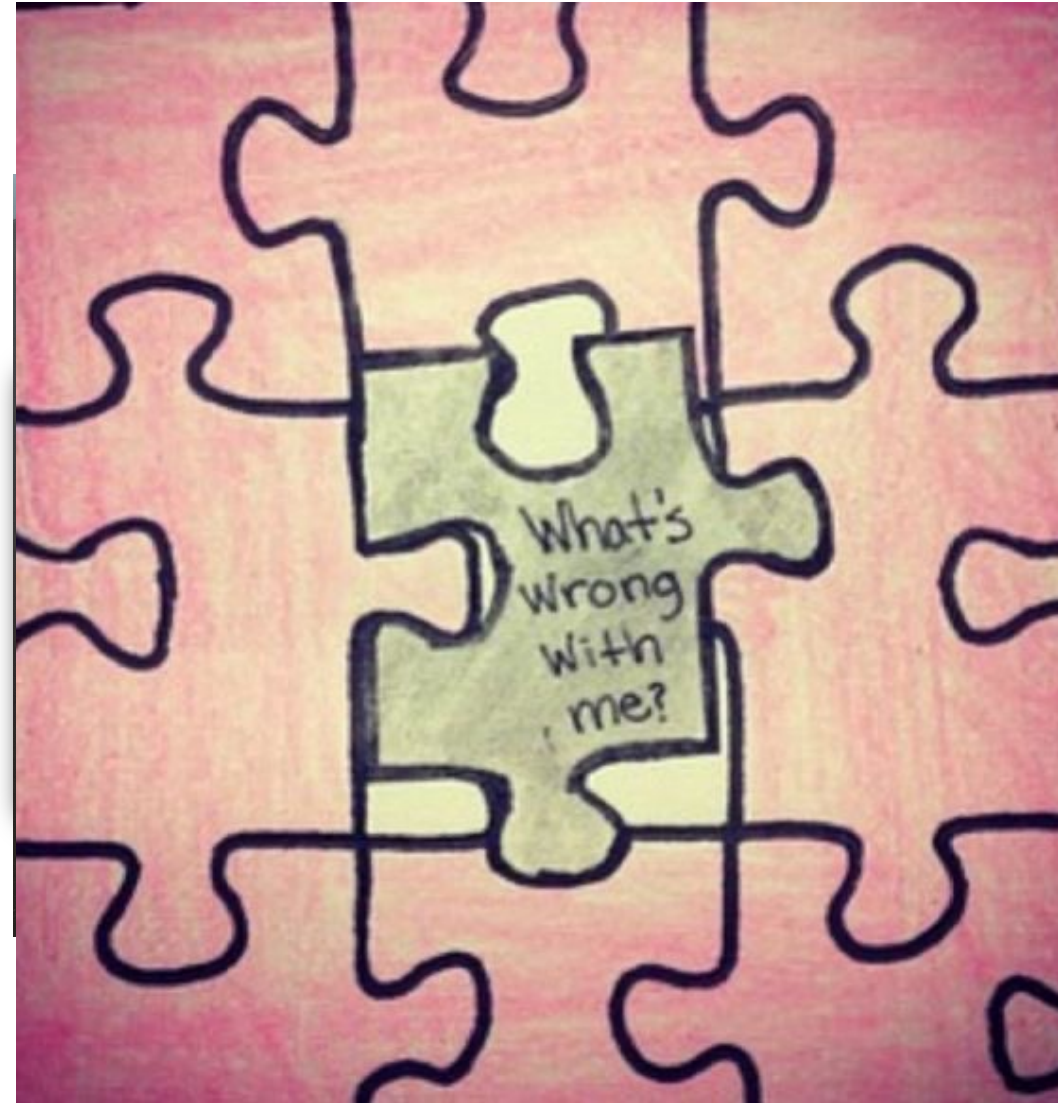
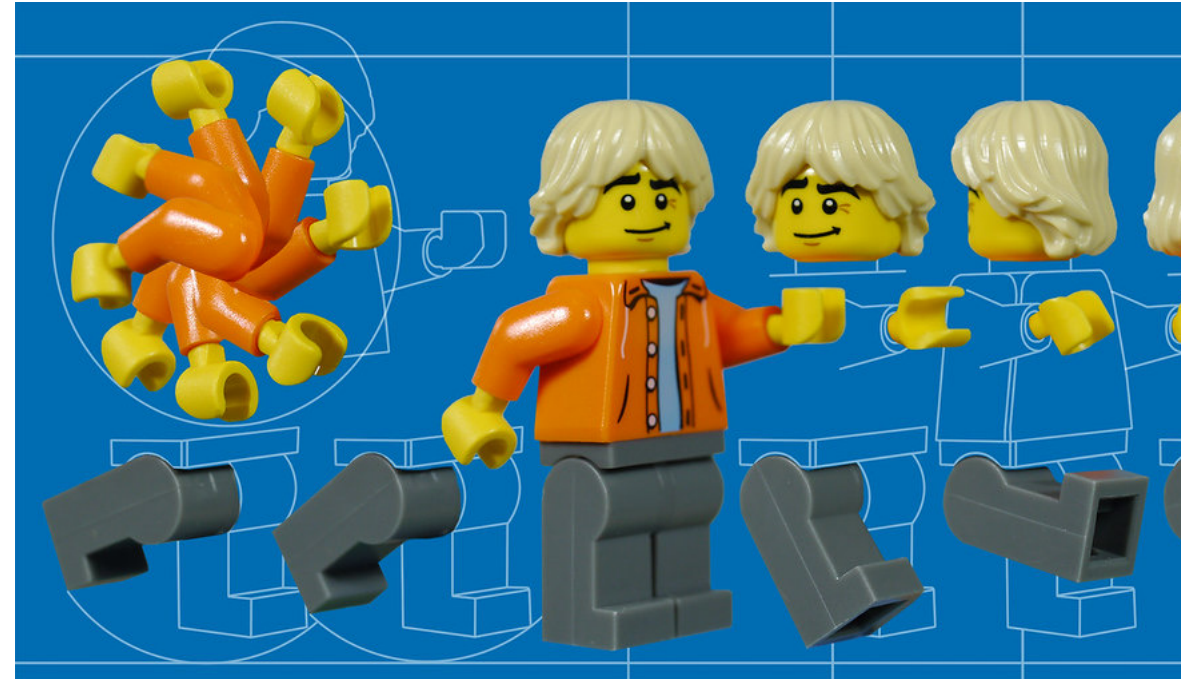


Image by Savanah Grace



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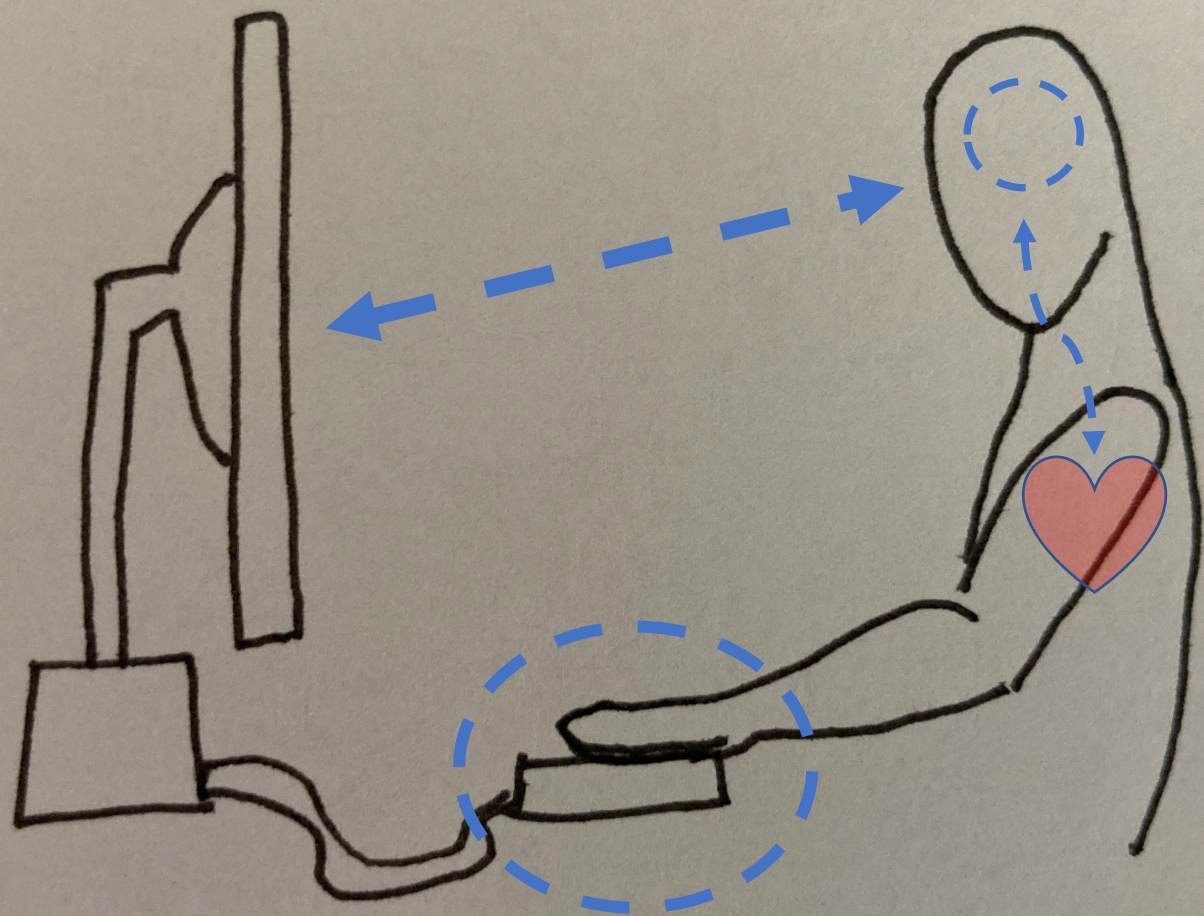




# Digital embodiment as prosthesis

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  - “prosthetic vicarious embodiment”
- Manning, P., 2009. Can the avatar speak?
- Matviyenko, S., 2010. Cyberbody as drag. *Digital creativity*, 21(1), pp.39-45.
- Nakamura, L., 1995. Race in/for cyberspace: Identity tourism and racial passing on the Internet. *Works and Days*, 13(1-2), pp.181-193.
  - Digital performances as “identity prosthesis”
- Nguyen, M., 2009. Queer cyborgs and new mutants: race, sexuality, and prosthetic sociality in digital space. *American Studies: An Anthology*, pp.281-305.
- Purnomo, S.L. A, Purnama, S.L.S., Untari, L., Asiyah, N., and Anggraini, N. 2019. Gamemunication: Prosthetic Communication Ethnography of Game Avatars. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 35(4), pp.1-16.







**Sicart, M., 2017.  
“Queering the  
Controller”**

We don't “feel” in  
games, “we press F  
to feel” (Sicart,  
2017).



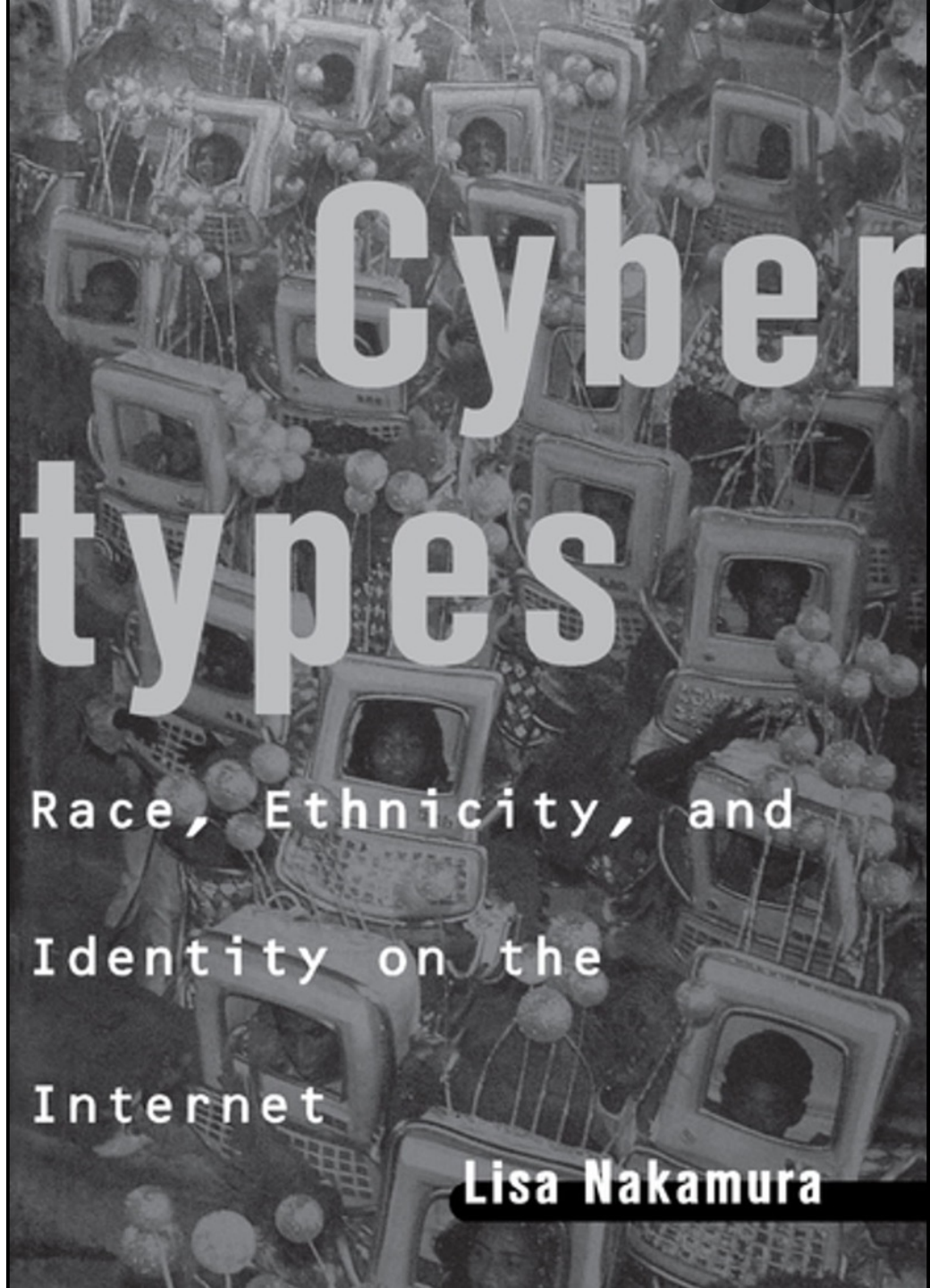


Lisa Nakamura (1995, 2002)

Describes early digital textual performances as “identity prosthesis”

Notably, when white players took on stereotypical Asianness in what she describes as “identity tourism”

Meanwhile, makes it harder for minoritized communities to seem to perform authentically



# Scholars with lived prosthesis experience

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- Sobchack, V. 2006. "A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality." *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future*. Edited by M. Smith and J. Morra. The MIT Press, 17-41.

# Scholars with lived prosthesis experience

Scholars using prosthesis as metaphor rarely rely on insights from amputees and their prosthetic devices, and often ascribe agency and autonomy to prosthetics while neglecting those traits in their users.



# Rejection

- Burrough and Brook describe rejection as “the non-use or minimal use of a prosthesis which has been fitted to an individual” (1985, 40; emphasis ours).
- Wilson writes how rejection may arise from challenges such as poor fitting (1970).
- McKenzie describes poor comfort, unnatural appearance, and the reactions the wearer gets from other people as reasons a prosthetic may be rejected (1970).
- Kurzman describes how “an artificial limb which is never quite incorporated usually indicates that an amputee is having difficulty adjusting to the amputation” (2001, 371); that is, struggles with the loss of their body.

[NEWS](#)[COMPANION](#)[BUY RUST](#)

# Rust

# EXPLORE BUILD SURVIVE

The only aim in Rust is to survive. Everything wants you to die - the island's wildlife and other inhabitants, the environment, other survivors. Do whatever it takes to last another night.



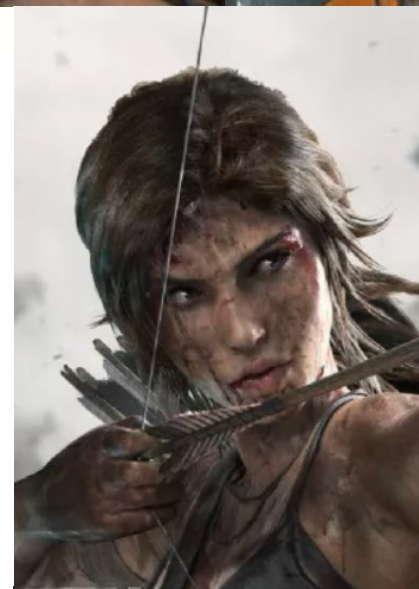
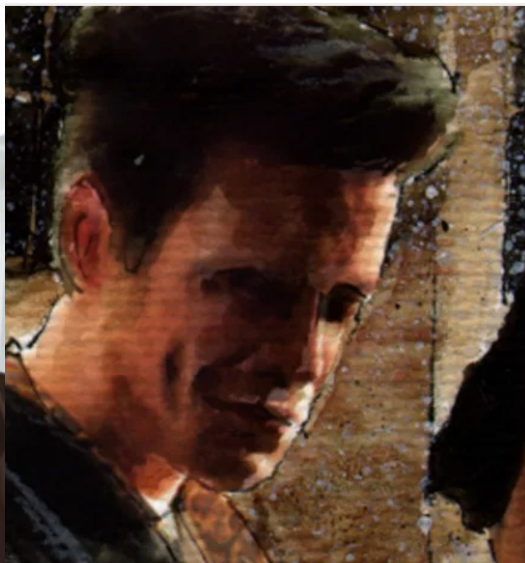




Random  
parametric  
default  
characters







# One-white-male-body-fits-all...

|                                | Indie | AAA | Total |
|--------------------------------|-------|-----|-------|
| White Masculine                | 32    | 54  | 86    |
| Both Undeterminable            | 18    | 0   | 18    |
| White Feminine                 | 8     | 6   | 14    |
| Undeterminable Masculine       | 7     | 4   | 11    |
| Latinx Masculine               | 1     | 4   | 5     |
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| Mixed feminine                 | 0     | 1   | 1     |
| Ambiguously non-white feminine | 1     | 0   | 1     |

(Gardner and Tanenbaum, 2018)



# “Privilege of Immersion”

“imbalanced and differential access to gaming’s benefits based on race-ethnicity” that disproportionately benefits white players (Passmore, Birk, and Mandryk, 2018)

In their findings, players of color often expressed what they call “learned neutrality,” reminiscent of Shaw’s “acceptance” (2014).



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GAME ON

## Exactly how male gamers react when they are forced to play female characters



MOTHERBOARD  
TECH BY VICE

### This Game Is Forcing Some Players to Be Women, And They're Freaking Out

Rust is randomly giving some players female avatars, and a few of them are being dicks about it.

CULTURE

### Rust Chooses Players' Race For Them, Things Get Messy

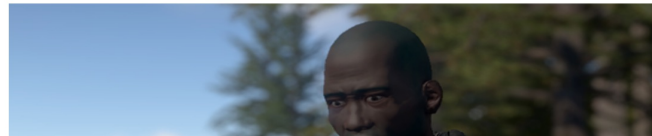
By Nathan Grayson | 3/24/15 7:44PM | Comments (435)

AD Pick

PCGamesN

NEWS | REVIEWS | HARDWARE | GUIDES | COMMUNITY

### Every Rust player has been permanently assigned a skin and hair colour. Including pube colour



### Rust Players Divided Over Not Being Able To Choose Their Sex

By Nathan Grayson | 7/20/15 9:45PM | Comments (389)

AD

MOTHERBOARD  
TECH BY VICE

### 'Rust' Players Don't Mind Being Women—So Long as They're Hot

You don't get what you want. You get what you get and you have to learn how to deal with it and survive.

Seriously devs. You've had your fun with the whole "gender and race isn't a choice irl" thing. #11283



Ravensong



May 27 @ 8:46pm



### Character.

I simply cannot enjoy the game when my character is chosen for me.



oXYnary



Jul 17 @ 1:07pm

Oh no! You have breasts!

The Horror. The Horror.



Dark Shadow



Jul 17, 2015 @ 7:24am

Well i am male in the real world and I want to stay that way in the game. And if you think that I have anything against girls, I do not. It isn't fair not to give the choices to community.

#3



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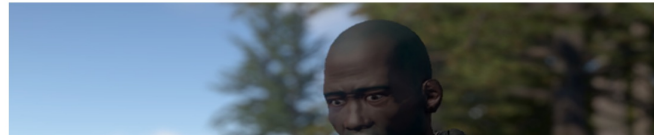
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Overwhelmingly white-male players struggled to adjust to another embodiment after losing *their* demographic representation in-game.

# A discussion of *fit*



**Ravensong** ▼



May 27 @ 8:46pm



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Williams et al. 2009 – The Virtual Census

Passmore et al. 2017 – Racial Diversity in Indie Games

Shaw et al. – The LGBTQ Video Game archive

Many more...

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(Gardner and Tanenbaum, 2018)

***Privilege of rejection:*** When (white) players need not *accept* or *learn to be neutral* about demographically un-aligned embodiments simply to participate in the medium of games.

White players exercise their ***privilege of rejection*** to demand/retain Passmore et al.'s “privilege of immersion” (2018).





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# Nothing new...



*Being the single solution to a Pan African problem is great. But it is also a tremendous responsibility.*



## Nigerian artist makes dark skin prosthetics to boost patients' confidence

By Seun Sanni, Nneka Chille

3 MIN READ



UYO, Nigeria (Reuters) - Michael Sunday is delighted, if a little stunned, as he admires his new right hand: a silicone glove-like prosthetic meant to help him return to normal life after he lost three fingers in a car accident a year ago.

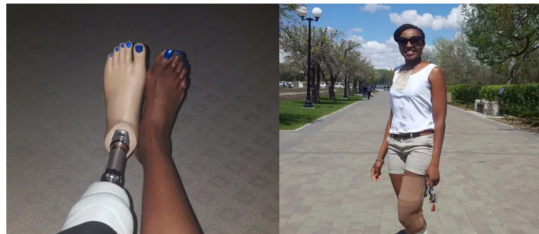


## Regina woman shocked to discover lack of colour options for prostheses



Rahab Wanjau says her options were 'one very light and one very dark'

Alex Soloducha · CBC News · Posted: Aug 01, 2017 3:00 AM CT | Last Updated: August 1, 2017



## 'Back on my feet': how artificial limbs can have a second life in Africa



## Amputee teenager to donate old prosthetics to Africa

BORDER | CUMBRIA | Thursday 25 April 2019, 4:03pm



## Black amputees face challenges and increased costs for prostheses



By Crystal Goomansingh · Global News

Posted October 28, 2020 8:56 pm



# Re-mixing *fit*

It may be helpful to re-visit avatars as performative/representational prosthetics that *fit* (or are made to fit) different players differently, powerfully influencing how we may become *attached* to games or *articulate* gameplay experiences.

**...and as another means of reflecting, and combating, the pervasive myth of the one-white-male-body-fits-all default characters/players.**

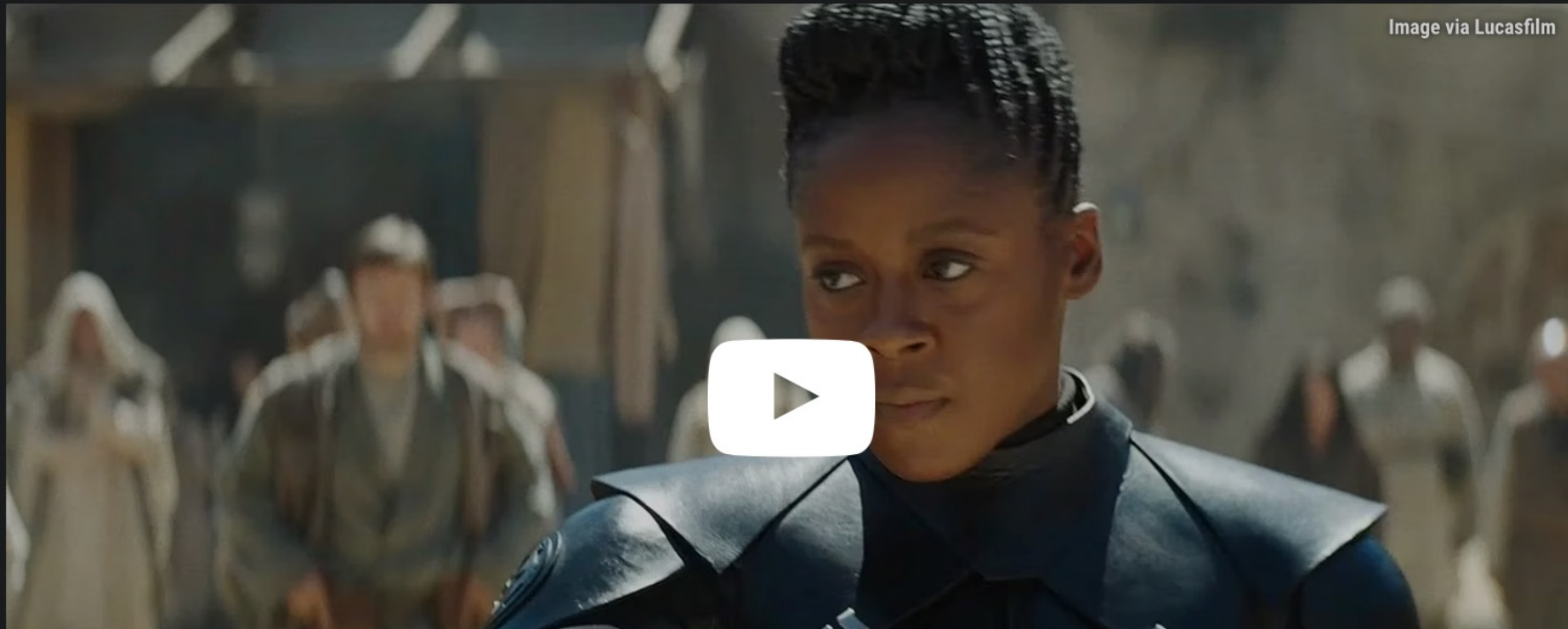
- **Privilege of Rejection** – can be used to reflect on everyday experiences of minoritized individuals *never* or rarely have access to demographically aligned characters
- **Acceptance/Learned Neutrality** – highlights how players can adapt to playing as other(ed) embodiments
  - Provided qualitatively meaningful, not just quantitatively present representation
  - Moving past Nakamura's identity tourism

# Star Wars Calls Out Racist Reactions to 'Obi-Wan Kenobi' Star Moses Ingram

"Don't choose to be racist."

BY MARCO VITO ODDO

PUBLISHED MAY 31, 2022





# Detaching...

- “Prosthesis” as a metaphor for avatars is complex and we need to remember *centering the human* is sometimes essential for reflecting on varied and sometimes inequitable *attachments*
- There are often *transactions* and trade-offs that occur in the initial selection, creation, *fitting* or *attachment* of a character
- Future work
  - Canceled: Content analysis of comments/reviews
  - Folding this perspective into other ongoing projects related to:
    - Community driven, participatory research through design on more inclusive character creation – beyond standardization or bolted-on diversity
    - Research on the sale of “skins,” identity tourism/commodification, diversity at a premium (Reza et al. 2019, 2022)

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# Questions?

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