

# The Visual Politics of Play: On the Signifying Practices of Digital Games

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## Abstract

Digital games are so pervasive that they increasingly shape how people ascribe meaning to their world; in short, games are now culture. Similarly to music, literature, television, fashion and film, games as culture constitute "networks of meaningfulness which individuals and groups use to make sense of and communicate with one another" (Hall). Games expand the ways that we image our own possibilities, create empathetic connection, and seed ethical engagement with lived-world challenges and problems. Recent games 'culture wars', notably, Gamergate definitively confirmed that games traffic in the politics of representation, just as any other form of mass media. This panel examines the social functions of playable media as powerful forms of visual culture and ideological world making, especially as they relate to notions of difference.

This panel includes contributions in critical games research that model intersectional approaches foregrounding the politics of representation, and signifying practices of video games as new media and visual culture. Brought together are three important voices, who—each in their own field—utilize intersectional approaches foregrounding more nuanced or inclusive forms of representation, and therefore more sophisticated signifying practices of video games as electronic media and visual culture. Each panelist (Everett, Harrell, Jenson) presented their work for twenty minutes, with an informal question and answer session that included the audience, speakers and moderator (Murray).

## Keywords

Games, representation, signification, Gamergate, identity, social identity, race, gender, sexuality, feminism, cultural studies.

## Introduction

To play video games is to engage with the myths and value systems of a constituency whose access, agency and ability to wield the technology allows them to communicate their wishes, fears, fantasies—and even identity politics—through a form of interactive entertainment. Although games are not the same as films or popular television nar-

rative, they do operate as expressions of myths, the "dream life" of culture, whose depths are only beginning to be plumbed (Hall). Among these "dreams" are the roles of differenced bodies, gendered bodies, and racialized bodies, within the technological spaces of game play. The powerful representations in games are extensions of the visual cultures from which they arise, the political and cultural contexts, and can be mined for their significant potentials.

There is a burgeoning and exciting discussion of game content, which includes textual studies of games as forms of cultural expression (Dovey, Jones, Galloway, Wolf and Perron, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter). And there are texts that investigate from various perspectives the potential for games to affect positive social transformation or make ethical interventions on the level of design (Harrell, McGonigal, Flanagan, Sicart, Frasca). Lastly, there are few—but nevertheless seminal—interventions into broader issues of digital media and representation, most prominently race and gender, but recently sexuality as well (Nakamura, Shaw, Anthropy, Nakamura and Chow-White, Cassell and Jenkins, Kafai et. al, Laurel). This panel is designed to build upon and enhance current scholarship in relation to issues of representation and practices of signification, as they specifically relate to games.

## Gaming Matters: Playing with Black Womyn MPCs (Everett)

A paradigm shift of sorts has occurred in the procedural rhetorics and gameplay structures of videogames over the last two decades where race and gender in games intersect, though the changes are not nearly enough. Gamers now negotiate and amplify the joy and pain of their videogame fandom quite publicly and enthusiastically as game characters of color are gaining some new visibility as optional play (OP) and must play characters (MPC). As powerful narrative agents in action-adventure, open-world and first- and third-person-shooter genres in mainstream, casual and online gaming spaces (including networked games on

Xbox Live), black women as MPCs in successful mainstream gaming franchises and action-adventure game brands are redefining the gaming experience in terms of 21<sup>st</sup>-century multicultural, multiracial heroic/heroic character ideals. This work explores some benefits and drawbacks of gaming's tepid embrace of black women and girls as sheroes of video game play in popular game titles. Online fora /fansites/ blogs, etc. devoted to gaming, video games journalism, and recent scholarship on intersectional politics in gaming industry theory and praxis are at the center of this study. My motivation for interrogating the discourse function of both Aveline de Grandpré as the baadass protagonist of *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* and Sheva Alomar as the powerful female buddy/protagonist in *Resident Evil 5* coupled with acknowledging the vocal gamer girl-citizen journalists agitating for more black female MPCs is not intended to tamp down excitement for this development (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). Rather, it is meant to amplify those voices of black girl gamers and fangirls savoring this long-overdue moment of gaming diversity and inclusion. Nonetheless, a cautionary imperative at the heart of this study warns: "be careful what you ask for!"



Figure 1. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation's* Aveline de Grandpré.

Clearly, it is a promising as well as exciting phenomenon that the *Assassin's Creed* and *Resident Evil* franchises have expanded their gaming storyworlds to make room for black women, as well as other women of color, into the ranks of must-play characters (MPCs); optional characters (Ops) and playable characters (PCs) for the first time. At the same time it is curious that Capcom's 2008 release of *Resident Evil 5* features a lead MPC of African descent, Sheva Alomar, whose scant attire beyond the expected hypersexualization, is sedimented with questionable signifiers of primitive, nativist African mythology (figure with Sheva in bone necklace and body paint). Similarly, Ubisoft's decision to situate Aveline de Grandpré at a great historical remove, in the colonial period of slavery seems overdetermined in both its willingness to address this ignoble past and, arguably, its unwillingness to craft a powerful contemporary black shero tackling racial justice issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That said, it is important to acknowledge and encourage game developers and designers to go even

further in their economically sound decisions to up the percentages of women of color (WoC), and women from dominant groups for that matter, in their future game sequels and franchises. Better still would be for games companies to develop and put the marketing and publicity resources behind new games titles centered on non-white MPCs. As games developers are coming to realize, diversity and inclusiveness in the industry makes good business sense and it addresses the reality that older women and underrepresented racial groups now make up the largest demographics of their consumer base.



Figure 2. *Resident Evil 5*, Sheva Alomar is Capcom's Hypersexualized Black Woman MPC in Primitivist Garb and Wardrobe Malfunction (if you look closely enough).

What I am calling the gaming industrial complex (GIC) is also attuned to heated debates, conversations, and controversies on and offline about the confluence of race and gender in gaming. Primarily, most controversies revolve around refusals of many male gamers to share what JaySmooth calls their "privileged gender spectrum" with black and other women/girls of color as narrative and ludic agents in action-adventure, fighting, and other lucrative gaming genres. This work also took cognizance of the increasing presence of black and other women of color (WoC) in networked gaming spaces, especially in discourses on Xbox Live, in Indy games, and elsewhere in the gaming ecology, all of which have exacerbated the culture's retrenched gender wars, as the 2014 #Gamergate controversy underscored. Nonetheless, indices of gaming's slowly changing gender dynamics can be found in the proliferation of social media buzz, special websites, blogs, wikis, YouTube channels, and Vimeo videos, Instagram, among other discursive online platforms that engender powerful participatory gaming cultures of play and critique. Moreover, one cannot consider adequately the growing push for more gender and racial diversity in contemporary gaming culture outside the heightened racial framework of American civil society at large, a society still adjusting to having elected the nation's first bi-racial President, Barack H. Obama who self-identifies, proudly, as black or African American. Also, there is the industry framework driven by the enlarged roles of global audiences

and market shares to which game developers cater with strategies and tactics unparalleled even during the golden age of the business' expansion in the Bushnell and Miyamoto eras of the mid to late 1970s through the mid 1980s. Then, there is the digitized race and ethnicity framework promulgated by the *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) franchise that introduced mainstream gaming's most high-profile, if not first ever, central black protagonist C. J. as a must-play character (MPC). Fourth, there is the gender framework following the girl games movement that gave rise to the highly successful *Lara Croft* game brand at the end of the twentieth century. Finally, there is gaming's networked online framework that has taken the industry by storm and to new heights of social, cultural, global and financial influence and significance. A through-line transecting each of these frameworks is the often disavowed problematic of sanctioned racial otherness in gaming's historic narratives. My concern, then, with exploring the beneficial (I hope) industry move of developing black women MPCs, is the huge, often unspoken stakes involved in the seriousness of gameplay. As game theorist Jos de Mul put it in 2005:

Just as narratives, computer games are expressions that, among other things, play a function in the formation of our identity . . . [W]e could say that the (computer) games we play are nothing but a remote imitation of the infinite play of the world.

## Modeling and Expressing Social Identity in Games (Harrell)

### Overview

Avatars and player characters in games offer us new ways to see ourselves. They also impact us in the "real" physical world. Studies show that avatars can have a range of effects on users such as performance and engagement (Kao and Harrell 2015b, a). Avatars can have other impacts on user behaviors, it has been shown that users conform to expected behaviors and attitudes associated with an avatar's appearance (Yee and Bailenson 2007). Avatars can also trigger stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson 1995), the phenomenon of being at risk of confirming a stereotype about one's group, and even impact future aspirations (Good, Rattan, and Dweck 2012). Since avatars can impact physical world experiences even including oppression and violence, it is important to look closely at the effects of avatars on users. This section argues for the importance of analyzing identities and how computational modeling can be used to better design expressive identity representations in videogames.

### Back End Representations

While clearly graphics are important for analyzing socio-cultural aspects of avatars, there has been little analysis of how culture impacts back end representations such as data structures. It is imperative to look "under the hood", how-

ever, because analyzing back-end technical aspects of systems can reveal how they implement particular worldviews. For example, Harrell and his collaborators have revealed that racial stereotypes and gender biases have been built into character attributes in games<sup>1</sup> (Harrell 2010, Lim and Harrell 2015a).

However, the argument for analyzing back end representations of virtual identities extends beyond analysis of attributes. For instance, in the bestselling computer role-playing game (RPG) *Neverwinter Nights*<sup>2</sup> while the graphical gendered and racial features of player characters are superficial and do not impact gameplay, the back end data structures for race, phenotype, and gender are defined in surprising ways with subtly interacting effects. E.g., the genders of non-player characters (NPCs) can be set to "Male," "Female," "Both," "Other," or "None." If the creature appearance is of one of these standard NPC racial types, setting the gender to "Male," "Both," "Other", or "None" will assign the male appearance to the character. So there are five genders possible for NPCs, 80% of which are apparently male by default!

Such observations are not intended to single out the excellent RPG *Neverwinter Nights* as having deficits compared to other games. The implementations of gender, race, and ethnicity in games reflect broader social worldviews many developers (and many players) share in, along with long held RPG conventions. Yet, the results of such implementations influence how real world phenomena of race and gender play out in game worlds including detrimental effects such biases, stereotyping, and other forms of inequity.

### Computational Modeling of Social Identity in Games

The work presented here for modeling identity phenomena including, but not limited to biases, stereotyping, and other forms of inequity in games is pursued in two main ways:

- Computational analysis: Developing theory and build systems to *analyze computational identity phenomena*.
- Computational expression: This analysis informs new ways to *model social identity experiences*.

The next subsections overviews several efforts towards these ends.

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<sup>1</sup> These analyses include both humanities-based and computational AI analyses of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. In that game, player character abilities grow based upon user actions in, so that these attribute differences can largely be overridden. However, this is still a significant phenomenon for many players, in particular those who optimize their characters as much as possible, because racial or gender attribute differences still result in different maximal possibilities for player characters.

<sup>2</sup> In this game back end data structures are easily accessible since the game enables user created content such as creatures and non-player characters (NPCs) using the Aurora Toolset.

### Computational Analysis

*AIRvatar* (Lim and Harrell 2015b) is a data-mining AI application that collects data on user behaviors as they create customize their avatars (See Figure 3).

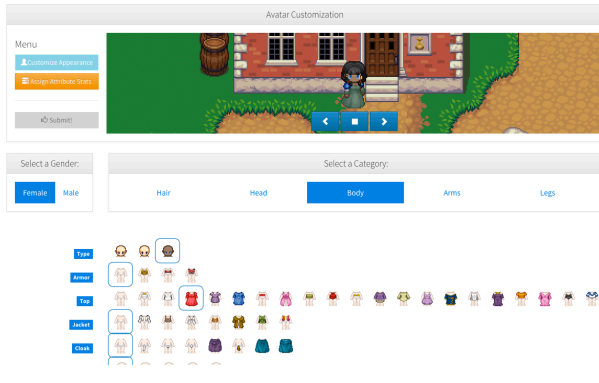


Figure 3. Screenshots of the *AIRvatar* interface.

Lim and Harrell have discovered a number of results relating to gender stereotyping and cross-gender play using *AIRvatar* (ibid). E.g., in a study of 191 participants, female players tended to construct male characters that correspond to gender stereotypes of high physical ability attributes, but low attributes for mental attributes and charisma (See Figure 4). Revealing users' gender stereotypes is a quite telling discovery because it empirically demonstrates that stereotyping is not just a matter of developer biases or user biases alone, but rather these worldviews and their associated imagery are socially widespread and only semi-visible, in other words they are *cultural phantasms* (Harrell 2013).

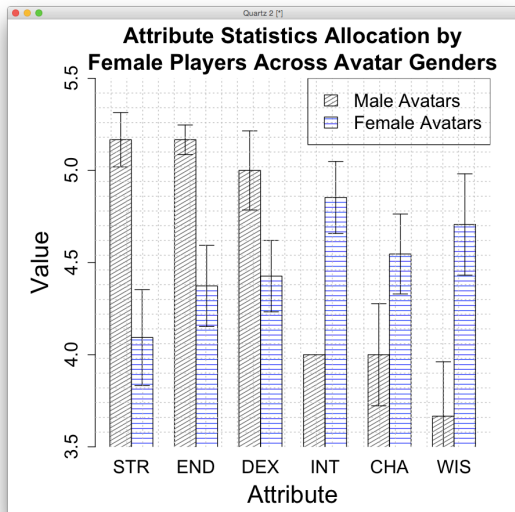


Figure 4. The allocation of attribute points by female users for male player characters reveals gender stereotyping.

### Design and Expression

Computing can also be used to model social identity phenomena in expressive works. E.g., *Chimeria* (Harrell et al. 2014a) models how users' identities change over time – an engine for implementing dynamic virtual identities.

*Gatekeeper* (See Figure 5) is a game made using *Chimeria* in which a player character is prompted to try to gain access to a castle through a trajectory of actions enabling “fitting in” to a privileged social category or its highlight membership in a stigmatized category (Harrell et al. 2014b).

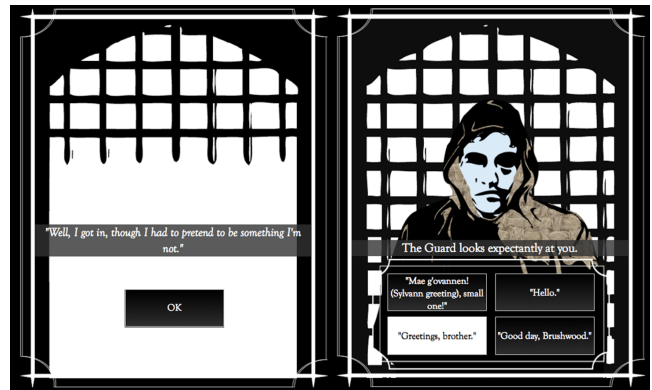


Figure 5. Screenshots from the game *Chimeria: Gatekeeper*.

### Conclusion

We must be critically aware of the effects of avatars on users. Computational modeling can be deployed toward this end through both analysis and creation of expressive tools and systems. To avoid introducing detrimental social identity phenomena into systems, and to support users in critically engaging with their own biases, developers must consider that avatars are technical, cultural, and cognitive co-constructions between systems, developers, and users. This means that we must be cognizant that users' and developers' social stereotypes alike persist as phantasms prompted by systems. This situation provides a special responsibility for developers: games hold great expressive power in designing and deploying avatars, yet we must take care as this power can be used alternately to fulfill, subvert, invoke, or reveal social identity phantasms and their resultant clichés and stereotypes.

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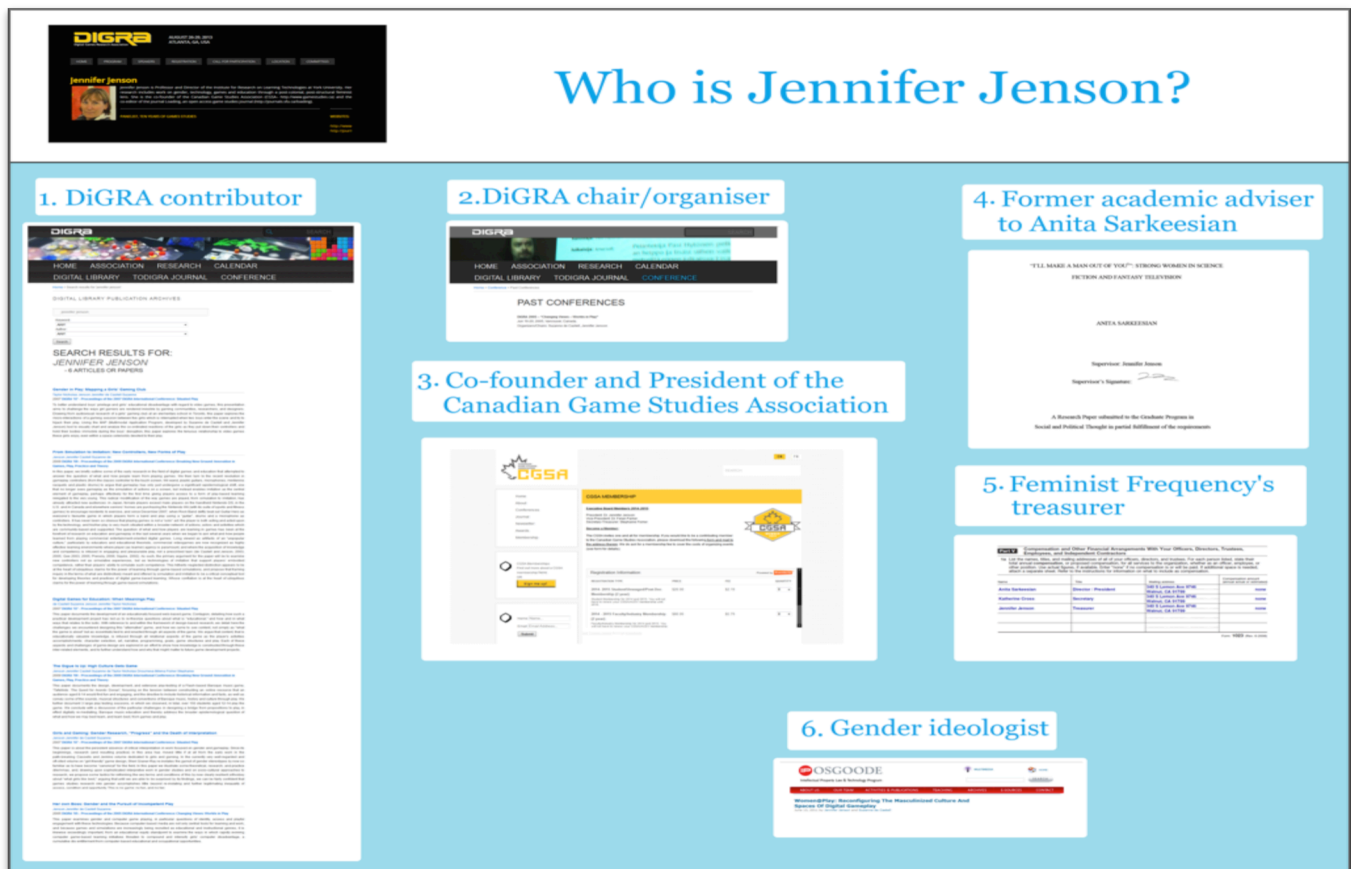


Figure 6. “Facts” about Jen Jenson.

### Fighting Gamehate: A Feminist Project (Jenson)

In mid-August 2014, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, gaming websites and 4chan exploded with allegations of “corruption” in games journalism, naming the phenomenon “Gamergate” (see Twitter hashtag #Gamergate). Since that time, nearly every major English news outlet and game-related journalistic website has reported on Gamergate. Women (critics, game players, game makers and journalists) are at the center of the controversy, and many have received threats that, as games journalist David Auerbach put it, are “so egregious” that a prominent female journalist (Jenn Frank) publically announced that she would no longer be writing on games (Auerbach 2014a, 2014b). This situation further escalated into a public threat of a “massacre,” forcing games critic Anita Sarkeesian (Executive Director, Feminist Frequency) to cancel a public address at the University of Utah, and even the author of this notation has been targeted (See Figure 6).

To better understand what feminist/s frameworks and approaches might offer games scholars and game makers under these conditions is my explicit focus. I here describe the origins and development of an explicitly feminist project, Feminists in Games (FiG), which brought together makers, players and researchers to work on the ‘gender troubles’ of digital games industry and culture – and give a brief overview of the opportunities that project created.

Most of what Gamergate has been doing is precisely a kind of boundary policing – reacting against women speaking in public. And it is precisely that public speech that comes under fire, not just in games but also in many other aspects of a now public social media. Feminist in Games (FiG) was first imagined, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, completed in 2014, then became the foundation of a 5-year funded cross-sectoral partnership to work to transform the games industry and gamer culture. “FiG” (See Figure 7) is described here as one concrete example of how it’s possible to ‘speak up’ against the pervasively misogynist games industry and culture – and from there, how to help build political and practical tools to achieve diversity in games.



Figure 7. Feminists in Games.

The challenge, then, is not only to better understand what is supporting the ongoing inequities in digital game design and play, but to work to transform these conditions. The FiG project, taking up that challenge, was designed to develop not just a research partnership, but also a feminist alliance. In the face of widespread cultural, academic and political repudiation of the term ‘feminist’, seen as a divisive and indeed aversive label more likely to lose than engender support, we explicitly embraced both the terminology and the historical, theoretical and methodological resources feminism offers. The FiG project brought together social science and humanities researchers from a variety of disciplines, community organizers and activists and games industry employees (both from large/mainstream companies and Indie developers) to build meaningful research, but also to build an activist alliance, around what has been and remains today a hugely resistant problem. Our aim was to help create the conditions for more equitable participation of women, both as consumers and as producers, in an industry that has gained increasing social, cultural and economic importance for 21<sup>st</sup> century work, education, communication and play, not only in Canada, but globally. In the service of that work, we invited researchers and others interested and invested in games industry, community, education and culture to begin a conversation about what feminism could offer the above ‘problems’ of and for women in games.

There are two primary points to emphasize by way of a conclusion: 1) Gamergate is part of a larger, systemic problem in the games industry and culture; and 2) Feminist approaches and practices can and do provide a means initiate a broad-based, grassroots transformation, with a powerful cross-sectoral infrastructure.

What is new with Gamergate and the ongoing sexism and misogyny that characterizes game cultures and industries is that *nothing is new*. What matters most in the deployment of tropes of ‘surprise, dismay, shock and awe’ round and about Gamergate is that extreme angst makes it look like this has not always happened and that something new and really different is going on. The real shock should be that it’s same ol’, same ol’, and we need to name that significant fact. Otherwise it’s as if we had no understanding of how social situations are made and can be re-made, as if we had no power to change this somehow ‘natural’

order of things, as if, to borrow from the law of the conservation of matter, violence against women is neither created nor destroyed—it just changes its shape. Violently silencing women, whether in *The Odyssey* or in *Call of Duty*, is as old as the hills.

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### Author Biographies

**Professor Anna Everett** of Film & Media Studies, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, works in the fields of film and TV history/theory, African-American film and culture, and Digital Media Technologies. She holds a PhD. From the School of Cinema-TV and Critical Studies at the University of Southern California. Her former administrative positions include: Interim/Acting Associate Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity and Academic Policy; Chair of the UCSB Department of Film and Media Studies, Director of the UCSB Center for Black Studies. Dr. Everett is a two-time recipient of the Fulbright Senior Scholar Award (2005/2007). Her many publications include: *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949*; *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media* (For the MacArthur Foundation's series on Digital Media, Youth, and Learning); *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, *Afrogeeks: Beyond the Digital Divide*; *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace*, and *Pretty People: Movie Stars of the 1990s*. Everett is finishing a new book on President Obama, social media culture and the Where U@ Generation.

**D. Fox Harrell, Ph.D.** is Associate Professor of Digital Media in the Comparative Media Studies Program and Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at MIT. His research explores the relationship between imaginative cognition and computation. His research involves developing new forms of computational narrative, gaming, social media, and related digital media based in computer science, cognitive science, and digital media arts. The National Science Foundation has recognized Harrell with an NSF CAREER Award for his project "Computing for Advanced Identity Representation." Harrell holds a Ph.D. in Computer Science and Cognitive Science from the University of California, San Diego. His other degrees include a Master's degree in Interactive Telecommunication from New York University, and a B.F.A. in Art, B.S. in Logic and Computation (each with highest honors), and minor in Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University. He has worked as an interactive television producer and as a game designer. His book *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* was published by The MIT Press (2013).

**Jennifer Jenson, Ph.D.** is Professor of Pedagogy and Technology in the Faculty of Education and Director of the Institute for Research on Learning Technologies at York University, Canada. She is currently co-editor of *Loading: The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* and past president of the Canadian Game Studies Association. With Professor Suzanne de Castell (Dean, University of Ontario Institute of Technology), Dr. Nicholas Taylor (NC State University) and a team of students in her CFI-funded Play:CES (Play in Computer Environments) lab, she designed educational games including: "Contagion", "Epidemic: Self-Care for Crisis", a Baroque music game, and an iPad game for early readers, Compareware (free in the app store). She completed 2 longitudinal studies of gender and digital gameplay, and holds a Partnership Development Grant that intervenes and supports women and girls in the game industry, "Feminist in Games". She also completed a 3-year, mixed methods study of massively multiplayer online games and their players in partnership with SRI International, Simon Fraser University and Nottingham University, UK. She publishes widely on education, technology, gender, design and development of digital games, and technology policies and practices in K-12 schooling. She is co-editor of *Worlds in Play: International Perspectives on Digital Game Research* (Peter Lang Press, 2007) with Suzanne de Castell and lead author of *Policy Unplugged* (McGill-Queens U. Press, 2007) with Chloe Brushwood Rose and Brian Lewis.

**Professor Soraya Murray** holds a Ph.D. in art history and visual studies from Cornell University, and an MFA in Studio Art from the University of California, Irvine. An Assistant Professor in Film & Digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz, she is also principal faculty in the Digital Arts & New Media MFA Program, and affiliated with the History of Art & Visual Culture Department, as well as the Center for Games and Playable Media. Murray is an interdisciplinary scholar who focuses on contemporary visual culture, with particular interest in contemporary art, cultural studies and games. Her writings are published in *Art Journal*, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, *CTheory*, *Public Art Review*, *Third Text*, *Gamesbeat* and *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*.

Dr. Murray is the convener and moderator of this panel.