



Selected Papers of Internet Research 16:  
The 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Phoenix, AZ, USA / 21-24 October 2015

## WHITENESS AS DIGITAL IMAGINARY: SJW AS BOUNDARY OBJECT

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The last few years have seen increased public attention to the ways in which misogyny is performed or contested online (Marcotte 2012; Marwick 2013; Rentschler 2014; Herring and Stoerger 2013). Only rarely, however, has race been incorporated into research on these events (Daniels 2015). This paper seeks to extend research into this area by applying the concept of boundary objects (Star and Griesemer 1989; Star 2010; Bowker and Star 1999) to racial ideology as articulated in a video game, *Social Justice Warriors*, alongside associated online discussions about the game, and video games and race in general. The paper concludes with a discussion of how Whiteness could be ascertained from other digital boundary objects and the importance of deconstructing racial ideology in technocultural research.

### Background

Social Justice Warrior, ostensibly a term defining activist resistance to coercive regimes, is instead more commonly understood as a pejorative definition of a particular type of internet inhabitant. Per Urban Dictionary ("social justice warrior, 2011), an SJW is typically a member of LiveJournal or Tumblr, narcissistic, emotional, a slacktivist, overly concerned with online reputation, and obsessed with being politically correct. Coincidentally, the SJW's activities in this definition revolve around perceived injustices to women and people of color. While the gendered aspect of the SJW warrior has received attention from the academy, the racial aspect is less easily discernible in the research. This paper argues that by interrogating the SJW as a boundary object with technical, cultural, and rhetorical components, one can determine how race articulates itself through digital objects and online discourses.

### Conceptual Framework

Star (2010) defined boundary objects as "a sort of arrangement that allow different groups to work together without consensus" (602). She argued that boundary objects have three dimensions: interpretive flexibility, material and organizational structure, and scale or granularity. For Star, object refers to concepts in computer science, pragmatism, and materialism. For computer science, an object is something other objects and programs act toward and with; for pragmatism, it is something that people act toward and with; and from a materialist standpoint it is the actions ascribed to the

Suggested Citation (APA): Brock, A. (2015, October 21-24). *Whiteness As Digital Imaginary: Sjlw As Boundary Object*. Paper presented at Internet Research 16: The 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Phoenix, AZ, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

object rather than the object itself. From this definition I contend that the SJW is a discursive and technical concept drawing upon the interpretive schema of racial ideology, gender ideology, and technical literacies of the internet. While this paper is primarily concerned with the SJW's racial aspects, gender roles in technology and technoculture inform the analysis of the technical and social aspects as well.

## **Data and Method**

CTDA is a problem-oriented analytical approach to digital (née Internet) objects and phenomena. It applies a critical cultural theoretical framework drawing from critical race theory and science and technology studies to the semiotics of the ICT under examination and the discourses of its users. In doing so, it seeks to provide a holistic analysis of the interactions between information technology, cultural ideology, and technology practice.

For this paper, CTDA's conceptual framework draws from Star's work on boundary objects (Star and Griesemer 1998; Bowker and Star 1999, Star 2010) to interrogate how a technocultural practice (or more accurately, its practitioners) can be interpreted by disparate communities drawing upon racial ideology and technical identity formation.

Rather than review the unwieldy corpus of discourse surrounding hashtag campaigns such as Operation Lollipop, #solidarityisforwhitewomen, or #gamergate, I chose to interrogate the video game Social Justice Warriors. Video games, through their capacity for simulation, representation, and ludic experience, are an uniquely concretized take on cultural belief and discourse. Using the above conceptual framework, the game's interface, mechanics, and lore will be analyzed to unpack how SJWs are represented, enacted, and understood. In addition, the game's associated Steam\_ forum will undergo a discourse analysis drawing upon the same conceptual framework to examine how players understood the game's representations and aim.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

Preliminary analysis reveals that the game carefully avoids assigning racial characteristics to avatars, instead drawing upon European high fantasy to provide archetypes for gameplay. In the pre-release forums, however, players were uninterested in the setting or the gameplay. The most heavily trafficked threads before the game's release debated the technical, racial, social, and (surprisingly) age implications of SJW and anti-SJW discourse. Typically, Steam forums (as well as other enthusiast game communities) obsess about the formal qualities of games, e.g., gameplay, genre, design, or mechanics. Many comments referenced the perceived anti-whiteness of SJWs as a rationale for participating in the discourse about the game. For example, typical comments proceeded along these lines of argument: "Ultimately SJWs are extremely racist. They have their own distorted image of how people of color should think and behave. If someone doesn't do that, omg, how dare they! They must be Uncle Toms! SJWs are also about hating straight white males, because in the way of SJW "thinking", SWM cause all the problems."

The #GamerGate controversy has been argued as being about ethics in game journalism, but the Social Justice Warriors video game provides an interesting space where actual game players discuss a game about the subject, rather than through the mediations of social network platforms. Accordingly, the digital and social mediations of the Steam forums provide additional space for discussants to build more detailed arguments about their warrants for playing the game; microblogs such as Twitter and Tumblr are necessarily limited in the amount of space available to conduct such discussions. Finally, analyzing a game, rather than social media, to unpack misogyny and racism in technoculture helps to reveal how digital artifacts can be explicitly designed and understood as cultural touchstones incorporating anti-social mores above and beyond discussions of virtual depictions of violence or conspicuous consumption.

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