

## Children's Video Games as Interactive Racialization

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**Abstract:** Cathlena Martin explores in her paper "Children's Video Games as Interactive Racialization" selected children's video games. Martin argues that children's video games often act as reinforcement for the games' television and film counterparts and their racializing characteristics and features. In Martin's analysis the video games discussed represent media through which to analyze racial identities and ideologies. In making the case for positive female minority leads in children's video games, Martin examines the games and franchises of *Rugrats* and *Dora the Explorer*. She argues that the influx of games with a greater diversity of minority female characters has only been a recent phenomenon in game production -- since 2002 -- and holds a strong correlation with the medium of television.

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**Cathlena MARTIN****Children's Video Games as Interactive Racialization**

Children's exposure to digital media facilitates and engenders both racial and cultural knowledge. Popular digital media, specifically video games, transfer certain racial conceptions that are reinforced through the player's identification with and control of a primary avatar. These conceptions can be both negative and positive, but recent video games for children present a surprisingly positive view on racial diversity, particularly for minority females. Also, children's video games act as additional reinforcement for ideologies such as race because most game titles are spin-offs of television shows and movies that children regularly watch. With most of the negative mass media attention fixated on violence and the sexist portrayal of women in video games, E for Everyone games marketed toward children have been largely overlooked as positive examples to combat negative gender and racial stereotypes. Predominantly for the GameBoy Advance, but shifting toward the Nintendo DS and Wii platforms, these children's games provide more affirmative racial diversity, particularly for minority girls, than adult video games provide for women and minority players. In my analysis I discuss specific children's video games as reinforcement for the games' television and film counterparts through which to analyze racial identities and ideologies. In making the case for positive female minority leads and I examine the games and franchises of *Rugrats* and *Dora the Explorer*.

In a large number of games, particularly computer games, a player may choose to create an avatar. This construction of a virtual identity or a cyborg has been discussed in terms of race (see Kolko, Nakamura, Rodman; Nakamura) and gender identity (Haraway; Turkle), but having a choice in the identity of your character is quite distinct from video games with a pre-set character as one's playable option. The question of an online or virtual identity constructed by the player is not applicable to the video games such as *That's So Raven* and *Dora the Explorer*, which have defined title characters that players cannot modify. One cannot make Dora into a white character at the player's whim; she remains a Latina character in appearance and dialogue. By looking at specific games with popular children's entertainment and edutainment characters, one can see a socially and commercially constructed view of race as presented to children through mass media. However, the influx of games with a greater diversity of minority female characters has only been a recent phenomenon in game production since 2002. Children Now, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping children, conducted a study January-June 2001 examining games in terms of violence, gender, and race and concluded that video games "ignore women and people of color and reinforce racial and gender stereotypes" (27). When games do show racial diversity "they often incorporate stereotyped images and roles for people of color" (27). Similarly, "not only are females severely under-represented, they are generally cast in either insignificant or stereotyped roles" (27). After this study concluded, games began appearing on the market that dispute and change these results. The games that I focus on are largely targeted toward female players by presenting a minority female in an active role, thus these games begin to negate the negative report from the 2001 research in regards to both race and gender. Children's games are progressing quickly in terms of balancing the negative portrayal of race and gender; they are even doing so more quickly than adult games. Thus, currently, children's games provide a greater diversity in terms of racial sampling than adult games, but it is helpful to address also adult video games since the majority of scholarly research on specific games has been conducted on games marketed to adults. Educators, sociologists, and organizations such as Children Now might look more at the effect of video games on adolescents and children, but video game scholars, online video game sites, and video game reviews are dedicated chiefly to the adult players and their games.

In general, the only games with racial diversity (or the appearance thereof) for adults are fighting games, where there are a plethora of characters and each of them are slightly different. Adult adventure games provide limited racial diversity and simulation games allow the player to create his or her

own character, but this provides a different type of model than having a pre-designed title minority character with a back story. When games do have minority characters, they tend not to be what one would term wholesome role models. For example, the M-for-Mature-rated-game *Beat Down: Fists of Vengeance*, released in 2005, provides a non-white female option as one of the five main characters, but all of the characters are criminals. Adult video games that use race-lead characters other than white or Caucasian have been compared with old-time minstrel theatre or minstrelsy. David Leonard's work on video games, particularly *Grand Theft Auto III* and sports games, describes white players controlling black avatars as racial cross-dressing or a form of blackface. Similarly, Jeffrey A. Ow and Anthony Sze-Fai Shiu analyze separately yellowface in video games, with both focusing largely on *Shadow Warrior* and its main character Lo Wang. Both look at the dynamics of Asian Otherness with Ow referring to "digitized yellowface" as "the new makeup of the millennium" (55). Without specifically privileging one race, Lisa Nakamura uses the term "identity tourism" to describe online recreational passing when a player of one race uses an avatar of another race (13). Leonard, Ow, and Shiu develop and explore independently from each other the negative racial stereotyping and the use of race in video games using specific games as examples of larger trends; Nakamura explores online social and gaming spaces such as graphic chat rooms, MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon), MOOs (MUD object oriented), and MMORPGs (Massively multiplayer online role-playing game) that use visual avatars. These specific examples provide a sampling for the overall negative tone used when discussing race and video games. While Leonard, Ow, and Shiu address male players in the minstrel performance, Thomas Foster views cyberspace as "available to women and African Americans only through mimicry or cross-identification with the supposedly more universal position of white men," which he cites as the "adoption of a full-body 'prosthesis'" (138). This provides an almost reverse analogy in regards to who is constructing the identity through performance or passing. Foster does address blackface in terms of the cyborg in *Deathlok*, a comic, but his statement linking online gender and racial passing helps situate these two groups together as under identified technological users.

If women and minorities, particularly Asians and African Americans, are the underrepresented Other, then the next logical step in that framework for identification positions minority females as the lowest and most ostracized user or player group. While this has historically been true of video games and video game players, the children's video game market is beginning to redefine this position. Children are considered "other" just in their very nature of not being adults. But when one moves past having to create an online character identity and looks at the benefits of pre-created identities of minority females in children's games, one sees a poignant distinction in identity formation and reception. Yet, in both online and gaming cultures there is still an overwhelmingly negative construction and portrayal of race and racial identity. While this topic needs to be addressed and studied, the games that provide affirmative racial diversity need to be lauded for their activist game design and content. Additionally, any game that promotes a positive female role should be supported, and games that provide both strong female roles and favorable racial diversity should be modeled.

While the racial character portrayal in children's video games is the focus of this article, the video games I discuss are linked integrally to other media, particularly television, and I would be remiss to discuss one without acknowledging the influence of the other. The three media are intrinsically linked, even to the point of creating a symbiotic relationship. Today, there is rarely a Hollywood movie premiere that does not have a video game released at the same time. And there is hardly a current video game that is not based on a previous text such as television or a comic book or vice versa. While this is true for the video game market as a whole, it is particularly poignant for the children's video game market and has been a topic of video game scholarship. Video game studies has grown, but it is still linked to other media in various ways. Video game theorists Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron assert that "many writings on video games, especially earlier ones, attempt to connect video games to other media, seeing elements shared between them" (11). While video games can be analyzed through the visual rhetoric of film or television studies since they are a visual medium and they do usually include

animated cut scenes, the games I discuss go beyond this one approach and have their production roots in the actual television programs, not just the visual medium of television. Video games are integrally linked to other popular cultural media and create media crossovers quite frequently. Marsha Kinder laid the groundwork for discussing video games and other media, insisting that one cannot talk about transmedia franchises without discussing video games. Wolf and Perron classify this transmedia crossover as working both ways, with video games now becoming a source material for other media, such as television and movies (6). However, in children's games it is still largely one-sided, with television acting as the pilot project that catalyzes film and video game production based on television series. This is true for *Rugrats* and *Dora the Explorer*.

Not only is television a source for video games, but it largely drives children's internet viewing habits and online activities: "Television holds the tightest connection to the Internet in the children's minds," asserts Ellen Seiter after conducting a case study for four years in an elementary school in southern California. This connection "is reflected in their favorite sites, which largely correspond to television channels (Disney, Fox Kids, Kids WB, Nick, and MTV) or to programs (Rug Rats [sic], Charmed, Digimon, Dragonball Z, X-Men, and Worldwide Wrestling Federation)" (95). Most television shows now provide websites with games for viewers to play, thus integrating gaming even more readily than purchasing a spin-off game for a console. Television has spread out, refusing to stay confined in its box and incorporating other media such as the internet, the world wide web, and video games through which to include tie-ins and thus branch its various series out into other media. Yet, this progression from television to other media is not confined to children's shows. Popular adult dramas such as *Lost* are incorporating the world wide web in a gaming fashion to draw more viewers into the show and give them the ability to interact with similar situations that they watch during the episodes. Online activities for television shows help cinch their connection to video games even tighter.

Television and video games are also linked in another critical way. A societal *déjà vu* happens when one looks at studies from over twenty years ago of the effect of television on children. These studies used the same rhetoric of concern for television viewing that people and corporations like Children Now currently apply to children's video game habits. In a study of television as a means of socialization, particularly of the minority child, Gordon L. Berry and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan try to go beyond the popular debate on "the relationship between the exposure to violent programming and subsequent aggressive behavior" and move on to other socialization functions of television, "including its impact on identity formation, self-esteem, cognitive development, moral development, and cultural awareness" (3). Taking their lead, I am interested in the impact and portrayal of cultural and racial awareness as presented in video games for children. Here, I am discussing two titles for children that present positive examples of race by providing main female minority title characters. While some titles, like *Bratz*, prove problematic upon closer examination, *Rugrats* and *Dora the Explorer* show the progressive strides that media is making for minority viewers. The television show *Rugrats* came out on Nickelodeon in 1991, followed by Nickelodeon's premiere of *Dora the Explorer*, a show for younger viewers, on Nick Jr. in 2000. There are additional games and franchises such as *Lilo & Stitch* and *That's So Raven* that also exhibit main characters that are minority females, but *Rugrats* and *Dora* each provide more than just a strong minority female lead. They each break new territory in racial representations not only for children's video games, but video games in general. *Rugrats* provides positive examples of racial blending in various formats including television, movies, and video games. I begin with *Rugrats* because of its lengthy program history, its use of multiple racial characters, and its portrayal of not just minority female lead characters but also of a mixed-race family. *Rugrats* provides a positive exception of racial depiction in fictional popular culture through the use of an integrated nursery. Viewers have seen this type of integrated nursery before in Jim Henson's *Muppet Babies* television series which provided a mixture of animals (pig, frog, bear, dog, and whatever Gonzo was) on the set. While this type of species diversity helped pave the way for a show such as *Rugrats*, it is not until the main characters are actually human that the racial integration is complete. While *Rugrats*

could be seen as adding minority characters for marketing purposes to reach a larger viewing audience, the very act of including minority females in a role of power represents progress.

*Rugrats*, the popular Nickelodeon television series which premiered in 1991, has several movie spin-offs as well as numerous video games for multiple platforms. The series and games diverge from a conventional one-race cast and effectively show a healthy mixed-race family and include a strong African-American three-year-old character. Susanna "Susie" Yvonne Carmichael, the wise African-American in the group, is a role model for the other children in the series and a foil to the tyrannical Angelica. Kimberly "Kimi" Watanabe-Finster, the bold Asian baby of the nursery, has an older Caucasian brother as a result of a mixed marriage. But neither Susie nor Kimi are original *Rugrats*. The show started with only four main children: Tommy, Chuckie, Phil, and Lil. However, the neighborhood grew and thus the nursery expanded to be more racially inclusive. Susie was added relatively quickly in "Meet the Carmichaels" which aired in 1993, but Kimi was added in the 2000 *Rugrats in Paris: The Movie* and then become a regular on the show with the airing of "Finsterella," thus giving the red-headed Chuckie an Asian mother and sister. Kimi also adds international presence because she and her mother met the *Rugrats* gang in Paris. But she does more than add token diversity. By birth, Kimi is a citizen of Japan and explores her Japanese heritage while researching a family tree project in the episode "Memoirs of a Finster." She also adds diversity immediately in "Finsterella" where everyone wears socks in the house, adopting the Japanese custom of removing shoes when entering a house (I add a cross-cultural point of reference here that this is also a custom in Canada). While Kimi's mother, Kira Watanabe, was also added late in the series, there is a strong resemblance between her and a nameless guest at the Pickle's residence in the pilot episode, thus suggesting that possibly the producers had a mixed-race cast in mind from the show's conception.

Although the show did not start with a heterogeneous group, it has melded into a broader sample of US-American diversity with two strong minority female characters and a mixed-race family. Additionally, the dichotomy of bratty Angelica and wise Susie provide a racial opposition with Angelica, the white character, oppressing the other children as the villain and Susie, the black character, providing advice and help as the friend and role model to the other children. Susie can usually best Angelica, which provides a unique power structure in the nursery. Susie also possesses skills that neither Angelica nor the younger *Rugrats* have, such as being able to speak several languages. While Angelica and Susie are same-aged foils for each other, the younger Kimi is joined with Susie by their mutual courage against Angelica's tyranny. Susie and Kimi are also visually linked through their hair-dos; both sport an unusual three groupings of braids or ponytails while Angelica dons a typical pigtail. Susie and Kimi help provide both positive minority and female presence in the nursery. Lil, an original *Rugrat*, is a female character, but she has a male twin and is thus identified through and with him, which complicates her gender portrayal since she and Phil are so close as to finishing each other's sentences. The show not only provides a situation to teach children about racial diversity through friends and family, but also takes certain episodes and devotes them to a positive awareness of race and culture. For example, one television episode titled "A *Rugrats* Kwanzaa" has Susie and the Carmichaels learning about and celebrating Kwanzaa. In researching children and their dealings with being "other," Owain Jones asserts that *Rugrats*, "throws up a nice take on the otherness of childhood" (174). While Jones deals more with children as other compared to adults, his statement remains true for otherness as race, which *Rugrats* positions optimistically in their franchise.

Fictional popular culture like the integrated nursery of the *Rugrats* provides positive examples of multiracial relations repeated through multiple mediums: television, movies, and finally onto video game format to solidify interaction within the multiracial setting. The *Rugrats* video games have spanned into a large universe and include thirteen titles, not including the one *Rugrats* game exclusive to mobile phones. The first game, *Rugrats: The Movie*, gives, as the title implies, children a chance to replay the first *Rugrats* movie. Another *Rugrats* video game, *Rugrats: Royal Ransom*, starts with a replication of watching TV, illustrating the *Rugrats* integral link with multiple media. The beginning cut

scene of the game is framed in a rectangular box and fades from black into replicated television static and then into a short animated scene. This same static closes the scene as the "tv" turns off and the game begins. Even as a video game, the series is self-referential in its origin as a television series. Also, within *Rugrats: Royal Ransom*, the player can choose to play as any of the *Rugrat* characters and can alternate between characters with the push of one button. Having this flexibility to choose one's character out of multiple characters is a benefit for games with a large cast. But unlike most games with this type of party play feature, all of the *Rugrats* characters have the same abilities. For example, in *The Chronicles of Narnia* Peter fights with a manly sword, but Susan fights with a bow and arrow or throws snowballs, keeping her away from the heat of battle. However, in *Royal Ransom*, Tommy cannot jump higher than Kimi and Phil cannot throw better than Lil. Therefore, gamers actually have the opportunity to play as a minority female without penalty. Each character is talented equally and can be chosen as the playable character for the multiple levels of play as the *Rugrats* try to storm the castle/play house and beat Angelica.

The *Rugrats* franchise has also been linked through marketing strategies with computers, not just computer games. In time for the Christmas sales of 1999, Gateway and Nickelodeon joined together to produce the Gateway Astro PC *Rugrats* Edition computer. The package deal included five *Rugrats* software titles and *Rugrats* accessories. Gateway's president and chief operating officer at the time, Jeff Weitzen, used edutainment to sell more of his product: "Kids love the Nickelodeon characters and they love the magic of computers. Combine the two and you've got kids having fun while learning" (qtd. in "Nickelodeon and Gateway" 1228). Jeff Dunn, the chief operating officer of Nickelodeon, is quoted saying, "Gateway recognizes the power of the Nickelodeon brand and the power of kids influence on computer buying decisions. Through this extensive alliance -- the most significant licensing partnership to date -- Gateway joins us in putting kids first by creating a product line that not only appeals to kids, but empowers them" (qtd. in "Nickelodeon and Gateway" 1228). And *Rugrats* did empower children to be more savvy technologically so that they could play the *Rugrats* video games while at the same time inspiring children to be more accepting, particularly in a mixed-race family. Thus, *Rugrats* and shows like it link to the freedom and empowerment of media in another way. In her article "Children in Cyberspace," Valerie Walkerdine explores power through freedom: "children are left to their own devices, as is graphically illustrated in television series like 'Ninja Turtles' and 'Rugrats.' In this context, cyberspace offers a new space, one in which rational play may be offered without the fears attached to public space and indeed without undue interference from adults: it is adult-free, unknown and unsupervised" (236). Video games provide a model of childhood freedom and power based on the freedom that *Rugrats* shows by the children wandering off on their own unsupervised adventure, usually because Grandpa Lou has fallen asleep. Video games are a space of power for children, similar to the unsupervised space of adventure that the *Rugrats* inhabit while Grandpa is napping. A video game space comprises a place where children gain control of their virtual space within certain boundaries. For some children, minority and other, this is the only space of control they have. A child wins or loses a game based on her ability and effort, thus gaining a degree of ownership and control over the virtual space. Similarly, the *Rugrats* have control over their world when the adults are not paying attention, which comprises most of the episode time and provides a sense of power for all *Rugrats* involved, no matter what their race.

While *Rugrats* supplies the best example of a children's text across several media that present race in a positive light, particularly for minority females, there are other narratives on the market that also provide strong minority female roles. Briefly, I mention the primary African American female lead on the Disney Channel, Raven Symone. This popular series turned video game has multiple releases for the Game Boy Advance; *That's So Raven* was the first in the series followed by *That's So Raven 2: Supernatural Style*. The game breaks the traditional role of black females as passive by creating an African American title character. The games studied in the Children Now research found that the "games especially created for young children featured only white characters" and that in all of the

games studied, "most African American females were non-action characters" (22). *That's So Raven* has helped give minority girls a fun and accessible game. Whereas *Rugrats* is targeted to a diverse market of children of both sexes and of multiple races, *Raven* has a smaller target market and provides a game designed more for females, particularly African-American females. *That's So Raven: Psychic on the Scene* has been upgraded on the Nintendo DS instead of the GameBoy Advance. *Dora the Explorer*, a Nick Jr. series, has also branched out past GBA games and now has titles available for PS2, GameCube, and several games for the PC. Whereas mainly children own GBA handheld systems, a more diverse population has consoles. The more platforms a game can produce versions for, the more marketing and sales potential to spread the game around to different audiences. Also, the more a game is recognized and played, the more potential for its inclusion in research. When games like *Raven* and *Dora* expand onto more "adult" consoles, it helps broaden their reception and counteract the negative perception about race and gender that has been placed on video games.

The majority of research and discussions on race and identity in cyberspace or video games focus on either the Black/White dynamic or on Asian as Other. Yet the discussion of Spanish and Latino characters also needs to be addressed. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* created a raging backlash from Cubans and Haitians because of its racial slurs and was hotly debated in terms of race: I postulate that games that provide positive minority characters need to be examined as well as the ones that display racism. *Dora the Explorer* provides a positive model for young Latinas. Not only is Dora a Latina main character, but her show and games teach Spanish language skills and appreciation of Latino culture. She not only models an affirmative racial perspective, but educates viewers and players on her race and culture. *Rugrats* had a single episode on Kwanzaa, but Dora actively lives and portrays her cultural and racial heritage. By actively portraying her Latina heritage, she reduces chances of being merely a token racial character, and by teaching others about her race, she expands their racial and cultural awareness while broadening the positive racial content of video games in general. According to Children Now, "not one of the 1716 characters in this study were Latina;" this means that Dora is radically breaking new ground for the video game market (22). Dora, unlike Kimi or Susie, dominates her show and is central to every episode and game. Dora cannot be marginalized or left out of episodes like Kimi or Susie can, thus giving her a privileged seat of power. In this way, Dora and Raven are given more power in their shows while Kimi and Susie provide diversity in an ensemble cast. Dora is an adventurous seven-year-old who invites preschoolers to join her and her monkey Boots on an interactive adventure, through television or video games. The term "interactive" can be quite loaded, but with *Dora* episodes there are quite a few interactive examples with the audience. As common with a lot of programming for young children, Dora and her friends will speak directly into the television screen to ask the viewer a question and then pause for the answer. This is a common trope in children's television, but Dora adds a technical dimension by having a touch screen and a map that guides Dora on her adventure and gives her help. Additionally, the show uses a blue arrow cursor to click on links or icons.

The opening credits to the television show zooms in from a live action set of a children's room onto a computer screen where Dora and friends are characters navigating a simple computer game. This opening immediately situates Dora in an online realm. Because of the opening, a blue arrow cursor that acts as a secondary character and navigational tool does not seem out of place in the television show. The cursor seems invisible to the characters as a non-diegetic tool and it functions sometimes as a pointer to select an object from a line-up, most often though it works as a computer cursor by clicking and selecting an object or icon. Since the show begins with a first-person view up to the computer screen, the viewer is the natural player. Thus, the viewer is the implied user and manipulator of the mouse. This role is enhanced because the cursor will point to an object after Dora has asked the viewer where something is. For example, Dora will ask, "Do you see a lake?" and in the pause for the viewer to answer, the blue arrow will click on the lake and highlight it. In turn, the television show is reminiscent of a side-scrolling adventure game scattered with puzzles, a game that is introduced in



the opening credits on the computer screen. The end credits reinforce this computer mode by using the cursor to click and pull down the final credits. Because of the way the television show situates itself as a game narrative, children should find it an easy cross-over to then actually play the games. *Dora the Explorer: Journey to the Purple Planet* is one of Dora's many video games that closely models the television show format. In the video game, Dora and Boots travel to outer space to help their alien friends return home.

Aliens link my final example of Disney's *Lilo & Stitch* to *Dora the Explorer: Journey to the Purple Planet*. Lilo is visually Other, a native of Hawaii with dark skin and dark hair. She provides a model for girls, not only minority girls, but any girl that feels alienated/marginalized. The 2002 Disney animated movie *Lilo & Stitch* revolves around the idea of being alien, whether that is a non-human extra-terrestrial from outer space or a human alienated among other people, racially or socially. The first *Lilo & Stitch* video game was based on the movie; the sequel video game, *Lilo & Stitch 2: Hamsteviel Havoc* is based on the Disney Channel television program *Lilo & Stitch*. Both games provide players with the opportunity to play as either Lilo or Stitch, but most gamers will prefer Stitch because he has the capacity for more moves. Whereas Kimi and Susie possess the same game play possibilities as Chuckie and Phil in *Rugrats: The Royal Ransom*, giving Stitch more capabilities places Lilo at a disadvantage and marginalizes her. She is even further marginalized to the point of elimination in *Disney's Stitch: Experiment 626*, designed as a prequel to the movie *Lilo & Stitch*. Stitch brings up a sub-point in terms of race and children's texts I address here briefly: video games for children use traditionally either animals or non-humans as avatar characters and thus circumvent racial stereotypes. Yet race is still prevalent, although masked, and alludes to conventional fables where animals are used in human stead for didactic purposes. Animated animals that are supposedly non-racial produce a projected ethnicity and include such characters found in *Madagascar* and *Shark Tales*. Also, the use of magical and otherworldly creatures such as aliens and elves in children's video games also try to circumvent race. However, racialization is enhanced through racial voice acting for animated characters and through colorization as other for evil bosses or villainous characters. But the positive racial examples are thankfully beginning to outweigh the negative. Hopefully, the video game examples discussed here will help balance research conducted in 2001 on gender and race in video games for children and teens by Children Now. As illustrated, there are a number of games on the market for children that affirm racial diversity and provide games for minority girls with strong female lead characters. Yet, while there have been several video games released for children that exhibit positive racial characters instead of negative stereotyping or games that lack racial diversity, more such games are needed.

In conclusion, the examples discussed in my paper provide a sampling of video games and story lines with constructive female minority leads positively and in inclusionary manner. Within the children's market as a whole one can see the small shifts. Even Barbie has started to integrate with a cast of multicultural characters in her video game titles. But for every minority female role on the market, there are countless traditional middle-class US-American white leads such as Lizzie McGuire and Kim Possible. However, a mixture is good and a healthy balance is best for reaching a wide spectrum of girl gamers. Providing games of any sort for girls of any race is a good and welcome step in the industry. Hopefully, this trend will continue and girl heroes like the PowerPuff Girls to girl bands like the Bratz will enliven the game systems and television for young girls everywhere, reinforcing the idea that girls of any race can game too.

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