OPINION: Hollywood should stop racebending

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**Film is the best representation of modern culture available**. *When considering the historical and cultural context surrounding the early years of Hollywood, the focus on “white” narratives is not necessarily a problem.*

Hollywood has been a prominently white industry since it began. The vast majority of films focus on stories and themes that surround white narratives, such as movies about Westward expansion and European monarchies.

However, times are changing, and with a much more diverse and progressive population and an international audience, a change in narrative should be expected. The film industry has already started to portray this cultural shift, but the problem arises when people fight against this wave of change.

One way people and the film industry have done is racebending, the intentional change of the identities of characters in writing or in casting. Racebending comes in two ways: forced diversity and whitewashing, both controversial. To understand why both extremes are problematic, we must first understand the purpose behind storytelling, casting, intentional whitewashing and diverse casting.

Like any other form of art, the purpose of film storytelling is to communicate a message, express emotion and connect people through culture and identity. Likewise, casting should aim to tell stories with the appropriate representation of characters and people. Yet, here’s where both extremes come to a fault. When casting choices interfere with the story’s quality because of whitewashing or an outside agenda like diversity, intentional or not, the whole project suffers.

Whitewashing is perhaps the most common and prominent issue of the two. No matter the kind of story, or from which book the adaptation stems from, the main cast often consists of mostly white actors. Whether we assume the industry is intentionally racist or not, this type of casting ignores the identities of the characters and other cultures.

A few of the [many examples](https://www.indiewire.com/gallery/hollywood-whitewashing-25-roles-emma-stone-jake-gyllenhaal-scarlett-johansson/screen-shot-2017-08-29-at-12-21-38-pm/) of this include Johnny Depp as Tonto in “The Lone Ranger” and Rooney Mara as Tiger Lily in “Peter Pan,” where both Native American characters were replaced by white actors for no apparent reason.

Ultimately, whitewashing disregards the identity and cultures of intentionally different characters, therefore having a lack of authenticity throughout the story, and undermining the purpose of the characters’ backgrounds.

The only exception to this is when a story is adapted to a different setting in which racebending does not interfere with world-building. Netflix’s live-action adaptation of the anime “The Death Note,” for example, was set in Seattle, which explains why the characters were mostly American.

To combat this, the industry has attempted to promote diversity in recent years. However, some people often perceive diverse casting as forced, saying that it’s only there to pander to the audience, as opposed to a genuine concern for representation. This concern then detracts from the story being told.

Some studios use a “color-blind” approach, where casting focuses on skill, but the identity of the actors and their characters is put aside, and this often seems counterproductive and an obvious attempt at representation. Although not many critics touch on race often, viewers often discuss it on comment sections and other online forums, and some people are not too happy about it.

Most recently, Netflix’s “The Witcher” was criticized for racebending, primarily for casting an actress from Zimbabwe to play the sorceress Fringilla Vigo. Numerous other minor characters in the show are played by people of color as well, and by some, this was seen as the opposite of whitewashing since “The Witcher” world is famously based on Polish culture and folklore. This resulted in some members of the Polish community feeling underrepresented because of the American desire of diversity.

Moreover, the color-blind approach is counterproductive because representation should celebrate different identities and cultures instead of existing for its own sake. In this case, “The Witcher” not only misrepresents Polish culture, it ignores race altogether.

While these stories might get a pass for being of the fantasy genre, a much more effective and immersive approach can be seen in “Game of Thrones,” where every region of the world had a specific culture, ethnicity, language and religion.

On a different note, a movie that faced a similar kind of criticism (and many other kinds) by fans was “Star Wars: The Last Jedi,” where the main characters included an African-American stormtrooper, an East-Asian mechanic and a Hispanic pilot.

While there’s nothing inherently wrong with the representation of minorities, it seemed like the film’s diversity was just so the producers could check off the minority boxes. This caused many fans online to react negatively to the movie, claiming it was forced diversity.

The problem with this reaction is that not only is it extremely subjective, it is also unclear regarding the line between natural and forced diversity. To a certain extent, it seems like people think “over-representation” is not realistic and assume diversity must have been forced.

While this is an important point to consider, ultimately, race should not matter in a world full of blank-slate characters, especially ones assumed to be diverse— a typical trait of science fiction and fantasy.

Many are quick to label this point of view as racist, but that may not be the case. It’s not that underrepresented identities are in lead roles; it’s the fact that the minorities are “too in-your-face.”

In reality, there’s no such thing as “forced” diversity, but rather, it’s simply poor writing paired with an agenda of social commentary.

The obsession with representation can diminish the quality of writing, as seen in the TV show “Supergirl,” during which the writers focus on the characters’ identities and lives to the point of annoyance.

So what is the alternative to avoid whitewashing and agendas resulting in “forced” diversity?

Simple, studios should either stick to the source material or have a reason beyond “just because” if they wish to keep racebending characters. If they really want representation, studios should create more narratives and characters in which a diverse cast feels organic and essential to the story, where different identities are actually celebrated.

Ultimately, the priority of casting, like every other element in writing and film production, should be to enhance storytelling.

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