# Gamifying Blackness: A Discussion on Black Gamers and Black Portrayals in Contemporary Videogames

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**Abstract**

Black videogame players in America face racism both in their lived reality, but also in digital gaming spaces. Game developers and gaming publishers continue to isolate their Black consumers and reify that blackness should be consumed in specific ways. Game developers should acknowledge and confront their own racist biases to create more grounded depictions of blackness and foster a hospitable gaming experience. Through a descriptive analysis via direct observation of gameplay from five popular video games released between 2008 - 2017 and an examination of Black player experiences, it is evident that blackness in real spaces and videogames is treated as subpar. The developers' negligence in their digital recreation of blackness adds to the negative experiences Black players confront in real life. Black gamers are left to choose to engage with false or half-truth depictions of themselves in games which exacerbates being Black is to be targeted and mocked in American society.

## Introduction

Gamer refers to a relationship between digital environments and social actors (game players, game producers, publishers, etc.) via controllers, screen, mice and keyboard, voice communication, and nowadays, online capabilities. I identify and contextualize the representations of Black people in videogames and in real spaces. Articles that examine characters in popular and profitable games allude to not all, but some of the popular games that contain negative and stereotypical imagery of people of color, especially African Americans (Dietz 1998; Dickerman et al. 2008; Mou and Peng 2009; Behm-Morawitz 2014). Black characters are more than likely presented as rude, loud, violent, and very aggressive. According to Ong (2016), Blacks often appear as background characters such as "sidekicks' ' or are shown as "very muscular antagonists or comic relief" (1). Dmitiri Williams et al. (2009) performed a content analysis on 8,572 videogame characters across 133 popular videogames between March 2005 and February 2006. He compared the populations of those characters with the actual populations from the 2000 U.S. Census. He observed that whites are approximately 7% overrepresented and Blacks are approximately 13% underrepresented (Williams et al. 2009, 824). It has been shown that African Americans are underrepresented on videogames' front case covers (Mou and Peng 2009). Mou and Peng (2009) examined "26 human characters" on the cover of "19 games" and found that out of 26 characters, 12% or three Black characters were shown on those covers compared to the 84% or roughly 22 White characters shown on covers (928). Though small in sample size, this speaks to a significant issue of the lack of inclusion of Black characters in videogames. Such lack of diversity in games and games advertising does not help with invoking confidence that actual Black gamers get to play characters that represent them.

Black gamers participate in gaming culture but are accustomed to unjust depictions of blackness, sexism, and racism both online and offline. Examples of several Black digital characters and Black-lived experiences will highlight the often contentious space in which Black players must compromise to participate in gameplay.

I have three main objectives in this paper: 1) Contextualize the meaning of representation as it relates to videogames; 2) Understand the state of Black portrayals through four popular videogame franchises; 3) Examine the experiences of Black gamers. I do not claim to present a universal framework to interrogate Black digital representation and lived experiences, but to examine a few of the archetypes and encounters when blackness intersects with gaming culture. Subsections in this article are brief, a proverbial snapshot if you will, to a few topics surrounding Black digital representation and lived experiences.

## Methods

I use descriptive analysis to gather information via direct observations on how the digital gaming environment constructs their Black characters and possible connections to the real world (see Sloman 2010). In the selection process for this paper, I examined games from big budget game studios that featured Black characters in prominent roles, as such, for the games selected for this analysis. The Black character(s) must have audible dialogue, especially if they are not playable, and interact with the protagonist. Lastly, each game comes from a different genre of videogame; third-person shooter, action-adventure, episodic, and action role-playing. I wanted to examine Black characters in different genres to view how Black character narratives were contrived and if there were any similarities between characters from different genres. I analyzed characters based on oral engagements, in-game dialogue, and visual representations which are adapted from works that view these narrative elements as important in the understanding of virtual characters (Brock 2015; Gray 2018). The following games analyzed are as follows; Gears of War 2 (GoW2)(2008), Mafia III (2016), The Walking Dead: Michonne - A Telltale Miniseries (Michonne) (2016), and Assassin's Creed: Origins (AC:O) (2017). Note, GoW2 does not have a Black character that is playable. The character I focused on was still featured prominently and had audible dialogue with the main protagonist.

For each videogame, I watched gameplay walkthrough videos on YouTube.com. I watched through someone else's experience to supplement my understanding of the gaming environments for each game. Therefore, one's experience with this game will be different depending on the player's in-game choices; however, there is an overarching narrative

structure all players will go through for each game. See Appendix for YouTube videos I watched to help examine each videogame. Lastly, to get a barometer of the Black-lived gamer experience, I read through contemporary literature that discusses Black player experiences. Also, popular press articles were used to provide examples of Black individuals understanding their relationship to digital representation and their lived experiences. I spotlight a famed esports player as one example of the way in which racism affects a Black individual regardless of their prowess in the gaming competitions.

*What's Representation Have to Do with It?*

Before discussing representation, we must establish what representation means to situate or, instead, challenge negative stereotypes (representation of others) in digital spaces. Elfriede Fürsich (2010) discusses representations and the connection to understanding the representation of "the other" within media. Fürsich (2010) posits, "Beyond just mirroring reality, representations in the media such as in film, television, photography and print journalism create reality and normalize specific world-views or ideologies" (115). Furthermore, Fürsich (2010) states that such a view understands ideology is a "hegemonic" and "normalizing" force in contemporary society (115). For example, a tier list is a categorization tool[1] used to put characters in some ranking order, i.e., F (lowest rank), E, D, C, B, A, S (Superior). There are many ranking videos online in which players interrogate and rank characters to reflect their view of weak characters to optimal characters to play. These conversations establish a 'meta' or a strategy or set of strategies used often by players within a game for the desired outcome. It is a method to establish something as truth, especially if other players begin to come to the same conclusions. Thus, the hegemonic force here is the idea that tier lists are someone's subjective, and paradoxically, objective measurement of value to compare to others' sense of value. With this in mind, we can begin to examine what digital representation of blackness means within the videogame medium itself.

I will briefly be looking at a few examples of representations of blackness through aesthetic and cultural lenses in videogames. When it comes to conversations around representation, I have three main thoughts/concerns: 1) Representations can embody values and beliefs about the 'nature' of things; 2) Representation can embody ethics about how things

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[1] The popular site www.tierlist.com provides a customizable interface in which the user can create

their own ranking system to classify characters or utilize presets.

should be perceived and understood by others/outsiders; 3) Representation is a site of conflict and contestation. With this in mind, we can begin to examine what digital representation of blackness means within the videogame medium itself.

## Results

*Examination of Black Videogame Characters*

What are some characteristics that would describe your character if your likeness was put in a videogame? Tall with short blonde hair? How about short with dark skin and cornrows? Videogames are another form of media; therefore, they are susceptible to the same tropes, (mis)representations, and stereotypes as other forms of media (Chess, Evans, and Baines 2017; Behm-Morawitz 2014; Gray and Kappeler 2014). There are four games worth exploring; *Gears of War 2* (*GoW2*) (2008), *Mafia III* (2016), *The Walking Dead: Michonne - A Telltale Miniseries* (2016) (*Michonne*), and *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017) (*AC:O*). Out of these four games, only in Michonne, the main character is a Black woman named Michonne. So, let us start with the most overt and problematic character to least offensive characters of Black culture in digital spaces.

*Gears of War 2 (2008)*

Given the narrative context in *Gears of War 2*, Cole Train is a hyperbolized digital representation of a Black male. One way this is done is the codification of blackness in the American football athlete. Augustus Cole, aka "Cole Train" from the third-person cover-based shooter *Gears of War* franchise, adheres to this flagrant characterization of a Black person. Players learn in *Gears of War* (2006) that Cole Train is an ex-pro thrashball player, and thrashball is a post-apocalyptic version of American football; this detail of his character was even included as part of promotional materials for *Gears of War 3* (2011)[2]. While the association may appear benign to some players, Cole Train's thrashball background is unnecessary. It participates in a construction in which blackness and

athleticism go hand-in-hand, and thus easily packaged and marketed towards White audiences (Oates 2007; Lewis et al. 2019). For more on the problematic aspects of this trope, see (Ray and Rosow 2012; Foy and Ray 2019).

Another problematic and offensive trope is often depicted with firm, aggressive, athletic Black males. This is not an original observation, but it bears mentioning because the repeated appearance of this trope in American culture suggests that it is an essential and common narrative about Black people used to sell blackness to White audiences. In 2008, this trope appeared in two moments that are relevant to our investigation of *GoW2*. First, as the locus of controversy on the April 2008 cover of *Vogue* magazine, when editors decided to depict a Black man on the cover for the first time in the publication's history. They chose a photo taken by Anna-Lou "Annie" Leibovitz of LeBron James and Gisele Bundchen that was done as part of a photo shoot for the issue, and they decided on the only photo that reenacts either an infamous caricature of King Kong holding Fay Wray on a 1933 film poster, or an infamous military propaganda poster depicting King Kong holding Lady Liberty hostage, depending on how you want to interpret the reference (Denton 2008). Both ultimately underscored a historical pattern in racist depictions of Black people. Regardless of intention, the depiction of James and Bundchen on the *Vogue* cover catalyzed public discourse over appropriate and/or racist representations of Black men in popular media. Whether or not game developers at Epic Games at the time paid attention, the release of *GoW2* in November 2008 represented a commitment they made to either extend or amplify representations of Black men in popular media.

Developers for *GoW2* ultimately relied upon existing stereotypes about Black men to place them in the story of a post-apocalyptic fight for humanity's survival. *What is the story? GoW2* takes place on the planet of Sera in which human civilization has been in a long-standing conflict with a mutated, genetically-modified 'race' of humans known as the Locust.[3] Cole Train joins main protagonist Marcus Fenix, the leader of Delta Squad, when most of Cole Train's crew were killed during an insurgency on the Locust.[4] Our first

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[2] Giant Bomb. 2011. "Gears of War 3: Cole Train's Thrashball Flashback Spoiler." *YouTube.* Retrieved October 16, 2021. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRQ3wRXiNuw&t=91s&ab_channel=GiantBomb).

[3] I am just using the language the Wikipedia entry uses. Whether or not this is an appropriate use of 'race' in the maintenance of a logical classification

system is not a question I can address within the scope of my analysis. Gears of War Wiki. n.a. "Locust Horde." *Gears of War.Fandom.com*. https://gearsofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Locust_Horde.

[4] For the sake of clarity, the player experiences *GoW2* through Marcus Fenix. Cole Train joins the player's crew about half-way through the game.

impression of the character is based on his expressive and over-the-top attitude. Players are introduced to Cole Train with a boisterous, "Wooo! Oh yeah!"[5] as Marcus Fenix, Carmine, and Dom are having a shootout with a group of Locust soldiers. After the player shoots all the enemies in the area, a cutscene occurs in which Marcus and his comrades look bewildered as they try to figure out who is yelling. The camera still focused on Marcus's puzzled face, in the background one hears, "Come get some! Come get some! Yeah, Cole's here, baby!" Moments later, the camera pans over a ridge showing Cole Train swiftly using his chainsaw gun on a nearby enemy. He then swiftly plants a bomb on the back of another enemy, to lastly get a headshot on another combatant. After the enemy explodes from the bomb, Cole Train motions over to the ridge peering down Marcus, Carmine and Dom. "Nobody plays this game like me. Nobody!", said Cole Train. Dom cheerfully exclaims, "Cole!" "Ha ha! In the flesh, baby!", said Cole Train followed by a quick bow (Xbox Games Studios 2008).[6] The "game" Cole Train is referring to is the game of thrashball, which again, is where he got his fame.

To further position Cole Train as a "Black figure which White audiences would understand", Cole Train speaks using slang words reflecting African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Note, within GoW2 other characters speak loudly and with aggression. However, unlike Cole Train's comrades, his tone of voice is consistently louder on average. Cole Train is the only Black male character with any significant role. Thus, the usage of AAVE becomes more pronounced because it positions Cole Train as being unable to communicate like that of his comrade. In GoW2, Cole Train and his three comrades reach the Hive fortress, one of the antagonists in the game being the Hive Queen. After fighting through waves of enemies, they manage to make their way into a communications room. The Queen is heard through loudspeakers espousing how the world is "rightfully [The Hives]" (Xbox Games Studios 2008). As Cole Train's comrades attempt to gather information within the room, Cole Train takes a microphone connected to the P.A. (public address) system and shouts:

> Delta Squad is coming to your house, bitch.
> You hear that shit. You grubby-ass bitches
> are goin' down! Like way down - dead

down… so down you ain't even gonna know which way is up! Your asses are gonna be cryin' to your skank-ass queen, 'Oh mommy, don't let the bad men hurt us!' Fuck you! We gonna whup your momma's ass! Woo! (Xbox Games Studios 2008).

To further position Cole Train as "the other," Baird, a White male comrade, tells Cole Train in a patronizing fashion, "You were great. I love your speech there, especially with the bitch-ass stuff. Very good, very enlightening" (Xbox Games Studios 2008). Cole Train, as a character, is the loudest and brutish one of his comrades, in which his comrades do not acknowledge his actions as outlandish.

The only other person of color with substantial screen time in GoW2 is Delta Squad member, Dominic "Dom" Santiago. Dom's main motivation in the game is to find his wife, Maria, who was captured by the Locus and held hostage. Dom is a mostly well-tempered individual, showing expressions of anger and grief during moments when he feels he is closer to finding his wife. Dom is showing a range of emotional traits, thus creating a sense of depth to his character. Cole Train shows depth of character through cracking jokes during intense situations and acts with a "shoot first ask questions never" mentality. To be clear, the protagonist, secondary, and most tertiary characters are men with muscular physiques who frequently use expletives, and yell. However, the members of Delta Squad, unlike Cole Train, open dialogue about the best course of action to take during a mission. Some players may view Cole Train as a means to break up the intense stress the characters are under in the game, while at the same, it is at the expense of contributing to a notion of viewing Blacks as only comic relief.

*Mafia III (2016)*

Lincoln Clay is of mixed race; however, the game presents him as a Black male. The game takes place in a fictionalized version of New Orleans called New Bordeaux, set in 1968. Given the time the Vietnam War was ongoing, civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968 passed, to name a few key moments. Lincoln can easily be seen as an aggressive Black man bent on revenge. Within one of the cinematic trailers entitled, "Mafia III – Revenge – Official Launch

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[5] Xyjar. 2008. "Gears of War 2 Cole Train-Best Cole Train Moment Ever!!! Woo~!." *YouTube.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTAVTkQx72w&ab_channel=xyjar. (accessed January 5, 2021).

[6] This cutscene happens between 48:03-48:50 of the video sourced here. Gamer's Little Playground. 2015. "Gears of War 2 Game Movie (All Cutscenes) HD." *YouTube.* (https://youtu.be/Oqy4oeiO34Q?t=2883).

Trailer", the audience first sees '1968, New Bordeaux' in bright white letters with the city of New Bordeaux in the background.[7] The video goes dark to then transition to a person presumably pushed out of a storefront. The camera moves to show smoke from a shotgun barrel, and afterward, the camera pans up to Lincoln Clay, stoically standing.

Again, if one takes the trailer at face value, Lincoln Clay is portrayed as another Black man out to do something or someone harm. This trailer does not highlight any of Lincoln's personality beyond acts of violence. Lincoln Clay is a Vietnam War veteran returning home. According to the wiki fandom page, "Lincoln's war experiences scarred him mentally and physically, leaving him unable to sleep soundly and insisting on sleeping in the basement, most likely suffering from PTSD." (Mafia Wiki: Fandom n.d., 1). Lincoln Clay comes back to New Bordeaux as a man seeking to find his identity while enacting revenge on those who wronged him during a time of heightened social unrest and racism towards Black folk. Though players use Lincoln to engage in gun violence, players must also traverse through an environment in which nigger is often used by White gangsters, and Confederate flags are painted freely on the sides of vehicles. Hangar 13, the development studio of *Mafia III* (2016), acknowledges the weight of using real life traumas, racialized tensions, and language to create their game. The game creators fumble on the opportunity to explore these topics in a meaningful way to engage in a robust conversation about mental health in the Black community and political efficacy.

Hangar 13 missed an opportunity with Lincoln Clay's character development in exploring how he thinks about and manages his trauma. A cutscene near the beginning of the game shows Lincoln walking towards the basement of his step father's bar with his step brother, Ellis, in tow. Lincoln told Ellis he was going to sleep in the basement. Ellis laughed and inquired about Lincoln's choice in sleeping in the basement. Lincoln simply replied, "I'll see you in the morning." The cutscene ends and then the player must walk Lincoln to the bed to sleep. Upon waking up, Lincoln's waking up animation is him popping up quickly and panting or "catching his breath" for two seconds. Out of all the characters in the game

including Lincoln himself, Pastor James, positioned as the narrator recounting his memories of Lincoln in an interview, speaks upon Lincoln's personality and concern for his overall well-being. The developers decided that audiences could understand what wartime induced trauma could mean for a person via another character's perspective. Due to that narrative decision, Lincoln's trauma is expressed only through his violent actions, especially since his trauma from war is compounded or sidelined due to his family members being killed in front of him and him left for dead. Black people are more than just their trauma, but this is the narrative created to sell the game.

*The Walking Dead: Michonne - A Telltale Miniseries (2016)*

*Michonne* (2016), based on the *Walking Dead TV Series*, is a three-part episodic adventure game featuring a Black woman as the protagonist. Through this game, one sees the transformation of Michonne, a successful career-driven woman of two, into the sheltered, sword-wielding survivor with PTSD. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) produces annual reports showing the "Top 20 Selling Video Games of [Year] by Units Sold." From 2004 (the earliest report I could source) to the 2020 report, there has not been a single videogame in the Top 20 featuring a Black female-led protagonist.[8] This suggests a lack of interest from consumers to invest in games featuring Black women and a lack of investment from videogame development companies to create videogames featuring Black women.

There are four videogames or seasons that make up the main narrative of *The Walking Dead (A Telltale Series)* videogame series; *The Walking Dead: Season One* (2012); *The Walking Dead: Season Two* (2013); *The Walking Dead: A New Frontier* (2016); *The Walking Dead: The Final Season* (2018). Each of these games feature protagonists of color with the character, Clementine, a woman of color, being the main recurring character throughout these games. *Michonne* (2016) received mixed reviews with gaming news outlets stating Michonne, the character, was well developed; however, the overall story became lackluster and unsatisfying with some of the plot

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[7] Trailer for a videogame functions like a trailer for a movie in which it is less than 2 minutes, highlights who the main character(s) are, and constructed to entice interest from the potential consumer. Mafia Game. 2016. "Mafia III - Revenge - Official Launch Trailer." *YouTube*. Retrieved October 17, 2021. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNiHOpHbCz M&t=9s&ab_channel=MafiaGame).

[8] The reports come from the Entertainment Software Association. However, they do not have an archive in which they keep their reports. These are easily sourced simply by searching online, [Year of report] Essential Facts About the Videogame Industry." Also, contacting them directly has proven useful.

(Clark 2016; Gwaltney 2016; Plagge 2017). I could not find reliable retail sales figures on *Michonne* (2016); however, it was reported in 2014, the episodes of the series released from 2012 to 2014 had sold "28 million copies" (Ohannessian 2014) and then "50 million copies" by 2017 (Nunneley 2017).

*Assassin's Creed: Origins (2017)*

Bayek from *AC:O* (2017) is based in ancient Egypt. In the context of *AC:O* (2017), Bayek, as a Medjay, is a highly trained warrior and trusted individual as various NPCs (non-playable characters) often come to him for help. Bayek is a well-tempered yet stern individual, in which, yes, he does kill as a part of his character, but the narrative itself gives the player a reason he is doing it instead of blindly killing NPCs fodder. Lastly, Bayek is a father and a husband. In the early portions of the game, Bayek goes on a short hunting quest with his son, Khemu. Khemu, a prepubescent child, wants to be like his "Papo" (father) and become a Medjay. Khemu expresses concern about lacking the courage it takes to become a Medjay. Bayek reassures him it is possible because Bayek is his father and thus will possess the necessary knowledge and courage to become one. Bayek also shows his sternness as a father when a little girl screams for help, and Khemu says he recognizes the voice as his friend, Chenzira. In response, Bayek urges Khemu to go home, but Khemu is too afraid to go home by himself. Bayek firmly tells Khemu, "Khemu, just do what I say, please! Go!" (Ubisoft 2017). This scene would mark the first time the player sees Bayek giving his son a formal command.

Shortly after, players see masked individuals capture Bayek and Khemu. During a knife tussle between Bayek and a masked assailant, the masked foe directs Bayek's arm carrying the knife towards Khemu, thus impaling him to death. Players experience the joys of Black fatherhood for approximately twelve minutes until the game orients players, Black players in particular, to a notion that to be Black is to experience trauma. Therefore, this game is yet another example of Black trauma selling as a gaming experience to consumers. At the same time, I acknowledge the story of the game has characters coded as simply Egyptian, devoid of our modern understanding of the construction of race and racism.

The games examined highlight motifs in which digital Black bodies are used to either explore a particular set of traumas and/or a digital prop in which to sell games. Fürsich (2010) discusses that digital media has disrupted traditional (news broadcasts, magazine covers, etc.) business media practices. Fürsich is also arguing that traditional media representation is not the only area needing a reformation, but media practices (Fürsich 2010, 127). Behind every videogame is typically a team of individuals who construct digital environments and characters to express some narrative and/or provide mere entertainment. The author uses the word construction deliberately to highlight the technical construction of Blacks in videogames.

## Design of Black Characters

Representations of blackness within games are intensely problematic, as evinced by simplistic, stereotypical characters who do not represent the reality, and indeed the joy of Black existence. Compounding the problem that videogame companies cannot seem to embody real Black experiences is that they seem incapable of even embodying blackness in the first place. The technical design of Black characters-rendering skin tones, lighting their models, and accurately depicting African hairstyles - is still insufficient and irresponsibly inadequate. Yussef Cole and Tanya DePass (2017), in their article entitled, "Black Skin Is Still A Radical Concept in Video Games" discusses the persistent problems in the creation and reflection of Black people. Cole and DePass (2017) claim lighting of Black and Brown characters in videogames is an issue in which they look disconnected from the world. Blatant colorism is still consistent in which certain shades of skin tones are still inconsistent. Lastly, lighting can be prohibitively expensive to render, so the fewer lights there are in the game, the smoother it runs. As a result, many games rely on lightmaps and other forms of "baked" lighting, which predetermine how objects in a scene will look, but can further exacerbate inconsistencies in character lighting.

Another yet troubling part about the construction of blackness is hair. In this context, we are talking about hair options in games that allow character customization. Afro, cornrows, a fade (high-top or low with a slanted part) are hairstyles that African Americans have had for years. Evan Narcisse (2017) points out that these hairstyles worn about black folk for long have gone through moments of contention. Narcisse (2017) boldly claims certain hairstyles are salient to blackness, the misrepresentation or blatant neglect of the addition of these hairstyles "Suggests that videogame producers and art directors incorporate these styles to signal to an audience "See, our black character is spiritual. Or edgy. Or threatening", furthermore that the Afro suggesting "Boy, this black guy must [be] really funny!" (1).

Tanya DePass (2017) wrote this article reinforcing this point about the disappointing hairstyles for customization. Her main argument is

that older videogames such as those displayed on screen do a way better job of certain hairstyles such as locks and braids than the AAA titles. DePass (2017) boldly calls out game development studios to be receptive to the feedback from the folks in their companies that have these hair options. Black existence within videogames is tenuous because of the problematic sociocultural and technical representation outlined above. However, Black existence as a player of these games is no less daunting because the environment constructed around videogames is often hostile to and full of harassment towards blackness. Developers have a responsibility here, too, because they are conversing with Black lived experiences as soon as they choose to embody blackness in their games or as Black players choose to make those games part of their lives.

It cannot be expected for depictions of blackness to be accurately represented without Black game developers holding positions of power, let alone, simply having a presence within game development studios. The gaming industry has Black game development pioneers such as Gerald A. "Jerry" Lawson, creator of the Fairchild Channel F gaming system in 1976 and removable cartridges (Russworm 2019; The Strong 2013). Also, Jacqueline Beauchamp, who founded Nerjyzed Entertainment, Inc. in 2005 which produced *Black College Football: The Xperience* (BCFX) (2009) for the Xbox 360 (The Strong 2018). *BCFX* allows players to choose one of thirty-six HBCU teams to play football and includes a rhythm-based mini-game as if you are part of a drumline (The Strong 2018). While African Americans continue to thrive in game development spaces, there are still few African American developers.

According to the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) *Developer Satisfaction Survey* 2019 report, of the 1,116 developers surveyed, only two percent identified as Black/African-American/African/Afro-Caribbean (Weststar, J et. al. 2019, 13). Furthermore, 81 percent of developers identified as White/Caucasian/European (Weststar, J et. al. 2019, 13). Sam Srauy (2019) discusses developers' normative practices and their understanding of race (479). Srauy (2019) pushes on this White/Caucasian/European majority statistic by pointing out by arguing that due to market uncertainty and historical beliefs/practices within the work environment an "internal pressure" is leading to the implementation, or rather creation and usage of problematic narratives (480). Srauy (2019) mentions

many U.S. game developers are White, yet claims, it is the "coercive power" of the company or society at large dictating the default perspective, in this case, White and male (480). Srauy (2019) concludes game developers create games a studio would find to be safe investments with narratives the studio head understands, and their audience will understand as well (493). The gaming industry market needs to reevaluate their reluctance to have characters of diverse backgrounds, otherwise videogames will continue to alienate a growing population of gamers of color. Game developers of color need to be in positions of power to have their voices and experiences taken seriously.

## A Snapshot of the Black Gamer

It is no secret about the rampancy and danger of online harassment. Bullying, swatting, and DDoS attacks, blatant racism leads to segregated communities. When communities are "misrepresented" and/or inaccurate information is used to classify a group, it has the potential to justify certain prejudices. Such as if "black on black crime" is used to describe a particular perspective of viewing violence committed by black people, then that could (and has already) translated to the stereotype that Blacks are inherently violent people. Therefore, justifying racialized ideologies that may form into blatant acts of discrimination.

Unfortunately, in reality, Black people are still seen as "less than", and for Black players that can be quite known in online communities. In May of 2016, a player by the name of Terrence Miller competed in a tournament playing the popular online card game, *Hearthstone* (2014) (Campbell 2016). During a Twitch livestream interview, the chat was bombarded with racially charged comments. Sadly, Miller stated, "I knew it would be bad, but I didn't think it would be that bad" (Campbell 2016, 1). Therefore, he knew that his blackness was going to be used as a weapon against him. This occurred again during a TwitchCon Panel with Terrence Miller[9] and other black streamers. Almost oxymoronically, people in the chat were using the "TriHard" emoticon which is the face of a Black man as a slur to avoid deletion of typed racially charged comments (Campbell 2011, 1). The Miller case highlights technical issues that when combined with harassing behavior pose real obstacles to Black participation in gaming communities.

Another system that is an online platform for gamers to share information and communication is Xbox Live. Xbox Live is Microsoft's online

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[9] The following is the link to the TwitchCon Panel https://www.twitch.tv/videos/92310171. Please refer

to the citation for the news article synopsis of what occurred as well.

communication service that allows players to play online with each other. Kishonna L. Gray (2014) cites Geddes (2008), who discusses that in November of 2008, Xbox Live introduced new applications such as Netflix, a party chat system that allows private chats and avatar creation (xx). Gray (2014) explains that the private chat functionality affords players to self-segregate into their own groups, especially if they experience discrimination (xx). Furthermore, Gray (2014) argues that Xbox Live private chat is not a permanent or "meaningful" solution for it does not address the issue of online harassment (xxi). Even if technical barriers do not exist or are mitigated, the issue remains that identifying as Black, or as any minoritized community, is still fraught in a space that marginalizes and misrepresents people regularly.

Dominique "SonicFox" McLean is an Esports player within the fighting game community (FGC). Dominique is Black, and quoting from their 2018 Game Awards acceptance speech, "super-gay" and a "furry."[10][11] SonicFox, on June 6, 2020, posted a tweet stating they are "..a nonbinary gamer that just happens to be really godlike at fighting games and very outspoken about [their] beliefs."[12] Within the embodiment of marginalized identities, one can expect SonicFox has had their fair share of racist and homophonic comments. In Figure 1, SonicFox tweeted about their discomfort being in Orlando, Florida when they were competing at the Community Effort Orlando (CEO) FGC tournament in early-July of 2018.

**Figure 1: Sonic Fox's Tweets from July 2, 2018**



In these tweets, SonicFox expresses the tension they must straddle; one being a queer and Black and the other being a highly decorated esports player. This is to stay, one's racial identity can determine how safe one feels in an environment regardless how accomplished, famous, or educated one is. Black identity becomes salient for Black gamers during times safety and/or comfortability is no longer a given.

Kotaku.com contributor Evan Narcisse (2012) described not feeling "cool" while playing Black characters in videogames and claimed Black characters are "simply not true black characters" (1).

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[10] According to Gerbasi et al. (2008). "A furry is a person who identifies with the Furry Fandom culture. Furry Fandom is the collective name given to individuals who have a distinct interest in anthropomorphic animals such as cartoon characters" (p. 198).

[11] Kotaku. 2018. "Sonicfox Wins Best Esports Player at the Game Awards 2018". *YouTube.* https://youtu.be/pyR-8Fcbf48

[12] This statement was written on May 31, 2021. At that time, SonicFox had this tweet "pinned" or featured at the top of their Twitter account which is https://twitter.com/SonicFox.

He followed up later in the article "…that beneath all the comforting platitudes about a character's color not mattering lies a sticky web of stereotypes and cheap myths that can still insult and anger people playing a game" (Narcisse 2012, 1). In that statement, Narcisse directly comments on the constant perpetuation of stereotypes and archetypes about black people in general that keep being reaffirmed in the media, in this case, videogames. LeSean Payne's (2014) reflects on some of his life experiences as a black man playing videogames in his aptly named article, "A life spent gaming while black." He mentions going through years of playing videogames without black characters. Payne (2014) lamented about games not allowing richer character customization, specifically skin tone, since gaming has the technology to have a range of colors for their gaming avatars. There is a shared feeling from at least some Black gamers that they feel marginalized, misrepresented, and treated unfairly in both real-world and virtual spaces.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The act of representing must include the reality that human bias and other values are a part of that act. In terms of game development, the creation of the digital environments is overseen with many perspectives. However, as expressed in this article, Black thought and voices are utilized copiously to highlight some kind of reality that may be familiar to some. The Black lived experience reflected in racialized depictions of Blackness produced between 2008-2017 by North American studios shows a gamut of some kind of diverse reality, but not an equitable one.. It is easy for marginalized identities to be obscured and picked apart at will by those in power. Change will not come if the Black folk are not involved in the game development process. Developers must use a system of checks and balances when considering and implementing designs incorporating Black experiences and not silo those experiences as something that only encompasses traumatic events. In each videogame discussed, we see how Black trauma is used as a means to sell games. In GoW2, through the lens of the only Black character of importance, fighting becomes pleasurable in order to be consumed with the harsh reality that humanity is fighting for survival. In Mafia III, it is a revenge story using a character who had already gone through horrific experiences while serving in the Vietnam War. In AC:O, Black fatherhood is a dynamic rarely seen in videogames, but stripped in order to give motivation for Bayek to kill. Lastly, Michonne is set in already where the dead are alive and thus must survive while still processing her grief over her family. Yes, the environment in which Michonne must survive supports her need for violence. However, Michonne is still part of a series of videogames in which a Black character's pain, especially murder of one's family, is the narrative. There are plethora of other ways in to justify the actions of a minoritized character without defaulting to taking away familial bonds for players to witness. To engage an audience, in particular a White audience, does not necessitate a recapitulation of Black death, Black pain, Black trauma to gain sympathy and empathy.

The choices developers make matter within the games they make – and can affect the interactions Black players have in and around these games – Terrence Miller and SonicFox being two out of the many instances of the mistreatment of Black members of gaming communities. The disparaging representations in games reinforces hegemonic notions of the devaluation of Black bodies. At the same time, the Black players must choose either stop playing a game for its unjust racialized depictions or simply deal with it. It should not be on players to make this kind of negotiation within the game they play. It is challenging enough to live in a real environment in which one's Black identity is seen as something to be controlled or erased. I am not saying that Black people should stop playing games or that developers should stop making games that include the African Diaspora. Developers should stray away from creating simplistic characters of color in order to sell games. This in turn challenges ideologies of how a Black person should act and think, especially within a society so bent on controlling the bodies of people of color. Gaming environments have the resources to do and Black people have recognized those years. However, change will not come if the Black folk are not involved in the game development process.

Poignantly put, "Ultimately, as with everything else when it comes to diversity in games, it'll take marginalized players and developers alike, to make themselves heard and create art that challenges a status quo which still pretends white faces are the norm, while casting shade on a vibrant and colorful world" (Cole and DePass 2017, 1). Developers should utilize other forms of the Black experience – joyful moments - to create well-rounded characters who are not solely steeped in or defined by traumatic and stereotypical experiences. This model of creating games based on lived experiences without consulting or including those people is fraught. It shows very clearly in games that stray away from topics that may be divisive. Including moments of Black positivity can be quite compelling when Black positive expressions and/or an intersectional approach is taken up at the beginning of the narrative process. What games can be birthed when coming from the lens of Black Joy as it relates to game

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creation? Black people live complex lives as there is constant surveillance and policing over Black bodies. Digital environments have the ability to challenge the status quo, but it must include the perspectives from those in the African Diaspora.

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## Appendix
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