

Let's Play, Zoomers: Cultural Authority and Stereotypical Representations in Video Games

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Abstract

In this study, we examined representations of race and gender in popular U.S. video games presented in *Let's Play* videos on *YouTube*. We also investigate how Let's Players, who are viewed as cultural authority to the gaming community, reacted to these representations. After filtering from a comprehensive list of Black characters from contemporary video games, we identified ten characters and searched on *YouTube* for associated *Let's Play* videos. From our observations of the videos, we found that Let's Players further co-opted Black culture within their videos and exhibited colorblind rhetoric. In addition, we found that the Black characters in these video games mirrored stereotypical tropes historically found in other forms of media. Black men were often portrayed as criminals, strong athletes, or minstrel characters, while Black women were portrayed as sapphires or jezebels. To increase the number of Black characters that do not adhere to these problematic tropes, we present support for increased efforts toward equity and inclusion from gaming executives and consumers alike.

Keywords: Generation Z, *Let's Play*, media representations, video games, *YouTube* influencers

Publication Type: Original research article

Preferred Citation: Smith, Andrea C., and Bhoomi K. Thakore. 2023. "Let's Play, Zoomers: Cultural Authority and Stereotypical Representations in Video Games." *Sociation* 22(1), 6-20.



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Introduction

The Zoomer Generation (also referred to as Generation Z, the Internet Generation, and Neo-Digital Natives), conceptualized as those in the U.S. born between 1997-2012, are today's young consumers. This generation is defined in its parameters as the first to completely grow up with the Internet -- specifically Windows 98, the first heavily web-integrated computer operating system included on all mass-market computers since 1998. As a result, this generation has experience with a variety of Internet capabilities, including access to multi-player online video games and consumer-created content on social media like *YouTube*. Of media consumers today, this generation of young adults are the most immersed in a digitally connected society, exposed to limitless content and information.

While there are certainly advantages to these new forms of interconnectedness, there are also many challenges due to the reproduction of problematic tropes and ideologies. These contemporary examples

of racist and sexist stereotypes in popular culture reaffirm problematic racialized and gendered attitudes and normalize these long-standing social practices. In this paper, we highlight racialized and gendered stereotypes and tropes in popular U.S. video games, examining both the video game content ("worlds") and the associated *Let's Play* videos of these games on *YouTube*. For the former, we will elaborate on the ways in which video games are created to reflect real-life dominant White ideologies (e.g., Gray 2017; Hetfeld 2018). For the latter, we provide here a contribution to understand the impact of *Let's Play* videos and players as a form of cultural authority. Both dynamics highlight how racialized and gendered ideologies in popular culture operate -- from the cultural consumption (of video games) and the mediated cultural consumption (of consuming others' media consumption) respectively. First, we outline the importance of the scholarship on racism, particularly as it relates to popular culture. Next, we discuss our data and methods - including the history and relevance of *Let's Play* videos and players. Then, we outline our

key findings regarding racialized media tropes in popular U.S. video games. We conclude with a summary and implications for this line of research.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Transmission of Racialized and Gendered Ideologies in Popular Culture

Within social interactions, racial and gender identities are assigned through the dominant groups' immediate perceptions of subordinate groups based on specific physical characteristics (i.e., phenotype and gender performance), most immediately non-White skin tone and non-masculine characteristics, but also through perceptions of features and language (Butler 1990; Collins 2004). These classifications are key in reinforcing a social hierarchy that places Whites and men at the top and Non-Whites and women/non-binary groups below. Fair skin tone and high socio-economic status will especially privilege BIPOC groups' proximity to Whiteness (Bonilla-Silva 2004). In the United States, systemic racism manifests in contemporary post-Civil Rights-era forms of colorblind racism that talk about race without actually dealing with the effects of inter-generational racism (DuBois 1898; Feagin 2009; Omi and Winant 2014; Bonilla-Silva 2017; Mueller 2020).

Media consumption is linked to the subjective identities of consumers (e.g., Crenshaw 1991; hooks 2000; Eng and Han 2019; Romero 2018). This is especially important for Gen Z, who are making sense of themselves amid our digitally connected society. In addition to their real-life spaces (college, work, communities), mediated spaces also become important platforms for identities to develop. So too can, user-created content on social media be understood as "controlling images" (Collins 2000) that do the ideological work of normalizing those dominant physical and cultural characteristics subjugating others. In the 21st century, we see this manifest and contribute to the broader dominant ideologies of whiteness, toxic masculinity, and cisgender heteronormativity.

Characterizing Blackness in popular culture has come in a variety of forms (e.g., Hall 1992). Caricatures of men of color as subservient, bumbling, and comical, and women of color as angry Sapphires or hypersexual Jezebels, have come to stand the test of time as key tropes used in White spaces. Beginning in the Jim Crow Era, the transformation of White actors into Blackface have reaffirmed how specific physical features are racialized today, i.e., melanin skin, exaggerated facial features, and other embodied forms. During the 1930s and 1940s, children's culture

illustrated some stereotypes, including children's books like *Little Black Sambo* and *Bugs Bunny* performing in Blackface. Classically trained Black actors have long been relegated to stereotypical roles. Even popular Black jazz musicians like Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, and Lena Horne were still subjected to these same minstrelsy punchlines (Barker 2010; Lott 2013; Mueller, Williams, and Dirks 2018). An exaggerated Black/African American vernacular also became key to the representations of Blackness, heard in 20th-century radio broadcasts like *The Amos 'n' Andy Show* and *Beulah*. These two programs, the first imports from radio to television in the 1950s, were the sole representations of Black Americans being broadcast into suburban homes and beyond (Riggs 1986). More recently, we have seen the colorblind "New Negro" character portrayed as integrated into White spaces, but only when subservient and secondary (Daniels 1998; Vera and Gordon 2003; Gray 2004; Robinson 2005).

The media functions in part as entertainment – what we do in our leisure time, away from these alienated and oppressive experiences in the labor market and society. Media consumers favor content in which the casting, writing, and character development feel familiar to the genres (comedic, dramatic, etc.). On the economic end, media corporations are in it to "sell" people – to the product at hand and to all the advertising and user information that goes with it. Thus, for media content to proliferate, it must be strategic in the subliminal messages and ideologies enveloped within (Coltrane and Messineo 2000; Vera and Gordon 2004; Cortese 2006). The White male gaze operates by defaulting to a White male aesthetic and experience. Through this symbolic annihilation of BIPOC women in popular culture, media gatekeepers use pre-existing stereotypes of race/ethnicity, beauty, and attractiveness to inform character development and racial/ethnic characterizations (Mulvey 1975; Tuchman 1978; Smith 2013; Thakore 2014). From a purely business point of view, it would benefit such media corporations to market progressive and diverse content to BIPOC audiences, and all audiences for the greater good. However, any financial losses are little compared to what could be lost by dismantling the white supremacy from which the culture industry has long profited.

Profitable and Predictable Media Tropes

Video games play an important role in creating, reproducing, and perpetuating problematic stereotypes of Black people. Such problematic representations are even more dangerous when media consumers have no interactions with people outside of their own identity groups. As Gerbner and colleagues (1994) found,

heavy TV consumers viewed the world as a more dangerous place than people who did not watch TV as much. They suggest that people who heavily consume media tend to shape their reality and worldview to match the one they consume (Gerbner et al. 1994; Williams et al. 2009).

Gray and Hetfeld (2018) noted that when Black characters are present in video games, they are one of two tropes: violent or the sidekick/funky person (Peckham 2020). First, the violent and criminal trope is one of the most common ways Black characters are framed in video games (Burgess et al. 2011; Dill and Burgess 2013). The *Grand Theft Auto* series is one of the most notable examples. In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, many stereotypical Black male characteristics are attributed to CJ, the protagonist in the game. CJ does not know his father, cannot swim and by the age of ten was introduced to “gang life” (Fandom n.da). In addition, he has a lengthy arrest record and lost his friends to street violence. Of course, the game does not explain systemic and institutional forces that lead to criminality and life experiences (Gray 2017). With the absence of this counter-narrative, it makes it look like it is CJ’s fault for the unfortunate events in his life and not that of a racist system.

Second, the sidekick Black character in video games is normally seen as comic relief to the gamer. Gray (2017) portrays them as unintelligent, with childlike characters, lacking education and strategic thinking. This trope is very similar to that of the long-standing historical image of the subservient Sambo. Hetfeld (2018) also speaks on the funky Black man character, which is a spinoff of the sidekick. Just like the sidekick, the funky Black character is meant to be comedic relief. They normally have an afro or other Black hairstyle, wear sunglasses, and say “yo” or other Black vernacular words and phrases (Hetfeld 2018). This image is very reminiscent of that of the minstrel show image which was meant to entertain and generate laughs from White people.

When confronted with such overtly coded media stereotypes, consumers decode them in different ways based on their positionality and subjectivity (e.g., Hall 1980). Zoomers in particular are still in the process of developing their own identities, and thus are more likely to be under the influence of dominant media narratives. While the Internet has made it easier to seek out alternative forms of media tailored to one’s interest, social media has allowed cultural influencers to play the role of media coder. In adhering to their own dominant frames, these influencers reproduce the same attitudes for the next generation.

Black Cultural Co-Optation

Black American culture has been foundational to the development of larger (U.S.) American popular culture in all avenues. At its core, cultural appreciation of Black culture comes from a desire to know about Blackness without burdening with the realities of inequality. This leads to a level of racial ignorance (Mueller 2020) whereby, even with an appreciation of the cultural aesthetic, there is an inherent assumption about Blackness as deviant, rebellious, and counter-cultural. Cultural appropriation operates by deeming cultural goods and artifacts as desirable objects (Buyukokutan 2011). Black culture is seen to exist merely for entertainment and profit, rather than as an expression of identity and self-authenticity. Most recently, we see examples of commercial culture imported from hip-hop culture – originating first in economically depressed urban cities on the East Coast beginning in the 1970s, and then moving into other urban spaces creating unique regional styles (Rose 1994; Chang 2005). These forms of cultural appropriation and co-optation are key racial projects under White supremacy, maintaining the oppression of Blackness and the invisibility of Whiteness. One way in which the commodification of Blackness occurs is through the commercialization of African American Vernacular English (AAVE, or Black vernacular)—specific language patterns that stand in contrast to Standard American English (Bucholz 1999; Smitherman 2000; 2006; Means Coleman 2003; Bucholz and Lopez 2011; Eberhardt and Freeman 2015). This co-optation of Black vernacular, or linguistic minstrelsy (Bucholz and Lopez 2011), highlights the mismatch between language and identity. The significance of Whites emulating a Black vernacular is two-fold. First, at the individual level, those Whites (particularly Gen Z White men) who consume hip hop culture are experience their own self-authentic fandom and emulation of performers and their content (Chrobak 2007). Geographically, these young White men who live in close proximity to Black urban spaces gain more from their co-optation of mass marketed Black culture. Not only are they self-reflexive on the privileges granted to them through their own performances of code-switching, but they also fail to integrate their proximal white spaces despite having the awareness that comes from consuming hip hop culture.

Second, at the economic level, inequality is maintained for profit. As Whites are estimated as the highest percentage of the commercial hip hop market share, there is an inherent financial benefit to Black cultural co-optation (Eberhardt and Freeman 2015). In their study, Eberhardt and Freeman examined lyrics by popular White Australian rapper Iggy Azalea to identify words and phrases that indicate Black sociolinguistic co-optation, through phonological

features that demonstrate Black vernacular, and more specifically a “southern U.S. rap drawl.” As they note, Azalea (and her label) profit from this linguistic minstrelsy performance – the ability to perform Blackness without the burden of being Black. This continuous process of maintaining and managing White identity is key in developing Whiteness as a dominant ideology (Lewis 2003; Hill 2011; Mueller 2020). The processes inherent to representations and characterizations of Whiteness and Blackness are also relevant to online worlds, including video gaming experiences.

Representation and Stereotypes in Video Games

Video games are an immensely popular form of leisure culture among Generation Z. These Neo-Digital Natives know the benefits and struggles of the various 21st-century video game platforms and have played both single-player systems and massively multi-player online games (MMORPGs). These multiplayer games perpetuate racist tropes against BIPOC players (Ritsema and Thakore 2012). So too has everything Neo-Digital associated with games, to include message boards, Fandom websites, cultural artifacts, and social media engagement with everything on and about popular video games. In the same way that visual media has picked up upon key tropes to perpetuate dominant white ideologies, so too have video games. In this paper, we are establishing typologies among Black characters in popular video games – looking at similarities between tropes, and comparisons across the types of tropes within and beyond to other forms of popular culture, as discussed above.

In video games, there is literature on how racial identity is represented. While video games are not normally cited as a historical space where structural and institutional racism exists, video game development and gaming communities are white spaces (Gray 2017). According to the International Game Developers Association, in 2019 81% of game developers identified as White while 7% identified as Latine, and only 2% identified as Black. Additionally, 71% of respondents identified as male, 24% identified as female, and 3% as non-binary. This blatant underrepresentation of BIPOC and non-males in the development of video games leads to the creation of racist and sexist characters that fit the stereotypes, ideas, behaviors, and attitudes the dominant group has created which helps uphold white supremacy (Gray 2017).

Several studies show the ways in which racialized stereotypical images in video games impact a player's judgment, choices, and attitudes in real life (Dill et al. 2008; Dill and Burgess 2013; Yang et al. 2014). When

analyzing the effects that sexist gender portrayals have on a participant's thoughts on sexual harassment, Dill and colleagues (2008) found that male participants that were exposed to games that sexualized women were more likely to downplay sexual assault, blame the victim, and assign weak punishments to the perpetrator (Dill et al. 2008:1407). When looking at racial stereotypes in video games and the effects they have on favoring a political candidate, Dill and Burgess (2013) found that when participants were exposed to video games that featured the stereotypical image of the criminal and dangerous Black man, they were less likely to rate a Black political candidate as more favorable than a White political candidate. Similarly, Yang et al. (2014) found that after White participants played a Black character in a violent game, they were more likely to display explicit negative attributes toward Black people and link Black people to weapons. The absence of counter-narratives and the use of the same stereotypical tropes, coupled with the limited contact people have with minoritized groups, ensures that gamers believe and play into what is said about Black people in video games.

We set out to see how both main Black characters and major non-playable characters are portrayed in video games and how it compares to stereotypes and tropes normally portrayed in other forms of media. We also set out to see how gamers interpret this representation by analyzing popular Let's Player recordings on *YouTube*.

Methods

Character and Video Selection

A comprehensive list of Black characters in video games was obtained from Wikipedia. The list was filtered to include games that were developed after 2012 as that is when *Let's Play* videos became popular on the *YouTube* platform. To ensure that we were able to analyze a variety of YouTubers, the list was further filtered to include games that were popular during the time of its release as it is common practice for many Let's Players to record popular games in hopes of gaining more views. The list was also filtered to only include playable Black characters

Table 1: Selected Black Video Game Characters

<i>Character</i>	<i>Game(s)</i>	<i>Trope</i>	<i>Let's Players</i>	<i>Developers</i>	<i>Release Date(s)</i>	<i>Gaming System</i>
<i>Augustus Cole (Cole Train)</i>	<i>Gears of War: Ultimate and Gear of War: Judgement</i>	Minstral	RadBrad, CaRtOoNz	The Coalition	2013; 2015	Xbox One, PC (Ultimate Only)
<i>Franklin Clinton</i>	<i>Grand Theft Auto V</i>	Criminal	RadBrad, LetsPlay	Rockstar North	2013	Play Station 3, 4, 5, Xbox 360, Xbox One, PC
<i>Marcus Holloway</i>	<i>Watch Dogs 2</i>	Criminal	RadBrad, Tmartn2	Ubisoft Montreal	2016	Xbox One, PC
<i>Lincoln Clay</i>	<i>Mafia III</i>	Criminal	RadBrad, Chris Smoove	Hanger 13	2016	PC, Playstation 4, Xbox One
<i>Matt</i>	<i>Until Dawn</i>	Athletic	Markiplier, Pewdiepie	Supermassive Game	2015	Playstation 4
<i>Aveline De Grandpre</i>	<i>Assassins Creed III: Liberation</i>	Sapphire, Jezabel	Game Riot	Ubisoft Montreal, Milan, Sofia	2012, 2014, 2019 (remastered)	Playstation Vita, Playstation 3, Xbox 360, Xbox One
<i>Nadine Ross</i>	<i>Uncharted 4: A Thief's End</i>	Sapphire, Athletic	Jacksepticeye, Pewdiepie	Naughty Dog	2016	Playstation 4
<i>Daisy Fitzroy</i>	<i>Bioshock Infinite</i>	Sapphire	RadBrad, Cry	Irrational Games	2013	PC, Playstation 3, 4, Xbox 360, One, Nintendo Switch
<i>Lee Everett</i>	<i>The Walking Dead</i>	Criminal	RadBrad, Pewdiepie	Telltale Games	2012	PC, Nintindo Switch, Playstation Vita, 3,4, Xbox 360, One
<i>Clementine</i>	<i>The Walking Dead and The Walking Dead: New Frontier</i>	Sapphire	RadBrad, Pewdiepie, Jacksepticeye	Telltale Games	2020	PC, Playstation 4, Nintindo Switch, Xbox One

Table 2: Selected Let's Players with Subscriber Counts

<i>Players</i>	<i>Subscriber Count</i>
<i>RadBrad</i>	12.6 million
<i>Cryaotic</i>	2.5 million
<i>Game Riot</i>	1.73 million
<i>LetsPlay</i>	3.77 million
<i>Jacksepticeye</i>	27.1 million
<i>Pewdiepie</i>	110 million
<i>Chris Smoove</i>	5.04 million
<i>Tmartn2</i>	4.65 million
<i>Markiplier</i>	29.5 million
<i>Cartoonz</i>	3.73 million

and major nonplayable characters to get a sense as to how the creators and developers racialized and scripted these characters for the players (Gray 2017). Battle royale (i.e., *Apex Legends* and *Overwatch*) and fighting games (i.e., *Tekken*, *Street Fighter*, and *Mortal Combat*) were excluded from analysis as the storylines within these games are not the focus and are often overlooked by Let's Players. Instead, we opted to analyze action-adventure games which are typically more story-driven (Moore 2006; Adams and Rolling 2006). Characters that were based on real people were also excluded as the developers did not have to create these characters from scratch.

After filtering, we were left with ten characters: Augustus Cole (Cole Train), Franklin Clinton, Marcus Holloway, Lincoln Clay, Matt, Aveline De Grandpré, Nadine Ross, Daisy Fitzroy, Lee Everett, and Clementine. This list of characters as well as the games they come from, the trope they adhere to, and other relevant information can be seen in Table 1.

To gather the *Let's Play* Videos, we searched the name of the video game as well as the phrase "Let's Play" in incognito mode to ensure that previous searches would not sway the results given. Once the results were shown, they were sorted by view count to guarantee we were watching videos that were the most viewed. Because we were also analyzing how characters are perceived and potentially racialized by the players, the videos that were selected for analysis had to include commentary from the player. We were unable to find any Let's Players who created videos for all of our games in this sample, however, some players did come up for multiple games. A list of the Let's Players used in analysis, and their follower counts, can be found in Table 2.

Regarding interrater reliability, we were interested in this study through different lenses. AS

was interested in the video game production content storyline, BT was interested in Let's Play and observing the consumption of consumption (consumers watching players play games). We both viewed the Let's Play videos, took jottings, made notes on character progression, interesting/funny things, and other observations, and time-stamped them. Then, we read through each other's jottings and used the comments bar for extrapolating notes into themes. Our themes addressed the representations of the characters and the associated video game content, and the dynamics of the Let's Players playing the games in real-time.

Let's Play Videos as Cultural Artifacts

History and Impact of Let's Play Videos

The term and concept of *Let's Plays* originates from the *Something Awful* forums in 2005 (Klepek 2015). Within the forums, posters would upload screenshots of games with text commentary underneath the images. Members who browsed the forums would interact with the poster through the comments, voting on what steps the poster should take next and giving hints if the poster was stuck on a particular part of a game. This screenshot *Let's Play* format was the inspiration for the first *Let's Play* video posted onto the *YouTube* platform in 2007 by a user named Slowbeef. He recorded himself playing *Snatcher* and laid audio over the video. His experimental work led to the modern day *Let's Play* videos we see today.

Once creators on *YouTube* were able to monetize their videos, the modern *Let's Play* as we know began to show itself, characterized by big personalities and quality production (Edwards 2016). *Let's Play* became well known to people who did not play video games once Felix Kjellberg (PewDiePie) started posting them. He reached 1 million subscribers in July 2012, just two years after starting on *YouTube*. His milestone coincided with the spike in the number of people searching the term "Let's Play" (Google Trends 2021) and his presence on the platform influenced others to post videos of themselves playing games and making commentary.

Let's Players as Cultural Authorities

We understand that culture manifests through consumption, and in how individuals develop and reaffirm their identities. This is evident throughout the life course, in neighborhoods, schools, and professional settings, and plays out in social interactions. Expertise is a form of capital and cultural

authority is a form of expertise, with usually some political, economic, or social interest in mind (Khitrov 2020). Today, many people most notably consume their culture via social media (e.g., hashtags on *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube* influencers). As most media consumers today are familiar with video, movie, and video-telephony, they have not only consumed it on these platforms, but may have also performed it on these platforms themselves.

In the 21st century, Zoomers inherently seek out their information via social media outlets. Gamers interested in specific games will search the Internet for information about these games, landing on *Let's Play* videos that simulate the game play. The scholarship on cultural authority in the profession of medicine highlights how freedom of thought creates a dynamic for people to seek out their own information, and rely on the authority of others (e.g., Starr 1982; Pescoslioto and Marin 2004). In many ways, Let's Players operate similarly to other social media influencers – popular Players today include PewDiePie, TheRadBrad, CaRtOoNz, and jacksepticeye (who are all included in our sample). They aim to serve as cultural authority into the worlds of these games. This is interesting in general, but especially relevant in our sample of videos that focus on games with Black characters. In many ways, these individuals reintroduce and reinforce these video game tropes within these spaces of consumption.

When watching these *Let's Play* videos, gamers are consuming not only the games but also the mediated experience of the game as experienced by these Players. *Let's Play* videos are important in understanding both cultural consumption, and social consumption (in the case of Co-Op *Let's Play* videos, played by two or more Players). As we observed in our analysis, Black cultural consumption comes out in these spaces. For one, there are examples of overt cultural co-optation by Let's Players, specifically in their frequent use of Black vernacular when interacting with the Black characters in these games. As established above, these forms of cultural co-optation exist for economic capital (profit) and social capital – informed by popular cultural trends. These dynamics are especially noteworthy as Let's Player influencers are entering into the White spaces of those mostly White gamers, who are further subjectifying and essentializing Black culture in their performances of Blackness.

This kind of linguistic exchange (between the player and the pre-scripted video game character) frequently occurs in the *Let's Play* videos, as a way for the Players to move their video along at different low points in the mission. As discussed in our findings, these exchanges often are simply mirroring the Black vernacular used in the video games to racialize the

characters. For example, in the *Grand Theft Auto V* gameplay, Michael and Kerry from the *Let's Play* channel tended to use Black vernacular (i.e., “fucking foo’,” “You got work son? What you got,” “mad skills foo’,” “He takin’ about being cray,” and “I’m following this busta...nah he ain’t my busta. He my homie. Hell yea!”) as a way to garner laughs and in some ways mock Franklin Clinton and the other Black characters in *Grand Theft Auto*. These kinds of exchanges are noteworthy when assuming the cultural significance of *Let's Play* videos as cultural artifacts.

In addition to Let's Players racializing characters via mocking Black vernacular, players also enacted colorblind racist reactions by refusing to acknowledge problematic statements or talk about the character's race and how it is affecting their experiences within the game. For instance, in *Assassins Creed: Liberation*, Avaline de Grandpré bumps into a guard and he pushes her onto the ground. The player from Game Riot was surprised to see that a guard was treating a little kid like this saying, “What? What’s up with these people around here? The guards are like so aggressive. I’m just an innocent little girl that isn’t even an assassin yet.” The player seems to forget that Grandpré is a Black little girl in the 1800s. In fact, in the scene before Grandpré was threatened, there was a slave auction taking place in the marketplace. The player also seemed uncomfortable to mention that there were enslaved people within the game, choosing to call the enslaved woman that was rescued in the first mission “the person we just saved.”

TheRadBrad exhibited similar behavior when playing *Bioshock Infinite*, a game that does not shy away from issues surrounding race and class. When playing the game, RadBrad did not comment on most of the clearly racist, classist, and nationalist commentary and imagery present in the game. When he realized that he could no longer ignore the imagery, RadBrad then talks about how he tries to “stay away from that stuff [racism] ...it is not something that will stop me from playing it I just worry about people not having an open mind ...realize it is just history and it is not now.” This comment demonstrates that RadBrad looks at race from a colorblind perspective and hints as to why he did not comment on the imagery in the game. Next, we discuss our additional findings with regard to the games themselves.

Results

Of the ten characters analyzed, all of them adhered to at least one established stereotype: the minstrel,

criminal, athlete, sapphire, and jezebel. Although this was the case, some of these representations were more nuanced than others. Other observations were made outside of these themes and are noted as well.

Minstrel

Augustus Cole (aka Cole Train) is a former Thrashball (game similar to American football) player turned military man. Although Cole is seen killing enemies throughout the *Gears of War* series, he is more depicted as comic relief between cut scenes and sometimes in the middle of battle. His character is comparable to the sambo stereotype and minstrelsy because of the way he speaks and interacts with the other soldiers. Cole uses words like “baby”, “brotha”, and “man” and says Black vernacular phrases in ways to convey that Cole is uneducated (Rodriguez et al. 2004; Gray 2017). While speaking in Black vernacular is not inherently bad, and commonly used within Black communities, it becomes a problem when developers try to sell the aesthetic of “ghetto cool” to consumers (Gray 2017). As Kishonna Gray (2017) explains, this “co-opting of culture is a means to reduce and simplify Black characters” and maintain racial stereotypes.

Criminal

Franklin Clinton is one of three protagonists in *Grand Theft Auto V*. He is showcased as a Black male who had been a part of the gang life since he was a child. Early on in the game, we see that Clinton has the desire to be something bigger and wants more for himself. When he meets the other protagonist, Michael, he has the chance to do that by committing crimes and pulling off a major heist.

One theme constantly seen in *Grand Theft Auto V* is Clinton and other minor nonplayable Black characters engaging in Black vernacular in a very limited manner, just like Cole Train. The very first time we see Clinton in the game he is speaking to his friend Lamar and uses words like “homie,” “fool,” and phrases like “fo’ real.” Even when Clinton and Lamar interact with Michael, they still continue to speak in Black English, calling Michael their “homie” despite not knowing him personally at this point. As we have established, this limited use of Black English serves as a way for developers to monopolize on the “ghetto cool” aesthetic. It is also a way to paint Clinton as well as other Black characters as ignorant. Another notable pattern is that these characters do not stop using AAVE, choosing not to engage in codeswitching (the act of switching between AAVE and Standard American English) at any point in the game. To see these characters not engage in codeswitching is

unrealistic and a symptom of these characters being written by White developers and writers that are unaware of the everyday speech patterns of Black Americans.

Lee Everett is a protagonist in *The Walking Dead*. Prior to the zombie apocalypse, Everett was a history professor at the University of Georgia. During the start of the game, he is seen in a cop car, on his way to jail (he killed a state senator for sleeping with his wife). Lee Everett is one of few characters that breaks the mold of being just a criminal. Before the zombie apocalypse, he was a history professor and shows sympathy to and cares for Clementine, a newly orphaned little girl he finds in an abandoned house which directly contradicts the common stereotype of Black men being uneducated, dangerous, and unsympathetic (Wingfield 2007; The Opportunity Agenda 2011).

In addition to having a Black male character that deviates from stereotypical traits, the main conflict of *The Walking Dead* deviates away from the typical conflicts developers write Black characters in. For example, Black characters in games are normally criminals fighting to do crimes or revolutionaries fighting for racial justice and freedom. The *Walking Dead* writes Everett (as well as Clementine) as a human trying to survive the zombie apocalypse. As Dornidien (2020) points out, “what makes representation effective is not only visibility but ensuring that characters are included without forcing them to be tied to whatever stereotypical trauma their demographic endures.”

Marcus Holloway is the main protagonist and playable character in *Watch Dogs 2*. He joins a hacktivist group called Dedsec. Dedsec’s main goal is to bring down Blume corporation and their Central Operating System (CTOS 2.0) because it had been established as a threat to people’s freedom. Besides the fact that Holloway gets in trouble with the police in the game, his character is a bit different from the other Black men who were characterized as a criminal. For one, he serves as a revolutionary in the *Watch Dog 2* universe, a trope that has only been seen in Black women in the analysis. Holloway is depicted as this genius hacker that is a Blerd (nerdy Black person) given his love for computers, technology, anime, and action movies which is also different from the Black men investigated within this study. Holloway is also seen speaking AAVE around his friends, using words like “yo,” “real talk,” and “dope,” and speaking Standard American English around strangers and other White folk.

Despite Holloway having skills and personality traits that are normally not afforded to Black men, there are times where Holloway is hyper aware of his blackness. For example, in the first mission of the

game, Holloway has to erase his profile in the CTOS system. Before erasing it, his threat level was at 82%. When looking at his criminal record, he sees that the claims were all false and deleted the entire criminal record. Even after deleting his false criminal record, his threat level was still at 42% because he was a Black male who owned a gun and was unemployed.

After he deleted his profile, he was inducted into Dedsec. When Holloway meets Horatio Carlin, the only other Black guy who is a part of Dedsec, Carlin says that he is “happy to have another brotha around here” pointing out the fact that there are not that many Black people who are apart of Dedsec or the hacking community in general. While it is great that the developers decided to include exchanges like this as it is relatable to Black players and could be informative for White players, they did not come up often given that there were not many exchanges between Carlin and Holloway because Carlin was not seen in any other missions besides one, Eye for an Eye. Within that mission, he was killed, serving only as a plot device for the game's storyline (Harris-Lowe 2017).

Lincoln Clay is the only character in the lineup that is both a military man and a criminal. He is introduced to players as a Vietnam war veteran who is described as a man who “served this country with honor and distinction” although he was not always known as this kind of man. Clay is an orphan who doesn't know his father and is abandoned by his mother. Once the orphanage was shut down, he began to hang out with Sammy Robinson, the leader of the Black mob. To feel as though he belonged, he joined the army but once he was back home, he fell right back into the mob.

A common element missing in games that portray Black men as criminals or military men is a more in-depth explanation for why they are criminals and why they joined the military, both of which hint at racial and economic disparities. In *Mafia III*, developers provide that explanation with Clay. Within the game, Paster James explains why Clay joined the military:

“Orphaned colored boys didn't have a lot of options back then. Boys like Lincoln...ones who've been abandoned, there're always looking for a home. Always looking for a place to belong. I think he thought he would find that in the army...Thing is, once that is lost, you never get it back again.” -Pastor James

This narrative somewhat hints at the reason most Black men decided to join the military during that time, believing that they would have a place where they would finally belong and gain more

rights and respect in the United States (Leal 2005, PBS n.d).

The developers also do a great job in supplementing Clay's criminal activity with actions that could only be described as being charitable, giving Clay more nuance and reasoning behind his actions. For instance, Sammy, the leader of the Black mob, donated gumbo to the community soup kitchen and Clay must complete a mission to serve the gumbo to every person in line in order to move ahead in the game.

Athletic

Matt is a prime example of the athletic Black man in a video game. He is one of the eight playable characters in *Until Dawn*. He is the star linebacker at his high school although it is confirmed early off that he is “not the sharpest tool in the shed” (Fandom n.d.b). One of the first interactions we see Matt have is with his Asian girlfriend, Emily (the only other person of color in the game). They arrive at their friend's mountain lodge where they plan on staying for the weekend. It is immediately established that Emily is the leader in the relationship and Matt is her muscular servant, as he is asked to carry her luggage to the lodge. Throughout the game, Emily and other characters reinforce Matt as the dumb jock calling him a “doofus,” “dumb oaf,” and “muscle man.” One of the most glaring examples of this stereotypical depiction is when Emily and Matt travel back to the gate to find her missing bag. During that trip, this exchange is had:

Emily: It's so nice to be here with you muscle man.

Matt: Ah, I'm not all muscle. There are some brains in here too!

Emily: Well, you've got enough brains to like me, so let's see that brawn.

This dialogue as well as other exchanges that call Matt dumb and strong reinforce Matt as the strong, muscular, dumb jock, all traits, and characteristics normally attributed to Black men (Dines 2016; Waldie 2018).

Sapphire

Nadine Ross is a South African woman established as the secondary antagonists in *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*. Formerly a mercenary, she is hired by the primary antagonist, Rafe Adler, to help him find a missing treasure. Within the game, Ross's race does not seem to affect her and the characters do not seem to mention it or treat her any differently which is an issue. Besides upholding racist tropes of Black

characters, developers also have a difficult time making them realistic which translates into Black characters being race neutral. Blackmon (2015) speaks on Ross's race neutrality in a blog post: "Did they not recognize that the experiences of White and Black South Africans would be vastly different? Here we are talking about a country where apartheid ended just two decades ago. Are we to believe that Nadine's life experience as a mercenary, a woman, and a person of color were not affected by that fact?... Not to mention the effect that [the South African apartheid] had on the lives of her parents and the way that she was raised because of it." When developers try to make characters race-neutral and one-dimensional, it does a disservice to players who racially identify with these characters, and it does not inform White players of how race could affect the character's life. Even though the developer tried to keep Ross as race-neutral as possible, they still built her from a trope, that of a physically strong and aggressive Black woman. Ross's physical build is much more muscular than that of the main character and it is glaringly obvious when she is next to him. Within the game, she has to fight the main character and she is prewritten to win this fight. Given her mercenary background and perceived bad attitude, she could be seen as a sapphire to be more digestible and "normal" to White players.

Daisy Fitzroy is one of the most notable examples of an angry (or sapphire) revolutionary. In *Bioshock Infinite*, Daisy Fitzroy is established as the leader for an anarcho-communist resistance group known as the Vox Populi. The Vox sets out to destroy the Founding Fathers, a political party and citizen faction group that promotes xenophobic, White supremacist, nationalistic, racist, and classist ideology. The game does a great job of simulating what U.S. race relations were like in the 1920s by having colored bathrooms and showcasing Black people as blue-collar workers. Even with these more relatable and realistic representations of Black characters and scenarios, the developers failed in that they demonize Fitzroy and the Vox. For example, once the playable character (Booker DeWitt) and the secondary protagonist (Elizabeth) enter an alternative world where the Vox ruled Columbia, Elizabeth makes this comment as she looks out at the destruction that Fitzroy and her group have brought onto the city:

"They're just right for each other aren't they...Fitzroy and Comstock." -Elizabeth from *Bioshock Infinite*

This comment seems to compare Fitzroy, a left revolutionary leader to Comstock, a White supremacist, racist, nationalist man who is "for the White man, the rich man, the pitiless man" in Fitzroy's

own words. This comment also discounts Fitzroy's reaction to overthrowing a fascist government.

In *The Walking Dead*, Clementine is depicted as an innocent eight-year-old girl who is trying to survive the zombie apocalypse alongside her new guardian, Lee Everett. This narrative of a Black girl being innocent is not a common characteristic afforded to little Black girls. People see little Black girls as less young, less innocent, and assume they need less protection and comfort than their White counterparts (Epstein n.d). It is important to note that Clementine's character design is more racially ambiguous. We know she is Black as players are shown a picture of her family. In the game, she even comments that her hair "gets lots of tangles," yet it is easy to label her as White given her lighter skin tone. This could be reinforcing the idea that dark-skinned Black girls cannot be depicted as innocent given their proximity to blackness and in order for Black girls to be seen as innocent, they have to be light skin and as close to whiteness as possible.

We see her grow up from an eight-year-old to a thirteen-year-old in *The Walking Dead: A New Frontier* episode one. She has shifted from this innocent girl to that of a girl who is trying to survive, which comes off as her being angry, aggressive and in Let's Players own words "a badass." Developers do a great job in humanizing Clementine, making sure to explain why Clementine is so blunt and aggressive. After snapping at Javi (the main playable character) Clementine says:

"...I'm not use to being around other people...not for a while anyway. Usually, it's just me on my own." - Clementine

She even talks about the days she used to have a group of people who looked after her but they ended up dying in very traumatic ways. Once more, developers are able to help players understand why she acts that way she does by putting her in a situation most people can understand as being difficult, surviving a zombie apocalypse, rather than letting it remain ambiguous and subject to tropes and stereotypes.

Jezebel

Avaline de Grandpré plays the role of a revolutionary in *Assassins Creed: Liberation*. Since she was a child, she has seen the racial injustice and lack of freedom for Black people. Wanting to defend and free the enslaved people of New Orleans, she joins the Louisiana Brotherhood of Assassins whose main goal was to rid colonies of the Templar Order, an organization that supports the enslavement of Black

peoples, amongst other things. Throughout the game, players can go on missions to help Grandpré rid New Orleans of the Templar Order and rescue enslaved people. Developers do not try to negate this noble narrative with something negative like they did with Daisy Fitzroy, but instead paint Avaline out to be somewhat of a Jezebel. In the game, the character of Avaline has three personas that come with different clothes and abilities: slave, lady, and assassin. The slave and lady outfits are the most notable: in her slave persona she is able to speak with enslaved people and sneak onto plantations without anybody questioning why she was there; in her lady outfit, she is able to talk to White citizens and nobles as well as flirt with men in order to get the information she needs to move ahead. Given her mixed-race status, this could be seen as problematic to Black women and something that was not taken into consideration when the character was designed.

Noteworthy Exceptions

Games that do make the race of the characters a part of the plot line do not do so in an authentic way. Hanger 13, the developers of *Mafia III* sought out to disrupt this pattern. When players start up the game, they are met with a warning for the developers:

“*MAFIA III* takes place in a fictionalized version of the American South in 1968. We sought to create an authentic and immersive experience that captures this very turbulent time and place, including depictions of racism. We find the racist beliefs, language, and behaviors of some characters in the game abhorrent, but believe it is vital to include these depictions in order to tell Lincoln Clay’s story. Most importantly, we felt that to not include this very real and shameful part of our past would have been offensive to the millions who faced- and still face- bigotry, discrimination, prejudice, and racism in all its forms. Hanger 13”

A warning similar to this one was not seen in any other game analyzed and they were true to their word. Clay was very conscious of his race when he interacted with others. One of the first instances is his interaction with his partner in crime, Giorgi. Once they reached the mission destination, they have this exchange:

Giorgi: Some of these fellas get a little rough with the language
Lincoln: Ain't like I've never been called nigger before

Giorgi: I know. But I'm just sayin' if I go alone with it, ain't nothin' personal.

When inside the building, the guard asked why Clay, a Black man, was with Giorgi and he replied “Affirmative action. You know how it is.” After the guard finds out that Clay was in the military, the guard goes on about how his white cousin was not able to join the military but Clay, a Black man, was able to:

“It’s a sad day when a God-fearing white man can’t get a job but any nigger who staggers in is hired on the spot.” -Guard in *Mafia III*

A bit later in the game, Clay was told to meet Sal Marcano at the country club and Clay replies “The only Black folk allowed in there are the help.” When Clay gets there, he is mistaken for “the help” by the gate guard. Once the guard found out that he is there to see Marcano, Clay was allowed in although he was told to “mind his manners.” Once he enters the gate, Clay runs into Giorgi and he shows him where Marcano was sitting. They pass a White woman and she clutches her purse. These interactions, some being very minor details, accurately depict what it was like to be a Black man in the south during the 1960’s.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper identifies common and familiar racialized tropes utilized in popular 21st-century video games. As discussed, the qualities of the tropes have stayed the same - Black men are portrayed as either savage and criminal, or secondary characters in predominantly White spaces; and Black women are portrayed as angry sapphires, or sexualized Jezebels. We observed how these stereotypes were mediated through the lenses of popular Let’s Players on *YouTube*. In the process of creating their cultural content, they are reproducing these problematic tropes to their audiences and reinforcing colorblindness in their lack of critical engagement with these images. We emphasize the influence of Let’s Player videos, and other charismatic social media influencers who especially hold significant cultural importance to Gen Z consumers. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics and focus more attention on the economic space in which this content is created, produced, and consumed.

These findings have larger implications for improving Black representation in video games. The reliance on stereotypical Black characters in video games is due to the absence of Black developers (Hackney 2018). One way this can be solved is by hiring more people of color to design and craft the storylines for these characters. These White

developers are likely not interacting with Black people because of de facto and de jure segregation (Rothstein 2018), meaning that they likely adhere to racial stereotypes that are perpetuated through forces outside of themselves such as political figures and mass media (Blumer 1958; Carter and Lippard 2020). Dennis Matthews, CEO of Revelation Interactive Studios, said it best, White developers “don’t know what they don’t know” (Koller 2015). Hiring more Black game developers in these historically White spaces means that they could call out problematic character design and contribute to their creation. Of course, this needs to be paired with a work environment that is willing to take criticism and listen to their Black developers. Such changes could greatly improve the kind of representation of Black characters as well as eliminate stereotypical tropes from games altogether.

It is important to note that not all the labor needs to be put on Black developers. They are not the only ones that should be fighting for better Black representation within video games. Consumers also have the power to demand better representation. If players do see “games that get it right” they should support them, recommend them to other players, and let the developers know that it was great (Domise 2016). Players should also give bad reviews to games that do rely on stereotypes and tropes as well as inform the developers that they will not support them if they choose to build Black characters around the same overused and harmful tropes (Domise 2016). By framing this as not only a “PR issue” but a genuine business problem that is affecting the quality of their games (Peckham 2020), gaming executives for these popular games could make it a priority to hire Black developers and allow them to assist in the creation of characters that do not rely on tropes. In doing so they are improving the quality of these games and helping dismantle white supremacy, one game at a time.

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