# PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2025 BLACK, INDIGENOUS, AND PEOPLE OF COLOR GAMES STUDIES CONFERENCE

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# The Inaugural BIPOC Games Conference

**Dr. Lindsay D. Grace**
University of Mami and Co-Chair of the 2025 BIPOC Games Conference

It is with tremendous pride and excitement that we welcome you to the inaugural BIPOC Game Studies Conference proceedings. The conference took place September 12–14, 2025, at the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. This landmark event marks a significant milestone in creating a vibrant, interdisciplinary space dedicated to amplifying the voices, experiences, and scholarship of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) within gaming and as the subject of playful media.

Our conference emerges at the intersection of academic inquiry, creative storytelling, and design innovation. With peer-reviewed research, curated analog and digital game showcases, dynamic industry keynotes, and an unconference format, we are offering a comprehensive platform for exploration, collaboration, and community building.

**Conference Objectives & Highlights:**

**Advance Scholarly Discourse**: Presentations exploring representation, identity, cultural preservation, decolonization, and knowledge systems continue to shape how we understand and engage with games as cultural artifacts.

**Showcase Lived Experience in Play**: A curated exhibition of digital and analog games developed by BIPOC creators facilitates direct engagement between creators, scholars, and the public.

**Foster Cross-Sector Dialogue**: Panels and keynotes will bring together academic, design, and industry perspectives to reflect on strategies for equity, inclusion, and cultural justice in game design and play.

**Cultivate Community-Led Exploration**: In unconference sessions and networking events, both informal and formal, we encourage emergent, participant-driven conversations, from grassroots research to prototype sharing.

This conference is the culmination of ongoing efforts to shine a light on existing work that has too often been overlooked and to preserve the stories and practices of BIPOC game creators for future generations. We extend our deepest gratitude to the conference committee, peer reviewers, sponsors, and community members who have brought this vision to life. It is your energy, creativity, and commitment that make this possible.

To all attendees, researchers, creators, industry professionals, students, and advocates, a hearty thank you for joining us. Your presence and participation are essential to shaping a new future in the dynamic in game studies and game development is more inclusive, representative, and responsive. May this conference and its proceedings spark new collaborations, inspire fresh inquiries, and strengthen the bonds of our shared community. As you read the work, please note that these proceedings have been reformatted in editing for this volume, which may have introduced some typographic errors.

Upon peer-reviewing the work for this conference it is clear that this work comes from both the new community of emerging scholars and established scholars alike. The work included comes from an open call for submissions and represents work from traditionally trained scholars, industry professionals, creative practice and more. The writing styles, conventions of research and aims of this community are diverse. As a result, the guiding pillars of our program, each represented across research papers, panels, exhibitions, and interactive sessions included:

- Representation and Identity in Video Games
- Digital & Analog Games as Cultural Artifact
- Games By & About Black and Indigenous Communities
- Decolonizing Game Development & Design
- Integration of Indigenous & Black Knowledge Systems
- Afrofuturism in Gaming
- Cultural Preservation & Digital Heritage
- Social Impact & Activism Through Games
- Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in Playful Technologies

This program would not have been possible without our sponsors, the generous efforts of the Strong National Museum of Play and Stephen Jacobs. This work is the product of a collaborative effort across a wide array of communities.

# Conference Organizers

**Conference Chairs and Lead Organizers:**

**Dr. Lindsay Grace**
Knight Chair and Director of the MFA in Interactive Media at the
University of Miami School of Communication

**Stephen Jacobs**
Scholar-in Residence The Strong National Museum of Play, Professor RIT
School of Interactive Games and Media

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# Special Acknowledgement

Jennifer Hinton, Director of Games Industry Relations, MAGIC Center, Rochester Institute of Technology

Aryol Prater, Research Specialist for Black Play and Culture, the Strong National Museum of Play

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The leadership and staff at the Strong National Museum of Play for conference support, guidance, community development, and fundraising.

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# 2025 Conference Keynotes:

**Stanley Pierre-Louis**
*President & Chief Executive Officer* Entertainment Software Association

> **Stanley Pierre-Louis** has served as ESA's President and CEO since 2019. Stan first joined ESA as its Senior Vice President and General Counsel in 2015, where he led the legal, policy and regulatory affairs function for the association.

**Elizabeth Del Valle,** Global Partnering Marketing Lead, YouTube Music and Premium

> **Elizabeth Del Valle** is an award-winning marketing leader who focuses on building community and brand and platform loyalty with makers of all kinds, including gamers, developers, media companies, and content creators. With over 16 years of experience, including almost a decade at Google, she has a proven track record of driving impactful marketing initiatives for major platforms such as PlayStation, Google Play, and YouTube.

**Elizabeth LaPensée, Ph.D.**

> Narrative Director at Twin Suns, is an award-winning designer, writer, and artist of games and comics who was named a Guggenheim Fellow in 2018 and inducted into the Global Women in Games Hall of Fame in 2020. Notably, she was the designer and artist of Thunderbird Strike, a lightning-searing side-scroller game which won Best Digital Media at imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival 2017. Most recently, she directed and designed When Rivers Were Trails, an adventure game about land allotment in the 1890s which won the Adaptation Award at IndieCade 2019.

**Guha Bala, President of Velan Studios**
> President of Velan Studios, the game studio best known for Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit, Knockout City, and the newly released Midnight Murder Club. Before co-founding Velan, he co-founded Vicarious Visions, which he led with his brother, Karthik, for 25 years before its integration into Blizzard Entertainment. Named Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's "Entrepreneur of the Year," Guha serves on the Boards of Trinity Health of New York, Emma Willard School, the Eddy Foundation, and several high-growth companies.

He holds degrees from Harvard College (AB) and MIT's Sloan School of Management (MBA).

## Karthik Bala, CEO, Velan Ventures / Velan Studios, Inc

**Karthik Bala,** CEO, Velan Ventures / Velan Studios, Inc. with his brother are founders of Velan Studios (www.velanstudios.com), an award-winning indie game studio focused on discovery of breakthrough new game experiences. They are also founders of Velan Ventures, an innovation investment firm exploring game and game technologies that can transform other industries such as music & linear media, healthcare, education and more.

Karthik has been making video games for nearly 35 years on a wide range of platforms spanning indie original IP to blockbuster entertainment franchises. As part of Velan Studios, he has contributed to the groundbreaking mixed reality experiences Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit, and Hot Wheels Rift Rally, the online multiplayer "dodgebralwer" Knockout City, pinball reinvention in VR with Bounce Arcade and the innovative social party game of hide and seek and shoot…in the dark in Midnight Murder Club.

Previously, Karthik and Guha co-founded Vicarious Visions in 1991 while both were in high school. Over their 25-year leadership of the studio, VV grew to become an industry-leading game developer, with products generating over $4 Billion in sales, helping shape popular culture around the world. The brothers have built and led teams in the development of multi-billion-dollar franchises such as Skylanders, Guitar Hero, Crash Bandicoot, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater and more. In 2021, Vicarious Visions became part of Blizzard Entertainment.

Karthik enjoys mentoring entrepreneurs and looking at how game technologies can transform the world. He is on the Board of Trustees of The Strong Museum of Play and holds bachelor's degrees in computer science and psychology from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and an MBA from MIT Sloan.

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# Full Papers

# Racial Representation and Resistance in Dystopian Video Games:

## Exploring Detroit: Become Human and The Last of Us

**Kendal Jordan**
University of Rochester alumna

**Abstract:**
This paper examines the portrayals of race and resistance in Quantic Dream's Detroit: Becomes Human and Naughty Dog's The Last of Us. Examining these narratives, this paper intends to explore how these games explore themes of exploitation, autonomy, and survival. Drawing from critical literature such as Sascha Morrell's analysis of zombies and robots as metaphors for labor and racial oppression, Dr.Kishonna Gray's discussion of necropolitics, and Melvin G. Hill's concept of 'Black Deprivation', this analysis highlights the role of Black characters like Markus, Luther, Marlene, Riley, Sam and Henry. By situating these portrayals within historical and cultural contexts, the paper explores how these games reflect and critique systemic inequalities while grappling with ethical dilemmas surrounding resistance and survival in dystopian games. This is inherently important as Black games often turn to these games to escape systemic issues, while non-Black players may subconsciously absorb the allegories and lessons in unintended ways.

## 1    INTRODUCTION

Video games are powerful cultural texts that can reflect and critique societal issues, particularly concerning race, labor, and autonomy. As Morrell argues, figures like zombies and robots serve as metaphors for the dehumanization inherent in systems of labor exploitation and racial oppression. These figures are considered 'other' and are used as the building blocks of society similar to how enslaved Africans were in the United States. Zombies, rooted in Haitian traditions tied to plantation slavery, embody forced labor and alienation that is forever. Morell writes: "The Haitian zombie association with labor regimentation in modern industry persists… evoking the death effect of industrial labor on the factory assembly line" [1]. These formerly enslaved individuals, now zombies, are forced to wander and work even after the freedom of death. Similarly, robots also symbolize the commodification of labor and the stripping of individuality under industrial capitalism. These allegories persist in modern narratives, where figures like zombies represent

the loss of autonomy, while androids represent marginalized identities and struggles for autonomy.

This metaphorical framework is explored in two critically acclaimed dystopian video games, Detroit: Become Human [2] and The Last of Us [3]. Detroit: Become Human set-in a near-future Detroit in 2038, depicts a society revitalized by androids designed for everyday tasks and jobs. These androids, however, exhibit signs of consciousness, sparking a rebellion that forces players to confront ethical questions about freedom, humanity, and resistance. The game centers on three playable characters: Kara, an android tasked with caring for a child; Connor, a detective android tasked with hunting deviant androids; and Markus, a revolutionary leader who seeks liberation for androids. Through their intertwined stories, the games examine themes of systemic oppression, labor exploitation, and the fight for autonomy from multiple angles [4]. In contrast to the futuristic Detroit: Become Human, The Last of Us takes place in a post-apocalyptic United States ravaged by a fungal plague that has decimated a majority of humanity. The narrative follows Joel, a hardened survivor, and Ellie, a teenage girl who may hold the key to a cure. Their journey across the country explores the depths of human resilience, ethical dilemmas, and the heavy costs of survival. Along the way, the game introduces serval different secondary characters, including Marlene, leader of the Fireflies resistance group; Riley, Ellie's best friend and love interest; and brothers Sam and Henry, who struggle to survive in the chaos and watch out for each other [5]. While the game is often celebrated for its emotional storytelling and compelling characters, it has also been critiqued for its portrayal of Black characters, whose narratives often serve to advance those of the white protagonists.

Both games use their respective settings – Detroit: Become Human's high tech future and The Last of Us's bleak post- apocalypse – to explore the intersections of race, labor, and resistance impact the black body. The concept of necropolitics, as mentioned by Dr. Kishonna Gray, is central to understanding these portrayals. Gray argues that "video games are sites of necropolitical logics that use Black death to propel narratives," reflecting the broader societal ideologies of the dehumanization of Black bodies [6]. Melvin G. Hill's term 'Black Deprivation' further illustrates how Black characters in games like The Last of Us are constrained within the narrative framework, existing primarily to serve the development of white protagonists [7]. By analyzing key characters in both franchises such as Markus, Luther, Marlene, Riley, Sam, and Henry, this paper examines how these narratives engage with historical and social contexts while highlighting the potential to both challenge and reinforce systemic inequalities. Through this lens, the paper seeks to answer the following questions: How do video games portray Black characters

in narratives about controversial topics such as systemic oppression, and to what extent do these portrayals center or support the arcs and development of the white protagonists?


## 2        DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

### 2.1        *Markus – Android Revolutionary*

#### 2.1.1        *Narrative Overview*

Markus's journey as one of the main protagonists begins as the caretaker android for Carl Manfred, an old White artist who treats him as a son. Through Markus's everyday duties, he is faced with discriminatory remarks (i.e., 'Machines don't feel pain…You should really watch where you are going'; Shades of Color [2]) and demeaning actions (e.g., standing in the back of the bus in an 'android only section'). If Markus was human, these actions and words would be reminiscent of the treatment of Black people during the Civil Rights movement and the 1960s. Compared to this outward discrimination, Carl's progressive views challenge societal norms that view androids as unfeeling property, but his hands of his son, Leo, forces Markus to confront humanity's prejudice head on. After being executed and ripped apart by the police force and spread across the junkyard, Markus realizes his true purpose within the android rebellion, where he must unite diverse perspectives on android lives being equal to human lives.


#### 2.1.2        Connection to Other

Carl Manfred and Leo Manfred

The relationship between Carl Manfred and Markus begins within the confines of a master-slave dynamic; however, Carl's guidance encourages Markus to discover his individuality. Carl's affirmations –"You have to protect yourself. Make your own choices. Decide who you want to become" (Painter) and "Don't let anyone tell you who you are" (Broken) – serves as pivotal moments that inspire Markus to begin exploring his identity as a 'deviant'. While Markus initially struggles to comprehend these early instances of autonomy, the traumatic events of Carl's death at the hands of his son, combined with his own brutalization by the police, breaks past the fire wall in his mind preventing deviancy. This forceful realization causing his painful awakening to systemic oppression forced upon android.

## North and Androids at Jericho

Markus's companions in Jericho – North, Simon, and Josh – play essential roles in shaping Markus's leadership and his personality. Through these companions, him and by extension of the player's perspectives toward the looming android rebellion. Among them, North's relationship with Markus stands out as significant, marked by both shared trauma and the conflicting ideologies leading to tension. North's backstory as a Traci android, a sex slave, who escaped sexual abuse at the Eden Club profoundly influences her militant approach and hatred toward humans. Her perspective constantly challenges Markus to confront the urgency of the rebellion and push aside the feelings of sympathy.

Markus's passivity is shown his actions, in which in several scene involves him removing his noticeable features – his dark skin – to spread messages. Compared to this passivity, she often urges direct action as seen in Capitol Park, where she insists, "They only understand violence, Markus. We have to make them afraid."[2] This sentiment while divisive and a very pointed moment in Markus' arc is very reminiscent of how Malcom X handled issues during the Civil Rights Movement. With the constant frustration and lack of help to mobilize this leads to an overflowing of hatred of oppressed groups to resort to extreme measures to be seen and represented.

## Connor

The dynamic between Connor and Markus is very foiled. It is very reminiscent of slave over watcher-field slave dynamic. Markus is the face of the android liberation movement, advocating for androids to deviate and become their own person. Connor begins as a tool of systemic oppression while being a part of the oppressed group, tasked with dismantling the rebellion or risk being deactivated. While Markus navigates the balance between violent and nonviolent rebellion, Connor's journey explores the conflict between duty and emerging agency. While struggling to fulfill is initial mission, the player can choose to be ruthless and kill any androids that stand in this mission or learn what is it like to be human though experiences with Hank, a human detective. Their interplay serves as a microcosm of the game's broader exploration of identity and systemic oppression, demonstrating how choice and solidarity can shape the fight for freedom.

2.1.3   *Connection to Others*

Markus's approach to resistance aligns with historical figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X based on the players' decision. In the pivotal Capitol Park scene, Markus states "That's not who we are. We can show them out humanity without becoming monsters" [2] as a response to North, a white android, saying that rebellion needs to be violent. Markus knows that with his abstract black body, that he will be perceived as a threat no matter what. This parallel of Markus is similar to Martin Luther King Jr. are evident in the Freedom March scene, where Markus declares, "We are people! We are alive!" [2]. The choice to choose non-violence evokes Gray's idea of necropolitics because depending on the options by the players they will see the police brutalize the androids in real time.

While Markus' leadership reflects the philosophical debates between figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X, Luther's story offers a more personal exploration of freedom and survival within an oppressive system. As a freed android, Luther's journey highlights the complexities of navigating autonomy and resistance in a world that continues to dehumanize him. His experience contrasts Markus's more public, symbolic fight, underscoring the varied ways marginalized individuals resist and reclaim their humanity.

## 2.2    Luther – Freed Android

### 2.2.1    Narrative Overview

Luther's story in Detroit: Become Human highlights the struggles of androids trapped in servitude. Initially owned by Zlatko, an abusive human, Luther gains freedom through Kara, another android. Together, they form a makeshift family with Alice, a young girl. Luther's arc explores themes of loyalty and the quest for humanity, as he seeks both physical liberation and emotional connection. His presence underscores the broader narrative of resistance against systemic oppression.

### 2.2.2    Connection to Others

#### Kara and Alice

Luther's main relationship is between Kara and Alice. This relationship transitions from reluctant alley to devoted protector. His turning point is marked by defiance against Zlatko, his former owner, where he states, "No, I won't obey you anymore. I'm free now" [2, Crossroads]. While this scene is

the most pivotal scene in his minor role, it shows how marginalized groups have to stay together in trying times and especially in times of high racial tensions.

### 2.2.3 Historical Context and Stereotype

Luther's portrayal aligns with Sacha Morrell's analysis of labor exploitation, as he is initially in servitude to a white man. This echoes historical systems of slavery because Luther is programmed (i.e., forced) to serve and we as the player do not get to see a scene where he struggles against his orders and 'breaks free' into deviancy. Alongside, the labor exploitation, Luther's character also reinforces the 'Mandigo' stereotype (e.g., tall, broad, athlete, beastly) by being the security and muscle for Zlatko operation. Unlike Markus who gets more character development and interactions, Luther is relegated to being a black body used to protect the white androids – Kara and Alice.

This exploration of race and resistance in Detroit: Become Human lays the groundwork for examining similar themes in The Last of Us. While Markus and Luther highlight androids' fight for autonomy. The Last of Us delves into the human cost of survival for the marginalized and the suffering of Black characters in a post-apocalyptic world.

## 3     THE LAST OF US

### 3.1     Marlene – The Leader Who Bears the Burden

### 3.1.1     Narrative Overview

Marlene is characterized as the determined and resourceful leader of the Fireflies, a resistance group seeking to develop a cure from the fungal plague that created the clickers. Her familial bond, created by a promise to Ellie's mother, underscores her maternal instincts and commitment to a larger cause. Marlene's narrative reaches a climax during the events at the Firefly Lab, where she prepares Ellie for surgery to extract the cure, fully aware it will cost Ellie her life. This decision pits her against Joel – Ellie's pseudo-father figure. Marlene's attempt to reason with Joel shows her pragmatic view of sacrifice for the greater good. Despite her attempts, Joel kills Marlene to save Ellie, cementing his descent into madness.

### 3.1.2     Connection to Others

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Marlene's relationship with Ellie is one of care and responsibility stemming from their pre-apocalyptic interactions. This causes a conflict in Marlene to balance her personal affection with her duty as leader of the Fireflies and humanity. In contrast, Marlene's relationship and interactions with Joel are very tense. For example, in the chapter titled Outskirts, Marlene tasks Joel and Tess to bring Ellie to the Fireflies outpost in which Joel responds, "this is your crusade not mine." [3; Outskirts]. This scene shows their differing priorities – Joel's focus on Ellie versus Marlene's commitment to saving humanity.

### 3.1.3    Historical Context and Stereotype

Marlene's resilience and leadership reflect the "Strong Black Woman" archetype, yet her death undermines any of her narrative autonomy. In Marlene's final plea to Joel, "You can't save her, Joel. Even if you get her out of here, what then?" [3; Firefly Lab] underscores her approach to sacrifice. This portrayal aligns with broader media trends that valorize Black women's strength, resilience, and ability to think about the collective good while neglecting their vulnerability and safety.

Her death shifts the narrative focus to Joel and Ellie yet again echoing Hill's initial critique of the game and the concept of "Black Deprivation". While Marlene embodies the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype, her tragic end and the narrative shift to Joel and Ellie signal a deeper exploration of vulnerability and the erasure of Black female agency. In contrast, Riley's character offers a different kind of narrative progression. Rather than being relegated to a background role, Riley's presence becomes a catalyst for growth – both in terms of character development and the unfolding of larger themes within the story.

### 3.2    Riley – The Catalyst for Growth

### 3.2.1    Narrative Overview

Riley is introduced in Left Behind DLC as both Ellie's best friend and first love. Through their bittersweet reunion, Riley's growing disillusionment with the authoritarian REDRA regime and decision to join the Fireflies is revealed. Ellie and Riley both explore an abandoned mall, sharing moments of joy and vulnerability in their harsh reality. During their trip, both are bitten by the infected. While Ellie discovers her immunity, Riley accepts her

fate, choosing to spend her final moments with Ellie rather than being in despair.

### 3.2.2 Connection to Others

<div align="center">Ellie</div>

Riley's bond with Ellie is very personal, offering insight into Ellie's formative experiences and emotional struggles. Through their time together Riley helps imbue Ellie with the courage that shows through the rest of the series. Riley's death leaves a lasting impact on Ellie similar to Sam's death, while increasing her survivor's guilt. Even in her final moments, Riley states "But we fight. For every second we have left…we fight" [8] , which shows her resilience and role in the narrative

### 3.2.3 *Historical Context and Stereotype*

Riley's role as a sacrificial figure aligns with the other characters – Marlene, Sam, and Henry – in this game and the tropes shown in other media. While her narrative explores themes of rebellion, hope, and resilience, her ultimate fate underscores the limited narrative autonomy often afforded to Black characters specifically LGTQ+ characters. This also ties into the "bury the gays" trope where LGBTQ couples are broken apart through traumatic means such as death.

Her portrayal also reflects the challenges of representing Black women in narratives of resistance. Riley's dreams and ambitions are cut short her potential is undeveloped due to her secondary character nature. This is a shared experience among other marginalized characters in other game franchises. Riley's tragic fate highlights the recurring theme of marginalized characters having their potential truncated, a pattern also evident in the story of Sam and Henry. Like Riley, Sam and Henry are shaped by their circumstances and the harsh realities they face. Their sibling bond in the chaos of the post-apocalyptic world illustrates the personal struggles of marginalized individuals, but their story, too, is marred by the same narrative limitations and tragic outcomes that often characterize characters from oppressed groups.

## 3.3 Sam and Henry – Siblings in Chaos

### 3.3.1 *Narrative Overview*

Sam and Henry, a pair of brothers in The Last of Us offers a poignant exploration of familial bonds and survival in a harsh, post-apocalyptic

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landscape, Henry, the elder, shoulders the responsibility of protecting Sam, his younger brother. Their story reaches a climax when Sam is bitten by an infected and hides his injury out of fear. The following morning, he succumbs to the infection and attacks Ellie. Henry's final words, "What did I do?" [3; The Suburbs] after he shoots his infected brother, Sam, convey the crushing guilt and despair that survival often demands.

### 3.3.2  Connection to Others
#### Ellie and Sam

Sam and Henry teach Joel and Ellie more about their familial dynamic. Sam and Ellie's connection is built on moments of shared innocence. Their conversations highlight their childlike curiosity in this world. For example, Sam asking the question, "Do you think they're still inside? The people…when they turn?" [3; The Suburbs] reveals his deep fear of losing his humanity, mirroring Ellie's growing apprehensions about survival and infection. This moment shows their shared vulnerability while showing the psychological toll of the apocalypse on children.

#### Joel and Henry

Henry and Joel bond over their shared struggles as protectors, but their differing moral boundaries create tension. While Joel is more willing to take violent risks, Henry often hesitates. Henry's protective instincts clash with Joel's pragmatic violence, which shows their differing moral compasses. Henry's eventual breakdown marked him crying, "What did I do?" after killing his infected brother, Sam, serves as a tragic testament to the unbearable burden of responsibility. This devastating moment contrasts sharply with Joel's hardened demeanor, emphasizing the varied ways survivors cope with trauma and loss.

### 3.3.3  Historical Context and Stereotype
The portrayal of Sam and Henry reflects Gray's concept of necropolitics and Hill's concept of "Black Deprivation". The deaths of Sam and Henry serve as a development of Joel's and Ellie's relationship development. The death of Sam specifically also leads to emotional development in Ellie as she witnesses someone around her age die. Sam and Henry's story also fits into the "Black Deprivation" concept because their story is relegated to a tiny subplot to expand on the white protagonists' bond. This dynamic shows the systemic tendency to marginalize Black characters' narratives in favor of white-centered arcs.

# 4     CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the portrayals of race and resistance in Detroit: Become Human and The Last of Us, highlighting how both games engage with themes of systemic oppression while often relegating Black characters to roles that reinforce harmful stereotypes. In Detroit: Become Human androids are used as allegories for marginalized groups, offering a compelling exploration of resistance through characters like Markus and Luther. However, the game risks oversimplifying the realities of racial oppression by relegating, Black-coded characters to sacrificial or protective roles that align with long-standing stereotypes. Similarly, The Last of Us, depicts the human cost of survival in a post-apocalyptic world but relies on Black characters like Marlene, Riley, Sam, and Henry to advance the emotional journeys of its white protagonists, Joel and Ellie. This dynamic reflects what Melvin Hill terms "Black deprivation", where Black characters are denied agency and longevity to justify white preservation. Furthermore, Kishonna Gray's concept of necropolitics underscores how these deaths are used as narrative tools, perpetuating a troubling pattern of marginalization.

These portrayals carry significant implications for diverse gaming audiences. For Black players, these narratives can feel disheartening, as games meant to offer escape instead reinforce systemic issues. For non-Black players, the misinterpretation of thinly veiled allegories risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes rather than fostering understanding. To move forward, the gaming industry must embrace more equitable representation, ensuring Black characters are portrayed as autonomous agents whose stories are as complex and meaningful as those of their white counterparts. By doing so, video games can fulfill their potential as vehicles for entertainment and as mediums for empathy and social change. The responsibility lies with developers to recognize the cultural weight of their narrative and to craft stories that reflect the diversity and complexity of the audience they aim to reach.

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# Decolonizing Play: Exploring Frameworks for Game Design Free of Colonial Values

**Elaine Gomez**, *Midnight Hour Games*

with Dan Cook and Roxanne Blouin-Payer

**Abstract**

Modern video games often act out the values of colonialism. Browse the top selling lists on popular game platforms and you'll spot numerous titles that encourage players to explore new lands, strip them of their resources and eliminate NPCs around them.

When the topic of colonization arises, many game developers often hesitate to get involved in meaningful and constructive design conversations around how to mitigate values that are heavily ingrained in game theory and player expectations. However, those who actively attempt to decolonize their games' design run into an issue - a lack of game design tools to step outside the sticky web of inherited values they've spent years mastering.

What if there were game design tools that could help designers and teams take their first steps into finding creative solutions to craft engaging and richer worlds utilizing non-colonial mechanics and systems? By creatively decolonizing rooted game design principles using practical design applications, it is possible to change and adapt existing core mechanics, features and systems that highlight interesting gameplay without the need of relying on the status quo.

## Limiting the scope of the discussion

Colonialism is admittedly a complicated topic. There's much history, many layers of repeated misery, and many perspectives to consider. But it is also a very simple topic. Maybe, just maybe, we could make fewer games that glorify extermination, looting, and pillaging worlds.

In that light, we propose the following limited scope for this paper:

● Who this is for: Working commercial game designers
● What they need: A pragmatic, defensible, easy to understand design process
● To what ends: Help them create designs that break free of implicit colonialist values

**Our point of view as commercial games designers**
This paper comes from a very specific point of view. We are commercial game designers speaking to other game designers. Unlike many voices in this discussion, we have deep empathy for commercial game designers and understand that they operate in a cursed world of limited resources and limited power; a capitalist hellscape of market and economic constraints that destroy most artistic and moral inclinations. Rarely can designers afford to be idealists even when our hearts are in the right place.

To enact change, we require boring, pragmatic design tools that frame rhetoric in terms of utility and economics. Our teams struggle to productively process emotional manifestos, well-intentioned shaming or densely alienating theory. We are not academics or revolutionaries. We are just simple farmers, people of the land.

Yet, we believe commercial game designers, even in the face of notable constraints, have the power to reach millions; leveraging vast engines of distribution and promotion that most allies can only dream about. If we, as game designers, can start interrogating and evolving the underlying values of our work, perhaps we can bring about a future abundance of innovative, decolonized video games.

**Problem Space**
**What is Colonialism?**

Colonialism most commonly refers to a period beginning around the 1400s and ceasing officially in the early 1900s, where European nations conquered, subjugated and exploited over 80% of the world's population. It reshaped the world, leaving hundreds of millions enslaved or murdered. Ancient cultures were pillaged and erased, their raw wealth redirected to Western coffers via religious, racial, legal and economic frameworks that still underpin current world power structures.

**How are colonialist values expressed in gameplay?**
In the 1600 - 1800s, numerous board games educated European children on the joys of conquering others. Many of those boardgames still inform popular genres such as strategy, building and RPG titles. See Playing Oppression: The Legacy of Conquest and Empire in Colonialist Board Games (MIT Press) for an in-depth discussion of this history.

These common mechanics of race, resource extraction, dehumanization and violent conquest are so ingrained in the language of modern game design, we

struggle to even see them. We have entire professions such strategy design, progression design or combat design that naively trade in colonialist values.

**What are the mechanics of colonialism?**
Here is a list of specific mechanics that exhibit strong colonialist values.

Before we jump in, you should read this list with the following caveat: Game mechanics are like musical instruments; they can be played in many ways depending on the artist's skill, intent and cultural context. Can a game have these colonialist mechanics and not be a celebration of colonialism? Absolutely! With effort, careful thought and context, you can make even a bongo drum sound mournful.

However, if you blindly embrace these mechanics in an unthinking way, you'll get their default, perhaps undesired cultural expression. Our initial goal is visibility. Do you, a smart well-informed designer, see the potential issues?

Let's start with 4X mechanics of eXplore, eXpand, eXploit and eXtermination made popular in various strategy games such as Stellar Conquest, Masters of Orion, or Civilization.

**Explore**

Exploration is an admittedly beloved mechanic that suggests openness and discovery. However, there are some problematic variations to notice.

● **Savages and Civilization**: The game world is split by default into superior civilized areas and inferior savage frontier areas with no rule of law. Exploration only occurs in the savage portions of the world. During the colonialist era, very few 'discovered' areas were in reality 'unknown to humankind', since most had untold millennia of inhabitation. The whole fantasy of 'discovery' of the unknown was a self-aggrandizing invention of the colonialists.
● **Tokenized territories**: The player is encouraged to explore large territory or nation-scale swaths of abstract lands. They are tokens, not actual places. There are very few details of who lives there or any meaningful details of their lives. Players get to enforce their own names and borders upon the new land.
● **Resource hunt:** The player explores specifically for the sake of future conquest. These games encourage you to seek out and judge discovered areas based on their extraction potential. Not any inherent value of what exists there.

**Expand**

Once a player has 'discovered' a location that provides value, they must acquire or occupy it.

● **Colonies:** If the player's main job is seeding new colonies in new territories, you might just be making a colonialist game. Just food for thought.

● **Terra Nullius**: This is a phrase that Europeans used to declare "Land without a master". It was a legal and rhetorical ploy used to justify taking it from whoever actually lived there. If there's no one there, it is totally fine to take it! You see this used as a move in video games to make future extraction or exploitation morally justified. For example a game like Masters of Orion will be set in space since empty worlds are conveniently just there for the taking.

● **Growth at all costs**: The player progresses by seeding a small foothold in a new area and then growing large no matter what the cost to those who might already be there.

**Exploit**

Once a location has been seeded, colonialist logic states that it must be stripped of resources, often for the benefit of some powerful empire or superior culture.

● **Finite resources:** A location has finite resources and your job is to deplete them to the point of exhaustion. There is no mechanism for renewal or preservation.

● **Coercive economics:** The player can use power differentials to force transactions of resources from the less powerful party to the more powerful party.

● **One way flows:** The game is set up to transfer resources from out of an area (often a savage frontier land) into another area (often a civilized land)

● Lack of externalities: Unlimited extraction has no negative cost, only positive benefits that accrue to the dominant culture.

●**Processed vs raw goods**: Low value raw goods are available in frontiers and high value, processed goods are available in civilized areas. Very little value accumulates to the frontier lands.

● **Locals represented as resources**: Any local people in an area are treated as a worker resource to use in operating the extractive economic machinery.

Exterminate

And finally we get to the destruction of Others or their culture. A video game staple.

●**Dehumanization and Othering**: Anyone who is 'against' the plans of the imperial side is framed as less than human. Maybe they are called an orc. Or

an evil monster. The goal here is to remove any moral concerns with regards to fairness, kindness or equity. Othering is a critical first step in most extermination-focused mechanics.

●**Violence, coercion and subjugation** are the only real options to deal with resistance: If a group pushes back against the player's imperialistic actions, they become an obstacle to be removed. Only rarely is there a means of creating a win-win solution for both parties. Instead most of the options just so happen to involve bloodshed or subjugation.

●**Power differentials:** The player has the ability to eradicate others with very few repercussions. More broadly, mechanics of control based on unbalanced power dynamics are incredibly common in colonialist games.

●**Celebration of mass murder or genocide**: The players is performing a great service by massacre thousands of intelligent beings. It is often framed as a righteous act.

## Other mechanics

There are numerous other patterns we see that have their roots in colonialism. For example:

● **Exoticization**: Indigenous representation used as decoration. In Lara Croft, the player spends time exploring exotic South American ruins that are almost entirely detached from any actual culture. They are just vague gestures at the exotic nature of an Othered culture. A related concept is Orientalism, which is the patronizing imitation of Asian aesthetics by European cultures.

● **Erasure through abstraction:** The game operates at the level of nations, races, imports, experts, labor. This is a traditional colonialist reduction that helps people ignore the implications of the horrors they are enacting.

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**Exercise**
● **Pick a game**. Either your current project or a favorite game.
● Score 1 point for every instance of a mechanic listed above. Use your best judgment.
● Now sum up all the points. What is the colonialist score of the game?

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A game like Civilization might score around 12 or more depending on how you count various systems. Decolonized games like a Bejeweled or Mario Party often have scores of 3 or less. It is an inexact rubric intended to generate insight, not direct comparisons.

**Challenges for designers**
You may look at this list of colonial adjacent mechanics and think, "Goodness! That covers almost every game mechanics I know how to design or enjoy playing." Watch any expensive AAA media event and it is quickly apparent that there are a vast number of games out there that are essentially power fantasies about dominating and destroying others.

There are three main issues that designers describe when they first attempt to decolonize their game designs

1. If we remove common mechanics, we lose our familiar design toolbox
A typical game design is not created from whole cloth. Most professional game designers perform craft-like creation within heavily defined constraints of existing well-established forms. We consistently borrow old systems or tropes from existing genres. Much of our work is only culturally meaningful in the context of a trained audience who values a long history of highly derivative creations.

This is not easy work to create! It takes a designer many years to learn these design spaces and immense mastery to execute within them at a professional level. The result is that some of the most skilled designers in our industry have spent their careers passionately perfecting out how to craft games about killing natives in foreign lands.

When the project of 'decolonizing play' prevents a designer from using their trusty design tools, they are lost. For perhaps the first time in their career, they are faced with a blank canvas and they panic.

2. It takes time to relearn how to think about games in a non-colonial manner.
There exist immense (and profitable!) design opportunities out there for folks interested in creating decolonized gameplay. However, just as it took immense effort to master colonial mechanics, it takes time and practice learning new ways of seeing and making.

Many designers will need to go back to the basics and apply design fundamentals to these new design spaces. They'll need to get to know and understand audiences who may not be like themselves. It helps to approach the problem with a certain sense of grit and determination.
Creating decolonized gameplay will be a new long-term journey towards excellence, not a switch you can just instantly flip.

3. Established IPs and genres add major constraints on change

Complicating all this is the reality that most professional game designers operate with the constraints of existing successes. No matter what our personal beliefs, we can find forward looking designs hamstrung by IP requirements, conservative team members and existing player genre expectations.

This is not insurmountable given strong creative leadership and buy-in across the team. However, it adds a deep friction to most efforts.

## Frameworks for Decolonizing Design

These are substantial challenges, but luckily there's some relatively straightforward options available to teams interested in decolonizing their gameplay.

We've put together a set of steps and tools that can be used to identify risks, assess available design flexibility, and provide design exercises to identify alternatives to major colonialist game verbs. It is a simple but impactful framework that will help you create games using core values that fit your design intention while stepping away from negative and problematic standards.

## Risk Spectrum: Is Your Game at Risk?

Most commercial designers work within well-established genres or product categories. There are a considerable amount of genres that have little overlap with colonialist values. Yet, there are some genres that share a direct lineage with colonialist themes. The first framework we put together is the Risk Spectrum, a breakdown of game genres categorized by their risk factor in leaning towards colonialist values. We divided these genres and assigned them into a risk

category based on their overall mechanics and player experience. Below is the listed breakdown and graphic that can be used to assess where your game falls.

The Risk Spectrum is a visual representation of game genres categorized by the level of risk towards colonial values

## Low Risk Genres

This is not an extensive list, but the following genres tend to be less problematic. There are exceptions, but they are rare. Some genres with low risks include:

● **Abstract Casual**: Match-3, puzzle, solitaire, hidden object, and rhythm. Abstract titles tend to mostly focus on personal mastery.
● **Life Sim**: Focus on tending and growth.
● **Party**: Games like Mario Party, Trivia, and Social Deduction. These are often more about interpersonal experiences that are meant to be fun with friends.
● **Stealth**: Games like Stray or Thief, where an individual wants to lay low and confront a powerful system.
● **1 vs 1 Fighting**: Skill based competition. Many popular titles are full of exoticism and cultural stereotypes, but these are fixable issues with proper research and authentic representation.
● **Horror**: Players are low power and fighting against the unknown.
● **Vehicle Simulation**: Games like racing games, flight simulators, and trucking simulators.

**Medium Risk Genres**
The following genres include examples of both colonized and decolonized play. These titles are perhaps the biggest opportunities to shift existing games and franchises away from colonialist values while still preserving popular mechanics.

● **Interactive Fiction**: Visual novels, adventure games, and romance titles. Content boils down to theme and context. You can easily tell a colonialist story, or not.
● **Platformer**: The core mechanics of jumping and exploring. But there are also a large number of these games about pith helmeted explorers stealing jewels from masked tribal minions.
● **Tower Defense**: Defending your village is not specifically colonialist. However, some titles use the frame of advancing based on a frontier and fighting back against waves of dehumanized attackers. Squint and it looks very British.
● **Monster Collection**: Games like Pokemon, Monster Hunter or PalWorld. Again, context matters. Are you the monster's best friend? Or are you entering unknown territories and stripping them of resources through routine murder? See case studies below for more discussion of games like Pokemon.
● **Multiplayer Shooter**: Within this genre fall battle royales, MOBAs, arena shooter and deathmatch. Despite being hyper violent, they often have equitable power balance and elements of cooperative gameplay. However, more military themed versions often include nationalist elements and cultural stereotypes.
● **City Builder**: When set in modern, abstract, peaceful settings, they can be about balancing complex urban systems. When they include warfare and settlement of hostile areas, they start exhibiting colonialist values.

● **Idle**: Games like Cookie Clicker or Idle Heroes. These represent growth at a cost with few meaningful externalities.

**High Risk Genres**
The following genres tend to be greatly rooted in colonialist values. You will tend to encounter the slippery slope of 'accidentally' keeping up with colonist values as you pull in design patterns and themes that are inherent to these genres' player experiences.
● **Strategy**: Games like 4X, wargames, real time strategy (RTS). Usually these are games about nationalism and territorial conquest.
● **Tactical War**: These games are less focused on nation building, but often hyper focus on exterminating 'Others'.
● **Survival**: Games like Rust, Minecraft, and Valheim. These titles deliver a strong power fantasy around starting out from nothing and extracting resources to create a dominant base/settlement/colony.
● **Single Player Shooter**: Slaughter hordes of dehumanized 'Others' for personal pleasure. Often with strong nationalist theming and fetishizing weapons of war.
● **Action Adventure**: Games like Uncharted and Tomb Raider. There's a strong emphasis on discovering a past civilization and stealing its artifacts while wrecking irreplaceable sites in the process.
● **Role Playing (RPG)/ Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO)**: Many digital role playing games are power fantasies about a small group delving into ruins (that are not from their culture) and exterminating the locals in vast numbers, often for an imperialistic or extractive goal.
● **Factory / Automation**: Games like Factorio or Infinifactory. Strong focus on efficient extraction and conquest of a territory without a master.

It is possible for your game to fall in one or more risk factor categories. The important takeaway within this tool is to understand how much your mechanics and core experience is at risk of perpetuating colonialist values.

The good news is that beloved but problematic genres are not immutable. A genre is a composite bundle of existing human systems, values and culture. Consider what parts you want to keep and what parts you want to replace:

1.**Identify values**: Name and understand the values that design patterns include. Find players who enjoy those design patterns. What emotions and fantasies do they express? Both good and bad. Look up the history of the design so you can understand what big ideas it rests upon.
2.**Map supporting mechanics**: Next, map out the ecosystem of secondary mechanics that support this design pattern. Ask which secondary elements are

load bearing (key aspects of the player experience depend on this feature)? What values do those elements bring with them?

3.**List areas to replace**: If you see problematic areas, search out alternatives that replace those load bearing elements. This way you can still surgically build within a risky genre.

Once you know where your game fits in the Risk Spectrum, it should open you up to ask questions like:
● What kind of mechanics would fit in a decolonized strategy game?
● Is exterminating 'others' the core value of my game? If it isn't, then what are my core values?
● My game is problematic but how do I fix it and still make it fun?

The tool that follows will aid you in answering questions like the ones listed above. It's meant to provide you with tangible solutions to address concerns by changing the perspective of the problem.

**Brainstorm Alternative Values**
Your game's values inform the creative pillars that flow across all the game's features and systems. They drive the player fantasy and are supported by player verbs and game mechanics. They are reflected by the game's narrative and world building. At the heart of most modern colonialist games are a set of naively inherited values. By thoughtfully replacing those values with alternative values and then building your game upon these new values, you can avoid creating problematic themes and experiences.

The question now is: How do you come up with alternative values? What better way to find alternatives than by using antonyms.

**Gameplay Verb and Antonym Framework**
Our suggested approach is to take your gameplay verbs and pair them with respective antonyms, verbs that would be the opposite in meaning. These new verbs would represent the opposite values and give you the push to brainstorm ideas in a new direction.

Why gameplay verbs? We chose verbs because they directly translate to player actions and are the foundational concepts of systems. When you can strip a mechanic to its most basic action verb, you can easily deconstruct the role that it plays in the gameplay and find verbs that are similar or opposing to ideate further. Once you have an antonym for a gameplay verb, you can continue extracting more values by finding more synonyms, words that have similar meaning. Before you know it, you'll have a list of new possibilities that will provide fodder for conversations.

What follows is a short breakdown of the gameplay verb, antonym, and synonym process:

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**Steps to gameplay verb, antonym, and synonym process**
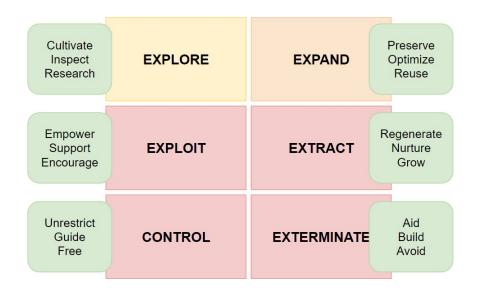
1. Select a problematic verb or theme you see in your game, for example "Exploitation"
2. Find an appropriate antonym for that verb or theme. For exploitation, we may use "Regeneration"
3. Continue exploring synonyms that are similar in meaning to your antonym. For regeneration, we may list "Nurturing, Growth, Gifting, Empowerment, Encouragement, Befriending"
4. Assess whether or not these fits in your player fantasy. Do these new values make sense to your game? Do you have the flexibility to bring them into your game via mechanics, world building, narrative, etc.?

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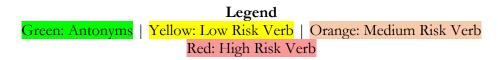
**Sample brainstorming**

There are lots of ways this exercise can go but it should be fun to come up with options and think outside the box. When using this tool on your own or with a team, we recommend incorporating a visual element and to color code your verbs. Whether it be through a digital or physical format, use shapes and colors to aid you in the process.

Below are some verb brainstorms we did as a group and a visual format we used to categorize them:

- Explore: Cultivate, Inspect, Research
- Expand: Preserve, Optimize, Co-exist, Populated Land
- Exploit: Empower, Support, Encourage, Delegate, Invest
- Extract: Regenerate, Nurture, Grow, Gift, Empower, Encourage, Befriend
- Control: Unrestrict, Guide, Free, Inspire
- Exterminate: Humanize, Aid, Build, Avoid, Cooperate, Love

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cultivate Inspect Research | **EXPLORE** | **EXPAND** | Preserve Optimize Reuse |
| Empower Support Encourage | **EXPLOIT** | **EXTRACT** | Regenerate Nurture Grow |
| Unrestrict Guide Free | **CONTROL** | **EXTERMINATE** | Aid Build Avoid |

**Legend**

Green: Antonyms | Yellow: Low Risk Verb | Orange: Medium Risk Verb
Red: High Risk Verb

*A visual representation of the Gameplay Verbs and Antonyms Framework in use*

## Identify Design Flexibility

Now that you know where your game falls in the Risk Spectrum and have an understanding of alternative values to possibly implement, it's time to figure out what areas of your game can and cannot be modified. The goal here is to help you answer the following questions.

● What elements can you change if you want to decolonize values in your game?
● Given your current stage of production, what elements are still easy to change?
● What are specific decolonizing moves you can make for different elements of your game?

## Design Flexibility Framework

Not all elements of a game are easily changed once development begins. The following elements of a game are listed in order from mostly flexible to least flexible.

**Player Fantasy** ↑ Less Flexible

**Verbs**

**Economy**

**World**

**Story** ↓ More Flexible

Ordering of game elements in terms of flexibility.
Credit: Jason Vandenberge

Within reason, a team can more easily tweak their story and world elements, even relatively late in development. It is much harder to alter Player Fantasy and Verbs, unless you do early in the game's development process, like concepting or pre-production.

As you dissect what features and systems have the most flexibility in design modifications, we'd like to suggest questions that you can use to further evaluate important aspects of your game. We broke them down by the categories used in the Design Flexibility Framework.

**Player Fantasies**
● Non-colonialist values: What gameplay verbs are problematic in my game? See Brainstorm Alternative Values section. If you've used the Gameplay Verbs and Antonyms Framework, you've made the first critical step towards decolonizing your gameplay.
● Non-colonialist fantasies: Are there player fantasies that don't involve conquest, subjugation and eradication of others? What story do I want to tell? What are my player goals?
Verbs
● Mechanics that arise from values: What are verbs that build off your non-colonialist values? Are there opportunities for growth and collaboration? See Brainstorm Alternative Values section
● Player mythology: Player mythology is Designer Alex Jaffe's idea that player actions embody player values in ways that are impossible to merely reskin. If you use game mechanics like those found in Diplomacy about player

competition betrayal, no amount of saying "actually it is a game about friendly unicorns" is going to change the player's experience.

**Game Economy**

● Power disparities: Are there extreme player-centric power fantasies? Can you reduce them? Or reverse them?

● Value extraction: Are all actions extractive? How can you introduce externalities as meaningful inputs into player decisions? How can you create cyclical economies that depend on renewals as much as removal?

● Agency: Do the people or locations that act as resource sources have any say in the player's extractive actions? If not, how can you add impactful value to them?

● Consequences: Are there any consequences for acting as a colonizer? How can you include cause and effect to shift the dominant strategy towards your values?

World

● Time period: Is your game set during a colonialist era? Does it need to be? If so, what can you do to showcase various perspectives?

● Protagonists / antagonists: Are your heroes and villains reminiscent of any stereotypical colonialist roles? How can you reverse these or remove them?

● Nation building: Is the acquisition of territory for nation building a big part of your world? Does the scale of your world reduce cultures to names on a map? If so, what can provide positive and negative pushes or pulls to make the experience intentional and purposeful?

**Story**

● Contextualization: Can you replace obvious colonialist symbols with something better? For example, does your game need to be about a white hero saving or killing poor brown people? Maybe there's an alternative framing?

● Authenticity: Can you replace stereotypes with authentic details based on lived experience? Often complicated reality ends up being more interesting than the inherited cartoons we fall back upon.

**Get Feedback from Real Humans**

Even when using all the steps, frameworks, and tools listed above, it is surprisingly easy to get close to shipping a project and discovering that our game contains a handful of mechanics and symbols that accidentally tell a colonialist story. Solicit feedback to see how actual players (who are blind to your intentions!) might mischaracterize inopportune combinations.

Here are some tips.

● Listen for lived experience: When you hear that a player has personal experience with an issue in your games, listen! Don't dismiss them as incorrect because their response does not match your intent.

● Use sensitivity readers and cultural consultants: Consultants can help highlight problematic issues before release. This is a cooperative relationship; they want to help you make a great game.

● Flag feedback from concern trolls: Some strong feedback consists of preemptive worries that someone else might be harmed. In practice, these concerns may or may not be an issue! We've found that second or third hand concerns can arise from a cartoon understanding of complex topics. We recommend grounding your responses in feedback from those who have direct experience, instead of reflexively gutting your game.

● Be willing to change: Dig in and see if it is really important to your values to keep a problematic topic in your game. Many times, we can trivially change a frame for a system in ways that improve the game and do no harm to our game's vision.

## Examples of Decolonized Play Using Pokémon

So how does decolonizing play work in practice? The widely known game Pokémon contains numerous colonialist themes of exploitation and extraction. Over the years, other teams built some variations that are more colonialist, while other teams have focused on decolonizing

Pokémon. Let's explore the following Monster Collection titles to see how they handle the challenge:

● Pokémon
● PalWorld
● Cassette Beasts
● Pokémon Snap

### Pokémon

In Pokémon games, the player fantasy sets you as a kid in a fictional world where animals are captured, domesticated and used for different purposes, such as fighting each other. You, as a pokemon trainer, are expected to collect the rarest and most powerful breeds of pokemons and compete in the highest fighting arenas with your captured animals.

It's easy to see what are the exploiting themes here. Training animals to fight each other is not exactly legal in the real world and is mostly considered animal cruelty. Given that some Pokemon have human-like features, it also can be interpreted as a reference to slavery. There's also a domination fantasy with

the concept of gaining rank and status through collecting badges when you defeat a trainer gym and ultimately become the best trainer.

Of course, the world of Pokémon is not the real world and the developers sugar coated their concept to be more kid-friendly. The player is making friends with the pokemons they train, the defeated pokémons are only fainting and quickly heal with the care of nurse Joy. The fights between pokemons are presented as friendly sportsmanship similar to martial arts. All of these efforts make Pokémon an acceptable and enjoyable family-oriented game despite the problematic sides.

### PalWorld
PalWorld is an announced game that can be described with the following question: "What if we could arm pokemons with guns and hunt other giant pokemons, like in the Monster Hunter franchise?". This game is obviously a satire of Pokemon, pushing all its problematic aspects to an extreme.

In PalWorld, you can enslave cute pokemons to craft weapons for you. Source.

However, the game is presented with cute and kid-friendly graphics that are strikingly similar to Pokémon and the developers don't seem to make an effort to nuance their statement. Of course, this analysis is based purely on their marketing content since the game is not out yet. But in the released trailers so far, the player fantasy seems to be catching, exploiting and killing cute critters for fun. The problem with satire in that context is that colonialism values are ingrained in western societies, so it's possible that few players understand or care about the fact that this game is a satire and will fully enjoy its system of values.

### Cassette Beast
Cassette Beast is an independent game that tried to make a very similar game to Pokemon, but by turning all the problematic and exploitive themes around. In Cassette Beast, the player uses recordings of the beasts they encounter to transform themselves into them and fight other beasts. Source.

In this game, the main character washes out in this weird land that seems to be out of time. That place is populated by incredible beasts that block your way in your quest to return home. However, in order to fight them, you can record their essence on cassettes and then turn yourself into these beasts with these recordings and inherit their abilities.

Cassette Beast changes the exploitive aspects of Pokémon in significant ways:
● Your goal is not to collect all beasts and become the best by dominating others, it's simply to survive and return home.
● You don't capture the beasts and make them fight, you record them and then transform into them.

There are no zero-sum situations in that game because there is no one that has a net benefit or a net loss based on the game's player fantasy. Beasts attack you because it's in their nature, and you defend yourself with abilities that you virtually collected on them. Defeated beasts flee, while defeated "rangers" (equivalent of Pokémon's other trainers), transform back to their human form.

While also being a parody on Pokémon, Cassette Beasts make some comments on capitalism and colonialistic values using a mature and thoughtful narrative and relationship you develop with your new neighbors that are as trapped as you are in this weird world.

**Pokémon Snap**
In Pokémon Snap, the player is a wild-life photographer that strives to take the best photos of pokémons in their natural habitat.

In Pokemon Snap, you gain points when you succeed at taking good shots of Pokemon in special poses.
Source.

As a safari visitor, you are not catching or disturbing pokemons in their everyday life, but rather patiently trying to photo shoot them in their best pose and light. Even more than in Cassette Beasts, Pokémon Snap is a non-zero sum game as no combat is part of the gameplay. You have limited control on the pokémons, except for some treats you can throw at them to get better pictures. It even teaches good environmental preservation values to the player, which are at the opposite of exploitation.

**Invitation / Conclusion**
Colonization is a complex topic that is easy to latch onto thematically and mechanically. It is the game equivalent of the press' worst predilection "If it bleeds, it leads." Afterall, humans have been expanding, exploiting and exterminating one another since the dawn of time. Pick any spot populated by humans and you'll see that its culture is built on layers of bones, blood and borrowed beauty.

At the same time, we believe that humans are more than our worst instincts. Games need not be limited to the glorification of past horrors. We can move beyond fellating imperialism as the central focus of our joyfully broad and vibrant artform.

**What if games enriched our modern culture?**
In part we were motivated to write this paper because we want to see fresh, new game designs that help society to move forward in a positive way.
● **Identify values of culture you want to propagate**: We believe there are positive values worth preserving. We should be conscious of the value expressed by our games.
● **Be open to mixing, blending and reinvention**. For culture to truly live, it must be enacted by people in ways that are relevant to their current lives. How can we adapt old values to the modern world and needs of a modern audience?

**Invitation**
What if you made a game that doesn't involve moving into someone else's space and killing everyone who lives there and then taking their stuff? It is certainly possible. We just need to understand the failings of the past, see the opportunity for promoting positive values. We can choose to devote our limited and precious lives towards creating a better world.

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# Black "Quare" Game Studies:

## A New Approach to Gaming Education

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the transformative potential of integrating Critical Race Theory (CRT) with Quare theory into gaming education to address the persistent divide between theory and practice in game design and development. Drawing parallels with movements in film education, such as the LA Rebellion, it proposes a pedagogical framework that prioritizes lived experiences, identity, and community needs over purely technical skill development. By emphasizing "theory in the flesh," this approach bridges the gap between academic theory and creative practice, fostering diverse, self-expressive, and socially impactful game design.

## 1    INTRODUCTION: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

A Critical Race theory (CRT) intervention via Quare theory in gaming education can revolutionize how we teach and create video games by theorizing the lived experience in the creative learning process. This better emphasizes the philosophical and social impact of gaming as an art form and bridges the gap between theory and practice even more. Since the inception of gaming studies, there has always been a sharp distinction between its practice and theory. The collections The Video Game Theory Reader and The Video Game Theory Reader 2, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, are significant and historical attempts to address these gap [1]. Theory by Design, Abstraction in the Video Game, Gaming Literacy: Game Design as a Model for Literacy in the Twenty-First Century, and Philosophical Game Design all attempted to marry critical thought and practical design when it comes to creating interactive digital experiences. Lindsay Grace's Black Game Studies also highlighted this divide but intervenes by emphasizing the importance of racial studies and the impact they have had on both the study and production of games [2]. From the An Introduction to Black Games, Blackness in Games, and Otherness and survey of all Black-identifying gaming makers known at the time to the importance of Black Radical Aesthetics in the Black Analog Game Designers, the gap between theory and practice began to shrink with a focus on race and how it informed these practices. However, a pedagogical divide between the theory and practice of video games persists. Evidence of this divide can be seen in the current state

of the industry, which arguably sits in its worst position since its inception in the 1970s [3]. This divide has facilitated a lack of diversity both in front of and behind the controller in terms of development. It has prioritized capital gain over meaningful experiences, leading to the largest layoffs in 2024 [4]. Furthermore, it emphasizes high graphical fidelity over core game loop refinement and the creation of an overall enjoyable experience [5]. However, this divide is not unique to video games and can also be found in other mediums, particularly film, which I will often use as a parallel in this paper. The divide between theory and practice persists in the film industry; however, the indie space and its integration within the industry as a whole distinguish it from the gaming medium. In film, there is room for these productions to thrive in both practice and theory while also being economically viable. For example, within the EU and on various state levels, tax breaks incentivize the creation of productions for the sake of producing films rather than financial return–art for art's sake, if you will [6]. Countries like France, Spain, and Germany heavily subsidize the creation of films that often occupy the indie space. The ability to produce art without profits overshadowing the creator's process leaves room for experimentation and self-expression. Although well-established as both an art form and a source of capital generation, gaming as an industry is often only supported by the state and private sector as a technical skill, and its education is treated the same. This calls for a Quare intervention.

CRT, at its inception via Derrick Bell and legal studies, was a post-structuralist intervention into both the education and practice of law in the United States [7]. This had tremendous ripple effects not only in the conception of new legal frameworks but also in how society viewed, practiced, and taught these technical skills–despite modern-day pushback. Returning to film as a parallel to the video game industry, moments like the LA Rebellion were made possible through Elyseo J. Taylor's work and the CRT, decolonial, and Afrocentric lens he offered to young filmmakers. He was the only Black instructor at the UCLA Film School in the early 1970s and was an influential figure in the program. [8]. Teshome Gabriel, a film scholar and historian, began teaching at UCLA in 1974 and became both a colleague and mentor to many filmmakers associated with the movement. [9] This CRT intervention into film pedagogy in the 1970s at one of the most prominent institutions for film education aided in fostering a marriage between theory, practice, and Blackness. It resulted in films like Several Friends (1969), Daughters of the Dust (1991), and Sankofa (1993), to name just a few. Experimental films of the time sought to merge theory, practice, and identity to address both the philosophical and social nature of the art form. This did not cure the theory and practice divide or degenerative capitalistic nature that both industries still suffer

from today, but it did legitimize lived experiences through authorship and create an alternative space and outcome for film studies and practitioners to come after.

But how can this be replicated in gaming? And why is it even needed? Does gaming need an LA Rebellion movement? If so, what would it look like, given that film and gaming are two different experiences of self-expression?

In this paper, I argue that in order to achieve artistic movements like the LA Rebellion–which are both happening and needed within the video game industry to bypass its current state of capitalism and production–CRT, particularly the notion of Quareness and its idea of theory in the flesh within educational institutions, can help foster and facilitate this progression. At the core of these ideas is an acknowledgment of marginalized folks' lived experiences and their use as tools to create theory that then informs practices–practices that materialize as games, acting as living theory and critical discourse. To begin, I will first properly define Quare and Theory in the Flesh as concepts, then discuss how these concepts push gaming education beyond the idea of it being purely a technical skill. I will explore how this approach transcends pre-established gaming education frameworks and helps bypass reliance on corporations by emphasizing labor ownership. Finally, I will conclude with a case study on the Black Quare Gaming Studies Course (2022–2025) and the Black Quare Video Game Museum as an ongoing example.

To properly trace the logic of this intervention into Game studies and education, the tool that is made to intervene must be briefly explained–Quare and the idea of theory in the flesh.

## 2 DEFINING QUARENESS AND THEORY IN THE FLESH AND THEORIZING ONE'S LIVED EXPERIENCE

Quareness, which is outlined in "'Quare' studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother" by E. Patrick Johnson in the seminal Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology has been important in building the idea of pedagogical intervention in gaming education that theorizes one's lived experience in the game studies pedagogy. [10] Johnson definition is important to start with at this moment:

> "Quare (Kwâr), n. 1. meaning queer; also, opp. of straight; odd or slightly off kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer; sometimes homophobic in usage, but always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of being; curiously equivalent to the Anglo-Irish (and sometimes "Black" Irish) variant of queer, as in Brendan Behans famous play The Quare Fellow.

*–adj. 2. a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who loves other men or women, sexually and/or nonsexually, and appreciates black culture and community.*

*–n. 3. one who thinks and feels and acts (and, sometimes, "acts up"); committed to struggle against all forms of oppression–racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc.*

*–n.*

*4.      one for whom sexual and gender identities always already intersect with racial subjectivity.*

*5.      quare is to queer as" reading " is to 'throwing shade.'" [10]*

Outside of the obvious fact that it is both a modification and empirical intervention into the use of Queer and Queer Studies, which seeks to account for more than just gender and sexual identity by bringing in race, class, religion, etc., its usage in the adjective form is what's pulling most of the weight here for this paper–particularly the "Black culture and community" clause. Community and work that go beyond the academy–Theory in the flesh, which theorizes one's lived experience–is at the center of Quare.

The theory that I advance is a "theory in the flesh." Theories in the flesh emphasize the diversity within and among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color while simultaneously accounting for how racism and classism affect how we experience and theorize the world. Theories in the flesh also conjoin theory and practice through an embodied politic of resistance. This politics of resistance is manifest in vernacular traditions such as performance, folklore, literature, and verbal art.

What's important about the aforementioned section is understanding that theory and practice are bridged through the quotidian and, therefore, one's lived experience. Rather than adhering to rigid theoretical frameworks and academic practices that often disenfranchise those who cannot assimilate or perform to the liking of the intellectual in-crowd, one's life, words, experiences, and reality act as the theoretical framework through which to think and create. Case in point: Johnsons Grandmother's colloquial use of the word "Queer" in the Quare form was the guiding light for the theorizing of its use. Her denotation of the strangeness of something and its inherited difference from the world around it. [10] Beyond Johnson, one can look to the work of the late bell hooks and how her personal experiences informed the way she theorized the world, rather than theorization or the establishment of the ivory tower. In Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom hooks brings in the idea of wholeness, which is one's lived experience, and how empowering this is to those that teach and are from the

margins of our society: "Those of us in the academy from working-class backgrounds are empowered when we recognize our own agency, our capacity to be active participants in the pedagogical process. This process is not simple or easy: it takes courage to embrace a vision of wholeness of being that does not reinforce the capitalist version that suggests that one must always give something up to gain another." [11] Quare as a framework allows one to bring the wholeness of themselves to a project without sacrifice; a lived experience is just as important as the technical knowledge.

But how would Quare work in the realm of video game education and practice? For this paper, a Quare approach can be defined as a critical study of video games and their creation that accounts for demographic factors such as race, class, gender, and one's lived experiences and community needs.

In this Quare approach to both the study and creation of video games, the first point I would like to highlight is the notion of going beyond the technical when it comes to teaching the trade.

## 3 TEACHING BEYOND THE TECHNICAL

A Quare approach allows gaming to go beyond teaching it as a technical and capital skill set by emphasizing its creative, self-expressive, and philosophical qualities. This idea of going beyond the material or technical nature of gaming in an educational setting is similar to another well-established game studies notion, which is going "beyond play." Play can be understood in three tiers: It is separable, safe, and pleasurable. [12] These factors of play have been used historically as a "roadblock to understanding what is powerful about [gaming]." [12] But in this "beyond play" scenario, the outcomes usually land in the realm of gaming being used as a tool to foster technical skills or the transfer of information about tangible ideas–serious games. However, to Quare, the study and education of gaming is to take it one step further–not just go beyond play for games that are already made, but to go beyond the technical before the skill is even acquired to make the game. To teach gaming beyond a technical skill is to redefine what is possible within the craft of game making. For example, one way this beyond-technical teaching approach can manifest is by thinking of game crafting as a form of activism, similar to the mediums of film and music. [13] Games like Hair Nah by Momo Pixel showcase this beyond- technical outcome: an experience where players take the role of a Black woman swatting away hands that will touch her hair. Momo Pixel's official website reads, "Hair Nah is a response to the perverse action of touching a Black woman's hair without permission. The micro-aggression of assumed authority and ownership of Black bodies." This is not only the outcome of teaching beyond the technical but also theory in the flesh: a

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melding of theory and practices that serve the community from which they come. To offer another manifestation of going beyond the technical in gaming, the Black Trans Archive offers this too. Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's official website reads in full uppercase, "THIS INTERACTIVE ARCHIVE WAS MADE TO STORE AND CENTRE BLACK TRANS PEOPLE TO PRESERVE OUR EXPERIENCES, OUR THOUGHTS, OUR FEELINGS, OUR LIVES, TO REMEMBER US EVEN WHEN WE ARE AT RISK OF BEING ERASED." In the experience, one gets to transcend the material to speak to those of the trans past, and, one might interpret, find meaning for not only trans presence but a future that lives in a state of constant erasure due to both immediate and historical violence. This melding of theory and practice to create an experience that reflects the needs and desires of a community is, once more–like Hair Nah–theory in the flesh. This act of a pedagogical shift from the technical to the social-philosophical realm will ensure that gaming, as an acquired skill set, goes beyond not only play but beyond the purpose of the craft and the experience one can make. This then leads us to the next point: how this Quare approach and theory in the flesh can help us rethink established game study frameworks, particularly how we can bypass the binaries of teaching what makes a good game or a bad one.


## 4 GOING BEYOND GOOD AND BAD

CRT and Quare–just as it has in other fields of study–brings forth new questions and knowledge around existing frameworks that allow us to bypass the binary of good and bad game making and focus more on the purpose of creating a digital experience. Let's consider the framework of what makes a good game in general. In terms of game reception or the idea of a "good" or "bad" game, these Quare perspectives can bypass this binary of judgment by focusing more on what purpose does this experience serve. Take, for example, Forspoken, which was dubbed a studio killer. Luminous Productions, which was also behind Final Fantasy XV and the Luminous Engine that powered both open-world titles, shut its doors on May 1, 2023, shortly after the game's release on January 24, 2023. There was a lot of pushback about the game, but the main complaints focused on the story, particularly the dialogue [14]. The idea that the game "does not know what it wants to be" dives deeper into the pushback against the script. More so, from the initial trailers, the game is sold to some as a lighthearted fantasy adventure that a younger audience may gravitate toward, but the protagonist, Alfre "Frey" Holland's foul language and disdain toward everyone and everything around her, both in New York City and in the fantasy realm of Athia, showcase the opposite. The gameplay itself is considered somewhat standard, with its highlight being the traversal and combat system [15]. To provide an overview, the story is bad but the

gameplay is standard. Therefore at time of writing this in the eyes of metacritic it sits at 64 which is "mixed or average". But to return to the central point with a Quare intervention: what purpose does this experience serve? To be critical about it, there are a couple of purposes. For one, its reception acts as the standard by which games with Black protagonists are measured. On Metacritic, other games that sit in the same bracket of 64 to 65 help showcase this. They include Cel Damage, Mister Mosquito, Star Wars: Bounty Hunter, Kane & Lynch: Dead Men, Stranded Deep, Fallout: New Vegas - Honest Hearts, Saints Row: Gat Out of Hell, Atlas Fallen, White Knight Chronicles International Edition, Fallout 4: Nuka-World, The Simpsons: Road Rage, Dead by Daylight, Dragon Age II: Legacy, Batman: The Telltale Series, Armored Core: For Answer, Warframe, Killer Is Dead, and Darksiders III. Plenty of the co-op titles demonstrate a priority of gameplay over story by the nature of the genre–Cel Damage, Dead by Daylight, and Warframe, for example.

But the general reception of these games is polar opposite, favorable, or passable when you account for both HD reboots and continuous player counts–particularly Dead by Daylight, with a current player count of 32,762 at the time of writing this. But to avoid an "Apples to Oranges" comparison by pitting co-op multiplayer experiences vs. a single-player, narrative-driven one, let's focus on other single-player, story-driven experiences in the same tier. Fallout: New Vegas - Honest Hearts, Dragon Age II: Legacy, Batman: The Telltale Series, and Fallout 4: Nuka-World all focus on single-player, character-driven experiences. However, the customization of said character in these experiences allows the player to not only make their avatar into their own image but also bypass traits that they deem unfavorable, such as race, gender, and other demographics. And for the one title in the batch that does not–Batman: The Telltale Series–the IP of Batman is well- known and established, which means that customization of said character would most likely never be a feature or would be unwelcome by its fanbase. Forspoken's purpose as an experience was to put players into a fantasy realm in the shoes of Frey, a Black female protagonist. This act, in itself–whether it be deemed authentic or not–was a major factor in its downfall as the online campaign used to deem the game overall "bad." Even its association with the gaming narrative consultancy company SweetBaby added digital fuel to the woke fire, as they have been labeled victims of the second gaming gate online hate campaign [16]. To take a Quare approach to the inclusion of this title in an educational setting is to present a game whose purpose acted as the antithesis to the gaming community of both critics and players, where they are forced to experience a world through the eyes of a protagonist that they deemed "inauthentic," which sits in the same tier as live-service model games like Dead by Daylight. Even in the controversial "Official Woke Game Ranking

List" that has circulated the internet and was created by Woke Content Detector (WCDetector). Forspoken is listed as "Woke," and under its description, it states, "Contains overtly pro-DEI messaging. Almost all prominent characters interacted with in NYC are POC. The same diversity seen in NYC is also seen in Athia." As invalid as this source may be, it speaks to the larger real-life anti-woke smear campaign that the game suffered. A Quare approach to this bypasses this simple binary of good or bad because what determines a good or bad game is not simply based on merit; it is a politically loaded system of gaming journal outlets and gaming online social media influencers. Taking this Quare approach not only to Forspoken but to any critical analysis of games reveals the deeper political and social implications of said games' creation. This bridges theory and practice even more because it requires aspiring game creators to look beyond simply making a "good game" and focus more on "creating an experience" that can have revolutionary outcomes. But this is not the only method that a Quare approach to teaching gaming can offer; it also opens gaming and its creations to other marginalized identities in the workforce and promotes ideas around understanding the value of labor and owning it in a harsh industry.

## 5 GOING BEYOND LOOKING FOR A JOB

CRT and a Quare approach allow other marginalized identities to be brought into the fold of gaming via education as an outlet for self-expression and community building, rather than relying on corporate industrial organizations. The IGDA publishes reports on the gender and racial makeup of game developers in the industry and they tend to reveal the low numbers for both demographics overall [17]. This is not new nor secretive as even deeper work has been done to explore why this racial gap even exist in the past:

In report from some Black game makers interviewed for this project, the resounding theme was that such designers and developers simply didn't feel there was a space for them. For some they arrived with the skills, with the creativity or software skills, but could not fully enter the community of game makers. This is of course a challenge that many new to the industry may feel, as there are often more people looking to enter the industry than opportunities [2].

This lack of space facilitation for racial minorities and a desire to integrate also exist in a gendered aspect. In the Everyone Can make Games Movement (ECMGM) notion that was coined by Alison Harvey & Stephanie Fisher the idea of community facilitation from the industry is also called for.

ECMGM is a rallying cry for those who feel unspoken for in games to have a voice themselves. However, if the industry refuses to hear those voices, how much change can we truly expect? Everyone may be able to make games; yet can we say that everyone has the same opportunity to make a career in games? This is a fundamental reality that ECMGM must come to terms with in order to devise strategies that will set developers up for success. The late game development legend Satoru Iwata is often quoted as saying, "Above all, video games are meant to just be one thing: Fun for everyone." It will take a great deal of reform from within the industry itself, and pressure for the industry to make radical change. Toward this end, it is my 17 sincerest hope that someday the idea that "everyone can make games" is not merely a truism but is true for the gaming industry as a system [19].

In this ECMG idea, which focuses on gender disparities–another part of the problem–the end goal, as mentioned in Grace's words before, is to find a harmonious and sustainable way to not only get other minorities into industry positions but also to ensure they stay. The industry must help facilitate this through things like pipelining, mentoring, and networking. However, when taking a Quare approach, community and self-expression are at the heart, and a deeper understanding of capitalism and labor exploitation can lead to a different endpoint. The ongoing effort to sell one's labor to industries that have proven to not only take advantage of but also disadvantage laborers in the end is futile. In this Quare intervention, creators turn to their own community to facilitate, organize, control, and capitalize on their own labor and ownership–a cooperative model. A cooperative model of game creation means joint ownership and a democratic approach to creation in a group setting. In its most optimal form, labor exchange is both valued through input and protected from overarching structures that seek only to maximize profits, even at the cost of creative vision. This may seem far-fetched for gaming, but this model already exists with organizations like the Berlin Game Worker Cooperatives or The Glory Society. In an educational setting, a Quare approach prioritizes young game makers not to rely on these larger exploitative organizations to make a living, but rather to understand their trade and how they can use it to create experiences that are both expressive and profitable. A gaming pedagogy that focuses on self-expression and labor autonomy versus trade knowledge transfer and industry acceptance lets younger aspiring artists and creators know that gaming is not only a viable career path but also a creative outlet for one's own self-expression–similar to film, music, or other forms of traditional art.

# 6 CONCLUSION: A CASE STUDY: THE BLACK QUARE GAMING STUDIES COURSE AND THE BLACK QUARE VIDEO GAME MUSEUM

At this point, and as I conclude, I wish to shift from the academic tone to present the lived experiences that Quareness, as a theoretical framework, embraces through the ongoing case study of the Black Quare Video Game Theory course, which has run from 2022 to the present.

When conceiving and delivering the first Black Quare Gaming Studies courses from 2022 to 2025, there was no expectation for the reactions that followed from both students and faculty of both institutions. Given that both programs were extremely technical by nature, the theoretical portions of them were and still are restricted to course requirements.

Many students expressed that they 1) knew of no game that was either Black or Queer, and 2) believed that there was a typo in the program being that "Queer" was spelled "Quare." Beyond these initial reactions, they were even met with harsher abrasions when the first reading assigned was that of E. Patrick Johnson's Quare Studies which had nothing to do with the subject of video games. As Johnson stated in his own work, "What could this Southern Black woman teach me about Queerness?"; this statement manifested into "What could learning about Black people teach me about gaming?" one of the students protested. The answer provided was as followed:

"Everything."

To take gaming away from the clutches of capitalistic reproduction and labor, and to place it in a space where it allows not only the creator's lived experience to be valid, but also to become a framework for creation, is what it teaches. Lessons about Blackness, Quareness, labor rights, accessibility, intersectional thinking, activism, and online space building showcased a few outcomes of what gaming could be beyond both a career and a way to make a living in these dark times for the industry. Some students were not only reluctant but entirely opposed to the trajectory and made claims to the administration that it was an attempt to "Wokeify" them, even to the point of asking for the instructor's termination from the university. While others were supportive of the endeavor and even brought their own lived experiences as players and game makers of the next generation. So what did the latter look like?

In one course, a manifestation of Quareing the study of video games came in the creation of an online Black Quare Studies museum to showcase the students' work as a way to capture what they learned in their experiences. Some students made games, and others made visual presentations. One game

entitled Closeted remixed and Quared the traditional Donkey Kong. In place of the Italian plumber was a femme Black Queen in knee-high platforms and an Afro. In place of the iconic Kong was a rumbling closet that threw not barrels, but hangers at the player. Rowdy rainbows offered power-ups to beat your way through and eventually out of the closet. And for the background music, in the space of silence, was the vogue tune that took over the internet from Kevin Jz Prodigy: HERE COMES THE HURRICANE LEGENDARY KATRINA. Given that the museum is no longer live as of this writing due to it being hosted on the now-closed Mozilla Hubs, these experiences have been archived and capture a moment of game crafting and philosophy that seeks to live beyond the closure of practicality and move into a setting that centers one's reality both in front of and behind the screen.

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# Reclaiming My Controller

## Gaming as Site of Black Feminist Intervention

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**ABSTRACT**
This paper examines the potential of video games as a medium for Black feminist intervention, focusing on Slime Rancher as a case study. Through the lens of Black feminist thought and cyberfeminism, I explore how games that prioritize care, softness, and autonomy serve as tools for self-care and radical soft resistance for Black women. Analyzing the protagonist Beatrix LeBeau as a representation of Black womanhood, this study challenges traditional narratives that often portray Black women through stereotypes of hyper-resilience or trauma. Instead, Slime Rancher presents an alternative future where Black women exist in nurturing and joyful environments. By framing gaming as a form of soft activism, this paper highlights the broader implications of inclusive representation and the growing trend of cozy games. It advocates for creating digital spaces that reflect diverse identities and experiences, enabling marginalized communities to redefine their narratives and reclaim joy in virtual worlds.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

What might it mean to center Black women in a digital world, not as participants in a dystopian future or victims of
an imperial past, but as nurturers of a world where self-preservation and autonomy take precedence? This paper engages with Slime Rancher, a game that seemingly departs from the usual tropes associated with Black female characters in gaming, to examine the impact of placing Black women at the center of progressive speculative fictions and the use of gaming as soft activism. In their article "Replaying Video Game History as a Mixtape of Black Feminist Thought," TreaAndrea M. Russworm and Samantha Blackmon use the term Black feminist play to describe the ignored play practices of Black women.1 I build on their work to argue that Black women's engagement in games that emphasize care and softness constitutes a specific form of resistance, a radical reimagining of Black womanhood through "soft resistance." In this context, 'soft' not only refers to the aesthetic imagery of the gameplay but also to the nature of the resistance itself. The game's protagonist, Beatrix LeBeau, is a dark-skinned woman who could represent many different ethnicities, but I interpret her here as a Black woman. More

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specifically, when I first discovered the game in 2018, I saw her as a representation of myself. Now, with Slime Rancher 2 recently released on the PlayStation 5 and a feature film adaptation in the works, I want to reflect on why this game felt revolutionary to me and to others.

Building on traditional Black feminist thought, I identify common stereotypes of Black women in digital worlds and explore how Beatrix's unique portrayal contrasts with broader societal representations of Black women. Slime Rancher is an action-adventure game set in a future where Beatrix leaves Earth and travels light years away to the Far, Far Range, where she makes a living wrangling slimes (colorful living blobs) and restoring the land. Beatrix lives in a world fueled by care and joy, not survival or trauma. In this context, Slime Rancher becomes more than a game. It offers a vision of an alternate future where Black women can exist beyond, not despite, the trauma and violence that have often defined their representations in digital media. When playing, I naturally adopt a Black feminist lens because the game offers a space free from the constraints of racial trauma and historical oppression. I bring that same lens here and intersect it with Afrofuturistic concepts. This game exemplifies how virtual worlds heal and help players reframe their self-perception. Black female characters are often relegated to roles that reinforce harmful stereotypes: they are frequently portrayed as victims of violence, hypersexualized figures, or "strong Black women" who must endure immense suffering to be deemed valuable.2 Instead, Slime Rancher offers a new vision of Black womanhood, where queerness is accepted, and romantic relationships (if any) are open to interpretation, freeing Black players from hegemonic norms.

Rather than focusing solely on the game's mechanics, this analysis emphasizes the concept of Black feminist play. As Aaron Trammell suggests, it's not just about decolonizing games but decolonizing play itself.3 Often, playing imperialistic games replicates exploitative labor in the real world, where the player is punished for not 'working' (playing).4 However, Russworm and Blackmon also observed that Black women enjoy task-based games as a form of self-care and intellectual challenge. Digital postcolonial worlds like Slime Rancher provide an alternative to exploitative narratives. The game presents farming and exploration mechanics that are not rooted in notions of imperialism or capitalistic exploitation. Unlike many farming-based action-adventure games that center these frameworks, Slime Rancher allows players to engage with the world through balance and care of the planet's inhabitants. This decolonial approach challenges the design frameworks that typically reinforce imperialistic and exploitative systems of power. The game shows an alternative narrative where Black women are not the subjects of labor exploitation in field labor or homemaking. The player's labor on the range can

reframe Black women's relationship with labor as a form of self-care and self-preservation rather than a forced serving of others.

Digital self-care is one of the most powerful forms of activism for Black women. Framing Slime Rancher through a Black cyberfeminist lens helps us see its potential as a tool for Black feminist play.6 Using Black cyberfeminism, we expand the possibilities for how Black women and Black queer women can be represented in digital media and, in turn, how playing representations can contribute to new ways of existing for Black women and affirmations of such. I examine the broader implications of cozy games as a genre that often prioritize calmness over competition and aggression, making them particularly appealing to Black women, who have historically carried the burden of resilience in their real lives. As I explore the characteristics of cozy games, I will demonstrate how they offer a refuge for Black women to engage in innocent and freeing gameplay that emphasizes the importance of nurturing oneself. This examination will draw connections between the gameplay mechanics in Slime Rancher and the broader trend of gaming as a form of self-care which allows Black women to redefine what it means to exist in gaming spaces where they are often marginalized.

Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the implications of these representations for the broader gaming culture. I aim to further demonstrate, as other scholars have, the potential of video games as a medium for healing and empowerment by representing the unique experiences of Black women within this digital space. This analysis seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation about representation, identity, and the power of gaming culture and advocates for more spaces where Black women can reclaim their personal narratives and find comfort in gaming communities that often shun them. As the gaming industry continues to evolve, it is imperative that we recognize the contributions of BIPOC players in shaping these narratives and push for greater inclusivity because their voices and practices could challenge domination cultural norms of gaming spaces.

## 3 NO VIOLENCE AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY… NO ZOMBIES!

The representation of Black women in video games often reflects broader societal narratives that reinforce stereotypes and limit identity. The first time I encountered Beatrix, the protagonist of Slime Rancher, was a moment of unexpected joy. My sorority sister introduced me to the game, and upon launching it, I saw no cover art or character design initially. The game opens in first-person mode, prompting the player to go through a tutorial. When the player enters the house to learn how to read "Starmail," they finally come

face-to-face with their character: dark-skinned, teal-haired, and smiling. Admittedly, this came as a surprise, and I screamed, "Oh my god! She's Black!?" to which my Soror replied, "Yes!" as if she'd been waiting for me to notice. She later told me that Beatrix's appearance was a pleasant surprise to her as well.

Reflecting on this moment, I recognize the layers of my own internalized expectations. The game's color palette, narrative, and overall genre led me to assume that Beatrix would be white or at the very least non-Black. I had unknowingly accepted a norm that assumes certain genres and roles are for certain people, so I subconsciously prepared myself for a white protagonist. This immediate reaction proves how the "unequal power relations operating within the gaming community influence not only what gamers consume but also what they learn about themselves and others."[7] While this paper is not solely about Slime Rancher, it uses a key moment from the game as a starting point to explore the broader importance of reimagining Black women's representation in games.

Examining the demographics of video game players reveals a significant representation gap and highlights the need for diverse narratives. White adults constitute the majority of video game players in the U.S., making up around 75% of the gaming demographic, followed by Hispanic individuals at 19%, Black people at 12%, Asian people at 4%, and Indigenous individuals at 3%. [8] These figures mirror the broader U.S. population, confirming that the gaming community is just as diverse as the society it entertains. Yet, like many other media forms, video games often fall into patterns of white heteronormativity, BIPOC erasure, or stereotyping since white players make up the majority. Black women occupy a marginal yet distinct space within video games. While we are occasionally present, the roles we're given are highly limited and pigeonholed, reflecting larger societal narratives. Examining the repeated patterns of Black women's representations reveals how these images not only impact Black players but influence broader perceptions and internalized identities.

Through critical analysis, we can explore the potential for more meaningful, positive representations and recognize the powerful impact of reimagined portrayals.

The portrayal of Black bodies in video games has historically reinforced harmful stereotypes. In the field of game studies, the portrayal of Black bodies has been well documented. Black men are often relegated to roles that emphasize physicality or criminality, while Black women, in contrast, tend to appear in dystopian or historical re-imaginings.[9] One popular narrative in U.S.

gaming culture is the post-apocalyptic genre, usually in the form of zombie survival or imagined historical dystopias. These scenarios lend themselves easily to Black characters, who, due to the legacy of enslavement and systemic racism, are often imagined as fighters with hardened personas molded by adversity. For Black people in post- enslavement America, life has indeed resembled a post-apocalyptic existence.10 These experiences have fostered stereotypical personality traits like toughness and endurance, which align with the worlds of dystopian video games. As a result, Black women often find themselves depicted as resilient fighters and eternal sufferers in these games. bell hooks argues that white male enslavers created a body of myths to discredit the contributions of Black females; one such myth was the notion that they were "all masculinized sub-human creatures."11 This concept echoes in many video games where Black women characters are given limited, often stereotypical traits that play into this idea of hyper-resilience. These portrayals allow us to "play ourselves," but in a narrow and incomplete way because the "self" presented is limited to a persona formed by historical trauma. This means our virtual selves are rarely allowed to experience opposite video game narratives that surround softness or joy.

In many games, Black women's femininity is framed in relation to masculinity, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting character depth. Black women's femininity in these games is defined in parallel to masculinity, not in the literal sense but through masculine codes. In order to do this, a contrast is made between the Black female character and non- Black female main character. Notable games that utilize this narrative mechanic include The Last of Us and Bioshock: Infinite, where a white woman is often used as a balance, typically regarded as more feminine. Interestingly, in The Last of Us, the main character, a white girl named Ellie, is a tomboy, but even in the end, she is still presented as helpless and frail, merely a girl when saved from Marlene.12 Slime Rancher pushed me to confront these internalized beliefs and understand how persistent stereotypes can lead us to box ourselves in before anyone else has a chance to. Patricia H. Collins discusses how repeated negative images, such as the "Jezebel" or the "Sapphire," become internalized by Black women over time.13 These archetypes of anger, aggression, and resilience are not merely media tropes but products of a society that has continuously recycled such imagery, which the video game industry further reuses. Catering to the white gamer gaze may not be deliberate but is an inevitable result of creating games without social consciousness.14 This analysis aims to showcase the impact of creating characters with intention and imagination and how this can counter the dominant gaze in video games.

# 4 I'M IN MY SOFT GAME ERA

Slime Rancher represents a significant shift in gaming by portraying Beatrix in a soft, cozy game which subverts traditional expectations of Black women. The game follows Beatrix after she makes the bold decision to purchase a ranch on a distant planet, leaving everything she knows to pursue her dream of slime ranching. The gameplay centers around gathering happy slimes of various bright colors, nurturing them, and expanding her ranch. The pace is entirely in the player's hands, and the option to turn off the game's only mild threat, the tar slimes, allows for a completely peaceful experience if one chooses. The concept of 'cozy games' is defined as "evoking 'safety, abundance, and softness,' providing a gaming experience free of high-stress or competitive elements."[15] This genre of cozy games has often been associated with a feminist aesthetic because it provides a safe and relaxing space for women, in particular, to enjoy gaming.[16]

Kishonna Gray discusses how toxic gaming communities, typically associated with 'masculine' games like war and first- person shooters, often foster sexism and racism due to their competitive nature.[17] Cozy games, on the other hand, emphasize calmness, creativity, and personal growth. While the sentiment of cozy games has been around for decades, the term did not come about until the COVID-19 pandemic popularized them as people sought out new, relaxing hobbies. In 2020, "the onset of COVID-19 coincided with the peak growth of video game usage."[18] Following the 2020 release of another installment of the well-known cozy game Animal Crossing, the Nintendo Switch sales doubled compared to the previous year.[19] In 2021, the couch-play cozy game It Takes Two even won The Game Awards' Game of the Year (GOTY) which marked a significant achievement for a genre that traditionally caters to gaming's marginalized audience.[20] It Takes Two became the first, and most likely the last, cozy game and the first indie game to win The Game Award's GOTY. This achievement speaks volumes about the impact the pandemic era had on gamers, representing a growing acceptance of "softness" in gaming spaces, aligning with social media trends around the "soft girl" aesthetic.

However, the 'soft girl' trend, which gained momentum in 2019 on TikTok, also reveals how softness is racialized, requiring Black women to both verbally and physically claim the aesthetic in order to be recognized within it.[21] The soft girl aesthetic is described as being "deliberately feminine, almost overly so, with lots of pinks, pastel shades, and glitter," but it "isn't just about looks. It's also about expressing emotions, being sentimental or romantic, and embracing one's tender, more gentle side."[22] It is important to note that since 2020, the definition of cozy games has expanded beyond being inherently

"soft." Now, any game that is slow-paced or relaxing can be considered cozy, while "soft" games often share aesthetics reminiscent of the soft girl aesthetic. Many Black women pointed out how, through imagery and racially coded words, "softness" was portrayed as synonymous with whiteness, while "hard" and "masculine" were often silent descriptors of Black women's mannerisms.23 This stereotype, rooted in oppressive imagery detailed earlier, suggests that Black women must make radical efforts to "soften" themselves to fit into this mold. Understanding the trend as micro aggressive, many Black women adopted the trend over time as a form of resistance not only to the trend itself but also to historical oppression.24 Being promoted through the same social media platform, women were encouraged to play cozy games by other women, and it quickly became a sub-category of the soft-girl trend.25 Given that gaming is often not understood as a space for Black women, it was only natural that soft game aesthetics would seem to cater more to the dominant culture.

While cozy games are often viewed as inclusive, there is a need to expand this perspective to include intersectionality and racial representation. Agata Waszkiewicz argues that cozy games provide a safe and inclusive space particularly for women and queer players."26 In games like Stardew Valley and The Sims, players can form relationships and build communities in inclusive, open-ended ways. Characters in Stardew Valley can be "player sexual," meaning they are romantically available to players regardless of gender, a mechanic that resonates with LGBTQ+ gamers. However, even within this inclusive genre, issues of racial representation persist. Aimee Hart, writing for Gayming Magazine, highlights how Stardew Valley, despite its popularity among queer players, fails to represent a "queer utopia" because it does not reflect the diversity of ethnicities within the LGBTQ+ community.27 In contrast, Slime Rancher centers a potentially queer Black woman as the protagonist and includes racially diverse NPCs, creating a space where Black women and other marginalized identities can see themselves reflected in the world of cozy games. The game's NPCs reflect a variety of ethnic backgrounds: Afro, Indigenous, Spanish, and Japanese, and the inclusion of queer identities through the ambiguous relationship between Beatrix and Casey adds a layer of intersectionality.28 The developers stated that Casey was canonically gender-neutral, inviting queer players to project their experiences onto the character.29 This suggests that cozy games can be inclusive of both race and sexual orientation without centering whiteness or heteronormativity. Thus, Slime Rancher not only disrupts traditional expectations of cozy games but also expands the possibilities of intersectional representation in gaming which indicates that cozy games do not have to be colorblind to be peaceful. Instead, they can actively include marginalized identities without compromising the softness of the game.

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For Black women, this cozy game trend intersects with the need for spaces that allow them to be soft and experience innocence. This game allows Black women to redefine what softness and relaxation mean on their own terms, allowing them to exist in a world that isn't structured around working and endurance. Beatrix's femineity is not presented in contrast to masculinity, and she is not the "strong Black woman" stereotype with an unbreakable will to survive. Instead, she is soft, joyful (as she never stops smiling), and fully focused on exploring the land she bought. Her femininity and softness are enhanced through the game's aesthetics rather than muted or hardened. In a broader sense, Slime Rancher reimagines what representation in video games can accomplish, particularly for Black women who are often portrayed as either overly sexualized or asexualized, leaving little room for depth or nuance.30 While Beatrix's subtle relationship with Casey implies a romantic connection, this connection does not define her narrative or her worth. Instead, it serves as a background detail that emphasizes Beatrix's humanity through her choice. In this portrayal, Beatrix's narrative becomes a quiet (soft if you will) celebration of agency and choice, and this narrative offers a glimpse of what it might look like for Black women to choose spaces where peace is their primary pursuit.

## 5 THE FRUITS OF MY LABOR, I EAT

Beatrix's independence and solitude on the ranch challenge conventional expectations of how Black women use their time and labor. Her life involves no familial obligations; she is alone, and not only is that okay, but it's also freeing. Many Black women may find solace in this portrayal because it affirms their desire for independence from the societal roles that have historically demanded their labor and care for others before themselves.31 Black women in real life often carry emotional and physical labor for their families and communities and playing as a Black character who is alone and unburdened is comforting.32 By existing in a low-stress environment, Beatrix embodies a radical idea: that Black women can exist in peaceful spaces without the need to be tough or constantly "on guard."

The gameplay mechanics in Slime Rancher further enhance this representation, highlighting the appeal of task- based games for Black women. Russworm and Blackmon interviewed three older Black women about their gaming practices, revealing that they found interest in "task-based games that allow them to compete and succeed in more traditionally domestic tasks such as farming, organizing, and financial management."33 These types of games enable players to engage with domesticity in a way that feels empowering rather than limiting. While many scholars critique the capitalist aspect of farming games, which cozy games usually fall under, Slime Rancher offers a

different perspective, suggesting that these games are emotionally beneficial.34

While farming and exploration-based games can be viewed as imperialistic through one lens, it is crucial to recognize how these mechanics can also represent simple acts of living and self-care through another, especially in games like Slime Rancher. Jayanth argues that farming games operate within bell hooks' framework of dominator culture, stating, "We design games in the afterlife of empire, with tools that have been used to subjugate and annihilate. The pleasures of naming, categorization, and collecting are deeply embedded into the normative design frameworks of the video game."35 While I agree with this claim as a general observation of longstanding game design practices, I depart from Jayanth's assertion that any game with a farming or exploration mechanic falls under "dominator culture." At its core, dominator culture is defined by hierarchies and coercion, not by the fundamental acts of cultivating land and surviving. As Collins noted, "Despite slavery's burdens, African Americans did not perceive work as the problem but, rather, the exploitation inherent in the work they performed."36 Many farming tasks were seen by African men as feminine, making it easier for enslaved Black women to adapt to farm labor in the colonies.37 In Slime Rancher, the player's labor on the ranch reframes Black women's relationship with labor as self-care and self-preservation rather than exploitation.

For many Black women, there is value in the simple, mundane tasks of working for oneself, especially after a long history of laboring in service to others. Thus, it is not surprising that cozy games, which usually include labor mechanics such as farming, foraging, fishing, are the games they gravitate toward.38 According to Waszkiewicz, "Many cozy games reject the stereotypical division of certain activities or images as gendered. By emphasizing low risk and abundance, they embrace mundane activities as universal…they reject gendered, and thus often oversexualized, character designs."39 By presenting labor without hierarchy or violence, Slime Rancher repositions work as a form of self-care for the player.

While not unique in this approach, using a Black woman as the central figure in this game sends a fresh message that sets it apart from other cozy games. Historically, Black women's labor and fertility were commodified; their bodies treated as units of capital, and their children increased their owners' property and labor force.40 Slime Rancher, however, offers an alternative vision where Black women are not subjected to the kinds of exploitation tied to field or homemaking labor. During enslavement, Black women were burdened with cooking, cleaning, and caregiving on top of farm work, as Black men regarded such tasks as "women's work."41 Here, the game suggests a life beyond the hegemonic family structure, one in which Black women can prioritize

themselves over caretaking roles. Yet in Slime Rancher, the player exists peacefully alone, with NPC interactions limited to Starmail exchanges.

## 6      RADICAL SELF-CARE AND SOFT ACTIVISM

Gaming is used as a tool for many Black women's radical practice of self-care. As Russworm and Blackmon put it, gaming becomes a means of self-care and preservation for Black women, following Lorde's belief that caring for one-self is not self- indulgence; it is self-preservation.42 Although traditional perceptions of a "gamer" often overlook Black women or casual players, they have long been integral to the gaming community. This mythology that Black women are not gamers stems from the fact that "Black women have been nearly absent in the annals of video game and digital media histories."43 In their interviews, Blackmon and Russworm reveal a compelling connection between Black women's engagement with games and concepts of leisure and self-care. These Black women, though they may not embrace the gamer label, play an essential role in gaming culture, particularly through genres that emphasize relaxation over intense skill or competition. For them, gaming provides a peaceful escape and offers a much-needed reprieve from social expectations and responsibilities.

The need for relaxation and self-care has been intensified rather than being a new concern for Black women during the isolating period of the pandemic. Psychologist Joy Harden Bradford discussed with Melissa Boone, Chief of Staff at Halo Studios, about the therapeutic potential of video games for Black women.44 Like many others who picked up gaming during this time, Bradford was "enjoying the cool breezes and relaxing scenery of my island in Animal Crossing."45 Boone, reflecting on her childhood, observed that gaming served as a relaxing escape for Black women and a space to decompress from life's pressures. However, this space had to be created and sought after because it is a prevalent understanding in the gaming community that players must have a "thick skin" to play.46 This stems from game spaces being known as safe havens for discrimination and even bigotry, which is often explained away as "trolling." Boone's work at Microsoft included making it easier for players to report discriminatory rhetoric in an effort to shift the blame onto those making harmful comments rather than on players for being "too sensitive."47 As stated earlier, these game spaces are usually white male dominated. Because cozy games are feminist-coded and less likely to include online play, they provide a space for unconventional gamers to play without question. In a society that often demands resilience and fortitude from Black women, cozy games gently remind them of their right to rest.

This form of escapism is not about avoiding reality but about finding a quiet place for healing and self- affirmation. My 51-year-old mother seems to be enjoying this stage of her life where she now lives alone, and gaming has become a peaceful ritual for her that reminds her of the importance of solitude after almost three decades of motherhood and wifehood. Reflecting on our relationship, I notice that I always make sure my mother has a cozy game queued up when she finishes one because I recognize how vital gaming is to her self-care. She says Slime Rancher reminded her of Kirby (a pink blob character from Nintendo); she is into innocent, cute, and soft cozy games, and it is nice to see her able to enjoy them at a stage in her life where she is more focused on herself. I was initially worried about whether she would find Slime Rancher challenging and be discouraged, especially with controls that require two joysticks, as that usually means she will be stuck staring at the sky (if you know, you know). My mom is more used to platformers and mobile games, but to my surprise, she enjoyed Slime Rancher and was progressing well, even if there were a few looks up to the sky. Ironically, her giggles at herself for not being able to look straight echo Kacey Bonner's description of her experience in finding joy as a Black woman: "As I pointed my face toward the sky, I sought out and found joy. And in that moment and all those that will follow, I resisted."48 Like the older Black women interviewed by Blackmon and Russworm, my mother would not describe herself as a gamer, yet she influenced my own gaming identity. Whether she knows it or not, she took games seriously as a source of family enjoyment and something worth protecting. I remember her scolding me to never lose the Tetris cartridge for our Game Boy, and years later, when I was in undergrad, I came home hoping to take our old PS3. She refused to let me take it, worried I would somehow delete Rayman, a PS1 classic no longer available on the PlayStation Store. Even down to recording cheat codes on scraps of copy paper revealed how much gaming meant to her. Though she may not consider herself a gamer, for my mother, gaming is a soft form of resistance to an overworked lifestyle both in the world and at home.

Slime Rancher demonstrates how speculative imagination can serve real lives and heal traumas we did not even know existed. Representation in gaming has a significant impact on identity and self-perception, especially for young players developing a sense of self. One Black Slime Rancher player shared on Reddit, "Beatrix being Black/dark-skinned really makes me happy as a young Black girl! … It really helps seeing people like you represented in things like that."49 Additionally, Black female Youtuber Cozy K posted a video giving a comprehensive list of cozy games centered on Black characters.50 Just like my reaction to Slime Rancher, one user commented, "I just started playing Spiritfarer and I IMMEDIATELY said, 'this girl is Black!' And I'm hyped playing it."51 These comments show how powerful it can be for marginalized

players to see themselves reflected in positive, non-stereotypical roles. One game on Cozy K's list, Dot's Home, follows a Black woman who is sent back in time to experience pivotal moments in her family's history, confronting issues of racial inequality and difficult choices. In response to this game another user commented, "While I think games with a message like Dot's Home are important, I have reached an age (55) where I am tired from 'the struggle' and like Black people in my entertainment who are just living their lives, being silly or not, having adventures or not, etc."52 This comment is an example of Black women's use of soft activism through gaming. While there is certainly room for narratives like Dot's Home and for Black women in narratives like The Last of Us, this comment reveals that some Black women, especially older ones, want carefree narratives. As Russworm and Blackmon explain, "Black women living freely and healthily with video games—living 'golden' as they approach their golden years, as Jill Scott would have it—is also activism."53 While gaming spaces are more inclusive than ever, this shift is recent, and older Black women may not have had the privilege of growing up with it. As a result, it is much more radical for them to want to be portrayed as soft and unburdened, and I hope this paper spreads awareness of this fact.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Through this paper, I invite more marginalized players and creators to claim their place in gaming spaces. Games do not always have to mirror our current reality; when they do, media representations too often become reflections of dominant culture and its ideologies. Simple reflection is not true representation, but reimagining is. Black women do not always have to play roles that cast them as deviant bodies or individuals expected to sacrifice themselves for others. The surprise I felt when I first played Slime Rancher wasn't just that a Black woman led the game, but that she did so in a genre traditionally dominated by other representations. This experience led me to rethink where I belong in gaming spaces, a shift I imagine other women may be experiencing as well. To answer my initial question, it means a lot to many of us. While visual diversity in games is essential, it is not enough to actively combat the hegemonic principles that continue to shape game narratives. A more holistic approach to diversifying games includes not only player representation but also a focus on how that representation is allowed to interact within digital worlds and the kinds of stories they are given. Soft, cozy games centering BIPOC and queer players are becoming more common, and I wanted to use this opportunity to recognize Black women's collective radical choice to prioritize their own joy and well-being.

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# Preserving Hmong Batik Through Play: Songs of the Hmong

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the potential of video games as interactive platforms for preserving and promoting intangible cultural heritage, focusing on the integration of Hmong batik art and culture. What follows is a critical consideration of Songs of the Hmong, a video game that integrates many Hmong art styles. The research examines how traditional art forms, such as Hmong batik, paper cutting, and music, can be adapted into engaging gameplay and visual storytelling. The game highlights the aesthetic and cultural richness of Hmong heritage while addressing challenges like technical limitations, gameplay simplicity, and accessibility. By analyzing the game's artistic and gameplay, this study demonstrates how video games can bridge traditional art and modern technology, offering innovative solutions for cultural preservation and education. This paper argues that an overly ambitious pursuit of immersive representation by incorporating all elements of Hmong art may ultimately prove counterproductive, preventing the project from achieving its intended impact.

## 1. Introduction

As an interactive platform, video games have evolved to encompass a wide variety of genres and artistic styles, while developers continue to explore their potential. Many excellent video games on the market successfully integrate diverse artistic styles with gameplay, storytelling, and artistic expression. Examples include the ink painting aesthetics in Okami (Clover Studio, 2006) and Inked (Somnium Games, 2018), the watercolor visuals of Gris (Nomada Studio, 2018), and the embroidery-inspired style of Scarlet Deer Inn (Attu Games, 2024). Yet, to date, very few video games have explored the artistic style of batik, particularly Hmong batik. This research analyzes a new released paper cutting and batik style video game, Songs of the Hmong, to study video game as an interactive platform can be not only an educative and preservative tool to protect intangible cultural heritage, but also a transformative medium that fosters cross-cultural dialogue, stimulates emotional engagement, and

encourages active participation in cultural practices, thereby bridging generational gaps and reimagining traditional knowledge in contemporary contexts. Songs of the Hmong is created by 3 Chinese students (Meijun Fu as director, Qiongyu Li and Chenhan Liu as music design) from Graduate School of Film and New Media, Tokyo University of the Arts. This work was part of their master degree thesis.

## 2. Background: the Art Form and Relevance to Video Games

In Guizhou, China, where I was born and raised, more than four million Miao people reside, approximately 40% of China's Miao population and about 30% of the global total, making it the most densely settled Miao region in the world [1]. In the local context, the term "Miao" conveys both "obstinacy" and "resilience," yet it unavoidably bears pejorative undertones. In fact, "Miao" is not the group's autonym; depending on dialect and locality, they identify themselves as Hmu (牡), Xong (雄), Ahmao (阿卯), or Hmong (蒙) [2]. During the national ethnic-classification campaign of the 1950s, the Chinese government subsumed these subgroups under the official category of "Miao," designating them as one of the country's fifty-six recognized ethnicities [3]. Outside China, however, members of the community commonly refer to themselves as "Hmong," rejecting the externally imposed label "Miao. [4]"

The Hmong people have preserved their culture despite the ancient loss of their written language. While missionaries introduced phonetic scripts in the 20th century, it has not been universally adopted by all the Hmong people [5]. Instead, the Hmong in the southernwest China have relied on oral traditions and batik, a wax-resist dyeing craft, as visual records of their culture. Hmong batik involves intricate designs of flora, fauna, and geometric patterns made using beeswax on fabric, dyed with natural indigo. The technique creates unique "ice patterns" from wax cracks, giving the fabric a distinctive charm. In Songs of the Hmong, narrative transitions are realized through animations rendered in the style of Hmong batik. For Miao ancestors, batik motifs functioned as a cultural chronicle: the patterns stood in place of written language, serving as symbolic codes and endowing the designs with historiographical significance [6]. Hmong batik played a role in documenting Hmong civilization, but modern pressures threaten its survival. Traditional batik craftsmanship relies primarily on familial and master-apprentice transmission, which limits its reach

and lacks systematic teaching methods and instructional materials, hindering its wider dissemination [7]. Most batik items retain conventional patterns and formats, with little innovation, rendering them less appealing to younger consumers and to international markets [8]. As lifestyles evolve, Hmong batik's survival may depend on new platforms like video games, offering innovative ways to reach a global audience while protecting its heritage. Batik patterns possess a unique aesthetic style characterized by bold geometric designs and natural elements such as fish, birds, flowers, and plants, offering a distinctive visual identity for the game. This visual uniqueness can help the game stand out in a highly homogenized market, particularly in genres that emphasize artistic expression and cultural depth [9]. Moreover, batik patterns carry rich cultural significance, with symbolic meanings embedded in the designs—such as peace, prosperity, and harmony with nature—which can serve as integral components of the game's narrative or puzzle elements.



Figure 1: ice patterns cracks on fabrics. Via Minority Garments and Decorations Museum of Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology (http://www.biftmuseum.com/technics/detail?sid=10&pid=3&page=9)

## 3.    Songs of the Hmong

## 3.1.    Overview of the Game

In the game Songs of the Hmong, the plot adapted from Miao Ancient Songs, a collective term referring to the most ceremonial ballads within the oral narrative tradition of the Hmong people. This puzzle, music, adventure game was released on November 9, 2024, on the Steam platform. It is available exclusively for PC and is suitable for players of all ages. The players assume the role of a courageous young Hmong girl named Xiao Miao. She encounters a mysterious elder, Yan Jiang who teaches her the power of singing to heal plants and warns her about an imminent crisis threatening the world's balance. To restore order, Xiao Miao embarks on a daring adventure to find the sacred tree's seed. The game features a distinctive picture-book art style, seamlessly integrated with intricate origami aesthetics, to create a fantastical yet authentic depiction of the Hmong homeland. From lush forests to majestic mountains and shimmering lakes and seas, each scene invites players to explore its vibrant beauty. Guiding Xiao Miao through these mesmerizing environments, players solve puzzles and enjoy enchanting music inspired by ancient Hmong melodies. Throughout the game, players follow clues derived from ancient melodies, delving deeper into each scene to uncover hidden fragments of information and assemble them into more complete musical scores. For instance, players might lure birds from tree branches with food to obtain useful tools or decode box puzzles using observed hints from the environment. As part of the gameplay, players will experience music adapted from traditional Hmong melodies, with each musical piece representing a puzzle clue. Additionally, players can opt to perform more complex rhythms and scores, striving for higher achievements while helping Xiao Miao uncover the means to save the world.

The following analysis will focus on the various art forms employed in the game and how they are integrated into the gameplay                                        experience.

Figure 2: Screenshot from Songs of the Hmong showing the main interface using a cutting paper style.

## 3.2. Art Forms in the Game

Although this game incorporates numerous Hmong cultural elements, its primary visual style is based on paper cutting. As the main narrative medium, paper cutting is extensively applied to the background layers as well as the design of both primary and secondary characters. The game consists of two main parts: the first involves searching for musical scores, which includes interactions with the game environment and puzzle-solving elements; the second involves playing the musical scores. The story progresses by evoking Yan Jiang's memories through the performance of the scores. In essence, the game integrates at least three art forms from Hmong culture: Hmong songs, Hmong paper cutting, and Hmong batik. As the director Meijun mentioned on her website, "The objective is to promote the work of protection towards Intangible Cultural Heritage through new media such as video games. The culture of Chinese Hmong nationality boasts pluralistic artistry, and it has its own uniqueness in construction, literature, painting, patterns, craft, etc." The game does indeed attempt to recreate and transform various forms of Hmong art, including architecture, clothing, and more.

Hmong songs serve as the primary narrative-driving element, mainly featured in the performance segment. The gameplay delivers a strong sense of rhythm and provides satisfying feedback. Since the musical notation of Hmong songs differs from that of modern popular music, players unfamiliar with it may find its rhythms and beats to be a unique

experience. Furthermore, the Lusheng, a traditional reed pipe instrument commonly used in Hmong culture, is not frequently featured in the game's music. One of the most refreshing aspects of the game is its animated adaptation of batik patterns. As a traditionally two-dimensional art form with modest and subdued colors, Hmong batik is "brought to life" in the game, significantly enhancing its visual appeal. However, as the Hmong people lost their ancient script during their historical conflict with Qing Dynasty [4], the use of simplified Chinese characters in the game's cutscenes might somewhat diminish the cultural authenticity. While subtitles allow English- and Japanese-speaking players to understand the content, relying solely on this method may not fully convey the intended cultural depth, despite the game offering multilingual options.



Figure 3: Screenshot from Songs of the Hmong showing the mini music game interface.

## 4. Artistic Representation and Effect

### 4.1. Enhancing Player Experience and Preserving the Art Form

This game excels in engaging players' auditory and visual senses, allowing them to experience the charm of batik while enjoying the rhythms of Hmong music within a single cohesive work. The combination of these elements beautifully conveys the ancient legends of the Hmong people. Notably, the use of traditional Hmong songs vividly showcases the Hmong people's perspectives on life and the universe.

The game's narrative is adapted from ancient Miao Ancient Songs, providing a rich cultural foundation. The opening animation, reminiscent of a hand-drawn picture book, immediately captures the player's attention. Upon entering the game, it quickly becomes apparent that the use of paper cutting, batik, and traditional clothing has been carefully considered. Combined with the integration of Hmong music, these elements offer players a fully immersive cultural experience.

In the current gaming market, the advancements in game engines have brought rapid progress in realism and lighting effects [10, 11]. However, this has also led to a certain degree of homogenization among games. The release of Songs of the Hmong marks a shift, suggesting that stylized games might be what the market truly needs, offering a unique approach to better leverage the potential of games in preserving and promoting cultural heritage.



Figure 4: Screenshot from Songs of the Hmong showing rich Hmong elements.

## 4.2. Challenges

The charm of batik lies in its intricate details and multilayered textures, which can pose rendering challenges on certain game engines or hardware, particularly on mobile devices or low-performance systems. If the game requires frequent use of dynamic batik effects, it may face technical bottlenecks or optimization difficulties, which could partly explain the frequent bugs in Songs of the Hmong. Additionally, for players unfamiliar with batik culture, the symbolic meanings and

motifs may not be intuitively understood, potentially limiting the effectiveness of cultural transmission.

Batik's visual style might not appeal to a broad global audience, especially in the absence of proper cultural context or background explanations. Moreover, it could face compatibility issues with modern aesthetic themes; for instance, if a game is set in a sci-fi, urban, or minimalist context, the traditional and naturalistic elements of batik may seem out of place, making it challenging to integrate into the overall style. Similarly, the naturalistic and traditional feel of batik may clash with the fast-paced and industrial aesthetics of certain popular game genres, such as shooters or racing games.

Digitally replicating batik art may also struggle to fully capture its handcrafted essence, such as the randomness of wax cracks and the layered richness of the dyeing process, resulting in a less vibrant and authentic effect compared to real batik. In other words, when the batik style is applied across different types of games, it may encounter issues of incompatibility. However, such challenges are an inevitable part of the process in bringing batik art to a broader audience.



Figure 5. Screenshot from Songs of the Hmong showing animation with Mandarin Chinese subtitle.

## 5.    Audience Reception

The art style of the game is quite impressive, utilizing a paper-cutting aesthetic where layered visuals create a shadow puppet-like effect for the characters. When controlling Xiao Miao as she moves, it feels as

though we are watching a shadow puppet performance. As the gameplay progresses, the ethnic stories embedded within the game gradually unfold. The character designs are particularly charming, with rounded, innocent faces and eyes that blink adorably, exuding a sense of purity and simplicity. While the characters are rendered in a chubby style, the level of detail is notable. Even for players unfamiliar with Hmong culture, the traditional Hmong costumes, architecture, and other cultural elements portrayed in the game reveal the developers' meticulous research into Hmong heritage. Additionally, the game includes a beautifully animated depiction of the "Butterfly Mother" giving birth to twelve eggs, a visual treat.

However, despite the game's unique cultural significance, it falls short in some aspects as a game. One significant drawback is the lack of engaging gameplay mechanics and guidance. Upon first encounter, the game may lost its attraction by not providing any tutorial, which may discourage players from continuing. Another issue is the lack of a memory function for language selection; players must choose their language every time they start the game, which disrupts the overall experience. Without a tutorial, new players must rely on simple clicking for most interactions; this lack of clarity can create a negative first impression.

From a technical perspective, the game faces notable issues. The playthrough duration is approximately two hours, but about thirty minutes may be spent encountering bugs, reloading saves, and replaying sections. The bugs are mostly repetitive, such as triggering previously viewed cutscenes, which halt progress. Although these issues can be resolved by reloading the game, they are likely to recur, significantly impacting the overall experience.

The gameplay itself is quite monotonous. Players interact with various objects in the environment to collect musical scores, which are then given to Yan Jiang. The rhythm-based mini-games involve using the SDFJKL keys to match notes on six tracks. The key layout resembles a fan, and players press the corresponding keys as the notes descend and approach the bottom arc. The tactile feedback from successfully hitting notes enhances immersion. For long notes, players must hold the key, and achieving combos is encouraged, the higher the combo count, the closer players get to a 100% completion rate for the song. The rhythm mini-games also feature three difficulty levels and a forgiving accuracy requirement, allowing players to progress the narrative even with around 80% accuracy. The songs featured in the

rhythm sections are traditional Hmong melodies, and they are all beautifully composed. It is somewhat disappointing that, although the game's music was composed by two other members of the development team, the musical mini-games do not feature the Kouxian, a traditional Hmong reed instrument, alongside the previously mentioned Lusheng.

The puzzle-solving elements are extremely simple, requiring minimal thought. Most puzzles revolve around following clues provided by Yan Jiang after completing a rhythm game. However, the lack of variety in these tasks may disappoint players seeking a more challenging experience. I believe a significant design flaw lies in the absence of a "Game Over" mechanic. Failure triggers are essential for introducing an appropriate level of challenge to players, and it is precisely the cycle of frustration and retry that creates a game's unique emotional tension [12]. Games that are overly simplistic often fail to sustain player engagement and interest. Although many games in recent years have adopted a design approach that omits a "Game Over" mechanic, they typically include constraints such as resource depletion to maintain a sense of challenge. Songs of the Hmong, however, lacks any such limitations.

Additional technical shortcomings include the lack of support for windowed mode in resolution settings and the repeated playback of the game's introduction sequence every time it is launched. The volume settings for the introduction sequence are not synchronized with the game's volume settings, resulting in unexpectedly loud audio. These issues could be resolved by synchronizing the volume and providing a skip option for the introduction. Furthermore, skipping rhythm game segments can sometimes trigger a black screen bug, requiring players to restart the game entirely.

In sum, as a puzzle game rooted in Hmong ethnic culture, the game skillfully integrates cultural elements with puzzle-solving mechanics. Players collect musical scores through exploration and perform songs for the old man, thereby immersing themselves in the powerful rhythms and lyrical tones of Hmong music. Beyond the gameplay, the game serves as a vessel for conveying Hmong cultural traditions, allowing players to gradually appreciate the unique charm of this heritage. While the game has a solid foundation in cultural storytelling, addressing its technical issues and gameplay limitations would greatly enhance its overall impact and player experience.

## 6.Conclusion

In summary, Songs of the Hmong demonstrates the potential of video games as interactive platforms for preserving and promoting intangible cultural heritage. By blending traditional Hmong artistic elements such as batik, paper cutting, and music with gameplay mechanics, the game provides players with a unique cultural experience. The visual storytelling and incorporation of traditional melodies offer an authentic lens into Hmong traditions, while the game's emphasis on narrative and aesthetics distinguishes it within a homogenized gaming market. Despite its innovative approach, the game faces challenges, including technical shortcomings, simplistic puzzles, and a lack of engaging gameplay mechanics, which limit its broader appeal and impact.

The implications of Songs of the Hmong extend beyond its entertainment value. It exemplifies how video games can serve as a bridge between traditional art forms and modern audiences, offering a platform to preserve and celebrate cultural identities at risk of fading. The game's aesthetic focus also highlights the potential of stylized design in reinvigorating underrepresented cultural art forms, encouraging more developers to explore similar approaches.

However, even for a small-scale game, attempting to comprehensively represent all aspects of Miao culture is undoubtedly a significant challenge. While the game was originally developed as part of a master's thesis and its level of completion is commendable, its current release on Steam at a price of $9 warrants greater scholarly rigor. The development team should at least provide a clear explanation for the interchangeable use of "Miao" and "Hmong," and consider incorporating traditional Miao instruments that were previously overlooked.

Future directions for this line of research and development include improving technical optimization, enhancing gameplay variety, and addressing accessibility issues to broaden the game's appeal. Incorporating more sophisticated educational elements and deeper narrative layers could further solidify the game's role as both an engaging experience and a cultural preservation tool. Additionally, future efforts might explore integrating batik and Hmong heritage into other genres and interactive platforms, such as augmented reality or educational applications, to expand their reach and influence. By refining these approaches, Songs of the Hmong and similar projects

can inspire innovative ways to protect and celebrate the world's intangible cultural heritage.

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# We can still revive Rival Schools: Contemporary efforts to maintain arcade venues and culture and the relevance of competitive culture in community building

## Why the arcade is still relevant, and what they can offer a new generation of competitors

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**ABSTRACT**

The American arcade serves multiple functions and reaches widespread layers of society. A store owner could have a cabinet installed without a having or fostering a dedicated environment to promote arcade culture, though in either case resources are engaged in order to partake in an interactive medium, a product. Though what if these products carry meaning beyond the high scores and end result of a match? Theories of Resource Utilization posit societal groups and units' ability to 'partake in the sustained use of a resource to achieve a desired outcome', where the engagement and consistent use of that resource necessitates "financial as well as cultural capital" [1].

**Introduction:**

Academic environments present a common setting for cultural capital to be presented, critiqued, and exchanged, at an accessible level for various members of society. Public schools in particular can be a comparative point; for some they are a place of business, for others the foundation for subcultures and even utopias that offer meaning and identity to those that frequent their buildings. Individuals learn to leverage their positions within power structures to gain advantage, which mirrors how competitive arcade game players learn to make careers derived off their focused skillsets and capacity for adaptation. While public schools impact on youth has historic and significant study, more can be assessed about the role of the arcade and its contemporary relevance despite their rare and even struggling conditions. The preservation and elevation of the fighting game branch of arcade culture offers a unique insight to one of the first and most prominent offline grassroots gaming environments with an emphasis on community.

My research takes me to various cities in America and globally to find what about the communal arcade was so meaningful, particularly to communities of color in the 90s, and what the lessons learned in these settings not only carried with the competitors, but can be used to teach the next generation. With participant observation and extended interview as guiding tools, my research highlights the cultural significance of the journey to the arcade (busses, trains, carpool and flights – often overseas) and the role of transportation in establishing the arcade as a gathering point one seeks out or is introduced to. I draw upon expansions in both arcade technology and home consoles to delineate where each medium separated in development and how these led to different audiences often for the same games. I seek support for ongoing efforts to maintain and restore communal grassroots efforts – the long term goal to secure grants to place frequent arcade patrons into educator roles. This is most pressing for teenage boys learning to be competitive, both within gaming clubs and programs and for their overall maturation.

My research seeks audiences who, either now or in the future, work in organizing and gathering resources to maintain a collective culture towards participatory gaming and the banter and camaraderie that provide the experience with an identity. These identities keep patrons coming back beyond the most popular titles of the time. This presentation follows an initiative enacted over a timespan where community engagement had been put under the most terse conditions for analysis, reflection, and rearticulation: the covid pandemic and following years where the fighting game community largely moved to an online setting and prioritized netcode
 (online connectivity quality) and quality of connectivity. These elements brought new players into the competitive environment that were previously inaccessible, though my work also looks into folks who may feel like their ways have been left behind in an era that has less opportunities for offline play that is not apart of larger corporate aligned circuits (e.g. Capcom, Bandai Namco titles).

This research derives from Elijah Andersons contributions to the understanding of cosmopolitan canopies and conjoins with Eve Ewings theories on the aftermath of these communities onset with institutional mourning following the replacement/destruction/removal of the venues they hold memories and emotional weight to due to the familial like ties forged there. Findings may serve as proof that both the digital landscape and the in person component can coexist if both receive investment, similar to a post-pandemic era where online teaching finally receives the attention disability scholars demanded for years while the impact of meaningful in-person teaching garners re-evaluation after years of being taken for granted. We hold that formal education and the informal knowledge garnered in the arcade are distinctively separate, though there are some avenues where both may cross paths – a distinction that includes other social realms such as the Black
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Barbershop. The goal for this research is to highlight what the arcade can teach us about what we learn about our communities and how that knowledge is relevant for the education of populace often treated in the outskirts of schools and larger society.

This research features elements of my doctoral dissertation with applied focus on communal implementation of findings. Using interview data from 2+ hour interviews from 3 participants and reflections on Everyday Talk [2] of racial and ethnic communities, I highlight 4 key initiative points to argue the meaning of arcades and why society is better off when they flourish, particularly city life. Through participant observation extended interviews, I investigate arguments for continued support of Arcade games as a site and culture for collective play, competition, and shared lessons and values within the framework of social theorists assessments of collectivism and competition. These findings pose particular interest for Black and Brown men and efforts to maximize our fun amidst lingering stigmas and reduced support in our modern climate, averse to discussions or support of racial, ethnic, and gender matters.

In "A Place on the Corner", Elijah Anderson informs us that settings and establishments, particularly the urban setting like the tavern, bar, carryout and notably barbershop, possess unique value due to their placement as 'urban villages', gathering spots for those who make up the ghetto areas of cities [3]. For people whose lives face chaos and uncertainty in other realms, the creation of sociability among figures who similarly recognize a sense of self-worth is essential for communal bonding. There is a mutual recognition of limited resources, or at least the understanding that these settings house folks of varying levels of resources unlike the more exclusive upper levels of society. Anderson claims you can be yourself amongst 'equals', which is comforting as folks in these places know they share something linking them to the unequal dregs of society even if they themselves possess different perceptions on social mobility and the belief that someday they will get out. My research involves joining competitive and casual arcade and fighting game supporters and learning from them, alongside them, in elevating a culture that may not be large, but may not be going away either.

**Setting the scene:**

The name of my tagline for my dissertation study, 'Just a Quarter and a Dream' (JAQandAD) highlights the humble beginnings many professional fighting game players and organizers recall. My name characterizes the low cost investment in a low stakes environment that culminates in maturation and identity development decades later over a shared love of playing games – in this case, fighting games. Fighting games have unique placement within the larger gaming pantheon due to their player vs. player, nature and the dedication members allocate towards pushing grassroots, aka community led

competition. What distinguishes fighting games from many other forms of 1v1 gaming competition is their integration and eventual mainstay status in 80s era arcade cabinets – even being the selling point at the heyday of titles like Capcoms Street Fighter II: The World Warrior and subsequent updated editions. As many arcades sprang up in accessible locations that reach concentrated urban neighborhood gathering sites like shopping malls, laundromats, and sides of corner stores or bodegas. Urban Culture scholars highlight how the series of video game screens signal "the importance of los recreativos/game arcades" as a gathering centre for the youth' in Madrid [4], and my research investigates the timeline of the impact of these game centres in pivotal areas for American youth, particularly young men of color.

The grounded nature of the martial arts focus for fighting games and emphasis on moral and ethic codes associated with the honor code of learning a discipline places fighting game skills developed in the arcade within a unique juxtaposition with a reality patrons become quite familiar with. A reality where winners in life don't always, or even often, play by the rules, and take advantage of every tool or exploitative method possible to gain an upper hand on others.

The social element of traveling to the local arcade – which may not always be local at all – to spend your money on a potentially poorly maintained cabinet to clash against players of various ages and ethic codes demonstrates a vital site for analysis in an era where non-professional collective play and socialization appear more limited than ever. The technological developments of home consoles in the latter end of the 90s shifted the gaming landscape to become more self- contained to households; the social element was no longer needed if one simply wants to slap buttons, and the excitement of the 'You WIN!' screen could be replicated against a CPU at anytime without needing credits or a bus pass, or interaction with anyone else.

My participants speak in reflection to experiences they had as arcade travelers and why their history is crucial for carrying on various lessons into the next generation. The goal for my research is to demonstrate that the environments that fostered the growth in my participants does not have to be distant; with intentional investment and consistent maintenance, we can create settings and structure where Black and Brown boys can laugh, play, and compete while growing not just as fighting game players, but as knowledgeable people who gain experiences that can aid them in local city day to day exchanges as well as encourage travel and meaningful cultural exchange.

## What does the arcade tell us about our past

My full dissertation details the concept of 70s and 80s era urban composition and how the loss of the arcade contributes to institutional mourning, collective loss, suffering, and response from vulnerable communities when a critical institution is destroyed and/or not replaced [5]. Though the focus of the BIPOC Game Studies conference pushed me to think about how this phenomenon shifts to online platforms in the 2000s decade, where more of my participants were coming of age and gained access to their own means of communication in more approachable, controllable manners. My talks with SoulRobba, a professional Granblue Fantasy Versus competitor and Georgia FGC community member revealed how difficult this process can be to 'get good'. A multi talented fighting game player who made his breakout with Street Fighter IV, SoulRobba credits the community for offering him archived data to build a template of game knowledge off of, which later helped establish his own player identity.

"So, I remember just going through forums, trying to learn how to do these combos. And I ended up like, separating myself from, like, the people that casually play fight against the people that actually play by the game. So, now, it's to the point where I started being, like, my casual friends, and now it was kinda seeking towards playing people. I met with locally, and that's where we kind of have to learn stuff back and forth, back and forth.

The prior eras of competition saw numerous difficulties for information spread, though archival data was a strength. Players who lack an immediate community to engage with and test ideas at least could trust reliable forums to build on their knowledge set, based on contributions of trusted competitors who had earned their stripes. In a modern era, forums have largely fallen out of favor and the websites used to host them have gone dormant – keeping these things active takes money. Discord sees its ownership and policies change as well as the competence of accessing old data. The prominence of enshittification of the internet means competitors, somehow, find a more difficult pathway for acquiring community dialogue about their games and the experiences folks have while growing as competitors, travelers, and community members. You can look up a wiki to find your characters frame data, but you wont find that valuable information about how to respond when your combo drops.

My research proposes the reincorporation of forums for not just the active competition, but all the other logistic components of travel and engagement with the community. More experienced competitors can create 'Read-Me' stickys (aka stuck to the top of the board, first viewed when someone visits the site). This approach alters the hierarchal approach of knowledge sharing. While one may still look to someone with proven success

in bracket if they want to increase their technical skills, not-so-skilled but quite experienced players – or even inactive parents and chaperones – can make a better experience for all patrons by pooling knowledge over the best food options, most accessible transit, or even hotels and settings close enough to the venue.

Arcade historians may be necessary for proper carryover of the in-game and out-of-game peculiarities for fighting game and larger arcade culture. The Evolution Series hosts throwbacks to prior eras and features a 'Stick Graveyard' where viewers can look at various fightsticks used by high level competitors in memorable moments, though what if we canonized the guides players used to adapt to difficulties playing on wobbly sticks on outdated hardware? For affiliated students of a program offered for the new gen, documenting their experiences and incorporating them 'into the canon' furthers the scope of this initiative. We scholars and organizers may use novice participants experiences to demonstrate how the creation of community involves everyone at the communal level to play a role, not just the most prestigious figures. This is key for fighting games, a genre that outside of the biggest hitters (e.g. Street Fighters even numbered entries, most recently Street Fighter 6) has difficulty retaining players1. If the onboarding for participation involved membership practices, stakes, and formalities, feelings of belongingness and identity may go beyond just logging into your online account for 2 hours of ranked.

We shall close things out with a projection of the future later in the work, though next I move into an assessment of localized culture and then what that offers outside the arcade.

**What do arcade environments bring to the local culture**

In studies of Philadelphia, Elijah Anderson highlights a tenant of my engagement with collective culture, how those who share close proximity or engagement with a medium regard each other, come to learn about each other. He coins this as "an ethos of getting along" [6] and recognizes this phenomenon as well as significant increases in immigration in the last few generations as contributing to the cosmopolitan canopy: "settings that offer a respite from the lingering tensions of urban life and an opportunity for diverse peoples to come together".

Folks occupy these spaces pluralistically, and while Anderson defines interactions as predicated on a spirit of civility, comity or goodwill -all forms of etiquette or decorum- I simply highlight how individuals recognize the mood and temporality that overlaps the elements of engagement for participants. If that element is 'competition', then we cannot presume 'sportsmanship' just because that is the most presentable formulation of the concept. In addition, 'sportsmanship' even if presented may look different in

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the American fighting game arcade than say, a golf course. Contemporary fighting game enthusiasts, often divided by age and technological access to the medium, often debate cultural rifts on matters2 such as proper behavior after a win, or even the importance of resources.

For Anderson, a resident of Center City for 30+ years, a sense of familiarity doubles as comfort and encourages folks best behavior, peaceful relations, highlighting the same form of goodwill referenced earlier. This sense of camaraderie across folks of a similar race and class dynamic can be observed from collective peoples who know of their social links. Within the arcade, I seek out what linkages promote this approach, do fighting game players gathering at an arcade from the same neighborhood all hold each other in high esteem and view neighboring communities as adversarial.

This leaves me with research questions that I investigate in my interviews. Do people gravitate towards the superiority of their game of choice, or revel in the inferiority of the character they play and the perseverance to make a sub-par character work in competition? Is there a 'coolness' [7] among competitors that folks gravitate towards? All shall be studied, though for Anderson, it's the intentional spending of "casual and purposeful time together", which a researcher can participate in as a form of "folk ethnography". This is a concept I shall revisit in my methods essay, though for this piece I reach the outcome that ethnographers bring awareness of the elements that link members of a community and the inequality they, and the researcher, may endure. While a researcher does not necessarily have to possess traits that indicate they experience that inequality too (such as skin color denoting oppression under racism, or having a same-sex partner denting homophobic marginalization), it certainly may aid in the communities comfort in disclosing the conditions of inequality if the outsider is empathetic to adaptive culture that competitors incorporate to play at their best in changing circumstances.

As I speak to participants, I ask them what becomes of their time spent in their communities, their local neighborhoods, what becoming a regular arcade member means for their placement within the collective culture, and what this can tell us for the modern era. Here I draw from the the experiences of SoulRobba and move into an analysis of RickyTan to elevate this commitment to local infrastructure. Starting with SoulRobba

> So as the years went on by people just saying, oh, yeah, we want to go to float around run around, run around with that thing to go to. So, I felt like, okay, I feel like, I wasn't ready to play, like, in a major like that. Because I was kinda like, you know, scared, scared to play with at the time. But some kind of click and thinking, like, you know, what, if I win or if I lose, I just take it as experience. So I was going to like, regional or like, other tournaments and stuff like that. Like, in Nashville or in Atlanta.. And I went to somebody like somebody a little regional tournaments and stuff like that just to get experience. So I can get used

to playing in a tournament because always tell people now, I end up being a mentor.

Now, at this point, I always tell people like, you're gonna you're if you're if you're not gonna be, you gotta come in with the mentality of, like, you're not gonna win your 1st match.. Especially in tournament, like, you don't get nervous, you're going to drop combos you're going to do everything else like that that it's perfectly normal. What you're gonna do is you're gonna build that experience. You can work with those transmit nerves so those internal will be working for you instead of against you.

Balancing the 'coolness' expected for Black and Brown youth who then take that back into their communities, who get on the busses, who engage with the 'Uncs and Oldheads' and even survive encounters with bullies. Some of these young men grow onto be fathers and carry these cultural ethics to the next generation. RickyTan, a New York to Hartford based rapper and sound engineer. He grew up playing video games and now coaches his sons basketball team. I asked about the significance of growing up not just with video games, but the arcade as a social site for gathering and fraternization particularly for men of color in the city.

I consider myself an anomaly to be honest, because I come from a come from an urban community that pretty much had nothing. We had nothing grown up in Hartford. Um, and, you know, I kind of just let my curiosity lead the way of my life. It's just how I see things, learn things, do things, experiment with things, you know, link with different people, you know, and keep this ambitious, passionate imagination and just kind of go and keep going and doing and doing. And I just never let that go.

Of love of what I love and things that, like video games, for example, and how that impacts done so much there for me for a lot of people. My child, I've learned a lot with my child. I don't get to see my son as often as I want to, but all I got to do is hop on Playstation and add him in the game. That's how we spend our quality time.

I'm no father, and even 6 years into competition I would consider myself still a 'noob' as I grew up on the tail end of arcade prominence. Though within these 6 years of travels, I observed disparities between myself and those who have dedicated their lives to a craft. I also noticed similarities between our desires, travel habits, responses to notable moments, and in reflection of meaningful events in our childhood. Gaming scholars [8] use Herbert Blumer's [9]ideas on Symbolic Interactionism to make sense about how engagement signify larger significance "This (the maintenance of online and offline social dynamics) often demands long hours of play for gamers, participating in dungeon runs or conducting raids with other online players. By "dungeon runs" and "raids," ; we are referring to group-oriented play within MMORPGs whereby players are forced to cooperate, negotiate, and play as a team to complete a mission or task within the game. Such time

demands can easily become a source of conflict within families. In addition, differences in technical skills, social roles within the family, and a host of other variables can become a source of either irritation or of relief for couples and for those engaged in adult-child interactions

RickyTans interview however demonstrates how for the new era, fighting games and the direct interactivity they offer flips this dynamic on its head, where fathers can not only spend time with their sons in a challenging but fun learning environment, but they can also convey the meaning of these specific avenues for social conversation that build on ideas of belonginess. An increase in arcade prevalence, participation from fathers and 'Unc-like' figures, and documentation of forum like guidance would strengthen efforts to recenter collective strengths to the local level

## What does the arcade offer beyond the communal cabinet?

The socialization of young boys, particularly through media as a form of education was heavy in my interview with Darian highlighted the role of media exchange for expanding connections for boys who spend mandatory time together. Darian grew up in the 'Toonami' era of programming, where Japanese manga adaptations made their way overseas as English dubbed anime. Darian was a huge fan of the Marvel vs Capcom fighting game series that blends East and West haymaker characters to a blended experience that pushed forward the 'tag fighters' genre, and in 2018 the DragonBall FighterZ title released, drawing upon the classic depictions of Dragon Ball that took off in popularity stateside with the installment on Toonami. Our talk came shortly after Dragon Balls creator and artist, Akira Toriyama, had passed away. While not a fan of the FighterZ game, we reflected on the impact of Toriyamas work and why Fighterz might have been such a massive success I the Fighting Game Community, largely comprised of individuals with identities and upbringings like our own.

> That's what Akira Toriyama said. He said, All I, he said all I tried to do was have as much like I'm paraphrasing, but he was just like as much fidelity to what young boys would like. Like for him, that was like dragon ball. Like dragon ball, Dragonball Z was just him. He's just like, these are things that the young boys that are watching my show.
> I mean that are reading this manga with a love and think is amazing and awesome. And that and he's like I'm not really that great a social person, I'm not really, he says I'm not really that great of a person, like in terms of quality, all I could but what I really could do was just stay true to the heart of young men, young or boys and young men and create something that they would love.

The American arcade serves multiple functions and reaches widespread layers of society, one of those unspoken realms is housing adolescent masculine culture and operating as an alternative school of sorts.

A store owner could have a cabinet installed without a having or fostering a dedicated environment to promote arcade culture, though in either case resources are engaged in order to partake in an interactive medium, a product. Though what if these products carry meaning beyond the high scores and end result of a match? Theories of Resource Utilization posit societal groups and units' ability to 'partake in the sustained use of a resource to achieve a desired outcome', where the engagement and consistent use of that resource necessitates "financial as well as cultural capital" [1]. As with other interviewees, our conversation then went to the man Darian has become thanks to the fighting game experience. I would characterize this development as a form of cultural capital that is reminiscent to discussion points SoulRobba brought up on how offline tournaments pushed him as a social young man

Yeah, and honestly it were video games. I've, uh, I've met some people that. That was so different from me that. They Made me a better person, you know, like, I'll play a tournament with somebody who's from a whole world and I'll have a conversation with this individual. It might be a brief conversation. I'm like damn. You know, you just. You from a whole different place, a whole different world like nothing that I, I grew up on board, you know, and I learned something. You know, from this individual in a short amount of time I remember before.

This concept is backed up by Darians perspective on the matter, but now from the lens of adults in competition as a spectacle:

> It's been such a wide range of people from different backgrounds, different things they're doing, and things like different ages. But what I do find is that there's some type of competitive, spirit that they have, and two, because of the way fighting games work. They tend to, it tends to be people who enjoy spending time with me, right? Cause fighting games tend to be a one on one type of thing often, but you're playing against a person, right? So you have to kind of like the people you're playing against.

> You have to like the crowd, you have to like what people are doing to stay in it, you know? It's not like, it's not like basketball in certain ways where you can just, where you just like you I mean you it is kind of where you can just like pick up a game with some people. And then like, you know, you can play and then there's like ten people and like you can easily say man, that person sucked, you know? But with fighting it's oftentimes it's like it's it's me and this other person and we're playing each other and we kind of have to enjoy the connection that we have. They're all people that I've been.
> Relatively close to are people that have really brought into fighting games that really like stuck with this like they liked spending time with me, you know? And then they also liked the, the game, but really it's a way to like the kind of connection you can build in a fighting games can be pretty in depth. Yeah.

Darians perspective reinforces findings in the larger field of play that speaks to fighting games unique impact as an e-sport "where observation was absolutely core to the cultural experience". [10]. Two kids can hop onto a recreational basketball court and try to emulate the Michael Jordan or Lebron James figures that they grew up alongside, but they will not have a moment where 200 people will gather in a room to watch them face off one by one. This honor is reserved for most in only the most professional, organized and facilitated amenities, like junior league or school sports. Even for the youth that have these opportunities, they will not get to square off against their heroes like a fighting game competition may if they succeed in a double melimination bracket. Some kids who watched Daigo Umehara, our 'GOAT or Greatest of All Time' have gone onto face and defeat them, to the praise or spite of the watching audience.

I have played against the majority of my interviewees as well and even some of the bigger names like SonicFox. Being able to meet my interviewees and observants at an equal level to them is unique within the different forms of ethnographic study sociologists engage in. Within these moments, I relinquish my 'professional' position and compete under a widely shared and accessible standard. The cheers of the audience pump me up and the jeers force reconciliation of my skill and even belongingness. Embrace of the communal tradition brings me, the researcher, into the community as a fellow competitor and patron who spends money the keep the venue up, supports the local food trucks, and laughs with my peers.

My field notes indicate some of my experiences after telling Brooklyn participants that I was 'from Connecticut', which I quickly adjusted to describing as 'Im from DC' after noting some of the assessments made based on the location you claim and perhaps some understood similarities between the city cultures of the boroughs of and districts of the Nation's Capital.

Regions matter a lot, the rivalries between west coast and east coast fighting games run similar to the competitive intensity (minus the real world violence) of raps progression in the same decade of the 90s. The high flying, stylish west coast playstyle is best characterized by Alex 'Calipower' Valle, a Peruvian immigrant who rose to power by dominating Street Fighter Alpha and Tekken Tag Tournament simultaneously with an aggressive, hyper offensive 'Rush that Shit Down' playstyle that he later coined into a lifestyle hasttag #RTSD on dealing with problems face first. The east coast headed by success of Justin Wong, a Chinese competitor who learned from predecessor Eddie 'King of Lame' Lee.3 They found success largely in the Marvel vs Capcom series by forcing opponents to slow their pace and deal with methodical defensive strategies that stifle offensive approaches and promote real life frustration and fatigue.

For participants like RickyTan, the arcade pushes patrons to open their horizons, ask questions, and become immersed in the lifestyle and

mindsets of fellow competitors. His reflections corroborate my own experiences as a participant attendee that I contrast with playing online fighting games. I find myself losing, and laughing. I can look over at my opponent and we can both quickly reflect of the absurd situations that just appeared onscreen before getting back to the match. A hard fought victory may follow with a popoff (standing up in sheer excitement) and I do not experience rage due to the visual of their excitement. I feel pride knowing that they felt this much accomplishment for beating me and qualifying for the next stage of bracket. Or even for landing a combo they spent all weekend practicing, finally getting it even in a casual offline environment.

**Parallels to the classroom**

There are a lot of reasons and motives that participants derive from the fighting game experience, though the human component is necessary for community to truly thrive. Then for folks like Darian, being one with the fellow competitors, the spectators, the roaring crowd noise, its akin to being a showman or mini celebrity at compact level. We scholars may investigate how regular attendance at both arcade based locals and regional to major gatherings may tie into both self-worth of competitors and feelings of collectivism or feeling like one is part of a greater community based on not just identity, but shared habits across identity factors. Not everyone in the arcade is a man or a person of color, though the foundation of our collective play is based upon considerations made by men of color who pushed grassroots settings forward via an interactive medium placed in many neighborhoods they grew up in

Academic environments present a common setting for cultural capital to be presented, critiqued, and exchanged, at an accessible level for various members of society. Public schools in particular can be a comparative point; for some they are a place of business, for others the foundation for subcultures and even utopias that offer meaning and identity to those that frequent their buildings. Individuals learn to leverage their positions within power structures to gain advantage, which mirrors how competitive arcade game players learn to make careers derived off their focused skillsets and capacity for adaptation. While public schools impact on youth has historic and significant study, more can be assessed about the role of the arcade and its contemporary relevance despite their rare and even struggling conditions. The preservation and elevation of the fighting game branch of arcade culture offers a unique insight to one of the first and most prominent offline grassroots gaming environments with an emphasis on community.

With these theories set, our working understanding of the value of intellect, or at least as measured by performance in the organized American school system, race and education scholars offer assessments through their surveys of students, families, and operational structures. Lewis- Mccoy [1]

draws a distinction where resource utilization divulges into a group or units' ability to 'partake in the sustained use of a resource to achieve a desired outcome', where the engagement and consistent use of that resource necessitates "financial as well as cultural capital". For my field site, the American East Coast arcade, this premise is not only seen in the stability and maintenance of retro arcade ware that is often technologically decades dated, but circa the 90s this could be seen in the attention and care paid to the non-arcade emphasized sites that hosted arcade cabinets.

The laundromats, the movie theaters, the outside alleys and town alleys where a hub may be located. Communities model the behavior of care and attention to detail in ensuring these small venues remain in top care, as they realized they would not be replaced and updated in specs quite often. It is not as if these Black and Latinos inhabiting New York's storied Chinatown Fair arcade hub didn't display value towards cultural capital, but rather their race is at the lower end of the hierarchy, they often lack finances, and their cultural capital of choice is frowned upon.

Lewis-Mccoy maintains that frameworks like the Lareau's Concerted Cultivation [11] do not employ the intersectional analyses needed to adequately explain inequality at the infrastructural level, one embedded at its racist core despite enough fiscal resources to go around. If scholars do not wholly comprise methods to appropriate blame onto the communities, its no surprise there will never be meaningful change at the institutional level as there is no external pressure and the internal demands are easily sidestepped. This work isn't to say that more storied scholars haven't (clumsily) tried to work their way through connections between culture and race, in fact they may mistake the inequality component as operational outcomes by expectation. For Lewis-Mccoy, this was the Black and white divided elementary school in Rolling Acres. For Eve Ewing [5], its the activist site accompanying lobbying for closed down high schools in Chicago's south side. For my own works, it's the informal, cultural education one develops while socialized in the American arcade. My engagement with the community demands an informal approach reflective of the nature of the setting, a concept I contend further in my methods section.

Here I utilize Carter's assessment of the interactive relationship between non-dominant capital and the adversarial relationship of the unequal peoples with the social elite: "Full reliance on one's non-dominant social capital does not provide a means to combat the dominant forces, 'since dominant culture facilitates its success through mainstream institutions and organizations.'" [12]. For Cultural Sociologists, an understanding of the social sciences necessitates an understanding of its practitioners, their efforts and theories of life and the study of social life. Blanket assessments of a population after some odd time spent in their setting yields little to no practical takeaways if we only operate in the supposed mind of the community for study and not

the known mind of the studying researcher who documents their mindset and rationale. This is how we get research that patently misrepresents folks for the purpose of setting an agenda4 or aligning with hegemonic contemporary thought.

## What do we look forward to for the future? Parting analysis

Given the modern association with competitive gaming of all realms and their viability as an e-sport, I look to organizational studies for the determination of understood market value. For this task, I look to the findings for executive based research on how to retain members when there is gaps between buy-in capacity across varying levels. For this task I draw from 'Defining value'[13]:

"What will I get or what will be the result?" (the benefit)

−The investment I have to make (money or time) = Value

Fighting games, let alone those still played in offline settings like arcade reminiscent environments, do not have the luxury of throwing purchasing power around to demonstrate our value (though some outsiders may, and try, to do so5). With online gaming, be that on console, PCs or on-the-go devices, the benefit of grassroots participation is intrinsically linked to the benefits of participation, and the results for participation goes beyond their numbered result in a double elimination bracket. The minimal presence of archived experiences for tournament and casual attendees over the last few decades makes upholding the arcades historic and contemporary relevance needlessly more difficult and reduces the visibility of our continued contributions towards local culture. The future for arcades success hinges upon an embrace of culture derived in the peak of the arcade scene positions us for a future where the past is embraced and built upon rather than abandoned in pursuit of larger fiscal goals

Soulrobba highlighted how his experiences post high school both in the military and at a Black college gave him an expectation for communal engagement and socializing among peers with similar life and identity experiences as well as motivators. RickyTan demonstrated his reinvestment in the local community reinforces what he learned as a youth and can give to the next generation. Darian highlighted how the images young men see growing up put them on a path to make stronger connections with other communal members based on their shared love and values. The assessments of Black men construction of their own 'cool pose' is most evident here, where the arcade becomes the primary manner for demonstrating ones

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coolness in a site and form understood by peers and wider audiences. When competitors nail a huge combo with the pressure of a room full of people, all the way to when you teach a next gen player how to input simple mechanisms such as a dragon punch on stick. Future research and funding opportunities must utilize these narratives to demonstrate arcades as still possessing considerable value for the socialization and communal upbringing of the next generation of competitive Black and Brown boys looking for the proper outlet to hone their skills.

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# "I am not the default": Racialized Experiences of Avatar Embodiment Among Black Social VR Users

## Racialized Experiences of Avatar Embodiment Among Black Social VR Users

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Previous research has uncovered racialized avatar experiences in traditional virtual worlds, but less attention has been given to how this has evolved into the more immersive medium of social virtual reality (VR). Leveraging Intersectional Tech and the Virtual Identity Discrepancy Model as frameworks, we provide an overview of findings from two complementary studies aimed at understanding the avatar embodiment experiences of Black users on VRChat, a popular social VR platform. Study 1 draws on interview findings (n=11) to examine how Black users navigate, negotiate, and respond to avatar-based racial inequity and defaults of whiteness in this immersive context. Study 2 extends these findings with a quantitative experimental study (n=41) that examines how the discrepancy between physical and virtual attributes influences Black users' psychological experience in social VR while manipulating their avatar's visibility. We use these mixed-methods findings to identify new perspectives on the embodied consequences of racial discrepancies in social VR. By centering perspectives from Black users and

discussing implications for designers and researchers, we expand avatar research on the multi- faceted experiences of racially marginalized users in social VR.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Prior research investigating how defaults of whiteness manifest in digital gaming culture have uncovered how virtual worlds have lacked in providing sufficient options for selecting avatars with Black appearances [1, 2, 3] and perpetuated stereotypical representations [4]. As virtual worlds evolve, affording deeper immersion and new forms of mediated interactions, understanding the potentially novel implications of racial inequity in contemporary sociotechnical contexts warrants investigation. Over the past decade, social virtual reality (VR) has become an emerging digital ecosystem for socialization, collaboration, work, and play for millions of global users [5, 6, 7]. Unlike traditional virtual worlds, body- worn trackers enable real-time syncing between a user's physical movements and their avatar's movements. As a result of the experiential differences that distinguish physically embodied avatars, a small but growing body of work has sought to understand the nuance of avatar-based experience in this immersive context [8, 9, 10]. However, understanding how these differences and the cultures that have emerged from them shape the racialized experiences of its users remains understudied. This is problematic considering the potential embodied consequences of racial inequities in highly immersive, virtual environments.

In this presentation, we address this empirical gap by providing an overview of findings from two complementary studies on the racialized experiences of avatar embodiment among Black social VR users [11], a population that has been marginalized in gaming and underrepresented in VR literature [12]. Grounded in Gray's [13] Intersectional Tech Framework and Jin's [14] Virtual Identity Discrepancy Model (VIDM), we aimed to highlight any racialized friction in the process of embodying VR avatars. Through mixed-methods findings, this presentation will provide new perspectives on embodied implications of racial discrepancies in social VR that stakeholders can use to understand how to create more inclusive user experiences.

## 2 STUDY 1: INTERVIEW STUDY

As part of a broader ethnography, we conducted an interview study of 11 users of the social VR platform, VRChat, who self-identified as Black. Through open inductive coding and exploratory analysis, we identified major themes that emerged from the interviews that encapsulate the racialized experiences of Black users on VRChat. In this section, we will discuss the following themes: (1) Racialized Burdens Working Around Non-Inclusive Avatar Cultures and Systems, which addresses how participants navigated, negotiated, and responded to avatar-based racial inequity in social VR, and (2)

Embodied Glitches and the Psychological Salience of Racially Discrepant Avatars, which reveals the unique, embodied, and psychological consequences of perceived avatar discrepancies in social VR.

## 3 STUDY 2: EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

Leveraging experimental methods, Study 2 (n=41) explored how the discrepancy between physical and virtual attributes influences Black users' psychological experience in social VR. This follow-up was inspired by our qualitative findings surrounding how the salience of one's avatar, alongside its racialized representation, influenced one's sense of immersion. First-person point of views and virtual mirrors offered different perspectives for participants to view and reflect on their avatars in VRChat. However, the question remained of how one visually sees their avatar can shape the relationship between racialized avatar discrepancies and the user's psychological experience. We manipulate the presence of a virtual mirror to examine the role of avatar visual salience in this relationship. In this section, we will discuss findings highlighting the relationship between avatar discrepancy and presence and points of racialized friction during the immersion process. Notably, in the absence of a virtual mirror, participants embodying a representation perceived as more different from their physical self was linked to feeling less presence inside their virtual environment and within their virtual body.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Situated in one of the most utilized social VR platforms, our findings illuminate disparities in avatar racial representation and their novel implications in social VR for Black users. In line with Intersectional Tech [13], the digital realities of Black users in VRChat reflected some physical realities. Given the consequential effects of colorism, defaults of whiteness, and racial harassment on the platform, Black users navigated the digital expression of their intersectional identities and undertook racialized burdens in complex ways (See Table 1). Hence, this presentation provides insight into how systemic racism shapes avatar systems, cultures, and practices in social VR. In accordance with VIDM [14], there were psychological implications of perceived inconsistencies between avatar appearance and physical appearance, especially when the full appearance of an avatar was less visible. While past literature has established the psychological consequences of discrepant avatars, this presentation sheds light on the racialized nuance of this dynamic in the more naturalistic, immersive context of social VR.

We will conclude our presentation through highlighting embodied racialized glitches, avatar racial discrepancies shaping the embodiment experience, and immersive consequences of embodied racial harassment as new perspectives on racialized experiences in social VR, alongside limitations and future work.

We use these findings to detail implications for designers and researchers of social VR.

| Category | Description | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Embodied Glitches and Rendering Issues | Unexpected technical errors and rendering issues that are tied to one's body in immersive virtual space | Texturing of eye and teeth with skin tone (Study 1) |
| | | Missing hair asset by default (Study 1) |
| | | White-washing or miscoloring of selected skin tone (Study 2) |
| | | Improper rendering of Afro-textured hair (Study 1) |
| Embodied Design Bias | Hierarchical design choices that manifest while a user embodies their avatar | Default to white skin tone in customizable avatars (Study 1) |
| Disruptions to Immersion | Immersive consequences of avatar discrepancy when aiming for self-representation in VR | Greater avatar discrepancy was associated with less spatial presence (Study 2) |
| | | In the absence of a virtual mirror, greater avatar discrepancy was associated with less avatar embodiment and less spatial presence (Study 2) |
| Survival Tactics for Embodied Racial Harassment | Avatar-based survival tactics that users employ as a defense against embodied racial harassment | Embodying non-Black avatars to avoid harassment (Study 1) |
| | | Mentally preparing to defend oneself against harassment when choosing to wear a Black avatar (Study 1) |

Table 1. Non-exhaustive list of barriers to inclusive avatar embodiment in social VR

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# Virtual Reality Museums: Redefining Engagement and Understanding in Cultural Heritage

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the paradigm-shifting impact of Virtual Reality (VR) on museum experience design, using the banjo's rich history as a case study to explore these benefits, especially in regards to understanding and empathizing with African-American culture through out time. This VR museum's design model not only enhances visitor engagement through interactive 3D models, videos, and virtual explorations, but also transcends the limitations of physical space, making the museum experience accessible to a global audience, so long as they have access to a VR headset. Our findings indicate that the educational quality of the VR museum matches—and in some aspects surpasses—that of traditional museums by providing immersive, interactive learning environments where visitors can deeply engage with the cultural and historical narratives of the banjo. Additionally, VR facilitates the easy customization and updating of exhibits, allowing for content that remains current and relevant. Most importantly, the VR setting offers a sensitive platform for presenting emotionally charged content, such as the banjo's connections to slavery and African American history, fostering a deeper cultural connection and understanding. This study demonstrates that VR technology can significantly transform museum experiences, making them more inclusive, educational, and emotionally engaging, thus redefining the standard museum design paradigm. While VR headsets are not yet widely accessible due to socioeconomic factors, addressing this challenge is beyond the scope of this paper.

## 1.    INTRODUCTION

### 1.1.    *Technology Background*

As digital technologies transform our interactions with cultural heritage, Virtual Reality (VR) stands out for its potential to revolutionize traditional museum experiences. According to V-Must, VR museums should deliver "personalized, immersive, interactive experiences [2]," making historical and cultural artifacts accessible from anywhere in the world. Building on the transformative potential of VR in cultural heritage, this paper

presents the VR banjo museum, a pioneering project designed to not only educate but deeply engage users with the banjo's storied past—a quintessentially American instrument with profanities to African American history. By leveraging VR, this museum transcends geographical limitations, inviting global audiences to explore the banjo's evolution and cultural significance through interactive 3D models, videos, and virtual explorations. This approach not only broadens access [3] but also enhances the educational impact by providing an immersive learning environment where history is both seen and experienced [4].

The VR banjo museum I developed serves as a virtual experience to showcase the quintessential American instrument: the banjo. The genesis of this immersive VR experience took root when Kristina Gaddy [1] briefly told the banjo's history during a small concert at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The MET)'s Musical Instruments Galleries. As an instrument born from the hands of enslaved individuals in the New World, Gaddy [1] asserted that the history of the banjo is a profound reflection of African American history, as detailed in her book "Well of Souls." In the foreword of this book, the iconic musician Rhiannon Giddens mentioned that she possessed no prior knowledge of banjo history when she started to learn to play it. This sentiment resonates deeply with numerous musicians. Driven by our deep respect and curiosity for the banjo and its historical significance, I took the approach to create an educational experience, aiming to inspire a broader audience to enjoy the rich history.

## 1.2. Potential Challenges

Creating a virtual reality museum presents several challenges, including handling multimedia in virtual environments, adapting to VR headsets, learning to use controllers, and navigating the virtual space. Managing intense emotional content is also crucial. Ensuring user comfort with the technology and immersive experience is essential.

As VR has been shown to enhance engagement and learning outcomes in educational settings [5,6]. I aim to inspire the curiosity in visitors about VR technology, banjos, and VR museums. Research by Doz and colleagues [7] shows that VR technology can enhance curiosity and learning. User tests and interviews indicate strong interest in these topics. I hope to attract further interest in banjo's origins and its historical significance, particularly in its connection to American slavery and the Black community. This topic may appeal to those interested in music history, cultural studies, and social justice issues.

Exploring the resilience and creativity of the Black musicians who developed the banjo can inspire and educate visitors with the stories of cultural heritage and artistic expression overcoming oppression. Exhibitions outside the core collection offer non-guided experiences and emotional

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respite to avoid emotionally overwhelming the audience with too much all at once, featuring recent media content and fun facts to entertain and educate visitors [8].

Engaging with the banjo's history can empower the Black community by highlighting their ancestors' contributions to American music and the importance of preserving cultural heritage. This empowerment extends to other racial groups with similar histories, encouraging engagement and learning from the experience [9,10].

### 1.3. Ideate Concept

Immersive Environment: Based on Parong and Mayer's [13] research, learning performance improves in multimedia learning environments. This theory encouraged the utilization of VR technology to create a three-dimensional environment that simulates the space and medium of a real museum, complete with signs, multimedia exhibition, and interactive features. I took advantage of the virtual reality space and curated image, text, 3D model, audio and motion elements in the virtual reality museum(see Fig. 1), to create an immersive learning environment in the virtual space. I had to modify the elements multiple times for smooth navigation and avoid cognitive overload(see Fig. 2).contribution under a heading References, see our example below. Fig. 1 Elements label in VR museum floor plan.
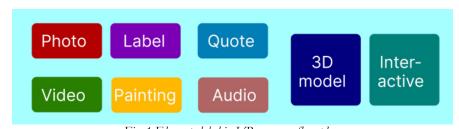


*Fig. 1 Elements label in VR museum floor plan.*

Accessibility: Providing access to the virtual museum across different VR platforms and devices, ensuring compatibility with various hardware setups to reach a wide audience. The Accessibility Virtual Reality YouTube channel helped a lot with the practical design process and software attachments. Benefited from using an open sourced platform Spatial, I can slowly proceed to add accessibility attachments in our VR museum.

*Fig. 2. VR museum floor plan with elements distribution.*

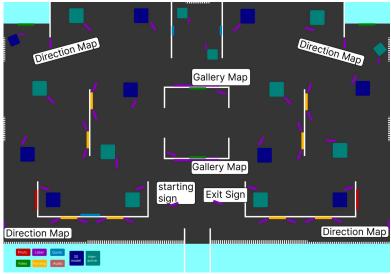Social Significance: Use multimedia content to demonstrate the various usage of banjos in the immersive environment. Utilize interactive features to enhance the engagement. From 3D model websites and official museum websites, I gathered banjo models from different years in history, and curated them around the virtual space based on the relative location and time. The combination of scanning and using existing 3D models is to ensure the accuracy, at the same time reducing cost and time for developing the VR museum. Emotional Value: Offering educational resources, guided explorations, and object based learning to enhance visitors' understanding of the museum's content and facilitate meaningful learning experiences. The figures following (see Fig. 3) showing the guided experience, the time region, and the locations I planned for visitors to explore.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Museums have long been informal learning institutions, showcasing artifacts to preserve culture and contribute to historical knowledge [17]. Traditionally, museums use spacious buildings to house exhibits, accompanied by text-based notes. To enhance visitor engagement, museum shave started incorporating audio and video elements and adopting digitization to offer virtual content accessible through websites.

The advancement of virtual reality (VR) technology has transformed museums, enhancing both experiences and digital engagement. VR headsets immerse users in multimedia environments, offering a more engaging way to convey messages [18]. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of VR, allowing museums to provide remote, interactive educational experiences

that complement traditional offerings. This research examines case studies and

research papers on three VR museum experiences, including our personal experiences, to uncover the benefits, limitations, and objectives of VR in museums.

On the Morning You Wake (to the End of the World): This VR documentary, about the threat of nuclear weapons, was emotionally impactful. It used immersive storytelling and expert consultations to convey its message. Plass et al. [16] found that VR experiences offered higher enjoyment and learning outcomes compared to 2-D tablet experiences, suggesting that VR's immersion and interactivity enhance user engagement and learning. Vintage Telecommunication Exhibition in 1960s Malaysia: Cheong et al. [17] explored the acceptance and usability of VR museums among young adults in Malaysia. Using high-resolution interfaces and interactive elements, the VR museum allowed users to navigate and interact with exhibits. The study found high usability and positive learning outcomes, though it acknowledged the need for a more diverse participant group.

E-Trouria App Based on Etruscan Museum in Rome: Poce et al. [14] developed a VR app using digital storytelling and reflective questioning to create personalized experiences. The VR museum focused on the female figure during the Etruscan age. Participants reported emotional engagement and positive experiences, though the soundtrack needed improvement. These studies demonstrate VR's transformative potential in museums, enhancing engagement and learning, which aligns with our project's objectives.

However, even with convincing potential of VR in education [19], these papers also highlight a gap in addressing accessibility for people with special needs. Future research should focus on inclusivity to fully leverage VR's benefits for enriching museum experiences.
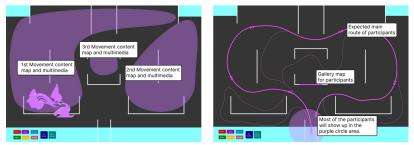


*Fig. 3. VR museum floor map with content distribution and movement guidance.*

## 3. DESIGN SOLUTION

Keeping in line with the paradigms brought in by new media, I hypothesize that incorporating multimedia elements such as sound, images, and videos can

significantly enhance the public's understanding of musical instruments. With these concepts in mind, I started the task of assembling 3D models of various instruments (see Fig. 4). I positioned descriptive screenshots adjacent to the models and embedded videos behind them, effectively crafting information capsules for each instrument. This layout not only ensures effective information delivery, but also reduces the cognitive burden for visitors. As our project progressed, I saw the potential to arrange the 3D models based on their geographical origins across the globe, tracing their developmental journey. Leveraging the strengths of VR technology, I integrated maps onto the virtual floor, marking the chronological placement of the 3D models. Guided by user-centered design principles [12], I ensured that the VR museum was intuitive and accessible, allowing for seamless exploration and interaction that empowers visitors to follow the trajectory and comprehend the instruments' evolution and transitions. By contextualizing paintings containing musical instrument elements with videos and text, I created a gallery of musical instruments with specially curated related information, all designed to provide participants the option to engage with the experience either through VR goggles or a web interface.



Fig. 4. VR museum multimedia display.

Upon clicking the shareable link, users undergo an initial process to select avatars, complete platform-provided training, and subsequently embark on their exploration of the VR museum. The notes are closely displayed next to the 3D models, alongside with images on virtual walls that enrich understanding. Through videos and text-based content, users gain profound insights into banjo history, sound, and playing techniques. The textual descriptions further illuminate the instrument's historical narrative

Fig. 5. Paintings featuring banjo elements.

The inclusion of paintings (see Fig. 5) featuring banjo elements stands as a highlight for much of the audience. This fixture offers users the opportunity to interact with historical evidence, immersing themselves in authentic settings that provide context and depicts the banjo's origins and evolution over time, with the diverse range of banjo players and distinct techniques among each becoming apparent. While some methods might have faded from contemporary musical practice, these paintings serve as enduring records of historical moments, reforming the broken links between our past and our present. This comprehensive approach accommodates diverse learning preferences and engagement modes, whether users opt for immersive VR goggles or a web-based experience.

At its core, our VR banjo museum serves as a faithful digital recreation of the instrument's journey throughout history, from conception to modern usage, all presented on a culturally-sensitive and appreciative platform.

1.  Learner Characteristics

To gain deeper insight into our potential users, I adopted Falk's [15] classification of museum visitor types from his book "The Museum Experience Revisited". The Contextual Model of Learning (see Fig. 6) combines three parts of the museum learning experience into one diagram, highlighting their interaction and connection. To cater to visitors with different purposes, I utilized activity theory as a framework and created three personas, each focusing on different aspects of the learning model [11]. I categorized the personas into three groups: Museum
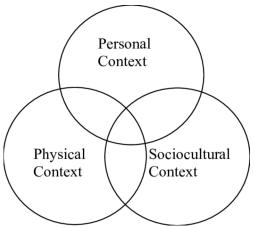
Fig. 6. The Contextual Model of Learning.

Enthusiastic, Musician (subject matter professionals), and Activity Facilitator. By developing these personas, we can tailor the virtual reality museum experience to meet the diverse needs and preferences of different visitor types. This approach ensures that the museum educates, engages, and inspires a broad audience, making the history and cultural significance of the banjo, accessible and enjoyable for all. To create realistic personas, I conducted in-person interviews, sent out surveys, and collected notes from informal conversations. This information helped generate three distinct personas, each with their own mission and purpose for visiting a museum(see Fig. 7).

For Musicians, I aim to attract them with a banjo-focused experience and music. Inspired by an Indian musician's story, I interviewed 5 to 6 musicians after their performances. I asked about their life stories with their instruments, what they seek in a museum visit, and what essential details should be included in a virtual reality environment. The musicians expressed interest and passion for the virtual reality museum and shared preferences for musical instrument-related museum experiences.

Fig. 7. Three personas for subject matter expert (upper left), museum enthusiastic (upper right), and activity facilitator (bottom middle).

The museum lover persona combines insights from museum professionals and enthusiasts I encountered in person and through webinars. During the Museum Education course, I consulted with museum educators interested in our VR project. Their ideal museum experiences and expectations were categorized and analyzed to find common themes.

Event Facilitators focus on socio-cultural expectations. Falk [15] noted that individuals' cultural backgrounds significantly influence their museum experience. I gathered insights from close friends who are passionate about seeking new events and planning trips. While most of our friends were female international students or employees, their feedback helped shape the persona. To ensure a more diverse perspective, I plan to extend interviews to community or school activity organizers. By developing these personas, I aim to create a virtual reality museum experience that is engaging, educational, and tailored to the diverse needs of its visitors.

## 4.     USER TESTING

### 4.1.    Testing Research Plan

To better understand and serve the participants, I conducted user testing to evaluate the acceptance of the VR technology and the effectiveness of the VR museum in helping participants gain knowledge of banjo history. I utilized the thinking-aloud protocol and user interviews to gather feedback from New York University students and community members.

Tasks:
1.      Create your own avatar in Spatial [20].
2.      Find the content for New York, 1736.
3.      Tell me what you learned from the current virtual reality experience.

User Feedback: Participants found the avatar creation process engaging and navigated the virtual space with ease. They expressed interest and empathy towards the banjo's history, with some suggesting the addition of background music and vocal explanations to enhance the experience.

*4.2.    Design Iteration*

With the valuable feedback from participants and subject matter experts, I improved the project for better user experience. By display interactive 3D models in the virtual space, I expect the participants can better focus on the historical content while interact with the models. I also modified the design style to ensure clear signage for a smooth experience flow, alongside with a self-paced vocal guide.

## 5.      CONCLUSION
The VR banjo museum project successfully demonstrates the potential of virtual reality to revolutionize the museum experience by providing an immersive, engaging, and educational platform. Through the integration of 3D models, paintings, videos, and enriched informational content, the VR museum offers a comprehensive exploration of the banjo's historical and cultural significance. The project addresses several challenges present in traditional museum settings, such as the separation between exhibits and descriptions and the cognitive load on visitors. By leveraging the capabilities of VR technology, the museum creates an environment that allows for open exploration and deeper understanding of the banjo's evolution and impact.

The development process highlighted the importance of user-centered design, drawing on the needs and preferences of different visitor personas to create a meaningful and accessible experience. The inclusion of musician interviews, detailed historical narratives, and interactive elements ensures that visitors can connect with the content on multiple levels. Additionally, the project underscores the importance of continuous updates and the application of educational theories to enhance visitor engagement and learning.

Overall, the VR banjo museum exemplifies how virtual reality can be harnessed to preserve and share cultural heritage in innovative ways. It offers a promising model for future VR museum projects, demonstrating the

potential to provide enriching, informative, and emotionally resonant experiences for diverse audiences. As technology continues to evolve, further research and development will undoubtedly expand the possibilities for VR in the museum sector, paving the way for even more transformative educational experiences.

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# The Role of Romance in Shaping Player Interactions in Thedas: Deconstructing Misogynoir and Fan Interpretations of Vivienne

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**Abstract:**

Racist and anti-Black depictions in media impact how the public perceives the lives of Black women. Dr. Moya Baily terms this as Misogynoir. Vivienne de Fer is an accomplished mage in the Fantasy game world of Thedas in the Dragon Age game franchise. Through fan reception and community board forums, it is also apparent that Vivienne de Fer is one of the most hated characters of all the companions. Black people are not always in control of our depiction in media. Often time representation comes from digitized minstrel stereotypes built upon the historically racist depictions of Black people in US History. This paper argues that the character Vivienne de Fer in Dragon Age: Inquisition exemplifies how interactive technology, through its narrative and mechanical limitations, reproduces the historical and racialized tropes of misogynoir, particularly through her exclusion from romantic subplots and fan rejection. As Dr. Kishonna Gray notes, the "racialized element inherent in mediated imagery further serves not only to limit agency but also to influence public perception of Black life" (Gray, 62). Games as emerging media became more visible in prominence in the 1990s and early 2000s. Interactive game worlds extend the function of romance as a literary genre by expanding the narrative and gameplay through character interactions. Digital games offer grounds for technological innovation in gaming spaces and alternative ways of community building. Apart from counter- public fan spaces, the histories and material consequences of misogynoir are rendered invisible in fan communities. In Dragon Age: Inquisition the romantic subplot of companion characters offers more context and immersion into the narrative of the game and the fictional world of Thedas. Vivienne, as the only Black character, is also one of the only companions the player cannot fully romance. Within a fictional game, Vivienne de Fer is still affected by the history and material consequences of misogynoir outside of the game space. As alluded to by Dr. Christine Tomlinson, Romance in a digital game can cause a deeper emotional impact and connection to the game through affect. Vivienne de Fer cannot escape the trope of ill-fated love parallelled in Western media. Through examining Vivienne de Fer's character and subplot romance in Dragon Age: Inquisition, I seek to illuminate how romance as a literary genre and Vivienne de Fer are

impacted by interactive technology, and misogynoir and thus influence fan interpretations and interactions in the context of digital games.

## Literary Genres and Black Romance

Black people are not always in control of our depiction in media. The stereotypical depiction of Black people as negative stereotypes further serves to remove their dignity and humanity and seeks to other Black people [1]. The stereotypes for Black women work in a multitude of ways through the machinist of race, gender, and class as it is mediated through media.

Genres in literature are often described as the negotiation of bounds and meaning between the audience and the author.[2]Within these bounds or institutions as Claudio Guillen terms, there must be signifiers that guide the engagement and interaction both overtly and subversively. Northrop Frye categorizes romance in literature as a type of wish fulfillment[2] that is both released from the anxieties of reality but is at the same time still contained within reality.

It is within the understanding of romance and the tensions of reality that Black romance sits. Within studies of romance in popular fiction narratives often center white relationships. As noted by both Margo Hendricks and Julie E. Moody-Freeman there is a lack of critical scholarship surrounding Black romance in the late twentieth and twenty-first century.[3]Within game studies, there is a sparsity of research at the intersection of Black Studies in games. Mirrored by research in romance as a literary genre, "Black romance has thrived despite an often dismissive or hostile romance community (here we are speaking of predominately white publishing and readership).

What sustained Black romance throughout the 1990s and to this day are Black readers." (Hendricks and Moody-Freeman) Black gamers, Black Fans and Black counter-public spaces have continued to Games.

Often, time representation comes from digitized minstrel stereotypes built upon the historically racist depictions of Black people in US History. Josephine Baker is considered one of the first Black women to star in a major motion picture in 1927. However, there are prior depictions of Black people by white actors. This is seen through Blackface, stage makeup that imitates social assumptions regarding African features, in 19th-century minstrel shows[4]. These films often carried a sense of nostalgia for pre-civil war America, with Black characters cast as ignorant, subservient, and often villainous. Even in times of triumph, such as Hattie McDaniel's winning an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for her role in Gone with the Wind in 1939 and as the first Black woman to win an award for

acting, the award was for the mammy character in the film. The Mammy is a caricature of Black women that evokes imagery of a larger Black woman in a subservient role to her employer or masters[5] .She is characterized as maternal, desexualized, strong-willed, and content to be enslaved. The character of Mammy in this way works to aid the political, social, and economic interests of mainstream America. The caricature of Black women, also evoked in mainstream media, is the Jezebel and the Sapphire. The Sapphire characterizes Black Women as assertive, Angry loud, controlling, and often antagonistic to white society and Black Men. While the Jezebel is characterized as being hypersexual, inherently promiscuous, and immoral.

These caricatures and stereotypes strip Black women of their individuality, and complexity and are harmful reductions of Black women's dignity. It is through understanding the legacy of racist depictions of Black women that we can begin to weave the connections and sit with the tensions arising within Black woman characters in Video Games and romance. Jim Crow era racist depiction and productions were built upon the expectation that Black people should always perform for white audiences without question. To be entertaining became ingrained with a Black person's acceptance into a space, even if that performance hinged on the dehumanization and stripping of the dignity of a Black person to conform to racism. Through the evolution of technology and culture, this expectation is mirrored in how fans engage with Black characters in video games.

Racist and anti-Black depictions in media impact how the public perceives the lives of Black women. Dr. Moya Baily terms this as Misogynoir[6] .Media depiction of love and Black women is influenced by the early 19th-century caricature of Black people and the stereotypes that arose for Black women, as it relates to class race, and gender. As Dr. Kishonna Gray notes, the "racialized element inherent in mediated imagery further serves not only to limit agency but also to influence public perception of Black life"[7]. Games as emerging media became more visible in prominence in the 1990s and early 2000s. Interactive game worlds extend the function of romance as a literary genre by expanding the narrative and gameplay through character interactions. Digital games offer grounds for technological innovation in gaming spaces and alternative ways of community building.

**Role-Playing games and Romance in Thedas**

In Dragon Age: Inquisition[8] the romantic subplot of companion characters offers more context and immersion into the narrative of the game and the fictional world of Thedas. Dragon Age

is a game franchise set in the fantasy world of Thedas. Within the fictional world of Thedas, there are multiple different races and Factions such as elves, dwarfs, Qunari, and Humans all with their actions and conflicts. The role of the player character is often cast as a hero throughout all four Dragon Age games. In Dragon Age: Origins the character is cast and known as the Warden while in Dragon Age: Inquisition the Player character eventually holds the title of Inquisitor.

Throughout the series, protagonists are tasked with stopping significant threats such as the blight, answering moral dilemmas with companion characters, and political strife. The themes of all four games in the franchise are power, autonomy, oppression, and freedom. In Dragon Age: Inquisition the player character, the inquisitor, is called to usher in peace during rising tensions eventually leading to a civil war between rebel mages and templars. It is the complex dialogue wheel, the narrative dialogue mechanic that Bioware, the development company, is known for. Dragon Age is built upon complex and nuanced relationships. Within complex relationships and revolving political and social questions asked of the player inside and outside of the game. Romance plays a key factor.

Romance in Digital games diverges from the traditional literary trope through its usage of player interaction and engagement. Romance in role-playing games often enhances engagement and emotional depth in the fictional game works. Through the usage of romance, players have agency. The option to romance characters and in turn have characters reject, betray, or nurture a romance with a companion character lends itself well to the relatability between player and game. Shaping the interactions also helps shape the outcomes of the story. However, it is through the combination of both impactful decisions that affect the narratives and nuanced characters that have stakes in the fictional world that romanceable characters strengthen a player's connection to the gamer world and build a more impactful storytelling experience. Romance in Roleplaying games may also serve as a tool for inclusivity. Often in Roleplaying games, there are multiple fantastic races with histories that differ from heteronormative expectations and social scripts. By allowing players to pursue different genders, sexual orientations, and relationship styles, roleplaying games broaden the appeal of the game to a wider audience. In role-playing games such as Dragon Age: Inquisition, Romance deepens not only the player's engagement with the fictional world through added stakes but also functions as a narrative tool to introduce different perspectives and moralistic choices depending on who you romance.

The role of romance in Dragon Age, simultaneously in other RPGs, is to enhance the player's emotional investment in the game through intertwining connections, attachments, and stakes. Romance in this way allows the players a sense of agency through choices that can reflect values and desires. Within Dragon Age: Inquisition, certain romances are locked depending on the player-character race and gender choice during the character creation. Also factored in is the player fighting class that either increases or decreases likability and how the world reacts to your player character in Thedas. Each companion character in Dragon Age: Inquisition is a complex character with deeply intertwined histories and goals tied into the game plot. The Narrative in Dragon Age hinges on the decisions of the player. Similarly, who the player romances impact so many aspects of the game plot. The romance in Dragon Age of companions' characters allows players to directly impact the companion's character development and shape the political and social outcomes in the world of Thedas. Dragon Age: Inquisition has a gated romance system.

This system within a Role-playing game system, encourages the player to make a distinguished protagonist in the character creator with a variety of backgrounds. This modified protagonist player will then open or close specific aspects of the game and narrative. Dragon Age: Inquisition is also one of the AAA that has inclusive queer narratives and romance at the forefront of its plot. The mix of circumstances, player choices, and mixing of dynamics allows players to have multiple playthroughs with a variety of experiences and new lore within the game world.

Vivienne der Fer, often referred to as Madame De Fer, is an ambitious and powerful mage. She is a high-ranking courier and a member of the circle of magi. Within the empire, a high-ranking courtier is expected to play the often-deadly game of politics. She eventually becomes a First Enchanter, the head of the loyal mages to the religious chantry group. As a companion and character, Vivienne is charming and intelligent. She was born into a merchant family from Dairsmuid in Rivain, however, due to her magical abilities she faced hardship and persecution. While Vivienne is born into a noble family her race and a Black woman, and magical abilities cause others to look down on her with prejudice and discrimination. When placed in the circle, she quickly rose to the highest ranks with a desire for political power, influence, and mage independence. In Dragon Age: Inquisition, the player characters have a variety of leadership options that companions approve or disapprove of depending on their moral values and character backgrounds. Vivienne prefers the approach that balances power and order rather than chaos. She believes in reform

rather than revolution. Of the inquisitor's companions Vivienne tends to side with the templars and chantry as she leans towards pragmatism and stability to advance mage independence. Vivienne is a character who strongly stands by her values. Vivienne is portrayed as an institutional loyalist, supporting the Chantry and traditional power structures. While this makes her ideologically distinct, it also positions her in opposition to the often rebellious, reformist path many players choose. Unlike other companions who might shift their views based on player actions, Vivienne resists change and challenges the player's authority. This inflexibility can frustrate players who seek validation or ideological alignment from their party members. In the game she is often at odds with the companions and even the inquisitor depending on the players' dialogue choice, when confronted with disagreement or arguments Vivienne masterfully guides the conversation to her advantage. Vivienne's personal quest, while polished and politically intriguing, is relatively static and does not allow for a significant shift in the character's development based on player choices. Other companions' quests often provide opportunities for vulnerability, personal growth, or ideological alignment with the player character. The lack of such flexibility in Vivienne's arc can feel distancing, making it harder for players to influence or emotionally engage with her narrative. Her storyline maintains her elite status and power but offers little room for transformation or deeper relational connection. It is through side conversations and companion quests that the player unveils that Vivienne as a character wants to shape the world on her terms, even at the expense of personal ideals if the outcome champions order and influence. Vivienne's dialogue is often formal, guarded, and intellectually sharp, which some players interpret as cold or arrogant. Unlike other characters who gradually open to the player through humor, trauma, or confession, Vivienne remains composed and somewhat emotionally impenetrable. This reinforces the "strong Black woman" trope, where strength and competence are emphasized at the expense of emotional depth. As a result, many players find it difficult to relate to her on a personal level. Throughout the narrative, Vivienne's character arc makes it clear that she values self-preservation and calculated pragmatism. Vivienne de Fer is notably the only female companion in Dragon Age: Inquisition who cannot be romanced by the player, regardless of gender or choices. This absence of a romance arc significantly limits the player's ability to form an emotional bond with her, especially in a game where romantic subplots enhance narrative depth and player immersion. By contrast, other companions offer rich, branching romance paths that invite intimacy and player investment. Vivienne's exclusion reinforces

the feeling that she is emotionally inaccessible or "othered" within the companion lineup.

**Madame Vivienne de Fer and Misogynoir**

In Dragon Age: Inquisition Vivienne de Fer, as the only Black character, is also one of the only companions the player cannot fully romance. Her role in the inquisition leans heavily into advisor for the player-character. It is a combination of her character's pragmatism and her guarded stance on relationships that portray Vivienne as a difficult character to develop a romance with. Her commitments remain focused on her ambitions, mage independence, and the world-ending Threat in Thedas.

Vivienne is a complex and well-written character. However, within Dragon: Age Inquisition her reception was mixed and even negative. Multiple factors weigh into fans' dislike of her character, the first of which is her stance on the mage templar war. Like many of the Inquisitor's companions, Vivienne has a strong stance that is impacted by her character's background.

Vivienne's stance on order over chaos is read as oppressive in comparison to other player characters, such as Solas who leans more into rebellion and chaos. Fans view her as anti- revolutionary or conservative. In addition to this reading, Vivienne rose to First Enchanter of Montsimmard at an early age in her circle and captured the attention of Duke Bastien de Ghislain, whom she would later become a mistress. Vivienne, through her charm and intelligence, gained the position of first enchanter to Empress Celene in the Orlais court, taking a role once considered like a jester and turning it into an advisory position to the empress.

Characters such as Vivienne, who is seen as an Anti-villainess, a character with noble goals but questionable methods, are often popular with fans. However, it is with Vivienne that fans very readily dislike and often leave her out of party configurations during open-world exploration and combat. This is of note as many of the player-character and companion bantering and dialogue happens with the four-person parties exploring and fighting in Dragon Age. Outside of personal companion arcs, party banter is another key way characters can gain additional information and expand narratives. The players' choice to completely keep Vivienne out of the companion party erases her perspective. As noted in Dragon Age, companion bantering offers additional lore and context for the world of Thedas, Emotional connection with the companions, and exploration of the character's personality. In other non-Black characters, Vivienne's championing of pragmatism and arrogance is seen as desirable and positive. However, when placed upon a Black non-playable companion

character in a fantasy role-playing game these characteristics are seen as undesirable[9]. This is due to Vivienne being both Black and a Woman.

Vivienne de Fer cannot escape the trope of ill-fated love parallelled in Western media. Within a fictional game, Vivienne de Fer is still affected by the history and material consequences of misogynoir outside of the game space. Vivienne is not exempt from the intersecting of her identity as a Black woman, or misogynoir, which impacts her through prejudice and discrimination. Within Thedas Vivienne must navigate not only classism but racism and sexism. As alluded to by Dr. Christine Tomlinson, Romance in a digital game can cause a deeper emotional impact and connection to the game[10]. Through examining Vivienne de Fer's character and subplot romance in Dragon Age: Inquisition, I seek to illuminate how romance as a literary genre and Vivienne de Fer are impacted by interactive technology, and misogynoir and thus influence fan interpretations and interactions in the context of digital games. The inability of players to engage in a romantic relationship with Vivienne significantly diminishes their emotional connection to her character. As a result, this lack of emotional investment may lead players to overlook and undervalue Vivienne's contributions and insightful perspectives regarding the ongoing conflict in Thedas within Dragon Age: Inquisition. This disconnect prevents players from projecting their values and aspirations onto their character. When players do not see their ideals reflected in Vivienne, they are less likely to engage with her character.

Vivienne as an un-romanceable character, perpetuates the harmful stereotype that Black women are undesirable or unworthy of romance. This perception is often shaped by prevailing narratives concerning her identity as a Black woman, both within and outside the Dragon Age franchise.

Vivienne is often viewed as cold and unrelatable. Through the reproduction of harmful historical and racialized tropes rooted in misogynoir—particularly her exclusion from romantic subplots and frequent fan rejection—Vivienne de Fer is stripped of dignity and framed as other[11], even within a fantastical world where magic, dragons, and parallel systems of oppression exist. Her characterization, shaped by player agency, underscores how deeply real-world biases can persist and manifest in fictional spaces, ultimately rendering her as less human and emotionally inaccessible. Black characters who are emotionally reserved and pragmatic in their interactions in-game narratives are uniquely situated. Black characters and people have been historically expected to perform and entertain

due to the legacy of chattel slavery and the continuing effects of Jim Crow. when a Black character in a game environment refuses to perform in the way players expect, especially when player integrations in games have trained us to expect specific bound rules and outcomes with players cast as the savior in their plot narrative. It creates tensions. It inadvertently blurs the line between game interactions and fandom engagement toward wider social implications. Her portrayal as a mistress to Duke Bastien revealed through her companion side quest and personal storyline, aligns her with damaging romantic tropes and stereotypes associated with Black women in literature. Given the historical context of racist depictions, players may inadvertently draw upon the legacies of racism, discrimination, and prejudice prevalent in mainstream media, resulting in a skewed perception of Vivienne as a character. For fans who express disdain toward Vivienne de Fer, this sentiment can extend to other marginalized and Black characters within the Dragon Age Fan community. Such negative perceptions risk alienating Black fans and creating a hostile environment for marginalized individuals. In a fandom and genre of role-playing games that has historically struggled with inclusivity for Black fans, there is a significant risk of disengagement or exclusion from community involvement. The exclusion of Black fans undermines their efforts to advocate for positive representation of Black characters and the inclusive narrative of the Dragon Age franchise. As their desire for authentic representation diminishes, game developers and studios may inadvertently reinforce damaging stereotypes or fail to create more nuanced characters like Vivienne. The decision not to allow Madame Vivienne de Fer to be romanceable adversely impacts her character, perpetuating the harmful stereotype that Black women are neither desirable nor worthy of romance, even within a fantastical role-playing game filled with magic and dragons.

Vivienne de Fer is an accomplished mage in the Fantasy game world of Thedas in the Dragon Age game franchise. Through fan reception and community board forums, it is also apparent that Vivienne de Fer is one of the most hated characters of all the companions. Vivienne de Fer is frequently cited in fan forums, Reddit threads, and YouTube discussions as one of the least liked companions in Dragon Age: Inquisition. Common criticisms label her as arrogant, condescending, or emotionally distant. While some players admire her style, intelligence, and magical prowess, these positive remarks are often overshadowed by the prevailing dislike. The intensity of this reaction is notably disproportionate compared to how players respond to other strong-willed or formal companions,

suggesting deeper social dynamics at play. While the inability to romance Vivienne frustrates some players, it is not the sole reason behind her negative reception. Much of the dislike stems from her perceived coldness, loyalty to powerful institutions, and unwillingness to challenge the status quo. These character traits, combined with her sharp tone and formality, are often read as hostile rather than complex. Many of these criticisms mirror longstanding racialized and gendered stereotypes, such as the "angry Black woman" or the "unapproachable strong Black woman," highlighting how identity politics inform player reactions.

Bioware developers have largely remained silent on the intense fan backlash directed at Vivienne de Fer, offering little public commentary on her reception. While writers like Patrick Weekes and David Gaider have occasionally acknowledged the polarized response to her character, they have rarely engaged with the role that race, and gender dynamics may play in shaping that response.

Behind-the-scenes materials suggest that Vivienne was intentionally designed to embody elegance, confidence, and political savvy—qualities inspired by powerful real-world Black women such as Michelle Obama. However, these design intentions often fail to resonate with players, many of whom interpret her composure and assertiveness as arrogance[12] or coldness. Public forum comments across Reddit, Fextralife, Bioware social network, game wikis, and fan discussions frequently describe her as "stuck-up," "condescending," or "hard to like," with some players expressing open disdain for her lack of emotional vulnerability or ideological flexibility. Forum commentators such as Davesin[13] and Phoray[14] have noted that their initial dislike of Vivienne stemmed from a perceived emotional distance and the lack of romance options, which limited opportunities to connect with her character. This disconnect often led them to disregard her side quests and exclude her from their active party during gameplay. However, after multiple playthroughs and engaging with the Trespasser DLC, both players expressed a shift in perspective. They came to recognize Vivienne's depth, political complexity, and the subtle nuances of her character, ultimately gaining a greater appreciation for her role within the narrative and the broader world of the Dragon Age. In other forums where players question the decision for Vivienne to not be romancable it is noticeable that users such as BossAttach[15] allude to Vivienne as "fuck Vivienne she's basically the house nigger[16]." Persistent negativity, often rooted in racialized and gendered expectations, goes largely unaddressed by the developers. The lack of official engagement with the racialized elements of Vivienne's reception reflects a broader discomfort within

the gaming industry around confronting misogynoir and the ways it manifests in fan communities. The Dragon Age: Inquisition – Trespasser DLC expands on Vivienne de Fer's character, though the depth of this development has been a point of debate among players and critics. Set two years after the main game, Vivienne is appointed Grand Enchanter of the Circle of Magi, positioning her at the forefront of mage politics. Depending on player choices, she may either lead a reformed Circle or navigate political maneuvering to maintain her power, offering insight into her political acumen and complexity. However, some fans feel her character arc in Trespasser remains underdeveloped compared to other companions, with critiques noting that Vivienne's storyline lacks the depth of others. In summary, while Trespasser provides additional layers to Vivienne's character, some players believe it does not fully explore the complexities of her role, particularly in terms of race and gender dynamics.

Since Dragon Age: Inquisitions initial release date in 2009 other Black companion characters in Dragon Age has been subjected to a mixed review or dislike of the character, such as Davrin a Black male warden companion who is romanceable in the newest installment in the Dragon Age: Veilguard. A similar fan reception occurred in the 2023 game of the year Baulders Gate 3, with a romanceable companion character Wyll Ravengard Blade of the Frontiers, a warlock, and a main party member. Other notable Black woman RPG companions of note include Pallegina mes Rèi in 2018 Pillars of Eternity II a recruitable avion-like companion with the paladin class. And Seelah a paladin in 2021 Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous. Within high-budget, high-profile, or AAA Role-playing games there have been few Black woman characters since the half-romance and flirt dialogue in Dragon Age: Inquisition Vivienne de fer. The few included in the games as companions, often players are unable to fully romance them, or they are unromanced and disliked by fans in the community.

Literary genres are often understood as a negotiation of boundaries and meanings between the audience and the author. Digital games provide a platform for technological innovation within gaming environments and foster alternative methods of community building. However, beyond the counter-public fan spaces, the histories and material repercussions of misogynoir remain obscured within fan communities. The expectation for entertainment has become intrinsically linked to a Black person's acceptance within a space, often demanding performance or adhering to social norms that dehumanize and undermine their dignity to align with prevailing racist

norms, even when the Black people are characters within a fantasy game world as non-playable companion characters. This expectation reflects the evolving interplay of technology and culture, particularly in how fans engage with Black women as non-playable companion characters and romance in video games.

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16. Sanitizing or censoring slurs and harmful language erases the material reality of how misogynoir functions, minimizing the violence Black women face in both digital and real-world spaces. Preserving this language in its original form is an act of solidarity that confronts audiences with the full weight of that harm rather than shielding them from discomfort.

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16) Sanitizing or censoring slurs and harmful language erases the material reality of how misogynoir functions, minimizing the violence Black women face in both digital and real-world spaces. Preserving this language in its original form is an act of solidarity that seeks to other Black people

# Extended Abstracts

# Playing with Orientalism in How to Host a Murder's Hoo Hung Wu

# Game Play and Race Play in 1980s Analogue Games

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**ABSTRACT**

Hoo Hung Wu is a murder mystery dinner party hosting kit, written by Anne L. and Robert R. Johnson, published by Decipher Inc. in 1986, as the sixth installment of their series How to Host a Murder[1]. Inside the game box are eight player booklets, eight invitations, a host's guide to running the mystery, six pieces of evidence, name tags, and a cassette tape explaining the details of the murder. The host booklet also includes suggestions for costumes and food, and a recipe for "Hoo Hung Wu Casserole". Hoo Hung Wu stands apart from the other murder mysteries in the How to Host a Murder series, since it is the only game not set in Europe or the United States. Additionally, it is the only game with a full cast of non-white characters.

Hoo Hung Wu reproduces many tropes of Asian characters building on decades of stereotypical representation. The female characters fit the "images of exoticism and docility [that] socially and psychologically impact Asian American women," explored in the 1986 documentary Slaying the Dragon: Asian Women in U.S. Television and Film[2]. Their narratives in the game are reduced to sexual exploits. The men are incompetent and feminized, unable to assert themselves in the world. The game not only creates a racist fictionalization of China, but layers in flawed understandings of Japanese and Korean culture as well.

In addition, the game imposes the culture of the United States onto Asia. Characters names are puns of English phrases, but mangled to fit an irreverent form of dialect humour. Names like "Hao Dee Doo" and "Hoo Li-Gan" are not elaborate jokes about characters, but instead form a very surface-level joke about Chinese language. Place names such as "Chi Ka Go" and the "Mis-Si-Pi River" highlight the ways in which Orientalist works re-map the Occident on to the Orient, creating a landscape exotic yet familiar[3][4].

In this paper, I build on Tara Strong's idea of Ludo-Orientalism to unpack the ways in which Hoo Hung Wu not only replicates Asian representational tropes, but reinforces them "at the invisible level of game mechanics."[5]. Players are expected to speak the racist names out loud. By

demanding active participation in racist humour (cooking food, mispronouncing words, dressing up in appropriated costumes), the players create a performative imitation of China from the comfort and privacy of their home.

The gameplay of Hoo Hung Wu also highlights power issues contained within traditional understandings of "the magic circle."[6]. Not only does the game replicate Orientalist tropes, the magic circle protects players who engage in racist play, since in theory all players agreed to the rules when they entered the circle of play. Like playing as Asian characters in video games, players are given the chance to "appropriate an Asian racial identity without any of the risks associated with being a racial minority in real life."[7]. It is not "just a game" for Asian players, and instead can encourage complicity with racist material[8].

This project touches on multiple themes and goals of the BIPOC games conference. I am examining Hoo Hung Wu's place in broader cultural narratives around Asian representation in gaming, exploring how the game uses identity and expression. I offer a critical perspective on Asian representation in gaming, showcasing past challenges to achieving DEI in gaming. The representation in Hoo Hung Wu also has a social impact. The game aims to represent minority groups, but does so offensively. My project offers a unique perspective on these themes, and contributes to the growing body of work exploring BIPOC representation in analogue games.

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# Expectation versus Reality

# Black Millennial Fandom of the Yu-Gi-Oh! Trading Card Game

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## ABSTRACT

There is a racial divide in trading card game (TCG) fandoms. Some player communities, like that of Magic: Thee Gathering, are overwhelmingly white. Others have more diverse player bases. The Yu-Gi-Oh! TCG community particularly stands out for the visibility of Black men in the fandom both online and off. Olympic sprinter Noah Lyles made this especially clear when he flashed a Yu-Gi-Oh! card at the camera at the 2024 Olympic Trials, but Black men are popular figures in Yu-Gi-Oh! fandom even on more mundane levels. this presentation highlights Team APS, a Black-owned YouTube channel that is one of the most popular Yu-Gi-Oh! channels on the platform. By analyzing the stories Team APS tells through their YouTube videos, I explore what has made Yu-Gi-Oh! popular among Black millennial men to a degree that other TCGs are not.

I analyze Black Yu-Gi-Oh! fandom through the lens of reachability, a framework for mapping out the kinds of gaps that stand between raced (or classed, gendered, etc.) players and a game, and the sorts of bridges that help players cross those gaps. Derived from Sara Ahmed's [1] theorization of race as a "corporeal schema," reachability asks scholars to consider how easy it for players to find games, learn how to play them, join communities, and make social connections. It demands that scholars zoom out from games as texts to consider how the racial dynamics of gaming communities are shaped by economic, social, political, and cultural context. I develop reachability through a thematic analysis of thirty videos created by Team APS. The set of videos spanned a variety of genres, from comedic skits about Yu-Gi-Oh! player archetypes to talking head discussions of issues facing the Yu-Gi-Oh! player base. I watched each video carefully, listening and coding for repeated themes in how the seven Black creators behind Team APS talked about the coincidences and serendipities that led to them to enter and stay in the Yu-Gi-Oh! player community.

By proposing and theorizing reachability, I show how circumstances outside of analog gaming culture placed the Yu-Gi-Oh! trading card game in reach of Black boys who were disconnected from older generations of TCG fans who could have introduced them to and mentored them through the

challenges of mastering this sometimes arcane game genre. Team APS's videos tell stories of Black boys who watched the 2001 anime Yu-Gi-Oh! on the WB each Saturday mornings and learned the ropes of the card game from the program's dramatized matches. They begged their parents for starter card decks displayed in the aisles of Walmart, Toys 'R Us, and Books-A-Million. They played games and competed in tournaments at places familiar to them and their families: school playgrounds, city parks, public libraries, bookstores, and water parks. Read through the lens of reachability, the accounts of Yu-Gi-Oh! fandom in Team APS videos show how global television flows, the pedagogical possibilities of Saturday Morning Cartoons, and the embrace of geeky commodities by big box retailers positioned Yu-Gi-Oh! as an on-ramp into analog gaming for Black boys who did not have social or cultural connections to white analog gaming cultures. Finally, seizing on one story told about a

Team APS member's sister whose Yu-Gi-Oh! fandom did not last beyond her childhood, I use reachability to show how the gendered nature of the toy market, girl's representation in the Yu-Gi-Oh! anime, and hostile gaming spaces and communities made the Yu-Gi-Oh! TCG unreachable for many Black girls.

Building on scholarship about how social networks shape the race and gender dynamics of geek, nerd, and gaming culture [2,3,4,5,6], this analysis of Black Yu-Gi-Oh! fandom demonstrates how Black gaming cultures, analog or digital, cannot be understood without considering how they are situated within global media flows, media industry decisions, and local geographies, even if those factors appear unrelated to either race or gaming cultures.

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# A Greater History of Video Games

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This presentation situates the early DOOM games (1993-4) developed by id Software within longer historical tensions between settler colonialism [1] and survivance [2], by asking a seemingly simple question inspired by the transformative power of what Philip Deloria refers to as "the Greater X," "where X is any standard narrative, event, or structuring device of U.S. history, now rethought to include American Indian people." [3] The question is: How might narratives of video game history be transformed when centering the political status of John Romero, a founding member of id Software, as American Indian? It answers this question by way of a close reading of a specific video game "Easter egg" as a fusion of a covert "mechropolitical" device [4] and American Indian humor [5] embedded within the final level of DOOM II (1994)—the much-anticipated sequel to the popular, gory, and networked first-person shooter DOOM (1993). Residing behind the final boss—in a location invisible to the player but fully present in the code—is an impaled severed head of the game's Cherokee and Pascua Yaqui designer, John Romero. Long regarded as an "Easter egg," Romero's head exists as both a visual and playable object, insofar as the hidden head is what the player is actually, without their knowledge, doing damage to when they battle Doom II's final boss, Icon of Sin.

The visual politics of Romero's head conform strikingly to a much deeper history of physical and symbolic violence towards Native Americans within the United States, however, it is not just these aspects of this artifact that are of interest to this analysis; "Romero's head" is accompanied by an audio message which Romero himself hid in this final level, as a response to finding his head in the game before the game's release—a humorously sardonic message that arguably saved face with his fans. Despite the audio message complicating the politics of the Easter egg, its significance has been confined largely to origin stories of office pranks and youthful recklessness, including those told by Romero. [6] To address these discursive limitations and to bring meaning to the Easter egg, this presentation hierarchizes the placement of the Romero Easter egg, hidden within the game's ludic, technological, representational, and discursive structures. [7] The presentation concludes with considerations on the consequent ramifications of a refigured DOOM within the field of video game history, and in turn, this field within a much broader cultural history of play within the United States. That is, the aim of cracking the Easter egg's "discursive shell," so to speak, is to create a historiographic chain reaction that works to further dislodge video games from a position of exceptionality while recognizing the unique ways in which

computing technologies continue to both obfuscate and disseminate settler-Indigenous tensions across the rapidly shrinking post-1990s world.

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# Preserving and Promoting Latine Cultural Heritage Through Gaming

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Games are a powerful tool for preserving and promoting cultural heritage, offering immersive educational experiences unique from traditional methods. Key studies have highlighted games' potential: Barwick et al. (2010) showcased games as comparative tools in cultural contexts; Mortara et al. (2014) demonstrated games' educational efficacy in cultural heritage; Hasibuan et al. (2011) emphasized game-based learning for engaging youth in cultural narratives; and Porikia et al. (2019) highlighted games' significant role in both preserving and transmitting cultural values and histories. Together, these works underline the significant role of games as dynamic platforms for cultural engagement, education, and preservation.

In this extended abstract, I present my viewpoint as a Latina researcher and game developer on using games for preserving and promoting Latine* cultural heritage. I aim to delineate ways game developers can contribute to cultural preservation, highlighting both the potential opportunities and challenges. While centered on Latine culture, because of the personal significance and rich heritage, the ideas discussed may inspire similar efforts in other cultural contexts. This paper seeks to spark a wider conversation and encourage others to consider the intersection of gaming and cultural preservation, especially in underrepresented communities.

## 2 OPPORTUNITIES

Simulation Games: These games recreate aspects of a culture, such as festivals, rituals, or historical events. For instance, a game could simulate a "Dia de los Muertos," celebration allowing players to experience the festival's vibrant colors, music, and traditions. To ensure authenticity, developers must engage with cultural stakeholders, including cultural historians and artists, and prioritize their focus on cultural understanding rather than commercial success.

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* Throughout this paper, the term 'Latine' is used to refer to the diverse communities and individuals of Latin American descent. This term is preferred over Latinx as it is more inclusive and linguistically friendly to Spanish speakers. 'Latine' respects the gender-neutral language structure in Spanish and is increasingly recognized for its inclusivity, encompassing all gender identities within the Latin American diaspora. My use of 'Latine' reflects a commitment to both cultural accuracy and inclusivity.

• Venba: Recreates cultural traditions and practices, such as cooking authentic South Indian dishes (Visai Games 2023).

Narrative and Storytelling: Many games use strong narrative elements to tell stories rooted in cultural myths and legends. For example, a game set in pre-Columbian civilizations could offer insights into Latine mythology, bringing ancient stories to life through interactive storytelling.

• Mulaka: A game based on the mythology of the Tarahumara people from Mexico, exploring their culture through an interactive narrative (Lienzo 2018).

Language Preservation: Games can be instrumental in teaching and preserving languages. For Latine cultures with indigenous languages, such as Quechua or Nahuatl, games can serve as an engaging way to learn and practice these languages, which are often at risk of being lost.

• Sethian: A puzzle game where players learn a fictitious language (Duang! Games 2016).

Cultural Representation in Game Design: This involves incorporating cultural art, music, and aesthetics into game design. This could mean using traditional Latine art styles or music genres like Mariachi, Cumbia, or Salsa, giving players a sensory experience of the culture.

• Okami: A love letter to Japanese art and mythology, presented in a sumi-e ink painting style (CAPCOM Co.
2017).

Collaborations with Cultural Experts: To ensure authenticity, developers must go beyond basic consultation and involve cultural experts as co-creators and decision-makers. While some studios like Ubisoft have included historians and scholars, these efforts often lack depth. Long-term, equitable partnerships that give cultural contributors creative agency can lead to more respectful, representative, and meaningful games.

• Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna): Developed in collaboration with Alaska Native elders and storytellers (Upper
One Games 2014).

## 3 COMPUTER CODE

**Balancing Accuracy and Entertainment**: One of the primary challenges is maintaining cultural accuracy while ensuring the game is engaging. There's a risk of oversimplifying or misrepresenting complex cultural elements to make them more "game-friendly."

**Cultural Sensitivity and Appropriation**: Games focusing on cultural heritage must navigate the fine line between representation and

appropriation. It's crucial to portray cultures respectfully and avoid stereotypes, which requires deep understanding and sensitivity.

**Commodification and Exploitation in the Game Industry**: While games can support cultural preservation, they also risk commodifying marginalized cultures. AAA studios have often extracted cultural elements for visual or narrative appeal without properly compensating or crediting the communities involved. This can strip traditions of their meaning, turning them into entertainment props. To avoid repeating these harmful patterns, developers must carefully consider whose stories are being told, by whom, and for whose benefit.

**Technical and Financial Constraints**: Developing high-quality games that accurately represent a culture can be resource-intensive. Smaller game studios, independent developers, and more, may face financial and technical challenges in producing such games.

**Accessibility and Reach**: Ensuring that the games are accessible to the community they represent is another challenge. This includes language options, affordability, and availability on platforms that are widely used within these communities.

**Dynamic Nature of Culture:** Cultures are not static; they evolve over time. Games that represent a specific cultural moment or aspect can become outdated, requiring updates to reflect cultural changes.

Educational Integration: Integrating these games effectively into educational curricula or cultural preservation efforts requires collaboration with educators and cultural institutions, which can be a logistical and bureaucratic challenge.

## 4 CALL TO ACTION

I urge developers to collaborate closely with the Latine community, ensuring cultural authenticity and respect in their projects. By involving community members in key roles and supporting Latine creators, we can create games that not only entertain but also preserve and promote our rich heritage. It's my hope that the suggestions outlined above inspire a movement towards cultural preservation in gaming, setting an example that extends beyond Latine culture.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Embracing games as a medium for preserving and promoting Latine cultural heritage holds immense potential. This approach offers engaging and dynamic ways to connect people to their own heritage and also introduce others to new cultures. While this path is fraught with challenges, including the need for accurate and respectful representation, overcoming these obstacles can transform games into powerful tools for cultural preservation. They offer a unique fusion of entertainment and education, appealing to a wide audience. It is essential to foster collaboration with the Latine

community, ensuring authenticity and inclusivity in every game that celebrates our heritage.

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# Clones and their (All)Mother: Postmemory, Techno-Orientalism, and Asian Diasporic Gaming in 1000xResist (2024)

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## 1 ABSTRACT

The indie success of 1000xResist (2024), the debut game developed by the Asian-Canadian indie studio Sunset Visitor, attests to an emergent genre of "Asian diasporic" games. Like Venba (2023), Thirsty Suitors (2023) or games developed by Analgesic Productions before it, 1000xResist tackles themes such as migration, intergenerational trauma, and family dynamics of the Asian diasporic subject. Most importantly, despite the seeming over-representations of Asian or Asiatic subjects in mainstream, triple-A gaming, these developers insist that there is value in Asian developers telling these stories themselves [1].

In this paper, I examine 1000xResist and how it resignifies tropes associated with techno-Orientalism. Techno-Orientalism names how Asia and Asians are imagined in hyper-technological terms [2]. 1000xResist unfolds its narrative by centering its gameplay around the techno-Orientalist trope of the clone—specifically, a society of clones a thousand years in the future, all of whom are copies of a Vancouver teenager and child of Hong Kong immigrants, Iris Law. I argue that 1000xResist queries and queers the trope of the clone, and in doing so, uses it to interrogate Hong Kong's vexed postcoloniality. Against techno-Orientalist conceptions of the interchangeability and disposability of Asian bodies and labor, what we witness as the main character, "Watcher," is how clones contain within themselves the seeds of resistance against tyranny in multiple contexts, from the Hong Kong protests in 2019 to the militarized "Red Guards" occupying the Iris-clone society many generations later. My paper suggests that we should read these clones as fictional, proliferating "postmemory" subjects of the 2019 protests: that is, in Marianne Hirsch's words, the subsequent generation's "relationship…to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their birth but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" [3]. In gamifying postmemory—traces of memory and resistance even countless generations of clones could inherit—1000xResist politicizes the Asian diasporic game, queering techno-Orientalist tropes to resist forgetting as a method of anti-imperial and anti-authoritarian struggle.

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# Procedural Blackness, or How to Read a Loss of Ontological Resistance in Video Games

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# 1 ABSTRACT

Within video games, racial representation and critique is often too complex and too slippery to take a given character's racial or ethnic signification at face value. That is, video games' complex interplay of mechanics, theme, narrative, globalized development teams, and fluid player dis-/identifications complicate in-game racial and ethnic legibility, while also opening up new and promising areas for subversive social commentary [1]. For example, the oft-theorized aesthetic of "cultural odorlessness" that characterizes many prominent Japanese videogames has produced games such as Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeros that initially affect a placelessness and ethnic non-specificity, which close-reading reveals to be a screen for a deeply Japanese worldview that critiques Western hegemony [2, 3]. Thus, in order to read race and ethnicity in games, scholars must attend to how video games index and enact the real world structures and processes that subtend race and ethnicity and produce their contemporary forms [4]. Specific to race, I argue that tracing its forms within video games requires tracing how games index and enact a societally induced loss of ontological resistance. I make this argument via analyses of the video games Prey and The Sinking City [5, 6]. Via its skill tree and its choice-dependent ending, Prey proceduralizes both anti-Black and anti-Asian racism in a way that, I argue, turns any given playthrough into an encounter with and critique of those forms of racism and their ongoing production of race in the United States. At the same time, Prey does this work in a way that complicates the racial legibility of its characters and truly complicates racial representation as such. By turns, The Sinking City participates in H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, at the same time that the game critiques the anti-black racism that suffused Lovecraft's stories. This game further draws a parallel between Lovecraft's cosmic fear of the Other and xenophobic responses to the European Union's 2015 refugee crisis. Further, The Sinking City merges this thematic critique with a core game loop that compels the player to abrade the temporal and psychic boundaries between subjects and events and thereby trouble the ontological edges of things. Both games thus enact a loss of ontological resistance. Drawing on Franz Fanon, I understand a loss of ontological resistance to be the state of being held captive to another's concepts — the state of losing one's tether to alternative ontologies that could oppose imperialist claims on oneself [7].

Fanon frames this loss as a key feature of how blackness was and is produced in our white supremacist world. I would argue that this loss is a key feature of racialization more broadly, for white supremacy turns most of the world's peoples into mere standing reserves for its machinations. In order to distinguish between different forms of racialization that involve a loss of ontological resistance, I draw on another of Fanon's concepts — epidermalization, or the manner in which skin accrues meaning over time such that it begins to index stereotypes and otherwise oppressive stories. Thus, I argue that tracing race in video games requires attending to moments in which there is a procedural and/or thematic loss of ontological resistance and then attending to how implicated characters are marked in relation to that loss. Further, I understand that given centuries of oppression, black skin in the Americas has come to index the process of racialization itself. That is, black skin indexes the loss of ontological resistance that subtends racialization more broadly. As such, when the gameworld treats an implicated character as if they index that loss itself, then we are in the presence of procedural blackness. By turns, when the gameworld treats an implicated character as if they index another race-making form as a function of having lost their ontological resistance, then we are in the presence of a procedural version of that racial form. Attending to race in games in this way allows for persuasive readings and counter- readings of games that are "doing race" in conceptually rich, though very subtle ways.

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# Collegiate Esports: Overcoming Bias, Exclusion, and Misinformation

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Much of the esports research has been done by researchers outside of the field of game studies and has focused on the individual player, [1, 2]. or a discussion of the degree of esports' "sportiness" rather than the complex ecosystem that supports this phenomenon. [3, 4]. An academically rigorous investigation that documents the digital heritage of the first college esports programs and investigates the cultural history that afforded the growth of collegiate esports has yet to be done. This lack of information leaves collegiate esports subject to being understudied or judged by information derived from studying professional gamers or gamers in crisis applied broadly to collegiate esports. The fact that esports can be discounted on the grounds of lack of inclusion, addictive behavior, or toxicity before colleges can make the effort to develop an inclusive program is a problem. There is a lack of documentation about the collegiate esports ecosystem, the interactions between organizations, and the many different titles and considerations that make up the collegiate esports scene. There is a lack of documentation about the diversity of collegiate esports communities which are broader than the players in the spotlight. One of the conference themes is "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Playful Technologies: Challenges and solutions for achieving DEI in gaming." Collegiate esports programs could be a powerful force for addressing challenges and providing solutions to improve DEI in gaming. More comprehensive studies are needed to understand the current challenges and lay the groundwork for future success related to DEI in gaming in the collegiate environment.

The factors and stakeholders involved in the formation of collegiate esports have not been systematically documented through the lens of cultural history. Jenny et. al. produced a Handbook of Esports that covers a broad range of related topics, but it does not focus on collegiate esports. [5] Multiple practical guides on collegiate esports have been published like Hoffman et al.'s Understanding Collegiate Esports: A Practitioner's Guide to Developing Community and Competition. [6] and Chris "Doc" Haskell's book College eSports: What You Need to Know provides a first-hand account of how a specific program was built. [7]. Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming by Dr. Gray shed light on the experiences of Black Gamers [8] Todd Harper has contributed to the research on the fighting game community, on college campuses this aspect of gaming culture is often student-led. [9] There is room for more research specific to the collegiate environment and the experience of all the stakeholders in this space.

An academically rigorous investigation that documents the digital heritage of the first college esports programs and investigates the cultural history that afforded the growth of collegiate esports has yet to be done. Without this documentation there will be ambiguity around the origin of collegiate esports that could lead to gaps in the historical record for future researchers. The cultural shifts that happened in the 2009-2020 time frame helped esports become more established and recognized by universities. [10] It is important to understand how, when, and why esports moved from grassroots student clubs and communities to formal programs recognized, legitimized, and resourced by colleges and educational institutions. [6. 10, 11] The need for further research also extends to the broader cultural factors related to the growth of collegiate esports in some places and the stagnation of collegiate esports in other places. There is a gap in the research and lack of clear documentation of the macro level cultural factors that helped enable and establish the first collegiate esports programs. Much of the esports research has been done by researchers outside of the field of game studies and has focused on the individual player [1, 2], a discussion of the degree of esports' "sportiness" rather than the complex ecosystem that supports this phenomenon [3, 4].

Collegiate esports also faces the problem of being painted with a "broad brush stroke" allowing information from studies on professional gamers and other populations that may or may not apply to college players to be used to make decisions on collegiate esports programs. For example, Hayday and Collision examine "gamers" without clarifying specifically who they are referring to. [12] There is a lack of documentation about the collegiate esports ecosystem, the interactions between organizations, and the many different titles and considerations that make up the collegiate esports scene. There is a lack of documentation about the diversity of collegiate esports communities which are broader than the players in the spotlight. Because of these gaps we are impacting our understanding of collegiate esports. This can lead to administrators, donors, sponsors and others making social, cultural, and financial decisions about collegiate esports based on observations that may not apply to the college scene. These decisions can impact the well-being and emotional health of our students. Incomplete and misattributed data can lead to sub-optimal decision making or the decision to "table" the esports question for a future date.

Some colleges do not even consider developing college esports programs for fear of the backlash from investing in an activity that is presumed to have issues with inclusivity and possibly addiction. In 2024 Anker Nexø reviewed 54 empirical research articles and concluded "…it is demonstrated that knowledge of toxic behaviours is typically based on self-reported accounts." The fact that esports can be discounted on the grounds of lack of inclusion or Toxicity before colleges can make the effort to develop

an inclusive program is a problem. Currently on college campuses there are students who want to compete against other universities through official channels. However, the administrators of their universities deny them access and refuse to invest in esports. This refusal can be based on incomplete information, self- reported information from people not in college, and the administrators' own bias against esports. The failure to take the time to understand the role esports plays in the life of college students and the low priority esports can be given leads to indecision or denial when it comes to obtaining recognition and official support for collegiate esports programs.

Esports communities are forming organically outside of universities due to interest, entertainment, and the potential for profit. The uninformed and under informed conversations between decision makers and other esports stakeholders within the university can limit the formation of engaging, inclusive, supportive communities for students inside of universities. This too is a problem because it could prevent pathways to college through scholarships, prevent the opportunity for students to find friends with common interests (community), prevent students of a reason to stay in college (retention), and potentially prevent student them of a career or entrepreneurial activities related to esports.

Documenting the history and understanding the motives that led to decisions that formed collegiate esports during the 2009-2020 time frame can improve our understanding of collegiate esports' role in college culture. This understanding can help us establish an accurate baseline for collegiate esports and make informed decisions as we address issues and opportunities facing collegiate esports today. Collegiate esports could be the perfect environment for fostering inclusivity in a natural way that does not feel forced or prescribed. The digital playing field is where our students can enjoy competitions, develop technical and creative skills, and get to know each other. College administrators have the opportunity to set the scene and create the space for natural interactions that lead to healthy friendships and shape behaviors in a positive direction.

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# Collaborative Mechanics for Ancestral Improvisation Collaborative Mechanics

## The liberatory re-use of interactive technology and play as a means to recover othered imaginations.

**Natan Diacon-Furtado,** Electronic Arts, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

In-process examples of "collaborative mechanics" from the author's own research-creation practice explore how current theories of liberatory play allow us to begin to think and practice decolonial urban computing, locative media and expanded gaming. Linking collaborative art making and the adaptive re-use of public space to concepts of emancipatory bleed [2], restorying, and bending [14], these examples point towards a method for integrating and collaborating with ancestral and cultural knowledge through survivance [15], recuperation [8] and ancestral imagination [4]. Embracing the poet Lucille Clifton's urging to "pay attention to what sits inside yourself and watches you [1]," examples discussed adaptively re-use public space to allow for collaboration with each of our more- than-human communities via accessible and open-source folk hardware and software interfaces [10].

"Collaborative mechanics" is proposed as a conceptual and practical adaptive re-use of interactive technology as a means to recover other(ed) ancestral imaginations and personally reconnect to Black and Indigenous knowledge systems. As stated by the activist healer and writer adrienne maree brown, "[w]e are living in the ancestral imagination of others, with their longing for safety and abundance, a longing that didn't include us, or included us as enemy, fright, other [6]." Attempting to re-open a space for calling forth and living in our own ancestral imaginations, this work highlights and combines theories of improvisation and performance from the fields of Critical Improvisation Studies, New Media Art and Interactive Storytelling.

Three collaborative mechanics are presented that propose game mechanic inspired methods for interacting with public spaces traditionally defined through public art: murals, fountains, and monuments. This work empowers us to engage in the liberatory re- use of spaces and meanings that frame our everyday lives through improvisation and play. Utilizing light and sound to project the possible futures already present in our pasts, the intent of this work is to reveal, re-frame and lay claim to the built environment outside and within ourselves.

These examples utilize "folk" popular software such as Open Broadcasting Software (OBS), Software Defined Radio (SDR) and social media platforms to allow for the real-time personal liberatory re-use of public space through light and sound. The collaborative and open source development of this work is discussed along with its implementation in diverse public, institutional, temporary, permanent, national, international, physical and virtual settings. "Our Patterns" is a collaborative mechanic for the liberatory re-use of murals. It that has been the subject of national and international solo museum exhibitions, become a permanent part of the curriculum at one of the most diverse colleges in the United States, and has been utilized in the co-creation of meaning with institutional and ancestral archives. "Community Portal" is a collaborative mechanic for the liberatory re-use of fountains and other public water features. Utilized as a tool for embodied listening with water by high-school age youth science fellows of the North Troy (New York) Art, Technology and Urban Research in Ecology Lab, this mechanic is also being developed as a part of the Wave Farm international transmission arts organization's first sound art transmission toolkit cohort. A third collaborative mechanic for the liberatory re-use of monuments, "Our Monuments" is being developed as an "ancestral improvisation" application for mobile phones.

In the context of these examples, the concepts of "ancestral improvisation" and "liberatory re-use" are presented as devices for opening up the inclusive, intuitive body [9] into a navigable structure [11] for navigable play [3] that aids players in becoming performers [12] within themselves and steward a felt commitment to meaning [13] between themselves and their ancestral imaginations. Ancestral improvisation is presented as a tactical act of agency reclamation through collaboration between self and the ancestral that requires no specific technologies, know-how or abilities, and functions as a counterpoint to, and expansion of, prevalent notions of interaction design in gaming, pervasive media and urban computing. Theoretical framing draws from varied sources, including Jonaya Kemper, Dana Reason, David Rokeby, Theresa Jean Tanenbaum and Karen Tanenbaum. Their writings aid in the understanding of how improvisational acts become particularly relevant in the context of expansive and pervasive gaming that extends the "magic circle" of play across time and space [7]. This extension fosters a digital realism that operates across various medias and corporealities at once, with interfaces that allow for echoes and reflections, rest and openness. Improvisationally-intuited collaborative mechanics of space and rest tie directly to the concept of prosthetic memory and the usage of technology to make and transmit shared memories that are not physically lived through but communally remembered [5]. Presented in the context of expanding the magic circle of play through collaborative public art making, the author's own in-process

research-creation work is offered as examples of tactical decolonial methods for affectively reflecting ourselves in the world around us through play.

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# Game On: Using a documentary film about game designer Brenda Romero as a tool for BIPOC youth to create serious games

**Theresa Loong,** Parsons School of Design

## Description

Game On is an upcoming documentary by BIPOC filmmaker and game designer Theresa Loong that focuses on pioneering game designer Brenda Romero (Dungeons & Dragons Heroes, Wizardry 8, and 45+ more). Brenda treats board and video games as art, incorporating game play into every aspect of her life. She creates contemporary and historical games to amplify social issues. Her games explore Black, Indigenous, Irish, Mexican and Jewish history in ways that challenge players. Brenda also navigates the male dominated game design industry.

Game On follows Brenda's life as the CEO of her video game company and a mom. She and her husband, legendary game developer John Romero, are on a mission to do what they love while raising four kids in an ethnically blended family. Brenda helms the production of a new game, and opens up a timely discussion about discrimination in the tech industry as well as the gaming world.

How can we make a more comprehensive community surrounding women, BIPOC creators, and the values we espouse? Game On encourages us to rally around the film and Brenda's achievements, creating space to acknowledge the social and economic struggle between caretaking, economic survival, and career building.

During her long career, Brenda has intentionally tackled challenging historical topics: the Middle Passage, the Holocaust, and the Trail of Tears. Brenda leads workshops for girls and underprivileged communities. Game On explores her drive and values as an outlier to the industry as she helps steer its meaningful change. Brenda Romero does what she loves - she "games" for a living. Her life is a strategy game, a form of serious play in which she seeks to challenge normative worldviews and influence how power is described and experienced. At only 15, Brenda broke into the game industry as a game tester at Sir-Tech, rising through the ranks working on game, level, and system design for top companies. Today, Brenda uses her status and skills to help the next generation understand the potential for games to intervene in and disrupt problematic narratives, and help change the world.

Game On immerses the viewer in Brenda's quest and her universe, a woman and a caretaker who also cares about games and their social impact.

She tries to make the right decisions, under pressure--giving the viewer a candid ringside seat at the table of game creation.

This session will highlight clips from the documentary Game On and discuss the impact campaign, creating game design workshops using clips from Game On as a tool for BIPOC youth to create serious games.

Theresa Loong is an award-winning director, producer, and visual artist who creates innovative film, games and immersive AR/VR/MR experiences. Her documentary, Every Day Is a Holiday premiered on public television, and her work has been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum, Asia Society Hong Kong, and Círculo de Bellas Artes. She directed and produced Building Stuff: Change It! for NOVA and developed games for AMC's The Walking Dead and Breaking Bad. Theresa is chairperson of Filmshop and has served as a juror for the March on Washington Film Festival's Equity in VR program. An Oculus Launch Pad fellow, she has been recognized by the IGDA Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Theresa is currently working on Game On, a documentary about game designer Brenda Romero and Bought/Broken, a digital experience exploring intimate partner violence. She has created games and digital experiences for the New York Hall of Science, M+ Museum, and the Tech Museum of Innovation, among others. Theresa holds degrees from Harvard and Hunter College and teaches part-time at Parsons School of Design.

# "Jokes over you're Dead!"

# The Role we Play in the Necropolitical Design of Black and Latinx Characters in Game

**Luke Hernandez**, University of Texas at Dallas

In games such as Overwatch, Valorant, and Marvel Rivals the role of a character is a prominent aspect within multiplayer team-based games where the relationship between marginalized characters and their role design needs to be critically explored. Often divided into three categories, characters in these games are labeled as either a tank, damage dealer (DPS), or support (healer). A character who is a tank is often the protector, a character who is a healer indeed renders aid for their teammates, and DPS characters are responsible for quickly dispatching their enemies. This research critically interrogates how the otherwise previously thought universal mechanic of roles and its subsequent play design of characters within Overwatch, Valorant, and Marvel Rivals recreate a racialized space that (re)produces violence towards Black and Latinx bodies and communities. By analyzing key characters in these games, we witness how many Black and Latinx characters within the DPS role are centrally designed through necropolitical logic compared to their peers. This reinforces a play culture where Black and Brown characters are always regulated to an aggressive and precarious role that prioritize a death world playstyle. Coupled with the fact that there is a drastic lack of Black and Latinx Characters in support and tank roles, one wonders about how game industries and gaming culture come to construct and understand non-white representation and play expression.

By incorporating a queer or color critique this research pays close attention to Black, Latinx, and Afro-Latinx characters such as Phoenix, Reyna, and Raze from Valorant. Sombra, Reaper, and Lucio from Overwatch 2, Black Panther and Cloak & Dagger from Marvel Rivals. By examining these characters' play styles and their position as mostly DPS characters we see the symbolic violence that Kishonna Gray speaks about where "... is useful in understanding how order and restraint are established and maintained through indirect mechanisms, as opposed to direct or coercive control…. Those who continue to exist in gaming culture perceive this maltreatment as normalized, so this symbolic violence continues to be enacted while the pervading power relations operate in obscurity."(Gray, 2020, p. 166) This symbolic violence is seen in how many of these characters are perpetual flankers, where death is central to their play style that requires many players

of these characters to always be close to death and destruction more so to their peers while requiring a higher skill level, which must be complicated. For example, Phoenix, a Black man from Britain, has a famous ultimate ability where he charges in the enemy team and dies but if he dies, he is quickly brought back to life, owing to his phoenix fire- like abilities. Raze, an Afro-Latina from Brazil, is one of the few characters where her own abilities can potentially kill herself, this is unique as many other characters have destructive abilities that do not harm themselves. This analysis carries on the work of critical game studies by extending our "...purview of games and play beyond that artificial binary, and below the surface, by examining the infrastructure of gaming as itself a raced project," (Fickle, 2019, p. 3) and illustrate how "Black digital identity draws in equal measure on expressions of joy and pain in everyday life in American racial ideology, which are articulated as cultural critiques and enacted online." (Brock, 2020, p. 12-13)

But the story does not end through as we critically approach these characters through Trammell's idea of examining torture and repairing play. Trammell states that this "seeming paradox—that torture both is and is not play—can be resolved. Torture is play, and approaching it as such reveals a good deal about how play subjugates and disciplines people." (Trammell 2023, p. 14) Indeed the play styles and roles of these characters betray larger systems of oppression and behind racialized violence obscured behind the veneer of "politically" neutral game mechanics not often critiqued. But to work towards a better future it is important to "repair play, or to 'write back' through the ways we play, we must first endeavor to produce a space where ludic narratives can aspire to tell painful stories alongside the pleasurable." (Trammell 2023, p. 37) This project hopes to identify and critique the pattern of how racialized violence has become intrinsic to Black and Latinx characters in recent gaming in DPS roles. With this dialogue and paying attention to figures left on the

margins, scholars, game makers, and gamers themselves can work towards a gaming culture that celebrates a future that shows creativity and nuance that is often deprived for non-white characters and playstyles.

Keywords: Gaming, Critical Game Studies, Black Studies, Latinx Studies, Representation, Play

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# Panels and Roundtables

# Diversity, Citational Justice, and Analog Game Studies: A Roundtable

**EDMOND Y. CHANG** (CO-CHAIR)
Associate Professor of English, Ohio University Editor-in-Chief, Analog Game Studies

**AARON TRAMMELL** (CO-CHAIR)
Associate Professor of Informatics, UC Irvine, Former Editor-in-Chief, Analog Game Studies

**EVAN TORNER**
Associate Professor of German Studies and Film / Media Studies, Director of UC Game Lab, University of Cincinnati, Senior Editor, Analog Game Studies

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**Abstract:**
In the inaugural issue of Analog Game Studies (AGS) in 2014, editors Aaron Trammell, Emma Leigh Waldron, and Evan Torner wrote that "analog games hold the potential to allow a new and different set of voices into design processes, voices which might resist the pathological displays of racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence native to the video game industry. In addition, analog games are…marginal and estranged from demands made by

the conventional publishing industry…Because the impetus is on invention as opposed to industry, analog games epitomize the potentials of a design ethic [that] does not pander to over-generalized market demographics." Since the journal's inception, AGS has worked to invite, discover, develop, mentor, and foreground scholars, designers, artists, and players from a range of disciplines, institutions, geographical locations, and stages of career. The journal regularly publishes essays on tabletop role-playing games, board games, card games, live-action role-playing, actual play, and gaming communities with an emphasis on analyses of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and other identities, materialities, and embodiments in analog games. Now, over a decade later, Analog Game Studies continues its interdisciplinary mission to provide "a periodically published platform for the critical analysis, discussion of design, and documentation of analog games. By offering sharp narratives that highlight the most interesting features of individual games, we hope to increase the visibility of analog games within the sphere of game studies."

This roundtable brings together the editorial board of Analog Game Studies, including founding members, new editors, and editorial interns, to discuss the current state of game studies scholarship, publication, professionalization, as well as the intersections with game design, industry, technology, and popular culture. In particular, while game studies as a field is growing and changing, much of game development, marketing, and criticism is still largely white, normative, and homogenous. According to the Citational Justice Collective, scholars and researchers must "recognize the knowledge contributions of less dominant, routinely overlooked voices. Pursuing citational justice, then, entails moving away from individualistic views of authorship and toward a shared, reciprocal understanding of how knowledge is produced." Therefore, this roundtable hopes to outline and explore:

● Organizing, maintaining, promoting, and archiving an online, academic journal; navigating economic, cultural, and institutional landscapes and pressures

● Editorial and peer review philosophies that center mentorship and collaboration, challenge current models of academic publishing, and embrace diversity and interdisciplinarity in policies and leadership

● Engaging with diverse topics, contributors, and audiences; encouraging underrepresented and marginalized authors and designers; innovating ways to address representational, ludic, and citational justice (i.e. #gamestudiessowhite), particularly Black, Indigenous, Non- Western, Queer, Trans, and Crip game studies

● Organizing Generational Analog, an annual online tabletop games and education conference, which foregrounds new voices, global perspectives, and innovative games and criticism

● Publishing, professionalizing, and persevering in academia, publishing, game design, and game studies


*Note on Analog Game Studies, Editorial Practice, and Citational Justice*
*EDMOND Y. CHANG & AARON TRAMMELL*

In the inaugural issue of Analog Game Studies (AGS) in 2014, editors Aaron Trammell, Emma Leigh Waldron, and Evan Torner wrote that "analog games hold the potential to allow a new and different set of voices into design processes, voices which might resist the pathological displays of racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence native to the video game industry."[1] Poised in response to the racist, sexist, misogynist, and phobic backlashes of Sad Puppies,[2] GamerGate,[3] and other toxic fandoms of the moment, AGS offered a new platform and a more inclusive editorial philosophy for the study of non-digital games. As the then editors argued, "While games are now a clear part of our social infrastructure, they often act as a counter-progressive apparatus in the world today," yet "the most innovative and progressive movements in gaming recently have been analog."[4]

Since the journal's inception, AGS has worked to invite, discover, develop, mentor, and foreground scholars, designers, artists, and players from a range of disciplines, institutions, geographical locations, and stages of career. The journal regularly publishes essays on tabletop role-playing games, board games, card games, live-action role-playing, actual play, and gaming communities with an emphasis on analyses of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and other identities, materialities, and embodiments in analog games. Our most accessed essays include Shelly Jones's essays "Blinded by the Roll: The Critical Fail of Disability in D&D"5 and "The Psychological Abuse of Curse of Strahd,"6 the latter of which discussed Dungeons & Dragons and trauma; Tanya Pobuda's "Assessing Gender and Racial Representation in the Board Game Industry"[7]; and Aaron Trammell's duo essays "Misogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons & Dragons"[8] and "How Dungeons & Dragons Appropriated the Orient."[9] Now, over a decade later, Analog Game Studies continues its interdisciplinary mission to provide "a periodically published platform for the critical analysis, discussion of design, and documentation of analog games. By offering sharp narratives that highlight the most interesting features of individual games, we hope to increase the visibility of analog games within the sphere of game studies."[10] In a deep way, central to AGS's promise, history, and longevity is its dedication to collaboration, community, and an open, inclusive citational practice.

In particular, while game studies as a field is growing and changing, much of game development, marketing, and criticism is still largely white, normative, and homogenous. AGS was open access, open scholarship, and

open review from the start. According to the Citational Justice Collective, scholars and researchers must "recognize the knowledge contributions of less dominant, routinely overlooked voices. Pursuing citational justice, then, entails moving away from individualistic views of authorship and toward a shared, reciprocal understanding of how knowledge is produced."[11] At the level of publishers and editors, the demographics are stark and telling. For example, according to a summary report in Nature, studies of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity (or lack thereof) among academic editors reveals deep, structural disparities, inequalities, and biases: "one such analysis, which examined 81,000 editors across 15 disciplines, found that women accounted for 14% of editors and 8% of editors-in-chief. And a survey of 368 editors across 25 medical and science journals revealed that more than 75% are white."[12] Moreover, even the "value of long-established peer review approaches has been questioned. Concerns relate to the choice of reviewers, their credibility, the time it takes to complete the review process,"[13] as well as the moving goalposts of rigor, gatekeeping, and the implicit and explicit biases of readers. Christen Smith, an anthropologist at the University of Texas at Austin credited with starting the "Cite Black Women" movement, argues, "We want to create a conversation that encourages people to actually stop and think about their citational politics, the choices that they're making, and the consequences of those choices."[14]

In the early days of AGS, we editors were just excited to find like-minded authors to work with and we developed an idiosyncratic work ethic accordingly. In the first year, we burned the proverbial candle at both ends to put out monthly issues with sometimes as many as six essays within them. It was an exciting but exhausting time, and when we couldn't find enough material to complete an issue, we would write it ourselves. When we weren't sending emails to our friends and colleagues to solicit their writing for the journal, we were hard at work editing the work of new friends who found us via the website, social media, or word of mouth. The time crunch of issue-after-monthly-issue necessitated a faster editorial model—one that prioritized transparency of process, hands-on relationships with authors, care, and quality.

Aaron had prior experience working with Sounding Out!, a middle-state sound studies publication that put out a new essay every week. Launched in 2009, Sounding Out! was expert at dealing with tight time constraints and used a model where each author was paired with an editor who would guide them step by step through the publication process. It used an open form of peer review that allowed for more flexible editorial control over the cadence of the process. If things needed to speed up or slow down, if things needed to switch gears, then it was a simple matter of clear communication among author, assigned editor, and editorial board. The process freed us from requiring external readers, many of whom are often juggling their own

deadlines and workloads, and in doing so, made for timely, accessible, and unambiguous review. When a paper seemed promising but required major revisions, we would consult with the editorial team to see if someone wanted to give the essay a look before rejecting it entirely. Additionally, external help was sought when needed, especially when an editor determined an essay needed specialized feedback. Nick Mizer, a contributor to AGS, reported, "AGS is first-rate when it comes to the peer review and editing process, and I don't mind saying that the editors put me through the wringer in a good way, making the piece much better than my original submission. But at the same time it is also fast, lightweight, and lean compared to traditional journal models."[15] We have been fortunate to learn, adapt, and grow over time as scholars, organizers, and editors, and all of our wisdom is embodied in our current editorial philosophy:

As a journal, Analog Game Studies uses an open-yet-curatorial model to review submitted works. We strive to represent a varied set of perspectives in each issue and, as such, find it to be of the utmost importance to offer transparency to writers in our review process as well as authorial and topical diversity to our readers with regard to articles we choose to publish. For these reasons, the editorial board carefully curates select essays for each issue from our pool of submissions and then works closely with the selected authors in a rigorous and transparent editing process. We see this process as a collaborative, expressive, and open conversation between editor and author. It is because of this curatorial model that our essays can present clear and timely arguments in engaging and readable prose.[16]

Now, over ten years in, our ragtag operation has hit a few material and algorithmic roadblocks from lack of visibility to the deterioration of online platforms. Time and time again, we have witnessed recent publications and think pieces on analog games lament in some variation that "there is a lack of scholarship on analog game studies." This is in part because we built our journal on the WordPress platform (considered de rigueur at the time), which is findable by search engines, but volumes, issues, and individual essays are not indexed by Google Scholar or paywalled databases. Visibility, legibility, and indexability are crucial parts of accessibility and citational justice. Junior and marginalized scholars often require these forms of legitimacy for promotion and professionalization. Moreover, minoritized scholars doing cutting edge work (like game studies) are often forced to publish in newer, middle-state, or perceived-to-be-less reputable journals.[17] As Paul Longley Arthur and Lydia Hearn argue, "Open access and open scholarship are offering new avenues to make data more freely and easily available for use and reuse by the broader community…[and] to develop more open, congruent ways for universities to reshape their assessment of research."[18] In other words, the problems of citation and publication are systemic, and we scholars must be active in lobbying our peers, committees, departments, conferences,

and communities about celebrating smaller journals that have taken an alternative path forward than those which are more canonically or traditionally legible to the institution.

Starting in 2025, our new editor-in-chief Edmond Chang has made these platform, editorial, and citational concerns a top priority for AGS. The journal is now working with a university library system to migrate AGS to a stable, indexable, and archivable system. We have forged new relationships with Play Story Press (formerly ETC Press), an open community publishing consortium, and Game Pathways, a nonprofit organization founded by industry professionals who care about inclusivity, creativity, and celebrating new voices. We are actively pursuing new talent and perspectives, understudied research foci, special issues, guest editors, and new collaborations with other journals, conferences, and programs. For example, recent special issues include "Analog Games and Translation" in 2020, "The Fiend Folio" in 2021, and forthcoming special issue on "Queer Analog Game Studies." We are continuing our partnership with Game in Lab, a program that supports the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge about board games on an international scale, and our organizing of Generation Analog, an annual online tabletop games and education conference. And we will fully commit to invite, mentor, and publish scholars, teachers, artists, graduate students, designers, researchers, and others at all stages of their academic or professional careers; we have also endeavored to include and support nontraditional, underrepresented, and international authors, creators, even topics.

Ultimately, we hope and create and dream big for the future of Analog Game Studies. Or, to riff on Aaron's words, how might we imagine AGS as a kind of reparative play, an alternative kind of scholarship and academic endeavor: repairing scholarship, publishing, and citation must be "aligned with the messy imperfect and everyday values that are at ease with the postindustrial landscapes we inhabit where things are often imperfect and broken, and people are just 'making do'"[19] and repairing scholarship, publishing, and citation must embrace a speculative BIPOC future "where we play together in a web of mutual aid, supporting one another through both challenging and joyful times."[20]

Or, in the spirit of Evan Torner's charge, "Stay analog!"

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# Reckoning with Japanese American Redress: an interdisciplinary, community-engaged design story

## Panelist bios

**Lien B. Tran** (she/her) is an associate professor of games and design and chair of the game design program at DePaul University's Jarvis College of Computing and Digital Media. She is director of Matters at Play, a transdisciplinary design lab partnering in the creation of interactive advocacy solutions for learning and positive social transformations (including social justice, public health, and the environment). Her design portfolio includes interactive solutions in collaboration with Full Spectrum Features, Open Society Foundations, World Bank, and the United Nations. Tran received her M.F.A. in Design and Technology from Parsons School of Design. See more at mattersatplay.com.

**Dr. Belquis Elhadi** (she/they) is an ACLS Leading Edge Fellow and the Manager of Learning and Impact at Full Spectrum Features. Dr. Elhadi received her PhD in American Culture from the University of Michigan, where she wrote a dissertation interrogating representation discourse through looking at depictions of Muslim women in popular culture and their relationship to US empire. They also hold a certificate in Learning Experience Design and work on healing-based pedagogies and curriculum development for Reckoning with Redress.

**Clara Bergamini** (she/hers) is a PhD Candidate in history at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is formally trained as a historian of East Asia and her research centers around how people's experiences with and memories of crises and catastrophes shape society over time through moments of memory-making. She has been working as a historian and researcher with Full Spectrum Features since 2021 and is currently working as the Web Producer for the Reckoning with Redress project.

**Ashley Cheyemi McNeil**, PhD (she/her) is the Director of Education and Research at Full Spectrum Features, an arts/media non-profit that works to uplift stories from marginalized communities. She has PhDs in Literary Studies and American Studies with extensive experience working with cross-disciplinary teams of academics and community partners to create public-facing projects that disseminate stories and research. At Full Spectrum, Dr. McNeil leads the development of cinematic Open Educational Resources

while also supporting the team in community collaboration, development strategy, and fundraising.

**Dr. Karen (Kat) Schrier** (she/they) is Full Professor and Director of Games & Emerging Media at Marist. She is also a game design consultant for World Health Organization (WHO) and CEO of PlatyPlay, LLC, which designs games for care, health, and inclusion. Dr. Schrier is the author/editor of over 100 published works, including We the Gamers (Oxford University Press) and Knowledge Games (JHU Press). She has over 20 years of experience in game development, and has worked for Nickelodeon, Scholastic, and BrainPOP. See more at: https://www.karenschrier.com/ and https://www.linkedin.com/in/katschrier/.

# What is Happening?: Social and Economical Factors that affect BIPOC Game Developers

**Javon Goard**, Johns Hopkins University

**Latoya Peterson**,  Elsewhere Entertainment

**Dr. Kishonna L. Gray**, University of Michigan

## PANEL DESCRIPTION

Our three panelists will engage the audience in a conversation surrounding social and economic factors attributed to the current state of the games industry: toxic work culture; high cost to develop games; cannibalization of game studios; mass layoffs. These factors have left consumers and games professionals to speculate about the stability of the games industry. The panelists are interested in how these factors impact BIPOC game developers? Where do they go after layoffs? The panelists will discuss what changes need to take place to create a more sustainable and equitable games industry?

This presentation will be with a brief explanation of the series of layoffs within the games industry. Afterward, there will be a conversation about the first-hand experiences of acquiring venture capital and maintaining an indie studio. Lastly, the presentation will end with a discussion on the need for the creative and social gaming spaces.

The panel will be given by Javon Goard, Latoya Peterson, and Dr. Kishonna Gray. Javon Goard's research takes an interdisciplinary approach in studying aspects of video game culture by working in the domains of sociology, informatics, and media studies. His current work focuses on African Americans/Blacks within esports and the intersection of black joy within gaming culture. Javon holds positions related to geek-culture related conventions; Member of the Board of Directors for MAGFest, Inc., Founder and Co-Director of the

B.L.A.D.E. initiative at BlerDCon, and Steering Committee member for the Black in Gaming DMV Chapter. You can read his work in Sociation, blerdsonline.com, ROMChip: A Journal of Game Histories, medium.com and GamesIndustry.biz. Latoya Peterson lives at the intersection of emerging technology and culture. Named one of Forbes Magazine's 30 Under 30 rising stars in media, she is best known for the award winning blog.

Racialicious.com - the intersection of race and pop culture. She co-founded and was CXO, and Director for the Culture at Glow Up Games, a creative R & D studio telling beautifully crafted stories using mobile, AR/VR,

AI, and other emerging technologies. She is currently on the advisory board of the Data & Society Institute and the board of visitors for The John S. Knight Journalism Fellowships. Dr. Kishonna L. Gray is a Professor in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. She is also a faculty associate at the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard University. Dr. Gray is the author/co-editor of Intersectional Tech, Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live, Woke Gaming and Feminism in Play. She also has a book currently under contract titled Black Game Studies. Dr. Gray is a highly sought-after speaker and regularly addresses both academic and industry audiences such as at the Game Developers Conference. She is the winner of a number of awards over the years, including The Evelyn Gilbert Unsung Hero Award and the Blacks in Gaming Educator Award.

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# Cultural Threads in Gaming: Indigenous Representation, Knowledge, and Game Development

**Kendall Scott**, Rochester Institute of Technology

**Kaualani Ceberano**, Rochester Institute of Technology

**Diego Martinez**, Rochester Institute of Technology

## 1 PANEL DESCRIPTION

This panel explores how Indigenous representation and cultural knowledge are being reimagined through games and interactive media. As Indigenous peoples continue to assert sovereignty and in both physical and digital spaces, the gaming world is becoming an important platform for storytelling, cultural preservation, and social impact. This session brings together students and advocates from the Native American Future Stewards Program at the Rochester Institute of Technology to present a diverse range of perspectives on how game development can be decolonized and made more inclusive.

Kendall Scott will open the session by providing historical context on Indigenous engagement with gaming and digital media. While early Indigenous representation in games was often sparce and stereotyped, recent decades have witnessed a growing number of Indigenous-led projects like Never Alone and Where Rivers Were Trails, as well as indie games exploring cultural protocol, language preservation, and community wellness [1][2][3]. Kendall will offer insights into how game development is being used by Native students and professionals as a form of activism and community education.

Kaualani Ceberano will then discuss how Native Hawaiian traditions, visual storytelling, and media practices are shaping game narratives and animation. Drawing from her own work as a mixed media artist and animator, she will share how cultural values such as aloha 'āina (love of the land), mo'olelo (storytelling), and ancestorial memory can be honored through digital media [4][5]. Her talk will also explore how Indigenous Pacific Islander communities use animation and game design to challenge colonial narratives and reconnect youth to cultural identity.

Diego Martinez will close the session with a deep dive into case studies and technical barriers to integrating cultural as game mechanics. Drawing from his paper on Indigenous storytelling and games like Assassin's Creed III, Diego will analyze cultural authenticity can be achieved in game development when developers collaborate with communities and adapt tools to reflect nonlinear, dynamic cultural logic [6][7].

Together, the panelist will offer practical strategies and theoretical frameworks for designing culturally responsible games. The discussion will be relevant to developers, educators, and advocates committed to representation, equity, and innovation in the gaming industry. Attendees will leave with tools and inspiration to elevate Indigenous voices in their own work.

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# Leveling Up: Designing a Community Generated Video Game Exhibition

## Exploring the intersection of gaming culture, technology, and the experiences of black, indigenous, and other people of color and communities worldwide.

**Masaya Heywood**, Harlem Gallery of Science
**Matthew Lopez**, Harlem Gallery of Science

## 1 PANEL DESCRIPTION

Attendance and engagement are the core of a learner's success. Yet, schools across America struggle to build a strong foundation upon which education thrives. In 2021, the Harlem Gallery of Science sought to strengthen the educational foundation in West Harlem, Upper Manhattan, and the South Bronx communities. The Gallery understands that BIPOC youth are often left out of transformative educational experiences and resources and seeks to rectify this issue through the power of video games. Games can attract students to school through cultural presence and engage students in many subjects because they relate information through play. Harnessing this power led to the creation of an educational initiative called Gaming Pathways and an exhibition named Video Games: The Great Connector. This panel will focus on the background, design, and running of the exhibition. Its goal is to share the Gallery's learnings on creating such a program and how it fits into the broader community ecosystem.

To understand the community it services, the Gallery researched local students through an advisory, interviews and surveys. HGS took five months in 2021 to engage with over 200 high school and college students and educators. It found that students played video games more to develop personal and professional skills and social networks than just for entertainment. Gaming Pathways was formed in 2021 as a result of this research. The program aims to help grow a diverse and creative workforce in New York's digital games and related creative industries. The Gaming Pathways Program was awarded a $2M, 2.5- year contract by the NYC Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment in 2022 to pursue its goal. The centerpiece of this program is the creation of the first bachelor's degree in digital game design and development at a public institution, the City College of New York. To promote the creation of this program, the Gallery used its prior experience in creating exhibitions to create Video Games: The Great Connector.

Opening in 2024, the exhibition addresses how youth use video games to explore who they are, how they build communities, and what future opportunities for college and careers are available to them. A key element in the design process was forming three advisories of students, community leaders, and game experts. This locality-focused design led to a breakout success. The exhibition attracted 3,500 attendees, 2,834 of whom came from local K-12 schools across NYC. An analysis of 96 schools that attended the exhibition reveals that 90.6% of the schools served 50% or more students of color, and 75% of the schools served 80% or more students of color. In 2025, HGS followed up the exhibition by creating the Video Games Expo, a portable exhibition taken directly into NYC middle and high schools. The Expo serves as an opportunity for Hostos Community College and CCNY to recruit students to their respective Digital Game degree programs. Over 1,500 students and five dozen teachers have participated in the Expo.

The panel will discuss the importance of co-designing with the community through target group advisories and the exhibition's ability to become a nexus of community resources through games' allure. Through informed design, attendees can learn how to create video game exhibitions and their value to academic programs. Importantly, the panel will keep in sight the exhibition's ability to inform students, parents, and teachers about the many uses of games and address inequality and under-representation in the industry. Through education, the exhibition and Gaming Pathways seek to address and change the systems that cause inequality in the game industry and beyond. The Gallery desires to inform and inspire attendees to the panel on how they might use games to pursue outreach and programming in their localities.

Panelists' biographies

Masaya Heywood – Masaya Heywood is an NYU Game Design graduate and co-founder of Outfox Games, a funded indie studio. He is passionate about the crossroads of game design and business strategy. As a driving force behind industry outreach and development of NYC's Gaming Pathways Program, Masaya leverages his extensive network, from industry giants like Rockstar and Microsoft to grassroots developers such as Decoy Games and GUMBO, to nurture the next generation of gaming.

Matthew Lopez – Matthew Lopez is the Project Manager at the Harlem Gallery of Science. A graduate of The City College of New York, he managed the staffing, technical aspects, and general operation of the 2-month run of Video Games: The Great Connector and the Video Games Expo. With a background in gaming and as the former president of the Esports Club at City College, he has been instrumental in the formation of an esports league involving ten CUNY colleges. Matthew develops projects within the HGS mentoring program to engage middle and high school youth in activities related to STEAM fields.