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# The New Black Face: The Transition of Black One-Dimensional Characters from Film to Video Games

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THE NEW BLACK FACE: THE TRANSITION OF BLACK ONE-DIMENSIONAL  
CHARACTERS FROM FILM TO VIDEO GAMES

By

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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“Mass media have played and will continue to play a crucial role in the way white Americans perceive African-Americans. As a result of the overwhelming media focus on crime, drug use, gang violence, and other forms of anti-social behavior among African-Americans, the media have fostered a distorted and pernicious public perception of African-Americans.” (Balkaran, 2008).

Video games are a growing medium that continue to evolve as technology advances. As video games have advanced, the characters have become more intricate than the two-dimensional character sprites featured on the earlier Nintendo NES and Atari consoles. Naturally, characters in video games are derived or inspired by actual people and as such display characteristics of different races/ethnic groups. As a society, we understand, race as a way of identifying groups of people by their supposed phenotypes, as well as in terms of their geographic origins and their cultural characteristics (Goldberg, 4). A phenotype is an organism’s observable physiological or biochemical traits: our eyes, hair, skin color, etc. are all part of our phenotypes (Relethford, 16). Racial phenotypes are distinguishable even in fictional characters and as such are presented in video games.

While the notion of race is problematic, as it is used as a vehicle to drive social injustices, my analysis will use race as it is constructed in video games and its relationships to stereotypes or embedded ontologies that imply that characteristics of a group are innate and immutable (Bodenhausen and Richeson, 345). They have become generalized beliefs about the characteristics of particular social groups, and racial stereotyping is the process of attributing

certain characteristics to an individual because of their membership in a specific race (Whitley and Kite 2009).

Black Americans are often portrayed stereotypically in the media as one-dimensional characters, lacking complexity and depth. In *Tom, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, Donald Bogle examines the stereotypical African American caricatures that blacks portrayed in films: the simple and idiotic coon, the kind and selfless tom, the brutal black buck, the tragic mulatto, and the overweight caring mammy. For the purpose of this study, I will focus primarily on the coon, and the buck, because while all of these caricatures are important, these characters have seemingly made the most appearances in video games.

The aforementioned caricatures transitioned from film to radio, TV, and more importantly for this study, into video games. In this paper, I will explore how stereotypical black characters—in particular, the coon and the buck-- have influenced the way in which characters are developed in video games. This analysis will also explore how these characters, which lack depth and complexity, continue to perpetuate problematic stereotypes about black identity. To complete this analysis, I will use literature that explores the African American cinematic experience, because video games are becoming more like films in that they feature interactive plots and more sophisticated characters. I will explore the portrayal of the black body in many games, but more specifically, I will examine three specific games: *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Rust*. Race is an underlying theme in each of these three home console games. Specifically, *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, gives players the opportunity to create their own characters. While this can be considered a positive feature, the game's concept of race is problematic because when choosing a black character, the player loses intelligence points. Additionally, this race has the most endurance of all the others featured in the game, contributing

to the stereotypes about blacks' athleticism. I will also discuss *Grand Theft Auto V*, which is centered on three main protagonists--one black and two white. I will compare and contrast the character traits of the black character and the white characters. Lastly, *Rust* is different from the previously mentioned titles because it randomly assigns racial phenotypes to the player. The creator of the game, Garry Newman, explained that he wanted to make this game feel as real as possible, for in real-life we don't have a choice about the way we will look or what race we will be. "Everyone now has a pseudo unique skin tone and face. Just like in real life, you are who you are – you can't change your skin color or your face. It's actually tied to your Steam account or SteamID (Steam Identification)" (Newman, 2015). With that in mind, I will analyze how race is a factor in *Rust* and how it contributes to our notions of black stereotypes.

CHAPTER 2  
*TOM, COONS, MULATTOES, MAMMIES, AND BUCKS*

The earliest depiction of a black character in a video game was in Atari 800's *Basketball*. Released in 1979, it was a 2-player game that featured 8-bit character sprites playing a game of one-on-one basketball. The original Atari was a system that could only display at a resolution of approximately 160 by 228 pixels in 128 colors; therefore, to distinguish the character sprites from one another, the developers made one brown and the other pink (Edwards 2009). Arguably, while this game did feature a black character playing basketball, it did not feature any stereotypical imagery as the game's use of race was simply to distinguish the characters from one another. The character sprites were different in color, but were the same in every other way.

As a result of technological advancements, video games have evolved from the simple character sprites used in the Atari systems, into more developed complex characters that drive narratives similar to those presented in films; however, unlike movies, video games give the player the opportunity to assume the role of the protagonist, rather than being a spectator. Many films and games rely on age-old stereotypes in constructing characters' ethnicity. Black characters are not only uniform in appearance but in the way they speak and their behavior is often stereotypical. In an episode of the YouTube Channel *Game/Show* titled, "Are Video Games Racist?" Jamin Warren interrogates the representation of stereotypical imagery of minorities in video games. He doesn't believe video game designers are racist; however, the games themselves have racist content. Black video game characters' lack depth because game designers rely on stereotypes while designing them, making them less intricate than their white counterparts who typically have more variety and depth.



Indeed, game designers tend to employ stereotypes while designing black characters and therefore they tend to be one-dimensional, similar to those that have appeared in film and television for many years. These caricatures appeared even before the creation of film as white actors in blackface initially played these roles in minstrel shows, a popular form of entertainment in the nineteenth century that consisted of comedy, song, and dance. The shows featured white actors who used burnt cork to paint their faces black and exaggerated their lips with red lipstick when performing as African Americans onstage. When film emerged as a popular form of entertainment these skewed representations of black characters transitioned to the big screen where in early cinema white actors in blackface continued to perform as stereotypical African American characters.

In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, Bogle examines the portrayals of black characters, labeling the one-dimensional caricatures that appear in film--the simple and idiotic coon, the kind and selfless tom, the brutal black buck, the tragic mulatto, and the overweight caring mammy (Bogle, 4-10). One of the caricatures most prevalent in video games is the coon, an unintelligent black character used in the narrative as the comic relief. This caricature appeared in different forms ranging from the uncle Remus to the pickaninny. "The pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language" (Bogle, 7). The pure coon appears in *How Rastus Got His Turkey* (1910), the first of a series of slapstick comedies, which was centered on the actions of a Negro named Rastus. This short film starred Billy Quirk, a white actor in blackface, as Rastus who cannot afford a turkey and decides to steal one. In trying to steal the turkey he actually takes a piece of a wooden fence. Rastus paved the way for the emergence of more coons (Bogle, 7).

Importantly, the other most commonly used tropes in video games is the black buck, a violent, hyper-aggressive, sexually driven black male who lusts for white flesh (Bogle, 4-10). One of the most notable and powerful iterations of the black buck can be viewed in D.W. Griffith's controversial film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). *Birth of a Nation* is a silent dramatic film based on Thomas Dixon's novel titled, *The Clansmen*. It follows the Civil War and its effects on two families, one from the North and the other from the South. Written from the Southern perspective, Griffith used white actors in blackface to portray African Americans as savage, unintelligent and destructive: "the black bucks of the film are psychopaths, one always panting and salivating, the other forever stiffening his body as if the mere presence of a white woman in the same room could bring him to a sexual climax" (Bogle, 14). The most infamous scene is one in which a black man chases a white girl, with the intent to rape her. To avoid his unwanted advances, she jumps from a cliff to her death. The film concludes with the "heroic" white characters reforming the Ku Klux Klan, which overtakes the savage Negro population. Though this film infuriated some white and black audiences, a larger segment of the population (read white) loved the movie, making it a box office success. Further, the film's racist message connected with racist whites as it served as the catalyst for the revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Bogle contends that the stereotypical buck caricature persists in American films, albeit in a repackaged format. He calls the 1970's "the Age of the Black Buck" as directors like Gordon Parks glamorized the black buck as a hero with characters like Shaft. The buck also appears in later films such as *New Jack City's* (1991) Nino Brown, a callous, ruthless drug Kingpin.

### CHAPTER 3 THE BLACK BUCK IN GAMING

The buck is the most prevalent portrayal of the black male body in video games. Mainstream media have forged a stereotypical image of blacks as inhuman savages with supernatural strength. In an article titled, “Black Characters in Video Games Must Be More Than Stereotypes of the Inhuman”, Sidney Fussell describes how black video game characters are placed in games for the sake of diversity. Most representations of black males tend to be uniform in the sense that they usually wear clothing that emphasizes their physical strength. Some characters such as *Final Fantasy VII*'s Barrett or *Mortal Kombat*'s Jax, have cybernetic enhancements that further perpetuates and emphasizes their physical strength, further contributing to their buck-ness. While games like the *Street Fighter* series features many characters of diverse backgrounds, their black characters also tend to be uniform. Examples include, Balrog, Birdie, and Dee Jay, all of whom are hulking figures over six feet tall with extremely huge muscles and brash personalities.

*Resident Evil 5* garnered much controversy due to its portrayal of the black body. The game follows Chris Redfield, a member of a Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance, who is sent to investigate possible Bio Organic Weapon smuggling in Africa. While most of the characters in this game are black, this game has been criticized for its racist undertones with Chris Redfield, the white savior battling savage spear totting, brutal black bucks. There is a scene in the game with two African men dragging a white woman into a house. This scene is similar to the aforementioned scene from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, in which a black man chases down a young white girl with the intent to do her harm. Goldstein explains that if these characters had been white then there would probably be no problem; however, they are Africans,

therefore there is a racial undertone and historical context behind the scene that suggests white purity vs. savage black bucks. This notion is further perpetuated with the existence of Chris Redfield's partner Sheva Alamar, a heroic, light-skinned African woman that contrasts other blacks in the game, as they are mindless and hostile savages. While Sheva isn't a mindless savage, there are implications that can be drawn from the game: She differs from the other Africans, perhaps because she is fair-skinned. Because race is an underlying theme in the game, Sheva's fair skin color suggests that the lighter tone of her skin is what makes her a hero in a way that dark skin would not.

Additionally, sports games glamourize the physical strength and athleticism of their black characters. David Leonard argues that sports video games like *NFL Street* and *NBA Street*, are the new form of minstrelsy as they emphasize the athletic power and laziness of black bodies, all while glamourizing and turning the urban poverty-stricken spaces in which they are set into commodities. "The commodification of black urban aesthetics, in the form of trash-talking, taunting, showboating, tattoos, earrings, violence and aggressive behavior signifies patterns of minstrelsy given the pleasure of becoming a part of an imagined black body, community, or aesthetic" (Leonard, 1). Leonard argues that these games give white audiences the chance to inhabit black bodies and experience black coolness from the safety of their own homes. Games like *NBA Street* romanticize the crumbling urban spaces in which black youth are forced to play in with its imagery of chain-link fences, abandoned buildings, graffiti scrawled walls and the net-less hoops, while ignoring the harsh realities and ubiquitous levels of poverty that gave rise to those conditions. These games give the impression that blacks are too busy playing basketball to work, rectify social problems and improve the community's infrastructure, further contributing to the notions of black athletic superiority and laziness.

## CHAPTER 4 “SLINGING DOPE AND THROWING UP GANG SIGNS?”

The *Grand Theft Auto* series is one of the most controversial in existence as it gained popularity due to its hyper-violent content and emphasis on criminality. More specifically *GTA: San Andreas*, set in the early 1990s, it recreates South Central Los Angeles, and features a black protagonist. It was the first game of the series to explicitly add race to its narrative. In the production of this game, the design team visited South Central Los Angeles and were surprised to find that it was not how it was portrayed in the media; however, they chose to design the game based on film depictions from the 1990s. This is obvious in the game's design as the protagonist CJ's friend Ryda is a recreation of N.W.A.'s Eazy E, and the characters speak with dialect that is similar to the characters in *Boyz N the Hood (1991)* and *Menace 2 Society (1993)*. “*The Grand Theft Auto* series is a somewhat curious artifact, reflective of today's global digital media. The game world itself is neither real, nor fiction, but hyper-real, a stylized rendition of 1990s California, containing a mixture of authentic and fictitious state landmarks and neighborhoods (mostly representing the Los Angeles area) ...As such, *GTA: San Andreas* is an oddly global artifact, the result of a team of Scottish developers raised with the Los Angeles depicted in N.W.A. music and Spike Lee films exporting that culture back to Americans” (Devaine and Squire 4). This game was also the first of the series to introduce new mechanics such as the ability to play basketball, lift weights, change hairs styles, car customization (hydraulics) and even tagging (using spray paint to mark your gang territory). All of these new features contribute to negative stereotypes associated with minorities. This game glamorizes urban neighborhoods in the same ways that *NBA Street* does allowing upper and middle-class white and black gamers, along with members of other ethnicities to experience what they believe to be

a virtual ghetto, all while ignoring the social injustices and systematic oppression that created these environments.

*GTA V*, which was released a decade after its predecessor, also perpetuates African American stereotypes. *GTA V* shed some of the more demeaning elements of *GTA: San Andreas* such as gang tagging and putting hydraulics on the cars, but the black characters still appear to be nothing more than hyper-violent criminals. There are three main protagonists in this game. Trevor, Michael and Franklin. While Trevor and Michael are white, their personalities are different as Michael is an upper class, retired criminal, while Trevor fits the description of what most would call 'trailer trash' as he lives in a rundown mobile home. In stereotypical fashion, Franklin is still the typical "hood" resident who resides in an economically-challenged inner city community.

After the prologue, this game starts as two black characters are in a suburban setting to steal two cars. While they are committing the thefts the two exchange dialogue that immediately establishes their "hoodness," and the fact that they don't belong in this setting:

Lamar: "You the one all pumped up on doing this lick, nigga. I'm getting my money in the hood, I'm straight fool. I'm cool."

Franklin: "You cool? Cool what? Slinging dope and throwing up gang signs?"

Franklin and Lamar exhibit the same stereotypical criminal behavior as CJ and Ryda in *GTA: San Andreas*. In short, they are depicted as dope dealing, car stealing thugs. Franklin and Lamar speak in slang about selling drugs as they are stealing cars from a suburban neighborhood. Franklin's dialogue suggests that he wants to get out of the hood; however, his method of doing so is through criminality whereas Lamar is content with being a drug dealer.

While Trevor is white and the most violent of the three protagonists, there are other white characters within the game that counter Trevor's depiction of white males. Michael, the other white protagonist, is a criminal. Michael is portrayed to be a sympathetic character as he left a life of crime to raise his family but he suffers from depression, having betrayed his friends and being reminiscent of his past lifestyle. Michael's character spawned from humble beginnings just as Trevor did, but he doesn't fit the stereotype of being 'trailer trash' as he raised a family in an upper-class neighborhood. There is a plethora of white characters in the game that differ from each other, rather it be in the way that they speak, act and their social statuses. In contrast, most of the black characters in this game and the previous installments fit into the realm of stereotypes.

## CHAPTER 5 “THE QUICKNESS OF FOOT”

Most games are like *Grand Theft Auto* where the players are assigned or can select to play as characters whose race is predetermined. There are games that give players the opportunity to create their own characters or avatars, as seen in *The Elder Scrolls* series; however there appears to be underlying problems with the race mechanic in this game. *The Elder Scrolls* is a series of role-playing games (RPG) that take place in the fictional world of Tamriel. These games are based in fantasy; however, they feature realistic themes such as politics, religion, and even genetic determinism. Genetic determinism is a belief that suggests that natural selection and physical traits can contribute to a person’s social standing in society and even the world (Goldberg, 3). These sorts of beliefs gave birth to stereotypes such as all Asians are good at mathematics, and blacks are best for physical labor rather than activities requiring intellect.

*The Elder Scrolls* features ten races that a gamer can play with: The Imperials, Nords and the Breton are all variations of whites possibly derived from Scandinavians, British and Bretons (a Gaelic group from France); the Khadjit, a cat-like humanoid race; the orc: very bulky, green creatures: The Argonians, half-man, half-reptilian race: the wood elves, the dark elves, the high elves and lastly, the Redguards, a race derivative of Moors or African Americans.

The Redguards hail from the Desserts of Hammerfell; therefore, their physical traits are attributed to their geographic origins, so their skin tones are varying shades of of brown. Further, characters belonging to this race also have wider nostrils and more full lips. Also, the Redguards’ hair is coarse and they speak with accents that differ from other races. Finally, in *The Elder Scrolls*, a race’s geographic origin not only determines their physical traits but also their intelligence and fighting capabilities.



The character design in *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* echoes notions of racism and stereotypes, for it suggests that race is much more than a social construction. This game is known for giving players the option to choose any race they want to play with. This mechanic has no direct correlation or effect on the story of the game. However, it does affect the statistics and abilities that the character has from the start. For example, since the Argonians are a half-reptilian race, they have the ability to swim in water without ever losing air. Similarly, choosing to be a Redguard results in an increase in a character's stamina, yet they are less intelligent. In particular, the Redguard is the least intelligent race in the game, which perpetuates stereotypes about blacks being incompetent or unintelligent. They are more skilled in combat and they are also the race with the highest endurance. In addition, to having points added to endurance, choosing a Redguard awards the player with an ability perk called "Adrenaline Rush," which grants the player increased stamina for sixty seconds. As a result of these characteristics, the in-game description tells the player that this is the best race to choose for combat:

"The most naturally talented warriors in Tamriel, the dark-skinned Redguards of Hammerfell seem born to battle, though their pride and fierce independence of spirit makes them more suitable as scouts or skirmishers, or as free-ranging heroes and adventurers, than as rank-and-file soldiers. In addition to their cultural affinities for many weapon and armor styles, Redguards are also physically blessed with hardy constitutions, resistance to poison and disease, and quickness of foot."

This description, in conjunction with the Redguards' characteristics makes it clear that *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* contributes to the hyper-masculine stereotypes associated with black people.

Though *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* is problematic, it is important to note that there is a Redguard mage in the game named Trayvond. A player encounters Trayvond in the Mages

Guild. Trayvond has all of the phenotypes of a Redguard and he speaks with the cultural inflections of other Redguards. He shows self-awareness of his abnormality, because as the player approaches him he asks if they are surprised to see a Redguard mage. He addresses the lack of Redguard mages and states that they do not like spell casters. Trayvond differs from other Redguards in the game because he doesn't show signs of physical strength as he is wearing mage robes instead of the armor that other Redguards sometimes wear in combat. Trayvond's use of magic speaks to his intellect, as magic in *The Elder Scrolls* is an ability dependent upon wisdom and intelligence. Ironically, *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion's* race mechanic contributes to genetic determinism while seemingly recognizing the problem with racial stereotyping and attempting to challenge it with the Trayvond character.

## CHAPTER 6 “RUST AND NATURAL SELECTION”

There have been many different ways in which race is addressed while designing video games such as having characters whose race is predetermined. There are also games that have fictional races, some even giving players the ability to create their own avatar like *The Elder Scrolls*. In contrast, game designer Garry Newman created *Rust*, a game that features a unique element in which the player's race and phenotypes are assigned randomly. In *Rust*, the players must gather resources such as food, wood, and clothing to survive. Like most games, the characters were originally defaulted to white male characters and thus, all gamers had to play as a white male avatar. Later, Newman decided to add the element in which a player's phenotypes were randomly assigned. He explains that he fashioned the game in this manner, because he wanted it to feel as real as possible. From his perspective, since no one has the luxury to choose his or her own physical traits in real-life, then the same rule should apply to *Rust*.

Additionally, each player is assigned a unique identification number called a Steam ID that is connected to his or her character like a social security number, thereby prohibiting the player to change their character. For the most part, Newman says that the change was received well; however, the inclusion of darker-skinned characters caused players to use racially insensitive language toward each other, while some players actually experienced hostility because of their race. "Seeing this kind of thing play out made us realize that these aren't just 'real life' issues that we need to block. They're issues that we need to invite into the game to let people explore" (Grayson, 2015). Instead of trying to censor the game Newman said that this would educate white men about how it is to be a persecuted black man (Grayson 2015). Newman was shocked to find out that real world prejudices manifested into the game as he

states, "It makes me wish I'd set up some analytics to record how many times the N-word was used before and after the update... It was used quite a bit from what I've seen" (Grayson 2015). He saw an increase of racially fueled language and had even considered taking action against the people responsible. However, he realized that when this behavior was displayed other players joined together and took action against that individual.

## CHAPTER 7 “VIDEO GAMES ARE A WHITE MAN’S WORLD”

*Rust*'s inclusion of race also addresses the issue of how players view ethnicity in video games. Magan Condis writes, “These players appear to think of whiteness as a neutral type of embodiment, the universal category of humanity against which all those who do ‘have’ a race (anyone who is not white) are compared. “. . . “Once *Rust* made the decision to include race, many of its white audiences expressed concerns of the ‘lack of choice’ only after people of color were added to the game.” Most people criticized the game as being political because it takes away the player’s choice. However, Condis states that there was never a choice in the game altogether, that lack of choice only became apparent after the inclusion of other races.

A Video Game Census conducted by Dmitri Williams a Social Psychology Professor at the University of Southern California showed that 85% of characters in video games are white, meaning that 15% of characters in video games were Black, Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, or Native American. Williams concluded that approximately 10% of characters in video games were black and that most of these characters were gangsters or in sports games. Blacks aren’t the only race being underrepresented in video games as there are fewer than 3% playable Hispanic video game characters, along with Native Americans and Arabic characters that are often depicted as the enemies in such game series as the *Red Dead*, or *Call of Duty* series. While minorities are underrepresented in most games there are some games that deny minorities and appearance in the game at all.

In recent news, *The Witcher 3* has become the target of criticism due to its apparent lack of minorities. *The Witcher 3* is a role-playing fantasy game based on a Slavic mythology and it does not feature any minority characters. Game Critic Tauriq Moosa discusses how countless

reviews have appraised the game; however, very few critics have addressed its lack of minority characters. The most common defense for *The Witcher 3*'s lack of diversity is that the game seeks to be historically accurate. Moosa counters this argument by stating that since this game exists in a world with magic, harpies and wraiths, the realism argument holds no merit. Further, he questions whether or not the inclusion of minority characters in this game would seem less believable than dragons and wraiths (Moosa, 2015). "The real magic power of white heroes is that they can be anything without scrutiny—kings, detectives, space marines, assassins, witchers—while non-white heroes alone must pass the test of 'historical accuracy'...Are black nobles and paladins really too fantastical to exist, even in worlds of sorcery, wizards and unicorns" (Russell 2015)? Ironically, *The Witcher* does address racial bigotry as in one instance the protagonist explains: "Hatred and prejudice will never be eradicated. And witch-hunts will never be about witches. To have a scapegoat—that's the key. Humans always fear the alien, the odd." However, this quote was in relation to racism of other species and not races. Moosa argues that this scene dehumanizes minorities, for elves are allowed to exist in the game but ethnic minorities are not.

Jamin Warren addresses the lack of minority characters in video games, explaining that when minorities are included they are usually Non-Playable Characters (NPCs). In the gaming world the inclusion of NPCs is similar to the tokenism that occurs in film. The term token refers to a person, usually a woman or a minority, who is admitted or hired to a group to serve as an example that the group does not discriminate (Zimmer, 65). Therefore, the "Token black" character is a term used to describe one or few black characters that appear in a plethora of white characters, in a film, literature and even video games. Comedy Central's *South Park* (1997) uses this term in a literal sense as one of the only black kids in South Park is named Token Black.

Minority characters are reduced to the role of an NPC and they are usually one-dimensional and demeaning. Aside from sports games blacks are mostly prevalent in the roles of NPCs and they either serve as enemies, or allies used to progress the story as opposed to being the actual protagonist.

*Deus Ex* features an NPC named Latetia, an African American woman, who serves as an informant to the protagonist. Latetia is a key element to the progression of the story as the player must bribe her with money or beer to get information and to get access to a part of the game that is outside of his race and class. Evan Narcisse, a video game critic, wrote an article titled, “The Worst Thing about ‘*Deus Ex: Human Revolution*’” discussing how Latitia’s character is developed poorly due to the broken English she speaks, and that her character is equivalent to blackface from the period of minstrelsy. “The horrible broken English Letitia speaks is so far removed from any actual slang that it renders the character practically extra-terrestrial (Narcisse, 2011). As the player approaches, Letitia she can be seen rummaging through a trash bin and she begs the protagonist for some change. Letitia perpetuates the stereotype that African Americans are poor and her voice is more of a reiteration of blackvoice, than it is of any actual living being. Letitia is a “jive talking” coon whose portrayal echoes the decades of racist imagery about blacks being too poor, lazy, and dumb to share the American Dream (Narcisse 2011).

Many people believe that the shortage of minority characters is due to the audience that plays video games. However, according to a study conducted by the The Kaiser Family Foundation, the majority of gamers are minorities: African American children played video games at an average of 30 minutes or more daily than their white counter parts and Hispanic children played video games about an average of 10 minutes more daily. Despite this fact, there is still a shortage of minority video game characters.

IGDA (International Game Developers Association) conducted a survey among game developers in 2005 to determine whether or not the notion of “young white males” dominating the gaming industry was true. This study revealed that approximately 83% of game designers were white. The results also showed that 2% of developers were black and that 2.5% were Latino (IGDA 4). IDGA suggests that including more minorities into the gaming industry would create a more diverse array of video games and new ideas.



## CHAPTER 8 THE NEW AGE OF GAMING

Throughout history there have been many preconceived notions about blacks being athletic, incompetent, aggressive, thugs, so on and so forth. These fallacies are perpetuated in film and they have crossed over to video games, which increasingly feature cinematic elements. Since the release of the first home gaming console, video games have evolved from two-dimensional character sprites to three-dimensional realistic characters. However, black video game characters remain either absent or insufficiently developed. Game developers design these minority characters based upon how they perceive their realistic counterparts, resulting in superficial characters that fit into the realm of a stereotypes.

Unlike games where race is predetermined like *Witcher* and *GTA V*, there are games like *The Elder Scrolls*, where the player can choose their race and appearance, and *Rust* completely randomized the player's race. A player can choose the race and the facial features in *The Elder Scrolls*, however in choosing a Redguard they sacrifice intelligence for strength. Also the character creator is flawed as Narcisse discusses the difficulty of creating a black avatar in his image and argues that character creator sections in video games lack black hairstyles. The hairstyles that do exist in these games, are more for humor than any of the other hairstyles, ranging from big Afros to Mohawks. Games like *The Elder Scrolls* supposedly allow players to create an avatar to their liking; however, they lack physical features of minority characters. *Rust* challenges the notion of race in video games as they consciously take away the player's ability to choose their race and appearance. This challenges players to evaluate the way in which they are treated in a virtual space based off on their skin color and how this type of racial bigotry exists in the real world. It challenges players to examine this type of discrimination in the real world.

While black characters in media are still stereotypical, there is an apparent effort to change this in some films and video games, since black characters are becoming more intricate multidimensional characters. There have been many black characters in film and video games that challenge the typical portrayal of African Americans. *The Walking Dead* the video game abandons the traditional portrayal of black characters in video games as the story follows Lee Everett a black former college professor with a troubled past. In this post-apocalyptic setting Lee serves as the surrogate father and protector to a little biracial girl Clementine. Before the zombie apocalypse, Lee was a convicted felon who was freed because of the events of the zombie apocalypse. Lee's choices depend on the player; however, Lee is very articulate while also having a caring nature. Lee serves as the surrogate father of a little girl in the game named Clementine. He not only protects her from physical harm, but the emotional stresses of crimes committed by other people. He is far removed from an uncle tom, coon or a buck as he isn't subject to the will of a master but more so of his love for Clementine. While Lee has a criminal background, he is complex and his character unfolds based on the personality that a player chooses to give him. There is tension between Lee and other characters due to his race; there is a point in the game when a fellow survivor believes that Lee can pick a lock because he's black. Lee is black but he doesn't use "ghetto slang" to express his blackness nor does he have a brash loud personality as is usual for black characters. Lee is proof that a black character can be a criminalized, yet still be complex.

Set in New Orleans in 1768, *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* follows the protagonist Aveline de Granpre, a bi-racial heroine whose mother was a slave formerly owned by her father. Aveline is a contrast to the typical tragic mulatto seen in films. The tragic mulatto is a half black and half white character and is therefore forced to live in a world where they aren't accepted by

any ethnicity. Bogle suggests that the tragic mulatto's biracial status causes the viewer to sympathize with the character when they are seen doing menial household chores, usually associated with darker skinned people (Bogle 9). While the tragic mulatto is often portrayed as a sympathetic character, Aveline's biracial status is used as a mechanic of the game as she has the option to dress as a noble, giving her the ability to entice men, bribe guards and use her privilege to her advantage. She can also assume the role of a slave by dressing in tattered clothes, enabling her to move undetected amongst other slaves. Lastly, she can assume the role of an assassin, the most familiar form of the franchise. Unlike many games before it, *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* doesn't avoid the topic of race, rather it uses race as a narrative device and using it to add to the mechanics of the game.

Characters like Lee Everett and Aveline de Granpre stand apart from other black characters because their criminality doesn't define their characters; instead it adds more depth. Also, Lee and Aveline don't fit the description of the buck, the coon, or any of the other caricatures that appear in video games. There is no denying that there are real-life people like Franklin and CJ from the GTA series; however, these are the types of characters that are most prevalent in media as well. It becomes a problem when all of the black characters fit the stereotypes rather than challenge them. *GTA: San Andreas* glorifies urban hip-hop life, and allows people to experience "the ghetto", rather than raising issues of poverty stricken neighborhoods, systematic oppression, gang violence and social injustices that occur in these settings. A minority character doesn't have to be a college professor like Lee to be a good character. Good minority characters challenge stereotypes and oppose them as they move beyond the one-dimensional portrayals that have existed since minstrelsy. In sum, blacks have

historically been portrayed negatively in the media. Since video games are played by a large number of people, they have the potential to change ideas about race and stereotypes.

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