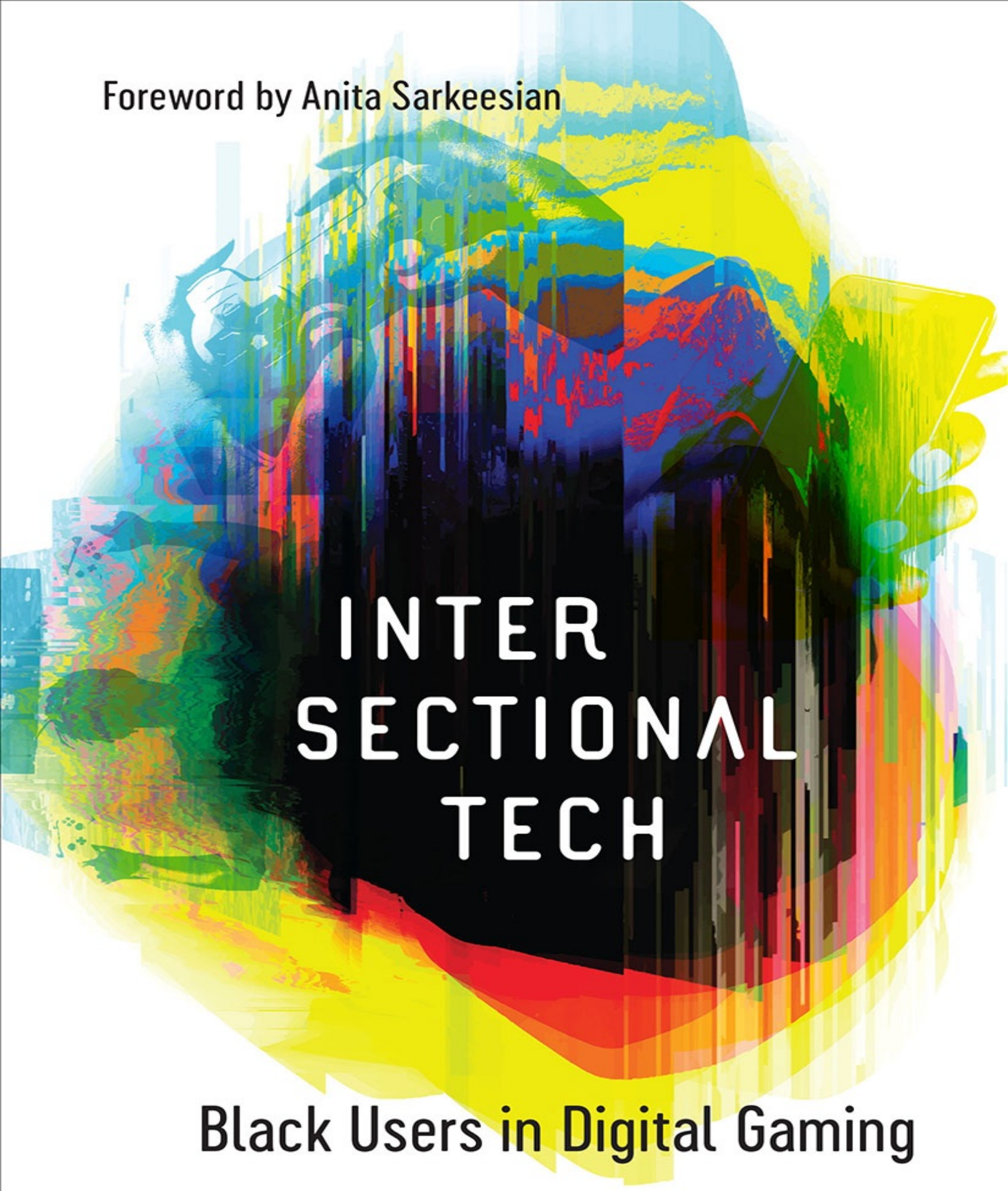
Foreword by Anita Sarkeesian



INTER SECTIONAL TECH

Black Users in Digital Gaming

KISHONNA L. GRAY

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In memory of
Susan Banks (OneOddGamerGirl)
and
Trey Loyal (Cityboy AKA City Life) . . .
Gamers gone too soon

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Your silence will not protect you.
—AUDRE LORDE

Loud, intelligent, and bold proclamation of the importance and centrality of marginalized experiences in the games community today is still, frustratingly, met with doubt, gaslighting, dismissal, or hostility. The mere act of acknowledging that not all bodies, whether of avatars in a game or of players behind the screens, are treated the same is, I would say, a courageous one. This is an act that Dr. Kishonna Gray has made central throughout her career. I have no doubt that Gray is keenly aware of the magnitude of producing a book like *Intersectional Tech* within a space so often occupied by privileged bodies. To have the audacity to centralize Blackness in our white technoculture illustrates the importance of this qualitative intervention in examining the realities of Black lives in gaming spaces.

I have previously stated, "If we were to judge by the history books, it would be easy to think that men were pretty much the only people who mattered in history—or at least, the only ones worth remembering." This can also be said of books around media, technology, and culture. But with the explosion of books on race, from Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* to André Brock Jr.'s *Distributed Blackness* to Ruha Benjamin's *Race after Technology,* we are in an era when we can't ignore Black interventions within technology or the historical impacts of Black expressive culture on our mediated world.

Gray's book is in conversation with these scholars, and it adds the dimension of gaming, a space that rarely engages meaningfully around race. While academic gaming culture has spent time focusing on gender and sexuality, Gray is adamantly continuing to center discussions of race, acknowledging and honoring the Black users who presently and historically influence gaming culture.

It too often falls to marginalized folks to undertake the exhaustive labor of

illustrating and proving our own oppression to those who oppress us, to convince them that our experiences, which are significantly different from the experiences of those with privilege, are real and impactful in ways to which they might be blind. Let me tell you from experience, this work is exhausting, and I am endlessly thankful for the stamina and tenacity of thinkers like Gray who are willing to do that labor.

As a cis woman who occasionally passes for white, I am hyperaware of the privileges I hold and the responsibility I have to help create a liberated world free of white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and all forms of oppression. It is my deepest hope that it is not simply folks who see their experiences reflected in the pages of *Intersectional Tech* who will engage with this material, but that it also will reach everyone else, who might be new to these concepts or who are seeking updated avenues and lenses through which to explore these complex conversations about identity and intersectionality.

In recent years, we have seen an emphasis on acknowledging white women's representations in games. But the discussions about increasing sincere, genuine representations in games must be an intersectional one. This book asks us to take a deeper look at the slowly widening landscape of Black characters. Has there been actual progress in the past decade? Was 2016 really the year of the Black gamer? Do Black men in games still get stereotyped as criminals? Do Black women even exist in games yet? Gray navigates gender and race, nudging us toward a more complex understanding of the liminal space floating between progress and stagnation.

What I admire most in this book is the range and depth of analysis. It seamlessly integrates representations in games, player and streamer experiences, the roles that social media play in our lives, biased hardware, and the overarching politics of it all, while also doing what the title says: acknowledging a full range of intersecting identities. There is much exploration of Blackness, but that is in cooperation with gender, queerness, ability, and more. That depth of analysis makes it even more striking that Gray also values qualitative inquiry into mediated tech spaces. While similar texts are theoretically driven, offering necessary critiques of the reciprocal impacts of human and machine engagement, Gray's ethnographic approach puts narrative at the core, keeping extensive stories and dialogues intact.

The pages of this text also illustrate the distance between user and producer, which is increasingly dwindling, with the lines between the two constantly blurring. But while white users of streaming technologies, for example, have

seamlessly made the transition from user to producer, the racial schema of whiteness continues to exclude Black users from centers of production. Nonetheless, Black streamers persist without fanfare or massive numbers of followers and are comfortable within their niche.

Without spoiling anything, I can say that the reader is in for a treat around the digital storytelling practices of *TastyDiamond,* a Black woman streamer who adopts traditional Black communication practices of humor, singing, comedy, and other modes of engaging traditional Black audiences. I love the way Gray allows these individuals to just exist and doesn't feel the need to explain or make legible the lives of Black folks (especially for white, academic audiences). That's the power of *Intersectional Tech.* It offers no apologies for laying out uncomfortable truths that mainstream audiences too often try to ignore (unless they can commodify and appropriate culture for profit, but that's another book).

As I conclude this foreword, I am reminded of the outrage that has become part of our daily experience. Globally, we are seeing a rise of authoritarianism, repressive policies, and the frightening normalization of xenophobia. But in between the literal horror show that is happening here in the United States, I also am filled with daily reminders of the ways in which people continue to build and support communities during these trying times. I try to remember that technology is a tool that can be used in a variety of ways and that marginalized folks have always been creative with our means of protest, resistance, and community building. As technology grows and changes, so do our strategies and tactics, and above all else, we must center the humanity of us all.

Kishonna Gray's *Intersectional Tech* is the book we need now, in moments when many Americans are increasingly concerned about the republic being shaken to its core, with leaders pushing us toward authoritarian ends, which is a reality that has long infiltrated the Black community. This is America. This book reminds us of the continuity of these repressive regimes. It acknowledges that America is and always has been oppressive to Black Americans. There are no checks and balances under white supremacy, and these toxic technostructures just remind us of their power and reach. But Black users of these digital technologies are steadfast in offering speculative futures and presents for the dystopian design levied upon them.

Gray offers an intersectional analysis, putting pieces of a puzzle together to explore a nuanced whole, an approach aimed at questioning the complex relationships among race, gender, ability, sexuality, technology, social expression, and cultural oppression. *Intersectional Tech* goes beyond

reimagining Black life inside technostructures. Instead, this book provides the here and now to not just survive in the midst of so much turmoil but also to thrive and to rely on the historical trajectories of past and present Black realities. *Intersectional Tech* makes visible these often hidden figures.

ANITA SARKEESIAN

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Sending love and thanks to my beautiful family, Kayland, Anteaus, and Jay, for inspiring me every day. Game over, FAM!

And to Jenny Keegan and the amazing folks at LSU Press, who took a chance on this book when everyone else said no. I am forever grateful to you.

INTERSECTIONAL TECH

Introduction

INTERSECTIONAL FORMATIONS AND TRANSMEDIATED METHODS

In this book, I explicate the possibilities of synthesizing theories and methods from the disciplines of feminism, critical race theory, media studies, and anthropology, among others, in a critical study of black, intersectional technoculture. Together, the chapters demarcate a research program for studying the intersectional development of technological artifacts and systems—a program that contributes to a greater understanding of the cultural production and social processes involved in digital and technological culture. Using gaming as the glue that binds this project, I put forth intersectional tech as a framework to make sense of the visual, textual, and oral engagements of marginalized users, exploring the complexities in which they create, produce, and sustain their practices. Gaming, which often lies outside of conversations on blackness and digital praxis, is a medium that is becoming more visible, viable, and legible in making sense of black technoculture. Intersectional tech implores us to render visible the force of discursive practices that position practices within (dis)orderly social hierarchies and arrangements. The explicit formulations of the normative order sometimes disagree with the concrete human condition and are inconsistent with the consumption and production practices that constitute black digital labor. It is, in fact, these practices that inform the theoretical underpinnings of black performances, cultural production, exploited labor, and resistance strategies inside oppressive technological structures in which black users reside.

The intersectional formations of the narrators in this book are illustrative of transmediated engagement. I use the term *transmedia* to engage what Göran Bolin calls “textual production that travels over technologies.”[1] The transmedia text involves intricate multiplatform narrative webs that, according to Henry Jenkins, capitalize on the affordances of digital media convergence.[2] The transmediated text thus requires cultural synergy of a multitude of mediated formats. The visual of this mapping creates an intricate nexus of analyzing what

intersectional blackness means across platforms.

Engaging intersectionality across these mediated platforms reveals a significant moment of critiquing narratives, creating content, and controlling narratives. The aftermath of Mike Brown's death in 2014, for instance, revealed the power of this innovative engagement: the once-invisible could now actively engage, participate, and produce content in hypervisible ways. In the context of #BlackLivesMatter, the combination of the textual and the visual ignited not only a movement but also a proclamation of reclaiming narratives and identities across media and platforms—from #BlackLivesMatter to *Black-ish* to *The Breakfast Club.*

It is important to examine the everydayness of mediated, intersectional counterpublics to examine black oral, visual, and textual culture in digital spaces and how this manifests in gaming culture. The transmediated nature of contemporary gaming communities affords the possibility of reframing traditional narratives, controlling and producing content, and sustaining black cultural production. It is necessary to move away from the deficit model of having to justify black experiences through white acceptance and justification. This only sustains digital media as a racial project in service to white supremacy.

W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about the reception of blackness, specifically speaking about the double consciousness of blackness and the veil that African Americans must look through, seeing themselves through the perspective of others. Mediated outlets have a significant history of creating and sustaining stereotypical narratives of blackness, and this transcends mediated platforms. By exploring the role of transmediated gaming in the construction of blackness, as well as the production of mediated narratives by black folks sustaining their identities, I explore how gamers reimagine their physical and digital conditions to control their digital instantiations of blackness.

Although much attention has been devoted to examining issues affecting women and toxic masculinity, that scholarship has mostly examined experiences of white women and the white men who harass them; this could be viewed as sustaining the racial project of white supremacy. Although gender issues make up the bulk of conversations about identity, very little has been written about race and racial minorities in gaming, confirming that black folk are still a hyperphysical, hypervisible (in the sports genre), invisible (due to limited narratives), overlooked population. The assumed white masculine norm in gaming heavily focuses on toxic masculinity, failing to capture other, more marginalized masculinities.

Furthermore, the purpose of this book is to explore how interdisciplinary, theoretical, and methodological approaches can address the challenges in studying race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, and other identifiers in digital contexts. Using gaming as a site of inquiry, I investigate the presence of resistance, activism, and mobilization among marginalized users employing visual tools such as memes, GIFs, images, gaming technologies, TV shows, and the like. By examining the dynamics in access associated with identity, internet usage, technological adoption, and control, *Intersectional Tech* will examine how unequal the internet still is, along lines of intersectional identity, and how our academic tools can be used to investigate and interrogate these oppressive practices. The cultural residue of this historical and technological development still discursively patterns contemporary experiences in gaming in significant ways—and in ways that mirror the historical legacies suturing white supremacy to these contemporary practices.

Informed by black feminist thought, this book focuses on social structures, or the rules of play that afford "certain actors advantages over others by endowing them with valued resources or indeed by serving as resources themselves."[3] Given the continual valuing of whiteness and masculinity in digital spaces, it is necessary to explore the often unstable relationship that develops between the user and technology, highlighting institutional, communal, and individual barriers that impede full inclusion of marginalized users. Many technological determinists assume that there is nothing about the technology itself that determines how it will ultimately be used; they insist that what matters are the "social circumstances of development" and, specifically, the outcomes of "intergroup negotiations."[4] In these negotiations, "relevant social groups" or "actors" use various strategies and tactics to shape a technology according to their own "needs, expectations, and beliefs." When these strategies include harassment campaigns against women in gaming, for instance, a focus should be placed on how technology is mobilized to fulfill the project of white masculine supremacy.

Although many corporate creators of digital technology claim that no offense is intended when their technology excludes and renders people of color invisible, we must explore how and why these technologies continue to oppress, placing the burden on the creators. Rudi Volti notes that once the relevant social groups are more or less satisfied with the shape of a technology, the groups' relationships stabilize and the technology achieves "closure."[5] But the wider social context in which users and audiences engage with technology also must be

interrogated. Which social groups decide on this closure? Why not engage technology as a continually evolving entity, influenced by culture and influencing cultures?

There also is an assumption that there is just one way to engage with a technology, but diffusion of innovation theory challenges this assumption by highlighting intersecting disparities that affect access and adoption, a concept that is explored in this book. The power asymmetry on display in gaming culture provides an opportunity for exploration of power structures and hierarchies and the unequal distribution of economic and cultural resources, which intimately link the creator to the content and the content to the culture—a cyclical relationship. This perspective reveals that there is no end goal when it comes to one's relationship with technology; rather, this is an interactive, ongoing, negotiated process whereby one influences the other on a continuum.

Intersectional Users of Transmediated Technology: Who Are They?

Who are these intersectional users of this transmediated technology? Are they fans? Audiences? Communities? Producers? Consumers? Gamers? There is no one way to capture the user of gaming technologies, and no single concept accurately captures the essence of the narrators in this ethnographic project. Their everyday practices as users of gaming technologies are intersectional and diverse; I find the fandom literature useful in making sense of the holistic practices in which gamers can engage. From the consumption of gaming content on the website *Kotaku* to learning new ways to assassinate a target in a *Hitman* strategy guide, to creating a build tutorial for *Fortnite* on YouTube, to live streaming *NBA 2K19,* these activities reflect the varied ways in which gamers simultaneously engage as consumers, users, audiences, producers, creators, and/or fans. So, as scholars suggest, the "practice of media fandom provides a highly visible and intensely concentrated example of how people interpret, internalize, and use popular texts in their everyday lives."[6]

Conceptualizations of fans and fandom have traditionally focused on two dimensions: activity and identity. By looking for certain behaviors and traits, one can distinguish fans from casual viewers and the wider public. For example, Jenkins describes fans as the citizens of "fandom," which he defines as "a cultural community, one which shares a common mode of reception, a common set of critical categories and practices, a tradition of aesthetic production, a set of social norms and expectations. The relationship between fan and text encompasses activity and identity; it requires expenditures of time, effort and

money, as well as an emotional and intellectual investment."[7]

As John Fiske outlines, fan activity consists mainly of "discrimination and productivity,"[8] meaning there are multiple modes of engagement, from analysis to interpretation and speculation, that work together in building a community through shared texts and playfully appropriating them for their own ends. Viewers can cultivate a fan identity by participating in these activities and by raising "the intensity of their emotional and intellectual involvement."[9] For example, watching television as a fan involves different levels of attentiveness and evokes different viewing competencies than would a more casual viewing of the same material.[10] Nancy Baym's foundational work, with its focus on cultures and communities that are created out of online televisual interaction, illustrates this. Her book *Tune In, Log On* highlights the connectivity around various soap operas, where users develop interpersonal relationships, and looks at how the users resist hegemonic categorization of their communities.[11] Rhiannon Bury's contributions also highlight how "fan practices cannot be analyzed separately from gender, class, sexuality, and nationality."[12] Bury's scholarship explores the interconnectedness of space, the body, and community and provides useful foundations for an intersectional engagement with fans and their mediated activities. Whether providing commentary in vlogs, commenting on articles, or remixing artifacts on TikTok or YouTube, fans, audiences, and users are participatory players in producing and circulating digital culture. The centrality of fans as users for the survival, maintenance, and sustenance of mediated spaces is a prominent theme in this book.

This text also is inspired by the essays appearing in *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice.* This volume reflects an understanding that "the Internet is far from a single thing and there are many ways in which online and offline practices are interwoven."[13] By focusing on women's lives, the authors of the essays in the collection explore how the online is a part of a mixed-reality identity that never resides fully on screen or off. These cyberfeminist practices are important and significant precisely because they do not stay online—an important component of *Intersectional Tech.*

Kristen J. Warner's work likewise is central to my project, as she explores the reaction of historically excluded communities when members of their population become central to production and narrative creation. Warner specifically looks at Shonda Rhimes's TV show *Scandal,* starring Kerry Washington, as an example of what a media artifact looks like when black women are in front of and behind the camera.[14] She highlights the power that black women fans have in urging for

more nuanced representation. Dayna Chatman explores *Scandal* from a socially mediated perspective, demonstrating the power of Black Twitter and the ownership that black fans and audiences have in seeing black creators and characters. The innovative power of live tweeting illustrated a politics of viewing, a discursive struggle in which these digital users are actively engaged with the show.[15]

In applying this kind of activity to users of gaming technologies, we see that users spend significant amounts of time watching others engaged in gaming activities, situating them as an interactive audience—similar to black women's active practices of live tweeting while watching *Scandal.* These practices highlight the transmediated nature of digital technologies and a central component of intersectional tech. As such, the purpose of the present discussion is to rigorously examine how black folks, as intersectional users, producers, audiences, fans, and overall consumers of gaming, destabilize racial, gendered, sexualized, ableist, and class values to (re)imagine engagements with technology. These strategies of destabilization constitute the current analysis of intersectional engagement with gaming and technology.

Methodological Challenges and Ethical Conundrums

The centrality of these intersectional narratives is reflected in the structure of this work. This introduction provides the reader with the conceptual framework of intersectional tech, which includes historical narratives, personal experiences, and theoretical frameworks, all viewed through an interdisciplinary lens. The examples throughout this critical study of race and games moves the reader and audience beyond gaming, demonstrating the power and the everydayness of this leisure activity. To achieve this goal, individual and group interviews were conducted, using a narrative format. Collective sessions highlighted themes emerging from participant observations, current events, controversial issues, and other political happenings in and around their lives. Although the more formal interviews did not last longer than a couple of hours, the informal mechanisms in place are harder to measure, as they have been ongoing for the past ten years. These informal mechanisms include direct messaging, text messaging, sharing tweets and memes, and meeting in physical spaces to check in.

The biographical fragments of these diverse lives are segmented largely by population and by the nature of their online presence. For instance, there is a chapter devoted solely to queer black women because their online community is solely black, woman, and queer. One chapter is dedicated to the experiences of

differently abled black women because it was necessary to carve out that space to discuss their needs. This may sometimes seem contradictory to an intersectional project, but this is how many make sense of their intersectional lives. While not divorcing intersectionality as a theory from actual practice, I had to maintain the integrity of their stories and perspectives, and while they are intersectional, the everydayness of their worlds is sometimes more compartmentalized than anticipated. I aimed to keep their words unedited, only modifying when necessary for an academic audience. But for the majority of the excerpts and summaries, participants' unfiltered words are on full display. I tried to minimize my presence to allow the free flow of ideas and thoughts. But at times, I am fully immersed as a welcome participant and co-narrator in these conversations.

So who are these narrators who afforded me the opportunity to engage with them? The names, gamertags, and user names are pseudonyms, protecting the narrators' physical and digital identities, though significant care was taken to ensure that their gamertags remained reflective of their real gaming personas.[16] These users spent significant time thinking about their user names in these gaming communities, and I did not want to haphazardly create an identity merely to serve as a placeholder. The gamertags are gendered, racialized, indicative of ethnic and national origin, and full of creativity and care. Ensuring that the created identities adhered to the narrators' existing identities without stereotyping and being culturally insensitive represented one of the ethical challenges of this book.

It also is important to note that only a handful of people, conversations, experiences, and interviews from a span of ten years are included in these pages. In total, there were forty-two participants (folks I call narrators) across Xbox, PlayStation, and a variety of text-based platforms and social media outlets.

Organizing Data, Structuring Narratives

I experienced some challenges in organizing the data to structure this book. First, I had to accept the flattening of multidimensional people, communities, and experiences to fit the traditional format of an academic text. Second, I had to condense more than a decade of experiences, stories, and narratives into a cohesive whole to ensure a unifying theme. Third, I sometimes had to go against my training as an intersectional feminist and present singular analyses around race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class, as opposed to keeping them troubled, tangled, and whole.

But it became evident that this book goes beyond simply documenting digital realities and applying a theoretical framework to make sense of those realities for an academic audience. For more than a decade, I have been collecting data on social identities and interactions in online gaming spaces, witnessing the processes of self-realization, self-definition, identity development, community creation, maintenance, and sustenance, and understanding the intersecting reality for many gamers. In (re)reading transcripts from those narratives, I realized that this process has unfolded in a variety of ways. By engaging with narratives in video games and online spaces, through political and high-profile events and social phenomena, and through the everyday leisure activities made available through the technology of gaming, black gamers developed the capacity to not only survive but also to thrive by engineering vast networks across platforms that also extend to their physical lives.

In the early interviews, many of the individuals who allowed me to be a part of their communities spent significant time just discussing identities—gaming identities. When I began uncovering how they made sense of their racialized identities, constructed gendered identities, sexualities, abilities, and more, there was little or no reflection on how those identities affected their overall experiences in digital and physical realms. For instance, when I asked Tyrell (gamertag xxChronicGamerxx), a twenty-six-year-old black man, to discuss his masculine identity and how digital environments influence this identity, he initially listed preconstructed characteristics and traits. He did not even identify racially as black. However, his discussions around his blackness and masculine identity over the span of our engagements evolved to include conversations on male privilege, toxic masculinity, and his desire to dismantle "the patriarchy." A sense of this evolution of his identity in the following excerpts also highlight the transmediated nature of our interactions.

JULY 2008, YAHOO MESSENGER

Tyrell: Who am I? What do you mean who am I? How would I describe myself? I'm me. I'm Tyrell. I'm a gamer. I, like, I work hard. I put work in. I don't know if I get what you saying.

Kishonna: No it's ok. Does this ever change? Do the spaces you're in impact who you are? Do you think differently about yourself like when you're online. At work. At church. With your family. You get what I'm asking?

Tyrell: Nah. I think I get it. But I don't let others control me or who I am like

that. As long as I am secure and confident in who I am, I am the same no matter where I go. Imma be a me regardless. I gotta be.

Kishonna: Are there times where you have to think beyond just being Black or Man?

Tyrell: I'm a person. Point blank. But gaming let's me ignore all that. That's why I'm here.

MARCH 2009, EMAIL FROM TYRELL

Hey Kishonna. Yeah I'm good. I finish up school this semester. Finally. I got a job doing some tech stuff and graphic design at [small urban tech company]. So it's in my lane. I am going to still try for game design. It's so hard to get in ain't it. I'm sorry I haven't responded to you in a while. I've still been gaming. I haven't been online in a long time though. I be on PS [PlayStation] mostly. I don't even want to chat with people. Xbox Live kilt that for me. I'll get back on there if you need me to. It's the same ol' racist stuff. I get reminded everyday that I'm Black. And not welcome. I don't need my technology reminding me. I know . . .

Nothing new to report. I guess that's what I'm saying.

DECEMBER 2009, XBOX LIVE MESSAGE FROM TYRELL

Hey Kishonna. You there? You see we can use Facebook on Xbox now? I don't like it. If I want to get on Facebook I'll log on myself. I guess people sharing their stuff. Like screenshots. And uploads there now. Chris is loving it. You should talk to him. I just ain't wit all that.

DECEMBER 2010, FACEBOOK MESSAGE FROM TYRELL

Yo! I got the Kinect [motion-sensing input device]. It can't see me! I guess I'm too black. Technology is the one that always reminds me that I'm black. I saw some blogs and other people having the same issue. I already know they didn't test it on nobody but white guys. I've been in tech long enough to know how that works. I thought that would be something you could talk about in your book. Merry Christmas.

DECEMBER 2013, FACEBOOK MESSAGE FROM TYRELL

Hey Dr. Gray. The new GTA [*Grand Theft Auto*] crazy. You gotta get it. They got this crazy white dude on there. It's like they are stereotyping poor white

people and of course the black dude still a criminal. But I want you to see that gaming paints other people bad. Not just black people.

My November 2016 observational narrative of Tyrell and his friends, Kinan, Jerome, and Denzel playing *Gears of War 4:*

There is a sense of excitement in the room. These gamers haven't played together in a while. In the early days, they would game for long periods of time. Of course, they had more time at their disposal, as college students. They are all working now. Tyrell has a great job at a tech company in the bay area. Jerome [BurbansNLax] went back to get his master's degree. Denzel created his own company and is thriving. It's really great to see Black joy. And Black success. And Black excellence.

But there is something that seems more connected about them. Now, they've always been close. But they had their own divergent lives. They didn't really connect in ways they are now. They talk more seriously about things happening in the world. They share news with each other. They feel like when something happens in Baltimore or the Bay or Chicago, it impacts all of them the same.

And they are bothered by it—but it doesn't disrupt their connectivity or their happiness. Joy is their core. It's their essence. And the bad things are just blips on the radar, that come and pass quickly. They see each other a bit better though. The arguing. The bickering. The class divides between them, they aren't as pronounced as they used to be. . . .

The world for them has become so much smaller since they interact beyond just gaming. They are friends with each other on social media. They text each other. Before, they were just friends online. Now they are friends in the real world, you could say. Denzel (xxGawdzillaxx) and Kinan (silentassassin321) meet up over the break. Tyrell attended DJ's (Smif&Wes) wedding. I am not sure what did it. They said they spend more time with each other than their friends IRL [in real life]. I think there is something unique about these gaming communities that let them be more real with folks online than IRL. I know that sounds crazy, but from what they say they have better connections with their gamer friends. I think it's dope. They've grown together so much, and just seeing this really makes my heart smile. They needed each other. Especially for the more blerdy [black and nerdy] among them that grew up in the hood or barrio. They had isolated lives. Now they don't.

DECEMBER 2017, XBOX LIVE VOICE CHAT WITH TYRELL

MzMygrane/Kishonna: How you liking *Watch Dogs?*

xxChronicGamerxx/Tyrell: Man. You already know I'm excited. I'm like, "That's me. Marcus is me." I didn't think I'd ever see a black hacker from the Bay Area. I mean they must have made this after my life! [*Laughing*] And I been playing *Mafia* too. Lincoln Clay? Vietnam! New Orleans. They went real black this year didn't they. I turn the game on and just listen to that powerful song [Jimi Hendrix's version of "All Along the Watchtower"]. I feel the power from it. I can't imagine living during that time. But I guess its [*sic*] similar to the times now.

MzMygrane: How do you mean?

xxChronicGamerxx: I mean, I'ono. Maybe it's similar. Police brutality. All these wars. Poor people needing help. And getting ignored. All that. You know?

MzMygrane: Right.

xxChronicGamerxx: And I uploaded the streams, if you wanted to check them out. I was too geeked the first time. I wasn't even making no sense. So check out the ones I uploaded today. It's hard being a streamer out here. Especially a black one. I tell you, technology reminds me of my blackness all the time.

JULY 2017, SKYPE VIDEO CHAT

[Observational notes before the interview begins.] I pose the same question as I always do. I should have kept count. How many times now? A dozen. A hundred. Who knows. But the question stays the same. It's where we always start. "What does it mean for you to be Black? To be a Man? Straight? Or a Gamer? And how does the technology influence this identity." These responses have become more and more interesting over the years. Maybe they're tired of me asking. For a while, they would say the same thing over and over again. I think they are thinking about it a lot more. Especially since Black Lives Matter. And Gamergate. It changed everything for many of them.

Tyrell: You know. It's different now. I mean it's probably always been the same, but I think about it more. Especially now with the whole "Me Too" thing. And the Google dude that wrote the memo. . . . [James Damore was fired by Google after he wrote about supposedly biological reasons that women are underrepresented at Google and other tech companies.] I don't think I ever

> thought about it like that. I mean as a black man. I guess I don't have to think about my gender. Because I'm a man. Or my sexuality. Because I'm straight. But that's privilege, right. Well, sometimes it's a privilege. Most times it's a nightmare. Because the world has turned my identity into a monster. Now, sometimes we are. And we gotta address that. You know there was a trans person killed here? That was because of toxic masculinity. Toxic black masculinity, to be exact. We gotta name that. I know that now, in a way I didn't before. But I know that I gotta talk to my brothers about accepting all of our people, no matter what we believe. We say black lives matter, right? How can we say that and we killing each other? Forget Trump. Fuck the white folks who voted for him. We gotta just take care of each other.

These excerpts from larger, ongoing conversations reflect a multitude of the dimensions that this book undertakes. First is the engagement with social locations in digital gaming spaces. How does one make sense of how one's identity translates into digital gaming realms? Does being online amplify any aspect of identity? Does gaming provide the means to forgo the body and occupy the avatar brought to life on our screens?

Second, these excerpts reveal the contested nature of conducting research in the digital era. I intentionally highlighted where these conversations took place and how they were digitally mediated and enhanced. I indicate how transmediated environments facilitate conversations, identity development, and community building inside and outside of the confines of gaming platforms.

Third, the excerpts illustrate the evolution of thought and understanding about one's identity and how the digital affects that understanding. This aspect of the text acknowledges how intersectionality is more like pieces of a puzzle for many black folks online. I hope this book reveals the complexities involved in developing an intersectional framework of self. There was little to no interrogation of what it meant to be a black man in a space that privileges whiteness. There was little to no acknowledgment of the diversity of the black community. These things were encapsulated and protected in a shield of blackness that ensured the protection of those marginalized experiences. They were downplayed. They were ignored. They were summarized and conceptualized as aberrations. For many of the narrators, being black meant they could not be vulnerable. As we will see, blackness is protection for many, and there was/is no need for anything else.

I also reflect on what it means to be a scholar of games who rarely talks about

games. The communities my participants and narrators inhabit are merely a backdrop—a stage in the performance of their ascribed identities. I interrogate the centrality of gaming in their lives. I explore "gamer" as an additional, ascribed identity for blackness. Video games clearly serve as the vehicle driving connectivity among gamers.

So where do I begin with the narratives I have amassed over almost a decade? I start where my participants, co-researchers, and narrators tell me to: at the juncture of blackness. This blackness is marked as other within gaming, creating a stigmatized identity. Stigmatized people are not considered to be legitimate participants but are considered deviants. Most often, blackness and any association with it are punished the most violently in social spaces, both physical and digital.[17] As a result of this deviant status, black users have employed the private spaces in gaming communities to develop their digital identities, create connections, and sustain communities.[18]

Collecting Stories, Curating Narratives

To make sense of a decade of experiences, I have employed a structure that provides a snapshot of the multifaceted, intersectional lives of black users in the transmediated spaces of digital gaming. Chapter 1, "The 'Problem' of Intersectionality in Digital Gaming Culture," provides the theoretical foundations guiding intersectional tech and begins with an example from a prominent figure in esports to anchor the argument. SonicFox, a professional esports player specializing in the fighting genre (which includes games such as *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter*) took home an award for Best Esports Player at the 2018 Game Awards. He concluded his acceptance speech by saying, "I guess I just gotta say that I'm gay, black, a furry—pretty much everything a Republican hates—and the best esports player of the whole year."[19] His elite status in the esports world, coupled with his intersectional identity, most succinctly captures the essence of intersectional tech. Through an examination of self-definition (a core tenet of black feminist thought, rooted in exploring the intersecting nature of identity), innovative use of digital technologies, and strategic engagement in and around gaming, this book dissects the structural contours attempting to bind black users in particular to the margins of digital gaming.

This discussion shifts appropriately into exploring mediated representations and how these representations connect to the media landscape within gaming. Specifically, chapter 2, "Historical Narratives, Contemporary Games, Racialized

Experiences," explores the complex and dynamic relationship black gamers have with the content and narratives inside these games, exploring the visualization process influencing racialization patterns. Looking at gamers' online interactions and their experiences with black characters within games, this chapter reflects on these contentious relationships within the hegemonic world of gaming, which only recently engaged blackness beyond stereotypes. This chapter connects engagements with in-game narratives to understand how a cohort of black men developed and navigated identity through these games and with each other. By exploring games such as *Watch Dogs 2*, *Mafia III*, and *Assassin's Creed IV* (*Freedom Cry*), where the protagonists are black men, this chapter critiques previous engagements with blackness to make sense of the contemporary attempts at depicting black masculinity in particular.

Many gamers claimed that 2016 was the year of the black gamer. Many gaming blogs and forums raved as the number of titles featuring black protagonists in nonstereotypical positions increased dramatically. As Sam Blackmon says, the release into popular culture of two black heroes who were "unapologetically . . . Black" reflects either gaming culture's recognition of inclusive stories or an inability to continue ignoring the demands of gamers who are urging for more diversity.[20] She refers to Luke Cage (a TV show character) and Lincoln Clay from *Mafia III*, but her analysis can extend to other titles. Even so, the black gaming community is divided on the extent to which these in-game depictions of blackness disrupt traditional narratives. For instance, *Mafia III* can be viewed as a traditional criminal narrative, and I contend that the hypervisibility and hyperconsumption of black death in *Battlefield 1* fits into the problematic framing of mediated black pain and struggle deployed in mainstream media.

Media portrayals offer singular visions of marginalized lives, behaviors, and roles in society. Specifically, blackness is consistently underrepresented or misrepresented across various media.[21] These images, controlled by hegemonic media, constantly clash with black reality, limiting the engagement with black holistic lives. The racialized element inherent in mediated imagery further serves to limit agency and to influence public perception of black life. Conflicting constructions of blackness only reify who is and is not eligible for full inclusion in humanity; hence, the statement "Black Lives Matter" leads to controversy and claims of reverse racism.[22] Black folks have long had their identities constructed by outside forces, most notably by white, Western, heterosexual masculinity, and other entities not valuing black agency. The in-game narratives and the responses

to these representations are explored through traditional media framing and through a scope of counternarrative and are examined for their potential to disrupt traditional outlets.

These counternarratives thrive within transmediated contexts beyond gaming spaces. Black gamers engage these counternarratives on Twitter, on Facebook, while streaming, and in other digital spaces, and chapter 3 explores this trend. While I continue with an exploration of black gamers' experiences with games as racial projects, I highlight and center the transmediation process in helping black gamers make sense of their realities. Whereas chapter 2 focused on the visuality of blackness, meaning when blackness is made visible, chapter 3, "Hypervisible Blackness, Invisible Narratives: Black Gamers Cocreating Transmediated Masculine Identity," suggests that this visibility is bounded by the larger physical structures impacting black life in physical and digital settings. For instance, black gamers draw connections between experiencing black death in games to the experiences of black life.

This chapter continues to draw theoretical connections in the process of visuality in service to white supremacy, in transmediated ways, most notably, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. This hashtag asks a simple question: "Which picture would the media choose to represent me if I were killed by the police?" This rhetorical exercise poignantly illustrates black digital praxis in the juxtaposition of imagery, comparing and contrasting the distinctions of black life. By exploring black death and pain, this chapter engages the stress, strain, and conflicts that arise for many black folks in navigating this violent digital landscape while also living it physically. Thus, I provide an extended examination of the utility of gender strain theory in cocreating transmediated masculine identity. This intersectional exercise begins the process of engaging the identity of "man" and "masculine identity" to see the role that race and gender play in influencing outcomes for black men in particular.

Black gamers' activities within streaming reveal the power of their cultural production; however, white responses to their content illustrate how black production continues to be devalued and delegitimized. I continue by illustrating the white anxieties and fears that pervade responses to black bodies online. Many gamers reflect on the blurring of their digital and physical experiences, remarking on the racializing process of digital publics. The racialization process reduces black gamers, othering their engagements. These otherizing depictions, rooted in white supremacy are put on full display in responses to the game *Friday the 13th*, which is explored at length in the chapter. With this, I connect

the concepts of rage and anger and add a dimension of monstrosity in interrogating the otherizing depictions within the game, showing the social, cultural, and political links between racism and the horror genre.

In crafting chapter 4, "#Me2, #Me4, Black Women, and Misogynoir: Transmediated Gaming Practices as Intersectional Counterpublics," it was necessary to use the concept of misogynoir to best capture what black women experience online. Moya Bailey, feminist scholar, writer, activist, and professor, coined the phrase and describes misogynoir as a particular brand of hatred directed at black women in American visual and popular culture.[23] Observational narratives and interviews illustrate black women's personal experiences online and their engagement with high-profile examples of misogynoir (such as the cases of Rihanna and Chris Brown, R. Kelly, Bill Cosby, and others). In thinking about their experiences with white masculine supremacy, black patriarchy, and white feminism online, black women have created spaces that I interrogate as intersectional counterpublics.

Marginalized groups create "coexisting counterpublics in reaction to the exclusionary politics of dominant public spheres and the state."[24] The intersectional, transmediated practices in which women engage in gaming communities reflects how they create meaning out of different texts, cultures, and practices—bridging multiple experiences to create a hybrid summation. One significant feature of these intersectional counterpublics is digital storytelling, which I consider an expanded form of testifying and one process through which intersectional identities are achieved and managed.[25]

Here, too, there is a distinct focus on rage and on looking at how black women transform this rage into strategic practices to sustain communities online. Popular culture continues to render black women's rage as inappropriate, constantly reminding them of their visitor status in the digital locker room. The spaces inside these toxic technocultures are reminiscent of the public spaces that continue to foster misogynoir, even while propagating progressive, "color-blind" rhetoric. However, in many of these public spaces (such as school, church, or work), black women are not always afforded the ability to create and construct their own counterpublics. Digital spaces become the go-to places and spaces to sustain cultures, as Catherine Knight Steele articulates.[26] The intersectional counterpublics that black women create inside gaming offer pathways for critiques of their conditions online and in physical spaces and create new avenues for discourse and political action.

Chapter 5, "#TechFail: From Intersectional (In)Accessibility to Inclusive

Design," begins with my observational narratives about Project Natal, the precursor to the Xbox Kinect. While the chapter provides a comprehensive exploration into the potential accessibility of gaming technologies, the introductory material provides the backdrop for the Kinect's initial reception. While the gaming world remarked on the possibilities created when the body becomes the controller, many black gamers illustrated the centrality of race in deciding who can (and cannot) participate in this technological potential.

Microsoft's introductory video for the Kinect was met with extreme enthusiasm by gamers I interacted with. However, the video I previewed during my observations illustrates the landscape in which the Kinect was built, highlighting the pervasiveness of whiteness at the core of this technology. In the video, we meet a white family that is using the Kinect and exploring the possibilities therein. Later, we are introduced to a black family, but their few moments on screen confirm the process of "adding and stirring," or incorporating diverse bodies in limited ways, hoping that their screen time will be enough to tick the diversity checkboxes.

While my observational narratives introduce readers to gaming tech's limited potential and its inaccessibility, chapter 5 also illustrates the possibilities that appear when inclusivity is at the core of design. Thus, the chapter has two distinct purposes: first, to provide an overview of the landscape of disabled characters within gaming; and second, to provide an intersectional exploration into accessible gaming technologies, which many differently abled gamers suggest afford them opportunities to continue participating in gaming culture. Although there are only a few differently abled characters in games, the ones that are present fit within certain tropes, with the underlying narrative privileging an abled body, suggesting that the disabled body is always in need of being "fixed" to resume "normal" functioning. The social meanings and stigmas attached to disability identity reveal the systems of exclusion, oppression, and normativity created around particular abled bodies. I explore these narratives to provide context for the landscape of accessibility in gaming technologies, mostly through the narratives of black deaf women.

The ableist normativity pervading the culture affects the development and design of gaming technologies. Thus, chapter 5 morphs into a discussion of inclusive design, highlighting various design approaches to increasing accessibility in all technologies.[27] I consider how accessibility in technology affects marginalized users' adoption of technologies, concluding that design centers white, able, masculine bodies. I move design justice toward a discussion

of not only design principles and intention but also consequences. Design intentions can influence usability and accessibility concerns for a diverse range of users.

Chapter 6, “Queering Intersectional Narratives: Claiming Space and Creating Possibilities,” provides an intersectional exploration into the experiences of black lesbians in digital gaming. Significant attention is devoted to lesbian identity development at the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality. The bodies of black women have been severely censured and punished, leading to the implementation of systematic forms of oppression (including calling the police, reporting women who violate terms of service in online communities, and even sexual violence). In patriarchal societies, women’s bodies, trans bodies, and other bodies that deviate from what has been framed as white, heterosexual, and masculine are always presented as subversive threats, and racialized women’s bodies pose an even greater threat. Although many women hold fears of spaces and places because of sexist constructions of space that use the threat of violence to circumscribe the lives of women, the uses of violence and the state of black women’s bodies have a particular relationship to slavery and the construction of black womanhood. These experiences lead black women to develop communities to support their physical identities, a process I explore as an intersectional counterpublic.

This chapter continues with the themes associated with white supremacy, heterosexual domination, black patriarchy, and white feminism. The chapter also captures the essence of black women’s rage, as many are forced to pick some aspect of who they are and to present it as the “meaningful whole, eclipsing and denying other parts of the self.”[28] For Audre Lorde and other black lesbians, one’s identity as a black lesbian is the meaningful whole.

Finally, the concluding chapter, “Resisting Intersectional Marginalization Using Transmediated Technologies in the Digital Era,” offers a provocative interrogation of intersectionality in the age of Trump (and prefigures my next book, *Black Cyberfeminism*). On November 9, 2016, a *New York Magazine* headline read “How Trump Made Hate Intersectional.” This title and the article revealed a powerful truth: we still have unproblematized views in perceiving the internet as a utopian space where all people and all groups have equal access to the production, dissemination, and consumption of information.[29] The author wrote, “Progressives talk a lot about intersectionality—meaning, thinking about race and sex and class simultaneously—but Trump won the presidency by making hate intersectional.”[30]

This manner of weaponizing digital tools to spread hate, and mobilizing white masculinity in particular, illustrates a popular play in the white supremacy playbook: steal contributions (or land, in a settler–colonial context), disperse existing bodies, revise the narrative, and reframe yourself as the hero and the displaced other as a villain in need of further pushing or banishment from the space. Weaponizing black women's intellectual contributions around intersectionality serves as a means to claim that black women are in fact the ones being discriminatory for not centering white masculinity. This illustrates the ongoing challenges to making radical thought popular to effect widespread social change.

Intersectional Tech questions the frequently invoked distinction between physical and digital environments; marginalized folks have made it clear that there is always a manifestation of physical inequalities in digital spaces. The examples woven into these pages illustrate what scholar and critic Katherine Cross articulates when she notes the vernacular distinction between "online" and the "real world," which discursively influences conversations in online gaming spaces in particular. The dominant framing that gaming is "child's play" or not a serious entity to examine suggests that the violence occurring therein is acceptable. Thus, as Cross articulates, this "amoral substructure of gaming culture" serves as an accelerant that currently is fueling toxicity, gender and racial harassment, and increasing alt-right ideologies inside this technoculture.[31]

The examples in this book are characterized by their broad contemporary contexts as they connect with historical legacies of intersectional oppression and contemporary inequalities. Furthermore, the narrators who shared their time, energy, and space illustrate the possibilities these technologies can afford. They continually reimagine transformative potentials, continually conceptualizing *Intersectional Tech.*

1

The “Problem” of Intersectionality in Digital Gaming Culture

In an interview on the gaming website *Kotaku*, Maddy Myers and Paul Tamayo highlighted champion gamer SonicFox and his greatness in the esports world: “Dominique ‘SonicFox’ McLean competed in his first *Mortal Kombat* tournament in 2011 at age 13. Back then, his opponents didn’t know what they were up against. But SonicFox knew his own truth: he was queer, he was a furry, and he rocked at fighting games.”[1] While SonicFox’s physical reality or “truth” may be that of a black, queer furry, his gaming personality or persona is that of a domineering figure in the competitive fighting community. When PewDiePie, a controversial figure in gaming, remarked on his identity, SonicFox tweeted, “Also idrc [I don’t really care] if pewdiepie mentioned me in his vid lol. He like many others keep thinking my personality is being gay and black and if that’s the case, youve missed the point already lmao.”

By allowing him to define himself, his tweet captures his personality most accurately. SonicFox’s self-described personality centers his continual greatness in a hard-core community; on the other hand, his personality also visibly features the “fursuit” of his “fursona,” a blue and white anthropomorphic fox. A furry is someone who adopts the identity or persona of an anthropomorphized animal in social, and often sexual, interactions.[2] SonicFox and his furry persona are his (visual) personality in the gaming world. But this visibility is often overshadowed by the sexualization of fursonas (in general), by his blackness, and by his queer masculinity.

Although the fighting community, a specific genre in esports, visibly features more black gamers than other esports genres, they often work hard to counter the narrative of being just “black gamers.” They center their experiences, skill sets, intellectual contributions, and technical expertise in a world that wants to lump them into a homogeneous identity of “just black.” The notion of intersectionality shows that these axes of identity are inextricably interconnected in the

production of social practices of exclusion.[3] Gamers who may not adhere to the white, cis-heterosexual, masculine norm of gaming culture occupy an intersectional social location between political and social cultures, and although they may experience oppressions because of these social locations, they are not bound to or limited by this marginalization.

Identity, especially at the intersection of blackness, is a contested terrain in gaming. Many black gamers have used their platforms to raise awareness around the experiences of marginalized users in the gaming industry, highlighting limited narratives and representations in games. They also have created huge platforms using social media to bring marginalized folk together in gaming. Others have created video games and podcasts, regularly live stream, and perform any other number of functions and tasks that currently constitute the gaming industry. Although many of these users specifically center blackness, others have deracialized their identities and their platforms and solely focus on gaming content. As these examples highlight the multitude of possibilities for interacting in and around digital gaming, they also reveal the contested fissures, leading to the development of intersectional tech.

To capture this concept, *intersectional tech* can be understood as the visual, textual, and/or oral engagement of the black body, originating from the digital and moving into the physical (or vice versa). It also is a recognition and critical deconstruction of the exploited, hypervisible labor of any associated black performances stemming from that engagement. These practices inform the theoretical understandings of the associated performances, productions, labor, responses, reactions, and resistance inside oppressive technological structures and interrogate the transformative physical actions of resistance by many of these black users.

This work is largely informed by black feminist traditions, by the tug-of-war and liberatory potential at the intersection of theory and practice and what bell hooks outlines in her foundational work: “When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two—that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other.”[4] Although hooks remarks that theory is not inherently liberatory, it can perform this function if it has intentionality behind it, and this is what we will see, in the pages of this text, from the people who create digital artifacts or sustain collective communities to improve their physical and digital conditions. Being rooted in transmediated

intersectionality, the narrators and participants who allow me access into their tech-enhanced worlds enhance their digital activities by engaging in liberatory practices, using multiple modalities to achieve these goals. Intersectionality allows us to see the varied approaches of these black users of technology and technology-enhanced media; they are varied in their identities and their approaches, and a concept like intersectionality reminds us that oppression does not represent the entire equation for those at these complex junctures. There are multiple oppressions working together to produce injustice, and alternative outcomes not bound by oppression.[5]

The example of SonicFox illustrates most succinctly the textual, visual, and oral approaches of intersectional tech. First, his declaration highlights the core of what many marginalized gamers want: self-definition, a tenet of black feminist thought that is rooted in exploring the intersecting nature of identity. His tweet was a powerful moment that put the esports world on notice. Second, his visual and physical engagement in the street fighting esports community reveals the treacherous path he and others have been forced to traverse, continually relegated to the margins of the esports community. The path he has created reflects the resilience needed to sustain oneself and one's communities in digital and physical settings. And third, his verbal pronouncements, performing in the physical, digital, and furry instantiations of his identity, force us to engage with him holistically and intersectionally. Because of all of this, he and others like him continue to be a problem for the hegemonic structure of gaming and technology.

"So How Does it Feel to Be a Problem?"

As an intersectional, digital feminist lurking in gaming culture, I had to critically ponder the question "How does it feel to be a problem?," posed by W. E. B. Du Bois in his formative text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, originally published in 1903.[6] I am contemplating the same question in 2020. And I have an answer: we are not the problem, but toxic, cis-heterosexual masculinity and persistent racism may be.

Recall 2014. Two seemingly divergent events—the rise of Gamergate and the reemergence of #BlackLivesMatter—unfolded almost simultaneously, and their prominence was supplemented by digital technologies and social media. It was immediately evident that Gamergate would continue the practice of demarcating gamers of color in particular by rendering them invisible, while continuing the assault on women who dare to criticize the culture. #BlackLivesMatter would be

privileged in alternative media spaces, including Twitter, while mainstream outlets would continue the practice of reporting black and brown pain and death with little analysis or drawing of connections to larger structural inequalities. The digital praxis of black users, or intersectional tech, reveals a particular power, illuminating the remix of visual, textual, and oral traditions in social media, affording different opportunities to communicate and interact across boundaries and borders. Intersectionality, rooted in black feminist intellectual thought, allows us to map the digital practices with the physical realities of marginalized populations.

Intersectionality provides needed pathways for examining the marginalized positionality of black users online. While Kimberlé Crenshaw specifically targeted the elisions of critical race paradigms and gender-normative paradigms in her foundational work,[7] intersectionality as an intellectual exercise and praxis emerged from the struggles of second-wave feminism as a crucial black feminist intervention, challenging the hegemonic rubrics of race, class, and gender in predominantly white feminist frames. Black feminists such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Angela Davis, the women in the Combahee River Collective, and others have continued to develop intersectionality conceptually, although it became solidified as a feminist heuristic through Crenshaw's analysis of US legal antidiscrimination doctrine. Specifically, Crenshaw mapped out three forms of intersectional analysis that she deemed crucial: structural - addressing the intersection of racism and patriarchy in relation to the battery and rape of women; political - addressing the intersection of antiracist organizing and feminist organizing; and representational - addressing the intersection of racial and gender stereotypes.[8]

Though the concept of intersectionality was designed to examine systemic legal exclusions, it also has been deployed to examine digital realities for marginalized users. Here, I highlight the digital contour of white, masculine, cis-heterosexual power that often is hidden beneath the structure of and is coded into existence within tech industries, and I will center the experiences of black users who continue to exist and thrive within such structure. The structure of technology often hides its power through explicitly racialized (white) and gendered (male) structures of operating.

Black gamers occupy precarious social locations when they exert themselves in spaces previously claimed and inhabited by primarily white (and secondarily East Asian) male bodies. Black users previously occupied invisible spaces of private chats in digital gaming culture, but with the expansion of more visible

digital technologies, gamers of all backgrounds are rightfully engaging in these everyday practices, expressing themselves orally, visually, and textually. From streaming to live tweeting and making games with content that disrupt traditional hegemonic narratives, these gamers are solidifying their intersectional identities through visibility, demanding recognition and making claims to space and content.

Gaming Culture as a Racial Project

In making structural sense of digital gaming culture, it is important to situate it as a racial project whereby social dynamics are distinguished by one's positionality in relation to the default user—the white male. André Brock Jr. discusses the normative presumptions of whiteness and maleness serving as the default identity of users of digital technologies. In making sense of the internet as a social structure that represents and maintains white, masculine, bourgeois, heterosexual, and Christian culture through its content, Brock explores how (white) racial frames are brought into design and practice where racial dynamics are expressed through electronic media. These practices neatly recreate online social dynamics that mirror real-world patterns of racial interaction by marginalizing women and people of color.[9]

Drawing on this framework illuminated by Brock and others, and using examples to underscore the validity of this claim, I expand on this notion of the default white user and explicate how black users in particular are not seen as legitimate participants.[10] Because women and people of color are not recognized as legitimate participants in virtual spaces, disparaging realities are rampant, leading to exclusion and limited participation in the associated communities. No matter the content, the dominant culture of digital gaming dictates who is legitimate and who is not, creating conditions of real and symbolic exclusion in everyday gaming practices.

Symbolic exclusion is useful in understanding the concept of legitimate and illegitimate digital practices.[11] Gaming culture replicates racialized and gendered exclusionary practices based on whose content and bodies are deemed worthy. Any practice in cultural production can become a symbolic site of struggle over the power to enforce the dominant definition from a hegemonic standpoint; these practices delimit and restrict access to certain places for particular populations, outlining who is entitled to take part in defining, shaping, and innovating in the digital realm. Gaming has shown its tendency to articulate and reproduce existing ideologies and hegemonic relations of power and inequality,[12] especially

around axes of gender, class, sexuality, and ability. But race continues to be an elusive concept within gaming culture.

As a hierarchical structure, race has been codified into the basic structure of technology, as Anna Everett signals in her narratives around African diasporic engagements with cyberspace:

> Before access to the then state-of-the-art MMX technology powering my system was granted, I was alerted to this opening textual encoding: "Pri. Master Disk, Pri. Slave Disk, Sec. Master, Sec. Slave." Programmed here is a virtual hierarchy organizing my computer's software operations. Given the nature of my subject matter, it might not be surprising that I am perpetually taken aback by the programmed boot-up language informing me that my access to the cyber frontier indeed is predicated upon a digitally configured "master/slave" relationship. As the on-screen text runs through its remaining string of required boot-up language and codes, I often wonder why programmers chose such signifiers that hark back to our nation's ignominious past.[13]

Programming, software, code, machine learning algorithms, facial and voice recognition technologies, and more have been continually criticized for their capacities to produce and reproduce racial and gendered prejudice. Some argue that these inequalities are new and unpredictable; others argue that this is the design.

As Safiya Umoja Noble boldly claims in her groundbreaking text *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, practices around information and access to information are deeply embedded in racial and gendered exclusionary practices.[14] Building on a framework of black feminist technology studies, Noble roots media, information, and technological industries within systems of white supremacy, showing historical and contemporary manifestations of these practices in the everydayness of technology use. It is essential to focus on the human labor behind the technological and digital realities that produce racialized and gendered hierarchies.

Video games provide chilling examples of these gendered and racialized practices of diminishing, devaluing, and excluding women of color in particular, especially at the intersection of programming and code. A great example comes from Purna Jackson, who is a character in the game *Dead Island*. Purna, a black woman, resonates with many women of color in the gaming community because

she is one of a few playable characters whose skill set and abilities can exceed those of her male counterparts. In the game, a specific, unlockable skill has been created just for her, and it allows her to inflict more damage against male victims. Although this skill is called “Gender Wars” in the game, its original name was coded “Feminist Whore,” which was uncovered by a computer gamer when a nonretail version of the game was accidentally sent to a retail game store.[15] The game’s developer, Techland, apologized but positioned the actions as the behavior of one person.

> “It has come to our attention that one of Dead Island’s leftover debug files contains a highly inappropriate internal script name of one of the character skills. This has been inexcusably overlooked and released with the game,” Blazej Krakowiak, Techland International Brand Manager, said via email. “The line in question was something a programmer considered a private joke. The skill naturally has a completely different in-game name and the script reference was also changed. What is left is a part of an obscure debug function. This is merely an explanation but by no means an excuse. In the end that code was made a part of the product and signed with our company name. We deeply regret that fact and we apologize to all our customers or anyone who might have been offended by that inappropriate expression.
>
> “The person responsible for this unfortunate situation will face professional consequences for violating the professional standards and beliefs Techland stands for.”[16]

The company may have apologized on behalf of the person who created the code, but this practice is reflective of larger practices in technology. As black technocultural scholars state, digital technologies are systematically embedded in uneven power relations that render invisible (or hypervisible, in Purna’s case) the core arbiters who craft and replicate structures of oppression.

It is necessary to explore video games as racial projects, where “racialized ideas, bodies, and structures are constructed, mediated, and presented through a safe medium.”[17] Racial projects do the work of racial representation (signification) and material redistribution of resources (structure). Racial projects link representation and structure, connecting what race symbolizes to how race is materially and hierarchically organized.

Although we have had new constructions over meanings of race, some rooted in revisionist narratives of color-blind ideology, the processes of racialization are

the same, with dominant, hegemonic structures and forces dictating narratives. Video games and gaming culture should be viewed as a particular interpretation and narration of racial dynamics that attempt to (re)organize assumptions and beliefs. A game about civilization, which perpetuates a narrative of "just fun," gets convoluted and performed as socially acceptable, rendering visible, colonial encounters invisible. The power of colonial rule shifts to the user, and we are able to ignore the imperial projects that have sustained settler–colonial legacies. Moreover, as scholars like Souvik Mukherjee point out, the association of video games with neoliberalism and capitalism inflect concerns around colonialism and empire.[18]

Race, produced at the structural level and coproduced at the individual level, fundamentally shapes collective identities and social structures. The collective terrains in which we operate are influenced by these historical markers, which continue to affect the formation of identity and of social structures encompassing economic, political, and cultural/ideological domains.[19] The racial order is organized and enforced by the continuity and reciprocity between these two "levels" of social relations, and this is made visible in digital gaming culture. Whereas the micro and macro levels are distinct, they continually and simultaneously affect individual and collective realities.[20] This complex matrix can help make sense of black folks' experiences in gaming, from the content in gaming to their experiences with games. Making sense of their decision-making processes around the use of technology to sustain identities and communities can illuminate the often hidden racialized practices. Although these digital users may not use the term *racial project*, the core of a racial project is embedded in a discourse and praxis of hegemony that, even at its most progressive, seeks to maintain the dominance of white European American culture. It is the default operating system.

It must be noted that black users have always participated in digital spaces on their own terms, often defying the established norms, bucking up against gaming as a racial project. For example, SonicFox was honored with the Best Esports Player of the Year title at the Game Awards, in December 2018. In September 2018, white, cis male esports gamer Tyler Blevin (gamertag Ninja) was featured on the cover of *ESPN* magazine. (Ninja's claim to fame is his insistent refusal to stream with women players.) On the surface, these events may seem unrelated. In fact, these are two separate entities—one is an awards platform and the other is a journalism outlet covering sports. But ESPN's power to inform knowledge around sports and gaming cannot be ignored. As the premier outlet of sports and

gaming, ESPN's propping up of a sexist player who sometimes spews racist rhetoric frames a particular discourse about who is acceptable to the power elite. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant suggest, racial projects mediate between the discursive or representational means by which race is identified and signified on one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms by which it is routinized on the other.[21]

Although racial projects vary in scope and effect, this example highlights the mobilization of a platform to continue centering white masculinity as the center of the gaming universe. This white cultural supremacy maintains hegemony by eliding and erasing specifically black contributions to gaming culture—what I position as an act of symbolic exclusion and symbolic violence. While symbolic violence is exercised with one's complicity within a structure allowing these practices of legitimation, this complicity also could be read as misrecognition—those who succumb to this symbolic violence may not recognize it as such. For example, black users continue participating in racialized and racist technological structures. Women continue to play sexist and hypersexualized games. Symbolic violence has the ability to mask itself, wielding the power of not being perceived as problematic.[22] I contend, however, that the symbolic and physical violence experienced in gaming culture is not misrecognized but is normalized, so that those most affected by the symbolic violence are also most subject to its impacts. These subtle forms of coercion sustain relations of dominance.[23]

Symbolic violence is in some respects much more powerful than physical violence or coercion in that it is embedded in individuals' very modes of action and structures of cognition—it is violent in both seeing and failing to see. It must be understood that systematic violence, and the daily articulation of its symbolism, sustains our economic and political systems. By focusing on the overt forms of subjective violence—that is, on the violence that is most visible—we as a society ignore the more subtle, coercive, everyday forms of symbolic violence that sustain forms of domination and exclusion.[24] Although there may be no person who directly harms another in the structure of cultural violence, the violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power, and consequently as unequal life chances.[25] This can directly lead to real threats and physical violence.

Violence and its associated trauma actively serve to form social constructions around race.[26] Although direct violence may affect only a few members of a community, the impact can be felt and experienced collectively through media

coverage and in the stories that people share, further extending its destructive reach. In addition to consuming violent imagery, we consume narratives and mediated discourse associated with the violence, reducing individuals and communities. The violence that marginalized users experience in and around gaming cannot be ignored, and in fact it reifies markers of identity. This is most pronounced for users who have specifically deracialized themselves, not adopting a racial identity, and thereby occupying what I consider an unprotected class.

From the symbolic violence of invisibility, hypersexualization, and stereotyping to the actual acts of violence associated with harassment campaigns, racism, doxxing (disclosure of personal identifying information), and death threats, I grapple with the possibility that race is only made (digitally) legible via violence. The threats of real and symbolic violence that have been hurled at racialized users of gaming technologies must be examined beyond individual acts of discrimination and intimidation. This violence must be explored through the structures and institutions that sustain the culture of inequality isolating marginalized groups. While the *ESPN* cover and other acts may appear small or unintentional, these acts of negligence reinforce and maintain hidden or invisible boundaries of racialized hierarchies, sustaining gaming as a racial project and making racialized bodies vulnerable to the effects of symbolic and actual violence.

As David Leonard explains, “Video games are not just games, or sites of stereotypes, but a space to engage American discourses, ideologies, and racial dynamics.”[27] As a part of the larger conversation around media, the internet, and digital technologies, these spaces continue to be a cultural map of assumed whiteness.[28] When there is an attempt to make race and ethnicity present, it is met with color-blind resistance. As Tanner Higgin explains, “The White dominance of gamespace has been recast as a racially progressive movement that ejects race in favor of a default, universal whiteness and has been ceded, in part, by a theoretical tendency to embrace passing and anonymity in cyberspace.”[29] This hegemony of play, as Janine Fron and colleagues call it, perpetuates the exclusion of communities that is seen in the offline world, a manifestation of real-world inequalities.[30] Importantly, this deployment of “white supremacy instills in many white folks the expectation of always being the center of attention.”[31] When this expectation is not met, white anxieties increase.

To make sense of this, I explore the concept of fear that is often used to express white concerns about racialized others. Frantz Fanon’s experiences of

being marked as a Negro in the white public sphere is one of the most visible examples of the concept of fear in making sense of the restricted and contained body, of black bodies to be feared.[32] Mapping blackness and the black body onto cultural maps of white assumptions provides a way to interrogate black experiences in racial schemas of digital culture. In addition to fear, I submit that the emotions of annoyance, anger, and rage better reflect white anxieties about their perceived dominance being challenged by racial others.

Adhering to the dominant discourse of gaming culture, Adrienne Shaw reflects on the construction of the white, cis-heterosexual, male, teen gamer as the center of the gaming universe.[33] The gaming industry is complicit in this framing because it traditionally focuses its marketing toward this imagined community of hard-core gamers.[34] This hard-core center is constructed through the association of a normative masculinity with performance in video games; "real men" are constructed as skilled and dominant in competitive games.[35]

This hard-core gamer identity is also demonstrated through a particular investment in games. Hard-core gamers not only play video games often but also commit economic resources to the pursuit of this hobby, and they consume texts and objects in and around gaming to make more discerning choices about which games to play. This is constructed in opposition to casual gamers, who are constructed as passive, naive, and mindless consumers of popular culture, or as feminized shoppers lacking agency and intelligence.[36] This casual versus hard-core stereotype only maligns the reputation of the casual market, though the dichotomy reflects multiple ways of engaging in gaming.[37]

This dichotomy also sustains the identity of gamer as white and male. This constructed technological (in)competence, a signifier and performance of white cis-heterosexual masculinity, is a part of the authentication process of the cultural script of gaming culture, keeping masculinity as the only viable option.[38] The possessive investment in this identity by gaming culture, through marketing, the constant creation of white characters, the centering of white masculine narratives (such as Ninja's), and exclusionary practices, upholds gaming as a racial project. But the resistance to this, and the continued visibility of racialized users of gaming technologies, has increased white masculine anxieties; many of them are fearful of becoming the minority, and their fear manifests as anger and rage.

Gamergate serves as a useful example of this emotional narrative. Gamergate, an online harassment movement against progressivism and diversity in gaming culture, provided both a playbook and a recruitment tool for the alt-right and

other white supremacist groups in the United States. However, while current discussions regarding white supremacist discourse focus on these groups' increasing content and its frequency in digital spaces, critical race scholars argue against framing this as a rise of anything. Rather, it should be examined as everyday practices in digital realms that have existed since the early days of the web.

Jessie Daniels articulates two trajectories in making sense of the alt-right. One says that what is really happening can be attributed to a crisis in white identity, that the alt-right is simply a manifestation of the angry white male who has status anxiety about his declining social power. The other is that the alt-right is an unfortunate eddy in the vast ocean of internet culture.[39]

I provide a generous, almost sympathetic read of Gamergate as a white victim narrative that establishes white racial innocence at the collective and individual levels. The common trope in this process is to devalue and misrepresent marginalized experiences. So, by branding Anita Sarkeesian (the creator of the *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* YouTube series, which highlights female representation in gaming) as evil and a destroyer of gaming culture, avatars of white masculine anxiety have vilified women and others who decenter the assumed white masculine norm. This common strategy from their playbook paints marginalized actors and "social justice warriors" as villains and positions the white male as the hero who will emerge victorious.

Although this text partially explores the consequences of these different processes for the politics of recognition, significant attention is devoted to how digital technologies provide pathways to participation for black users. *Intersectional Tech* explores the process of navigating and negotiating blackness, no matter how sexualized, differently abled, or gendered. By complicating blackness, I highlight the inescapable chains constantly binding marginalized populations to stereotypical frames and limited narratives. Examining games, gaming culture, and game development, I situate this trifecta as a contemporary loop of representation in an exploitative complex of materiality and visuality that extends back decades, demarcating and relegating blackness to a perpetual state of marginalization. Going beyond seeing black users of gaming and digital technologies as just fans, users, or audiences, I make sense of the complicated relationships that black users have with these technologies, recognizing, acknowledging, and complicating the role that blackness has had in the everyday practices and production of these users. This ethnographic exploration examines the pathways to social media and other digitally enhanced technologies that go

beyond being excluded. Black gamers, as a technically savvy populace, have been engaging in groundbreaking practices in digital realms, forming what I call intersectional counterpublics.

While the normalization of whiteness and masculinity in digital culture leads to isolation, exclusion, and punishment of marginalized bodies, the individual struggles of prejudice, discrimination, and microaggressions must also be examined in relation to the larger practices of institutional structures that sustain the oppression. I engage the daily practices that sustain what Mark Anthony Neal calls “micro-nooses,” or the lived reality for black gamers and those in gaming culture, both online and offline. In a mediated context, micro-nooses, microaggressions, implicit and unconscious bias, and overt racism are essentially new racisms and stereotypes repackaged as entertainment, leading us to be entertained by stereotypes and ignoring the power of these discriminatory acts. The development of these “new” racisms and complementary color-blind ideology can be understood as one more round of intense oppression.

Gaming spaces are prime locales to continue exploring the treacherous terrain sometimes experienced by black gamers. Using their narratives as sites of critical engagement on identity development and justice issues in gaming culture, I implore gaming culture to foster a critical techno-consciousness, to aid in participatory democracy, and to bring about social change. This text is rooted in the concrete situations of marginalized members of gaming culture. It reveals that despite the truths articulated by social justice warriors who highlight the persistent sexism, racism, misogyny, and homophobia that is common within gaming representations and gaming communities, hegemonic narratives continue to be privileged.

2

Historical Narratives, Contemporary Games, Racialized Experiences

RealGudda: Y'all, that *Mafia III* 'bout to be official.

x2HyTaRiotx: Man. I already know. And it's a black dude?

RealGudda: Yeah. It felt like some *Dead Presidents* shit. Ya know, the whole "black after Vietnam" kinda vibe. . . .

x2HyTaRiotx: And *Watch Dogs 2* [too?].

RealGudda: Watch Dogs? The hacker game?

x2HyTaRiotx: Yeah. The hacker black in this one.

RealGudda: That's crazy. They in Oakland too?

x2HyTaRiotx: Nah. Too black. [*Laughing*] Yeah, that'd be way too black.

This dialogue between two gamers was part of a larger conversation in Xbox Live, capturing the essence of the sentiment among many that 2016 was "the year of the black gamer." The year of the black gamer can be understood as the era that dramatically increased the number of black protagonists in video games and significantly decreased the pervasive stereotyping and "cybertyping" of these characters as well. As Samantha Blackmon states, the release of two heroes who were unapologetically black reflects either a recognition of inclusive stories by gaming culture or the inability to continue ignoring the demands of gamers urging for more diversity.[1] Although she is referring to *Luke Cage* (a TV series) and Lincoln Clay from *Mafia III*, her analysis can extend to other titles released. *Watch Dogs 2, Battlefield 1, Assassins Creed IV* (*Freedom Cry),* and other games reveal to the gaming community that blackness, rather black masculinity, must be consumed holistically—no longer through singular lenses.

However, the black gaming community is divided about the extent to which these in-game depictions capture the essence of black masculinity (as many

express it), and blackness is still consumed through traditional criminal narratives (such as *Mafia III*) or stereotypical narratives (such as Cole Train's in *Gears of War* or Sazh Katzroy's in *Final Fantasy*). Others contend that the hypervisibility and hyperconsumption of black death—of the Harlem Hellfighters in the opening mission of *Battlefield 1*—fits within the problematic framing of black death deployed in mainstream media.

I will explore the trend to render black bodies unfit for full inclusion in mediated narratives, which is on full display in *Battlefield 1*. The ways in which the black characters succumb to the violence of war, this level of hypervisible black death, has made many users uncomfortable. I liken this gaming trend to the social media era of consuming and sharing black death via a hashtag, where we witness the final moments of black or brown life with no larger context than that moment.[2] This is becoming a primary trope of blackness within gaming. Conversations black users had online around this game and others offer a detailed examination of the dilemma that many black gamers face in consuming characters that reflect their cultures.

silentassassin321: I don't want to play nan [neither] one.

CoppinDat: Why not, silent?

silentassassin321: Because I already know they gon' be racist as fuck.

RealGudda: I don't think so. *Mafia* legit. Like showing Jim Crow and everything.

CoppinDat: Dat's what I read too, in the review.

silentassassin321: Did white folks make the game?

RealGudda: Yeah, probably.

silentassassin321: OK, I ain't playin' that shit.

[*All laughing*]

RealGudda: You play other games white people make.

silentassassin321: Yeah. But not with black people in 'em. You won't see me playing *GTA.* I barely play *Gears.* I get tired of seeing the same shit. We thugs. Or we coonin. . . .

silentassassin321: If the game is more than that [stereotypical representations], I'll think about it. But I know how they do. And y'all fall for it every time.

As silentassassin321 suggests (and is confirmed by research), media

portrayals offer singular visions of marginalized lives, behaviors, and roles in society. Specifically, blackness is consistently underrepresented and/or misrepresented across various media.[3] These images constantly clash with black reality because hegemonic media controls them. The racialized element inherent in mediated imagery further serves to limit agency and influence public perception of black life. Conflicting constructions of blackness reify who is and is not eligible for full inclusion in humanity.

Another cohort of gamers discuss these mediated portrayals of blackness in gaming, offering a perspective different from silentassassin321 but still very illustrative of the problematic nature of representation in gaming. The conversation stemmed from a question I asked about continuing to buy games that feature problematic representations of women and people of color.

xxRobotechxx: I'ono. I get why you wouldn't, but what is that saying to them? Like, the people who make the games?

ChrisIsNice: I feel like . . . I mean how the movies depict us. I don't like it, but I still watch. Like to show we'll support it. Ya know, support them. Like people like Tyler Perry. And maybe they'll give us something else. Something better.

xxRobotechxx: Well, you think they'll think we like the stuff we see in *GTA* and *Saints Row* and just do more of that? Especially if we keep buying and playing them.

LightzOut: I feel like they gotta do it all. Because we ain't the majority and they gotta make money. So they can't make white boys mad.

ChrisIsNice: Yeah, they fragile as fuck.

[*All laughing*]

This group of gamers, who all identify as black men, introduced an important concept that interferes with the desire to create more equitable representations in games: the corporate factor. Video games are products of corporate industries whose primary purpose is to sell products and generate revenue. Female characters and characters of color are often framed within this narrative of "Will they sell?," and their sales (or lack thereof) justify their absence.

Although the black men in this chapter remark on their lack of power to influence content within games, I think it is necessary to complicate their collective engagement around the intersecting identity of "black man." I want to add nuance to their perception of their collective power while exploring how

they perceive their identities (collectively and individually). They often evoke themes that are present in the collective lives of black men: racial discrimination, police surveillance and harassment, incarceration, and mediated depictions. The power of their narratives influences collective black identity development in the gaming space.

Collective identity can be defined as an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution.[4] In digital gaming, this identity development stems from collective engagement about gaming narratives and personal experiences, shared with each other through that space. This engagement pushes forward the concept of intersectional tech by exploring how the physical influences black men's digital engagement with gaming and with one another. The communities with which they engage reflect the oral engagements needed to articulate particular standpoints that highlight their performances. Their reactions are varied, and there is no collective consensus. But the core engagement with gaming as a text, for them, is through the narrative power associated with blackness being made legible and how this positively affects their associations with gaming, broadly, and with each other, specifically.

Narrative Identity and Meaning-Making through Video Games

How do people use narratives to develop and sustain a sense of personal and collective identity and purpose, especially through mediated outlets? Discussions on narrative, identity, and culture are essential to making sense of how gamers make meaning from games. Scholars have made broad claims for narrative's essential role in the cognitive construction of reality.[5] An important contribution of this scholarship is an understanding of how humans think, behave, and communicate in communities, with a particular focus on the culture in which the individual functions and resides. The messages conveyed can be interpreted individually or collectively, and the community influences this processing.

If things were as they should be, narratives would not be necessary. There would be no need to engage alternatively or to deviate from the existing story. From this viewpoint, a description of the usual and expected within a traditional gaming narrative (the white hero as savior, for instance) carries no particular value and offers nothing significant or new in meaning. Faced with a break in the ordinary or the norm (such as the appearance of a black protagonist), however, one will often interpret the narrative by explaining why the traditional narrative may have been violated.[6] This is key to understanding not only the lack of

diversity in video gaming but also gamers' experiences with the content of video games. When conversations around diversifying content within games emerge, the tendency is to adopt a color-blind, postracial, antifeminist stance. Overarching questions that should guide narrative engagement with games must be who created these games, who are these games created for, and are we collectively okay with the answers to both?

Mediated Messages and In-Game Narratives

Scholars have long noted that dominant cinema narrates black characters primarily for the pleasure of white spectators.[7] This is often accomplished by representing black characters as nonthreatening, usually deterritorialized, and most likely transplanted to a predominantly white world.[8] The (white) visual pleasures of this arrangement of bodies highlights how Hollywood "reflects, reveals and even plays on" the white, masculine heterosexual, or rather, the "socially established interpretation that controls images and provides erotic ways of looking at the other."[9] Mainstream films forwarded the dominant (heterosexual male), phallocentric, and unconscious perspective of a patriarchal society wherein the male (or masculine) is subject and the female (or feminine) is object or spectacle. Similarly, black characters in media representations are coded in specific ways that reify and signify the meaning of black racial identity from a white masculine gaze. The difference between white and black articulates the meaning of the black character, frequently falling along the divide between the "normal" and the "abnormal," with the black characters frequently falling on the "abnormal" side of the divide.

Consider figure 2.1 as an example of the power of this divide. On the surface, the image appears to reflect ongoing controversies between police and the black community: a police officer has made contact with a black offender and has arrested him. Without further information, it is easy to view this image through the stereotypical lens of the pathological black male criminal. Adding another layer to the puzzle, the black man will soon kill the white officer. This additional narrative seems to reproduce the related stereotype of the dangerous black male and, in turn, the need for police officers to increase punitive approaches to prevent black violence.[10]

Without the missing context of the game's narrative to frame our perceptions, the scene seems to easily confirm and reproduce tropes of blackness that extend back for generations. But in the game, the black man, Everett, is in fact a history professor at the University of Georgia. He killed a man accidentally after they

engaged in a fight, and soon he kills the police officer in self-defense: the officer turns into a zombie, and Lee must defend himself from being attacked and eaten.

Figure 2.1. Lee Everett, protagonist of Telltale Games's *The Walking Dead,* being transported by a police officer.

If this image is one's sole point of reference, it is not readily apparent that Lee's character is one of a few progressive black representations in video game culture. Even so, gamers who previously expressed public concern about the lack of progressive visual representations of blackness often use Lee's character as a means to assert that blackness does not have to be reduced to stereotypes.

IceBergSlim502: Lee Everett is cool. He just a regular character. But the police did pick his ass up!

silentassassin321: Yeah, and that's the problem. To show that he is black. He had to be, like, have that black experience, you know what I'm saying? Like his blackness had to be authenticated by the game somehow. And they did it using the police.

IceBergSlim502: Silent, you don't like nothing, do you? [*Laughing*]

silentassassin321: Nah, I do, but they not making dem games fo' us. They making 'em for white people. And that's my biggest problem. They don't know how to make us or feature us in games without doing the stereotypical shit. I just get tired of seeing it. Dude is a professor! Why ain't we on campus at the beginning of the game?

silentassassin321 highlights another significant problem within gaming: how black bodies are organized and narrated for a (white) consumer audience. This

approach can be viewed as narrative processing, or the construction of "storied accounts of past events that range from brief anecdotes to fully developed autobiographies. These accounts rely on vivid imagery, familiar plot structures, and archetypal characters and are often linked to predominant cultural themes or conflicts."[11] The stereotype of the dangerous black man is a commonly used trope, often employed in mediated contexts.[12] The accumulating knowledge that emerges from reasoning about this particular narrative memory yields a schema that provides causal, temporal, and thematic coherence to an overall sense of identity.[13] In thinking about the representation of black individuals in the media, on TV, and in books, we can see and argue that the scarcity of mainstream representations of black bodies was quickly replaced with "cackling, bumptious, buffoonish clowns," black children portrayed as "pickaninnies," or any number of stereotypical narratives.[14]

Media portrayals offer similar visions of black women's lives as well. Television has historically represented women of color as hypersexual, promiscuous, and immoral.[15] Many media outlets rely on updated versions of minstrel-era stereotypes, such as the hot-tempered and loud-mouthed Sapphire, the domestic servant or Mammy, and the promiscuous Jezebel.[16] The common trope of black women promulgated in games is that of the angry black woman, who most often surfaces as a villain.[17]

Take Larae Barrett in *Tom Clancy's The Division*, for example. Although she is not a playable character, she is situated in a villainous role, continuing the narrative of black women as hypervisibly invisible, meaning that we see them but are unable to engage with them, which flattens their characters and their identities (and subjects them to a host of symbolic violence). While the game frames Larae as an angry black woman, villain, and criminal, black gamers suggest that she is more than that. She gives a speech in the game, and with her words she actually evokes much of the rhetoric deployed by contemporary social movements, which argues that one ought not be defined by victimhood: "You can turn that cry into a roar or you can turn it into a whimper. . . . You can choose to be a victim. No matter where you at: penthouse, prison cell, or even free roaming your own streets."[18]

While her powerful speech in the game reflects the challenges of overcoming victimhood and victim status, Larae guts a man in front of a large crowd, diminishing her words for many white gamers. For them, this violent act is more powerful than her important rhetoric, conjuring up the emotion of fear for many white gamers. In discussion forums centered on this part of the game, white

gamers link this rhetoric to the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Recall the earlier discussions of fear in this book. I challenge the concept of white fear and explore anger and anxiety, which may be more appropriate emotions to focus on in making sense of white responses to black anger, pain, and rage. These white anxieties redefine and reframe black rage as violence toward the white body politic, whether real or perceived. This (re)definition reduces black emotions to threats of violence against those in positions of hegemonic power. Tying this conversation back to white men's anxieties and fears about the black other, Larae Barrett's violent visual seems to justify the punitive measures and state-sanctioned violence exacted on her as the game unleashes a full assault to take her down.

Larae Barrett's character also illustrates the power of oral traditions for black women. Colonial projects mostly rendered the rich oral histories and traditions of black folk invisible, but these practices are still in place. Barrett's character makes visible and public the quiet rumblings of the oppressed. Although she uses violent means to further her point, she also illustrates the hidden transcripts of social interaction between dominant and subordinate social groups, demonstrating how police force and state violence try to silence the subordinate. In her speech, she discusses the need to reframe the impact of "the 'disease,' from being a tragedy to being a teacher. The people will no longer be subject to the uniforms [police authority], but they will actually resist and fight back."[19] This directly reflects the framework of anti–police brutality movements, which argue that the police lack legitimacy in communities of color because of the history of marginalization, oppression, racism, and violence. But her character's reverberation is that of an angry black woman advocating for only a few lives; this is how her character and the movement are read by the larger gaming audience. Consider the following conversation between these gamers, focused on Barrett as a villain.

MittyBittyKitty: But she's scary. Why are y'all praising her?

ChrisIsNice: Because we don't get to see black women, like, at all in games.

MittyBittyKitty: But you shouldn't praise a criminal, no matter their race. Isn't that the problem with Black Lives Matter, too? I mean, they are setting their neighborhoods on fire. I don't get why that's a good thing. That's not helping nothing.

MissUnique: Did he really just say that? Dude, we kill people in every game we play. You praise the dudes in *Call of Duty. Gears of War.* Why is this different

for you? Why is she different for you? We praise criminals in games. Point blank.

MittyBittyKitty: But this is like the first time y'all have been this excited. I just don't get it.

ChrisIsNice: Mitty! When have you seen a black woman in a game? That's not, like, a prostitute and don't have no lines?

MittyBittyKitty: I mean, I guess you're right. I just don't like it. Because we're the good guys and she's the bad guy.

MissUnique: Nah, his problem is Black Lives Matter. She looking like she from Black Lives Matter. And he feel left out. Welcome to our world.

MittyBittyKitty: Well, that's like racist too. I mean, if white people said that, like "White Lives Matter," y'all would be upset. OMG, SRSLY? Also, what's with that dumb name?

MissUnique: He 'bout to say it y'all. Don't say it. He gon' say "All Lives Matter."

MittyBittyKitty: I mean, well, yeah. They do.

[*Laughing and indistinct side conversations*]

ChrisIsNice: Nigga! I'm done. I can't. I'm out. Mitty, you usually cool, so I'mma chill on this.

While challenging common narratives associated with black womanhood, Barrett's character is collectively read by white men as villainous and angry. The timing of the release of this game (2016), which corresponded with the rise of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, solidified the connection between Barrett's rhetoric and the stance of the movement.

Connecting Historical Imagery with Contemporary Visuals

It is imperative that we do not construct false distinctions between virtual and real-world experiences. Instead, we must explore the looping logics of cultural representation that suture the "real" and the "virtual" into a "hybridized 'state of suspension.'"[20] Many of us, as users of digital technologies, reside in hybrid worlds where the boundaries between what is physical (or actual) and what is digital (or electronic) are fading.[21] The blurring of these boundaries must be explored, especially, for the ability to alter how one may act or behave and for

the ability to reinforce historical fantasies (that is, white revisionist histories) as truth.[22] Hegemonic, privileged bodies creating and depicting racialized bodies using real-life narratives (black criminality, comedic buffoon, the help, and so on), as opposed to fantasies, leads to blurred racial lines.

The character of Augustus "Cole Train" Cole, from the *Gears of War* franchise, reflects a continuous loop of representation extending from plantation narratives. Although Cole Train doesn't normally exhibit stereotypical violence, he does exist within the narrative of buffoon and sidekick for the white hero and savior, Marcus Fenix. Black masculinity in the shooter genre is most often depicted as hypermasculine, hyperphysical, and hypersexual. As a "hyperextended" black male, Cole exists with little to no intellect and a childlike, buffoonish manner.

Much attention is paid to the details of the futuristic world of Sera, where *Gears of War* takes place, from characters to settings to story line. However, in constructing Cole Train, the game reverts to stereotypical tropes associated with blackness and black masculinity that often are seen in buddy films. The character lacks maturity, which is common for black sidekicks in movies, who also has limited intellect compared to a white counterpart.[23] The hybrid of "coon" or "black buffoon," commonly referred to in media analysis as the "Uncle Remus," is often defined as unreliable, has limited mastery of English, and lacks intelligence.[24] The Uncle Remus is considered a hybrid of coon because of his stupidity, his naïveté, and his loyalty to his white counterparts. This type of character is used merely to elicit laughter arising from exploited, exaggerated, and racialized stereotypes.[25] The hybrid stereotype focuses on male interracial bonding, with black men in particular existing at a cross between Toms and Mammies—all giving, all-knowing, all-sacrificing nurturers.[26] The creation of such buddies pushes black characters into the background or reduces them to subordinate, updated loyal sidekick roles that subtly reinscribe the cinematic racial hierarchies of old.[27]

Cole Train's character is marked most vividly by his over-the-top linguistic patterns. Throughout the game narrative, Cole Train is heard speaking in stereotypical black vernacular. This particular form of black vernacular can be described as a way of speaking that has "set phonological (system of sounds), morphological (system of structure of words and relationship among words), syntactic (system of sentence structure), semantic (system of meaning) and lexical (structural organization of vocabulary items and other information) patterns."[28] It is both a formal and an informal communication pattern reflecting

verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. There is nothing inherently negative or inferior about this form of speaking, learning, being, and knowing. However, when it is co-opted for mediated purposes by hegemonic entities, the diverse ways of communicating by African descendants becomes diluted.

The belief that black vernacular is a derogatory or demeaning way to speak has been ingrained in the psyche of America and Americans. Geneva Smitherman states that during the abolitionist era and emancipation, black English became more congruent with white American English. In an attempt to prove black folks equal to whites and therefore worthy of freedom, abolitionists urged them to speak white (standard) American English.[29] This pervasive ideology continues to permeate mediated contexts, reducing black characters and situating them as inferior to their white counterparts. As the bearer of this speech, Cole Train is rendered ignorant and incapable of serious thought and agency. Gamers often remark about the problematic reception of Cole Train by white gamers.

CoppinDat: Man I hate when white boys play Cole.

RealGudda: Right. They start with all ’at nigger shit.

MzMygrane/Kishonna: What do you mean?

silentassassin321: They start mocking how he talk. And like go overboard like white folks always do.

CoppinDat: So they be doing that over-the-top black cooning. And it’s the game’s fault.

RealGudda: Yeah, I agree. Because if it wasn’t on the game, they wouldn’t be sayin’ dat shit.

The problematic speech that these gamers are referencing is often referred to as jive or Ebonics. Ebonics, jive, and other forms of black vernacular should be viewed as a form of protest, a defense mechanism, coded communication, and a method of deriving pleasure from something that those not familiar with the language are unable to understand. However, popular culture’s adoption of black vernacular in characters only serves the marketing appeal of commodified ghetto cool.[30] This co-opting of culture is a means to reduce and simplify black characters, as this particular discourse serves to enable “dominant actors to maintain domination.”[31] In this case, black masculinity is portrayed as inferior to white masculinity, confirming and sustaining its domination.

Visualization and Racialization in Gaming Culture

It is important to explore the process of racialization, paying particular attention to the intimate connection with visualization, particularly because racial minorities (as gamers, developers, and characters), both now and historically, have faced exploitation, isolation, and othering.[32] David J. Leonard has written extensively on the predominately white (secondarily East Asian) gaming industry's production of video games that reinscribe stereotypes of black masculinity.[33] Paul Barrett offers a critique of "ghettocentric" imagery in contemporary video games, which influences perceptions and offers limited visions of black inner-city life.[34] My examination of racialized imagery incorporates this pivotal scholarship and incorporates a critique of visual microaggressions, or "images that wound,"[35] as well as the rebellious responses to these images for visual empowerment, or images that resist.[36]

To do this, it is necessary to examine how blackness is experienced and consumed within gaming culture. Most black characters are not just characters; they are visually and narratively marked as other, as opposed to having an identity with intrinsic value.[37] This perpetual state of other is an unnamable space that is neither subject nor object but a consciousness of irregularity.[38] This concept of irregularity can be explored and illustrated particularly well through the figure of Lee Everett.

Everett's character in *The Walking Dead* depicts a point of contestation about the meaning of blackness that cannot be readily reduced to a stereotype/nonstereotype dichotomy. On the one hand, many critical race scholars of video games remark that, in the game, Everett resists and rejects the label of "other" so often attributed to blackness, instead showing a level of character development that is rather rare for a video game. Indeed, Lee's blackness, it would seem, is not particularly essential to his character's identity. Instead, the game developers treat his race as just another aspect of his life, likening it to an occupation one may hold. But, on the other hand, let us not forget the opening scene, where we are introduced to the black protagonist sitting in the back of a police cruiser. This initial framing, I argue, serves as a means to underscore Everett's blackness, a blackness only acceptably visualized for a mass consumer audience in culturally bounded, stereotypical representations. While Everett may exist as a character whose blackness is tangential to his overall character development, that very blackness is immediately marked as deviant, dangerous, and "other" by the visual arrangements of racialized bodies in the virtual space.

Research suggests that exposure to stereotypical imagery can negatively alter one's perceptions on an individual level.[39] At a structural level, such stereotypes serve as ongoing sustenance for white supremacist oppression and discrimination situated along racialized fault lines. As *Walking Dead* progresses, Everett's stereotypical blackness (that is, his master status as a dangerous other) is broken down as his character grows more complex and is clearly identified as the good guy. In other words, Everett's character transcends the initial racialized framing of his blackness. So there was an intentional effort to depict nonstereotypical imagery and help in the process of transcending race. Some scholars contend that these counterstereotypes can offset negative media messages about black people in general.[40] In this contestation of Everett's blackness, it is easy to see the primacy of the visual in the process of racializing the other.[41] From this example, we can turn with greater clarity to larger patterns that structure the visualization of race.

Nicholas Mirzoeff describes visuality as a process that is "not composed simply of visual perceptions in the physical sense but is formed by a set of relations combining information, imagination, and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space."[42] This space engages with the discursive practice in rendering and regulating the real, providing material effects, and influencing physical outcomes. Visuality dictates what is to be construed as symbols, the meanings those symbols are to hold, and how they should be ordered and reordered to construct the parameters of what can and cannot be seen. In short, visuality dictates that what we perceive as reality, even if it is mediated, is in fact normal.

Mirzoeff situates visuality as intimately bound to authority, further making the process and manifestation of such authority seem self-evident and normal. Through a process of classifying (naming, categorizing, and defining), separating, and aestheticizing (making the separated classifications seem right, pleasing, and even beautiful), what Mirzoeff calls a "complex of visuality" is forged that sustains vast exercises of authority:

> *Complex* here means the production of a set of social organizations and processes that form a given complex . . . and the state of an individual's psychic economy. . . . The resulting imbrication of mentality and organization produces a visualized deployment of bodies and a training of minds, organized to sustain physical segregation between rulers and ruled and mental compliance with those arrangements. The resulting complex has volume and

substance, forming a lifeworld that can be both visualized and inhabited.[43]

Mirzoeff identifies visuality as originally emerging on slave plantations in the mid-seventeenth century, where the first step in the complex, classification, "was founded in plantation practice from the mapping of plantation space to the identification of cash-crop cultivation techniques and the precise division of labor required to sustain them."[44] In turn, the slave was quickly separated from the rest of humanity through the simultaneous damnations of being legal property and being framed as originating from an "uncivilized" and hierarchically inferior culture, as defined by Western/Eurocentric standards. Mirzoeff reiterates that repeated exposure to such favorable definitions of classification and separation creates an aesthetic of respect for the status quo, the normalization of hegemonic authority, the creation of a distinct blackness as other.

Seeing Black: The Power of Racial Stereotypes

Figure 2.2 portrays characters in a popular fighting game, *Def Jam: Fight for NY.* Although there is nothing intrinsically negative about the portrayal of these black and brown characters, consumed in the aggregate with other racialized portrayals of black and Latinx men in the media, subconscious bias influences visual processing.[45] The game prominently features these characters dressed in a manner meant to invoke coded messages of black men to swiftly define these characters are "thugs" or "gangstas": jerseys, gold chains, baggy pants, sportswear, and boots, and donning aggressive poses.[46] Such a definition is almost guaranteed when one factors in more attributes of the game's racialized and criminalized frame. The stereotypes of black Americans as violent and criminal have been documented by social psychologists for more than sixty years and, I contend, can be discursively traced back to the beginning of the plantation complex of visualization.[47] With the rapid changing of mediated spaces of interaction over the decades, these stereotypical representations have kept pace not only by adapting to the medium but also by framing the possibilities of what content is included in the medium in the first place.

Figure 2.2. In-game screen capture for the *Def Jam: Fight for NY* video game. These characters have been created based on the actual likeness of rappers and popular figures in hip-hop such as RedMan, Ludacris, Ghostface Killah, D-Mob, Joe Budden, Method Man as Blaze, and Sticky Fingaz.

In this stock of racialized weaponry in service to visuality, stereotypical and otherizing depictions of blackness stand out prominently against a backdrop of popular culture dominated by the (su)primacy of whiteness and the secondary nature of black existence and representation. Blackness has been subject to the sharp stereotypical framing of these fantastical tropes, rooted in the rigid separation of the plantation era and aestheticized in new ways with each revolving loop of mediated representation. This culturally bounded framing of blackness is vividly marked and best illustrated through the popular game franchise *Grand Theft Auto.* Specifically, in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, the game's protagonist, Carl "CJ" Johnson, reflects this overreliance on poor, black, urban stereotypes.

The game begins with CJ, who lives in a "pseudo shantytown . . . under a bridge." His "friends are all unemployed, parentless gangbangers,"[48] and the violence in his life is immediate, automatic, and ever present.[49] By not providing any explanation of these circumstances, the game reifies black inner-city life, totally ignoring structural inequalities and institutional forces at work that have helped to create this reality—it is naturalized. Real-world/contemporary issues —such as three-strikes laws, the vast and disproportionate increase in the imprisonment of black and brown bodies, the impact of neoliberal economic and social "reform," racialized immigration policies, and the collapse of public concerns into private interests—are completely ignored. In place of a consideration of larger social causes, one is left to imagine either that this violent, unemployable, pathological behavior is the permanent, natural state of black and Latinx men, or that somehow CJ and his friends have found themselves in this situation as a result of their individual failings.[50]

The continued barrage of stereotypical imagery of blackness in gaming

culture has led many gamers to create their own countervisualities—narratives empowering themselves and claiming their autonomy through the definition of their identities. Such marginalized groups in the gaming community, who have their identities constantly defined in complexes of visuality (beyond their control), often consciously challenge the stereotypes tied to the visual attributes of their bodies. Within gaming culture, memes are a primary tool of countervisual resistance that allow marginalized gamers not only to reframe the racialized narratives of blackness they encounter but also to do so in a way that is readily accessible and easily replicable due to the proliferation of social media.

Heidi Huntington explores the interconnected relationship among producer, text, and audience, focusing on the back-and-forth process of acceptance and resistance.[51] Seeing internet memes in this way—as remixed images and videos—users engage a more interactive way of participating with traditional media, highlighting how it can be viewed as a form of subversive communication. Subversive communication responds to dominant communication structures in ways that could resist traditional modes of one-way, hegemonic communication.[52]

Similar to memes, GIFs provide symbolic complexities that makes them ideal for public commodification and consumption. GIFs are ideal tools for enhancing two core aspects of digital communication: the performance of affect and the demonstration of cultural knowledge.[53] Core cultural knowledge is an important aspect of black digital users' prolific use of memes, GIFs, and other digital artifacts. Black creation and dissemination of memes reflects the digital rendering of different aspects of black cultures and conversations. The reduction of these cultures in no way reflects a minimizing of the seriousness or importance of black culture, but this digital process makes black culture readily accessible. This accessibility condenses conversations within black culture, making them readily accessible and legible for a black digital audience.

In thinking about *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas,* gamers took to the internet to critique the first mission, which requires players to steal a bike. For those outside marginalized gaming culture, the mission with which CJ is tasked may not immediately provoke critical thought about the representational consequences implied by stealing a bicycle. For gamers with a critical race consciousness, however, this problematic imagery reinforces stereotypes of blackness framed as pathologically criminal and of individually induced poverty. The contemporary, structural consequences of the plantation complex of

visuality often necessitates illicit behavior to sustain survival. This same visuality, however, points us toward favoring a false assumption of individualized black pathology, combined with a complete ignoring of structural inequalities. Although the core narrative deployed in the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise is rooted in popularizing greed, extreme materialism, and capitalism, the recycling of mediated tropes of black criminality demonstrate that black fantasies will continue to be restricted by the desires of white supremacy.

Although this is the first mission for CJ, this is not the first moment when we witness him. Similar to Lee Everett, the first encounter we have with this protagonist is when he is under the authority of law enforcement. The game's narrative of the interaction between the police and CJ is one of brutality and police abuse of power. CJ is essentially forced to engage in the criminal enterprise of gangbanging and drug dealing, to protect himself from police overreach. Here, we witness the quiet rage that CJ endures while working to remain out of jail. Hegemonic framings of black rage can be seen as "a response to black suffering and failure, which is exacerbated by irresistible temptation to attribute African American problems to a history of white racist oppression."[54]

Whereas rage, in this context, suggests an aggressive response to oppression, rage also can manifest in a variety of physical, social, mental, and cultural ways. Because of the constant defining of blackness as negative, any expression of rage is usually met with hostility and fear. Thus, the expression of rage has constantly worked against black masculinity. The portrayal of black men as innately violent beasts is a particularly damaging "justification" deployed whenever physical violence is meted out against black bodies, whether in contemporary media's racially charged use of the word *thug* or in an officer's choice to resort to violence because they "felt in danger."

The narrative of perceived black rage directed toward white men rapidly oriented itself toward white women, taking on the sinister attribute of oversexualized depravity. After the end of the Civil War and throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, media portrayals of black masculinity began to be characterized by the myth of the black man as a violent sexual predator, and this served as a discursive mechanism to legitimize widespread white supremacist terrorism under the auspices of "justice," most notably lynching, contemporarily hypersurveillance, and state violence.[55]

Against the backdrop of the varied visualizations of black masculinity, the ambiguity of the sight of unfamiliar blackness serves as a powerful trigger. This triggering fulfills the master status of vague, dangerous otherness accompanied

by feelings of uneasiness, fear, and even aestheticized hatred. The authentication of Lee Everett's blackness in the opening scenes of *The Walking Dead* relies on this ambiguity and amplifies it by situating him in the police cruiser. Juxtaposed to the relatively unambiguous framing of the *Fight for NY* characters, it becomes readily apparent that, ambiguous or otherwise, the marketable authenticity of virtual blackness relies at least partially on producing and maintaining a stereotypical style that equates "black" with "violent and criminal," as well as the implicit assumption that the consumer audience for these digital images is white and male.

These are only a few instances of virtualized visualizations of race. This imagery is ever present in our socially mediated environment, where the means of digital creation and production, especially for video games, is overwhelmingly held by hegemonically conditioned bodies and positionalities. Viewed aggregately, every (mis)representation—from *Fight for NY*'s pointed dangerousness to CJ's criminality and Everett's ambiguous scene, from street to screen, within gaming culture and outside of it—serve as visual microaggressions. Popular gaming culture argues that these are seemingly minor infractions of representation, that no offense is intended in creating these visualities. However, they are powerful purveyors of the structural violence perpetrated on black bodies and the simultaneous relegation of black people to the margins of culture: stereotypes fueling microagressions, microaggressions fueling stereotypes, a sinister synergy doing its part to mask the baseless authority of the white supremacist, capitalist order of exploitation.[56]

The Countervisual as Empowerment and Resistance in Gaming

Increasing use of social media in gaming spheres has given marginalized groups aesthetic control over their visual depictions, actual definitions, and socially constructed identities. Critiquing the visualized authority that is attempting to sustain these racial enterprises (as well as exploring the creation of new content) addresses the promulgation of protest images, which become the primary rhetoric of the move away from relying on hegemonic definitions of self.[57] Furthermore, it is an assertion of the individual's ability to create meaning out of ideas, information, and visual images, instead of having that meaning precircumscribed by processes of visualization in service to authority. Such a right to existence is unencumbered by oppression or domination through an active engagement in which "the right to look acknowledges the patriarchal slave-owning genealogy of authority—and refuses it."[58]

This acknowledgment and refusal, the assertion of a politically subjective right to look, puts into play what Mirzoeff calls a "countervisuality." In thinking about the power of pathologized narratives that are ever present in media, I consider the role that countervisualities can play in resisting this domination.[59] Scholars have identified the hegemonic potential of narrative by illustrating how narratives can contribute to the reproduction of existing structures of meaning and power.[60] In this fashion, narrative and visuality are closely linked—with narrative arguably in service to visuality.

There are three important functions of narrative: it is a means of social control, a hegemonic process enhanced by the narratives' ability to colonize consciousness, and a contributor to hegemony, to the extent that narratives conceal the social organization of their production and plausibility. Because narratives depict specific individuals, cultures, and locations, they make sense of the world and become more powerful as they are constantly deployed and repeated. But it is important to engage the concept of countervisuality as a means of resisting this domination. Gamers frequently encounter stereotypical characters in gaming culture, and when a visual emerges that counters this traditional framing, there usually is a co-optation of the positive visualization to counter the negative framing. We see this in *Rust*, an online game that automatically assigns an identity to gamers—one such identity being black. The backlash to this was swift and severe.

A substantial segment of the gaming community asserts sustained opposition to increasing levels of diversity (as was seen with Gamergate). These gamers contribute memes, pictures, commentary, and other assertions of hegemonic visualization demonstrating their discontent with the increase in gaming of marginalized bodies that refuse to be immediately stereotypically racialized. One image in particular gained notoriety as a response to the perceived forced diversity in *Rust.* For some white gamers, being "forced" to sometimes play as a black man engendered a crisis of hegemonic white supremacist identity, fueling white masculine anxiety and necessitating a reassertion of racialized visualization situated squarely in the plantation complex.[61]

The racially satirical image or meme reflects controversies surrounding *Rust;* many gamers began creating racist memes to express their anger about being forced to play as a black character. Within this particular meme, the text overlaid on the image referenced characteristics stereotypically associated with blackness: full lips, wide noses, large jaw structures, and so on. The prompt inside the dialogue box asks, "Are you sure you want to be a Nigger?" This

memetic recreation, though obviously not a real feature of the game, reflects white responses to the game. The majority of internet memes about racism perpetuate color blindness by mocking people of color and denying structural racism.[62] The mouse cursor is pointed to “Yes,” completing the stereotyping process rooted in racism. This foreground is the overtly racist part, while the back confirms the stereotyped and racist imagery that is always linked to blackness.

Old-fashioned prejudice has evolved into a new type that is resistant to traditional remedies and legal solutions.[63] These new racisms and stereotypes have been repackaged as entertainment, leading us to laugh at stereotypes and to ignore microaggressions and visualized violence.[64] The development of these new racisms and complementary color-blind ideology can be understood as one more round of intensification, rendering visuality that much more effective.

The singular narrative used in games, which privileges whiteness and masculinity, reveals either a complete lack of creativity or a desire to maintain this hegemonic ideal as the standard in gaming. Thus, the reappropriation of visual tools (videos, imagery, characters, and so on) reflects an innovative means of either sustaining or resisting this level of dominant discourse. The social locations of these cultural producers are necessary to examining how individuals and social institutions are situated in interlocking forms of privilege, dominance, oppression, and subordination. There is a continuous history of black resistance to hegemonic dominance, and this resistance is very apparent in mediated spaces.

Being empowered in this manner is not equivalent to the reversal of power relations.[65] This notion of empowerment exists in a realm of freedom through dismantling existing power relations. The continual omission and racialized distortion of marginalized groups greatly contributes to the shock of white gamers, typically sheltered by structural privilege, when they encounter examples of blackness that are not discursively bounded by stereotypical misrepresentations. While covert and subtle racism, through pressures of contested intensification, have taken precedent in public spaces, examples of overt racism abound in virtual spaces. Visuality’s masking of authoritative whiteness as the social default setting perpetuates the proliferation of racialized stereotypes in both virtual and real spaces, the distinction, as mentioned already, being discursively irrelevant.

Many gamers who engage in racialized practices do not view their behavior as racist and fail to see any links to systemic racial domination.[66] Scholars

acknowledge that, in contemporary white ideology, people may truly believe that attitudes and actions that perpetuate racism are in fact race neutral.[67] The fight against this increasingly intensified plantation complex of visuality in virtual gaming culture, and in culture more broadly construed, requires an intentional and strategic critical examination of countervisual intervention in the hegemonic roles and roots of whiteness and masculinity. Such a discursive assault on visualization may allow us to finally break down the authority of white supremacy built on a destructive, willful obliviousness to the consequences of not seeing or acknowledging whiteness.[68]

3

Hypervisible Blackness, Invisible Narratives

BLACK GAMERS COCREATING TRANSMEDIATED MASCULINE IDENTITY

ChrisIsNice: It's hard being a black man right now.

silentassassin321: When ain't it been hard?

ChrisIsNice: I mean, it just seem like social media bring all the bad news. Everyday a hashtag. Police killing somebody. We killing somebody. I mean, it's just too much to take in every day. We know this happens. We don't need social media reminding us every minute that black lives don't matter. We need to get off that shit. Take a break even.

Smif&Wes: But you don't have to see all dat. Just follow the stuff that ain't all negative.

silentassassin321: Get ya algorithms right, nigga!

[*All laughing*]

Smif&Wes: Follow some positive shit. That's why I fucks with Luke Cage so hard.

ChrisIsNice: Yeah. You done went back to the Marvel vault or some shit.

[*All laughing*]

Smif&Wes: He like . . . life goals. Like, he gets shot. And he's OK. I, um, I wish like black men can be bullet proof . . . like him. [*Pauses*] I know that sounds corny as fuck. But could you imagine that? No death.

[Observational notes.] He pauses for a while. I'm listening. ChrisIsNice is maybe on the phone, away from the mic. I wait and listen. It seems Smif&Wes is trying to process his thoughts and figure out the words to say. Smif&Wes isn't

usually at a loss for words, so I assume this is something that he usually thinks about, not talks about. In the meantime we're still playing. The pauses and breaks in conversations aren't weird. It's normal actually. *Warframe.* It's not my favorite game, but everybody seems to be playing it. I feel like this is the game people who don't like *Destiny* come to. It's a pretty toxic place. I didn't realize that until they [the narrators] told me. I've come to rely on gamers like Smif&Wes and others to tell me what's happening in these gaming streets. LOL

Smif&Wes: And I know this'll sound crazy, but I'm glad I got the game. Cuz, like, I mean . . . I'ono. Y'all know what I be going through.

MzMygrane/Kishonna: No, I totally get it. I do. Have you ever left gaming?

Smif&Wes: Nah. I ain't never left gaming. Well, not unless I couldn't afford Live! [*Laughing*] This is my place, though. Social media cool. It just make me mad. Well, Twitter cool, but Facebook for the birds. I like following people like the BlackLivesMatter people. And the hashtag that kinda show us in a different way. That one had me thinking real hard about how they show us.

ChrisIsNice: Oh, you talking about If They Gunned Me Down.

MzMygrane: Oh, you saw that one?

Smif&Wes: Man. That was so powerful. It put on Front Street exactly how media do us. Seeing that. All the stuff from Black Lives Matter. Learning about Cointelpro. Hoping white folks don't call the police on me. And other stuff. It's just hard. It's a lot. I'm glad I got the game.

This excerpt, a small sample from years of observations and conversations with Smif&Wes and others, contains a plethora of feelings, thoughts, and powerful commentary on what it means to be black in an era of antiblackness. Many of these users have found solace in digital communities, including gaming, where they might be shielded from the onslaught of black death, pain, and struggle that many feel is fodder for white audiences and their traditional consumption practices. As media scholars have long noted, black defeat is necessary to establish the white narrative order.[1] Smif&Wes reveals that the utility of gaming spaces provides a refuge from the antiblackness that pervades digital media.

Smif&Wes invokes the powerful hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown in describing his engagement with social media, recalling how powerful black use of social media can be. This hashtag, and the narrators' use of the visual, textual, and oral, are central to building a conceptual framework of intersectional tech.

Using the example of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, black digital users juxtapose black death with a limited narrative of black life and reality. This is a clear illustration of the connectedness of the exploited, hypervisible body and the associated labor that black bodies must do to combat the powerful mediated narratives skewing their existence. The responses to #IfTheyGunnedMeDown reflect powerful reactions and resistance inside oppressive structures, and the use of technology to do so.

The hashtag and accompanying photographs—which challenged how media outlets often choose to characterize black men, in particular, through the photographs selected to represent them—emerged in response to the death of Mike Brown.[2] On the afternoon of August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed by a white police officer after a brief interaction in Ferguson, Missouri. In the hours and days following the shooting, the story gained international attention, propelling to prominence the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which itself began after the death of Trayvon Martin, the Florida teen shot and killed by self-proclaimed neighborhood security guard George Zimmerman in February 2012.

Initially, Mike Brown was referred to as a "thug" and was seen throwing gang signs, because of the images NBC News and others decided to use.[3] Nora Gross explains that the "low camera angle made Brown look particularly large and, to some, menacing—especially since he was holding out his right hand in an ambiguous three-finger gesture."[4] There was much criticism directed at mainstream media over their image selection, arguing intentionality in the perpetual negative framing of black bodies.

In response to Brown's shooting, the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, created by C. J. Lawrence, immediately began trending. The hashtag asks a simple question: "Which picture would the media choose to represent me if I were killed by the police?" Users of the hashtag answer this rhetorical question by offering a choice between two contrasting images—one positive, socially acceptable, and suggestive of innocence, and the other put forth as the stereotypically negative or problematic representation the media might prefer.[5] The image juxtaposition provides an immediate contrast and critique of media outlets deciding which image will fit into their narrative of "deserving and worthy"—which, as the black community knows, the black body is rarely afforded.[6] This inequitable media landscape sustains a narrative of perpetual criminality for black men. This perpetual criminality, in service to white supremacy, often justifies the violent deaths that befall black men.

I spoke with Tyrell (xxChronicGamerxx) at length about his evolving perspective on police and the black community. Early on, his thought process was rooted more in respectability politics, assuming that black men in particular could, by changing their way of speaking and dressing, have improved outcomes. The conversation soon morphed, after the deaths of Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and others. He witnessed firsthand police violence while at the mall with friends. The extended conversation below, which began in Twitter, shifted to Facebook Messenger, and ended up in a voice chat in Xbox Live, reflects his changing perspective.

Tyrell: Man shits crazy out here. We literally dying.

Kishonna: We who?

Tyrell: Black men in America. We are under attack damn near. Like I be so shook when the police go by. And you know me, I'm one of the good ones. I mean not like that. But you know what I mean right?

Kishonna: I think so. Can you help me understand a little more?

Tyrell: Like because I live in a nice area now. I can talk to people. Like I can articulate myself. I'm like, not hood, like . . . I mean I know that sounds bad. But I'm not hood. But they don't care.

Kishonna: What happened? I saw you post it just now that's why I reached out to you.

Tyrell: Oh shit. We were just all at the mall doing the VR [virtual reality] thing. And I guess we was too loud after. Security came so deep. And we been thinking about the whole Ferguson thing. We looking at them like that'll never happen to us. Not hear [*sic*] right? Next thing I know, we all on the ground in handcuffs. . . . Now I've had experiences with the police. But this was something else. It was something different. I think it's the first time I was scared of being Black.

Kishonna: How was it different?

[Tyrell sent the next message in Facebook Messenger, and the conversation continued there.]

Tyrell: Well. It's like. Nothing I did or said worked. They wouldn't listen to me. Now I feel like I've always had a way to explain myself. And articulate. But no matter what I said, it just made them more mad. They thought we were

underage. Or so they said. Then we showed our ID's. I was saying we didn't have to and that's what really started it all. I know the law. They weren't ID'ing white men. Just us. And they know dam well we don't look like kids. But it was too much of us I guess.

Kishonna: Were they just random? Or you think the VR folks called security?

Tyrell: You know. I really don't know. I can't say. And I think that scares me even more. I assumed we were being too loud at the store. Then it was like a group of us. We weren't dressed hood or nothing, but shit, how do I know how they define hood. I just . . .

[There is a short pause, but I see the dots indicating that Tyrell may have typed something.]

Tyrell: I guess. I guess it scares me. You know. Knowing that I could die at any moment as a Black man in America. And nobody would ever know why.

[Short pause, with no indicator dots.]

Tyrell: But you know what?

Kishonna: What's that?

Tyrell: I ain't gon let them stress me. I see them now. I see their game.

Kishonna: Speaking of game. We playing?

Tyrell: oh, fa sho.

I sent Tyrell an invitation to a private chat in Xbox Live. The following is a summary of our conversation and field notes compiled after our gaming session.

He suggests we play *Destiny.* It's not my game of choice. Not my favorite at all. But I agree, since it's new, and he had just bought it—while at the mall in question. I'm more interested in his thoughts than I am about this game. But we chat a bit about it. A completely normal experience. To have gone through something dramatic and be on the game like things are normal. I think the game creates a normalcy for many of these gamers. Especially those who live under conditions of violence. Their digital reality becomes their core reality because the alternative is too much, so they exist in this hybrid state of suspension.

We play for a bit and then Tyrell begins chatting about his mall VR

experience again. He is bothered. He is drinking. He's not one to abuse drugs or alcohol. He is usually cool about things. But this experience was something different. His inability to defuse a lit officer reminded him that his life doesn't actually matter. I learned that he was wearing khakis and a polo. He cursed himself for wearing red. A red shirt.

"Maybe the police assumed I was in a gang."

He really needs an answer. Other gamers have joined the chat. This is common. We aren't often alone inside the gaming chat. Which is fine. Totally OK. He needs his close friends right now. And I may be making it worse. I'm trying not to ask too many questions. I want to be here for him. This is the conundrum. The dilemma. The ethical dilemma in researching vulnerable communities. I want to tell him to file a report. Always get officers' names. Follow up. But I remember being told that this is being too intimate and involved. That advice alone could shift the conversation. Bias the participants in unforeseen ways.

I don't say anything. But luckily one of his friends did. I've stopped talking mostly. I listen and observe. And play of course. This shitty game.

I was moved by a comment made by one of the other gamers, when Tyrell kept asking why.

"They don't need a reason. You're black. That's reason enough. You just gotta keep it moving. So step up a be a man."

This was a powerful statement, and reflective of the trend to not just settle for pain and death. Black folk refuse to be relegated to their struggles. Instead, they engage with a variety of emotions and are influenced by the rage that often centers their emotions. In the wake of so much black death, black folks once again went to social media to illustrate the joy that emanates from the surrounding death.

Black Death, Digital Pain

As Catherine Steele and Jessica Lu explain, viral videos of black men and women violently dying at the hands of the police have become a staple of digital media.[7] This mediated trend on contemporary cable news was popularized during the lynching era, when lynching photography served as a representation of, or a pictorial shorthand for, the consensus among white communities about the roles of black (subordinate) and white (dominant) men and women. It proffered a version of white supremacist ideology that has maintained its

hegemonic power while being masked in a variety of ways (behind civil rights legislation, affirmative action, color-blind ideology, and so on). It offered a view of what Michael Hatt has called the "unified constituency of whiteness."[8] Media coverage of black bodies, perpetually depicted as criminal and violent, has been systematically and culturally scripted and normalized.

Although there has been a consistent mediated effort to resist this pervasive violent imagery, these images, when consumed in the aggregate with other racialized portrayals of black folks, reinforces subconscious bias and influences visual processing of the black other, as was described previously.[9] This scripting of black masculine bodies in particular perpetuates societal fears about black men.[10] Singularly framing black people in stories of criminality carries an "ideologically potent and damaging cultural connotation."[11] It delimits black folks, devaluing their humanity by showing excessive images of black pain, suffering, and death. Examining this long history of mediated black pain, from the plantation to the lynching era to Jim Crow to mass incarceration, the viewing audience becomes desensitized to black death.[12] As George Lipsitz, David Roediger, David J. Leonard, Jessie Daniels, and other critical race and whiteness scholars have explored, "the possessive investment in whiteness," color blindness, transparency, postracialism, and denial are the ideological glue that hold together this nation's social center—white supremacy.[13]

Blackness, having been historically designated as a marker for death, becomes a commodity to reify the humanity and life of the white subject.[14] The continued onslaught of mediated framing and physical reality has taken a toll on black folks as individuals and as a community. Digital media has provided an outlet to express these collective traumas, stories of resilience, and evidence of resistance. Social media networks have powerfully influenced the spread of social movements in the twenty-first century. With the case of Michael Brown, members of the black community and others took to the streets, both digital and physical, to demonstrate that Black Lives Matter. As Alicia Garza indicates, #BlackLivesMatter is an "ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression."[15] In this way, direct action, protests, demonstrations, and organizing at the local and national levels are used to express outrage at the continued subjugation of black communities.

But as the narrators in this book have explained, sometimes it is too much and too stressful. The constant influx of black pain, from dehumanization to social

terror to the damaging effects of minstrelsy, have not rendered the black body unable to withstand the constant bombardment. Instead, these micro nooses have informed the creation of a particular black masculinity, and the impact of the digital on black masculine identity reformation should be examined.

As Ronald Jackson explores in *Scripting the Black Masculine Body,* popular culture constructs the black masculine body as exotic, strange, violent, incompetent, uneducated, sexual, exploitable, and innately incapacitated, signifying it as an abnormality that must be dealt with in physical spaces.[16] In the pages of his profound text, Jackson puts forth a black masculine identity paradigm that reconceptualizes the black masculine body not simply within cultural framings or gendered characterizations but according to ideals of what it means to be masculine as constructed through white supremacy. His new paradigm for black masculinity is composed of four needs—recognition, independence, achievement, and community—which are centered by struggle. Similar to the paradigms of black masculinity discussed previously, this is a useful intersectional framework that explores black men through a multitude of masculinities, with healing and well-being at the center.

Scholars have paid significant attention to the duality of masculinity and blackness and its impact on mental well-being. Jewelle Gibbs's classic edited volume *Young, Black, and Male in America: An Endangered Species* (1988) gave necessary attention to the status of young African American males, highlighting how that generation experienced even more disparate outcomes related to unemployment, involvement with criminal justice, homicide, suicide, health and mental health stigmas, and even unsupportive familial structures.

Related scholarship focuses on the effects of racism and how it manifests differently in the lives of black men and women. For instance, Robert Sellers and Nicole Shelton found that African American men experience racial harassment and discrimination more frequently than do African American women.[17] To not discount their findings, research also suggests that the experience of racism might be qualitatively different for men and women of African descent (with women developing other coping mechanisms because of the gendered nature of their racialized reality).[18] Scholars describe how African American men's repeated encounters with prejudice and racism creates an "invisibility syndrome," defined as "an inner struggle with the feeling that one's talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or even recognized because of prejudice and racism."[19] The scholarship confirms that African American men's encounters with prejudice and racism adversely affect physical and mental

health. Racism and “racism-related stress” has consistently been found to be a predictor of psychological distress in working-class and upper-middle-class African American men.[20]

The Utility of Gender Strain Theory in Cocreating Transmediated Masculine Identity

Gender strain theory is a useful theoretical framework to help make sense of developing, creating, and sustaining masculine identities in digital spaces. The theory states that the development of masculinity is naturally stressful to all male populations. However, this experience may be more stressful for African American men for a variety of reasons, including their historical sufferings, their need to exist within prejudicial and oppressive systems,[21] and the intersecting nature of oppressions that pervade their lives. According to the framework of gender strain theory, this point would logically influence not only how black men experience masculinity but also how that masculinity develops and finds expression. Since this theory indicates that stress is a part of the experience, it is possible to infer that varying degrees of stress might affect how masculinity develops, and most related research focuses on toxic instantiations of black masculinity.

Lawson Bush and Edward Bush’s African American male theory is an interesting addition in making sense of racialized masculinity development. Bush and Bush ground their examination in the historical context of slavery, lynching, and contemporary moments in black history. Their ecological approach explores the multitude of systems, from the micro to the macro, that influence the daily lives of black boys and men. They even factor in the supernatural and spiritual realm, which further reflects the multidimensional levels of reality in which black boys and men may reside. The tenets that constitute this framework provide a useful perspective, with intersectionality, social justice, and resilience at the core.

I center gender strain theory in making sense of black masculinity online because of the internal focus on the psychological stressors affecting black men, recognizing that external factors actively perform as stressful agents.[22] This kind of psychological stress can be felt intrapersonally and interpersonally, with a person simultaneously expressing it toward others (black women) and feeling it from others (white men and women).[23] In this way, gender strain theory emphasizes the negative effects of conforming to and violating social gender expectations.[24] In terms of masculinity, the strain is magnified, heightening

dysfunctionality around traditional gender roles (such as the directive to “Be a man” or “Man up”). These include but are not limited to contradictory and inconsistent expectations of masculinity, worry about violating the masculine gender role, and the role of history in changing these expectations.[25] Research suggests that these dysfunctions could be a central factor in developing toxic masculinity. Violence, sexual assault, risky sexual behaviors, depression, parenting issues, and negative health outcomes have been correlated with high levels of strain.[26]

At the intersection of racial identity, there also is a higher correlation with gender role conflict. As James O’Neil suggests, the totality of the negative aspect of this conflict is the self-restriction of human potential, or the restriction of human potential transmitted to another person (such as black men’s toxic relationships with black women, including trans women).[27] Toxic masculinity has always featured prominently in gaming culture. Although the focus is often on white masculine anxieties, it also is necessary to center blackness at the intersection of masculinity, both to gauge the extent of strain and collective trauma and to imagine the possibilities of thriving in the midst of this stress. This focus on white masculine anxieties may seem obsessive, but it is more situated as a survival mechanism, as Brittany Cooper describes in her transformative text, *Eloquent Rage.* Cooper says that for black survival, we must know the depths to which whiteness will go to maintain positions of dominance.[28]

There is significant evidence suggesting that holding on to certain beliefs and behaviors that Western society deems masculine corresponds to a variety of intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts for black men.[29] Not meeting these rigid norms, or improperly trying to grasp them, is connected to negative outcomes.[30] For this reason, most of the research around the gender strain paradigm views the quest to “be a man” as a negative journey. But in thinking about the advice to Tyrell to “Be a man,” there is much to unpack, before automatically rooting this in toxic instantiations of black masculinity. This utterance could be interpreted in a multitude of ways. It could be interpreted as a way to step up and support the black community. It could be perceived as a way to stand up to the toxic structures of justice that continue to render black folks subject to violence. But it also could be rooted in the traditionally toxic ways: stop crying, stop complaining, and deal with it.

In acknowledging the limited ways in which men been conditioned to express their masculinity, I suggest that “Be a man” could be reframed as a process of self-discovery, of deconstructing negative consequences and life outcomes and

locating a future path forward.[31] Helping men understand how the socialized norms of masculinity contribute to their personal problems is the first step in making permanent positive change. In light of the statement uttered by Tyrell's friend, it is imperative to identify transformative schemas that assess healthy internal and external manifestations of masculinity in men.

This chapter illustrates such a project, highlighting the continued barriers that white supremacy inflicts on this progress. Digital technologies afford a different possibility and an additional avenue for black men to disrupt traditional narratives and assumptions about their populations. With the rise of #BlackLivesMatter, the proliferation of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, and other advocacy campaigns, black men and others have focused on the negative implications of the police state for their bodies and their communities, and black digital users have transformed the nature of engagement online, recalibrating the hegemonic rubrics of dangerous, black men.

TV, Gaming, and Connected Blackness: Disrupting the Stereotypes of Black Masculinity

Black masculinity has been subjected to stereotypical framings, rooted in racialized parameters stemming from the plantation.[32] The continued demarcation of black masculinity as "inferior to" and "less than" is a specific tool of white supremacy, systematically enforced to preserve the distinction between ruler and ruled. This imagery has historically been subsidized and sensationalized by television and print journalism and was bolstered during the Nixon-Reagan-Bush-Clinton years, propelling mass incarceration via the so-called War on Drugs.[33] It is necessary to be theoretically equipped to decipher these mediated attempts, which encourage the viewing public to believe that only a few exceptional black men are capable of succeeding, while the rest should be contained (literally and figuratively) because they are innately incapable. Portrayed as violent-natured, black men are featured in media in ways that seem to threaten the white/ruling/dominant body politic, including the visible and often invisible bureaucratic and corporate arenas of cultural manipulation of white public spaces, including the media.[34]

Historically, there has been a push by black masculinity to distance itself from the negative portrayals of blackness. Recalling the *Cosby Show* era of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which centered the black middle-class family on TV, as well as unintentional consequences of "enlightened racism," scholars suggest that such portrayals were "black enough not to offend and middle-class enough

to comfort."[35] Todd Boyd critiques this approach in suggesting that blackness does not always have to exist in response to white racism.[36]

But there currently is a desire among many social media users to finally center critiques of whiteness and racism, using certain (maybe stereotypically violent) images of blackness to do so. The trend is to embrace images of blackness that are uncomfortable to whiteness, as conversations around the show *Marvel's Luke Cage* reveal. The specific image of Luke Cage (played by Mike Colter) shown in figure 3.1 has both symbolic and literal ramifications. Cage, a fictional superhero who first appeared in Marvel comics in 1972 and then in a TV series in 2016, is featured prominently, with bullet holes shredding his hoodie and nearby walls. The iconic image comes from season 1, episode 3: "Who's Gonna Take the Weight?," in a scene that showcases one scenario from multiple vantage points. One is from an outside viewpoint, in which the audience hears the sound of gunshots and sees a couch flying out of a second-story window. Later in the episode, the audience sees the entire fight sequence from Luke's point of view, set to Wu-Tang Clan's "Bring Da Ruckus." Luke rips the door off its hinges and takes out every person posted inside the stash house of Cottonmouth (Mahershala Ali) and Black Mariah (Alfre Woodard), in a building named after Crispus Attucks. Cage moves with ease, unbothered by the bullets riddling his body, focused on the connection between the task and the music now playing in his earbuds.

Figure 3.1. A screen capture from *Luke Cage,* season 1, episode 3: “Who’s Gonna Take the Weight?” Cage is wearing a now iconic black hoodie riddled with bullet holes. There are also visible bullet holes on the walls around him.

At the start of this chapter, Smif&Wes expressed admiration for Luke Cage, comparing him to a “life goal,” and this particular scene, shared and reanimated through GIFs, depicted through one-dimensional lenses, shows a black man overcoming violent obstacles in his own neighborhood and achieving success that law enforcement have been unable to achieve. This moment, kept alive as a meme and GIF, allows the viewing audience to continue to engage in the “ruckus,” a temporary escape from violent inner-city life, which many in this study termed an inescapable cycle.

Examine the same imagery of Luke Cage in the bullet-riddled hoodie, now memed, with the added caption “A bulletproof black man in a hoodie. Luke Cage is an American police nightmare.” This controversial meme split many in the black community. While some viewed Cage as a hero, there also were feelings of discomfort with his association with law enforcement and his characterization as a police nightmare. Some journalistic outlets proclaimed Cage the superhero that America needs, but we must explore this idea through

the lens of Cage's complicity with law enforcement personnel.

The particular scene from which figure 3.1 originated has been criticized for visualizing black-on-black crime. Adding to this visual Cage's complicity with law enforcement, we can see the complicated relationship between the black community and law enforcement practices, specifically civil forfeiture, as Luke Cage and the police confiscate the bad guys' loot. This, coupled with the violence raining down on black bodies, creates a dilemma among black men.

The caption "an American police nightmare" may not speak the truth of Cage, but it does speak to the truths of so many black men in America, who are often unfairly targeted by the vague description "black man in a hoodie," intended to induce fear. This fear works in multiple ways. First, it instills fear in the (white) public about a black threat. Second, it instills fear in many black men whose only crime is being black in public spaces, as Tyrell so poignantly and painfully experienced and articulated. The police, who are frequently activated in nonviolent and even trivial situations (such as the cases of BBQ Becky, Permit Patty, and Cornerstone Caroline, among others), often respond violently, using lethal force to quell not only the fears of the public but also their own fears of black men.

There could be some truth to the statement that a bulletproof black man is a police nightmare, but the rallying of black men and others behind the meme and the GIF seemed to be less about revenge or rage than about relief—that in this scenario, created by *Marvel's Luke Cage*, they don't always have to die. This strong example of intersectional tech once again highlights the engagement with the (mediated) black body, one riddled with bullet holes, and moving into the physical, with the black community expressing strong emotions and reactions to this performance and production.

By examining gamers' experiences on Twitter, exploring these spaces as counterpublics, and engaging critical conversations,[37] we begin to see that although these constructed logics of black masculinity may once have served to relegate black men to physical and digital margins, by recalibrating them, black digital users make mediated connections to physical realities. In this example, we see the cultural connection between Luke Cage, Trayvon Martin, and the subsequent #HoodiesUp movement, situating these examples as counterpublics —making spaces where these conversations can now thrive. This "signifyin'," as André Brock Jr. notes in relation to Black Twitter, reflects mediated black cultural discourse that conveys meaning and connects relationships.[38]

Sarah Florini furthers this conversation in her examination of text-based

linguistic performances enhanced by other nonverbal cues: “Signifyin’ also relies heavily on context embeddedness to convey meaning, and nonverbal aspects of signifyin’ performances constitute important elements of meaning. . . . Many Black users have negotiated the absence of these elements in Twitter exchanges. Often, users will simply type the desired gesture or facial expression bookended with asterisks to indicate nonverbal behavior.”[39]

The engagement of *Luke Cage* within these gaming contexts directly reflects the remixing of cultural and linguistic elements stemming from black communicative traditions. From a comment added to a meme to a side-eye GIF to the reappropriation of an emoji, the prolific use and dissemination of Luke Cage imagery and visuals in gaming spaces reflects the interconnected nodes and the convergence of the black digital diaspora. Through this black praxis, there is a visual connection between comics like *Luke Cage* and video games, especially with the power of this kind of visual imagery to combat and counter negative images of black men in particular. As previously noted, however, Cage’s narrative, while mostly positive, does reflect certain tensions and entanglements about black men, the police, and popular media. Consider the following conversation among these gamers.

ChrisIsNice: We had to get some new heroes this year, huh?

Smif&Wes: Man. Who you tellin’! Cosby. Kanye. Kelly. Dem niggas wilding out. We betta off caping for Luke Cage. [*Laughing*]

ChrisIsNice: Ain’t that bad? Our heroes ain’t even real. T’Challa. Luke Cage. Hell, the only reason we support Cosby is because of Cliff Huxtable.

Smif&Wes: You right. Now, I love Luke Cage, but he fuck with the police too much.

silentassassin321: That nigga need to say “nigga” some mo’!

[*All laughing*]

xxRobotechxx: Yeah, why he don’t like say it and stuff?

silentassassin321: Respectability politics. That’s it. I stopped watching that shit after the part where he was like “Don’t call me a nigga.”

Smif&Wes: But Silent, don’t you see that as a problem with us? In the black community?

silentassassin321: The problem ain’t us using the word *nigga.* And if you think

us not using that word and pulling up our pants is gonna improve shit for us, you dumb as hell.

Smif&Wes: Calm down, man. I ain't tryna argue with you. But it's something positive. We need positive images.

silentassassin321: No, I agree. But we don't need to be blamed for some shit white folks did to us.

There was quite a bit of tension around this conversation in this small community of black men, about the "N-word," Luke Cage respectability politics, and continuing to support black men like Bill Cosby, Kanye West, R. Kelly, and others. How they engaged in these tough conversations reveals that these communities are microcosms and reflect tensions in the black community in general. These conversations—at times, arguments—often were deescalated when a more neutral party wanted to continue with gameplay.

Digital Connections to Black Masculinity

This televisual connection goes beyond Luke Cage and is more salient with TV and movie characters who then become game characters. Even with this practice, the undercurrent of white supremacy is always present. Black gamers' connection to other iconic characters can be seen with the release of *Friday the 13th*'s revival of Jason Voorhees. *Friday the 13th: The Game*, produced by Gun Media, is a third-person horror survival game where one plays either as a camp counselor, trying to survive, or as Jason, trying to kill all of the camp workers.

The horror genre provides an interesting entry point to explore the often overlooked intersectional link between race, gender, and narrative structure. In addition, this example provides a powerful example of intersectional tech, exploring the black body for exploitative purposes. From the association of blackness and zombies, to exorcising sexual demons from promiscuous women, the horror film genre particularly hinges on constructing fears of the monstrous, deviant other.[40]

In gaming, the monstrous other is made most obvious in *Street Fighter*'s representation of so-called second- and third-world characters. As Nicholas Ware explains, this monstrous other is not associated with Us (Asian East) or You (American West).[41] In this sense, Japanese game designers have constructed and sustained white Western thinking about the default racial setting, creating whiteness as the universal appeal: "Much of the reassertion of Japanese homogeneity shares a distinctly white Western ideology . . . This selling of the

Other (necessarily Monstrous in *Street Fighter,* due to the exaggerated nature of the genre) creates an Other that is neither East Asian nor White Western; as game objects that are both playable (thus, controllable) and destructible (thus, marginalized)."[42] Visually, the "monstrous" characters are marked as dramatically different, being abnormally tall and big, and many appearing almost animal-like, as in the case of Blanka, a green beast from Brazil.

The phrase "pixelated minstrelsy" is appropriate in understanding the deployment of race and racialization in these genres in that race, racial imagery, and identity depicted in this manner lead to hegemonic whiteness and masculinity. Race matters in the construction and deployment of stereotypes, and it matters in legitimizing widely accepted racial cues and assumptions in the workplace and in leisure pursuits. Race matters in video games because many games affirm the status quo, giving consent to racial inequality and the unequal distribution of resources and privileges.[43]

In making sense of the horror genre in video game culture, the generic pattern of the classic American horror film oscillates between the "normal," mostly represented by the white, middle-class heterosexuality of the films' heroes and heroines, and the "monstrous," frequently colored by racial, sexual, class, or other ideological markers.[44] When we examine these films through the lens of a racial project, we should not be surprised that the vast majority use race as a marker of monstrosity in ways generically consistent with larger assumptions about white supremacy and superiority. As the horror genre has evolved, so has the nature of constructing blackness. As Ed Guerrero notes:

> The social and political meanings of "race," of course, are not fixed but are matters of ongoing construction and contestation; whether in volatile debate or subtle transactions, the negotiation of racial images, boundaries, and hierarchies has been part of our national life from its very beginnings. The turbulent power of race is evinced by the variety of ways in which the images and historical experiences of African Americans and other people of color are symbolically figured in commercial cinema.[45]

Those symbolic figurations in turn contribute to the ongoing construction of racial meaning and identity within specific social and historical contexts. While the focus of the previous chapter was mostly on making sense of games as a racial project, it also was necessary to highlight the construction of the monstrous other, linking destructive images of black men in popular media,

social media, and gaming. This framework from the horror genre solidifies the connection of America's framing of black men as bogeymen, continually instilling fear in the white body politic. In this way, intersectional tech reveals the importance of deconstructing performances and mediated practices that restrict black narratives.

In making the connection between otherizing depictions and *Friday the 13th*, it's necessary to discuss gameplay—not what the game affords but what gamers who play the game have constructed and sustained. The image of "Part 2 Jason" (figure 3.2) contextualizes the current argument. The image appears to be an exact replica of Jason from the movie *Friday the 13th: Part 2*, where Jason covered his disfigured face with a sheet, or maybe a pillowcase. However, some gamers opt to play this variant of Jason as a member of the Ku Klux Klan. For these players, the pillowcase represents a Klan hood.

Figure 3.2. A screen capture of "Part 2 Jason." He wears a sheet with holes torn near the eyes. The screen also highlights in-game content, from weapons to strengths and weaknesses.

In making sense of this phenomenon, I observed and interviewed black gamers, who provided insights into the nature of this problem. For instance, xxRobotechxx told me:

> In one game in particular, I spawned as Buggzy. Yes, he's black, but I like playing him because of his speed and strength. And of course they'd give these characteristics to the black man. While playing, I got trapped in a house and Jason overpowered me. As always. I swear, can't nobody get away from dude. I went back into the lobby and began to spectate the other people playing. There were four more alive. I watched Deborah Kim [Asian woman]. Jason

killed her quickly. Then I moved on to AJ [white woman]. And as Jason came upon her, he kept her alive. I assumed they were working together. But I thought helping Jason was a bannable offense. I guess as long as you white, it don't matter. Anyway, I didn't think more about it, but hoped that time would quickly expire so we could start another round.

Jason and AJ then walked to find other counselors. Vanessa [woman of color] was next, and she was quickly killed. When the gamer who was playing Vanessa entered the game lobby, she explained that they didn't in fact know each other but Jason saved AJ because she was white. I then asked how he knew that, since in-game chat wasn't being used, but when characters come into close proximity to one another, the chat becomes active. The person playing Vanessa went on to explain that Jason Part 2 was being used like a Klan hood, and many gamers were using it just like that—killing all of the minorities. And keeping the white ones alive.

There is a great deal to unpack in this narrative. First, as xxRobotechxx explains, the characters of color in *Friday the 13th: The Game* have been created using traditional stereotypes. Buggzy, who appears to be an athlete, has great speed and athletic ability but lacks intellect. Vanessa also has superior physical ability but she is loud, and Jason is quickly attracted to her noise—one could read this as the "loud black/Latinx woman" stereotype. Deborah Kim has limited physical ability but she is extremely smart, thus sustaining the stereotype of East Asians as intellectually capable. Finally, in addition to the game engaging in stereotyping counselors of color, gamers themselves have used their own racial hierarchy, creating and sustaining practices of white supremacy by using Part 2 Jason as a Klan member.

While conducting participant observations, I also encountered a trend to "Make Camp Crystal Lake Great Again," a hashtag used in online gameplay to locate other gamers who are inclined to support "Trumpish" tactics. *Trumpism* describes those adopting and adhering to the philosophy and ideologies of Donald Trump's rhetoric, which includes misogyny and racism. This form of othering fits within Ware's narrative of monstrous bodies. As Ware explains, the "monstrous other" in gaming, in particular, has been constructed and is sustained through white Western thinking about the default racial setting and the racial order.[46] Specifically, according to Nirmala Erevelles, "Without the monstrous body to demarcate the borders of the generic, without the female body to distinguish the shape of the male, and without the pathological to give form to

the normal, the taxonomies of value that underlie political, social, and economic arrangements [of power] would collapse."[47]

Visualizing nonwhite characters as monstrous is part of the racial system of producing and consuming black bodies in pain, which maintains the structures of power that institutionalized the myth of white racial superiority and continues to define the black body in particular, but also others, as monstrous. For instance, as Jack Halberstam posits in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, the story of *Dracula* "condenses the xenophobia of Gothic fiction into a very specific horror—the vampire embodies and exhibits all the stereotyping of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism," in which the Jew was marked as a threat to capital, masculinity, and nationhood.[48] Jews in England at the turn of the nineteenth century were the objects of internal colonization. While the black African became the threatening other abroad, closer to home, people conflated their fears about the collapse of the nation with a desire for racial homogeneity. Halberstam's mention of black Africans as "threatening others" is especially worth noting in the context of Part 2 Jason, or "Jason the Klan member." As Alexandra Warwick adds, the "monstrosity of blackness is one of the final contributions of the nineteenth century to the modern myth of the vampire."[49]

Such arguments clearly foreground the social, cultural, and political links between racism and the horror genre, consolidating the long-lasting impact of slavery and its attendant prejudices with popular media. While some may consider the conclusions of black gamers to be a stretch, I contend that the dramatic structure of gamers reappropriating Part 2 Jason and turning him into a Klan member sends a very clear racially charged message—a message that reflects the cultural anxieties of a white America newly confronted with the fact that it can no longer segregate itself from those whom it has labeled other.

"Streaming Our Struggles"

Gamers who explore racial struggles in gaming use multiple modes of media to express their concerns, from social media to blogs and live streaming. Live streaming presents a particular opportunity to push back on skewed narratives. One of the key aspects of live streaming is that it allows users to create and produce content for an audience, giving them a level of control over that content and associated commentary. YouTube, Twitch, and Mixer (among other platforms) allow ordinary users the ability to provide their own narratives.

Although users engage in streaming activities for a variety of reasons, scholars like T. L. Taylor identify streaming and esports in particular as acts of

play that represent the mainstreaming of digital gaming culture. The narrators in her ethnographic work suggest that they engage in esports and streaming to earn money, for leisure, and to bring gaming to the masses, among other reasons.[50]

Black users engage in streaming for similar reasons.[51] Because many black users are excluded and isolated from traditional modes of production around streaming, however, they mobilize their platforms in different ways, sustaining the conceptual praxis that intersectional tech is building. Although much of black streamers' commentary is focused on gameplay and strategies, a segment of the streaming community also uses streaming for other means. In particular, these gamers employ streaming platforms to highlight controversial issues in gaming and other issues that affect the black community.

Black gamers, as marginalized users within digital technology, often are simultaneously active participants in gaming and fierce critics of the hegemonic cultures in which they exist. Twitch, a live streaming platform featuring players and real gaming content, has been a site of significant resistance to hegemonic whiteness and toxic masculinity, by black men in particular. The nature of the space, going beyond its intended purpose, has allowed for expanded opportunities to mobilize gaming as an activist platform. Black gamers specifically empower themselves by continuing to use Twitch despite the color blindness, racism, and harassment of other gamers who view and post content while they stream. The mere act of existing, engaging, and producing in this hegemonic culture can be situated in the field of cultural production, illustrating the path to making sense of black masculinity in the toxic digital era.

> > >

Streaming as Cultural Production

Live streaming can be examined through the lens of cultural production because it is material generated by nonprofessional users.[52] Mixer, Twitch, and YouTube are all live streaming platforms that allow users to actively engage in gameplay by providing their own narratives and commentary. Active participation in the game extends the immersion of users—both the player and the streaming audience. Audiences are not passive consumers but active interpreters,[53] and the ability of gamers to interpret games through their own lenses empowers these users.

Because streaming is a technology that allows one to be disengaged from commercial media, dictating game narratives has the capacity to produce

counterhegemonic messages unarticulated by the cultural industries. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green believe that digital content creation is capable of operating in unauthorized ways, outside of industry control.[54] Although this form of do-it-yourself labor still benefits the capitalist structure of media, users nonetheless feel empowered. The internet does not truly turn users into enfranchised creators and producers; rather, cultural industries employing the internet present users with pseudo cultural and economic power/capital, shifting the focus away from their labor.[55]

While participation is not always the same thing as power sharing,[56] users still suggest that participation in streaming influences gaming culture in meaningful ways. As Pierre Bourdieu acknowledges, no cultural good is inherently better than another, which leads to an important designation: notions of legitimate production are contestable. Black streamers are excluded from this area of discussion about what an appropriate contribution to the field is; it is decided for them by the default gamer, or those who sustain "hegemonic whiteness and masculinity to the detriment of non-white and/or non-male users within the space."[57] Black gamers' presence in streaming exists counter to the hegemonic norm. Their bodies and existence run counter to the conformist cultural practices operating not only in streaming but also in gaming culture in general.

The unequal power relations operating within virtual worlds manifest themselves through the body. The significance of the body for intersectional tech demonstrates the contested constructions around and through the body (the policing of the black body and the liberation of the white body). By policing an unequally permeable racialized border (created in the physical world and sustained in the digital), I am able to draw parallels with the discursive marking of the black body as well as the associated discursive practices around the fears and anxieties created by the racialized body.

With live streaming, the black body becomes a very visible fixture within this culture. As such, many black streamers use their platforms to highlight black issues and concerns. Recent controversies such as Gamergate and the visceral reactions to #BlackLivesMatter are two areas where these black streamers have engaged their viewing audiences. However, this cultural self-affirmation is not universally warmly received across viewing audiences. Many comments reveal that white masculine performances are the ones accepted as legitimate, leading to the devaluation of the "other" in streaming.

While the comments directed toward black streamers overall are not directly hostile or negative, the assumptions inherent in them reveal extreme discontent

with the presence of blackness. These comments include “But no one wants to hear all that. We can’t relate.” and “What do you expect when the majority of the player base seems to be white people?” These are just a few examples that capture the essence of the color-blind and covertly racist commentary that leads to the exclusion of black streamers. This exclusion occurs through the “othering” process, which refers to discursive acts that establish a binary divide between “us” and “them,” wherein “they” are deviant, abnormal, and otherwise different in a negative sense and “we” are normal and acceptable. This othering is a discursive practice constructing black users as undeserving of the full label of gamer and streamer. My observations and informal interview with CosmicKennel, while streaming *Minecraft*, provides a useful example of this.

[Observational notes.] He begins his lively commentary like most streamers, doing the capitalist thing. Getting likes. Increasing subscriptions. Clicking the notification bell. It’s the template for a successful stream. He’s engaging. He draws people in. The “safe, smiling Negro” he calls himself. Not publicly. Not on his stream. But in our private conversations. CosmicKennel explains what makes his audiences—which he assumes to be white children, primarily, secondarily the gamer, techbro type—feel safe is his nonthreatening demeanor. I think I know what he means, but I ask him to explain. He suggests:

CosmicKennel: I’m nonthreatening because I smile. A *lot* [his emphasis]. I’m always joking. And that makes them feel safe. So if white people feel safe, then they’ll watch my channel.

MzMygrane/Kishonna: So safety is a concern for most audiences, or just for children?

CosmicKennel: Well, none really. Parents really don’t care what their children are watching. I mean being black. Are we safe enough for them to watch?

MzMygrane: [*Jokingly*] Are black streamers acting crazy out here?

CosmicKennel: Oh, no. Not at all. But people just don’t want to watch black people streaming. They just assume we’re too black.

MzMygrane: So no matter the content, black streamers are held to a different standard?

CosmicKennel: Heh. Such is life.

This comparison between the “real world” and digital realities reflects the

blurring of boundaries for these users. In a space that promised the possibility of being freed from the societally imposed confines of their particular body, there is a replication of real-world inequalities online. My observational narrative continues:

[Observational notes.] CosmicKennel has a particular streaming style—one that blends his natural humor with in-game content. And he charismatically brings a natural charm that doesn't seem as forced as some streamers who are more performative. To draw a comparison, I am thinking about Urbanite, whose streaming performance is that of hyperblackness. He accentuates stereotypical blackness as a way to confirm what people assume about him. White people think black folks are loud. So he's loud. He uses incorrect grammar, on purpose. A lot of black vernacular. It's really an over-the-top performance. And comments are racialized. Racist—I'll go ahead and say it. Very racist. Comments posted on CosmicKennel's streams are racialized. Racism lite, if you will.

I am fascinated by the different streaming styles across racial lines. While my observations reveal that most streamers engage in a highly energetic performance, there are some racial differences in these performances. I don't have extensive interviews with Urbanite, but the following conversation reveals his reflections about streaming while black:

Urbanite: Listen. No matter what I do, folks are gonna be uncomfortable. I'm black. So I do what makes me laugh. I perform. To use the word that you use, yes, it's a performance. This shit ain't real. People want to be entertained. So I do that.

MzMygrane: Do you engage with the comments? What are they like?

Urbanite: You know. The comments have always been racist. Even early on, when I wasn't as dramatic. But they blame me for their racism. It's like my antics forced them to call me nigger or something. LOL. Whiteness knows no bounds! [*Laughing*] I barely check the comments. I disable them most of the times.

For CosmicKennel, the comments section is a bit of a mixed bag. He relies on the comments to keep his content fresh. If folks want more giveaways, or if they want to raise money for a cause or donate to some group, he relies on the comments to keep him abreast of what the audience wants. But this creates stress

for him as a streamer and as a black man, as the next extract suggests.

CosmicKennel: I feel like a monkey. Or a hamster on a wheel. I had to ask myself who was I doing this for. Am I doing it for me? For them? I can't answer that some days. I like engaging with people, but sometimes it's too exhausting.

MzMygrane: Is the streaming exhausting, or keeping up with the fans?

CosmicKennel: Well, no doubt, there is a lot of labor that goes into doing the stream. Now, I don't have a full team like some of these other guys have. I have my friends who help me, but mostly it's just me. But that's tech stuff. Setup. Postproduction, if it's not a live stream. But the energy in dealing with folks sometimes becomes too much. But I think it's too much because I have to navigate being a black man. And making sure that I'm not threatening to them. So I adjust my behavior so much just to keep fans. And then I think about how freeing it must be to be like Urbanite, who just doesn't care.

I think CosmicKennel would be surprised to know that Urbanite experiences similar stress. His over-the-top performance of blackness is exhausting. He has created this persona in response to white supremacy, essentially. This is their response to white supremacy: tame their blackness or put it on full blast. AndOneUP puts it into perspective in a group chat session.

AndOneUP: You know me, Cosmic, Urbanite, and these others guys have been at it for a long time. We've been streaming since the beginning. We realized that they were never going to accept us as equals. We would always be the black streamers and othered. Never fully accepted. Or asked to join the big teams. Or asked to co-stream. Because we are the niche. If they are playing a black game, then they ask us to join them.

CosmicKennel: Oh yeah. Diversity Night is what we call them.

[All laughing]

Urbanite: I ain't gon' lie. It gave us hella visibility. Like, my followers double every time. But that just shows me that we have to be vouched for. If white guys like us, then we're OK. The audience ain't gon' just fuck with us outright.

MzMygrane: So it sounds like a game you have to play. Do you play it?

AndOneUP: See, that's the thing though. White dudes don't even realize it's a game they have control over. They think we just have to add a little jingle. Or a

chatbot or something. Just add it and they'll come. It's all fixed.

Urbanite: They don't even realize that race is the problem.

CosmicKennel: Cuz they don't have to. It's privilege. And we just have to accept it.

[Observational notes.] In thinking about their comments, and their streams, and their experiences online, I realize that there are multiple ways that they enact blackness online. One forced by white supremacy, if you will. To just exist in the digital space, where they can participate, as pseudo-equals, they have to endure so much. There is another blackness, one hidden from public view, that comes to the fore in the private spaces of the chat, reflected in conversations similar to the one above, in which they vent about their experiences. The ways that they modulate in and out of blackness highlight the similar practice of modulating blackness in physical spaces—at work, at home, at school, on the court, etc. Each of them continues to carry around a different form of blackness. I think they were hoping for some kind of release from these constraints. To be able to just exist. And be. And live. Without fear associated with revealing/unveiling their black selves. But instead, they seem forced to adopt a facade. Put on a mask. Perform blackness.

The process of normalizing racism creates a racialized hierarchy in which black users are relegated to the periphery of streaming culture. This extension of othering resides directly in power relations, justifying the imbalance of power and cementing members of the dominant group at the top of the social hierarchy.[58] This racialized social hierarchy highlights the racial privilege afforded to white men as streamers.

As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva articulates, many whites continually fail to connect their racial attitudes to systemic practices of power and domination in which they participate and from which they benefit.[59] This echoes other scholars' sentiments with regard to racial identification—that taking on a racial identity and assigning racial identities to others is a necessary precursor to forming ideas about (one's own and others') racially marked bodies. Bonilla-Silva takes the additional step of reminding us that those racially marked bodies exist in a social system that has been and continues to be marked by power differentials, dominance, and oppression. The absence of power in these analyses results in a depiction of whites' racial attitudes as somehow nonracial, at worst, and as secondary to other structural forces (such as social class), at best. In the absence

of a framework that foregrounds the relations of dominance and oppression that exist between racial groups, white concerns about black violations of American values and norms, for example, appear as just that: moral-cultural concerns, devoid of racial sentiment.

Racializing (Virtual) Public Space

Users and audiences online have a limited conception of space. We assume it to be a fixed and permanent structure, but in reality, space and place are not fixed or innate but rather created and recreated through the actions and meanings of people. Space and place are coproduced through many dimensions: race and class, urban and suburban, gender and sexuality, public and private, bodies and buildings.[60]

Although the era of public segregation may be gone, modern digital segregation mirrors the historical practice of designating space as "whites only." These practices come in many forms, including lack of inclusion, toxic environments, and outright hostility, harassment, and violence in many contexts. Virtual spaces are direct mirrors of historical segregation, as overt racism permeates them. In society, "we think of space in three interactive, interconnected ways. There is psychological space, political space, and physical space. They are all interactive, . . . they are highly racialized . . . Once you say . . . 'Occupy the Hood,' everyone knows you're talking about people of color. The reason that is true is how we've racialized physical space through housing policies, land use planning, and many other public and private actions."[61] This affects how we treat each other in a public space and how we decide whom to include and whom to exclude from space ,for reasons that are ultimately driven by political space and misplaced fear.

Contemporary examples reveal just how ingrained in the public psyche is word association with racialized places. For instance, when media reports use the term *thug*, it is mostly in reference to a black or a brown body. Likewise, when the terms *ghetto, inner city*, or *urban* are used, they are mostly referencing black spaces, to situate the reader in something "other."[62]

The ideological framing of these words is rooted in color-blind racism. Color-blind racism is a new ideology that explains contemporary racial inequality as being the outcome of nonracial dynamics. This type of racism is subtle and institutional and strives to be color blind to maintain structures of white privilege.[63] Bonilla-Silva rightfully claims that color-blind racism is as effective as slavery and Jim Crow in maintaining the racial status quo. In addition, "the

beauty of this ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards."[64] He effectively contrasts today's so-called color blindness with overt racism that permeated society during the Jim Crow era, describing it as new racism. The experiences outlined by the black streamers are directly rooted in this new racism—it's a way to maintain systems of oppression and racism without the (overt) racists.

As a form of cultural production, streaming creates the opportunity to blur the boundaries of restricted production within this community. Black streamers may not be allowed access to the spaces and industries controlled by their white counterparts, but they are not silent, nor are they passive bystanders consuming white, hegemonic, masculine ideology. Many black streamers act as agents of social change, regardless of their intent. The mere presence of their marginalized bodies disrupts the norm of the space designated for privileged bodies. They participate as social agents who engage in a dynamic and ongoing process of producing and reshaping the discourse about what it means to be a true streamer and gamer. Although they participate as cultural producers who create meanings and values, the authority of their discourse is partly determined by the default user in virtual settings, leading to the invalidation of their knowledge. Black streamers lack the symbolic capital needed to be seen as full participants in this culture. And dominant cultural interpretations of "blackness" as a site of negative visibility often complicate the ability of African Americans to inhabit public spaces.

4

#Me2, #Me4, Black Women, and Misogynoir

TRANSMEDIATED GAMING PRACTICES AS INTERSECTIONAL COUNTERPUBLICS

During my early years of online gaming, I experienced visceral moments of being a black woman subjected to intense misogyny—or rather, *misogynoir,* which is a more fitting concept to explore my experiences at the intersection of being both black and a woman in digital culture. Moya Bailey, feminist scholar, writer, activist, and professor, describes misogynoir as a particular brand of hatred directed at black women in American visual and popular culture.[1] Consider my personal experience playing *Gears of War* online, circa February 2007.

> My journey begins the same as it always has, in the comfort of night, with the sounds of light whirring and warmth emitting gently in my direction. It's almost soothing, white noise to a baby's ear. I continue along and enter the world of Sera. I'm not alone. There are others who have embarked on this journey with me. We group ourselves together so we don't have to continue as individuals and become a collective, a team. We are just a group of people gathered for one cause, to save the world.
>
> We organize ourselves for safety and many begin to talk strategy. The number one goal: stay alive! Several in the group begin talking and it's obvious one has emerged as our leader. I listen attentively and pay attention to the directions given. My first task: guard a particular area and prevent our foe from nabbing a certain weapon. My efforts were not successful. This led to the demise of my entire team, and I was disappointed I could not put up more of a fight to defeat the enemy. Fortunately for us, this magical world allows us to come back to life and gives us another chance to avenge our deaths.
>
> We begin in another location and once again I am given instructions to help

serve the team. This time, I am tasked with the safety of the leader. So I follow him and provide support. He runs naively into the opponent and I follow him as a good teammate would. It is a trick. We are flanked and killed, and I am blamed for this failure once again, although our team emerges victorious.

The leader begins talking rather harshly to me and is upset that I am not engaging with the team or responding to his questions. So as to not aggravate him further, I insert my microphone and begin talking. I start off by apologizing for my failures and pledge to do better. However, this conversation shifts away from my poor performance within battle to attacks against me as a person.

"Oh, you guys hear this? That's why you suck. You're a fucking girl! What the fuck are you doing in my room?" Even after this initial attack, I am still apologetic, hoping that the attacks will soon end (at this point, I am used to the name calling). However, the attacks get worse.

"Wait wait wait. You're not just any girl. You're black. Get this black bitch off my team. Did you spend all your welfare check buying this game? Why aren't you doing what you love? Get back to your crack pipe with your crack babies." The insults continue with a barrage of colorful stereotypical comments aimed at me as an African American woman. The beautiful world . . . is not so beautiful all the time. The journey, although mostly fun and enjoyable, frequently becomes a place full of hatred and intolerance.

This journey I am referring to is the online gaming experience associated with Xbox Live—a console video game. Although this is one of the most extreme displays of racially sexist speech I experienced personally, other marginalized gamers experience similar acts of racism, sexism, and other inequalities every day inside the virtual walls of Xbox Live.[2]

I am unable to detangle, in any analytic or actual way, my gender, race, or sexuality from the vitriol and symbolic violence heaped on me after the discovery of my physical identities. Misogynoir, a core facet of black feminist discourse and an integral part of intersectionality, acknowledges that black women's experiences inside the matrix of domination are echoed by the many ways black women are dehumanized in popular culture. Misogynoir expands the scope of examination and provides an inclusive focus not just on antiblackness and white supremacy but also intraracially, exploring how black masculinity and black patriarchy contribute to the objectification of black women.

To gain a sense of both the interracial and intraracial experiences of black

women in gaming, I provide more excerpts of observations from black women and other women of color in online gaming communities. These examples highlight the continued devaluation of black women in public spaces, and my observational narratives weave together engagements with being a black woman while online, while gaming, and while consuming mediated content about black women in the "real world." This transmediated engagement illustrates intersectional tech, exploring the entanglements of visual, textual, and oral engagements of the black body in the digital and physical realms.

The examples in this chapter explore a type of patriarchal masculinity,[3] and as bell hooks rightly points out, the adoption of this toxic masculinity by black men in dealing with black women reflects the reiterations of plantation patriarchy being inherently unequal along racialized gender lines. Because black men lack racialized power, a subset of them began to use the few gendered privileges afforded to them, affirming their masculine privilege.

Though I provide an example of the social interactions that are ever present when black men and women are in close proximity online, these kinds of social interactions are rare, because the black community in gaming is segregated along gendered lines (as well as racial ones). In this particular excerpt, XpkX MammaMia, a woman who identifies racially as black and ethnically as Puerto Rican, outlines the contentious relationships in particular.

> *XpkX MammaMia:* Well, I remember this one time in particular we was gaming with some black dudes. Think they was black. They sounded black. It was sort of a clan match. But it started off cool. They had mad respect fa' us. Then they started flirtin' and shit and you know where dat leads. They started saying shit like "I bet you suck a mean dick" and "Why you gaming when you should be licking my balls?" and shit like that. So Laysha (XpkX RicanMami) tries to chill e'erbody out before shit go to far. Well, Boss jumped in that shit and it was all she wrote. And you know Boss talk like a nigga, so they started on that dyke shit. She was getting with 'em, saying "My girl look betta than urs" and "I'm more of a man than you'll ever be," and that cut into the pride of black men you know. So they just pulled e'er word out the arsenal: Dyke. Bitch. Cunt. Whore. You going to hell. Breath smell like pussy. You know, all that shit. They even started crackin' on our accents and shit. They said something like our social security numbers started with letters and we need to get south of the border. And then all hell broke loose. You know Puerto Ricans hate being called Mexican. So we all had to defend PR baby! It was curtains

afta that. [*Laughing*]

The intersectional power dynamic that unveils itself between men and women of color in this gaming community is highly problematic. From machismo to racialized sexism, the sexualized exploitation of women of color by men of color has historical roots, and the example is a digital manifestation of this ongoing aspect of culture. Throughout this chapter, I examine the connections between ethnographic observations and narrative interviews to explore how misogynoir, black male patriarchy, and controlling images reinforce intersecting oppressions that restrict women's participation online, leading to levels of resistance to continue participating in digital gaming culture. Centering intersectional tech in this way, I continue to explore the process of navigating and negotiating racialized, sexualized, and gendered identities in gaming as a domain of power, establishing a hierarchy whereby an elite maintains control over marginalized others. I also go beyond the use of digital technologies and explore how black women have inserted traditional black communicative practices of activism, storytelling, and sharing of oral narratives to transform spaces. While I provide snippets of narratives from longer conversations that span about ten years, the excerpts provide the necessary context to explore the intersection of black women's gaming cultures, gaming content, social media, and other digitally enhanced technologies. Their experiences, while not bound by the toxic, technomasculine cultures that dominate gaming's landscape, are bordered by the practices to relegate women to the margins.

Disrupting Technomasculinity in Digital Gaming Culture

I often evoke the locker room analogy to explore gaming culture, suggesting that these spaces have been constructed by and for men. Marketing and advertising practices are continually developed to fulfill the perceived desires of young, middle-class men who are supposedly the market's target consumers.[4] Gaming culture replicates gendered practices and normalizes gendered hierarchies, and these structures amplify oppressive practices when gendered identities are racialized. But merely rooting the toxic, hypermasculine nature of spaces to a locker room metaphor neglects the larger systemic trend of marginalizing women in public and private spaces. These isolating and oppressive practices relegate women to the margins of culture, influencing and affecting their experiences therein.

Gaming traditionally has been framed as an activity for white adolescent

males, and the number of women who historically have played has been overlooked. According to a 2016 report, women in the United States make up 41 percent of those who play games, with the number of women in mobile gaming at 49 percent.[5] Regardless of the genre (whether shooter or casual) or the age, gaming is a significant aspect of our everyday lives, especially with the proliferation of gamification in nongaming spaces. Even with the numbers consistently showing women's and girls' engagement in gaming, male players still often characterize them as "invading" masculine spaces. These male anxieties have been steadily increasing in response to the growing calls for diversity in gaming culture, with Gamergate providing the most pertinent example.

From the perspective of Gamergate, it was a movement to address ethics in video game journalism, in that gamers perceived intimate relationships between game developers and journalists, influencing the objectivity of video game reviews. From a feminist perspective, "Gamergate can be viewed as the response of the default gamer being forced to accept the inclusion of women and increased diversity in game narratives. Also from this perspective, it is a movement that focuses on men's anxieties over losing ground in a once homogenous universe."[6] As Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw explore, feminist critiques of video games and gaming culture were at the heart of the Gamergate harassment campaigns.[7] Toxic technoculture and geek masculinity centered themselves as victims in the "social justice warrior" era.[8]

In attempting to make sense of Gamergate in previous work, I asked whether this is this a movement, a moment, or an everyday practice inside gaming culture.[9] The technocultures and subcultures in gaming have continually centered and privileged masculine perspectives, situating men as the norm and as their core demographic.[10] The violent experiences of Zoë Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu, and others who were targeted in Gamergate are central to the argument of how symbolic violence can transcend the boundaries of the games and move into reality, becoming actual physical violence. The core demographic of gaming essentially mobilized Gamergate, sustaining the historically exclusionary and violent practices and restricting women's access contemporarily by claiming that women do not play games.

Feminist media scholars have drawn attention to this environment in gaming, which situates itself as explicitly created by men and for men, questioning gendered character portrayals that have continued to underrepresent women. Dmitri Williams and colleagues have overwhelmingly demonstrated that video

games systematically overrepresent men and underrepresent women as characters.[11] Similarly, Tracy Dietz found that, among the video games in her sample that contained characters, 41 percent did not include any female characters. Furthermore, those games that did include female characters reflected stereotypical gender representations, with women "portrayed as victims or as sex objects." Even female hero characters were presented as "subordinate to male characters" or were sexualized.[12]

Other scholars examine the position of these characters in game narratives and their power in relation to one another. Monica Miller and Alicia Summers found that video games gender characters not only in terms of appearance ("females were portrayed as sexier and more attractive compared to males" and "were also likely to be wearing more revealing clothing than males") but also in terms of playability, as male characters were more often playable than female characters. They also found that males often were given "more weapons and abilities than females," who were often relegated to supplemental, less active, and less important positions.[13] These concerns go beyond problematic representations in their simplification of women as characters; rather, this objectification rids women of agency and power, reducing them to decorations or supplements to the important, male characters.

Unfortunately, the imposed invisibility of women does not end with the games. Many examples of the underrepresentation of women can be found throughout the gaming industry and at gaming events and tournaments, such as at Major League Gaming events.[14] Although women are present within these spaces, perhaps more so now than ever, they still are overlooked and rendered unimportant because of the presumed maleness of gaming culture and spaces.[15] In fact, gaming culture has gained notoriety for its toxicity, with sexist, racist, ableist, and homophobic language and attitudes permeating the gamers and their interactions. Verbal attacks, rooted in specific identities, often are instigated through linguistic profiling, whereby, by talking, players undermine the assumption that all gamers are male and thus are labeled deviant and punished for this transgression.[16] These intersecting inequalities render the most marginalized hypervisible and subject to extreme violence and objectification.

These examples should help to situate the phenomenon known as Gamergate not as a temporary cultural hiccup in gaming culture but as a normal operating procedure that has always existed. Nonetheless, we have curated women's experiences with Gamergate as a moment to pass by and get over, because gaming culture is not ready to claim its complicity in the toxic technoculture

sustaining white masculine supremacy. This everyday practice of gender differentiation and male domination has normalized symbolic and real violence for women in gaming culture, and it is important to privilege women's resistance practices to this domination. Women in these gaming publics do not simply exist in this oppressive structure; they also have implemented a variety of coping mechanisms and strategies to deal with the barrage of oppression and harassment to which they are often subject.

Marginalized participants in gaming have to struggle and maneuver in a structured system of social positions that has predefined their existence. Within this system, characterized by a series of power relations in which positions are viewed as more dominant or less dominant, an individual's access to status, opportunities, and overall capital in the space is significantly affected. Similarly, when women achieve positions of power in the gaming culture, they can play an influential role in promoting the visibility and power of female gamers. For example, Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell found that women in a gaming club played more, took up more space, enforced rules, and displayed more technological competence, interest in games, and knowledge of games when technologically competent female gamers were in charge.[17]

Although these examples and experiences mostly describe the social conditions facing white women in gaming, they also are useful in providing a baseline understanding for women of color. Because of exclusionary practices and invisibility, many women of color have unified and formed their own communities in these cultures, often operating in the margins and counter to the dominant narrative. The mere presence of women creates a reality of othering, situating them as deviant in these contexts.[18] Even more problematic, women who try to incorporate their knowledge are swiftly punished. But they resist the damaging narratives so often disseminated about women using the digital and physical tools afforded (or not afforded) to them. This trend is illustrated best by exploring black women's activism around #BlackLivesMatter in the era of Gamergate.

Gender and Race: Black Women's Activism in Gaming

The gaming industry's elite maintains a system of hegemonic masculinity that leads to the isolation and exclusion of women and girls due to the matrix of intersecting oppression.[19] Thus, many women opt for the self-segregated spaces of private parties and chats to avoid the sexism they experience.[20] Although gendered spaces to support women online exist, these spaces become

contentious at the intersection of race and gender. As discussions around race in digital spaces have revealed, conflict emerges around these kinds of exchanges in online contexts.[21] I illustrate this through the discussion of #BlackLivesMatter in an online gaming community, which generated a significant amount of controversy among female gamers.

Around October 2014, a cohort of women created an online gaming forum to express concerns related to the increased harassment campaigns related to Gamergate. Using tags to locate “feminist-friendly” forums, a group of black women entered one such forum to also express support for #BlackLivesMatter in gaming. Their presence immediately triggered a negative response, as the Gamergate awareness group did not welcome the #BlackLivesMatter group. The black women were swiftly labeled “angry” and “bullies” for inserting race into a conversation about gender, and this apparent lack of awareness about intersecting identities reveals a continued pattern to diminish and dismiss black women and to render them invisible. The women in the Gamergate awareness community continually uttered comments such as “But look how far we’ve come” as a means to diminish and dismiss continued racial inequalities within social institutions.[22]

The level of antiblackness in the responses that surrounded conversations related to #BlackLivesMatter in public and digital spaces reveals the inescapable bounds of white fragility, respectability, tone policing, and other ways of perpetuating symbolic and real control over black women’s bodies. This led black women to invoke the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, an intersectional critique of mainstream white digital feminism, to explain the reality of black women and their associated invisibility.

Mikki Kendall created the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen in response to growing concerns about the “predominantly white feminist activists and bloggers at sites like Feministing, Jezebel, and Pandagon who failed to acknowledge the racist, sexist behavior of one their frequent contributors.”[23] Kendall illustrated, through black cyberfeminist activism, the general problem that women of color have with the lack of inclusivity of mainstream feminism. This case is significant because it reveals that relationships with white men have always influenced and affected white women, masking the everyday social relationships that act as glue for the superstructure of white supremacy. While the backlash to this hashtag was significant, the outpouring of serious and satirical tweets associated with it were empowering to women of color and to their white feminist allies and launched a much-needed conversation about the

invisibility and forced absence of women of color from feminist discourse.

Comments posted on the short-lived gaming forum captured the essence of black women's response to the dominance of white feminism:

SheBangs321: Everytime you come to this room, you start problems. We're not racist so stop saying that.

TastyDiamond: The shit yall say make yall racist. Yall don't care what my color is? But yall want me to care about your pussy and the shit you go through? Fuk'd up logic.

SheBangs321: But this is an all girls space so of course we'd talk about girl shit.

TastyDiamond: But I'm a girl too! Right! I'm just a black one!

SheBangs321: But we are addressing your needs too. We're talking about helping all women here.

TastyDiamond: But you're not. When you fix the whole gender issue, I still have to deal with racism.

SheBangs321: Racism isn't a problem tho! Gamergate's not racist. They're attacking women.

MzTeeVxV: Bitch that's fucked up! We been dealing with shit and yall just now got a problem in here. Where were yall when dem white boys was calling us black bitch and shit? Yall was playing with they cracka asses.

TastyDiamond: Dis broad stupid.

LotusBloom: Don't call her stupid. Yall are being rude and we're just trying to help. Yall aren't helping at all.

The construction of boundaries around women's spaces online demonstrates the uncritical perspectives these spaces take toward race. There was no acknowledgment of how race affects the lives of black women online. It is a perfect example of the proliferation of white feminism that's so pervasive in digital culture. This short-lived but deep conversation reveals the continued tensions among many who work to improve the conditions of women in digital and physical spaces. There is often a failure to capture the lived, intersectional experiences of all women, particularly women of color.

While the forum was created specifically in support of women, to make sense of Gamergate in gaming communities, black women, seeking community, began using this space to raise awareness about the death of Mike Brown and about the

#BlackLivesMatter campaign. This generated the bulk of the tensions in the space, well illustrated by this excerpt:

SheBangs321: This wasn't made for that.

TastyDiamond: What was the space made for then? For activism right? Why you picking and choosing?

SheBangs321: I'm not trying to be a bitch but we can't do all that. Like their lives are being threatened. These fucks are posting their addresses and shit.

TastyDiamond: Niggas is getting kilt. Aint nothing happened to these white bitches yet.

LotusBloom: Just make your own forum and let this one alone.

Madam_Racks: I don't understand why yall have to act like this all the time. Just leave.

The larger conversation demonstrates the failure of white women to fully embrace the racialized and gendered nature of oppression. The black women suggested that white women fail to recognize the privilege of whiteness by refusing to recognize their complicity in white supremacy. The forum also highlights black women's lack of patience in helping white women understand the intersectional nature of oppression. Their lack of patience was read as black women being angry.[24]

After the cohort of black women was asked to leave the forum, they did so, and then they created their own forum and brought the movement #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen to Xbox Live, to discuss the lack of attention paid to issues faced by women of color in the gaming community. They also discussed the tendency of many white women to dismiss the amplifying effect of race on oppression. The posts made by black women in the new space reveal that the tensions of previous generations of women have manifested in the gaming community as well. Ironically, the forum was flagged for being offensive and was removed by administrators, a decision that directly reveals institutional racism and the complicity of structural inequalities in the digital realm.

Although the forum was created specifically to discuss #BlackLivesMatter, it became a space for participants to vent about their experiences as black women in general. They were kicked out of the original forum for being black, masked by the color-blind rhetoric of "You're rude," which is code historically and continually used to dismiss and devalue angry black women. Women of color

often are blamed for creating or contributing to a toxic form of feminism, diverting attention away from the structure sustaining their oppression. Their harsh reactions to racism and sexism seem to take precedence over the racism/sexism itself, leading to black women's continued invisibility, objectification, and being labeled as "rude" or "angry" when they become visible.

In previous chapters, I summoned the term *fear*, which was linked to a white public marking of Frantz Fanon's blackness, rendering him invisible. It is necessary to explore invisibility as a cultural complex because stereotypes and racism have had profoundly deleterious effects in deforming the self-esteem and spirit of black people, and of black women in particular. According to Ralph Ellison's theory of the "social invisibility generated by racism," a group's identity overshadows the identity of the individual, sustaining the idea that white folks do not see black folks, nor do they differentiate among them.[25] Ellison's discovery that he was "invisible to the white man," Fanon's fear of being marked as a Negro in white public spaces,[26] and black users remarking on their invisibility in gaming all illustrate this conceptual notion. This cultural complex is a pervasive phenomenon in understanding how obscurity and invisibility operate in tandem with racial formations.

This idea is useful to intersectional tech because it allows us to reframe black recognition in white public spaces, although black users do not exist to fit within the constraints and oppressive boundaries of white supremacy. Instead, this text makes black contributions legible on their own terms, outside of the bounds of white technoculture. This is made most evident when traditional black cultural practices are transposed onto digital publics. Black communication practices in digital communities, for instance, reflect the discursive practices often seen in black physical spaces.

As Catherine Knight Steele has illustrated, the legacy of oral communication in the black community has been transferred to online spaces. In her examination of blogs, she explicates their structure, reflecting on the rhetorical strategies employed by bloggers/users and linking these to the practices of physical black public spaces. She rightfully notes that Twitter, blogs, and other social media sites afford black users the features of oral culture, enabling them to engage with and critique dominant culture. In particular, she discusses four elements of African American oral culture: the sacred song, slave tales, the secular song and humor, and African American folklore and folk heroes. These oral practices require context and proficiency in order to participate, and users rely on

"internalized understandings, long-term relationships, and strong boundaries to guide effective communication."[27] These practices are present in both the physical and the digital spaces of black communities.

I take on this concept in centering black women's communicative practice of sharing stories and passing on lived experiences in intimate gaming spaces. Although intimate spaces traditionally would be the kitchen table, church, or beauty salon, Steele illustrates that black women engage in these practices in their digital experiences as well. From telling stories to participating in shared singing to posting visual and textual images (such as GIFs or memes), black women in gaming have transformed their digital ghettos, created by forced segregation and isolation, into thriving spaces of nurturing and support. This support allows them to withstand the violence of white supremacy, black masculine control, misrepresentation, and other forms of racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence.

From *Tetris* to *Tekken* to Testifying: Black Women's Transmediated Strategies for Thriving Online

Testifying is a core black rhetorical tool used by black women in gaming culture. The tradition of testifying reveals resistance to structures of domination that permeate black women's lives. Testifying presents a paradigmatic critical theory that is relevant to the intersectional struggle within digital culture. These women invoke what Patricia Hill Collins calls for in *Black Feminism at the Crossroads,* where she asks three essential questions to assess the efficacy of black women's transformative approaches to addressing oppression: Does this critical social theory speak the truth to people about the reality of their lives? Does this critical social theory equip people to resist oppression? Does this critical social theory move people to struggle?[28] The black women narrators in this book engage in these practices on a daily basis.

I previously centered the textual practices of black women, applying critical discourse analysis to make sense of their realities. I quickly adopted the practice of capturing their oral traditions online, because the community is mostly voice based and because this is a key practice in black communicative culture. This offered a beautiful comparison among these women's written, oral, and even visual practices—the trifecta in self-definition and a core practice in their move to dismantle oppressive structures. The oral traditions expressed through signifying, storytelling, and more exemplify black women's unique and oppositional nature, presenting alternate social locations, placing black women

at the core, and valuing black subjectivity.

bell hooks's concept of radical black subjectivity is useful for further explaining this practice.[29] Self-definition and commitment to liberatory and transformative praxis constitute this black subjectivity. As hooks outlines, these habits of being, these radical practices of centering the intersectional self, disrupt the confluence of the matrix of domination and intersecting oppressions.[30] While significant attention is often paid to the controlling images that dominate black women's representation in mainstream media, black women in gaming create narratives and experiences that are self-actualized, self-determined, oppositional, and engaged in their healing, understanding, and commitment to the justice struggle.

From Invisible Reality to Hypervisible Stereotypes: Black Women Examining Contemporary Gaming Culture

In a series of interviews I conducted with black women about making sense of their perceptions of their purported representations in gaming, user MistyKnight2CGL stated, "They aren't real. They aren't believable. They aren't even entertaining. It's sad. No matter the media, we have to fight to get real stories of real women of color out there. Until they do it, and do it right, we'll just create our own or complain until they do it right. . . . So we'll be complaining because they will never get it right."

In media outlets dominated by privileged bodies, the disseminated narrative is limited by who the primary producers and assumed consumers of digital content are. In navigating this, black women, like members of other marginalized communities, isolate themselves from the larger gaming community. The following snippets from ongoing conversations confirm this practice:

MissUnique: We should just create our own spaces. Like, why do we still beg to be acknowledged?

Patroa917: It's conditioning. My conditioning is conditioned.

[*All laughing*]

Patroa917: I see what you saying. Like we wanna be acknowledged, but that comes from whiteness.

MissUnique: So that's why we create our own shit.

XpkX RicanMami: But that's getting them off the hook. They don't have to see us anymore or deal with us.

Patroa917: Yeah it's like what Mygrane was saying. Redlining. And creating the ghetto. But what the fuck else should we do? We complain being out there. We complain in here. Let's just fucking play.

MissUnique: But we happy here. We fine here. We don't need them [the default gamer]. And it's not complaining. It's venting for real. Like, we need that. To deal with gaming shit and real-life stuff too. I don't mind being in the ghetto if this is, what, the virtual ghetto or whatever. Especially if this is what it looks like.

To continue participating, many women exist inside the boundaries of hegemonic ideology by forming their own communities that operate counter to the dominant narrative. Despite the extreme discrimination, lack of inclusion in the gaming industry, misrepresentation, and a host of other concerns, black women still participate in a culture that continues to delegitimize their participation. Their rage is often misread through a deficiency lens: can't play, can't take it, can't keep their cool. hooks rightfully asserts and disrupts the traditional approach to making sense of black women's rage: "They named it pathological, explained it away. They did not urge the larger culture to see black rage as something other than sickness, to see it as a potentially healthy, potentially healing response to oppression and exploitation."[31]

Linking these transformative practices to black women in gaming illustrates the power that transmediated gaming has to connect black users across platforms. It would be premature to define black women by the hostilities they experience online, which represents only a small segment of their overall experiences in gaming. A more nuanced exploration into their everyday relationships with each other and with gaming is key to making sense of their testifying, oral narratives, and other forms of storytelling. Exploring black women's gaming practices, from playing to streaming, through a lens of digital storytelling explicates the synergistic relationship between white supremacy and black feminist orality. Oral narratives and digital storytelling connect these contemporary practices to historical legacies of black feminist thought. This practice has led to black women creating intersectional counterpublics, an important concept for the survival of black women in intersectional tech.

Black Women's Gaming Practices as Intersectional Counterpublics

Marginalized groups create "coexisting counterpublics in reaction to the exclusionary politics of dominant public spheres and the state."[32] While there is

much academic debate about what and who constitutes a public or counterpublic, for the purposes of the current discussion, my understanding focuses on the spaces that black women create in digital gaming in direct reaction to white masculine supremacy, black patriarchy, and white feminism. As Paul Gilroy points out, “In the history of the black Atlantic . . . movement, relocation, displacement, and restlessness are the norms rather than the exceptions.”[33]

Evoking Gilroy’s theory, I similarly consider black praxis in digital gaming as forming cultures that are hybrid, transnational, and varied. In applying an intersectional lens to translocational positionality, Floya Anthias argues that the word *transnational* suggests “social, symbolic and material ties between homelands” that are centered “in two or more national spaces.”[34] The intersectional, transmediated practices in which women engage in gaming communities reflect how they create meaning out of different texts, cultures, and practices—bridging multiple elements to create a hybrid summation of experiences. Black folks have patched and pieced together multiple modes of culture and identity because of the discontinuous trajectory of the black Atlantic—a practice that resonates significantly with the digital experience of the black diaspora. In applying this concept to the fragmented experiences of black gamers online, I continue making connections between the visual arrangements of racial and gendered hierarchies and physical relations, going beyond the discursive practices that render and regulate certain bodies to the margins.

As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, from a US-centric perspective, the resulting “plantation complex of visuality” enjoyed hegemonic dominance from the start of the transatlantic slave trade in the mid-seventeenth century until the end of the Civil War in 1865 (before being overtaken by the dominance of the “imperial” and then “military-industrial” complexes of visuality).[35] For two centuries, the plantation complex quite literally kept African slaves and their descendants “in their place” as little more than tools in plantation operations, with fairly sophisticated divisions of labor and surveilled by a sovereign overseer, an object to the gaze of white supremacy and capital.

It is disturbingly easy to trace the plantation complex’s lasting physical, psychological, and symbolic trauma and violence, structurally engendered against black individuals and communities today, with similar practices making plain the links from the physical to the digital. Although the practices of digital redlining in gaming are markedly hostile and violent, black women’s responses have been to create nurturing spaces for healing and transformation. One significant feature of these intersectional counterpublics is digital storytelling,

which I consider an expanded form of testifying and which Amy Wilkins suggests is one process through which intersectional identities are achieved and managed.[36] This is a necessary trajectory for intersectional tech.

A powerful example of digital storytelling comes from TastyDiamond, when she was streaming the cinematic trailer for *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag —Freedom Cry*, an action-adventure game set in a fictional history inspired by real-world events and situated in the colonial West Indies. We follow Adéwalé, a pirate shipwrecked off the coast of Haiti. He makes his way into Port-au-Prince and becomes acquainted with local freedom fighters working for slave liberation. Though he often works against the wishes of the local freedom fighters, Adéwalé continues to violently plot against the slave trade, ultimately killing the governor-general of Saint-Domingue, the French aristocrat de Fayet. Under de Fayet's rule, the slave population increased significantly, exceeding in number the European colonists living on the island.

There was significant interest in this game from black gamers when the trailer was released, and gamers and streamers began discussing this transformative narrative. Before delving into these powerful streams and stories, especially from TastyDiamond, it is necessary to gain a sense of the context of the trailer and the compelling nature of this visual slave narrative. As I observed at the time:

> The cinematic trailer for this downloadable content was truly an experience I have not seen within gaming. The Ubisoft production opens with the sounds of traditional West African music, with a voice uttering, "I was born into slavery." The scene immediately cuts to a black woman, appearing to scream out.
>
> Everything is slow.
>
> We can't hear her. But we see her and feel her emotions. They are striking. Seconds later, we see the cause of her angst—her child, presumably her child, being taken away by a white man while she is chained to a wood shack.
>
> This is a familiar scene. The narratives of slavery have revealed the horrific truths for black women, being perpetually bound to the wills of white slave masters: taking your body; taking your children; taking your life—but as many black women's slave narratives have revealed, never taking their minds.
>
> As the viewer, we assume that the narrator is the black boy who was stripped from his mother and sold away to another plantation. We see the violent scenes of slavery—whippings, beatings, killings. Ubisoft *actually* went there.

The black boy then has a moment when he decides “No more.” He looks up at us with his piercing eyes and the scene immediately shifts to him holding up a rock. On first thought, I assume the rock would break the chains he is bound within. Instead, the camera goes wide—beneath the rock and beneath the body of the black boy is a white man—the literal and symbolic manifestation of the institution of slavery.

In a slow, dramatic motion, the black body brings the rock toward the white man and then—cut.

He is running, mouth open wide. Fade to black.

WOW! WOW! Even though we don’t see it, we can assume that the boy smashed the white man’s head with the large rock.

The boy reappears as a grown man. He is animated now. Gaming graphics have taken over the live action from the cinematic trailer. The video game character is slicing and dicing one white man with a machete and blasting another white man away with pirate shotgun, flintlock style. He puts his hoodie up. He’s ready for more.

It is necessary to understand this narrative to make sense of TastyDiamond’s digital storytelling while streaming the trailer for *Freedom Cry.* The shock that many black folks in gaming experienced while viewing this trailer reveals the singular narratives of black life in gaming and the desire for more nuanced representations.

TastyDiamond is a partial furry, similar to SonicFox. She dresses up for all of her streams, wearing a big-faced Pikachu hat that covers the ears and hangs down the side of her face. Her background is performative and staged. It fits with her Pokémon aesthetic. She streams from her bedroom. She lives with other people, small children. They often are loud and she has to shush them when she streams during the day. She often blogs about black women in gaming and women of color as characters, and she has written beautiful fan fiction creating alternate possibilities, with black women as protagonists, often through queer, disabled lenses.

I was drawn to her streams after seeing her prolific fan fiction and because she often is featured on lists of black women to follow in gaming. Although she doesn’t have a huge following on Twitch, her several thousand followers watch her streams often. Her audience ranges in demographic, with the majority of them being “white dudes,” as she describes them. She generated this demographic in the Pokémon community through her technical abilities and

skills.

While TastyDiamond describes the majority of her content as “friendly for all,” she recognizes that her black, queer content and her continued focus on the differently abled community puts her in a specific niche in the streaming community. As such, she provides disclaimers when her streams are for “black women only,” or some variation. She explains that she began providing disclaimers because her general audience was not too excited about hearing about lesbians and #BlackLivesMatter. The following excerpted transcription comes from one such stream, where TastyDiamond specifically focuses on black narratives in gaming and engages her audience with the cinematic trailer for *Freedom Cry.*

> TastyDiamond: Can you imagine it? A game that actually lets you kill slave masters? I mean, we see movies and shows all day that do that. I’m thinking about *Django.* And as much as gaming reflects Hollywood, this is a story line they have not done anything with. Slave narratives are common. But I think the problem is with this type of slave narrative. It’s not some white dude telling his story through a slave. You know, like his path to redemption or some shit.

TastyDiamond clicks on the link to begin the cinematic trailer. She continues talking while it loads.

> Man. Y’all ain’t listening. Sit yo’ ass down! This story, behind Adéwalé, I think is his name, puts the black man in control of his own narrative. And he gives no fucks. No fucks y’all.
>
> Y’all ain’t listening. Sit yo’ ass down.

This is a common catchphrase uttered by TastyDiamond. She explains that she borrowed this phrase, “Sit yo’ ass down,” from black mothers urging their children to focus and listen.

> Y’all, I watched this and was just like, “I have to stream this.” The world has to see this. I know this might offend a lot of my followers, but that’s OK. Y’all probably just scared we gon’ get ideas. Chill. Sit yo’ ass down. Black folks are real chill on y’all. If we didn’t massacre y’all then, we damn sho’ aint got time to do it now. [*Laughing*]
>
> OK so here go. You ready? Sit yo’ ass down and listen.

TastyDiamond begins the stream and watches for a few moments before she talks on the stream again. She pauses the trailer after the mother, unable to save her child, screams (figure 4.1).

> OK. So did y'all feel that? Like this black woman just puts all her energy into making sure we felt that. To know what it's like to have your baby stripped from you. And they got her ass chained the fuck up. *Sit yo' ass down!* Can you imagine that? Being so helpless. Not being able to protect your child. Shit, this is what black women out here feeling right now. You feel me? Scared that they black-ass kids won't make it back home. And people got mad at that mama for whopping her kid for protesting. Y'all ain't listening. Man. The fear that she was probably consumed with was too much. Shit, it would be for me. It makes you not even wanna have kids. When they can just be taken from you on some bullshit. Like I know what happens at the end of the trailer . . .

Slight pause while TastyDiamond begins the video again.

Figure 4.1. Screenshot from the cinematic trailer for *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag—Freedom Cry,* showing a woman screaming for the child that was taken from her.

> . . . but I hope in the game that he gets back to his mama. So much time passes, though. I'm just like . . . ugh. I don't know. Y'all ain't listening no way. I said sit yo' ass down.

TastyDiamond unpauses the video and continues watching, providing the following commentary while the video plays.

> Y'all. I am still watching like it's my first time. I'm listening. You listening. Chile. Sit yo' ass down! This shit is done real good. I hope the game is just like

this. I know it won't be, though. They being all dramatic here—setting us up. [*Laughing*]

Just wait till the end. That's the part y'all gotta see. Y'all listening?

TastyDiamond watches in anticipation, knowing what's coming. The moving image from the cinematic trailer shows a black boy straddling the body of a white man. The black boy is preparing to smash the head of a white man with a large rock.

Wait for it. Wait for it.

OMG. Look! Rock to the head. He about to smash this motherfucker's head.

Sit yo' ass down!

No! What? Why the fuck not?

This the shit that piss me off. Why won't they show it? All the fucking violence in these games and you won't show one white motherfucker getting his head smashed? I'm like, he deserves it. We slapping Nazis, why can't we smash slavery? See, this is what I don't get. Movies. TV. Even games have always shown Nazis getting fucked up. It's a narrative we expect to see. But why not slavery? Why not the people who kept slavery going here? It was just as bad, right? But white folks don't wanna disrupt something that they still benefit from. That's the problem. We ain't sorry for slavery. Jews get they revenge narrative all the time. When I was watching ol' dude with the rock, like, I was rooting for him. For him to, like, win. Even though ain't no winning, it was still like the moment to, to like slap a Nazi. This was our moment to get back at the oppressor. And they didn't give it to us. Y'all ain't listening. Y'all don't care. . . .

They let me kill all the crazy people in *Arkham Asylum.* We kill people all the time. But that narrative must have hit too close to home. Y'all don't wanna hear that though. They was like, "We ain't gon' give you coloreds no ideas." Or some shit like that. But that's OK. Cuz lemme tell you, this dude slays any damn way. He reserved all that anger and sadness to take down slavery. Even though I'm mad they didn't show his head get smashed, I see ol' dude still putting in work. This is fun y'all. He slaying the shit outta these fuckers.

Pauses trailer and looks at camera—toward us, the viewing audience.

Is it bad that I'm having this much fun? Man, sit yo' ass down.

In “Retelling Narratives, Reclaiming History: Exploring Revenge as Catharsis in *Assassin’s Creed Freedom Cry,*” Cassandra Jones and I explored *Freedom Cry* as one of the only AAA titles to explore a racialized narrative of revenge that allows African-descended peoples to avenge their forefathers (and foremothers) through the slaughter of slaveholders and the release of Africans from their literal and figurative cages.[37] We explored the cathartic nature of this tale in gaming, seeing Afrofuturism as a decolonization of the black imagination that provides a therapeutic means of reimagining a black past. Recalling TastyDiamond’s cheer—“This is fun”—it is not far-fetched to explore the therapeutic properties of this kind of slave narrative, where the audience must engage more than just pain and struggle with no control.

In this configuration of the digital slave narrative, we are not just rooted in the passive, objectified version of slave. We see the formation of the rebellion and uprisings—the precursor, maybe, to what we now know was a successful insurrection under the military leadership of Toussaint L’Ouverture, which freed the Haitian people from French colonial rule, in 1791, and formed the first free black nation in the western hemisphere. This serves as a site of black pride, inspiring generations of African-descended activists and civil rights leaders. Among these was Frederick Douglass, who looked to Haiti as a “bright example” of the possibility of free black people.

The developers of the game surely researched which site would serve as a springboard of black liberation for the game hero. It is no accident that Port-au-Prince, a strategic target during the slave revolution, was the site of Adéwalé’s intervention in the slave trade and his participation in the growing maroon movement.[38] Media is culpable in framing a collective memory of slavery, a collective memory situated on insurrections and slave uprisings. This game, disrupting the traditional narrative around slavery, provides an oppositional gaze centering marginalized perspectives.

The power of TastyDiamond’s digital storytelling resides not only in her charismatic engagement with this cinematic trailer but also in her ability to reconnect to the narratives in the trailer, highlighting essential content and context for the viewing audience. Although we only engage with the mother for a moment in the trailer, TastyDiamond ensures that we remember her and reconnects her to overarching narrative of the trailer and game.

> TastyDiamond: Listen. *Sit yo’ ass down and listen.* Now, I know this trailer was cool and all, but we gotta remember what has him so angry. He still trying

> to get back to his mom. He parading as a pirate to get to all these islands and different areas to find the one who matters. Mama! Shit, y'all know we ride or die for our mamas. That moment being taken away, look, all the white men are that dude. The one that took him from his mama. That's why he smashed the shit outta that dude. And has no problem killing all the people that's a part of this ugly-ass system that took him away from his mama. He will not stop until he finds her or he destroys the thing that destroys. Slavery. It's got to end for him.

TastyDiamond takes this violent visual and provides some background context and motivation. She reads Adéwalé's violent quest to destroy the slave trade as a love story between himself and his mother. Going back to the story she's telling in this digital format of streaming, she applies additional layers to the already complex moments the trailer reveals.

Here is streaming explored through the lens of intersectional counterpublic, where black women in particular reclaim narratives, providing culturally relevant content for black audiences, all through the intimacy of their private spaces—away from hegemonic gazes. This oppositional gaze is where streamers like TastyDiamond reside. One significant feature of her stream, a feature of an intersectional counterpublic, is her disabling of chat and comments. Although she does not always disable the interactive feature of her streams on YouTube, she does when she wants the audience to just "sit down and listen." In consuming stories, it is imperative to be active in listening and observing. As TastyDiamond frequently notes when she uses this feature, "You ain't listening if you commenting." Her catchphrase "Sit yo' ass down" is a common feature of her streams only when she disables comments. She often uses this phrase in a way that black mothers do: to get their misbehaving or unfocused children to pay attention to their surroundings. Some may argue that disabling comments reduces the interactive features of the stream, but I argue that this creates more intimacy between her and the audience. She has these moments to be angry and to rage but also to express a range of other emotions, as the stream for the *Freedom Cry* trailer illustrates.

The anger and rage in this particular digital storytelling session can be viewed as a generative force for black women, as Audre Lorde posits.[39] The intersectional identity work that TastyDiamond engages spans from race to gender, to mothering, to a transnational identity linking diasporic engagements with slave narratives. Here, TastyDiamond shows how the anger generated from

experiencing a holistic narrative of slavery provides a cathartic release from the supposedly inescapable chains of slavery and oppression. This intersectional identity work occurred through the transmediated landscape in gaming—from the cinematic trailer, to the gaming content, to the stream. And it is a defining feature of intersectional tech.

In examining streaming for its capacities to serve as an intersectional counterpublic, TastyDiamond emphasizes how stories can be tools for self-making and sense-making, linking the technological features of the digital to sustain stories and narratives, showing how they are useful cultural tools for crafting intersectional identities and negotiating key dilemmas entailed in intersectional identity work. In her story, she dramatically captured and connected simultaneously with the intersectional identities, leading to empowerment for her—and most likely for others. The claiming of Adéwalé's character as distinctly countervisual serves "the right to look" and the "claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity," creating a sense of solidarity, empowerment, and group consciousness among many in the gaming community who are now actively advocating for more diversity in gaming culture.[40] Telling one's story allows the individual to provide a narrative description, in everyday language, of a life story or unique event(s).[41] In this sense, that "narrative" is essential for empowerment, a necessary part of framing an intersectional counterpublic that the black women within these pages would suggest. While gamers may not have direct power to recreate the visuals of hegemonic imagery, people exert some influence over their lives through the construction and creation of their own environments.

Black Women's Rage as Praxis in Digital Gaming Communities

One of the overarching themes in this book is the troubling of the normalization of emotions seen in the default gamer, especially anger. Since white male gamers are accustomed to seeing whites in positions of power and control in gaming, any deviation may increase their fears, anxieties, and rage. Their responses have propelled larger conversations about what constitutes "appropriate" narratives and story lines. Popular culture continues to render black women's rage as inappropriate, ignoring their creative constructions of a rage that would suffocate them were it not for this expressive savvy.[42] Such cultural disapproval serves as a constant, reminding them of their visitor status in the digital locker room, and thus the spaces inside these toxic technocultures are reminiscent of the public spaces that continue to foster misogynoir while propagating so-called

progressive, color-blind rhetoric. In many of these public spaces, however, black women are not always afforded the ability to create and construct their own counterpublics, and so digital spaces become the go-to places to sustain cultures.

The intersectional counterpublics that black women create in gaming offer pathways to discuss critiques of their conditions online and in physical spaces and create new avenues for discourse and political action. These activities reflect the activities in which black women often engage offline. What presents a particular strength here, though, is the ability to control spaces, as the muting practices of TastyDiamond's stream revealed. Participants in the digital spaces of gaming can temporarily pause individual acts of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other intersecting oppressions to which they usually are subject. The varied ways that black folks create public and private spheres in gaming illustrate the potential to create and design inclusive spaces.

TastyDiamond continued to remark on how difficult it was to mute users who were being disruptive, rude, sexist, and racist while streaming in spaces like Twitch or Mixer, but she noted that YouTube provides the simplest way to not only mute, block, and ignore harassers but also to render them completely unable to engage in any way. Although this doesn't completely disrupt the oppressive nature of interactive digital communities, it provides many black women some level of empowerment to control spaces.

This chapter has provided a revisioning of black women's rage, which typically is viewed as a destructive emotion offering no value to modern society.[43] Lorde offers a compelling critique of rage by engaging the useful aspects of this emotion while balancing its limitations. The "systematic devaluation of black womanhood"[44] has given rise to interracial oppression and intraracial practices of devaluation and exclusion. We continue to see the proliferation of black women's historical misrepresentation repackaged in contemporary ways. From Aunt Jemima to Sapphire to the angry black woman, these caricatures are used in attempts to flatten the complexity of black womanhood, simplifying the intricacies of black women's anger, sexualities, relationships, and so on, and rehashing them as stereotypes to control black women's bodies.

This demonization becomes dangerous because these singular narratives delimit societal engagement with black women; there is no holistic understanding of the roots of these images. Thus, the anger that emerges from black women in response to these controlling images is loaded with information and energy, which provides black women with an arsenal to transform rage into

advocating for liberation and changing the disenfranchised experiences of marginalized folks. Lorde argues, “We are women forced back always upon our woman’s power. We have learned to use anger.”[45]

From Audre Lorde to bell hooks, theorizing of black feminine rage proves useful as a tool for dismantling structures of oppression in gaming communities. In digital spaces crafted by black women, there is a process to engage with the rage that is so often quelled by society, families, and others. Black women must undo the haunting of the demonization in response to their rage, the suggestion that their anger has no legitimacy.

The black women profiled here mobilize their rage in strategic ways, validating each others’ feelings even while society deems them destructive and inappropriate. Just as Lorde and hooks did in creating public spaces for the expression of black female rage, these women create intersectional counterpublics free from judgment. Their work inside the spaces of digital gaming provides space to heal the intersectional wounds and collective traumas from white supremacy, black patriarchy, white feminism, and more. These spaces validate the range of black women’s expressions.

hooks asked the question, “Why is the rage of black folks about white supremacy made to appear ridiculous, even if the direction that rage is targeted at is not an appropriate one?”[46] The centrality of this question speaks to the necessity of black women’s rage to generate the attention needed to begin making structural changes to transform lives. Black women in gaming use storytelling, critical theorizing, and remembrance practices to comprehend, resist, transform, and heal from patriarchy, racism, colonization, and the history of slavery in constructing, creating, and sustaining spaces for their intersectional realities.

5

#TechFail

FROM INTERSECTIONAL (IN)ACCESSIBILITY TO INCLUSIVE DESIGN

In the winter of 2015, a group of women who identify as black visited my gaming lab. What began as a reunion among friends soon evolved into a critical play session in which we explored the inaccessibility of gaming and gaming technologies for those of us at various intersections. It quickly became evident that not all of us had equal or equitable access to engage in contemporary gaming. For Kim, a person who identifies as a black deaf woman, her experience was one of confusion, isolation, and silence. I provided a small selection of games for everyone to choose, games I thought were the most accessible and that featured diverse representations. Kim decided on *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, a popular action-adventure game with historical elements.

The game opens in a junglelike surrounding, and Kim gets a sense of its basic mechanics, using parkour movements, controlling the actions of a pirate-looking person in what appears to be a tree house structure. A caption on the top left screen reads "Find the Assassin." The game soon transports us to a ship. It's nighttime. "Cape Bonavista—June 1715" appears on the screen. The cinematic transition introduces us to the horrors of battle on the high seas. The foggy background conceals whatever enemy hides in the mist. There is chaos. Confusion. Questions.

"Can you see her?"

These words appear in small white letters at the bottom of the screen.

"Man the cannons!"

These next words signal the user that action will soon be required. In these moments, Kim is just watching. I'm nearby, chatting with Regina. Regina, a voice speaker, also regularly communicates using American Sign Language, a

practice she has implemented in the years I've known her, to create more accessible spaces; she keeps Kim included in our conversation. However, Kim is now unable to communicate back to us. Although the game requires her attention, the controller has taken away her primary mode of engaging: her hands.

She begins using her voice. Soft tones come from her mouth, words that I am not able to discern. But it's clear enough for Regina to gain a sense of what she is articulating: "What do I do now?" She has reached the point in the game where on-screen instructions suggest that she take the wheel and begin firing. In-game voices are providing more instructions to help locate the ships that have flanked hers. However, Kim is unaware of this and is taking damage. She puts the controller down and places her right fist, with a thumb up, on her open left palm.

Kim has made the American Sign Language sign for "Help." I feel awful. I thought I selected games that were accessible enough for all of us, with different abilities and skill sets, to be able to fully participate and have fun. The game was stressful for Kim. She explains her experiences, signing as Regina interprets.

Kim: The on-screen directions were great. I knew where to go. I knew I had to get to the front of the ship to take the wheel. I also figured out how to shoot. Hold left trigger to aim and press right trigger to shoot. But I couldn't figure out what to shoot at. The ship kept taking damage, but I had no idea that the bad guys were already there. I thought I was going to drive to them or something. I didn't know I had to move the screen around to find them.

Kishonna: I am so sorry, Kim. You had no way to know that. They were using their voices to give instructions.

Kim: So how do people like me play? If you weren't here, what would I have done? This is the reason I don't play games anymore. I used to. I used to love them.

Kim highlights a pervasive issue in communication technologies. They are rarely designed to be accessible for differently abled bodies, especially those who are outside the hegemonic framing of design that privileges abled bodies. This could be due to the perceived difficulty in designing for differently abled populations, or maybe those who have ability privilege create products by and for their own communities, with no thought for others who may wish to use the same technologies.

Inclusive Design Thinking: Starting with the Community

Let's break down Kim's experience. First, her primary means of communication was taken away when she had to hold the controller. Second, the game required her to listen to instructions to progress in the game. This immediately signals that the developers and designers of these gaming technologies did not include differently abled users in their practices. I assumed that the game that I had selected was accessible enough. I should have started first with what the community has articulated about their wants and needs with gaming.

It would have been useful to have a website like Deaf Game Reviews, which uses a grading system to rate accessibility in video games. (The site was created after Kim had visited the lab.) By noting which games need subtitle modification or rely heavily on audio to convey meanings and messages—or that have no captions at all—the reviews provide a way for differently abled audiences to gain a sense of the level of accessibility, which influences their ability to participate.

Deaf Game Reviews was created by Susan, also known as OneOddGamerGirl, a self-identified Deaf, Muslim, queer, disabled, schizophrenic gamer. Susan explains the moment that prompted the creation of Deaf Game Reviews, situating her and her co-reviewer, Courtney Craven, as the leading platform for deaf gamers. While playing *Destiny,* an online multiplayer first-person shooter video game, she experienced an early mission that plunges the user into darkness when fighting an enemy called the Hive.

"It's about an hour in and requires players to listen closely for nearby enemies since the game's torch and motion sensor are limited. This may seem like a simple challenge typical of a first-person-shooter but for those who are deaf and hard-of-hearing, it's an incredibly difficult part to play through and creates a near insurmountable roadblock to the rest of the game."[1]

As Susan explains, her character died numerous times before she realized she would not be able to complete this task and thus could not finish the game. Not wanting others to have similar negative experiences, Susan and Courtney created Deaf Game Reviews.

Their website, http://www.caniplaythat.com, features a variety of ways to preview games, from alphabetical order, to the most viewed, to the most liked. While *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* wasn't reviewed, *Assassin's Creed: Unity,* another title in the franchise, was reviewed, having been released almost a year later. *Unity* received a B+ grade, being negatively marked for having tiny captions, but overall the game was praised for having visual cues to get the

user’s attention, directing them toward action.

At the intersection of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, ability, and other characteristics, Susan mobilized her platform to address a structural concern inherent in gaming technologies. This simple practice has had a powerful impact on the Deaf community in gaming. There has been a surge in activity around user-generated content, with users describing their experiences, illustrating the level of empowerment that has come since the launch of Deaf Game Reviews. Although the industry has yet to fully address this level of marginality, some companies (such as Ubisoft) have committed to making their games more accessible, and Microsoft has even begun creating accessible ways to interact with their video games, as we will discuss.

Deconstructing the Abled, White, Masculine Norm: Enabling the Privileged Intersection

While visiting the gaming lab, Kim expressed that her exodus from gaming was the result of a variety of things—from gaming being framed as a “boys’ activity” in which her participation was devalued, to not being able to engage games fully because of a lack of accommodations (captions, subtitles, and the like), to not seeing other black women and girls featured prominently in gaming. From gender to ability to race, this intersectional stance is understandable and illustrates the crux of this text: that intersecting realities are a problem for the hegemonic structure of gaming and technology. They are the problem. But marginalized folk are identifying ways to continue participating, creating intersectional counterpublics—a core facet of intersectional tech.

It is necessary to critically deconstruct the “normative” invisibility of whiteness and its functioning in mainstream games. Going beyond individual expressions of whiteness in and around gaming culture, this provocation has everything to do with systemic issues of representation, cultural construction, and observation of the visual politics at play as it relates to an ideological construction of whiteness. Games engage in a politics of identity through their inclusions and omissions, their complex constructions, and their highly manufactured totalities.[2] The presence of black folks in gaming makes whiteness more visible. The presence of women makes men and their behaviors more visible. The presence of the differently abled makes clear the boundaries and exclusionary practices of ability. As this chapter outlines, there has been a mass exodus of differently abled people, and women and people of color have been some of the most visible in expressing their concerns about this. This

conversation with Kim, interpreted by Regina, explains more reasons for this.

Kim: Are there any disabled video game characters?

Kishonna: You know, I can't think of any right now. I'm sure there are, though.

Kim: But you know all the games!

We laugh together, and I am slightly embarrassed that I can't think of a single one.

Kim: Are there any women?

Kishonna: Yeah, there are plenty of women.

Kim: Black women?

Kishonna: A few.

Kim: But the fact that you can't even think of one disabled character is the problem.

Kishonna: I know, right?

Kim's question immediately led me to look up and explore disabled characters in games. In my quest to uncover accessible games, I'd failed to think about representations, a central aspect of being engaged in gaming for marginalized bodies and a core feature of black feminist thought. When I could finally recall characters that were differently abled, I could only remember those whose purpose was to support the main, playable character, or the characters who were disabled by war.

Aside from these, one of the most visibly disabled characters in gaming is Lester from *Grand Theft Auto V,* a franchise that features poor representations of most populations. While Lester helps the main character with heists and a number of felonious acts, he is mostly a terrible human being. When we first meet him, he is being aided by a cane to support his mobility; subsequent meetings have him in a wheelchair. He begins discussing his reclusive lifestyle, describing himself as awkwardly unable to form physical relationships with people but expressing villainous interest in them, using dating apps to facilitate the process. When he meets potential love interests, he dupes them and dumps them, essentially without ever actually meeting, hoping that they feel a sliver of the isolation that he has felt his entire life when trying to speak to the opposite sex.

"I never told anyone that before. It feels good to talk," Lester says, in

concluding his opening rant. While the game attempts to generate empathy for Lester, there is a lack of complexity around him. We are unable to respond to any of his comments. Instead, we are bystanders to his struggles and then proceed to exploit him, using his technical skill sets for our advantage. The designers of the game narrative lump a multitude of stereotypes into one interaction, one scene, and we develop our feelings about Lester based on these tropes and on the way in which he describes himself, as a "sick, creepy voyeur."

Lester's description of himself feeds into normative assumptions about mobility and disability. Disability arises in the incongruities between one's physical ability and the greater demands of the environment in which one lives. As technological and medical advances continue, disability is increasingly becoming viewed as a social and environmental construct, one needing to be "fixed."[3] But Rhoda Olkin, Constance Pledger, and Rosalyn Darling all pose a question that is essential in constructing identity around disability: When do people consider themselves to be persons with disabilities?[4] This is an important question to ask, especially in thinking about how one may define oneself. Olkin and Pledger's analysis suggests that disability identities need to be evaluated on a continuum, a point that has some heuristic and descriptive value. Darling recognizes the impact the disability movement has had, leading some to replace the stigma-based identity model with one of disability pride. Because disability can occur at any point in the life span, and because people's experience of disability varies, it is difficult for researchers to agree on a model of disability identity development.

Black feminism provides a useful pathway for exploring self-definition and (dis)ability, especially for those at the intersection. In her groundbreaking 2019 essay, "Toward a Theory of Black Deaf Feminism: The Quiet Invisibility of a Population," Reshawna Chapple provides an intersectional framework to capture the holistic nature of black deaf women, illustrating how social constructions and assumptions can negatively affect their realities.[5] By exploring race, gender, class, and ability, Chapple develops a framework of black deaf feminism, drawing on critical race feminism, feminist disability theory, and critical deaf studies. Her intersectional approach is necessary to keep intact the varying dimensions of identity while ensuring the centrality of deafness. This approach can help make sense of black deaf women within gaming. It can also help us make sense of Lester and his problematic self-definition.

Identity development is motivated by the desire to reduce stress from the contrast between one's personal expectations of oneself versus the societal

expectation of a person of such an identity.[6] Stigmatized groups, or any group that displays marked differences from the majority and are thus devalued, often struggle more with developing a positive identity and high self-esteem.[7] Although Lester was constructed by a team of designers who may have had a mediated and biased understanding of identity and disability, we nonetheless can understand his character through this lens. From what disability scholars suggest, Lester could have an inability to cope with stigma, which can lead to minimizing, denying, or attempting to correct what makes him different, leading to further isolation from his cultural identity group.[8] However, studies show that people who identify closely with their cultural group, stigmatized or not, have a greater sense of identity and are less likely to try to assimilate to the unfair demands and parameters of the majority.[9]

Black deaf women often report feeling misunderstood or that they are not taken seriously, and they often feel pressured to choose between their blackness and their deafness to be accepted in either community.[10] This creates an almost impossible conundrum, cycling between visibility and invisibility, being recognized by one and ignored by the other. As Chapple explains, in the Deaf community, deafness is often considered the most significant identity, rendering others, such as race, gender, or sexual orientation, less significant in people's daily experiences with stigma and oppression. Establishing one's identity around deafness is influenced more by the desire to develop coping strategies for people with disabilities, reducing the stigma of that identity. Lester's self-definition as creepy voyeur could reflect his inability to identify with a stigmatized cultural group, the physically disabled. Having other privileged identities (being white and male) are not enough to provide connection or cultural cohesiveness; thus his connection with a more deviant identity.

Broadly speaking, there are only a handful of disabled characters in video games: Adam Jensen from *Deus Ex,* Master Rahm Kota from *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed II,* Bentley from *Sly Cooper,* Taimi from *Guild Wars 2,* Sir Alistair Hammerlock from *Borderlands 2,* and Master Sergeant Frank Woods from *Call of Duty: Black Ops.*[11] Of these games, I have only played *Call of Duty: Black Ops,* but I have enough knowledge of these games from reading reviews and watching playthroughs to get a general idea of the characters. The majority of disabled characters in games are disabled because of violence and war—they are soldiers who have lost limbs in battle. Their limbs are then replaced by technologically enhanced body parts. For example, General Horace Warfield from *StarCraft II* had his right hand amputated after he was injured in

battle. His hand was replaced with a bionic arm, which can become a cannon. Such technologically enhanced characters sustain a narrative of technology as a cure for disability, confirming the necessity of technology to control unruly (disabled) bodies.[12] This narrative, made popular by science fiction and perpetuated in gaming, continues to privilege an able body, with other bodies needing to be "fixed" to resume "normal" functioning.

This sci-fi genre invocation in gaming allows us to explore the conversations around disability and technology, as they highlight the collective anxieties inherent in ability privilege. The technologies and politics in these mediated narratives reflect our stereotypical assumptions about disability, from physical impairment to social constructions. The distinction between impairment and social process is a core aspect of disability studies because this way of examining disability exposes how disabled bodies are constructed as other, deviant, and nonnormative, when, in fact, human bodies exist along a spectrum of difference and ability.[13]

The social meanings and stigmas attached to disability identity reveal the systems of exclusion, oppression, and normativity created around particularly abled bodies. The framing of the "good life" and what constitutes a good life centers an able body as core to this narrative. However, there are new ways of imagining, creating, and inhabiting lives—ways that embrace rather than reject or disavow disability. It is essential to move beyond the premise that impairment and disability need to be overcome, transcended, or cured.[14]

Although gaming technologies have continued to improve to provide equitable access for differently abled gamers, we must explore whether these improvements actually help to create possibilities for participation. Thus, it is necessary to explore not only the possibilities of this technology but also the limits impeding some users' full participation. My first experience with the Kinect, then called Project Natal, particularly with how the trailers initially advertised this technology, is one example illustrating restrictive use of technology.

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#TechFail: The Kinect as a Tool to Perpetuate Intersectional Inequalities

When: Summer 2009
Where: Xbox Live
Who: My participant observations and conversations with Militant Misses, a

clan in Xbox Live made up of women of color who were more focused on hard-core gaming than on socializing within the space. They created their clan to ensure their members were adequately trained and prepared to fight in clan matches on *Gears of War* and *Call of Duty.* The space was created as a practice ground to prepare fighting men. They also spend significant time playing and reviewing games and engaging new technologies. The following is one such participant observation.

I pop open the plastic wrap enclosing my copy of *Batman: Arkham Asylum.* The sticky tape atop the green case is working my nerves. I bit off my nails just last night, creating even more problems opening this game.

I finally open it. I don't really want to play this game. But the Militant Misses have been talking about it a lot, along with other gamers. So I want to see what all the hype is about. I have a problem with the *Asylum* narrative. My mom spent so many years in an asylum for the criminally insane. My mom is Joker. Minus the killing. But I sympathize with Joker. He is just a victim of the system. An underfunded system that criminalizes the mentally ill. Anywho.

It's one of those combo games. Not a button smasher, but pressing *Y* will mostly allow me to be successful. I like using Detective Vision. The bad guys —well, the people who need a better cocktail to manage their mental illness —are glowing. It's a cool feature.

I thought they (Militant Misses) would spend time talking about the game but something else has piqued their interest. PoppinSmoke, a friend of theirs, not a member of their clan, enters the private chat room with excitement.

PoppinSmoke: Y'all been watching the E3 videos?[15]

PoppinSmoke is raving about a YouTube video titled "Project Natal," which, as Xbox advertises, is a new way to play and interact with the gaming console without a controller. He sends the link to each of us via Xbox messenger. I begin watching.

"You are the controller," the video exclaims. Showing a white user interacting with a digital rendering of a sensei or martial arts master of supposedly Asian heritage (though he looks and sounds white). The white user then engages in digital combat, ducking, throwing uppercuts, and kicking into nothingness—but toward a TV screen.

We are then thrust into a room with what appears to be a family, "driving," with nothing in their hands, but motioning as if they are turning the wheels of a car. The one female user of the invisible steering wheel motions left and right

through twists and turns of the racetrack on the TV screen, while three others, presumably family members (or friends), motion simultaneously with her. She shifts an invisible gear and the audience goes almost into third person, peering into the TV screen of what she is also viewing. She moves the car into the pit stop, and the male viewer to her left jumps up quickly and assumes the role of the pit stop crew, replacing a damaged tire with enthusiasm and excitement. She takes off, ready to proceed with her race alongside her friends and family. White friends and family.

Another set of users transitions into the same family room space—two adolescents, white, male. Maybe brothers. Maybe neighbors. Maybe classmates.

The caption reads “Use your whole body.”

The active user is a dinosaur maybe? Swatting at objects in the air. Destroying buildings in a city. Stomping aggressively and roaring in the direction of the TV.

Fade to black.

Then two young women, white, appear on the screen, grinning at one another. Bodies in motion, ready to be active and engage. We are in the same open-concept living room. Dining table to their right. Refrigerator behind them, some distance away. A bicycle is propped behind the dining table. Yellow. Twelve speed. Road bike.

Pause.

I literally pause the video.

I pause and think about the framing of the environment. I start thinking about what I see, and what I don’t see. A single-family home. Probably has an upstairs living quarters. Four bedrooms. Three and a half baths. I would guess a basement. The room we see is a common area. The family room. Not the main living room or sitting area where the fancy folks come and sit and have tea. (For black folks, the front room we aren’t allowed in. It’s the space where the preacher sits. Or the insurance man. Someone Big Mama or “ma’dea’” deems important. Maybe these white families have similar practices?) But we aren’t there. We are in the active, living room. The space for living.

Unpause.

Two white women. One—pink shirt. Brown pants. The other—yellow cardigan. Red pants. What are they wearing? I’m not feeling the outfits at all.

Hardwood floors. Brunette.

Is that a chalk wall? Cool.

Kids live here.

Tall kids.

An oscillating fan.

The fern in the corner. Or some variation of fake plant that collects dust.

The words “Full body motion capture” appear on the screen.

Red pants. I see her on the TV screen. A digital skeleton outlines her limbs. Dramatizing the movements of her arms and legs. Erratic movements.

I shift behind them. Not by choice. By force. Behind the couch. Watching over red pants’s left shoulder.

Soccer. Split-screen soccer. The erratic movements, in fact, are dribbling. And kicking. And passing. And blocking.

Red pants scores. The white woman with brunette hair, held up by a ponytail holder, does a lap around the couch. Praising herself and her efforts to score a goal.

Black screen. Then an on-screen caption. White letters: “Use your own gear.”

We see more of the house. I was right. There is an upstairs portion to the home. It’s a modern space. Stainless steel appliances. Track lighting. Exposed beams holding up the structure. I might watch too much HGTV.

On the couch. Another white youngster. Maybe a teenager. Is he the same kid from the previous cut scene? Not sure.

Gray hoodie. Jeans. Skateboard.

I hear the word “scan.” Maybe the white kid said it. Maybe a dub over.

The skateboard covers his face; he holds the board to his face, rather. A digital glow flashes across the board. Scanning. He rotates the board to the bottom side, red wheels. Cool letters spell the word *tricking,* maybe. There is another skateboard. To his right, behind him. Next to the extravagant chalkboard wall.

A built-in microwave is tucked away in the kitchen.

The screen shifts behind the teenager as he flips through a series of skateboards on the TV screen. So something has scanned and captured his board and rendered it digitally visible. He finds his exact skateboard.

WOW. COOL. I literally say it out loud. The coolest part of the whole experience thus far.

“Play” he says. (I assume he was the one who said “scan” earlier.)

An avatar appears and jumps on the scanned, customized skateboard and begins skating. The youngster has some skills. His physical skills are mapped

onto the digital rendering of the avatar on the skateboard.

Kickflip. Ollie. Grind.

Words that are not foreign to me. Words I learned from playing *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* in the early 2000s. A culture I grew up in—well, I grew up around. Grunge. This is familiar.

Wait a minute. Red pants is back. The soccer player. Rather, the person playing soccer. She is still wearing the yellow cardigan thing. I still do not like it. She walks in.

An avatar, the black silhouette figure, is on the screen until she steps directly into view of the technology, which is I assume is Natal. This is the first time I actually pay attention to it. It's sitting there. Unassuming. Capturing and surveilling everything.

"Facial recognition."

It sees her. It recognizes her. The avatar. Ugh. Red pants. Yellow vest. Brunette. Ponytail. A digital avatar of the physical person.

What did she just say?

Rewind.

"Hook me up with Sarah"?

Not sure. And, of course, no captions.

"Hey."

Another person appears on screen. A physical person. Not an avatar. Not a digital rendering.

A woman of color. A light-skinned woman. With long curly hair. Wearing a butterfly shirt I think.

What did she say?

"Did you get [something] for the party yet?"

It's not clear. There should be captions. Whatever she asked on the TV screen, the person we are in the room with, red pants, yellow cardigan, says no. She is disappointed.

The words "Connect and share" pop up on the screen.

So whatever she didn't have or whatever she didn't do, the on-screen person has taken care of. The screen shifts, moving the woman of color to the right side of the screen. On the left is an avatar model. Outfits appear in the middle of the screen, and the on-screen woman of color is motioning, from right to left, shifting the outfits in the middle.

The woman of color, the digital help, picks an outfit. The person we share the room with, red pants, yellow cardigan, motions toward it with her left hand.

She appears to grab at the outfit and put it on the avatar model. The model on the screen then becomes her. She shifts her body from right to left, looking at different angles of the avatar in the outfit.

“I love it,” red pants, yellow cardigan says.

The on-screen helper, the woman of color, has completed her task.

“The help.”

The white woman, red pants, has her outfit. She plops down on the couch. Success.

Black.

Black screen.

Oh. Mom. She feels like a mom. A lovely smiling face. The woman from earlier. When the group of people were driving.

It’s becoming clear. This is a family.

A nuclear family.

A white. Heterosexual. Nuclear family.

A mom. Dad. Older sister. Two younger brothers.

It’s now nighttime in the home. We are still in the family room. We don’t get to see other areas in the home, I guess.

The outfits are the same. Red pants. The older sister. The other woman from the soccer experience, the mom. Pink shirt. Brown pants.

What are they playing? Right hand is in a fist. Left hand is open, underneath the fist.

Unpause.

A man’s voice speaks eloquently off screen. We are facing the family. The TV and Natal are behind us. Looking at the family.

A game show. The older brother. The skater. Slams his fist into his open, left hand.

He buzzes in first.

“Millard Fillmore.”

On the screen, white words appear: “Voice recognition.”

The technology recognizes the voice. And brother answers. It’s the correct answer.

High-fives with dad. Older sister is excited. She cheers in the background, while the foreground is dominated by the skater and by dad.

Dap.

Or fist bump. Depending on where you’re from.

Big brother and little brother—bump fists. We shift.

Dining room table.

Yellow bike. Twelve speed. Lamp in the corner. Pictures on the shelf. Art on the wall.

We shift.

Into another house. With another family.

A family of color. I assume black. A black dad. Bald. Playing the same game. Mom. Long hair. Straight. The daughter. Lighter complexion. Curlier hair. Purple cardigan. Too many cardigans.

Right fist in the air about to slam into an open left hand.

I pause the screen. I glance at the time. The time on the video I am watching. The YouTube video.

It's running out. Time is running out. There are about thirty seconds left of this three-minute, thirty-nine-second video. There isn't enough time.

Time is running out.

What will I learn about this family in thirty seconds?

What *can* I learn about them in thirty seconds?

Unpause.

Black.

The screen is black.

Fade to black.

The black people on the screen are gone. In an instant. Quickly.

The words. The white words "Controller free entertainment" are on the screen.

We shift back. Back to the white family. Mom. Pink shirt. Brown pants. Dad. In their living room.

What did the black family's living room look like? What was the black mom wearing? I don't remember. What did they have in their family room? What can I assume about their living environment, based on the clues offered by the video? Video clip. The few seconds we had with the black family.

I haven't unpaused the video yet. I am . . . bothered. There are twenty-nine seconds left. Will I see them again? Another family? Of color? Maybe a family with two dads? A family member in a wheelchair?

Time's running out.

Unpause.

Mom. White mom. Is looking through movies on Zune. I like the Zune. I actually prefer it over the iPod. I have so many songs on my Zune. It's a great platform. Maybe there are some cultural differences. My white friends have the

iPod. My black friends have a Zune. My brown friends have neither.

Batman. Oh, excuse me, *The Dark Knight. Eagle Eye. Iron Man,* maybe. Is that *Benjamin Button?*

"Play movie."

Mom has decided. She picks *The Dark Knight.*

Mom and Dad get closer. Cozier. They cuddle some. Dad puts his arm around Mom. The kids are gone now. Asleep maybe. Maybe to their rooms. Maybe to the finished basement.

Mom and Dad. On the couch. The couch that has witnessed tons of digitally enhanced excitement today.

But where are they? Not the kids. The black family.

Twenty seconds remaining.

White words. Bold letters. Center of the screen: "*The only experience you need.*"

Pause.

The only experience you need?

The only experience you need?

The only experience you need!

I repeat these words. Over and over again in my head.

Nineteen seconds remaining.

The only experience we need appears to be reaching its finality. Its conclusion.

What does that mean? The only experience I need? What experience? The experience of the fully engaged, fully developed, white family?

Unpause.

3:23.

Three minutes. And twenty-three seconds.

A second line appears beneath "The only experience you need."

"Is life experience."

It appears on the screen. Beneath.

The only experience you need is life experience.

What an odd phrase.

Really though. An odd phrase. After the digital experience. Xbox trying to sell a digital experience to us. And then to conclude with these words.

Maybe there is more.

Unpause.

Cut scene. We are back with Mom and Dad. They have concluded their

movie. *The Dark Knight.* Christian Bale. Scruffy harsh voice.

The credits are rolling.

We are behind Mom and Dad. In between them. Very close to them. Intimately connected to them. We are so close they are actually blurry. The words on the screen are clear.

Black screen. White words.

"Goodnight."

Goodnight, mom says. Smiling. Happy. Excited about her experience. Dad looks on in assumed agreement. His arm is behind her neck.

Ten seconds left.

We zoom onto the black technology. Natal. A green light. To the left. The words *Xbox 360* to the right. And in the center, two eyes. Two cameras, rather. Watching. Looking. Capturing. Recognizing.

Ready for a command. An action. A movement. A word. Or phrase.

Seven seconds.

The voices of cheers and singing can be heard. I am not sure what they are saying. Something jubilant. Exuberant. Exalting.

Green light. Off.

Music stops.

Screen fades to black.

Four seconds left.

"Xbox 360. Jump in."

This was my first experience with the Xbox Kinect.

This autoethnographic observation was conducted in 2009, while I was collecting data for my dissertation. At the time, I had no idea how to make sense of this technology within the larger dissertation project. It was only after subsequent concerns were raised around the Kinect that I realized how significant this moment was. Concerns about the Kinect's inability not only to incorporate people of color but also to see people of color has fueled the othering process of inaccessible and inequitable gaming tech, as this chapter will continue to outline.

From the Controller to the Kinect: Technology, Accessibility, and Inclusive Design

Xbox Kinect and the Adaptive Controller are two examples highlighting the transformative potential of inclusive design in making gaming more accessible.

Although the Kinect may have inclusivity issues for racialized bodies, this chapter explores its potential to disrupt inaccessibility in gaming by providing an avenue for players to participate without losing the primary means of communicating, as the following conversation with Kim illustrates.

Kishonna: OK. So the controller won't work. There is no way you can communicate. Let's try the Kinect.

Kim: What's a Kinect?

Kishonna: Well, it's a way to play using your body. Your body is the controller. You see the camera on top there? That scans and senses your body, allowing you to play without a controller.

Kim: OK, let's do it!

I explore the few titles I have for the Kinect and decide on the adventure game that came with it. This interactive title will allow us to engage in white-water rafting, underwater adventures, and other outdoor water fun. Kim immediately expresses praise for this format of play, as she is able to continue communicating with Regina, on whom she relies to interact with other voice speakers in the room. She is able to remain a part of the conversation and still play.

Gaming scholars continually remark about the social dynamics of gaming, highlighting this as a core activity in contemporary gaming communities.[16] Although this positive engagement with the Kinect in no way dismisses concerns for other black users, we can see the potential for differently abled black gamers to participate.[17] Let's start with the possibilities being created around controllers.

In 2016, Microsoft held its annual internal hackathon, an event that invites employees to work on experimental projects, receive feedback, and potentially have their products developed. At this hackathon, the prototype for the Xbox Adaptive Controller was created. Although expensive, it was designed for those who have reduced functioning of their hands and arms and extends playtime for those who may experience pain or fatigue from extended periods of play. Visually, the controller is flat like a keyboard, so the user would interact with a panel in a more free-form way, instead of pushing buttons with fingers.

Before the hackathon, James Shields, Xbox marketing manager, revealed the privilege inherent in their initial design processes, which led to the continual development of products for the privileged: "We assumed people would have two hands, we assumed they would have all their fingers and thumbs, we

assumed they would have the strength to hold the controller for a long period of time. So, we knew we had to do something to address that."[18] While this privileged thinking led to a very narrow understanding of the user, inclusive design thinking leading up to the hackathon inspired other possibilities. After the hackathon, Xbox designers began collaborating with a diverse set of groups, including the Cerebral Palsy Foundation, the AbleGamers Charity, and Warfighter Engaged. Only by adopting an inclusive design approach were they able to consider gamers with different kinds of mobility.

"Copilot mode" is another accessibility project, in which Xbox allows the use of two controllers to play with one character. Gamers can use the controllers in different positions, based on their needs, or even mix a hacked controller, with special buttons, and a standard one.[19]

In 2017, Xbox introduced Project Torino, a programming language that teaches visually impaired kids the basics of coding and that features inclusive design and accessibility.[20] This project, now called Code Jumper, offers visually impaired users an experience similar to block coding, using a drag-and-drop interface to introduce youth to coding. The majority of coding languages require vision for data entry. This project, working together with the American Printing House for the Blind and the Royal National Institute of Blind People (in the United Kingdom), is designing a physical programming language to teach computational thinking skills and basic programming concepts to children with different abilities around vision.[21] The actual design includes connecting large plastic pods together to create programs (see figure 5.1).

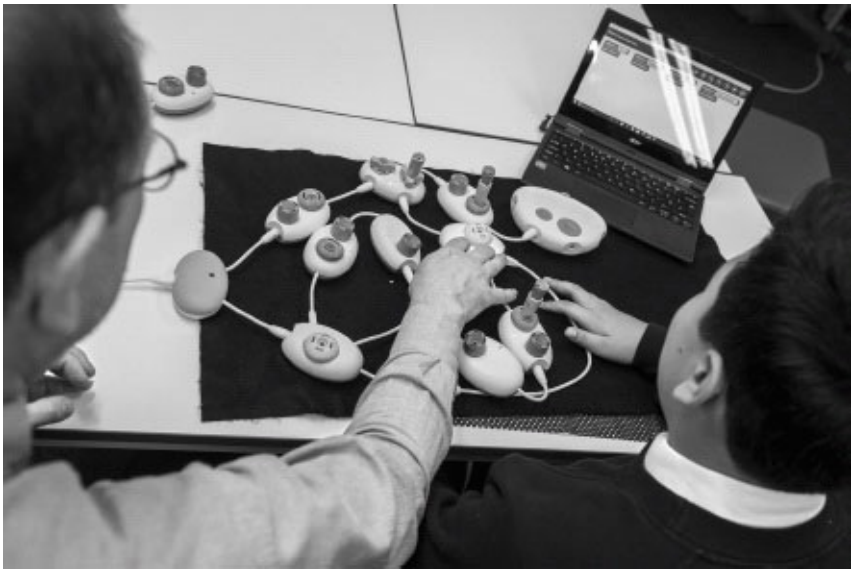

Figure 5.1. Pods from Project Torino and one youth interacting with them.

In thinking about this user-centered design, which facilitates design thinking by placing human needs, goals, and desires at the core of iterative processes, I also think about the process that propels an organization to incorporate inclusive design. Xbox was introduced in 2001 but only created its first accessible branded product almost fifteen years later. This compels me to interrogate the reality of differently abled gamers within the hegemonic parameters of gaming.

Diverse design approaches state that accessibility can be combined with innovative, intelligent, and autonomous computing to increase accessibility in all technologies. Various approaches in accessing information and technology are only a part of this equation. Previous scholarship has found that social factors influence how disabled people choose to use their technologies, which often affects access.[22] So users' feelings affect their engagements with technology. Whether they feel self-confident or self-conscious, this impacts their continued engagement and use of that technology. Kim mentioned that her exodus from gaming was rooted in inaccessibility and a lack of acknowledgment in gaming; the space failed to welcome her intersectional identity, and this led to her exit. Although the Kinect has the potential to bring her back, its perceived limitations around racial identity may solidify Kim's concerns, keeping her excluded.

The Kinect was released in November 2010, and although it saw only meager sales, the possibilities have been endless, from hacking and adaptation to appropriating the technological features. The Kinect was discontinued in 2015, and Microsoft stopped manufacturing the device in 2017. It had sold a meager 35 million units since its 2010 debut.[23]

The Kinect may have been designed for a privileged user, and these assumptions were confirmed when the Kinect was finally released for public use. My observational narratives reveal that the initial excitement around the Kinect or Project Natal dissipated for racialized users who were not able to fully use this technology. The designed racial configurations did not promote racial integration or racial interaction, though Xbox attempted to assuage racial anxieties. In recalling the Project Natal video, the black family seemed incorporated as an afterthought, merely to appease calls for diversity and inclusion in gaming. But there also was something even more sinister happening for darker-skinned gamers.

Initially, gamers were excited about the possibilities of such an innovative technology. A community of hackers continues to retrofit the Xbox 360 Kinect for the Xbox One, to keep engaging with it. However, these hackers mostly identify as white or Asian, and male. What happened to the community of

gamers who once praised the Kinect for its potential to turn their bodies—their black bodies—into controllers? Their black bodies happened. As many black gamers remarked in the days following Kinect's release, "It can't see me." Reflect on the following comments by black users of the Kinect:

PoppinSmoke: So I got the Kinect. Right? I been waiting on it. I opened it up. Hooked up the cords. I didn't have space for it in my room, so my mom let me use the living room. I turns it on. Do the whole activation process or whatever. And it didn't even recognize me. Now I saw everybody saying that lighting is the problem. We had plenty of light. The floor lamp. The ceiling fan lamp. The lights from the kitchen were on. I'm telling you. I had lights from all angles shining on my black ass. Still nothing. . . .

. . .

DreDaySmash: OMG the Kinect. That piece of shit was a waste of money. The voice recognition is cool, but it still has not done the facial recognition thing.

MzMygrane/Kishonna: What happened?

DreDaySmash: It just wouldn't recognize me. I tried different rooms. I tried different lights. I tried at different times of the day. High fucking noon even! I don't care what white folks try to say. That shit racist as hell. . . .

. . .

xxxTooTriLL4Uxxx: I ain't gon' lie. I wasn't gon' get it. But I fucked with some the games at the mall and thought they were dope. I really thought people were being too damn dramatic. I'm thinking these hood-ass dudes got this terrible-ass lighting and that's why the Kinect won't work. Nah. That shit for real. It didn't see me and I ain't even that dark. I got perfect light. Good internet connection. Don't know if that shit makes a difference. But it took me several days of trying for it to finally work.

Several gamers confirm what PoppinSmoke explains, that the Kinect, not being inclusively designed, had a visual bias in processing information from darker-skinned bodies. Responses from the tech community immediately dismissed the concerns of black gamers who expressed these issues. An article published by *Consumer Reports* emphatically claimed that users who expressed racial bias with the Kinect were just wrong, though the authors of the article did not even consider the history of discrimination in technology.[24] They went even further and conducted their own test to examine whether the Kinect was racially

biased. They suggested that, while replicating the facial recognition tests with black users, they were successful in operating the Kinect and thus that no racial bias was encountered. In fact, this report blamed users for failing to have adequate lighting. As the article opined, “The Kinect camera needs enough light and contrast to determine features in a person’s face before it can perform software recognition and log someone into the game console automatically.”[25]

This explanation did nothing to ease the worries of black gamers who placed this experience in a long line of discriminatory practices in technology, from algorithmic bias,[26] to biased artificial intelligence, to inaccessible controls, to stereotypical representations—data-driven discrimination that continues to relegate nonwhite, nonmasculine bodies to the margins. There were similar concerns with Hewlett-Packard’s face-tracking webcams and with iPhone X’s inability to discern Chinese users.[27] Facial recognition software often is programmed to work according to contrast recognition algorithms, which are calibrated to white faces and fail to recognize darker-skinned folks as a person to be engaged.[28] Google Photos’ image recognition software provides the most pertinent example, illustrated in Safiya Noble’s text *Algorithms of Oppression.* Because it had not been primed with enough images of people of color, Google Photos’ automated recognition and tagging began to identify pictures of black people as gorillas.[29]

This process is not new. Motion sensor technologies, like many other technologies, have their roots in photography and imaging technologies. Recall the Shirley Card, a standard photograph used to calibrate photographic printing equipment. Until the 1990s, the standard Shirley Card depicted a white woman, and photo labs were calibrated to print her face with good clarity and contrast, leading to generations of poor photographic representations of dark-skinned people, in which black faces and bodies sometimes appeared as shadows or blots, with few distinguishing features other than white teeth and eyes.[30] Things began to improve in the 1970s, when wood furniture makers and chocolate makers began complaining that Kodak film was unable to capture the varying conditions of their brown products.

This trend in racial bias continues. As Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru report, facial recognition artificial intelligence was less accurate when classifying the faces of people with darker skin.[31] This is only one of many examples. Amazon got rid of an artificial intelligence recruitment tool after the company found that it was not rating candidates for software developer jobs and other technical posts in a gender-neutral way. Essentially, the tool was biased

against women.[32]

The power of data to influence our perceptions and negatively impact our everyday realities is directly related to the biases of algorithmic information, whether we are searching the internet for the terms “black girls” or “black-on-white crime” or encountering racially biased reviews on Yelp.[33] danah boyd uncovered how immersive virtual environments are a discriminatory embodiment of technology, producing a sexist effect in which men are able to be seamlessly transplanted into virtual worlds (such as *Oculus Rift*) but most women are excluded, unable to allow their bodies to disappear into virtual embodiment because of the nausea that motion parallax imaging often produces in their physical bodies—a condition that disparately affects women users but could be rectified through inclusive design.

Inclusive Design: Transformative Potentials for the Technological Matrix

The “technological unconscious” in which many in the tech industry find themselves leads them to a global assumption about the centrality of Western whiteness. However, the “unconscious” part does not allow this inherent design feature to be seen, as it is neutral and situates itself as a color-blind phenomenon. Being embedded in the core of technologies, whiteness is defended and continues to be replicated and reproduced, unseen and unacknowledged.[34] We must explore design at its structural base, creating the core of technological artifacts. The inaccessibility, exclusion, and discriminatory nature of built digital environments continue to oppress marginalized people.

As Sasha Costanza-Chock explains, most design processes reproduce inequalities structured by the matrix of domination, which was discussed previously. They approach this through “design justice,” which is a field of theory and practice “concerned with how the design of objects and systems influences the distribution of risks, harms, and benefits among various groups of people.”[35] Design justice focuses on how design reproduces, is reproduced by, or challenges the matrix of domination (white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism). In invoking intersectionality, I must also incorporate a discussion of the matrix of domination in making sense of discriminatory practices in technology. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, the matrix of domination, as a conceptual model, helps us think about how power, oppression, resistance, privilege, penalties, benefits, and harms are systemically distributed. She further notes that although oppression is experienced on three levels—the personal, the group or community, and the systemic—these levels

can be experienced simultaneously.[36] Intersectionality approaches dialogue by tactically combating social structures and individual experiences of oppression to lay the foundation for the possibility of social change.[37]

Organizing and mobilizing the visualization of the matrix of domination as a technological framework maps the challenges for women of color that are not readily reflected in social structures. For Kim, the black deaf woman we met earlier, it was not apparent what her actual experiences in gaming would be if her narratives were unacknowledged. Based on my initial assumptions, I thought I had identified a game that would allow her full accessibility. Kimberlé Crenshaw notes the consistent omission of women of color at the intersection of multiple marginalizations, given the disguised resolution of women's issues and the purportedly successful countering of oppressive practices through policies and progressive practices. In gaming, even with innovative controllers and other technologies, there still has been no acknowledgment that technologies have actually led to marginalization, creating divides and isolating the most marginalized.

The approach of addressing select marginalization is one that Crenshaw might consider a "single-axis framework."[38] It ties back to the critique by disability studies scholars as they interrogate the trend to "solve" and "fix" disability through technology. There also is the tendency to centrally locate disability, as there are only a few critical disability scholars who incorporate an intersectional focus into their scholarship. As Reshawna Chapple troubles in her work on black deaf feminism, there must be an acknowledgment that accessibility is an issue and has a primal role in theorizing the lives of black deaf women. This approach emphasizes the three levels of the matrix of domination not only as sites of domination but also as potential sites of resistance. By using justice in the design process—through constructs, models, guidelines, principles, theory, and more—we can begin the process of making technology accessible and realizing the potentials to disrupt various systems of oppression.

I move design justice toward a discussion of not only design principles and intention but also design consequences. Design intentions can influence usability and accessibility concerns for a wide range of users. There is a focus on the range of outcomes when the user interacts with the design. At the ideation phase of development, if creators explored the consequences of their products, they might in fact design those products differently to address potential and anticipated consequences and outcomes. This fits the narrative of impact versus intent. I don't suggest that Microsoft, HP, or Apple mean or intend to be racist,

but the impact of their products—creating exclusionary, discriminatory practices—is the harm.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this perspective is that it manages to centrally focus the liminal process in design, especially when it comes to the relation between intent and impact. Technology exists in a space between history and memory, between effect and identity, between past, present, and future. This positioning on a constantly shifting threshold is a theme that runs concurrently with the advent and dissemination of any new technology product. However, they are independent of each other. A previous experience will carry residual effects into new experiences, which explains how black users observe racist impacts regardless of intention. Thus, design must also factor in the interpretive aspect of design, such as how a marginalized user may engage in that technology through their own historical lenses.

The intersecting forms of oppression—including white supremacy, cis-normativity, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism—are hard-coded into designed objects and systems. These values have been encoded in and reproduced through the technological artifacts created.[39] As Mary Flanagan, Daniel Howe, and Helen Nissenbaum delineate, design thinking is a process that changes with the technology created. One example they provide focuses on interface and usability and how these are often overlooked features of software system design;[40] now they are essentially the core. Along with Costanza-Chock and other scholars, they provide explicit pointers for designers to be more inclusive with design.

While incorporating inclusive design and accessible practices into technology is useful, those elements alone are mostly ineffective at addressing historical legacies of exclusion and contemporary practices of discrimination. The purpose of this book is to explore why and how users of gaming technologies have continued to participate, despite the historical legacies of inclusion that continue to relegate them to the margins. Technological practices are inextricably bound to other symbolic systems of representation. Oral practices and signs or other visual systems collectively constitute a communicative matrix. This chapter also considers the changes in a technological object from ideation to inception to deployment. Although creators and designers may not intend to exclude anyone, the impact highlights the space where hidden practices, invisible oppression, and the progressive rhetoric of color blindness meet the aesthetics.

Kim and the other women throughout this text have theorized in powerful ways from their social locations, a core tenet of black feminist thought. Patricia

Hill Collins articulates critical theory that privileges the viewpoint of black women, basing her conclusions on the lived experiences of black women, which she describes as different actors in history from various social locations. Historically, black women's survival has rested on their ability to create communal, gendered spaces for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing as a response to domination and alienation. bell hooks writes about her experiences in creating a communal space for self-healing and group affirmation—just one of countless examples.[41] Black women have a variety of responses in making sense of these experiences and their reactions to them. They cocreate spaces, designing practices from their intersectional social locations; ensuring accessibility, inclusion, and transformation from within; and illustrating the beauty of intersectional tech.

6

Queering Intersectional Narratives

CLAIMING SPACE AND CREATING POSSIBILITIES

The controversial cover art for Ubisoft's game *Far Cry New Dawn* (figure 6.1) generated many conversations around violent visualizations, racial hierarchies, and white masculine anxieties. The cover features a white man tied to the top of a destroyed car that has its nose firmly planted in the ground and the tail end up in the air. In the foreground, the woman of color on the left has what seems to be protective sports gear on, covering her shoulder, arm, and torso. She is holding a weapon in her right hand, aimed up, with her finger off the trigger. Her blond hair is styled in French braids. In some iterations of this image, there is a tattered American flag below her, draped over the couch on which she is sitting. The woman on the right wears a blue hoodie, with hair similar in style to the other woman's, and she holds a crossbow.

The environment seems to be a postapocalyptic dystopia. The natural Earth has taken over human-constructed spaces. The pink flowers provide a beautiful backdrop for the potentially violent scene.

Although they are not aiming weapons at the white man on the car, the audience gets a sense that he may soon experience violence at the hands of these two black women. This is not a common visual narrative, and this rendering shocked many in gaming who are accustomed to seeing white men in positions of (violent) power over all others.

Figure 6.1. Cover art for *Far Cry New Dawn,* prominently featuring two women of color and a white man tied to a car in the background. Reproduced with permission of Ubisoft.

Women in these intersectional counterpublics in gaming expressed their own opinions about the cover. Since many of them had not played the previous installment of *Far Cry*, they were left guessing and wondering about the direction of this game.

cdXFemmeFataleXcd: Oh. They lesbians.

MissUnique: No, they sisters. That white dude did something crazy probably.

cdXFemmeFataleXcd: What white dude? Oh, I didn't even see him in the background.

ThugMisses: Nah. This is a love triangle. Ol' dude trying be a player. He got caught up when he asked for a threesome.

MizzBoss917: Girl, shut up!

[*All laughing*]

cdXFemmeFataleXcd: Listen. They names is Lou and Mickey. These bitches gay as hell.

MizzBoss917: Well they might be gay, but not with each other. They twin sisters.

cdXFemmeFataleXcd: Aww hell! They probably still gay. They villains. You know they always making lesbians evil.

MissUnique: Fuck all that. I'm ready to play!

[*All laughing*]

ThugMisses: Well, we know they black.

MissUnique: How?

ThugMisses: Look at them roots!

[*All laughing*]

This back and forth continued while MizzBoss917, a lesbian who ethnically identifies as Puerto Rican and racially identifies as black, offered opinions on the real identity of the game characters. They are in fact twins, and they represent the villains in this latest iteration of the *Far Cry* series.[1]

We all were cautiously optimistic, not really knowing then whether this was actually the cover art, if the women were central to the game's narrative, or even if the art was real. But the immediacy in which the narrators of this study queered Lou and Mickey highlights the limited narratives around queer representations overall in gaming. This lack of queer representation in gaming does not deter this cohort of lesbian gamers from co-opting heterosexually read characters—from this *Far Cry* example and others—remixing stories to see themselves represented in gaming culture, navigating their racialized, gendered, and sexual identities.

These "gaymers," as Jenny Sundén emphatically discusses, are a vibrant part of game culture but are mostly invisible in game studies, ostracized in gaming communities, and oppressed in gaming culture.[2] As Adrienne Shaw posits, the homogeneous, white (secondarily East Asian), male nature of the gaming industry has led to the lack of LGBTQIA+ content in video games,[3] and this exclusionary culture extends to heterosexist interactions online. For instance, the creation of the LGBTQIA+ friendly community in *World of Warcraft*—and its subsequent suspension (for violating terms of service)—reveals the contentious and hypocritical stances taken by stakeholders in gaming communities. As gamers and scholars suggest, "Cases such as these make it clear that 'virtual' worlds are only virtual in a limited sense; real-world issues can and do impinge on the fantasy landscape of games."[4] Furthermore, queer "folk [have] always

been told to hide themselves and who they really are in the real world."[5] The same holds true in many digital spaces as well.

Culture, Community, and Anonymity in Xbox Live

The group of women with their lively conversation around the *Far Cry* cover art constitute a core segment of black lesbians whose stories and experiences I have documented and archived for more than ten years. They have created a thriving community in digital gaming, where their queer identities are central, but this identity may not be known to their physical friends and families. As the adage goes, "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (a phrase actually highlighting the pervasive yet invisible default of whiteness in digital spaces), and in their digital gaming space, these women can hide their sexual identities.

The idea behind that phrase is that when we move into digital spaces, our physical bodies, inclusive of our varying identities, have no bearing on our experiences and outcomes because no one knows who we are.[6] Early internet scholars theorized that virtual environments would provide an outlet for existing beyond the parameters of the body.[7] This liberatory potential of the internet was extremely enticing; however, this lure existed in a realm of assumed white, heterosexual masculinity, as the internet was traditionally a domain of the privileged.

The premise has since been criticized as both utopian and irrelevant to marginalized circumstances in new technologies.[8] We cannot just forgo our bodies in virtual spaces because much of our real-world selves comes into these spaces. Because of this, marginalized users are largely unable to be completely anonymous online. The very nature of Xbox Live, which is a mostly audio-based community, does not allow for full anonymity or identity deception; there is a virtual manifestation of physical reality.

Marginalized bodies cannot hide from the digital public their presumed race, gender, sexuality, or other aspects of their identities because of linguistic profiling, which is one of the origins of conflict on Xbox Live and in other digital communities that rely on verbal communication. When one is profiled this way, the othering process begins. *Othering* is defined here as the process of categorizing a person or group of people as belonging to an out-group rather than an in-group. This stems from our desire to belong to groups with which we identify,[9] with the dominant group having the power to dictate who belongs in both out- and in-groups. The process of othering is what leads to the marginalization of certain groups and individuals.

The medium of communication in video games is therefore important in analyzing the othering process. In voice-based communities, auditory communication (and hence linguistic profiling) leads to othering. Because Xbox Live also allows for real-time voice communication, much of the racism and sexism that emerge there stem from linguistic profiling, which occurs when auditory cues are used to confirm or speculate on the racial or gendered background of an individual. This extends to other identifiers as well; in an example illustrated later in this chapter, we will see that one's sexual orientation may be presumed based on how one sounds.[10] Linguistic profiling as a mode of communication has become almost normal in some digital gaming communities.

Before looking at the toxic effect of linguistic profiling on black lesbians in gaming, it is imperative to see how gaming spaces allow them to express their identities and sustain their communities.

cdXFemmeFataleXcd said, "I see it [Xbox Live] like an actual place. With actual people. And we are really connected. They are more than just gamers on a list. They are the people who know me the best. . . . I can't say these kinds of things to anybody in my family. And really not to any of my friends. They have no idea I like girls. I get to hide that."

Similarly, MissUnique shared, "Being online lets me be me. And we do more than just play games. Sometimes we just sit in a chat and talk about everything. So I'll have the headset on and tell them what happened all day. I get my papers done, I get on social media, all while on Xbox. There is no other place in my life where I can do that."

ThugMisses agreed:

> I can't be who I want to be on Facebook or Twitter. I know too many of those people in real life. And, like, my real friends aren't gamers, so this is a space I have all to myself . . . to really be . . . like, me. Ya know? I know that might sound crazy, but my mom read one of my chats one time because I forgot to log out of Facebook. Luckily it wasn't too crazy, but I don't really have a private life on FB. And Twitter is just too much. Ain't nothing really like Xbox . . . that's just me.

These women reveal the affordances of Xbox Live to express their identities and share in a community with others like them. It underscores the importance of Xbox Live in helping them to build their community. Although a single quote does not uncover the complete process, it must be understood that Xbox Live has

inadvertently given them this tool of empowerment. As ThugMisses expressed in her few words, other socially mediated spaces don't have the level of anonymity that Xbox Live does. As she pointed out, she logs in to Facebook in a variety of settings and on a multitude of platforms: at school and at home, on tablets and on other mobile devices. Potentially everyone who is near her could have access to her personal Facebook Messenger chat because she forgets to log off. Because almost no one except her expresses interests in gaming, however, they aren't concerned about what she is doing in that space. As she often remarks, "They see it as a game, and that's it."

While Xbox Live is equipped with Instant Messenger and can link to social media accounts, the participants express that they keep these mediated worlds mostly separate. MissUnique seemed to be the only person who used Xbox Live to access these other social media spaces.

While "hiding" in real life may be an achievable feat for many of the "fem"-identifying women in this cohort, those who adopt more ambiguous, gender-neutral, or masculine identities aren't able to shield their identities and often are assumed to be lesbian because of their outward appearances. They don't express similar feelings with the affordances of anonymity online.

According to xxxTooTriLL4Uxxx:

> Man, ain't no closets in the ghetto, and none online—at least not for me. I mean that literally, too. Ain't no damn closets. [*Laughing*] On some real shit, you can't hide. I can't hide. All deez team noseys. Everybody know everybody business. But aside from that, you can't be different in the black community. And I look like a dude. Everybody assumed I was gay, and so maybe I was like, "OK, yeah I am." I'm not saying that made me gay, but I didn't spend time trying to hide it. Because I couldn't.

YeahSheBlaze feels similarly: "Anonymity dumb. I get why some people need it, but I can't hide, so I get mad that all deez damn fems dat get to. If they fuck wit' us den dey should be out wit' us. I know it ain't that easy though. Just ventin'."

And ShedaBoss says, "You know what anonymity does? Gives ammo to people who hate me. The shit I read every day—going to hell, praying the gay away, all dat shit. It gets to you. Because ain't nobody saying it to my face."

Someone in the background says, "Dem preachas tell you every Sunday!"

"You right. And I expect it from dey ass. But it's hard comin' from these so-

called woke niggas who only care about black men. And dey really be coming down on gay dudes. . . .”

These powerful excerpts run counter to the feelings expressed by the fem-identifying women who game in proximity to them. Those with more neutral or masculine gendered expressions describe a lifetime of being “outed” because of their appearance and not being able to conform to the cis-female constructed identity. And as xxxTooTriLL4Uxxx powerfully expressed it, “Ain’t no closets in the ghetto.” This statement, rooted at the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality, reflects the interlocking nature of being poor, black, female, and queer identifying.

xxxTooTriLL4Uxxx also expresses the singular identity of having to be “just black,” above all other identities. This idea can trace its roots back to the civil rights era, to the lynching era, to the plantation, where women had to vow loyalty to their racialized identities, and not to their gender or sexuality, to survive.[11] The singular narrative of blackness restricts identity development in physical settings—and online, as it is currently being expressed. As many of those who adopt gender-neutral and masculine gender expressions reveal, they are constantly bombarded with the singular narrative at the expense of who they really are. They have dealt with it all their lives, so the anonymity afforded online does not provide much protection for their physical lives, which is of utmost importance to them.

Isolation, Exclusion, and Digital Connectivity in Xbox Live

> Finally, there was a space . . . that allowed me to be me. I could be black and it was OK. I could be a woman and it was OK. I could be a dyke and it was really OK. Now, if I could find a way to make that happen in real life, I’d be one happy bitch.
>
> —YeahSheBlaze

As Audre Lorde describes, black lesbians are constantly encouraged to pick some aspect of who they are and present it as the “meaningful whole, eclipsing and denying other parts of the self.”[12] For Lorde and other black lesbians, one’s identity as a black lesbian *is* the meaningful whole. As YeahSheBlaze expresses it, “Being inside, in gaming, is like a community within a community,” and Xbox Live gives her this ability. MizzBoss917 explains it more as a process that occurs, as opposed to a singular moment when she could express her intersecting identity: “Now I’ve always been Borinqueña. Please believe! So I knew I was a woman. I knew I was Puerto Rican. I’ve only recently been thinking about what

did it also mean to be Negrita. I don't look black. But I am black. Many people don't get that. And when I realized I was attracted to women I was like, 'Aww, shit. I'm struggling enough. Being black while brown. Disrupting colonized minds. I'm too woke for all this.'"

MizzBoss917's journey to consciousness and realization of who she is made a big impression on her physical and digital realities. She recognized the intersecting nature of her identities and how they are required to be fluid to fit the dominant cultural script about "people like her." She spent considerable time during our interviews articulating the spectrum of her identity in different spaces that often require a singular form of blackness (church, school, and so on). In expressing digital blackness, she suggests that only performative blackness is valued—blackness easily packaged for a white audience and suggested by black gamers who stream online.

She summarized her sentiments this way: "Now, most black folks [in physical settings] don't even get my struggle or even try to understand it. But it's not their fault. We conditioned for division. But I found this group [of women on Xbox Live] where all that didn't matter because we all have our own individual struggles . . . and we try to understand each other. . . . Does that make sense? And that's enough for me. I can be who I am. They want to know more about it."

She went on to explain that Xbox Live is the only community where she can be herself. She suggested that some of the black and brown groups on Facebook are very singular and become toxic if one deviates from the racial or lingual identity. So the private chat of Xbox Live gives her the ability to explore her identities safely with others who value each aspect. This research highlights the tendency of men of color to rank oppression by rooting their marginal status as more significant than that which women of color encounter.[13] Identifying spaces where this intramarginalization does *not* occur is a chore.

The women in this study have found each other and support each other in the space. They express pride in the community they have created and recognize that if it did not exist, they would not have remained. As xxxTooTriLL4Uxxx puts it, "I'm too old for gaming for real. We all are. But we stay not cuz it gives us something to do—please believe, we got plenty of shit to do—but because we can't find nowhere else like this. . . . I don't have nobody but them."

This perspective centers an additional dimension of identity, the effect of regional differences on lesbian identity development. Mary L. Gray's foundational text on queer visibility among youth in rural America highlights the tendency to center urban experiences.[14] What is intriguing about making sense of

rural experiences is that, in this context, rurality is coded as exclusion and inadequacies, in need of urban outreach and support.[15] In her statement, xxxTooTriLL4Uxxx decenters metro-normativity (centering the urban), highlighting the isolation common to being queer in rural America.

Furthermore, the added dimension of being black and a woman in white rural America poses particular concerns for metro-normativity. xxxTooTriLL4Uxxx, who is a student athlete and hails from an urban center, did not realize the "privilege of the city" until she did not have it. "If I knew it would be like this, I probably never would have came to this shit. But I'm here. Getting an education. But it's hard, cuz I can't really be gay. Coaches don't fuck with that shit. So we don't really have anywhere to be who we are. Imma do my time and get the fuck out . . . So yeah. Xbox gives me an outlet."

Digital scholars have recently made the connection between users' physical and online selves, recognizing that these spaces are linked, rather than distinct, separate spheres. But the digital world of xxxTooTriLL4Uxxx and others who adopt neutral, ambiguous, or masculine gendered expressions is completely separate from their physical realities—and many would prefer that their physical spaces mirror their liberatory experiences online. Because of the frustrations experienced in physical and digital settings, many users respond to these inequitable practices in ways that offer catharsis.

Transgressive Play

It's important to acknowledge that many of the women on Xbox Live use gaming to connect with others and, through their play practices, to actively resist "the patriarchy." This type of resistance play could be referred to as *transgressive play.* Transgressive play is "a symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a . . . way . . . to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself."[16] This framing of resistance is essential to explaining the experiences of women of color in gaming communities. YeahSheBlaze explains her process when experiencing harassment online.

YeahSheBlaze: I think I might be the only one that still like gaming in the main lobbies. Everybody else just be playing with people from they friends list. But I miss how it was. Now, I don't have time for the foolishness. So when they start coming talking about "black bitch this," "nigger that," I light they asses up.

MzMygrane/Kishonna: What you be doing?

YeahSheBlaze: When they start all the disrespectful stuff, I don't say, like, all the negative stuff back to them. I keep it focused on the game. Me calling them names won't hurt. I mean, it doesn't hurt me, and I want them to know I'm not bothered by it. So, you know, we can beat anybody, so that's what I do.

MzMygrane: So your strategy is to embarrass them? In the game?

YeahSheBlaze: And make sure they know good and well they lost to a girl. I talks to 'em the whole time. I send messages. They usually block me when nothing they do is working. So they can't beat me. They can't hurt me. They so fragile. Fragile as fuck. [*Laughing*]

There is much to unpack from this interaction. First, her approach is similar to the practices of other women in gaming, such as the Militant Misses, who would excel in game play to thwart the oppression they experienced online.[17] As Amanda Cote demonstrates in her powerful work, women are an active audience and implement a variety of in-game strategies to prevent harassment; some of those tactics include leaving gaming altogether, hiding their gendered identity, avoiding strangers, or reaching a high-ranking or prestigious skill level.[18] The latter is the approach taken by YeahSheBlaze, and although this coping strategy may work for only some of the women in this space, the levels of empowerment are huge and must not be discounted.

The women in my study express their transgressive play in other ways as well. Although sexuality is not a prominent theme in their daily online interactions, they make it visible in other ways. YeahSheBlaze and Patroa917 describe an interaction in which they were initially assumed to be men, and the subsequent process of unfolding the layers of their identity, which went quickly from praise to ridicule and harassment. In the following excerpt, they explain what sometimes occurs when they interact with black and Latinx men, especially in the popular game *Gears of War.*

Patroa917: Well, it started because we was running shit. We had the most kills for like four rounds straight. And then they said, "Let's party up."

YeahSheBlaze: So when we came into the room and they heard us talking, of course they start all that shit . . . "Go to the kitchen" stuff and "making sandwiches" and shit like white dudes be doing. But I think it's worse. What deez niggas put us through is way worse.

Patroa917: Yeah, they want us to suck they dick and shit.

YeahSheBlaze: Right. So we kilt all dat noise and was like, "Yo, y'all wanna game or what?" We coulda went ahead and said we lesbians, but we know where that leads to.

Patroa917: Exactly. It's like the less we tell them, the better the gaming [experience].

YeahSheBlaze: But when did they find out? I don't think we told them right out. Or did we?

Patroa917: Nah, [ShedaBoss] joined with chat with her man-sounding ass.

YeahSheBlaze: Oh shit, that's right. OMG, they started riding her so bad. She sound straight like a nigga. So she can't even hide who she is you know?

Patroa917: And I told them to leave my baby alone.

[*Laughing.]*

A side conversation begins before they return to this conversation.

Patroa917: But then dudes were like, "Oh, these dykes this, dyke that," and I was like, "Oh hell naw." And we all going back and forth. And I was like, "What, you mad we get more pussy than you?"

YeahSheBlaze: Man! Why you even say that? They lost it and kicked us out the damn room. It's like, once they manhood was challenged, it was over. And for white dudes, its like, dey'on' [they don't] like for dey gaming to be challenged. It's weird. But niggas like bitches that can play.

Patroa917: We just gotta be fuckable too, I guess.

When YeahSheBlaze and Patroa917 recall this interaction, I am immediately reminded about the interlocking nature of oppression and what that means in communities of color. As was discussed earlier, black and Latinx feminists have long understood the unspoken rule to avow loyalty to race over gendered and sexual identities. The ways in which the men of color lashed out at YeahSheBlaze, Patroa917, and ShedaBoss were rooted in a lack of recognition of sexual identity. For these black lesbians, sexuality comes into play in harsh ways that make them hypervisible and hypervulnerable to the effects of racialized, heteronormative, heterosexist patriarchy. While the "ideal" player is white, male, and straight, black and Latinx men may exert their masculine privilege in hostile and toxic ways. Many queer-identifying women are unable to

locate affinity spaces with men of color, so this amplifies the discriminatory practices. As Jenny Sundén rightfully states, “Even if queer players have a vivid presence in online communities, to ‘come out’ in the game, or simply express an inclusive attitude in terms of sexual orientations, has proved to be enough for exclusion. . . . Thus, another potentially transgressive, disobedient, unsettling figure is the nonstraight player—male, female or in-between—who makes explicit how sexuality comes to matter in online game cultures.”[19]

Although the tendency is to root gamers in a singular identity of “gamer,” gaming culture must become aware of the precarious nature of residing in a marginalized body and traversing the toxic climates that dominate many gaming spaces. Queer identity is perceived to exist as rebellion, disobedience, and deviance because compulsory heterosexuality is the core operating system in most social settings. Those who adopt queer identities disrupt the boundaries of normalcy that are often implied. YeahSheBlaze and Patroa917 explained that they were hoping to “pass” in a hostile, heteronormative space but were quickly outed because ShedaBoss is unable to hide aspects of her identity. The linguistic profiling that she experienced was swift and severe, and as a result, ShedaBoss isolates herself from the larger gaming community.

Queering Intersectional Narratives, Claiming Space, and Creating Possibilities

Many marginalized groups in gaming culture inhabit the few private spaces that value the articulation of marginalized interests and viewpoints. In the small community these lesbians of color have established, they build social cohesion and establish alternative, and equally valuable, interpretations of what it means to be black, woman, lesbian, poor, and geographically isolated in many contexts. These women often are forced, in physical and digital spaces, to fit limited narratives and skewed labels, to root their identities in the black community and in the white lesbian community.

According to John Edward Campbell, “Just as the real, or somatic, bar has been crucial in identity formation among LGBTQ communities, so too is the modern virtual social space inhabited by those who identify as LGBTQ.”[20] Because of the ingrained white default, however, women of color often are excluded from this identity formation. The process leading to understanding one’s identity also occurs across time and space and in different contexts. What it means to be a lesbian online may or may not be the same as in physical settings. And as ThugMisses reveals, the experience of being a black lesbian

online changes based on the affordances of anonymity. But anonymity will not reduce the history of oppression, marginalization, and exclusion that LGBTQIA+ people have faced. Gabriela Richard and Christopher Hoadley's work is pivotal in assessing how supportive communities can improve resilience by mitigating the effects of stereotyping, microaggressions, and other discriminatory practices in online gaming.[21] Their findings demonstrate that a female-supportive gaming community can foster equitable gaming identification and self-concepts.

Although Xbox Live may not have intentionally created private party chats to foster supportive gaming, this feature has inadvertently created connectivity that facilitates identity development among black lesbians. In this way, lesbians online have claimed spaces that were constructed for and by hegemonic entities, and the women in this context reconstruct them for resistive purposes. As Michael Love Michael writes, "When Black women claim space, it changes the world."[22] Although he was writing about the transformative actions of black women like Ruby Bridges, Rosa Parks, Bree Newsome, and Therese Patricia Okoumou, who all took up literal and figurative space while demonstrating against racial inequality, black women online engage in similar practices.

In society at large, black women are often reminded of their "place"; the use of space and place to restrict the movement of black women is common practice in both digital and physical spaces. In response, black women have used a variety of responses to continue existing and residing in these spaces, from self-segregating and isolating themselves to disrupting and invading the spaces anyway.[23] In "Women in Everyday Spaces," Gillian Rose situates her arguments on time/geography and the invisibility or privileging of white/male heterosexual privilege. As she proclaims, "Many feminists have looked at women's unease in and fear of public spaces, and many argue that 'women's sense of security in public spaces is profoundly shaped by our inability to secure an undisputed right to occupy that space.'"[24] June Jordan explains this lack of security in public spaces:

> [There is] . . . a universal experience for women, which is that physical mobility is circumscribed by our gender and the enemies of our gender. This is one of the ways they seek to make us know their hatred and respect it. This holds throughout the world for women and literally we are not to move about in the world freely. If we do then we have to understand that we may have to pay for it with our bodies. That is the threat. They don't ask you what you are

> doing in the street, they rape you and mutilate you bodily to let you remember your place. You have no rightful place in public.[25]

Although many feminist geographers have worked to deconstruct the ideas of public and private spaces as they relate to the roles and oppressions of women and their bodies, white cis-heterosexual men still have a freedom to roam, constructing spaces as made by and for them. Patricia Hill Collins confirms that in the naturalization process forming gendered hierarchies, "the differential treatment of girls and boys regarding economic autonomy and free access to public space parallel practices such as the sex-typing of occupations in the paid labor market and male domination in government, professional sports, the streets, and other public spaces."[26] In staking claims to space to resist white masculine domination, other marginalized groups (namely white women and black men) have co-constructed spaces to transgress the boundaries prepared for and maintained by white men. But in the construction of these spaces, black women and other women of color have been framed as invaders, as not welcome, thus leading to their self-segregating practices or propelling their resistance to transform those spaces.

The bodies of black women have been severely censured by the threat and implementation of systematic forms of oppression, such as calling the police, reporting women who violate terms of service in online communities, and even sexual violence. In patriarchal societies, women's bodies, trans bodies, and other bodies that deviate from what has been framed as masculine are presented as subversive threats, and racialized women's bodies pose an even greater threat. Although many women have fears of spaces and places because of sexist constructions that use the threat of violence to circumscribe their lives, the uses of violence and the state of black women's bodies have a particular relationship to slavery and the construction of black womanhood. Enslavers used violence to break women, fragment them, destabilize them, and make them cease to be subjects, to transform them into "docile bodies."[27]

This is a practice that other oppressed groups (black men and white women, specifically) have adopted in sustaining their few privileges over black women. Being perpetually bound by and conditioned to the legacies of racialized, sexualized, and gendered histories, other groups have taken their cue to invoke claims of control over black women's bodies, as YeahSheBlaze and Patroa917 explain in describing their experiences with black men in *Gears of War.* But the confidence generated by being a woman of color, coupled with the affordances

of digital technologies, have offered these women the tools to critically deconstruct their exploited conditions. As an example of intersectional tech, these women have asserted themselves as change agents, using digital and physical tools to resist the oppressive technological structure of digital media.

Conclusion

RESISTING INTERSECTIONAL MARGINALIZATION USING TRANSMEDIATED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE DIGITAL ERA

The overarching goal of this book was to complicate the relationship between the transmediated technologies of digital gaming culture and its intersectional users, fans, and audiences. This simple relationship becomes more complex with the transmediated nature of digital technologies, which engage the holistic nature of the intersectional user. In complicating the social construction of technological systems, it becomes essential to explicate the need and possibility of synthesizing ideas and methods from traditional disciplines and use a more multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary approach.[1] This is necessary in connecting the various historical practices that influence contemporary realities.

Drawing from communication studies, new media studies, library and information sciences, sociology, history, black studies, gender and women's studies, and anthropology, this interdisciplinary book adds to the conversations surrounding intersectional engagements with digital technologies. The interdisciplinary engagements around race, gender, and aspects of identity showcase the critical prowess of marginalized scholars in unpacking the oppressive conditions of digital infrastructures. Notable works include the groundbreaking compilation *Intersectional Internet* (edited by Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes); *Programmed Inequality* (Mar Hicks); *Distributed Blackness* (André Brock Jr.); the provocative text *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks* (Sarah Florini); *Black Code* (special issue of *The Black Scholar,* edited by Jessica Marie Johnson and Mark Anthony Neal); and *Race after Technology* (Ruha Benjamin). I was truly inspired by the powerful narratives offered in *Algorithms of Oppression,* by Safiya Umoja Noble. In this groundbreaking text, Noble says, "Algorithmic oppression is not just a glitch in the system but, rather, is fundamental to the operating system of the web."[2] In the tradition of other critical technocultural scholars who have demonstrated the inherent white masculine practices of the internet, Noble and

others examine the persistence of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and more embedded in the core of technology.

Together, the chapters in this book demarcate a research program for studying the development of technological artifacts and systems—a research program to contribute to a greater understanding of the social processes involved in technological development, centering the impact that intersectional identity has had on the construction, dissemination, and proliferation of technologies. This text elucidates the social structures embedded in the core of technology, which can be explored as "rules of play" that "give certain actors advantages over others by endowing them with valued resources or indeed by serving as resources themselves."[3] This invests the user with a significant amount of power to influence outcomes in technology. By coming to terms with the proliferation of technology, "relevant social groups" or "actors" in these negotiations use various strategies and tactics to shape a technology according to their own "needs, expectations, and beliefs."[4] This is a compelling point in making sense of the role of technology in the everyday lives of users. However, it does not completely account for the bias inherent in technologies and the creators of those technologies.

Take gaming, for example, where the relevant social group usually is defined as the white masculine users. Women who insert themselves into the "digital locker room" meet with resistance from the "boys' club" for violating the invisible borders of the space. Although most would agree that responses to women in these spaces are not overtly violent, the oppressive nature of this marginalization and exclusion over time has led to the devaluation of women in particular. Marginalization can be viewed as the process of pushing a particular group to the edge through practices, policies, and other mundane interactions.[5] Furthermore, through exclusion, the process of devaluation continues, and violence against that group may not be taken as seriously (as in rape culture). So, in critically interrogating toxic masculinity and women's experiences in gaming culture, an intersectional interrogation, it is imperative to incorporate a discussion of the materiality of symbolic violence.

The concept of symbolic violence is useful in understanding how order and restraint are established and maintained through indirect mechanisms, as opposed to direct or coercive control.[6] This system thrives on the symbolic transference, from the physical to the digital, of oppressive systems that are perceived to be legitimate power structures. 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. This often makes them unrecognizable or causes them to be misrecognized as something else.[7] Anita Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* YouTube series, highlighting a system that has remained unchecked, created such a break in the normalized system that the backlash was swift and immediate. The unchecked gender imbalance and discrimination that has been ever present in gaming has fostered a climate of inequality and complicity in oppression. These power relations must be at the core of making sense of the creation and dissemination of technology.

To provide any kind of answers to the questions posed, we must gain a sense of groups' capacity to shape a technology. We need to know where users, as individuals and collectives, are in relation to the structural matrix of domination. We need to know what the relative power of the contending groups is and the sources and varieties of this power. We should understand potentially relevant social groups in relationship to each other and their structural characteristics, and we should be clear about the resources they have to draw on in their efforts to shape a technology.[8]

To make sense of the interactive relationship between user and technology, it is necessary to understand power, social hierarchies, historical legacies, access, and a host of other concerns that make up the asymmetrical power structure of digital technologies. This asymmetry is based on an unequal distribution of economic and cultural resources, which are closely linked.[9] This perspective reveals that there is no end goal when it comes to one's relationship with technology; rather, this is an interactive, ongoing, negotiated process whereby one continually influences the other.

The present ethnography considers both the user and the technology the user engages as equally important. This is why no single word can capture the individuals who make up the communities explored in these digital spaces, who are connected by identity and facilitated by technology. *Gamer. Fan. User. Consumer. Audience. Producer. Community. Other mother. Activist.* Holistically, these concepts have practical utility for this project by enabling us to make sense of users' wide range of engagements with gaming technologies.

I trouble this concept of audience and what it means to be a member of an audience consuming black images. Audiences may see the same thing, but they are not experiencing the same thing. Black audience consumption of black characters, for instance, is a dramatically different experience than it is for their nonblack counterparts. White audience consumption of black characters is

mostly read as a racial tour through the digital ghetto. In thinking about the power structures of digital technologies, we see a practice of reducing black characters to tropes and stereotypes to render their bodies subject the white masculine, supremacist gaze. As *Intersectional Tech* demonstrates, through a variety of examples exploring marginalized experiences, an intersectional focus dismantles the illusion that white men are the center of the digital gaming universe.

The revisionist construction of white victimhood has led to digital and physical harassment and attacks, the threatening of women and people of color who dared to venture into the "white men only" space of video games. White masculine anxiety has become increasingly legible for a larger body politic since the election of Donald Trump. We witnessed a very pronounced iteration of it during the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation hearings. Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Kavanaugh unleashed the white man's backlash in visceral ways, and Graham's statement captures the essence of this backlash: "I'm a single white male from South Carolina, and I'm told I should just shut up, but I will not shut up."[10]

Kavanaugh, currently an associate justice of the Supreme Court, was accused of sexually assaulting Christine Blasey Ford, now a psychology professor at Palo Alto University, when they were younger. Deborah Ramirez and other women came forward, making similar allegations. As journalists expressed in the days leading up to his confirmation, the women accusing Kavanaugh and other men in the era of #MeToo were not allowed to be victims; instead, the white man became the victim. To those who evince anxieties about being white and male, he was the so-called victim of political correctness, of #MeToo's overreach, of a check-your-white-male-privilege culture drunk on its own self-righteousness.[11]

We also can situate recent mass shootings under the umbrella of white cis-heterosexual male privilege. However, there is something more happening than a person stumbling upon the invisible knapsack of their privilege. Whether one uses the term *white extinction anxiety, white displacement anxiety,* or *white minority anxiety,* this phenomenon is an active engagement with an idealized, fabricated reality that projects a fantasized world in which white men are central and superior. This collective cultural repository perpetuates false narratives of marginalized groups and relies on imposing revisionist, dominant narratives. This framing can be understood as a "racial project" that reinforces long-standing racial stereotypes while simultaneously reflecting the subtle changes to racial meaning produced by the current context. Although the context may

change, this concept is not new; in fact, it is just the latest iteration of white masculine anxiety and white victim rhetoric.

A primary function of the white victim narrative is to establish white racial innocence at the collective and individual levels.[12] Myths about the racial other and revisionist narratives informing personal identity have been crucial to the American imaginary, particularly in the construction of white masculinity (and the deconstruction of black masculinity, in particular). The myth of the threatening black male appears again and again in American discourse, from fears about slave insurrections to terror about miscegenation in *The Birth of a Nation;* from Tom Buchanan's dread of racial infiltration in *The Great Gatsby* to Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy;* from civil rights–era apprehensions about black power to anxieties about Barack Obama's legitimacy as president of the United States to SonicFox, the black, queer furry, winning the title of Gamer of the Year in a community bent on sustaining white heterosexual masculinity as the core demographic. This level of panic, resistance, and revisionist history is consistently deployed to protect white supremacy and the American ideal of manhood.

White men's invented truths and revisionist histories have them feeling culturally deprived and burdened by notions of checking privilege. Think back to 2014, the year of the "culture wars" of Gamergate and #BlackLivesMatter. Despite the "civil war" trope that came to define both,[13] David Leonard and I collectively stated that these moments were not battles between two equally powerful constituencies.[14] Feminists, women of color, people of color, and allies were demonized and vilified for asserting the notion that their marginalized lives mattered. The trend that emerged at the peak of Gamergate was of the gaming industry embracing the rhetoric of diversity, much to the chagrin of many gamers. Since then, we've seen a plethora of gaming companies incorporating inclusion statements that assert a commitment to producing diverse games and building an industry no longer dominated by a hegemonic elite.

Given the "postracial" rhetorical turn since the election of President Barack Obama, and its reversal since the election of Donald Trump, it is important to push conversations about gaming and gamers beyond diversity to expose the disconnect between rhetorics of multiculturalism and the struggle for justice and equity. White anxieties and white victim narratives still are prevalent in the midst of these progressive strides. It is important to highlight the contradiction between ideals of inclusion espoused in the video game industry and in society as a whole and the persistence of injustices in the structural and institutional context in

which they may have developed. It also is important for gaming culture, and therefore for the games industry and game studies, to find a way to move beyond "add diverse bodies and stir," to not only include marginalized perspectives but also transform cultural practices rendering these populations isolated, invisible, and obsolete.

The continued barrage of stereotypical imagery, racism, sexism, black patriarchy, white feminism, inaccessibility in technology, and other forms of oppression has led many users of digital technologies to create their own intersectional counterpublics, illustrating the powerful effect of empowering narratives and claiming autonomy through self-definition. As such, marginalized groups in the gaming community who have their identities constantly defined within complexes of visuality beyond their control often consciously challenge these oppressions. As the *Luke Cage* meme shows, transmediated engagement is an important component for maintaining resistance practices in these intersectional counterpublics. They allow users to reframe the racialized narratives of blackness they encounter and to do it in a way that is readily accessible and easily replicable because of the proliferation of social media.

The current era of black hypervisibility could simply be viewed within the narrative of consuming black death. This limited vision of black reality would render blackness only intelligible under conditions imposed by white supremacy. Social media has given visibility to #BlackExcellence, #BlackJoy, and #BlackHumor, among other holistic instantiations of black cultural practices in digital form, such as #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies, #DuragHistoryWeek, #RootsSyllabus, #BlackOnCampus, and others. Black digital practices in this transmediated era of engagement have disrupted traditional narratives of blackness. No longer can commercial entities deny blackness, and they are beginning to offer complex modalities of representation and engagement.

The intersectional clapbacks that were used and on full display in this book disrupt the deficit model and instead illustrate how narrators make sense of their intersecting identities in the midst of oppression, sustaining their communities. The holistic nature of their identities is made legible to them through intense harassment, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. The narrators moved away from this deficit model of intersectionality once they abandoned the oppressive spaces of digital gaming and formed their own communities. In these moments, they began to understand that they were more than a sum of their intersecting experiences with the privileged bodies who continually attempt to remind them of their marginalized status. Through collective, intersectional

identity development, they resisted and pushed back against these intensive rounds of digital Jim Crow. These examples illuminated the pursuit of making transmediated blackness visible, and showcasing the affordances of these technological engagements demonstrates the discourse of the possibilities of intersectional blackness—or, to put it more simply, *intersectional tech.*

NOTES

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INDEX

Note: Italicized page numbers refer to figures.