Chapter Two: On Being Black and Gamer

The year 2016 may go down as the year of the Black gamer. As many gaming blogs and forums raved, the number of titles featuring Black protagonists, in non-stereotypical positions dramatically increased (Obee, 2016). As Sam Blackmon (2016) states, the release of two Black heroes in popular culture who were “unapologetically…Black” either reflect a recognition of inclusive stories by gaming culture or the inability to continuing ignoring the demands of gamers urging for more diversity. While she is referring to Luke Cage (not a video game) and Lincoln Clay from Mafia III, her analysis can extend to other titles released. Watch Dogs 2, Battlefield 1, Assassins Creed: Freedom Cry, and others extending back a couple years reveal to the gaming community that Blackness must be consumed holistically – no longer through singular lenses. However, the Black gaming community is divided to the extent that these in-game depictions capture the essence of Blackness as many express that Blackness is still consumed through traditional criminal narratives (Mafia 3), the Black sidekick, or through Coon/Buffoon narratives (Cole Train from Gears of War or Sazh Katzroy from Final Fantasy).

As continues to be revealed, media portrayals offer singular visions of marginalized lives, behaviors, and roles within society. Specifically, Blackness is consistently underrepresented and/or misrepresented across various media (Glascock, 2001; Signorielli, 1997). Further, these images are in constant clash with Black reality as hegemonic media controls them. The racialized element inherent in mediated imagery further serves to not only limit agency but also influences public perception of Black life. Conflicting constructions of Blackness only serve to reify who is and who is not eligible for full inclusion into humanity.

Do Black Lives Matter in Digital Gaming?
So do Black Lives Matter in gaming? Take the case of the Mississippi Sheriff’s Deputy who was fired for his racist rant inside Xbox Live. He expressed that he “gets paid to beat up niggers” to a room full of Black gamers. During his online rant, he provided his name, divulged the county in where he worked, his badge number, home address, and other personal information. This information was forwarded to his place of employment and he was terminated.

The firing of this officer, while commendable, does nothing to dismantle the systematic racism that privileges Whiteness, sustains White supremacy, and unjustly denies the marginalized full access and inclusion to participate in society. The firing (or prosecution) of individual officers also suggests that while there may be a few bad apples, they are all otherwise good in the barrel. This negates the culture of complicity within policing that condones these behaviors and does nothing to challenge or correct this embedded culture. This individual act of racism exhibited by this officer is reflective of the institutional racism that has bred this person’s (and others) contempt for Blackness. And in the anonymous spaces of the Internet, this individual sworn to protect and defend his community (that is 20% Black) adamantly claimed that Black lives don’t matter. This is the reality in Xbox Live.

The systematically embedded discrimination is apparent in Microsoft’s inaction on the issue of racism within the gaming community. Microsoft representatives have even proudly proclaimed that racism was not a major issue (Gray, 2011). This was a huge oversight for marginalized gamers who fail to conform to the White male norm. Although Xbox Live, and other virtual gaming communities may not be rooted in historical legacies of institutional and structural racism as policing is, internet technologies are inherently White and masculine (Gray, 2015). So rooted in this foundation are the intersecting and overlapping racist policies, practices, ideas, and behaviors that sustain White supremacy.
Video games are directly complicit in sustaining the narrative that Black lives don’t matter through the stereotypical and racist representations of minority characters, the hostile existence in which Black gamers reside, and through the failure to diversify the gaming industry. In-game narratives and gamer’s responses to them will be explored through traditional media framing as well as through the scope of counter-narratives and examined for their extent to disrupt traditional outlets.

**Narrative Identity and Meaning-Making Through Video Games**

How do individuals employ narratives to develop and sustain a sense of personal identity and purpose especially through mediated outlets? Bruner’s discussions on narrative and culture are essential to making sense of how gamers make meaning from narratives within games. Bruner has made broad claims for the narrative's essential role in the cognitive construction of reality (Bruner, 1990a, 1991). An important contribution of Bruner’s work is an understanding of how human beings think, behave, and communicate within communities with a particular focus on culture where the individual functions and resides. The messages conveyed can be interpreted individually or collectively and the community influences this processing.

Bruner (1990b) outlines the significance of why narratives are necessary especially as they deviate from traditional modes of communicating. As he states, if things were as they should be, narratives would not be necessary. From this viewpoint, for example, a narrative describing the usual and expected within a traditional narrative in gaming (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 and norm (e.g. a Black protagonist) one will often interpret the narrative through explaining why the traditional narrative may have been violated (Bruner, 1990b, 1991). This is a key to understanding the lack of diversity in video gaming and why there
is so much resistance to the diversifying gaming content. As the events that unfolded around Gamergate revealed, the tendency is to adopt a colorblind, post-racial, post-feminine stance. But this chapter will reveal the extent that the diverse images truly deviated from traditional mediated narratives.

**Media Messages, In-Game Narratives, and Semiotics**

People interpret media messages through semiotics. Semiotics is the study of signs, with the most common being verbal and nonverbal communication. Language is the most common verbal communication, while nonverbal communication includes facial expressions, gaze, gestures and bodily movements, bodily posture, bodily contact, spatial behavior, clothes and appearance, and nonverbal aspects of speech such as tone of voice or grunting (Lacey, 1989). Although there is no meaning inherent to any sign, there are agreements about meanings associated with particular signs (Babbie, 2007). Anything that can stand for something else is a sign, and this can include words, gestures, objects, and sounds. Contemporary semioticians do not study signs in isolation, but as part of a semiotic sign system, such as a medium or genre (Chandler, 2012).

Black characters within media representations are coded in specific ways that reify and signify the meaning of Black racial identity. It is the difference between White and Black that articulates the meaning of the Black character and frequently the divide occurs between the normal and the abnormal, with the Black characters frequently falling on the latter side of the divide. Take the image below as an example of the power of the Black/White divide.
On the surface, the above 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 male 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 ward off Black violence (Crutchfield, Skinner, and Haggerty, 2012). Without the missing context of the games narrative to frame our perceptions, the above scene seems to easily confirm and reproduce tropes of Blackness that extend back generations. The Black man, Lee Everett, is in fact a History professor at the University of Georgia. He killed a man, accidentally, after they engaged in a mutual fight, and he will soon kill the police officer out of self-defense. The officer turns into a zombie, and Lee must defend himself from being attacked and eaten.

Using the above image as the sole point of reference, it is not readily apparent that Lee’s character is actually one of a few progressive Black representations within video game culture. Gamers who had 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 (Gray, 2014). Singer and Bluck (2001) have defined this approach to the organizing bodies 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. (p. 92)

The stereotype of the dangerous Black man is a commonly used media trope, and has been for decades. 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 (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Mehlinger (1970) discussed the evolution of the representation of the Black man (Black people) in the media, TV, and books, arguing that the scarcity of mainstream representation was replaced with “cackling, bumptious, buffoonish clowns” and Black children portrayed as “pickaninnies.”

Media portrayals offer singular visions of women’s lives as well. Television represents women of color as hypersexual, promiscuous, and immoral (hooks, 1992; Patton, 2001). 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 (Emerson, 2002; Stephens & Phillips, 2002). The common trope promulgated by contemporary media is that of the Angry Black Woman. Within video games, this Angry Black Woman surfaces as a Villain. Take Larae Barrett in Tom Clancy’s The Division. While she is not a playable character, she is still situated as the game’s antagonist.

While she is not a playable character, situating her in this villainous role continues the narrative of the Black person as perpetual criminal. But she is more than that. She gives a speech in the game, and within her words, she actually evokes much rhetoric deployed by contemporary social movements to not be defined by your victimhood:
“You can turn that cry into a roar or you can turn it into a wimper... You can choose to be a victim. No matter where you at: penthouse, prison cell, or even free roaming your own streets... (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jM5e0oW-v6Y).”

Viewed independent from the video, the above comments reveals the challenge that exists in overcoming victimhood and a victim status. Unfortunately, after she stated these lines she guts a man in front of other followers. And this is more powerful than her important rhetoric, and evokes fear in social movements that rise up against the status quo: self-defense that gets redefined as threats of violence by those in positions of hegemonic power.

Larae Barrett discusses the need to reframe “the impact of the disease from being a tragedy to being a teacher (in game commentary).” The people will no longer be subject to the ‘uniforms’ but they will actually resist and fight back. This directly reflects the framework of anti-police brutality movements emerging from the Black Lives Matter movement: the lack of police legitimacy in communities of color because of the history of marginalization, oppression, racism, and violence (Gray, 2016). But her characters reverberation is that of an Angry Black Woman advocating only for a few lives.

Larae Barrett’s character while challenging common narratives associated with Black womanhood is collectively read as villainous and angry. The racialized element inherent in mediated imagery serves to perpetuate dominant ideology in the lives of women of color. Conflicting constructions of Black womanhood only serve to reify who is and who is not eligible for full inclusion into womanhood. Black women have long had their identities constructed by outside forces, by masculinity, and by other entities not valuing Black women’s agency. Black women and girls struggle for self-determination and self-definition against their ghettoized, angry, and otherwise distorted representations (Richardson, 2009). Hegemonic
ideologies dominate the narrative of female life in the public sphere; women must work hard to resist these destructive forces.

**Connecting Historical Imagery with Contemporary Visuals**

In their engagement with the virtual world of video games, Ferrell et al. (2008) implore us to not construct “false distinctions between virtual and real-world experience”, and to instead explore the looping logics of cultural representation that suture the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ into a “hybridized ‘state of suspension’” (p. 145). As Brigitte Jordan (2009) explains, “a number of people now live in a hybrid world where the boundaries between what is physical (or actual) and what is digital (or electronic) continue to fade (p. 181). The blurring of these boundaries must be explored especially for the ability to not only alter how one may act or behave but also for the ability to reinscribe historical fantasies as truth. The continuation of depicting populations in real narratives as opposed to fantasies leads to the blurring of racial lines. Augustus “Cole Train” Cole, from the Gears of War franchise, is an example that reflects this continual loop of representation extended from plantation narratives.

While “Cole Train” doesn’t traditionally 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. With this ‘hyperextended’ Black male, Coles’ character is mostly devoid of intellect and exists in a childlike, buffoon manner.

In the futuristic world of Sera where Gears of War takes place, much attention is paid to the details of the world, from the characters, to settings, to story line. However, in constructing the player of Cole Train, the game reverts to stereotypical tropes associated with Blackness and Black masculinity often seen in buddy films. The most vivid trait present within Cole Train’s
character is his lack of maturity (a common story often told of Black sidekicks in movies). This can be understood through the hybrid framing of “Coon” or “Black Buffoon,” referred to in media analysis as the Uncle Remus. The pure “Coon” is a stumbling, stuttering idiot, is often defined as unreliable, has limited mastery of the English language, and lacks intelligence. The Uncle Remus on the other hand is considered a hybrid of coon because of his stupidity, naiveté, and loyalty to his white counterparts. This type of character is used merely to elicit laughter evoking from exploited, exaggerated, and racialized stereotypes (Leonard, 2006).

According to Bogle (2001), 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 (p. 268). Guerrero (1993) says the creation of such buddies pushed Blacks into the background or reduced them to subordinate, updated ‘loyal sidekick’ roles that subtly reinscribe the cinematic racial hierarchies of old” (p.128).

Cole Train’s character is marked most vividly through is over the top linguistic patterns. Throughout the games narrative, Cole Train is heard speaking stereotypical Black vernacular. Linguist Lisa Green (2002) defines African American English Vernacular, or Ebonics as a “variety that has set phonological (system of sounds), morphological (system of structure of words and relationships among words), syntactic (system of sentence structure), semantic (system of meaning) and lexical (structural organization of vocabulary items and other information) patterns. (p.1).

It is both a formal and informal communication patterns reflecting both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. There is nothing inherently negative or inferior about this form of learning, being, and knowing. However, when coopted for mediated purposes by hegemonic entities, the diverse ways of communicating by African descendants becomes simplified and diluted. The belief that Black Vernacular is a derogatory or demeaning manner in which to speak has been ingrained in the psyche of America and Americans. Smitherman (1977) states
that during the Abolitionist era and also Emancipation, Black English became more in line with White American English. In an attempt to prove Blacks equal to Whites and therefore worthy of freedom, abolitionists aided in urging Blacks to speak White American English (i.e. Standard English). Abolitionists and others in support of the freedom of Black people believed that part of proving Blacks equal to Whites was entrenched in their ability to speak as White Americans spoke. This pervasive ideology permeates mediated contexts – reducing Black characters, situating them as inferior to their White counterparts. Cole Train, as the bearer of the speech, is rendered ignorant and incapable of serious thought and agency.

Ebonics, Jive and other alternative forms of Black vernacular and speech should be viewed as a form of protest, defense mechanism, coded communication, and a method of deriving pleasure from something those not familiar with the language are unable to understand. However, popular culture’s adoption of Black vernacular into characters only serves the marketing appeal of commodified ghetto cool. This co-opting of culture is a means to reduce and simplify Black characters. This particular discourse serves “dominant actors to maintain domination” (Germond-Duret, 2012, p. 138), or in this case, Black masculinity is shown 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) contemporarily and historically have faced exploitation, isolation, and othering (Daniels & Lalone, 2012). In this vein, David J. Leonard (2003) has written extensively on the predominately White (secondarily Asian) gaming industry producing video games that reinscribe stereotypes of Black masculinity. Similarly, Barrett (2006) offers a
critique of ‘ghettocentric’ imagery in contemporary video games. The current examination of
racialized imagery within gaming culture focuses on such visual microaggressions, or ‘images
that wound’ (Huber & Solorzano, 2015), as well as the rebellious responses to these images for
visual empowerment, or images that resist.

In order 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 (Gray,
2014a). The in-between state where most marginalized bodies reside, what Fanon (2008) calls
third consciousness, is the state of difference. This perpetual state of other is an unnamable
space that is neither subject nor object but a consciousness of irregularity (Gordon, Ciccariello-
Maher, & Maldonado-Torres, 2013). Returning to Lee Everett in Figure 1, this concept of
irregularity can be explored and illustrated particularly well.

Lee’s character in Walking Dead depicts a point of contestation over the meaning of
Blackness that cannot be readily reduced to a stereotypical/not-stereotypical dichotomy. On the
one hand many critical race scholars of video games often remark that within the game Lee
resists and rejects the label of ‘other’ so often attributed to Blackness, instead showing a level of
character development rather rare for a video game (Dill & Burgess, 2012). Indeed, Lee’s
Blackness, it would seem, is not particularly essential to his character’s identity. Instead, the
game’s developers treat his race as just another aspect of his life, likening it to an occupation one
may hold. But let us not forget the opening scene where we are introduced to the game’s Black
protagonist who is sitting in the back of a police cruiser. This initial framing, as critical race
scholars argue serves as a means to authenticate Lee’s Blackness, a Blackness only acceptably
visualized for a mass consumer audience within culturally bounded stereotypical representations
(Gray, 2014b). While Lee 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. As research suggests, exposure to stereotypical imagery can alter one’s perceptions in negative manners on an individual level (Burgess et al., 2011). At a structural level, however, such stereotypes serve as ongoing sustenance for White supremacist oppression and discrimination situated along racialized fault lines. As the game progresses Lee’s stereotypical Blackness, i.e. his master status as a dangerous other, is broken down as Lee’s character grows more complex and becomes clearly identified as ‘the good guy’. In other words, Lee’s character transcends the initial racialized framing of his Blackness, and some scholars contend these counter-stereotypes can offset negative media messages about Blacks in general (Holt, 2013). In this contestation of Lee’s Blackness it is easy to see the primacy of the visual, of Hall’s (1996) eroticized ‘scopic drive’, in the process of racializing the ‘other’. It is from this example that we can now turn with greater clarity to grander patterns that structure the visualization of race.

In order to fully understand current iterations of stereotypical Blackness portrayed and reinforced in video gaming culture, we must situate them as contemporary loops of representation within a ‘plantation complex of visuality’ that spirals back three-and-a-half centuries to the start of the transatlantic slave trade and plantation agriculture. In his exploration of visuality, Mirzoeff (2011) describes it as a process “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… a discursive practice for rendering and regulating the real that has material effects…” (ibid: 476). Visuality, that is, dictates what are 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 what we perceive as reality, as normal. Mirzoeff situates visuality as intimately bound to authority, in that visuality masks the tautology of authority’s own self-authorization of itself, by making such authority seem self-evident, normal. Through a process of classifying (naming, categorizing, and defining), separating (the segregation of “groups so classified as a means of social organization… to prevent them from cohering as political subjects” (ibid. pp. 480), and aestheticizing (making the separated classifications seem right, pleasing, even beautiful), what Mirzoeff terms 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 inbraiding 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 (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 480).

Mirzoeff identifies visuality as originally cropping up on slave plantations in the mid-17th 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” (ibid: 476). In turn, the slave was quickly separated from the rest of humanity through the simultaneous damnations of being legal property and being from an ‘uncivilized’ and hierarchically inferior culture, as defined by Western/Eurocentric standards. Quoting Fanon, 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, and the creation of a distinct Blackness as other. As 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-17th Century until the end of the American Civil War in 1865 (before being overtaken in dominance by the ‘imperial’ and then ‘military-industrial’ complexes of visuality). 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, surveilled by a sovereign overseer, 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 to the present day. Particularly relevant to the plantation complex’s power of separation, *de jure* segregation of Black bodies held on for a century after the Civil War, with *de facto* segregation continuing to this day and arguably intensifying under the conditions of neoliberalism. The plantation complex of visuality, and the visualization of race in particular, sustains and more importantly is sustained by such discursive violence that loops and spirals through popular media at large (see Ferrell et al., 2008: 129-137). The power of this discursive violence is prominent within gaming cultures heavy reliance on visual imagery to narrate stories. The subsequent examples reveal this reality.

*Seeing Black: The Power of Racial Stereotypes*
Figure 2: Def Jam Fight for New York Video Game Characters

Figure 2 portrays characters in a popular fighting game, *Def Jam: Fight for New York*. While there is nothing intrinsically negative about the portrayals 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 (Cunningham, et al, 2004). Simply viewing these men of color dressed in this manner, with gold chains and aggressive poses, one might swiftly define these characters as thugs or ‘gangstas’ (Leonard, 2009). Such a definition is almost guaranteed when one factors in additional attributes of the game’s racialized and criminalized frame, such as its violent nature (being a fighting game) and character names such as “Sticky Fingaz” and “Ghostface Killah”. The stereotypes of Black Americans as violent and criminal have been documented by social psychologists for over 60 years and can be discursively traced back to the very beginning of the plantation complex of visualization (Allport & Postman, 1947; Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Greenwald, Oakes, & Hoffman, 2003; Sagar & Schofield, 1980). With the rapid changing of mediated spaces of interaction over the decades, these stereotypical representations have kept apace by not only adapting to the medium, but
framing the very possibilities of what content is included within the medium in the first place, including within gaming culture (Brock, 2011).

**Major Paradigms of Black Masculinity in Media**

Within this stock of racialized weaponry in service to visuality, stereotypical and otherizing depictions of Blackness stand out prominently against a popular culture (especially gaming culture) backdrop dominated by the (su)primacy of Whiteness and the secondary nature of Black existence and representation. Black masculinity in particular has been subject to the sharp stereotypical framing of these fantastical tropes of Blackness, rooted in the rigid separation of the plantation era and aestheticized in new ways with each revolving loop of mediated representation. As Gray (2014a) outlines, the culturally bounded framing of Black masculinity within mainstream media can be categorized into four major paradigms of (mis)representation:


The Resistant Masculinity Paradigm reflects the continued demarcation of Black masculinity as inferior to, and less than, White masculinity. During slavery, Black men were systematically forced to endure emasculating behavior designed to preserve the distinction between ruler and ruled (Wright, 2010, p. 13). Such humiliation and degradation continue to this day and are met by the attempts of Black men to resist such oppression through the assertion of their own masculinity (Gray, 2014).

Michael Kimmel (1996) discusses the paradigm of self-made masculinity as the standard of manhood situated in the new standard of individual achievement. Although Black men have been structurally excluded from the means to achieve ‘self-made manhood’, a status largely reserved for and defined by the privileges of White masculinity, many historical Black men
achieved ‘self-made’ status despite impossible odds. This potential repertoire of positive representations of Black masculinity, however, have been actively undermined and repressed within popular in favor of an overabundance of inner-city imagery of Black youth attempting to attain the American Dream through mostly illicit means. This is best illustrated through the popular franchise, Grand Theft Auto. Specifically exploring 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,” (Barrett 2006, p. 101) and the violence in his life is immediate, automatic, and ever present (Gray 2011). By not providing any explanation of these events, it reifies Black inner city life totally ignoring structural inequalities and institutional forces at work that have assisted in creating this reality—it is naturalized. 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 collapsing of public concerns into private interests are completely ignored (Barrett, 2006, p. 101). In place of a consideration of larger social causes, one is left to imagine that either this violent, unemployable, pathological behavior is the permanent, natural state of Blacks and Latinos, or that somehow CJ and his friends have found themselves in this situation as a result of their own individual failings (Ibid).

The continued barrage of stereotypical imagery of Blackness deployed in gaming culture has led many gamers to create their own countervisualities – narratives empowering themselves and claiming their autonomy through the definition of their own identities. Such marginalized groups in the gaming community who have their identities constantly defined within complexes of visuality beyond their control often consciously challenge the stereotypes tied to the visual attributes of their bodies (Gray, 2015). As Figure 4 below illustrates, “memes” within gaming culture are a primary tool of countervisual resistance that not only allow marginalized gamers to reframe racialized narratives of Blackness they encounter, but also allow them to do it in such a way that is readily accessible and easily replicable due to the proliferation of social media.

Figure 4. Black protagonist, CJ, from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*
For those outside marginalized gaming culture the mission that CJ is tasked with may not immediately provoke critical thought as to the (mis)representational consequences that simply stealing a bicycle implies. For gamers with a critical race consciousness, however, this problematic imagery reinforces stereotypes of Blackness as pathological criminality and individually induced poverty, as explored above. 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 the complete ignoring of any structural inequality.

The core narrative deployed within the Grand Theft Auto is rooted in popularizing greed, extreme materialism, and capitalism, and this is a core tenet of the self-made manhood within Black centered media (Blaxploitation films are a great example of this). Given this reality, Black masculinity is not only punished in private and public spaces, it is devalued in each twisting and turning representation of it that fails to attain and maintain a norm established by and measured against White, capitalist, heteropatriarchy.

Black rage and violence are additional paradigmatic tropes prevalent within media representations of Black masculinity. As Roosevelt Noble, Jr. suggests, we can understand hegemonic framings of Black rage 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” (as cited in Wright, 2010, p. 25). While rage in this context suggests an aggressive response towards oppression, rage can manifest in a variety of physical, social, mental, and cultural ways. However, 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 medias racially charged use of the word “thug” or in an officer’s choice to resort to violence because they “felt in danger”, danger as equated with Blackness. The narrative of perceived Black rage carried out on White men rapidly oriented itself towards White women, taking on the sinister attribute of over-sexualized depravity. After the end of the Civil War and throughout the early to mid-20th century the myth of the Black man as a violent sexual predator began to characterize media portrayals of Black masculinity, and this in turn served as a discursive mechanism to legitimize widespread White supremacist terrorism under the auspices of “justice”, most notably lynching.

Lastly, plantation patriarchy refers to the model of manhood demonstrated by White men on southern plantations during slavery (Wright, 2010). As bell hooks (2004) reveals, plantation patriarchy, or patriarchal masculinity is situated in White supremacy and White men’s need to dominate anyone that they consider inferior or a potential threat to their dominance. She rightly points out that Black men soon adopted this same approach in dealing with their wives and families, the reiterations of plantation patriarchy being inherently unequal along gender lines. This led to divides among Black men and women upon emancipation. Because of Black men’s lack of racialized power, they began to utilize the few gendered privileges afforded to them, affirming their masculine privilege.

Against the backdrop of the four visualizations of Black masculinity, ambiguity serves as a powerful trigger at the sight of unfamiliar Blackness. This triggering serves to fulfill the master status of vague, dangerous otherness accompanied by feelings of uneasiness, fear, and even aestheticized hatred. The authentication of Lee’s Blackness in the opening scenes of Walking Dead relies on this ambiguity and amplifies it by situating him in the police cruiser. Juxtaposed
to the relatively unambiguous framing of the *Def Jam* characters, it becomes readily apparent that ambiguous or not, the marketable authenticity of virtual Blackness relies at least partially on the production and maintenance of a stereotypical style that equates Black with violent and criminal. And these are but two instances of virtualized visualizations of race. This imagery is ever-present within our socially mediated environment where the means of digital creation and production, especially the production of video games, is overwhelmingly held by hegemonically conditioned White bodies and positionalities. Every image can be mapped for connotative messages, and each take on added meaning when they are grouped in a sequence (as cited in Hall, 1997). All different but strikingly the same, viewed aggregately every re-presentation of *Def Jam’s* pointed dangerousness, CJ’s criminality, and Lee’s ambiguous scene, from street to screen, within gaming culture and outside of it, serve as visual microaggressions that, while seemingly minor individually, are powerful hegemonic justifications for the structural violence perpetrated on Black bodies and the simultaneous subjugation of Blacks to the margins of non-virtual culture (Sue, 2010). Stereotypes fueling microaggressions, microaggressions fueling stereotypes, a sinister synergy serving its part to mask the baseless authority of the White supremacist capitalist order of exploitation (Burdsey, 2011).

**The Countervisual as Empowerment and Resistance in Gaming**

Mirzoeff identifies the ‘right to look’ as a view that is situated within a framework of radical egalitarianism predicated off of each individual’s right to an existence of their own dictating (2011, p. 476). Further, its an assertion of the individual’s ability to create meaning out of ideas, information, and visual images instead of having that meaning pre-circumscribed by processes of visualization in service to authority (Ibid). 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” (p. 479). This acknowledgment and refusal, the assertion of a politically subjective right to look, puts what Mirzoeff calls a ‘countervisuality’ into play. Countervisuality challenges visuality’s classification through “education understood as emancipation” (ibid, pp. 484-85). Such countervisualities are not solely visual in nature, but include all efforts, strategies, and ideas that expand the discursive realm of autonomous possibility.

The power of this pathologized narrative is ever-present within mediated outlets (Curran, 2002). Scholars have identified the hegemonic potential of narrative by illustrating how narratives can contribute to the reproduction of existing structures of meaning and power (See: Culverson, 1998; Curran, 2002; Entman, 2007). In this fashion, narrative and visuality are closely linked; the former, arguably, in service to the latter. There are three important functions of narrative: 1) a means of social control, 2) a hegemonic process enhanced by the narratives’ ability to colonize consciousness; and 3) a contributor to hegemony to the extent that narratives conceal the social organization of their production and plausibility (Ewick & Silbey, 1995). 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. This reinforcement is an important tool in perpetuating certain ideological projects, and rhetoric deployed relies heavily on our previous encounters with certain metaphorical language.

**Images that Empower**

The employment of countervisualities can also manifest at the level of the psyche with active resistance to racism and racialization within gaming being potentially understood as an expression of psychological empowerment related to racism. As Zimmerman (1995) has defined, psychological empowerment “integrates perceptions of personal control, a proactive
approach to life and a critical understanding of the sociopolitical movement” (p. 581). Scholars have identified different aspects of psychological empowerment in relation to race, which includes interpersonal, interactional, and behavioral components (ibid.). Individuals who have high levels of race related psychological empowerment may not differ in their frequency of experiences with racial discrimination, but they may be more protected against negative psychological effects resulting from these encounters than those who have low levels of racial empowerment. The phenomenon of racial empowerment has the potential to counteract feelings of helplessness and frustration that may result from experiencing or witnessing a racist event, the development of discursive psychological reservoirs of personal strength and radical possibility (Zimmerman, 1995).

Gamers encounter stereotypical characters frequently in gaming culture as well as individual acts of racism (Gray, 2011). Another countervisual act of resistance to this situation often occurs by lifting up, and occasionally co-opting, characters that break with the mold of stereotypical Blackness. One such character, in addition to Lee from above, is Adéwalé, a former slave turned pirate, and the protagonist in *Assassin’s Creed: Freedom Cry*.
While the image in Figure 5 merely reflects Adéwalé engaged in pre-scripted fighting within the story narrative, gamers of color frequently use and reference this image as one of personal empowerment. Although a very violent visual, the narrative of a former slave killing slave traders and plantation masters is a narrative rarely expressed in video games or any other media outlet. This image, retweeted, reblogged, and often reposted reflects a transition among many Black gamers from powerlessness to participatory competence. The claiming of Adéwalé’s character as distinctly countervisual serves to assert “the right to look… claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity” – a sense of solidarity and group consciousness among many in the gaming community now actively urging for more diversity in gaming culture (Mirzoeff, 2011: 473).

Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) indicate that empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors to matters of social policy and social change. Pinderhughes and Pittman (1985) suggest that central to the concept of empowerment is the ability and the capacity to use one's self to create options for one's self and, most importantly, to reject the ideology of powerlessness and personal inadequacy. Rappaport (1995) argues, "the ability to tell one's story, and to have access to and influence over collective stories, is a powerful resource” (p. 802). To tell one's story, allows the individual to provide a narrative description, in everyday language, of life story or events that are unique. Rappaport (1995) further asserts that narrative is a useful perspective to have with respect to empowerment. “The goals of empowerment are enhanced when people discover, or create and give voice to, a narrative that sustains their own personal life story in positive ways” (p. 796). While gamers may not have direct power to recreate hegemonic imagery of
marginalized groups within gaming, Bandura (1989) asserts that people exert some influence over their lives by the construction and creation of their own environments.

Mirzoeff (2011) argues that as countervisual challenges to visuality’s hegemonic dominance over meaning construction and interpretation grows stronger, a sort of discursive arms race begins to occur. Mirzoeff (2011, p. 482) aligns this arms race with a process that “Foucault [(1977, p. 207)] called ‘intensity’ [that] has rendered visuality and countervisuality ‘more economic and more effective.’ Under the pressure of intensification, each form of visuality becomes more specific and technical…” An additional narrative often associated with Adéwalé’s image, illustrative of this intensification, stems from the default gamer who would prefer traditional (to be read: White) characters and storylines within gaming. Comments such as this are often posted in association with Adéwalé’s image: “this doesn’t belong in gaming, it belongs in history books.” This single statement is indicative of the level of discomfort felt by many White male gamers accustomed to seeing Whites in positions of power and control within gaming (Gray, 2012b). This response has propelled larger conversation within gaming culture of what constitutes “appropriate” narratives and storylines.

A substantial segment of the gaming community asserts sustained opposition towards increasing levels of diversity. These gamers contribute memes, pictures, commentary and other assertions of hegemonic visualization demonstrating their discontent with the increase of marginalized bodies within gaming that refuse to be immediately stereotypically racialized. One image in particular, Figure 6, gained notoriety in response to Rust, an online game that would automatically assign an identity to gamers - one such identity being Black. For some White gamers this engendered a crisis of hegemonic White supremacist identity (Gilman, 1985),
necessitating a reassertion of racialized visualization situated squarely within the plantation complex:

![Figure 6: Racist gamer’s response to *Rust* depicting stereotypical markers of a ‘nigger’](image)

The text associated with the image depicts stereotypical characterizations associated with Blackness: full lips, wide noses, large jaw structures, etc. And the prompt inside the dialogue box asks, “Are you sure you want to be a nigger?” The mouse cursor is pointed to ‘Yes’ completing the stereotyping process rooted in racism. As Dovidio and Gaertner explain (2004), old-fashioned prejudice has evolved into a new type that is resistant to traditional remedies and solutions of change. These new racisms and stereotypes have been repackaged as entertainment leading us to laugh at stereotypes and ignore microaggressions, and visualized violence (Burdsey, 2011). The development of these “new” racisms and complementary colorblind ideology can be understood as one more round of intensification rendering visuality that is much more effective.

**The White Problem in Gaming**
The singular narrative deployed in games that privileges Whiteness and masculinity reveals either a complete lack of creativity or desire to maintain this hegemonic ideal as the standard in gaming. Thus, the reappropriation of visual tools (videos, imagery, characters, etc) reflects an innovative means of resisting this level of dominant discourse (Phillips, 2000). The social locations of these cultural producers are necessary to examine the ways in which individuals and social institutions are situated within interlocking forms of privilege, dominance, oppression, and subordination. There is a continual history of Black resistance to hegemonic dominance and this resistance is finally gaining traction in mediated spaces. Once, these counter stories were limited in scope and dissemination, but alternative media outlets have emerged. Being empowered in this manner is not equivalent to the reversal of power relations, as Foucault (1988) outlines. Instead, this notion of empowerment exists within a realm of freedom through dismantling existing power relations. The continual omission and racialized distortion of marginalized groups contributes greatly to the shock of White gamers, typically sheltered by structural privilege, when they encounter examples of Blackness that are not discursively bounded 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 within virtual and non-virtual spaces, the distinction, as mentioned above, being discursively irrelevant. As research shows, gamers who engage in racialized practices don’t view their behavior as racist and fail to see any links to systemic racial domination. Brown (1997) acknowledges that contemporary Whites may truly believe their attitudes and actions that perpetuate racism are race-neutral. Among White gamers who actively use the “n-word” within gaming spaces, they view their speech as trash talk
and in no way connected to racist epithets (Gray, 2011). In order to fight back against this increasingly intensified plantation complex of visuality within virtual gaming culture and culture more broadly construed, what must occur is an intentional and strategic critical examination of, and countervisual intervention into, 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 blindness to the consequences of not seeing or acknowledging Whiteness (Lipsitz, 1995). Perhaps Mirzoeff’s imagining of “a time in which my claim to the right to look is met by your willingness to be seen”, not filtered through complexes of visualization, is yet possible (2011, p. 496).