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## Killing the Black Body: Necropolitics and Racial Hierarchies in Digital Gaming

### Keywords

video games, antiblackness, necropolitics, Black death, race

### Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore the patterns of antiblackness within contemporary gaming. Video games are sites of necropolitical logics that use Black death to propel narratives. But even more concerning, is that these games might make sense of larger desires of white colonial supremacy, attempting to remove and destroy its troubled racialized past. Ethnographic observations also engage gaming as a carceral logic that seeks to surveil, police, and criminal Blackness. Under these conditions, it is imperative to explore how the continuation of the institution of slavery within policing is actively embedded into technical and digital practices, leading to carceral conditions for those subject to its power and gaming provides a pathway to engage this trend.

## Ubijanje črnškega telesa: nekropolitika in rasne hierarhije v digitalnih igrah

### Ključne besede

videoigre, protičrnkost, nekropolitika, Črnska smrt, rasa

### Povzetek

Namen tega eseja je raziskati vzorce protičrnskosti v sodobnih videoigrah. Videoigre so prizorišča nekropolitike logike, ki Črnsko smrt uporablja za spodbujanje pripovedi. Še bolj skrb vzbujajoče pa je, da te igre morda osmišljajo večje želje kolonialne nadvlade, ko se skušajo znebiti svoje problematične rasizirane preteklosti. Zato etnografska opazovanja vključujejo tudi video igre kot obliko jetnišnične logike, ki skuša nadzorovati in kriminalizirati Črnkost. V teh pogojih je nujno raziskati, kako je nadaljevanje insti-

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tucije suženjstva vpeto v sisteme nadzora ter aktivno vgrajeno v tehnične in digitalne prakse. To pa vodi do jetnišničnih pogojev za tiste, ki so podvrženi njeni moči. Video igre omogočajo pot, kako se lotiti tega trenda.



## Introduction

Cameron Kunzelman writes in the essay, “Destroyed in the Cut,” that gaming “is deadly for its Black characters.”<sup>1</sup> While he may have been referencing *The Last of Us*, this statement is applicable to the larger landscape in which games have created and narrated Blackness, and that’s within a space of antiblack death. Engaging with the current theme of this volume, which returns to the question of the *body*, this essay engages the necropolitical tensions between Blackness and gaming, as a technological structure of white supremacy. Games urge for an immersive engagement of the material conditions of the body. While the body in gaming might be a digital rendering of hegemonic conceptualization, there are discursive realities in which we must contend. I argue that gaming serves as a necropolitical site to engage in antiblackness.

Gaming, as a narrative and immersive text, facilitates a particular kind of discursive arrangement wherein ideological structures are on permanent display. Racial and gendered hierarchies are produced on the assembly line of power in gaming. They become sites of very little contestation as Blackness becomes merely a mechanism to propel an action or storyline forward. The construction and uses of racial subjectivities fuel the logic that Black identity can be encapsulated and folded neatly into a system of consumptive entertainment. It is imperative to critically interrogate the techno-structure that engages in this form of antiblackness.

Going back to the game and TV adaptation of *The Last of Us* (hereafter also *TLOU*), it is a space that helps to make sense of the necropolitics of Black death

<sup>1</sup> Cameron Kunzelman, “Destroyed in the Cut,” *Bullet Points Monthly*, July 22, 2020, <https://bulletpointsmoonthly.com/2020/07/22/destroyed-in-the-cut-the-last-of-us-part-ii>. See also Cameron Kunzelman, *The World Is Born From Zero: Understanding Speculation and Video Games* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

that pervade the gaming industry. In *TLOU*, that game can be understood as a space where the creators had the sovereign right to kill Black characters. It was decided that certain bodies would be sacrificed for the movement of the larger plot, a revenge story essentially. To quickly summarize, *TLOU* is centered on white girl/womanhood throughout the entire series. We follow the world of Ellie and her quest to survive apocalyptic conditions although she is immune to the virus that has turned most of the world into zombies. The game introduces us to several Black girls and women who come into close proximity to Ellie only to be met with their demise soon after. The narrative world that was created protects Ellie and destroys Blackness. In one scene, the game forces us to kill a Black woman on behalf of Ellie: the game will not progress until we press the square button. While the creators of this game admit that there is an egregious amount of cruelty, it is justified as it is a revenge narrative written inside the apocalyptic genre. And while there is an extreme amount of death, Kunzelman explains that the treatment of Black death is beyond just a quick and to the point death. He states that Black death is unlike any other in the game, because a Black woman is condemned, stripped of her humanity, and is purposefully unmade of her personhood.<sup>2</sup> Even more concerning, the television adaptation of *TLOU* manages to increase the amount of Black death than was seen in the game.

### Carceral Logics and Black Death in Gaming

*TLOU* provides an entry point to make sense of the necropolitical logics that propel gaming narratives forward. One has to work hard not to notice the treatment of Black bodies in gaming. They are contrasted against disembodied whiteness that has free form and flow within the narrative schema. A recurring trope within game narratives is the continuation and reiteration of racism's colonial form: violence. The corporeal schema of designating death upon the Black body has a historical legacy. And because racism never loses its localization in the body, gaming becomes a primary site of white colonial supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Under these conditions, it is imperative to explore how the continuation of the institution of slavery within policing is actively embedded into technical and digital practices, leading to carceral conditions for those subject to its power.

<sup>2</sup> Kunzelman, "Destroyed in the Cut."

<sup>3</sup> Kent A. Ono, *Contemporary Media Culture and the Remnants of a Colonial Past* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

Scholars rightfully explore the carceral logics embedded in digital platforms.<sup>4</sup> Digital platforms often adopt policies and procedures supposedly to keep users safe. But what often happens is that some policies are unfairly applied leading to the intentional targeting of the most vulnerable in these spaces, most often Black people. So digital platforms have become places that reify institutional practices that police and criminalize Black practices.<sup>5</sup>

While gaming is not intentionally a carceral state, it operates often under these carceral logics which surveil and criminalize Blackness. In thinking broadly about carceral logics, they are extensions of the legacies of chattel slavery which shifted to the prison system upon the so-called ending of slavery.<sup>6</sup> Systems of capitalism forced descendants of enslaved populations into a permanent labor state under mass incarceration. The vulnerability that presents for Black people subjects them to levels of violence and colonial forces that sustain white supremacy. This anti-Black state of labor and violence often exists in a shadow of secrecy that justifies the destruction of Blackness in both actual and symbolic ways. Take this quote from Assata Shakur's 1978 essay:

For many, prison is not that much different from the street. [. . .] For many the cells are not much different from the tenements [. . .] and the welfare hotels they live in on the street. [. . .] The fights are the same except they are less dangerous. The police are the same. The poverty is the same. The alienation is the same. The racism is the same. The sexism is the same. The drugs are the same and the system is the same.<sup>7</sup>

For Shakur, prison recreates the conditions of slavery, and death is a feature of the system that attempts to restrict the fullness of Black life. These systems, structured by antiblackness, function as carceral technologies.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Kishonna L. Gray and Krysten Stein, "We 'Said Her Name' and Got Zucked': Black Women Calling-out the Carceral Logics of Digital Platforms," *Gender and Society* 35, no. 4 (August 2021): 538–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211029393>.

<sup>5</sup> Gray and Stein, 539.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Dillon, "Possessed by Death: The Neoliberal-Carceral State, Black Feminism, and the Afterlife of Slavery," *Radical History Review* 2012, no. 112 (Winter 2012): 113–25, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1416196>.

<sup>7</sup> Assata Shakur, "Women in Prison: How We Are," *The Black Scholar* 9, no. 7 (April 1978): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1978.11414002>.

<sup>8</sup> Dillon, "Possessed by Death," 115.

Gaming, too, can be explored through the lens of a carceral technology. Game narratives, especially violent ones, are driven by the extent to which it can extract labor and destroy bodies, especially Black ones. There has been a history of troubling and stereotypical narratives when it comes to representing Blackness<sup>9</sup> as well as exclusionary and discriminatory practices of Black folks inside other gaming spaces like streaming.<sup>10</sup> With this logic, there is the continual haunting of slavery and antiblackness. Black characters in games, much like Black people in reality, are haunted by the specter of whiteness. This lingering presence in the creative minds of the gaming industry indicates a desire to go back to the realm of supremacy and oppression which is often the only way to make sense of all the Black death inside gaming. *Battlefield 1* serves as a great example making sense of this premise.

### **#Blackdeath in Contemporary Gaming: Ethnographic Musings of *Battlefield 1***

October 2016. Swedish company DICE, published by American company Electronic Arts, released its award winning, first person shooter, *Battlefield 1*. There was much acclaim upon the release of the 10th installment of this series, and additional interest because it was the first to feature Black military personnel in significant ways. The Harlem Hellfighters are the opening act, if you will, fighting alongside the French in World War I. The opening moments in the game witness French, British, and American forces defending against German attacks around 1918.

But the game's opening provides us with a brief respite from war and struggle. It rightfully opens with the musical selection "Dream a Little Dream of Me,"<sup>11</sup> and we see a Black man resting peacefully in his bed. This peace and slumber

<sup>9</sup> Javon Goard, "Gamifying Blackness: A Discussion on Black Gamers and Black Portrayals in Contemporary Videogames," in "Racism and Sexism in Virtual Comic and Gaming Environments," ed. Rhys M. Hall and David G. Embrick, special issue, *Sociation* 22, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2023): 42–53.

<sup>10</sup> Akil Fletcher, "Black Gamer's Refuge: Finding Community within the Magic Circle of Whiteness," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Anthropology*, ed. Elisabetta Costa, Patricia G. Lange, Nell Haynes, and Jolynna Sinanan (London: Routledge, 2022), 368–78.

<sup>11</sup> Doris Day, vocalist, "Dream a Little Dream of Me," by Fabian Andre, Wilbur Schwandt, and Gus Kahn, released November 11, 1957, track 4 on *Day by Night*, Columbia CL 1053, 33<sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> rpm.

is interrupted by a white hand gently touching his right shoulder, as to motion him to wake up. So when he opens his eyes, he is thrust immediately into battle.

We awake on the ground, as if we were knocked out briefly. Our comrades quickly reorient us to the fight, but it's almost as if we are in an in-between state—of dream and reality, and we still hear the music:

Say nighty-night and kiss me  
Just hold me tight and tell me you'll miss me  
While I'm alone and blue as can be  
Dream a little dream of me<sup>12</sup>

We then shift our attention to a fist battle between two men. We now have a weapon in our hand, a Winchester semi-automatic rifle. The camera pans to our face and we begin to accept the reality in which we are in—war.

The game then fades to black and words appear on our screen orienting the viewer, the audience to what is about to come: “You are not expected to survive.” The concluding line of text is very chilling and unnerving. But for many who are accustomed to military shooters, we take this in jest, because most of these games are full of death and gore. But we respawn and ignore the larger ramifications of this symbolic death.

In the next scene, the actual gameplay begins. So most users ignore the emotional rollercoaster of the opening and put on our gamer hats and begin to wreak havoc on the digital lives of NPCs (non-player characters). We pick up our weapon and look for enemy combatants. We fight and shoot and we ignore the warning that the game offered: “You are not expected to survive.” We soon learn how true this statement is.

We begin traditional gameplay, and it's a template shooter: we find the enemy, kill them and avoid our own demise. And having played previous iterations of this game, the task is doable. But the gamer quickly recognizes that something is amiss with this gameplay. The enemy somehow has the innate ability to know where we are at every moment, and their bullets don't miss. It is hard to avoid

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<sup>12</sup> Lyrics from Day, “Dream a Little Dream of Me.”

being shot and we have to hide frequently to regenerate our health. Something is different with this game. I assume this latest installment has progressed in a way that the artificial intelligence has gotten smarter, and the machine learning more savvy to become a formidable opponent for its human, because we reach a point where we realize the game wants us to die.

I point and aim my weapon towards the enemy. I am shot from multiple vantage points and the screen turns red. The gameplay slows. I try to reload my weapon, and it takes so long. I can't retreat. I fall to my death.

Based on my prior knowledge and experience with first person shooter video games, I assume I will respawn as some previously saved checkpoint and get back into the fight. But something different happens. Words appear on my screen:

Clarence Point Coupee: 1900–1918

I pause the game here and take a moment to comprehend what I am seeing and experiencing. It feels like a memorial, a way to honor this person's life and death. I actually have a strong emotional reaction to seeing and witnessing this and to see the game honor that. At the moment, it feels beautiful. Because it is also coupled with an on-screen narration of what war meant, "a rite of passage."

The camera quickly pans to another gun, a French light machine gun with *beaucoup* ammo. We have to quickly dismiss the death of our comrade as we spawn into another life. This feels different. For other military shooters like *Call of Duty* and *Gears of War*, we respawn into the same life. We get a do-over. We can try it again. But the action feels progressive and moving forward at a pace that we are not in control of. The war is raging regardless of our actions, behaviors, and moves.

We get a hint from the game on how to use our weapon and how to improve its accuracy. I ask myself, "is this entire opening scene a tutorial?" Nevertheless, I comply. And the tip disappears.

Weapon Zoom

I quickly kill several soldiers progressing towards our position. They are increasing in numbers and the game is increasing in difficulty. We take on heavy fire and we are blown from our position atop this hill. I don't die. So I pick up a weapon and proceed through a destroyed edifice. On screen instructions caption the voice I hear in the game, telling me where to go. I listen. I comply. My comrades continue to die around me. I kill several opposing soldiers with the weapon I've picked up. I run out of ammo, and I pick up a pistol until I have time to reload the pump-action shotgun that has given me temporary success. That luck has run out. The screen starts to turn red. I can't regenerate my health. There is a fire around me. I have no way to escape. I am going to die.

James Johnson: 1892–1918

Another in-game memorial, honoring this fallen soldier. We shift to another life on his way to his death. I try not to normalize the theme of Black death, but we quickly reach our demise as the war rages on and the trend continues:

Theodore Panola: 1892–1918

Willie Jefferson: 1897–1918

Rudolph Johnson: 1886–1918

Death becomes more frequent, dramatic, and normalized. Memorial have lost their impact, as we realize the names are random and change with each experience in the game. Learning how to shoot the weapons and drive the machines becomes more novel than experiencing the final moments of these Black and Brown men's lives. Black death is the tutorial for the White war machine and the design feels intentional.

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David Leonard discusses disrupting and unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex in games in his 2004 essay.<sup>13</sup> He explains that virtual war games generate support for America's wars and imperialism around the world. Even playing a historical war game elicits nostalgia for the power and domination of a previous generation of American domination. Scholars have rightfully offered cri-

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<sup>13</sup> David Leonard, "Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex: Video Games and a Pedagogy of Peace," *SIMILE: Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 4, no. 4 (November 2004): 1–8.



tiques of these kinds of games to help us make sense of the layers of messaging and propaganda around the American nation state.

*Battlefield 1*, among other examples, provides an additional lens and inward investigation of US racial policy to expand white settler-colonial supremacy. Video games are a vehicle and tool that disseminate ideologies of power and hegemony. These games reveal more about the innate character of the US empire than sometimes other media. Users and gamers learn vital theories related to racial formation, hierarchies, and the legacies of supremacist practices.<sup>14</sup> And I must offer this reminder of the context in which *Battlefield 1* was created and released, the year 2016. The US empire had elected Donald Trump as its President after a targeted campaign of mis/disinformation aimed at vulnerable voters and social media users.<sup>15</sup> The movement for Black Lives was continuing to gain steam in the midst of so much backlash.<sup>16</sup> One glance at social media and one would assume the increased focus on Black lives resulted only in more death.

### Trauma Porn and Mediated Obsessions with Black Death

To make sense of the hypervisibility of Black death, during this era, Rasul Mowatt frames the complicated viewership of Black death as a snuff film. As Mowatt describes, “‘Snuff’ is a movie genre depicting the murder, dismemberment, or suicide of a person, often times for the viewer’s pleasure.”<sup>17</sup> While some argue over whether snuff films depict real death, there are always discussions that allude to their existence. But used in the context of Mowatt’s argument, the death we see materialized on our social media timelines was/is real. And like snuff films, the images of the bodies of Black people as well as the recordings of the actual killing of the Black person are commodities for entertainment and view-

<sup>14</sup> David Leonard, “Live in Your World, Play in Ours: Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other,” *SIMILE: Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 3, no. 4 (November 2003): 1–9.

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Kuo and Alice Marwick, “Critical Disinformation Studies: History, Power, and Politics,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 2, no. 4 (August 2021): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-76>.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Drakulich, Kevin H. Wozniak, John Hagan, and Devon Johnson, “Race and Policing in the 2016 Presidential Election: Black Lives Matter, the Police, and Dog Whistle Politics,” *Criminology* 58, no. 2 (May 2020): 370–402, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12239>.

<sup>17</sup> Rasul A. Mowatt, “Black Lives as Snuff: The Silent Complicity in Viewing Black Death,” *Biography* 41, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 777–806, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2018.0079>.

ing consumption. So similar to trends in larger media, *Battlefield 1* is a reflection of the larger treatment of Blackness and Black death.

As conversations around the movement for Black lives increased in magnitude, so did the visibility of Black death. Take the events that unfolded after the death of Mike Brown by Ferguson police officer, Darren Wilson. Visibility around the treatment of Black folks by the police aided in transforming public perceptions, social activism, and mobilization in a way that we haven't seen since televisions flooded homes with images of Black bodies being assaulted with water hoses and German shepherds in the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> And since the death of Mike Brown, we have continued to consume Black death as hashtags, linking victims of police violence to a larger culture and trend of systematic inequality,<sup>19</sup> and the continuation of plantation politics and carceral logics.

The gaming industry, as a mediated outlet, engaged in a variety of tactics to also express and espouse support for the movements for Black lives especially after the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Brands and organizations constructed statements and messages advocating for justice and sought reform to address the continued harms that the Black community is subject to. Many of the statements in support stated things like: "We stand with our colleagues and the Black community; we stand against racism, violence, and hate; we all have a responsibility to create change," among others.<sup>20</sup> Many companies provided funds to support public initiatives, research, and others tangible and symbolic efforts. Among gaming companies specifically, there were efforts to increase diversity in the workplace and to increase diverse representation in games.

While diversity is a broad topic, the desires and efforts to increase Blackness in particular has been met with some scrutiny. The increased visibility of Blackness

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<sup>18</sup> Michael J. Klarman, "How *Brown* Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (June 1994): 81–118, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2080994>.

<sup>19</sup> Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, "#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States," *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (February 2015): 4–17, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12112>.

<sup>20</sup> Nathalie Spielmann, Susan Dobscha, and L. J. Shrum, "Brands and Social Justice Movements: The Effects of True versus Performative Allyship on Brand Evaluation," *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* 8, no. 1 (January 2023): 83–94, <https://doi.org/10.1086/722697>.

in games requires a level of context and historical background that many consumers of games don't have. Using the concept "high-tech lynching" (wrongly used by Clarence Thomas), this phrase helps us make sense of the ways that digital technologies adhere to legacies and trends of rendering Blackness illegible, hypervisible, and subject to hyperviolence, continued carceral logics.

Recall the narrative around *Battlefield 1* from earlier. The hypervisibility of Black and Brown bodies and then the mechanic to force death upon them is similar to the historical trend of lynching. This game reveals the failure to acknowledge institutional and structural forces that perpetuate Black death at the intersection of race, gender, and class. And adding the layer of the digital reveals the need to utilize a concept like high-tech lynching.

While the spectacle and ritualistic nature of lynching was used as a tool for control, extrajudicial and police killings in recent years rarely receive the same level of attention. But take the death of Mike Brown as an example to understand high-tech lynching. Upon his death, his body laid in the street for hours before it was taken by the coroner. Additionally, his body was photographed and posted on social media and shared by an abundance of news outlets.<sup>21</sup>

Making connections between sharing his death as a high-tech lynching and historical lynching, I argue that the sharing of his body can be compared to the sharing of lynching photographs from the early 1900s. Lynching photography served as a representation, or a pictorial shorthand, of the consensus among white communities about the roles of Black people. These images proffered the version of white supremacist ideology that remained in hegemonic power from the post-Reconstruction period until the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>22</sup> The 1930s were a period where the meanings of lynching photographs and lynching in general were becoming contested among certain segments of

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<sup>21</sup> Ersula J. Ore, "Twenty-First Century Discourses of American Lynching," *Critical Discourse Studies* 20, no. 5 (2022): 508–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2022.2090978>.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Gregory, "Policing Jim Crow America: Enforcers' Agency and Structural Transformations," *Law and History Review* 40, no. 1 (February 2022): 91–122, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0738248021000456>.

the population, but when the public opposition to lynching was still being cultivated and the vast majority of lynchings still went unpunished.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to situate violence performed by social control agencies of the state in racially disparate manners. As scholars have long concluded, control agencies of the state (police included) principally serve the interests of the privileged.<sup>24</sup> And a primary task of criminal justice and law enforcement agencies is to maintain control over the dangerous classes who threaten the public order.<sup>25</sup> Lynching or death has been one of those tools utilized to maintain that order.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, policing as an extension of the state has also utilized the media to control messages and narratives.<sup>27</sup> So necropolitics continues to help us understand the targeted ways that Black bodies experience death in both physical and digital spaces. These systems of social control extend far beyond the physical spaces of jails and prisons, and these practices underscore how carcerality is embedded in and sustained by a range of processes and dynamics, including creating stereotypical characters (Blackness as criminal), the limiting of the Black expression in games (Blackness as the help or sidekick), and the devaluing Black life (Black death as seen in *Battlefield 1*). And the justification of Black destruction in the media is a part of the process to justify the continued destruction of Black bodies IRL (in real life). The carceral logics embedded inside gaming rely heavily on disseminating mediated messages and disinformation about Black life.<sup>28</sup> Systems of mass media have been built on the exclusion of people of color, so in the spaces of convergence, what new narratives, if any arise from what's

<sup>23</sup> Michael Hatt, "Sculpting and Lynching: The Making and Unmaking of the Black Citizen in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 1 (2001): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/24.1.1>.

<sup>24</sup> Naomi Zack, *White Privilege and Black Rights: The Injustice of U.S. Police Racial Profiling and Homicide* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Weitzer, "Theorizing Racial Discord over Policing Before and After Ferguson," *Justice Quarterly* 34, no. 7 (2017): 1129–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2017.1362461>.

<sup>26</sup> Bonilla and Rosa, "#Ferguson."

<sup>27</sup> Sherri Williams, "#SayHerName: Using Digital Activism to Document Violence against Black Women," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 5 (2016): 922–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1213574>.

<sup>28</sup> Madhavi Reddi, Rachel Kuo, and Daniel Kreiss, "Identity Propaganda: Racial Narratives and Disinformation," in "Farm Media," ed. Zenia Kish and Benjamin Peters, special issue, *New Media and Society* 25, no. 8 (August 2023): 2201–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144448211029293>. First published online in 2021.

created? Using gaming as an extension of media, there are continued trends to adopt racialized narratives that fit within white racial schemas of acceptance.

### **Hypervisibility as a Cultural Script of Control**

Scholars have been outspoken in examining the dangers of hypervisibility for the Black community. As Nirmal Puwar<sup>29</sup> outlines the paradox of “in/visibility” for minoritized folks: as ‘in/visible’ subjects, vulnerable populations are highly visible and this occurs in spaces occupied and dominated by privileged bodies. The close proximity in which we reside renders the vulnerable as bodies out of place.<sup>30</sup> But these bodies become perpetually bound and conditioned to the legacies of racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression. Black women have been severely punished under these conditions. They present a subversive threat because of the sexist and racist constructions of the social hierarchy. The use of violence on Black women’s bodies has a direct connection and relationship to plantation necro and sexual politics. Contemporary manifestations of this practice often appear as a reminder of Black women’s place in the gendered or racial hierarchy.

Hegemonic structures then create racist and gendered scripts that many of us are conditioned to follow. Media is a great tool in propelling these scripts. A great example is Ronald Jackson’s work on how Blackness has been written and coded into media as tropes of what it means to be Black.<sup>31</sup> Within games, Black characters have been created by White designers, and have historically been categorized as sidekicks, criminals, and non-playable villains. While the categories continue to grow and improve, it is hard to untangle and detach the new stories from the racial and settler colonial projects in which they were created.

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Gaming is an interesting space because it combines the innovative tools of a variety of media. It has the immersive qualities not seen in TV, and the screen cultures are dynamic and captivating and draw in huge audiences. The convergence of social media and streaming into gaming spaces provide a level of con-

<sup>29</sup> Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Puwar, *Space Invaders*.

<sup>31</sup> Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

nectivity to build community and interact in real time. The ability to mobilize to reach audiences in a matter of minutes with content can't be ignored. So the images of hypersexualized or hypervisible women and hypermasculine men are a part of an instantaneous message machine that feeds dangerous narratives about vulnerable populations.

Under this framework, it's important to interrogate how hypervisibility creates conditions of pain and harm for women of color in gaming. Larae Barrett from *Tom Clancy's The Division* offers a perspective. Larae is not a playable character in this game. She's actually a non-playable character and is situated as a villain. This is a common trope of Black women in gaming, beyond the help and support role, they are often villainous and/or monstrous mothers. The game frames Larae as an angry black woman, villain, and criminal. She gives a speech in the game that is reminiscent of rhetoric deployed in contemporary movements for Black lives. And during this speech, she kills a man in front of the crowd. While her speech has nothing to do with the violent act, the linkages between both solidify her as a dangerous villain and we ultimately kill her in the game.<sup>32</sup>

An additional example of the dangers of hypervisibility for women of color comes from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. In *Call of Duty*, there is a perk called "Cold-Blooded." A perk is an increased benefit or skill set in the game that one has to buy or build up and this one in particular lets the user be invisible to detection systems and reduces visibility so you're not easily identifiable when targeted. When the character Farah Karim enables this perk, it is supposed to render her invisible when opposing players look for her through their long-range visual scope in the game. While it renders her body invisible, her hijab is still prominently visible and, in fact, glowing while looking at her through the scope, making her hypervisible and subject to an increased amount of deaths (and racial and gendered disparity).

This example illustrates the landscape in which diverse characters are often created. It fits within the scheme of adding and stirring and hoping that the diverse bodies can seamlessly transition into the hegemonic structures of Western empire and white supremacy. There is a knowledge imbalance when these diverse

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<sup>32</sup> Kishonna L. Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020).

characters are introduced to satisfy the needs of empire, settler colonial legacies, and white supremacy. There is no real incorporation of this diversity as they merely serve as tokens to placate white desires and guilt. So the hypervisibility and hyperviolence Farah is subject to represents a type of gendered colonization of Black bodies that makes it possible to continue to reify women of color exempt from full life. These examples continue to suggest that Black flesh is discardable.<sup>33</sup>

### Black Death in Gaming as Antiblackness

Scholars continue to engage theoretically with conversations around the body and the material conditions of the body. While these conversations continue to grow and expand, it is disturbing to recognize that much of the story of Blackness remains unchanged. From the necropolitics of *Battlefield 1* and *The Last of Us*, to the continued movements for Black lives, we still are engaging conversations around the violent, colonialist undercurrents of physical and digital life. It is not hard to understand why the hypocrisy of law and order continues to wreak havoc on the Black community. Achille Mbembe's work speaks to the fantastic worlds that continue to be created off the literal backs of Black bodies.<sup>34</sup> White fantasies of futures without Blackness continue to be created. It is in these spaces that make us wonder if there is an intentional, nihilistic desire to destroy Black people. Necropolitical narratives justify continued violence in physical and digital spaces. In these games in particular, they can be understood as spaces where creators have the sovereign right to kill Black characters. Conditions under antiblackness and necropolitics decide what bodies will be sacrificed.

So by exploring these gaming examples, we get a peek inside the sinister ways in which whiteness imagines itself disconnected and removed from its troubled racialized past. These games may provide offerings of the dark side of humanity, but these created conditions are actually just the imaginations and machinations of white supremacy. What we actually get to see in the midst of all the Black death and pain is the brutal nature of whiteness. These characters aren't

<sup>33</sup> Jasmine Johnson, review of *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, by Ashon Crawley, *Dance Research Journal* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 109–11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767717000274>.

<sup>34</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

just randomly killed or left to die in some arbitrary fashion. The game specifically and intentionally designed the parameters in which Black folks are subject to the most harms. Their identities rendered them hypervisible and subject to the most harms and violence. These games continue to frame Black folks as a “troublesome property.”

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