

Black Deprivation in Naughty Dog's The Last of Us Remastered and The Last of Us Part II

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Abstract

In recent years, several content creators and game developers have attempted to engage the complexities of re-articulating, re-creating, and re-narrating black subjectivity being-in-the-digital-world as a way of proactively creating more diverse and authentic representations. Though these developers' earnest efforts are appreciated and valued, their strenuous attempts sometimes fail to reassess what Black existence means, furthermore, what the existential implications are in and out of the gaming world. This essay examines black subjective demise as a philosophical reflection of the white gaze, providing a context in which black characters in The Last of Us and The Last of Us Part II are shaped through Naughty Dog's whiteness, which sustains what I call black deprivation. Both games not only expose the normative order of whiteness and its existential impact upon digital black bodies but also expose the ideological constructions of blackness and practices of white prejudice discourse.

Introduction

As a new strain of discourse, the black game sphere may be described as a realm of game culture where black protagonists are unapologetic lead characters in premier games and major franchises. From the moment of its emergence during “the Obama phenomenon,” black protagonists have materialized as a 21st-century neo-narrative about race and the meaning of blackness, forging an essential place in the consciousness of white mainstream gaming com-

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munities. In a larger sense, the black game sphere presents a new way of seeing race and blackness as it challenges the game industry's biased cultural norms. Several notable content creators and game developers have attempted to engage the complexities of re-articulating, re-creating, and re-narrating black subjectivity being-in-the-digital-world as a way of proactively visualizing more diverse and authentic representations. Several games foster immersion and engagement with black protagonists such as New Orleanian assassin revolutionist Aveline de Grandpré in Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012/2014), the falsely convicted History professor Lee Everett in Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead, Season One* (2012), revengeful Vietnam War veteran Franklin Clay in Hangar 13's *Mafia III* (2016/2017/2020), legendary assassin Billie Lurk in Arkane Studio's *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* (2017), and android rebel 'Markus' in Quantic Dream's *Detroit: Become Human* (2018/2019). These games, and several others, engage in the authenticity and agency of blackness which cuts against the grain of conventional stereotypes. However, more games continue to perpetuate and marginalize blackness at the expense of maintaining the status quo of whiteness.

Widespread historical stereotype discourse of the black body encounters the gaming space, maintaining first and foremost that derogatory images of blackness remain intact. As such, the digital black body as a discursive text embodies racial stereotypes repetitively embedded within game development pragmatics. Bell and Harris (2016) point out that the "black body is a text to be read and/or interpreted by audiences internationally, in person, at home, on television, in the community, at work, or even at school" (p. 138). The black body as a text is imposed upon through the perception of the white gaze, struggling to transcend white fiction and imagination. The most influential conceptions of blackness in the white imagination involve seeing the black body through false narratives, according to which value judgments are created and maintained.

In confronting the racial reality concerning digital black bodies in console video games, it is vitally important to use as a criteria insights from Yancy and Fanon. Yancy (2008) provides a philosophical treatment of the black body in the context of whiteness in America and unearths the mechanisms of racism by explaining the hegemonic power of whiteness and the white gaze. According to Yancy, the white gaze "constructs the black body against the backdrop of a racist discursive regime of 'truth'" (p. 91). In *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), Fanon echoes the sentiments of Sartre, stating that the "white gaze fixes blackness, marking it with a slur and epidermal character, thus sealing blackness into itself" (as cited in Drabinski, 2019, p. 8). As such, the black body becomes a negotiated product within white spaces, reproducing a 'truth' woven by the pillars of whiteness—the history of racism and the culture of stereotypes—which functions as the normalcy of blackness. This invention of 'truth' through the lens of the white gaze "possesses the power to unveil, 'to dissect,' 'to lay bare,' the unknown [and] 'fixes' the black [body] in [its] place, 'steadies' [it], in order to decode and comfortably recode [it] into its own systems of representations" (Yancy, 2008, p. 93). The black body is constrained within and unable to transcend the parameters of the conscientious white imagination and inextricable white gaze.

The culture of creating the black body's inability to transcend the parameters of whiteness in gaming spaces is what I call 'black deprivation' where black characters are restricted from any potential of autonomous value and erode the longevity of black existence to justify white preservation. This familiar game culture is part of ideological constructions of blackness and practices of white prejudice discourse. As such, black deprivation is identifiable in several games such as Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead, Season One* (2012) and Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* (2010). For example, in *The Walking Dead, Season One*, gamers play the role of African-American professor Lee Everett who encounters volatile white masculinity as he interacts with two white southerners, Larry and Kenny. Both white characters are discontented with Lee, which is fueled by his past (convicted of a crime), race (African American), and social class (university professor). However, during the game, Lee demonstrates his intelligence, devotion, and leadership to not only ensure Clementine's survival (the little girl that Lee protects) but also protect Larry, Kenny, and other white survivors who have joined the group. Despite Lee's meaningful presence in the game, he dies due to an infection after season one, emphasizing that his survival is less important than the white characters who are prioritized and survive.

Another instance where the black body is subjugated to black deprivation is in Quantic Dream's psychological thriller game *Heavy Rain* (2010). Players take on the role of four protagonists to solve a series of child murders committed by the "Origami Killer." As white FBI Agent Norman Jayden, players encounter Jackson "Mad Jack" Neville, a junkyard operator and the main suspect in the theft of a 1983 Chevrolet Malibu. The narrative's representation of Jackson interweaves the historical and social perceptions of black masculinity as dark, burly, and threateningly fearful. In one of the uncanny scenarios between Jackson and Norman, the men engage in a verbal altercation that morphs into a physical brawl. Norman struggles but eventually defeats Jackson as Jackson's loose clothing is caught in the crawler grooves of an unattended moving heavy tractor. Jackson vigorously petitions for help, but Norman ignores his plea and walks away. The Jackson and Norman scenes explicitly yoke together the historical and social diametric representation of "savage" versus "civilized," "inferior" versus "superior," and "black" versus "white." *Heavy Rain* demonstrates that black masculinity carries with it "images of pain, suffering, and death" as the presence of blackness labors and dies to maintain white existential longevity (Gray, 2020, p. 68).

In the same vein, Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (2013) and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), created and directed by Neil Druckman, best illustrate black deprivation in games for several reasons. First, both games' persistent racial problematics with blackness seem to exemplify stereotypical western culture, creating a more impactful picture of black deprivation than found in *The Walking Dead* (2012) and *Heavy Rain* (2010). Second, both games received numerous accolades in the United States and across Europe, such as BAFTA Games Awards for Best Games, BAFTA Games Awards for Action and Adventure, BAFTA Games Awards for Best Story, Writers Guild of America Award for Outstanding Achievement in Video Game, Game Award for Best Anticipated Game, and the impressive list continues. Not only

did both games receive overwhelmingly positive reviews, but they experienced universal success—*The Last of Us Part II* sold over four million copies, and *The Last of Us* sold over 17 million copies. Precisely, their wide-ranging notoriety suggests more exposure to gamers which is more reason to probe Naughty Dog's lack of responsibility to avoid perpetuating the stereotypical constructs widely associated with people of color. *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part Two* up the ante by adding more stereotypical imagery to the racist construct already present in previous games, re-enforcing the images graphically and tonally.

One has to wonder, are there subtexts to these post-pandemic survivalist games? Do these games speak to 'Us' on some level as humans? Are these games existential commentary about which 'Us' matters and which 'Us' does not? Perhaps most importantly, are these games cautionary tales for the *other* 'Us' as humans to rethink the world in which we attempt to survive? The conversation surrounding these questions is essential, especially in such a time of racial unrest.

This essay attempts to probe these questions through the lens of black deprivation and challenge content creators, developers, and writers to reframe how black characters are scripted in video games. It is not the scope of this essay to dwell on all of Naughty Dog's games, although one can see the intersection between black deprivation and *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* (2016), *Uncharted: A Lost Legacy* (2017), and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014). *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II* games expose black deprivation, the normative order of whiteness, its existential impact upon digital black bodies, the ideological constructions of blackness, and practices of white prejudice discourse.

Black Deprivation in *The Last of Us Remastered*

Naughty Dog's popular and critically acclaimed brutal post-pandemic game, *The Last of Us* (2013), was released exclusively for Sony's Playstation 3 video game console with remastered version for the Playstation 4 (2014). The game offers two white protagonists as central playable characters: Joel, a 40-year-old survivor and father figure, and Ellie, a 14-year-old orphan. *The Last of Us Remastered* narrates the experiences of Joel and Ellie as he escorts her through a post-apocalyptic America in the wake of a worldwide pandemic that metamorphoses infected humans into cannibalistic creatures known as "the Infected." The game explicitly foregrounds the elusive nature and important implications of human survival in a competitive and hostile environment.

The game includes three secondary black NPCs: Henry and his younger brother, Sam, are roaming survivalists with short-lived lives; And Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies militia, is entangled in a deadly exchange with Joel before he finally kills her. Naughty Dog's inclusion of these black characters has received minimal attention and criticism. However, Russworm (2017) criticizes Naughty Dog in "Dystopian Blackness and the limits of racial empathy in *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*," claiming that "*TLoU* most evidently satisfies an

uncritical multiculturalist imperative to merely include diverse characterizations in game worlds" (p. 112). From Russworm's perspective, Naughty Dog has included these characters only to treat them as, using Yancy's term, "standing-reserve": raw materials waiting to be used [and] exploited [...] through whiteness, or as Heidegger would call it, "available equipment" (Yancy, 2008, p. 185). The following exposition briefly demonstrates how Naughty Dog's post-pandemic project fails to create a narrative where Black survivalists become a site of value and meaning, and as a result, are unable to transcend their world.

Concealed in the Title: 'Us'

The game's title, *The Last of Us Remastered*, is the first apparent attempt to build an account based on the familiar idea of who would survive a dystopian world. The crucial adjective *Last* instantly calls attention to itself as it indicates a position in a particular situation, integral to the substantive noun that reinforces and emphasizes the visual on the game case cover: Joel and Ellie. As such, the game's title can be read, in part, with a linguistic twist, in which its meaning is taken to assert specific knowledge and can be metaphorically interpreted to mean something different. The word *Us* brought together with the image of Joel and Ellie, who are assigned both implicit knowledge and distinctive meaning, underscores Darwinism and emphasizes a bias towards whiteness that serves as an axiological code and is within the context of the title and also the content of the game. As such, the image of Joel and Ellie seen with the title represents a fixed racialized taxonomy that connects them as survivors whose whiteness allows them to overcome existential crises during a pandemic. Moreover, there is linguistic tension between the literal meaning and the metaphorical meaning of the word *Us*.

The tension concealed in the meaning of the word *Us* reveals conceptual oppositions that reinforce a particular notion of who matters. The persistence of whiteness to exist rather than die is seen on the cover and experienced throughout the game. The *unseen* that is *seen* on the cover and implied in the word *Us* is the notion that blackness is not meant to survive, or black people are not meant to inherit a future beyond their lived condition. This horrifying phenomenon is expressed in the game's narrative as Henry, Sam, and Marlene are confronted by situational disadvantages relative to not surviving, while Joel and Ellie are scripted to transcend the zombie apocalypse as irreversible supererogation survivalists. As Gordon (1997) observes, a presence-absence dichotomy in the term *Us* and its literal and implied meanings explicitly reveal that "black presence is absence and white presence is presence lead to a skewed logic. Rules that apply to white [digital] bodies, by virtue of bad faith, substantiated identity of being-what-it-is, change when applied to black [digital] bodies" (p. 73). The black presence of Henry, Sam, and Marlene are not sources of existential expansion and meaningful narration within the context of the game. One way to make this point apparent is to examine the existential inessentiality of the three black NPCs.

Black Survivalists' Deaths: Sam and Henry

In Chapter 5: "Pittsburg," Joel and Ellie unexpectedly encounter Henry and Sam, who, like them, desperately escaped unrelenting attacks from ruthless ambushers and the onslaught of the Infected. Henry offers an ethical welcoming, as he acknowledges the capacity for managing their survival is greater together as he utters one of the principles of Darwinism: "Survival of the fittest" (Naughty Dog, 2014). The brothers prove to be the most logical candidates for survival, particularly Henry, who portrays black subjectivity as complex, intelligent, knowledgeable, and resourceful. Perhaps, the designated leader of the group, Henry, should be praised for his actions as he provides food and shelter, develops an escape plan, helps ward off hunters, and saves Joel's and Ellie's life. However, Naughty Dog's racialized consciousness demonstrated through Joel's conviction reveals their important endorsement of white patriarchy and masculinity as chosen qualities of the hero. Joel's unflinching sense of conviction is caused by his failure to foster a continuous role of power and authority. In fact, Joel challenges Henry's moral judgment and ethical commitment at every turn. Perhaps, worse than that, Joel witnesses how Ellie finds solace under the leadership of Henry as she adheres to his direction and desires a friendship with Sam.

At this juncture, Naughty Dog seems to refrain from including nonwhite characters as significant practitioners in the survival of human history. As a result, they reimagine black subjectivity and later portray Henry as a nihilist overwhelmed by a sense of despair, disappointment, and meaninglessness. Henry's autonomous agency is no longer a site of value, creating and maintaining profound levels of existential stability for himself and Sam. Existential nihilism promotes a state of hopelessness, judging human life as meaningless and existing without purpose. Existential nihilism provides a paradigmatic frame for describing Henry's existence without ontology, which is particularly understood in Chapter 6: "Suburbs" when Joel and Ellie reunite with Henry and Sam after the group separated during an ambush. Several cutscenes later, towards the bleak ending of the chapter, Sam viciously attacks Ellie, pummeling her to the floor, revealing to Henry and Joel (and the gamer) that Sam has been infected. Joel shuffles for his weapon to deal with the human/nonhuman predicament:

JOEL: Shit. He's turning.

HENRY: That's my fuckin' brother!

JOEL: Screw it!

This particular cutscene exemplifies how Ellie is an exclusive concern for Joel. However, beneath it all, Henry understands his brother through the concept of "double vision"—the term coined by Hayes III—that allows him to see Sam's black subjectivity and what Sam has become. Henry's urgent obligation to save his brother was necessary as he undoubtedly understood that it would mean killing him. For Henry, it meant to render his brother, Sam, visible by making his *becoming* the Infected invisible.

In the final cutscene, Henry points his pistol towards Joel and then, unexpectedly, shoots himself. Henry's death is problematic because it destroys any possibility for real meaning. In Camus's *Caligula* (1958), a character called Cherea observes that "what's intolerable is to see one's life being drained of meaning, to be told there's no reason for existing" (p. 30). Cherea's statement is indicative of Naughty Dog's sole purpose for Henry. It is crucial to bear in mind a cluster of troubling questions: How is it possible that Henry has moved from existential survivalist to existential nihilist by the end of the chapter? How does Naughty Dog justify affirming digital black life and simultaneously rejecting digital black subjectivity? How can Henry not imagine himself beyond the death of his brother, Sam, but Joel could survive after the death of his daughter, Sarah? Such contradictions reveal how Naughty Dog equates blackness, Henry and Sam, with despair, nihilism, and death. As such, Naughty Dog's "key story decisions exacerbate the flawed tradition of conflating black identity with the pathos of sacrifice and suffering" (Russworm, 2017, p. 119). They defy any attempt for Henry to transcend his nihilism. However, a shift in the game's narrative could have scripted Henry's existence to be meaningful and purposeful as he embodies the words of Camus: "In the darkest depths of our nihilism, I have sought only for the means to transcend nihilism" (Cruikshank, 1960, p. 3). As Naughty Dog has demonstrated, Henry and Sam's quest to survive was necessary but not sufficient.

Similarly, Naughty Dog asserts the necessity for black female subjectivity to ensure humanity's survival. Marlene, the final antagonist in the game and principal leader of the underground group, the Fireflies, is a secondary character who has a significant role in the game's larger narrative. Naughty Dog sets Marlene as a self-confident leader who embodies an expression of liberation and radical subjectivity. Certainly, Marlene's purpose has been to protect Ellie as promised to her mother, Anna, regardless of the cost and exercise options for the greater good of the Fireflies and humanity. This uncharted ground of analysis requires mapping Marlene's shift from an indispensable ally to an inessential antagonist. Although Marlene's narrative is intricately linked to Joel, she disrupts the long-standing structures of the white male hero; therefore, her death is inevitable.

Marlene's Shift: Indispensable Ally to Inessential Antagonist

An excellent place to begin this analysis is with the descriptive clarity of Marlene. Like other characters in the game, little is known about Marlene before the widespread outbreak. Marlene emerges as a central figure in pivotal moments of the story, such as her and the Fireflies' violent resistance against totalitarian military regimes, her willing collaboration with Joel's brother, Tommy, to survive their new reality, her distinctive moral reasoning to provide parental care for Ellie after the death of Anna, and her existential dilemma to save humanity understanding that the degree of risk would override Ellie's life. On this score, Marlene's character is distinctively interwoven with traits of courage, reliability, and temperance, all of which are convincingly demonstrated in the game. Notwithstanding, Naughty Dog's perception creates a context of illusion through the juxtaposition of Marlene and Joel, fostering

spaces where Marlene—despite all logic—is intentionally denied any claims to the status of heroine. From this perspective, Naughty Dog allows Marlene to transcend the ramifications of several deadly situations only to collapse in deference to white masculinity during the most significant moment in the game.

Near the end of the narrative, Marlene and Joel encounter each other for the final few sequences. It is important to remember that Marlene requested that Joel deliver Ellie to the Fireflies located at the capitol building prior to this moment. They would escort Ellie to Salt Lake City, where the Fireflies have a more extensive operating system, including a medical facility. After Joel and Ellie arrive at the medical facility, he is greeted by Marlene, who has taken Ellie to another part of the facility. Here, where the remaining scenes cut against the solidarity between Marlene and Joel, Marlene explains that Ellie is immune to the fungal virus, and her blood could be a vaccine to cure humankind, but as a result, Ellie would die.

Interestingly, Marlene experiences a genuine moral dilemma where she is challenged by two choices knowing that she can preserve only one: her responsibility as the leader of the Fireflies and the potential to save humankind and remaining steadfast to her promise to Ann to keep Ellie safe. Joel attempts to contest Marlene's decision as other Fireflies suggest that she kills Joel. In her refusal to kill him, she has one of her soldiers escort him out of the building after their verbal exchange.

Joel has perceived his position as one of objectified status in his encounters with Marlene. It seems evident that Joel's actions throughout the game concerning black characters are neither pristine nor unambiguous. However, Naughty Dog casts him as the heroic figure, which might have to do less with heroism and more with "symbolically embodying white racial superiority" at the expense of black subjectivity and agency (Nama, 2011, p. 10). To overcome the implicit challenge to white masculinity, Joel embraces his relationship to violence as he overpowers a soldier and goes on a killing rampage throughout the facility searching for Ellie. After he secures Ellie, Joel and Marlene's final encounter unfolds. The essence of this sequence is an encounter of systematic constructs. For Joel, the encounter is an event that maintains the *status quo*, continuing the biased tradition of the prevailing white masculine hero. For Marlene, she desires to save humanity and enact her humanity against an anti-black world.

Their inevitable deaths complete the existence of these three digital black bodies in the game. It is important to emphasize that Naughty Dog's act of black deprivation suggests that the existence of Sam, Henry, and Marlene are better off dead than alive. In "A Litany for Survival" (1978), Lorde's final line is most befitting within the context of the game: "We were never meant to survive" (p. 31-32). Like the white imagination, Naughty Dog fails to envision the possibility of their survival, signaling that both black humanity and longevity are not vital options. Unfortunately, the gamer has limited him or herself to the spectacle and entertainment of digital black deaths. In *Woke Gaming: Challenges to oppression and social justice*

(2018), Gray and Leonard (2018) lament, “the humanity of Black lives is lost, reducing life to the spectacle of Black death” (p. 6). Naughty Dog, or more specifically, Druckmann, employs the act of black deprivation to produce positive conclusions for white characters Joel and Ellie. Despite explicit expressions and well-intentions to include the diverse ethnicity of Sam, Henry, and Marlene, *The Last of Us Remastered* still perpetuates widespread sentiments that are only visualized through the white gaze.

The Continuum of Black Deprivation in *The Last of Us Part II*

The Last of Us Part II (TLoU II) plunges gamers five years later into Naughty Dog’s drastically decimated post-pandemic wasteland, one which measures human nature and morality against the disintegrating structure and frailty of human culture. The narrative strategy in the game serves as a lens to examine central characters’ controversial decisions within a descriptive moral framework as the game consistently asks gamers to counter what it means to be human with what it means to be moral in such a chaotic world as characters “try to adhere to a more beneficial sense of their moral code” (Green, 2016, p. 747). Druckmann attempts the paradoxical: sympathetic immorality. The game offers gamers a diametrically polar experience to the first installment. As Druckmann explains, “The first game, at the very core, was trying to tap into this primal feeling that a parent has for their child. This unconditional love. How do we create a game that captures that? This game [*The Last of Us Part II*] tells a very complementary story” (Newton, 2018).

The story breaks with the central theme from *The Last of Us* in crucial ways, proffering instead for more horrific gameplay through forms of hate, morality, and violence. Much of the emphasis of human morality is on Ellie and Abby, a member of the Washington Liberation Front and the daughter of Dr. Anderson who Joel murdered in *TLoU*. It is striking that two prominent secondary black characters Nora Harris, a trained medical officer, and Isaac Dixon, the leader of the Washington Liberation Front (WLF), are not characterized in terms of “human morality.” This section argues that the continuum thesis from the previous game, black deprivation, manifests itself in Nora and Isaac, who are marked by their measure of human morality.

Gamers encounter the main protagonist Ellie who is 19 years old and lives in a reconstructed settlement in Jackson, Wyoming. She and Joel, now in his mid-fifties, live peacefully amongst other survivors in the thriving and tranquil community. Still, there is the constant imminent threat of the infected and continuous terrifying dangers of treacherous factions. The story’s tone shifts when Ellie is forced to witness Abby Anderson brutally kill Joel. This atrocious event sends Ellie on a relentless journey to enact her retributive justice at any cost. As she hunts those individuals responsible for Joel’s death, the lines between good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice, heroine and villain, and forgiveness and condemnation are blurred; thus, challenging gamers, as Druckmann intended, to consider their notions of moral laws. It is this emphasis on moral quandaries that become particularly apro-

pos with characters, most notably Ellie, as the game “seeks to show the immensely complex morality and emotional depth of human beings” (Chinn, 2020). While a measure of human morality occurs between Ellie and white characters in the game, it would be a mistake to ignore Nora and Isaac’s depictions of human morality despite their scripted deprivation and temporality.

Nora and Isaac’s Depictions of Human Morality

One of the earlier memorable and fruitful portrayals of human morality occurs during a cutscene when Ellie searches for Nora at Lakefield Hospital in Seattle. Pointing the gun at her, Ellie begins to question Nora about Abby’s location. During their brief verbal exchange, Nora creates an opportunity to escape. After an intensive chase, overcoming WLF soldiers, and avoiding the infected, Ellie confronts Nora again. Ellie stands over her in a threatening posture while again pointing her pistol and questioning her about Abby’s location. The significance of this moment is captured in Nora’s dialogue: “We could have killed you” (Naughty Dog, 2020). This dialogical entry makes Nora’s moral language a point of departure as it provides the gamer with a sense of her moral thinking. Nora’s five words are important in two specific ways. First, her statement suggests favoring human life or, at the very least, not unnecessarily disposing of it. Nora has the capacity to display in her conduct and communication appropriate moral virtues. Second, the statement implies that living in an inhumane world does not negate the human act of acknowledging and demonstrating a moral concern for either friend, foe, or stranger. The statement proves that Nora can exercise moral capacity and moral judgment that produce a humane outcome. As the only black woman character in the game, Nora symbolizes moral thought and is not so much deprived or warped by Ellie’s vengeance as she is marked and shaped by her humanity. However, Naughty Dog scripted her death as an acceptable casualty of Ellie’s violent revenge.

It is significantly worth noting that Nora did not have to become a victim of Ellie’s relentless and graphic violence. A couple of chapters earlier, Nora was exposed to the virus that would have eventually turned her into the infected. Nevertheless, *The Last of Us* universe is not conducive for black women characters to survive, but they become existentially expendable. For example, if we revisit *The Last of Us* and the expansion pack, *Left Behind*, we will recognize that Naughty Dog’s apparent strategy is to create “images contrasting white female bodies with black ones in ways that reinforced the greater value of the white female icon” (hooks, 1992, p. 64). Indeed, it is unfortunate that Nora dies because of Ellie’s revenge and justice; however, Nora’s agency begs questions about moral choice, performance, and responsibility.

Continuing this engagement of black moral invisibility requires providing an analytical recognition of Isaac Dixon. Dixon has been referred to as the “secondary antagonist” in the game, depicting him as “ruthless,” dangerous, and “willing to torture innocent people” (Sakellariou, 2020). This type of scripting of Dixon is detrimental to identity meaning-making because it continues to “perpetuate societal fears about black men” and overall “delimits

black folk, devaluing their humanity" (Gray, 2020, p. 68). Despite obvious stereotypical descriptors, there appears to be a nexus between Dixon and his moral duty that pushes against the boundaries of the script. It is necessary to define the *morality of duty* before unpacking two scenes where his morality is visible to avoid seeing Dixon through the white gaze.

By all accounts, "a morality of duty is one that requires each individual to demonstrate concerns for the interests of others" (Gyekye, 2011). Commander Isaac Dixon occupies morality of duty principles as emphasized through his "compassion, solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence, and social well-being" in the game (*Ibid.*). These essential principles can be seen after Anderson returns to their home base and is escorted by Manny Alvarez, a close friend of Abby, to meet with Isaac. During this moment, Isaac is intensely coercing an individual as Abby and Manny enter the room. The scene's emphasis is the intimate moment between Isaac and Abby as he expresses to her the consequences for Owen killing Danny, two fellow members of the WLF. As Abby advocates for Owen, Dixon points out that "this is bigger than any of us...Definitely bigger than Owen" (Naughty Dog, 2020). An awkward silence emerges as he eats an apple. After contemplating the situation, Dixon reveals his moral thinking, "If he [Owen] turns up, then fine. I will give him the benefit of the doubt, and we will get to the bottom of it. I need you, Abby. Yeah?" Isaac's statement, focusing on the situation's complexities, suggests that he juxtaposes the reconfiguration of the morality of duty against the imposed human nature created by the hostile environment in which he lives. Yet, he is compassionate towards Abby and benevolent towards Owens. Isaac is not reshaped by the dangerously cruel world's inhuman obduracy and resists it in many ways.

The last scene of emphasis charts Isaac's second confrontation with Abby as she protects Lev, a former member of the primitive cult and antagonistic faction, the Seraphites, from an onslaught of violence that awaits him. In doing so, gamers witness the complex interweaving of Isaac's moral tendencies toward Abby. With a gun in hand, the intense moment unfolds between them:

Isaac: Move out of the way. We will deal with you [Abby] back home.

Abby: He [Lev] is not one of them. Please...

Isaac: Abby, move...

Abby: God damn it, he's just a kid!

Isaac: You have three seconds to get away from that Scar. One...

Abby: You really going to shoot me?

Isaac: Two...

Abby: I'm not fucking moving.

Although brief, the moral mapping performed in this scene can be understood through the next frame. Isaac silently stares at Abby, contemplating his next move as he attempts to lower his gun. Although there is some uncertainty about what will happen next, gamers can see that Isaac has some hesitation about pulling the trigger and killing Abby. The practical interpretation of this moment lends itself to moral virtue as the concern for others. But before gamers can witness Isaac's intentions, he is shot and killed by a Scar, disposing of another black character of value.

Isaac's investment in the principles of *the morality of duty*, with a couple of notable exceptions, stands in contrast to Naughty Dog's beloved protagonist, Ellie, who seemingly disregards any moral codes as she embarks on her revenge tour. The fixity of Isaac limits any possibility or potentiality for black transcendence, enabling him to deify the game's cultural and racial bias as he attempts to restore precisely black agency and subjectivity within a post-pandemic world.

Conclusion

As I have posited, the black bodies in Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us Remastered* and *The Last of Us Part II* are created, designed, and scripted to maintain a whiteness thesis. Both games embody cultural norms of whiteness that share a common ideological core organized around a racialized discourse. Asserting the treatment of black bodies in these two games does not, in any way, negate the possibility of cultural change. The meaning-making of blackness poses a vital challenge to even progressive game developers like Naughty Dog in this new decade of gaming. Scholars within game culture and game studies have argued for the necessity of including authentic and positive accounts of diverse communities who are too often misrepresented. Without such a practice, the game industry will continue to reproduce and reanimate an overly negative and biased representation of ethnic, gender, racial, and sexual identities. If we are to continue to play and analyze games, we must locate and share the positive cultural potential that is buried within video games.

Despite its failings, the gaming industry's future has the opportunity to be as bright or bleak as the imagination of the creators and developers. Continually regurgitating and virtually reproducing the digital constructs of white prejudice discourse in video games will only reinforce one-dimensional, stereotypical black characters trapped within pixelated parameters, evidence of the developer's conscious subscriptions to biased discourse, or subconscious subjugated archetypes that emerge on the virtual page. Through complex systems, video games incorporate ludology to satisfy gamers' desire to escape reality to a virtual world where they can experience power and control. Though one would think that video games would offer a medium in which blacks can achieve power and control, it is a fleeting gaming experience as their virtual contexts of reference are black characters that are either i) non playable and without lines or ii) non playable with lines that ultimately die. Notwithstanding,

there are impactful changes that game culture can undertake to shift from black deprivation to transcending the stereotypical tropes of Black characters.

Seminal to creating transcendence in black characters is changing the demographics of the creators and developers that produce the games; in short, employ more black creators and developers. To illuminate the necessity to change hiring practices as a primary step toward change, one must acknowledge that racial bias in games is reflective of conscious or subconscious biases of the creator and developer, which helps to explain and understand why black characters are created through stereotypical tropes that involve nihilism, death, pain, detachment, and intellectual unsophistication, to name a few. Consider these statistics about game developer demographics. According to the International Game Developers Association, 81% of the game developers identify as “white/Caucasian/European” versus 7% identifying as “Hispanic/Latinx” and 2% identifying as “Black/African-American/African/Afro-Caribbean” (Weststarr, Kwan, & Kumar, 2019, p. 13). The expectation of black character images beyond what has become customarily formulaic without changing the demographics of creators and developers is naïve at best and missing the problem, which will, at worst, continue the propagation of those same images in some form. This way, the transcendence of black characters beyond stereotypical tropes begins with hiring more black creators and developers who can offer different experiences inspiring different protagonists/agonists, storylines, narratives, and gaming experiences.

Secondly, the gaming industry must produce more black playable characters with solid narratives. Unfortunately, the scant availability of black playable characters also reflects the demographics of game creators and developers, who are limited by their experiences. Increasingly, gamers devote significant amounts of time within virtual spaces, which can be captivatingly deceptive in conveying reality through digital images supported by narrative. Digital images and narratives mixed with music deliver a pathos that evokes either empathy or apathy for the playable and nonplayable characters. Empathy becomes associated with the hero/heroine of the game. In this respect, the gamer subconsciously learns to connect to and empathize with the white playable character. Simultaneously, they learn that only the white playable character is acceptable in terms of heroism, worthy of life, and capable of humanity, despite the apparent opposite conveyed by Elli in *TLOU II*. By applying a positive value judgment upon white playable characters coded as heroes, the gamer makes converse judgments about non playable black characters that are alternatively subjugated or demonized. If not convinced by this philosophical argument for the need to employ more black creators and developers, the gaming industry must acknowledge that many gamers are Black and Latinx. In “The Era of White Male Games For White Male Gamers Is Ending,” Packwood, co-founder and executive director of Gameheads, notes that “[r]oughly 57% of video game players in the U.S. between the ages of 6 and 29 will be people of color in less than ten years” (Quartz, 2018). So, from the standpoint of cultivating the future of gaming, it would behoove gaming companies to start producing more playable characters to enrich the present gaming experience and the rising future demographic of Black gamers.

Thirdly, black character transcendence in video games requires solid non-stereotypical storylines and images. The importance of discontinuing stereotypical digital images is far-reaching when considering the fact that children as young as six years old begin their nascent journey into the gaming world. Depending on their games, digital images teach young gamers to employ similar value judgments through subjective lessons about right and wrong, problem-solving, gender roles, gender bias, sexual identity, social hierarchies, and other disposable tropes. As the gamer ages, these once subjective tropes evolve from nuanced and ambiguous to blatantly layered stereotypical digital images and narratives. Furthermore, the importance of discontinuing stereotypical narratives and images can be established when noting that games created with these digital images and narratives are global as we live in a technologically interconnected global gaming world that transmits these images instantaneously and iteratively as desired, adding to their pervasiveness. Linking stereotypical storylines and images conveyed in games with perpetuated stereotypes that exist in many other forms of media that approbate pejorative images of black bodies, video games have become another acceptable medium to use in coding and solidifying the black body as inconsequential, unnecessary, and a blight against humanity that must be subjugated or annihilated. One only has to peruse any news medium to understand this point concretely.

The gaming industry has within its power to disrupt the conveyance of black deprivation as the preferred trope for black characters. Instead of focusing on stereotypes, it would be as easy to create complex black characters that evolve internally and externally, exhibit restraint and depth, experience weakness and strength, display cleverness and intelligence, are hopeful and experience trepidation, are protectors and avengers, and the list goes on.

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