

UCLA

UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Virtual Segregation- Black History, Politics and Resistance in Video Games

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jx9x6cj>

ISBN

9798252418056

Author

Jackson, Joshua Christopher

Publication Date

2026-06-12

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Virtual Segregation

Black History, Politics and Resistance in Video Games

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

Of the requirements of the degree Master of Arts

in African American Studies

by

Joshua Christopher Jackson

2026

© Copyright by
Joshua Christopher Jackson
2026

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Virtual Segregation

Black History, Politics and Resistance in Video Games

by

Joshua Christopher Jackson

Master of Arts in African American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Sobukwe Odinga, Chair

Once thought of as a children's toy, video games have developed into a valuable storytelling tool, adapting and creating stories that routinely permeate popular culture. As their influence has grown, so has the variety of stories being told through the medium. This includes stories centering Black diasporic experiences through folklore and cultural values. Yet, as Black presence in video games has increased, concentrated efforts to silence their voices through hate movements have emerged to a point where they have now grown to influence global politics.

Most notably, Steve Bannon, the former Chief Political Strategist to Donald Trump, recognized the potential of radicalizing and weaponizing white male gamers as far back as 2005 within World of Warcraft communities. Bannon's subsequent appointment as the head of far right website Breitbart News in 2012 put him in an ideal position to follow through on a far more ambitious project of radicalization which manifested as the GamerGate controversy of 2014. What started as a movement largely contained in fringe pockets of websites like Reddit would snowball to the point where it helped form an emerging political demographic, one that helped carry Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016, fueled by the misogynist and anti-Black rhetoric that continues to the present day. My research will draw connections to these hate movements and historical efforts to deny Black storytellers space in media, explain the importance of digital representation to shape cultural attitudes, and emphasize how the interactive power of video games places them in a unique position to express culture outside of a Western hegemonic standard. This dissertation's methodology includes a literature review foregrounding selected scholars of Media Studies and Black Studies, citations of quantitative research drawing from case studies of specific game releases, autoethnography recounting my lived experience in these online spaces as these cases unfolded in real time, and discourse analysis.. In addition, I cite historical examples of resistance in entertainment to develop analyses foregrounding how Black creatives in the contemporary video game industry manage to disrupt the domination of far-right ideologies in gamer discourse and provide alternatives to the radicalization pipeline that has captured so many young men in the demographic that consumes these cultural products.

The thesis of Joshua Christopher Jackson is approved.

Ugo Edu

Caroline Streeter

Sobukwe Odinga, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles,

2026

DEDICATION

To the family, friends, loved ones, classmates and mentors past and present who guided me up to this point. A piece of all of you is walking that stage with me.

To Pinky, we're going home!

To my cohort for keeping me equal parts supported and sane over the last two years. We finally did it!

To Megan, who has seen this through with me at my best, my worst, and everything in between.

Thank you for inspiring me to be better every day.

To Greg and Bebe. I thought I couldn't do it without you, only to find that I faced every day alongside you. I hope I made you proud.

Table of Contents

Introduction	Pg. 1
Section I- Online Harassment and Social Media with <i>Tales of Kenzera: ZAU-</i>	Pg.17
Section II- Ownership of Image in <i>Relooted-</i>	Pg. 21
Section III- Sweet Baby Inc., <i>Assassin's Creed Shadows</i> and the Virtual Jim Crow-	Pg. 26
Section IV- Cultural Production as Resistance: Fighting Back With Games-	Pg. 32
Conclusion-	Pg. 37
Bibliography-	Pg. 39

Introduction

“I can’t believe we meme’d Donald Trump to the presidency,” a friend and colleague texted to my professional group chat in 2016. Despite being the only conservative in the freelance game journalist group I was in at the time, even he was shocked by the outcome of the first Trump election. What he meant by “meme’d” was the way Internet and gaming communities in particular often posted “ironic” thinly veiled endorsements couched in humor that either supported Trump directly, or amplified the white supremacist and misogynist rhetoric associated with his campaign. While I found myself just as shocked by the outcome, I was also immediately reminded of the GamerGate movement of 2014, which I believe is the origin point of what is, in 2026, a Trump regime in its second term. I was confronted with questions I couldn’t answer no matter how hard I tried. How did we get to this point? Why weren’t the many racist and sexist comments and actions disqualifying months ago? And why was so much of the rhetoric nearly identical to what I saw a few years prior when gaming communities bombarded women in gaming with similar incentives, before expanding their scope to people of color?

Video games have become a cultural battleground both in and out of their virtual worlds, serving as a pipeline for the right-wing political movement. While anti-Black sentiment has been a constant in gaming communities for nearly as long as the industry has been part of the mainstream, (Gray, 2024), harassment of marginalized communities exploded in 2014. Though that year largely saw the intimidation, doxxing, and threatening of women in gaming, these efforts have grown in both scope and sophistication. A trip to your social media platform of choice will show how verbally violent these efforts can be. Any game made by a diverse team or featuring a cast that isn’t dominated by heterosexual white male leads are met with long

comment threads intended to harass, minimize and sabotage. This is especially true for works by Black creatives.

Case in point: Surgent Studios. A little over a month after the successful launch of *Tales of Kenzera: Zau*, the studio's latest project from director Abubakar Salim, Salim found himself coming to the defense of his work, his team, and himself. The weeks leading up to the release of *Tales of Kenzera* and the days immediately following its debut saw a targeted harassment campaign so vitriolic that Salim felt compelled to make a public statement addressing the toxicity.

"So I didn't want to address this, but we're here now... I've had to ignore people saying that it wasn't the work that got me the opportunities, no, it was simply because I'm black, and I've turned the other cheek and just kept doing my thing. But some of these comments, a few of them you can just brush off, but when it's a constant barrage of them, it's exhausting... [the harassment received is] constant and targeted from people who see diversity as a threat." (Salim, 2024).

Here, Salim gives voice to the experience that many Black game developers have as right wing influence has aggressively conscripted young, impressionable, and mostly white males through gaming. Harassment campaigns in the video game industry as a strategic political effort arguably began with GameGate in 2014. GamerGate was an online movement centered around "ethics in game journalism" stemming from an alleged affair between a male game journalist and a female game developer. As a freelance game journalist at the time, I was not immune to hoping for improved ethics in the space, as I had been in rooms where colleagues at other outlets openly admitted to either taking kickbacks for positive coverage, or sharing examples of co-workers

who were fired for not agreeing to do so. Yet, the situation quickly moved in a direction I was uncomfortable with. Rather than scrutinize the professional white male journalist that was acting unethical in this scenario, almost the entirety of the vitriol was directed at the femme-presenting non-binary developer. In what was perhaps unfortuitous timing, media scholar and critic Anita Sarkeesian began releasing YouTube videos called *Feminist Frequency* and the *Tropes vs. Women* series around the same time. While these videos discussed long standing media tropes that endured in video games that put women in subservient positions, these criticisms resulted in Sarkeesian getting pulled into the storm of GamerGate, with accusations of her trying to destroy the space often being accompanied by death threats to the point where the television show *Law and Order: SVU* dramatized the situation in the episode *Intimidation Game*, (Robinson et. al, 2015).

As the outrage grew in online spaces, far right journalists such as Breitbart Editor, Steve Bannon, and writer turned provocateur, Milo Yiannopoulos, used GamerGate as an opportunity to stoke the flames in a larger culture war. Bannon recognized this opportunity nearly a decade prior while running a World of Warcraft currency farming network, where players could pay agency to generate in-game currency while the player was away from the game. Here, Bannon saw his path towards a far right cultural shift. Bannon's biographer Joshua Green reflected on the media figure's time within World of Warcraft as, "...one that introduced him to a hidden world, burrowed deep into his psyche, and provided a kind of conceptual framework that he would later draw on to build up the audience for Breitbart News, and then to help marshal the online armies of trolls and activists that overran national politicians and helped give rise to Donald Trump" (Green 2017). As time went on, Bannon would become more vocal about his intentions as he acknowledged a "rootless" audience of white males he identified on the niche online message

boards that predated larger platforms such as 4Chan and Reddit. Bannon realized this population had potential for significant political power (Snider, 2017). In this way Banon both predicted and enabled the flourishing of alt-right ideology within online communities, as these once rootless individuals found a political home among a group of like-minded individual intent on ostracizing games that did not privilege a straight white male perspective.

Yiannopoulos was key to Bannon's strategy as he was particularly skilled at reaching this young, impressionable, mostly white audience, (Green 2017). What resulted in GamerGate 2014 was a wide scale harassment and doxing effort primarily targeting cis gender and LGBTQ+ women in the video game industry. Similarly to how extreme ideology has historically been underpinned by legitimate unrest within given communities, this was done under the guise of an ethics campaign that explicitly and implicitly implied that non-white cisgender males could not succeed in gaming without receiving special treatment, (Wells et. al. 2024).

This political strategy has born fruit in predictable and disappointing ways that quickly expanded beyond the initial goal of harassing women in gaming. Yiannopoulos cultivated a loyal community of gamers that sincerely felt he had their best interests at heart as he had spent days endearing himself with the members of these online gaming communities throughout GamerGate.. When he pursued a cause, his community would not be far behind. This became apparent when Yiannopoulos and his fans harassed Black actress Leslie Jones on Twitter, (now X). as part of a larger campaign against the all-women *Ghostbusters* reboot from 2016. This incident escalated to the point where Jones would temporarily leave the platform while Yiannopolous would be banned, but not without cries from his base to reinstate him, (Altman, 2016). The reinstatement of Yiannopoulos after Elon Musk's takeover of the platform, emboldened efforts on the part of right wing power brokers to weaponize the digital space. While

not directly tied to video games, the harassment of Leslie Jones demonstrated how quickly alt-right communities amassed power and influence. Just as Bannon predicted, tapping into a community of impressionable, young white males through video games as a digital Trojan Horse mobilized them in other realms. If they could be “activated” to attack an actress on Twitter, then they could surely be activated in ways that many at the time could never imagine. The message was loud and clear: anti-Black bigotry not only goes largely unpunished, but is rewarded with influence, a cushy speaking gig and a book deal, all of which Yiannopoulos received during this period. The effects have since grown to unimaginable proportions, with Bannon parlaying his growing name recognition off the back of Breitbart and GamerGate to become the White House Chief Strategist for Donald Trump.

This legacy can be seen to this day considering any game with a hint of Black influence, (or any game with Black lead characters, prominent side characters, or behind the scenes developers in both high and low level positions), is bombarded with social media comments implying that the game is “woke”, is a product of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in a way that suggests entitlement over merit, and an inherent inferiority in the product. This increased level of harassment has been acknowledged within the industry, with written statements and insider panels being held to discuss ways to curb it, (IDGA, 2024). Beyond social media engagement, these seeds that were planted with GamerGate have grown into a full fledged political movement, with many treating that movement as their political awakening. This period coincides with the increase in young white males identifying as right-wing, which helped propel Trump to the White House. While it might not be fair to say that young white men were the only factor that played into Trump’s first election, nor can the entirety of the increase in white males voting for Trump in 2016 compared to Romney in 2012 be attributed to right wing strategies

originating from GamerGate, it does coincide with a shift that's only become increasingly more apparent, (Pew Research Center 2012, Circle Staff 2016).

Unfortunately, Salim's story is not an outlier, as recent years have seen video game developers that craft narratives that step outside of white male focused perspectives are often met with similar outcomes. Again, this is not a coincidence, but a concentrated political strategy that turns games into a cultural battleground where Black work, representation, and cultural aesthetics are labeled as inherently inferior. While Black experiences in gaming has often been met with hostility even prior to this, such as culturally Black signifiers such as usernames, voices and avatars being confronted with a disproportionate amount of racist interaction, (Gray, 2024), it wasn't until now that these attitudes were being funneled into tangible political action. As right-wing journalist Andrew Breitbart is quoted as saying, "politics is downstream from culture," which has essentially proved to be his website's mission statement under Bannon. What might appear on the surface as the actions of Internet trolls with too much time on their hands is instead the continuation of a history that is much more insidious. Breitbart's statement echoes what white gatekeepers have always understood throughout the history of media long before the broader community could recognize within gaming; that culture IS politics and that entertainment, including gaming, is a reflection of said culture.

As far as entertainment goes, video games have emerged as one of the largest global forms in both reach and revenue, regularly exceeding \$10 billion, (Bayeck, Casino & Young 2018). This figure is mentioned not to place value on the capitalist motivations of the global gaming industry, but to highlight how much the industry has grown to a point where the medium's cultural impact is undeniable. In fact, gaming is a medium with the potential to be even more influential than film and television considering their interactive nature can potentially

expose players to new cultures in a safe, controlled space, (Shilakhovchuk and Garcia, 2020). This is echoed by media scholar Soraya Murray, who cites video games and their unique ability to serve as tools to expose players to experiences outside their own while challenging or reinforcing cultural norms in an interactive environment, (Murray, 2018). Even outside of video games, it has been well documented that there is a strong correlation between interpretations of reality and mass media depictions, (Gandy and Matabane, 1988), which explains why white supremacy endures so strongly in entertainment. Even as the public is gaslighted around the idea of separating politics from media despite the two being one in the same, these efforts would not be so strongly implemented if the two were truly independent. This is why there has been a constant struggle for Black voices to be heard in entertainment media, a struggle that has endured long before and definitely since D.W. Griffith first put his hate to film. Most notably, his movie, *Birth of a Nation*, vilified an entire race of people while nearly singlehandedly reviving the Ku Klux Klan, (Lennig, 2004). What can be called the clearest example of how media can manufacture culture, the resurgence of open bigotry and violence inspired by this film still reverberates over a century later. Meanwhile, Black art has been under constant attack throughout history. From Freedom Libraries being burnt to ash, (Kaepernick, Kelley & Taylor 2023) to Black artists being labeled as communists during the Red Scare by white supremacist groups like the John Birch Society, (Nesteroff, 2023), and music and film being pushed into the margins away from broader American culture until it could be regurgitated through a white lens, Black media has never had the same luxury of exposure.

As if carrying the torch for the likes of Griffith and the John Birch Society, the manipulation of white supremacy in media has never truly gone away. Rather, it changes forms. While it may come as a surprise to those who still see video games as a children's toy that is

hardly worthy of further study, the current culture war, the rise of fascism, the growing influence of Donald Trump and the right-wing shift in young men can be tied directly to video games in a variety of ways. Again, a through line can be traced to top aide and advisor Steve Bannon, whose influence is still maintained in his rhetoric.

As detailed prior, Bannon took over Andrew Breitbart's news platform and used video games as a testing ground for his strategies to filter young white men down a right-wing pipeline, a method he toyed with starting in 2005 when he secured investments for Internet Gaming Entertainment. This company acted as a gold farm network, or a group that employed low wage workers in China to perform tedious tasks in games to unlock in-game currency for players who didn't want to do so themselves. This is where Bannon was exposed to *World of Warcraft*, where he was first exposed to the way gaming communities worked towards a common goal. From here, he would harness this experience to form the strategies that would influence GamerGate before shifting to electoral politics, (Snider, 2017). As the economic instability brought about by a seemingly endless supply of financial crises, a worsening job market, and a cost restrictive higher education system only worsens, this has led to the continuous degradation of the prospect of a fulfilling future by Western capitalist standards. For young, easily influenced groups like white male gamers who didn't have the experience necessary to analyze these systems and their failures, gaming was seen as a source of refuge that found itself increasingly occupied by women, queer identifying, Black and brown creators. Bannon and his writers used the GamerGate harassment campaign as an opportunity to take an audience of primarily young white men and point them at these creators as their personal villains. When we consider how Western culture has positioned the white male as its center from its inception, they tend to see progress for groups outside of their demographic as a direct attack on their identities. Equality for the

powerless feels like oppression for the powerful, (Kooistra, 2025). Suddenly, the purpose of Black, brown and queer creators was reframed; not with the intention to create games that offered a personal, unique experience based on their own perspectives, but one that is trying to take away the hobby they find solace in. Once thought to be a fringe laughing stock of the Internet, this group slowly gained influence over time alongside the rise of Trumpism. The rise of video game streaming has also played a role, with creators who cultivated their fanbases around their game play echoing these far-right talking points to become some of the most visible propagandists for a younger audience. Now, rather than get their news or research data from vetted sources, it's much easier to watch someone in their room play their favorite game for eight hours a day while explaining how America is a white nation, something that popular streamer Asmongold said to his 4.5 million YouTube subscribers and thousands of viewers with little pushback, (Gupta, 2025). From this pattern of white personalities disparaging Black video games without consequence, it supports the idea of white rage as a type of religious ideology. Superiority cannot exist with a target labeled as inferior, so when Black art such as games are treated as inherently lacking in quality or artistic merit, it's in contrast to the "default", the "normal," and by extension, the white. Yet, these dynamics are rarely questioned, as white rage is often accepted and justified as a type of omnipresent force that cannot or will not be challenged, (Finley, Gray and Martin, 2020).

Politics is upstream from culture indeed, a mission that Bannon and his ilk continue to manipulate as they label any Black focused art as DEI, insinuating that these works are inherently inferior and only hit the market out of obligation for a fictional Black privilege that Salim alluded to in his statement. While it is tempting to label people who share these beliefs as ignorant, incompetent and inconsequential, their real strength is in framing Black art as an outlier

that is less worthy. Thus, it is framed solely as part of an agenda driven political project as opposed to their “neutral” white focused stories. But just as their work is inherently political, Black art is not only political, but it is a subversive form of resistance whether the creators intended it to be or not. As Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith said regarding indigenous art,

“...representation is also a project of indigenous artists, writers, poets, film makers and others who attempt to express an indigenous spirit, experience or wild view. Representation of indigenous peoples by indigenous people is about countering the dominant society’s image of indigenous peoples, their lifestyles and belief systems. It is also proposing solutions to the real-life dilemmas that indigenous communities confront and trying to capture the complexities of being indigenous,” (Smith, 1999).

Here, Smith is speaking to the importance of countering negative images that support, promote, and give life to negative stereotypes created for the purpose of “proving” white superiority. Whether made with this intentionality or not, art such as Black made video games inherently challenge the conventions of white supremacy. This is accomplished by treating cultures that fall outside of Western societal norms as equally valid, something that white supremacist ideology inherently recognizes as a threat to the centuries old myths that prop it up. Games that bring Black culture to a global audience in an authentic and respectful way disrupts white normalcy. Thus, by the doctrine of white rage, it must be violently rejected using methods of intimidation and delegitimation, all to protect the status quo of whiteness.

But for as hard as right-wing politicians, advisors, and personalities try to label Black art as less worthy of time and attention, separating Blackness from interactive media will never truly

be possible. We see this with creators like Salim and his team at Surgent Studios and their use of Bantu mythology to craft a story about love, loss, and grief between a father and son. We also see it with Kiro'o Games out of Cameroon, bringing authentic, culturally rich stories to the role playing genre with *Aurion: Legacy of the Kori-Odan*. Released on Xbox and Windows, it follows Prince Enzo of Zama, a fictional land that seeks to, "bring African magic and mythology to life," across his adventure to reclaim his throne, (Plug It In Games, Kiro'O Games, 2015). Most recently, we see it in *Relooted*, a heist game by Nyamakop out of Johannesburg, South Africa. In the game, a team works together to reclaim real African artifacts from European museums among many others while highlighting the cultures they came from. Black creators continue to endure while challenging the white dominant power structures that seek to intimidate them into silence. After all, a quick glance at the social media pages for these games will have comment sections with rampant harassment and claims of Black identity serving no further purpose than to push an agenda. Meanwhile, games like *Resident Evil 5*, a Japanese developed horror game that takes place in a fictional and ubiquitous region in Africa, largely exist without incident. While it was released pre-GamerGate, the game is still viewed fondly to this day, perhaps due to its framing around a white hegemonic standard. Despite being made in Japan, the game seeks the approval of a global audience by starring a white American protagonist whose primary objective is to gun down hundreds of African villagers who are infected with a fictional virus that turns them violent and animalistic, (Martin 2016, Brock 2011). That begs the question; why are games that depict Black culture in a positive light worthy of condemnation while a product like *Resident Evil 5* can sell millions of copies globally with hardly a peep outside of mostly Black journalists and academics? A deep irony exists around the lesser known fact that Jerry Lawson, a Black man and a highly influential programmer who is considered one of the

fathers of video games, invented the technology used for interchangeable cartridges. This technological advancement allowed for software to be swapped between and within devices, a contribution that would be instrumental to the home video game industry. Despite the framing of video games as a white male dominated space, Lawson's contributions prove that this all white gaming space that alt-right gaming communities are trying to return to never existed to begin with. Indeed, much like American history, video game history IS Black history.

As a lifelong gamer who has witnessed these harassment movements develop into tangible political action in real time, I aim to use this project as a way to acknowledge the political power media can have through video games, how bad actors have co-opted this space to further marginalize Black creatives, and how these campaigns are part of a larger shared effort to silence Black voices. Stories such as Salim's have inspired me to develop and expand on research around Black storytelling, history, representation, and resistance in video games. Largely due to my lived experience as a mixed man with Black, white and Filipino heritage who watched Black voices be pushed into the margins many times over, some of my earliest memories with media as cultural reflections were around my father. My dad was a Black man from Louisiana, but moved to Los Angeles by way of Texas to find himself working in the television industry. His experience in entertainment, as a World War II veteran, and a Black man growing up in the South through the Jim Crow era left him with a pessimistic view of the world. For example, my earliest memories confronting racism were around the looks we would get out in public, his distrust in America's political systems, and his refusal to stand for the National Anthem decades before such an act became a political lightning rod. This was reflected in the conversations we shared about the games I played. In the rare moment that a Black character appeared, he would ask, "is that character the bad guy?" Much like his assumption with film and

television that Black characters would either be cast in a negative light, would lose a scripted competition, be killed early in a narrative, or be given less than substantial roles, this assumption extended to the games that I showed him. Sadly, his assumptions were often correct, as characters created primarily by white and Japanese creators would often lean on negative stereotypes to give their Black characters life.

Perspectives around video game narratives such as the ones my father held are exactly why Black creatives are continuously demanding space in this massive industry to tell authentic and respectful stories, all while white supremacist actors continue to push back against them. I have played video games since I was four years old, starting as an effort to inspire me to read and write by my parents. In the years since, I've seen Black players, creatives, and works framed negatively in the digital spaces I occupy. This research aims to be a way to counter this negativity while establishing the importance of counter narratives when artistic expression is under attack.

I was ultimately inspired to pursue this topic in the hopes that I can help bring light to this issue both in academic spaces and eventually permeate public consciousness. Ideally, this would help frame video games as an important form of cultural production. By extension, the cultures that are allowed to produce within this space are vital, and the white power structures that seek to further strengthen their ideology recognized this years ago. I have found myself tired of these efforts being trivialized or dismissed as unimportant, all while those behind it like Bannon and his ilk make their moves through these spaces with little acknowledgement. That needs to change.

With that said, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the intersecting issues that permeate this topic. As mentioned, GamerGate started primarily with the harassment of white

women or femme-presenting developers and journalists, with the movement gaining steam through targeted harassment towards a developer who was accused of sleeping with a journalist for positive coverage. It should be noted that Zoe Quinn, the developer in question, has maintained this narrative is false, (Quinn, 2017). With that said, such harassment would be uncalled for regardless of whether the affair actually took place. After Anita Sarkeesian and other women and femme-presenting journalists got attacked as the hate mob's net continued to grow, LGBTQ sentiment took shape within these communities as well. A pattern began to form showing that any community that falls outside of a white cisgender heterosexual male identity will become the target of their ire. In that sense, the experiences of Black creatives who go through this form of harassment is not unique to them. However, the targeted harassment that Black creators face in particular deserves more study. Black creators in particular exist in a specific context, one that continues a centuries long history of imposed inferiority. Meanwhile, direct connections that can be drawn towards the current repealing of DEI initiatives across institutions nationwide and the ostracization of Black creativity in gaming. Culture has been hidden, science has been manipulated, and faith has been twisted to serve as the foundation of Western empire off the backs of Black muting. These stories of harassment aren't an anomaly within gaming, but part of a continued history of Black exclusion that is currently continuing in real time in this digital space. That is not to say that women, LGBTQ+ communities and their intersecting identities across sex, gender, class, and race have not also gone through historical abuse in the name of Western hegemony, but the Black culture specifically has both served as a target of white ire as well as a contradiction to their fictive superiority.

Finally, despite this project focused primarily on the video game industry, it will often discuss Internet culture and social media alongside it. From the moment online gaming became a

reality on consoles in the early 2000s, video games and the Internet have become increasingly intertwined. Today, it's common for many games to cease to function without a constant Internet connection, and such a relationship only further fosters online communities to form around them. While this project is not necessarily intended to be an examination of Black identity on the Internet and on social media platforms, it is impossible to adequately discuss the realities of modern video games without assuming the Internet is playing a large role alongside them.

This project has three major goals. First, this work will directly tie historical efforts to silence Black art and control popular culture through film, music, and television to the modern video game industry and the current efforts by politicians, pundits, and policy makers to erase Black art in interactive mediums. This goal has two sub-objectives in itself. First, these ideas will be tied together to illustrate how these are not just isolated incidents worth studying in a vacuum, but the continuation of a much larger struggle dating back centuries. This research into film, television, and music will primarily focus on the post-Reconstruction period through the 1980s. This time period is to highlight how secluding Black art is not a new phenomenon, but one that has existed since Black people in America have achieved a sliver of autonomy. Second, as academics have studied film, television, and music as serious forms of culture for decades, video games are still generally looked down upon within academia outside of studies attempting to measure their capacity to inspire violence. This research will add to the existing literature that treats video games as a serious field of discussion with the capacity to shape and inform culture just as much as other forms of media if not more so. This will include a brief history of video games as a growing cultural medium, anti-Blackness in video game communities, and how those sentiments have developed into strategic political action to minimize Black voices while bolstering white supremacy.

Next, by using a combination of literature review, autoethnography, and case studies, this project will examine the ways that white supremacist actors are manipulating our current culture to morph it into a place less safe for Black artists, highlighting how the art itself is being pushed into the margins. This examination is important because as alluded to above, a strong, organized effort has been slowly put in motion for years, taking advantage of the anxiety of the youth while manipulating a supposedly “ironic” anti-Black sentiment that has existed in gaming for years prior. By doing so, these efforts by bad actors will both be easier to identify and challenge as they continue to flood discourse with veiled and overt bigotry.

Lastly, this research will take historical examples from Black artists who pushed back against attempts to silence them and the efforts of current video game developers to craft their stories in our current cultural climate. The aim is to put them in conversation to help devise strategies to drown out and ultimately strip the power away from the harassment so that Black art in gaming can continue to grow and thrive. If these goals can be achieved, then the hope is to eliminate what this work identifies as “virtual segregation”, a double-entendre expressing how Black artists are being segregated into the margins through targeted harassment in virtual spaces, and how these harassment campaigns are essentially forming a new way to replicate historical discrimination in a new form. The hope is to form a two-pronged attack that both helps open a space for Black creators and stories to thrive without the fear of targeted vitriol while stripping power away from those who would use Black art as a battleground to bolster white supremacist ideology. Those currently in power are well aware of the strength that lies in interactive media’s capacity to shape culture, so let this be one small contribution to help take that culture back.

Online Harassment and Social Media with *Tales of Kenzera: ZAU*

Following the philosophy of “My Shoes, Your Feet,” this was the driving force behind the development of *Tales of Kenzera: ZAU*. Abubakar Salim, the director of the project and founder of Surgent Studios, wanted to find a way to pay tribute to his father who passed away in 2013. Acting as an outlet for his grief, *ZAU* employed the same artform that he and his father bonded over when the director was a child. By playing the game, it allowed players to explore the process alongside him. As Salim stated on the game’s website, “... I realized that the journey towards deciding to share how you feel is as important as the sharing itself,” (Salim, 2024). By drawing from Bantu mythology to call to his own cultural experience, he clearly hoped to present a product that was both vulnerable and authentic.

As a player, I was beyond excited for the project. While the independent game development space manages to flex its creative muscles often, the big budget mainstream market tends to go in the opposite direction. Often pursuing safe, tried and true genres such as military shooters, (most of which follow jingoistic narratives from an American perspective,) the thought of playing such a personal story was an exciting prospect. *ZAU* found itself somewhere in the middle of being an independent project and a big budget release, being developed in-house at Surgent Studios while being published by Electronic Arts, (EA), one of the biggest and most well known video game companies in the world. Combining the resources of a publisher like EA with the passion of Salim and his team meant this game had a strong chance to succeed. Add to

the fact that cultures out of Africa are rarely depicted in a positive light in gaming, and it felt like this project could be something special.

Knowing the current climate of gaming culture, it was inevitable that there would be some pushback. A game by a Black director featuring an all-Black cast that paints Bantu culture in a positive light could not avoid it in certain pockets of the Internet. Yet, for better or worse, Salim was doing everything right when it came to the development of this game. In this case, “right” was the opposite of what white supremacist Internet discourse constantly complains about. Is a Black character part of an ensemble cast that is marked as existing solely to check off a diversity box by their standards? This game is rooted in authentic culture informed by the director’s lived experience. Some will declare that Black creators should make their own games rather than “force an agenda” on big budget titles. Surgent Studios was doing exactly that. Despite these subversions of the usual complaints, as Salim would allude to in his statement acknowledging the harassment he and his team received after release, there was never going to be a “right way” to release a game like *ZAU* as the criteria of right or wrong will forever shift. “...these exclusionary rules continue to stack up and the goalposts continue to shift, [until] people who look like us, just sit down, be quiet and just accept the fact that you’re outsiders,” (Salim, 2014).

Upon release and the days after, there was a concentrated effort to make *ZAU* look like a failure. Despite receiving glowing reviews, the game’s X page celebrating the positive reception was bombarded with vitriol, (@ZAUTheGame, 2024). User TheSupahPiglets replies to the page stating, “Let’s put this baby to rest. Permanently. This game is gonna die a quick death.” Similarly, Ultrawide Gameplay And Ben... states, “Go woke go broke what a disaster” alongside an image of the game’s Steam charts. Steam is the largest Personal Computer (PC) digital game

storefront that keeps track of the concurrent player base, its 24-hour peak, and an all-time peak. The screenshot shows 163 concurrent players with a 226 player peak and a 287 all time peak, suggesting that the game was a failure. These numbers don't tell the whole story, especially considering that these charts don't take console users into account. Also released on Sony's Playstation 5, Microsoft's Xbox Series X and Series S platforms, and Nintendo's portable Switch console, they represent three platforms not recognized in the count that have sold nearly 300 million units between them. Additionally, the PlayStation platform added *ZAU* to its subscription streaming service on day one, so any user with a membership could play it at release without making a separate purchase. Lastly, with *ZAU* being a single player story driven game, titles of this kind typically act as one-and-done experiences rather than something you play on an ongoing basis. All this is to say that Steam charts alone don't tell the story of its success, but this effort was not meant to accurately assess its commercial performance, but to label it as a failure in its infancy.

While actions such as the ones designed to tear down *ZAU* feel new thanks to the technological medium they're taking place on, these efforts are far from original. After all, the history of minstrel shows in the United States dates back to the early 19th century, showing how Black depictions in media were only allowed to exist through a racist lens. As influential novelist and author of *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe astutely said, "The whole idea of a stereotype is to simplify," (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.) So if minstrel shows were meant to simplify Black depictions to the point of primitivity, then humanistic and vulnerable art such as *ZAU* challenges that notion inherently. In that same vein, *Lime Kiln Field Day* would be produced nearly a century after the rise of the minstrel show. A 1913 silent film that's considered one of the first to feature an all Black cast, the movie was archived and never

released, seemingly intentionally, (Price, 2023). Only two years later, *Birth of a Nation* would be released. Its depiction of Black men played by white actors in blackface as sexual deviants that prey on white women was a favorite of President Woodrow Wilson. The American public agreed, with its fictitious depiction of a heroic Ku Klux Klan salvaging white purity from a Black cultural threat being so galvanizing that it's often credited with reviving the Klan in real life. In the music world, the 1960s would see dance show turned pop culture tastemaker, *Soul Train*, have to fight for air time as it was assumed that national audiences, (in other words, white), wouldn't want to watch it. Then once the show became a proven commodity, Dick Clark and his competing *American Bandstand* show tried repeatedly to steal its ideas, (Lehman, 2008). Make no mistake, the media landscape where minstrel shows and *Birth of a Nation* can thrive while *Lime Kiln Field Day* was locked up until its degraded reel was rediscovered decades later is by design, (Price, 2023). The benefit of digital distribution is that once released, a piece of art can never truly disappear, so *ZAU* couldn't meet the same fate. Yet, it's impossible to ignore the way it was aggressively pushed into the margins by the users sending harassment to Surgent Studios, as if inherently understanding that positive depictions of the African continent challenges racial hierarchy. As cited by Saraya Murray, Stuart Hall called to the power of popular culture, stating that, "Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged," (Murray, 2014).

Ownership of Image in *Relooted*

ZAU and Surgent Studios faced a direct form of harassment, one that was designed to call the merit of their work into question while labeling their game as a failure fresh out of the gate. Over a year later, developer Nyamakop out of Johannesburg, South Africa revealed a trailer for *Relooted*. As the name suggests, the game tasks players with “relooting” stolen African artifacts from British museums. Essentially an afro-futurist heist game, players control Nomali as she memorizes the layout of each building, claims as many artifacts as she can in a single run, and meets her team to aid in her escape at the end of the game.

Needless to say, I was also excited to play *Relooted* in a similar way that I was anxiously awaiting *ZAU* when it released. The game was launched as part of Xbox’s Game Pass subscription service, allowing for easy access for subscribers. As soon as it was available, I downloaded it and began streaming my playthrough on my Twitch channel, where I have a small but consistent community who will check out what I’m playing. When one of my most frequent viewers said hello in the chat, and realized what I was playing, he seemed surprised that I was enjoying it. When I asked him if my enthusiasm stood out for some reason, he said, “You’re the only person I’ve seen play it who isn’t making fun of it.” The comment caught me slightly off guard, but I wasn’t completely surprised. Because while the narrative around *Relooted* and its release was not one that wished for it to fail or one that led to widespread harassment like with *ZAU*, it was being intentionally misrepresented from the moment it was announced.

The prior year when it was revealed during the annual *Game Awards*, an end of year event akin to the Oscars or Grammys for video games, the comments were flooded with many of the same comments. They were worded in different ways, each one trying to outwit the last despite repeating versions of the same joke, but the sentiment was universal among this group. “They’re releasing a game where you’re playing as Black people who steal.” Of course, that’s intentionally ignoring the core premise of the project where the characters are taking back items that were already stolen to begin with.

As if being intentionally and collectively obtuse, Internet comments around the game and its supposed promotion of Black people stealing was a constant talking point. Whether intentional or not, this act promotes three types of Western hegemonic thinking. First, it obscures the crimes committed by Western societies as they stripped African nations of their cultural heirlooms and artifacts, then assigned them new meaning behind a glass box for Western consumption. Claiming that the protagonists are stealing what was already stolen implies that rightful ownership lies with the museums. Second, it erases the cultural significance of the context behind the task that the player is given. Video games often serve as an interactive power fantasy, and the ability to take back artifacts and return them to their continent of origin gives the player a cathartic feeling of rights being wronged, even if it’s only in the context of the virtual world within the game. Lastly, it assigns criminality to the characters, largely due to the cast being Black. While taking back the artifacts on their own would be a noble goal in itself, the game goes out of its way to strip its narrative of all moral ambiguity. The premise of the story is based around an in-game law that required all publicly displayed pieces to be returned to their place of origin. Rather than return them, these museums transferred them into private collections, circumventing the law. With that additional context, the player character is essentially forcing the

museums to follow the law. Still, that fact is ignored for the sake of swapping the designation of criminal and victim.

As with *ZAU* and its shared history with white supremacist actors trying to hide or obscure Black art, *Relooted* is just one of many pieces of media where anti-Black stereotypes are assigned to characters to reinforce concepts of inferiority. When discussing Black depictions in American media until 1961, author Stephanie Larson draws direct comparisons to the stereotypes employed and the minstrel shows discussed prior. During this period, Black roles often involved playing some kind of subservient character such as a maid or housekeeper. Their personalities did not deviate from specific stereotypes either, with Larson highlighting how most characters of this time could be labeled as either, “Mammies, Toms and Coons,” (Larson, 2006). Mammies were nurturing, loyal, and subservient women who usually acted as carefree motherly figures within a white household. A Tom is essentially the male coded opposite, as a man who is extremely eager to help white characters to prove his undying loyalty. Lastly, a coon was someone seen as lazy, attributing this trait to an inherent lack of value to society rather than a reflection of how slaves and sharecroppers were worked to exhaustion. These roles almost universally ignore the working conditions and economic realities that lie underneath, with some stories like Disney’s *Song of the South*, a 1940s film based on Uncle Remus’ folktales, presenting brutal systems like sharecropping as a period of racial unity.

In television, shows like *The Little Rascals* in the 1950s would bring forward the negative stereotypes of *Our Gang*, a series of shorts about a diverse group of children getting into mischief. While being revolutionary for its time when the shorts debuted in the 1920s, the Black children that acted in these works were given roles that called directly to stereotypes attributed to them by white media. From clothing to dialect and their relationships with white characters that

reinforced a carefree but subservient image, author Julia Lee compares them to the Uncle Remus stories popularized in the 1880s. Stymie, one of the Black characters in *Our Gang*, was directly inspired by trickster figures due to his sharp wit. This type of character can be traced back to Yoruba, reflected in deities such as Esu-Elegbara. Yet, these depictions were popularized in the United States in Uncle Remus stories, which were a distorted representation of Black folklore repurposed by white author Joel Chandler Harris. The racial stereotypes such as the trickster figure were popularized in the book, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, where a happy-go-lucky former slave would recount folklore around characters such as the crafty Br'er Rabbit. (Lee, 2015). By being so deeply rooted in the American consciousness due to the book's popularity, Black stories were distorted in a way that suited white audiences to the point of becoming a cultural norm. As *Our Gang* would be remade as *The Little Rascals* in the 1950s on television and on film in the 1990s, while these stereotypes weren't as blatant, traces of this characterization would exist in every iteration.

The examples drawn from *Our Gang* / *Little Rascals*, *Song of the South*, and the history of Black character tropes ties directly to the misrepresentation of *Reloated*. In each example, we see how Black culture was either distorted for the consumption of white audiences, how it altered history to make the lived realities of Black people seem better than they were, and created an image of racial unity that simply didn't exist. By classifying the liberatory actions of the characters in *Reloated*, this continues an American tradition of obscuring the realities of the situations these works are representing to reinforce Black inferiority to preserve the illusion of white supremacy. If the Cultivation Hypothesis popularized by George Gerbner and his team is to be believed, repeated exposure to the same depictions of reality in media will construct the consumer's perception of reality to match it, (Gandy and Matabane, 1988). Combined with the

idea that the interactive nature of games has the potential to expose players to new perspectives in a comfortable space, encouraging cooperation and empathy, (Shliakhovchuk and Garcia, 2020), there is a clear power dynamic at play. If *Relooted* is labeled by the dominant culture as one that reinforces the stereotype of Black people as thieves, then fewer people will engage with the art while fewer still will absorb it as intended. It's a poisoning of the well to stop us from drinking.

Sweet Baby Inc., *Assassin's Creed Shadows* and the Virtual Jim Crow

At this stage, the anti-Black script within gaming communities has been so embedded into the discourse that people both for and against it recognize when the hate storm begins to brew. The pattern is so obvious that it's hard to tell how many people are repeating negative talking points around Black games because they genuinely believe what they're saying or are purposefully trying to hurt the game's chances of success. Knowing that, it was unsurprising that *Tales of Kenzera: ZAU* and *Relooted* got the pushback they did. However, much like the silencing of Black art under the guise of anti-communism, (Nesteroff, 2023), the vitriol the creators of this game faced was couched behind a concern around diversity consulting firm Sweet Baby Inc. Reminiscent of GamerGate nearly a decade after its inception, 2024 saw extreme backlash towards the Montreal based firm as detractors sought to blame them specifically for "DEI" in video games. In this case, DEI is a stand-in for anything that's part of the interactive experience or the development process that involves non-white males.

As alluded to in earlier sections, Sweet Baby Inc. (SBI) is a consulting firm out of Canada with the goal of improving diversity in gaming narratives. Despite *ZAU* and *Relooted* being developed by creators with ties to the culture being expressed in the game, SBI was brought in to help flesh out the narrative while ensuring it remained accurate and respectful in line with the creators' intentions. Yet, once the company was identified by the white supremacist adjacent message board Kiwi Farms due in part to its involvement in *Alan Wake 2*, a highly anticipated sequel that was introducing a Black woman to to what was previously an all white

male main cast, the forum raised the company's profile to the point of infamy, (Mercante, 2025). This eventually led to a mass boycott effort against any game that hired SBI to the point where a SBI detector extension was developed for Steam, the largest digital video game storefront for PC. This extension would automatically identify any game that listed SBI as part of their staff and flag them for boycotts.

The creator of the SBI detector, known by the online username Kabrutus, would make his intentions more clear as he would start his own website called DEI Detected, or DEID, (<https://deidetected.com>). It was never about one particular firm pushing games in the wrong direction like what was claimed, but an effort to remove anything that was labeled as DEI. While the topic is often obscured in national politics behind fictional concepts like meritocracy, Kabrutus makes his intentions clear. Claiming that he hopes to, "... do something good and meaningful for the video game community all over the world," his contribution to the medium is to label games under different "DEI levels," extending from levels 1 through 3. Level 1 may include what he deems as "implicit censorship, avoidance of traditional male and female terminology, [or] narrative changes to comply with politically correct standards." What these standards are is never stated, but we get a clearer picture as we move through the different levels.

DEI level 2 includes everything mentioned in level 1, but expands its scope to include any form of consulting used during development. Additionally, this category maintains its vague definition of terms such as "forced diversity" and "political correctness." With Kabrutus being the ultimate authority in this scenario who defines what falls under these categories, we are only left to assume what he means by these terms. However, we can draw informed conclusions by his last category and his avatar, the former of which is more blatant when it comes to gender expression. "Subversion of the male gaze and traditional beauty standards: designing female

characters to deliberately challenge and overturn conventional ideals of attractiveness for a heterosexual male audience,” says the quiet part out loud. According to Kabrutus and the people who share this mentality, the heterosexual male audience is who should be catered to specifically. Anything else is automatically forcing an agenda on video games. This is further informed by his avatar and the mascot of this website, which stylizes him as an offshoot of “Doom Guy.” This character is the generic space marine popularized in the *Doom* video game series of the mid-90s, a white male who relishes in overt acts of violence in the ultimate ultra violent power fantasy. Drawing on this image as inspiration is more telling than he realizes.

Lastly, level three gets much more explicit with its categories, taking a clear antagonistic position to anything considered progressive or left leaning. This final level is defined by the, “incorporation of contemporary left-wing politics, historical revisionism often influenced by DEI principles, explicit and aggressive progressive messaging, inversion of traditional moral or heroic archetypes, [and] sex or race swaps of legacy characters.” It’s true that the definitions of what terms like “revisionism”, “DEI principles,” “traditional morals or heroic archetypes” even mean are never mentioned, leaving us with the expectation that they’ll mean whatever this one person wants them to mean. But if we look into what’s flagged as DEI to begin with, we’ll have a clearer picture of his mindset when approaching these concepts.

When examining the games listed on the SBI detector’s Steam page, (<https://store.steampowered.com/curator/44858017-Sweet-Baby-Inc-detected/>) we’re greeted with a page labeling multiple games as either being not recommended, or describing what DEI level it falls under. Brief descriptions of the reasoning behind the label accompany each game, including “Anita Sarkesian involved”, which continues to treat her name as a type of Scarlet Letter dating back to her drawing GamerGate’s ire for gentle media critique. As we scroll

through the list, there are multiple games that visibly focus on Black protagonists, including *Tales of Kenzera: ZAU* and *Relooted*. Both titles were labeled as DEI Level 2 simply for SBI being involved, a sin worthy of a full boycott regardless of content.

When looking at DEI Level 3 labels and the “full review” accompanying them, (which often consists of a single sentence explaining the logic behind the classification), anti-Black sentiment becomes much easier to identify. For example, the review of *Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, a super hero game starring an afrolatino protagonist, is labeled as Level 3 DEI for featuring a Black Lives Matter mural in this digital recreation of 2020s New York City. Puzzlingly, *Spider-Man 2* is also on the list, the sequel to *Miles Morales* that allows players to play as both Miles and the traditional white male protagonist of the Spider-Man mythos, Peter Parker. Despite being labeled as Level 3 DEI, its only justification is working with SBI, which by its own rules would classify this as Level 2. Hardly a scientific study, it shows how this list is simply based on how its curator is feeling about any given project. Perhaps most insidious is its classification of *Assassins Creed: Shadows*, a game set in Feudal Japan with historical Black samurai, Yasuke, starring as one of its two protagonists. The detector labels this game as DEI Level 3 for historical inaccuracy, which cites assistant professor Yuichi Goza as one who has disputed Yasuke’s role as a samurai during this period. This game being included in the tracker and the conclusion that the game was purposefully changing history based on the opinion of one historian is part of a larger effort at the time to erase Yasuke’s historical significance, a movement that was sparked by his inclusion in the game.

Yasuke had been, and still is, widely accepted as a samurai in academic circles, a perspective that was reinforced by Thomas Lockley in his book, *Yasuke: The True Story of the Legendary African Samurai*. Lockley, a British author, professor, and researcher out of Nihon

University, became the target of a renewed harassment campaign as he was framed as the sole reason as to why the game was “historically inaccurate” due to Yasuke’s depiction.

Transcriptions of a now deleted episode of the Lance E. Lee Podcast details Lockley’s experience during this time. From having to remove pictures of his family from social media due to the harassment he was getting to acknowledging that most of the harassment was coming from users outside of Japan, Lockley attempts to stay focused on Yasuke the man and not the manufactured controversy that was emerging.

With that said, one aspect of his interview was particularly insightful, stating that the minor amount of pushback he’s received from Japanese users stood out due to Yasuke being, “...seen as a hero in Japan. Even in the 70s he was a hero and he’s only gotten bigger,” (Baculi, 2024). Knowing that Yasuke has been revered in Japanese culture as far back as the 1970s, but was only now beginning to be scrutinized in some circles in Japan off the backs of a Western based harassment campaign, it lends to the idea of how negative perceptions can easily spread across cultures when repeated enough. It’s a move from the same playbook as GamerGate, with Lockley in some ways experiencing what Sarkeesian and Quinn did a decade prior. The obvious difference is his identity as a cis gender white male with a family, an identity that’s often framed as the ideal within these communities. It goes to show that while women, non-white, and / or queer identifying people are attacked at many different angles that Lockley was shielded from, his whiteness was superseded by him putting a historical Black figure on a pedestal.

Some humor can be found around this campaign being sparked around the idea of historical accuracy in *Assassin’s Creed*, a franchise that has never been concerned with it. While Yasuke himself is recognized as a real historical figure, even if his role was exaggerated, (a claim Lockley firmly disputes to this day), *Assassin’s Creed* has always been historical fiction.

Previous entries had protagonists fighting The Pope, directly buying working flying machines from Leonardo DiVinci, and singlehandedly ensuring the success of the American Revolution as a Native American protagonist. Audiences had never been so concerned with historical accuracy until a Black man was put on the cover. Again, we see through the DEI checker and the wider controversy around Yasuke as attempting to preserve a white male hegemony in video games that never really existed. What has resulted is this effort to craft a Virtual Jim Crow, where any form of positive Black depiction, culturally respectful narratives, and historically accepted truths are ostracized through boycott campaigns and outright harassment.

Cultural Production as Resistance: Fighting Back With Games

Now that the cases surrounding *Tales of Kenzera*, *Relooted*, the SBI detector and *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* have been thoroughly examined, that leads this paper to its most important question. Why does this matter? It's easy to see that the events detailed in prior sections are abhorrent, but why does it merit further study outside of the gaming bubble? Again, all roads point to GamerGate, and specifically Steve Bannon, who helped introduce these strategies to gaming communities over a decade prior. In fact, an argument can be made that gaming communities were the testing grounds for his "flood the zone" strategy. This strategy is designed to overwhelm the media and the public with information to the point where it's difficult to focus on all of them at once. It was effective as part of GamerGate when the media focused on the perceived absurdity of "ethics in games journalism" while the underlying political motivations went underexamined. More importantly, it was effective as part of the Trump political strategy, one that continues to serve as a powerful tool in the current administration, (Aitkin, 2025). But upon closer inspection, we see these same strategies not only being employed by gaming communities or exclusively by the Trump administration, but by politicians nationwide. By powerful tech figures like Elon Musk who routinely decries what he considers reverse discrimination with tweets about how "DEI must die," (Hart, 2024). By institutions like our workplaces and universities that have increasingly cut back programs labeled as "DEI", (Guynn, 2025, Binkley, 2025), affecting the livelihoods of workers and students alike. Much like the DEI tracker, the term often means whatever the decision makers want it, advancing discrimination under the guise of equality.

If as argued, these strategies began in the gaming space and have since been deployed to continue a history of the discrimination, ostracization and segregation of Black cultural expression, games can also be used to bring it back. This potential of games as a source of cultural production is supported by numerous scholars in the field of media and technology studies. In her book, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* by Saraya Murray recognizes gaming as a, “core site of social engineering, political influence and a potent means by which subjects come to understand their place and possibilities in a given social context... a site of contestation,” (Murray, 2014). If games serve as such a site, then it further supports claims made by media and technology theorist Alexander Galloway, who called gaming, “one of the most important sites today where racial coding is worked out in mass culture, (Murray, 2014). While not discussing games specifically, Simone Browne writes that, “... with certain acts of cultural production we can find performances of freedom and suggestions of alternatives to ways of living under a routinized surveillance, (Browne, 2015). To add to this concept, media academic Lisa Nakamura studied the concept of identity tourism and race in virtual communities. Her assessment was that in virtual spaces, “A diversification of the roles which get played, which are permitted to be played, can enable a thought provoking detachment of race from the body, and an accompanying of the essentialness of race as a category, (Nakamura, 1995).

That’s not to say that diverse identity in digital roles inherently challenges concepts of race, because in what David Leonard calls “high tech blackface,” video games also have the potential to reinforce and even award agency over Black bodies to people who otherwise wouldn't have the ability to do so. Using sports video games as an example, Leonard compares sports games to minstrelsy, giving a primarily white male audience the ability to consume,

control and in some cases injure virtual representations of real Black people, (Leonard, 2004). Sports games in particular are a peculiar example because not only are they immune to the outrage that the games we've discussed experienced, even when based on fictional players, but Leonard's framing essentially adds to the debate of the exploitation of athletes in real life for the benefit of their extremely wealthy owners for audience consumption. The main difference is the games give audiences of any economic background the ability to own and control their teams.

When we take the above assessments into consideration, it can be assumed that there is a right and wrong way to resist anti-Black structures in gaming. Black presence alone without the proper context is not enough. When guiding us towards a potential path to effective resistance strategies, we need to draw from the same history that informs the anti-Black racism that currently floods gaming communities. Some of these examples are explicitly political in nature. For example, the Wattstax music festival of 1972 was a celebration of Black cultural expression in the face of increased surveillance and policing. Spurred on by the general public's reaction to the Watts Rebellion and the perceived lawlessness of Black communities, Civil Rights leaders, comedians and musicians came together to show that they would not be silenced under increased scrutiny, (Murch, 2012). Across the wider African diaspora, activists in Senegal used hip-hop as a form of protest against hostile governments. This allowed communities that otherwise would not have the resources for a wide scale counter movement to inspire young populations to get involved while spreading their message to an international audience with the help of social media, (Ndiaye, 2021).

Resistance can even take shape without explicit political intent. Case in point, Jordan Peele and his massively influential horror film, *Get Out*. Horror was a genre that was known in Black and white spaces alike as the one that would kill the Black people first. They usually had

trivial roles and would often exist to play the killer's first victim, acting more as a warning sign for the white protagonists than as their own characters. When they weren't the victims, they were often the threat, such as in the 90's film *Candyman*. Here, the spirit of the son of a slave who was murdered for getting a white woman pregnant, returns to terrorize a Black housing project while tormenting a white college student implied to be the reincarnation of his former lover.

Get Out challenged and reversed these trends. Centering Chris, a Black man who travels with his white girlfriend to meet her liberal elite family, this story frames institutional whiteness and the microaggressions of ignorant center-left as the horror. By extension, Chris represents how Black identity fights to survive in even left-leaning spaces and the uneasiness of being observed as a cultural other. What resulted was the film blowing up into a cultural phenomenon, receiving accolades and recognition throughout the film industry. While there is a certain irony to Peele's work being awarded prominence by the white liberal institutions it was criticizing, it helped reshape what Black people in horror movies can be.

The game space has no shortage of attempts to achieve the same, which is why this paper argues that the backlash against these types of works in video games is a deliberate attempt to prevent such a shift in the interactive space. Yet, publishers around the world still persist. Looking back at *Relooted*, the development team held a talk at UCLA, where creative director Ben Myers discussed their development philosophy behind the game. Initial versions had the game centered around fictional artifacts that could be damaged or broken during the heists. As the project progressed, the team felt it was more important to pay respect to the real artifacts that inspired the game's narrative. However, having felt that these artifacts had been through enough in the real world, they sacrificed aspects based around play to make it so the artifacts could not be damaged. In exchange, successful heists are met with the objects being put on display in your

base, where the player can look up the real history and cultural significance of the objects that were retrieved.

Efforts to bring African culture to gaming communities continue to grow despite the hostility found online. One example is *Nolzawi*, a narrative focused puzzle game that emphasized oral history, community and problem solving in a way that invoked traditional folklore, (Randle, 2024). Leti Arts, a game developer based out of Ghana, developed a game and comic series titled *African Legends*. By combining culturally relevant folklore with a Western superhero aesthetic, they hoped to appeal to a global audience while challenging negative depictions of the continent through their art, (Pijnaker and Spronk, 2017). In the United States, video game live streamers like Ebonix and OTRGamerTV used mods, or tools often developed outside of the official game resources to change, add, or remove digital assets, to repurpose games like *The Sims 4* and *Grand Theft Auto 5* into outlets for resistance. Protests were organized within the games, one of which was set as a fundraiser for The Bail Project, an organization seeking to abolish cash bail, while the other was meant to speak out against police violence in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, (Cortez, Asino and Young, 2022). Whether through conscious efforts to share culture, change public perception, or raise money for liberatory causes, these examples all show how Black gaming can be used to resist structures of power.

Conclusion

What started in 2014 as an attack on women in gaming with GamerGate grew into a political project that has done tremendous harm to Black and brown communities both in and out of gaming. As the harassment and obfuscation tactics employed by gamers have been repurposed to roll back DEI initiatives, remove funding from programs that disproportionately affect Black communities in broader politics, it's important to identify the way that these strategies are being workshopped. As if continuing a centuries long history of anti-Black sentiment as a way of bolstering white hegemonic ideologies, the harassment faced by Surgent Studios, Nyamakop, and Thomas Lockley among countless others is not unique to gaming. Rather, it's a continuation of the agenda that was put in place when white people put on blackface and mocked Black people during minstrel shows of the 1800s. It's the archiving of Black films to ensure they're never viewed at the turn of the twentieth century. It's how even into the twenty-first century, Black depictions are often informed by negative stereotypes crafted by white people to control Black identity.

But just as Black creatives have historically used their art to resist in the face of adversity, gaming has the unique ability to allow those outside of a culture to experience it. Due to their interactive nature, games can potentially and simultaneously educate the player while helping them develop empathy and appreciation for perspectives outside of their own. Expressed through in-game protests, culturally authentic depictions of Bantu spirituality, a power fantasy where stolen artifacts can be "relooted", or by simply sharing a piece of one's self with those who might not experience it otherwise, games can and should be taken seriously as a way to promote Black culture. Those who are trying to segregate it take it seriously, so resistance to those actors should be just as strong if not more so. As long as projects like the games discussed in this work

continue to be made and repurposed to promote Black culture, causes, and expression, then a new flood can overtake the zone that will be too powerful to ignore.

Bibliography

Abubakar Salim [@Abzybabzy]. (2024, May 31). A needed message.
View: <https://x.com/Abzybabzy/status/1796602487522328761>

Altman, Jamie. "The Whole Leslie Jones Twitter Feud, Explained." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 25 July 2016,
www.usatoday.com/story/college/2016/07/25/the-whole-leslie-jones-twitter-feud-explained/37420235/.

Aitken, Peter. "Steve Bannon's 'Flood the Zone' Strategy Explained Amid Trump Policy Blitz." *Newsweek*, February 6, 2025.
<https://www.newsweek.com/steve-bannon-flood-zone-strategy-explained-trump-policy-blitz-2027482>.

Baculi, Spencer. "'Assassin's Creed: Shadows' Backlash Prompts Academic Thomas Lockley to Defend His 'Black Samurai' Narrative: 'Yasuke Was a Hero in Japan.'" *Bounding Into Comics*, July 30, 2024.
<https://boundingintocomics.com/video-games/thomas-lockley-defends-black-samurai-narrative-assassins-creed-shadows-backlash-yasuke-was-a-hero-in-japan>.

Bayeck, Rebecca Y., et al. "Representations of Africans in popular video games in the U.S." *Journal For Virtual Worlds Research*, vol. 11, no. 2, 30 July 2018,
<https://doi.org/10.4101/jvwr.v11i2.7285>.

Binkley, Collin. "DEI Rollbacks Hit Campus Support Systems for Students of Color." *AP News*, April 22, 2025.
<https://apnews.com/article/dei-diversity-equity-inclusion-college-bbe09c081d8a47fcb5616c8fa3b23cee>.

Browne, Simone. (2015). *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press.

Cortez, A., McKoy, A., & Lizarraga, J. R. (2022). The Future of Young Blacktivism: Aesthetics and Practices of Speculative Activism in Video Game Play. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 26, 53–70. [https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.202203_26\(3\).0005](https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.202203_26(3).0005)

Circle Staff. (2016, October). *Circle Staff www.civicyouth.org 2016 millennial poll analysis 2016 election*. Circle.tufts.edu.
https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/2016_millennial_poll.pdf

Gandy, Oscar H, and Paula W Matabane. *Television and It's Influence among African-Americans and Hispanics*. 1 July 1988. Accessed 29 Oct. 2024.

Gray, K. L. (2024). *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins*. Routledge.

Green, Joshua. *Devil's Bargain Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Nationalist Uprising Joshua Green*. Penguin Books, 2018.

Gupta, Sehjal. "Asmongold's Viral Rant about America Being 'White People's Land' Turns into Major Race Debate Online." *MSN*, 31 Oct. 2025, www.msn.com/en-in/news/world/asmongold-s-viral-rant-about-america-being-white-people-s-land-turns-into-major-race-debate-online/ar-AA1PzxWh.

Guynn, Jessica. "These Are the Companies That Rolled Back Dei amid Trump Backlash." *USA Today*, December 9, 2025. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2025/12/09/trump-dei-rollback-list-backlash/87457060007/>.

Hart, Robert. "Elon Musk Says DEI 'must Die' and Criticizes Diversity Schemes as 'Discrimination.'" *Forbes*, May 8, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/roberthart/2023/12/15/elon-musk-says-dei-must-die-and-criticizes-diversity-schemes-as-discrimination/>.

IGDA. *Statement Against Harassment in the Games Industry*. (2024, March 19). <https://igda.org/news-archive/statement-against-harassment-in-the-games-industry/>

Kaepernick, C., Kelley, R. D. G., & Taylor, K.-Y. (2023). *Our History Has Always Been Contraband: In Defense of Black Studies*. Kaepernick Publishing : Haymarket Books. Kooistra, S. (2025, February 20). *Why White Men Fall for the Far Right*. *Green European Journal*. <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/why-white-men-fall-for-the-far-right/>

Kooistra, S. (2025, February 20). *Why White Men Fall for the Far Right*. *Green European Journal*. <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/why-white-men-fall-for-the-far-right/>

Larson, S. G. (2006). Chapter 3: African Americans in Film and Television Entertainment. In *Media & Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment* (pp. 26–30). Essay.

Lee, Julia. *Our gang: A racial history of the little rascals*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt18s30zn>.

Lehman, Christopher P. *A Critical History of Soul Train on Television*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2008.

Lennig, Arthur. "Myth and Fact: The Reception of 'The Birth of a Nation.'" *Film History*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2004, pp. 117–41. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815447>. Accessed 15 Mar. 2026.

Mercante, Alyssa. "Sweet Baby Inc.. Doesn't Do What Some Gamers Think It Does." *Kotaku*, July 31, 2025. <https://kotaku.com/sweet-baby-inc-consulting-games-alan-wake-2-dei-1851312428>.

Murch, D. “The Many Meanings of Watts: Black Power, Wattstax, and the Carceral State.” *OAH Magazine of History* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 37–40.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oahmag/oar062>.

Murray, Soraya. (2018). *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*. I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd.

National Museum of African American History and Culture. (n.d.). *Blackface: The Birth of an American Stereotype*.
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/blackface-birth-american-stereotype>

Ndiaye, Bamba. “Chapter 1: Hip-Hop, Civic Awareness, and Antiestablishment Politics in Senegal.” *Youth and Popular Culture in Africa: Media, Music and Politics*, University of Rochester Press, Rochester, NY, 2021, pp. 37–61.

Nesteroff, Kliph. (2023). *Outrageous: A history of showbiz and the culture wars*. Abrams Press.

Pew Research Center. (2012, November 26). *Young Voters Supported Obama Less, but May Have Mattered More*.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2012/11/26/young-voters-supported-obama-less-but-may-have-mattered-more/>

Pijnaker, T., & Spronk, R. (2017). Africa’s Legends: Digital Technologies, Aesthetics and Middle-Class Aspirations in Ghanaian Games and Comics. *Critical African Studies*, 9(3), 327–349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1371617>

Plug In Digital Label and Kiro’o Games. (2015, September 15). *Aurion: Legacy of the Kori-odan by plug in digital label — Kickstarter*. Kickstarter.
<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/plugindigitallabel/aurion-legacy-of-the-kori-odan/description>

Quinn, Zoe. (2017). *Crash override: How gamergate (nearly) destroyed my life, and how we can win the fight against online hate*. PublicAffairs.

Randle, O. (2024). The roles of riddles, puzzles, and narratives as pedagogy in video games: A case of African-themed video games. *Journal of Black Studies*, 55(8), 661–683.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00219347241278383>

Robinson, Céline C., et al. “Intimidation Game.” *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 16, episode 14, 11 Feb. 2015.

Salim, Abubakar. “My Shoes, Your Feet.” *Www.Ea.Com*, 18 Apr. 2024,
www.ea.com/games/tales-of-kenzera/zau/news/my-shoes-your-feet.

Shliakhovchuk, Elena, and Adolfo Muñoz Garcia. “Intercultural Perspective on Impact of Video Games on Players: Insights from a Systematic Review of Recent Literature.” *Educational*

Sciences: Theory & Practice, vol. 20, no. 1, 28 Jan. 2020, pp. 40–58,
files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1241464.pdf, <https://doi.org/10.12738/jestp.2020.1.004>.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books Ltd. ; University of Otago Press, 2008, Accessed 11 Feb. 2026.

Snider, Mike. “Steve Bannon Learned to Harness Troll Army from ‘World of Warcraft.’” *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 18 July 2017,
www.usatoday.com/story/tech/talkingtech/2017/07/18/steve-bannon-learned-harness-troll-army-world-warcraft/489713001/.

Wells, G., Romhanyi, A., Reitman, J. G., Gardner, R., Squire, K., & Steinkuehler, C. (2024). Right-Wing Extremism in Mainstream Games: A Review of the Literature. *Games and Culture*, 19(4), 469-492.

ZAU, Tales of Kenzera™; “Tales of Kenzera™: Zau (@zauthegame) on X.” *X (Formerly Twitter)*, 23 Apr. 2024, x.com/ZauTheGame/status/1782880719825477735.