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Art Imitates Life: The Representation (Or Lack Thereof) of Black Women in Video Games

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Abstract: The key focus of this essay is to compare the representation of black women in media, primarily in television and film, to the representation of black female characters in video games. Using black feminist theory, this essay illustrates the treatment of black female characters in gaming. The particular and deliberate methods of writing black female characters in video games are used to highlight white video game characters and their narratives, instead of giving life and dimension to the black female characters themselves. The hostile and unsafe environments in gaming spaces are cultivated through upholding these harmful stereotypes of black women, and they directly harm black women who enjoy gaming.

Key Words: Black Women, Video Games, Oppositional Gaze, bell hooks, media, Black Female Characters, Representation, Film, Television, Gaming Spaces, Racism, Misogynoir

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Black Feminist History

Black women have always had to carve out their paths. Oftentimes, the path to freedom and equality was led by their counterparts - white women and Black men. The misogynoir experienced by Black women in the Black Liberation movement (Civil Rights Movement, Black Panthers, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Black Nationalism, and others) has only been discussed as recently as the early 2000s because there are very few records of their experiences outside of Black men (Spencer 91). As Black scholars took a closer look at race relations in the second generation Feminist movement, it became apparent that Black women were not allowed to take up the same amount of space as their white 'peers'. Black suffragist and civil rights leader Mary Church Terrell called on her white suffragette sisters for aid against the disenfranchisement of the Black female vote (Staples 1). She was told that the disenfranchisement of Black women was a race issue, and therefore out of their jurisdiction (Staples 1). Having been left out of both movements meant to liberate them, Black women like Mary Church Terrell, Tony Morrison, Sojourner Truth, and Bell Hooks decided to devote their lives to a different movement, Black feminism.

Black feminist organization began in the mid to late '60s when black women began to question the importance and recognition of their roles in both the Women's Suffrage movement and the Civil Rights movement (Roth 47). There have been many instances in

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which white suffragettes alienated and rejected black women, one being the noted reluctance white women had when called to organizational action by the political persecution of Angela Davis in 1970 (Taylor, 234). Racism in both the first and second Feminist movements took the form of exclusion. Conference panel members were exclusively white women unless the panel was specifically about black or 'third-world' women (Hull, 35). The curriculum taught in women's studies was centered around the work of European women, and the directors of women's studies programs in universities were white as well (Hull, 35). During discussions of sexist oppression, white feminists ignored the differences between white and black women's experiences (Hull, 35). The representation of women's 'collective' oppression was shallow and exclusionary; Black women's unique experiences of misogynoir were overlooked and ignored.

Being systematically oppressed by sexism cannot negate the racism used to oppress Black women. White feminists refused to acknowledge their anti-blackness because of the belief that the oppressed cannot oppress others (Hull, 36). Akasha Gloria Hull, a poet, and Black feminist described this in her book *But Some Of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men* (1993): White women, who were (and still are) without question sexually oppressed by white men, believed that because of this oppression they were unable to assume the dominant role in the perpetuation of white racism; however, they have absorbed, supported, and advocated racist ideology and have acted individually as racist oppressors (36). It also wasn't uncommon for white feminists to have employed women of color as private household workers. Seven times as many women of color (who were 90% Black) in the Feminist movement were household workers than white women in

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1963 (Hull, 36). White women failed to recognize the intersections of race and class when concerning levels of oppression. Some white feminists pushed the idea that white women were incapable of racism. (Hull, 37). Their ideology of 'the oppressed cannot oppress' was deeply flawed. White feminists failed to consider their roles in racism by choosing not to acknowledge the intersectionality of womanhood (Hull, 37). White men were used as scapegoats for white women's racist aggressions as they were considered the common 'enemy' of oppression. They refused to see themselves as agents of classist, racist, and patriarchal society in partnership with white men (Hull 37).

The Black Liberation Movement equated the concept of freedom with masculinity because race was very sexualized in the rhetoric of the movement (Hull, 38). Slavery and racial prejudice denied black men their masculinity through acts of dehumanization. Black liberation was for the black male, in praxis and action (Hull, 38). The notion that Black men endure harsher racism than Black women because of the lack of manhood that Black men are permitted is a product of patriarchal ideology. Black women took it upon themselves to create a movement more suited to their needs, calling it Black Feminism.

Black Feminist Theory

Patricia Hill Collins, a distinguished Black Feminist scholar working at the University of Maryland, identified four major themes in the construction of Black feminist thought (Taylor, 235). She stated that these four themes of Black feminism were "a process of

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self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” formed by a Black woman’s “standpoint”(Collins, 14). The first goal of Black feminism is to redefine and reclaim Black womanhood as a more positive and empowering identity than it was given by white supremacy(Roth 235). Secondly, gaining an understanding of intersectionality between race, class, and gender, as it pertained to Blackness, is essential in the praxis of Black feminists (Taylor 235). Thirdly, Black feminists are to “intertwine intellectual thought and political activism” (Taylor, 235). Finally, Black women must be aware of our distinctive cultural heritage as it gives us energy and skill to combat racist and sexist aggression as we move about the world (Taylor, 235). Ula Taylor, a professor of the University of California Berkeley, defines the emergence of Black feminism as such: Thus, the historical evolution of Black feminism in the United States not only developed out of Black women’s antagonistic and dialectical engagement with White women but also out of their need to ameliorate conditions for empowerment on their terms (235).

While both the Feminist Movement and Black Liberation Movement had failed to acknowledge the importance of intersecting identities, Black Feminism explored these identities concerning oppression in the United States. Working within intersectional frameworks is an important structure of Black feminist thought(Bailey, 20). Black feminists have been thinking about how race, class, sexuality, and gender intersect before the term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989(Bailey, 20.) This term has since helped scholars understand the ways that racial injustice, identity politics, and policing come together to affect the lives of people of color (Crenshaw, 160). The reach of

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intersectionality in Black feminist theory has only continued to extend as we discuss topics like having a black feminist disability framework (Bailey, 20). Ableism negatively impacts the lives of Black people just as much as sexism and racism, making life even more difficult for Black people to get the quality of care that they need (Bailey, 21). Black feminist Audre Lorde explained the need for intersectionality in Black feminist thought by stating that “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives”.

Representation of Black Women in Media

Up until just about four decades ago, Black people had very little control of their narratives in the media. Shows like *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons* were produced by White men while a small number of the writers of the show were Black (Cheers, 2). At this point, three stereotypes of Black women existed in both film and television: the Jezebel, Mammy, and the Tragic Mulatto. (Pilgrim, 15) White television producers like Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin actively shaped the public opinion of Black people for over a decade. Through their narratives, Black women were seen through a white-middle class lens that only interacted with domestic servers and entertainers (Gray, 42). Starting with the *Cosby* show which debuted in 1984, Black men began to assume creative control over their stories (Cheers, 2). It was much longer before Black women began producing television shows. Black feminists examined these shows and were still able to point out certain categories that Black women characters in television often fall into. In both *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge,*

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Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment(2000) and *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*(2005), Patricia Hill Collins examines how the original stereotypes of Black women have morphed and transformed into alternatives from their more aggressive and offensive past translations(Cheers, 3). Although there has been a shift from white men controlling all of black television to Black men controlling some of black television, the stereotypes just take on a different tone, rather than exploring the diverse narratives of Black women.

This reinforces the idea of Black womanhood being a very singular experience that can only correctly be expressed by Black women. Collins identified three contemporary alternatives of the representation of Black women: 'modern mammies' 'Black ladies' and 'educated bitches' all of which she claims are visible in television(Cheers, 4). Modern television shows produced by Black women, like *Insecure*(2016), and *Black Lady Sketch Show*(2019) are devoid of these stereotypes while still honoring the little bit of truth that developed them. bell hooks is a prominent Black feminist scholar that reinterpreted the thesis of Laura Mulvey's dominant Male Gaze to define what she calls the Black Gaze. While the Male Gaze examines how visual media forms like film and television are impacted by sexist racist views of the world, bell hooks tells us that the Black gaze is a radical one (hooks, 3).

bell hooks, or Gloria Dean Watkins is an author known for her disruptive theories surrounding White feminism(Biana, 13). She observed that white feminist movements often purposefully excluded other disenfranchised women while fighting for the same

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rights that men had(Biana, 13). bell hooks critiqued white feminists by telling them that while their movement was for the betterment of their sex (womanhood) their whiteness was still at the forefront of their agenda(Biana, 13). She proposed a new form of feminism, one that did not ignore other forms of oppression stemming from White supremacy(Biana, 13). She states that the fight against sexism can not be isolated from the fight against race and sexuality(Biana,13).

Each of these forms of oppression are interrelated and inseparably connected to each other through interlocking webs of oppression (hooks 1984, 31).

The Oppositional Gaze

bell hooks began exploring the concept of the black female spectator. The dominant white male gaze can only be challenged if those who do not possess it begin to look back(hooks, 115) To 'look back' is an act of defiance in rural black communities (hooks, 116). Black parents often instill the fear of looking back into their children (hook, 116). This practice can be traced back to slavery, as Slaves were not permitted to look at their masters (hooks, 117). This is because looking a person in the eye means that there is some form of equality of the gaze. The seer becomes the seen. Slaves were denied the right to see, they were stripped of their presence and therefore their humanity, power over themselves and their reality(hooks, 116). The inherently defiant act of 'looking back' has cost millions of

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black lives. Black men like Emmet Till and Pervis Payne were both killed- one lynched, the other by capital punishment- for looking (Levy, 13)

The passive roles that women were given and the denial of the black existence in visual media left the black female spectator in a position of masochistic observation (hooks, 133). The black woman is forced to identify with parts and pieces of the screen, but cannot consume media wholly without some escapism. In the screen world, the black female does not exist. If she is ever-present on-screen her role is not only passive but also one of absence. bell hooks explains that the looking relations of black women in the real world translate on screen. Black women are placeholders to uplift white women in their desirability, black women are denied a 'body' on screen. Black women are denied their bodies in the real world every day. The bodies of black women are dissected and cannibalized by consumer culture (Loft, 4). The phallogentric and white supremacist stereotypes of black women are used to justify the mistreatment and dehumanization they face (hooks, 119). On screen, they are lifeless and scapegoated; black women only exist as plot devices to drive white narratives. Black female spectators had to develop a new, different way of seeing in order to consume cinema in a way that doesn't harm them. The black female gaze is an interrogative one. Black women cannot take any media they consume at face value as cinema and film rarely have their existence in mind. The black female gaze is created by the natural suspicion black women have as they move about the world, making it an oppositional gaze.

On white-dominated screens, representations of black women never has the actuality of their lived experiences in mind. Only black women themselves or someone with

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a visually educated eye can see this; the way black women are written are caricatures that already exist in the minds of our society through media socialization (Cheers, 7). These regurgitated images are violent representations of black women and they shape their lived experiences without ever acknowledging them (Adams-Bass, 86).

An application of the cultivation theory to the TV-viewing habits of black youth suggests that youth will accept black-character portrayals and media images as valid models of acceptable and expected behaviors for black people (Adams-Bass, 86). White supremacists established stereotypes in order to control the narratives of marginalized people during colonization (Adams-Bass, 82). This is a process of 'othering' which bell hooks mentions in her observation about the oppositional gaze. The oppositional gaze of the black female spectator challenges not only cinema's rules of presentation but also interrogates the models of representation within it (bell hooks, 123). The black female spectator should not get comfortable with the stereotypes being presented on screen as the engagement of this media means to images willingly in the negation of black representation (bell hooks, 124). The erasure of black women in visual media is another process of othering that doesn't allow for black women to exist or have an active presence in the real world. The cyclical nature of creating violent stereotypes of black women and society accepting the stereotypical behaviors as truthful depictions is intentional and dangerous to the bodies of black women.

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'Looking Back' in Gaming

The way that identities are portrayed in different mediums gives researchers insight into how those identities are viewed in the real world. Just as Black women are seldom shown as warriors and trailblazers in film and television, the world of video games projects false and stereotyped identities onto their black female characters. They are given no agency, their stories stop with them, and are often stopped by the protagonist themselves. Black female characters are seen and used as stepping stones in stories that are engulfed by whiteness. These characters are denied the ability to have agency in their own narratives to give agency to white protagonists.

One character that comes instantly to mind is Marlene, from the first installment of *The Last of Us* series. *The Last of Us* universe is in peril as a zombie apocalypse has ravaged the world, leaving little resources and little humanity for the remainder of the survivors. Marlene is the leader of the Fireflies, an anti-government group that actively and violently resists the totalitarian rule of the U.S. government post-zombie apocalypse. She is given the responsibility of watching Ellie, the game's co-protagonist, after Ellie's mother passes away. Marlene is stern, but compassionate and caring. She manages hundreds of disenfranchised people in factions while trying to find a cure for the brain virus that causes zombies.

When it is revealed to Marlene that Ellie is immune to the virus, she is aghast. She eventually complies with the doctor's wish to extract the part of her brain needed to create

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the vaccine, knowing that it will kill Ellie. She is visibly hurt. She insists that Joel, a man who helped Ellie get to the Fireflies, has a right to know her fate. Joel is our troubled white male co-protagonist that is struggling with the trauma associated with the death of his daughter at the beginning of the outbreak. When he is told the fate of Ellie, he spirals and kills almost every doctor in the operation room to 'save' Ellie from death. He then shoots Marlene. First in the stomach, and then in the face in order to prevent her from looking for Ellie in the future.

Marlene is murdered by a grief-stricken white man who overlooks the entirety of humanity to save one white girl. Even as Marlene begs him to think about Ellie's eventual fate in such a cruel and hostile world- being eaten, the possibility of her being raped and murdered instead of dying a peaceful, painless, and meaningful death, she is shot dead to further both Ellie and Joel's stories as protagonists. This is later affirmed by the release of *The Last of Us 2* in 2020. Had Ellie been killed and used in the development of the vaccine, there would be no need for a second game.

The Last of Us 2 (2020) is centered around the repercussions of the events on the day Joel 'saves' Ellie. Joel is brutally killed for the death of Marlene and the deaths of the doctors. Ellie goes on a quest for revenge while still carrying survivor's guilt. Marlene's death is what kicks off an entire sequel to the franchise. She was used as a plot device; her noble goals and dreams die with her. In *The Last of Us 2*, the Fireflies have disbanded due to a lack of leadership and resources. bell hooks quotes Manthia Diawara, a cultural theorist, when discussing the oppositional gaze:

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Every narration places the spectator in a position of agency; and race, class, and sexual relations influence the way in which the subjecthood is filled by the spectator (hooks, 117).

The power of any narrative relies solely on the spectator and their way of seeing the world. The largely assumed target audience for most AAA video game titles is white men, usually with alt-right affiliations (Bezio, 1). A large majority of video game design studios are led by white men (Bezio, 1). There is a case to be made about why Marlene was designed to be a black woman; the black woman is easier to antagonize despite her selfless and honest goals. In *The Last of Us*(2013), an antagonist is exactly what Marlene is to Joel. The spectator assumes the agency and identity of the traumatized and pained Joel, making it easier to have less empathy for Marlene. She is depicted as a selfish child-killer, and not the potential savior of their society.

Sheva Alomar is one of the most trivial and unused characters in the Resident Evil game timeline. She only has one appearance in the franchise while other characters make multiple appearances. Sheva Alomar is a black woman and is a native of West Africa. We are not told where in West Africa, which has 17 countries. The game *Resident Evil 5* (2009) takes place in West Africa, insinuating that we would have never seen Sheva outside of West Africa. It's true, as she is never seen again in later installments. The game is designed to be a multiplayer experience, with both Sheva Alomar and Chris Redfield as protagonists. However, if you choose to play the game solo style, you have to play through the game first as Chris Redfield. It is only after the completion of the game that Sheva is unlocked as a choice for solo gameplay. Sheva exists only to contrast Chris Redfield and to help him finish

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his mission. Her personal goals and work experience are not an essential part of the game's narrative; we learn very little about her other than her impoverished background. Sheva has no agency in her own story because, in order to do that, she would have to gaze back in a game that is largely about killing 'infected' black people.

Resident Evil 5 was a very controversial game when it came out due to the assumed justification of violence towards black African people at the hands of the white protagonist. Scholars like Andre Brock responded to the video game by stating that "Videogames construct exotic fantasy worlds and peoples as places for White male protagonists to conquer, explore, exploit, and solve" (Brock, 1). Western ideologies of black African people consist of savagery, incivility, and poverty. These 'monsters' consist of only dark-skinned men, carrying their cleavers and butcher knives. Sheva expressed very little concern for her people being mowed down carelessly by Chris Redfield. In fact, she joins in, killing right alongside him, hundreds of infected black people. hooks describes spaces of agency for black female spectators as a space where "we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other, but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see." Sheva was not designed to look back or question her partner's violent actions against her people. She does not look at the suffering villagers as her own, despite having grown up in the area. The game denies a space of agency for black people to exist and critique, to be hurt by the deaths of their once human brethren. If Sheva was given the agency to look back at both her white partner and the assumed white male audience, perhaps she would have denied helping Chris Redfield, seeking a humanitarian approach on her own. A humanitarian approach to their epidemic

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could have been to contain as many people as possible for further research to a cure. White supremacy rarely considers a humanitarian approach to black people and blackness.

Absent Black Female Characters

Black women are used as placeholders in white narrative structures. They exist in a vacuum to be compared, contrasted as the less desirable and unimportant characters to their white counterparts (hooks, 118). bell hooks describes this sort of 'representation' as presence as absence. The existence of black women in media is a sort of non-existence; she is denied a 'body' in order to perpetuate white supremacy and with it, phallogocentric spectatorship where the 'desirable' woman is the white woman (hooks, 118). Black female characters in video games aren't exempt from this treatment. In fact, while hooks in her essay states that this 'presence as absence' representation is dated in film, it's still very prevalent in gaming.

Dead or Alive: Xtreme 2 is just one of many games in the Dead or Alive franchise that has questionable representation of women. While Dead or Alive started as a fighting game franchise, the Xtreme sub-franchise is akin to something like a volleyball dating simulator. The player chooses girls to play volleyball as during the day, and at night, the player can gift their favorite girls items in exchange for sexy cutscenes and skimpy bikini outfits to play in. Lisa Hamilton is the only black woman in the entire franchise of 16 games, in which she appears in only 9. Her features are euro-centric. The only important information about her

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character is that she aspires to be a luchadora. Her main role in the franchise is an agitator of the other female characters around her. Lisa is the only brown-skinned woman in the entire franchise, and she doesn't last very long in the Xtreme series. She didn't appear in the third or any other of the Xtreme series games. Lisa's existence in the Dead or Alive universe is only to juxtapose the fairer skinned women around her. Knowing that these games exist only for the spectacle of jiggle physics and the objectification of women, Lisa's absences suggest that her character wasn't favored; her role in the game was small and unimportant. She later appears in other Dead or Alive fighting games, however. This suggests that Lisa is more valued in an aggressive setting than a sexualized one.

The objectification of women in fighting games is a normalized practice in gamer spaces. Female characters are almost always scantily clad, lacking any armor to cover their vital organs, like their hearts and stomachs, despite being in extremely dangerous circumstances. This practice goes beyond clothing as well; many female fighting game characters have similar, if not the same, exaggerated body type that is considered visually pleasurable to men. Mortal Kombat is one of the oldest fighting games, debuting in 1992. Until Mortal Kombat 4 (1997) Jade was the only black female character in the franchise. Her only role in the Mortal Kombat narrative is a servant. She was first a servant to Shao Kahn, the villainous and ruthless ruler of Outworld. She eventually betrays him to serve her long-time best friend and Shao Kahn's daughter Kitana. Little is known about her background or past other than the fact that she is classified as an Edenian. Her costume is only a very low-cut bodysuit and a pair of high-heeled boots, and her weapon of choice is a staff, which she uses as a stripper pole to celebrate her wins. Jade is a servant throughout

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her entire life, and is only given one love interest in the 11th installment of the game who is killed shortly thereafter. She is expected to give her life to protect her masters, and does in the 9th installment of the game, *Mortal Kombat 9* (2011).

Jade's death is the most gruesome in the entire cutscene; her white and male counterparts are only put down with punches and kicks. Her master, Kitana, is merely shoved away. Jade's stomach is ripped out of her body as she tries to protect her. Jade's presence in the *Mortal Kombat* series is absent; her entire identity is shaped by the people around her and whatever conflict they're facing. She is only given a 'body' after her body is mutilated. Jade has served her purpose to prolong the life of her fair-skinned master. She will fuel Kitana's anger and need for revenge in the rest of the game's plot. Black female characters are not given the opportunity to be whole and full in video games. Instead, their bodies are used as transparent placeholders to advance plot and highlight whiteness in contrast to their own useless blackness. The alienation of the black female body in video games also alienates the black female spectator-player.

Conclusion

The lived experience of the black female spectator-player is one of escapism. To enjoy the act of consuming video games, black women are forced to ignore their own lives and experiences. Mainstream triple-A title video games are largely created for and by cis heterosexual white men. This means that players who aren't cis heterosexual, white, and male are forced to identify with whiteness-centered stories and characters. Black female

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spectator-players are hardly considered in these stories; it is blatant by the way black women are both written in and out of narratives. There has even been pushback from writing black women into these narratives. *God of War: Ragnarok* (2022) was announced at the end of the PS5 Showcase Event and it has since been surrounded by controversy.

The God of War series revolves around Nordic Mythology and the tales of Kratos, the Greek God of war. During the PS5 showcase event, God of War: Ragnarok introduces a new character to the franchise, Angrboda, who is the mate of Loki and the mother of monsters (Lindow, 114). She is depicted as a black woman in this story which caused backlash from the games' fanbase. There were cries of historical inaccuracy, race switching, and fishing for diversity. However, the God of War series has a list of many undisputable historical accuracies. The developers have made choices that deliberately veer away from Nordic tradition, like having one character talk with a Texan accent. Another character speaks in a Scottish accent, but for God of War fans, having a black woman in the game was the breaking point of 'realism' in the series.

In her Oppositional Gaze essay, bell hooks talks about the reality of the moviegoing black female spectator:

Every black woman who was/is an ardent moviegoer, a lover of the Hollywood film, testified that to experience fully the pleasure of cinema, that they had to close down critique, analysis; they had to forget racism. And they mostly did not think about sexism. (hooks, 139).

The black female spectator-player has the same dilemma; she cannot critique or analyze the games she plays nor the actions of the non-black spectator-players she interacts with.

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This would mean engaging with the constant and overwhelming alienation that comes with enjoying video games. She cannot wonder why all of the protagonists of her favorite video games are white, or male, or both. She surely cannot criticize her non-black counterparts, as this puts her in danger of being ostracized from her 'community'. The black female spectator-player must be anonymous, silent, and forgetful of her own identity.

Virtual gamer spaces are inaccessible to black women because of this. They are denied a safe space among the white men that typically inhabit these spaces. bell hooks says that the extent to which black women feel devalued, objectified, dehumanized in this society determines the scope and texture of their looking relations (hook, 140). The dehumanization, scapegoating, and hyper-sexualization of black female characters in video games translates directly to how black women are treated in gamer spaces. Black women are the ultimate other to white men and video games reinforce this othering by actively having the player-spectator engage with othering processes. Video games are a very different medium than the ones that have come before. They allow a different relationship to the screen world, one of agency. The spectator-player controls the actions of the protagonist, so identification is immediate and full. It is no mistake that video games attract bigoted young white men through the process of othering. Black female spectator-players close their eyes and accept shallow and lifeless representation, knowing that this representation shapes the minds of racists.

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