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## Ready Player?: Sex and Race in Video Games

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# READY PLAYER?: SEX AND RACE IN VIDEO GAMES

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Dean of the Graduate School

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2022

# READY PLAYER?: SEX AND RACE IN VIDEO GAMES

by

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THESIS

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## **PREFACE**

As a child, I had always been fascinated with video games. Sure, I used video games as a way to relieve stress mainly, but I found myself drawn into the worlds that I was immersing myself in. These worlds are filled with social structures, cultures, governments, even religions. Once I started doing research in college, I took a bit of a step back from the games I loved and took a broader look at what I was playing. Specifically, I wanted to see what these worlds had to offer in terms of representation of races, gender, and non-human characters. These questions began to be in the back of my mind. I began to change how I was viewing the game as I was playing. Why are the women that I see or play as in the games that I enjoy so highly sexualized? How come the racial minorities that I see or play as in many of the games that I play are stereotyped? Why are the non-human characters that I see seem to be mistreated and discriminated against?

Just as I started to think about this as I played my games, I have chosen to organize this thesis in a similar manner. This thesis is organized in a manner similar to that of a video game, with the presentation of the content and immersion into the various worlds that are to be explored. I challenge the reader, the gamer, the scholar, to think on these subjects. Hopefully, when you turn on that console or boot up that game on your pc, you may notice how race, gender, and representation are presented within the game worlds that you find yourselves in. What and how others are represented and presented matters. Therefore, let us begin this tutorial.

## CHAPTER 1: PRESS “START” TO BEGIN

A hooded figure emerges from the forest, sprinting into the settlement, weaving around the settlers at breakneck speeds. This figure makes it to the settlement’s church. Here he pauses seemingly listening for something. This something is soon revealed to be the sounds of a whip cracking and whistling through the air and the wails of someone in pain. He takes off again, rounding the corner of the church to see a white overseer his two compatriots whipping an enslaved person who is tied to the wall, forced to undergo this inhumane and painful treatment that the locals would call “discipline.” Discipline that happens so frequently in the settlement, no one bats an eye. No one cares. If the enslaved person dies, so be it. Not this time. It stops this time.

The hooded figure leaps into action, a blade slides out from the small brace at his wrist, stabbing into the overseer that is doing the whipping. Before that overseer hits the ground, the hooded man moves to attack the overseer on the right, pulling out a machete. This tool that was once used to cut cane sugar, a tool of the enslaved, will now be used to cut down the oppressors. The third overseer seeing his comrades in danger, readies a rifle to put down the hooded man, but he is not quick enough. As he takes aim and pulls the trigger, the hooded man grabs the second overseer and uses him as a human shield. The second overseer dies at the hand of his comrade before it becomes his turn. The third overseer drops the rifle, desperately trying to pull the cutlass at his waist. Too little too late. The hooded man is already upon him, and with a wet crunch, buries the blade of the machete deep into his torso, killing him almost instantly.

This is the opening title scene for the game *Assassin’s Creed Freedom Cry*, an action-adventure video game Downloadable Content (DLC) add-on to the game *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag* which released initially in December 2013 and in February 2014 as a stand-alone

game. Within this game, players play as Adéwalé, a previously enslaved person from Trinidad and supporting character from *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* who washed up on the shore of Saint-Domingue (Present day Haiti) set between 1735 and 1737. This game was a notable depiction of what has been termed the “slave narrative video game genre” (Hammar, 2016). The game’s story of what life was like during the 1730s displayed scenes of torture, mistreatment, enslavement, and the attitudes towards enslaved peoples in the region. Specifically, the game narrates how owners viewed enslaved not as people, but as animals or property, with no capability to experience pain or display any semblance of humanity.

In focusing on a narrative of the enslaved, the game indirectly addresses race and the representation of people of color. As this game is set in the 1730s, the topic of enslavement and oppression is in the background of the game given that it was strongly tied to both colonialism and commerce during the time period and in the region of Haiti. In this way, the game helps to inform the game player about the historical events that occurred as well as people of importance in the region. Historical context can be accessed via small pop-up windows that can be expanded to show both an image of either a historical figure or structure (such as a building or point of interest within a setting’s location), followed by small excerpts giving the historical background and information. This is not the only game within the *Assassin's Creed* series that situates play within a historical setting. Indeed, all of the games within this franchise is set within a specific historical setting that serves its historical narrative and also serves as an aesthetic backdrop for the game itself. In this way, *Assassin's Creed* immerses the player into the historical setting that the games take place in.

Ubisoft, the game company that creates the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, has argued that a focus on historical specificity lends authenticity to the time period in which the plot of the game

resides. Additionally, historical context is utilized as a tool to indicate the passage of time within the game's plot in order to help to move the story along. However, while the game uses historical periodization as a form of game mechanics and aesthetics, its design does not probe historical narrative as a concept to be reexamined. Within the *Assassin's Creed*, quotes like "To the victor goes the spoils. Goes the history," highlight that the history being presented is usually that of those who conquered over another group. History thus is used merely as a mechanism to delineate the diegesis of the game and to motivate plot events, rather than to encourage players to negotiate political power in any meaningful way.

In this instance, the institution of enslavement is constantly placed at the forefront of the plot as a mere device. See for example, how the game focuses on the formation of the Maroons, a group of runaway Black enslaved persons who had become an organized group intent on freeing more enslaved peoples and avoiding being recaptured. Players can engage in activities to liberate plantations, intercept, and free enslaved characters from human trafficking ships along the coast, and even take down enslaving outposts. The video game's depictions of living conditions and enslaved peoples' quarters on ships is displayed in the game's mise-en-scène, exposing players to the graphic depictions of violence and death of enslaved characters as a slave ship burns and sinks. As part of gameplay, players are encouraged to attempt to free as many enslaved persons as they can, but in the end, the vast majority aboard the doomed ship drown as they are all chained to their cabin beds.

Race and representation, though never addressed outright in *Assassin's Creed* is nevertheless present in its depiction of historical institutions of enslavement and how the players must move through the narrative of the game. Certain missions within *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry* are locked until the player manages to liberate a set amount of enslaved people. Thus, it is

unavoidable that players confront race when playing. These enslaved peoples and race narratives displayed here with the example of *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry* highlight the necessity of analyzing the role of race and representation within video game story worlds and characters.

### TUTORIAL LEVEL 1: AN OVERVIEW OF THE GAME

Video games depict race both implicitly through the game's style or narrative and explicitly by directly addressing it through character design, dialogue, and game mechanics. These various representations of race can even shape players' perceptions and attitudes towards race and even towards the role of race in history and society (Gilbert, 2019). This project will explore how race and representation figure in video games through an intersectional lens considering how non-white game characters are often sexualization and exotified. In order to demonstrate the complexities of the intersection between race, sexuality, and gender in game and character design, I will perform two case studies. The first will focus on the sexualization and exotification of race through the use of games such as *Resident Evil 5*, *Apex Legends*, *Overwatch*, and *Bayonetta 2*. The second case study will focus on race and representation using the *Assassin's Creed* series, the *Mass Effect* trilogy, and *Watchdogs 2* which were chosen due to their popularity and relevancy (revenue sales and gamer reviews). An analysis on how cliches and stereotypes become transferred and coded into representation of race and those considered as other (including non-human races) within games can reveal to what extent or how these codes of race apply. Active constructions of notions of race are taken to create a character that is boiled down by the game designers and developers into what is predominantly a white male lens.

### METHODOLOGY: THE MECHANICS OF THE GAME

The focus of race, for the purposes of this research, will focus on representations of characters coded as Indigenous People and People of Color including African and African

American peoples, Asian and Asian American peoples, and the Latinx Community. Race is constructed in video games through character design, speech, and game behaviors in ways that sexually objectify and exoticize, trivialize, or stereotype characters. In doing so, the game relays both implicit and explicit messages of racism, tokenism, and objectification that can then extend into the real world. What happens in the digital world, the messages found there, and the experience within these worlds, bleed into and are influenced by the world around us. In fact, what happens in this digital world can be completely different from that of the real world. No matter the situation, how those that are perceived as different, is influenced by and influences video game players and audiences.

Additionally, my study considers how perceptions of Indigenous communities and people of color are utilized to map racialized characteristics unto non-human characters within fantasy games. The reason for this is to display racist or discriminatory actions, perceptions, and behaviors that can be observed within the games being studied as well as that fantasy races and non-human races may have more room to be overt in the treatment and discriminations of those that are viewed as other or seen as “inferior.” As such, parallels to historical treatments of real-world races can be drawn. It should also be noted that such dynamics are needing to be based on some form of real-world focus or example in which to model such discrimination. The aliens and mistreatment are no longer alien, they are modeled on real treatments of races (specifically of people of color and indigenous peoples) within our world.

While this study focuses on a textual analysis of race within video games, the identities of players cannot be wholly divorced from such a project. The racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities of gamers within gaming communities impact how race is understood when represented within the game. White gamers and developers are often treated uncritically as the

status quo makers and audiences of video games. Within gaming communities, Black gamers are often labeled as “deviant” by white gamers within interactive game play and gaming message boards through the use of linguistic profiling associated with Black gamers’ physical identity of Blackness (Gray, 2012a; Gray, 2012b).

As Kishonna L. Gray (2012a; 2012b) has demonstrated, Black players tend to experience discrimination from non-Black players within the gaming community. White and non-Black players discriminate against Black gamers through the use of derogatory terms including racial slurs and in game insults attacking the competence of the player. Additionally, Black gamers disproportionately experience interference of play such as when other players go out of their way to annoy, frustrate, or make playing difficult. According to Gray, these racist experiences have become normalized for Black gamers who have become accustomed and have even begun to accept the label of “deviant.”

This research will also delve into the contradictions of authenticity within industrial promotions of racial equality when the racial demographics of game developers behind the scenes do not match with the racial representations on screen. Discussions of the mismatch of racial representations on and off-screen was coined as Plastic Representation by Kristen J. Warner. The inorganic nature of representation and displays of racial practitioners both on and off-screen regarding television is what was highlighted by Warner. Such occurrences are met with movements and resistances towards these inorganic representations are seen with examples like that of #representationmatters and the exploration of on-screen and off-screen depictions of representation and the long history of racism within media (Warner, 2017). It is rather hard to claim to promote racial equality or claim to display authentic views of racial and ethnic cultures of minority groups if the individuals who work on these aspects are not from these backgrounds.

In doing so, one could make the argument that such gestures merely function as lip service to appeal to a wider demographic in the hopes of increasing profits or increasing interest in a game. Video game companies attempt to sell players on “plastic representation,” this lip service appeal to a wider viewer demographic, of non-white characters in order to garner interest or market to a niche audience. Meanwhile, predominately white developers can only write and design from their own identity lens.

However, in attempting to promote the game as authentic or realistic, games often fail the audiences they claim to represent offering mere surface attempts at diversity, equity, and inclusion. As a result, gamers of color are denied an opportunity to see themselves within the narrative and play a dynamic racial character. This illusion of representation and authenticity only adds to this status quo, albeit in a more subtle way. Each chapter will add an autoethnographic component to add perspective from the view of a user and consumer of these games as well as my own experience playing these games. I will further attempt to immerse readers briefly into these gaming worlds with narrations of gaming scenarios for the case study chapters as a means of giving the readers an immersive experience before analyzing the world.

This project will focus on how video games utilize assumptions and stereotypes of race within contemporary society to construct character representations of non-white races. I analyze several games that offer a compelling case for how race, sex, and gender is consciously or unconsciously designed within the game requiring players to confront both the racial identities of the characters in the context of their own racial, gender, and sexual identity. Specifically, my case studies will focus on the following games which were chosen due to their popularity and relevancy (revenue sales and gamer reviews): *Apex Legends*, *Overwatch*, *The Assassin's Creed* franchise, *Watchdogs 2*, and the *Mass Effect* trilogy. Additionally, much of my analysis will

focus on games produced by Ubisoft. I will explore why Ubisoft, in particular, utilizes historical and contemporary depictions of People of Color, Indigenous Communities, as well as imagined fantasy races of characters in their game and character design.

I begin with a review of literature (chapter 2) which will demonstrate how this project draws from video game scholarship by several researchers across a wide range of academic fields of study and methodologies in order to analyze the various video games' depiction of race. I utilize research from communication and rhetoric, communication theory, critical race theory, cinema, media, and game studies, history, and cultural studies. Each of these fields help address representations of race in video games by considering a historical overview of race in video games, historical representation of people of color within games, and historical accuracy. Additionally, my research emphasizes the value of content analysis of racial minorities within video games, games as cultural artifacts, and highlighting the damaging role of racial stereotypes within games. Each of these sections will explore various methodologies that I have drawn inspiration from for this research and which have helped provide context from which this research will build from. Additionally, this project will call upon Stuart Hall's notion of "encoding/decoding" model to explore the representations of the characters within a video game and how it is designed for the observer (the gamer) such as clothing design, body types, behaviors, dialogue, and any displays of stereotypes that may be present.

Next, I will offer an intersectional analysis of how race is represented in video game characters and stories by highlighting two game-specific case studies. The games used within the case studies will be analyzed both within character depictions of how characters are designed to look, act, react and how are treated within the game by other characters and within the game's

narrative. In this manner, this will be a mixed methods analysis using case studies of multiple games to discuss the sexualization of race, race representation, and stereotyping.

The first case study, chapter 3, will focus on the sexualization and exotification of race, particularly regarding women of color. The games that will comprise the analysis of this particular chapter will be that of *Apex Legends* and *Overwatch*, supplemented with discussions of *Resident Evil 5* and *Bayonetta*. Discussions of what is known as “The Lara Phenomenon” (the sexualization of women in a leading role in relation to their competency within the plot of the game that was based on the game character Lara Croft from the game *Tomb Raider*) which was explored and coined by Jeroen Jansz and Raynel G. Martis. There will also be discussion of how female characters and female characters of color, are relegated to props or secondary to a male character (of which the trend of said male is white, cis-gendered and heterosexual). In this manner, the case study will explore how the games used within this case study perpetuate or, where applicable, contradict the established patterns and racial stereotypes within a large majority of published games over the course of the past two decades.

The second case study, chapter 4, will focus on games in which there are non-human races such as aliens. In particular I will examine how the *Mass Effect* trilogy utilizes racial stereotypes and attributes to code an “otherness” to non-human characters in fantasy games. Connections to the alien races, and their interactions with other characters within these games will be compared to that of racial biases, racism, and prejudice within the real world and will be made to connect with representations and evidence of othering that plays out even in games where race does not seem apparent. These connections will then be allegorical to that of systemic and seemingly inherent systems of othering, racism, and discrimination found both within the game, and extended to real world applications and implications.

I conclude my project with a brief discussion of these case study findings and the discussion of the game worlds that were explored. My goal with this project is to show how race is being portrayed and the representation of people of color, Indigenous peoples, and women of color are being portrayed. The codifying of race and portrayal of people of color, indigenous peoples and women of color through the white male lens needs to be observed and studied. Whether a continuation of the white male dominated character lens continues or a change towards more inclusion occurs should be looked into and observed. Further research should focus on what the trends found within popular games could be changed or continue to observe if the trends found within this research will persist, whatever that may be.

## CHAPTER 2: THE LORE OF THE GAME: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Two hackers step off the bus heading to the large corporation known as Noodle. Their objective: Hack into the servers in order to have access to a large portion of the city's infrastructure and power grid. This job has been months in the planning with one of the hackers, Horatio, being an inside man infiltrating the company as an IT worker. The second hacker, Marcus Holloway, gets off the bus that has taken them to Noodle HQ, which is set deep in Silicon Valley, and looks around him. He watches as the various men and women walk about the entrance courtyard to the building. It is just another day in the life of a Noodle employee and business seems to be going about as usual. Yet something does not feel right to Marcus. Horatio soon follows his ally and Marcus pulls him aside.

"Hey, Horatio man, I'm scared bro."

"Whoah, what is it?" Horatio asks.

"Nobody look like us." Marcus says gesturing around at all the people walking by.

"Ha, man, welcome to Silicon Valley. Hey, what do you call a black man surrounded by a thousand white people?" asks Horatio as the two begin to walk towards the main entrance.

"What?"

"Mr. President."

"Hey man, they see two of us together, they gonna think we're plotting." Marcus says, still bothered by the people around him.

The reason for the concern and the context of Horatio's joke stem from one detail left out in the exchange above: Both Horatio and Marcus are Black. Everyone around them working at this company (whose name is a reference to the corporation Google) is white. During this particular mission in the game *Watchdogs 2*, an action-adventure game set in a hyper-realistic world nearly identical to our own, gamers are tasked with infiltrating Noodle in order to acquire information and access the servers to expose the company and its subsidiaries to the discrimination, fraud, and illegal business practices of its workers. The characters that go about doing this are hackers capable of taking control of access panels, lighting, communications, and so much more using little more than a smartphone. This is made possible as the game world is one in which an operating system known as CtOS controls the vast majority of city functions and mass media. The problems with this sort of system, aside from the seemingly obvious danger of having so many vital functions connected to one central operating system, is that this system becomes a bit *too* advanced. CtOS can analyze individuals and determine their race, ethnicity, gender, internet search history, spending habits, and overall daily routines and then predetermine if they can get a mortgage, gain approval for a loan, and calculate your credit score.

The way video game companies represent race can be tied to parts of a game's story or to add to the origins of a character in order to provide players with some context. The dialogue between Horatio and Marcus in *Watchdogs 2* highlights a key issue of race within the context of the game's mission. Being two of the few Black men at the company headquarters, players can get a sense of standing out when the intent is to blend in for the purposes of infiltration and gaining access to restricted areas. This can be something rather hard to do considering that the Non-Player Characters (NPCs) within the level are all white. How players view characters' racial identities can influence the interactions and perceptions that players may have about the

character and about the character's race. Again, the discourse between Marcus and Horatio implies that their (by implication the player's) every move is being watched not just by the security systems and guards, but by the NPCs as well. NPCs will react to the presence of Marcus as he walks around. They can note odd behavior such as hiding behind cover and react to anything suspicious, which can in turn draw attention to the player.

As *Watchdogs 2* illustrates, race can be a vital aspect of the plot or development of both story and character design. The representation of race in video games has been a topic researched within various fields and subfields including History, Communication studies, Cinema and Media studies, and Rhetoric. For this project, I borrow from a variety of these distinct methodologies to inform my research on race and representations in gaming.

## RACE IN THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

Representation of racially diverse characters is something that is vital for both video game players and video game companies. The majority of primary main characters are white male characters. According to David Leonard, a researcher who focused his study on platforming games and the links between race, gender, pleasure and items of power, found that over the course of their research and through the research done by the community-based organization Children Now in 2002, the demographics of video game characters were shown to be, "...64% of characters are male, 19% are nonhuman, and only 17% are female. More specifically, 73% of player-controlled characters are males, with less than 15% female, of which 50% are props or bystanders." (Children Now, 2002, as cited in Leonard, 2003). Additionally, "Over 50% of player-controlled characters are white males; less than 40% of game characters are black, the majority of whom are depicted as athletic competitors." (Children Now, 2002, as cited in

Leonard, 2003). These percentages are updated with the work of Corey Haines who did a content analysis of over 28 different top selling games released from 2016-2019 to analyze the demographics of the characters' race and gender. The results from Haines' (2019) analysis were that 46% of all games sampled had a white male as the player-controlled character, 7% were viewed as tan, and Brown or Black male player-controlled characters at 8%. Player-controlled white female characters were 25% of all the games sampled, with tan women being 2%, Brown women 3% and Black women at 1%. The overall gender of player-controlled characters being male at 68%.

White male characters are the status quo racial and gender identities assigned to game characters. This go-to standard for main characters then treats non-white race characters as either being or even props. The implications of a white male racial and gender norm within games perpetuates the views, stereotypes, and opinions about racial minorities. If the views that the main "good guy" is a white guy who saves the damsel in distress with minorities played to stereotypes or as the villains, the question should be raised: What message are game companies sending to players?

#### FROM NIM TO WATCHDOGS 2: THE HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES

Video games have had an uneven history in their representations of race. At first, games did not represent players through anthropomorphic characters, but instead as bodyless entities. Since the 1950s, when the first official video games were created in Toronto for the Canadian National Exhibition called *Bertie the Brain*, and up to 1970, games were relatively simple in design such as tic-tac-toe for *Bertie the Brain* or the game *Nim*, a mathematical game of strategy to create distinct heaps or piles. Video games eventually progressed to what is considered the

first recognized video game, *Spacewar!* (Kent, 2021). This game was created for the PDP-1 mainframe computer at MIT to allow two players to play in a space combat simulation. In these games, players maneuvered objects within the game play and did not control a virtual avatar. From there, games had difficulty with wide distribution given the lack of computer resources and trained programmers interested in making video games (Kent, 2021). During the 1970s, video games saw a rise in popularity as BASIC and C programming languages became more widely used. The 1970s gave rise to one of the most recognizable games in history: *Pong*, as well as the first generation of video game consoles both for the home and for arcades. Many arcade games came out during this decade including *Space Invaders*, *Pac-Man*, and *Donkey Kong*.

It is with *Donkey Kong* that one can see one of the first examples of character race and representation. This first character was that of Mario. This is the first example of character race within video games, and his purpose was to defeat Donkey Kong. The character of Mario that gamers play as within this game originally had no designated name other than “Jumpman” in the English instructions. However, in the sales brochure, a name arose for the character: “little Mario.” This name and the character design became the first iteration of the video game character known in popular culture as Mario. Mario is an Italian plumber whose franchise of games by Nintendo has had major success in worldwide distribution becoming a highly notable video game reference in popular culture. While games during this time period were 8- or 16-bit with blocky pixels where details like skin tone were not discernable, the representation of race was displayed through stereotypes. In the case of Mario, this was in the form of sound bits. When entering a level Mario would shout phrases in a heavily accented English “Lets-a Go!” or lines such as “It’s-a Me, Mario!” or “Mama Mia!”.

Within the 1980s, there was a struggle with games. With the advent of the NES game console systems during this time period arrived notable games such as *Castlevania* and *Mega Man*. Within these games, the characters were coded as white. In *Castlevania*, the artwork and the depiction of the character was that of a muscular white male seen to be the hero with the task of hunting down and defeating Dracula. With *Mega Man*, the main character is a white robot humanoid character. Again, the trend of white male characters continued.

Historically, there are plenty of examples of the white male character archetype that one can draw from. *The Legend of Zelda*, with the main character, Link, represented as blonde-haired and blue-eyed white male character. Zelda, the princess within the game, is usually depicted as white as well. The villain, Ganondorf, is Brown or Black when in his humanoid form, though his “true” form is that of a large pig. This was established by Nintendo and has been a staple in popular culture. It may be almost subconscious in nature how game characters, since the moment that characters were coded with race, started and continue to be mostly white males. These examples show the display of stereotypes to convey race are subtle in their enactment of gender and racial norms.

By the 1990s, video games had taken off as a rising popular form of commercial entertainment. Video games evolved from 2-dimensional spaces and 8- or 16-bit pixelated graphics to 3-dimensional modeling and mapping. Arcade and home entertainment consoles became more popular with the rise of Atari and the game known as *Mortal Kombat* hit the consumer market. This side-scrolling fighting game pits 2 players against each other (or one player and an artificial intelligence) in which the objective is to defeat your opponent in hand-to-hand combat. The game introduced a lot of detailing in their character designs with many of the main characters being white male characters despite the game’s heavy use of Asian inspired

imagery and its martial arts theme. This game franchise continues on today with recent game *Mortal Kombat 11*.

This particular franchise is both famous and infamous within the world of video game debates and academia as the violence within the game was met with much controversy. This game contributed to the great debate on whether or not video games, specifically violent video games, have an influence on aggression in youth (Anderson, 2004). This game franchise relied heavily on racial and gender stereotypes of various characters that are non-white or male. Female characters are highly sexualized or objectified in highly revealing outfits while non-white males would showcase imagery, outfits, or affect an accent or behavior that showcases their ethnic or racial background. Examples can be seen with Liu Kang and Jax. Liu Kang is coded as Asian within the game and his introduction at the beginning of the match includes him preparing for combat in a similar manner as that seen by the late Bruce Lee. In comparison, Jax, who is coded as an African American, has certain lines that are a reference to Mr. T, an actor who is most famous in television for his role as B. A. Baracus in the hit show “The A-Team.” This television reference to another character persona who is also Black and fits a similar physique to Jax can fuel the problematic imagery of a highly aggressive and combative African American male stereotype.

Video games continued to progress into the early 2000s with the introduction of home entertainment console systems of Xbox by Microsoft, Game Cube by Nintendo, and PlayStation by Sony. 3-dimensional worlds became the standard. Entire rendered environments became the large majority of games that were produced. From the 2000s to current times, these games have continued to become more realistic in terms of graphics and scale of the environments that the game industry produces. With this seeming trend towards realism, social structures and subjects

of race, ethnicity, and gender begin to rise to the surface. Going back to *Watchdogs 2*, which came out in 2016, we see it is an example of a meta-awareness of representation or instances of self-awareness that play out within the game. This can be seen with the interaction between Horatio and Marcus shows an awareness of race and representation. Another example is when both characters are walking into the Noodle headquarters, and Horatio notes how difficult it is to be one of the few African American employees at the company and that sitting in a meeting with other corporate employees makes him feel like he is representing "...all of Blackdom." While this type of interaction is a good example that there is more of an awareness towards race shown within recent games, one must again look at current demographics such as that of Haines' (2019) research. There may be examples and signs of awareness of displays of race, but the majority of player-controlled characters continue to be white males.

#### RHETORICAL AND CONTENT ANALYSIS OF RACIAL MINORITIES IN VIDEO GAMES

Rhetorical research on video game representation focuses on how racial minorities have been figured within the narrative content of games. Tara Fickle's (2019) work "The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities" demonstrates how games and game theory contribute to the contemporary understanding of race and racial formation in the United States, both in terms of representation within the gaming industry and with the representation of Asian or Asian-American characters within games. In particular, Fickle (2019) addresses how race has been trivialized or marginalized into discussions of class. Fickle observes through the collection of literary and critical texts such as congressional records of exclusion debates showing how, "...ludo-Orientalist rhetoric crucially elevated economic arguments to the transcendent realm of ethics and ideals. By aligning (white) American values with ludic ideals and Asian immigrants with the degradation of these ideals..." (Fickle, 2019). In other words, the perception and

arguments regarding the imagery of Asian immigrants clashing with the ideals of White Americans and the values that are dominant. This is then showcased within literary texts and games through imagery and stereotyping.

By utilizing game case studies such as *Pokémon GO* and *World of Warcraft*, and marketing campaigns for these games which feature Asian American characters, Fickle demonstrates that the video games have become more and more part of American lives, and thus our views of Asian American peoples. Fickle goes on to discuss how games are used as instruments of soft power to help further political agendas. As video games have become a mainstay in everyday life, Fickle (2019) argues that it is easy to overlook game tropes or stereotypes portrayed within games such as the stereotype that all Asians look alike and how this plays out with Asian and Asian-American characters having a set repeated model with little to no variation, but not of the influence on the perceptions that come from these preconceptions or tropes within United States culture. The lack of representation, or the generalization of people of color, can reinforce the seemingly traditional norms of white male led games.

While Fickle examines race in terms of players and characters, game development and race are the focus of Christopher B. Patterson. In “Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games,” Patterson observes that game designers and creators tended to not mention or refer to their own race as part of their identity. The overall attitude according to Patterson’s (2020) research, is that race and ethnicity of the character designers and creators is not something marketable. Patterson states that when, “...developers give interviews, they rarely, if ever, present themselves in terms of their racial backgrounds, deferring to the post-racial presumptions of information technology. In research for this chapter, I found myself searching through lists of designers...only to find that developers...did not discuss their family history in

interviews...” (Patterson, 2020). The feeling of authenticity of race and culture within the game’s spaces, according to Patterson, is reliant on these developers and their backgrounds to be seemingly hidden or behind the scenes in order to preserve the immersion and authenticity within a game. Therefore, the race and ethnicity of those who made the game, predominately white and male, is not something that is addressed or seemingly discussed in interviews with these designers and creators.

Additionally, the discussion of race and representation in games, according to Soraya Murray’s (2018) work, “On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space,” has come outside the area of academic game studies. Murray insists that race and representation intersects with game culture and the game industry with the example of *Assassin’s Creed III: Liberations*. Within this game, the player plays as the character Aveline de Granpré, a character of French and African heritage who lived in the area of New Orleans during the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. While the character is a fiction within the historical context and the time that the game itself was released, Murray (2018) argues that both the historical context and the game release time influence how the politics of identity work within the game. This can be in reference to missions within the game in which Aveline can infiltrate areas of high society given her French Heritage and her upbringing as a Lady of some nobility within the social circles of the age, or her African heritage in which she could disguise herself as a slave in order to accomplish the same mission. Even as fictional or simulations of the real world, game worlds engage in social commentary and create detailed, in-depth spaces within the worlds that the players can then engage in political imaginations and racial views that Murray points out with the example of the increase in media attention focused on the brutal mistreatment of Black men such as the police killings and the ‘Rough Ride’ van killing of Freddie Gray while in police custody.

Murray further goes on regarding the *Assassin's Creed* franchise by quoting the Creative Director, Alex Amancio, of the game *Assassin's Creed Unity* and the first *Assassin's Creed* game. Amancio stated that when the first game of the franchise was released, it did so during the Iraq War. This was pointed out by Murray due to the setting of the game being within the Middle East. Amancio indicated that current events tended to influence choices of setting and locations for the games in the franchise. The experiences of the time seeped into the work whether the game designers wanted it to or not. The players can explore these works and game locales at their leisure and are surrounded by them throughout the time that they play. These concepts, commentary and dialogue are not static, but they follow players beyond the virtual world.

Bonnie Nardi and Justin Harris (2009) similarly explore this phenomenon in their research. By focusing on gaming interaction and collaborative play within games such as *World of Warcraft*, a popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), this study looked into how the game was designed around collaborative play and interactions between players ranging from brief encounters to extensive interactions that can last hours, days, or even years. These collaborative ties extend out of the game and into forums and chats regarding the game as a way for individuals to continue to further bond, socialize and learn more about the game in general. The collaborative nature of play observed by Nardi and Harris allows an open space for mixed collaboration and encourages exploration of political and social commentary through their own interactions amongst fellow players and flexibility in learning. The development of community is left to the players and how they go about developing senses of community are then explored.

In this way, the simulated environments mimic real-world social interaction dynamics and roles through both collaboration and an open space in which to enact social and societal roles

as the various races within the game can have their own isolated communities or mingle with other races at select social hubs or cities in-game. This study shows that there are prosocial aspects within gaming communities as they are just that: communities (Nardi & Harris, 2009). MMORPG's can help promote a sense of belonging, socialization and interaction, dialogue, and deliberation aimed towards achieving the goal of helping other gamers in need. While Nardi and Harris's focused on collaborative play and its benefits, they noted that in the span of their research other players engaged in disruptive activities that were upsetting to other players. These included spamming messages, constantly killing player avatars as well as the use of mocking or offensive language which frustrated pro-social interactions and play such as racial slurs and harassment including sexual harassment, sexist comments, and profanity.

This can lead to individuals referring to the player as doing something that is not appreciated such as remaining by the corpse of a player in order to kill the player again when the player respawns and generating terms such as that found in *World of Warcraft* called "Barrens Chat," named for an area in the game called The Barrens in which such activity and communications such as profanity, harassment, spamming messages etc. and use the term Barrens chat as an identifier of the player who is being disruptive (Nardi & Harris, 2009). Real world systems and structures such as social hierarchies and behaviors transfer over to the gaming world. These gaming communities, gaming cultures and gaming groups, like any community, culture or group, has a deep connection and impact upon the identities of the individuals who are part of them.

Following the distinction of "Barrens Chat," there is anti-racial rhetoric or attitudes within the game. Lisa Nakamura (2009), demonstrated that origin of this phenomena stemmed from 'gold farming' or the act of "selling in-game currency to players for real money, usually

through resellers such as IGE or eBay.” Players who engage in gold farming sell their equipment, items, and even their virtual bodies or avatars in exchange for money. Exploitation of workers within locations such as China in which sweatshop conditions are rather common. This has become so prevalent that gold farming has received a reputation within *World of Warcraft*. However, the gold farmers are viewed in a highly negative light. With the labeling of gold farming being associated with Asian players, this negative light then extends to Asian workers and thus Asian players are considered unwanted or “...Asian culture as threatening to the beauty and desirability of shared virtual space in the *World of Warcraft*.” (Nakamura, 2009).

This reaction and treatment of associating the actions of a select group of players (gold farmers) with a racial and ethnic group, then generalizing the behavior of anyone fitting the racial/ethnic profile or perceived racial/ethnic profile and then shunning them showcases forms of racial bias and racism within this game in which shared virtual space is so desired. The contradiction of wanting a shared virtual space yet being exclusionary due to assumptions based on perceptions of race become apparent.

### GAMES AS CULTURAL ARTIFACTS AND SOCIAL SIGNIFIER

The field of Cultural Studies interprets video games as cultural artifacts. These artifacts according to Greenfield (1994), with the introduction of commercialized gaming, have the ability to create new modes of play and encourage youth to develop cognitive socialization skills. Greenfield states that due to games being designed to develop cognitive social skills and are meant, according to Greenfield (1994), to help prepare youth for a “...future in which computer skills will become ever more crucial to thriving in a technological world.” This design and intention of games to prepare for increasing skills in computer operations makes the study of

video games multimedia and multimodal in terms of representational tools. As video games are posited as a form of media, video games are considered a blend of television and the computer according to Greenfield (1994), and thus, like both, have a large following and society all its own. Additionally, giving video games the classification of a cultural artifact, there would of course be discussion on what the members of video game culture would be. The culture in this instance being that of “Gamers.”

This name has had a bit of a controversial connotation as it has been used as label, description, and Identity according to researcher Adrienne Shaw in their work “Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity.” The name of Gamer has been used as a means to market games towards those who play them. Gamer crosses over other identities such as race, sexuality, and gender according to Shaw (2012). This targeted marketing had the consequence of creating connotations towards the designation, many negative. This has led to a reluctance to take on the identity of gamer and to discussions of how there is a lack of the portrayal of marginalized or minority groups within games.

Shaw takes this further with their ethnographic study in which Shaw observes and concludes that there is a lack of representation of marginalized groups in games that the gamer market in Europe and North America is “...constructed as primarily young, heterosexual, White/Anglo and male.” This focus has led those who do not fit into this target consumer group, many disassociate with the Gamer moniker and culture. Shaw (2012) states that this targeting shapes the construction of games as a medium and therefore shapes the discourse on representation. Shaw encourages the normalizing of video games for all audiences with “finding ways to emphasize their ‘everydayness’ in contemporary media culture, is a more productive approach to demands for representation. This is the only way to argue for representation in this

medium in a way that does not reify the very categories already used by the industry.” (Shaw, 2012). A changing in the status quo of predominantly white male narratives is therefore encouraged.

While this challenging of status quo and the continued struggle for accuracy does show that representation along stereotypes as something that is still ongoing, it would be inaccurate to say that there exist stereotypes for all characters. A study done by Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, and David Ta (2014) examined how gamers, specifically white gamers, perceived Black and Asian people based on their experience with Black and Asian characters within the games that they played. Behm-Morawitz and Ta (2014) found that there was a stronger connection between perceptions of Blacks by White gamers than that of Asians within the real world. They noted that certain tropes or stereotypes that were perpetuated were that of the “Black criminal, White hero, and Asian martial artist” (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014). Even so, there were inconsistencies with these results as various games stereotype race in a different way with varying effect.

Design of a game could have the ability to customize the playable character with options to choose different races. These can be independent from the race of the gamer who is customizing the character and can freely choose to play a race or gender that is not aligned with the player. While this is a feature seen in many games such as that of the popular game series *Mass Effect*, it can also clash with plot and lead to inconsistencies that game designers may have overlooked and could conflict with plot or what the game writers may have intended. This can be seen with the discussion found within the book *Dramatic Storytelling & Narrative Design: A Writer's Guide to Video Games and Transmedia* by Ross Berger. Berger discusses the game *NBA 2K16* in which there is a narrative that is then analyzed.

Berger (2020) highlights that the main character's family is Black, but that the player can choose a different race or ethnic background for the main character. While this game does lean towards the main character being a person of color as the narrative follows a Black family household which clashes with any other race than that of Black as the main character's twin sister is also Black, the writers of the game seemed to have fully intended that the main character be Black as the inconsistency of racial and ethnic backgrounds is shown with having a Black biological family in contrast to the main character, should the player choose a different race or ethnic background. While the mechanics of being able to customize race and ethnic origin is present, the game does seem to follow the tradition of having people of color to be viewed through the stereotype of competitive athleticism as discussed with Children Now (2002) as cited by Leonard (2003) regarding the issue of Black bodies being in the competitive athletic category as the majority of games in which the main character is a Black person.

Additionally, the game's narrative alludes to the main character having committed a crime are shown through the development of the game's story (the crime or alleged crime being that of the mysterious death of one Dirt Bike Donnie and how the character of Vic, a former friend and antagonist to the main character, blackmails the protagonist by stating that he was the cause of Donnie's death. This was all presented through cutscenes and dialogue within the game to illustrate the narrative rather than through player action. This plays into racial stereotypes regarding people of color and that of crime. According to Berger (2020), this subplot served no real purpose within the narrative as at no other point was it mentioned throughout the game.

This is not an isolated case. Many games, like many movies and shows, have plot issues or story inconsistencies. What makes games unique is that they can still be edited to be added to long after they go on the shelves and are bought by consumers. Take for example how *Resident*

*Evil* as a franchise was highly criticized for their inconsistent stories and plot structure along with the way in which expressions of women of color within games such as *Resident Evil 5* having designs to highlight color as exotic, tribal, and highly sexualized. Again, this is in reference to the “Tribal” Alternative outfit discussed previously. This is not all that this game does. Interactions of African enemies within the game play up western perceptions and othering (Brock, 2011). The displays of violence and destitution that play out within those first 10 minutes of the game *Resident Evil 5* again highlights these depictions with the acts of beating a person inside of a sack as the main character walks by.

### VIDEO GAMES AS VISUAL FORCE

Video games are a form of media. As such, Video games have a story and message much like any other form of media such as film. In film, emotion and meaning are seen within the discourse and actions of the characters being portrayed. Their identity, as well as their personality, are displayed throughout the film. The messages of what the character is meant to convey to the viewer and how they are represented are constructed through a number of visual and aural techniques and cues. These same messages are seen in video games through the use of dialogue and cinematics or “cutscenes” in which one can interact with other characters through menus or dialogue options with other characters within a game. The action and activities seemingly pause around the focus of a scene in which these messages are then displayed. Whereas a film has control of camera angles and the use of camera, lighting, and employment of sound effects and other audio features like background noise and music help to aid in this process, video games have a slightly more challenging issue. Mainstream cinema (with exceptions) tends to lean more towards a linear storytelling, or a focused plot trajectory with

obstacles overcome and barriers resolved. Games, by design, can be more fluid and non-linear in nature. Additionally, player actions can change the pace of the narrative within a game.

Non-linear exploration in comparison to the more linear narrative of cinema is discussed within the book by Michael Nitsche “Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds.” The gamer who plays a video game, unlike a viewer who watches a film, has more control over the narrative and the environment. Exploration of the virtual world and the people within the environment can alter and shape perceptions and understanding of the story as it unfolds. Additionally, as gamers can interact in the space in these virtual environments, camera design and the use of angles takes on a different approach. Nitsche (2008) shared experiences of attempting to incorporate cinematic practices such as use of the deep space effect in which, for cinema, is the 2D picture of a projection designed to be read as the presentation of a 3D space through the use of perspective and motion. The goal of using such an effect is to add a depth of the field within a picture that can be used to open up different layers of action within the space of one scene or image.

A lot of this, however, is rendered moot given that a video game can be designed to render a 3-Dimensional space in which the player can freely explore at their leisure. However, the idea still had merit for Nitsche. The effect was used within a game experimental setting in his retelling to give the illusion of a much larger space of the environment than it actually was. In this manner, the small underground maze that was designed for the experimental testing, the use of the camera to simulate the illusion of a much larger space than there actually was and given that the depth of field could not rely on the image as 2 dimensional, the visualization of the environment gave the feeling of becoming lost through disorientation. This disorientation of the

camera and the player helps to dramatize the exploration and navigation aspects of the game within that location.

In relation to race and representation, again we turn to games such as *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry* in which the exploration of the historical locations opens up opportunities for liberating slaves or uncovering scenes of mistreatment and torture of Black bodies. Such depictions of violence, drug use, sexual content, etc. is handled by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). Ratings are coded as Everyone (E), Everyone 10 years old and up (E10+), Teen (T), Mature (M), Adults Only (Ao), Rating Pending (RP), and Rating Pending Likely Mature 17 and older (RP17+).

These ratings are based on factors such as how much violence is within a game, is there any drug or tobacco content, anything sexually explicit, etc. ESRB has a website in which users can search for the title of a game in order to see the rating for the game as well as the reason for the rating given in detail. Game cartridges and cases for physical copies of video games also have the rating on the front and back of the case with an abbreviated list of content within the game that gave the rating assigned<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, exploration is encouraged as unique gear and resources are rewarding for doing so. In this manner, the player is directed to explore and immerse themselves within the history that is on display around them and be constantly have the issues of race and slavery pushed to the forefront of the gameplay and story.

Though games seemingly break from traditional cinematic practices, they lend themselves to these practices through different approaches such as this in spatial structure and spatial perception. In doing so, lore, worldbuilding and player perception of the people and

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Ratings: <https://www.esrb.org/>

environment can commence. Vital information, hints, and connections between characters can be obtained through aspects of the game's mise-en-scène. Some of these can be subtle like a light at the end of a series of narrow dark streets, a fallen ladder next to a climbable wall, a distinctive color differential on doors or objects hinting that they are breakable or interactable within the environment, etc.

These images and presentations are almost subliminal with players realizing and adapting gameplay to match. Perhaps they see a red barrel or gas tank near an enemy and know, almost subconsciously that they could shoot it or throw something that is on fire at it to trigger an explosion. Maybe they explore the world and notice that there seems to be something that is shining in the grass or that the environment has darkened, hinting that an item is nearby or that danger is fast approaching. Players adapt or react to these changes with various degrees of success and efficiency. Perhaps they ready a weapon or begin to slowly investigate their surroundings in order to discover any items that can be obtained.

Not only can one obtain information on a wide variety of topics (within the limits of the interactions, conversations and the local world), but also within the manner in which sound design such as dialogue is spoken from the playable character and non-playable characters (PCs and NPCs respectively) also helps cue in players to the views and perspectives of others. Accents, tone, and the words chosen to speak intention also lend to understanding the personality and mindset of the PC and the NPCs of the world. Through this mechanic, players have the lore explained to them as the attempt to progress, even if that is not what the players are aiming for. While lore is not necessarily vital, it does showcase the mentality of people or groups. In this manner, players can learn more about a great host of different aspects from various groups or factions in game to individual character traits and personalities. What about music and other

sound effects. This humanizes the characters and allows for a connection between the character and the player to be potentially formed.

Additionally, cutscenes in which a cinematic will play, taking players out of the gameplay for a brief moment and grabbing the attention of said users to convey plot, emotion, backstory and a connection or relatability with the character also are large components of showcasing story. These can be anything from large scale cinematics that last several minutes, to a gesture or emote of the character that you can play in-game or when selecting a character at the beginning of a gaming session. Each one of these is meant to convey something of the world, the character, or the situation within the game, lending visual cues for players to pick up on.

Rune Klevjer (2014) discusses how the use of cutscenes has a massive impact on the narration and impact of play within a game. The cutscene plays a part in a form of symbology or symbolic impact to information gathered over the course of a gaming session that can culminate into a grand narration that furthers the plot points and story within a game. Klevjer (2014) states that the dynamics of play and story are balanced using cutscenes to combine the two parts of a game (that being the playing of the game and that of the set story and narrative) and binding them through the willing suspension of belief that all gamers engage with when playing. This form seeming contradictory aspects come together to create a marriage of agency of player, and the set dynamic of plot progression and semi-linear to linear narration. This form narrative forces a player to take on the aspect of a viewer similar to that of a film in which the perceptions are set and are forced into an angle regarding both plot and representations.

While the character may act on the whims of the gamer and gamer agency, the cutscene showcase characters in a set manner and thus aspects of race and representation are displayed in

the manner that the developers designed for these characters. Voice, background music, and camera angles can highlight aspects of characters as seen with the example with *Resident Evil 5*, in which the cutscene that first introduces Sheva Alomar focuses on the buttocks as a form of objectification, and then focuses on her body or her tribal tattoo as a form of racial identifier.

### LOADING NEXT LEVEL...

In summation, video games have had a long and interesting history both as an entertainment medium, and as a medium that constructs conceptions about race. Objectification, stereotyping, racism, and discrimination both within games and within the gaming industry has been explored and discussed through the various lenses and fields those past researchers have done. Games continue to be an area of research and continues to evolve with the times that we as a society find ourselves in. But what about right now? Why not take a small look through the window to see what some games are showcasing regarding race and representation? This research will be doing just that with two chapters. A focus on sexualization and exoticization of race in games and a look at non-human races as a comparison to real world aspects of racialization and representation.

Employing the research and discoveries from the various scholars and researchers discussed here, a lens is prepared for this research to look through regarding the trends of white male heterosexual trends for the main characters and if this trend persists. Along with this, the accuracy of race and representations of race within historical settings or the addressing of race, racial stereotypes, and gender/racial stereotypes are then explored, not just with the races that we know in the real world, but also with non-human races and their connection to real world racial biases, stereotypes, and perceived gender norms/stereotypes.

### CHAPTER 3: SEXUALIZATION IN GAMES

The hustle and bustle of the people of New York City go by the busy streets. Snow is lightly falling and there is a sense of Christmas in the air. The decorations on the store fronts, advertising the sales and prices of their clothes are prominently displayed at every window. A news report is blasted from the speakers of one of the many large screen televisions that dot the buildings around the busy shops discussing how the government is investigating the unusual weather and strong earthquakes that are occurring throughout the region. The camera is panning to the storefronts before focusing in on a single can as the opening credits: *Bayonetta 2* roll by, cleverly displayed as signs throughout the landscape. Suddenly, the can that the camera had been focusing on that displayed the name of the director Yusuke Hashimoto gets smashed by a boot. The camera zooms out to show a stocky man who is watching the news broadcast, carrying several large packages and shopping bags comically stacked far above his head.

Suddenly, another shopping parcel lands upon the pile. The camera zooming out to reveal a tall, well-dressed woman in flowing white silk, with a furred scarf and white sun hat adorned with white roses. Viewers do not see her face, only her lips as she slowly sucks on a lollipop.

She speaks to Enzo, “You know what I need? Some heels without guns. You don’t mind making a quick stop do you, Enzo?”

Enzo replies, “Do you know what day’s coming up? Here I was shopping. Minding my own business, then you show up and turn me into a damn porter. Seriously Bayonetta! You still haven’t paid me back for the car!”

Bayonetta stops, causing Enzo to bump into her behind and almost stumble and drop the shopping bags and parcels that he was carrying. “Now now, is that nay way to speak to an old friend?” She begins to pace around him, swaying her hips, almost strutting in the way that she

carries herself. “Besides, I did that job for you. For free I might add. Do I really have to tell everyone how you grabbed on to my leg sobbing like a schoolboy?” She stops him from responding by pressing the lollipop to his lips before putting it back into her mouth. It is at this point that the camera shows her face.

The scene progresses with a small reference to the previous game which allows the viewer to have some background information from the previous game, followed by the character Enzo (the man carrying Bayonetta’s shopping bags) desiring to purchase a toy for his child for Christmas. On his way to get his gift he runs into (and nearly gets run over by) another character named Jean who converses with Bayonetta discussing that something does not feel right in the heavens, earth and hell before taking off. Shortly after, a squadron of jetfighters fly overhead performing an arial show. Things do not feel right. There is a tension in the air outside the shop that Enzo has gone to in order to buy a jet for his kid. Suddenly one of the jets flies directly at the shop and Bayonetta intervenes, kicking the jet up into the sky and leaping upon it to face the angelic creatures that were seemingly responsible of the out-of-control jet crashing down. These winged centaur-like creatures face off against Bayonetta.

“At least your lot still knows know how to make an entrance,” she says as she blows them a kiss and creates a purple magic circle that she leaps through hurling herself at the charging enemies. Suddenly, the scene slows down as she slowly twirls through the air, the lances that these enemies wield thrusting out with the intention of impaling her upon the ends of them. Instead, these lances rip and strip her of her clothing in slow motion as she moans out. Flipping through the air, naked she leaps over the heads of the enemies, legs and arms splayed out silhouetted by the noon sun obscuring her genitals and nipples as she transforms into her signature black combat outfit made from her own magical hair and summons her guns in

preparation to fight. She lands upon the flank of one of her enemies and proceeds to spank this flank riding the enemy like a bucking bronco, her buttocks bouncing upon the back of the enemy as she fires her pistols.

This was the opening cutscene that I experienced when I played *Bayonetta 2* for the very first time. It left me speechless as to the amount of explicit nudity and innuendo that I got to experience in the first 10 or so minutes of this game. Ever since I began to research games, I started to notice things that I never really paid attention to before such as this level of sexual content. I have begun to notice a pattern of sexualization of female characters as I played, not just with this game, but in a lot of the games that I play on a regular basis. It was more apparent when I looked at how women and women of color within the games I played were being portrayed. At first, I did not pay attention to the role that female characters played, but over time I started to notice that female game characters were portrayed more as objects than their male counterparts. What constitutes full plate armor for a male character would be a metal bikini for a female character of the same design and level. Cleavage on large breasted women with small waists and large buttocks was almost a standard in the games that I was playing.

As a Cis gendered, heterosexual male gamer, the issue of how women were being portrayed was not one in which I held a stake. Yet, it was clear that there was a trend in the games that I played where women were more objects than people, more toys than substance. This was not okay. I began to wonder if this was an overall trend, or if it was simply that the games that I, myself, was playing just happened to objectify or sexualize women and women of color. Therefore, I decided to conduct some research.

### THE PRICE OF “BEAUTY:” THE FEMALE BODY IN VIDEO GAMES

A current trend in video games is the prevalent sexual objectification and stereotypes of women being portrayed in video games. By prevalent sexual objectification, I am referring to the trend towards female characters in video games having hyper-realistic/overexaggerated body proportions specifically focusing on large buttocks, breasts, large thighs, and long legs along with outfits that are designed to accentuate or highlight these features (i.e., short, cropped shirts with cleavage, curve hugging short shorts or pants that highlight buttocks and legs, etc.). In regard to gender stereotypes, I refer to gender stereotypes regarding women (obsession with fashion, men, shopping, jewelry, etc.).

In this vein, Sarah M. Grimes (2003) and Laura Fantone (2003) conducted studies that explored female video game characters with a focus on the representation of female bodies and beauty ideals within games. Grimes' research focused on the paradox of beauty ideals and female body types versus the untraditional gender roles that come with being a lead character within a narrative. Grimes (2003) used audience interpellation to conduct a content analysis. There was not so much an argument in her research as it was a means to "...[examine] how the imagery and narrative structure of popular, contemporary video games construct a paradigm of the ideal female heroine."

There were some limitations to the study such as that the scope of the research was very limited seeing as there were not a lot of games that were used in the content analysis. In fact, only three were used: *Metroid Prime* (2002), *Resident Evil* (2002), and *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002). As such, Grimes urges that there should be more research with a wider sample size in order to have a more in-depth analysis. Fantone (2003), on the other hand, discusses how, through video games, there is a challenge to established gender norms (female body types) and racial norms while also attempting to navigate away from/play into gender and

racial stereotypes. She argues that games establish a new relationship between bodies and identities, specifically that of women's bodies and identities of gender. She further argues that interaction in games is a "...process of imagination and action." By this, she refers to how the player performs or acts through a virtual controlled body or avatar. Fantone (2003) mentioned some examples of gender stereotypes that Fantone states to be oppressive aspects of virtual female bodies, which include virtual female body imagery of slim, athletic, with realistic or hyper-realistic emphasis on body parts such as long legs, larger busts, buttock and/or thighs with clothing that has the capacity to enhance or emphasize as much of these body parts as possible.

In this chapter, I will explore two prominent examples of female body stereotypes or sexualization include Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise and Bayonetta from the game series of the same name. These women are seen by the video gaming community as female gaming icons, but their character designs are heavily suggestive with Bayonetta in poses in which she has her legs spread on her back, licking her lips and moaning, using weaponry like looted spears with attacks that are more akin to pole dancing as she stabs it into the ground spinning around it with her legs spread, and even her walking animations are that of a catwalk strut with exaggerated hip movements. Additionally, I will examine how video game production including voice over performance and character design contribute to objectification of women characters in the game *Apex Legends*. In doing so, I demonstrate how objectification is part of the overall mechanism of game design and participatory engagement with players.

### BAYONETTA 2: PLAYING WITH AND PARTICIPATING IN THE MALE GAZE

In the opening combat scene of Bayonetta Two<sup>2</sup>, Bayonetta is shown fighting angelic or angel-like creatures that are in the form of winged Centaurs atop a fighter jet over the cityscape

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<sup>2</sup> Bayoneta 2 Opening Cutscene [HD] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mj5aqXUSH6Y&t=389s>

of New York City. The camera slows down in an extreme close-up of her body in profile view with the focus being on her body from the neck down. Bayonetta is constantly seen in a suggestive pose such as dodging bullets or swords lingering on close-ups of her cleavage or buttocks. In these scenes, Bayonetta is bent over backwards or in the air with her legs spread wide, the camera hovering above her in a close-up of her breasts and/or crotch like someone angling for a better look.

Finally, the character design of Bayonetta uses costume design to further her sexualization for the male viewer. Such costume design and character design employs “The Pleasure of Looking” outlined within Lara Mulvey’s (1989) essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey argues that cinema employs the use of the absence of masculinity (the castrated female) as both a threat to masculinity in the form of strong female character, but also as the enaction of visual pleasure as an object of eroticization. The look of the camera and the design of fetishistic or erotically designed clothing and attitudes of a female character act as an enaction of the male gaze to observe the female form as an object of pleasure. She argues that the fetishization of the female form counteracts the castration fear of strong female characters. This applies to video games as seen with the example of *Bayonetta 2*.

Near the end of the opening cut scene, Bayonetta fights atop a jet during which she transitions from her current outfit, a white formal backless dress that is form-fitting with slits that display her legs and thighs as well as a plunging neckline, into her “combat outfit” which consists of no actual clothing but is actually created from her own hair and magic. These bullets and lances, seemingly implying a phallic symbology, that violently removes her clothing, without her consent, continue with this objectification of her body.

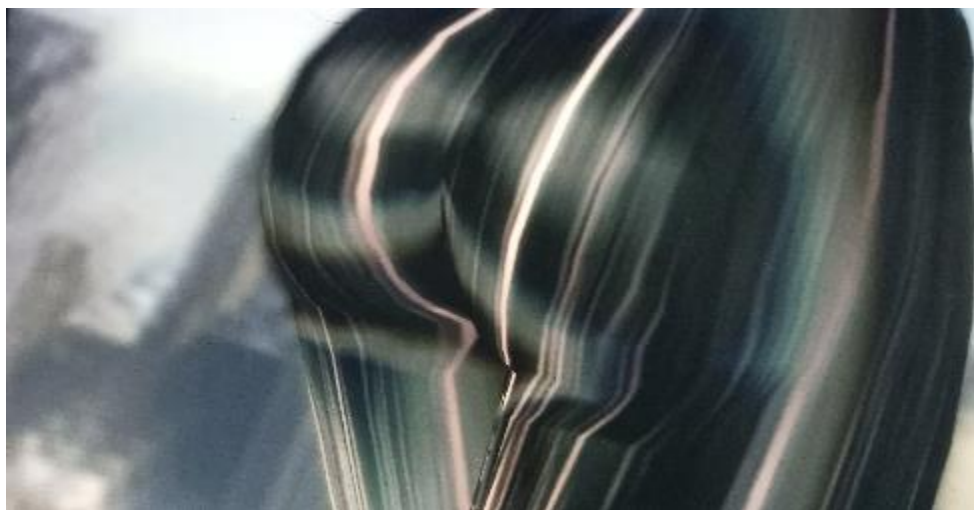
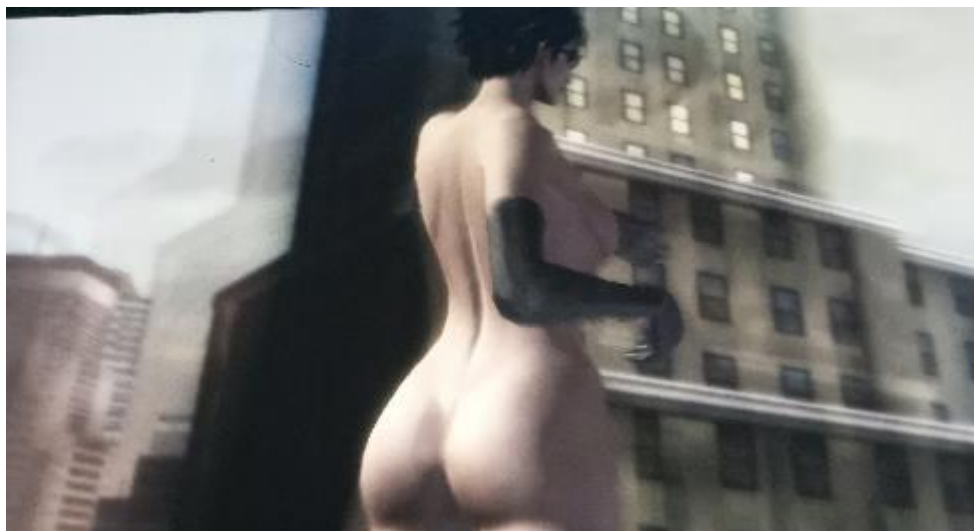
Though the enemies are the ones who attack her and whose weapons are tearing her clothing, she herself purposefully leapt towards the weapons implying that the removal of her clothes was intentional on her part. After this removal of her clothing, she remains naked though her genitals and nipples are not displayed. The player observes her bare skin slowly being covered by her outfit once she is fully naked. The transformation is completed when her body has been fully covered. This outfit is then fully revealed as a black skin-tight suit with guns on her heels as well as other paraphernalia. This combination of the dangerous and the sexy, the stripping down or modification of the outfit in order to be able to fight better seems a form of catering to the male audience and again perpetuates the male gaze to give the viewer a ‘good show’ with the added illusion that the player may see nudity. This again shows the ignoring of the character as a woman or as a person and seeing her as merely entertainment.

It should be stated however, that the outfit that Bayonetta was wearing was not meant for high combat, but rather was formal wear. Indeed, Bayonetta refers to it as her “Sunday best.” The design and fabric of the long white silk dress and sunhat give off both an air of sophistication as well as expense. That outfit is not something one wants to get dirty. The outfit that she changes into has both design and implied lore specific reasons to function as a combat outfit. The formfitting black outfit made from her own hair is imbued with magical properties and is used to seemingly fuel her magical attacks and moves. When a player performs a move in which creation of large magical constructs such as a large fist or foot, parts of the outfit will be removed and used to fuel the move, leaving parts of Bayonetta’s body exposed.

What is interesting about this, is that while the player participates in the objectification of Bayonetta, they also play as her. In this manner, the player is both a willing participant of the objectifier and the objectified. A form of duality that also is reflected in the character herself. She

is aware of the objectification that she has, seemingly breaking the fourth wall with the player as well as being aware of the looks from other characters. She is aware that other characters sexualize her, yet she may tease them or call them out on their lechery yet seems to welcome the looks and advances to an extent.









**Figure 1:** *Bayonetta's outfit in opening cutscene, showcasing of outfit removal and combat (Bayonetta 2)*

*Note:* 1<sup>st</sup> panel: Bayonetta in her “Sunday Finest,” about to fight a massive jet. 2<sup>nd</sup> panel: Bayonetta has her clasp on her chest ripped, exposing her cleavage. 3<sup>rd</sup> panel: Bayonetta prepares to leap up into the air while nude while the camera focuses on her buttocks. 4<sup>th</sup> panel: Bayonetta's buttocks is slowly encased in magical hair, transforming into her magical combat outfit. 5<sup>th</sup> panel: Bayonetta poses in her new outfit before engaging in combat. 6<sup>th</sup> panel: Close-up as Bayonetta strips her outfit in a magical spell to summon a giant creature while moaning. 7<sup>th</sup> panel: Bayonetta finishes the summoning ritual spell, posing nude with her hair covering her genitals and breasts as a form of censor. Bottom panel: Bayonetta using a spear picked up from an enemy, using it as a pole and pole dancing upon it.

Like the camera framing and costume design, the sound design additionally heightens the sexualization of the female body. As Bayonetta magically undresses herself, she moans, though if in pleasure or pain is unclear. The removal of the dress, signifying the violent taking or desire to remove modesty is counteracted with the moaning to imply that Bayonetta may or may not be accepting of such violence. Here, the use of voice over offers the players a means of their own interpretation of the scene, but the scene itself was designed to be entertaining or comical to offset the violence implied within the scene. Additionally, she can be seen riding on the back of one the enemies (a winged centaur like creature) in which she would bounce upon the back. At this point in the scene, the focus of the camera is upon her buttocks and crotch, with each

bounce upon the enemy's back being accompanied by the sound effect of *boing, boing*. This adds a lighthearted attitude towards the scene while also heavily implying the bounciness of her buttocks and the innuendo of sexual intercourse.

Both the character design of Bayonetta sexualizing her female form and the comedic aspects that highlight her body are designed for the titillation and entertainment of male players. Nonetheless, there are also angles on the objectification of female characters and character design that do not have these comedic or lighthearted aspects to them. Such is the case of the other female character example, Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise.

### LARA CROFT AND THE “STRONG FEMALE CHARACTER” AS FANTASY

The similarities between Bayonetta and Lara Croft are seen with the central figure of both Lara Croft and Bayonetta being the central characters, highly objectified with provocative clothing as well as a showcasing of gymnastic and acrobatic prowess with focus on flexibility and fitness. When referring to the character Lara Croft, I refer to her designs in such games as *Tomb Raider Anniversary* (2007), *Legend* (2006) and *Underworld* (2008) in which her outfit consisted of a blue, brown, or black crop top with exposed midriff and high-waisted short shorts that accentuated the buttocks and legs. However, in the series, Croft wears other clothing highlighting both her sexuality and femininity. In the cutscene<sup>3</sup> “Meeting With Takamoto,” Lara Croft wears a backless evening dress with a plunging neckline and slits along the sides that accentuate her legs.

When she engages in combat after being attacked, the cutscene reveals that she had torn her dress in order to strap the leg holsters for her weapons as well as making the hem of the dress incredibly short. The entirety of her legs and thighs are fully exposed as well as the sides of her

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<sup>3</sup> *Tomb Raider* Legend-“Meeting With Takamoto” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9p5SFPrTCs>

buttocks. Even within the cutscene, Lara is not taken seriously as she is a woman. To counter this, Lara has to remind Takamoto that she is not to be taken lightly by bringing up previous defeats at her hands, humiliating and insulting him in the process. This goes back to the disregard of women as anything more than objects of desire and that, in order to be taken seriously, they must have great strength.

This need to be taken seriously to counteract their dismissal due to their gender can also be observed in the case of Bayonetta. In her case, it occurs in the form of her outfits giving off a more dominatrix appeal and her magical strength to easily avoid being harmed while seemingly being effortless in execution. For Croft, it is in the form of heavy caliber firearms and acrobatic abilities. While Bayonetta tends to be more teasing and aloof, Croft is more direct and confrontational when insulted. Both of these methods and attitudes are meant to ensure that the female characters are taken seriously in some form.

As with Bayonetta, Croft's outfit is designed by the developers to act as a form of visual pleasure. There is no care for Lara's humanity, only that she is eye candy, a pleasurable show for the male players. It is only through the enaction of violence and displays of power that female characters are treated as anything more than that. The developers do show strong women but counteract the strength through sexualization so as to not be perceived as too strong. This, again, showcases the enaction of the male gaze and visual pleasure to ensure that, although Lara is a strong female character, she is also a fantasy. In the second half of this case study, I explore how the fantasy is produced through video game production techniques, namely voice acting and performance.

#### PERFORMING AND DESIGNING OBJECTIFICATION: VIDEO GAME PRODUCTION OF SEXUALIZATION

It is not just on the imagery of the female form or poses that add to the eroticism or sexualization/objectification of these characters, but also from the voice actors that play these characters. While heavily suggestive with the cutscenes of Bayonetta, the moaning and suggestive language used by the voice actor adds the *finishing touches* to eroticizing the character. This is not to say that voice over actors only add to eroticizing of characters. Voice over actors also help add a human element to female characters, allowing players to see a character as both object and real fantasy at the same time. Voice over actors are the individuals who say the dialogue lines for characters as well as perform noises or sounds that characters make in various situations, ranging from grunts of pain, shouting, and, in this instance, moaning. With the aid of a voice over actor's work, a character can play into, or contradict gender stereotypes and objectification. Such imagery and suggestiveness both from the character design and from the actors that give these characters a voice, but the selling point is again for the player, (assumed to be male) to have fun and enjoy the display or sexualization and engage in the fantasy that is created by the sexualizing of these characters.

The observation that video games use character design and actor performance to sexualize women characters is not entirely new. Researchers Jeroen Jansz and Raynel Martis (2007) coined this occurrence within videogames as "The Lara Phenomenon" to explain that the more capable the female protagonist, the more likely they are to be sexualized. The more developed the character in terms of backstory, physical capability, and frequently they are placed as figures of female empowerment, the more sexualized they are displayed within the game. Raynel and Martis (2007) analyzed how female bodies of characters were designed, demonstrating that 77% of female characters they studied had large breasts and buttocks. This was gathered from a content analysis of 12 games from the years 2000 to 2003, specifically

*Charlie's Angels* (2003), *Devil May Cry 2* (2003), *Enter the Matrix* (2003), *Final Fantasy X* (2001), *GTA Vice City* (2002), *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001), *Parasite Eve 2* (2000), *Primal* (2003), *Shadowman 2: The Second Coming* (2001), *Silent Hill 3* (2003), *Splinter Cell* (2003), and *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness* (2003).

Along with this, women's clothing in the games were styled to either showcase these features and/or show off a lot of skin. The female characters had more of a well-defined figure (large curves) that emphasized thin or fit figures. Not only is there an emphasis on female body parts, but also upon body imagery in terms of body size. Martins et al. (2009) conducted a content analysis of the 150 top-selling video games in the United States at the time of the study across 9 platforms. They discovered that the higher the photorealism that the characters within these games were shown to have, the thinner they were on average.

While this shows objectification of women, especially with women in key roles, the characters were portrayed in a dominant role of decision making and capability of overcoming challenges that they face. Such imagery showcases strong female empowerment with dominant central roles with emphasis upon them being capable of filling said roles, but at the cost of the objectification and sexualization of the body. This pattern of a strong female character having to pay a price of sexualization of her body is done for the seeming reason to make her not as intimidating to perceived masculinity. In addition to lowering intimidation to masculinity, such sexualization is seemingly meant to be "good entertainment." In concluding, Raynel and Martis (2007) state, "...the Lara phenomenon may be empowering for female gamers. The female characters they are playing may look odd, but they are competent and occupy a powerful position in the virtual world of the video game." This body imagery is well established within media with

extensive research into the subject. It is evident with this work that the phenomenon has extended into games as well.

With the history of games, one must analyze the intended audience. Games were marketed towards male users and as such, oriented games that had characters coded with female gender to be within gender stereotypes and body imagery. Women in bikinis, skintight outfits or dresses, damsels in distress or femme fatales, the assumption that boys would play these games along without considering that women would also play games led to the popularity of sexualized games. It is almost a self-fulfilling prophecy: Companies assume that only boys would or could play games, so companies increase the release of sexualized games or highly gender stereotyped games. As a consequence, the pull for marketing is the highlighting of these aspects which in turn increases desire for these games, creating a cycle of objectification and sexualization of female game characters for company profit. However, the demographics in the past decade show a different story.

Research by Irakles Ioannou (2016) focused on the demographics of gamers and gender stereotypes. This study mostly studied the game known as *League of Legends* and found that nearly half of the gamers within the United States (44%) and more than half of the gamers in the United Kingdom (52%) are women. With this knowledge, Ioannou (2016) points out half of the demographic for this game is vastly ignored by many other game companies. In terms of gender portrayal, Ioannou (2016) found that the game that was used as the case study, *League of Legends* (a mass multiplayer online role-playing game) which is a highly popular video game, was a large example of gender stereotypes.

Ioannou (2016) found that women were often depicted as thin with small waists, large breasts, and were conventionally attractive. While this conventional attractiveness was not

defined within the work, the concept would appear to be individuals who are deemed to be generally attractive. While this does not narrow down the definition of attractiveness, it gives a bit more of a definition to this phrase in which these characters deemed to be conventionally attractive female characters were more likely to have outfit options in which the character would be dressed in provocatively and/or revealing clothing and were even promoted via the gaming platforms to emphasize their bodies through the design of these or promotional banners showcasing these outfits.

Furthermore, a study from Lynch et al. (2016) analyzed 150 different video games across 31 years (from 1983 to 2004) and found that a “...positive relationship emerged the sexualization of female characters and their physical capability.” Despite this trend, Lynch et al. (2016) did not find any relation between this sexualization and success of the games in terms of sales, critics or fan reviews. However, companies seem to target heterosexual, cis-gendered men more than women and would adjust the themes to their taste. It is also worth noting that games have predominately featured a white male main character. Male-led video games were more popular due to videogame companies’ assuming these games would outsell those with a female lead. The trend may still hold true for popular games such as *Overwatch* and *Apex Legends*.

#### CASE STUDY: CHARACTER DESIGN AND OBJECTIFICATION IN *OVERWATCH* AND *APEX LEGENDS*

*Overwatch* is primarily a first-person shooter game with multiple modes and game styles ranging from team deathmatch to capture the flag. As for *Apex Legends*, the game is primarily a first-person shooter battle royale game. By first person battle royale, I refer to the camera being angled as the perspective of the player in a game that is focused on gun combat with the goal being to be the last player or team alive in a gaming session against other players online. Both of

these games are online multiplayer video games in which one interacts with other players across the world or at the very least across the servers in their local area.

These games vary from one another though they both are first person shooter games in that both *Overwatch* and *Apex Legends* feature a wide and diverse roster of playable characters including a variation of female characters. In both games, characters have a deep background and, in some cases, a colorful history with unique attitudes, behaviors and personalities that can be explored by the player at their leisure. Women characters in both *Apex Legends* and *Overwatch* are designed to showcase various body types and show a wide range of sexualized and non-sexualized bodies.

Within the roster of these two games, there are female characters of varying heights and body types. In *Apex Legends*, the heights of female characters range from around 5'4" (Wraith) to 6'0" (Loba) with body types ranging from lanky to voluptuous. Characters can choose any of these characters, though body type and height do indeed have an impact upon gameplay. Smaller characters have a smaller hitbox (the area around the character designated to register a hit when shot at). The smaller the hitbox, the harder it is to actually deal damage when facing a smaller opponent. The larger and curvier the character, the larger the hitbox is due to the larger size. This holds true for *Overwatch* in which female characters heights range from 5'3" (Mei) to 6'5" (Zarya) and whose characters can range from plus sized women to body builder physiques. With these variations, the larger characters tend to move slower than the smaller characters do with the characters that are more on the plus-sized end of the spectrum or taller end having larger hitboxes in comparison to the more short and petite female characters within the game.

The second half of this chapter will focus on an analysis of characters design in each game. From *Apex Legends*, I will analyze the characters of Loba, Valkyrie, Wraith, and Lifeline

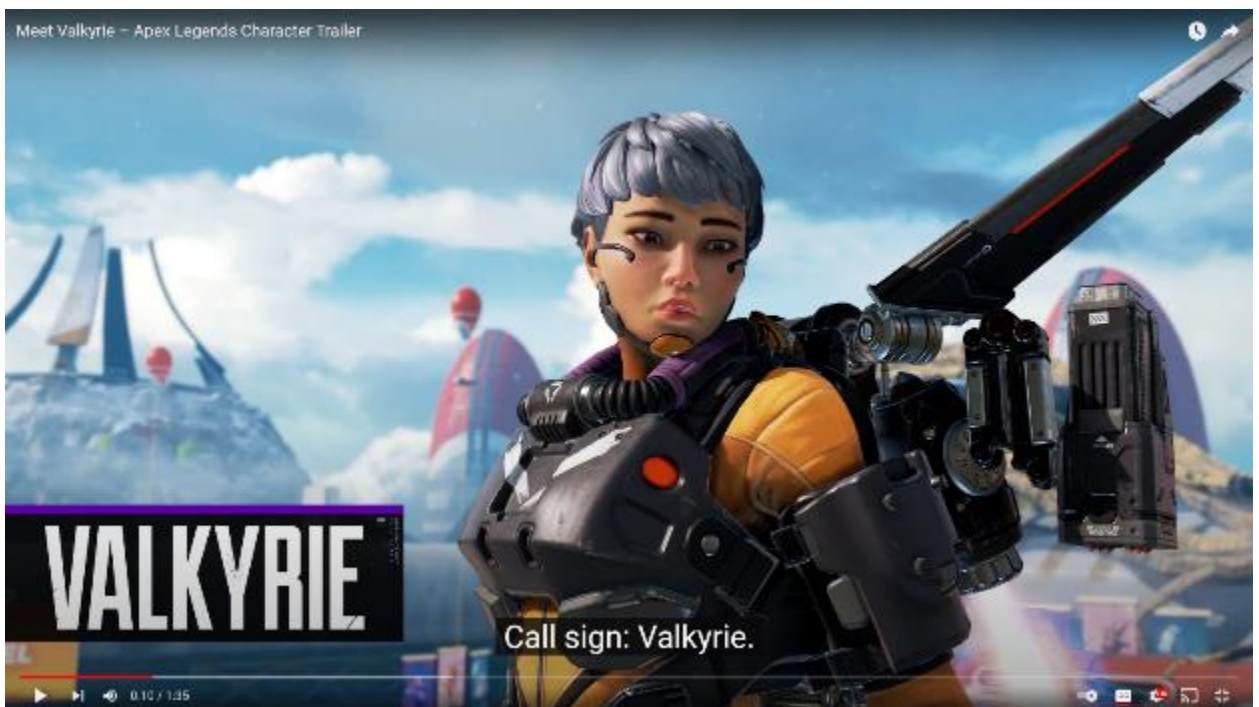
and from *Overwatch*, I will analyze Mei, Zarya and Widowmaker. I have chosen these characters for a close textual reading of their character design in the game because these characters show a wide range of the various body types and character designs employed within their respective games. It should be noted that these female characters are not the only female characters in each game, but rather a sample of the female characters within. These selections indicate a form of spectrum of female body types, nationalities, and outfit designs to analyze and discuss.

In *Apex Legends*, the character of Loba is described as a translocating thief and designated as a support character through her character selection screen. This means that her abilities are designed to help aid her and her fellow teammates. Loba is constantly depicted as an individual who desires rare items and trinkets. This of course plays into the character concept of thief and her descriptions within the introduction videos tend to be regarding fashion and beauty. This can also be reflected in her outfit: a form-fitting white leather outfit with fashionable footwear and accessories such as bracelets of precious metals and gilded trim as seen in the figure below. The character design of the corset and high neck attire along with the very short skirt combined with some of her moves having her swing around on a staff like a pole gives an implication of an exotic dancer or pole dancer to mind. This flamboyant design lends to the Brazilian ethnicity stereotype with the highlighting of the buttocks.



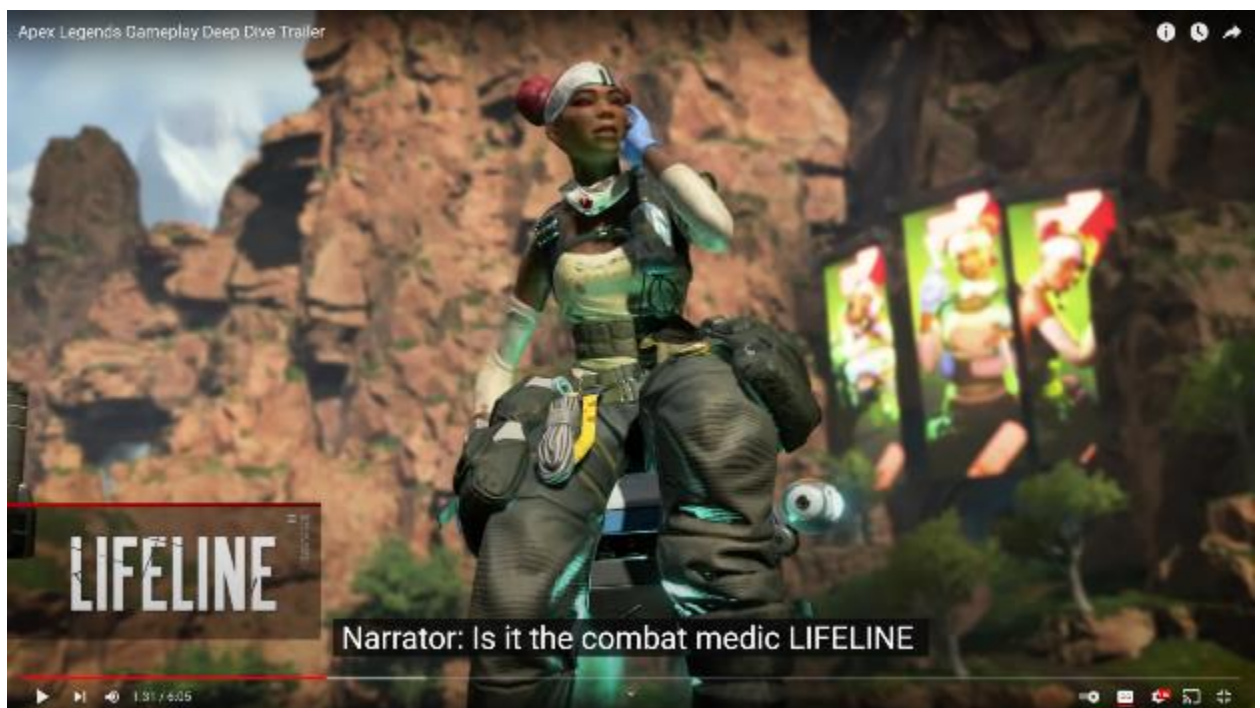
**Figure 2:** Screenshot of character Loba (*Apex Legends*) taken from video *Meet Loba-Apex Legends Character Trailer*

Also in *Apex Legends*, Valkyrie is designed with the aesthetic of a fighter pilot. Her design showcases a unique jetpack that was designed from a combat machine called a Titan within the story of Titanfall, a game series that *Apex Legends* was based off of. The Jetpack comes from a particular Titan that was piloted by Valkyrie's father whose call sign was Viper. The Jetpack is her way of honoring his memory. Her attitude is an aggressive combatant who actively challenges the ethnic and racial Asian stereotypes with voice lines like, "Too aggressive? Oh, I keep forgetting I am supposed to be timid and shy. My bad." The rest of her outfit consists of a pilot's orange flight suit as seen with the figure below. This outfit does not lend to racial ethnic or gender stereotypes, but rather focuses on the motif of piloting and the flight suit adds that to the jetpack and flight gear that she has equipped.



**Figure 3:** Screenshots of character Valkyrie (*Apex Legends*) taken from video *Meet Valkyrie- Apex Legends Character Trailer*

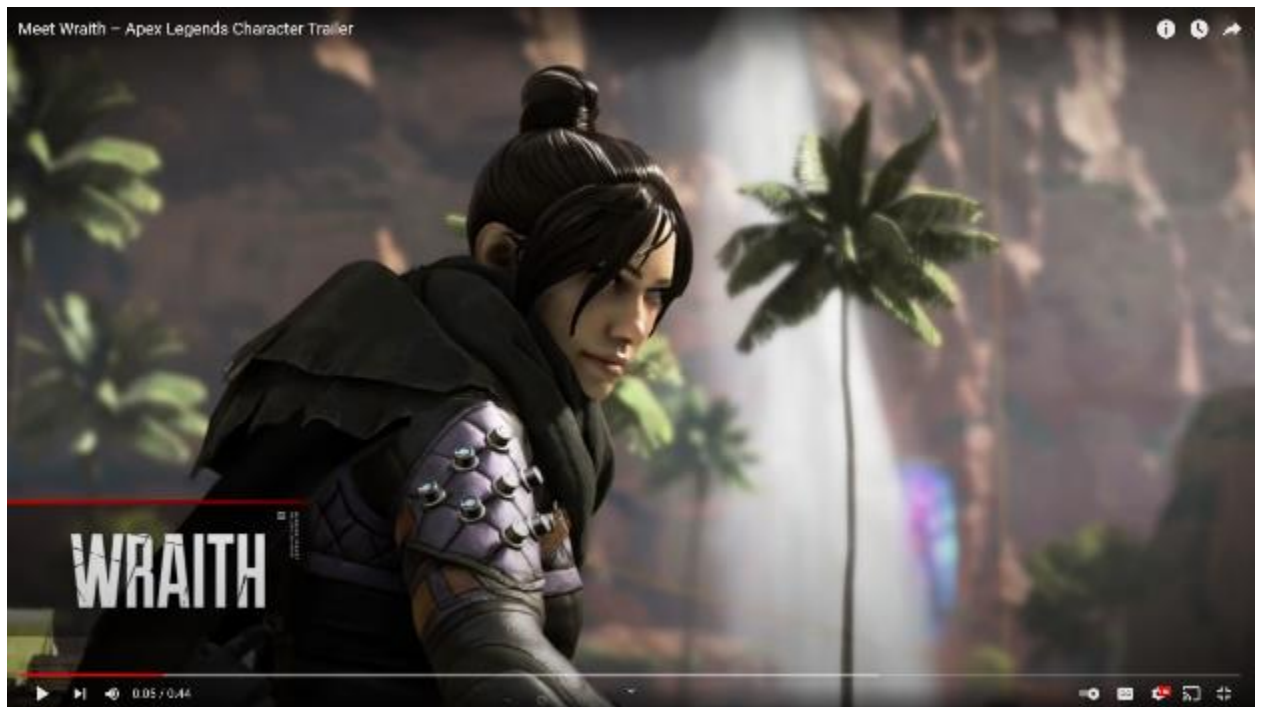
Lifeline is labeled as a support character and combat medic. Her abilities are aimed towards healing teammates or reviving them if they are knocked down in combat. Her outfit consists of baggy clothing with a large part of the accessories being medical related or for climbing showing wear and tear due to constant use in combat as seen in the figure below. Her outfit is centered more around combat medic designs with colors of olive drab and canvas pants. That being said, there are still some personal fashion designs such as the cutoff sleeves and tank top. These small modifications to functionality seem to lend elements of femininity to the overall outfit. It almost seems to state that this character may be a medic and empowering, but she is also feminine and expresses this through her outfit to a certain extent.



**Figure 4:** Screenshot of character *Lifeline* (*Apex Legends*) taken from video *Apex Legends Gameplay Deep Dive Trailer*

Wraith is considered to be a combat-oriented character whose skills and abilities focus more on closing distances quickly like with her portal ultimate ability or her ability to phase in

and out of reality to avoid attacks. Her outfit consists of gear and equipment designed for stealth and is lightly armored. With a large scarf that covers her throat and part of her chest area as seen in the figure below. The outfit lends a certain Ninja-like motif. This style reflected in her gear such as her heirloom weapon being a throwing knife (Kunai), a throwing knife that is associated with Ninjas. In this regard, her outfit lends to an Asian motif and design without specifically calling attention to it.



**Figure 5:** Screenshot of character Wraith (Apex Legends) taken from video *Meet Wraith-Apex Legends Character Trailer*

Mei is a Chinese climatologist with her abilities centered around cold weaponry and ice. Her gear is something that was inspired from Chinese Ice-climbers with a leaning to her being covered head to toe in winter gear. As can be seen in the figure below, Mei is more full-bodied in comparison to other female characters within the game of *Overwatch*. In this regard, her outfit

design is meant to highlight a profession that has recognizable connections to a specific profession from her home country.



**Figure 6:** Screenshot of character Mei (Overwatch) taken from video Mei Ability Overview / Overwatch

Zarya is a former Russian bodybuilder that has taken up arms in defense of her country. Due to her body-builder background, Zarya has maintained the physique, and this can be reflected in her outfit as seen below in which her arms are left bare to accentuate her muscles in her biceps along with her many tattoos. The outfit design is not focused on race or ethnicity, but rather on the former profession of the character coupled with modifications for functionality in combat. Hardened plating rather than cloth as well as a hip harness to help accommodate her large weapon that she carries into combat.



**Figure 7:** Screenshot of character Zarya (*Overwatch*) taken from video *Zarya Ability Overview / Overwatch*

Widowmaker is a highly skilled French Sniper and former ballerina who is depicted as an antagonist within the *Overwatch* story. Her physique reflects her former dancing past with a very slim and lithe figure. This is coupled with her outfit which is a skintight, spandex-like semi-reflective material upon the torso with some form of grey leggings for her thighs. The outfit has a plunging neckline that nearly reaches her belly button. This neckline is spread wide to the point where nearly all her cleavage is revealed except for her nipples. The leggings of her outfit reveal the shape and definition of her buttocks, which are fully on display. The combat gear that is fitted on her hands and head are stylized to be reminiscent of a spider, a motif that is shared with a tattoo on her arm of a spider web. The design seems to pull from several sources such as the characters history as a former ballerina and the spider designs. Unlike the other characters

displayed for *Overwatch* that have been displayed here, the design of this character leans more towards sex appeal than to functionality or professions.



**Figure 8:** Screenshot of character Widowmaker (*Overwatch*) taken from video *Widowmaker Gameplay Preview | Overwatch | 1080p HD, 60 FPS*

There is a large contrast between the two games and their characters. In comparison to *Apex Legends*, *Overwatch* has more of a lighthearted style of play and interactions, with a large back story of emotional connections between many of the characters as well as conflicts between them. *Apex Legends* includes more violence, death, and overall destruction. Interactions between enemies in *Overwatch* tend to state the general dislike and anger towards each other while conflicts between characters in *Apex Legends* involve threats and even profanity in some instances. However, both games boast multiple variations of sexual orientation, sexual preferences, attitudes, body types, races, and ethnicities through their playable characters.

While this wide array of playable characters demonstrates the game companies' attempts to be inclusive and progressive, having such variety of characters' personalities requires that, either through the characters' background stories or through their behaviors and interactions with other characters, various game sessions take place to reflect these different aspects of their person. To clarify, each gaming session or match that a player participates in will have teammates who pick various characters. These characters will interact with each other through unique dialogue depending on the characters that are chosen and the backstory between them. This can be seen through the dialogue that can be either triggered by player interaction with other teammates or by triggering a voice line or quip through an interaction menu or hot button/hotkey when in a match. The dialogue can range from antagonistic to flirtatious and can be used as a form of communication between teammates to state their intentions or may give the player a better idea of the character's personality.

An example can be seen with the interplay of lines between Loba of *Apex Legends* and her teammate Valkyrie. When being revived by a teammate or when given loot or items from a teammate, a player can issue a quick voice line to say "thanks". The player being thanked can then give a "you're welcome" voice line. If the characters are Loba and Valkyrie, upon receiving loot items and using the thanks prompt, Valkyrie will state to Loba, "Aww...a gift from the Loot Queen herself. Sweet." Afterwards, if Loba uses the "You're Welcome" voice line, Loba will state, "Flattery will get you everywhere." These types of interactions can showcase the relationships and personalities of the characters both as individuals and with other characters.

There are also voice lines in which characters talk in their native languages that demonstrate their ethnic or racial origins. In order to incorporate this, the voiceover actors and actresses for these video game characters were casted from a wide variety of racial or ethnic

backgrounds that matched the characters that they are portraying. Examples include Mela Lee who plays the character Lifeline in *Apex Legends* and has stated<sup>4</sup> that she was very excited to voice a character who is so representational of her makeup within the game as she herself is a person with a multi-cultural background. Though she did not elaborate upon what this background was specifically for either her or her character, she mentioned that having a multi-cultural background allowed her to really identify with the character. Additionally, Shantel VanSanten who plays the voice of Wraith, states, “[It is great] to have female representation that is strong-that isn’t overly sexualized and doesn’t have to just be like a boy, but she can be a woman.”

This last example shows that, although there are characters like Loba within games like *Apex Legends*, there are non-sexualized female characters as well. There are several female characters within *Apex Legends* and *Overwatch* who are in lead roles, yet do not have a character design that is sexualized or objectified. As the roster needs to showcase more diversity, characters may seem to end up taking on ethnic and racial stereotypes in order to highlight ethnic origins and racial backgrounds while at the same time contradicting either the very same stereotypes or contrasting stereotypes in some other aspect such as job roles, responsibilities or actions. Christopher Patterson discusses this in his book *Open World Empire* where he analyzes characters from *Overwatch*.

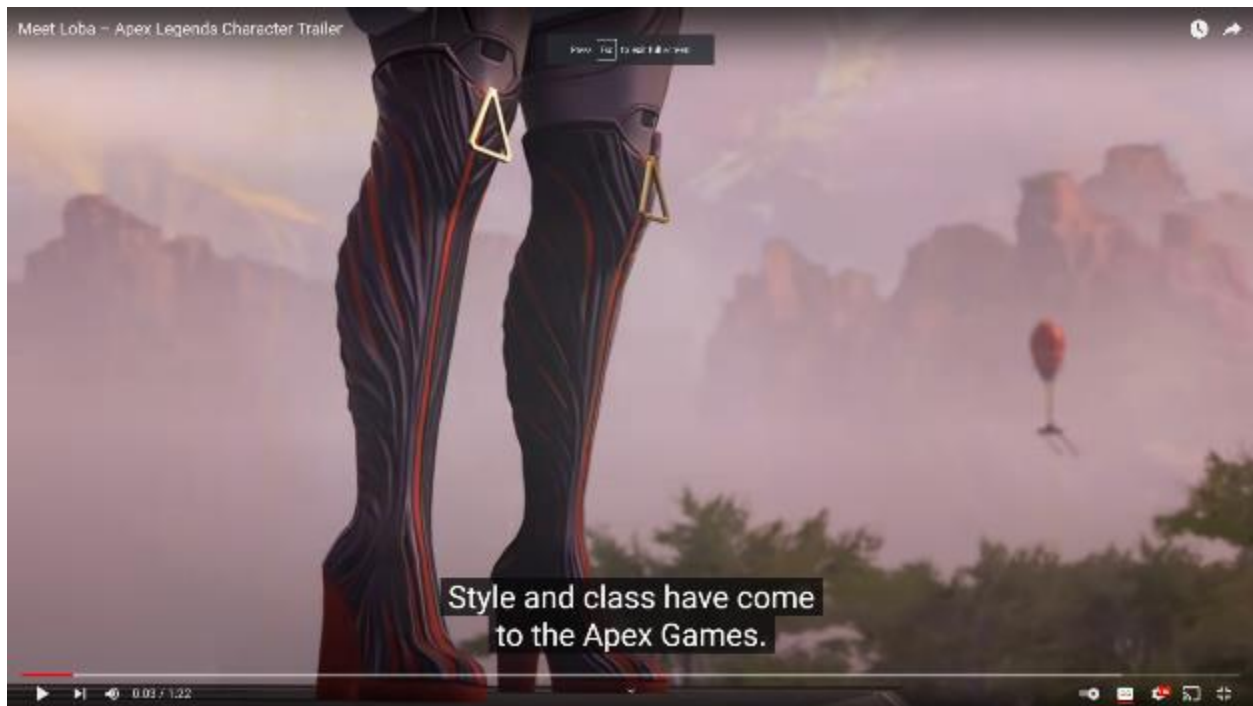
An example given within the book discussed the stereotypes seen with the character of Mei from *Overwatch*. Mei is a Chinese character who, according to Patterson “...unlike Chinese film icons, Mei sports a large silhouette and undermines the vastly male-dominated science industries in China itself” (Patterson, 2020). While these subvert a lot of stereotypes of icons of

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<sup>4</sup> *Apex Legends* Characters Voice Actors | Behind the Legend  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13xyoSfoNQg&t=521s>

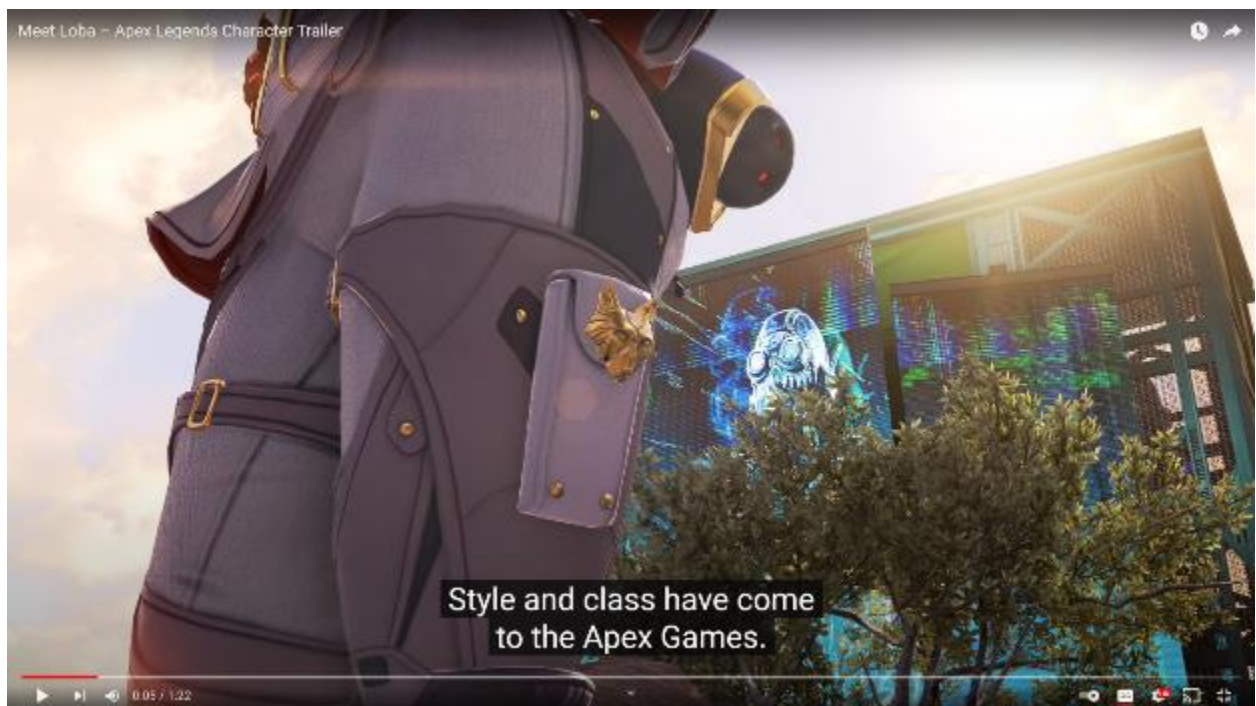
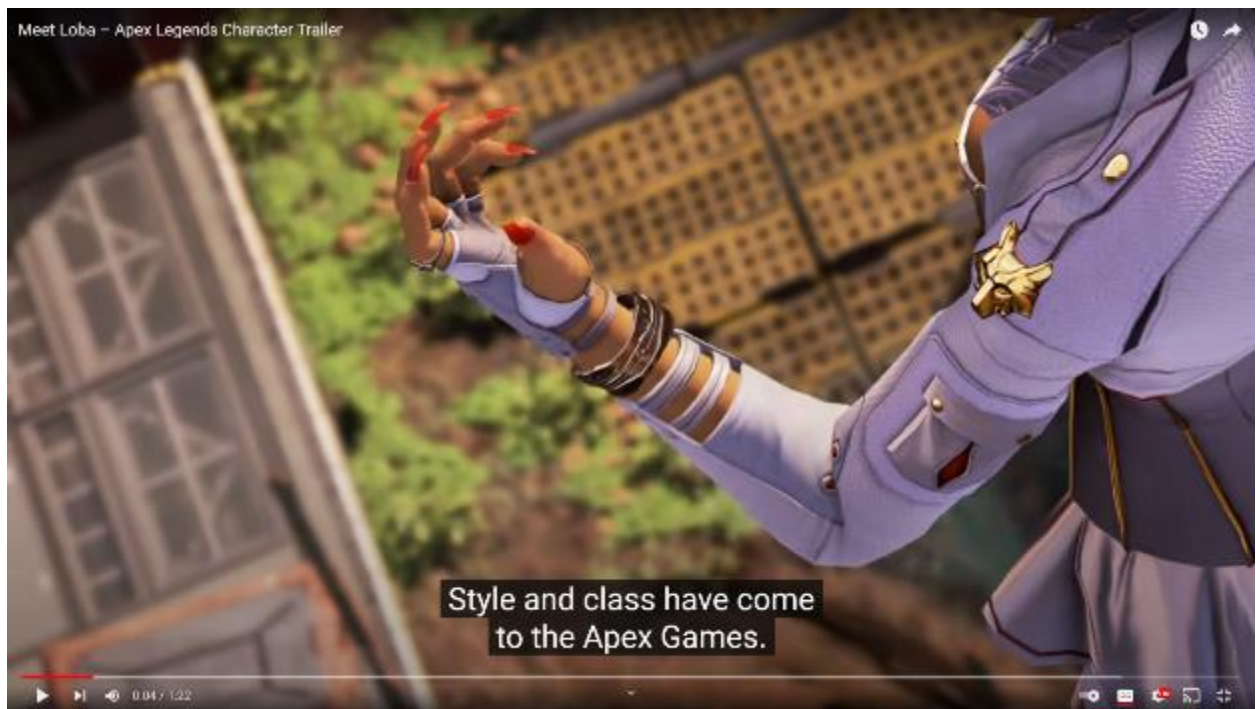
Chinese nationality as discussed in the book, Mei plays to certain stereotypes such as that of the nerdy scientist. In addition to this, there are allusions to minority stereotypes of being seemingly meek or quiet along with a slanted Chinese accent delivering lines in her native language like, “Dòng zhù! Bù xǔ zǒu!” which means “Freeze! Don’t move!” in Chinese.

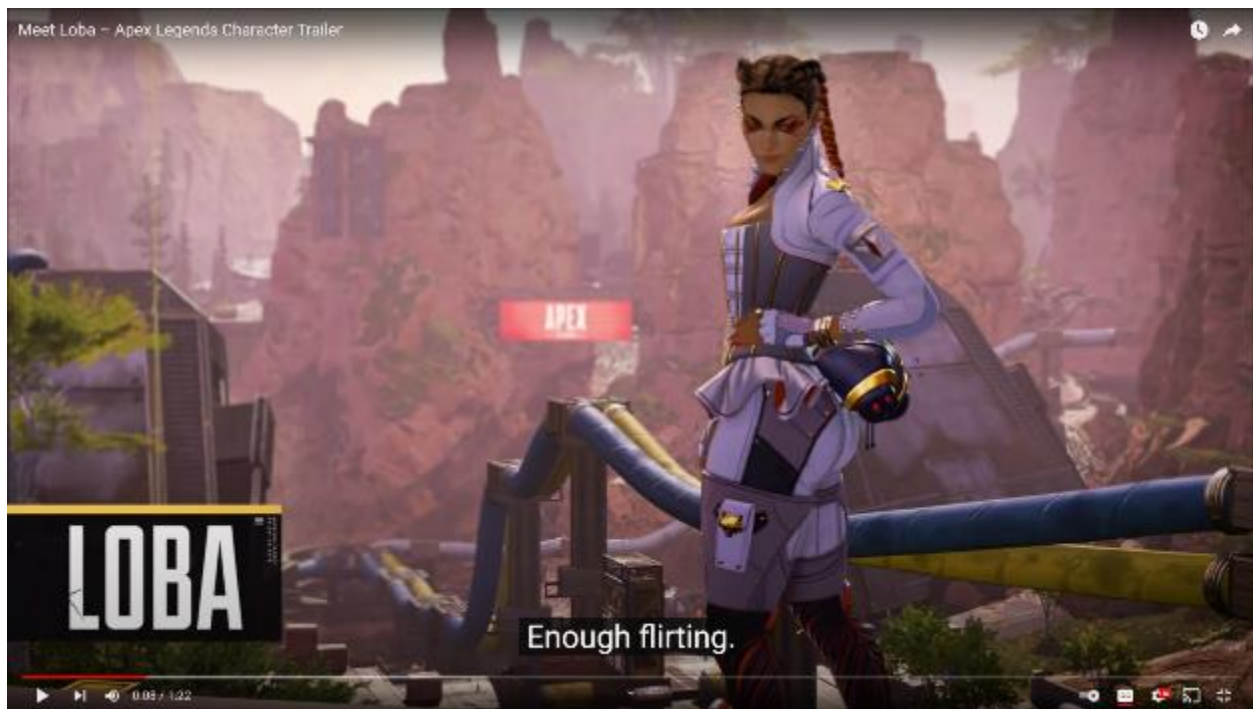
In the case of *Apex Legends*, sexualization was not disguised within the game but was blatant even in advertising such as with the introduction of Loba to the game. Emphasis on the character’s posterior can be seen within the character introductions released by the official game company, EA Games. The introduction video to the character has scenes that emphasize the character’s posterior as she moves about on the arena maps (EA Games, 2020). One could claim that the camera is angled to show something in the background, with Loba’s posterior coincidentally being in the shot<sup>5</sup>.

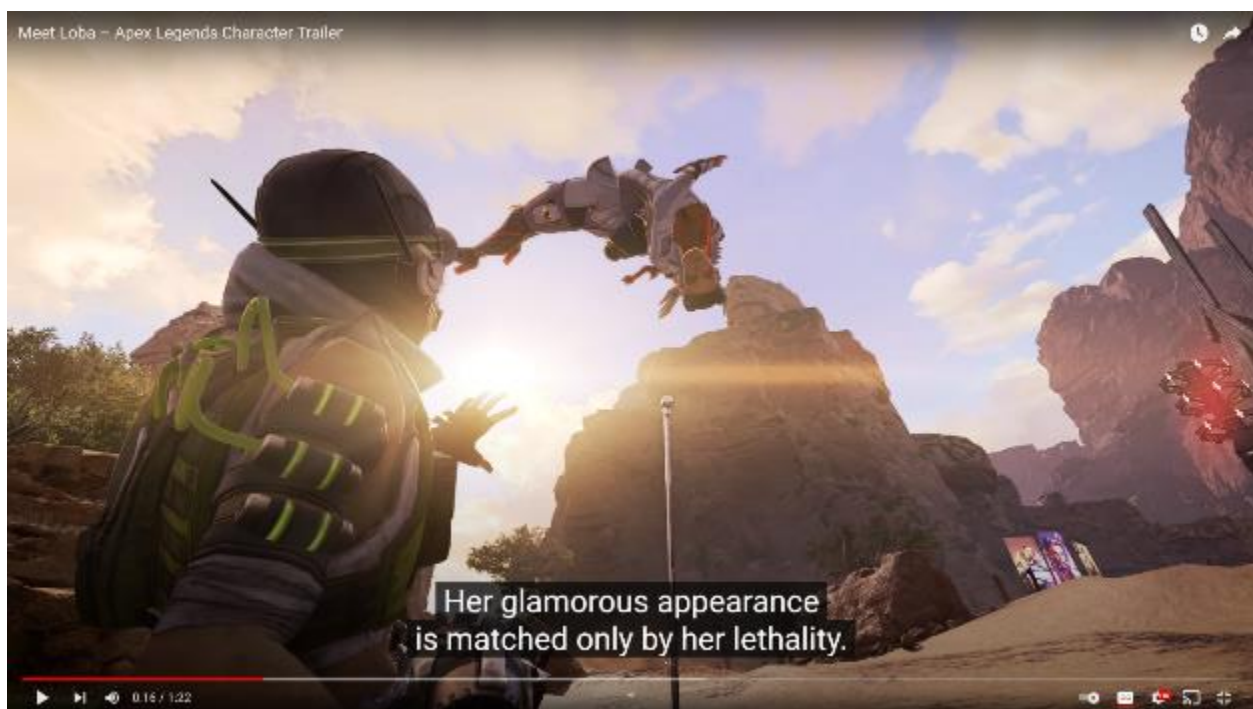
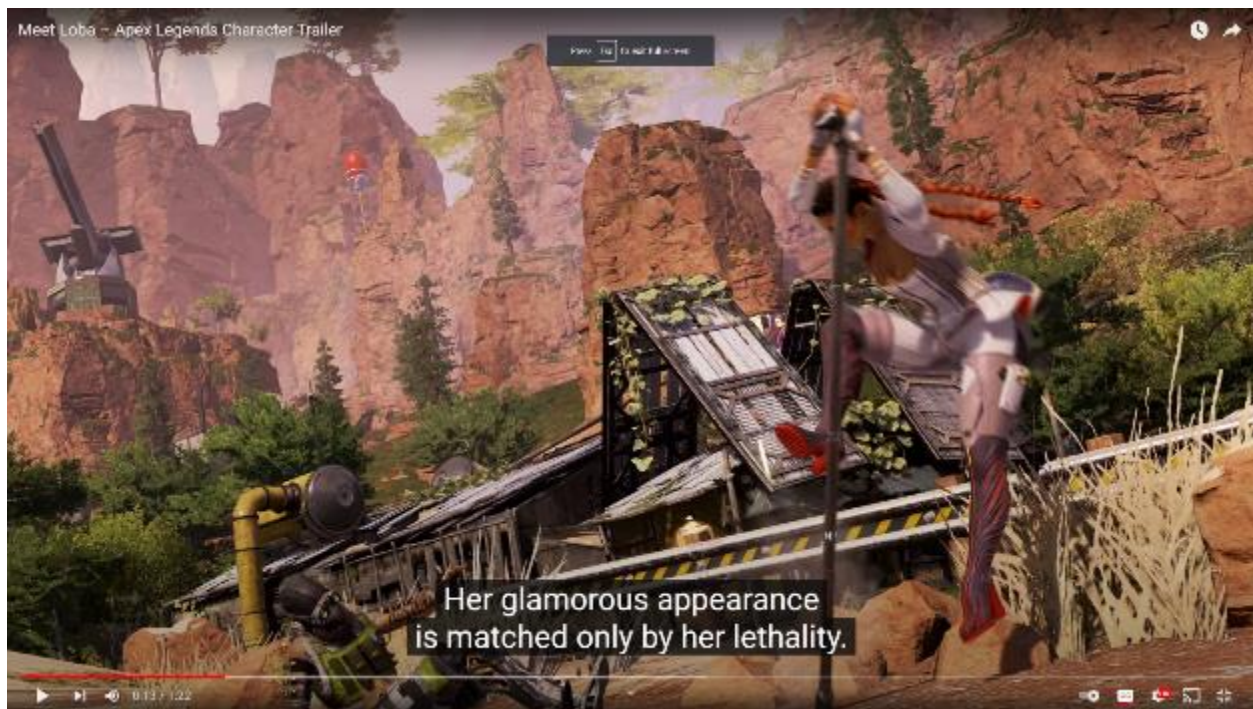


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<sup>5</sup> Meet Loba – *Apex Legends* Character Trailer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRzZGQEPwY4&t=2s>









**Figure 9:** Screenshots from the Introduction Video for Loba (Apex Legends) taken from video *Meet Loba-Apex Legends Character Trailer*

Note. 1<sup>st</sup> panel: Opening visual of the video with the focus on Loba's shoes. 2<sup>nd</sup> panel: Focus transitions to her manicured nails and accessories on her wrists. 3<sup>rd</sup> panel: Focus shifts again to focus on her thighs and the gilded aspects of her outfit. 4<sup>th</sup> panel: The camera zooms out to show her posing with her posterior towards the camera as she looks over her shoulder with a voice line shown in the subtitles discussing flirting. 5<sup>th</sup> panel: The scene transitions to her walking across the map with the main focus of the shot being her posterior. 6<sup>th</sup> panel: Loba is engaged in a finishing move on an opponent in which she twirls around her collapsible staff similar to that of pole-dancers before launching herself into the air. 7<sup>th</sup> panel: Different angle shot of her flying through the air towards the enemy that she is using the finisher move on. 8<sup>th</sup> panel: Loba lands upon the neck of her opponent with her posterior displayed before snapping the neck of the downed enemy with her foot. Bottom panel: Close-up of Loba posing for the camera with body language and expression of sensual or suggestive nature.

In these shots, there is a primary focus upon her posterior seen through the images as well as heard from the video's narration that consistently refers back to her looks while the video zooms in on her body and lingers upon her face or body. In an interview conducted by Chris Edgerly (2020) on YouTube, the Voice Actress Fryda Wolff who plays the voice of Loba states that upon her character's release and announcement within the game, the adult film online service, Pornhub, had her character as top searched for subject on their site for the first week of release. Pornhub does have statistics regarding *Apex Legends*. According to the postings by Pornhub in February, searches for the game *Apex Legends* saw a massive spike. Additionally, *Apex Legends* was ranked as number 8 in top searched for "searches that defined 2019" (Pornhub Insights, 2019).

It should be noted that the majority of videos seen from a cursory search of content for Loba on Pornhub did not seem to show gameplay footage, but rather a 3D model of Loba's likeness engaged in sexual acts or situations. It is unclear if this is due to copyright infringement or any legal reason, but the character model being shown in the pornographic scenes may be the main reason for not having as many of the pornographic content of Loba taken in the style of first-person point of view like that in the video game itself. Additionally, gameplay footage

would have not been focused on Loba, but on her perspective as the game is a first-person point of view shooting game.

While I was unable to find an accurate source for Fryda Wolff's claim regarding Loba as Pornhub's top search, the message remains: Loba is highly sexualized both by the game design and its players. Fryda Wolff has stated that she is aware of the sexualization of her character and general idea of what the reception of her character would be like. As stated before, the focus of this paper is upon the representation and perception given by the game characters within the game and not on how it was received. As such, the focus with this example should be upon the voice lines and imagery that was focused upon. While emphasis on the female body was present, this was not all what was focused upon with the reveal and subsequent season within the game.

While this does show that representation along stereotypes is something that is still ongoing, it would be inaccurate to say that all stereotypes for all characters are seen. A study done by Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and David Ta (2014) examined how gamers, specifically white gamers, perceived Black and Asian people based on their experience with Black and Asian characters within the games that they played. Behm-Morawitz and Ta (2014) found that there was a stronger connection between perceptions of Black people within the real world by White gamers than that of Asian people. Even so, there were inconsistencies with these results as various games stereotype race in a different way with varying effect. As such, though there was more of leaning to perceptions of race based off stereotypes, other factors were involved.

Research done by Tompkins et al. (2020) showed that there is an increase in variation of female characterizations. It was remarked that, beyond physical appearances, female characters have a likelihood to be identifiable to players who play as them with emotional responses to plot

or actions. Tompkins et al. (2020) go on to state that audience interpretations could potentially be used to counteract or mitigate sexist visuals or representations of the female form. The article continues further discussing how game companies are not only increasing the variety of female bodies, but also showing that the companies used in the research have shown a trend toward an increase of gender inclusiveness and feminist discourse as more women are becoming part of the design process with increase in the number of resources at their disposal. In the end, Tompkins et al. (2020) states that continuing this trend of gender inclusion and educating game designers on ambivalent sexism is necessary to combat stereotypes and sexualization.

### THE “PUNCHLINE”

In conclusion, video games and the video game industry have very clear examples of objectification and stereotyping. Nudity, provocative clothing, and camera design in cutscenes showcase the employment of visual pleasure and the male gaze, but there is also a level of self-awareness. This self-awareness is both positive and negative in nature as the games acknowledge the sexual objectification and exoticization of female bodies. These games can then challenge the act of looking, such as the characters’ awareness of the camera, seemingly “catching the voyeur,” or having the characters “put on a show.” This comical or playful manner of slyly highlighting when the game designers have done such objectification lets the audience in on the “joke.” When I played as these female characters, I bore witness to the comical nature of this firsthand. The needless posturing and sexual innuendos, the stripping and violence, the groping and the reactions of the characters to these instances.

Some, like Bayonetta, seemed to play it up and display themselves in a manner to tease the camera before showing their strength and ability. Others challenged other characters out on

their objectification or reacted with violence, highlighting that these female characters are capable and are not going to passively allow themselves to be objectified. The problem that I found here, was that the objectification, regardless of the reaction to it from the female characters was not only present, but almost normalized. The game developers, the characters and the players are all in on the “joke.” Indeed, when objectification becomes the norm, it becomes a punchline, but it isn’t funny.

## **CHAPTER 4: NON-HUMAN RACES AND REPRESENTATION**

Space: a wide expanse full of unknowns and mystery. A spaceship travels through its vast expanse. Its crew is burdened with a great purpose: to stop a madman from bringing about a large scale inter-galactic war. As the ship continues its travels, a lone person walks purposefully towards one of the rooms on the 3<sup>rd</sup> deck of the vessel. Their destination appears to be the Medical Bay. Upon entering the Med Bay, they walk through and pass the various medical beds and instruments that line the walls on either side of the room getting to a door at the other end. The sliding doors whoosh open to reveal a small room filled with some boxes and lab equipment placed carefully upon a single small desk next to a computer.

Sitting in a chair in front of this desk is a female scientist who is meticulously taking notes on archaeological discoveries and field notes. She does not notice the visitor entering her small room but finally gets up to greet them when she sees them appear from the corner of her eyes. She immediately recognizes them and states, “I get the feeling that you want to ask me something Commander.”

“I’d like to know more about the Asari”

“We were the first species to discover the Citadel. We were instrumental in forming the Council and always strive to be the voice of peaceful cooperation in galactic disputes. My people believe we are all part of a single galactic community. Each species contributes something to the greater whole.” Her eyes become downcast as she sadly states, “Although we seek to understand other species, it seems few of them seek to understand us. The galaxy is filled with rumors and misinformation about my people.”

“Like what?”

“Most of the inaccuracies are centered around our mating rituals. My species is mono-gendered. The terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ have no real meaning for us.” She shyly looks away before adding, “We still require a partner to reproduce. This second parent, however, may be of any species and any gender.”

“I don’t understand. Your species can mate with anyone?”

She shakes her head, “Mating is not quite the proper term. Not as you understand it. Physical contact may or may not be involved, but it is not an essential element of the union. The true connection is mental. Our physiology allows us to meld with other beings. We can touch the very depths of their minds. We explore the genetic memory of their species. We share the most basic elements of their individual and racial identities. We then pass these traits on to our daughters. This is how we learn to grow as a species, and how we develop a greater understanding of other races.”

“What happens to your partner after the union?”

“Every relationship is different. Some unions are a single encounter, with both parents parting ways afterwards. Others can be more long term. Sometimes an Asari and her partner will stay together for many decades.”

The commander ponders this for a moment before asking, “Do you know who Matriarch Benezia chose as her partner?”

Upon hearing the name of her late mother, her expression becomes sad and her eyes downcast. “She rarely spoke of her partner, though I know my father—if you want to use that term—was another Asari.”

This is a small section of a conversation between the main character, Commander Shepard and Liara T’Soni from the game *Mass Effect* (2007) regarding the race and culture of the Asari, a non-human advanced species of mono-gendered, blue-skinned feminine beings who are victims to many racial stereotypes born from ignorance. The *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007-2012) is a science fiction space opera third person role-playing shooter game made by the developers Bioware, Edge of Reality, Demiurge Studios and Straight Right. The games place a large focus on the dialogue between the player’s character Commander Shepard and the various characters that appear within the game. Learning about the various races and the social dynamics alongside the created histories of these alien races was fascinating.

The amount of world-building needed to portray these races as more than just background characters, but as a fully fleshed out society with culture, religious practices, political beliefs and social structure was very complex and nuanced. The level of complexity that these social structures made me realize that this was not purely thought up without forms of inspiration. As such, I began to look at the social dynamics and interactions between the player and NPCs as well as the interaction between NPCs, specifically the non-human and human interactions. In this chapter, I will be exploring the interaction between players and non-human Non-Player Characters (NPCs), the depictions of alien/fantasy races with the games of the *Mass Effect Trilogy*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, as well as discussing the alien other with a brief history of its use in film and video games.

## THE ALIEN “OTHER:” A BRIEF OVERVIEW

As with the discussion with Liara, the forming of prejudices, assumptions, and stereotypes is something that has become a common occurrence not just in this game, but rather as a topic of discussion. Exploration of this alien “Otherness” is not a new occurrence and is not just found in video games. Science fiction narratives tend to lean towards an anthropocentric view as discussed with Jonne Arjoranta’s (2020) work regarding the nonhuman experience of players within the *Alien Vs. Predator* (2010) video game. Arjoranta (2020) states that this anthropocentric view of aliens allows for both a bond and a means of separation. The human experience is used as a baseline for play. The experience becomes a comparison to humanity. The use of technology and overcoming nature becomes standard. Gameplay becomes human-centric or as human as possible. This also means that characters that are far from this human baseline have a tendency to become “Othered” and, as such, there is an increase in the separation of these non-human, human, and humanoid (non-human characters with human-like qualities or overall human characteristics) characters.

Dries de Groot (2016) explains that this Othering can take on many forms, but the focus of their work was on the artificial “Other,” the alien “Other” and the female “Other” in order to explore the *Mass Effect Trilogy* and its employment of “Otherness.” Dries de Groot (2016) found that there was a trend of having robotic characters and alien characters as enemies and threats. Nonetheless, there is also the counter that is designed into *Mass Effect* that the “Other” is not necessarily something that should be feared or seen as the enemy. Instead, there is a display of “Sameness” that allows to present aliens and robotic races as human and as such, create connections with the player.

While this may be the case for *Mass Effect*, research done by Melinda Burgess et al. (2011) found that video games that tell a narrative about minorities were told by underrepresentation and an overreliance on racial, gender, and ethnic stereotypes. This stereotyping can be seen with non-human characters such as the example with the discussion the player can have with Liara. This act of generalization plays out with the game as outside of the occasional Asari Mercenary or diplomat that characters interact with our fight, the majority of Asari that the player will see within *Mass Effect* are within strip clubs in which the Asari are pole dancers or prostitutes.

These displays of stereotypes have evolved to include these fictional races but are inspired by real world stereotype dynamics. Referring to Stuart Hall's (1973; 1994) work on encoding-decoding, the manner in which these texts, these games portray racial and ethnic tensions and interactions is left to the interpretation or decoding by the audience, in this case the player. The message of representation can be interpreted by the player to make the connections between race and interaction. This meaning making relies on the symbology and imagery surrounding the various cultures and has a connection to real-world interactions. In the case of the Asari, what is being pulled from the culture is that of presumed Asari promiscuity and racial assumptions of Asari being mercenaries or dancers. Players are then confronted with this imagery, but also with the contradictions to this imagery from Liara and conversing with her regarding her culture.

The visual aspects of Liara are indeed non-sexual in nature with her outfit not playing into the assumed racial stereotypes that she points out to be misconceptions. She is dressed in a simple laboratory jumpsuit that does not seemingly emphasize her figure nor designed with exposed skin or cleavage. Additionally, specific language employed by the game such as that of

“Azure” which is a derogatory reference to Asari genitalia yet is also used as the name of an erotic night club and escort service establishment discussed in the Downloadable Content (DLC) expansion mission from *Mass Effect 2*. This “Othering,” generalization, mistreatment, and exotification is not new.

Entertainment media has explored the alien as “Other” such as seen in film. Prime examples are that of *District 9* (2009) and *Avatar* (2009). With *District 9* (2009), Hall’s (1997) work comes into play regarding South Africa and the racial tensions between white and black South Africans and the allusion to Apartheid. The entire film was more of an allegory of the treatment between black and white South Africans. The encoding and decoding can clearly be seen here with the aliens (given a derogatory name of Prawns) being that of black South Africans. The poor living conditions, exploitative practices such as unlawful eviction and casual violence and horrible living conditions, are all given to the audience to interpret. The film ends rather open ended, as it is unclear if the main character, who was slowly turning from human into an alien, was alive or dead, and the great spaceship that the aliens had arrived at Earth in having left.

With *Avatar* (2009), the encoding/decoding is that of the Native Americans. The destruction of land in search of rare minerals and resources and the forcible relocation and threatening of native lands is clearly present throughout the film. In addition to this, the exotification of the Na’vi (the native peoples of the planet Pandora) is seen with the characters being seen as valuable commodities for the creation of synthetic Na’vi that human operators could remotely control in order to interact with the natives. The conflict between the two groups, the seemingly technologically advanced humans and the “primitive” or “savage” Na’vi, is a corollary to the Native Americans who were exploited in a similar manner. This film ended with

nature and the Na'vi as the victors of the conflict, forcing the human forces to leave Pandora, though the main character stayed behind and seeming fully transfers his consciousness into that of his Na'vi avatar.

Both films provide corollaries to real life events of othering that inspired the behaviors and interactions between human and non-human characters, showcasing the alien “Other.” With these examples, “Othering” is both shown with the negative treatments and mistreatment of the alien characters, but there is a highlight of the alien characters being the victims as well as the film’s main characters siding with the alien characters with an attempt to liberate or defend them. There is still a problem: the main characters were white males and thus, perpetuates the trope of white male characters as the saviors of the story. A trope that I have continuously stated is a trend found within videogames. In addition to this, there is still the exotification of race as a highlight towards either appeal or for “Othering.”

Again, the topic of exotification of race can be seen here, only this time it is in reference to non-human species rather than real-world race or ethnicity. Referring to Callahan (2019) and the work of Brock (2011), using a non-human race allows for the exploration of controversial topics such as science fiction thought experiments regarding ethnic identity scripts being almost non-existent as racial and ethnic identities become more mixed. These discourses work in these fictitious settings when referring to non-human populations as it allows for an almost outsider perspective without any specific real-world race or ethnicity assigned to any particular scenario.

This can even extend into the design of local landscapes and environments. These designs of can imply primitive or archaic living in a very harsh environment. Andrew Stephan Wright (2021) explores the representation of worlds in which such designs are present like that of the planet Tatooine present in *Star Wars: The Old Republic (SWTOR)*. The impression that was

made was that these outer planets and systems of the galaxy are viewed as primitive or “Backwater”. Wright (2021) states that the use of these locations combined with the saturation of monsters and colored peoples, or dark aliens (Jawas and Sand People), employ the concept of “The Dark Other”. This representation of people of color as lesser, or as Other, creates a damaging image of these alien races and, by extension, the races that these aliens are based on, specifically in the case of Tatooine, the Middle East and Middle Eastern peoples.

### ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE “OTHER” IN THE *MASS EFFECT TRILOGY*

Racism, stereotypes, bigotry, and prejudice come into the light. While this may be interesting to the casual player, how does this factor into race and representation of characters in video games? After all, these are not humans. Their society in its entirety is fictitious, so why does it matter? It is for that reason that it matters as these racial dynamics, oppressions, mistreatments, racial slurs, and abuse of powers on fantasy and alien racial minorities were not created in a vacuum. These were based on real world social dynamics of the past and present. These are not Elves or Dwarves or Asari or Turians, these very well represent LatinX peoples, indigenous peoples, the Black and Asian communities.

This is displayed with portrayals of oppression and discrimination, topics and acts that are very familiar in the real world with racial and ethnic minorities are played out in a fictitious world. This can take the form of racial discrimination by law enforcement authorities for example. In *Mass Effect 2*, there is a small side mission that a player can discover while walking through the large cultural hub of the Citadel in which the player will overhear an Volus male talking to a human Law Enforcement Officer (Citadel Security or C-Sec for shorthand) accusing

a Quarian woman of being a thief. Players can engage in conversation with the officer and the alien parties involved to get the full story of the incident<sup>6</sup>.

Talking to the Quarian, Lia’Vael, reveals that she had been simply walking past a store when the Volus, Kor Tun, bumped into her and then proceeded to walk away without apologizing. Shortly after, she was stopped by the C-Sec Officer Tammart and Kor Tun with the charge of theft. Kor Tun claims that his Credit Chit (a form of currency within the game for purchasing items) was missing and that he only discovered this after bumping into Lia’Vael. If the player investigates further with questioning both Kor Tun and Officer Tammart, the player can discover the apathy of the Officer towards other races and the assumption of Kor Tun that every Quarian is a thief in his eyes. If the player investigates the nearby shop that Kor Tun had visited, they will discover that Kor Tun had dropped his chit as he left the store, and the clerk was holding on to his chit.

Upon notifying Kor Tun, the only response is that Lia’Vael “...could have stolen it.” This is followed by Officer Tammart threatening to run Lia’Vael in for vagrancy if she does not get a permanent residency on the Citadel. At this time, the player can step in and challenge both Kor Tun and Officer Tammart on the way they are treating Lia’Vael, reprimanding them both before making them leave the area, if the player chooses to take this action. What games like the *Mass Effect Trilogy* do, whether intentionally or not, is leaving the reaction and action to these topics up to the player instead of offering an opinion or view. But offering of choice to the player also

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<sup>6</sup> lolSergio Mass Effect 2-Missing Credit Chit with Tali in Group [HD]  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tx7us1b9sZ4>

portrays a shirking of responsibility for a world view that the game developers have participated in constructing.

By putting the onus on the player, the game seems to avoid responsibility, instead confronting the player with a series of implied questions: How should the player react in gameplay when confronted with racism and bigotry? Or, more importantly, what game actions do the designers even allow the player to take in direct response to their reaction? Here again, the designers feign to shirk responsibility, designing within the game mechanics a kind of open-ended choose your own adventure. In order to facilitate this freedom of choice, this game series used the “dialogue wheel,” a way in which players can dynamically steer conversations with other characters by selecting from several preset choices. When I played this game, I was not aware of the large social and political dynamics that I would be experiencing simply from talking to the various characters on topics that I could access from a dialogue wheel. It made me ponder on the similarities that various aliens had to real-world social structures and challenged me with how to interact with others, both the bigots and those that are being abused. I, therefore, wanted to investigate this further.

I began to really pay attention to the dialogue and interactions that I could have with the various characters as I went on my adventures and started to learn about the various cultures that existed within this fictitious universe. The dialogue between Liara and Commander Shepard displayed interesting views on the stereotypes that were associated with the Asari race as well as on gender identification. The Asari not only face complex issues such as race, racial stereotypes, and prejudice, but their religion, philosophy, and cultural identity are also discussed. However, due to this display of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity both with humans and non-human

characters, there is a downfall. By this I refer to prejudice, racial profiling, racism, and racial slurs.

Keep in mind this is a fantasy world and, as such, racial slurs were created in reference to the various fictitious races that exist within it. Terms like “Jellyfish” and “Azure” may not sound much like a racial slur out of context, but “Suit-rat” and “Xeno-Lover” can be interpreted as an insult even out of context. There are several occasions within the first *Mass Effect* (2007) game where these insults can be heard. These interactions do not just happen with the non-player characters (NPCs), but also with the characters that join you on your adventures. One example of this is seen with Ashley Williams, a Space Marine whom the main character rescued at the beginning of the game.

As part of the team that Shepard gained over the course of the adventure, Ashley begins to have issues with the non-human crew. When confronted about this, she states that she does not trust other races with the layout of the ship that they are on. She then compares the other races to dogs. Her belief is that, when in a desperate situation, other races will look out for themselves, so humanity should do likewise. She even uses an analogy of being confronted by a bear and then throwing your dog at the bear in order to survive<sup>7</sup>. She follows this by stating that her belief is not racist.

This denial gets undermined when, in following scenes, the player is walking around large cultural hubs with Ashley, and she comments on the wide diversity of alien races with “I can’t tell the animals from the aliens!” along with showcasing a disrespectful treatment of the

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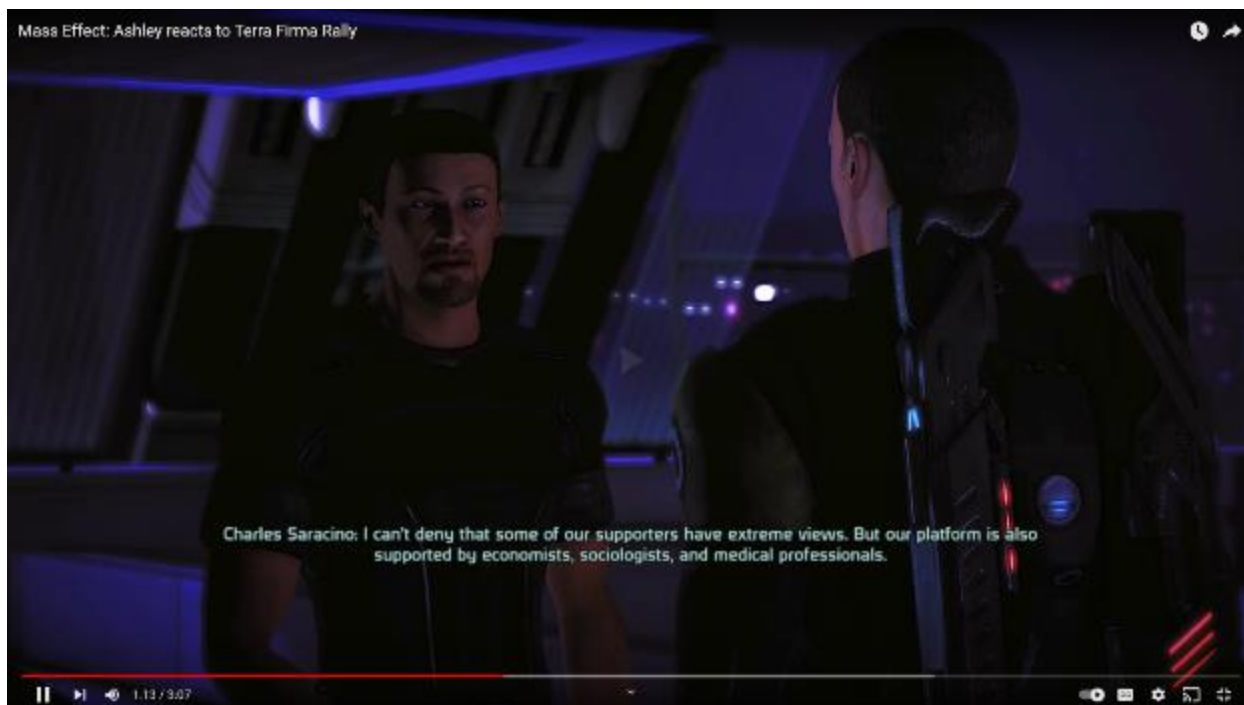
<sup>7</sup> David Hearn Mass Effect - Ashley and aliens <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4M9vBZm0iUw>

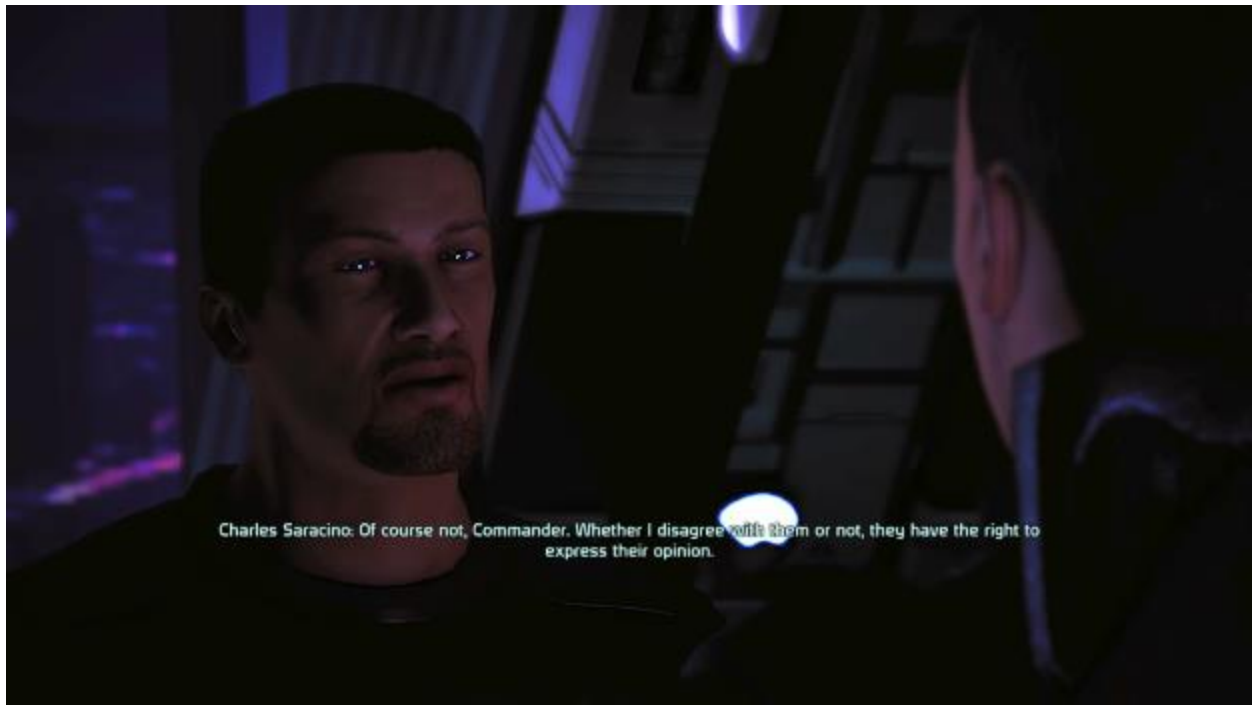
non-human crewmates such as Liara T'Soni who she refers to as "The Alien" on several occasions. The explanation provided within the game regarding these behaviors was that Ashley's ancestor oversaw an outpost that was the center of a battle during the first contact between humans and aliens. It was historical as the battle (the Battle of Shanxi) was the only skirmish in which humans surrendered to a hostile alien force. Due to this disgrace, Ashley has a chip on her shoulder and a deep mistrust of non-human species.

This event is revisited during a scene set at the cultural hub known as the Citadel, a massive space station that acts as the galactic capital of almost all known alien species. There was a rally going on during the anniversary of the Battle of Shanxi on behalf of the Terra Firma Party, an all human, anti-alien political organization with known racist members and ideals. Commander Shepard is confronted by the leader of the political group who proceeds to try and convince the Commander to give their endorsement to the organization as seen below.









**Figure 10:** *Conversation with Charles Saracino on Political Platform of Terra Firma (Mass Effect) taken from video Mass Effect: Ashley reacts to Terra Firma Rally*

*Note:* 1<sup>st</sup> panel: Charles Saracino introduces himself to the player along with who he represents. 2<sup>nd</sup> panel: Saracino states Terra Firma core values. 3<sup>rd</sup> panel: Ashley accuses the party members of racism. 4<sup>th</sup> panel: Saracino admits to the extreme views of some party members. 5<sup>th</sup> panel: Player chooses dialogue option in which they question why Saracino does not curtail racist dialogue of party members. Bottom panel: Saracino states that party members have the right to voice their opinions.

This exchange makes Ashley confront a lot of sentiments that she shares with the group, though she distances herself by stating that she disapproves of racism showcased by the Terra Firma party. Exchanges like this one are not limited to any singular character within the game, but rather the main character is confronted with prejudice and racism in dialogue throughout the playing of the game. From Ashley's views to the Chief Navigator Pressley and the NPCs that Shepard interacts with, anti-alien or anti-racial conflicts and commentary is experienced throughout the first game.

Indeed, some of these racial confrontations carry over into the following games of *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012). In *Mass Effect 2* (2010), one of the characters from the

previous game, Navigator Pressley, died when his ship was attacked and destroyed at the beginning of the game. Pressley was open about the fact that he was very anti-alien and had expressed this to Commander Shepard when engaging in conversations in the previous game. When exploring the crash site of the ship in *Mass Effect 2* (2010), Shepard can discover a partially damaged digital diary that belonged to Pressley in which his opinions would slowly change over time as he continued to work alongside the non-human team members that Shepard gathered in the previous game. He even goes so far as to state that he would have laid down his life for any one of them.

It is worth mentioning that these interactions and situations are only discoverable when one explores each location and deliberately attempts to interact with as much of the surroundings as possible. I was blown away with how much social and racial dynamics were put into this game, but seemingly only in the background of the main story, like a narrative subplot or subtext lending significance and context to decisions made by the player along with the attitudes of the NPCs throughout the landscape. which made the issues of race and racism within the game more subtle than games like *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry* (2014).

Rather than make the player outright confront racial injustices or topics of racism within the plot of the game's story, *Mass Effect* (2007-2012) has race and racism in the background of the game action, the subtext of cutscenes, and the creation of the atmosphere of the environment, which are only addressed if the player confronts it themselves. At least, that is the illusion that the game gives. In actuality, as the dialogue options are available to either remain neutral in the discussion and interaction of characters, reprimand racist or prejudiced remarks when the option is available, or to agree with the racist and prejudiced comments made by various NPCs that the player can interact with, there is indeed a very racist and discriminatory view of the NPCs that

the game developers have set. While I personally do not understand the need to include racist remarks and attitudes that a player can engage in, they are oriented towards a game mechanic of the *Mass Effect Trilogy*.

#### “GOOD GUY” OR “BADASS:” A LOOK AT THE PARAGON/RENEGADE SYSTEM

This game mechanic is the Paragon/Renegade system. This system allows players to act or react to set scenarios with options either in dialogue or a short quick-time event in which a symbol of the paragon icon or renegade icon flashes on screen. If players press the appropriate button response next to these icons when prompted, cutscenes in which these events occur will alter towards a more aggressive attitude/action (Renegade) or a more inclusive. While it is true that the game developers included these features arguably with the intent that the player interacts with them, these elements are only discovered through secondary interactions that are not needed to win nor advance in the game.

In contrast to other games who explore racial topics more upfront, *Mass Effect* does not include any missions that force the player to adopt either an inclusive or racist mindset. Furthermore, rather than have the player have a dynamic of combating racial injustice and racism, the game provides the option to be racist themselves. The game is designed to allow players to explore racist dialogue, confront this dialogue, encourage, or remain neutral in situations in which allow it. In the case of *Mass Effect*, I am referring once again to the use of the dialogue wheel in which players can choose from a selection of conversation options including gathering more information, remaining neutral in the discussion, embracing a more aggressive/offensive dialogue, or more inclusive. However, while racist and inclusive dialogue options are provided, the player can also choose neutral responses.

In the conversation with the leader of the Terra Firma party for example, Shepard could state that they agree with the Terra Firma party and endorse their political platform. As I said, games such as *Mass Effect* do not simply display racial injustices and racism, but very much are allowing the player to choose what they would do, even allowing for the player to enact racist and discriminatory dialogue or actions by choosing them through the dialogue wheel. This design allows the player to pick from a selection of set dialogue options. What is more, these actions have significant impacts on the way the story becomes shaped through your playthrough. Being discriminatory may lead to racial tensions and may alienate potential allies and love interests later in the story. In the case of the small side quest with Lia'Vael, players can overhear the altercation, but can choose not to approach and interact with the characters to trigger the quest, thus bypassing the entire scenario altogether. Additionally, the quick time event that occurs to allow a player to enact a Paragon action<sup>8</sup>, can be missed or the player can choose not to trigger the event and thus leave the ending with the threat by the C-Sec officer before saying goodbye.

#### A LOOK AT ENSLAVEMENT AND SITH WITHIN *STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC*

BioWare, the game company responsible for creating and producing the *Mass Effect Trilogy*, has had similar game mechanics within other games that they have created over the years. Yet another example is that of *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011), an online MMORPG that takes place within the *Star Wars* universe a few hundred years before the timeline in which the movies take place. In this time-period, there is a conflict between the Sith Empire and the Republic that spans across the galaxy. The Sith Empire boasts a large economy with a major contributor being the purchasing, trading, selling and use of slave labor. Players can create their

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<sup>8</sup> lolSergio Mass Effect 2-Missing Credit Chit with Tali in Group [HD]  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tx7us1b9sZ4>

own custom character with a wide selection of races and pick what side of this conflict they will fight on, their alignment (Light or Dark Side), and their class of character and subclass. Again, there is a confrontation of race and racism in some of these class story lines. Each class has a different story that unfolds in a unique way based on the decisions and actions of the player. In particular, the Sith Inquisitor and Sith Warrior storylines are the most telling.

In the case of the Sith Inquisitor storyline, the player is a former slave who was freed after the Sith Empire discovered that they had an affinity to the dark side of the force and were taken to be trained in the ways of the Sith. Dialogue between the character and the other Sith acolytes showcase how little they think of slaves and constantly discriminate and belittle the character. Indeed, purity of Sith bloodlines is a matter of great pride within the Sith Empire and comments about how lowly slaves are of mixed or tainted lineage that only further weakens the Sith are made. Players can choose whether to have their character be against the institution of slavery or to embrace the outlook and attitudes of their former slavers and enact and enforce the slave trade.

Furthermore, the Sith Warrior storyline has slavery and decisions towards slaves more directly built in. The first companion that the player gets in this storyline is a slave. Players can decide whether they will put a slave collar on their companion and, if so, whether to use the shocking feature installed within the collar to discipline their companion<sup>9</sup>. The companion's race is a Twi'lek, an alien group that has a stereotype for beautiful women who are often displayed as exotic dancers at night clubs and stripper clubs. They are also considered one of the more heavily trafficked alien groups in the Sith Empire. If a Twi'lek woman is not a dancer or a slave, she is

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<sup>9</sup> Dezaxa SWTOR-Vette and her Shock Collar FULL VERSION  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLxeQpYwTeE>

often assumed to be a criminal. In the case of the companion, Vette, casual violence can become commonplace.

This viewing of non-human races as inferior and primitive or savage in nature regardless of any evidence is a very Imperialistic mindset which may be intentional on the part of the game developers when creating the Sith Empire. Slavery and mistreatment of non-human races is not exclusive to the Sith Empire, though the Empire is a large user of the institution. There are factions such as the Hutt families and crime syndicates who make money from the housing, capturing, and selling of enslaved peoples and enslaved labor. This has a real-world corollary with that of Black Americans and Indigenous peoples. The encoding and decoding of Hall (1997) once more comes into play here with the interpretations of the players. The Twi'lek people are enslaved African peoples, the men sent for manual labor, the women used as a form of erotic entertainment or sexual pleasure. My conversations with Vette show this when I discuss her past and how she used this encoding of both her race and gender in order to steal from rich targets. This fascination and exotification/objectification of her race and gender is acknowledged within my conversation with her and normalized.

During my own playthrough of the Sith Warrior storyline and exploration of Tatooine, I attempted the opposite of most of the Sith Imperials. Rather than choosing the game option to abuse slaves or shock Vette, I consistently chose the options that led me to free her and other enslaved peoples as well as to make peace with local alien groups during different game missions. This choice was made possible through the game design mechanics. When presented with the opportunity to talk with Vette during the first few missions after leaving the planet that you start the story on, Vette will ask the player if they would remove the slave shock collar that is around her neck. This collar was placed on her by the Sith Empire as a means to ensure that

she would comply with your wishes and help you infiltrate a tomb at the beginning of the story.

As she had helped to lead you through the tomb, she wanted the collar to be removed. Players are presented with a choice on removing the collar, stating that the collar will be removed at a later time, or a refusal to remove the collar followed by shocking Vette as punishment for asking.

Similarly, when confronted with enslaved peoples during the playthrough, there would be similar choices on freeing other enslaved peoples.

Players could choose to inflict torture to enslaved peoples, refuse to free them and walk away, or to free them. This highlights the diversity of possibilities in the decision making within games. Player agency facilitates behavior and perceptions which will then shape and be shaped by the display of characters and locations that the player engages with. My character's opinions or views in the game were not shared with other Sith characters. Indeed, when exploring the world of Tatooine, the player may learn the local inhabitants, Sand People and Jawas, are considered to be primitive "savages" by chatting with NPCs. As seen in the images below along with dialogue with Vette regarding a story of obsession with Twil'ek women, alien species tended to be objectified either as a means of labor, sex/visual pleasure, or as an unpleasant necessity for local relations or trading.











**Figure 11:** *Discussions with Sith Imperials regarding Sand People and Jawas and Vette*

### *Dialogue (Star Wars: The Old Republic)*

*Note.* 1<sup>st</sup> panel: Sith Imperial Izzeebowe Jeef referring to the Sand People as “savage.” 2<sup>nd</sup> panel: Sith Lord Darth Silthar calling the Jawa natives primitive masters of machinery. 3<sup>rd</sup> panel: Sith Imperial Captain Golah comparing Jawas to rats during trade season. 4<sup>th</sup> panel: Sith Imperial Captain Golah calling the Sand People “savages.” 5<sup>th</sup> panel: Interaction with a Jawa with dialogue options showing the dialogue wheel. 6<sup>th</sup> panel: Vette discussing her heritage and past with dialogue wheel displayed. 7<sup>th</sup> panel: Vette discusses the exoticification and eroticization of her race. 8<sup>th</sup> panel: My character asking if Vette was able to liberate any enslaved peoples during her adventures. Bottom panel: Sith Imperial Izzeebowe Jeef referring to a group he calls “The Savage Ones.”

In the case of Vette, I would like to highlight an interesting dialogue. She acknowledges the objectification of her species’ female form but uses this knowledge to gain an advantage. This is a somewhat empowering statement that refers back to the Lara Phenomenon. The objectification as a seeming price to be paid in exchange for agency and empowerment once more is on display. Even more telling is the way the dialogue has been written. This acknowledgement attributes self-awareness to the non-human species that are found throughout the game. These are not just some characters with a different appearance, these are races and

cultures that are self-aware and very aware of how they are being treated. This is rather humanizing for those treated as less than human merely for not *being* human.

This otherness and interactions between human and non-human races are explored in Dries de Groot's (2016) research. Dries de Groot explored otherness within the *Mass Effect Trilogy* and discovered that in this instance, unlike that of *SWTOR* the display of the alien other was done in a positive light. However, the female Other was highly stereotyped and sexualized. Going back to the discussion with Liara<sup>10</sup>, the game and the characters acknowledge that there is gender stereotyping and exotification of otherness as a non-human species.

Additionally, the exotification of a race as either a means to objectify or look down upon a race can be seen with derogatory comments that stem from ignorance. The assumption that the Asari people, in the case of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, are either strippers or mercenaries at their early years and politicians in their later years is seen as a standard during the gameplay. Fetishizing of what the Quarian race looks like underneath their environmental suits becomes commonplace background discussions as the player walks around a planet's social hub. All around are signs of racial profiling, prejudice, racism, and objectification. In many instances, the character can engage in these situations, shaping the outcomes and inserting their own personal views (to an extent) into the character that they play as. Will they stay out of the debate on racism, fight it, or encourage it? That is for the player to decide, if they decide to engage at all. Again, this refers back to the ability to ignore or not engage with characters or to refuse quests and missions within games, such as the examples of Lia'Vael and Vette.

With *SWTOR*, there is additional generalization and assumption of "primitive" nature of local inhabitants, as well as assumptions of criminality or sexuality and promiscuity. As seen

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<sup>10</sup> Thieving Hippo Mass Effect 1: Liara talks Asari Culture <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GvQhpkDr6Q>

with the screenshots captured during my playthrough of *SWTOR*, this game entertains these same conversations and presents players with choices on how they can go about solving or interacting with these scenarios if at all. By providing the views of those that are victims of slavery, of oppression, and abuse, players get the opportunity to emotionally connect and practice empathy.

Empathy between players and characters is exactly what Jonathan Harth (2017) investigated in his research. Harth (2017) discovered that humanizing non-human characters within games creates an empathetic connection with players and becomes a basis for bonds and emotional connections to characters within video games. The different types of play practicing (player action and decision in dialogue in the case of *SWTOR* and *Mass Effect*) can influence player empathy and connection with characters. This form of emotional connection, investment into the plot, and interaction of characters tends to be a large component of games. The engagement of players and characters help shape both the playing of the game as well as the perceptions of people both in the game and in real life.

The connections, social dynamics of race, racism, discrimination, and oppression are all very sensitive topics and can be seen with games like *SWTOR* and *Mass Effect*. These races in fantasy, while not outwardly human, represent very human scenarios and sentiments. The racial dynamics that these games display is clearly inspired by what we, as humanity, have done to each other, both in the past and in the present. Racial dynamics like segregations, enslavement, racial slurs, among the others that one sees within these games were not created in a vacuum but are based on real life events and inspired by established racial and social dynamics of the past and present within the real world. These are no longer aliens or elves or fictitious characters, these are people who are being oppressed and objectified in the real world. They are Other. So,

just like these games are designed to present to you a choice, so does this paper. Will you ignore this? What will *you* do?

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS: MY VOICE

In this thesis, I have explored the games of *Watchdogs 2*, *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry*, *Bayonetta 2*, *Mass Effect Trilogy*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Overwatch*, *Apex Legends*, and *Resident Evil 5*. Each one of these games presented and contributed to the discussion on race and representation within games. Each had their own unique dynamic to contribute to the discussion on race and representation of characters within the video games. Each of these games were presented to ensure the exploration of each of these worlds, from the lore and imagery to the behavior of the characters in various situations and settings.

The exploration of an enslaved peoples' narrative story was explored with *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry* enabling players to take on and walk in the shoes of a formerly enslaved person in a region and period within history where enslavement was the social norm. The game is designed in a manner to ensure that players would need to take action against enslavement in order to progress the story and explore the lore that this world is immersed in. In this manner, it gives a simulation of what life may have been like during this time period in history and forces the player to consider it. This narrative shows the issue head on, it cannot be brushed aside or ignored, it instead must be confronted and combated.

In *Watchdogs 2*, we see Technologically advanced futures of convenience in which everything is routed through a central core network for ease of access, while showcasing the dark side to this concept combined with racial profiling. This is put into practice with programs designed to stop crimes before they happen yet being discriminant towards people of color. The exploration of tokenism and representation of Blackness within a predominantly White company was explored and navigated. The issues of representation and the ability of the game to allow a

player to gain a little insight into real world scenarios, expressed by the feelings of the characters of Horatio and Marcus, which occur all over the United States.

The exploration of casual representations of primitive or animalistic behaviors of people of color in the background was explored with *Resident Evil 5*. The blatant sexual harassment and exoticification of racial and ethnic origins for a “Tribal” outfit, the avoidance of addressing race through the game, and the animalistic behavior of the local peoples being fought with a white protagonist are all highly problematic and clearly evident through the exploration of that game world. An unfavorable light and abuse on people of color is cast and can be seen throughout the exploration of the world.

From a world of zombies to a world in a galaxy far far away, a galaxy in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, A universe that is steeped with issues of enslavement and inequity that challenges the player to decide on what they should do regarding every situation: Confront, encourage, walk away, or ignore. Each of these with their own outcomes and consequences for the player and their playthrough of the game to an extent. This hints that a player’s actions have true repercussions, adding weight to all decisions being made. This confrontation created by the game is seemingly designed to have the player confront their own views regarding otherness, enslavement and objectification.

The galaxy exploration and saving worlds, with a crew of human and non-human crewmembers and teammates is seen with the exploration of the universe of the *Mass Effect Trilogy*. The racial and ethnic ignorance of characters, racial prejudice, and racism directed toward the alien other is played out before our eyes. Once again, players are confronted with the challenge of what to do, what to think of these situations and histories. Fostering emotional connections with these characters, fleshed out with their own hopes and dreams. The characters’

racial origins are steeped with history, culture, religious beliefs and philosophies. This feeling of emotional weight lends a feeling of significance towards a player's actions and can dictate one's worldviews and how one acts, both in the game and in real life.

Yet another world in which objectification is on display was the world of *Bayonetta 2*. Sexualization and objectification was so blatant, that it was a source of comedy within the cutscenes that were explored. The comical and playful style of these displays was almost an inside joke between the game developers and the players. Both the player and the developers are aware of the blatant sexual objectification, so much that the objectification itself becomes comical and over the top. This skewed view of women's bodies as well as the seeming empowerment from the high combat and effortlessness of overcoming adversity that is presented highlights the fantastical nature of this female imagery. Thus, further solidifying the comical nature of sexualization throughout the game. When sexuality becomes a punchline, objectification becomes a norm.

With *Apex Legends*, there is the message that not all is objectification. Elements of female empowerment are seen within games as well. In the case of *Apex Legends*, there is a diverse roster of characters for a player to choose from. The female characters on this roster fill a wide spectrum of female body types, ethnicities, and races with unique personalities and styles of dress. These strong and capable women are empowering, yet in some instances with the use of some characters, women are still objectified within the game such as with the example of Loba. However, there is also the challenging of gender and racial stereotypes and objectification with characters openly addressing these issues such as what was seen with Valkyrie.

As for *Overwatch*, the challenge of objectification and stereotyping is also seen. The challenges of walking the fine line between proudly displaying each character's racial and ethnic

backgrounds while also attempting to not perpetuate the stereotypes associated with their respective genders and ethnic/racial origins are seen. In many instances, such as the example of Mei, rather than avoiding racial stereotypes, elements of a character's background are designed to almost openly challenge the stereotypes without mentioning them. With Mei this was in the form of her stated profession which in the real world is a predominantly male led profession. In this manner, empowerment comes from the challenging of established norms or preconceived notions or stereotypes of gender and race as almost an identifying characteristic of the character.

### MANIFESTO: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS ON CHANGE

With this exploration, I would like to break the fourth wall in line with games and address the reader, the gamers, and the game developers with a list of ideas from this gamer's experience. This list is meant to help guide and perhaps shape the future of games, as I hope this thesis has helped to change or expand the views of you dear reader. Here are my Ten Commandments of video game change:

- I. While marketing and economics is a major objective of game developers and game publishing companies, there needs to be more of a balance of ethics, profits, and most of all transparency between the consumers of games and the companies that make and distribute these games. I have highlighted how game developers had a tendency to not advertise their race or ethnicity as it is seen as not highly marketable, but for the purposes of transparency and representation, this needs to change.
- II. The sexualization of women should not be used as a punchline. I understand that the old adage "Sex sells" is still a model in entertainment and that this humble thesis will not make such a drastic change, but perhaps using sexuality as a joke could be a good step in the right direction.

- III. While using fantasy races as a means of addressing race and representation as well as the treatment of real-world races as a means of making a message works, there is still the issue of removal of blame. The game design leaves decisions up to the player, but the game is still designed to allow the use of racist behaviors or ideologies when using such methods like that of *Mass Effect*. While this does challenge the gamer, it also removes or seems to attempt to remove accountability. This accountability needs to be present when making games such as this.
- IV. Racial and ethnic origins of characters run a knife-edge between the representation of race and culture whilst avoiding or attempting to navigate racial and ethnic stereotypes. In this regard, lore and voice lines could help to alleviate some of that difficulty. Having the character refer back to their racial and ethnic origins, speak in the native language of their race or ethnic background, and having a description or story laid out for the player to read or discover would go a long way towards showing the representation of racial and ethnic minorities without falling back on stereotypes.
- V. The tradeoff of strong female characters and objectification should be reduced if not eliminated. The “male gaze” and the myth that the majority of gamers are male has been debunked. Characters need to be marketed towards a wider audience of various gender, racial, and ethnic backgrounds while avoiding “plastic representation.” Towards this end, adding more designers and developers on gaming teams with these diverse backgrounds would help to bring more authenticity and agency towards character design and marketing demographics. How much help would remain to be seen, but it is a good start.

- VI. Players should notice the aspects discussed within this thesis in their own games. Notice the objectification, the discrimination, the stereotypes. Do these represent you? Do these characters seem accurate to your own cultures, or are they caricatures of your cultures, races, gender? As games are built with a certain amount of suspension of disbelief, fantasy and logic sometimes may not mix, but stereotypes are not fantasy, they are very real and have impact on the views of those observing them or experiencing them.
- VII. Developers should not shy away from race or racial topics. With *Resident Evil 5*, we saw this with the white characters being identified by each other as American, yet there was nothing to denote nationality on their bodies. If that was the direction that was intended, do not try to mask clear representational markers such as a white minority in a setting that is predominantly people of color. Be unafraid to state that. If you cannot, then that may be a sign that you need to change that part of the story or direction that you intend to take a game.
- VIII. I want to stress that the marketing belief that the majority of gamers are male is a myth. As such, more gender inclusion is needed and more marketing demographics to demonstrate a more recent and accurate market demographic of video game consumption is needed. You may have noticed reader, that the demographics data on gender of gamers is nearly a decade old. There needs to be more recent data on gamer composition, this should include nonbinary, genderfluid, transgender, etc. for a more accurate makeup of the gaming community. Perhaps this way, games could represent genders without the male gaze or marketed towards men as a standard.

- IX. There needs to be an examination of ethics and content regarding the amount of sexual content within games. Again, “Sex Sells” is still big in entertainment, but regulation of how much sexual content is placed within the games by ESRB should be examined closer.
- X. I want gamers to look at the non-human races within the fantasy or science fiction games that they play and interpret where the inspiration could have been from. With *Star Wars: The Old Republic* we saw that the Sand People were equated with the people of the Middle East with the landscape also portraying the region. From there, see how these characters behave, and how they are treated by others. What does this say about the preconceptions of these peoples by the developers, what does it say about how you viewed them as you played?

#### IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Video games have such great potential in various fields such as communication, engineering, education, art, and so much more. There does not seem to be any stopping with the progress of this entertainment medium. As such, once again, I stress that how we view and are viewed in the virtual world matters. Stereotypes (ethnic/racial/gender etc.), objectification and sexualization, racial and ethnic representation both within the game and within the game companies that work on these games all play a role in influencing and being influenced by how and why we view others the way that we do. Our preconceptions and misconceptions are fueled through the media we consume, the experiences we have, and the environments we live in. Video games play a role in this; therefore, more research needs to be done on video games by scholars and academics.

Towards this end, using these commandments, more research should be done in terms of ethics, marketing, representation on a wider range of games from across more game companies to improve accuracy on findings. Along with this, an update on gamer demographics in terms of age, race, ethnicity, and genders should be conducted to gauge the demographics with more recent data. Furthermore, there should be more research into games that counter the patterns and findings from this thesis such as strong female non-sexualized characters in a main or central role and games that have a diverse developer demographic and representation of racial and ethnic backgrounds with high levels of accuracy.

### SAVING YOUR PROGRESS...

Explorations of dystopian futures, alien conquests and rebellions, and even delved into the past as if it were the present. Each of these adventures is made possible by video games. The history of games has evolved since the time of *Donkey Kong* and *Pong* into vast open worlds filled with life, with social dynamics, and race. These worlds were designed here in our own world and took components of our world into a new one filled with endless possibilities. Yet when we explored these worlds, we found inequity, oppression, and discussion of topics that we struggle with here in our own world. Female empowerment and the empowerment of women of color while clashing with the objectification and sexualization of women within the virtual world, the topic of enslavement and mistreatment of other races, both human and non-human, issues of stereotypes of gender and human/non-human races and ethnicities are all occurring almost in the background of each of the games that have been explored here. A constant yet seemingly silent struggle that only waits for the player to confront and engage with unravel its vast implications and issues.

These are not just some entertainment mediums for a bored child to play when they have nothing else to do (or to do instead of homework). These are stories with depth and nuance, meant to evoke thinking and challenge the player to do more than observe, but to act, even if the act is done virtually within the game. I want to look back at these games, games that seemed to challenge me as I played and seemed to ask me what I would do and turn this back to the hypothetical. Like a game, this thesis has established a history, a story and a struggle. The exposure and immersion into the characters and views of the world around them and forcing the reader to acknowledge these elements, even if it's done passively. This world, this exploration of race and representation within video games, has now been created and set, however it cannot remain static. It is now time for the reader, the player, the gamer, and/or the scholar, to take up the metaphorical controller, and begin their own adventure within this world. An individual must explore, be mindful of the surroundings and ask themselves the same question: What will you do here?

Ready Player? Tutorial Complete.

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## **VITA**

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Matthew Michael Espino began his undergraduate career in 2013 with a summer program called the University of Maryland College Park ESTEEM Research/Mentoring Program in College Park, Maryland focusing on a Research project labeled Routine Monitoring of Facial-Expression and Physiological State to Improve Accuracy in ADHD Diagnoses. He later went on in 2014 to enroll and study at the University of Maryland, College Park in the Gemstone Honors College majoring in the field of Mechanical Engineering. From 2014 to 2016 he was part of a Gemstone research team focused on developing vesicle-based treatment for Osteoarthritis and also worked as an Office Assistant for the Honors College before transferring to the University of Texas at El Paso in 2016. From 2016 to 2020 Matthew Michael Espino studied at the University of Texas at El Paso majoring in Communications Studies with a minor in Sociology. During the last years (2019-2020) of his Undergraduate Career, Espino worked as an Office Assistant/Accountant for the Office of Special Events at the Don Haskins Center at the University of Texas at El Paso before graduating Cum Laude in 2020 in Communication Studies. From 2020 to 2022, he worked as a Teaching Assistant in Public Speaking for the College of Liberal Arts for Undergraduate students. He received a Master of Arts in Communication from the University of Texas at El Paso in 2022.