GAMING WHILE BLACK: THE SOCIAL IDENTITIES OF BLACK GAMERS

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of Sociology

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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TiMar Long

December, 2016

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ABSTRACT

Tabletop game, such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, are interactive worlds in which a person creates an avatar representation to explore fictional worlds. These avatars provide fertile ground for a person to explore different identities and different identity traits. Due to this unique interaction between individual and character tabletop roleplaying games offer sociologist a unique chance to observe the complex interactions that occur in identity creation. While gaming has been used to study identity formation in a more general sense, it has yet to be used to examine the creation of racial identities. To explore the unique ways in which racial identities may form and be challenged I conducted thirteen in depth interviews with black gamers. This study finds that black gamers engage in a delicate dance of balancing their racial identity against the norms and expectations of what other people consider to be black. Drawing on elements in black culture that they find to be positive and uplifting the gamers in this study sought to engage in their black identities in fictional worlds, even transferring their racial identities onto other aspects of their gaming experience such as non-human character types. They not only explored what it might be like to have different black identities but also explored what it would be like to experience blackness sans the negative stigmas that can come with being black in America. Finally the gamers in this study resisted media driven essentialistic notions of blackness in order to advance a black identity that they felt was more true than the one that others expected of them.

Keywords: Identity Construction, Race, Gaming, Black Studies

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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be black? Is being black a matter of skin color? Is it a matter of

culture? If so does this mean that Rachel Dolezal is black? Rachel Dolezal was a civil rights

activist who taught Africana studies at Eastern Washington University. She also served as the

chapter president for the NAACP in Spokane Washington. Dolezal also received a Master's of

Fine Arts from the HBCU, Howard University. In the summer of 2015 Dolezal's parents outed

her as a white woman, providing her birth certificate as proof that she had not been born

biologically African American. Thus at the time of her outing, many considered her to be a white

woman who was pretending to be black. But she darkened her skin to look black, thus she had

the skin tone. Her hair looked black to many people. Her children were black, born from a

previous marriage to a black man. She described facing the same racial discrimination that many

blacks faced. She conducted her daily affairs in a way that many people thought were black until

her parents came forward and showed pictures of her from her youth as a white woman. For all

intents and purposes, however, Rachel Dolezal lived the life of a black woman and she

constructed her identity as a black woman despite her white heritage. Yet once her white past was

exposed she was no longer considered black by the world. This raises the question. What is

blackness?

Race is a social construct that varies from time and place, but is concerned with

biological phenotypes such as skin color, and hair texture (Omi and Winant 2015). As a social

construct, race developed in part to satisfy the European desire for cheap labor in the New World,

with blackness designated as a mark of servitude (Japtok and Jenkins 2011). This would

eventually lead to the one-drop rule, designating anyone with a single drop of African blood as a

slave no matter how close to white they might look (Davis 2008). Despite the fact that race is socially constructed, the idea of race is vigorously defended by various political, intellectual, and even religious racial projects (Winant 1994). This situation creates a perfect example of what W.I. Thomas, a sociologist who researched Polish immigrants, called the Thomas theorem which postulates that "situations that are believed to be real are real in their consequences." What started as an identity thrust upon them by white slave owners would soon turn into an identity that was adopted as a tool for surviving their diaspora.

As black identities were created and forged, various racial projects such as religion and politics arose to erect boundaries around these identities. The boundaries erected by various racial projects helped to solidify these identities and assisted in blacks' fights against oppression. The fight against racial oppression was assisted by the boundaries drawn by providing points of solidarity and a sense of community to rally behind. They helped to serve as a point from which political activism for black rights could draw common ground. However, these boundaries were also vigorously defended and identities that did not conform to more common identities were often marginalized. This included identities such as homosexual identities, in which gay and lesbian blacks, such as James Baldwin, had to carefully manage the public expectations of blackness with their own personal identities that differed from the norm in important ways.

This study recognizes that navigating a black identity in the 21st century is a complex and, oftentimes, paradoxical experience. A person must balance the expectation of his peers against the stark realities of race in this country while trying to maintain a sense of self. Therefore, this study proposes to explore the ways in which a black identity is constructed when inhabiting two worlds. How do people who participate in activities that are not traditionally considered black

construct their black identity? In what ways is blackness challenged by the black world and the white world?

Throughout this study I opt to study blackness as opposed to just African American culture. This is done for two reasons. The first is that many of the gamers in this study described their identity using the term black or blackness over using the term African American. They were more prone to identify with black culture as opposed to the phrasing of African American culture. Secondly, while all of them identified as being black not everyone identified with being African American. Some of the participants in the study were of African or Afro Caribbean descent as opposed to being African American. Thus while they may have identified with being black not everyone identified with being African American.

Tabletop gaming is a hobby in which its participants create avatars to engage a fictional world. Its predominate practitioners, for the most part, are white, middle-class males (Fine 1983; Jones 2012). This means that black gamers must exist in both a white world when playing these games and a black world when not. Nevertheless, it is a hobby that gives its players a chance to explore alternate identities making it an ideal place to study black identity construction (Bowman 2010). Black gamers are given the chance to live a black experience, but also experiment to see what a different construction on blackness can lead to.

While the body of academic literature on tabletop gaming has grown since Gary Fine first approached the hobby in the late 1970's and early 1980's, no scholar has yet to apply race to the hobby. Scholars have yet to explore how race may intersect with culture and leisure activities to create a unique and different experience for gamers. Thus, this study will be the first to introduce the themes of gaming and identity construction as it pertains to race. Much in the way that

Zandria Robinson (2014) shows how media, regionality, and new, distinctly southern urban sites come together to create a unique black experience I illustrate the ways in which proximity to white spaces can be combined to create a unique and different black experience.

The next section is the literature review. The literature review explores the ways in which scholars have traditionally approached racial identity construction as well as examining some of the more traditional explorations of the black experience. This will be followed by a look at how scholars have typically approached gaming with an eye towards outlining some of the hobby's history to help center it in its present form. The literature review is followed by the methods section which describes how this study was conducted. The results section will cover the codes and code families and what I discovered. This is then followed by a discussion and conclusion that consolidates the ideas and themes that were explored by this project. Appendix I discusses the study participants, describing how they got involved in gaming and some basic biographical information. Appendix II covers important terms related to gaming and brief descriptions of the games that come up during the discussions with this studies gamers.

As blacks move into a new century and more and more blacks are realizing the potential of upward mobility in the United States, it becomes important to understand the new ways in which black identity can form and be realized. Blacks are venturing off into new realms of cultural identification from becoming nerds, often times known as blerds, to taking a greater interest in comics, fantasy, and sci fi mediums, and even become less religious. This indicates a diversification in the black experience. As Tourè (2011) points out, there are as many ways to be black as there are black individuals. We can no longer assume that there is a monolithic or essentialized nature to blackness that creates the same experience for all blacks everywhere.

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Instead blackness can be better understood as negotiated and mercurial. Something that is in motion, evolving, and changing.

     This research seeks to answer two questions. I first wish to look at how black role-playing gamers are constructing their identities as black individuals. Second, I want to know whether and how gaming becomes a site through which different ideas on blackness can be explored. This research will, therefore, fill in two gaps in the literature, one regarding nontraditional sites for the construction of blackness and one on regarding how race and role-playing gaming intersect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Black Identity

Initially, blacks had little control over the identities they were allowed to create (Davis 2008). America's white elites were often the authors of black identity in the early days of African slaves (Japtok and Jenkins 2011; Davis 2008). Most definitions of blackness were defined in opposition to society's definitions on whiteness, with whiteness being the purer concept (Johnson 2003).

It is in this climate that W.E.B. Du Bois (2007) writes *The Philadelphia Negro,* the first sociological look at blacks. Du Bois' work establishes the characteristics typically assigned to blacks were not biological or psychological, but instead historical and economic. While *The Philadelphia Negro* establishes history, economics, and religion as the groundwork for black life, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1989) outlines the ways in which black culture is held within the

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musical and oral traditions of the early black slaves. Between these two works, Du Bois was able to lay the foundation on which an essentialist image of blackness would be born.

This more essentialist image of blackness had two primary cultural manifestations: the folk (Favor 1999; Japtok and Jenkins 2011) and the religious (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). The folk image of blackness served as the primary image through which black culture would be viewed. Scholars of the Harlem Renaissance would focus on the personality and nature of the poor and southern black experience (Favor 1999; Japtok and Jenkins 2011). With only a talented 10th of blacks not living in impoverished conditions (Du Bois 2007), it made natural sense that the core of black culture would revolve around the poor and rural blacks.

The folk image would follow blacks as they migrated from the rural south into the urban cities of the north. In keeping with its earlier themes of representing the poor, the urban folk culture manifested itself in the form of the poor living in the cities (Japtok and Jenkins 2011). Modern incarnations of the folk today include hip-hop and gangster rap, both of which serve as outlets for the life experiences of blacks living in the ghettos of America (Japtok and Jenkins 2011; Jones 2011; Nyawalo 2012). With the migration of blacks to the north thus taking the folk out of the south, academic scholarship on blackness began to focus on the lives of those in the north (Robinson 2014).

The folk image of blackness does present some problems. Namely, it centers the essence of blackness on oppression, second-class status, poverty, and exclusion (Favor 1999). This in turns creates a situation in which Du Bois's (2007) talented 10th, the black middle class, experiences becoming inauthentic. E. Franklin Frazier (1959) observes that by moving into the middle class, blacks become uprooted from their folk culture roots. However, with three-fourths

of blacks living in the middle class, can we afford to privilege the voice of just the folk (Pattillo-McCoy 1999)? With social class becoming a stronger determinant of the fate of an individual black person then focusing only on the poor distorts the image of what blackness can be (Wilson 1978).

While the folk may have served as the content for a more essentialist notion of the black image, religious tradition served as the means through which black culture would be born and expanded. The black church would become the womb through which black culture would be born (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). In addition, the black church would provide the structure needed to establish black institutions (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). In many black neighborhoods, the church became the focal point of the community providing aid and sustenance that may not have been possible to gain through white institutions (Hutchinson 2011). Furthermore, the black religious structure and traditions would prove to be fertile grounds for both the training of black leaders and black's resistance to white oppression.

The black church as the center for black identity comes with its own set of problems. While 87% of African Americans are religious, 13% are not religiously affiliated (Pew Research Center 2009). These non-religious blacks often find themselves excommunicated from the black community and thus deprived of the very institutions meant to help them (Hutchinson 2011). The religious experience also proved problematic for black homosexuals who found their voices silenced by religiously conservative views on sexuality (Ward 2005; Pew Research Center 2009; Japtok and Jenkins 2011).

Despite the societal acceptance of more commonly defended racial projects on the black image, centered on the folk experience (that of the poor black) and their religious life, there has

been some exploration into the lives and experiences of those who do not fit the more traditional

mold. For instance, the life experience of black elites was first explored by Frazier (1959). These

were blacks whose slaves ancestors were house slaves or of mixed blood and were thus able to

integrate better into white society. While critical of the black elite, Frazier (1959) examined the

ways in which they constructed a life separate from their poor black kin, but also outside of

white society, to which they could never truly belong. Lawrence Otis Graham (1999) would

return to the black elite in *Our Kind of People* to examine the culture, fraternal orders, and elite

colleges of those blacks inhabiting the talented 10%.

Black middle-class life would see deeper exploration from authors like Mary Pattillo-

McCoy (1999) and Karyn Lacy (2007). Pattillo-McCoy (1999) focuses on the ways in which

black middle-class communities often serve as a buffer zone between more affluent white

communities and poorer black communities. This creates a situation in which blacks in the

middle class must raise their children with the benefits of middle-class life such as nicer

neighborhoods, better schools and access to more resources while at the same trying to protect

them from the dangerous influences of poor black neighborhoods such as drugs and crime.

Lacy (2007) explores two ways in which black identities may be constructed. In one

neighborhood, residents seek to construct blackness as a lived experience, with the neighborhood

being a predominantly black neighborhood in which kids interact daily with other blacks in order

to construct their black identities. In other neighborhoods, blackness becomes a taught

experience in which residents live in a mixed neighborhood with the desire to help their children

be able to interact successfully with the white world. Blackness then becomes a function of

outings at black churches, clubs, and social organizations as kids balance the needs of being with

other blacks against being with whites.

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Meanwhile, the idea of a singular black experience is challenged by William Julius Wilson (1978) who illustrates the problems involved in continuing to use race as the main determining marker of individual black experiences. With the growth of a black middle-class, class not race becomes a major factor in determining the types of challenges and outcomes a black person is likely to face. This is not meant to undercut the ways in which racism has changed from a more overt display to a more covert institutionalized form (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Instead, Wilson's (1978) work illuminates the ways in which class distinctions between blacks can create separate and unique encounters that defy the standard depiction of an essentialist notion of blackness based on the concerns of the poor.

More recently, the south has risen once more to challenge notions of a singular black experience. The "country cosmopolitan" combines the tropes of the old south such as closely knit kin networks, southern hospitality and manners, and religiosity with traditional urban images such as working class life, poverty, crime, and poor schools (Robinson 2014). While Robinson (2014) essentializes blackness in a fashion similar to the previous images of blackness discussed earlier by extending a singular southern identity, her work still highlights the different toolkits used to construct a black identity in a non-northern urban environment.

As can be seen, there are a variety of voices speaking on the notion of what it means to be black. These concepts have evolved (and in some cases coexisted together) from rural poor blacks (Favor 1999; Japtok and Jenkins 2011) to an emergent black bourgeois (Frazier 1959). From the religious black identities (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990) to black identities created through atheism (Hutchinson 2011). Even blacks who inhabit the same social class, such as the middle-class, have taken to creating black identities in different ways (Lacy 2007). There has even been a shift in how we conceptualize the black experience, no longer relying solely on race

as the sole determining marker and instead taking into account economic and class structures (Wilson 1978)

The above literature is by no means meant to be an exhaustive list. There are a variety of different points of views and racial projects being expressed on the matter of what creates a black identity. But much like culture, blackness is not a static idea. In the same way that black music has changed and evolved as the culture around which the blacks creating the music changed and evolved, idea's and concepts of blackness has equally changed and evolved.

As we recognize the changing nature of blackness we must be careful not to privilege select voices on blackness that privileges some voices on blackness over others. By privileging only a handful of voices we fall into the trap of creating restrictive boundaries around blackness that may otherize those whose images of blackness do not align with the privileged voice. Creating these otherized groups runs the risk of marginalizing an already marginalized population. The black individuals I seek to study come from an othered group of blacks. A group of blacks whose hobby activities do not fit with the essentialist notions of what blacks should be doing in their free time. Black tabletop gamers challenged preconceived notions of what a black person can and should do. They also expand our understanding on what it means to be black and also the kinds of environments in which a black identity can survive and thrive.

Tabletop Gaming

Role-playing games (rpgs) got their start in the 1970's with the release of *Dungeons and Dragons*, a game in which a group of friends journeyed into a make believe world to slay dragons, ogres, trolls, and various other monsters; collect gold and magical items; and save the world from the forces of evil. In defining what role-playing MacKay (1974) wrote:

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An episodic and participatory story creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a game master in determining how their factional characters spontaneous interactions are resolved. These performed interactions between the players' and the game master's characters take place during individual sessions that, together, form episodic or adventures in the lives of the fiction characters. (P. 4)

As such roleplaying games is an interactive activity. The players create fictional personas that they use to engage a fictional world that is created by the Game Master. The Game Master acts as the creator of the world, similar to being a writer for a book or tv show. The Game Master plays all the non player characters, creates the adventures, and otherwise controls the world in which the players inhabit. Dice are then used in order to decide the outcome of events, giving the game an element of chance and uncertainty. Gaming sessions last anywhere from as little as two hours to as long as an entire day or evening, the fun stops when the players and Game Master are ready for the game to end basically. The adventures, and the campaigns they generate, can be short lived lasting a single night or long lived going on for years.

There are three formats for role playing games; tabletop, live action and online. Tabletop gaming involves game master and a group of players who sit around a table and use dice to resolve in-game actions (Bowman 2010). Live action, also called larp, is more theatrical in nature. Players in live action games act out their actions as opposed to describing them and may also dress as their character (Bowman 2010). Finally, online gaming, which is similar in structure to tabletop gaming, makes use of online mediums such as chat rooms, forums, and email in order to facilitate gaming (Bowman 2010). Online gaming plays out similarly to tabletop gaming, only instead of people being gathered around a table for their gaming adventures they make use of a computer and various online tools in order to facilitate their gaming adventures.

In spirit, while the games themselves have complex rule systems that allow their players to tackle more complex games, role-playing games are no different from the games of make believe that we played as children. Such games for children are an important part of child development (Bowman 2010). For adults, role-playing has also served as a therapeutic tool by helping patients overcome fears and anxieties and as a business tool to train individuals for new roles and positions (Fine 1983; Nephew 2006).

While as a leisure activity most gamers are not using gaming as means for therapeutic release or seeking to train for new positions in life, games can serve as a means to escape the normal troubles of life that a person may face (Fine 1983; Nephew 2006). Still, the roles between player and character can often be fluid thus making gaming an excellent site for the study of identity construction (Fine 1983; Waskul 2006). These alternate identities can learn and take on skills that can prove useful outside of the game, with the game serving as a safe place through which these skills and traits can be learned and explored (Bowman 2010; Fuist 2012). Thus, role-playing can serve as a site by which people who are marginalized during their daily lives are able to gain a measure of control over their environment (Nephew 2006).

Because gaming offers a safe place for players to construct new identities and realities, it becomes an ideal place to study the construction of black identities. When making a character, a black gamer has the option of not only playing someone that is similar to themselves in outlook and life chances, but also someone who is very different from them, someone who may not have faced the challenges they faced in their normal daily lives. In the same way that it is possible to explore what life may be like if you can cast spells or turn into a nine-foot-tall werewolf, it becomes possible to explore what life may be like with a different view on blackness. While on

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the surface, the study of games seems whimsical, these studies can reveal a lot about human nature and the ways in which we choose to interact (Mäyrä 2008).

Gaming also provides its participants with a certain amount of agency to explore their identities (Fuist 2012). This agency combined with gaming's ability to serve as a projection of cultural representation makes the study of racial identity unique in that it allows the gamer to play out their various interpretations of a racial identity (Fuist 2012). Furthermore, such an exploration can serve as a means of challenging negative stereotypes that might be faced during daily life (Jones 2012). Thus gaming provides a unique opportunity to see how black identities might be created and tested in response to outside experiences, both positive and negative.

The research on black identity construction tends to cover more traditional black cultural experiences such as hip-hop (Nyawalo 2012), sports (Anderson and McCormack 2010; Steinfeldt, Reed and Steinfeldt 2010), and movies (Robinson 2014). Other common cultural markers typically explored include religious life (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990), economic life (Fraizer 1959; Wilson 1978), and social status (Lacy 2007; Graham 1999). There is, however, a lack of research into areas of life that are not commonly thought of as black, such as role playing games. Conversely, while there is research into the ways in which identities are constructing for and by gamers, the research produced thus far has failed to take race into account. Furthermore, research into gaming can help us better understand how culture and identity can be created through interaction (Jones 2012).

This research seeks to answer two questions. I first wish to look at how black role play gamers are constructing their identities as black individuals. Second, I want to know whether and how gaming becomes a site through which different ideas on blackness can be explored. This

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research will, therefore, fill in two gaps in the literature regarding nontraditional sites for the

construction of blackness and research on how race and tabletop gaming intersect.

METHODS SECTION

Data were collected using a combination of telephone interviews and online interviews via Skype and Google Hangouts. The interviews were recorded, and then transcribed, and the data coded for visible themes. The interview pool consisted of 13 individuals, 7 men, and 6 women (See Appendix I). Interviewees were found through a combination of snowball and convenience sampling. Black gaming friends were approached first to form an initial pool, most of whom were able to recommend another black gamer that may be interested. In addition, both Facebook and Twitter were used to contact additional participants for this study, with Twitter proving instrumental in finding respondents.

The Pew Research Center (2014) found that 80% of the black community makes use of the Internet. They also found that 92% African Americans use a cell phone with 56% owning a smart phone. The Pew Research Center found in 2012 that 68% of African Americans make use of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. 26% of Twitter users are black which is twice as much as white non-Hispanic users (Facebook does not release their user data based on ethnicity). This makes using social media an ideal tool for finding participants for the study.

Online methods are ideal for a study such as this as it provides a means through which small and hard to reach communities might be reached (Willis 2011). In addition to finding hard to reach communities, online research methods do not restrict the researcher to a geographical location (Willis 2011; Bower and Tuffin 2004; Crichton and Kinash 2003; Suzki, Ahluwalia, Arora, and Mattis 2007). Instead, it now becomes possible to interview a more diverse group of people without having to travel. This also helps to reduce selection bias among the interview pool as my respondents will have grown up in different environments and faced different local

challenges than respondents from a single city. Furthermore, research has shown that respondents may be more open to disclosing personal and private details when a researcher is not present (Willis 2011; Bower and Tuffin 2004; Crichton and Kinash 2003; Suzuki et al 2007).

However, there are some possible limitations of online research methods. Online methods require that the user is tech savvy and have at least a smartphone or a computer (Willis 2011). While this may be true, most role play gamers have invested in rule books, gaming tokens, dice, dice bags, and various rules supplements thus indicating that they are individuals with some degree of disposable income. Furthermore, many games have an online presence and provide pdf files of rules changes and corrections, character sheets, dice rolling programs and extra material that may have been removed from books thus requiring a gamer to be computer savvy. Critiques similar to those raised against phone interviews such as missing facial cues, body language, and posture has been leveled against online interviewing (Willis 2011; Suzuki et al. 2007). However, Skype and Google Hangout interviews do not suffer from that problem as they allow the researcher to see the person they are speaking too. This makes it possible for the researcher to gain the benefits typically associated with face to face interviewing while still also gaining the benefits of online research. These benefits include a diverse interview pool, creating a safer and more personal space to conduct interviews in, and being able to reach what is an otherwise small community of blacks.

Data Analysis

The interviews will be transcribed and analyzed using a combination of frame analysis (Goffman 1974) and semi-grounded theory (Glaser 2002). The respondents in this study were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Given the role-playing theme of this project, all the

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interviewees were given character names (see Appendix I) as if they had created a character for a game.

The data were coded using atlas.TI. Taking a grounded theory approach, in which themes and codes were developed using the data itself, the transcribed interviews were read to see what themes were important to the gamers in this study. After transcribing the interviews the transcriptions were read to determine what sort of themes were visible and present in the data. This focused on the ways in which the respondents framed their black experience and talked about how that related to gaming. Next, after the initial set of themes was determined the data was reread to establish a set of codes from which an analysis of the data could take place. The codes most relevant to the themes in this study were then subdivided into code families for deeper study. These code families also helped to tie together and support emerging themes.

Ethical Considerations

All research participants were given full knowledge of the purpose of the research. Additionally, informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. The consent form indicates that there is no direct benefit to participating in the study, that their information will be kept confidentiality and that they may opt to withdraw from the study at any time.

All data was stored on a password protected flash drive. The flash drive was stored in a locked drawer on campus. The primary researcher was the only one who has full access to the data. This study contains no outstanding risk to human subjects and was approved by the Institute Review Board (Protocol Number 14518-02).

RESULTS

Overview

The thirteen interviews provided a total of 345 general codes. These codes were sorted into six families of codes, though only the codes that were relevant to the themes that developed were filtered into code families. Some codes are represented in multiple families as their quoted content traversed multiple themes. The coded families were *Blackness and the Self*, *Blackness as a Threat*, *Gender Identity and Presentation vs Black Identity*, *Rejection of Blackness*, *Role Playing Games*, and *The Racialized Other*. These families can be broken down into two large themes of Black Identity and Role Playing Experience. Black Identity covers the code families of *Blackness and the Self*, *Blackness as a Threat*, *Gender Identity and Presentation vs Black Identity*, and *Rejection of Blackness*. The Role Playing Experience theme covered the family codes *Role Playing Games*, and *The Racialized Other*.

The codes in the Black Identity theme relate to how the respondents related to their blackness. *Blackness and the Self* was comprised of 62 codes. These codes focused on elements that helped shaped my respondents' sense of blackness. *Blackness as a Threat* was comprised of 17 codes and discussed issues in which my respondents felt their black identities were threatening to their white peers. *Gender Identity and Presentation vs Black Identity* comprised a total 17 codes. In these discussions gender identity was discussed as being more salient than their black identity, this includes being a woman as well as being gay. Finally, *Rejection of Blackness*

was comprised of 27 codes. Here my respondents related their experience having their blackness questioned by others.

Two families of codes represented the Role Playing Experience theme. The code family *Role Playing Games* had 59 codes in it. This code was very broad and covered such topics as the respondent's entrance into gaming to the types of characters they identified most with. *The Racialized Other* family were comprised of 43 codes. In this family of codes, my respondents revealed their racial experience involved with gaming. This includes how these gamers brought their race into gaming as well as how race issues surfaced in their gaming experience.

Black Identity

Blackness and the Self

All the gamers in my study constructed identities as black individuals. While ideas on blackness may have varied there was no denying that they viewed themselves as being black. For some their blackness was built, in part, on phenotype. As Talon states very simply:

"It's not something I wear on my sleeve. I don't have to because I know, I just look at my arm like I'm doing right now and I know what color I am." (Talon)

Star furthers the point when she says:

"It [is] just who I am. It's what I've always been." (Star)

However, blackness was not limited to one's phenotypical traits. Blackness also came with an awareness of being black. As Hanzo illustrates:

"You know it's subtle. Like I'm sitting in a theater and a whole bunch of pro-black movie trailers comes on [and] I know what it is. It is overarching because I don't ever forget that I am black and that knowledge has [a] percentage of influence on all of my things. But it's one of those things that, because it's constantly there because I'm always that [at] that level of influence is not one that so much that it defines me. It is simply part of my nature to be aware that I live in a predominately white culture and I'm a black guy" (Hanzo)

Myrissa concurs when she says:

"As I've gotten older it's gotten a lot more, I'm aware of my blackness because of the world around me and how I just can't go about my day sometimes. About how I can turn on the TV in 2015 and still see a story about a dude getting lynched in Mississippi. … So the world around me has really informed and reinforced that no matter what I do or what I accomplish I'm still nothing to a lot of people simply because I'm black." (Myrissa)

Blackness was also centered on their ideas of black culture and the positive elements they found within. Community, family, and solidarity were prominent themes.

"It is a sense of community and connectedness. I was in the British Virgin Islands last week and I was able to do black solidarity head nods with people on the island. To know that we all have a shared history and experience. To be an African American it means that in this day and age your people have struggled to survive and continued to move things forward against almost insurmountable odds. And so there's a certain connectivity between a shared history, a shared experience, a shared struggle, and sometimes a shared vision of your people getting somewhere better." (Helo)

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Helo ties his sense of blackness to a feeling of solidarity with other blacks, even those in other countries. And much like Myrissa his sense of blackness is tied back to a sense of awareness of blackness, an awareness that is also located in a shared black history and struggle.

Hawk further highlights history:

"The black identity in my core, when it's not that pressure it's just being myself. I mean I love the richness of my history." (Hawk)

Stone furthers the point by adding:

"What does having a black identity mean to me? Having a black identity means being proud of the rich heritage that we have … where we were kings and queens, and compassionate people … healers, storytellers, craftsmen, warriors, scientist, [and] explores." (Stone)

Talia expressed similar thoughts when she states:

"I like it in that I feel, you feel that sense of like this sense of community and like things I can relate to with other people in that way." (Talia)

Sylva agrees:

"This solidarity with others who have experienced or who had family members that experienced certain things and certain situations." (Sylva)

Thus community, solidarity, and family all combine with a shared history and experience that helps define what blackness means to these gamers.

Blackness was also defined by their ties to black culture. As Hawk illustrates:

"I never believed in guns or any of the drugs or any of the drinking. That wasn't the profile that I took. But we definitely would have the walk, all the handshakes, everything. We were like hood rats, like gangstas. But not, not gang banging by any sense. We were all about dancing and having fun. Listening to De La Soul and positive rap, you know that kind of stuff. We were having fun by dancing. Our battles would be dance battles, not drive byes." (Hawk)

For Lucien ties to black culture were also confidence building:

"You know at first I was just raised to be a good kid. Then this thing black music comes along and to a degree it's helpful because it gives, it gave me, it gave people another avenue towards confidence." (Lucien)

Thus black music helped to shape their black identity. Taking the principles from hip hop culture they found to be empowering they shaped a black identity around elements they wanted to reaffirm, such as the music, while removing elements they found distasteful, such as gang banging.

Positive traits in black culture were not the only aspects of black life that defined my respondents, though. A great deal of discussion fell to defining their blackness against black stereotypes, in which they resisted being defined by others ideas of blackness.

Helo makes this point while discussing his experience at tournament games:

"They expect, and they've never meet me before, they expect me to act a certain way. I think they expect me to sound more thuggish or be more aggressive in both my play and my mannerisms than I am. And it wears on you somewhat … just where they are waiting for you to be in that performance all the time. And you're like 'fuck that I'm not here for your

entertainment.' I used, I [used to] get a little righteous and you know it angers me because I'm like, in their mind, there are certain things they ascribe to being a black person and certain things that they ascribe to being a white person. And if you are not performing, if you are not engaging in a performance that meets with their definitions they don't really know what to do with you." (Helo)

Jade also found the comparison to stereotypes angering:

"It made me kinda angry … you know what I mean? I don't like [the] stereotype of African Americans because I'm African American and my family is African American and if anyone said those things about my family I'd be pretty upset. Even if some people in my family is stereotypical like that I don't want them saying those things about my family. And it's like not everyone is the same. So I was offended and angry." (Jade)

Helo found the expectation to be a *certain kind of black* angering. His blackness shouldn't be a performance for others and being expected to perform in such a fashion was disheartening. When similar expectations were felt by Jade, she too was angry. Her anger also extended to her connection to her family, whom she felt shouldn't be treated in a similar fashion.

Stone was particularly angry when these stereotypes came from fellow blacks.

"It's more insulting coming from my own because you and I need [to] be pants shagging. We need to be smoking blunts. We need to have girlfriends, a couple of baby momas. We need to be watching BET. We need to be doing all these stereotypical things that are part of *black culture* because these things define black culture… Here's the thing, I can accept the whites treating me that way. It's sad saying that. I accept that and I expect it actually. But when it comes from my own it hurts." (Emphasis Stone's)

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For Stone it wasn't just that he was being expected to be a stereotype, it was that these expectations came from other blacks. And the expectations that other blacks wanted him to abide by were traits that he felt were negative, such as smoking blunts and having a string of meaningless relationships.

For Frost, such attitudes from other blacks have negative consequences for the black community. As he explains:

"You know we get people of color that are very intelligent and they're very motivated and [for those] very circumstances our peers kinda look down on us. *Oh you're a sell out. You're an Uncle Tom. Why you talk'n white?* You know you've heard that. I've heard that too. And so what happens is that we wind up going outside of the community and staying out there. Thus we hemorrhage talent, you know?" (Emphasis Frost's)

Not all stereotypes were treated equally, though. Helo often mobilized stereotypes aimed at gay black men to make people feel more comfortable around him.

"I think they are more comfortable when I am a sassy gay black man than just me as a black man. I think it makes me seem less threatening and more disarming when I'm that way than I were to just present as a black man. You can kinda see that with people." (Helo)

Thus the sassy gay black man stereotype is used to downplay a more aggressive appearing black man stereotype that may make people more uncomfortable to be around him. While Helo finds the need to perform to be angering at times, he often feels that some performances are better than others and switching to an overtly gay black identity is a performance that sets people at ease a lot more than just being a black man does.

Helo's choice to use the sassy gay black man stereotype as a means to deflect from a black identity that others find threatening and uncomfortable also highlights how blackness was not the only salient identity for these gamers. Six of the gamers were women and one of the men was gay. For these people, their blackness intersected with their identities either as women or as a gay man. Helo illustrates this simply when he says:

"You know, probably the race thing is probably the least of my issues. I think the gay thing is more present due to sexism." (Helo)

"First of all whenever I walk into a hobby store, first of all whenever I walk in they say 'oh my god there's a girl in here! What's going on? … So when they see me they would be like 'what is she doing here?' and then 'oh wow you're not white.'" (Jade)

Here Jade highlights how being a woman seems first and foremost in the minds of others when she walks into a gaming store. Star faced similar challenges as she highlights:

"More because I'm a woman than because I'm black. So one of the things is 'a girl wouldn't do that'" (Star)

Her place in the gaming hobby was challenged not because she was black but because she was a woman.

Even while gaming being a woman felt more salient. Sylva relates this experience:

"You know I've always felt that things like that, and again it's more on the lines of gender. I've never had to say to a person playing a character of another race 'that's kinda racist and nobody of that race would ever do that' or nobody of that ethnicity would ever say

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something like that' or that's a stereotype and you know you should stop doing that.' I've never had that situation. I've more had the situation of 'girls don't do that' or 'why do you assume that a girl would do that?' That's more the conversation I've had." (Sylva)

Most of the women played in groups comprised mostly of men. This heightened their status as women over their status as black. As Myrissa states:

"I've always [been] the only woman or the only black person. But gender has always been more of a thing than race issues." (Myrissa)

Talia and Star both describe their experience in gaming as being part of a boys club. While discussing race-related microaggressions Talia had this to say:

"No, I really haven't. Not in the aspect of race. I've, you know once again my experience in general has been different. I always felt it was me and the boys club the times I felt I got microaggression. But I've never really, I never really had people come down on me as far as you know my race." (Talia)

Talia extends this idea of gendered differences when she discusses her sense of community:

"I feel that same sense of community in the same aspect that, you know it develops and changes in the same aspect that I feel with being a woman. And I think the reason why I keep coming back to the whole gender thing, especially in my position; I see and feel that much more in my everyday life people talk to me about being a woman in technology. They don't care about my race. They don't give a damn about my race. The fact that I'm a woman in technology." (Talia)

Thus while blackness was important to these gamers it wasn't their most salient identity trait. Their experience, especially in terms of gaming, was often mediated by their experiences as women or being gay. As Talia highlighted the challenge for her was that she was a woman, not that she was black. This difference in experience was not missed by the men however as Frost relates this story of his experiences with playing a female character:

"I have played a different gender once but I don't like the connotations that it brings because let's face it, you play a female character and you've got to deal with the sex jokes. I did not like that whatsoever so I feel for women when they try to role play and they try to game because it sucks. I did it once and oh god the comments would not stop and it was like leave me the fuck alone." (Frost)

Blackness as a Threat

Taking up a theme identified by Helo, other respondents noted feeling the need to perform blackness in a non-threatening way when gaming with white friends, "He's [actor Avery Brooks] very animated, cause we're black. We're very animated people but when he [Avery Brooks] plays Sisko that scares white people so he's very stiff. You can see him like struggling to be stiff and be non-expressive. And I did that and I would, I would moderate every behavior because I didn't want to scare and offend people." (Frost)

Here Frost is talking about how others perceive his black identity, especially in white spaces. A common theme that arose when talking about their blackness was how others perceived it. And for many in this study, their black identities were found to be threatening. Helo alludes to this earlier when he talks about playing up his gayness to set people at ease. He also elaborates further when he states:

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"Everyone's seen the sassy gay friend and he's like you're gay and you're asexually gay and you're not as threatening as you know blackness. I think blackness comes with a certain level of threat to it whereas the sassy gay man is just 'oooh this is the sambo, he's going to entertain us!'"(Helo)

Myrissa backs this sentiment when she states:

"For me being black means a lot of people or some people I should say, will see blackness as a threat, as lesser and that's not true." (Myrissa)

As illustrated earlier Myrissa draws part of her sense of blackness from her awareness of black history and the history of violence aimed at blacks that are still relevant today. Here that history is reinforced by a sense that people find blackness to be threatening.

Stone relates a similar experience:

"What upsets me is whenever an Asian has their identity and they express pride in that identity or that heritage or even when a European or Russian or Greek or Italian or a Latino or whatever it's labeled by many in society as they have pride about themselves. It's hailed as respectable pride. A healthy pride. But when I do it, when you do it, when any of our people express something that's not only positive but happened pre-slavery, well then we're militant. What's wrong with that picture? If you have [an] identity that you're proud of then, for all intents and purposes, you are militant. No, I'm not militant. Why do I have to be militant? No, I'm just proud of who I am." (Stone)

Stone took pride in his black heritage and it's rich history. But as he relates here when he expresses that pride others are threatened by his expression of blackness and call him militant.

He contrasts this experience from what he sees of other races expression of their unique racial or ethnic heritage to highlight the ways in which blackness is treated differently from other racial identities.

This experience wasn't limited to interactions with strangers. Frost also dealt with his blackness being deemed as more threatening than he really intends to be. While with a group of friends and discussing musical taste a friend in the group insults his preference for hip hop music and the following exchange is had:

"So when he said that I joked, I was like 'dude making fun of my music or we're gonna have to step outside' right. And I was joking with the guy. So a couple of days later the guy who owned the place takes me to his room and starts telling me, yelling at me like I'm a little kid like

Friend: 'you can't threaten people in my house.'

Frost: 'what?'

Friend: 'You threatened him, he left scared.'

Frost: 'Are you kidding me?'

Friend: 'Yeah you threatened him straight to his face. You threatened to beat him up'

Frost: 'I was joking. You've known me for 10 years now. Have I ever done something like that before?'

Friend: 'No you've never done something before but now'

Frost: 'Oh so it's just a matter of time? Is this how you see me? You think I'm that kind of person? You have two choices here, you didn't understand what I said. You didn't want, you

could have given me the benefit of the doubt or you could assume the worst. And you all assumed the worst. All of you.'

And I realized oh shit you can spend your entire life trying to be non-threatening, trying to be down, you know down with them, trying to not act like some of that and the first chance you do something they don't understand [and] you're just another nigger. You're just another nigger." (Frost)

Frost highlights how he had known these friends for a decade. And not once had he done anything violent or anything that related to violence. To him, his statement was just a joke, not something to be taken seriously by his peers. Despite this, his blackness lends itself to add a level of threat to his statements that he didn't intend to communicate. To Frost, his statement was a joke. To his friends, his statement was a threat of violence. Frost attributes this perceived threat to being black. His story highlights how others, even friends he's known for a number of years, perceive blackness as a threat.

Rejection of Blackness

Paradoxically, despite blackness coming off as threatening the gamers in my study also found that their black identities were often challenged by others, with it frequently being called into doubt or question. All of my respondents faced the charge of acting white at some point in their lives.

As Stone discusses:

"Sir I've been accused of being white or acting white since I was walking and talking. … I've been accused of everything but. I've been accused of 'he's gonna end up wit a white girl.'

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Really? Have you seen my girlfriend? Have [you] seen ever other girlfriend that I've had? Yeah, I may have had a relationship or tryst with white girls, and this that or the other, but every serious relationship that I've had? Black girl. My son's mother, black girl. 'Ah he only ah ah he a ole sell out' Really? I've been involved in insurance and wealth management. And I'm up there explaining it to you because this is something that you need in your life. Things that were not taught to us. But yet you wanna sit up here and say that I'm uppity? So the way I see it is this, you wanna say that I talk and act white? Ok fine, whatever you have displayed your ignorance and I'm gonna keep living my life." (Stone)

Here Stone ties his perception of being black to the relationships he's formed over his lifetime. When people call him white for the way he talks or the job he has he's reminded of the relationships with other blacks that he feels demonstrates his blackness. His serious romantic relationships are highlighted as proof that he is black by virtue of who he chooses to be seriously involved with.

When this charge was levied by blacks it was most often seen as a means of control, as a method for correcting errant behavior. As Jade puts it:

"When it was from people who were biracial or black they were trying to tell me that it was wrong." (Jade)

Frost backs Jade's point when he states:

"other black people love to tell you how to be black. Cause you're not black enough for them. You know they *looooove* telling you how to be black and it's like ugh" (Emphasis Frost's)

There was less of a sting however when the charge came from white friends. Lucien reminds himself that:

"They're speaking of the experience that is said to them, you know what I mean? When you look on tv and you see a black person nine times out of ten it's someone involved with rap music. And so I don't take it too much to heart that is all these people have to experience. I try to educate them and say 'hey guess what they're a little bit different. I'm a little bit different.'" (Lucien)

Thus Lucien attributes their questioning of his blackness to be rooted in media portrayals of blackness which are limiting and narrow.

For some participants, the accusation came off as less insulting from white people. In these cases, there was no perception that the accuser was intending harm or to control their identity. As Jade states:

"They were trying to compliment me." (Jade)

Being accused of being white engendered a variety of feelings in my participants. For Hanzo accusations of whiteness made him feel isolated:

"In those moments I definitely do feel isolated a little bit because what has happened is that it's pointed out how different I am from everybody." (Hanzo)

For Hawk such accusations angered him as his presentation of self was reduced to stereotypes.

"What you're really saying is all blacks should act a certain way for you and that's the essence of the question when it comes up for me. And that's like how do you expect black people

to be? I'm sorry what is the generic thing I'm supposed to be? Should I be trying [to be a] negative stereotype in the world for you? So it always bugs me because I'm just being me. There's no imitation and I can't hide what I am you know?" (Hawk)

The problem of being accused of being white for Hawk is the narrow definition of blackness from others. He is who he is and not adhering to what he sees as negative stereotypes about black people shouldn't make him any less blacker.

In some cases, these accusations would prompt them to act in a way that others would perceive as black or may illicit changes in behavior that are perceived as being blacker. Hanzo mentions that at times he may speak faster while Talia mentions she might engage in more code switching, the act of changing ones speech patterns based social situation (Nilep 2006), talking in ways that she might not normally do so with that group in order to highlight her blackness. Lucien even played up stereotypical black qualities to comedic levels as a way to highlight his blackness while keeping the situation light.

Others, however, resisted stifling definitions of blackness and didn't allow it to change their behavior. As Jade expresses:

"When people say that it made me think [that] I'm just going to keep acting the way I am acting to show that I don't care." (Jade)

Meanwhile, Myrissa locates the problem not in her presentation of self but in the persons interpretation of blackness. As she puts it:

"That's their problem. I'm gonna be black till I die." (Myrissa)

Stone responds by questioning the value of essentialist notions of blackness in the first place

"Cause then the question is what is acting white and what is acting black? Because not every other word out [of my] mouth isn't bitch, ho, slut, god damn, motherfucker, bitch better have my money, and I'm not quoting a rap song? That you know supposed to make me more black? Or do I need to walk around with a dashiki or afro with the fist pic in my head? Would that make me more black?" (Stone)

Stone already locates his sense of blackness in the relationships he forms and the pride he takes in black heritage and history. These are elements are ever present in his life. These are not things that one can turn off and on to suddenly make one appear to be more black, thus his response to the accusation that he is white for engaging in a white hobby or having a white job is to question the very nature of assumed notions of blackness.

These accusations can be painful, though. As Stone highlighted earlier when discussing being compared to stereotyped charges of not being black, especially from other blacks, is hurtful. While Lucien may be understanding on the matter he does feel that

"It always hurts." (Lucien)

In Ebony's interactions with her friends they sometimes forget about her blackness when saying such things and as she states:

"[they] say things that are extremely offensive and then [do] not understand why I'm upset." (Ebony)

The remark isn't always bad, though. Even though for Hanzo being accused of acting white made him feel isolated at times it also made him feel unique. As he explains:

"Fortunately my maturity, what had happened is that I've come to really embrace that uniqueness as part of what makes me me. So now it doesn't do anything to me other than continue to let me know that I am still the unique person that I am." (Hanzo)

Being accused of acting white was a common experience for these gamers. However, in many cases they resisted the charge, centering their feelings on the accusation of being white back to the elements that made them feel black. Reminding themselves that their identities were not limited to narrow perceptions of blackness and sometimes even questioning the very idea of essentialized blackness that was not what represented them in the first place.

Role Playing Experience
Role Playing Games

Role playing games are a group activity. Character creation itself is a personal experience, however. What type of character to play, their race, their gender, their abilities are all individual choices. With this in mind, characters tended to represent aspects of the gamer playing them. For most gamers their characters represented them.

"I was living as a closeted black gay man. I couldn't be loud about it. It allowed me to endorse a kinda non-typical masculine aesthetic. And so she [the character he built] was like my ability to be that, to roleplay as that female character and be a little sassy because I wasn't allowed [that] in my life. And there wasn't much [of a deal made] of it because it was roleplaying" (Helo)

"And that was also like around the time my grandma died. So I was kinda like a way of grieving, with me thinking of different ways to live my life. So my character, I mean she, I'm trying to think, she was pretty small and me, I'm not really a small person but like I guess I feel small. Or I felt small during that time. So I kinda like 'oh I feel kinda helpless or hopeless.' But you know I wanted to be this great person. I wanted to be like, be really cool and show people like 'even [I can] do this cool thing' and my character was also really I can do these cool things. But you know she couldn't because of her size and I can't because you know I was really young and no one took me seriously" (Jade)

As Helo highlights, playing his characters allowed him to express what he felt was his true self through roleplaying. At a time when he had to remain in the closest playing a female character allowed him the opportunity to be more feminine in his presentation than would have otherwise been allowed in normal interactions with his friends. Thus role playing offered Helo a chance to start exploring his own sexuality.

Jade, on the other hand, felt small. She missed her grandmother and wasn't sure about her place in life. Her character reflected the feelings she was experiencing at that time in her life. The character was physically small while trying to be as cool as possible, with the hope of doing the things that Jade felt she couldn't do in life.

For some, their characters were just themselves mapped into the setting they were playing in:

"Pretty close to being me. For me that's what roleplaying is. I like to insert myself into a situation and see what I would do." (Hanzo)

"I'm not a professional actor so I don't try to play as a different persona as me." (Frost)

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"I don't do much craziness with my character. My imagination goes into the world, so usually my character is just a copy of me" (Hawk)

As can be seen here characters could be representations of the gamer. They were insertions of the player into the gaming world, with little change in personality between the character and the player. For others, characters were based on the gamer but were also something more to the player, a chance to be something they weren't.

"I think they're all still probably some aspects of me. Like right now I'm playing a Monster Hearts character that is kinda the me I wanted to be in high school but not the me I was in high school." (Star)

"Kinda based the character on some parts me and some part someone who was completely unlike me" (Sylva)

Characters, thus, exhibited a mixture of what the gamer felt they were combined with aspects of themselves that they may wish they have had or wanted to explore. The people in my study thus identified with aspects of the character that they felt were a part of them and played them up.

"Opinionated, strong, you know the things I was good at she was good at." (Myrissa)

"I can be manipulative and outsmart people sometimes. It [is] just a side of me I don't necessarily like to perpetuate. But through this character I got to play out that side of myself in a playful way." (Ebony)

"They were like me in that he was a philosopher in a sense." (Talon)

"A lot of the characters I've created have been sorta like an offspring of me. Cadus represents the playboy version of me. Talik was my first real spiritual warrior." (Stone)

Opinionated and strong, philosophers and spiritual warriors are all positive aspects that these gamers play up in their characters. Traits that might be viewed negatively in normal interactions are also played up for fun as well, as is highlighted when Ebony mentions playing up the manipulation of other people in a playful way.

Differences tended to be rooted in physical traits or traits that are unique to the gaming experience.

"She was a foot tall, so she was super short. I'm nearly 6 feet tall." (Star)

"The character was white … [and] certainly different in terms of presentation and appearance. Always very sharply dressed. Always very, you know kinda on point in how she presented herself and me I'm just very causal." (Talia)

"How are they different from me? Well one Cadus had powers and Talik could shoot a gun and not have a problem with it. I absolutely abhor guns." (Stone)

Since, more often than not, the characters played were extensions of themselves it was very common for the characters to be portrayed to be black.

"I always just assumed my character was white until somebody asked me one day 'describe your character' I'm like why would I be that way. I'd be me because that just comes out naturally as my character. So it was, and then after that it was like, why not be me unless they tell me I cannot be me." (Hawk)

"That dragon character I was telling you about, when I role played him as a human he was black. Like he looked black" (Lucien)

"I made sure that the character was black and that she was powerful. That she was powerful and that she was black and that you know for once it wasn't an issue that she was black." (Myrissa)

"I used to get flak for that too when I played a black character, which was funny. From the black kids too! 'Another black one?' 'Yes another black one what's the problem?' 'There were no black people, especially in fantasy. There were no black people back then' which was another issue." (Frost)

Being black translated into an important part of their gaming experience as it was how many of the gamers opted to interact with the gaming world, though playing characters that represented them. While many people explored playing characters of different races and types the gamers in my study gravitated towards playing black characters like themselves. As Frost highlighted he did so even under circumstances when his peers felt it was not in keeping with the setting they were playing in.

Even the biracial experience was translated into their characters.

"Anise, this first character, was meant to be mixed race." (Ebony)

"In terms of ethnicity, my character looked like me. She was a, you know, mixed race female mixed race dark skinned kind of girl. She was very vibrant and outgoing but of course, there were other elements of the character that were completely different from me." (Sylva)

Both Ebony and Sylva (and, as we will see later, Jade) translate their biracial heritage into the characters they create. Their characters aren't simply black or white. Sylva, for instance, made her character vibrant and outgoing (elements she associates with her own personality) in addition to taking on the physical traits of having a mixed heritage and skin tone.

This gave some respondents the chance to explore blackness in ways that they might not have been able to do otherwise.

"Oh for sure. I think that gaming gives you … a performative space for you to engage in different concepts and ideas that you wouldn't ordinarily have access to" (Helo)

"Sometimes you know it's like playing [with] a particular stereotype specifically. It's like 'let's play with this'" (Star)

"I do, largely because it has allowed me to explore a wider scope of what blackness and what blackness can be." (Sylva)

Gaming thus offered a chance to see what it was like to embody different ideas on blackness by allowing them to try out traits and personas that they may not normally enact in daily life. Gamers were allowed to see what it was like to enact different ideas on blackness within a safe environment. This also extended to the exploration of race issues in a more general sense.

"I mean race is relevant to everything. I think that a lot of people use gaming to explore issues. … My current character comes from a culture that really has a different understanding of rights [and] I guess what is race? There are these vampires who are not seen as human by many of the countries and other undead who are sentient and people from my culture see vampires as

human. So one of the things my character is having to say is "these are people too and they have rights and you just can't go ahead and kill them." … I find myself seeing parallels to categorization, otherness, [and] dehumanization that have parallels to race." (Ebony)

"I played [Shadowrun] with a guy, who was a very good friend of mine and also his wife, but he runs the games, his accessing of the game is that this whole game is a metaphor for race relations. And we talked about Shadowrun and he said for him the whole game was a metaphor for race relations and I said I agree with you, I think you're right. So we definitely explored it a lot." (Talon)

Ebony saw current race struggles for rights and recognition play out in the games she was involved in. Seeing vampires as an oppressed group she was able to further explore what it meant to fight for an oppressed group. Talon and his friend also saw race issues present in Shadowrun. Shadowrun is a game set in the cyberpunk near future of Earth in a world in which magic has returned and transformed the world as we know it. The fantasy races of elves, dwarves, trolls, and orcs return as aspects of humanity. Instead of being separate races, as they are in more standard fantasy settings, they are instead human offshoots. Discrimination in this setting became a matter of being a different human race as opposed to being a different skin tone. The setting material highlighted how some groups within the settings hated the new metahuman races of elves, dwarves, orcs, and trolls with this new brand of racism replacing the old brand based on skin color. This set up allowed Talon and his friends to replicate and explore race without having to stick to issues of just color.

This wasn't the case for everyone, however. Since some players felt they were playing themselves they didn't see role playing as a method of exploring different ideas on blackness.

"No it's me. I'm definitely not experimenting." (Hawk)

"I would say no and it's going to go back to my earlier statement in that I don't know if you could." (Hanzo)

"In order to do that you have to know what blackness is. And the thing is well what do you go with? How do you, how do you define modern, urban culture in a fantasy world? Or even in a sci-fi world for that matter? So [if] neither black or white people know what true blackness is then how do you express that in the game world?" (Stone)

Hawk and Hanzo are typically role playing as themselves, putting their characters into unique situations and seeing how they would respond if they found themselves in similar straits. Stone questions the ability to explore blackness within the game environment when there isn't a unified vision of blackness. Furthermore, since blackness is situational and personal, Stone questions whether or not you can translate the unique experience of being black into a make believe world removed from the social cues that one attributes to blackness.

By separating their black experience from their character and role play experience individuals like Stone are able to use role playing as a means to escape racial issues. As Stone later explains:

"I enjoy being in fantasy worlds where, ok I'm not having to walk down the street and be stared at and glared at by people. I'm not having to travel in a car or a vehicle or whatever and [be] afraid to be pulled over for some bullshit alright. I don't, I can walk into a store or an inn in the fantasy world and not have to be followed around like I'm about to steal something." (Stone)

The Racialized Other

"If I don't play a black character I usually play a non-human character when I can." (Myrissa)

This sentiment was fairly common for the gamers in this study. When not playing a black character most of the gamers opted to play a non-human character instead. In some cases, this acted as their preference.

"I never actually played a human besides in that one Firefly setting" (Jade)

"You know something just appeals to me being [non-human]. I already was different in so many ways and I think it just appealed to me to be, to embrace a certain sense of difference in the game and that you got some other option. Anything you know? You can now be a different skin, [a] demon. There is so much diversity to being a different race. And I think some of that resonated with me in hindsight, you know." (Helo)

As Helo highlights being different, being black made playing something not human resonate more with him. While discussing why he played non-human characters Frost had this to add:

"As I become more social conscious they've become very much socially conscious and like I said before they [his characters] have always represented how I've felt. I've always felt like an outsider so my characters have always been people from another culture that are trying to get by in mainstream culture. And I didn't even realize it when I was younger because that's how I feel. That's how I feel now, that's how you feel as a person of color by living in mainstream America."

Their racial identity was thusly being translated into their gaming experience and their choices to play as a racialized other when they weren't playing as black humans. The non-humans races were transformed from simply being just fantasy races of elves, dwarves, and halflings to being racial representations of themselves. Jade makes this point clear when she talks about playing half-elves:

"Yeah like my friends say 'why don't you just play a regular elf or a regular human?' They say like 'half-elves are pointless, half-elves, dude there's no reason to play a half-elf.' And I always find myself defending that and saying 'well half-elves are good because you know' you know I can't remember exactly but I just like them because they're not fully elves and they're not fully human. They're just a mixture of both." (Jade)

Half-elves are the result of a pairing between a human and an elf. They have traits that are a mixture of the two races, such as an elf's pointed ears with a more human looking face and build. This mixed heritage appeals to Jade (and the other biracial gamers in the study) as it helps them express their own mixed heritage. Jade gets defensive when her choice to play half-elves is questioned because questioning her choice to play them is like questioning her identity.

Elves were by far the most common fantasy race played. Over half of the gamers involved in this study opted to play elves when they were playing non-human races. When asked on whether he explored race and ethnicity via his characters Helo said:

"A little, race definitely. Ethnicity not as much, since I really don't play humans. I mean I have played definitely played a Drow. I play a lot of elves. I'm like hmmm this Drow is busted, even with this whole character level adjustment thing you have to do because you're much more powerful than you should be"

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The racialization of their gaming experience becomes clearer however when you consider a sub-race of the elves, the Drow. The Drow, also known as dark elves, are a villainous race in fantasy setting made popular by Dungeons and Dragon. Drow have black skin with white hair and live underground. They are an evil matriarchal society that also engages in slavery and demon worship (Long 2015). They are despised and hated by the heroic races in the fantasy settings that they appear in. This "outsider status" is why some gamers related to them.

"I like playing elves, especially like playing dark elves because of that whole stigma and stuff like that. It feels comfortable to me because of that whole outsider thing you know? That's why I favor the dark elves, because that's the closest analog you're going to get to the black experience in a fantasy gaming, playing [as] a Drow. You're being blamed cause of the color of your skin for being evil. Although the Drow keep repeating that they have earned their reputations and I'm like 'yeah whatever.' You know it still sucks to be blamed, you know to have no choice in the matter. So that's why I identify [with] playing Drow." (Frost)

The Drow experience to Frost is analogous to the black experience. They are hated on sight, an experience that Frost can relate to. They are stigmatized in a negative light, another aspect of life as a black man that Frost connects to. Drow carries the same sense of otherness that Frost feels in his everyday life and thus allow him the chance to explore that within a safer setting. And they allow for a release that he wouldn't otherwise have access to in his everyday life.

"That's why I like playing Drow because I get to be angry. I'm not taking shit from anybody. If I don't like you I stab you. Oh yeah, you gonna talk down to me? I stab you."

Talon also related to the skin tone of the Drow.

"Ever since I saw the Drow I wanted to play the Drow. I liked the idea of being an elf but I wanted to be the Drow because frankly I related more to the color of the character. I liked the idea of a black elf."

And in a similar vein, Talon relates the black experience to the Drow experience.

"So I became more interested in that, I guess the sociological aspects of living in that world and getting by as someone who's supposed to be the most hated and feared basically of beings, with the possible exception of the Illithids."

The Drow were not without their problems, though.

"So then I had, so one time I played a D&D convention game, my first D&D game ever. I walked in and I had seen the cover art of a Drow matriarch of some sort. Dark, dark skin with white hair, kinda looked like punk Storm. I was like 'god I want to play that one.' So I make up the character and I describe [her], I didn't know the background of D&D. So I'm describing my character walking into the bar and one of the players stabs me and I'm like 'aww.' So then they explain [that Drow were evil]. I was like that sucks and it kinda put me off on it a little." (Star)

One of Star's first gaming experiences is of relating to a character that was racially like hers was marred by the negative stereotypes that were attributed to the Drow. People's use of the Drow also made some gamers uncomfortable. When describing a live action role playing event that she attended, in which she was asked to play a Drow non-player character, Jade (who described herself as being light skinned) had this to say when asked to put on make-up for the character:

"So the make up for that was just black face with white swirls. And so for a moment I turned to my friend and I said 'I feel kinda weird doing blackface' and he was like 'yeah I actually do too.' And you know everyone else was just going on putting it on and I felt very weird and very uncomfortable doing this. … But no one else said anything about race. No one else made any comments. Like no one even thought about the fact that it might be a little bit racist."

The dark makeup that others were putting on made Jade feel uncomfortable with the character she was asked to play. She likened the experience to having to see or do blackface, thus highlighting the racist undertones that some gamers have expressed about the Drow. The inherent racism with the Drow wasn't lost on those who liked playing them either:

"The thing about the Drow is that you gotta understand is that yeah it's racist. Oh, it's hella racist … when we talked about [it] last year, the Drow on a scale of one to ten with ten being the most racist thing and one being the least, Drow honestly are like two or three because it's the bigger issue of dark equals evil. The Drow are just a symptom of that." (Frost)

In Dungeons and Dragons, and fantasy games based on the game, races can be born evil. This is typically seen when encountering races that are meant to be played as adversaries of the player characters. Classifying the dark skinned version of elves as being evil by virtue of birth is viewed as racist and problematic. This didn't stop Talon and Frost from enjoying Drow or subverting those ideas.

"You remember the Fiend Folio from way back when? It had the Drow and I was like 'I want to be that guy. That guy is awesome, I want to be the Drow.' And [my friend] was like 'you can't be the Drow, the Drow are evil.' 'Why are they evil?' 'Well because they're in the Fiend

Folio' kind of circular argument. … And it was like what do these alignments really mean? It's not like the Force where you start off as a Jedi and you start doing mean things eventually the dark side takes over. It's not like there's any place where you can go to where there's just a bubbling pit of evil and every time you do something bad it rises to the surface kind of thing. It's just based on decisions and the choices you make. … but back in the 80's I was playing, I was creating Drow characters and fleshing out my own idea of what the Drow culture was like." (Talon)

"In game, it has really just been my refusal to see an entire group of people as evil. And that's caused me repeated, repeated rubbing people the wrong way. I see the structural racism. I refuse to see it as not there." (Frost)

Both Talon and Frost recognize the problems with considering all Drow as evil. Talon points out how he doesn't allow others' ideas on the Drow to influence how he thinks and feels about playing them. Talon questions the very nature of alignment, indicating that he doesn't believe that one can be born evil. That being evil is a matter of the choices you make as opposed to the way you are born. When you consider Talon's racial identification, not only with his characters in general but in playing the Drow a rejection of then negative stereotypes associated with the Drow by virtue of being born with darker skin is also a rejection of similar views that are expressed about blacks and other minorities in everyday life.

Frost makes a similar connection. His refusal to see an entire group of people as evil speaks to his rejection of negative images associated with being black. This is done even though most of the people he games with prefers to see their gaming worlds in such stark dichotomies.

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Frost instead recognizes the classification of an entire race, even a make believe race, as a symptom of structural racism.

In this way, gaming takes on a very racialized role, with gamers seeing themselves in the fantasy races they opt to play. They see the struggles of the non-human characters as reflecting the struggles of black people. They opt to experience the other, via playing elves, as opposed to playing as human. Additionally, they view the Drow as being in a similar situation that blacks find themselves in, relating the struggles that this fictional race faces with their own struggles. Rejecting negative portrayals of them in favor of creating a more balanced presentation of them and thus subverting what some see as symptoms of structural racism.

DISCUSSION

So, are the Carlton Banks and Steven Urkels of the world black? The short answer would be yes. As the gamers in my study illustrate it is possible to be black without engaging in activities that are typically considered black. Their sense of blackness was personal with each

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person defining it along terms that were important to them. For some blackness was merely a matter of skin tone. They were born with black skin and would face the challenges that come with that, therefore they were black.

For most, however, blackness was more than skin deep. Blackness was culture. Blackness was a sense of awareness. Blackness was a sense of history. Blackness was a shared struggle. Blackness was music. Blackness was art. Blackness was a sense of community. The respondents in this study defined blackness on their own terms. In many cases, they take elements of black culture they like and incorporate that into their idea of blackness while discarding elements that they don't like. Hawk makes this case when he describes what gang banging meant to him. He described it as having the handshakes and walking the walk but also engaging in what he felt was positive rap and dance battles as opposed to negative rap and gun violence. So his idea of gang banger blackness was more Beat Street and less Boyz in the Hood.

The respondents also rejected notions of a universal blackness, of a blackness that was the same everywhere for everyone. They often resisted stereotypes which they felt were negative or restrictive. Media portrayals of blackness for them were not the only forms of blackness that existed. Furthermore negative portrayals of blackness were forms of blackness that they did not identify with. This rejection of negative portrayals of blackness is not uncommon. In a study high school black youths conducted by Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004) they discussed their perception that acting black was a negative thing. The students characterized blackness with skipping school, not doing one's school work, and underperforming or goofing off in class. These were not traits that they themselves embraced, but it was their perception of blackness. Where the gamers in my study differ is that in rejecting negative images of blackness they forge newer

and more positive images of blackness that they feel is just as valid, if not more so, than the negative images they see.

However, blackness itself wasn't the only salient aspect of their personality that was important to the gamers in this study. Helo highlighted the importance of his sexuality and being gay as important to his identity, and even how he constructs his blackness. He sometimes deploys his gay identity in order to set people at ease about his black identity. Gender identity was also important. The women in this study felt they were more challenged, both in life and in the gaming hobby, by being a woman than they were for being black. Sexism was felt to be more prominent in their lives than racism.

Still, their sense of blackness was often times challenged, both by black and white friends. When they didn't measure up to peer expectations of blackness the gamers in this study responded in one of two ways. Sometimes they would do something to remind the person that they were black. This included such techniques as putting a bit of bass in their voice or code switch in order to convey their black identity. Other times they would simply ignore it, as they found no need in appeasing those who didn't recognize their blackness. As Stone stated

"Why do we have to define ourselves, to ourselves, about ourselves?" (Stone)

Stone questions the need to define his blackness to anyone other than himself. He wasn't alone in this sentiment. This refusal to bow to other people's construction of blackness highlights how central and core their black identity is to them and how firmly rooted it is in them.

Thus it isn't surprising that their blackness carried into their gaming choices. While over the course of years of gaming their character choices ran the gamut from human to non-human, from black to white, from male to female, the characters they spoke about the most or most

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identified with were typically black. Many of the gamers opted to play black characters even in settings, such as fantasy games like Dungeons and Dragons, in which black characters were not common or considered a part of the setting.

This indicated that the characters played were extensions of the gamers personality and identities. They brought elements of themselves that they felt were important and translated them into their gaming experience. This also included the complexities of their black identities, such as the biracial gamers who tended to create mixed race characters that had to navigate the challenges of being from different races, ethnicities, cultures, or even species. In short, these gamers were translating their racial identity and experience into their gaming identity and experience.

This allowed for a unique exploration of blackness in two ways. One form of exploration was to challenge and explore differing ideas of blackness. While not everyone engaged in this, as some gamers felt that they were just role playing as themselves, this was a fairly common activity for the gamers in this study. This gave them the opportunity to see what it would be like to embody different ideas of blackness that they may not normally engage in. Sometimes the reason they wouldn't embody a particular idea of blackness is because they viewed it as negative and stereotyped. However, they still found the concept interesting enough to explore. Other times these ideas on blackness were personality types they simply did not agree with. In some cases, they simply just felt like the identity just wouldn't work for them. Gaming, thusly, opened up a chance to see what it might be like in a safe environment.

The other unique exploration of blackness that occurred was a normalization of blackness. They were able to engage in their ideas of blackness sans the normal stigma that is

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often carried with being black. Thus even in games where black characters might be uncommon, they were ultimately treated no differently than any other character. When walking into a store they were not followed. They were not racially profiled. They were not discriminated against. These characters could be black, with blackness being an important aspect to the character or to the player, and they were not judged or treated any differently for it. This level of exploration was engaged in even by those who were not opting to explore different ideas of blackness as it was more a feature of the gaming environment than an active choice to explore something different.

Additionally, the gamers in my study were racializing their gaming experience by opting to play non humans when not playing black characters. Non humans allowed them to play the other while engaging in the more fantastical aspects of the games they were involved in. Struggles faced by the fantasy races were also related to struggles faced by themselves and other blacks. The most prominent example of this was the exploration of the Drow. While recognizing their use as racist and problematic the gamers in this study still opted to play them precisely because they were an "other" that they could relate to. A group of people that were cast off as evil because of their dark skin, attacked on sight by others, and exhibiting the worst traits (such as slavery) in the setting was something they identified with.

It was also a concept that they resisted. They rejected the idea of an essentialized evil essence. That a creature was born evil with no redeemable qualities, that an entire culture or sub species could be nothing irredeemable and evil. These are ideas about race that they face and resisted in their everyday lives. Playing as these others, as the Drow, allowed them to continue to actively resist the idea that an entire race of people could be negatively stereotyped.

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Other scholars have explored the problematic way the non-human races have been used in fantasy settings. Van Dyke (2008) analyzed the way in which dark skinned non humans were used, finding that they were typically given negative traits and deemed less likable and more undesirable by the source material. For example, Van Dyke highlights how orcs are often described using terms used to disparage blacks. Other studies have examined how race often disappears in popular fantasy role-playing games, such as World of Warcraft, with blackness vanishing and races such as orcs and trolls being stand-ins for real-world races such as blacks and Native Americans (Higgin 2009; Monson 2012; Packer 2014). By playing as the Drow and resisting the idea that they are innately evil these gamers are subverting the idea, both in gaming and in their normal lives, that personality traits are inborn. That dark skin is inherently evil and flawed.

This study had two research questions; how are black gamers constructing their identities as black individuals, and whether or not gaming becomes a site for the exploration of blackness and if so how? I found that while at times blackness was thought to be inborn, related to the physical fact that they were black blackness was also being constructed in a variety different ways. Blackness for the gamers in my study was culture, awareness, music, shared history, shared struggle, family, sexuality, and so much more. It was defined individually but was deeply valued by all. Due to this deep connection to their blackness gaming does serve as a site for its exploration. Whether they are exploring it by playing as a racialized other via non-human characters such as the Drow, exploring different ideas of blackness, or merely exploring what it is like to be black sans the stigma of blackness the gamers in this study engaged in some level of exploration of their black identity via their gaming hobby.

CONCLUSION

As black people continue to become more socially mobile they will be tasked with forging black identities in social settings not commonly considered black. This study contributes to our understanding of what this process may look like in spaces rarely occupied by blacks. As the number of blacks who invest time and energy into new hobbies such as comic books and games grows they are going to put new spins and interpretations on old ideas of blackness. Understanding this process gives us a deeper understanding of a diversifying image of blackness. This deeper understanding will also help grow a sense of community.

This study helps to provide insight into the complex, diverse, personal, and fluid ways black people construct and negotiate their racial identities. By incorporating gaming into how we examine blackness we are also able to see how these elements are engaged, explored, internalized, and reexamined. By having to think about how they are going to portray blackness in a fictional setting gamers needed to have a firm understanding of what blackness meant to them. To explore ideas on blackness different than their own they would also have to understand different conceptions of blackness that others may have. Thus gamers are ideal to continue to study the transforming nature of blackness.

Therefore future research should be expanded to consider the role of setting on how gamers might construct blackness. Different settings come with different expectations in regards to what is permissible in terms character creation. This may, in turn, present different options in what a person feels comfortable portraying and exploring. Furthermore, the racialization process in gaming deserves deeper exploration. Knowing what traits and elements draw gamers to play non humans, especially elves, could highlight ways that make gaming more inclusive for non

white gamers. Additionally studying other hobbies that aren't traditionally considered black, but instead considered white, such as gaming, comics, sci fi, and fantasy will expand our knowledge of how unique and different black identities can be.

This study set out to find out if black individuals who engage in white hobbies where constructing black identities. I found that not only where they constructing unique black identities but that these identities were important to their sense of self. So much so that they took those identities into their gaming experience by either favoring black characters or opting to continue their experience as the other by playing non humans. This also leads to exploring blackness via gaming, an experience that occurred on two levels. On one level was the open exploration of different concepts of blackness by playing black characters who embodied blackness in ways different than their own. The second was to play through blackness in worlds and settings where the stigma of being black didn't exist. Thus they could experience blackness without worry of experiencing racism or discrimination that are often times associated with the black experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX I – Study Participants

Ebony is a biracial female gamer living on the west coast. She started gaming when she attended college. Her initial group that she gamed with were composed of white friends. Her boyfriend at the time got her involved in the hobby. The game that she got started in was a fantasy based LARP. Fantasy role playing games remain her favorite and she has no game that she particularly dislikes.

Frost is a male gamer living on the north east coast. He started gaming in middle school with a group of friends who were black and latino. The GM of that group recruited him into the game. His first game was Marvel Superheroes. His favorite game was Exalted while his least favorite games were Heroes, Mage the Ascension, and Vampire the Masquerade.

Hanzo is a male gamer living on the west coast. He started gaming when he was 10. He got involved via a group of friends he was hanging out with at the time. His group was composed of white friends. His first game was Dungeons and Dragons. Dungeons and Dragons remains his least favorite game while his favorite game was Robotech. The highest level of education he obtained was a BA and he describes his background while growing up as middle class.

Hawk is a male gamer living on the west coast. He started gaming when he was 10. His initial interest in the gaming hobby was started by buying some Dungeons and Dragons books he saw in at the book store. His first gaming group was white and they played Dungeons and Dragons. His least favorite games were Traveler and Rifts while his favorite game was Shadowrun.

Helo is a male gamer living on the east coast. He identifies as being gay. He started gaming while he was in high school with a group of white friends. His first game was Dungeons and Dragons, which remains his favorite game. There was no game that he didn't dislike.

Jade is a biracial female living on the east coast. She started gaming when she was 12 while playing Dungeons and Dragons. Her initial group was composed of white friends. She was introduced into the hobby, however, by her black uncle who was also a gamer. Her favorite game was Dungeons and Dragons while her least favorite game was Pathfinder. Her highest level of education is a BA and she described her background while growing up as lower middle class.

Lucien is a male gamer living on the west coast. He got involved in gaming when he was 12 by a group of friends. His starting group were racial mixed and they played Dungeons and Dragons. His favorite game is still Dungeons and Dragons while his least favorite game is Vampire the Masquerade.

Myrissa is a female gamer living on the west coast. She started gaming in middle school with a group of friends. The group was a diverse group who started playing Dungeons and Dragons. Her least favorite games are those set in a fantasy genre like Dungeons and Dragons or Pathfinder. She has no favorite game.

Star is a female gamer living on the east coast. She got her start in gaming while attending college. Her first game was Earthdawn which she played with a racially diverse group

of friends. Her favorite games were Urban Shadows and Monster Heart while her least favorite game was Dungeons and Dragons.

Stone is a male gamer living in the south. He got his start in gaming in high school with a group of white friends playing Star Wars. His favorite games were Legend of the Five Rings and Star Wars and he has no least favorite game.

Sylva is a biracial female gamer living in the south. She started gaming as a young adult while in college. Her initial group were white friends who were playing Heroes. Her favorite games were Exalted, Fading Suns, Pathfinder, and World of Darkness while her least favorite games were Dungeons and Dragons and Rifts.

Talia is a female gamer living in the south. She started gaming in high school when she was invited to game by her boyfriend. Her initial gaming group were a racial diverse group of friends playing Legend of the Five Rings. Her favorite games were 7th Sea, Pathfinder, and World of Darkness while her least favorite game were Dungeons and Dragons and Legend of the Five Rings.

Talon is a male gamer living in the south. He started gaming when he was 10. He was introduced to gaming via his first GM and his initial gaming group was composed of white friends. His first game was Traveler. His favorite games were Shadowrun and the World of Darkness while his least favorite game was Werewolf the Apocalypse.

APPENDIX II – Important Terms

7th Sea – 7th Sea is swashbuckling themed rpg released in 1993 and produced by Alderac Entertainment Games.

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) – Dungeons and Dragons is the first role playing game, created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. It is a fantasy based game inspired in part by the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. The first edition of D&D was released in 1974 by TSR. The game has gone through five editions and is currently being produced by Wizards of the Coast.

Earthdawn – Earthdawn is a fantasy based RPG produced by FASA. It was released in 1993 and has four editions.

Exalted – Exalted is a high fantasy themed game that was produced by White Wolf Publishing and released in 2001. It has three editions and is currently being produced by Onyx Path Publishing.

Fading Suns – Fading Suns is a mix between sci fi and fantasy based rpg. It was released in Holistic Design Inc and was released in 1996. It has six editions.

Game Master (GM) – The game master is the person that runs the game. They create the world, manage the scenarios that the characters play through and adjudicate disputes.

Heroes – Heroes is generic game ruleset that has a variety of different genres to play in from pulp, fantasy, comic book, and sci fi. The game is produced by Hero Games and was released in 1989. It has six editions.

Legend of the Five Rings (L5R) – Legend of the Five Rings is a fantasy based Asian themed rpg based on the card game by the same name. The game was produced by Alderac Entertainment Games in 1997. It has four editions.

Live Action Role Playing Game (LARP) – A style of rpg that combines the elements of of tabletop rpg play with improve acting. Players typically dress up as their character and speak in game as their character would.

Mage the Ascension (MtA) – Mage the Ascension is a modern horror themed game based on playing magic users. The game was produced in 1993 by White Wolf Publishing and is part of the World of Darkness set of games. It has three editions and is currently being produced by Onyx Path Publishing.

Marvel Superheroes – Marvel Superheroes is an rpg based on the Marvel Comics universe. It was produced by TSR and released in 1984. It has two editions.

Player Character (PC) – player characters are the avatars that gamers create to play in the games that they participate in.

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Non Player Characters (NPC) – Non player characters are characters created and run by the GM. They represent pretty much everyone else in the world that isn't a PC.

Pathfinder – Pathfinder is a fantasy based rpg produced by Paizo Publishing and released in 2009. It was inspired by Dungeons and Dragons and uses an evolution of that games third edition ruleset. The game is often praised for its push for racial and sexual diversity.

Rifts – Rifts is a post-apocalyptic rpg that combines various genre elements such as fantasy, sci fi, cyberpunk, horror, and various myths. The game is produced by Palladium Games and was released in 1990.

Robotech – Robotech is a sci fi rpg based on the anime of the same name. It was released in 1986 by Palladium Games.

Shadowrun – Shadowrun is a cyber punk themed rpg that mixes in fantasy elements. It is set in the near future. The game was released in 1989 by FASA. The game has gone through five editions and is currently being produced by Catalyst Games.

Star Wars – Star Wars is an rpg based on the Star Wars franchise. It was first released in 1987 by West End Games and ran for three editions under them. It then moved to Wizards of the Coast in 2000 where it had three editions. In 2012 Fantasy Flight Games took over production of the game.

Tabletop Role Playing Game – The typical rpg played around a table with a group of friends as opposed to online, via a written medium or via live action.

Traveler – Traveler is a science fiction based set of rpgs first released by Game Designers' Workshop in 1977. It has eleven editions produced by Steve Jackson Games, Mongoose Publishing, and Imperium Games.

Urban Shadows – Urban Shadows is urban fantasy game. It is produced by Magpie Games.

Vampire the Masquerade – is a modern horror themed rpg released in 1991 by White Wolf Publishing. In VtM you play as vampires and is part of the larger World of Darkness family of horror games also produced by White Wolf. It has three editions and is currently being produced by Onyx Path Publishing.

Werewolf the Apocalypse (WtA) – Werewolf the Apocalypse his a modern horror themed rpg released in 1992 by White Wolf Publishing. IN this game you play as werewolves and is part of the World of Darkness set of horror games. It has three editions and is currently being produced by Onyx Path Publishing.

World of Darkness (WoD) – The World of Darkness is a set of modern horror games produced by White Wolf that included VtM, WtA, and MtA. It had a variety of horror themed games that played under a compatable set of rules that allowed for cross genre play in a shared world.

APPENDIX III – Interview Questions

1. What kind of neighborhood did you live in while growing up? Were there many minority families there?

2. What kind of schools did you go to while growing up? Were there many minorities in your classes?

3. When did you first get involved in gaming? Who got you into it?

4. Tell me about the first gaming you played in? What was your first character like? What did you enjoy most about it?

5. How long have you been gaming?

6. Do you engage in tabletop, larp, or online gaming? Do you have a preference? If so why?

7. What settings and/or games do you most identify with? What about them makes you enjoys these types of games?

8. What settings and/or games do you least identify with? What about them do you not enjoy?

9. What is your favorite game? Why?

10. Do you have a least favorite game? If so why?

11. Do you consider your gaming group inclusive? Why or why not?

12. How do you feel race is represented in the games you play? Please give examples.

13. Does the way race is portrayed in gaming affect your interpretation of race and blackness?

14. Do you feel that race is relevant to gaming? Please explain how.

15. Do you find it difficult to be black in a predominately white hobby? Why or why not?

16. How have your non-gaming friends and family responded to your gaming hobby?

17. Have you ever been accused of acting white? Explain.

18. Can you think of a time where you felt singled out or uncomfortable because of your race while gaming? Please explain.

19. Can you think of a time when a white gamer was singled out or made uncomfortable because of their race while gaming? Please explain.

20. A microagression is a small way in which the world says or does harmful things to people of colored without realizing it. Do you experience any microaggressions while gaming?

21. Do you feel that your race is invisible erased in your gaming groups? How do others respond to your race if at all? Do they make jokes or assumptions? Or do they ignore it?

22. Do you feel that gaming offers you the chance to explore different ideas on blackness? If so have you used gaming as a means to explore different ideas on blackness?

23. Do you explore what it might be like to be a different race or ethnicity than yourself? If so in what ways?

24. How do you manage your black and white friendships?

25. How do you define black identity in America in your experience?

26. How do you define white identity in America in your experience?

27. How closely do you relate to these identities?

28. Do you consider gaming to be more commonly connected to a particular race? Explain.

29. How does gaming connect with your sense of racial identity? Does it clash?

30. What does it mean to you to be black?

31. What does it mean to you to be a gamer?

APPENDIX IV – Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

PROJECT TITLE: Gaming While Black: The Social Identities of Black Gamers

You are being invited to participate in a research project conducted by TiMar Long from the Department of Sociology at the University of Houston,

NON-PARTICIPATION STATEMENT

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any question.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of African Americans who play tabletop role playing games. This study seeks to discover if African American gamers consider themselves to be black and if so in what ways they feel they are black. The study will also seek to determine if role playing games becomes an avenue through which a person can explore their ideas on what it means to be black.

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PROCEDURES

A total of 25 subjects located throughout the United States will be asked to participate in this project.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will interview you in a location of your choice or if this is not a viable option via the technology of your choice. The interview will last approximately one to two hours, depending on your level of interest and your desire to continue the interview. The interview will cover basic demographic information (sex, race, education, etc.); your history and experience in gaming; how you define being a gamer; how you define being black (in regards to both gaming and outside of gaming); and whether or not you use gaming as an opportunity to explore different ideas on blackness.

I will use a digital voice recorder to record your voice during the interview and will also take handwritten notes.

After the completion of the interview, your part in the study comes to an end, unless you agree to be contacted later for clarification of any issues discussed. In this follow-up interview you may be asked to clarify certain statements made in the initial interview or elaborate on unclear topics. As the participant, it is your prerogative to allow or deny participation in the follow-up interview. Upon completion of interviews, your part in the study comes to an end

As a participant in this study, your total time commitment will likely be 2 hours or less, including the main interview and any follow up.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your participation in this project. Each subject's name will be replaced with a pseudonym by the principal investigator. This pseudonym will appear on all written materials and voice recordings. The list pairing the subject's name to the assigned pseudonym will be kept separate from all research materials and will be available only to the principal investigator. Confidentiality will be maintained within legal limits.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

I believe there to be minimal risk associated with participation in this study. All identities of subjects will remain **confidential,** which thus addresses any unlikely risk from disclosure of identity.

BENEFITS

While you will not directly benefit from participation, your participation may help investigators better understand how African American gamers feel about their black identities. This knowledge will contribute to the understanding of the experiences of minorities in hobbies like tabletop role playing.

ALTERNATIVES

Participation in this project is voluntary and the only alternative to this project is non-participation.

PUBLICATION STATEMENT

The results of this study may be published in professional and/or scientific journals. The results may also be used for educational purposes or for professional presentations. However, no individual subject will be identified.

AGREEMENT FOR THE USE OF AUDIO TAPES

If you consent to participate in this study, please indicate whether you agree to be audio taped during the study by checking the appropriate box below. If you agree, please also indicate whether the audio tapes can be used for publication/presentations.

<u>I agree</u> to be audio taped during the interview.

I agree that the audio tape(s) can be used in publication/presentations.

I do not agree that the audio tape(s) can be used in publication/presentations.

<u>I do not agree</u> to be audio taped during the interview.

If you do not agree, please indicate whether you agree to allow the primary investigator, TiMar Long, to take hand-written notes

<u>I agree</u> to allow the primary investigator, TiMar Long, to take hand-written notes

SUBJECT RIGHTS

I understand that informed consent is required of all persons participating in this project.

All procedures have been explained to me and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Any risks and/or discomforts have been explained to me.

Any benefits have been explained to me.

I understand that, if I have any questions, I may contact TiMar Long at (713) 743-3944. I may also contact Dr. Shayne Lee at (713) 743-3944.

I have been told that I may refuse to participate or to stop my participation in this project at any time before or during the project. I may also refuse to answer any question.

ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING MY RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (713-743-9204). ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

All information that is obtained in connection with this project and that can be identified with me will remain confidential as far as possible within legal limits. Information gained from this study that can be identified with me may be released to no one other than the principal investigators. The results may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations without identifying me by name.

I HAVE READ (OR HAVE HAD READ TO ME) THE CONTENTS OF THIS CONSENT FORM AND HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGED TO ASK QUESTIONS. I HAVE RECEIVED ANSWERS TO MY QUESTIONS. I GIVE MY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. I HAVE RECEIVED (OR WILL RECEIVE) A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR MY RECORDS AND FUTURE REFERENCE.

Study Subject (print name):

Signature of Study Subject:

Date:

I HAVE READ THIS FORM TO THE SUBJECT AND/OR THE SUBJECT HAS READ THIS FORM. AN EXPLANATION OF THE RESEARCH WAS GIVEN AND QUESTIONS FROM THE SUBJECT WERE SOLICITED AND ANSWERED TO THE SUBJECT'S SATISFACTION. IN MY JUDGMENT, THE SUBJECT HAS DEMONSTRATED COMPREHENSION OF THE INFORMATION.

Principal Investigator (print name and title):

Signature of Principal Investigator:

Date:

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