

5

Recentering Blackness in Games and Play

One of the famed voices of Black feminism, bell hooks, begins her essay “Understanding Patriarchy” with an anecdote about a game of marbles. In the story, a four-year-old hooks asks repeatedly to join her brother and father in the game. Her father repeatedly scolds her and tells her “no,” until the pressure mounts to a point where her father breaks a board from the door and beats her repeating, “Girls can’t do what boys do” (hooks 2010, 2). Of course, the story illustrates the intersectional nature of oppression and how what hooks terms “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” is internalized by Black folk. For the purposes of this book, hooks’s story reminds us of exactly the kinds of stories that are lost to the White European definition of play that solely sees it as productive of pleasure. hooks’s experience is an earnest retelling of how play can produce affects of trauma, pain, and abuse. In a sense, it is a reminder of how the continued and shared trauma of slavery still haunts the Black community today.

Another example of how a definition of play can embrace its fraught and painful tendencies by recentring the experiences of minoritized people is Jeremy O. Harris's play *Slave Play*. It is a story about a trio of interracial couples who are engaging in sex therapy because the Black partners are no longer attracted to their mates. The play brings race to the forefront of the conversation by foregrounding the discomfort of the White characters in referring to their partners' race. Perhaps even edgier, it has the White characters take the role of the masters or mistresses in BDSM slave play (Harris 2019). In a performance, Harris called for a "Black Out"—only Black-identifying people would attend the play—in order to subvert the affluent White norms of Broadway. He explains to *American Theater*, "For me it was about Black work begetting Black work and Black audiences" (Tran 2019, para. 15). This decision immediately attracted controversy from the conservative theatergoing community. The (presumably White-identifying) *National Review* critic-at-large Kyle Smith quipped, "It would be illegal to refuse to sell tickets based on this or that race" (Smith 2019, para. 2), showing the very discomfort with even discussing the discrimination familiar to all BIPOC people. In the play, themes of role reversal and trauma sharing are imposed upon White theater audiences. Recentring how play intersects with the experience of BIPOC people will rarely produce the same pleasurable affects that games like *Mario Kart* and *Dungeons & Dragons* build into their core gameplay loops.

In Clifford Geertz's (1972) *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, he argued that cockfights—no matter how violent and brutal they appeared to outsiders—were a way for the Balinese to understand themselves as a culture. He gestures to the Dutch occupation of 1908 to argue that the violence of colonialism brought the European customs that drove the cockfight—which had previously been situated in the center of all village life—to the margins of society. Similarly, slave games have been forced to the edges of Western society. They only exist now in a handful of history books and through the oral histories shared by the descendants of slavery.

White supremacy conspires to make Whiteness invisible by making Blackness shameful. Kishonna Gray shares how the experience of Black gamers today involves the pain of disclosing their race online. She explains how the question “are you Black?” in a gaming session of *Gears of War* prompted one gamer to downplay their Blackness, shooting back “Why? Are you White?” Things devolved into race-shaming, with taunts of “nigger, nigger” accenting the trauma that the gamer’s Blackness was shameful in the eyes of the other players (Gray 2012, 267–8). Approaches to play that read gaming sessions like this as constructive of socialization and learning, while separating the racism occurring in game chat as “not play,” are complicit in White supremacy. A reparative approach to play is aggressively anti-racist because it foregrounds how the most painful

dynamics of play often exist alongside its most pleasurable aspects.

Let me seed a radical idea: play reduces humans to objects because play is violent. This may seem extreme, but as conversations about race return to the center of political discourse globally, now is the time to rethink the White supremacy of the social and intellectual structures of today's world. Acknowledging the ways that play dehumanizes allows us to recenter and better appreciate games that exist at the margins of Western society. We succumb to colonialism and White supremacy when we assume that play must always produce affects of pleasure. Despite the violence of play, something important might be recovered by a closer analysis of its more dangerous tendencies.

Black Radical Aesthetics

Understanding and appreciating the aesthetics that are borne out of violence, danger, and pain are part of the Black radical tradition. While research in this tradition tends to focus on forms of play that are not gameplay, the multimedia aesthetics that Black designers, composers, writers, and instrumentalists choose speaks to a common tradition. This chapter concludes by offering some ideas about how this tradition theorizes the “break” and offers some examples of Black game designers inhabiting it.

BIPOC game designers have endured abuse, harassment, struggle, and dehumanization as they labor on their excellent games. Here I write about Black game designers because it helps to refine my analysis, draw attention to the tradition of Black radical aesthetics, and highlight how these designers are part of what Hortense Spillers terms a “rupture” in African culture. She writes, “The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness, that takes place on the sub-Saharan Continent during the initiative strikes which open the Atlantic Slave Trade in the fifteenth century of our Christ, interrupted hundreds of tears of black African culture” (Spillers 1987, 68). Contending with the aesthetic, social, and narrative impact of the fissure described by Spillers means sketching the contours of an artistic scene that has endured in spite of hardship.

Fred Moten calls this aesthetic sensibility “the break.” For him, it is the essence of the Black radical tradition. It’s a recognition that Black radicalism demands holding on to contradictions by embracing both the horror and the hope of Black artistic expression. By way of an example, Moten describes music: Abbey Lincoln’s scream in Max Roach’s improvisational track “Triptych: Peace/Protest/Prayer” on the album *We Insist!* He writes that Lincoln sounds “troubled by the trace of the performance of which she tells and the performance of which that performance told” (Moten 2003, 22). Is Lincoln in pain or is she exuberant? She’s both and neither.

She is the scream; she doesn't own the scream; she's just performing the scream; she is more than a scream. Moten's theorization of Black radical aesthetics remains indebted to W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness—where one is always evaluating themselves through the eyes of White society (DuBois 1994, 5). Black artists constantly bring this duality into their work. Their work is radical because *they* are radical. The survival, perseverance, and success of Black people in cultures that have been colonized and defined by White Europeans is itself a radical form of expression.

Perhaps Frantz Fanon wrote it best: “Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon 2008, 82–3). Here, Fanon is referring to the significance of colonization to the construction of Blackness. Blackness—as an identity or as a lived experience—is the result of years, decades, even centuries of subjugation and struggle. Indeed, the brutality and violence of colonization draw the inequity of Blackness into focus and have long been a common point of solidarity among BIPOC people worldwide. My focus on analog game developers of color in this chapter is thus intended to shine a light on a particular history of minoritization. In so doing, I hope to also speak to the unique conditions of Blackness globally.

The Black radical tradition applies to more than just music. In this chapter, I look to games to consider how the Black radical tradition is articulated in design communities today. As I note in the introduction, this is a

far more radical intervention than one might at first think. By and large, Black people are largely absent from the publicity and concept art of many early hobby games. I have argued elsewhere that this is because the hobby game scene was mainly the invention of White suburban men, whose networks and aesthetic sensibilities remain dominant (Trammell, forthcoming). The high barrier to entry imbues each analog game from a Black designer with a unique sense of struggle, compromise, and purpose.

In concluding this chapter, I look only to analog game designers because analog games have typically been the black sheep in the field of game studies. Often underrepresented in favor of games that hold a more explicit relationship to technocapital, analog games have been relegated to the margins and footnotes of game studies research for decades (Torner 2018). Yet analog game research speaks most clearly to the club that I identify with. As cofounder and now editor in chief of the journal *Analog Game Studies*, my research frequently focuses on the critical analysis of analog games. In this regard, analog games are my personal “break” from the dominant tradition of game studies. And I delight in the many nuanced ways that Black designers have devised their own aesthetic breaks in their writing.

The aesthetic output of Black game designers *is* multifaceted, complex, and challenging, and that itself is the contradiction of Black radicalism within the analog game scene. While some designers like Chris Spivey and

Julia Bond Ellingboe make explicit overtures toward Black history in their work, others like Eric Lang subvert it by playing with popular culture and remixing historical narratives from the Nordic countries, East Asia, and fantasy worlds. Analog games as a design category traverse many genres, each with a different consumer base, separate distribution network, and even distinct design conventions. Knowing how to speak to, with, and between these different sensibilities speaks to the skill of the designers this book catalogs in the paragraphs that follow.

Analog games are notoriously White in the illustrations that they provide to their players. Consider this brief history. In 1965, Avalon Hill's *General*—wargaming's¹ premier magazine—featured a Black man on the cover. He is the limo driver of Elwood Gardner, one of the company's representatives, and he poses with Elwood and a huge bag of money for a publicity stunt. By 1980, two dark-skinned heroes surround a dragon on the cover of *Dragon*, hobby role-playing's premiere magazine. Two months later, *Dragon* includes a Black high school student in a depiction of a schoolyard. Three months later, a Black student on the cover participates in a food fight with his peers. In 1982, *General* features a rendering of a White Cleopatra on its cover. It wasn't until February 1995 that *Dragon* would again feature a Black character on its cover—again, a pair of evil Drow (dark/Black) elves, killing an adventurer.

Representation was not much better on the fan circuit. It wasn't until issue number 40 of *Alarums & Excursions*—the main fanzine of *Dungeons & Dragons*—that a Drow elf was featured on the cover. And in the thirty-year time line covered here, there were no more instances of Black people on the covers of any of these three publications. Hobby games, as such, were largely packaged, sold, and presented to their audiences as a space for White cultural production. Even as moments of integration—"Black cool" and multiculturalism—filtered through the American popular consciousness, hobby games insulated themselves from these conversations by marketing to a specific and niche set of consumers.

The tragedy of this story is that Black people have long been active as designers in what I refer to as the analog game scene—a scene composed of the common interests of role-playing game, card game, board game, pervasive game, and live-action role-playing game fans (Torner, Trammell, and Waldron 2014). Take Mike Pondsmith, who was the designer of the 1987 tabletop role-playing game *Cyberpunk 2013*, a game that has now become a franchise, most recently yielding CD Projekt Red's blockbuster *Cyberpunk 2077*. Even though *Cyberpunk 2013* was a cult hit—big enough to influence the development of the AAA video game title forty years later—Pondsmith's race is barely visible in the game itself. In film and theater, the Non-Traditional Casting

Project was only just beginning to advocate for a more inclusive approach to casting roles in popular entertainment media. Pondsmith was publishing for a postal network of predominantly White hobbyists in an era when hobby role-playing games were only available at model train stores.

Pondsmith wasn't alone, and there were many other Black designers in the hobby game scene. Still, I would argue that *Cyberpunk* is a paradigm case in how Black designers are able to subvert the expectations of their readers and play against genre conventions. The tagline of 2019's recently released sourcebook *Cyberpunk Red* reads, "The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future." The future is dark because Pondsmith articulates a dystopic vision of a future in which corporations run amok, people have found new drugs to tune in and drop out with, and the bustle of urban life is contrasted only against life in the bombed-out wastelands that surround "Night City." The future is also dark because the future is Black. "Night City" is minority White, and the world is, in many ways, imagined from a perspective that takes Black culture for granted and works to make the exotic mundane.

The break lingers in every detail of the world and has even garnered controversy in the game's digital adaptation, *Cyberpunk 2077*. Some critics of Pondsmith's work have suggested that the game furthers racist stereotypes by uncritically presenting BIPOC characters in a gang called "The Animals." Pondsmith's response perfectly

captures the essence of Black radical aesthetics: “Who the fuck do YOU think you are to tell ME whether or not MY creation was done right or not?”² Pondsmith refuses to be told what Black is, and how Black can identify or disidentify. As a Black author, Pondsmith is vocalizing against the double standard by which his work is being judged. “The Animals” are at once too Black and not Black enough. But Pondsmith inhabits the break. He knows that Black art isn’t always legible to White folks, and he eagerly embraces these contradictions in his design.

Eric Lang is one of the most popular board game designers working today. Until 2020, he was the director of game design for Cool Mini or Not, a board game design company that specialized in lightweight, miniature wargames with broad market appeal. Many of Lang’s games focus on adapting intellectual property into an exciting board game experience. The list of properties Lang has developed is impressive and includes *Marvel*, *Game of Thrones*, *Star Wars*, *The Godfather*, and *Dilbert*. One of Lang’s greatest talents as a designer is being able to imagine how wildly different worlds and settings might be transformed into a board game. Lang is a master of the game remix.

Lang’s creative output constantly reimagines and reforms the presumptions that we bring to the game table. His “Mythic Trilogy” of wargames are prime examples of his ability to shift expectations. *Blood Rage* innovates on Norse mythology to imagine a wargame

where part of the goal is to kill your own troops and send them to Valhalla. His game *Rising Sun* takes place in feudal Japan, and has a heavy focus on the economic consumption of war. The third game in the trilogy, *Gods of Egypt*, pushes players to contemplate religious dogma. In it, players take on the role of gods in a polytheistic pantheon competing for followers in a world that is turning to monotheism for religion. All of Lang's games in the trilogy allow players to toy with miniatures that represent monsters from the various mythologies.

Black radical aesthetics inhabit Eric Lang's designs too. He subverts conventions of the wargaming genre to bring in more fantastic elements from cultures on the margins. Lang's game designs appropriate and repack-age Norse,³ Japanese, and Egyptian mythologies. He uses these mythologies to recenter BIPOC cultures in a genre that all too frequently fetishizes the history and symbology of White men.⁴ Games in this trilogy are also all wargames, a genre that this chapter has already identified as being notoriously White. Rather than adopting them wholesale, Lang appropriates conventions of the wargaming genre and then reskins these games with themes that dive deep into Japanese and Egyptian mythology. In so doing, he opens space for more diverse stories than wargames' celebratory accounts of Confederate general Robert E. Lee and Nazi general Erwin Rommel's military prowess.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't end with describing Julia Bond Ellingboe's role-playing game *Steal Away*

Jordan: Stories from America's Peculiar Institution. The game is best described by one of Ellingboe's collaborators, Katherine Castiello Jones in an interview with Ellingboe. Jones writes,

For those readers who have not yet played the game, *Steal Away Jordan: Stories from America's Peculiar Institution* is a tabletop role-playing game in which players tell the collective stories of enslaved people. Written in the spirit of neo-slave narratives like Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, the game is set during the United States' antebellum period. Each session focuses on the struggles of a group of slaves to achieve their secret goals. These range from large goals like killing the overseer, to smaller goals, such as keeping a family member from being sold away, learning to read in secret, or getting a pair of shoes. Players have to work together to achieve their goals, but the game also forces characters to make hard decisions about when to prioritize their own goals over the needs of other characters. Does one make a break for it during a moment of conflict or stand up for another slave as they are interrogated about missing goods? (Jones 2016, para. 2)

Steal Away Jordan retells the story of American slavery. By drawing on the work of Black authors to think through how living through slavery requires managing trauma, scraping by—and even conspiring with one another to achieve freedom, comfort, and even joy—Ellingboe expertly shows how Black radical aesthetics can inform the role-playing game genre.

Often, Ellingboe's critics describe *Steal Away Jordan* pejoratively as not being a game but an educational exercise. Some people were "afraid to play it" (Jones 2016, para. 16). Specifically, critics even related to Ellingboe that they were "afraid of getting it wrong" (Jones 2016, para. 17). In other words, because Ellingboe focuses on the institution of American slavery in her game, the threat of a play experience that touches on trauma was too much for many of the presumably White players who encountered it. "The definition of 'fun' is something that gets policed," Ellingboe recounts, "There is an idea that games have to be fantastical. That a game shouldn't make you think beyond what pleases your character" (Jones 2016, para. 23). But this is life in the hold. We're just holding on to the things that make us Black. The indelible mark that we all carry with us replaces a sense of origin with a common cause and solidarity.

Embracing the painful as well as the pleasurable is what makes Black radical aesthetics so poignant. If Frederick Douglass had omitted Aunt Hester's scream in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, would it have inspired so many to work toward abolition? Would the flourishes of John Coltrane be so sublime if he didn't improvise both tonal and atonal notes? As Ellingboe so adeptly put it, the Western European canon of play scholars has been mostly concerned with policing the kinds of affect that play is productive of. Sharing the pain of Black fantasy is an important part of the project of Black radical aesthetics. There is a political end to this

work, of course. As André Carrington puts it, “Haunting will not go away so long as its conditions of possibility remain intact” (Carrington 2016, 23).

The policing of play that only allows for pleasure allows trauma, death, and pain to haunt Black aesthetics. Although Ellingboe, Lang, and Pondsmith all take different approaches to designing games, the Black radical tradition runs through their work. Within each game lies a desire to surface and make legible the contradictions of White culture. Pondsmith imagines Black futures, Lang subverts genre expectations from within, and Ellingboe simply makes a game of history and encourages us to spend some time inhabiting the traumatic lives of the past. All three, along with so many more Black artists, are haunted. All tell the same story in different ways.

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A Black Phenomenology

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