The Breakdown: Black Culture, Video Games, and the Importance of Adult Play

A Conversation between TreaAndrea M. Russworm and Cicero Holmes

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Russworm: The history of video games is often discussed as evolving outside of Black neighborhoods, without influences of Black culture and without much Black technological ingenuity or any visibility of Black people who played video games when the industry began to take shape. When we listen to the personal and oral histories of Black players from the 1970s and 1980s,

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we can invalidate and unnerve some of the most common approaches to writing about the history of the industry. When you think about growing up in the Bronx in the 1970s and 1980s, what do you remember most about how your love of video games began?

Holmes: To give you a sense of my own personal history, I think it is important to underscore that I grew up as an only child. While I did have friends and family around my age, there was no one in my household experiencing the world in the same way that I was. As a result, I spent a lot of time cultivating my imagination, and video games were a big part of that. Video games were a seminal part of my creative growth and development because they allowed for incredible levels of immersion within a structured space without the need for someone else to be around for me to have a fulfilling experience.

The VCS or what is popularly known as the Atari 2600, I think, was released in 1977, and around that same time the home video game *Pong* (1975), which was kind of an all-in-one console, was also released. One of my earliest memories about this time was playing *Pong* in our apartment in the South Bronx. I can remember the layout of the console, I can remember it being on our TV and our playing with the paddles and playing squash or playing tennis, and it was simply the greatest thing that I had ever experienced. Not only could I play against someone else, but it gave me the ability to play by myself; as an only child that was one of the things that really helped me. At that age, I was using my imagination when playing with toys and action figures, but I was also using my imagination while playing in digital landscapes. The digital landscapes made available to me at that early age were places I very much wanted to be. I think it is important to stress that while I've always been curious and gravitated towards science and entertainment and digital technologies, I personally believe that you are not necessarily predestined to do things, but maybe you are predestined to have affinities for certain things you are exposed to at an early age. This does not necessarily mean that you can't develop affinities for other things, but there's something inside of you that leads you to be predisposed to loving that thing, and no one can describe what it is, or why it is that way, but it is that way. For me, video games were definitely one of those things, science was definitely one of those things, the love of being an A-plus top student and being nerdy was where I was at that time. All of this fell right into place with my early appreciation of video games in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Russworm: Not much has been written in academic accounts of video games about the relationship between hip-hop culture and video game history or about the creative synergies between the two industries. I published a short entry in the *Encyclopedia of Video Games* on hip-hop because the connection is so fascinating. One of the points I made is that there is also a lot of appropriation of hip-hop culture in the games industry, particularly at the level of sound engineering. We can also see that games like *Parappa the Rapper*, *Def Jam: Fight for NY*, *NBA Street*, and even contemporary multimillion dollar franchises like *NBA 2K* and *Grand Theft Auto* widely use at least four of the five principles of hip-hop (MCing, DJing, break dancing, graffiti, knowledge). There are even video games that use tagging and graffiti play mechanics. Meanwhile, there is a tradition of hip-hop artists talking about and rapping about their own histories with video games, shouting the industry out in their lyrics—like the Wu Tang Clan and Biggie Smalls. Have any of these intersections between the start of the video game industry and the birth of hip-hop informed your experiences as a player?

Holmes: I grew up in the South Bronx—the birthplace of hip-hop—and this was the time that hip-hop music and culture was taking shape. And it was also the time when the video games industry was forming an audience. It quickly became apparent that there was a large consumer base around games and arcades.

Both video games and hip-hop were a part of my earliest cultural experiences. We can't forget the arcade scene and how important that was to young Black kids, especially the scene at some of the bigger arcades in Manhattan. The arcade scene was huge in the 1980s, and that overlapped with Black culture, with Black gamers, and with a love of hip-hop. We could easily draw a large Venn diagram to visualize where those connections were happening because the connections were all around us. Both the arcade scene in New York and the b-boy (break dancing boy) scene were huge and there was a lot of overlap there. For example, in the 1980s on Forty-Second Street and Seventh Avenue, right there at the crossroads of the world, there was the biggest arcade I'd ever seen. Well, guess what was always happening right around the corner, up the block where the Port Authority and buses were? B-boys would either be at the subway station in Times Square or at Port Authority break dancing to make money. And then they would take some of the money that they just made and go to the arcade to play some arcade games. So, you would see the same Black kids

in one spot or the other. If they weren't break dancing, they were hanging out and playing video games at the arcade. It was amazing to watch those things happen at the same time and to be a part of it. And that overlap between hip-hop and video games was one of those things that you inherently understood, because for Black kids this is just what we were doing at the time. Not only were we out there dancing and rhyming, but we were in the arcades hustling, and we were hustling for a reason because we had to beat the high score on *Space Invaders* or *Missile Command* or some other game like that.

Russworm: These memories about hip-hop performance and the history of arcades—which is often discussed as a scene of mostly young white boys—are the types of connections that are still missing from academic conversations about video games. Whenever I have read histories about arcades, I have always wondered: "Where are the Black people?" Because, like you, everybody Black who I knew was in the arcades or playing games like *Street Fighter* and *Double Dragon* at the pizza parlor across the street from my high school. That was my reality growing up playing games in Southern California.

Holmes: There is another important parallel you can draw between the arcade scene and hip-hop. When you think about it, hip-hop, b-boying, MCing are actually similar. When we were playing in the arcades, we were playing two-player games. You would put your quarter up on the top of the cabinet—that means you're next. Well, the whole reason you're out there vying to be next is so that you can show everybody in the hood that you're the best, that you are the top player. If I'm the best player, for me to leave this space and stop dominating the scene, someone has to beat me to earn the privilege to put a quarter up there. You have to battle me in front of everyone else and claim that spot. And then, for these arcade battles, there was a big crowd there—everyone was oohing and aahing and yelling—and at the end there could be only one winner until the next technical master came along.

Hip-hop battles, of course, play out in the exact same way: you got MCs and they rap—they battle it out—in front of a hyped crowd with the same oohs and aahs, and at the end of it, one master is declared the winner and that person gets the "rep" of being the best until the next person comes along to challenge them. With b-boys, it's also the same thing, only it's like a two-player or multiplayer team game with your crew. You got your crew,

I got my crew, we go out there and we do our thing, we battle it out in front of a crowd. We got cats that are doing "the worm," and back spins, and all sorts of stuff, and at the end one team wins, they earn their "rep," they're able to have some pride, and everyone in the hood knows who they are.

Growing up with these two influences, hip-hop is as important to me as video games. One of the things that hip-hop helped me do by listening to one of my favorite artists, KRS One, is educate me on who I am as a human. Hip-hop helped me understand who I am as an American but, most importantly, hip-hop helped me understand who I am as a Black American man. KRS One helped me establish a sense of pride when the rest of the world, or at least the rest of this country, told me that I was undeserving of it. With hip-hop I could see many people who were out there doing stuff who looked like me, while dominant American culture was trying to hide and undermine those parts of myself. When I discovered both games and hip-hop, I felt like I had a super power, a language, that I was using to sharpen my tools and sharpen the greatest weapon that I had—my mind.

Russworm: Thank you for reflecting on those connections between what hip-hop and video games have meant for you since a young age. That was also a powerful and vivid parallel you offered there about battling and what that looks like in games and MCing and b-boying and how that is mirrored in gaming. I think, throughout game design history, hip-hop has mostly been treated as a commodity that could attract large communities of gamers who would crave a safe association with sound tracks, the artwork, and Black Cool that hip-hop culture signifies. Your memories, however, really get at more complicated cultural fusions that really predate some of those corporate appropriations we see happening later when games explode as hot commodities themselves. Now I think we can see some of the ways that video game history cannot be told without also talking about the evolution of hip-hop.

Holmes: Just like in a larger sense, you can't have a real conversation about American popular culture without talking about whatever the popular purveying Black culture was at the time. America has a very interesting way of harvesting the best of what Black America does well and appropriating it for the non-Black mainstream.

Russworm: My research on video games and Black culture has led me to grapple with some of the ways Black women have been rendered nearly invisible in the grand narratives about the evolution of games and technology. It wasn't

until I visited The Strong Museum and saw for myself in game company announcements, newsletters, and pamphlets that there most definitely were Black women working at companies like Atari and Midway, but you rarely, if ever, saw their names printed anywhere. Other Black tech luminaries like Jerry Lawson and Ed Smith, who were central to the formation of the games industry, are just now being "discovered" and written about in our incomplete analyses of how the industry became what it is today.

Holmes: Funny that you should mention Jerry Lawson and Black women in tech because I have a connection to both! My mother, Linda, was an IT engineer starting in the late 1970s, so I was able to view technological advances via her stories and my visits to her office. I distinctly remember my mother coming home one day in the early 1980s with this heavy suitcase that she plopped onto our dining room table with a thud. She proceeded to open it to reveal one of the first laptop computers! Another time she came home with two suitcases, the second much smaller one contained the weirdest contraption. She took our home phone, removed the receiver, and placed the receiver on top of this contraption and lots of weird noises started emanating. I learned from her that this was called a "modem." She was also one of the engineers who worked on a technology called "DecTalk," which was most popularly used as the computer voice in the 1983 Matthew Broderick film *WarGames*.

Before my mother worked at DEC (Digital Equipment Corporation), she worked at Honeywell, and she befriended the only other Black woman that worked there in IT—someone who I affectionately call my Aunt Audrey. Aunt Audrey was married to my uncle Larry from Queens. I also knew that Uncle Larry's best friend growing up was a Black computer nerd named Jerry Lawson. I didn't discover this connection until after Jerry had passed on. Jerry Lawson, for those people who don't know, is essentially one of the fathers of video game hardware. Nolan Bushnell gets lots of the credit, but without Jerry Lawson lots of things wouldn't have happened. There would not be any cartridges without Jerry Lawson, and in fact Jerry Lawson was the guy who kind of invented game streaming. Specifically, he created the Channel F and proposed using cable television providers as the distribution mechanism for software. A precursor to streaming, digital distribution models are commonplace today.

Russworm: Where would that early formation of the industry be without Lawson's contributions to the Fairchild, to controllers, and as you mentioned,

to his early vision for streaming over data lines and digital distribution?

Holmes: Right. But I didn't discover my family's connection to Jerry Lawson until after Jerry was gone, and I told my Uncle Larry about my podcast *Spawn on Me* and what I was doing in the video game space, and he was said: "Oh yeah? You know I had a buddy, he used to do stuff with video games back in the day…." As an adult being in the gaming space and learning about how absolutely instrumental Jerry was to this thing that I love filled me with pride. But then to find out that he was also my uncle's best friend? I thought: Wow, that revelation only increases my stake and interest in the medium.

Russworm: Shifting now to some of your direct contributions to the industry, when I discovered *Spawn on Me*, I felt pure joy hearing video games talked about in a popular venue and also in cultural context—in the social, political, and racial context in which we live. With regard to the form of a podcast, because you can hear people's voices, their laughs, their intonations, where they pause to think in the conversation, there is immediately a sense of intimacy, both for the hosts and for the audience. For example, whenever I was listening to you and Kahlief Adams, the show's cofounder, interview people in the industry as I was going about my daily life (commuting to work, walking the dog, cooking dinner), I always felt like I was hanging out among friends and like I was an important part of the lively conversations. So, why did you start the podcast? What did you initially hope to accomplish with the more than 350 episodes you recorded?

Holmes: Starting a podcast was not even something on my radar outside of inebriated conversations with some friends. It wasn't until a chance meeting with my friend and future cohost, Kahlief Adams, that I discovered that I could do this. Kahlief and I wound up having conversations about how there are plenty of games that have issues with racial representation, but nobody was having those conversations in game reviews and in games journalism at the time. We took it upon ourselves to not only say that we were going to have great conversations about video games, but we were going to have nuanced conversations about race and games, about politics and games. We were willing to talk about all the things that you're not supposed to talk about—the taboo topics—and connect that to the medium that everyone loves and considers just entertainment.

We knew that, as two Black men talking about these things, we were going to ruffle some people's feathers, but our perspective was, "If you don't

like what we have to say about it, you're more than welcome not to listen to us." It was important for us to create the podcast that we would want to listen to. And if nothing else, our motivation was that, if all we could do was inspire the eleven-year-old versions of ourselves to aspire to work in video games, then we've done our job.

Russworm: That is a beautiful ambition to aspire to inspire younger versions of yourself. These days we also know that the demographic of who actually plays video games has shifted and that the hottest market for some time has been adult players. While you were doing the show, were you able to get a sense of how it impacted the broader community of Black adults who play video games?

Holmes: There were quite a few people within the Black gaming community, and allies outside of it, who were looking for the type of content that we were providing. The best, and most rewarding, part is hearing stories about how our content helped articulate a feeling a person was having about a game, and how the podcast helped to enlighten someone about the ways that systemic oppression is omnipresent even in our play spaces. It was also rewarding to discover through people like you that our podcast has become part of their academic curriculum (which is incredibly humbling).

The other thing that I would like to think our show helped with in the broader games community was to create a vehicle for people to make their own voices heard. We wanted to let Black and other marginalized gamers know that they aren't just an island of diversity in a sea of sameness. We wanted them to feel like they were part of this ever-growing landmass of people of color who could find kinship around their love of games because they found *Spawn on Me*. In retrospect, I think the podcast also gave a space for the marginalized folks already in the industry the space to speak up from their own platform or to speak out using ours.

Russworm: How did you navigate the often toxic culture of the games industry, where it is all too common to have exclusionary practices, very low numbers of Black programmers and designers, and a mainstream culture that can be racist and hostile to anyone who deviates from the presumed norm of the white male gamer? Did you experience any aspects of the well-documented toxic social dimensions of gaming culture?

Holmes: There was a ton of sweat equity that went into making *Spawn on Me* a respected space in the industry. Our belief was that the intersection of games, politics, and diversity was not part of the discourse when we began

but that it needed to be. We thought if we were critical, conscientious, and comical, we could create a much-needed niche. So overall, in response to what we were doing, the industry has been very welcoming of myself, Kahlief Adams, and Shareef Jackson (who later became another cohost). I think once they knew who we were, had a chance to witness our work, and saw that we were serious about bringing gravitas to the industry, we were looked at as peers in the industry. Some very key people in lots of different spaces made sure that there was room for us at the table even when the metrics said we weren't big enough to be there. I'm incredibly thankful for that. I'd like to think that we honored these admissions by creating top-notch content.

It was also great interviewing the traditional gatekeepers in the games industry and pressing them on conversations that we've privately asked ourselves: Why aren't there more Black people in games development studios? Why aren't there more Black game developers? Why aren't there more games analysts and journalists who are people of color? Being able to ask these questions directly of people and having them feel comfortable enough with us to at least attempt to answer the questions felt like a triumph. And then, hopefully, when we were done with our conversations with industry executives at places like Microsoft and Ubisoft, I hope that the questions we asked gave them pause and encouraged them to maybe think about why their answers were what they were. Also, I think it was a good thing when they felt emboldened enough to ask questions of us. If they actually listened to the answers, and if our feedback made them rethink their process about how they were trying to acquire and attract talent of color in their various projects, then it was all worth it.

Now there is a difference between how the industry welcomed us and how gamers in general responded to the work we were doing with the podcast. The gaming community had lots of things to say about us. There were definitely times where you would wind up hearing things that were similar to the lobby of a *Call of Duty* game [where the use of racial epithets is common—eds]. Among gamers, the culture has historically been this way, especially since the inception of widespread access to multiplayer online gaming, where people have a measure of anonymity. The silver lining is that platform holders like Sony and Microsoft have been very good at creating spaces to allow you to form your own communities where you can moderate the toxic culture. They are now doing a better job of

policing their own spaces for harassment, but stopping everyone from being an anonymous villain is about as easy as running across water.

You'd like to think that all white supremacist views and actions directed at us and at other people of color working in the industry are vestiges from an older generation, but looking at footage from the 2017 Charlottesville riot or, more recently, the January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection and riot, proves that Generation X through Z are also fully participating in these legacies of hate. We know that this same group avidly plays video games, and we see all of that manifested in their responses to people like you and me who are on the scene. "Get your politics out of my games," they yell at us.

Russworm: The claims that games are not political and that critiques of the games, of the industry, and of gaming culture is somehow ruining this landscape of pure entertainment and unfettered play are the types of claims that I try to address as an academic who not only writes and teaches about games but who is also actively teaching and recruiting the next generation of game developers. Now as someone who also plays video games because I enjoy them as an important site for speculation and imagination (even if it is not an entirely "free" play space), I am aware also that, as adult players of games, we are constantly switching between modes of criticality and play, alternating between respite and resistance.

Holmes: What we experience in playing games is not that far off from real life, except that I think in the game space, especially in online communities, people are more emboldened than they are in real life. Instead of getting a look that, in real life, you know you can interpret as something negatively aggressive and directed toward you, in an email or on a forum or over a voice chat online you'll get the actual racially charged verbiage that someone directly hurls at you. There are times when you have to deal with it and address them, block them, or report them, and then there are times when you just realize you're better off not engaging them. And so, instead, you turn to the communities you have cultivated for yourself around games.

One of the things that I thought we were really good at, when we were for a short period of time managing both the *Spawn on Me* podcast and the *Spawn Point Blog* simultaneously, was writing articles about these issues to try to draw and generate traffic to the site; we were also bringing people there via the podcast and hoping that that could turn into something even larger. At the time there were a lot of comments made about our Blackness

and the topics we covered on the *Spawn Point Blog*. We made a point of going in and engaging each and every comment and taking the time to not only talk about the things that they wanted to talk about, but also to thank them for coming, thank them for visiting, to show people our humanity and remind the trolls: "Hey, there's a person on the other side of this. Maybe you forgot that, but there is a person with feelings reading and writing this response."

Russworm: Given that you were producing the show in a climate where there was obviously still so much work to do both in the industry and in the culture surrounding games, and given all the incredible people you interviewed—voice actors, producers, writers, academics—can you recall a favorite guest that helped you increase your impact and reach?

Holmes: It is impossible to pick a favorite child! In over 350 episodes and hundreds of guests, there is at least one thing special and unique about each and every one of them. But our first guest was Dave Fennoy, and that was incredible, because we didn't believe that we could get someone as celebrated as he is. He was at the height of his voice-acting career, and he had just been nominated for a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television) award for his role in Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead: The Game*. Dave Fennoy famously put on a tour de force performance in that game, and that masterful performance is probably the thing he is most known for—even to this day after all the other work he has done as a Black man doing voice acting for games. He has gone on to voice some really seminal parts. For example, he was the radio commentator in another critically acclaimed game about Black folk, *Mafia 3*.

To get Dave on the show, I wrote this impassioned email to his manager: "Hey, this is our show, this is what we're about, this is who we are, it's Black History Month and we want to have Dave be our first guest on the podcast." Dave contacted me personally, he gave me his number, and then he called me later on in the day and said: "I'd love to be on your show." I was over the moon, I just could not believe that this was happening. At the time when we were able to get Dave on the show, nobody in the world of video game production knew who we were or what we were about. We took the opportunity seriously and did an incredible amount of legwork and research beforehand—we had our questions written out and we had just an absolute blast for the two hours that Dave graciously gave us. We used the show to celebrate him and to celebrate the great things that he

had already accomplished during his career.

During that conversation we also had a chance to discuss the trials and the tribulations that Dave had to overcome as a result of being Black working in the games industry. Experiencing discrimination is universal in a way because there is not a person of color in the history of this country, if you have the opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments, who does not talk about how they had to overcome some adversity in their career and in life due to their race. These moments are cathartic for the person, I believe, because they create an opening for someone else to recognize that it has been a struggle. These stories of what the person overcame intensifies the celebration, and hearing their experiences can be reassuring for the Black people and other people of color who are listening.

Bebe Moore Campbell wrote a book called *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine,* and I quote that title all the time, because the fact that you have your version of the blues that ain't like mine also doesn't negate the fact that we can find similarities between your blues and my blues. Candid conversations like the one we had with our first guest on the show are important to have because that is how we know we are not in isolation doing things that have never been done before.

Russworm: I cited your impactful interview with Fennoy in my "Dystopian Blackness and the Limits of Racial Empathy" chapter in *Gaming Representation* because it gave us much more context about what Fennoy brought to the role of a Black history professor who found himself in the middle of a zombie apocalypse. The fact that you could be a Black professor in a video game really resonated with me for obvious reasons. Unfortunately, as I argue in the book, there are some narrative conceits that are consistent with a history of regressive characterizations of Blackness (such as Fennoy's character is on his way to prison for murdering his wife when the apocalypse starts, and at the end of the game he has to encourage this young child who has been in his care to shoot him in the head). First of all, why on earth is this Black professor criminalized right at the start of the game? Instead of being on his way to prison for murder, why wasn't he on his way to deliver a masterful lecture at his college when the apocalypse started? Then, too, I was especially critical of how the character dies at the end of the game, even if dying makes sense in the broader *Walking Dead* universe. As I argued, given the ways in which Blackness has labored as a symbol of suffering in science fiction (and, of course, in real life), it would

have been more radical for these two characters to survive the zombie apocalypse instead of playing the empathy game in which the test becomes whether or not the young child loves him enough to kill him to prevent him from becoming a zombie. What an awful choice to make with two Black characters in a video game. Still, Fennoy's performance was outstanding even if the script left more to be desired. The options that Black voice actors have for bringing a sense of cultural context and humanity to these roles remind me of the limited options classical Hollywood actors like Sidney Poitier and Cicely Tyson had to contend with.

Holmes: I would like to think that if Telltale, the developers of that game, were around today, they would make better choices for those two characters. I would think that, when it's time to develop the narrative and make those narrative decisions, there would now be a conversation about whether or not that's appropriate to have the only other Black character kill off the Black father figure in their game. Those two characters were unlike everybody else because they had to commit this act together to try to create more empathy, to illicit a strong reaction from the gamer. I would hope that because of what *Spawn on Me* brought to the industry and because of the type of conversations we are having now, the same decision would not be made today.

Russworm: While we are on the topic of racial representation in video games, rather than go through the litany of examples where video game companies faltered or reinforced a long history of stereotypical tropes, are there any games that stand out as not necessarily being perfect but as nonetheless meaningful to you for some of the things they got right? What is your recommended playlist for people who are curious about how some video games have become sites of meaningful play for the critical and discerning adult?

Holmes: *Strider* (Sega 1989). This game was a huge departure from the arcade game of the same name. What I found most remarkable about this game is that it didn't have a happy ending. The protagonist did his job and beat the bad guy, but he didn't live happily ever after. He just lived. Even when I played it for the first time at thirteen, I felt that. I liked Disney movies but I knew I wasn't living in one. Here was a game that let me know that you're not always going to be happy when your work is done.

Metal Gear Solid (Konami 1998). There have been games before it that can easily be described as "ambitious," but this is the first game that I could

remember saying, "This game is just as engaging as, and has the production values of, a major motion picture—and it pulled it off!" This was the game that showed me not only can video games endure as things for kids but games can also evolve to be a form of entertainment and escapism as well as a forum for social critique for adults.

God of War (Sony Interactive Entertainment 2018). I would argue that this game's protagonist, Kratos, is Black because in the original game (2005) he is voiced by a Black American artist, TC Carson and the current one is voiced by Christopher Judge. Kratos is a perfect metaphor for living as a Black person because he is misunderstood by most folks and he is consistently harassed by the gods (a.k.a. the authorities). The game is about this demigod's journey with his son as they try to find a way to properly put to rest and honor their dead wife and mother. It is analogously about a Black father showing love and empathy to his son and helping his son reach maturity.

Mafia III (Hangar 13 2016). Now this game was completely unafraid to tackle the racial politics of the late 1960s American South. It was the most honest I've ever seen a mainstream game be about bigotry, systemic racism, and racial violence. It was also the first time in games where I've seen a power fantasy offered specifically for me as a Black man that let me play with the tools and mechanics to punish and dismantle the same people, forces, and ideologies that have terrorized for centuries anyone who looks like me. This game could have easily been called *Catharsis Simulator*, as far as I'm concerned.

Russworm: That is an impressive lineup of games to consider, and it would make for a fantastic play session for an adult who wants to approach video games from a thoughtful, introspective, and also socially reflective place. Some of my favorites that I would add to this list for adult players is the game *Sunset* (Tale of Tales 2015) where you play as a Black woman domestic worker who is cleaning the home of a South American revolutionary; the recently released game *Blackhaven* (Historiated 2021), where you play as a Black woman student from Xavier University who is an intern on a former slave plantation; and *The Sims 3* (Maxis 2009) because it is an open world life simulator and a utopia, and who doesn't want to simulate Black life in a utopia for once? After all, games are exercises in playing with power, and because of that they are also about negotiating power and experimenting with the kinds of agential play that influence how we move through space

and time outside of the game worlds.

This discussion and our play lists of recommended video games also makes me think about some of the cultural and social stigmas around adult play that dismiss activities like playing games as the childish hobbies of people who would rather live in fictional worlds than be so-called "responsible adults." I think such stigmas carry particular weight and resonance for Black people when play historically has been understood as either for children or for a privileged white leisure class. The double bind in all of this, of course, is that Black people have been infantilized by a broader American culture that is all too willing to see Black playfulness as threatening or as indicative of innate immaturity and marred by a lack of intelligence.

This is why the work you are doing to raise the public conversations around games and adult play and also the work you are doing now as a voice actor are so important for debunking these long-held myths and stigmas. Then, too, I think your contributions make it clearer that Blackness at play is not defined by all the barriers to play, such as the regressive representations we have to challenge constantly or the surveillance, harassment, and exclusionary tactics we might be subjected to as we play. As we have discussed, such things do exist writ large in the commercial video games industry, but playing video games while Black—even in spaces designed for our denial or exclusion—is never only or always about our experiences with systemic bias and oppression. If that were the case, why on earth would we ever play games or pursue these hobbies that are autotelic? For Black adults who play video games, there are certainly ways to claim play as imperative and necessary, as joyful and restorative, and in ways that increase our capacity for living in this world.

How has playing as an adult been essential for you?

Holmes: Continuing to play as an adult is important for so many reasons. I cannot overemphasize the importance of reigniting my imagination and how impactful that has been on my mental health. As adults we've been conditioned into thinking that using your imagination, specifically for play, is the exclusive domain of children. The adult play culture around video games and tabletop games like Dungeons & Dragons (D & D) has shown what folly that thinking truly is. Using my imagination, especially within the collaborative storytelling framework of D & D, has been immeasurably helpful in my personal and professional life. You learn patience, perspective, and empathy. If you even give it a chance and sit down at a table, in

person or virtually, you'll see that it's one of the best decisions that you could ever make. The best thing you can do for yourself as an adult is to make time for play.

I think that part of that stigma around adults who play video games is starting to fade because people who are our age are the old folks now right, and we've grown up with video games so at least we know that there can be important imaginative work done with and through games. On top of that, the people who are making the big blockbuster games now are our age, so they're also bringing their play and life experiences to what they produce. For example, now there are new developers of games who have grown up playing a game like *God of War,* and they are now parents who understand some of the complex character dynamics that go into that representation of a parent who is a brute force in the world and also nurturing.

I think we've arrived at the point in the development of the medium where we've finally put that existential question, "Are games art?" to rest. So as adult players—as Black adult players—we can play with all the ways that these stories we play and the worlds we create through our engagements rival some of the greatest works of literature, film, and art.

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