



Article

The Future of Young Blacktivism: Aesthetics and Practices of Speculative Activism in Video Game Play

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Abstract

*Our study examines the collective ingenuity of Black young people as they develop speculative activist stances in the context of video games. Drawing on an Afrofuturist perspective, we center hope and possibility by exploring how Black people leverage their histories as a resource in the present to imagine radically new Black Futures in games such as *The Sims* and *Grand Theft Auto V*. We offer a framework for how youth develop fugitive and abolitionist imaginaries and practices that remix technology, resistance, and social relations, thereby re-articulating the possibilities of video game play, collaboration, and activism toward consequential forms of learning.*

Keywords

Gaming and Learning, Speculative Education, Afrofuturism

Introduction

Arundhati Roy (2020) argues that portals are “a gateway between one world and the next” (p. 132). In this respect they are simultaneously boundaries, imposing and mysterious or inviting and communicative. Within the context of social rebellion and this global pandemic, new portals have revealed social possibilities, facilitating the development of new cultural practices, such as freedom dreaming for Black young people. Consequently, this paper examines the collective ingenuity (Gutiérrez et al., 2017) that emerges as Black young people and adults engage in what we call speculative activism (Cortez & de León, 2021) in the context of video gaming ecologies. Drawing on an Afrofuturist perspective (Yaszek, 2006), we center hope and possibility by exploring how Black people leverage the past as a resource in the present to imagine radically new Black futures. Following the murder of George Floyd and at the height of the social uprisings in summer 2020, we illuminate how a group of Black young people and adults across the world engaged in speculative storytelling (Bell, 1992) and worldbuilding on *Sims* and *Grand Theft Auto V*. As gamers, we have gained insight into the practices that have emerged across broader gaming ecologies, and for the purposes of this study we share our insights on the gaming and content creation practices of Black streamers. In particular, we offer a framework for how learning spaces can be designed to support Black youth in developing fugitive and abolitionist imaginaries and practices that remix technology, resistance, and social relations (Benjamin, 2019). Through such a framework, we aim to re-articulate common conceptions of the possibilities of video game play and center how collaboration and activism inscribed in such gaming practices can lead to consequential forms of learning.

Video games have often been criticized for not being inclusive enough nor designed with diverse interests or storylines (Schut, 2007). In today’s gaming context, designers are pressured to create games that adequately represent Black and Brown experiences and address issues of representation and diversity in gaming. Here, we take the position that young Black and Brown people are already engaging in the creation of gaming ecologies that are for them and by them, irrespective of any formal efforts by major and mainstream game designers/creators. Specifically, these young people are repurposing tools that are available to them and challenging the very notion of

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what video game play is and can be. We understand these practices to be consequential for Futures Studies as they rearticulate notions of utopia from that which is an achievable, ideal reality to one that is dynamic and ever-changing. This engagement with utopia centers practices that are generative of a not-yet-here (Muñoz, 2019), which critiques the present and rearticulates tools towards the creation of new possible futures.

For example, Black gamers are re-articulating the practices of popular games such as *NBA2K21* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, as we see in the gameplay shared by popular streamer¹ LakeyBake. As illustrated in frames of Figure 1 below, the flexible built-in features of these two games in particular allowed for “sandbox play”²—modifying the shirts that characters wear, as well as signs—where the players are able to stage their own versions of Black Lives Matter protests. Images of these in-game protests, which departed from the original game design, were widely shared on social media.

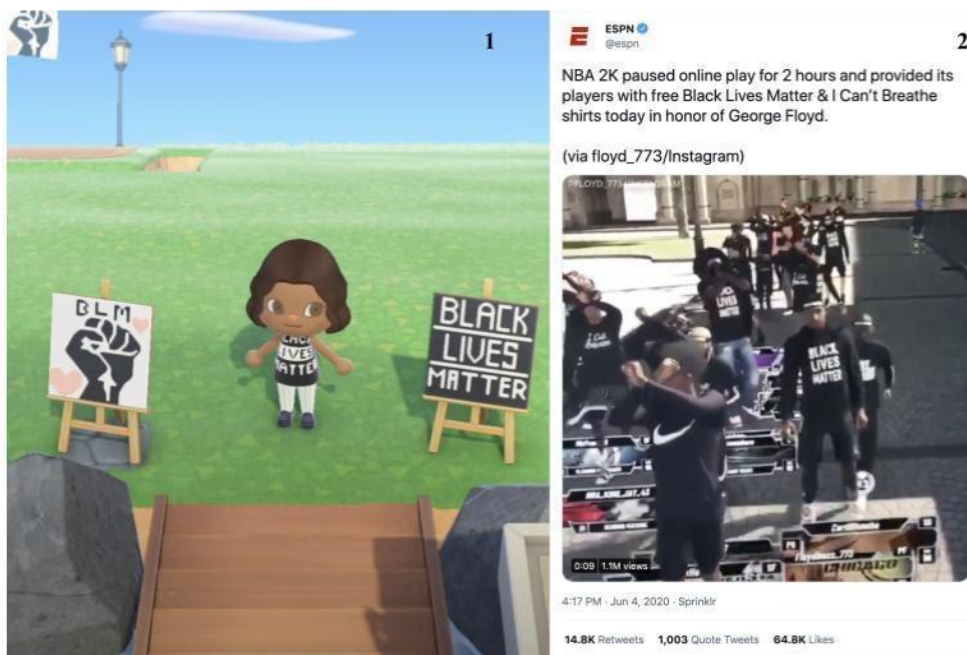


Fig. 1: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (frame 1) and *NBA2K21* (frame 2)

We offer these two examples as an overture to the sophisticated speculative activism that Black youth engage in as they play video games. As will become clear in this article, Black youth engage in a variety of gaming practices that go beyond one-off symbolic engagements with socio-political issues and begin to organize for new possible social futures across the virtual and physical terrains of their ecologies.

Our work addresses the following questions that highlight the ingenuity, agency, and future-oriented practices of Black youth as they engage in everyday video game play: (1) What can we learn about the political and ethical imagination of Black youth as it exists in the present, especially as we see young people engaged in speculative activism within the context of video game play? and (2) What kinds of cultural practices emerge in these processes?

We begin by outlining the theories that animate our examination of Blacktivism and speculative activism. These theories are concertedly nested in dynamic views of utopia and Afrofuturism: visions and practices towards futures that depart from those imposed by colonialism and the white gaze. We continue by presenting and defining a set of video gaming practices that are characterized by Black youth’s impetus to critique current political and ethical issues and world-make for the purposes of imagining and organizing towards new possible futures. This is what we call speculative activism. In the third section, we discuss two examples of Black youth engaging in the aforementioned speculative activism across the ecologies of the *Sims 4* and *Grand Theft Auto V* games, as well as social media platforms. These examples are representative of activist gameplay that were discovered in the weeks following the murder of George Floyd. We conclude with implications for Futures Studies as well as educational research.

Theorizing Future Studies in Times of Black Fugitivity

We heed the call of the editors of this special issue of the *Journal of Futures Studies* to center the dreams of “generations of Black people who are now not in possession of the education and imagination that allows them to envision the future” (Davis, 2012, p. 89). In what follows, we claim that Black youth, in particular, have had and continue to have the ideational and material tools to imagine new futures, but that we, as educators and researchers, have often lacked the vision necessary to recognize these as valued and consequential (Gutiérrez, et al., 2017). It is possible that such perceptions of futurity, specifically visions of utopia, are informed by colonial and static versions of possible futures. This is to say that utopia is often conceived of as an ideal endpoint that falls on the dichotomy between the abstract and concrete (Bloch, 2000). According to Muñoz (2019), abstract utopias can be described as untethered from historicity and considered no more than “banal optimism,” while concrete utopias are situated more historically and have the potential of becoming reality in our everyday lives (p. 3). However, we find that such a dichotomy does not adequately capture the type of utopia that centers Black conceptions of fugitivity and abolition—a utopia that manifests in everyday resistance and world-making and foregrounds how Blackness is still being invented and reinvented.

Utopia as dynamic: Centering the not-yet-here

We follow those who have challenged the dichotomy of abstract and concrete utopias (the idealist linearity of the concept) to advance a definition that is dynamic and reflective of Black futurity. Levitas (1990; 2004), offers an understanding of utopias as falling between an *educated hope* and the *education of desire*. The former relates to a critical awareness of the potential perfectibility of humanity, thus offering a model of a perfect and desirable future that may already exist in our present reality. The latter centers the *desire* for a future that has not been articulated in our current world, rupturing taken-for-granted notions of what a “perfect” future looks and feels like. Within the context of Black fugitivity and abolition in the United States, the *education of desire* framing of utopia seems apt, since it can be argued that there have been few if any models of what true Black utopia is (Zamalin, 2019). Moreover, centering *desire* in articulations of utopia unsettles (Bang et al., 2012) common, white-centered visions of ideal future techno-utopias that are race-free and where “technologies would purportedly render obsolete social differences that are divisive now” (Benjamin, 2019, p. 43). We argue, as have others, that color-blind ideologies often frame race and Blackness as a liability and exacerbate whiteness and white supremacy.

As explored in previous work (Lizárraga & Cortez, 2020), queer utopias have not had a finite materiality. As Muñoz (2019) articulates, such utopias occupy a liminal space, a “not-yet-here,” or a perpetual look towards a horizon that may never arrive. In this sense, utopia resides in the queering and challenging of normativity, but also in the pleasure and joy that comes from seemingly fleeting moments of disidentification with the heteronormative and patriarchal systems that surround us. In addition, by eschewing notions that privilege prescriptive and perfect utopias, we align these examinations of queer utopia with what we know about Black fugitivity and futurity as processual—a rhizomatic pattern threading together “moment-in-history-interaction” (McKinney de Royston & Sengupta-Irving, 2019) identifying the everyday moments of liberation and joy that can catalyze future change.

Afrofuturism as aesthetic and socio-technical

Dery (1994) explains how mainstream explorations of futurity ostensibly parallels the plight of African Americans. In Dery’s view, African Americans exist under the “impassable force fields” of colonialism and capitalism as descendants of “abductees,” and technology is “too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind)” (p.180). Consequently, Dery argues that speculative fiction that centers Black themes in technologically and prosthetically enhanced futures can be called *Afrofuturism*. A core tenant of Afrofuturism, then, is reintroducing Black selves into forcefully erased and painful histories and imaging better, alternative (future) realities.

To be clear, Black people continue to do this work, not just in speculative fiction, but in the most “unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points” (Dery, 1994, p. 182), such as the paintings of Basquiat or musical innovations of Sun-Ra (Elia, 2014), P-Funk/Funkadelic, and Missy Elliot (David, 2007), and, as we illuminate in this manuscript, in the everyday practices of young people. Looking at the world through an Afrofuturist lens means looking at how institutions and oppression impact reality and knowledge, but also how, in spite of this, Black

individuals are able to (re)imagine and (re)invent alternative realities and futures.

We align ourselves with those who see that presently-dominant notions of the future come from an industry that generates data from the past, scientific data, and scientific and cooperative activity into a coherent narrative that conflates blackness with catastrophe (Eshun, 2003; Yaszek, 2006). Instead, Afrofuturism (as framed in our work) fights these dystopian futures in two ways: (1) using everyday use of innovative technologies, namely gaming, as an avenue to highlight how black alienation is perpetuated in dominant visions of the present and future; and (2) painting the future as something dynamic that allows for movement back, forth, and across time and space—in this way looking to the past is also looking towards the future (Yaszek, 2006). Afrofuturism largely sees this luminality—a looking back as looking forward—as Sankofa, a term appropriated from Ghanaian origins. Other notions of this concept exist as temporal switchback (Eshun, 2003), but also, when coupled with constructionism—such as the case with Afrofuturist as critical constructionist design (Holbert et al., 2020)—creating possible futures is a cycle of connecting to personal and communal histories and reflecting forward on current and local systems towards action.

Moten's framing of blackness as fugitive (2018), as a perpetual state of refusal and desire to escape, is in direct conversation with Afrofuturism's impulse for flight. Whether in Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* (2003), Parliament's *Mothership Connection* (1975), or Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1998), flight in Afrofuturism symbolizes Black folk's ability to fly (or move) past any constraints that the current reality might impose on them (Banks, 2015). This theme of escape by means of flight is situated in a long tradition of stories for which flight—across the diaspora, across galaxies, across time and place—has been an ongoing means of claiming freedom.

Speculative activism and Blacktivism

We build on a definition of speculative activism as a “co-constructed repertoire of resistance practices, leveraged across digital and social media domains, oriented toward organizing new civic futures” (Cortez & De León, 2021, p. 5). In addition, following Hines (2020), “Blacktivism is a refusal of restrictions, an embrace of imagination and fantasy and dreams—realms of pleasure and forms of entertainment historically denied to Black people in the United States” (p. 221). It is our belief that a *speculative activist* lens allows us to see the Blacktivism in gaming as marked by a dynamic view of utopia and an Afrofuturist aesthetic and socio-technical orientation. Black fugitivity and futurity goes hand in hand with fungibility of tools and sociotechnical systems. Thus, it is fruitful to examine, despite the shortcomings of existing mainstream game design as others illuminated (Gray, 2020; Leonard, 2004; Shaw, 2012), how Black youth engage in micro-level gaming practices when it comes to issues of race and equity—described in the next section—that bring together notions of solidarity, love, and transformation as they challenge hegemonic power structures.

Seeing Everyday Gaming Practices Anew: Resistance and World-making

Our position is that everyday gaming practices are reflective of how Black youth make sense of their present oppressive circumstances and design for just and liberatory possible realities. In this vein, we begin with the premise that young people of color often engage in ingenious practices, involving socio-political action, critique, and other concrete actions in changing the world around them (Gutiérrez et al., 2019). In this present work, we center the common gaming practices of hacking, glitching, farming, respawning, and creating firewalls through the lens of speculative activism, an activism that espouses a dynamic notion of utopia and Afrofuturism. In this section we define these gaming moves both as important collaborative practices and as necessary practices for worldmaking. Our definition and illustration of these practices will be marked by hope and possibility, inscribing a movement away from ideal conceptions of utopia. Indeed, we see gaming practices of speculative activism as the perpetual agentic and affective movement *toward* utopia.

Hacking

Hacking involves the transformation of existing systems. While our common conceptions of hacking involve the under-the-hood re-coding of a digital software, we expand this definition to include hacking as repurposing the existing mechanics of the system toward ends beyond the designers' intentions. As Benjamin (2017) notes, hacking

requires that users have “an in-depth understanding of how [a system] works, its strengths and weaknesses, and a vision for how to make it better. These insights and skills allow us to subvert the systems and make it do something it wasn’t meant to do” (para. 7). As we will see in the next section, this is especially possible in role-playing games where gaming elements can be circumvented by users in order to achieve a collective goal that departs from the original game design, thereby allowing the gamers an opportunity to “embed new values and new social relations” (Benjamin, 2017, para. 8) into the game. As a Black speculative activist practice, we will present an example of a game (which, by design, reifies anti-Black ideologies) that is *hacked* for the purposes of protesting police violence.

Glitching

While hacking involves the transformation of the gaming systems, glitching is a practice that involves tapping into existing imperfections of the game. While not a focus of this article, glitching is an important practice in which gamers take advantage of malfunctions in the game’s design in order to gain an advantage in the game. Two common exploitations of glitches include gaining indestructibility and walking through solid objects. Related to the subject of the learning and transformation of youth of color, we are aligned with scholars like Rivero and Gutiérrez (2019) who have argued that glitching contributes to the agentic game play of youth of color by challenging the rules of codes and system designers, appropriating and repurposing tools, and employing ingenious means as young people leverage the expertise of others in gaming communities.

Collective farming and grinding

Farming and grinding is described as a repetitive and mundane activity that is done in order to gain experience points in a game. Examples of these activities include planting flowers in games like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* or repeating missions in *Grand Theft Auto* in order to make in-game money. As a Blacktivism practice, we see collective farming and grinding as a collaborative activity that leads to benefits for a broader community, both within the game and in real life (IRL).

Spawning and respawning

We identify spawning and respawning in gaming as instances where the player creates new life within the game. Spawning is an instance where a character first emerges as a sophisticated assemblage that blends racial/gender positionalities and socio-political identities. Respawning is an instance where a character returns to a gaming environment after it has been eliminated or “killed off.” Within the context of the work explored in this article, we view these practices as a concerted effort at Black survival in the face of dispossession and erasure.³

Firewalling

Technically speaking, firewalls typically safeguard systems by keeping unauthorized entities out. In the context of the gameplay described in this article, we describe firewalling as a practice where members of a gaming community keep out gamers who may be a hindrance to their socio-political work (cf. Castro et al., 2021). This firewalling manifests as the establishing and enforcement of the rules of engagement by leaders in certain role-playing video games. We view this practice as a micro-level act that protects the concerted speculative activism of Black youth in gaming.

Duality of tools in everyday gaming and play

As learning scientists steeped in the cultural historical tradition (Cole, 1998), we understand tools as having malleability. This is to say, tools are often repurposed and transformed depending on the changing needs, hopes, and desires of individuals and collectives (Engeström, 1990; Pea & Cole, 2019). In our work, we are particularly concerned with how digital tools of gaming are repurposed by youth in playful activity in order to develop new relationships, critique systems of oppression, and start organizing to take action in the world (cf. Gutiérrez, Becker, et al., 2019; Gutiérrez, Higgs, et al., 2019).

Black Gaming Ecologies

This study draws on ten hours of two live-streamed gaming events held by Ebonix and OTRGamerTV, including the conversations that took place during the game play, as well as the live text chat on respective Twitch and YouTube platforms. These two young Black streamers emerged as influential figures around gaming and activism during our engagement in broader gaming ecologies. Here, we consider these two vignettes of activity across gaming and social media platforms to illustrate how Black youth engage in speculative activism in everyday gaming practices. To this end, we screen-recorded the video game play as transmitted publicly by well-known Black gamers and streaming collectives, Ebonix and OTRGamerTV. We also collected transcripts of the public live chat that occurred during the livestream as well as conversations associated with this gameplay (via hashtags) that emerged on social media, primarily Twitter and Instagram.

Video, audio, and textual data were analyzed and reduced into activity logs (Erickson, 2006) and codes were developed inductively (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). In particular, we focused on how the gamers negotiated contestations that emerged across their participation during the video game play. Through the analysis of the microprocesses of multiple types of interactions in video game play, this study focused on how Black gamers who are part of our broader gaming ecology developed speculative activist stances as they contended with, ruptured, and re-imagined mainstream notions of activism.

About Ebonix

Ebonix is a content creator from London, who has gained notoriety for her creation of custom content for the game *The Sims 4*. She is particularly known for creating African-themed motifs, such as dashiki, that are not standard in the game. In the gamer community, Ebonix is well-known as a Twitch Partner and EA Game Changer. In her published online bio, she notes how across her work as a content creator and gamer, she is heavily influenced by her Black heritage (as Nigerian and Bajan) and a desire to see more of herself and her communities in gaming spaces.

About OTRGamerTV

OTRGamerTV is operated by multiple male-identified Black and Brown Muslims from the United Kingdom, ages 14-25 years old. Their YouTube channel hosts livestreams of synchronous online gameplay of, primarily, *Grand Theft Auto V (GTA5)*. OTRGamerTV maintains a community of predominantly Black and Brown gamers from all over the world. They gained public notoriety and influence in our broader gaming ecology in June of 2020 for their virtual Black Lives Matter protest and memorial for George Floyd that they organized on GTA5. The first author of this article who has become a well-known member of multiple gaming communities under the moniker, “The Professor”, is frequently invited to participate in OTRGamerTV’s gaming activities.

Blacktivism: Speculative Activism in Everyday Gaming

The following vignettes describe Blacktivism, or everyday speculative activism, by two Black gamers and streamers. We begin with Ebonix’s virtual fundraising campaign for Black-serving organizations that occurred over the six hours she played *The Sims 4* video game and streamed/simulcast her gameplay on her Twitch channel. Then, we continue with an analysis of OTRGamerTV’s virtual Black Lives Matter protest and memorial for George Floyd which was held on *Grand Theft Auto V* and simulcast on Youtube. Across both examples,⁴ we highlight the aforementioned gaming practices and moves as those that mark and catalyze resistance and new worldmaking for Black communities.

Spawning and farming: Ebonix and *The Sims 4*

Throughout the six hours of gameplay and streaming on June 7, 2021, Ebonix engaged in a variety of practices that expanded into relational, collaborative, and speculative activity. Ebonix began the day’s stream by logging into *The Sims 4* game and announcing that this would be a fundraiser for The Bail Project, a non-profit organization that aims to “restore the presumption of innocence, reunite families, and challenge a system that criminalizes race and poverty” by ending cash bail during the pretrial system (The Bail Project, 2020). In doing so, she further set some incentives for those tuned in for the stream: (1) for every 1,000 new subscriptions to her channel or 10,000 followers she would schedule a continuous 24-hour stream; (2) once \$5,000 was raised for The Bail Project (through a link posted in the chat), she would schedule another continuous 24-hour stream; and (3) for every donation to the Bail Project, she would eat a mysterious Jelly Belly candy, put on a temporary tattoo, or sing a viewer’s name.

In our observation of the activities, we saw how the tenor and cadence of the stream was very casual with Ebonix changing her Sims characters live and periodically engaging with the comments being posted in the chat. As we will describe shortly, her gameplay and participation with her audience was marked by the Blacktivist practices of *spawning/respawning* and *collective grinding and farming*. It is important to note that while we documented and analyzed this interaction linearly from beginning to end, our description and analysis moves across the event, out of linear time, in order to punctuate themes and concepts salient to our exploration of Blacktivism.

Spawning and respawning: New skins to see ourselves in gaming and activism

As we previously mentioned, Ebonix has made a name for herself as a Black content creator for *The Sims 4*. Namely, her desire to see herself and her communities represented prompted her to create “skins” with Black textured hair as well as clothing with African motifs. The skins and motifs that Ebonix has created have been widely adopted by gamers worldwide, including rapper T-Pain (Smith-Walters, 2019). Further, we see how her custom content helps catalyze the spawning of Black identity across her gaming ecology.

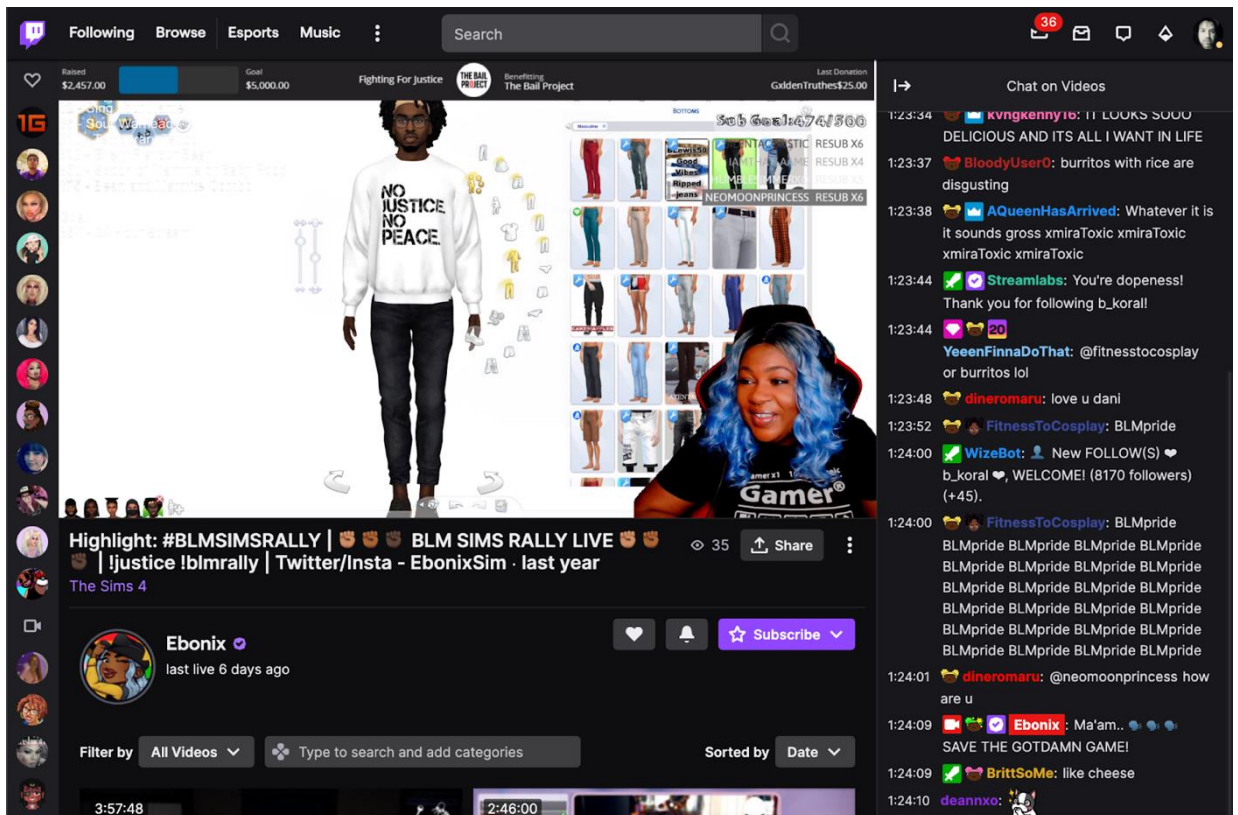


Fig. 2: Ebonix creating a Sims character live on Twitch

During the streaming of her gameplay, Ebonix crafted several avatars using her customized skins that would be part of an asynchronous online Black Lives Matter rally that she was organizing. As seen in Figure 2 above, while she was creating her character and donations continued to come in, she reminded the audience that one of the purposes of the stream is to monetarily support The Bail Project. It was at this moment that the audience transitioned from spectating to storytelling by offering testimonials and their personal experiences as Black people navigating white supremacist systems. Excerpt 1 opens the conversation about Black people and the medical system.

Excerpt 1: Ebonix’s community shares experiences with anti-Blackness (hour 4:27:07; lines 1-2 transcribed from chat; lines 3-8 from audio).

1. **jackrabbitjohnson**⁵: medical racism among doctors is also a huge issue! not enough
2. accountability for bad doctors.
3. **Ebonix**: I can personally attest to that. I can personally say my experience with white doctors,
4. especially white male doctors, is waaaay, way worse than my experience with a Black nurse.
5. When I had my first experience with a Black nurse I cried. I cried when I had my first experience
6. with a Black nurse because I’ve never felt more heard, more understood, more felt in my life. I’ve
7. never felt more heard in my life. Then I get this white doctors who’s ready to hang up the phone
8. on me.

When jackrabbitjohnson shared their personal experience on the stream, this signaled a collaborative pivot in what seemed to be an activity that Ebonix was engaged in on her own. We contend that Ebonix’s hand was guided by a collective desire to value and uphold Black life in light of everyday encounters that do the opposite. As she is creating the avatar, she is inviting the audience to imbue their experiences and triumphs into the image of Black resistance. Specifically, lines 5-7 illustrate the affective dimension of having Black humanity recognized, valued, and heard. Importantly, we see it as a collaborative *spawning* of new Black life in the game and beyond. Our analysis of this exchange illustrates spawning as a “surplus of vitality, a reserve of as-yet unexpended life, a technologically mediated capacity to keep on going even while facing dire adversity” (Milburn, 2018, p. 9). In Figure 3 below, one sees a picture emerge of robust Black life emerging in the game, as Ebonix engages in this collective testimonial work, all while not missing a beat in her gameplay.

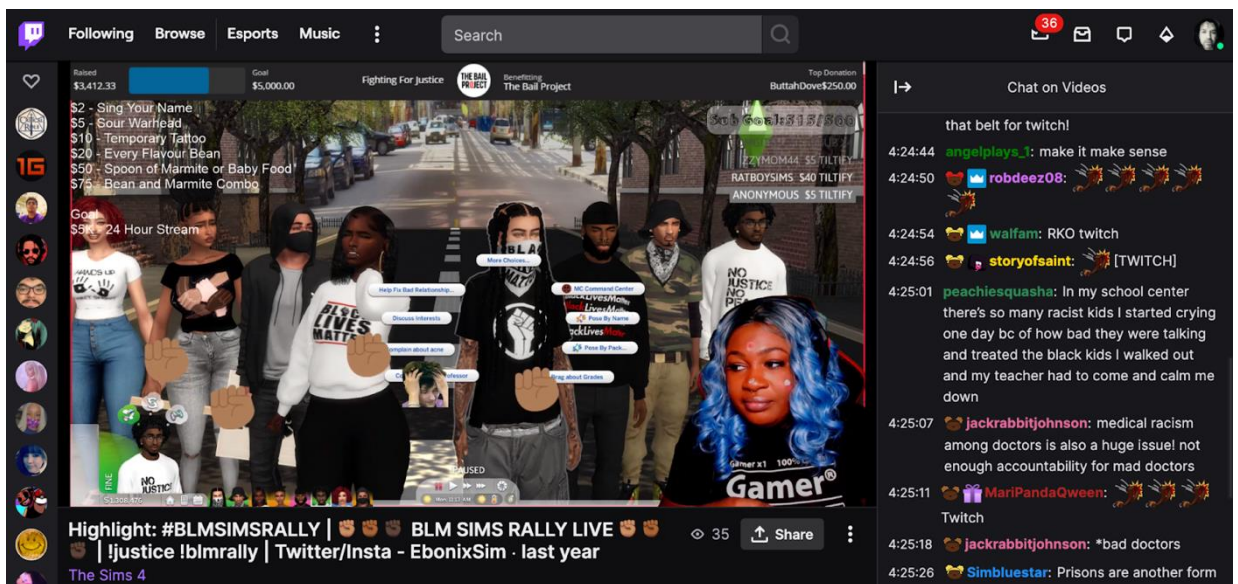


Fig. 3: Collection of Black life emerges on Sims

Farming and respawning across the gaming ecology: Black life into the future.

While this spawning continued throughout the six hours of streaming, a legitimate question emerged around the longevity of moments that value and uplift Black life through game play and activism. Specifically, at around hour five of the stream, Ebonix expresses her worry that people will forget about this important work “‘cause it is not done.” In her effort to extend the temporality of this endeavor, she posted the hashtag #BLMSIMSRALLY at the bottom of her screen and encouraged her collaborators to use it as they posted their own Sims creations online. Our mining of this hashtag revealed how Ebonix catalyzed a respawning of digital Black life across an ecology that spanned multiple social media platforms.

We simultaneously consider how the creation and sharing of *respawned* Black lives across Ebonix’s online community, displayed in Figure 4 below, is also a collective farming and grinding: repetitive actions in a game that guide a player in “becoming stronger and more experienced with each victory” (Milburn, 2019, p. 202). Here, we rearticulate that practice from one that is beneficial to an individual player to one that attends to the hopes, needs, and desires of a broader community. What on the surface may appear as well-curated images of virtual protest (represented in Figure 4) actually represents hours upon hours of elaborate avatar-creation.

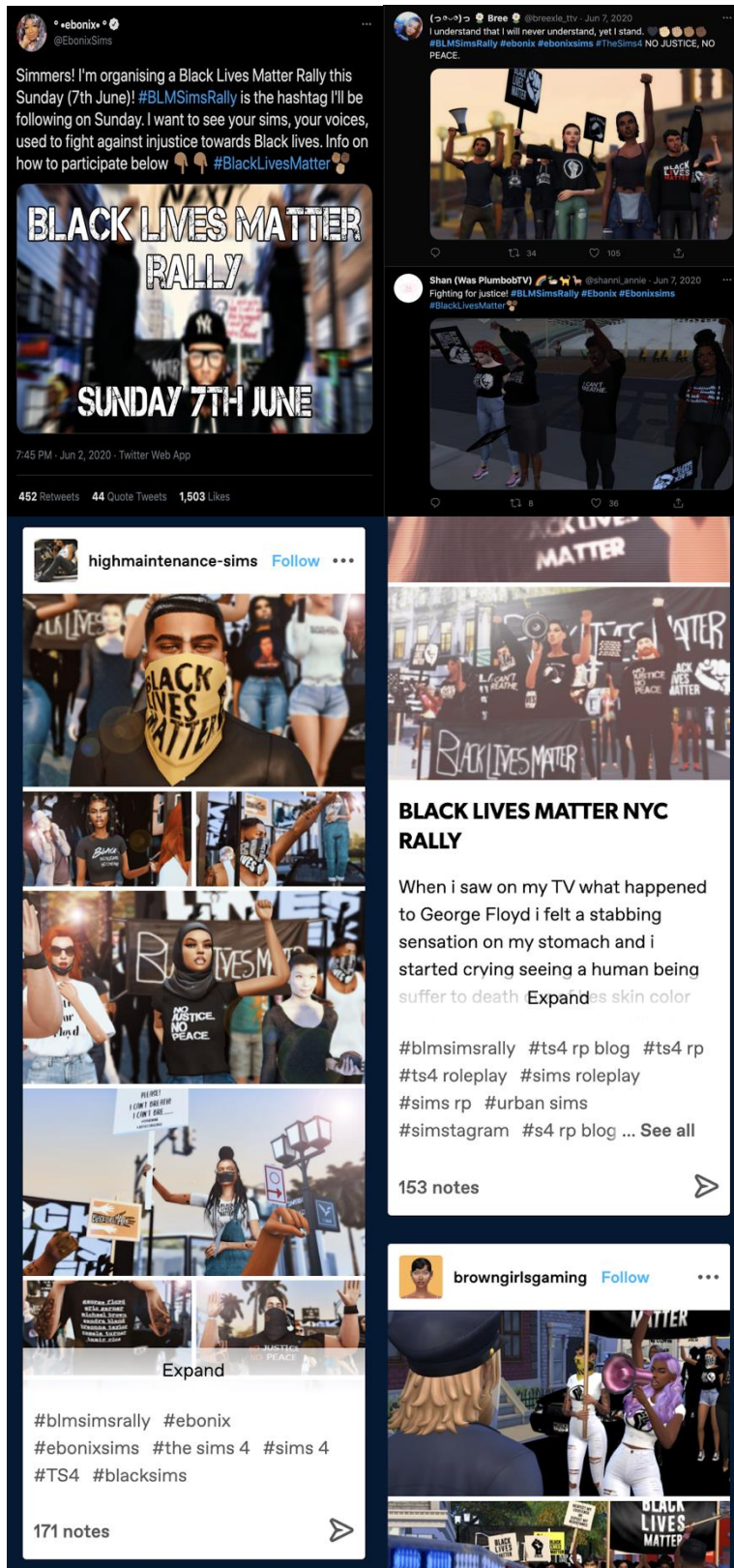


Fig. 4: Selected screenshots of Sims avatars created by Ebonix’s community

Towards utopia

We further see this collective grinding, farming, and respawning as a project to extend the longevity of Black protest, projecting Blacktivism into a perpetual future that will have life beyond the June 7th rally. In this regard, Ebonix's creation of Black-centered skins that facilitated the gaming practice of spawning and respawning Black life in the digital realm are acts of speculative activism that start organizing for new social futures. We also saw moments of this future-oriented thinking during the stream. Excerpt 2 illustrates an exchange between Ebonix and one of her stream collaborators exploring the necessity of changing systems of policing.

Excerpt 2: Changing systems of anti-Blackness

(hour 4:20:00; lines 1-3 transcribed from chat; lines 4-11 from audio).

1. **heyRynn:** I'm here lurking, but I wholeheartedly agree with you! The entire police force across
2. the nation needs to be completely gutted and rehabbed from the ground up! Requiring an actual
3. criminal justice degree, or it's [sic] equivalent, for incoming and grandfathered in officers!
4. **Ebonix:** I agree. An actual degree or equivalent for incoming or grandfathered in officers. I'm
5. telling you, I don't get how you can do, like what, isn't it 19, 20 weeks of training to become a
6. police officer. But, you have to do 4 plus years to be a doctor or like a psychologist. It doesn't
7. make sense. You have to be, you have to be x amount of years, six to ten years for a doctor. It's an
8. emergency service. It's an emergency service. You telling me you can encompass all that you
9. need to know to be a police within...that short amount of time. Do you know how much training
10. you need to do in order to deal with people. What is it, 9-10 weeks and then, boom, you're a
11. police officer and they're given a gun to do what they want. It don't make sense.

Ebonix takes on heyRynn's initial proposal for changing the police system by making concrete connections to existing educational and training trajectories for other professionals engaged in jobs that are considered an "emergency service" (line 8). In this regard, she provides plausible avenues for police reform that center the protection of life (line 6) instead of a current reality where life, specifically Black life, is trampled upon by police. From a dynamic utopia perspective, we see Ebonix's proposal as one that departs from "banal optimism" (Muñoz, 2019) but does not completely dismiss the possibility of existing models that can help remediate harmful ones. However, as we can see in a previous exchange (Excerpt 1) even the model that she proposes, the medical system, is fraught with its own pervasive anti-Blackness and inhumanity. This speaks to the constant moving target that is a Black utopia.

Hacking and firewalling: OTRGamerTV and *Grand Theft Auto V*

In the following vignette we examine the video game play of a group of Black and Brown young people (known as OTRGamerTV) who regularly come together to engage in multi-player games like *The Crew 2*, as well as *Grand Theft Auto V (GTA)*, a game with a notorious reputation for misogyny, homophobia, extreme violence, and its stereotypical representations of Black and Brown communities (DeVane & Squire, 2008). At the height of the social rebellions in 2020, members of OTRGamerTV planned a memorial to George Floyd on *GTA Online* a week after his murder. The organizers of this event used the stream and gameplay as a platform to raise money for George Floyd and his family. There were approximately 35 participants engaged in the actual game play and approximately 40 people watching the live stream. Several different countries from around the world were represented across the audience and players, including Kenya, Jamaica, Mexico, the United Kingdom, the United States, and others.

Over the course of four hours on June 6th, 2020, the collective established new rules for their gameplay. Specifically, all players were expected to dress in black, customize their cars in black paint, and refrain from killing each other. In addition, the group engaged in new practices during their gameplay as they collectively moved across Los Santos—the virtual city in *GTA V* that is modeled on Los Angeles—such as protesting through the streets, as well as outside the virtual Los Santos Police Department, as shown in Figure 5 below. Finally, players drove to the

Vinewood Cemetery in Los Santos and held a funeral and memorial for George Floyd, depicted below in Figure 6. All main activities that transpired over the course of the gameplay were collectively negotiated and performed, with new players joining in throughout the stream.

Two members of the group, regarded as the leaders of OTRGamerTV, were largely responsible for monitoring the chat stream (Figure 6) and often replied verbally, on the audio stream, to questions and comments that emerged over the course of the gameplay. The tenor and flow of the stream mimicked that of an IRL rally, with the two leading members organizing and physically orienting the growing crowd on the game. As we will describe shortly, OTRGamerTV facilitated gameplay and participation that was marked by Blacktivist practices of firewalling and hacking that offer insight into the ways that gaming systems can be transformed to center Black mourning and love.

Firewalling: Protecting the socio-political object of gameplay

As we explained earlier, firewalls typically safeguard systems by keeping unauthorized entities out. Castro et al. (2021) help us think of the ways in which gamers of color can repurpose the firewall, especially when these are meant to reify power structures designed to privilege the interests of a dominant class and often shut young people of color out of the design elements of gaming. In this respect, they challenge educators and researchers to consider how firewalls can be rearticulated to decenter legitimate power. This is significant because *GTA*, in particular, has been known to reify tropes about Black people (Polasek, 2014). In the context of this stream, we describe how OTRGamerTV, as facilitator of the gameplay, designed a *firewall* to keep out gamers who may be a hindrance to the gaming collective's socio-political work. Specifically, here we see firewalling in ways that establish and enforce rules of engagement.

However, our players negotiated several contestations in response to this firewall. In particular, there were concerns raised by some of the spectators who were watching the live stream stating that *GTA* should not be played in this way, that the game was meant to be apolitical, and that it should only center shooting and killing. Additionally, there were some viewers who began "disliking" the stream on Youtube. Excerpt 3 shows our OTRGamerTV leaders respond to this act of perceived aggression towards their gaming activity.

Excerpt 3. OTRGamerTV leaders respond to "dislikes" on the stream.

1. **Raja:** Look at the ten dislikes. Whose ever disliking...you know what,
2. guys.
3. **Omar:** Nah, that went from like five to ten in like fucking two minutes. You like haters, bruv.
4. How you gonna smash the dislike? When we're doing something that's trying to be like a
5. positive movement, people, like we're not here to just fuckabout. Come on, people. Look at the
6. screen. Look at what's going on. Everyone's listening, yeah, you lot want to hate like that. You're
7. fucked, man. You lot are fucked, bruv"
8. **Omar:** Raja, you know what it is. Think about it, yeah? That just shows we got racist people
9. among us, bruv. Straight up, bro. It was on five dislikes a couple of minutes. It said five, yeah.
10. And, now you've jumped to ten. Ah, one of 'em went away. Wow!?! You're not a racist. You're
11. not racist anymore, are ya?"
12. **MannyJ_14** (via message gaming platform): its probs 2fics bots disliking
13. **Omar:** Yeah, manny, that's probably true, my brother. We've got a lot of people showing love
14. and their support.

This excerpt illustrates how the young people who were playing online responded by asking the audience to examine the racism embedded in their actions (lines 8-9). The group specifically reminds those watching the stream of the public nature of their positions, and whether they wanted to be perceived as "racists" in such a visible way (lines 5-7). But, more importantly, it is significant to note that the firewall erected by OTRGamerTV was working.

Indeed, the “haters” were being held at the proverbial gate and the organizers of the virtual protest/memorial would not be deterred. And, as noted by Omar in lines 13-14, there were plenty viewers who were there to show their support. These micro-level acts of designing and sustaining the firewall—acts that protected the concerted speculative activism imbued in this gaming—further led to the *hacking* of a typically violent game in order to center collective mourning and Black affect.



Fig. 5: Players gather at a police station within the *Grand Theft Auto V* game

Hacking the anti-Black game

Throughout the streamed gameplay on GTA, OTRGamerTV circumvented elements of the game in order to achieve a collective goal that departed from the original game design, thereby allowing the gamers an opportunity to “embed new values and new social relations” into the game (Benjamin, 2017, para. 8). In this regard, they rearticulated how this game was meant to be played, away from one that privileges death and the accumulation of capital and towards one that involves shared affinity and a socio-political purpose. It was in these moments that we were able to see how these young people collectively pushed on the game designers’ intentions, and also how they *hack* the game for political purposes, rearticulating the possibilities of activism. Activism was reimagined within a virtual world across geopolitical boundaries allowing, for complex negotiations to occur within this gaming community, and also for young people to express their fears, desires, and hopes for a new world that is free of police brutality. Indeed, this was a breaking away from the common goals of *GTA*. It represented a possibility for transformative agency (cf. Haapasaari, Engeström, & Kerosuo, 2016; Sannino, Engeström, & Lemos, 2016).

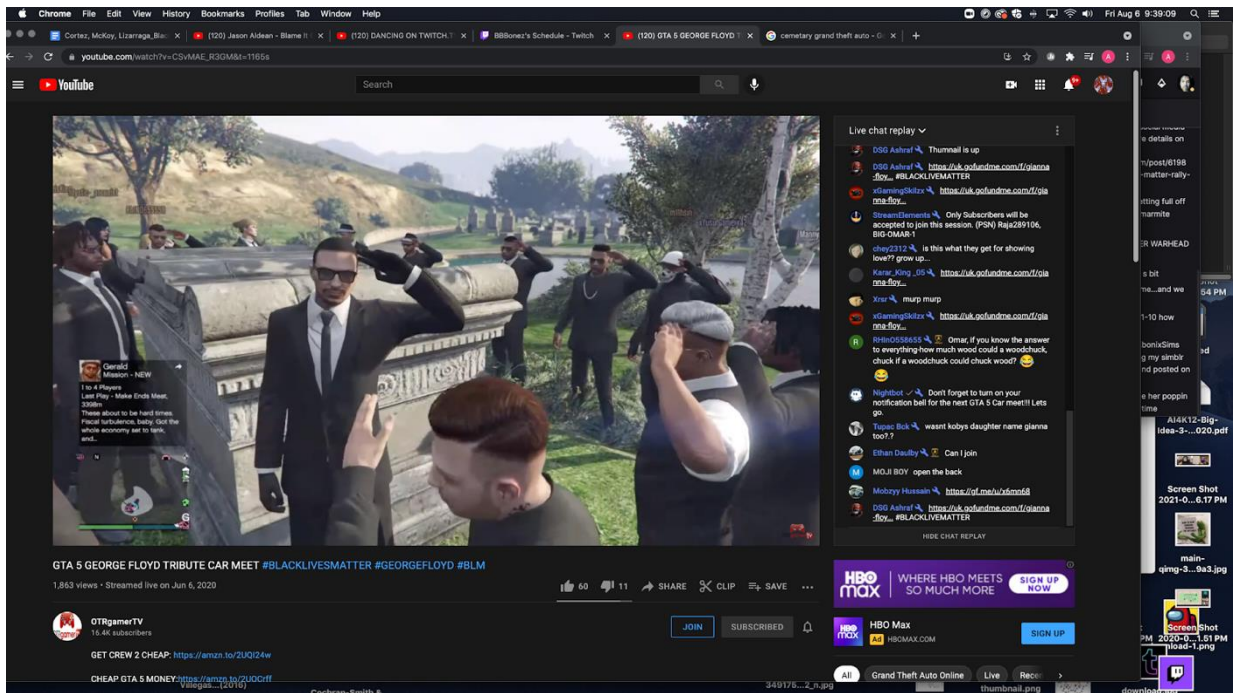


Fig. 6: Gamers gather at the cemetery within GTA V to honor George Floyd

Here, we see young people engaging in technologically-mediated and emerging forms of protest and activism in video gameplay that are indeed interactional and dignity-affirming. We consider activism, protest, and resistance to be sociocultural practices with their own set of local and global histories (Gutiérrez, Becker, et al., 2019). The gameplay shows us how the players are participating in the broader Black Lives Matter movement in their moment-to-moment interactions. Through their activism, protest, and resistance, the young people *hacked* the virtual environment to bend it to their rules of engagement. Not only are they pushing on the intentions of the game designers, they are also rearticulating what is considered possible for activism in digital spaces.

The hacking of *GTA V* also involved the *spawning* of activist life in the game, much like what we observed in Ebonix’s gameplay. In this case, participants were expected to dress their avatars in black and paint their cars black as they drove through the virtual streets of Los Santos to honor George Floyd. In this regard, the game’s privileging of individuality was subverted to create a sense of a collective, a necessary move for the Blacktivism of this activity.

Conclusion

This article aimed to center video game play as a valued and consequential site for speculative activism and articulation of Black futurity. Here, we saw that Black gamers engaged in what Mirra and Garcia (2020) call speculative civic literacies that highlight the development of “expansive, creative forms of meaning making and communication aimed at radically reorienting the nature and purpose of shared democratic life toward equity, empathy, and justice” (p. 297). In doing so, the young people developed fugitive and abolitionist imaginaries and practices. As Benjamin (2019) notes, “calls for abolition are never simply about bringing harmful systems to an end but also about envisioning new ones” (p. 162). Here, our study illuminates how Black young people remixed technology, resistance, and social relations, thereby re-articulating the possibilities of video game play, collaboration, and activism toward consequential forms of learning. That is, they called forth and created possibilities for technologically-mediated activism, opening up opportunities for new futures.

This study offers implications for the design of learning environments that leverage video game play as a central site for the development of sociopolitical action and critique. In doing so we offer a departure from common efforts to merely “gamify” existing pedagogical practices (i.e. bring gaming principles to content area lessons) and shift our focus to the rich and consequential learning that happens in everyday meaningful activities led by Black youth

and non-dominant young people. There is so much potential for building with teachers and adults in these gaming spaces by troubling the generational divides present in our society. Our work causes us to think about how young people and adults can learn to share their expertise with one another. Technology demands that we lean into these possibilities, especially in video gaming environments.

Despite the preponderance of deficit discourses around video game play and technological use more broadly, our work has implications for how we design dignity-conferring learning environments that privilege play. Following Vygotsky, play is not solely defined as a pleasure-seeking activity; it is about learning how to overcome the constraints of everyday life (Gutiérrez, Higgs, et al, 2019). In our work play is always speculative and presents an opportunity for an individual to become someone else both in the imagination and in our everyday lives. In this regard, video game play can be seen as a potentially robust learning environment. Furthermore, we trouble adults' specific expectations for what constitutes political and civic engagement and meaningful use of technology. While we obviously do not claim that all videogame play is marked by the Blacktivism represented in this article, we do believe that, through gameplay, young people have the potential of becoming a head taller as they leverage technology toward new, more just and liberatory ends. This underscores how teachers should design for learning opportunities that foster and leverage the agentic practices of youth; everyday practices of resistance and dignity affirmation.

We end with a quote from Ebonix's stream. Her words resonate with the broader themes of Blacktivism—a speculative activism—that we discussed in this article. In the cases presented here, gameplay went beyond being an activity for pleasure. That is not to say that joy was not present in either of Ebonix or OTRGamerTV's practices, but that the enjoyable nature of the game was imbued with socio-political purpose that imagines and organizes towards a futurity that is full of Black love and humanity. Here, Ebonix illustrates the hope and possibility of Black futurity after responding to a generous donation made by a stream participant named Chel:

[Reading Chel's text in the chat] "No justice, no peace. Thank you for always speaking the truth. You helped me as a black female gamer. I feel like it's a family in your streams. And to see you speaking the truth out here and advocating for our human rights it is inspiring and motivating. I'm tired. I'm tired."

I'm not gonna cry. Cause I'm at that point, I'm at that point. But, this is so fucking beautiful. This is so fucking beautiful. Like. Chel, honey, thank you so much for your really really generous donation. We are really breaking the system together, like we are really working on breaking the system, and together, as one. And I've never done anything like this before. And so it means so much to me that we as a community can help break down fucking systematic racism. And giving Black people back their life. Black women Black men who are wrongly being incarcerated. It is so beautiful to see. And I am so proud of us for raising so much.

Notes

- 1- Streamers refer to gamers who stream their gaming activities live on web-based platforms such as Twitch and Youtube.
- 2- Sandbox games refer to video games that give players a high degree of creativity and flexibility in completing in-game tasks.
- 3- While this article describes "death" in gaming spaces, it is important to not trivialize the very real violence and death against Black bodies in real life contexts.
- 4- The streaming services of Twitch and YouTube have respective affordances and constraints, with the former having more popularity within gaming communities and the latter having more mainstream use. Use of these services by our streamers is solely based on preference.
- 5- Usernames are used throughout in excerpts from livestream chats

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