# Re-Presenting the Black Gamer

## A practice-based exploration of the representation of people, bodies and communities of colour in selected Video Games.

A dissertation submitted in partial submission of the requirements for the Master's Degree in Fine Art: Department of Fine Art and Jewellery Design in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the Durban University of Technology.

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February 2019

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# DECLARATION

I declare that *Re-Presenting the Black Gamer: A practice-based exploration of the representation of people, bodies and communities of colour in selected Video Games* is my own work. All sources used have been cited by means of complete references. This dissertation is being submitted for the Master's Degree in Fine Art: Department of Fine Art and Jewellery Design in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the Durban University of Technology. I declare that this dissertation not been submitted previously for any degree or examination through any other institution.

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2019

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# ABSTRACT

This study uses my art practice to explore and critique stereotypical and violent representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in selected video games. I draw from the work of selected artists, Eva and Franco Mattes as well as Joseph Delappe, who use their art practice to address and unsettle stereotypical and violent video game representations. This study also draws from the work of Kishonna L Gray, who centres her critique of stereotypical and violent representations of people of colour in video games around her own experiences as a gamer of colour. Due to my art practice being at the centre of this study, this study thus adopts a practice based research methodology with an emergent design.

Literature suggests that despite having evolved significantly due to rapid advances in computer technology, video games are still often sites where well-trodden tropes and stereotypes in the representation of the racialised other continue to be reproduced and reinforced as the 'norm' (Sisler 2008, Leonard 2003, Conditt 2015, Gray 2014). People, bodies and communities of colour represented in the selected video games are often reduced through in-game narrative or gameplay to exotic sites for lustful desire, consumption or violent subjugation (Brock 2011, Sisler 2008, Leonard 2003, Conditt 2015, Gray 2014).

This study argues that stereotypical portrayals of people, bodies and communities of colour in video games are often informed by dominant social constructions of race and hierarchal racial difference: often presented by their creators as 'authentic' virtual recreations of the real world. Racial stereotypes in video games perpetuate the socially constructed myth that hierarchal racial difference is a naturally occurring phenomenon, permanently fixed and imbedded in nature. This study challenges this myth on the premise that race is not naturally fixed but socially constructed.

Drawing from the work of the selected artists as well as my own experiences as a black South African artist and gamer, my art practice challenges various visual/audial representations of hierarchal racial difference in the selected video games. My art practice recontextualises these video game representations, re-presenting them through my lens as a black South African gamer. This research resulted in a body of work, exhibited in partial fulfilment of the Master's Degree in Fine Art.

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# CHAPTER ONE: OUTLINE OF STUDY

## 1.1. Introduction

This study explores the unsettling of stereotypical and violent visual/audial representations in video games, in the work of selected artists as well as in my own art practice. My art practice focuses specifically on analysing, critiquing and unsettling stereotypical and violent representations of people, bodies and communities of colour[1] in selected[2] video games. I argue that these stereotypically racist representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in video games are often informed by dominant social constructions of race and hierarchal racial difference. To support this argument, this study draws from Social Construction Theory, Critical Race Theory as well as theory surrounding the act of visual and audial representation as a cultural practice. These theories inform my discourse analysis of the work of the selected artists and video games as visual texts. Drawing from these various theories and texts, I seek to gain a better understanding of how dominant notions, myths and assumptions of hierarchal racial difference inform the often-violent racial stereotypes perpetuated in video games. This study also draws from selected literature from writers who draw from their experiences as racially marginalised gamers to critique racial stereotypes and violence in video games.

Racial stereotypes in video games, often presented by video game developers as 'mimetically authentic' virtual recreations of the real world, perpetuate the myth that

[1] This study uses the term 'of colour' as a more inclusive alternative to 'black' in order to explore issues of race and representation in video games outside the 'black/white binary'.

> "By offering a two-dimensional discourse, the Black/White binary limits understandings of the multiple ways in which African Americans, Native Americans, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Chicanas/os, and Latinas/os continue to experience, respond to, and resist racism and other forms of oppression" (Yosso 2005: 72).

Whilst the representation of blackness in video games is explored in detail in this study, this study uses the term 'of colour' to indicate its broader exploration of the representation of 'non-whiteness' in video games. For example, this study analyses the work of selected new media art duo Eva and Franco Mattes, who explore and unsettle the representation of Middle Eastern conflict in American video games in their work. The subject matter of their work falls outside the traditional black/white binary race discourse but still falls within the realm of discussing the representation of the racialised other (non-whiteness) in video games.

[2] The video games selected to part of this study are video games that I have personally played and completed. These video games contain varying representations of people, bodies and communities of colour. The specific nature of the representations of people, bodies and communities of colour present in these selected games, as well as my experience of playing these games is discussed in further detail in chapter 4.

hierarchal racial difference is a 'real', naturally occurring phenomenon, permanently fixed and imbedded in nature. Premised on the argument that race is not naturally fixed but socially constructed, this study analyses selected video games containing prominent characters of colour or 'exotic' non-western settings. I utilise my art practice as a means to explore, critique, reflect on and unsettle the socially constructed racial myths and assumptions perpetuated as 'real' and 'authentic' in these video games.

This practice-based study adopts Critical Race Theory's emphasis on experiential knowledge. My art practice draws from reflections on my own experiences as a black male Zulu South African player or video games. My consumption of video games that contain stereotypical representations of people, bodies and communities of colour forms the departure point for the works I produce in my art practice.

People, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games are often reduced through in-game narrative or gameplay to become exotic sites for lustful desire, consumption or violent subjugation (Brock 2011, Sisler 2008, Leonard 2003, Conditt 2015, Gray[3] 2014). This study suggests that the marginalisation of the racialised other in the selected video games through the perpetuation of harmful racial stereotypes is often presented as a means to facilitate (white) player fantasy fulfilment. My art practice, stemming from my experiences as a black gamer, seeks to problematise these 'fantasies'. Unsettling hegemonic forms of (often violent) player fantasy fulfilment in video games is also a theme explored by selected artists, Eva and Franco Mattes as well as Joseph Delappe.

## 1.2. Background to the study

Video games have emerged as one of the most dominant forms of modern entertainment. Having outpaced cinema in revenue as far back as 1999 (Gentile et al. 2004), the video game industry now generates billions in revenue, frequently outpacing revenue from other entertainment media such as music, film, and TV. For

[3] "Dr. Kishonna L. Gray is a Lecturer in the Department of Criminal Justice at Eastern Kentucky University. She received her PhD in Justice Studies at Arizona State University with an emphasis on identities, inequalities, and new media" (Gray 2012: 428). Gray's critical inquiry into race in video games is a major influence behind my art practice. She centres her research around her experiences as a black female gamer. Her inquiry is a major influence because I too use my experiences as a black (South African) gamer to critically explore race in video games. Her work is discussed in more detail in chapter four.

example, *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), the highest ever grossing video game, has now sold over 90 million copies worldwide since its release in 2013 to become the single highest grossing piece of entertainment of all time, generating over 6 billion US dollars in revenue alone (Batchelor 2018). It is estimated that video games are now played by approximately 2.6 billion people worldwide (Entertainment Software Association 2018). The significant rise in the impact video games have in contemporary popular culture can also be exemplified by their gradual entrance into the realm of fine art.

Acclaimed art museums like the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) have begun to add video games to their permanent collections whilst other prominent art institutions and artists are also beginning to explore the potential of video games as an artistic medium (Antonelli[4] 2013, Sharpe 2015). Having played video games almost daily since adolescence as well as having observed its rise in popularity and cultural relevance, I began to be interested in exploring artistic ways to bring together my experiences as a contemporary fine artist and avid gamer. I was particularly interested in exploring what it means to consume modern video games as a black South African Zulu male fine artist andgamer.

Video games can be described as a form of New Media that places immersive interactivity at its core (Lister et al. 2009). Manovich (2001) defines New Media as the organisation and translation of 'traditional' communicative media (text, images, video, audio etc.) into (numeric) computable data which can then be interacted with by a user. Video games take this description of new media further. Video games transform computer data ('digitised' media; text, images, video, audio, virtual environments etc) into immersive and interactive virtual experiences (Lister et al. 2009, Candy et al. 2014).

Video games were initially limited to skill-based tests of hand eye-coordination and dexterity. Rapid advances in computer technology allowed for video games to grow and evolve into vast immersive virtual spaces where complex narrative-driven and

[4] Paola Antonelli is senior curator in the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) department of architecture and design. She oversaw the first permanent acquisition of video games by MoMA which sparked debate from art critics over whether video games could be considered art. (Antonelli 2013, MoMA 2018). This discourse over the relationship between video games and art formed the catalyst that sparked my initial interest in exploring video games through my art practice.

mimetic virtual experiences can take place. Many contemporary video games often transform the player form a passive ‘user’ into an active ‘participant’, actively partaking in a virtual experience in a virtual setting (Leonard 2003, Nacke and Lindley 2008, Folkerts 2011). Many video games still focus mainly on providing objectives that test and reward player skill, however more video game developers are beginning to focus on crafting games that are ‘experienced’ rather than played and mastered. In contrast to the skill-based chasing of high scores earlier video games like *Space Invaders* (1978) and *Donkey Kong* (1981), many contemporary video games often seek to do more.

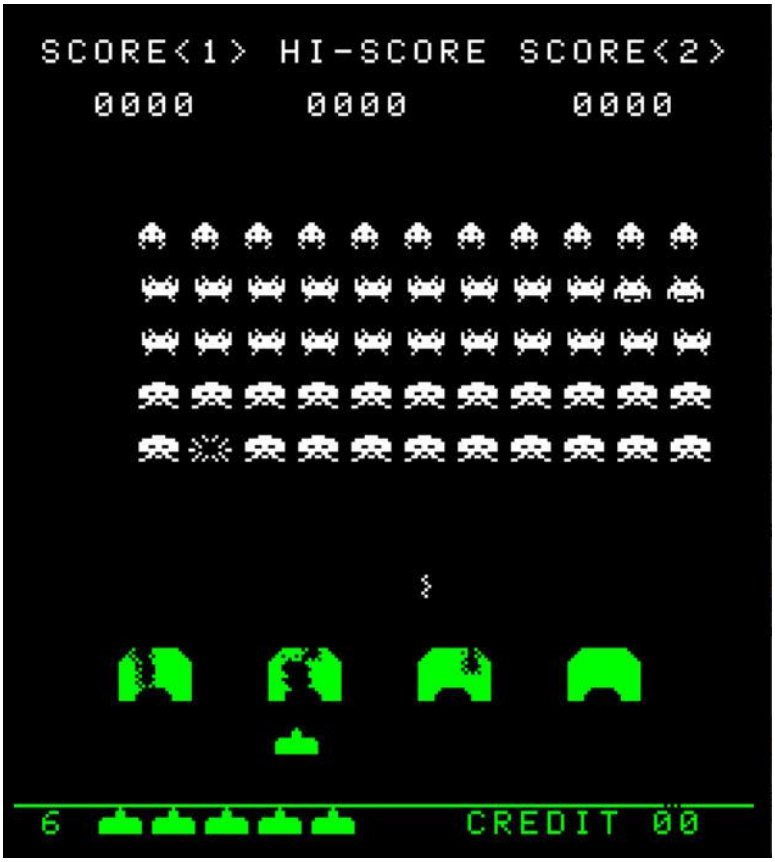


**Figure 1.**

Gameplay screenshot from *Space Invaders* (video game). 1978. Developed by Taito, Tokyo. Published by Midway Games, Chicago.

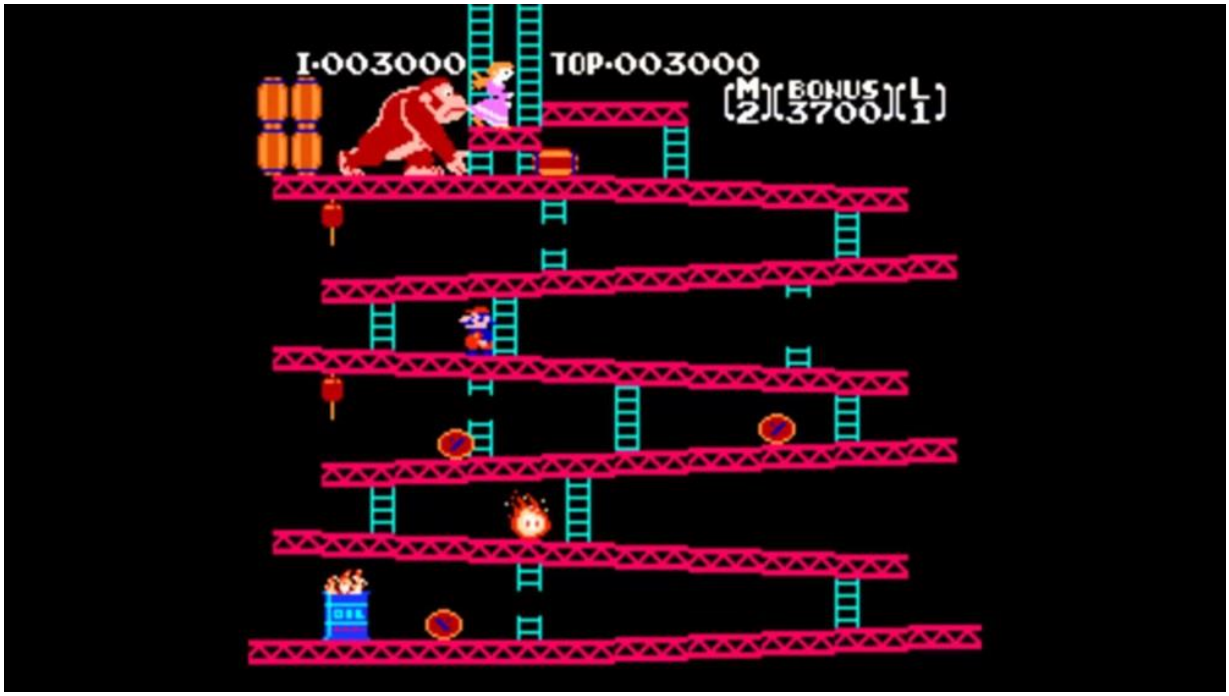


**Figure 2.**

Gameplay screenshot from *Donkey Kong* (video game). 1981. Developed by Nintendo, Kyoto. Published by Nintendo, Kyoto.

Contemporary video games often seek to either create immersive and often expansive virtual environments, craft compelling narratives with memorable characters or use 'interactive gameplay' to comment on a variety of contemporary real-world social issues. Contemporary video games can be separated into many different genres, which offer different experiences that give players varying amounts of freedom. These genres vary from linear video games that have heavily scripted objectives that are predetermined by the video game developers, to more open video games that give more control and freedom to the player. Open-world video games can be described as a genre of games that let players loose in a virtual open world (often described as a sandbox). Open world video games often give the player freedom and control to freely explore and interact with the game's virtual world as they see fit (Muncy 2015).

*No Man's Sky's* (2016), for example, is an open-world adventure game that uses procedural content generation[5] to create a virtual universe, complete with entire virtual galaxies, solar systems and planets that can be individually explored and interacted with by the player.

**Figure 3.**

Planet gameplay screenshot from *No Man's Sky* (video game). 2016. Developed by Hello Games, Guilford. Published by Hello Games, Guilford.

**Figure 4.**

Space gameplay screenshot from *No Man's Sky* (video game). 2016. Developed by Hello Games, Guilford. Published by Hello Games, Guilford.

*Uncharted 4* (2016) on the other hand uses sophisticated motion capture technology to digitally capture and recreate nuanced performances by real-world actors, creating a video game containing complex narratives, characters and acting often seen in film.

[5] As video games have evolved through rapid advances in computer technology, player demand for larger, more detailed virtual video game worlds to explore and interact with has also increased. In order to keep up with rising player expectations, many popular open-world video games today require large development teams (writers, artists, computer programmers, game designers, sound engineers etc.) numbering in the hundreds (Hendrix et al. 2013). The financial cost of video game development has thus skyrocketed in order to keep up with up with constantly rising player expectations. Procedural content generation offers an affordable, potentially time saving alternative for developers.

> "Procedural techniques are an alternative to making complex game worlds in a limited amount of time without putting a large burden on the game content designers. The main idea behind procedural content generation is that game content is not generated manually by human designers, but by computers executing a well-defined procedure. To avoid losing control over the design process, it is desirable that artists and designers can still influence the final product by adjusting the parameters of the procedure" (Hendrix et al. 2013: 3).

Whilst the parameters are still set by the video game developers, procedural content generation allows for computers to build vast virtual open worlds relatively quickly and inexpensively.

**Figure 5.**

Gameplay screenshot from *Uncharted 4* (video game). 2016. Developed by Naughty Dog, Santa Monica. Sony Computer Entertainment, Tokyo.

*Papers Please* (2013) uses its gameplay to comment on the global migrant crisis, tasking the player with 'processing' asylum requests as a border official at a border between two fictional countries in the game.


**Figure 6.**

Gameplay screenshot from *Papers please* (video game). 2013. Developed by Lucas Pope. Published by 3909 LLC, Tokyo.

These three examples not only highlight how much video games have rapidly evolved but also provide a glimpse of the potential games have beyond simply being an entertainment medium. Video games provide the opportunity for players to ‘travel’ to virtual reproductions of places that they would not be able to go to physically, embody characters from cultures that they would not otherwise be exposed to and potentially have virtual experiences far removed from their everyday real-world lives.

My decision to critically explore video games as an area of interest for this practice-based study originated from a negative virtual experience I had whilst playing the open-world action-adventure video game, *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013). The experience was an interactive virtual reproduction of a torture that I, the player, was an active participant in. The torture was presented as an objective that I had to ‘complete’ in order to progress through the game. The character in the game that I was tasked with torturing, with my white player-controlled character, was a dark skinned Middle Eastern man. This particular gaming experience as well as its implications in my art practice are discussed in further detail in chapter four. The experience, as a black male

player, actively participating in a graphic and gruesome interactive virtual torture of a dark-skinned character, was impactful and lead to an interest in exploring how characters of colour in other games are represented.

## 1.3. The research issue

Video games, despite possessing opportunities to present complex and diverse virtual environments, characters and experiences, are often sites where well-trodden racial tropes and stereotypes in the representation of people, bodies and communities of colour emerge (Sisler 2008, Leonard 2003, Conditt 2015, Gray 2014). As will be discussed in further detail in chapter four, video games frequently reinforce whiteness as the dominant normative standard and marginalise blackness almost exclusively through in-game violence (Leonard 2003, Sisler 2008, Barret 2006, DeVane and Squire 2008, Brock 2011, Gray 2012, Gray 2014, Fussel 2015, Conditt 2015). Protagonists and major characters in video games are predominantly white (men) (Williams et al. 2009: 825). These characters are humanised and presented through in-game narrative as complex, three dimensional and heroic (Leonard 2003, Sisler 2008). Characters of colour in video games are often relegated to nameless, threateningly violent and mindless ‘enemies’ that the player-controlled protagonist must completely eradicate.

**Figure 7.**

Gameplay screenshot from *Max Payne 3* (video game). 2013. Developed collaboratively by Rockstar Studios, Vancouver, London, Toronto, Leeds, San Diego. Published by Rockstar Games, New York.

Characters of colour that are not represented as enemies in video games are often still boxed into being represented as shallow racial and cultural caricatures that exist for the (assumed white) player's amusement or lustful desire for the racialised other (Sisler 2008, hooks 1992, Leonard 2003, Conditt 2015, Gray 2014).

Video games, due to their interactive nature, can also even be described as "racialized pedagogical zones", spaces where dominant stereotypical assumptions about race, different ethnicities, cultures and communities can be learned and ingrained through interactive 'play' (Everett and Craig-Watkins 2008: 142).

> "Games, despite claims of "horse play," offer insight into dominant ideologies, as well as the deployment of race, gender, and nationalism. From the privacy of one's home, game players are able to transport themselves into foreign and dangerous environments, often gaining pleasure through domination and control of weaker characters of color. Video games thus operate as a sophisticated commodity that plays on the desire of individuals to experience

> the other, breaking down real boundaries between 'communities' through virtual play, while simultaneously 'teaching' its players about stereotypes, United States foreign policy, and legitimization of the status quo, to name only a few" (Leonard, 2003: 1).

Whilst literature critiquing the prevalence of racial stereotypes in video games are beginning to emerge, literature from black writers like Kishonna Gray and Andre Brock who use their experiences as black gamers as a lens for their critical inquiry into representations of race in video games, are still few and far between. A gap exists in terms of academic literature that explores and critiques the subject of race in video games from a (black) South African perspective. 'Big budget' video games like *Uncharted 4* (2016) and *Metal Gear V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) are beginning to include (black) Southern African prominent characters as well as African settings, and thus I argue that there is need for more African voices within video games literature to critique these games. This study as well as my art practice seeks to contribute towards filling in this gap in the literature.

Despite the current popularity of video games, fine artists who explore, comment on and critique stereotypical representations in video games in their art practice are still relatively few and far between. The work of new media artists such as Eva and Franco Mattes as well as Joseph Delappe focuses on critiquing and unsettling the stereotypical glorification of violence in video games (McLeod 2016). Drawing from how these artists use their art practice to unsettle stereotypes in video games, my art practice seeks to critique and unsettle stereotypically racist representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in selected video games.

## 1.4. Aims and objectives

This study seeks to address the continued racialized stereotyping of people, bodies and communities of colour in selected video games through my art practice. My art practice seeks to highlight how non-whiteness is often punished in video games. Non-white characters, their bodies and their communities, are often represented in video games through the white imaginary. People, bodies and communities of colour in video games are often "reduced to spectacle" (Hall 1997), reduced to exotic and frequently threatening sites for virtual racial tourism and violent subjugation (Gray 2014). I

analyse selected video games containing black protagonists, prominent characters of colour as well as video games containing virtual recreations of African settings. This study also analyses the work of selected new media artists, Joseph Delappe and Eva and Franco Mattes, who subvert video game stereotypes in their work.

Drawing from social construction theory as well as critical race theory, I aim to argue that stereotypical representations of the racialized other in video games are often informed by socially constructed myths and assumptions of hierarchal racial difference. These myths and assumptions, often presented in video games and other mass media as 'real' unchangeably fixed fact, position whiteness and non-whiteness as unequal binary opposites (Guess[6] 2006, Hall[7] 1997). These socially constructed myths and assumptions place whiteness in a privileged hegemonic position of supremacy whilst relegating non-whiteness, particularly blackness, to varying degrees of marginalisation (Guess 2006, Haney Lopez [8]2006, Ladson-Billings [9]1998). I aim to explore through my art practice how video games frequently reproduce, reinforce and at times even glamorise harmful socially constructed racial myths and assumptions of non-whiteness and blackness through in-game narrative or gameplay.

[6] Teresa J. Guess is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Missouri. This study draws heavily from her writing on the social construction of whiteness. Her study on the social construction of whiteness plays a key role in contributing to this study's understanding of hierarchal racial difference as a social construct. Her writing is discussed in further detail in the literature review of this study, chapter two.

[7] "Stuart Hall was a Jamaican-British academic, writer and cultural studies pioneer, who was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1932 and died in London aged 82 in February 2014" (Stuart Hall Foundation 2018: para. 1 line 1-2). This study adopts much of Hall's seminal literature on visual/audial representation as a cultural practice, particularly his argument of (racial) stereotyping as a representational practice. This study also adopts suggestions by Hall on how to address and redress stereotypically racist visual/audial representations. His writing on representation in discussed further in the literature review of this study, chapter two.

[8] Ian Haney Lopez is professor in public law at Berkley in the University of California (BerkleyLaw 2018). He is considered to be one of the pioneers of Critical Race Theory. This study draws heavily from his writing on the social construction of race, the social construct of whiteness as well as his writing on Critical Race Theory. His literature is discussed in further detail in chapter two.

[9] "Gloria Ladson-Billings is the Kellner Family Endowed Professor in Urban Education and is faculty affiliate in the Departments of Educational Policy Studies and Afro American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison ... Ladson-Billings' research examines the pedagogical practices of teachers who are successful with African American students. She also investigates Critical Race Theory applications to education" (UC Davis School of Education 2018: para. 2 line 1-7). This study draws heavily from Ladson-Billings' writing on Critical Race Theory. Her writing is discussed in further detail in chapter two and four.

In my art practice, I aim to re-present the racist representations present in these games outside the context of (white) player fantasy fulfilment and through my experience as a black Zulu South African male gamer.

The objectives of this study are to:

- Explore how social constructions of race and hierarchal racial difference inform stereotypical representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games.
- Analyse the methods used by the selected artists to unsettle video game stereotypes in their art practice and adapt those methods to my art practice.
- Re-present through my art practice, racist representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games, using my own experiences as a black South African male gamer as a lens that informs the re-presentations.

To achieve these objectives, I ask three main research questions:

1. How is race and hierarchal racial difference, particularly visual and audial representations of people, bodies and communities of colour, represented in the selected video games, in these games?
2. What creative mechanisms and tools do the selected artists and writers employ to subvert problematic representations (of non-whiteness) in their work?
3. How are issues of race, hierarchal racial difference and the representation of people, bodies and communities of colour in video games addressed in my own art practice?

In order to answer these research questions, this study will first explore the theoretical context of social construction and how it applies to dominant conceptions of race. This study will also provide the historical context of the social construction of race, in order to gain an understanding of where socially constructed myths and assumptions of hierarchal racial difference come from. This study will also discuss the theoretical contexts of representation as a cultural practice as well as the historical context of racial stereotyping in media. These contexts form the Theoretical and Conceptual framework that underpin the exploration of race in video games in my art practice and will be explored and discussed in further detail in the Literature Review chapter.

## 1.5. Motivation for the study

Literature is beginning to emerge from gamers of colour and other marginalised groups, critiquing and challenging the current white masculine heteronormative status quo in video games.

Selected writers such as Kishonna L. Gray use their individual and social online gaming experiences in their studies as lens to view and analyse racial stereotypes in video games. These writers highlight the harmful real-world effects that stereotypes can have on the experiences of gamers of colour. Selected artists Eva and Franco Mattes as well as Joseph DeLappe use their art to problematise, challenge and unsettle stereotypes and violence in video games that are often accepted as 'normal' parts of the gaming experience.

This study seeks to contribute to this emerging pool of literature containing within academic video games criticism coming from 'outsider' voices that have often been overlooked or ignored. These outsider voices, often gamers from socially marginalised groups, draw from their gaming and lived experiences to challenge racism and stereotypical representations as the 'accepted' status quo in video games. Drawing from my own gaming and lived experiences as a black South African Zulu male gamer of colour, this study as well as my art practice seeks to contribute to the emerging call for video games to be more inclusive and better reflect the diversity of the players who play them.

## 1.6. Research Methodology

This Fine Art study centres on the use of my art practice to address the research aims and questions. The production and analysis of the artworks I produce during this study as well as a critical reflection on the production process of these artworks form both the main focus and the critical outcome of this research. This study thus adopts a Practice Based research methodology with an emergent research design. Due to the mostly emergent nature of the art making process, this study also adopts elements of the action research cycle.

My study will also use critical discourse analysis as a means to analyse the selected video games, literature and art that influence my art practice. The video games that I have selected are video games that I have played and completed which contain stereotypical and violent representations of people, bodies and communities of colour. This study therefore draws from critical race theory, which places emphasis of the value of experiential knowledge, to allow my lived experiences as a gamer of colour to inform my art practice.

I discuss the methodology of this study as well as the research methods employed in this study in further detail in chapter three.

## 1.7. Outline of Dissertation

Chapter Two (Literature Review) includes reviews of selected literature relating to social construction theory, the theoretical and historical context of the social construction of race, representation, as well as the theoretical and historical context of the use of racial stereotypes as a representational and cultural practice. This review aims to highlight the suggestion within current literature that race is socially constructed. This chapter is important as it provides the theoretical and historical contexts that underpin the socially constructed assumptions of hierarchal racial difference that form the foundation of the various racial stereotypes seen in the selected video games. Finally, I review literature which discusses various ways in which stereotypically racist representations can be addressed and redressed. The literature review forms the conceptual foundation of my art practice.

Chapter Three (Methodological Orientation, Research Design and Methodology) begins with an introduction of Critical Theory, the selected research orientation for inquiry. I then state the research aims, objectives and questions, and discuss how a practice based qualitative research methodology with an emergent research design is most appropriate for my fine art study. I then discuss how discourse analysis and critical race theory inform my art practice.

Chapter Four (Critical Race theory and Video games) comprises of a comprehensive analysis of the work of the selected artists as well as an analysis and reflection on my own art practice. This chapter unpacks Critical Race Theory and discusses how this

theory simultaneously speaks to the problems that I look to address in my art practice as well as the proposed solutions adopted and applied into my art practice.

In Chapter Five (Conclusion) I present reflections on my art practice as well as reflections of this study as whole related to the research aims, objectives and questions. I also present recommendations with regard to future research in the field exploring race and representation in video games from a South African context.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1. Introduction

This literature review chapter will discuss the key historical and theoretical arguments that underpin the notion of race as a social construct. This study and my art practice centres on the premise that race, particularly hierarchal racial difference, is not a natural occurrence but a social construct. This chapter forms the conceptual foundation for my art practice by reviewing literature and visual texts which argue that stereotypical representations of people and bodies of colour in various forms of media are simultaneously informed by, and reinforce, dominant socially constructed myths and assumptions about race and hierarchal racial difference.

This chapter will also discuss representation as a cultural practice. Drawing mostly from the seminal literature of Stuart Hall. This chapter will discuss how stereotypical representation of race and racial difference are both informed by and contribute to reinforcing dominant social constructions of race.

Discussing the notion of race as a social construct, representation as a cultural practice and racial stereotyping, and understanding the relationship between them forms the conceptual foundation that my art practice is built on. My art practice seeks to critique and unsettle stereotypically racist representations of people, bodies and communities of colour, in the selected video games.

## 2.2. Race: Not naturally imbedded but socially constructed

This study challenges the common assumption that race, particularly hierarchal racial difference, is an easily identifiable ‘natural’ phenomenon. Hierarchal racial difference - various behavioural traits and hierarchal social statuses arbitrarily assigned to different ethnic groups - has often been presented and reinforced in various forms of media as fixed ‘scientific truth’, permanently and unchangeably imbedded in nature

(Guess 2006, Smedley[10] 1998, Yosso[11] 2005). Whilst claims of biologically imbedded hierarchal racial difference have historically been presented as scientific fact or truth, contemporary literature disputes these claims.

Literature suggests that race is not an easily identifiable naturally occurring phenomenon but a (relatively recent) social construct, created as a means to institutionally enforce and maintain social hierarchies in culturally and ethnically diverse societies (Guess 2006, Smedley and Smedley 2005, Haney-Lopez 2006, Ehlers 2006, Smedley 1998, Tate[12] 1997, Crenshaw 1988, Lane 1997). In order to understand the socially constructed nature of race, it is important to first discuss Social Construction Theory.

### 2.2.1. Social Construction Theory

Social Construction Theory (SCT) can be described as a theory that is concerned with an individual or group's perceptions or understanding of 'reality'. SCT argues that perceptions and understandings of reality are not imbedded in nature but are socially, historically and contextually defined (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Pierce 2009, Robles 2012, Guess 2006). This argument centres on the notion that an individual or shared group understanding of reality is not informed by the material presence of physical objects or events but by the social meanings given to these objects or events (Hall 1997). According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), SCT refers to the process by which, over time, social meanings are (communally) created, institutionally legitimised (often by those in positions of power), internalised, normalised and accepted as 'reality'.

[10] Audrey Smedley is a professor in social anthropology and African American studies at Virginia Commonwealth University (Smedley 2005). Smedley's anthropological study of the notable absence of race in ancient literature from ancient civilizations highlights not only that race is socially constructed, but also that it is also a relatively new social construct.

[11]"Tara J. Yosso is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research and teaching focuses on educational equity utilizing the frameworks of critical race theory, LatCrit theory and critical media literacy" (Yosso 2005). Yosso's literature contributes significantly to this study's understanding of Critical Race Theory. She also advocates for experiential knowledge, especially from 'outsider' or marginalised individuals and groups, arguing that it is a critical resource in critical literature.

[12] William F. Tate is the dean of the Washington University Graduate School in Saint Louis. He documents the history or Critical Race Theory, from its beginnings in the field of law as Critical Legal Studies to its adoption by other fields such as education. This study adopts Critical Race Theory and applies it to a fine art context.

Gergen and Gergen (in Pierce 2009: 38) echo this argument by suggesting that (communally produced) knowledge and knowledge systems inform how reality is defined. This knowledge does not exist in the form of a "single, objective truth independent from human agency" but is "communally and linguistically produced" (Gergen and Gergen in Pierce 2009: 38).

> "Aware that knowledge is communally and linguistically produced, social constructionists question the right of any particular group, including researchers and scholars, to claim ultimate authority about what we know. Even 'objective descriptions' of the world are politically and morally saturated" (Gergen and Gergen in Pierce 2009: 38).

Central to SCT is the argument that the knowledge and knowledge systems that inform how we define reality are "communally and linguistically produced" (Gergen and Gergen in Pierce 2009: 38), "historically and culturally relative" (Burr in Pierce 2009: 39), malleable (Robles 2012), institutionally legitimised (Berger and Luckman [13]1966) and culturally normalised over time (Hall 1997). SCT thus views 'reality' not through the "abstract" question of 'what', but through the "sociologically concrete" questions of 'who, when, where and why' (Guess 2006: 658).

Critical SCT scholars, often adopting Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony[14], broaden these sociologically concrete questions of reality further by arguing that power often plays a significant role in the answering of these questions (Robles 2012, Pierce 2009, Haney Lopez 2006, Guess 2006). Mehan (in Robles 2012) exemplifies this critical view of SCT through his rephrasing of the Thomas Theory[15]. Highlighting the

[13] Sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann co-authored *The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, considered by many in the field of sociology to be one of the seminal texts of social construction theory. It was voted fifth in the International Sociological Association's list of most important sociological books of the 20th century in 1988 (International Sociological Association n.d.).

[14] Antonio Gramsci, an Italian theorist, although initially drawing from Marxist theory, rejected its superficial view of power manifesting only through force or class-based subjugation. Gramsci viewed power though a much broader 'ideological' lens. According to Gramsci, "particular social groups struggle in many different ways, including ideologically, to win the consent of other groups and achieve a kind of ascendancy in both thought and practice over them. This form of power Gramsci called hegemony. Hegemony is never permanent, and is not reducible to economic interests or to a simple class model of society" (Gramsci in Hall 1997: 48).

[15] The Thomas Theory, coined by American sociologist William Isaac Thomas, in short, argues that "if [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas in Guess 2006: 654).

significant role of power in the social construction of reality Mehan (in Robles 2012) states;

> “all people define situations as real; but when the powerful people define situations as real, then they are real for everybody involved in their consequences” (Mehan in Robles 2012: 25).

This rephrasing of the Thomas Theory not only highlights perceptions of reality as being socially defined, but also highlights the role that power, and hegemony can play in the defining process.

This study adopts a critical view of Social Construction Theory to argue that race is not a permanently fixed, natural phenomenon that ‘objectively’ exists independently of human intervention. The racial differentiation of individuals or groups is not ‘natural’ but is socially constructed. This study chooses to align itself with literature suggesting that race is a series of “communally and linguistically produced”, institutionally legitimised, normalised, malleable, hegemonic, socially constructed meanings attached to arbitrarily chosen physical features, ethnicities and lineages (Guess 2006, Haney Lopez 2006, Haney Lopez in Tate 1997, Lane 1997, Smedley 1998, Smedley and Smedley 2005, Crenshaw 1988, Hall 1997). Basing itself on the central premise that race is a social construct, this study also adopts Ian Haney-Lopez’s definition of race;

> “Race can be understood as the historically contingent systems of meaning that attach themselves to elements of morphology and ancestry. This definition can be pushed on three different interrelated levels, the physical, the social, and the material. First race turns on physical features and lines of decent, not because features of lineage themselves are a function of racial variation, but because society has invested these with racial meaning. Second, because the meanings of certain features and ancestries denote race, it is the social processes of ascribing racialised meanings to faces and forebearers that lie at the heart of racial fabrication. Third, these meaning systems, while originally only ideas, gain force as they are reproduced in the material conditions of society. The distribution of wealth and poverty turns in part on the action of social and legal actors who have accepted ideas of race, with the resulting material conditions

becoming part of and reinforcement of the contingent meanings understood as race" (Haney-Lopez 2006: 7).

This definition highlights that racialised social meanings attached to certain physical characteristics and lineages have been institutionally legitimised and hegemonically normalised to the point that the effect of these social meanings have now become tangible. Race, despite being socially constructed, is seen and even tangibly felt as 'real' in the lived experiences of those in positions of power as well as the marginalised. The representation of hierarchal racial difference in various forms of traditional and new media as an 'objective' natural phenomenon, is informed by the tangible consequences of the social construction of race. The selected video games analysed and critiqued in my art practice present race and hierarchal racial difference as 'real', 'mimetic' and 'authentic'.

Tracking the history of race as a social construct, particularly the history of the social construction of hierarchal racial difference, will assist in understanding how the racialised social meanings attached to race have been reproduced and reinforced over time to inform the racial stereotypes now present in the selected video games.

### 2.2.2. The social construction of race: A historical background

As indicated above, literature suggests that race is not a natural phenomenon that has always existed. It is a social construct that is only a few centuries old (Guess 2006, Smedley 1998, Smedley and Smedley 2005, Haney Lopez 2006). Tracking the history of this social construct, from its origins in the 1600's to its contemporary manifestations will assist in gaining an understanding of how it eventually became accepted as the status quo. Race is now commonly accepted and represented as a natural phenomenon in various forms of media, including video games.

In an anthropological study of 'old world' literature from ancient civilisations, focusing specifically on the ancient Greco-Roman Classical period, Smedley (1998) highlights that in contrast to many contemporary assumptions of ethnic identity as 'racialised' and 'unchangeably fixed', understandings of ethnicity in ancient civilizations were more fluid and malleable (Smedley 1998: 691).

Ancient civilizations advanced culturally and technologically through ethnic and cultural integration with the civilizations they either conquered or traded with. Major cities and trading hubs in ancient civilizations were culturally and ethnically diverse. Marriage also played a role in bringing ethnicities together. It was often used in ancient times as a strategic political and economic tool. Intermarriage was thus common between individuals of different cultures, ethnicities and lineages (Smedley 1998, Smedley and Smedley 2005).

> "The empires of the ancient world — the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman empires, and later the Muslim empire, with its center at Baghdad — encompassed peoples whose skin colors, hair textures, and facial features were highly varied, representing the same range of physical diversity that is seen in the "Old World" today — Africans, Europeans, Middle Easterners, and Asians" (Smedley and Smedley 2005: 18).

Smedley (1998) makes an important distinction between race and ethnicity in her study. Noting the absence of 'race' in old world conceptions of ethnic identity, Smedley states;

> "What was absent from these different forms of human identity is what we today would perceive as classifications into 'racial' groups, that is the organisation of all peoples into a limited number of unequal or ranked categories theoretically based on differences in their biophysical traits. There are no racial designations in the literature of the ancients and few references to even such features as skin colour … No structuring of inequality, whether social, moral, intellectual, cultural or otherwise was associated with people *because of their skin colour"* (Smedley 1998: 693).

Place of birth, kinship, paternal/maternal lineage, occupation and religion all played varyingly significant roles in determining an individual or group's ethnic identity and social status in ancient societies (Smedley 1998). Malleability and fluidity were the central themes that emerged in Smedley's (1998) analysis of social meanings attached to ethnicity, social status and identity in ancient civilizations. Even slavery, which was common in ancient societies, was never seen as a 'permanently fixed' 'natural' part of an individual or group's identity. Slaves admittedly occupied the lowest social positions in ancient societies, but they could eventually purchase their freedom

or be freed by their next-of-kin or owners, and thus have their 'free' social status restored (Smedley 1998).

Literature suggests that the notion of race emerged in the 17th century as a means to permanently fix the social meanings around slavery with certain physical characteristics, ethnicities and lineages, namely skin pigmentation and African lineage. This racialised fixing of certain social meanings sought to permanently relegate certain individuals or groups (of colour) to the social status of property, thus condemning them to a life in a state of permanent slavery (Ehlers 2006, Haney Lopez in Delgado 1994, Guess 2006, Haney Lopez 2006, Smedley and Smedley 2005, Crenshaw 1988).

Guess (2006: 644) links the racialised fixing of non-whiteness and the notion of permanent slavery, to the rising demand in Western Europe and North America for goods like cotton, sugar and tobacco. This rising demand resulted in a need for a large permanent workforce. Enslaved by West African civilisations "for the same reasons as Europeans [enslaved Europeans]: debts, crimes, conquest, and sale by parents" (Roy in Guess 2006: 655), the first African slaves were sold in trade agreements with European settlers and shipped to America in 1619. Africans initially arrived in America as indentured servants. These African indentured servants were initially equal in social status to their white counterparts and could thus work towards the purchase of their freedom (Bennet and Roy in Guess 2006: 664).

Colonial leaders began to devise the distinction of 'race' to quell collaborative rebellions from indentured servants of both European and African descent as well as members of the free (predominantly white) lower economic class (Hall 1997, Allen in Smedley 1998: 694). This distinction sought to ideologically differentiate white members of the lower social class from their black counterparts, essentially relegating black servants to property – slaves. Slaves of African descent also began to be preferred, as noted by Roy (in Guess 2006);

> "Colonial Europeans discovered several benefits associated with enslaving Africans in the New World: they were civilized and relatively docile, they were knowledgeable about tropical agriculture, they were skilled iron workers, they had immunities to Old World diseases, thus making them a more secure investment for a slave owner … During a 110-yearperiod (1700–1810),

approximately 6 million Africans were transported to the New World" (Roy in Guess 2006: 665).

This further fuelled the desire for the social transformation of temporary African indentured servants into permanent slaves. These ‘desirable’ traits seen in African slaves along the emergence of capitalist prosperity that soon followed, lead to North American leaders and lawmakers seeking to base the American economy on slave labour and the slave trade. North American leaders and lawmakers institutionally created permanent hierarchical ‘racial’ social categories that sought to permanently subjugate people of colour, particularly those of African descent (Bennet 1988, Haney Lopez 1994, DuVernay 2016, Guess 2006, Smedley and Smedley 2005). The racialised social categorisation and placement of individuals and groups into unequal ranks of humanity played a central role in justifying the notion of permanent slavery. Permanent slavery was ironically justified in the west during “an era when the dominant political philosophy was equality, civil rights, democracy, justice, and freedom for all human beings” (Smedley and Smedley 2005: 19) and the dehumanisation of people of colour played a central role in this justification. Individuals and groups of Christian, Western European (particularly Anglo-Saxon) descent racially categorised themselves as white and proceeded to racially categorise individuals and groups (mostly slaves) from different global regions and ethnicities under varying degrees of non-whiteness (Haney Lopez 1994, Guess 2006). Individuals of African descent were classified as the direct inferior opposite of whiteness; *blackness* (Fanon 1952, Hall 1997, Guess 2006).

Whiteness was not just socially constructed as the epitome of humanity but, more importantly was constructed as the normative standard of what it meant to be ‘human’. As the socially constructed definition of ‘human’, whiteness occupied the privileged highest social, economic and ideological societal status in western society. Non-whiteness was designated varying malleable degrees of ‘less than human’. Blackness was institutionally and socially relegated to the lowest ‘sub-human’ status; an ‘apelike’, primitive, intellectually and morally inferior physical threat that needed to be constantly monitored and subjugated (Ladson-Billings 1998, Fanon 1952, Hall 1997, Tate 1997, Guess 2006, Haney Lopez 1994, Smedley 1998, Smedley and Smedley 2005).

Whiteness would not only occupy the highest racial position but would also privilege itself further by also occupying a 'transparent' 'human' space outside of race. This exclusive 'human' space would be permanently out of the reach of non-whiteness and especially blackness, for whom race would be an inescapable 'reality' (Haney Lopez 2006: 12, Hall 1997). Haney Lopez (2006) makes note of the role law played in institutionally legitimizing the social construction of race and racial difference;

> "Put most starkly, law constructs race. Of course, it does so within the larger context of society, and so law is only one of many institutions and forces implicated in the formation of races. Moreover, as a complex set of institutions and ideas, "law" intersects and interacts with the social knowledge about race in convoluted, unpredictable, sometimes self-contradictory ways … "the law's construction of whiteness defined and affirmed critical aspects of identity (who is white); of privilege (what benefits accrue to that status); and of property (what legal entitlements arise from that status).The operation of law does far more than merely legalize race; it defines as well the spectrum of domination and subordination that constitutes race relations" (Haney Lopez 2006: 5).

The institutional legitimisation of race through law would have a tangible effect on the lived experiences on both white and non-white groups alike. For example, the criminalisation of racial intermarrying - institutionalised racial endogamy[16] - sought to maintain visible and identifiable 'physical' differences between the different (socially constructed) races, which would in turn validate the notion of racial difference as real and natural (Guess 2006).

Race was also legitimised and normalised through literature. Prominent and influential (white) leaders, writers and academics argued social, cultural and behavioural differences between races as biological, natural, and thus unchangeable (Smedley and Smedley 2005: 20).

> "Anglo-Saxon scholars such as John Locke, David Hume, and even Ben Franklin openly expressed popular opinions that dark skin color was linked to moral and mental inferiority … "race" had become more than an idea; it had

[16] "Endogamy is a cultural rule that encourages group members to marry only persons within their group. Thus, above all other considerations, group identity determines the extent to which one is an acceptable marriage partner" (Guess 2006: 655).

become a worldview, a way of understanding reality" (Bernal and Roy cited in Guess 2006: 665-666).

As mentioned earlier with the Thomas Theory, the adoption of hierarchal racial difference as an 'objective' 'natural' 'reality' by those in privileged positions of power resulted in racial inferiority becoming a 'reality' for the disempowered as well (Mehan in Robles 2012, Fanon 1952, Hall 1997).

Whiteness would become the normative standard of 'biological' and ideological 'purity' and understated cultural sophistication; thus, reducing the racialised other, and blackness in particular, to 'biological' and ideological 'contaminants'. The racist construction of white purity and the contamination of colour would ultimately go on to define race as a set of complex institutionalised social systems that centre on permanent exclusion (Smedley and Smedley 2005, Hall 1997). These social meanings surrounding race continue to persist to this day, with whiteness being presented as the heroic normative standard in many video games and blackness still being mostly relegated to non-human status (Leonard 2003, Sisler 2008, Barret 2006, DeVane and Squire 2008, Brock 2011, Gray 2012, Gray 2014, Fussel 2015, Conditt 2015).

Even after the eventual abolishment of slavery in America in 1863, the exclusory nature of race would persist through the institutional creation of segregation laws all over the world well into the 20th century (Guess 2006, Haney Lopez 1994, Haney Lopez 2006, Lane 1997, Puttick 2011, Tate 1997). The fluid legal interpretations of many of these laws, along with the failure of the scientific community to definitively prove hierarchal racial difference as genetic biological scientific fact, would only serve to highlight the socially constructed nature of race (Haney Lopez 2006, Smedley and Smedley 2005). The scientific community, particularly in the field of biology, not only failed to prove racial difference as biological fact but also eventually almost completely rejected the notion of race and racial difference as biological altogether (Fields in Haney Lopez 1994: 16, Haney Lopez 2006). Racial designation (through law) as a result began to draw from common assumptions or myths about race instead of science.

Institutionalised racial segregation focused initially on aiming to racially distinguish individuals and groups through visible 'easily identifiable' physical characteristics such as skin colour, hair, and facial features. This method of defining and designating race

promptly failed. Individuals of non-white descent who could be defined by their biophysical features as 'white', 'mixed race' individuals and groups with 'white' features formed a racial grey area that proved too complex for lawmakers to reliably navigate (Smedley and Smedley 2005). As a result of this failure, race (through law) began to be defined through the notion of the 'one drop rule'. This rule of thumb stipulated that should an individual have a single 'drop' of blackness (contaminant) in their lineage, that individual would be deemed black regardless of their physical appearance (Ehlers 2006, Haney Lopez 2006, Haney Lopez 1994, Smedley and Smedley 2005). But this definition of race would also fail with the racial designation of the Asian immigrants in America in the early 20th century as non-white despite not having a 'drop' or African blood (Haney Lopez 1994). The gradual social relegation of Hispanic Americans from white to non-white status, as well as the creation of the legal designation of the rising mixed-race population in South Africa as the 'coloured race' are also legal examples that point to the notion race as a social construct (Puttick 2011, Haney Lopez 2006, Haney Lopez 1994, Smedley and Smedley 2005).

Socially constructed meanings surrounding race created centuries ago, combined with generations of what Guess (2006: 651) describes as "racism by intent and consequence", still inform dominant modern-day assumptions of race today.

> "Racism by intent operates at the level of the individual and is manifested as racial prejudice and discrimination toward non-white individuals ... Racism by consequence, operates at the macro level of society, and represents an historical evolution. It constitutes a gradual shift away from a conscious, almost personalized conviction of the inferiority of an "othered" "race." … In its place follows social practices that are essentially depersonalized through institutionalization. As a result, racial prejudices may decline overtime, yet more subtle patterns of discrimination persist, supported by the inertia of custom, bureaucratic procedure, impersonal routine, and even law" (Guess 2006: 651).

To argue race as a social construct does not "trivialize it" (Vance 1989) or reduce it to nothing more than an 'abstract' idea.

> "Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has real effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true'" (Hall 1997: 49).

The premise of race as a social construct is a crucial point of departure in understanding how the social meanings surrounding race and racial difference can have a powerfully 'real' and 'tangible' effect on the lived experiences of individuals and groups in contemporary ethnically diverse societies. This study seeks to analyse, explore and critique how the reproduction of racial stereotypes in video games are simultaneously informed by and reinforce dominant institutionally legitimized and normalised socially constructed meanings of race and hierarchal racial difference. Drawing from my own lived experiences as a gamer of colour, my art practice critiques visual and audial representations of blackness, people, bodies and communities of colour in selected video games. Understanding these social meanings and how they have been reproduced helps me to unsettle them in my art practice.

## 2.3. Representation as a cultural practice

In order to argue the central role that representation plays in the social construction of race, it is important to understand what representation is, its key tenets and its function in informing individual and group understandings of 'reality'. This study relies on an understanding of representation in order to explore, comment on and critique the role it plays in the reinforcing of dominant racial myths and stereotypes, particularly with regard to people and bodies of colour. Understanding stereotyping as a process of representation (Hall 1997, Hall n.d.) is not just essential to my discourse analysis of the portrayal of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games, but is also essential to my recontextualised re-presenting of these portrayals in my art practice. The re-presentation of myths and stereotypes also plays a key role in the work of the selected artists.

### 2.3.1. Representation

Representation lies at the centre of this study as it not only highlights the research problem - the stereotypical and violent representation of people, bodies and communities of colour in video games - but also provides the conceptual foundation for addressing this problem in my art practice. This study adopts an understanding of representation as a series of complex processes. My art practice critically explores the

processes that create and reinforce racial stereotypes and seeks critique and unsettle them.

According Stuart Hall, seminal writer on representation as a cultural practice, representation can be described as a complex process, or processes, in which meaning is produced, shared, fixed and interpreted by an individual or group (Hall 1997, Hall et al. 2013, Hall in Jhally 1997). This study draws heavily from the literature of Stuart Hall on representation as a cultural practice.

Literature suggests that representation refers to the interrelated processes in which an individual or group produces meaning in order to make sense of 'reality' (Reid 2008, Hall 1997, Hall et al. 2013, Sisler 2008, Kowaltzke and Stewart 2007). The process of representation manifests itself in two distinct but interrelated ways, representation in theory - the conceptual attachment and organising of meanings to people, objects, events, things - and representation in practice – the attachment of these concepts to communicable signs (Reid 2008). Hall echoes Reid's suggestion by placing representation, in theory and practice, into two (interrelated) categories, using the term 'Mental Representation' to describe the former, and 'Language' to describe the latter (Hall et al. 2013: 3-5, Hall 1997: 17-19).

Mental representation refers the internal mental process of producing meaning through arbitrarily assigning concepts to words, images, sounds (signs) which in turn stand in for or *represent* objects, people, and events, both real and imagined. These meanings, attached to signs, are organised and stored into a fluid, malleable mental repository Hall describes as a "conceptual map" (Hall et al. 2013: 3). Arguing the importance of conceptual maps Hall states,

> "Without them, we would not be able to interpret the world meaningfully at all. In the first place, then, meaning depends on the system of concepts and images formed in our thoughts which can stand for or 'represent' the world, enabling us to refer to things both inside and outside our heads" (Hall 1997: 17).

Conceptual maps also play a key role in the assigning and organising of 'simple' and 'complex' meanings and signs produced through mental representation. These meanings don't exist independently. They are produced, assigned and organised in relation to one another in our conceptual maps. Hall suggests that language, the

second process of representation, is the means by which meanings and signs, both simple and complex, are grouped together and organised (Hall et al. 2013, Hall 1997).

For example, the English word ‘heart’ (comprised of the selected letters, h, e, a, r and t assigned in a specific order) is assigned a simple meaning to refer to the physical vital organ which pumps blood throughout the body. It can also be assigned a more complex meaning as the word that refers to metaphorical visual symbol for the abstract concept of love. It can also be assigned to refer to concepts or beings that do not physically exist, such as imaginary carrier of love, the fictional character Cupid. This example highlights the fluidity of meaning and the importance of language in the process of organising these meanings in relation to one another.

A conceptual map is thus more than just a ‘mental bank’ of produced meanings, it is a fluid lattice that informs how meanings are assigned and organised through language to represent ‘real’ or ‘made up’ people, objects, feelings, beings or events. Conceptual maps also play a significant role in allowing us to determine the relationships and distinctions between the different meanings and signs in our minds (Hall 1997, Hall et al. 2013).

Language plays a significant role in organising these meanings and signs in our conceptual maps. Language allows for these meanings and signs to be re-presented in a manner that can be interpreted meaningfully by another individual or group (Hall 1997, Hall et al. 2013, Hall in Jhally 1997). In the context of representation, the term ‘language’ is used in an expanded way to encompass language spoken, written, non-verbal, sensual and visual; thus referring to any means by which meaning is communicated (Reid 2008, MacMillan 2004, Kowaltzke and Stewart 2007, Hall in Jhally 1997, Hall 1997, Hall et al. 2013). The term ‘sign’ is also used more broadly and inclusively in this context to refer to “sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects” (Hall 1997:1). Discussing the relationship between language and signs, Hall states:

> “Any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is, from this point of view, ‘a language’” (Hall 1997: 19).

Without language, Hall agues, individuals and groups would not be able to communicate meaning to one another. Language thus plays an integral role in creating

“shared conceptual maps” (Hall 1997: 18) within a group, which Hall argues are an integral part of the formation of what we know as ‘culture’ or what Hall (1997: 4) describes as “cultural codes”.

Whilst culture, in an anthropological sense, may traditionally refer to a way of life, ‘culture’ in the sociological context of representation refers to the formation and upkeeping of shared conceptual maps. The meanings and signs in shared conceptual maps are then organised by a communally produced ‘common’ language and fixed by what Hall terms as a cultural ‘code’ (Hall 1997, Hall et al. 2013, Hall in Jhally 1997). The term ‘code’ in this context refers to the communal process of fixing meanings to a shared communally produced language, so that they can be interpreted by members within a culture (shared conceptual map).

Building on the example mentioned earlier, the assigning and fixing of certain social meanings to the socially constructed English word ‘heart’, gives the word its social significance within the English language and culture. Understanding the communally produced ‘codes’ of other cultures allows for the social meanings attached to this word to be translatable into a language that can be meaningfully interpreted by those cultures (Hall 1997, Hall et al. 2013). Arguing the communally produced nature of cultural codes Hall states, “This translatability is not given by nature or fixed by the gods. It is the result of a set of social conventions. It is fixed socially, fixed in culture” (Hall 1997: 22).

Shared conceptual (cultural) maps, language and code allow individuals within a group to experience and make sense of the world in similar ways. These experiences can also then be communicated meaningfully in a manner that can be interpreted by other individuals within the group as well as members of other groups through the sharing of codes between different cultures. Hall (1997: 44) describes this communication of meaning through language within and between shared conceptual maps as discourse.

Hall finally argues that representation is the coming together of all these complex internal and social processes,

> “At the heart of the meaning process in culture, then, are two related 'systems of representation', The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things — people, objects, events, abstract ideas, etc. – and our system of

concepts, our conceptual maps. The second depends on constructing a set of correspondences between our conceptual map and a set of signs, arranged or organized into various languages which stand for or represent those concepts. The relation between "things', concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call 'representation'" (Hall 1997: 19).

### 2.3.2. A constructionist approach to Representation

Understanding representation not as something fixed or imbedded in nature but as a series of complex processes, this study thus adopts a constructionist approach to representation (McMillan 2004, Hall 1997, Hall et al. 2013). I argue that current dominant meanings surrounding race are not 'fixed in nature but are socially constructed through communally produced 'shared conceptual maps'. This study adopts a constructionist approach in order to critique and subvert representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games. These representations are often presented as 'authentic' 'mimetic' direct reflections of 'reality' (Reid 2008), or "reflective" representations (Hall 1997: 24).

The notion of reflective representation stems from the assumption that real world objects, people, events etc. have naturally imbedded fixed 'true' meanings which are recreated or re-presented 'authentically' or 'mimetically' through language (visual, audial, textual, sensual etc.) (Reid 2008, Hall et al. 2013, Hall 1997). Whilst certain (particularly visual) representations can be said closely resemble 'real world' objects, the constructionist approach to representation critiques the assumption that these representations are direct, 'objective' mirror reflections of reality. The constructionist approach also disputes the notion that meaning, and thus representation, exists independently from human agency and intervention (McMillan 2004, Hall 1997). This approach thus coincides with this study's premise which disputes that race exists independently from human agency and intervention. Adopting a constructionist approach, this study explores and critiques stereotypical representations of people and bodies of colour which are often presented as 'reflective'.

Hall (1997, et al. 2013) notes that the constructionist approach to representation is mostly concerned with semiotics - the study of signs in their different forms as cultural

texts. Drawing from Saussure (in Hall 1997), Hall explains that signs are comprised of two key components,

> "forms of expression used by language (whether speech, writing, drawing, or other types of representation) - which Saussure called the signifiers - and the mental concepts associated with them - the *signifieds*" (Saussure cited in Hall 1997: 35-36).

The constructionist approach focuses on exploring, analysing and critiquing the cultural codes that link certain signifiers with certain signifieds. More importantly, the constructionist approach views representation not just as a process that re-presents knowledge, but also a system that can *produce* knowledge. It also considers the significant role that power often plays in the cultural coding and linking process of signifiers and signifieds, as well as the production of knowledge and the hegemonic fixing of certain meanings as truth (Hall in Jhally 1997, Foucault cited in Hall 1997).

> "Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has real effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true'" (Foucalt in Hall 1997: 49).

The term 'power', in the context of the constructionist approach to representation, is also used in a broader, more inclusive way,

> "We tend to think of power as always radiating in a single direction — from top to bottom - and coming from a specific source — the sovereign, the state, the ruling class and so on. For Foucault, however, power does not 'function in the form of a chain' - it circulates. It is never monopolized by one centre. It 'is deployed and exercised through a net-like organization' ... This suggests that we are all, to some degree, caught up in its circulation — oppressors and oppressed. It does not radiate downwards, either from one source or from one place. Power relations permeate all levels of social existence and are therefore to be found operating at every site of social life" (Foucalt cited in Hall 1997: 49-50).

This study thus adopts the constructionist approach to representation to argue that existing racial stereotyping is a complex process of representation and knowledge

production. This study analyses stereotypical representations of people, bodies and communities of colour – signs – in selected video games - texts. My art practice seeks to unsettle the hegemonic cultural codes that link the signifiers (a character of colour's physical appearance, their communities and neighbourhoods, their culture and language) with the signifieds (their character portrayal, their role within the game's narrative) in these signs. I also take into consideration the significant role that power plays in the representation process to argue that racial stereotypes have been reinforced through power and re-presented through language as normalised, 'true', 'objective' reflections of reality, circulated by both the racially privileged and the racially marginalised.

The representation of stereotypes as truth, as a consequence, ends up having a tangible effect on the lived experiences of individuals and groups in culturally diverse societies, affecting their perceptions of reality, and thus affecting how they mentally represent themselves and others. It is important then to unsettle this assumption of 'truth' in these stereotypes, my study and art practice seek to do this.

## 2.4. Racial Stereotyping: Race reduced to 'Spectacle'

Mainstream contemporary video games, much like other forms of traditional and New Media, are still rife with violent, stereotypical visual and audial representations of people of colour, their bodies and their communities they live in (Leonard 2003, Sisler 2008, Barret 2006, DeVane and Squire 2008, Brock 2011, Gray 2012, Gray 2014, Fussel 2015, Conditt 2015, Hall in Jhally 1997, Brooks and Herbert 2006, Hall 1997, Kowaltzke and Stewart 2007). Video games, due to their interactive nature, can even be described as "racialized pedagogical zones", spaces where dominant stereotypical assumptions race, ethnicities, cultures and communities can be learned and ingrained through interactive 'play' (Everett and Craig-Watkins 2008: 142).

> "These games draw heavily from racist discourses already circulating in popular and mainstream culture and arguably intensify these messages and lessons of racial difference through the power and allure of interactive gameplay" (Everett and Craig-Watkins 2008: 142).

My art practice appropriates gameplay footage from selected video games, which contain stereotypical representations of people, bodies and communities of colour.

Since the analysis and critique of stereotypically racist representations of people of colour in video games is a vital component of my art practice, it is thus important to explore stereotyping as a representational practice, breaking it down to reveal its complex inner workings. Focusing on visual and audial representation, this chapter section argues that prominent racial stereotypes perpetuated in mainstream media and popular culture often reduce people, bodies and communities of colour to 'consumable' sites for the enactment of lustful desire or violent subjugation or both (hooks 1992, Hall 1997).

Hall (1997) suggests that stereotyping is a representational practice that capitalises on a fundamental part of mental representation process, *difference*. As mentioned earlier, meanings don't exist independently in a vacuum. They exist in relation to one another and are often intertwined. Difference plays a vital role not just in distinguishing meanings from one another but also in determining the relationships that these meanings have with one another. Hall argues that along with distinguishing meanings from one another, which is an essential part of the mental representation process, difference itself can also carry meaning.

> "We know what black means … not because there is some essence of 'blackness' but because we can contrast it with its opposite – white … It is the difference between white and black which signifies, which carries meaning" (Hall 1997: 234).

Hall (1997: 236) argues that difference as a signifying practice plays a crucial part in allowing cultures to "classify" various socially constructed meanings in relation to one another. 'Racial difference' thus lies at the heart of racial stereotyping, which posits blackness and whiteness not just as binary opposites but also as hierarchal opposites (Guess 2006, Smedley and Smedley 2005). Socially constructed racial difference classifies whiteness as the dominant normative standard and blackness as its inferior opposite (Tate 1997, Books and Herbert 2006, Ladson Billings 1997, Guess 2006, Hall 1997, Fanon 1952, Smedley and Smedley 2005). Examples of notions of hierarchal racial difference perpetuated through racial stereotypes in video games are discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

Kowaltzke and Steward (2007: 37) note the significant role that power plays in the representational practice of stereotyping, stating that "stereotyping is often evident

when there is a power imbalance between members of society". As mentioned earlier in the chapter, power plays a significant role in the fixing of meaning, fixing certain signifiers with certain signifieds (Hall in Jhally 1997). In unequal societies, power plays a further role in the privileging of certain meanings over others. The use of the term 'power' in Gramsci's broader, more inclusive context of hegemony, means that the fixing and privileging or certain meanings as dominant is done through dialogue between both the powerful and disempowered with Individuals or groups in positions of power enjoy the controlling share of the dialogue (Hall 1997).

The privileging of certain meanings through power combined with the relational nature of meaning, means that certain signifiers can accumulate multiple signifieds within shared conceptual maps (cultures) to create what Hall (1997: 232) calls a "regime of representation". Hall (1997: 249) suggests that racial stereotypes can be said to be "racialised regimes of representation", with multiple (even opposing) accumulated meanings being attached to the difference between whiteness, non-whiteness and blackness.

Dark skin for example, due to racialised regimes of representation, accumulates multiple meanings ranging from being associated with exoticism and sexual desire to physical threat and violence. Racialised regimes of representation perpetuated through racial stereotypes socially and ideologically position whiteness as the dominant normative standard. Whiteness is fixed with signifieds such as physical and moral purity, intelligence, cultural sophistication, technological advancement, heroism and leadership. Non-whiteness becomes 'the racialised other', a racial contaminant which threatens the racial 'purity' of whiteness, occupying - through difference - various designated degrees below whiteness. Blackness, classified as the inferior binary opposite of whiteness, is relegated to the lowest position, sub-human, represented through racialised regimes of representation as morally impure, physically exotic or imposing, and culturally primitive violent threats that need to be subjugated or 'tamed' (Guess 2006, Tate 1997, Haney Lopez 1994, Ladson Billings 1998, Hall 1997, Smedley and Smedley 2005).

Brooks and Herbert (2006) highlight the significant role that media plays in reproducing, perpetuating and cementing dominant regimes of representation;

> “In our consumption-oriented, mediated society, much of what comes to pass as important is based often on the stories produced and disseminated by media institutions. Much of what audiences know and care about is based on the images, symbols, and narratives in radio, television, film, music, and other media. How individuals construct their social identities, how they come to understand what it means to be male, female, black, white, Asian, Latino, Native American—even rural or urban—is shaped by commodified texts produced by media for audiences that are increasingly segmented by the social constructions of race and gender. Media, in short, are central to what ultimately come to represent our social realities” (Brooks and Herbert 2006: 297).

From movies and television to music and forms of media historically perceived as ‘objective’ like the news, stereotyping is an almost ubiquitous representational practice in both traditional media and new media. Racial stereotyping is a representational practice as old as the social construction of race itself (Hall 1997, Hall in Jhally 1997, Brooks and Herbert 2006, Kowaltzke and Stewart 2007).

### 2.4.1. Racial stereotyping in Media

Hall (1997: 277) suggests that four key concepts, “Binary Opposites, Naturalization Essentializing and Reductionism” underpin racial stereotyping in media. These key concepts underpin the racial stereotypes present in the selected video games.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, socially constructed notions of hierarchal racial difference were created in order to justify the notion of permanent slavery during an ‘enlightened’ period in the west, typified by the rise of notions of freedom, democracy and capitalist ‘equal’ opportunity (Smedley and Smedley 2005: 19). Hierarchal racial difference positioned whiteness and blackness as unequal binary opposites. This pitting of blackness and whiteness as unequal binary opposites did not just ‘justify’ the permanent racial subjugation of people of colour in the west but, according to Hall (1997), also heavily influenced western perceptions of people of colour. These perceptions of people of colour – their physical features, characters, places of origin and cultures – informed how they were represented in western media at the time.

Racist imagery and narratives, drawing from socially constructed racial assumptions and myths, became commonplace in western newspapers, advertising and imperial

adventure novels. Africa for example was relegated to being known as the primitive 'dark continent', a direct opposite to the 'illuminated' civilisation, cultural sophistication and moral uprightness of the West. People of colour, particularly Africans, were represented in western media as physically imposing, exotic, unintelligent, morally debased and prone to visceral violence (Hall 1997). Many contemporary representations in media (and new media) of people of colour, particularly representations of Africa, still stem from centuries old, reproduced socially constructed stereotypical assumptions and myths of racial difference which persist to this day and still position blackness and whiteness as unequal binary opposites (Wainaina 2005, Hall in Jhally 1997, Brooks and Herbert 2006). Many video games that are set in Africa still portray the African continent as a dark, exotic and mostly primitive setting.

The persistence of these stereotypes can be attributed to what Hall (1997: 245) describes as "naturalisation".

> "The logic behind naturalization is simple. If the differences between black and white people are 'cultural', then they are open to modification and change. But if they are 'natural' – as slave holders believed – then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. Naturalization is therefore a representational strategy designed to fix difference and thus secure it forever. It is an attempt to halt the inevitable 'slide' in meaning, to secure discursive or ideological closure" (Hall 1997: 245).

The naturalisation of racial stereotypes was used as a representational strategy to justify the permanent racial subjugation of people of colour. Naturalisation continues to be used in contemporary media as a means to permanently fix meaning. Racial myths and assumptions - often held by individuals or groups in positions of power – are represented as 'objective' truth, unchangeably imbedded in nature (Hall 1997).

Despite being "mediations; mediated versions of reality" (Reid 2008: 199), socially constructed racialised regimes of representation in media have been and continue to be presented as 'reflective' – that is, they are often still perpetuated in media and presented as 'authentic' mirror images of reality (Reid 2008, Hall in Jhally 1997).

Kowaltzke and Steward (2007) also note that the reproduction of stereotypes over a prolonged period also contributes to the naturalising process. Many racist tropes and stereotypes that continue to persist to this day in media and popular culture are

products of decades or even centuries of repetition, re-presentation and cultural reproduction. They now appear ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ and are perpetuated and circulated in various forms by both oppressors and the oppressed alike (Kowaltzke and Steward 2007, Books and Herbert 2006, Hall 1997). Video games in particular are often guilty of naturalising racial stereotypes. Many video games contain long-standing racial tropes and stereotypes of people, bodies, and communities of colour, which are often presented as authentically realistic, mimetic virtual recreations of reality (Everett and Craig-Watkins 2008).

Hall (1997: 249) notes that “stereotyping reduces people to a few simple characteristics, which are represented as fixed by nature”, this reductionism and essentialism allows for stereotypes to be easily repeated, reproduced, circulated and accepted as the naturalised norm.

> “Stereotypes get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, easily grasped and widely recognised’ characteristics about a person, reduce everything about that person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and fix them without change or development to eternity… *Stereotyping reduces, essentialises, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’*” (Hall 1997: 258).

Using this definition, I argue that racial stereotypes reduce people of colour, their bodies, histories, cultures and communities to a set of fixed, simple and often exaggerated ‘essential’ traits.

Hall (1997: 295) also describes racial stereotypes as a form of “symbolic violence”, that can have a tangible negative effect of the lived experiences of the racially marginalised.

My art practice explores and critiques racial stereotypes in video games, focusing specifically on the visual and audial representation of characters of colour and my experience of playing these video games as a black gamer. In chapter four, I argue that video game portrayals of people of colour mostly relegate them to being little more that racial caricatures, sites for the enactment of sexual desire or visceral violence. I also discuss in further detail how certain racialised and naturalised ‘essential traits’, that are often presented in video games as ‘real’ or reflecting reality, end up having tangible real word effects on gamers of colour, including myself.

Adopting Everett and Craig-Watkins (2008: 142) assertion of video games as potential "racialised pedagogical zones", I argue that video games, due to their interactive nature, can be incredibly powerful spaces where damaging, ideologically violent racial stereotypes can be learned, naturalised, normalised and internalised. This study, as well as my art practice, both seek to contribute to a growing body of literature and visual texts by gamers of colour critiquing and unsettling the normalisation and naturalisation of racism and (violent) racial stereotyping in gaming.

## 2.5. Addressing and redressing stereotypically racist representations

In order to address and unsettle racial stereotypes in the selected video games through my art practice, this study adopts Hall's constructionist premise that meaning can never be finally or permanently fixed.

Despite power related attempts to permanently fix meaning, it will always contain some sort of fluidity and more importantly malleability, because it is socially constructed (Hall 1997, Hall et al. 2013). This malleability in meaning in the representation process, allows me the opportunity to use my art practice to re-present stereotypical and violent representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in video games. Appropriating and editing existing gameplay footage from these video games, my art practice seeks to re-present and recontextualise these stereotypical representations in a manner that critiques and unsettles the racial stereotypes.

Literature suggests that one way of addressing racial stereotypes in media is to simply 'reverse' the regime of representation, that is to intentionally portray racially marginalised individuals or groups in a 'positive' light. Examples of superficial 'positive' representations of people of colour can be seen in movies and television shows containing characters of colour who possess essentialised 'white' traits. Possessing these traits allow them to comfortably occupy 'white spaces' associated with nobility, dignity, wealth and cultural sophistication (Hall in Jhally 1997, Hall 1997, Kowaltzke and Steward 2007, Brooks and Herbert 2005).

**Figure 8.**

Dinner scene in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (film). 1967. Directed by Stanley Kramer. Distributed by Columbia Pictures, Culver City.

Attempts in media to re-present blackness with more 'positive' imagery is important, as it can assist the breaking down of age old racialised regimes of representation. However the opposite can also be argued, that these superficial reverse portrayals can also contribute to reaffirming the stereotypes they are seeking to break down. Simply portraying people of colour with 'nobler' traits associated with whiteness can reinforce the notion that blackness would have to 'adopt' whiteness in order to escape harmful racist stereotypes. This form of escape can be interpreted as just another form of symbolically violent ethnocentrism (Hall in Jhally 1997, Hall 1997, Kowaltzke and Steward 2007). Reverse portrayals thus occupy an uneasy space, juggling attempts to visually and audially unfix negative meanings associated with blackness whilst reaffirming whiteness as the normative standard.

Hall (1997) suggests that there is another way in which stereotyping can be reversed, which can be found not in escaping the stereotype but in re-presenting what it means to occupy the stereotype. Examples of this can be seen in the work of Kehinde Wiley. His large-scale paintings consist of contemporary stereotypical visual representations

of black men – physically imposing, dressed in baggy ‘hip hop’ clothing – comfortably occupying traditionally ‘white’ neoclassical spaces.

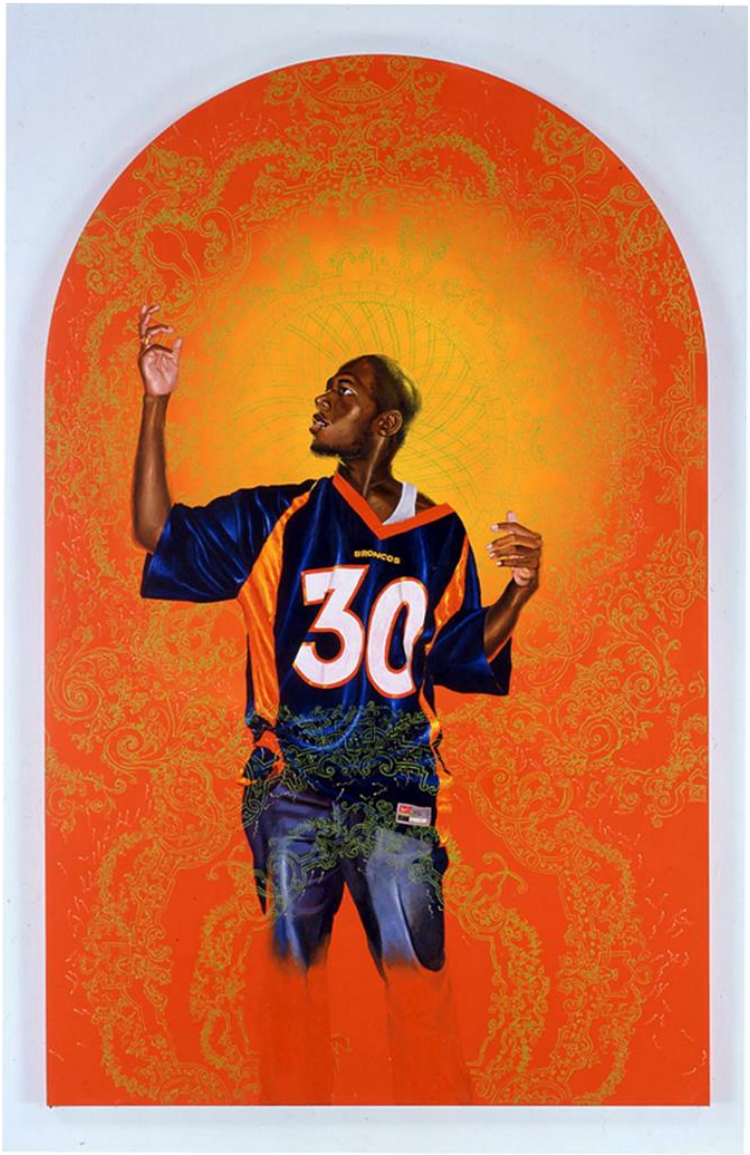


**Figure 9.**

Kehinde Wiley. *Female Prophet Ann, who observes the presentation of Jesus on the Temple***.** 2003. Oil on canvas. Brooklyn Museum.

Wiley’s paintings, according to Murray (2007: 92) combine “the bling-bling excesses of hip hop with the opulent artificiality of classical painting”. The black male figures in these paintings are depicted as occupying spaces historically reserved for “historically fictionalised saints, prophets, angels, and political figures” (Murray, 2007: 97). The

stereotypically dressed black male figures in Wiley's paintings are depicted as occupying spaces associated with white nobility, opulence and sophistication without having to erase their blackness or escape the racial stereotypes associated with the way they are dressed (Palmer 2011, Murray 2007).

This form or reversal does not necessarily change the stereotypes but reverses what it means to occupy these stereotypes. This form of reversal seeks to transform racial stereotypes into objects of desire or sources of pride. Commercial 'hip hop' culture often exemplifies this through its glamorisation of stereotypically black, viscerally violent hypermasculinity (Smedley 1998, Hall 1997).

Another example of this form of reversal was the transformation of the word 'black' and 'blackness' during the civil rights era from its earlier associations with moral depravity and threat to being associated with beauty and perseverance (Hall 1997, DuVernay 2016).

Whilst these forms of stereotype reversal add some much-needed diversity to the way in which people of colour are represented in media, Hall (1997) argues that they can also be seen simply as alternative forms of essentialised reduction. They often overlook and forego the complex social and historical contexts of people, bodies and communities of colour in order to produce simplified 'positive imagery'. Highlighting how these two forms of stereotype reversal can often "cut both ways", Hall (1997: 274) states;

> "The problem with the positive/negative strategy is that adding positive images to a mostly negative repertoire of the dominant regime of representation increases the diversity of the ways in which being black is represented, but does not necessarily *displace* the negative. Since the binaries remain in place, meaning continues to be framed by them. The strategy challenges the binaries – but it does not undermine them. The peace loving, child caring Rastafarian can still appear, in the following day's newspaper, as an exotic or violent black stereotype" (Hall 1997: 274).

Hall thus presents an alternative strategy, which this study adopts, that puts the unsettling and undermining of stereotypes at its centre. This alternative strategy draws from the premise that meaning - even meaning presented from dominant regimes of representation - can never be finally fixed. Hall suggests that racial stereotypes can

be re-produced, re-presented, and re-contextualised in a manner that allows them to begin to “work against themselves” and thus be unsettled (Hall 1997, Hall in Jhally 1997). By focusing specifically on unsettling the naturalisation process that contributes to racial stereotypes being adopted as ‘normal’, one can then re-present the racial stereotype as ‘abnormal’.

Racial stereotypes in video games are normalised and naturalised as fantasy fulfilment through interactive virtual play.

> “From the privacy of one’s home, game players are able to transport themselves into foreign and dangerous environments, often gaining pleasure through domination and control of weaker characters of colour” (Leonard 2003: 1).

My art practice, adopting Stuart Hall’s alternative counter strategy, seeks to unsettle the naturalisation and normalisation of racial stereotypes in video games, by re-presenting the stereotypes as they are, outside of the context of play and fantasy fulfilment.

In my art practice I appropriate and collect various forms of gameplay footage and audio from video games containing stereotypical and violent representations of people, bodies and communities of colour. I simply re-present these representations in a manner that aims to unsettle the racial stereotypes – in essence to *‘abnormalise’* them. My art practice re-presents stereotypical representations of people, bodies and communities of colour involving visceral violence, violent subjugation, being reduced to nameless faceless enemy, exoticism and ethnocentrism. My re-presentations draw from my own experiences as a black male South African fine artist and gamer, having frequently played video games containing overtly racist stereotypes which centre on violence against the racialised other. My art practice doesn’t seek to simply present new ‘positive’ counter-images of blackness in video games, but instead seeks to explore, unpack and expose the inner workings of these stereotypes and unsettle them.

# CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses my adoption of Critical Theory as the research orientation for my inquiry into the representation of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games. My art practice draws heavily from Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is a slightly more radical branch of Critical Theory that challenges hegemonic 'grand narratives' on race. CRT places value on the lived experiences of the racially marginalised, arguing that these lived experiences play a vital role in understanding and critiquing the legacies of normative hegemonic grand narratives on race. CRT forms the foundational conceptual pillar that informs my art practice as well as my analysis of the work of the selected artists. In order to comprehensively discuss the key tenets of CRT in relation to my art practice in chapter four, it is important to broadly discuss Critical Theory in this chapter and to argue why it is appropriate for this study.

This chapter will also discuss Practice Based Research (PBQR) as the adopted research methodology for this study. This fine art study centres on the notion of my art practice *as* research, an explorative tool to address stereotypical representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games. My art practice forms both the central focus and the critical outcome of this study.

The use of discourse analysis, particularly critical discourse analysis, as a means to analyse the selected video games, literature and work of the selected artists that influence my art practice will also be discussed.

## 3.2. Research Aims, Objectives, Questions, and Proposed Outcome of study

This study seeks to address stereotypical representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in selected video games using my art practice. This study draws from the work of selected new media artists, Joseph Delappe and Eva and Franco Mattes, who subvert video game stereotypes in their work.

The objectives of this study are to:

- Explore how social constructions of race and hierarchal racial difference inform stereotypical representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games.
- Analyse the methods used by the selected artists to unsettle video game stereotypes in their art practice and adopt those methods in my art practice.
- Re-present through my art practice, racist representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games, using my own experiences as a black South African male gamer as a lens that informs the re-presentations.

To achieve these objectives, I ask three main research questions:

1. How is race and hierarchal racial difference, particularly visual and audial representations of people, bodies and communities of colour, represented in the selected video games?
2. What creative mechanisms and tools do the selected artists and writers employ to subvert problematic representations (of non-whiteness) in their work?
3. How are issues of race, hierarchal racial difference and the representation of people, bodies and communities of colour in video games addressed in my own art practice?

A body of work, exhibited in partial fulfilment of the Master's Degree in Fine Art at the Durban University of Technology, as well as a partial dissertation accompanying the body of work, constitutes the proposed outcome of this study.

## 3.3. Critical Theory

As discussed in the previous chapter, this study premises itself on the notion that race is a social construct. The previous chapter argued that race is not a phenomenon that is permanently, and thus unchangeably, fixed in nature. Literature reviewed in the previous chapter suggested that race is a series of "communally and linguistically produced", institutionally legitimised, hegemonic, normalised, malleable, socially

constructed meanings attached, often through power, to arbitrarily chosen physical features, ethnicities and lineages of individuals or groups (Guess 2006, Haney Lopez 2006, Haney Lopez in Tate 1997, Lane 1997, Smedley 1998, Smedley and Smedley 2005, Crenshaw 1988, Hall 1997). As a result, Critical Theory, due to its critique of the role the fixing of socially constructed knowledge and social meanings as 'objective' unchangeable 'grand truths', is adopted as the overall research orientation of my research and art practice.

Originating in the Frankfurt School in the late 1930's through the work of now seminal writers such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno[17] amongst others, Critical Theory emerged as a school of thought consisting of theories which sought to critique western society. Critical theorists were particularly critical of positivism, often standing in stark opposition to the positivist search for 'objective' truth. Arguing that knowledge, even from empirical research, cannot be removed from its social, cultural and historical contexts, critical theorists critiqued and often outright rejected the positivist notion of "presuppositionless representation" (Agger 1991: 117) – that is the positivist representation of knowledge as fixed truth, independent from human agency and directly reflecting meanings 'imbedded' in the world and nature (Agger 1991, Rush 2004, Hanssen 2004, Honneth 2004).

Critical theorists cautioned against the positivist preoccupation with objectivity, arguing it as little more than a potentially harmful, hegemonic attempt to permanently fix knowledge, often through power, as 'natural' and thus unchangeable, as Agger elaborates,

> "The positivist theory of science has become a new mythology and ideology in the sense that it fails to understand its own investment in the status quo ... Positivism suggests that one can perceive the world without making assumptions about the nature of the phenomena under investigation. Its notion that knowledge can simply reflect the world leads to the uncritical identification

[17] Horkheimer and Adorno co-authored the seminal text entitled *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), a text that "many scholars view as the principle text of Critical Theory" (Rush 2007: 8). In this text they challenge the accumulated aura of 'objectivity' and elitism surrounding enlightenment within sciences and academia at the time, arguing this aura of objectivity and 'triumph' over nature as little more than myth (Rush 2004, Roberts 2004).

> of reality and rationality: One experiences the world as rational and necessary, thus deflating attempts to change it" (Agger 1991: 109).

Critical theory, in contrast to the positivist, modernist pursuit of 'objective' knowledge, is centred on the notion of knowledge as contextual, fluid, and thus always subject to critical self-reflection and change (Agger 1991).

Change plays a key role in Critical Theory. Partly as a result of it having emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War from many writers who were displaced by the war, social justice and particularly initiating social change form the key ideological pillars of Critical Theory (Rush 2004, Kincheloe and Mclaren 2011).

> "A critical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other social institutions, and current dynamics interact to construct a social system" (Kincheloe and McLaren 2011: 288).

> "Critical Theory is not merely descriptive, it is a way to instigate social change by providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality that can, in turn, inform political action aimed at emancipation (or at least at diminishing domination and inequality). Following this thought one might think that Critical Theory is "critical" just to the extent that it makes social inequality apparent, specifies some plausible candidates for the causes of the inequality, and enables society in general (or at least its oppressed segment) to react in appropriate ways" (Rush 2004: 9).

This study thus adopts Critical Theory as its research orientation to analyse and critique the perpetuation of race, particularly hierarchal racial difference through racial stereotypes, as 'objective' truth in the selected video games. I reject the notion of race and hierarchal racial difference as reflective of reality - permanently fixed in nature. Centring around my own experiences as a gamer of colour, this study and particularly my art practice, seeks to contribute to emerging pools of knowledge from gamers of colour and other marginalised communities, challenging the racist status quo of whiteness as the "default race" (Gray 2012) in video games. This emerging pool of outsider knowledge seeks to instigate a change which will lead to more nuanced

inclusive representations of the racialised other, as well as other marginalised communities, in video games.

Critical Theory is not just concerned with providing the theoretical catalyst for social change, it also inquires into instances where social justice and reform has stalled. Critical Theory seeks to understand why in these instances where social change should've taken place, it has stalled.

> "In contrast to the approaches that have achieved dominance today, Critical Theory must couple the critique of social injustice with an explanation of the processes that obscure that injustice, for only when one can convince the addressees by means of such an explanatory analysis that they can be deceived about the real character of their social conditions, can the wrongfulness of those conditions be publicly demonstrated with some prospect of acceptance" (Honneth 2004: 346).

This study, over and above its analysis and critique of the representation of people, bodies and communities of colour in video games, also analyses and critiques the 'progressive' changes in representations of people, bodies and communities of colour that have already taken place in video games. This study and my art practice analyses and critiques this 'gradual progress' made in video games. As a result of this study's focus on discussing race in video games, Critical Race Theory (CRT), an overtly political activism-centred branch of Critical Theory, is adopted as the central conceptual pillar that informs my art practice.

CRT not only premises itself on the notion of race as a social construct, it highlights the harmful legacies this social construct has by placing emphasis on documenting and critically reflecting on the lived experiences and experiential knowledge of racially marginalised individuals and groups (Yosso 2005, Ladson Billings 1998, Tate 1997). CRT commits itself to initiating social change by allowing racially marginalised individuals and groups, whose voices have previously been overlooked or ignored, the opportunity to voice out their lived experiences as counter-narratives to hegemonic, normative and often oppressive racial status quos that position whiteness and non-whiteness as unequal binary opposites (Ladson-Billings 1998, Tate 1997, Yosso 2005, Aguirre Jr 2000).

> "CRT challenges White privilege and refutes the claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, colour blindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity. CRT challenges notions of 'neutral' research or 'objective' researchers and exposes deficit-informed research that silences, ignores and distorts epistemologies of People of Color" (Yosso 2005: 73).

CRT finally also analyses how dominant neoliberal notions of social change have contributed to the stalling of racial reform. This study draws directly from some of the key tenets of CRT to address and redress stereotypically racist representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games in my art practice. These key tenets, as well as how they are adopted in my work and in the work of the selected artists, are discussed more comprehensively in chapter four.

## 3.4. Art Practice as Research: A Practice Based Research methodology

This fine art study centres on my art practice. The term 'art practice' within the context of this study, refers to more than just the production of an artistic body of work. This study uses the term 'art practice' in a more expansive way to position my art practice as "artistic research" (Borgdorff 2011: 44). Borgdorff (2011: 44) describes "artistic research" as a term that "connects two domains: art and academia". My art practice involves the initial conception, planning and written contextualization of an artistic body of work (hypothesis), the actual production of the body of work (testing of hypothesis often through trial and error), the final presentation of the 'complete' body of work (as research findings) as well as a process critical reflection and further contextualisation before, during and after the entire – mostly emergent – art making process (Dallow 2003). This study aligns itself with the claim that the 'art practice', within the context of "artistic research" (Borgdorff 2011: 44), is more than just a research tool, my art practice *is* research (Dallow 2003: 53).

Whilst the significance, contextualisation and critical reflection of my art practice is articulated through the written component of this study, I align myself with Candy's (2006:3) argument that the significance and contextualisation of the art practice expressed in the written component of artistic research cannot be fully understood without – or outside of – the body of work produced through the art practice. My art practice is not merely a separate accessory to the written component of the study. It

is central to this study, intertwined with the research aims, objectives, the data collection and the outcomes of the study. It is therefore important to adopt a research methodology that reflects this marriage between my research and art practice, to adopt a research methodology that advocates for the notion of art practice *as* research. This study adopts practice based qualitative research as the most appropriate research methodology.

The notion of artistic research – whether it be in design, the visual and performing arts, music etc. – emerged through "the integration of art schools into the wider national system of higher education" (Kalvemark 2011: 4). As a result of this integration, the need to produce arts based 'research output' thus emerged. This need for research output also emerged as a result of these arts schools having to compete with other more established scientific fields for university funding. Universities often awarded the most funding into departments, fields and disciplines with the most research output (Kalvermark 2011: 4-5).

> "Some colleges of arts and music were integrated into universities. Others were left with an independent status but still subject to rules and regulations designed to fit mainstream universities or other research-based institutions. In this context a natural question was raised. If research in the classical sense is the basis for teaching and training in universities, what then is the equivalence for the teaching and training in art schools?" (Kalvermark 2011: 4).

This question, still very complex and difficult to answer today, lead to difficulties in the integration process of creative arts schools into formal tertiary institutions. Some universities sought to compel the newly integrated creative arts schools to submit and conform to the stringent traditional rules and conventions of the formal academic research process. For example, these rules and conventions within traditional 'academic' research included the identification of a definite and clear research problem which would be 'solved', explored or addressed through 'rigorous' research. Some arts schools on the other hand, sought to broaden and expand the definition of 'research' to be more inclusive, embracing the complexities, emergent nature and often intentional ambiguity and intuitiveness of the arts and the art making process (Kalvermark 2011: 5, Dallow 2003). The most commonly accepted and utilized methodological middle ground that emerged between these at times conflicting

schools of thought was Practice Based Research (PBR) and Practice Led Research (PLR).

PBR and PLR are frequently used interchangeably due their mainly being centred on practice, they do however have some key differences. Within the context of the arts, Dallow (2003: 51) differentiates PLR from PBR by describing PBR as "research *through* arts practice" and PLR as "research *into* arts practice". PLR focuses on the gaining of new knowledge, understanding or insight *of* – or *into* – a particular practice. In terms of research outcomes, the production of research artefacts – a creative body of work for example – is less of a priority in PLR than producing (new) knowledge which contributes towards expanding and developing a particular practice (Candy 2006, Dallow 2003, Borgdoff 2011).

PBR on the other hand centres on using practice as a means to gain knowledge (Candy 2006: 1). Research in PBR is conducted *through* practice and thus the production of research artefacts – an artistic body of work for example – lies at the centre of PBR. The production of research artefacts forms one of the key research outcomes of PBR. These artefacts are then expanded upon and theoretically contextualised through writing.

> "Practice-based projects are those which include as an integral part the production of an original artefact in addition to, or perhaps instead of, the production of a written thesis. They are naturally of great interest to practising artists and designers, but they are not confined to these disciplines. One may find examples in music, in software design, in engineering, in law; in fact in any subject where the result might be an artefact generated in the laboratory or workplace" (Biggs 2000: 2).

The production of research artefacts not only constitute one of the main research outcomes of PBR but - as mentioned earlier – the creative (conceptual and physical) process of producing these artefacts *is*, in of itself, research (Dallow 2003).

> "Art practice thus is generally based upon an 'active' process of enquiry. The 'emergent' qualities of this process are bound up with the specificities of the art form adopted, as well as the final mode of presentation, exhibition or performance, which includes how it will be seen, heard or otherwise experienced or consumed, and perhaps by whom, where, under what

> conditions, and for how long. These are all potentially part of the nature of the enquiry, not merely an end point" (Dallow 2003: 53).

This study thus centres on my art practice. As an artistic practitioner and artistic researcher I argue that my art practice is research. The critical outcome of this study is the production of an artistic body of work as research artefacts, which are informed and contextualised by the written component of this study. I argue that a full understanding of the arguments, claims, observations and reflections expressed in the written component of this study can only be obtained through "direct reference" (Candy 2006: 1) to my art practice and the artistic body of work produced through this practice. This study therefore is practice based.

Some PBR scholars argue for the mandatory inclusion of some elements of the traditional research process – e.g. clearly articulated research aims, objectives, outcomes and questions – for the sake of proving academic rigour (Biggs and Buchler 2007, Candy 2006, Kalvermark 2011).

> "The distinction between a purely professional practice role in producing art works, and an academic research perspective being brought to bear in creating art works, is that the practice-based creative arts researcher is 'obliged also to map for his or her peers the route by which they arrived at' their products". (Frayling in Dallow 2003: 54).

Other PBR scholars argue that this emphasis on 'academic rigour' could have adverse effects on the creative freedom, intuitiveness, ambiguity and overall openness of the art making process as well as the artistic research output – the research artefacts. Biggs (2000: 4) highlights this seemingly strained relationship between free creative artistic practice and academic rigour through his posing of a series of questions;

> "What is the relationship of a systematic enquiry to creativity and serendipity?
>
> Does a contribution to knowledge imply the discovery of "objective facts"?
>
> Does stating how one is going to set about the research restrict creative development?
>
> Does framing a research question imply a research answer?
>
> Can appropriate methods be identified prior to their use in a new situation?

What is the role of the artefact in reporting the results?

Can artefacts present arguments?

Is experiential knowledge precluded from documentation?

Does textual justification make the artefact redundant?"

(Biggs 2000: 4)

As a fine artist, the questions and concerns mentioned by Biggs are relatable. I have often experienced my art making process being weighed down and hindered by attempts to state clear objectives, goals, questions and proposed outcomes beforehand. I have also found that trying to explicitly and definitively articulate what my artworks are about had an adverse effect on the openness of the artworks themselves to audience interpretations, especially with regards to allowing the audience some autonomy in the interpretation of the artworks.

This study, however – as mentioned earlier – adopts Critical Theory's main objective, "to instigate social change by providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality that can, in turn, inform political action" (Rush 2004: 9). As a result, I therefore, for the purpose of this study, adopt a stance which leans more towards borrowing elements of the traditional research process. This artistic study indeed seeks to address through my art practice, a clearly defined research issue – the stereotypical and violent visual and audial representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games. This study seeks to contribute to the emerging pool of knowledge from researchers of colour addressing and critiquing the issue of the representation of race and hierarchal difference in video games. I thus consider it important to 'map a route', as Frayling in Dallow (2003: 54) mentions above, through my art practice that can be seen, understood, built on and possibly even used by other (artistic) researchers seeking to addressing the same research issue. The artworks produced during this study are research artefacts first and foremost, artistic explorations of the research issue. Whilst I do concede that this more traditional approach may diminish the artistic and more open qualities of my work, I draw from elements of Action Research to make sure that the openness, intuitiveness and intentional ambiguity in my work is not completely lost.

In order to account for the often emergent and intuitive nature of the art making process, this practice based artistic study borrows elements of action research, particularly the action research cycle.

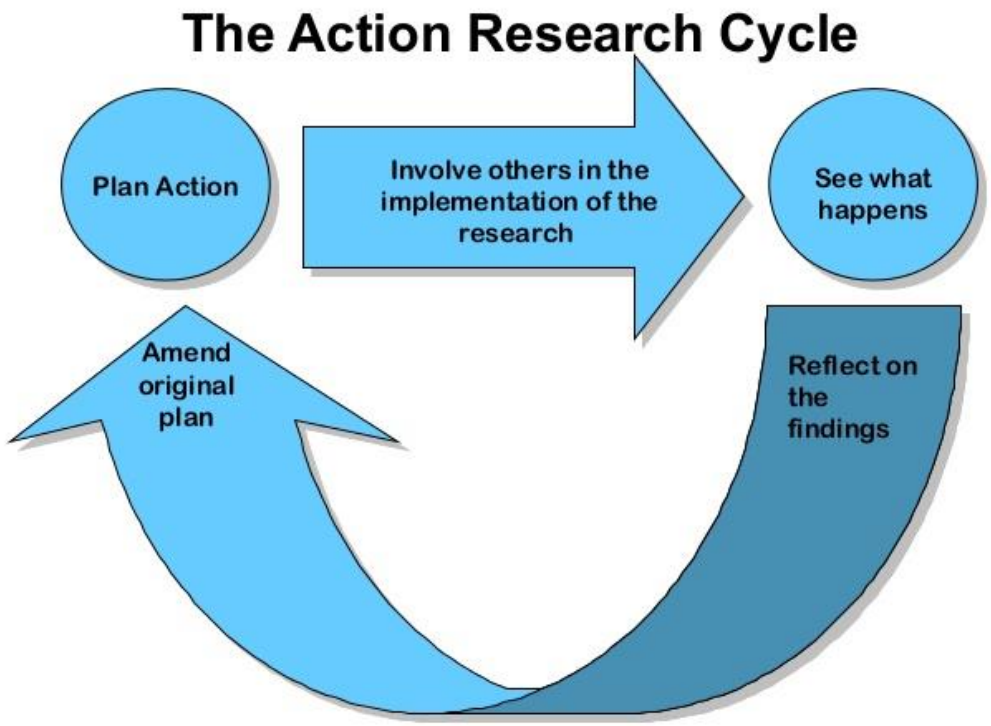


**Figure 9.**

*The Action Research Cycle* (Noushad 2015).

The strategy within Action Research that this study seeks to borrow – the Action Research Cycle – is the "cyclical process of conducting an investigation, taking action based on the results of that enquiry, followed by evaluation of the improvements in the situation under consideration" (Hughes in Candy and Edmonds 2011: 137). I apply this strategy to my art practice by creating a body of work that grows (almost organically) through a constant cyclical process of production, frequent critical reflection and alteration. The Action Research Cycle also allows my body of work to be open to the critique and input of my peers and other audience members, allowing me to use their feedback in the art making process. This study may have a clearly defined research issue that it seeks to address, but the Action Research Cycle allows for the addressing of this issue through my art practice to be more open, explorative and experimental.

> "In the intimacy of experimental studio practice, we can recognize the cycle of learning in action research, where research findings give immediate cause for changes and improvements" (Borgdorff 2011: 51).

Centring around the use of my art practice to explore and critique visual and audial representations of the racialized other in the selected video games, this study adopts a Practice Based Research methodology with an emergent design which draws from elements of the Action Research Cycle.

### 3.5. Discourse analysis

The artistic body of work produced during this study consists primarily of video footage and audio recordings appropriated from selected video games that I have played and completed. These video games contain stereotypical and violent representations of people, bodies and communities of colour. The appropriation and recontextualised re-presentation of this gameplay video footage in my art practice is informed by my discourse analysis of the selected games. The discourse analysis of visual and audial representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games forms the conceptual basis of my art practice and art making process.

As discussed in the literature review chapter, this study aligns itself with Hall's (1997: 19) argument that representation is the complex process of attaching various (socially constructed) meanings to various signs and then organising and communicating (representing) them through language. The organising, communication and sharing of meaning within and between cultures and groups in different positions of power is defined by Hall (1997), citing Foucault[18], as discourse.

This chapter takes this definition of representation a step further by arguing that it doesn't just take place in language, but also takes pace in discourse. Discourse,

[18] "Michel Foucault was a major figure in two successive waves of 20th century French thought--the structuralist wave of the 1960s and then the poststructuralist wave. By the premature end of his life, Foucault had some claim to be the most prominent living intellectual in France … Foucault's work can generally be characterized as philosophically oriented historical research; towards the end of his life, Foucault insisted that all his work was part of a single project of historically investigating the production of truth. What Foucault did across his major works was to attempt to produce an historical account of the formation of ideas, including philosophical ideas." (Kelly n.d.: para. 1 line 1-5, para. 3 line 1-4)

according to Hall (1997: 44), citing Foucault, is a complex “system of representation” – that plays a significant role on the social construction of knowledge. “Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language” (Foucault cited in Hall 1997: 44). Just as language, in the context representation, is used in a broader and more inclusive way in this study to encompass any means – spoken, written, non-verbal, sensual, visual etc. – by which meaning is communicated (Reid 2008, MacMillan 2004, Kowaltzke and Stewart 2007, Hall in Jhally 1997, Hall 1997, Hall n.d.), discourse, in the context of representation, is also used in this study in a broader, more inclusive way. This study draws from Hall’s (1997: 44) broad ‘Foucauldian’ definition of discourse;

> “Normally, the term 'discourse' is used as a linguistic concept. It simply means passages of connected writing or speech Michel Foucault, however, gave it a different meaning … since ail social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do — our conduct — all practices have a discursive aspect* … It is important to note that the concept of discourse in this usage is not purely a "linguistic* concept. It is about language and practice. it attempts to overcome the traditional distinction between what one says (language) and what one does (practice). Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. Just as a discourse 'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it 'rules out', limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it … Meaning and meaningful practice is therefore constructed within discourse” (Foucault cited in Hall 1997: 44).

This study thus adopts this Foucauldian perspective of discourse. I explore how the visual and audial representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games are simultaneously informed by, and contribute to reinforcing, dominant hegemonic historic, cultural and social discourses surrounding race and hierarchal racial difference. I argue that these hegemonic discourses ‘rule in’

whiteness as the normative social standard and 'rule out' the racialized other – who occupies varying degrees below this normative standard. My art practice, seeks to uncover, analyse and critique these racial discourses that permeate through the various visual and audial representations of race in the selected video games.

LeGreco (2017: 4) states that discourse analysis is "the umbrella term to describe various research techniques that are used to study everything from local language practices to larger systems of socially-constructed meaning". This study leans more to the latter description of discourse analysis, which is the qualitative[19] study of the production, communication and reinforcing of certain socially constructed meanings (as dominant) through the language and power (discourse) (LeGreco 2017, Wooffitt 2011).

My art practice draws particularly from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which according to Wooffitt[20] (2011: 22) is concerned with critically exploring and understanding "how language/discourse works to produce wider social inequalities and sustain the power and influence of dominant groups". CDA is premised on the argument that there is a relationship between "language use and its broader structural, political and institutional contexts" Wooffitt (2011: 22). The production of knowledge through discourse, can often be used by individuals and groups in positions of power to reinforce their ideological hegemony over marginalised and disempowered individuals of groups. CDA seeks to analyse and critique the discourses that contribute to reinforcing real-world social inequalities, injustice and oppression (Wooffitt 2011).

> "In critical discourse analysis, empirical research focuses on the interrelationships between discourse and wider social structures. The analysis of texts is central to this task. In everyday use, a text would be taken to refer to

[19] Qualitative research can be described as:

> "Collecting and analysing information in as many forms, chiefly non-numeric, as possible. It tends to focus on exploring, in as much detail as possible, smaller numbers of instances or examples which are seen as being interesting or illuminating, and aims to achieve 'depth' rather than 'breadth'" (Blaxter et al. 2006:64).

[20] Robin Wooffitt is a professor in the department of sociology in the University of York. He is interested "in the organisation of factual discourse, language and identity and the relationship between conversation analysis and discursive psychology" (University of York n.d.: para. 2 line 2-4). This study draws heavily from his writing on Critical Discourse Analysis.

> a written document, such as a letter, a film script or this book. But in critical discourse analysis (and, as we shall see, in Foucauldian discourse analysis) 'text' has a more complex meaning: it can refer to a speech or spoken discourse, written documents, visual images, or some combination of these three. Texts are regarded as multi-semiotic because many forms of representation may be combined in their construction" (Wooffitt 2011: 4).

The portrayals of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games are analysed in this study as visual, audial and cultural texts. These texts, I argue, are a form of racialised discourse, which are simultaneously informed by and contribute to dominant historically and culturally contingent discourses surrounding race. The appropriation, recontextualizing and re-presenting of video game representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in my art practice is also a form of discourse – which is also critically analysed and reflected upon, using the aforementioned Action Research Cycle.

Similar to Critical Theory, CDA is overtly political in its choice of research subjects and research outcomes. It often picks a clear political stance, (often against social inequalities and injustice) and frequently seeks to produce knowledge which instigates social change, through the critical analysis of the discourses that reinforce social inequalities (van Dijk cited in Wooffitt 2011: 3).

> "Critical discourse analysts seek to identify ways in which discourse (re)produces inequalities and dominance in the broader web of discourse, texts, contexts, non-discursive practices and wider social structure" (Wooffitt 2011: 9).

> Critical discourse analysis is critical of conversation analytic methodology, arguing that to fully understand how language works it is necessary to draw from wider social and political contexts" (Wooffitt 2011: 11).

CDA thus plays a significant role in my study and art practice. As an artist and gamer of colour, I have a clear stance against racism and racist stereotyping in video games. I argue that these racist representations in video games draw from "wider social and

political contexts" and hegemonic discourses surrounding race in contemporary culturally and ethnically diverse societies. This stance informs the main research aim and outcome of this study – which is the analysis and critique of stereotypical and violent representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games, and the production of an artistic body of work informed by this analysis and critique. This study uses CDA to uncover the harmful racial discourses which lie under these representations to critique and unsettle them. My art practice itself also forms an artistic 'dialogue' with these discourses. This study also seeks to contribute to social change by contributing to emerging pools of knowledge, critiquing the social construction of race through discourse in various forms of media.

Secondary sources such as newspapers, journals, books, academic internet sites, electronic databases and archives surrounding issues of race and the representation of people, bodies and communities of colour in video games, as well as the work of the selected artists are also analysed through CDA in this study. This CDA of these various texts also inform and contribute to my art practice.

One of the artworks produced as part of this study, entitled *The Book of Nadine*, is a collection and CDA of audio recordings taken from anonymous voluntary South African participants responding to a particular representation of a specific – South African – character of colour in a video game. These narrative audio recording sessions are conducted on a one-on-one basis and the participants' audio recordings then saved numerically in order to further ensure participant anonymity. This particular artwork, its significance and the methods surrounding its production are discussed in further detail in chapter 4.

# CHAPTER FOUR: AN ANALYSIS OF MY ART PRACTICE AND THE WORK OF THE SELECTED ARTISTS.

## 4.1. Introduction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this chapter discusses more comprehensively the key historical and theoretical themes and arguments that underpin Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is the overarching orientation that informs my Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of visual and audial representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games. CRT forms the conceptual foundation of my art practice. The body of work produced in my art practice are directly influenced by, and speak to the key tenets of CRT. This chapter is thus a discussion of CRT through the analysis of my body work as well as the work of the selected. Discussing the key tenets of CRT will assist in gaining a better understanding of why racist representations of people and bodies of colour continue to exist and persist in video games. This chapter also discusses how the selected artists use elements of CRT to address, critique and unsettle stereotypical and violent representations in video games.

## 4.2. Prologue: From Critical Legal Studies to Critical Race Theory

Literature suggests that CRT originated within the legal field during the mid-to-late 1970's in the United States as an offshoot of Critical Legal Studies (CLS). CRT emerged as a critical response by legal scholars to the slowing down and stalling of legislative progress made during the Civil Rights Era (Tate 1997, Lynn and Adams 2002, Puttick 2011, Taylor 1998, Ladson-Billings 1998, DeCuir and Dixon 2004). Gordon (in Ladson Billings 1997: 10-11) described CLS as,

> "A leftist legal movement that challenged the traditional legal scholarship that focused on doctrinal and policy analysis in favour of a form of law that spoke to the specificity of individuals and groups in social and cultural contexts".

CLS argued that the power relations and dynamics between individuals and groups within a given society had an influence on the logic and structures of the laws and legal systems constructed within that society (Ladson Billings 1997, Cornell Law

School Legal Information Institute n.d.). CLS scholars, according to Crenshaw (1988: 1350), would seek to explore and uncover "the ways that legal ideology has helped to create, support and legitimate America's present class structure".

CLS challenged the underlying power dynamics that had an influence on the perceived 'Meritocracy'[21] of American jurisprudence[22] and legislation. CLS however, either shied away from or outright failed to adequately address issues of race, and systemic and institutionalized racism in its critique (Ladson Billings 1997, Tate 1997, DeCuir and Dixon 2004). Despite its seemingly liberal and 'fair' ideals, the notion of 'Meritocracy' in American legal institutions and legislature either overlooked or ignored the long history and legacy of systemic racism in the United States. Systemic institutionalised racism, through law, had positioned and reinforced whiteness as the normative standard of intelligence, work ethic and moral purity and relegated the racialized other (non-whiteness and blackness) to being perceived as primitive, lazy morally corrupt and thus in need of subjugation (Tate 1997, DeCuir and Dixon 2004).

> Of Importance here is the binary opposition of White-Black: whites are an intelligent, diligent, and deserving people. Blacks are a simple, lazy and undeserving people. These socially constructed representations of subjective identity have categorized specific groups of society in terms of perceived abilities to think logically and justified the construction of oppressive social policy and law that reflect these categories" (Allen 1974, Anderson 1994, Crenshaw 1988, Jefferson 1954 cited in Tate 1997).

[21] A term coined by British sociologist and politician Michael Young in his 1958 book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy.* This term centres around the notion of selection, usually of people to positions of governance or authority, according to 'merit' (ability + effort). Due to the defining of what constitutes 'merit' being mostly stipulated by those already in a position of power, 'meritocracies' often lead to the further marginalization of the disempowered (Allen, 2011). In his book, Young (1958) used a fictional dystopian narrative to highlight that socio-economic inequalities would actually increase in Meritocratic societies. Allen (2011) notes that contrary to Young's intentions, the term is now seen and adopted in a much more positive light today and even used by prominent contemporary (neoliberal) politicians.

[22] "The word *jurisprudence* derives from the Latin term *juris prudentia,* which means 'the study, knowledge, or science of law'. In the United States jurisprudence commonly means the philosophy of law" (Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute n.d.).

CRT scholars, many of whom were also social activists, used CLS literature as a departure point to reveal the systemic and institutional racism which persisted in American society and law despite the legislative 'progress'[23] made during the civil rights era (Puttick 2011, DeCuir and Dixon 2004, Ladson Billings 1997). CRT, through its activist approach and pursuit of radical race reform, put race at the centre of its critical inquiry.

CRT is concerned with investigating the legacy of systemic and institutionalized racism, the tangible effect it has had on the lived experiences of people from racially marginalized groups, and the exploration of various means to address and redress these effects (Crenshaw 2002, Lynn and Adams 2002, Ladson-Billings 1998, DeCuir and Dixon 2004). CRT, according to Yosso (2005: 70), can be described as "a framework that can be used to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on social structures, practices and discourses".

Although CRT initially began in the legal field in the United States in the late 1970's to early 80's, its key themes, arguments and methods have been subsequently appropriated and adopted by scholars from a variety of different fields such as education and cultural studies (Yosso 2005, Tate 1997, DeCuir and Dixon 2004). Yosso (2005: 74) states that "Many in the academy and in community organizing, activism, and service who look to challenge social inequality will most likely recognize the tenets of CRT as part of what, why and how they do the work they do". This is true for my study and art practice. This study appropriates the key tenets of CRT to critically analyse the violent and racist representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games. These tenets are also used in the analysis of the work of the selected new media artists. Further, the key tenets CRT form the conceptual foundation of my art practice.

[23]I place the word 'progress' in inverted commas, as prominent CRT scholar, William Tate (1997), uses the notion of Interest Convergence (explained further in the chapter) to challenge the legitimacy of the gains made during the civil rights era and whether or not people of colour truly benefited from them.

### 4.3. Select "Normal" Difficulty: The CRT premise of racism as the 'norm'

Marable (in Yosso 2005: 72), defines racism as "a system of ignorance, exploitation and power used to oppress African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians, and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and colour".

The first, and foundational, key tenet of CRT is the premise that race and racism is so deeply etched and ingrained into contemporary culture and our lived experiences that it is almost seen as a 'normal', expected or unavoidable part of modern everyday life, especially for those from racially marginalised communities. CRT's central argument is that racism is not a slowly disappearing anomaly but it is in fact so ubiquitous, and now so subtle, that it can be said to have almost permanently stained itself onto the very fabric of many modern racially and culturally diverse societies (Yosso 2005, Tate 1997, Lynn and Adams 2002, Puttick 2011, Taylor 1998, Ladson-Billings 1998, DeCuir and Dixon 2004).

> "Unfortunately, racism is as powerful today as it was in the past; it has merely assumed a normality, and thus an invisibility, in our daily lives… We often fail to recognize racism because we do not see it beyond its most blatant manifestations" (Lopez 2003: 83).

DeCuir and Dixon (2004: 27) suggest that this foundational premise of CRT is perpetuated by "hierarchical structures that govern all political, economic and social domains". These structures, according to Puttick (2011), are simultaneously both informed by and perpetuate dominant hegemonic social constructions of race and hierarchal racial difference. These social constructs reinforce whiteness being as the privileged normative social and ideological standard and marginalises non-whiteness - especially blackness.

> "Conceptual categories like 'School Achievement', 'middle classness', 'maleness', 'beauty', 'intelligence', and 'science' become normative categories for whiteness, while categories like 'gangs', 'welfare recipient', 'basketball players' and 'the underclass' become the marginalised and de-legitimated categories of blackness" (Ladson-Billings 1998: 9).

Although the central premise of CRT was initially written as a critique of contemporary American society, it can be applied to the South African context to make sense of the enduring racism, both covert and overt, faced by many South Africans today. This racism continues to persist despite South Africa being in a Post-Apartheid era (Puttick 2011). Having to navigate covert and overt forms of racism is an unavoidable part of my lived experience as a black South African artist. These lived experiences influence my art practice.

This study adopts the central premise of CRT to argue that subtle and overt forms of racism are so widespread in representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in video games, as well as within the 'gamer' communities that consume these games, that it is almost accepted as a 'normal' unavoidable part of the 'gamer' experience.

This 'normality' is reflected firstly in what Williams et al. (2009) describes as the vast overrepresentation of white characters, specifically white male characters, in relation to characters of colour in video games.

A major content analysis study of 133 of the best-selling[24] video games from nine major gaming platforms[25] sold in the US from March 2005 to February 2006 found that 80.05% of the human characters that appeared in these games were white, followed by 10.74% black characters, 5.03% Asian/Pacific Islander characters, 2.71% Hispanic characters, 1.39% Biracial characters and 0.09% Native American characters (Williams et al. 2009: 825). This over representation of white (mostly male) human characters in popular video games mirrors the racial demographics within the professional field of video game development. An online survey conducted by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) in 2014 found that, "79 percent of

[24] "These 133 titles constituted a highly representative frame for the universe of games as made by developers by accounting for more than 95 percent of all game sales within the sampling period" (Williams et al. 2009: 823).

[25] Gaming platform refers to the physical computer hardware or gaming consoles that are used to play video games. The nine major gaming platforms used in the study conducted by Williams et al. are "Xbox 360, Xbox, PlayStation 2 (PS2), PlayStation (PS), Nintendo GameCube, PlayStation Portable (PSP), Nintendo Gameboy Advance (GBA), Nintendo Dual Screen (DS) and PC" (Williams et al. 2009: 822-823).

respondents identified as white, while 2.5 percent identified as black" (Conditt 2015: para.5 line 1), a slight improvement on a similar survey conducted by IGDA in 2005 which found that 83% of respondents identifying as white, 2% Identifying as black, 2.5% identifying as Hispanic or Latino, 7.5% identifying as Asian and 4.7% identifying as 'Other' (IGDA 2005: 10).

Whilst there admittedly has been a gradual increase in appearance of characters of colour in video games since 2005, literature suggests that video games across multiple gaming genres and platforms are still rife with stereotypical and often violent representations of people of colour as well as stereotypical representations of the locations and communities they live in (Leonard 2003, Sisler 2008, Barret 2006, DeVane and Squire 2008, Brock 2011, Gray 2012, Gray 2014, Fussel 2015, Conditt 2015).

Gaming, through rapid advances in computer technology, is now an entertainment medium that can digitally reproduce deeply immersive and detailed virtual environments, complex narratives, complex three-dimensional characters and mimetic experiences for the player to become emotionally invested in. Despite these seemingly endless opportunities, video games are often still sites where hegemonic notions of whiteness as the normative moral and heroic standard are perpetuated and reinforced. People, bodies, and communities that exist outside this hegemonic standard are often (violently) marginalised in many video games and used as sites for the enacting of exotic desire or violent punishment or both (hooks 1992, Sisler 2008, Leonard 2003, Conditt 2015, Gray 2014). The central premise of CRT that racism is 'the norm' is relevant when exploring how video game characters of colour are visually and audibly represented in video games today.

## 4.4. Gain “Experience Points” (XP): Consuming the Racialized Other in Video Games

According to Gray (2014), the marginalisation of blackness in video games manifests itself in four key ways, “1) Stereotypical representations, 2) Racial tourism, 3) Conquering the other, and 4) Deletion of Blackness” (Gray 2014: para.1 line 4-5).

Stereotypical representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in video games play a key role in giving the player reason and justification to participate in racial tourism, conquering the other or the deletion of blackness in video games. These three activities are positioned through in-game story telling as major objectives or goals in many video games.

From fighting against countless faceless nameless foreign ‘terrorists’ in military shooter video games like *Call of Duty* (2003 – present) and *Medal of Honour* (1999 – 2012), to engaging in fiery shootouts in dilapidated inner city environments with dark skinned ‘criminals’ in action games like *Grand Theft Auto* (2001 – present) and Max Payne 3 (2012), characters of colour in video games are most commonly represented as nameless, mindless, morally devoid, viscerally violent threats that the equally violent but ‘humanised’ player controlled hero character must eradicate in order to ‘save the day’ (Sissler 2008, Brock 2011, Leonard 2003).

In his discourse analysis of *Grand Theft Auto 3* (2001), a video game that received almost universal acclaim from the gaming community upon its release and won numerous game of the year awards, Leonard (2003) makes an interesting observation of the video game’s major characters, the Leone family, in relation to the other criminal gangs depicted in the game,

**Figure 11.**

Gameplay screenshot of 'The Leone Family' characters from *Grand Theft Auto 3* (video game). 2001. Developed by DMA Design Limited, Edinburgh. Rockstar Games, New York.

"The Leone family is described in the game instructions as a "charming, smart, traditionally well-dressed strong Sicilian family." They are, above all, loyal, reflecting "strong family values" despite a propensity to murder and to have their enemies assassinated with car bombs. The Triads, on the other hand, are described as "obsessively territorial maniacs." The South Side Hoods, whose turf is "the projects," have a style consisting of "gold chains, rings and teeth, branded street wear, hooded sweatshirts, and platinum." In short, they are hip-hop gangsters. Members of the South Side Hoods drive "Rumpo XLS," the Diablos drive low-riders, and those who hang with the Triads all drive around in fish vans. On the other hand, members of the Leone family drive pristine and

sporty black sedans. As the heroes of the game, members of the Leone family are constructed with life-like qualities. Hollywood actors (Michael Madsen and Michael Rappaport, among others) provide their voices, and close-up shots further reveal their humanity. Your enemies, of which virtually all are men of colour, have no voice or face" (Leonard 2003: 3).

This disparity between the representation of white, American or European, 'humanised' player-controlled protagonists in relation to the non-player-controlled 'enemy' characters of colour, is echoed by Sissler in his discourse analysis of multiple military action games set in fictional virtual recreations of the Middle-East:


**Figure 12.**

Gameplay screenshot of 'Taliban' enemies from *Medal of Honor* (video game). 2010. Developed collaboratively by Danger Close Games, Los Angeles. and EA DICE, Stockholm. Published by Electronic Arts, Redwood City.

"Action genre games such as War in the Gulf (Empire, 1993), Delta Force (NovaLogic, 1998), Conflict: Desert Storm (Sci Games, 2002), Full Spectrum Warrior (THQ, 2004), Kuma/War (Kuma Reality Games, 2004) and Conflict: Global terror (Sci Games, 2004) take place in the Middle or in ostensibly anonymous yet overtly Middle-Eastern settings. Generally speaking, the player

> controls American or coalition forces, while enemy units are controlled by the computer. Usually playing for the other side is not allowed. The enemy is depicted by a set of schematized attributes which often refer to Arabs or Muslims – headcover, loose clothes, dark skin colour. In many cases, the in-game narrative links these signifiers to international terrorism and/ or Islamist Extremism" (Sissler 2008: 208).

Sissler (2008: 208) highlights that although the player controlled American or coalition armies and their stereotypically 'Middle-Eastern' enemies are both engaged in violent conflict, significant narrative effort goes into the humanizing and individualizing of the (white) player-controlled characters, often emphasising their 'heroism'. These American or coalition characters have names, nicknames, personalities and complex story arcs whereas their darker skinned Middle-Eastern counterparts are often presented as nameless, faceless, disorganised, mindlessly violent and morally corrupt threats that the heroic player must either subjugate or eliminate through violent force in order to save the day.

Words like 'realistic' and 'authentic' are often used by the developers and publishers of these video games to describe the representations and narratives presented in their video games. Some developers go as far as hiring active American military personnel as consultants to prove the 'authenticity' and 'true to life' nature of their games (Martin 2012). Everett and Craig-Watkins (2008: 142) argue that many of these popular action video games which depict military conflicts in 'exotic' foreign countries or criminal gang violence in 'recognisable' urban environments "draw heavily from racist discourses already circulating in popular and mainstream culture and arguably intensify these messages and lessons of racial difference through the power and allure of interactive gameplay". The touting of these video games as 'realistic' and 'culturally authentic' interactive virtual experiences by many video game developers, publishers and consumers leads to these video games becoming breeding grounds for "some of the most powerful, persistent, and problematic lessons about race" (Everett and Craig-Watkins 2008: 142).

Whilst they don't speak specifically to race or the representation of people of colour in video games, new media performance artists Eva and Franco Mattes critically explore

themes of virtual violence and the glorification of military conflict in video games, focusing specifically on subverting the notion of the ‘nameless, faceless enemy’ in video games. Their site-specific virtual performance and intervention entitled *Freedom* (2010), is a virtual performance staged in the popular online competitive multiplayer military shooter game *Counter Strike* (Rae 2015, McLeod 2016).

**Figure 13.**

Eva Mattes and Franco Mattes. *Freedom***.** 2010. Online performance/intervention in *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (video game). Carrol/Fletcher, London.

*Counter Strike* (2000) is one of the most popular online multiplayer games in the world, with its most recent iteration *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (2012) still attracting over eleven million players (Counter Strike: Global Offensive official site 2018). This game puts players into two separate five-man teams, the terrorists and the counter-terrorists. The players are then either tasked with killing all the players in the opposing team or completing ‘terrorism themed’ objectives such as defusing bombs or rescuing

hostages. These matches take place in various exotic but uninhabited virtual locations, many of which are inspired by real world, often Eastern European or Middle Eastern, locations stereotypically associated with war and terrorism.

Eva Mattes enters these online matches, choosing to play as one of the terrorists, but instead of participating in the virtual killing or other objectives she uses the game's onscreen chat tools to plead with other players not to kill her. She documents how the other players respond (Mattes 2010, McLeod 2016). Along with pleading for her life, Mattes also repeatedly mentions that she is just an artist and not a terrorist and questions the purpose of the fighting and killing during the match. Her pleas and questions are often ignored with most of the other players frequently shooting her controlled character on sight. Some players however, do respond to her via the game's onscreen chat tools with responses ranging from amused bemusement at her pleas and questions, to frustration and anger at her refusal to participate in the shooting - with some players stating that they are fighting for "Freedom" and other players telling her to stop playing and "go and paint" (Mattes 2010).

Mattes unsettles "the enacted routine of these game spaces and challenge players to think through what their violent virtual actions mean" (McLeod 2016: 122). Mattes uses this performance to re-present war and violence in military themed video games outside of the "enacted routine" of play and fantasy fulfilment whilst also humanizing and giving voice to characters that are often little more than sites for the enactment of violence in these games. The act of appropriating existing representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in selected videogames and re-presenting them is a key focus in my study and art practice. Drawing from how Mattes re-presents violence and war in video games outside of the context of play and fantasy fulfilment in her work, my art practice seeks to re-present the marginalisation and punishment of people and bodies of colour in video games outside the context of fantasy fulfilment.

Of the relatively fewer games where the characters of colour are protagonists or player controlled, stereotypical representations and particularly racial tourism, remain dominant. My art practice initially focused on exploring stereotypical representations of black video game protagonists as well as the use of virtual black bodies as a site for racial tourism. This artistic exploration was informed by the critical discourse

analysis of characters, settings and narratives from video games that I had played as well as reflections on my experience of playing these video games.

Black male protagonists in video games are often depicted the same way as they have always been depicted in popular culture (Leonard 2003). They are often portrayed as mindlessly violent gangsters or criminals with physically large, imposing, menacing or threatening bodies and loud, hyper-masculine but fragile, aggressive personalities.


**Figure 14.**

Gameplay screenshot of the character Balrog from *Street Fighter V* (video game). 2016. Developed collaboratively by Capcom, Osaka. and Dimps Corporation, Osaka. Published by Capcom, Osaka.

**Figure 15.**

Gameplay screenshot from *50 Cent: Bulletproof* (video game). 2005. Developed by Genuine Games, Woodland Hills. Published by Vivendi Games, Torrance.

Through ‘playing’ as characters with these physical and personality traits, the virtual player-controlled black male body becomes a site where the player fulfils the fantasy of embodying the hyper-violence, “visceral criminality” (Cobb in DuVernay 2016), and inherent physical threat associated with black men in real life (Fussel 2015, Everett and Craig-Watkins 2008, Gray 2012, Devane and Squire 2008, Barret 2006, Leonard 2003).

Even gaming genres as seemingly innocuous as sports games can be sites where racialized player fantasies can be fulfilled. ‘Street’ sports games for example, are prominent sites where virtual racial tourism takes place.


**Figure 16.**

Gameplay screenshot from *Fifa Street* (video game). 2012. Developed by EA Vancouver, Vancouver. Published by EA Sports, Redwood City.

From being able to play as football stars in the favelas of Brazil or playing as basketball stars in ‘the hood’ or ‘projects’, these games allow the player to fulfil the fantasy of playing in (often uninhabited) virtual recreations of poor, inner city neighbourhoods. These locations and communities that live in them, are reduced to exotic settings for the player to pick and consume at their own leisure with no thought or worry about the socio-economic contexts surrounding them (Leonard 2003, Barret 2006).

> “Games, despite claims of “horse play,” offer insight into dominant ideologies, as well as the deployment of race, gender, and nationalism. From the privacy of one’s home, game players are able to transport themselves into foreign and dangerous environments, often gaining pleasure through domination and control of weaker characters of color. Video games thus operate as a sophisticated commodity that plays on the desire of individuals to experience the other, breaking down real boundaries between ‘communities’ through virtual play, while simultaneously ‘teaching’ its players about stereotypes, United

States foreign policy, and legitimization of the status quo, to name only a few" (Leonard, 2003: 1).

The exploration of this 'fantasy' became a starting point for my art practice and informed the production of my first video series entitled, *Embody* (2017). This video art series consists of appropriated gameplay video footage from selected video games containing black player-controlled protagonists who possess stereotypically violent traits. This work stemmed from reflections on my own experiences as a black South African male artist consuming and in essence 'embodying' these player-controlled characters of colour.

Embody as the title for this series is relevant because, due to the inherently interactive nature of video games, I highlight that, despite the various storytelling attempts to 'humanise' these characters and make them appear three-dimensional, these characters are unable to break free of stereotypes that exist specifically for the fulfilment of player fantasy. *Embody* is a visual and audial representation of my experience as a gamer of colour, 'playing' and embodying these characters of colour. *Embody* re-presents the tropes and stereotypes that are often positioned as the selling points in these video games, in a way that elicits feelings of discomfort instead of pleasure. The video works in the *Embody* series are appropriations of gameplay video footage and dialogue of three black, player-controlled protagonists from three different open-world action-adventure video games – Carl Johnson (CJ) from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), James Heller from *Prototype 2* (2012) and Lincoln Clay from *Mafia 3* (2016). I selected these three characters from these three video games as to examine how the visual and audial representation of people of colour, and their bodies, in video games has progressed and evolved in some ways but also largely remained the same in others.

Carl Johnson (CJ), is the player-controlled main protagonist from the popular open-world action-adventure game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004). This game is personally significant because it was the first video game I played that featured a black player controlled protagonist and an almost all black cast of main characters. According to Barret (2006), the depiction of CJ along with many of the other main characters of colour in the video game falls in line with conventional stereotypical

representations of people of colour from poor, inner city African American neighbourhoods. CJ is depicted as being part of the 'Grove Street' gang. Many of the game's objectives task the player with participating in various glamourized virtual reproductions of gang violence – against rival gangs from other poor, inner city neighbourhoods within the game's open world.

Barret (2006) notes that CJ and the other characters of colour in the video game are represented in ways that strip them of their humanity and agency, turning them and their communities into little more than bodies and sites, for the player to consume and dispose of at their own leisure without thought of the social, economic and historical contexts surrounding these communities.

> "From rap videos to video games to mainstream cinema, images of blacks running, being shot, shooting at one another and so forth accumulate within public consciousness to mark the black agent as primarily a body, and the black body as both the source and the target of anti-social violence" (Barret 2006: 98).

I collected audio recordings of CJ speaking as he moves around in San Andreas, the video game's open world. CJ's dialogue often depicted as being overly aggressive, hyper-masculine and violent, even when doing mundane tasks like driving and walking around in the game's open world. His aggressive dialogue, along with his threatening gangster criminal persona contribute to the construction of him as both a "source and target" (Barret 2006: 98) of violence.

I juxtapose audio files of CJ's aggressive dialogue with the appropriated gameplay video footage of the game's main objectives and 'selling points' – the carrying out of viscerally violent criminal activities and gang violence. I finally superimpose video footage of myself in visible discomfort onto the video footage of the game's activities and CJ's dialogue. I superimpose video footage of myself on all three video pieces in the *Embody* series to signify the discomfort I experience whilst controlling and "playing" as these video game characters.

**Figure 17.**

Luyanda Zindela. Still image from *Embody 1***.** 2017. Video. Artist's Collection.

**Figure 18.**

Luyanda Zindela. Still image from *Embody 1***.** 2017. Video. Artist's Collection.

In contrast to the criminal activities and gangs in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, Prototype 2* is an open-world action adventure video game that puts the player in the shoes, or boots, of Sergeant James Heller, a US Marine who becomes infected with a strain of a virus that gives him various superpowers, turning him into an anti-hero. The game's narrative occasionally explores themes of loss, grief and revenge. Unlike the gangster stereotypes found in abundance with CJ, James Heller was initially presented, especially during *Prototype 2*'s marketing campaign, as a relatable loving husband and father who lost his family during the virus outbreak that gave him his superpowers (Miller 2012). Despite there being narrative opportunities for the game to present a complex narrative with a human three-dimensional black protagonist, James Heller, from the moment the player is given control of him, is portrayed as little more than a hyper-violent and aggressive racial trope, spewing profanities at every turn and using his powers to gruesomely kill almost indiscriminately.

**Figure 19.**

Gameplay screenshot from *Prototype 2* (video game). 2012. Developed by Radical Entertainment, Vancouver. Published by Activision Inc., Santa Monica.

In his review of the game Greg Miller, a prominent video game reviewer, writes that Prototype 2's marketing campaign "weaves this heart wrenching story of a soldier who

told his family to trust the government and how it cost them their lives" (Miller 2012: para.1 line 3-6). Upon playing the game however, Miller notes;

> "The game starts and Heller begins shoehorning curse words into every other sentence. The emotional connection to our protagonist is severed. Heller becomes an angry caricature, and Prototype 2 becomes an enjoyable but predictable action title" (Miller 2012: para.1 line 11-16).

*Prototype 2* shows slight progress over *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* in terms of using narrative and in-game storytelling to humanise its characters of colour, but that progress is erased as soon as the game hands control of the protagonist to the player. Heller, much like CJ before him, becomes a site for the fulfilment of player fantasies of controlling and embodying a physically imposing, 'beastly' aggressive male character of colour who is 'set loose' in a virtual open-world to carry out indiscriminate visceral virtual violence.

**Figure 20.**

Luyanda Zindela. Still image from *Embody 2***.** 2017. Video. Artist's Collection.

I repeat the process of appropriating and collecting audio files of James Heller speaking. Instead of just juxtaposing the audio files with the in-game footage of the

violence that dominates Prototype 2, I appropriate and use video footage from the game's advertising campaign that presented Heller as a complex 'human' character.

For the final video in the *Embody* series I chose to appropriate video footage from the open-world action adventure video game, *Mafia 3*. This video game piqued my interest through multiple declarations made by its developers, during promotional interviews for the video game. They stated that the game would directly address issues of race.

*Mafia 3* is set in a virtual recreation of New Orleans in 1968 during the height of the civil rights movement in America and puts the player in control of Lincoln Clay, a mixed-race US Vietnam war veteran and the game's protagonist. They stated that race as a theme wouldn't just present in the game's overall narrative and in-game storytelling but are also in the game's open world. Clay, and thus the player, for example would be unable to travel as freely in some of the game's virtual reproductions of more affluent 'white' neighbourhoods in the game's open world.

Haden Blackman, the Creative Director for Mafia 3, stated;

> I think the time and place and the characters can not be understated. The fact that you're playing in our version of New Orleans in 1968, you're a mixed-race protagonist who's just back from Vietnam, I feel provides an incredibly unique experience" (Game Informer 2015).

Bill Harms, the lead writer for Mafia 3, stated;

> "Handling it (race) the way we are handling it, in a very sensitive and authentic way, I think is actually kind of rare in video games. I and I think the fact that we even have those characters is pushing boundaries" (Game Informer 2015).

Andy Wilson, the executive producer for Mafia 3, stated;

> "Given that he (Clay) is mixed race and it's in the late 60's in the Deep South, obviously we are going to explore some of those issues in the game as well. I thank that that's really going to make us stand out" (Game Informer 2015).

*Mafia 3*, according to its developers, sought to set itself apart from other games, especially games with prominent characters of colour, through its storytelling,

character portrayals and exploration of racial themes that other games would normally shy away from. Like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, the game's overarching narrative is a (violent) criminal gang story, but unlike CJ, *Mafia 3's* narrative goes through great lengths to humanise Lincoln Clay as well as other major characters of colour in the game.

**Figure 21.**

Gameplay screenshot from *Mafia 3* (video game). 2012. Developed by Hangar 13, Navato. Published by 2K Games Inc., Navato.

Clay, in the game's narrative, is portrayed as complex, intelligent, and honourable. He is guided and supported in the game's main narrative by equally intelligent and complex supporting characters (of colour). His quest for revenge for the death of his friends and loved ones at the hands of a rival gang pulls him back into a life of violence and crime, the premise of many of the game's activities and objectives.

*Mafia 3* however, suffers from the same issues as *Prototype 2*. Once control is handed to the player, the moment-to-moment gameplay stands at odds with and often overshadows the game's storytelling. Completing the main objectives in the game and progressing through the game's narrative involves Clay having to systematically 'clear out' the game's open-world, section by section, by interrogating, torturing or killing

hundreds of mostly white enemies. This violence is further glamorised through Clay's ability to perform gratuitously violent 'finishing' manoeuvres to gruesomely kill his foes. These finishing moves range from stabbing a person multiple times in the face and neck with a large knife to stepping on a person's chest and shooting them in the face at point blank range with a shotgun. Playing as Lincoln Clay, as a black gamer, despite the game's narrative and complex character portrayals, felt like catching a glimpse of what black violence looks like when viewed through the white gaze.

**Figure 22.**

Luyanda Zindela. Still image from *Embody 3***.** 2017. Video. Artist's Collection.


**Figure 23.**

Luyanda Zindela. Still image from *Embody 3***.** 2017. Video. Artist's Collection.

For the final video in the Embody series I appropriated audio from the interviews conducted with the aforementioned heads of *Mafia 3's* development team. I juxtaposed this audio with appropriated gameplay footage of Lincoln Clay's various gruesome finishing manoeuvres.

The *Embody* series is an artistic visual and audial critique of how visual and audial representations of black (male) protagonists in video games has 'progressed' but also largely remained the same. This series also an artistic representation of my experience as a black male gamer of consuming video games with stereotypically racist representations of people of colour.

Critical Race Theory's central premise of the normality of racism is a regular fixture in many of the video games that I play which have prominent characters of colour. "1) Stereotypical representations, 2) Racial tourism, 3) Conquering the other, and 4) Deletion of Blackness" (Gray 2014: para.1 line 4-5), is so common in the video game representations of people, bodies and communities of colour, that navigating or even ignoring feelings of discomfort has become a 'normal', unavoidable part of my gaming experience as well as the experience of other gamers of colour. Many gamers of colour believe that the racism they find in video games as well as within the gamer communities that consume video games is "part of the gaming experience" (Gray 2012: 421).

As more people of colour from marginalised communities continue to enter the fields of video game development, academic writing on video games as well as gamer communities that consume video games, the lived experiences that they bring with them will contribute towards changing the longstanding 'norm' or racist representations of people and bodies of colour in video games. Motivated by my own experiences as a black gamer, fine artist and artistic researcher, this study seeks to contribute to this change.

## 4.5. Branching Paths: CRT's Critique of dominant Neoliberal notions of Progress

The second key tenet of CRT is that it challenges normalised, hegemonic grand narratives and social constructions of race and hierarchal racial difference, through the use of "counter-narratives" (DeCuir and Dixon 2004: 27) that stem from the lived experiences of the disempowered or marginalised (Ladson-Billings 1998, Decuir and Dixon 2004, Taylor 1998, Aguirre 2000, Tate 1997, Puttick 2011). These lived experiences play a key role proving the central premise of CRT that navigating racism is indeed a 'normal' part of modern everyday life for those from racially marginalised communities.

Yosso (2005: 74) states that counter-narratives can take various forms including, "storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, testimonios,

chronicles and narratives". According to Delgado (in Tate 1997: 218-219), counter-narratives challenge "the myths and stories powerful groups use to justify racial subordination". CRT theorists use counter-narratives as "a means of exposing and critiquing normalised dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes" (DeCuir and Dixon 2004: 27).

Due to CRT's roots in legal social activism, CRT scholars view counter-narratives as a means to give voice to marginalised individuals, groups, and communities through empowering them with the opportunity to "name their reality" (Delgado in Ladson Billings 1998, Tate 1997, Yosso 2005).

> "CRT challenges White privilege and refutes the claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, colour blindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity. CRT challenges notions of 'neutral' research or 'objective' researchers and exposes deficit-informed research that silences, ignores and distorts epistemologies of People of Color" (Yosso 2005: 73).

Yosso (2005) argues that power plays a key role in determining which forms of knowledge are perceived as valuable and which are not. She argues that CRT aims to unsettle this hegemony by placing value on historically marginalised "outsider" knowledge that occupies the periphery of epistemology – namely "experiential knowledge" from marginalised individuals or social groups.

Although the communication of experiential knowledge through narratives is often marginalised and dismissed in (positivist) academia with "unscholarly labels of 'emotional, 'literary', 'personal', or 'false" (Ladson Billings 1998: 13), CRT scholars see these narratives as an essential component in building a nuanced contextualised understanding of the subtle forms and legacies of dominant social constructions of race, racism and systemic racial subordination (DeCuir and Dixon 2004, Ladson-Billings 1998, Tate 1997, Yosso 2005).

> "The primary reason, then, that stories, or narratives, are deemed important among CRT scholars is that they add necessary contextual contours to the seeming objectivity of positivist perspectives" (Ladson-Billings 1998: 11).

According to Tate (1997), these subtle contextual nuances, which often go unnoticed by those in positions of power and privilege, are often a ‘normal’ unavoidable fixture in the lived experiences of marginalised individuals, groups and communities. Using my own lived experience for example, stereotypically racist representations of black men in popular culture as mindless criminally violent physical threats has a tangible effect in my lived experience as a black male. Despite being in a country with a predominantly black population, minimising the perceived inherent threat of being a young adult black male informs many of my everyday choices and behaviours such as my dress and speech.

Literature suggests that the communication of lived experiences and experiential knowledge through counter-narratives benefits both the marginalised and the privileged (Ladson-Billings 1998, Tate 1997, Yosso 2005, Aguirre Jr 2000). Ladson-Billings (1998) highlights that racially marginalised and oppressed communities have a long history of using story-telling as a means of psychological self-healing. Being able to identify and communicate how racial oppression and subjugation intertwines in various ways with lived experiences doesn’t just assist in safeguarding experiential narrators from internalising oppression but it also allows them to “humanize their experiences in their own eyes” (Delgado cited in Aguirre Jr 2000: 322). Counter-narratives also assist in challenging and unsettling existing and established myths, stories or representations that justify or reinforce subtle forms of marginalisation or subjugation that are often ‘invisible’ to those who directly or indirectly benefit from it (Ladson billings 1998, Aguirre Jr 2000). “Stories by people of colour can catalyse the necessary cognitive to jar dysconscious racism” (Ladson Billings 1998: 14).

By adopting CRT’s use and value for counter-narratives, my art practice becomes a self-healing counter-narrative space where I name and narrate my lived experiences as a black Zulu South African male gamer. I use my experiential knowledge to critique problematic representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the games I’ve played. The naming and narration of lived experiences also plays a key role in the work of the various ‘gamer’ artists and scholars I cite. These artists and scholars use their experiences to challenge the dominant grand narratives and myths perpetuated in video games as well as within the gamer communities that consume them.

Using counter-narratives to critically explore the relationship between video game representations of people and bodies of colour and real-world myths forms the conceptual foundation for my second series of video artworks titled, *By the Book Mr K* (2017) and *Playable Black Monday* (2017) respectively. This video series mostly draws from how Kishonna L. Gray, author of *Race, Gender & Deviance in Xbox Live* (2014), uses her experiences as a female gamer of colour in her literature as counter-narratives.

One of the biggest assumptions in gaming is that consumers of video games are white (American) and male. The assumed default race in gaming and gamer communities is white (Gray 2012). This assumed whiteness and masculinity plays a role in the representation of people and bodies of colour in video games as sites for sexual desire or violence and directly affects how gamers of colour and gamers from other marginalised groups interact with other gamers online.

A gamer demographics study conducted in the US by the Entertainment Software Association (2013 para.3 line 5-6) found that "overall, 45% of game players are women". A similar demographics study found that "African American and Hispanic youths play games at the highest rates" (Rideout et al. cited in Williams et al. 2009: 820). Gray (2012) documents her own experience as a woman gamer of colour with other gamers online and the near constant sexist and racist harassment she faces as a result of normalised hegemonic assumptions of whiteness online. She suggests that "disassociate anonymity"[26] (Gray 2012: 415), due to most gamers adopting online names and personas that are different to their real-world identities, is a major contributor to the often-uninhibited language and behaviour she experiences whilst playing multiplayer video games online. Her narration of her experience is detailed and specific:

[26] "Dissociative anonymity refers to the ability to hide your identity in online spaces. Anonymity is a principle factor leading to the disinhibition effect because users can separate their online actions from their real-world selves. Whatever they say and or do cannot be linked to them in the real world.
Some individuals may even justify their actions by convincing themselves that they are not connected to the online persona at all. Online environments also allow users the opportunity to be invisible as they move in and out of web sites, message boards, and sometimes chat rooms. This invisibility gives users the courage to say and do things they may not normally do." (Gray 2012: 415)

> “The leader begins talking rather harshly to me and is upset that I am not engaging with the team or responding to his questions. So as to not aggravate him further, I insert my microphone and begin talking. I start off by apologizing for my failures and pledge to do better. However, this conversation shifts away from my poor performance within battle to attacks against me as a person.
> ‘Oh, you guys hear this? That’s why you suck. You’re a fucking girl! What the fuck are you doing in my room?’
> Even after this initial attack, I am still apologetic hoping that the attacks will soon end (at this point, I am used to the name calling). However, the attacks get worse and other team members join in:
> ‘Wait wait wait. You’re not just any girl. You’re black. Get this black bitch off my team… Did you spend all your welfare check buying this game?... Get back to your crack pipe with your crack babies.”
>
> (Gray 2012:412)

Gray (2012) uses detailed accounts from her lived experience as counter-narratives to uncover how normalised racial assumptions within gaming leads to her being racially profiled online by other players due to the sound of her voice as well as her African American English accent. This racial profiling, she notes, has led her to be more aware of her voice and accent when playing with strangers online. She also documents the counter-narratives of other woman gamers of colour who have experienced the same harassment. These players have had to resort to forming private online gaming groups or ‘clans’ to protect themselves from harassment (Gray 2012). When asked about why they created their own online private playing groups, one of the respondents recounts a personal experience of being criticized by another female gamer online for refusing to accept sexism and racism in gaming online as an unavoidable ‘norm’:

> “Well I friended a couple of them and started private chatting with one. Well she was talking shit about us saying we was not that good and we make women in Xbox live look bad. So you know I was pissed especially when I’m trying to just reach out to make some new friends. And I told her we just like getting on to have fun. We aint hard core gamers or nothing like that we just like to chill with ‘ar [our] folks. So she said that they practice wit dudes to make them better and

> I went into the whole spill about how we don't really fuck with dudes no more in here and I told her why. I told her I was tired of being called bitch, black bitch, dyke bitch, or any variation of bitch. She told my black ass to deal wit it. That's just how it is. She tried to tell me I was being too got damn sensitive" (MissUnique [gamer username] in Gray 2012: 420).

My art practice draws from and appropriates the CRT informed methods used by Gray to support her writing, empower other marginalised gamers and humanise their collective online gaming experience.

My use of counter-narratives in my art also draws inspiration from a site specific virtual performance and intervention project done by new media artist Joseph DeLappe entitled, *dead-in-iraq* (2006-2011).


**Figure 24.**

Joseph Delappe. *Dead in Iraq***.** 2006 – 2011. Online performance/intervention in *America's Army* (video game). Artist's Collection.

DeLappe staged this long-term intervention in *America's Army* (2002), an online multiplayer military shooter game developed and used as a recruitment tool by the US army. Delappe entered online matches in the game where the objective was to kill the other player-controlled characters in the game. Every time his character died during the match, he would use the games in-game text messaging system to type the name, age and service branch of an actual US soldier who died in the US military conflict in Iraq. He eventually typed the names of all 4484 American military personnel killed in the conflict (McLeod 2016).

His intervention stands as a counter-narrative to the game's tagline, 'Empower yourself. Defend freedom'. By listing the names of slain US military personnel, in a manner reminiscent of role-calling at war memorials – in a video game that glorifies war and trivialises death during armed conflict – each name listed in *dead-in-iraq*

(2006-2011) becomes a counter-narrative that challenges and unsettles the gaming experience the other played with DeLappe (McLeod 2016).

The *Embody* series centred on my initial focus of critically exploring and re-presenting existing representations of characters of colour in video games. In *By the Book Mr K* (2017) and *Playable Black Monday* (2017), my focus shifts towards artistically re-presenting detailed experiences of my consumption of video games as a young black male South African Zulu artist as counter-narrative art.

*By the Book Mr K* (2017) is a visual counter-narrative of my experience whilst playing *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013). *Grand Theft Auto V* is an open world action adventure game with a crime themed main plot set in Los Santos, a fictionalised virtual recreation of Los Angeles. The game puts the player in control of three characters, Michael Townley a rich retired bank robber tired of the mundaneness of his quiet life, Trevor Phillips, Michael's former partner in crime and a violent psychopathic drug addict, and Franklin Clinton a gang member who Michael eventually takes under his wing.

The game's objectives are grouped into three parts, Main missions, side quests and side activities. Side quests and activities are optional and do not have to be completed in order to progress in the game, but the player must play and complete game's main missions in order to progress through the game's main plot and complete it. *By the Book Mr K* (2017) draws from my experience of playing a particular main mission which could not be skipped or avoided in order to progress through the game's main plot towards the completion of the game's main story.

**Figure 25.**

Gameplay screenshot from *Grand Theft Auto V* (video game). 2013. Developed by Rockstar North, Edinburgh. Published by Rockstar Games, New York.

Entitled, “By the book”, this mission tasks the player - controlling Trevor Phillips - with interrogating and torturing a dark-skinned Azerbaijani character named Ferdinand Kerimov (Mr. K). The player also controls Michael Townley during the mission, who is tasked with using the information gained during Mr. K’s torture to racially profile and assassinate Tahir Javan, another dark skinned Azerbaijani character. Whilst controlling Trevor, a white character, the player must choose the instruments of torture to use and then actively participate in the torture. The player is made an active participant in the graphic virtual torture of Mr K through prompts that the game gives the player to press buttons on the video game controller to simulate the acts of torture happening onscreen. Administering the torture whilst keeping Mr. K alive is one of the mission’s main objectives. The player then controls Michael and is tasked with using the information gained through the torture of Mr. K to single out Tahir Javan in a building full of ‘Eastern European’ looking men and assassinate him. Like all the other main missions, the player is then given a grade based on their performance during the mission.

The dialogue between all the characters throughout this main mission is filled with witty and satirical criticisms of the use of torture by the American military. This mission falls in line with a game described by Murray (2013 para.5 line 1-3) as “a microworld of actual U.S culture: an unflattering - but not entirely inaccurate - reflection of all the flaws this superpower possesses”.

Whilst the dialogue nods to satire and critique were clear, I was still left with the experience as a black gamer of having actively participated in the torture of a virtual dark-skinned body and the racial profiling of a virtual dark-skinned character. The handing out of a performance score at the end of the mission reduced it from an attempt at social commentary to just another one of the game’s glamorously violent activities.

For *By the Book Mr K* (2017), I appropriated gameplay video footage of the mission from beginning to end. I then superimposed footage of my body into the mission using chroma-key (green screen) techniques. Whilst the player-controlled character is Trevor during the torture, I superimpose my body onto Mr. K’s body, mimicking his movements throughout the mission. This superimposing of my body onto Mr. K’s body signifies my experience of ‘playing’ the mission.

**Figure 26.**

Luyanda Zindela. Still image from *By the Book Mr K***.** 2017. Video. Artist's Collection.

Despite directly controlling Trevor during the torture, as a black gamer I identified most with the complete terror and pain felt by Mr. K rather than the complete control and power felt by Trevor. *By the Book Mr K* (2017) is a visual counter-narrative that seeks to visually represent the experience of consuming video game violence against bodies of colour as a gamer of colour.

*Playable Black Monday (2017)* is a visual counter-narrative of my experience whilst playing a mission in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015). *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) is an open world action adventure stealth game set in 1984. The player plays as a master infiltrator and mercenary leader codenamed

Venom Snake and the player is placed in digital recreations of Afghanistan and the Angolan-Zaire border during the Soviet-Afghan war and Angolan civil war.
The game's central plot, a mixture of real world political intrigue and science fiction, comments on cultural imperialism with the game's main antagonist, Skull Face, seeking to preserve the world's diverse cultures by creating a deadly virus that only attacks English speakers. The enemies faced by the player during the Afghanistan section of the video game speak Russian. The enemies faced by the player in the Angola-Zaire section of the video game however, are a mixture of Kikongo and Afrikaans speakers.

Playing through the Angola-Zaire section of the video game, against (mostly white) Afrikaans speaking virtual enemies, as black Zulu speaking South African, meant that the gaming experience hit a lot closer to home than usual. Playing this game during the height of racial tensions caused by the #*BlackMonday* protests in 2017 over farm murders and claims of white genocide in South Africa, contributed to the game feeling more like a mimetic experience. This experience lead to a shift in my art practice from exploring my experiences as a gamer of colour in general towards focusing specifically on my experiences as a South African gamer of colour.

In *Playable Black Monday (2017)* I appropriated gameplay video footage from a main mission from *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015). Entitled *Code Talker,* the story mission involves infiltrating a large white mansion to rescue Code Talker, the character responsible for creating the game's deadly virus. The mansion is heavily guarded with heavily armed mostly Afrikaans speaking security forces. Snake has a gadget that allows him to scan enemies and deduce among other things, what language they speak. The player has the choice to either stealthily infiltrate the mansion quietly and non-violently, or go in all guns blazing, killing all enemies on sight. I appropriated footage of a player adopting the more violent approach. I cut and edit the footage, focusing on the player searching the mansion for enemies, finding enemies, scanning them for their spoken language, and then killing them if they speak Afrikaans, before escaping with Code Talker at the end of the mission.


**Figure 27.**

Luyanda Zindela. Still image from *Playable Black Monday***.** 2017. Video. Artist's Collection.

*Playable Black Monday (2017)* is a commentary and critique of claims of white genocide and Afrikaans ethnic cleansing in a country where, according to Lizette Lancaster, manager of the Institute for Security Studies: Crime and Justice hub, "Whites are far less likely to be murdered than their black or coloured counterparts" (Lancaster in Brodie 2013 para.6 line 1).

Claims of white genocide are further challenged by a study conducted by the South African Police Services (SAPS) on 1378 murder cases in 2009 which found that 86.9% of the murder victims were black and 1.8% of the victims being white (SAPS cited in Brodie 2013). A much more recent study on farm killings specially, conducted by the South African Agricultural body (AgriSA) found that farm murders are at a twenty-year

low, with 47 recorded farm murders (of all races) in 2017/2018 so far, down from the 66 murders recorded in 2016/2017 and down significantly from the 153 farm murders recorded in 1997/1998 (AgriSA cited in Pijoos 2018).

*Playable Black Monday (2017)* does not seek to delegitimise the seriousness of murders happening on South African farms but seeks to visually represent the weight of the term 'genocide' when viewed from a black African lens. *Playable Black Monday (2017)* is also an artistic exploration of how a player's real-world experiential knowledge can have an effect on their experience whilst playing video games and vice versa.

CRT's use of counter-narratives allows me to make my lived experiences as a young black South African male artist who plays video games, an integral part of my critical inquiry into the representation of race and hierarchal racial difference in video games. The *Embody (2016)* series focused specifically on the critical discourse analysis of video games I've played and completed. With *By the Book Mr K* and *Playable Black Monday* (2017) I highlight that the analysis of my gaming experience whilst playing the selected video games is just as valuable and important as the analysis of the games themselves.

Winter (in Tate 1997:217) warns that narratives should not be seen as the "only means by which social meaning is institutionalised". Contrary to many racialized fears and knee jerk reactions expressed in response to the rise of CRT (Crenshaw 2002), CRT scholars do not seek to completely do away all existing forms of knowledge and epistemologies and replace them with counter-narratives. CRT scholars believe that existing knowledge can be expanded to be inclusive of the voices of individuals and groups who historically have either been ignored or silenced. CRT theorists, many of whom from are from marginalised communities seeking social reform, seek only to critique, unsettle and redress current hegemonic hierarchal power structures that place knowledge from privileged individuals and groups in positions of power above others.

> "If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories. Indeed, if some knowledges have been used to silence, marginalize and render People of Colour invisible, then 'Outsider' knowledges, mestiza knowledges and transgressive knowledges can value the presence and voices of People of Colour, and can re-envision the

> margins as places empowered by transformative resistance" (Anzalsua 1990, Collins 1986, hooks 1994, hooks 1990, Delgado-Bernal 1997, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal 2001 cited in Yosso 2005: 70).

Using my experiences as a central part of my critical inquiry, my study and art practice seek to contribute to this emerging pool of "outsider" "transgressive" knowledge within fine art and academia.

## 4.6. Branching Paths: CRT's Critique of dominant Neoliberal notions of Progress

The third key tenet of CRT its critique of neoliberal notions of neutrality, colour blindness, meritocracy and incremental progress. CRT argues that these seemingly 'liberal', noble and progressive ideals often practically amount to little more than interest convergence (IC) and do little to dismantle the current power structures that affect the lived experiences of people from marginalised groups (Lynn and Adams 2002, Tate 1997, Ladson-Billings 1998, DeCuir and Dixon 2004, Yosso 2005).

> "The interest convergence principle is built on political history as legal precedent and emphasizes that significant progress for African Americans is achieved only when the goals of Blacks are consistent with the needs of Whites" (Bell cited in Tate 1997: 214).

The CRT argument of IC is twofold. Firstly, 'progress' or change that empowers the marginalised often only seems to come when it falls in line with the interests of those in positions of power (Ladson Billings 1998, Tate 1997, Lynn and Adams 2002). These converging interests often result in the disempowered (people of colour) being 'given' forms of 'progress' that protect the privilege and benefits enjoyed by those in positions of privilege and power (whiteness) (Decuir and Dixon 2004). This slow incremental 'giving' of empowerment also plays a key role in preserving and maintaining the hegemonic power relationship between the oppressor and oppressed. IC allows the oppressors the opportunity to re-present and redefine themselves as generous 'givers' and morally heroic emancipators (Bell and Delgado Cited in Tate 1997, Crenshaw 1988).

CRT legal scholars, for example, argue that many of the legislative “gains” made during the civil rights were basic human rights enjoyed by white Americans for centuries (Decuir and Dixon 2004). These gains were also crucial to the US government’s foreign policy at the time. The US sought to globally reinforce itself ideologically as the capitalist ‘land of the free’ - a liberal and morally superior opposing force to the communist countries and adversaries that it presented as ‘oppressive’ (Bell cited in Tate 1997).

Secondly, any attempt at radical reform, social justice, equity, or attempts to dismantle present power structures and dynamics in a way that does not align with IC is often met with fierce opposition by those in positions of privilege and power (Tate 1997, Ladson Billings 1998). Forms of empowerment that directly threaten that privilege and power are interpreted, even by those in (privileged) liberal circles, as an attack or a form of ‘reverse oppression’ (Tate 1997). Bell (in Tate 1997) for example, uses the fierce opposition expressed by both conservative and liberal white Americans in response to proposed legislative plans to racially desegregate schools in America. He states;

> “The nation was more than ready to blame white Southerners, traditionally the country’s scapegoat when there is a need to assign responsibility for racial injustice… When school desegregation efforts moved north, the attitude towards the south changed from condemnation to complicity, with Northerners rallying to preserve neighbourhood patterns, avoid busing, and maintain the ‘educational integrity’ of white schools” (Bell in Tate 1997: 215).

Bell (in Tate 1997) used this example to make an important observation;

> “Most northerners do not oppose desegregation in the abstract. What they resist is the *price* of desegregation…the principle of non-discrimination is supported, but its implementation is avoided and, necessarily, opposed. The important question of course is whether the debilitating effects of racial discrimination can be remedied without requiring whites to surrender aspects of their superior social status” (Bell in Tate 1997: 215).

CRT argues that many dominant neoliberal ideals such as meritocracy, colour blindness are often preventative and not corrective. The primary objective of dominant (privileged) liberal groups is to prevent future forms of oppression. By focusing solely on preventing future forms of overt oppression, current power structures, social statuses and privileges remain intact an untouched. CRT argues that neoliberal notions of meritocracy and colour-blindness, often presented as noble and just, either completely overlook or disregard centuries of social inequality caused by institutionalised oppression and subjugation. These notions falsely assume that culturally and racially diverse societies are 'already completely equal' and have equal opportunity access based on merit alone (Ladson Billings 1998, Crenshaw in Tate 1997).

Video games have also been subject to slow incremental progress, especially regarding the representation of people and bodies of colour. Questions over the underrepresentation of characters of colour in video games in relation to their white counterparts were initially met with claims from game developers that technical limitations made the visual rendering and lighting of dark skin and curly hair in video games difficult (Cole and DePass 2017). Robert Yang, Professor at the New York University Game Centre, in response to these claims of technical difficulties notes that many of these difficulties are a by-product of the development of video game rendering technology that often tends to focus solely on the accurate virtual reproduction of white skin. The rendering of various diverse skin tones and colours is often an afterthought.

> "When 3D artists test their new skin shaders, they often use a 3D head scan of a white guy named Lee Perry-Smith… What does it mean if we're all judging the quality of our skin shader solutions by seeing who can make the best rendered white guy?" (Yang in Cole and DePass 2017: para.18 line 3-5).

Much like movies, TV shows and other forms of popular culture, video games have seen a slow but steady progress with the introduction of more racially and culturally diverse characters, with video game developers being more diverse in their hiring practices. This progress however is often undermined either by superficial attempts by certain video games at social commentary or video games that capitalise on contemporary real-world social issues (IC).

*South Park: The Fractured But Whole* (2017) is an example of a video game that, according to Winslow (2017), squandered a genuine opportunity to comment on the of social constructions of race and racism in a meaningful way. The game begins with the player being allowed to create their own character and avatar as well as choose how difficult they want the game to be.

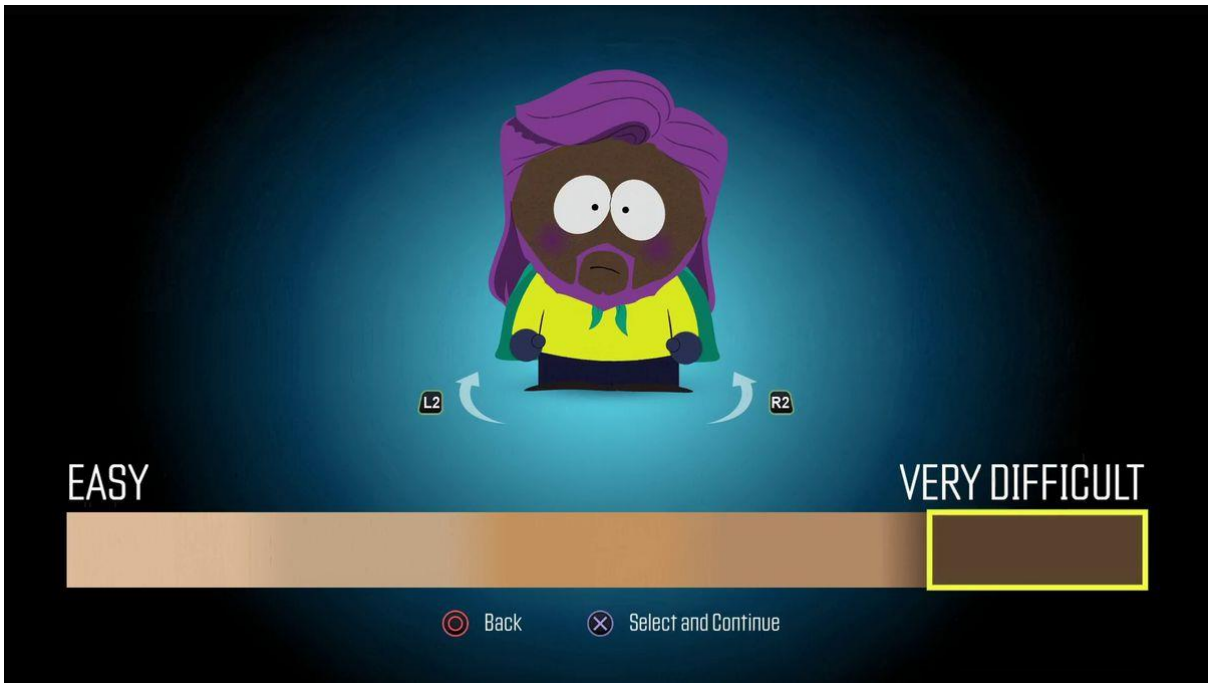


**Figure 28.**

Gameplay screenshot from *South Park: The Fractured But Whole* (video game). 2017. Developed by Ubisoft, San Francisco. Published by Ubisoft, Montreuil.

The player's choice of difficulty directly affects the skin colour of their player created avatar, with the easiest game difficulty being a white skin colour and the player avatar getting darker in skin colour as the player chooses higher difficulty settings. As the player cycle through the different difficulty options/skin tones, one of the in-game characters casually remarks, "Don't worry, this doesn't affect combat… Just every other aspect of your whole life".

When asked about the game's difficulty being linked with the player avatar's race, the developers stated that it was purely a satirical joke that had no real effect on the game's difficulty (Winslow 2017). Commenting on this missed opportunity, Winslow

(2017) states that it could've given players a small practical glimpse of the constant, 'normalised' presence of race in the lived experiences of people of colour, especially those with dark skin.

> "Ubisoft could have presented you with an active, in the moment confrontation with discrimination, racism and stereotyping. The Idea that the game would never let you forget you're black is an intriguing one" (Winslow 2017: para. 8 line 3-4).

*Watch dogs 2* (2016) is another example of video games, like other forms of popular culture, seeking to capitalise on real world issues. *Watch Dogs* 2 (2016) is an open-world action adventure video game set in San Francisco and puts the player in control of a black protagonist named Marcus Holloway. Holloway is wrongfully arrested due to racial profiling and the game's plot follows him as he becomes a vigilante and joins a hacktivist group called DedSec to bring down the corruption taking place in the city's government, law enforcement and big tech companies.

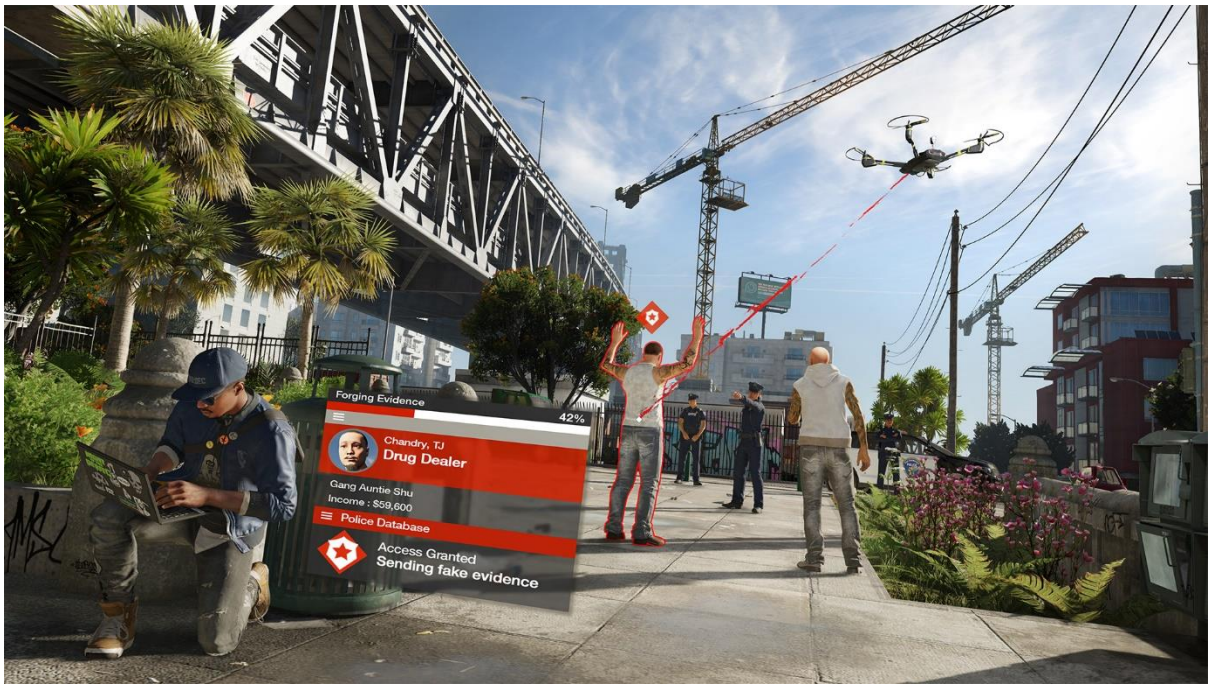


**Figure 29.**

Gameplay screenshot from *Watchdogs 2* (video game). 2016. Developed by Ubisoft, San Francisco. Published by Ubisoft, Montreuil.

*Watch dogs 2* (2016) draws from real world online activist groups and the use of the internet and social media as a tool for social activism. The game also came out during the height of the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement in the US. The game's exploration of themes of digital activism are rendered superficial and undermined by the fact that many of the game's missions result in Holloway's character falling into age old tropes of being a source and target for violence. Holloway can and often does kill criminals, law enforcement and civilians indiscriminately and the online activism in the game is reduced to little more than an edgy aesthetic - digital glitch art, electric dance music and gaining 'followers' on the internet. In its attempts to capitalise on the rise of social activism via the internet and online activism culture, *Watch Dogs 2* (2016) inadvertently ends up representing online social activism and the culture that surrounds it, as a form of violence.

Despite the racial and cultural diversity in video game characters being on the rise, this progress is undermined by the fact that many prominent characters of colour in video games have been and continue to be voiced by white voice actors (Daniels 2016).

> "black female characters in video games are rarely voiced by black women. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation's* heroine Aveline de Grandpe who is half French and half African, is voiced by white Canadian actress Amber Goldfarb ... Clementine from *The Walking Dead*, whose parents are both black, is voiced by Mellissa Hutchinson, who is white. This Phenomenon also affects black male characters. James Heller in *Prototype 2*, Marvin Branagh from *Resident Evil 2*, and Balrog from the *Street Fighter* franchise are all fictional black men voiced by real white actors" (Daniels 2016: para. 4 line 1-7).

This practice within the gaming industry became the inspiration for my final art project entitled, *The Book of Nadine* (2017 – 2018). *The Book of Nadine* critically explores the visual and audial representation of Nadine Ross, a black South African female character and one of the main antagonists in the acclaimed action adventure game, *Uncharted 4* (2016). Nadine Ross is voiced by Laura Bailey, a white American voice actress.

Responding to criticism from gamers of colour about hiring a white American to play a black South African, Neil Druckmann, the game's creative director, replied:

> "Having a white actress play a black character is part of the beauty of games and voice acting … your outward appearance doesn't matter at all" (Druckmann in Daniels 2016: para. 7 line 1-2).

Despite the outcry from the racial gaming minority, Nadine Ross was celebrated as a sign of how far video games have progressed. She was presented as a strong, complex, black African female character that the gaming audience can relate to (Daniels 2016).

Playing *Uncharted 4* as a black South African male gamer and listening to Nadine Ross speak was a strange experience. The game went through great narrative lengths to reinforce that she was a South African character but every time she spoke, her accent sounded foreign to me. I began to come up with and record my own narrative, drawing from my own lived experiences as a South African, seeking to explain how she got her 'foreign' sounding South African accent. I then collected gameplay video footage from Uncharted 4 containing Nadine Ross' dialogue scenes and invited voluntary South African participants to listen to her dialogue and anonymously record fictional backstories based on her English accent. These narrative audio recording sessions were conducted on a one-on-one basis and the participants' narratives were then saved numerically in order to further ensure participant anonymity. The narrative cues each participant was given were;

1) Nadine Ross is South African.
2) Nadine Ross owns a South African private security company.

Using these cues, the participants were given free rein to come up with whatever fictional backstory they wanted, explaining how Nadine Ross got her accent.


**Figure 30.**

Luyanda Zindela. Still image from *The Book of Nadine***.** 2017-2018. Video. Artist's Collection.

The fictional backstories collected were varied and diverse, but they also had one key thing in common, all the narratives noted that Nadine's English accent did not sound South African. The narrative explanations for the foreignness of her accent vary, with some participants stating that she went to a wealthy school or adopted by a wealthy white family, whilst other participants speculated that she must've spent some time living abroad.

I collected all the narratives and presented them alongside the collected video footage of Nadine's dialogue scenes. Presenting the project in this way allowed for the viewer to firstly see and listen to a prominent video game's representation of a South African character. The audience would then listen to actual South Africans (accents), using their experiential knowledge as South Africans, to create diverse narratives explaining a South African accent that sounded foreign to them.

*The book of Nadine* (2017 - 2018) doesn't dismiss that there are signs of progress in the portrayal of Nadine Ross. Her character portrayal is complex, three-dimensional and bucks many longstanding stereotypes in gaming concerning the representation of

black women. I argue that this portrayal would've been enhanced if an actual black South African woman was brought in to voice Nadine Ross. *The book of Nadine* (2017 – 2018) seeks to highlight that people of colour as well as people from other marginalised communities can and should be involved in the representation of characters that draw from their communities.

CRT, due to its roots in activism and social justice, argues that true progress and lasting empowerment doesn't just come solely from the prevention of future oppression but also from the redressing of centuries of physical, emotional and psychological damage caused by centuries of racial subjugation. This argument is relevant for video games too, as they begin to be more diverse. CRT poses a difficult and uncomfortable question for those in superior social positions of privilege and power. Do they only believe and support cultural and racial equity in the abstract? Do they perceive that the dismantling of the privilege and the redistribution of the power that maintains their superior social position as a threat? These questions are also relevant towards gamers from privileged groups who have grown accustomed and comfortable with the representation of whiteness as the hegemonic normative standard in video games. As a black artist who consumes these video games, my art practice uses CRT to contribute to the emerging critique of the neoliberal 'progress' that is already happening in gaming.

## 4.6. Epilogue

In Conclusion, Critical Race Theory plays a key role in my understanding of the main research issue of why violent racist representations of people, bodies and communities of colour of colour continue to persist in video games. This chapter discussed three key tenets in CRT and their relevance my critical discourse analysis of selected video games, the work of the selected artists and CRT scholars as well as my own art practice.

This study adopts the central premise of CRT that racism continues to exist despite the ending of overt institutional racial subjugation decades ago and neoliberal claims that we now live in a post-racial meritocracy. Using this central premise, along with the critical discourse analysis of selected video games with black player-controlled protagonists of colour, I argue that people and bodies of colour in video games, as

well as the communities they live in, are often represented as dehumanised stereotypical spaces for the enactment of visceral violence. The violent history of racial subjugation is often ignored in video games. People, bodies and communities of colour in video games are often reduced to sites that exist purely for player fantasy fulfilment as well as the normative reinforcing of whiteness as the hegemonic normative heroic standard.

CRT's activist approach of placing importance on the lived experiences and experiential knowledge of people of colour, provided a means for me to explore, critique and address issues of racism in video games using own experiences as a black Zulu South African fine artist and gamer. Using non-traditional media such as video, audio and storytelling; my art practice plays a key role, as it allows me to name, narrate and thus validate my experiences as a black male South African gamer of colour.

Each practical work is a counter-narrative stemming not only from the critical discourse analysis of selected video games but also from a critical reflexive analysis of my gaming experience whilst consuming these games. My art practice also draws from selected site-specific counter-narrative in-game art performances and interventions by the selected new media artists. I argue that these counter-narratives play an integral role in the challenging and dismantling long-standing 'norms', tropes, myths and stereotypes present in video games. These counter-narratives also seek to challenge gamers to reflect on the games they consume.

Whiteness is still the assumed race in gamer communities and prominent characters video games are still predominantly white. Despite this, as a fine artist and gamer of colour, I still see potential in video games to provide complex, nuanced interactive virtual representations of people and bodies of colour. More nuanced representations can give players of various backgrounds an insight into the real-world experiences of people living in marginalised communities of racially and culturally diverse societies. This artistic research seeks to contribute to the emerging field of video game experiences as new media art as well as contribute to the emerging pool of transgressive 'outsider' knowledge within academic video game criticism.

# CONCLUSION

## 5.1. Summary of the Study

This fine art study, through my art practice, sought to critically analyse, explore and unsettle stereotypical and violent representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games. My art practice drew from the key tenets of Critical Race theory, a critical discourse analysis of selected video games, strategies employed by the selected artists in their work, literature from selected gamers of colour as well as my own experiences as a fine artist and gamer of colour. This study, through my art practice, sought to uncover how the stereotypical and violent visual and audial representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the selected video games simultaneously drew from and perpetuated dominant social constructions of race and hierarchal racial difference.

Through the literature review of this study, I presented this study's foundational premise that race, contrary to how it is depicted in the selected video games, is not a naturally occurring phenomenon or permanently fixed in nature but is a social construct. I discussed how this social construct, throughout its history and even in the present day, hegemonically positions whiteness as the dominant normative social standard of 'humanity' and relegates non-whiteness, and particularly blackness, to varying degrees of 'sub-human' status. I then argued that the racial stereotypes perpetuated in video games were simultaneously informed by and contributed to reinforcing, dominant socially constructed notions of hierarchal racial difference.

I also discussed how this study centred on my art practice, adopting a practice based qualitative research methodology to argue that my art practice wasn't just a research tool or outcome, my art practice was research. Drawing from a critical discourse analysis of the selected video games, the work of selected artists as well as the literature of selected gamers of colour, my art practice became a counter-narrative space where I named and narrated my experiences as a black Zulu South African male gamer. My art practice sought to artistically explore, critique and unsettle the stereotypically racist representations of people, bodies and communities of colour in the games I played.

## 5.2. Research Findings

Through this practice-based fine art research, I have come to the conclusion that stereotypical representations of race and hierarchal racial difference in video games result in the people, bodies and communities of colour in these games being portrayed in a manner that (often violently) reduces them to little more than (sub-human) sites for lustful consumption or violent punishment or both.

With popular big-budget games, like *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), often being presented by video game developers and publishers as 'realistic' interactive virtual experiences that faithfully and accurately 'reflect' the real world, I argue that video games containing racial stereotypes can indeed, through their interactivity, become "racialised pedagogical zones" (Everett and Craig-Watkins 2008: 142). Video games, due to their interactivity, can become powerful virtual learning spaces where racial stereotypes and racist notions of and hierarchal racial difference can be learned, reinforced, normalised and internalised.

As indicated by the writing of Kishonna Gray (2012) on her gaming experiences online with other players, video games as interactive "racialised pedagogical zones" (Everett and Craig-Watkins 2008: 142), can have a tangible effect on the lived experiences of gamers from racially marginalised communities. Much like other forms of media, racial stereotyping in video games can often influence players' real-world perceptions of the people, bodies and communities of colour depicted in these games. This can in turn directly affect how players see and interact with people (and gamers) from racially marginalised communities, especially online (Gray 2012). These representations can also influence (harmfully) the perceptions that gamers of colour have of themselves and others, thus reinforcing the notion – held particularly by gamers of colour – that enduring and navigating racism in video games as well as the gamer communities that play them is an unavoidable 'normal' part of the (black) gaming experience.

Critiquing and challenging this perceived 'norm' in video games is thus a very important central conceptual pillar in this study – particularly in my art practice. This study seeks contribute to an emerging pool of "outsider" (Yosso 2005: 70) voices,

imagery and counter-narratives challenging and unsettling the current racist status quo in video games and seeking a more inclusive change in how the racialised other is represented in video games.

## 5.3. Significance of the Study

As mentioned in the introductory chapter of the study, video games are already fast becoming one of the most popular and dominant forms of entertainment in the world. An estimated 2.6 billion people playing video games across a variety of different platforms (Entertainment Software Association 2018). Despite the rapidly growing popularity of video games as well as the diversity their players, literature suggests that video games are still rife with stereotypical and violent representations of people, bodies and communities of colour. These representations are almost accepted as the 'norm' – the status quo (Sisler 2008, Leonard 2003, Conditt 2015, Gray 2014, Brock 2011, Leonard 2003).

Academic research from gamers of colour, particularly African gamers of colour, challenging this racist status quo in video games, is still relatively few and far between. As more players begin to be exposed to virtual video game recreations of African settings, African characters and African communities through high profile big budget video games like Resident Evil 5 (2009), Metal Gear Solid V (2015) and Uncharted 4 (2016), I argue that there is a need for more African voices within academic video games criticism. This study seeks to contribute towards the filling of this gap in the literature.

This fine art study also seeks to contribute towards the emerging field of South African new media art, particularly fine art which draws from or uses video games as an artistic medium.

## 5.4 Potential Future Research

The areas of future research suggested by this study include an artistic exploration, inspired by and expanding on The Book of Nadine (2017-218) and specifically focusing on analysing video game representations South African people, bodies and

communities (of colour) – and critically exploring how South Africans respond to these representations.

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