VIDEO ESSAY

Fear of Black Europe: Race in Medieval and Early Modern Video Games

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Video games set in or inspired by early modern or medieval Europe have historically featured almost entirely white casts of characters, a decision often defended on the grounds of historical accuracy. This video essay examines how the myth of an all-white European past emerged and how it has shaped both video game design and gaming culture more broadly. It then explores how diversity is represented in the *For Honor* and *Chivalry* series as case studies of the "historical accuracy" framing in video games. Ultimately, the essay argues that including a diverse cast of characters is not only appropriate but necessary for achieving true historical accuracy.

Fear of Black Europe: Race in Medieval and Early Modern Video Games

Watch *Fear of Black Europe: Race in Medieval and Early Modern Video Games.*

Transcript

What comes to mind when someone says the word "gamer"? If you don't play video games, your connotations with "gamers" are probably not very positive. In our current popular imagination, the "gamer" is a white adolescent cis heterosexual male who is often violently protective of the space he deems "his culture." There are many nuances to this popular image of the "gamer," and the image is far from an accurate description for the entirety of gaming culture considering people of all identities play video games. Games are not monolithic, yet this controlling image of the hateful gamer is so pervasive because there *is* a vocal subset of gamers who are incredibly toxic—especially as it relates to identity politics. Seemingly any time a video game developer simply acknowledges a non-white person or a queer person or a woman who isn't airbrushed to non-existence, there is a subset of self-proclaimed "gamers" who express vitriolic outrage at the mere presence of anyone or anything that does not fit into their extremely limited viewpoint. Indeed, there are people who base their entire personality around yelling about a game or a storyline that can be classified as "woke" or "SJW," and the satirical subreddit r/gamingcirclejerk is nearly entirely dedicated to making fun of "gamer rage" at the mere existence of a non-white male video game protagonist. For those of us in gaming communities, this backlash sometimes feels foundational to the culture. In her 2020 monograph *Gamer Trouble*, Amanda Phillips "situates antifeminist backlash as part of the gamer's distrust of 'expert' knowledge about video games, which has its roots in censorship campaigns in the 1990s and 2000s and the figure of the 'mean mommy,' another version of the angry feminist who lurks in the shadows of anxiety about restricted access to video games" (31).

While anti-feminism is certainly a central motivator of the angry gamer, whiteness has been an equally powerful motivator in the exclusionary popular culture of gaming. In her 2014 monograph *Gaming at the Edge*, Adrienne Shaw notably frames gaming culture as "particularly masculine, heterosexual and white," and she points out video games are "the least progressive form of media representation, despite being one of the newest mediated forms" (6). Now, it's important to note that Shaw's critiques apply principally to AAA video games, which are the games that are released by large publishers with multi-million-dollar budgets

and typically have teams of hundreds to thousands of developers, designers, artists, and writers. Indie games have a much longer history of diversity within both the game space and the production team behind the games—though that doesn't mean they are immune from these same issues. However, representation within AAA games is so suspiciously monolithic that there is a famous meme for the "average video game protagonist." Major video games have frankly not done a very good job when it comes to diverse racial representation, particularly of Black characters. Of course, there are always exceptions, and there have been Black characters in video games since at least the 1980s. But the fact of the matter is that most early representations of Black people in major games were either in sports games or were simply the rare exception to the rule.

Thankfully, there is a recent rise in Black video game protagonists in narrative-driven games like *Deathloop*, *Miles Morales*, and *Alan Wake 2*; yet these characters still pale in comparison to their white male counterparts. And the racial issues in games go beyond the protagonists in narrative-driven experiences. Action RPGs with character customization screens are notoriously problematic when viewed through a critical race studies lens. Research shows that white characters are typically the default option in character creation screens even in fantasy games with mythical creatures and mythical options. And the coded representation of Black or textured hair is so bad that comedy group RDCworld1 released a sketch about bad Black hair options in 2022, and several YouTubers have published YouTube essays examining the phenomenon such as Kinda Funny Games, Veridis Joe, and Joshua Rios for *Polygon*. In 2013, Austin Walker described a similar issue in relation to *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*, writing:

> The question of race seems to have never been brought up to begin with, and that has its own problems. Privilege works by naturalizing one position, or one set or style of positions. It isn't as simple as valuing that position over others: even that would acknowledge a field of differences. To work in a system of privilege is to start all projects from a set of premises that are believed to be inviolable. You don't get more pale, in *New Leaf*, you only get darker. The natural position is whiteness.

This is the practice of much of the game industry, and in game studies, Kishonna L. Gray (2020) has drawn our attention to the importance of intersectional analysis in game studies to properly contend with the racial works of video games.

There are many contributing factors for the homogeneity of video game characters including the historic homogeneity of video game producers, the alleged market expectations of a presumed white adolescent boy audience, and fear over backlash for insensitive or downright problematic characterizations of historically and presently marginalized voices. Aaron Trammell has called attention to the connections between the current video game culture and the earlier hobby game culture of the mid- to late twentieth century, and his 2023 text *The Privilege of Play* tells the story of a culture of geeky white masculinity in hobby gaming by contextualizing these often exclusionary spaces where "the community's suburban mindset was a holdover from segregationist policy and white flight" (80). Given the game industry's historic embeddedness into a particular brand of suburban whiteness, it is perhaps unsurprising that the discourse around race among the dominant gaming community is often abysmal. Yet, despite the relative marginalization of Black characters in large AAA video games, there is still a horde of "gamers" who insist on deriding any non-white existence in games. It is frustrating and leads to a horrible popular perception of gamers and the gaming community. But as satisfying as it would be to correct the *loudly wrong*, I actually don't want to focus on them today or any of the alt-right–rooted backlash against POC existence in video games.

Instead, I want to focus on the "to be fair" people. These folks usually appear as "devil's advocates" for the backlash and begin spouting this rhetoric about video games that are nominally set in or inspired by the medieval or early modern periods. Whenever someone critiques the lack of diversity in medieval- or early modern–set games, there is a cohort of people who respond, "To be fair, there weren't any Black people in Europe at that time." This mentality is even seen amongst certain game developers like Naoki Yoshida, producer of *Final Fantasy*, who said the game design concept of *Final Fantasy XVI* "always heavily featured Medieval Europe, incorporating historical, cultural, political, and anthropological standards that were prevalent at the time" (2022, 41), and he claims the incorporation of non-white characters would disrupt "the narrative boundaries" of the game. [Sigh] Okay, let's put aside for a second that the *Final Fantasy* series takes place in a made-up world where you swing physically impossible-to-carry giant swords and ride what can only be described as a mythical ostrich, and let us instead focus on the fact that Yoshida's claim *is* historically inaccurate. Indeed, all of these claims about an all-white early modern and medieval period are rooted in a designed misconception around Europe's past. There is an abundance of scholarship that indicates, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Black people have been present in Europe for centuries and long before the

transatlantic slave trade brought this presence to wider understanding. There is a wealth of art from the period that depicts Black people as well as numerous primary source documents that confirm the Black presence in medieval and early modern Europe. The same is true for other people of color in Europe during these periods. So why do so many gamers incorrectly assume that there were no Black people or Africans in Europe during the medieval and early modern period? Well, that is what we are going to look at today by discussing the African presence in Europe during the medieval and early modern periods, then exploring how this myth of an all-white European past developed, and how it influences our video games today.

Europe was never an all-white space. Shocking, I know! Scholars like Kim F. Hall, Imtiaz Habib, Dorothy Kim, and Ania Loomba have labored—against considerable institutional pushback—to show the continued Black presence in Europe during the medieval and early modern periods through today. In his seminal 2008 book *Black Lives in the Archives*, Imtiaz Habib looked at the archives of medieval England and acknowledged that scholars of the period had to "deal with an uncertain knowledge of the actual numbers of black people" in England during the era because the historical record of this presence was extremely obscured (1). Amongst scholars of the medieval era, it was long assumed that there was a "tiny population" of Black people in England at this time (Habib 2008, 1). However, Habib meticulously searched through the archives and discovered "obscure, truncated and largely inaccessible documentary records, which are only now becoming fully available," and which "paint a very different picture about the size, continuity and historical seriousness of the black presence in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, well before the English black populations became known through the transatlantic slave trade" (2008, 1). Government documents, personal letters, and church records all reveal that the Black presence was undoubtedly *present* in medieval England—a presence that continued well into the early modern period.

In *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, the scholar Kim F. Hall looks at the numerous allusions and references to Africans, "Ethiopes," and Blackness in early modern texts and images and takes them at face value by considering them as racial references. Most previous early modern scholars had reduced these allusions to Blackness to moralizing or beauty commentary rather than actual references to Black and African people—removing racial categorization from their scholarly consideration entirely. Huh! I'm starting to wonder if unreliable interpretations of early modern scholarship might have contributed to our collective idea of the all-white European past! But I digress. For Hall, the English in the early modern period began structuring their collective subjectivity in relation and opposition to Africa and Africans, and she writes, "Dark and light, rather than being mere indications of Elizabethan beauty standards or markers of moral categories, became in the early modern period the conduit through which the English began to formulate the notions of 'self' and 'other' so well known in Anglo-American racial discourses" (1995, 2). While Hall goes on to point out that "there are no extant firsthand accounts from the Black Tudor population" (1995, 11), subsequent scholarship like Miranda Kaufmann's *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (2017) details the lives of various Black individuals during the early modern period by piecing together different documents from the archive. In other words, there was undeniably an African presence in early modern England. This racial framing is not isolated to England alone. Hans Werner Debrunner's 1979 historical study *Presence and Prestige: Africans in Europe* details exchanges between Africans and various European nations such as Spain, Italy, and Germany between 1450 and 1650 and throughout the period of transatlantic slavery. More recent scholars have explored similar African presences in the Netherlands during the early modern period (Hondius 2008) and Spain during the medieval period (Simmons 2017).

This racial diversity even made its way into cultural works from these periods. For example, Pamela A. Patton details how race was depicted across medieval European art. Ania Loomba similarly shows how race thinking influenced the plays of William Shakespeare, persuasively suggesting "Shakespeare's plays have been an extraordinarily powerful medium between generations and cultures, a conduit for transmitting and shaping ideas about colonialism and race" (2002, 5). I have barely scratched the surface on scholarship that definitively shows that there was a Black and African presence in England and Europe during the medieval and early modern periods. These scholarly approaches are widely accepted among scholars of these periods today, and works by scholars like Eric Martone (2009), David Northrup (2009), Dorothy Kim (2022), and Geraldine Heng (2019) all detail the presence of Africans and other people of color in medieval and early modern Europe as well as the rising of techniques of racialization developed during these periods. If you want to delve further into this history from public historians, I recommend the now-defunct but still live MedievalPOC Tumblr page and the Public Medievalist website for many, many more examples in an open access avenue.

Despite the actual history, the consistent myth of an all-white European past remains. Why? There are many potential answers, but a central reason is the codification of Anglo-Saxon studies in the academy and the subsequent embrace of all things medieval by white supremacists. The term "Anglo-Saxon" has historically been used to describe any Germanic people who arrived in modern-day England and Wales during the

Norman Conquest. "Anglo Saxon studies" emerged as the chosen moniker for the study of medieval Europe. The idea of an "Anglo-Saxon" people eventually developed into a nebulous identifier for any white person who believes they are descended from western Europe, and white supremacist groups throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have latched onto the Anglo-Saxon myth to attest to the so-called cultural and racial superiority of white people. Yet, the Anglo-Saxon myth is exactly that: a myth. It was created by white folks to imagine that they were connected to some mythic past of "Great White Men." Medieval studies scholar Mary Rambaran-Olm writes: "Rather than accurately portray the early English people as separate tribes (most notably, Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) that migrated to the British Isle, the Anglo-Saxon myth links white people with an imagined heritage based on indigeneity to Britain" (2019). In reality, the term "Anglo-Saxon" was rarely used by people in England during the medieval period as they found identification elsewhere. Instead, it was academics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who began using the term "Anglo-Saxon" to refer to an entire region and period that was ethnically and racially and religiously diverse (Wilton 2020; Rambaran-Olm and Wade 2022). I wonder why that is? Could it be, perhaps, that these scholars had a personal investment in making medieval Europe *white* to correspond to eighteenth and nineteenth racial hierarchy?

But while we can only speculate about the intentions of these scholars whitewashing the past, we can see the very real ramification of their work today. Many white supremacist groups have latched on to the Anglo-Saxon myth and violently lash out at anyone who tries to correct their lies with the historical record. The myth of an all-white European past is ahistorical but has been given credence by a scholarly apparatus that is complicit in the white supremacist fantasy of an all-white medieval and early modern Europe. This history was brought to broader public attention in 2017 with the deadly "Unite the Right" riot in Charlottesville. While I won't show their images here, many of these white supremacists were wearing medieval or early modern–style clothing or armor because they are invested in the idea of medieval Europe as a homogeneously white space that they might return to—an idea that scholarship about the medieval period played a pivotal role in crafting. During the aftermath of Charlottesville, scholar Dorothy Kim argued, "Today, medievalists have to understand that the public and our students will see us as potential white supremacists or white supremacist sympathizers because we are medievalists" (2017), and how disappointing is that? The failure of scholarship to acknowledge the presence of any non-white people in medieval Europe has given credence to a white supremacist lie.

The problems with the Anglo-Saxon myth don't stop at medievalism and white supremacy. Maya Mackrandilal points out that the anti-Blackness of medieval history is part of a larger history of the construction of whiteness, and she writes, "The connections drawn between the Confederacy, Christianity, Anglo Saxon heritage, the Roman Empire, and Ancient Greece are not accidental. They are part of a larger mythology of whiteness that has been carefully constructed for centuries and is intimately linked to the foundation of the United States, with neoclassical art serving as its propaganda" (2017). Importantly, so called "white people" have not always been white—take a look at the Irish, the Italians, the Greeks, the Poles, the Swedes, and virtually anyone from eastern Europe who migrated to the United States. White is a racial category about power that, like all other racial categories, has no relation to biology. There is no logical coherence to racial categorization because race isn't a real thing. And unlike groups that have been historically oppressed or marginalized, so-called white people have largely not sought to create communal belonging with other whites—instead, whiteness has been far more about exclusion and determining who has access to various privileged spaces. This is not to say that people who are white do not have any culture. They do. However, whiteness, as a social category, has historically been about creating a narrative of power—who has it and who is oppressed by it. We return to Kim F. Hall, who looks to the early modern period and creates an argument for "a poetics of color in which whiteness is established as a valued goal," where "whiteness . . . is as much about a desire for a stable linguistic order as it is about physical beauty" (1995, 66). In other words, Hall points out that early modern English subjects recognized the instability of whiteness and tried to transform whiteness into something cohesive. In turn, scholarship of the medieval and early modern periods has similarly sought to give stability, and thus credence, to the myth of whiteness.

Thankfully, there has been considerable pushback to Anglo-Saxon studies, and many medievalists have rejected the moniker "Anglo-Saxon" altogether to call attention to its mythic foundations and white supremacist present. Many of the scholars I have discussed today have been at the forefront of a revolution in medieval and early modern studies. But alas, the persistence of the Anglo-Saxon myth largely remains with us in the form of popular culture representations of the medieval and early modern periods. There is no shortage of books, movies, games, and even music set in the medieval and early modern periods, and for most of our history, you are unlikely to find a person of color in any contemporary text set in that era, especially if it purports to be "historically accurate." These popular culture representations are creating a fictitious archive of the medieval and early modern periods that suggest it was an all-white time in Europe. The Anglo-Saxon

myth was particularly impactful for J. R. R Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and other Middle-Earth–set texts, which have in turn inspired the entirety of the medieval fantasy genre. Further, *Dungeons and Dragons*, the most pivotal and influential tabletop role-playing game, was deeply inspired by Tolkien's worlds, and the game largely imports his troubling racial worldview—thus ensuring a continued incorporation of the Anglo-Saxon myth across literature, film, and games.

Which brings us back to video games. While there are exceptions, many video games set in or inspired by the early modern period and medieval period continue to propagate the racial myths that history refutes. Some of these games feature almost 100 percent white human characters, like most of the *Total War* games, *Knights of the Temple*, *Shadow of Mordor*, *The Witcher* series, and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. When *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* was released in 2018, the Czech-developed game swiftly received criticism among certain sects of games media because of its all-white representation of medieval central Europe. The game's director, Daniel Vávra, responded with the tweet: "would you please explain to me whats [sic] racist about telling the truth? There were no black people in medieval Bohemia. Period." Well, that is probably true—oh wait? Thanks, MedievalPOC! Unlike Vávra, most of the developers of the other games never publicly commented on the homogeneity of their characters, but these games too were defended by their fans because they are going for some semblance of "historical accuracy," a notion that Helen Young points out has been "used to justify excluding people of color from, or to criticize their inclusion in, medievalist fantasy settings" in a variety of mediums (2019, 233). In many video games, the "historical authenticity" defense is used as an alibi for an all-white medieval Europe even though that alibi is based on a lie.

Not all medieval or early modern–set video games approach diversity with pure avoidance, and indeed, having a high fantasy game with zero non-white characters is increasingly rare as games like *Skyrim* have included entire factions of non-white populations while recent fantasy RPGs that clearly take inspiration from the medieval and early modern eras like *Diablo 4* and *Baldur's Gate 3* feature a wide variety of characters of color. But there are two important things to note here that we will focalize through Bethesda's much loved 2011 game *Skyrim*. One, games like *Skyrim* are not going for "historical accuracy" within their experience, so the developers and their fans recognize that this argument doesn't really hold sway. Two, games like *Skyrim* do retain a lot of the troubling racial ideology that informs the high fantasy genre, which Mark S. Hines points out in his essay "'An Affront to My People:' Excising the Other from the Fantasy of *Skyrim*" (2023). Hines points out that the Orcish races in *Skyrim* invoke racial essentialism that centers whiteness and perpetuates Blackness as othered, and other games that center Tolkien-esque Orcs, like *Middle-earth: Shadow of War*, rely on a similar visual code (2023). These examples reveal that diversifying medieval- and early modern–set games can only be truly successful if the game industry refuses the white supremacist racial ideology that continues to inform so much of the high fantasy genre.

Let's close with a case study of some recent popular hack-and-slash games: *For Honor* and the *Chivalry* series. *For Honor* is a 2017 medieval fantasy game that invites the player to take on the role of a different warrior within different historical factions like the Iron Legion (Knights), the Warborn (Vikings), the Dawn Empire (Samurai), and the Wu Lin (Ancient Chinese). The game allows players to change their playable character's skin tone. There was little controversy around these customization options precisely because the game is inherently fantastical and not even approximating "historical accuracy." The *Chivalry* series has a slightly different arc but a telling one. The 2012 game *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare* is a multiplayer hack-and-slash game where you play as a medieval knight battling other knights in medieval Europe. The game has minor character customization that allows the player to choose between four different playable classes that have different options, but notably, the only options are to play as a white European-looking man. At the request of the player base, the 2021 sequel, *Chivalry 2*, enabled new customization options that allowed players to choose non-white skin tones or even change the gender of their playable character. There was the predictable minor backlash, but the way this backlash was defended is really telling about the continual prevalence of the "historical accuracy" argument among gaming communities. Most people on social media and gaming websites defended the choice to make an inclusive character customization screen in *Chivalry 2* because the game isn't trying to be historically accurate. The "to be fair" argument still stands, and the argument about diversity in medieval fantasy games transforms into something else about realism and historical accuracy. All the while, the Anglo-Saxon myth and how it informs our video games goes fundamentally unchallenged.

Perhaps the continual lack of Black representation in medieval or early modern video games should be unsurprising considering that *Dungeons and Dragons* and Tolkien remain central touchstones for contemporary video games and our scholarship of the early modern and medieval eras has historically upheld the white Anglo-Saxon myth. Or perhaps the whiteness of medieval video games reflects the overwhelming whiteness of the game industry in general—a whiteness that is both demographic and ideological. Yet, we should still hold our games and game developers accountable for their blind adherence to the debunked

Anglo-Saxon myth. I'm not saying to harass developers or cancel the games or burn our copies à la some conservative who's mad at Bud Light or some other culture war touchstone. Instead, gamers should ask games to do better when it comes to racial representation *especially* if these games are set in or inspired by medieval or early modern Europe. It's particularly important for us to unapologetically critique our most beloved games. Listen, I love FromSoftware. *Dark Souls* is my favorite game of all time, *Bloodborne* and *Sekiro* are masterpieces, and I have put hundreds of hours into *Elden Ring*, and I've even played *King's Field*. However, the fact that even *Elden Ring*—a game released in 2022—has substandard textured hair options for Black players and that there are maybe five Black NPCs across the entire *Souls*-like series is incredibly disappointing *and* historically inaccurate. And don't give me any of the nonsense that FromSoftware is a Japanese developer and should be immune from this racial critique because, guess what, there were Black people in Japan throughout history too (Leupp 1995).

If games want to be historically accurate, they *will* include a racially diverse set of characters that properly acknowledges the diversity of medieval or early modern Europe. And we should all be committed to stop perpetrating a white supremacist myth about an all-white European past in our culture and our games. We demand better from our games. And next time some "to be fair" gamer says a game set in or inspired by the medieval or early modern period shouldn't have non-white people in it, let them know that *they* are wrong. The history says so.

Competing Interests

Acknowledgements

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