Uplifting Us: A BIPOC Game Design Case Study

CHRIS BROOKS, Northeastern University, USA

ERICA PRINCIPE CRUZ, Carnegie Mellon University, USA

JAMIE CAMERA, Otherside Entertainment, USA

ALEXANDRA TO, Northeastern University, USA

In this short paper, we share our experiences designing a game for and about students of color at predominantly white institutions as a case study for a BIPOC-centric game design process. Through our design process, we encountered tensions in game design. For example, the frequency and relative inconsequence of physically violent death harmfully emphasizing real-world trauma in a game where all the main characters are people of color. We also encountered exciting opportunities in how we might create game experiences truly centering people of color. For example, the surprisingly novel delight of designing and creating slice-of-life narrative scenes in which people of color interact and thrive. We share how we work through these tensions and opportunities in order to open a conversation around game design processes by and for people of color as ways to uplift ourselves and our communities.

CCS Concepts: • **Social and professional topics → Race and ethnicity**; • **Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI)**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: game design; race; transformational games; counterspace games; PWI; BIPOC

1 INTRODUCTION

Kishonna Gray writes that gaming is a site for "*resistance, activism, and mobilization among marginalized users*" [11]. With an understanding that BIPOC[1] (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) have always been present in games as designers, developers, players, critics, etc., this paper responds directly to FDG's 2021 theme, "*Diversity and Inclusion through Games*" [1] by discussing a BIPOC game design process. Conversations around racial diversity and inclusion in games have included the lens of the player (e.g., how women of color create community and space against oppressive norms [10]) as well as the lens of the player-character (e.g., general lack of racial diversity [22, 23], specific absence of women of color and over-representation of men of color as often violent stereotypes [3]). However, representation can go far beyond the presence of characters and can be found in the mechanics and structures of a game's design (e.g., "*Indigenously-determined*" video games as a form of enduring presence [17, 20], conversation design and rule and system design [35]).

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[1]We primarily use the term BIPOC to center Black and Brown peoples in our work, but interchangeably use the term people of color as well.

In this work we seek to explore what it might look like to design BIPOC games - games that center the experiences of BIPOC players and represent those experiences through all aspects of the game system - from narrative and character design to core game mechanics and aesthetics. This conceptualization of BIPOC games echoes what Ruberg has written about Queer games, that "*the queer games avant-garde makes games that are designed by, for, and about queer and transgender people - queerness is their ethos, not just their content*" [29]. In this paper we explore opportunities and tensions within a BIPOC game design process.

In our work we use intersectionality (i.e., the "*complex overlap of socially constructed identities*" [28]) as a lens to understand identity. Specifically, we assert that while our focus may be on race and/or ethnicity, it is ill-advised and often impossible to isolate racialized experiences from other aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality, body, citizenship, religion, etc. We use this framing as an opportunity to bring forward and reflect on our own positions in the work - we each bring unique experiences to bear on this work and at the same time, cannot speak for all BIPOC. We hold many different and intersecting positions of both marginalization and privilege. As a group, the authors of this paper are Black, Pilipina, Hispanic, Asian-American, mixed race, queer, bisexual, heterosexual, non-binary, women, and men. In writing this paper we seek to center and uplift diverse BIPOC, including ourselves.

myPWI is a transformational [4] counterspace [25] game prototype designed to center the experiences of students of color attending predominantly white institutions (PWI) through its themes, narrative, character design, and mechanics. In this short paper we reflect upon our game design work on *myPWI* to illustrate a process for designing BIPOC games using the autoethnographic storytelling style of Critical Race Theory [21]. Specifically, we share the tensions that we discovered between our aim of representing the true and challenging experiences of BIPOC students (e.g., the kinds of racial oppression and exclusion that often occurs at PWIs) and our desire to resist narratives of trauma and create joyful, aspirational experiences centering BIPOC. We hope to open a conversation that creates space for BIPOC game designers to bring their full selves into their work in centering BIPOC joy and play.

2 BACKGROUND

Uplifting BIPOC in games most often manifests as centering racialized experiences in game narratives and well-done representation in game character designs. We discuss three games (*Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, *Never Alone*, and *Butterfly Soup*) that are notably designed and developed by and/or with the BIPOC they uplift. To bring the lens of the audience back in, we end with a brief discussion of BIPOC players and their experiences in gaming.

Spider-Man: Miles Morales [6] is one of the rare non-Indie games with BIPOC-centric representation and narrative. This critically acclaimed game's hero is Black and Puerto Rican, and the player protects Harlem while meaningfully interacting with other BIPOC game characters in Miles' community (e.g., Black and Deaf street artist Hailey Cooper). *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* rises above other mainstream games, in BIPOC-centric representation and narrative because it involved BIPOC creators [13]. It's worth acknowledging that this game is not a standalone release and was an extension of the previous game which followed a white male character, Peter Parker. There is still a need both for full AAA games that center BIPOC, and for representation that pushes beyond narrative character design.

Never Alone or *Kisima Ingitchuna* [7] is a cooperative atmospheric puzzle platformer which delves into Iñupiat lore to create a rich narrative experience within the Arctic game world. In the game, players journey as an Iñupiaq girl, Nuna, and an arctic fox to find the source of an endless snowstorm to save Nuna's village. *Never Alone* embodies Iñupiat cultural wisdom, values, and stories shared by the Iñupiat elders, storytellers, and community in the Arctic game world, celebrating and extending Iñupiat culture [7]. Williams has discussed how *Never Alone* uplifts Iñupiat via

self-representation as decolonization of Iñupiat youth's education and facilitates community in and around the game [38]. Indigeneity is central to the game's characters, mechanics, content, and themes.

Finally, in *Butterfly Soup* [18], players experience a visual novel about falling in love and baseball among four queer Asian-American girls. *Butterfly Soup*'s creator Brianna Lei also highlights self-representation in the game's design, which Salter, Blodgett, and Sullivan discuss as an instance of "*own voices*" in transgressive game design that intentionally disrupts normative game narratives [30]. Placing BIPOC in the center of the design process and incorporating the messiness and complexity of many intersecting identities feels radically transformative when games can often feel that they are not made "*for us*."

The above games center and uplift BIPOC via representation and meaningful narratives. When games fail to do so, BIPOC players, especially BIWOC (Black, Indigenous, Women of Color) gamers, often have to make room for themselves to even enjoy playing. For example, BIWOC used the disruptive play practice *"griefing"* in *Modern Warfare* [8] and refused updates in *Xbox Live* [9] in response to experiences of oppression in those game-centric spaces. In contrast, Rankin and Han have explored how centering the experiences of Black women players in game design could generate and support better play experiences [27]. When people of color are centered in game design, games can be designed to function as counterspaces in which they do not *need* to create space for themselves as players and can instead enjoy playing games [25]. This is what we seek to do in our work to design a game that uplifts BIPOC as they navigate predominantly white institutions.

3 DESIGNING FOR RACE IN GAMES

In this section we first describe the context of our work, our intended audience, and the game's transformational goals. *myPWI* is currently in development, using the Unity game engine and the Tandem Transformational Game Design process which encourages rapid iteration and treats alignment conversations with multidisciplinary teams as opportunities for research and discovery [33]. Then, using storytelling methods from Critical Race Theory [21], we share game design decisions and reflections from team-alignment conversations, early internal playtests, and content reviews for *myPWI* to serve as a case study and initial exploration into tensions, challenges, and opportunities that arise in creating BIPOC games.

3.1 Defining Our Audience and Transformational Goals

Transformational games are games that transform players by design [4] and counterspace games are designed by and for people in marginalizing contexts and are meant to create safe environments that affirms players' identities and belonging as acts of playful resistance [25]. Our game, *myPWI*, seeks to create a counterspace [25] that reflects back the stories and experiences of students of color, showing what it looks like to live everyday life and thrive as a BIPOC student, while also reflecting the realities of the challenges at PWIs. PWIs tend to isolate students of color, creating environments that telegraph a colorblind ideology (i.e., that race doesn't matter here, or that your race is invisible), while simultaneously enacting racial oppression upon these same students [26].

This game also seeks to create transformation through slice-of-life representation in game mechanics and narrative. Other transformational games have addressed racially marginalized groups through transformations such as increasing self-efficacy [5] and increasing comfort with failure [34]. Our design choices mirror the role that cultural centers at universities play in helping BIPOC students see that their experiences are important and shared by others [15]. Therefore, the game must accurately capture how systemic racism and oppression can impact BIPOC students, while at the same time, show stories and experiences for how these students resist and thrive within these environments.

Squinkifer refers to this kind of game work as "joyful resistance" [31]. We also took inspiration from *Hair Nah!* by Momo Pixel [24], which "*locates structural oppression in the everyday... and highlights the power and potential of resistance of everyday and systemic violences within everyday cultural engagement*" [12], while trying to encapsulate this dichotomous experience. It's also important to note that while intentional transformation and creating a counterspace are both integral to *myPWI*'s specific design choices, neither are essential pillars to all BIPOC games.

We also emphasize that BIPOC students are not a monolith, and as much as possible we strive to represent a diverse range of BIPOC experiences, including how the intersection of other identities can give rise to unique experiences. As a team we often share personal stories and reflections on our experiences as BIPOC with histories at multiple kinds of PWIs. Our core goal is to showcase and share the unique joys of entering predominantly BIPOC spaces within and outside those environments.

3.2 Tensions & Challenges

In selecting *myPWI*'s main genre and designing its core game loop, we encountered several tensions between normative game design and how those norms are warped when creating a BIPOC game. In its first iteration, *myPWI* was a side-scrolling tower defense game where gameplay would involve the player controlling a group of BIPOC college students fighting off waves of zombies that were representative of the institutional issues BIPOC students face at PWI's. In our initial ideation, we liked the metaphor of zombies because they conveyed the mindlessness, pervasiveness, and physical and existential violence of systemic racism. Common zombie mythology also aligned well with literature on microaggressions - that a single one might feel easy to dismiss, but they accumulate and are damaging in high volume [32]. However our early internal team playtests and content reviews revealed that when put in a BIPOC game this unintentionally conveyed several troubling messages: 1) that institutional racism is something tangible that students can fight and defeat on a regular basis, 2) that the means to do so involve physical violence, and 3) that failure was insignificant. These messages seemed to detract from the main focus of how BIPOC students actually survive these universities.

Failure is a near ubiquitous part of a game design, and in games there is a safety to experiencing failure [34]. In digital games, ours included, failure is often deeply intertwined with physical violence (e.g., the hero dies and respawns or comes back to life at an earlier point in the game). However, *myPWI* includes only BIPOC characters and physical violence has a different meaning when enacted on BIPOC individuals, who, in the U.S. have been and continue to be the targets of perpetual violence. With *myPWI*'s intended audience being young people of color, it was critical that our players not be subjected to witnessing visibly BIPOC characters undergo trauma, as often is the case with BIPOC representation in games (e.g., the use of Africans and Asians as the enemy "other" to white masculine protagonists [2], the use of the Black and Brown virtual gangsters to allow white gamers to play out racist and violent fantasies [19]). Not only could that framing be harmful to our audience by implying that it's their responsibility to fight racism, but we ran the risk of perpetuating violent stereotypes. These tensions inherently go against our original message–and to fulfill out original goal, we would have to make adjustments.

By navigating these tensions, we eventually arrived at the game we have now. Our previous iteration fell short of effectively encapsulating the game's overarching purpose, which was to bring attention to the often-overlooked experience of being a BIPOC person at a PWI. After much reevaluation, we decided to change the game's genre to narrative strategy, as we felt it'd be better suited to highlight the experiences of our BIPOC characters without centering them in trauma.

3.3 Opportunities

Throughout the design of *myPWI* we treat design tensions and ideation stages as opportunities to bring ourselves and our communities into our work. Designing a BIPOC game required a great amount of trust and vulnerability within our team as we shared our personal experiences both at potential launching points for game narrative content, but also for honing in on our transformational goal of defining and capturing the BIPOC experience at PWIs. Though by now we had settled on the notion of colorblind ideologies as being a central experience for BIPOC, there was not much literature for us to work from in translating that experience to game mechanics. Here we'll share two of those conversations, one around designing the game enemies and the other around the narrative conversation design.

Although we made a shift in genres, we still wanted to incorporate some sort of fantastical element in our game. As previously stated, zombies were our monster of choice in our first iteration of the game. We liked the idea of monsters as physical manifestations of the racialized encounters that people of color face at PWIs, but through iterative design found that zombies were already cultural figures with their own concrete mythology that did not adequately encapsulate how racialized encounters affect people.

In response to this disparity, our team drew on our experiences as people of color at PWIs to consider the impact of those casual encounters on us. During one of such discussions, one of our team members described being racially profiled by his next-door neighbor while attempting to enter his dorm room, and how physically and emotionally drained he felt as a result of the encounter. In their testimonies, the rest of the team echoed this sentiment, and concluded that the most pervasive way racism manifests itself in the daily life of a person of color attending a PWI is through microaggressions that sap mental fortitude. Although this conversation required vulnerability and the revisiting of an unpleasant, racist experience, this was an opportunity for the team to validate each other's experiences and to put a name to the uncertainty and unease that often comes with experiences with interpersonal racism [36]. Though we ultimately agreed we would not want to put our game players through a similar experience, we were able to extract a core dynamic that became the focus of our new enemy design: that experiences with racism both big and small cumulatively drain your physical and emotional energy.

In another example, we shifted a large part of *myPWI* to include conversational vignettes between the different characters in the game. Of our many narrative options, we felt this would be the best way to showcase BIPOC living and thriving in everyday life as well as to showcase the idea of community as strength:

Kierra: So, basically, that's why when you get stuck trying to prove an implication, figuring out the contrapositive of the statement might help,

Luis: Ahh...

K: Because if you do a truth table, you'll see that the contrapositive is logically equivalent,

L: I see…

K: And from there you can use that to try and complete the proof.

L: Hmm… Of course. ...Question:

K: Yeah?

L: What's a contrapositive again?

K: Dude…

L: Well it's not my fault that none of this makes any sense! Honestly who even came up with thi—

As previously mentioned, real, joyful BIPOC experiences in the field of games can feel few and far between, so there weren't many examples to draw from when we started writing our own. Our team eagerly took this opportunity to draw

inspiration from our own BIPOC perspectives, recalling the small but significant encounters with others that contribute to our overall joy as people of color. We knew as a team that this would be one of the most critical aspects of our game design process, authentically capturing the joy that comes from the BIPOC experience was a major inspiration for creating the game in the first place, so it was not only gratifying to see our team's deep joy when viewing something as basic as a Black girl assisting her Latino friend with his math homework, but it also reassured us that the game we were making would evoke the reaction that we'd hope.

We have continued to use this process of sharing and validating each other's personal stories in our design process. At a meta-level, that is the feeling we want our game to deliver to our audience - the understanding that their experiences are important and shared by people like them.

4 CONCLUSION

We will continue to explore opportunities in making BIPOC games with and as people of color. In designing BIPOC games, we have started to uncover both spoken and unspoken norms in games that do not apply or translate when we center people of color as an audience and bring forward our racialized experiences in the design and development process. We have also begun to develop a vocabulary as a team for representing the diverse experiences of people of color beyond character representation - looking more deeply into the mechanics, genre, and overall theme of the game. We are inspired by the rallying cry of many activists from varied racial and social justice movements to view our "*existence as resistance*."

However, we caution that this work must be performed carefully and in partnership with BIPOC in order to avoid amplifying harm - people of color are uniquely able to communicate their own stories with expertise and should not be tokenized [21]. One risk of creating BIPOC games without context is cultural appropriation - the "*taking of knowledge, artifacts, or expression from a culture and recontextualizing it within game structures*" [37]. Distressingly common examples in games include the use of East Asian aesthetics to create techno-punk-futures without the actual presence of Asian people [14] or the careless recombination of cultural artifacts from different Asian countries [16].

FDG looks to explore "*how we might use games themselves to increase diversity and inclusion in industry, academia, and society*" [1]. While this is a noble and important goal, we simultaneously wish to draw attention to how much additional pressure and labor tends to be put on researchers and creators of color to not only make outstanding work, but to cure society's ills. Instead, we use this space to open a conversation on what it might look like to center the stories and experiences of people of color and prioritize their thriving. Our stories are not niche. What does it look like to design for BIPOC joy? Frivolity? What does it look like to design games for BIPOC rest and healing? What does it look like to design to center and uplift BIPOC without having to justify it by citing how other people could benefit from it? How might industry, academia, and society transform if BIPOC joy is recognized, valued, and prioritized?

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