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#### Résumé de l'article

Despite recent criticisms that call out blackface in video game voice acting, the term “blackface” was and still is seldomly used to describe the act of casting white voice actors as characters of colour. As a result, the act of blackface in video game voice acting still occurs because of colorblind claims surrounding the digital medium and culture of games. In this paper, I position blackface in video game voice acting within a technological and cultural history of oral blackface and white sonic norms. I focus on three time periods: the Intellivision Intellivoice and the invention of a “universal” voice in video games; early American radio in the 1920s-1930s and the national standardization of voice; and colorblind rhetoric of contemporary game publishers/devs and voice actors.

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# Avatar 'n' Andy: The Colour Blind Ideology in Video Game Voice Acting

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## Abstract

Digital blackface in games describes the casting of White voice actors to play Black characters and embody Blackness. More broadly, the term is used to describe White voice actors being cast as a character of colour, in addition to type casting. In this paper, I position digital blackface in video game voice acting within a technological and cultural history of oral blackface and White sonic norms. These norms, I argue, are rooted in colour blind rhetoric and figures the voice as “universal” and free from any racialized markers while still perpetuating racial stereotypes surrounding voice and privileging White voice actors. I demonstrate how colour blind arguments perpetuate digital blackface in games, privilege White voice actors and White sonic norms, and reinforce racial stereotypes/bias surrounding voice.

## Author Keywords

Voice acting; video game history; sound studies; critical race studies; colour blind racism

## Introduction

“It’s nearly the end of 2018,” Dia Lacina (2018) writes, “and I have to write an article about blackface and redface in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. That sucks.” It continued to suck in 2019, with blackface coming to the foreground in games, politics, and fashion: strategy game *WarGroove* (Chucklefish, 2019) revealed that its new DLC characters of colour were all voiced by White voice actors (see Wen, 2020); blackface was sold as high fashion (CBC News, 2019); Ralph Northam’s yearbook and Justin Trudeau’s brownface surfaced (Jennings, 2019); and a Twitch streamer performed in blackface (Knoop, 2019). In *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar, 2018) (*RDR2*), the character Charles Smith, whose father is Black and mother is Indigenous, is played by Noshir Dalal, who is neither Black nor Indigenous. While Lacina (2019) notes that this is “complicated” because Dalal is a person of colour, she emphasizes that the act is blackface because it “communicates that people of color are entirely interchangeable.” *RDR2* is not the only recent game that has used voice actors who are not the race of the characters they voice. Video game voice acting has a long history of casting White actors to play characters of colour. Most notably, 2017’s *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* (Naughty Dog), the Indian-Indigenous Chloe Frazer and the Black South African Nadine Ross are both played by White women: Claudia Black and Laura Bailey, respectively. Other examples include *Assassin’s Creed III: Liberation’s* Aveline de Grandpré (Ubisoft, 2012), who is voiced by White Canadian actress Amber Goldfarb; *Remember Me’s* Nilin (Dontnod, 2013) is played by White Welsh actress Kezia Burrows; and

the original *Resident Evil 2*'s Marvin Branagh (Capcom 1998) is voiced by White former American Football linebacker Rod Wilson (Daniels, 2016). And yet, the term “blackface” was and still is seldomly used to describe the act of blackface in video game voice acting because of colour blind claims surrounding the digital medium and culture of games. The scholarly work on the visual representation and portrayal of race in games is quite rich (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017; Daniel-Wariya & Sanchez, 2019; Brock 2011; Nakamura, 2008; Everett 2008; Leonard 2015; Galloway 2006). But, as Milena Droumeva et al. (2017) point out, voice and voice acting has received less attention with regard to race and gender. In this paper, I position digital blackface in video game voice acting within a technological and cultural history of oral blackface and White sonic norms. These norms, I argue, are rooted in colour blind rhetoric and figures the voice as “universal” and free from any racialized markers while still perpetuating racial stereotypes surrounding voice and privileging White voice actors. I demonstrate how colour blind arguments perpetuate digital blackface in games, privilege White voice actors and White sonic norms, and reinforce racial stereotypes/bias surrounding voice. Colour blindness, Apfelbaum et al. (2012) point out, “may actually perpetuate existing racial inequities” (p. 207), meaning that those who profess that they do not see race when casting voice actors in fact “need...race to rule” (Omi & Winant 2015, p. 212) whether or not their intentions are in the right place.

Recently, the term “digital blackface” has been used to describe the acts of blackface in games and in other digital media. In 2015, Shawn Alexander Allen used the term “digital blackface” to specifically describe “casting black characters with white voice actors” in games (quoted in Narcisse, 2015). The term “digital blackface” had been circulating earlier in slightly different contexts. Adam Clay Powell used the term “high-tech blackface,” emphasizing that “players become” and inhabit the stereotypes depicted in video games (quoted in Marriott, 1999; see also Leonard, n.d.). In Joshua Green’s Master’s thesis (2006), *Digital Blackface: The Repackaging of the Black Masculine Body*, he uses digital blackface to describe “the current appropriation of the black masculine body” and the “mythologized representation” of black bodies (p. 22). Powell, Leonard, and Green, however, have primarily focused on the act of *playing* White fantasies of people of colour in games, with Green giving some space to voice. Outside of games, Lauren Jackson (2014) uses “digital blackface” to describe the use of Black reaction gifs by White people in her article, “Memes and Misogynoir”. The term was brought to greater public attention by Jackson’s (2017) *Teen Vogue* article, “We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction Gifs”, in which she defines digital blackface as “us[ing] the relative anonymity of online identity to embody blackness...Digital blackface does not describe intent, but an act — the act of inhabiting a black persona.” I prefer Jackson’s definition because the performance of White voice actors as characters of colour in games is an act of inhabiting a persona of that character of colour, performing digital blackface through the anonymity of digital orality/aurality. Further, Jackson’s definition emphasizes the act, not intent, of digital blackface. Digital blackface (and blackface in general) is often excused and denied based on intent; the individual did not “know” that they were being offensive, or that they did not intend to be racist, or that the act was intended to be a respectful portrayal. As a form of “covert racism” (Coates, 2011), the focus on intent “allow[s] them to deny responsibility and culpability” while also serving to “subvert, distort, restrict, and deny rewards, privileges, access, and benefits to racial minorities” (p. 2). In the gaming industry, digital blackface is excused because of intent, asking audiences and critics to look past the act and pay attention to how well their intentions played out. That denial allows

for the continued privileging of White voice actors and the continued restrictions imposed on racial minorities in the industry.

The rhetorical arguments that continue to allow for and justify digital blackface in games are deeply imbedded in colour blind ideology. Colour blind ideology “is a belief that racial group membership and race-based differences should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed, and behaviours are enacted” (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). While this belief is implemented as a means of preventing racism and racist behaviour/actions, it is largely a “refusal to acknowledge the causes and consequences of enduring racial stratification” (Murakawa, 2014, p. 7). The rhetoric of colorblind ideology reinforces and “justif[ies] contemporary white supremacy” (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p.302) by disguising or misdirecting attention to digital blackface. In games, colour blind rhetoric heavily relies on the digital medium’s purported ability to let anyone be anything. The controversies surrounding digital blackface in games have received attention but is surprisingly swept under the rug or left to BIPOC writers to report on because of the persuasion of colour blind rhetoric. As James Chase Sanchez and Joshua Daniel-Wariya (2019) argue, “In an age where the myth of ‘color-blindness’ is well rehearsed, where many well-meaning people claim they ‘don’t see color,’ one medium in particular stands out as being absent from many racial analyses: videogames” (p. 137). There is also a hesitancy among more prominent critics to call these voice acting controversies “blackface.” On the 2017 August 18th episode of *Waypoint Radio*, Patrick Klepek hesitates to call the casting of Laura Bailey as Nadine “blackface.” He says, “it’s not the same...it’s not blackface...but it’s...complicated.” Klepek’s hesitation is understandable, given that blackface is typically associated with the minstrel theatre shows in which White actors “blackened up” their faces and played racist caricatures. On one hand, Nadine Ross’s voice is not a caricature compared to early aural/oral blackface like the radio drama, *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. On the other hand, Charles Smith in *RDR2* heavily plays into Indigenous stereotypes that are typically seen in American cinema, particularly Westerns (see Lacina, 2019). But both cases are blackface and redface. Like Klepek and Lacina both admit, digital blackface is complicated. Yet, whereas Klepek gets tangled in that complication and backpedals on calling Bailey’s act blackface by focusing on intent, Lacina directly addresses Dalal’s act as blackface. Digital blackface’s complication does not—and should not—disqualify digital blackface as being blackface. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow (2012) point out, “race is more than its representation, more than ‘screen deep,’ in [Wendy Hui Kyong] Chun’s words: it is part of the algorithmic logic of games and digital media themselves.” (p.8). The dismissal of digital blackface as blackface comes from a narrow view of what blackface entails, and specifically demonstrates how colour blind rhetoric surrounding orality and digital media misdirects criticism and causes individuals to withhold that criticism. As Bonilla-Silva (2014) argues, the rhetoric of colour blind racism “has become a formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order” (p .3). Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) adds that colour blind rhetoric “is deployed to hide or obscure inequality and disparities between African Americans and whites” (p. 72). Casting White actors as people of colour in video games and the hesitancy to call out these acts as digital blackface both excludes BIPOC voice actors from getting work and (re)emphasizes the “superiority” and “versatility” of White voice actors’ abilities.

Oral blackface and colorblind ideology have a long history of exclusion and subordination beyond video games. Throughout the paper, I select key moments that demonstrate how blackface has operated orally, with a focus on the colour blind arguments surrounding

digital/oral technology that establish “white sonic norms” (Stoever, 2016) for voice acting in games. I focus on three time periods: early American radio in the 1920s-1930s and the national standardization of White sonic norms; the Intellivision’s Intellivoice and the introduction of human voice in video games; and the colour blind rhetoric of contemporary game publishers/devs and voice actors. Early American radio claimed to be colour blind but established standards around “proper” voice, which is coded as White, and situated all other voices as deviant. The colour blind racism in radio created stereotyped voices that White people can adopt at will and that marginalized folx *had* to adopt if they wanted to be on the air. Radio’s role in establishing White sonic norms is both a cultural and technological construction of voice, and I turn to the Intellivoice to elaborate on the technical construction of White sonic norms in video games. While “synthesized,” I argue that this introduction of the human voice in video games set the precedent for video game voices as colour blind and “universal,” in which that universality is coded as White and predominantly male. I conclude the paper by positioning the rhetorical defence of digital blackface in video games that emphasizes the merit and ambiguity of voice actors as an extension of cultural and technological norms established by early American radio and the Intellivoice

### **Avatar ‘n’ Andy: Establishing White Sonic Norms in Early American Radio**

The standardization of voice as universally White can be traced back to the early history of American radio, especially given that the radio boom of the 1920s gave rise to the importance of establishing a national standard of orality and elocution. Popular rhetoric surrounding radio in the 1920s-30s viewed the radio as a democratic, disembodied space in which anyone’s voice can be heard, anticipating the discussion surrounding digital technology in the 1980s-90s. Yet, radio was hardly a democratic space. The “standard” of early American radio was White and largely established by cis-gendered men by the end of the 1930s, with only a few Black performers and DJs (Hilmes 1997, 2011; Stoever, 2016). During the early-to-mid 1920s, though, the radio was believed to give greater scale and exposure to Black voices, Black music, and other form of Black expression. W.E.B. DeBois, for instance, “considered the radio a potential avenue of self-presentation and social change” (Stoever, 2016, p. 257). That hope, however, only lasted “[u]ntil the Depression, when radio networks consolidated and almost totally whitened America’s airwaves” (p. 257). As Jennifer Lynn Stoever argues, it’s “no coincidence that U.S. radio’s golden age overlaps so neatly with both Jim Crow and the rise of state-sponsored color blindness” (p. 232). Black Americans were banned from radio stations because their presence sonically troubled the colour line: stations provided instructions within scripts for “proper” elocution and accent; non-American accents were parodied and violently othered; and many people complained about women’s voices (See Hilmes, 1997). Moreover, by the late twenties, the blackface program *Amos ‘n’ Andy* swept the nation, re-popularizing blackface minstrelsy on a national scale never seen (or heard) before. The standardization of American speech during the 1920s and 1930s was a national, White supremacist agenda that flourished under the guise of colour blind rhetoric.

The colour blind ideology of the American airwaves centralized White male voices and established White sonic norms of listening and voice, resonating with what Mattie Brice (2011) calls the “American Ethnocentrism” of video game voice acting. Brice writes: “The default

English accent is General American and deviations from this tap into a subtext that assumes an American player” (2011). Brice’s argument can be extended even further so that video game voices assume a White American player and a White American imagination of racialized voice. Dave Fennoy and Phil LaMarr, two prominent Black voice actors in the video games industry, shared with Shonte Daniels that they have been asked by White video game directors to “read ‘blacker’” (Fennoy quoted in Daniels, 2017) and “speak in stereotypical black accent or slang” (LaMarr quoted in Daniels, 2017). Similarly, in early radio the inclusion of “diverse voices” were situated within a White imaginary of racial stereotypes that presented BIPOC as sonically deviant. More, those “diverse voices” were often voiced by White voice actors/musicians the idea of Black Americans sonically entering American homes were met with fear and concern from White American families (Taylor, 2012, p.247). The argument for radio’s colour blindness was an excuse for excluding people of colour based on their inability to ascribe to White sonic norms and to allow for and justify the appropriation of Black American music. Stoeber (2016) argues that “The rise of standardized radio speech and state-sponsored color blindness subjected racialized groups to new forms of aural body...[T]hose that would not (or could not) conform to white sonic norms risked not only increased discrimination but the blame for it too” (p. 231).

One of the most popular programs in American radio history, *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, perpetuated the orality of blackface minstrelsy and produced the White imaginary of racialized orality. While the “face” of blackface minstrelsy is not seen in blackface radio programs, these programs conjure the image and speak to the tradition of blackface minstrelsy. As Fennoy acknowledges in his interview with Daniels, “there is a history of whites in blackface doing degrading imitations of black people and in fact all too often we have continued the practice” (qtd in Daniels, 2017) *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was started by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correl, two White men with previous experience in minstrelsy theatre and in blackface radio programs. In their program, they adopted stereotypical caricatures of Black voice that, as Cedric Robinson (2007) puts it, “was not merely the impersonation of Blacks which was drawn from minstrelsy but the persistent disfiguring of Black humanity, the reduction to servile, pathetic, caricatured appendices to *real* (white) life” (p. 128). Writing on silent film and blackface minstrelsy, Robinson argues that when silent movies “drew on blackness, minstrelsy dictated the semiotics” because “for the new racial regime minstrelsy embodied the iconography of blackness” (p. 129). But he adds that “The pre-sound films featuring racist figures were complemented by radio” (p. 131). To view blackface radio as complementing the blackface of silent films is important when considering digital blackface because Robinson’s argument acknowledges blackface radio programs as blackface despite the lack of visual semiotics. If silent films drew from the semiotics of blackface minstrelsy, blackface radio programs drew from the orality of minstrelsy. Or, as Eric Lott (2013), puts it: “Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface’s unconscious return” (p. 5).

Shows like *Amos ‘n’ Andy* “held absolute domain over blackness and the [orality/aurality] of blackness” (Robinson, 2007, p. 129). The continued dominance of White voice actors voicing Black characters or the confinement of Black voice actors voicing Black stereotypes upholds that domain over Blackness and the orality/aurality of Blackness. Gosden and Correl did not need to “black up”; instead, they simply spoke as how the White imaginary believes Black Americans speak. made that imaginary a national phenomenon, and thereby normalized this imaginary. At play is the colour blind ideology that situates Whiteness as universal, flexible and the sonic norm, “creat[ing] and maintain[ing] racial hierarchy much as earlier systems of control did”

(Alexander, 2012, p. 13). Even when the radio ban on Black Americans began to be lifted, these White sonic norms privileged White voice actors in the early radio industry and continues to do so in the video game industry. Phil Lamarr points out that “[i]f I have to compete for a Black male role with every Black male voice actor AND every white male voice actor, my chance of getting a job decreases immensely” (quoted in Daniels, 2017). In a 1947 interview, Lena Horne similarly argues that “[t]here are a few isolated cases of Negroes in broadcasting, but the lily-white policy is seldom violated” (quoted in Stoeber, 2016, p. 229). That lily-white policy continues, not only excluding people of colour from voice acting opportunities but also demanding from people of colour to play into stereotypes of themselves or of other racialized folk.

Along with silent film and radio, I must also acknowledge a third manifestation of blackface minstrelsy emerging simultaneously: animation. This third manifestation demonstrates Robinson’s point that “minstrelsy constantly changed in fascinating and unexpected ways” and continues to change today, as seen in video game voice acting (p. 132). Nicholas Sammond (2015) has demonstrated that the animation of Disney and Fleisher cartoons in the 1930s and 1940s draw explicitly upon minstrelsy and blackface. In their critiques of the game *Cuphead*, Samantha Blackmon (2015) and Yussef Cole (2017) have written on how that blackface animation appears and operates within *Cuphead*. Blackmon points out that *Cuphead* “threatens to draw upon racist caricatures to inform the narrative and give players a series of racism infused bosses and obstructions to justice to properly hate. Perpetuating the stereotype and, in some cases, feeding the racism that is foundational to the art style itself.” Despite the attention of critics, the developer – Studio MDHR – stood behind its animation style, acknowledging the racism in this style but claiming that they did not intend blackface (Cole, 2017). In their defence, they claim that they don’t see blackface when they see the animation style, they only see a style’s aesthetic merit. In other words, Studio MDHR dismisses their *act* of digital blackface because recreating blackface minstrelsy was not their *intent*.

The defence that the animation of *Cuphead* is not intended to be blackface resonates with Sammond’s (2015) observation that the cartoons that drew from the semiotics of minstrelsy also disguised the origins of its inspiration to misdirect attention. Referencing a 1933 Mickey Mouse cartoon that features Mickey exploding dynamite in his face to “blacken up,” Sammond writes,

That in 1933 they seemed white enough that they need to black up in order to clearly read as minstrels speaks to the state of animation at the dawn of sound film: they had become *vestigial minstrels*, carrying the tokens of blackface minstrelsy in their bodies and behaviours yet no longer immediately signifying as such. Their status as minstrels was becoming occluded by the rapidly changing conventions of cartooning and by the fading popularity of live minstrelsy itself.

Sammond, p. 3 (2015)

The performance of White voice actors as people of colour in games are those very vestigial minstrels, no longer signifying minstrelsy but still carrying it in their voices. As Cole (2017) pointedly puts it about *Cuphead*, “I see a game that’s haunted by ghosts; not those confined to its macabre boss fights, but the specter of black culture, appropriated first by the minstrel set then by the Fleischers, Disney and—twisted into the caricatures that have helped define American cartoons for the better part of a century.” Digital blackface in games is haunted by the ghosts of

radio minstrelsy programs and blackface's history, carrying the weight of blackface without signifying blackface.

### **Intellivoice: Invisible Bodies, Peripheral Voices**

In the 1980s, the colour blind rhetoric that American radio relied on to establish White sonic norms and the White imaginary of racialized voice became a dominant ideology for the post-civil rights era (see Omi & Winant 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Digital and internet technologies developed from the 1970s onward in America largely inherited the colour blind agenda because these technologies were believed to be free from any racial markers. As Anna Everett (2012) argues, the nation had a “desire to imagine and construct colour blind or hyper-tolerant virtual communities and digital public spheres” and “gave rise to the widely held perception and apparent wish-fulfillment that imagines America as having arrived at some idyllic race, gender, class neutrality in our civil society” (p.165). Mattel's 1982 Intellivision peripheral, the Intellivoice, is a product of and contributed to that colour blind desire Everett details, establishing the White sonic norms of the human voice and voice acting in games. The Intellivoice is a “voice synthesis module” that afforded certain compatible games to include digitally rendered human voices (see Figure 1). The Intellivoice attached to the Intellivision console through a port on the side of the console. In order to hear the voices of the select compatible games, the game cartridge needed to be inserted in the Intellivoice's game cartridge slot instead of the main console's. The voice of the video game console would sound from the Intellivoice, which had its own volume wheel. The player had to adjust the TV volume and the Intellivoice volume to blend together. The Intellivoice was the first introduction of the “human” voice to *console* video games—*Berzerk* (Stern Electronics, 1980), *Wizard of Wor* (Midway, 1980), and *Crazy Climber* (Nichibutsu, 1980) are all arcade games that included voice in 1980. Despite the hope of Mattel that the Intellivoice would usher in a new era of video games, the Intellivoice was a failure and only released four games that were compatible. The voices were terrifying, even leaving one report referring to the male voice as a “cylon” from the science fiction series, *Battlestar Galactica* (Speech Synthesis Project, 1979). Yet, arguably, the voices of the Intellivoice contributed to the early standards of voice acting, what kinds of voices sound in video games, and how voice functions in video games. What I additionally find critically interesting about the Intellivoice is the fact that it was sold separately as a peripheral with its own advertisements and instruction manual. As an object-to-think-with (Turkle, 2011), the Intellivoice demonstrates how race is pushed to the margins in video game voice acting through technological constraints.

While a synthesis module, the Intellivision provides an understanding of how the standard for “universalized speech” is coded in digital technology as White and preferably gendered male. In Kalindi Vora and Neda Atanasoski's (2019) terms, the Intellivoice acts as a surrogate for the human voice. Vora and Atanasoski argue that a surrogate is “a racialized and gendered form defining the limits of human consciousness and autonomy” (p. 9). Introducing a “human voice” in video games, the Intellivoice defined the limits of *the* human voice in games. Further, Vora and Atanasoski add, “[t]he racialized and gendered scaffolding of the surrogate effect continues to assert a ‘disembodied universality’ that actually offers the position of ‘human’ to limited human actors, thereby guaranteeing power and domination through defining the limits of work,



violence, use, and even who or what can be visible labor and laboring subjects” (pp. 9-10). In other words, the “universality” of colour blind rhetoric surrounding voice is often defined in relation to Whiteness and is only limited to those few privileged. Considering the manual, the reports on the project, and the ads, the Intellivoice privileged disembodied voices that perpetuate White supremacy surrounding voice and voice acting. The origins of the “human voice” in video games establishes the technological future in which the disembodied universality of colorblind rhetoric guarantees power and domination over BIPOC voice actors and the representation of BIPOC folx in games.

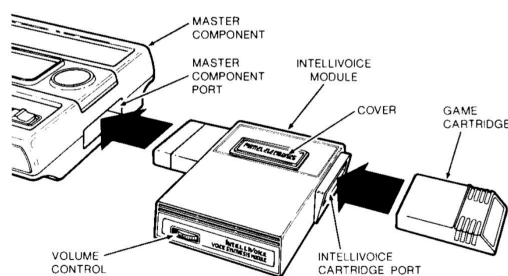


Figure 1 — Intellivoice Module

*Figure 1: from the manual for the Intellivoice*

The digitization of human speech in games is significantly perceived as separating the voice from the body. In the Intellivoice’s service manual, the human voice is described as a form of electronic current that can be completely manipulatable and decontextualized. The manual reads:

In observing human speech on an oscilloscope, it is seen as a complex combination of sine waves. Digital circuits, however, know only digital ones and zeroes, a high or a low voltage. Digital circuitry cannot store speech in its analog form. Speech synthesis circuitry, then, must be able to generate the complex speech waveforms from as digital code. If a spoken word were divided into, say, a hundred parts then we could assign each part a digital code which would correspond to its pitch, volume, and other variables. Digital circuitry, in this case, could generate speech from this digitally-encoded signal.

*Service Manual (1979)*

The manual reduces the human voice to “a complex combination of sine waves” that is “divided” into a “hundred parts” of digital code. The digitization of the human voice in this description abstracts the voice and divides it into purely technical parts, excluding any social, cultural, local aspects of the voice. The human voice in digital form is presented as entirely customizable to correspond to various pitches, volumes, and “other variables,” in which those other variables are likely technical. The exclusively technical details behind the digital manipulation of human speech strongly corresponds with the disembodied colour blind arguments that claim that voice actors can be whoever they want within video games. In Neil Druckmann’s response to the

casting of Laura Bailey to play Nadine in *Uncharted 4* (Naughty Dog, 2016), he notes: “That, to me, is what’s so awesome about our medium...Your awkward appearance doesn’t matter at all. If it did, Troy [Baker] couldn’t play Joel in *The Last of Us*. Ashley Johnson couldn’t play Ellie. In a movie version they couldn’t play those roles, but they played them to perfection” (quoted in Grayson, 2015). Druckmann focuses on the technical abstraction of voice, dismissing appearances as awkward and emphasizing the versatility of voice. Yet, the individuals that Druckmann lists are all White voice actors. Additionally, the statement that appearances are awkward suggests that race, gender, and disability are “awkward.” Druckmann’s praise of the abstraction and manipulation of identity in the digital medium of video games is rooted in the Intellivoice’s—and speech synthesis in games, generally—ability to generate human voice without a body, abstracting the “awkwardness” of human bodies to define a universality of the “human” that largely privileges White voice actors.

The launch of the Intellivoice coincided with the cultural imaginations of technology and voice in the 1980s that positioned universal human speech as disembodied. The idea of human speech, particularly computerized human speech, as “universal” and fluid strongly participates in a tradition of both philosophy and tech that positions the universal subject and language/voice as English, White, and Eurocentric. Atanasoski and Vora (2019) calls this ideological formation, technoliberalism, a “political alibi of present-day racial capitalism that posits humanity as an aspirational figuration in relation to technological transformation, obscuring the uneven racial and gendered relations of labor, power, and social relations that underlie the contemporary conditions of capitalist production” (p. 4). Early internet enthusiasts like John Perry Barlow and Howard Rheingold attached political and social aspirations to the internet and digital technology, claiming in the 1980s and -90s that on the internet “we leave our bodies behind” (Rheingold, 1993, p. xviii) and that “[o]ur identities have no bodies” (Barlow, 1996). The “we” and “our” of these claims were predominantly White and cis-male. These claims about internet identity are more broadly attached to popular and theoretical conceptions of digital culture and embodiment, the most popular being the infamous New Yorker cartoon that proclaimed “On the internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” But even popular 1980s icons like Max Headroom equated digitized disembodiment and Whiteness as universal and as having universal power. “Max Headroom,” Donna Haraway (1991) writes, “doesn’t have a body; therefore, he alone *sees* everything in the great communicator’s empire of the Global Network” (p. 183). Popular icons like Max Headroom, among many other digital or computer-related characters, draw attention to the “forms of ‘human’ authorized and sanctioned by developments in machine learning and artificial intelligence” (Risam, 2018, p. 41). These forms, Roopika Risam writes, “are exclusionary ones drawn on the presumptions behind the Enlightenment subject: White, male, Eurocentric. As a result, they reinforce the notion that there are normative and singular ways of being human in the twenty-first century” (p. 41). As a digital construction of voice, the Intellivoice presents a normative and singular way of sounding and emulating “human” speech that participates in a cultural imagination of a digital identity that has no body.

In addition to the technical description of the manual, the emulation of “human” speech in the Intellivoice is literally disembodied and has no embodied reference to the voices within the game. The Intellivoice’s voice emits from the module itself, and the contents of the speech are usually commenting on the player’s actions or the events occurring within the game. In one of the few print ads for the Intellivoice, the novelty of a digital object sounding “human” is emphasized. The ad puts the system as the human speaker, stating, “In case you haven’t heard,

Intellivision actually talks” (see Figure 2). The ad’s pitch is that you, the player, can tell the difference between an Intellivision and the Atari “with your eyes closed.” In the binary construction of Intellivision versus Atari, there is one console that talks and one that does not, one voice that you can hear and one that does not have a voice. And that difference is established with eyes closed, no visual demarcation and no body present. But *who* is speaking? Whose voice stands in for the Intellivoice? In Mattel’s test reports, there were complaints that the voices were “very monotonous” and that the “female voice was particularly poor with the voice frequency being more dominant and monotonous” (Speech Synthesis Project, 1979). They were concerned about a child’s voice being irritating, and it seems that they dropped the child’s voice altogether. In these reports, there is, of course, no consideration of race but rather simply “male, female, or child.” And the testing reports present the (White) male voice as the most suitable for the synthesis module. While a female voice was incorporated, the male voice dominated the majority of the four compatible games. The testing reports, the technological setbacks, and the eventual outcome reveal the ways in which normative and dominant cultural values, especially surrounding human speech, are technologically reinforced and propagated through constraints. Echoing Vora and Atanasoski, Risam (2018) rightly points out that “Asserting the ability of a text, an algorithm, a piece of software, or a computer to ‘pass’ as human presumes a universal definition of ‘human’ and reduces the totality of humanity to the ability of a computer to perform a task in a particular way defined by a set of limits that reproduces dominant cultural norms” (p. 51). Those limits of the Intellivoice reproduced as well as contributed to a dominant cultural and technological norm that positions digitized and video game voices as “universal” in which that universality is upheld by White men and sometimes White women, too.



Figure 2: ad featured in *Electronic Fun with Computers and Games*

The Intellivoice’s normalization of video game voices as White and male is visually established in Intellivoice’s lone video ad. The TV ad confirmed the voice of the Intellivoice as belonging to

a White body. The TV advertisement features George Plimpton, who is introducing “something new from Intellivision that will revolutionize the way video games are played and compared.” The ad begins with Plimpton showing the Atari playing on a TV. “Now,” Plimpton says, “don’t look.” He raises his hand to block most of the screen, inferencing for the viewer to listen. Video game sound effects are heard, but no voice. Then, Plimpton removes his hand, introduces the Intellivision, and then blocks the screen once again. The moment Plimpton puts his hand over the camera, the male “cylon-like” voice is heard. The ad concludes with Plimpton standing beside the Intellivision equipped with the Intellivoice and says, “Now that the Intellivison talks, you can tell the difference with your eyes closed.” Rhetorically, the visual and audio arrangement and timing aligns the voice of the Intellivoice with the voice of Plimpton. Seamlessly, the voice emerges when Plimpton covers the camera, prompting the viewer to consider if the voice is actually coming from Plimpton himself, like a magic trick (see Figure 3). Magic or not, the rhetorical situating of the visible White male with the game audio strongly connects the cylon-like voice with Plimpton himself. Despite covering the camera, the screen is not completely blocked: Plimpton’s hand is still visibly covering the camera, making him still present as the voice emerges from the Intellivoice. The choice of an older, White male like Plimpton instead of, say, a younger teenager or child is not haphazard on Intellivision’s part. Plimpton’s presence deliberately answers the question of who’s speaking when the Intellivoice speaks: it’s not a child, it’s not a woman (only sometimes). When players close their eyes and “hear the difference,” they hear a White, Eurocentric male voice.



*Figure 3: George Plimpton moving to cover the screen just before the Intellivoice “speaks.”*

The Intellivoice may not have been a success nor the first introduction of human voice in the history of games, yet its release as a peripheral attachment and its marketing demonstrate how the digital voice in games is peripheral, disembodied, and racialized as White. The Intellivoice’s, design, technical limitations, cultural context, and advertising took part in the normalization of video game voices as White, Eurocentric, and predominantly male. While synthesized voices today are mostly the service-oriented femininity found in Siri and Alexa, the Intellivoice shares its technical preference for “male-sounding” voices with Bell Laboratories’ 1939 *Voder*, the earliest incarnation of the vocoder. As AO Roberts (2015) states, “when [the voder] debuted at the 1939 World’s Fair, only men were chosen to experience the roboticization of their voice. The Voder was, in fact, originally created to only hear pitches in the range of 100-150 HZ, a designed exclusion from the start.” Despite the designed exclusion, the Voder was still presented and advertised as being able to mimic any kind of human speech just like the Intellivoice. The exclusionary design of the Intellivoice, as well as the frustrations and fears towards non-male-sounding voices, established a precedent for colour blind arguments in the video game industry. Intellivision’s focus on the Intellivoice speaking asks players and the general public to look only at the surface—or rather, to hear the surface-level and not seek out the voices behind the game.

## Hearing Talent, Not Colour: Colour Blind Ideology in Contemporary Game Development Rhetoric

Colour blind ideology has become pervasive since the 1980s, having developed into claims that we are now living in a “postracial” society, predominantly after Barack Obama was first elected as President of the United States in 2008 (Omi & Winant 2015; see also West, 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Everett, 2012). Post-racial and colour blind arguments may claim that race no longer matters, however, these claims are used to sidestep or outright dismiss any accountability with regards to race and racialized violence. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) writes: “Today, we are told, race does not matter... Where there is bad treatment on the basis of race, it is viewed as the product of lapsed personal behavior and morality” (p. 4). Likewise, games are figured as a postracial space, to such an extent that even racial slurs are not viewed as racist by some gamers and high-profile streamers because they take place within the context and space of the game (see Gray, 2014; Gray et al., 2017; Klepek, 2017). In addition to claims of postracism, games are even figured as being apolitical by developers and gamers alike (see Alexandra, 2018; Hall, 2018). These pervasive arguments that come from AAA game companies and vitriolic gamers who persist on the apolitical nature of games run deep within the technological field. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes (2015) argue, “As an enduring narrative in technology fields, color-blindness makes it more difficult to intervene on how power operates on the Internet surface” and in games and games culture (p. 5). Colour blind arguments are not simply a means of misdirecting criticism in games but also a means of preventing any kind of critical interventions to occur. This last section further develops the White sonic norms of video game casting, the meritocratic arguments that sideline colour blind racism, and the White aurality of video games.

When developers support and defend the casting of a White voice actor to play a character of colour, “the meritocracy argument rears its head” (Wen, 2020). Developers note that they cast voice actors based only on their audio auditions as a means of being inclusive, defending that the chosen voice actor is the best talent of the audition pool. Yet, Alan Wen explains that this “inclusive” casting process—called “blind casting”—still privileges White voice actors. Casting Director Kimlinh Tran points out, “meritocracy comes down to who has the time to study their craft and afford the classes. When you think about it that way, it’s stacked against them [marginalized groups]” (quoted in Wen, 2020). Even in discussions that are hesitant after the voice actor is revealed, the talent of the voice actor and the universality of the digital medium are foregrounded by developers in their defense. When the casting of Laura Bailey as Nadine in *Uncharted 4* (Naughty Dog, 2016) was met with backlash and critique, Naughty Dog defended Bailey’s talents and cast Bailey as Nadine again in *Uncharted: Lost Legacy* (Naughty Dog, 2017) without hesitation or consideration of another voice actor. Druckmann made three major arguments: that they cast Bailey as Nadine before they decided upon the colour of Nadine’s skin in *Uncharted 4*; that Bailey “killed it” in the casting audition; and that there is a Black voice actor who plays White character in the original game (Grayson, 2015). The first part of Druckmann’s argument showcases that the colour of a character’s skin is an afterthought and can be applied to any other character in development. Further, this does not explain why Bailey was cast again as Nadine in *Lost Legacy*. This approach to the construction of characters in games is the equivalent of the “I don’t see colour” or “colour doesn’t play a factor” argument of colour

blind ideology. The second part of Druckmann's argument—that Bailey “killed it”—foregrounds that Bailey's talent, not the fact that she is a White woman, is why she received the role and remained in that role. Druckmann's praise is indicative of meritocratic arguments for colour blindness, in which the merit of Bailey's talents grants her the ability and pass to play any character within the digital medium of games. Taylor (2016) writes that “Colorblindness and ‘postracial’ politics are vested in false ideas that the United States is a meritocratic society where hard work makes the difference between those who are successful and those who are not” (p. 72). For Druckmann, it's Bailey's hard work and talents that got her the role. And finally, his rejoinder that a Black actor was cast as a White character begs more questions than answers those challenges to the casting. Druckmann's statement defending the casting of Bailey doubles down on colour blind arguments that privileges White voice actors: that voice is malleable, universal, and free from being racially inscribed; a video game character's colour is limited to design choice and a brand; and that the digital medium focuses on merit and talent instead of representation.

For Druckmann and other AAA video game creators/companies, White sonic norms are so deeply ingrained in their approaches to digital media and sound that they do not pay attention to how these norms privilege White voice actors. The view that voice, especially voices of White actors, is free from being racially inscribed resonate with Marie Thompson's (2017) concept of “white aurality.” Resonant with Stoevers's concept of White sonic norms, Thompson defines White aurality as “invisibilizing its own constitutive presence in hearing the ontological conditions of sound-itself” (p. 274). She adds that White aurality “constitut[es] a sonic materiality that can be cleanly distinguished as preceding sociality, discourse, meaning and power” (p. 274). The aurality of White voice actors are positioned and described by game developers and fans, too, as “invisible,” emphasizing the flexibility and virtuosity of the White actor's voice talents. In these arguments, especially considering Druckmann's argument that Nadine's Blackness was an afterthought, voice actors' voices are heard as being free from being attached to any meaning, sociality, discourse, or power and can move freely amongst these intersections. Further, Thompson writes, any “reliance on situated and racialized aurality is obscured” (p. 274). When Druckmann describes “appearances” as “awkward” that can be overcome by the medium's ability “to have actors play characters that don't look like them,” he is invoking the obscuration of race and situatedness that White aurality enables (Grayson, 2015). By doing so, Druckmann is able to claim that he can hear everyone “equally” based on their talents and merit, while still privileging White voice actors' ability to be “universal” and move freely amongst intersections of identities in games.

Digital blackface in video games are not only donned by White people but are enforced onto people of colour in voice acting. If White aurality privileges White voice actors to move freely, White aurality forces people of colour to play into the ambiguity and mutability of colour blind ideology and White supremacy that reinforce stereotypes and the perceived interchangeability of BIPOC voice actors. In a fascinating observation about *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Dia Lacina (2019) points out that Noshir Dalal, the voice actor who plays the Black Indigenous character Charles Smith, claims on his website that he is “pretty damn ethnically ambiguous.” Under that title, Dalal advertises that he is “ethnically all over the place,” and that his look covers a “wide range.” Lacina writes, “Playing into this ambiguity is what white supremacy in the fiercely competitive space of acting demands of marginalized people.” The fault is not Dalal, but rather the colour blind ideology of voice acting that demands people of colour to embrace White



aurality, sound ambiguous, be invisible, or be the stereotypes that White people hear. Because of the meritocratic colour blind arguments surrounding voice acting, voice actors must compete under the expectations of White aurality. Like Dalal's statement of being ethnically all over the place, voice actors—especially BIPOC folx—must demonstrate their ability to obscure situatedness and racialized aurality to receive praise and merit.

Additionally, White sonic norms also demand people of colour to sound like the stereotypes that White people generally believe in and love to see/hear. While some people would be quick to point out that games like *GTA: San Andreas* have Black voice actors playing Black characters, there needs to be a consideration of how they characters are represented. In Blackmon's "Playing in Blackface: How Video Games Can Make You Hate Black People (More)" (2014), she writes about this phenomenon in relation to *GTA: San Andreas*:

While I was excited about the spectacle of the game and was made nostalgic for both the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s and the Neo-Black Power films of the 1990s I quickly came to realize that while I may be seeing the game as satire, that it could easily be read as an accurate depiction of Black life in America. I thought about the fact that many folks (especially those in small towns like the one that I live in) could/would easily believe that Franklin was the epitome of the Black man.

Blackmon (2014)

The title "playing blackface" connects to that tradition of having Black actors "black up" and play stereotypes for the amusement of White audiences (see also Leonard, n.d.; Leonard, 2003; Powell quoted in Marriott, 1999). Blackmon points out that whenever a person of colour is appropriately cast, they may be cast to play a stereotype. Or as Shonte Daniels (2017) puts it, "Sometimes hiring black people to play black characters can actually feel like a step backward for black progress, if it means the search for authenticity becomes more stereotypical". These instances draw attention to the fact that blackface was/is sometimes the only means of getting into an entertainment industry, as parodied in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*. Louis Chude-Sokei (2006) and Daphne Brooks (2006) have demonstrated how early Black actors at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like Bert Williams, performed in blackface only to subvert the tradition. Yet, there was still an overall expectation for black actors to sound and act like their stereotypes. For instance, the Black actors on the 1950s *Amos & Andy* TV show were instructed to sound and act like Gosden and Correl's characters did on the radio show (Clayton, 1961). Whereas White people are praised and hired for their merit to be anyone, BIPOC folx have been and are still hired by how well they can play the stereotypes that White people hear.

### **Conclusion: Digital Blackface is Complicated, But Still Blackface**

Recently, there has been more pressure on developers and the video game industry to seriously re-evaluate their (colour) blind casting practices (see Wen, 2020). But there are still systemic, technological, and cultural barriers. Alan Wen comments that "[u]ntil the industry becomes as diverse as the spectrum of characters and worlds it's intending to portray, all people like [Kimlihn] Tran can do is bang the drum." White voice actors and developers in more privileged positions should be creating greater support for BIPOC voice actors and be more accountable for which characters they play/cast. Digital blackface is blackface, and the industry needs to recognize this. Although colour blind ideology and casting practices, like "blind casting," are



meant to provide equal opportunity for all voice actors, these practices only privilege White voice actors, reinforce racialized hierarchies, and normalize digital blackface. The act of digital blackface, Shawn Alexander Allen argues, “removes everything from the character, and only perpetuates that games are so white, that they can’t even find actors to play the occasional black character” (quoted in Narcisse, 2015). And Ian Haney López (2012) writes, “a colorblind ideology...simultaneously proclaims a robust commitment to anti-racism yet works assiduously to prevent effective racial remediation” (p. 90). Currently, motion capture should be drawing even more attention to the fact that voice is and always has been embodied. Lacina (2019) rightly points out, “Now, with digitally created characters, we’ve shifted from the makeup and costuming to their CG counterparts. Mocap [motion capture] actors inhabit and voice constructs of Blackness and Indigeneity. It’s a violence that continues to dehumanize and perpetuate racist ideas about people of color”. Digital blackface may not be the burnt cork and grease paint of minstrelsy costumes, but digital blackface participates in a history of oral blackface and the lineage of blackface in American culture that, through technological means, virtually blacked up. As Lauren Jackson argues (2014), rather than viewing digital blackface as too complicated to call it blackface or claiming that the act was not intentional, developers must focus on the act and recognize the complexity and complicated practices of blackface that have continued in various forms since the early days of blackface minstrelsy.

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