

I've never bothered to learn who the first black character in a videogame was. That's because, up until recently, it's never felt like the medium's creators cared about people like me, beyond tapping into facile stereotypes. The 2016 release of *Mafia III* marked the most significant attempt so far to say anything about how black people navigate their lives in spaces ordered by white hegemony.

*Mafia III* focuses on main character Lincoln Clay (pl. 78), a soldier who comes home from Vietnam in 1968 and matches the mould of many action game protagonists. He's skilled at stealth and gunplay, capable of fearsome anger and focus, yet he's shot through with just enough sympathetic grievance to make all killing feel justified.

The big difference with Lincoln is that he's black and engaged in a vendetta against the good-ol'-boy criminals and Italian-American mafiosos who killed his surrogate father. It feels like actual life experiences and historical research

went into it, something that's all too rare in videogames.

As a critic and journalist, I've learned and written about people like Jerry Lawson and Ed Smith, African-American men who, respectively, helped to create videogame cartridge technology and the forgotten AP1000 home console system. While black folks were instrumental in adding to the slippery potentiality of the videogames medium, it's felt like the medium is only now fitfully concerning itself with how to meaningfully render visions of black life.

The first black characters I distinctly remember encountering in games are Jonathan Blade from an old-school Sega fighting game called *Eternal Champions* and Jax from *Mortal Kombat*. They both debuted in 1993 and I remember latching onto Jonathan Blade because his pixel colouration and flat-top haircut read as 'black' to me. But he was essentially a cipher that lacked any real cultural specificity, interchangeable with the other characters in the game. Jax had more flavour. He was a superstrong bruiser with a hella deep voice, in the mode of the Big Black Bad-Ass archetype. His bionic arms showed up in *Mortal Kombat III*. I didn't love how facile he felt in the midst of the game's melodramatic magic ninja intrigues but he was fun enough to play.



78, 79 *Mafia III*, game screenshots of Lincoln Clay and New Bordeaux



80 *Mafia III*, game screenshot



Jax, Jonathan Blade, and dozens of other characters like them landed in hundreds of videogames over the decades. These sprinkles of melanin didn't come across as anything more than marketing-driven tokenism. Throw a black character into the pixel landscapes to seem progressive or inclusive with the least possible effort and maybe a company sells a few more copies. Having had similar experiences as a comic-book fan, I saw these instances for what they were: a mix of both cynical calculus and well-meaning intent.

For my first few decades playing and writing about videogames, these characters and their ilk ultimately left me cold. One time, that aforementioned cynical calculus pulled right up to the curb outside the midtown Manhattan building where I worked. In the first half of 2005, I took a meeting in a luxury vehicle – either a limo, a Hummer or a Hummer limo – to see *187 Ride or Die*, a gangsta car combat game spearheaded by film director Matty Rich. He'd released the creakily earnest urban crime drama *Straight Out of Brooklyn* in 1991 with nothing by way of follow-up for more than a decade. As I listened to him talk about how videogame programming let him put virtual cameras in places where real ones couldn't go, I knew better than to entertain any false hope that this game would deliver the representation I craved. If memory serves, Rich was the first black person presented to me as a creative lead on a big-budget videogame. But I saw *187 Ride or Die* for the arranged marriage it was: a pact between a faded filmmaker and a videogame company trying to find dollars in a market segment desperate to see themselves on screen.

In the last decade, a scant few games with black lead characters have popped up. The first game with a black lead character that actually made me feel seen was *Assassin's Creed Liberation*. Released in 2012, it concerned itself with telling a story that wouldn't have been possible without a specifically black character. Players controlled Aveline de Grandpré (pl. 81), a young woman born to a white French merchant and his African slave, as she searched for her long-lost mother. Like most *Assassin's Creed* games, you got to sneak around and dramatically kill evildoers in a richly recreated historical environment. However, *Liberation* offered up a key differentiating feature: Aveline could change her appearance to adopt two other personas that let her traverse the class divides of eighteenth-century New Orleans. The 'Lady' identity let her bribe certain characters and/or operate with less suspicion, while the 'Slave' identity allowed her to move through plantations to achieve specific gameplay goals. This gameplay mechanic channelled the historical act of passing,

a phenomenon where lighter-complected black people obfuscate their race and live as white men and women. What made me appreciate *Assassin's Creed Liberation* was how it interactively explored what the lived experiences of two black women might have



81 *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*, Aveline de Grandpré

been like during the Transatlantic slave trade era. More than any game before it, *Liberation* centred blackness and gestured at a multiplicity that I'd seen my entire life. Once I played it and talked to people involved in its creation, I felt that progress towards a fuller sort of black cultural identity was possible. Having felt that, I could never go back to thinking it might never happen.

One year later came *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry* (pl. 82), an expansion to *Assassin's Creed IV* that showed the adventures of a tertiary character named Adéwalé. A mere firstmate sidekick in the main game, Adéwalé was promoted to lead character status in *Freedom Cry*. The game's story saw the freed black man fighting against oppressive slave traders on the island of Haiti in the late 1700s. *Freedom Cry* didn't boast a singularly magnetic feature like *Liberation* but made up for it by being an incredibly cathartic slave revenge fantasy. The first few times Adéwalé slit the throat of a slave catcher so an African could run

to freedom, it felt like I could actually weaponize the frustration I've felt at living in a system that originated to keep my ancestors in chains.

*Mafia III* was developed and published by an entirely different company but feels kindred to *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry*, because Lincoln Clay operates in a world constructed by Jim Crow, the name given to the aggregate legalities and prejudices descended from slavery. Set in a New Orleans analogue called New Bordeaux, his war against the mob provides a guided tour into the ways that drugs and organized crime have been targeted to disproportionately harm already marginalized communities. When Lincoln shuts down the cathouse where women had been drugged into sexual slavery, the attitudes of the people in the building and surrounding neighbourhood change for the better almost immediately. Sure, it's a fantasy composed of creative license but it's also what most of us dream justice looks like.

Part of what made *Mafia III* different from those *Assassin's Creed* games was the fact that it didn't have as much as a historical buffer. One can finish *Liberation* or *Freedom Cry*, look outside the window, and rejoice at how much better things have gotten. Black folks are allowed to read and assemble freely now, after all. All of these games highlight how institutional racism is systemic. It's all about places you're not allowed to go, things you're not allowed to do, rights and powers that you're not allowed to access. Game design is systemic, too, walling players off from parts of an open world until they get the right power-up to unlock new horizons. *Mafia III* uses videogame design to inform players about the socioeconomic designs that make white supremacy possible.



82 *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry*, Adéwalé

But that very systemization is *Mafia III*'s Achilles' heel. It hews to an overly familiar open world template, the kind of concentric-circle progression popularized by *Grand Theft Auto* (1997–present). The player's

control over the city of New Bordeaux increases as you complete one mission after another. This kind of game design calls for lots of repetition which dulls the impact of some of its messaging. The racist threats that enemies bark at you shock at first but become background noise after a while.

In a roundabout way, *Mafia III* reminded me a bit of Richard Wright's iconic novel *Native Son* (1940). As with the book's baleful protagonist Bigger Thomas, Lincoln's bloody vengeance is presented as a logical consequence of suppressing an entire class of people through legal and illegal means. *Mafia III* uses a documentary film framework and flashbacks to a congressional hearing to tell its story decades after the events in the game happen. At one point, the CIA operative who helps Lincoln with his quest makes it clear that Lincoln is just doing what the government trained him to do: kill his enemies in psychologically damaging ways that spread fear. He's just doing it back in the country where his rights aren't equal to those of white people.

One mission takes players through a decrepit Cajun-themed amusement park, with a haunted house that plays recordings of a loup-garou horror story chock full of thinly veiled racism. The climax of the mission sees Lincoln tying a rope around the underboss' neck, turning on the ferris wheel, and letting the man's broken body hang there for all to see. One doesn't need to be well-versed in American history to understand that moment as a reference to, and an inversion of, the kinds of extrajudicial lynchings that took black people's lives for decades. That ferris wheel lynching comes across as simultaneously chilling and cheap. It's chilling because seeing one game character secure a rope around another character's neck drives home the terrifying intimacy of this kind of violence. Imagining it at the frequency and scale achieved in the South – where crowds would gather to see black people hung, burnt and mutilated – should freeze a person's soul to the core. But, horror story aside, *Mafia III*'s amusement park lynching isn't invested with enough context to effectively invoke reality; the game only nods at history here. After Lincoln strings his enemy up, he moves onto hunting another lieutenant. There is no catharsis.

*Mafia III* represents the best effort so far by big-budget game makers to try and sketch out the dimensions of twentieth-century black life. But even this game leaves so much territory untouched. Its moments of family and fellowship outside of the guns-and-grief melodrama are all too fleeting. Pitting Lincoln against largely white antagonists creates a scenario that easily mirrors white hegemony, making *Mafia III* legible as a critique of systemic racism. But



83 *Mafia III*, game screenshot



that framing also falls into the trap as defining black people primarily in opposition to white people. Black lives exist with their own hopes, joys and agency. We don't sit around waiting for non-black people to be foils for us, especially since we often have to create existences that weave around institutionalized injustice and up-close microaggressions.

To its credit, though, *Mafia III* isn't really trying to be woke. It's too clumsy and heavy-handed to deftly gesture at multivalent black cultural politics. That lugubriousness comes from an earnest sincerity that tries to communicate an understanding of black life under white supremacy. You can feel the desire to be earnest but part of what hamstringing the narrative ambitions of *Mafia III* is its fealty to pulp genre conventions. Lincoln is a hard man whose heart hardens even further. Because he has to visit gorily righteous vengeance to his enemies, players don't get much time to spend with him in moments of self-reflection. The game's imperatives demand that he be more force of nature than three-dimensional human. As he blows through

New Bordeaux, you can see and deflect racism in action, knowing all the while that no one man can turn the tide of history.

This is what progress in my lifetime looks like, as regards portrayals of blackness. Even while I can acknowledge that the weight of the increments has increased, I still find myself frustrated by the fact that the progress has all been incremental. A gained foothold doesn't guarantee steadier purchase. Neither Aveline de Grandpré nor Adéwalé ever headlined another videogame and the successes of their games haven't even been copied, a true anomaly in a games industry where victory gets rapidly imitated. A year with multiple games with black lead characters can be followed by one with none. And the possibility of a majority-black creative team steering a big-budget videogame to completion – which happens in TV and movies – still seems so far off that I might never see it in my lifetime. Until that happens, black people will still just be half-realized characters in stories where they don't have enough control.



84 *Mafia III*, game screenshot