A History of Black Video Game Characters: The Good, The Bad, and The Shaq Fu

It is an inescapable fact that out of all the media consumed by Americans, (whether it be movies, television, or video games) most are dominated by male Caucasian lead characters. So when there are characters that buck the norm, they deserve to be recognized. In observance of Black History Month, here is a look at the progression (and regression) of black video game characters.

Black video game characters have been around longer than most would suspect; at least all the way back to 1979 when Atari released Basketball on the Atari 800 in color. The basketball player had no name, but that wasn't uncommon in the "Pre-Mario" days.

IMAGE

The first named African-American video game star was a name that carried a lot of weight... in fact he was the world heavyweight champion. *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* was a ground breaking title in many respects, but most notably it was the first game to license a celebrity athlete to appear in the game. Iron Mike remains to this day as one of the most fearsome bosses in video game history, with no predictable patterns and a one hit knockdown punch.

It almost become a right of passage for an African-American athlete to appear in his own video game... Bo Jackson, Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley, Scottie Pippin, Ken Griffey Jr, and of course Tiger Woods' long running series of PGA golf games with EA. Most of these titles also followed in the tradition of being absolutely horrible licensed games, with Shaq-Fu being one of the worst offenders.

Of course athletes were not the only African-American celebrities to make the transition into the digital space. Michael Jackson was very active in the video game industry, and specifically with Sega. Jackson not only appeared in the *Moonwalker* games (along with Bubbles the chimp), he also composed some music for *Sonic the Hedgehog 3*. Sega also worked with Jackson on the *Space Channel 5* games, where he appeared as Space Michael and lent his voice and signature dance moves to the title. At one time there was even a MMO in development based on Jackson called *Planet Michael*.

IMAGE
*Michael Jackson with Mark Cerny*

So why is it so many black video game characters are licensed athletes and celebrities?

Through most of the 80's and 90's Japanese developers were leading the industry. As someone who has spent a significant amount of time in Japan... you don't see many black people walking down the street. I'm not implying there's any kind of racism on their part, they just are historically not a very racially diverse country. So the Japanese perception of black people are these athletes and celebrities from America. When they can't officially license their likeness, a lot of times they still use a celebrity for "inspiration". Zack from *Dead or Alive* is designed from Dennis Rodman, Raven from *Tekken* is designed from the Wesley Snipes depiction of Blade.

IMAGE

Ironically even in the west, a lot of the notable African-American lead characters tend to parody well known movie and television characters. *Grand Theft Auto* surprised quite a few people when the series went to San Andreas. To have the highest selling video game franchise feature a predominantly

African-American cast was a pretty big deal. Much of the cast however felt very similar to characters from films like *Menace II Society, Boyz N' The Hood* and *New Jack City.*

The *Gears of War* franchise isn't quite as big as GTA, but is obviously a flagship title for Microsoft. Augustus Cole is without a doubt the most charismatic character from the series, so much that he was one of the main characters in *Gears of War: Judgment.* Cole's fan appeal comes largely from his voice actor, Lester Speight. The problem again is that Cole is also modeled after Speight in the looks department, and his character is a bit of a mash up of roles that he's played in the past (as well as his own football career).

The exact same thing is present in the *Mass Effect* series. Admiral David Anderson is a very important character, but he is the spitting image of Keith David. To be fair to Bioware, most of the characters in Mass Effect are modeled after their voice actors. Keith David is actually one of the very few African-American voice actors to play a range of characters in video games. His voice works just as well as a sergeant in *Call of Duty* as it does as the Arbiter in *Halo 2* and *3*. David even got the chance to play himself (to hilarious effect) in *Saint's Row 4...* a series that he's portrayed multiple characters in since the original title. Phil Lamarr also has an incredible body of work voicing characters of every imaginable race or creed.

IMAGE

Does race really matter as much in video games?

This is an entertainment industry founded on yellow Pac-Men, orange Q-berts, and blue hedgehogs. You have games that are very abstract, playing as something simple as a marble or even the wind... you won't find that in movies or television. The lines between race in those media are much more blurred in games; let's not forget the same guy who was Steve Urkel was also the voice for Sonic the Hedgehog.

Positive role models definitely matter in video games. Unlike athletes, singers, and actors... a video game character isn't going to be on the news for cheating on their wife, beating up their girlfriend, or running dog fights. Much like comic book characters, they are ageless. In those respects, black video game characters definitely matter.

While I wouldn't consider a convicted murderer seeking redemption in the zombie apocalypse a very good role model... I still think Lee Everett from *The Walking Dead* game has made significant progress. Lee was an original character made specifically for the game, and his race is never portrayed as a burden to him. Lee is a good man, and through his eyes you have to make a series of painful choices and feel the emotional impact as a result. He will go down as one of the best video game characters ever.

IMAGE (right column)

Adéwalé from *Assassin's Creed 4: Black Flag* has made similar progress, but in a slightly different manner. I really applaud Ubisoft for approaching the subject of slavery. *Assassin's Creed* has always been about approaching historical time periods... and slavery was just as much of a part of that time as whaling; and they unapologetic-ally depicted both. Adéwalé is also a fantastic character, he serves as a moral compass to Kenway and becomes a key character in the *Assassin's Creed* mythos. I only wish "Freedom Cry" wasn't released as optional DLC... because that is where this character truly shines.

With that being said... *The Walking Dead* and *Assassin's Creed 4: Black Flag* are definitely not games for children.

So there is still definitely more room for progress... especially for black female video game characters. The only two that really come to mind are Alyx Vance from *Half-Life 2* and Aveline de Grandpré from *Assassin's Creed: Liberation.* Both are strong female characters, but also only half black. Japan also still has a long way to go in their depictions... with characters like The Black Baron from *Madworld,* and especially his more recent appearance as The Blacker Baron in *Anarchy Reigns.* The video game industry is far from perfect... but the progress made so far is undeniable. Let's just hope Shaq-Fu 2 doesn't set things back too far.