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Echoes Rebounding Across the Pacific:

The Formation of Portrayals of Blackness in *Final Fantasy VII* and its Fandom

**Introduction: Not Just a Game**

“I repeat: ‘No one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great poets, filmmakers, novelists and poets.’”

-Roger Ebert, “Video games can never be art”

Few Japanese Role-Playing Games (JRPGs) can claim to have as significant an impact as *Final Fantasy VII* (1997). The first in its series<sup>1</sup> to be in 3D, *FFVII* is credited with propelling the genre into the mainstream worldwide, when before it had only a niche group of players outside Japan, as well as ushering in “an incredible new era of interactive entertainment” (Davies). It also heavily inspired and influenced a new generation of game designers, such as Jenova Chen (whose Western name is actually derived from one of the game’s characters<sup>2</sup>), the developer behind the critically acclaimed *Flow* (2006), *Flower* (2009), and *Journey* (2012) (Consalvo 200). The game’s impact is felt outside of the video game business as well, and indeed, Ian Jones-Quartey, the creator of the Cartoon Network series *O.K. K.O.! Let’s Be Heroes* (2017-2019), began his artistic career with the webcomic *RPG World* (1999-2004), an “affectionate parody” of *FFVII* (“RPG”). Contemporary critics gushed at nearly every aspect of *FFVII*, with many claiming it to be “the best game ever made,” and one going so far as to call it “the greatest entertainment product ever created” (Rox, see Fig. 1). While such glowing critical

reception to the game has tapered in the past two decades, it is still consistently placed on Best Games Ever lists and is also “frequently cited” in the games-as-art debate as a prime example of the creative potential of the medium (Parker 91). In their 2017 retrospective, Polygon describes it as “a rare case of resources matching ambition at a turning point in the game industry” (Leone). At over 10 million copies, *FFVII* is the second best-selling PlayStation game, and is credited with helping Sony find success with their new console. Furthermore, the commercial and critical success of its 2020 Remake<sup>3</sup> demonstrates the text’s continuing relevance with gamers, many of whom “cried with happiness” when the Remake was announced (Leone). Aside from the game’s revolutionary graphics and cutscenes, players were drawn to the game for its “memorable” story about a resistance group fighting to save their planet from an omnipotent conglomerate named Shinra (Consalvo 199). Its main characters, specifically protagonist Cloud Strife, a former Shinra soldier turned mercenary, have since become gaming icons.



Figure 1: An example of a glowing review from *GameFan* magazine. The reviewer gave *FFVII* a rare perfect score and praised its graphics in particular (Rox).

Yet one character has continued to incite controversy over the game’s high status. Barret Wallace, the first Black character (let alone playable) in the franchise, is described as “your common, everyday physical fighter,” and thus serves, for gameplay purposes, as the muscle of the group, with very high defense and strength stats but low magic abilities (“Final Fantasy VII,”

see Fig. 2). In terms of story, Barret is obsessed with revenge against Shinra for destroying his hometown and speaks in slang that has been decried as reminiscent of Black American stereotypes. However, the issue with Barret is much more complex and revealing than previous scholars and fans have anticipated. Indeed, his stereotyping is representative of grander systemic issues within global media that have lingered for centuries. The gaming industry is especially guilty of perpetuating harmful portrayals of people of color because of several insidious factors.



*Figure 2: Official art of Barret. Note that his right hand is replaced with a gun.*

If you were a gamer in the late 1990s and early 2000s, chances are you would be familiar with this tagline: “Live in your world, play in ours” (Athab). This phrase appeared in thousands of advertisements for the Sony PlayStation and reinforced the idea among gamers that games were just that: harmless virtual playgrounds for fun and competition (see Fig. 3). This sentiment increased throughout the 2000s as players defended *Doom* (1993-), *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-), and other violent video game franchises against the public crusaders who blamed them for the Columbine High School massacre (1999), bullying, and general moral degeneracy. While video games may not inherently cause players to grow more aggressive and violent, they are not completely devoid of social consequences either. In fact, gaming scholars like Kishonna Gray and David Leonard contend that video games “provide a training ground for the consumption of

narratives and stereotypes as well as opportunities to become instruments of hegemony; they offer spaces of white male play and pleasures” (6). Indeed, although the video game industry now generates more revenue than the film and music industries combined, its products “consistently recycle very old conventions and sensibilities about race,” and have a problematic track record with representation, with over eighty-five percent of playable characters being white (Papazian et al. 171). Stuart Hall predicted gaming’s ability to perpetuate fixed understandings of people of color in his seminal lecture on representation, as he explained “when we are immersed in something [i.e. game worlds], we may come to accept [representations] as part of the real and natural world” (3). The stereotypes of Blacks as aggressive and unintelligent that were once abundant in Hollywood cinema have persisted in video games and point to the extreme toxicity within the industry itself as well as the pervasive (yet slowly diminishing) belief that video games are just fun distractions, and even an inferior artform. Queer Studies scholar Bonnie Ruberg establishes that the argument propagated by reactionary gamers that “games should be ‘just for fun’ is shutting down discourse around diversity” (108). Furthermore, in terms of the medium’s legitimization, it has taken video game journalist Geoff Keighley the better part of two decades to launch the Game Awards, an annual celebration of video games that is the industry’s equivalent of the Oscars (Martens). It is vital to remember that “cinema was once treated with this same skepticism,” and recent efforts spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement to reanalyze what have traditionally been considered classic films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939)<sup>4</sup> validate the now common belief that cinematic representation has a meaningful impact on our society (Papazian et al. 174). As Stuart Hall notes, “the issue of power can never be bracketed out from the question of representation” (14). To finally return to *FFVII*, interrogating Barret as a stereotype will “open up ... the very practice of representation itself,”

one that has been amplified by the filmic properties of video games, the osmotic cultural relationship between Japan and America, and the deflective campy embrace of Barret by fans (Hall 21). Since *FFVII* has influenced countless games in its presentation, marketing, and characterization, using it as a case study will provide frameworks for deconstructing other texts, especially those that originate from Japan. In doing so, I hope to encourage gamers to reassess their favorite games in order to create a safer and more welcoming environment for gamers of color, as well as demonstrate that video game stereotyping is not inevitable, and that, “while current gaming culture systematically embraces ideologies that make clear that white lives are the only ones that matter, it’s clear that games can show that all lives matter” (Gray et al. 8).

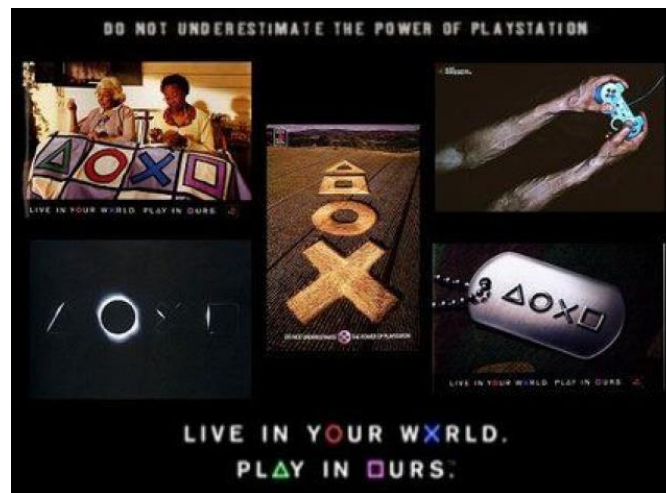


Figure 3: An early 2000s PlayStation advertisement that encouraged gamers to view video games as innocuous.

### Filmic Games: New Dimension, Old Tropes

“Someone please get the guys who make cartridge games a cigarette and a blindfold.”

-*Final Fantasy VII* Magazine Advertisement

In the mid-1990s, video games had entered the third dimension thanks to momentous advances in technology, specifically the compact disc, which could hold two-thousand times more data than the current most powerful cartridges. While video games had experimented with “interactive movies” well before this technical leap, such endeavors are considered akin to the

cinema of attractions model that pervaded early filmmaking, in that they were based more on the novelty of the fusion of the two mediums than improvements in gameplay, and ultimately gave way to new and more respected art forms (Wolf et al. 133). The hardware of the Sony PlayStation (1994-2006), specifically its Data Decompression Engine, allowed developers to showcase digitally animated Full Motion Videos (FMVs) that emulated cinematic techniques like suturing, panning, tracking, etc. between (and sometimes during) moments of gameplay (Wolf et al. 182). Thus, in a style similar to Henry Jenkins' theory of convergence culture, or the idea that consumers are encouraged to "make connections between dispersed media content," the PlayStation was able to retain the allure of cinema while also delivering the interactive experiences players craved. The filmic properties of this next step in video game evolution encouraged developers to exploit them to attract audiences familiar with their conventions. For example, Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* franchise (1996-) became an icon in a fashion similar to Hollywood actresses who are consciously constructed by the studios to highlight their sex appeal. Advertisements for games in the series even boasted "Starring Lara Croft" below the titles, clearly capitalizing on the classic Star System marketing schemes employed by Hollywood studios (see Fig. 4).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, some of the most popular video game characters of the 1990s were based on Hollywood action stars, and their marketing campaigns gleefully acknowledged this. The aforementioned Lara Croft is a fusion of Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) and female movie idols, Solid Snake of the influential stealth game *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) is inspired by Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell) from John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981), and the milestone First-Person Shooter (FPS) *GoldenEye 007* (1997) is naturally headed by the Pierce Brosnan iteration of James Bond. Film conventions not only aided developers in the marketing process, it also provided valuable reference templates in the development cycle. During the Golden Age

(1996-2004) of Survival Horror games, the creators of the first three *Silent Hill* installments turned to the works of David Lynch for inspiration in crafting their surreal and horrific environments,<sup>6</sup> while the Resident Evil designers incorporated elements from horror movies like *Pet Sematary* (1989) and *Day of the Dead* (1985) into their zombie apocalypses. The fact that these series were headed by Japanese companies and designers demonstrates the transnational influence media can have on video games.

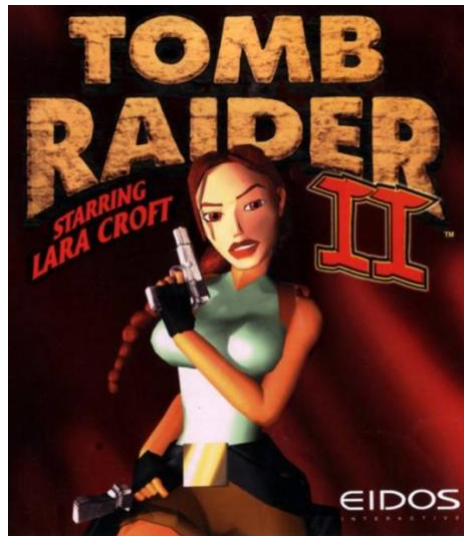


Figure 4: A promotional poster for *Tomb Raider II* (1997) that proudly displays “Starring Lara Croft.” The ability of the PlayStation to produce realistic graphics encouraged developers to fashion Lara as a voluptuous Hollywood actress.

While Sony’s competitor, Nintendo, was unable to feature FMVs in its games due to the hardware constraints of its flagship cartridge-based console, the Nintendo 64 (1996-2002), developers still learned from cinema in crafting their innovative 3D gameplay mechanics. For example, the developers behind *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) turned to samurai cinema<sup>7</sup> for guidance in designing its influential “wait-and-go” sword combat system (Luckerson, see Fig. 5). Other developers who sought to create less-serious gaming experiences utilized the new 3D capabilities to parody the popular films of the day. For example, Rare’s *Conker’s Bad Fur Day* (2001) replicated the iconic gradual tracking shot that introduced audiences to the twisted protagonist of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), as well as the bullet time

action scenes of *The Matrix* (1999) (see Fig. 6). *Super Mario 64* (1996), the first 3D installment in the longstanding series and the first 3D experience for millions of gamers worldwide, helped players understand the novel 3D camera system with the character of Lakitu, an airborne cameraman who, in the game's diegesis, documents Mario's adventures (see Fig. 7). Players were not just controlling Mario, they were also controlling Lakitu by moving the camera, or, as the Instruction Booklet proclaims, "You are not just the player, but the cinematographer, too!" When one considers that *Super Mario Bros. 3* (1988), a 2D entry for the Nintendo Entertainment System,<sup>8</sup> was portrayed in the diegetic framework of a theatrical performance, it becomes clear that developers have always turned to other artforms to enhance their own with familiar appeal (Schreier). In the realm of 3D, video game designers have adopted the mindset of the cinematographer and director and abandoned the 2D realm of the stage.



Figure 5: A battle from *Ocarina of Time* that demonstrates the cinematic sword choreography.





Figure 6: The protagonist of *Conker's Bad Fur Day* dodging bullets a la *The Matrix*. The 3D capabilities of the Nintendo 64 allowed developers to parody the CGI action sequences of Hollywood blockbusters.

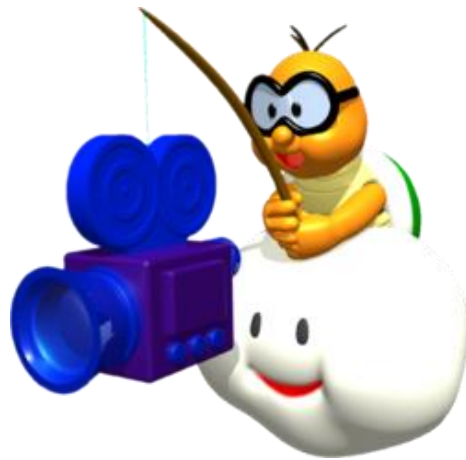


Figure 7: Lakitu, the flying cameraman of *Super Mario 64*, films Mario's escapades for his "television news report." He serves the technical purpose of providing players with an understanding of the game's original camera system.

The PlayStation and Nintendo 64 game libraries demonstrate the “ongoing whirl of intertextual references and transformations” that developers needed to employ in order to attract players to this new mode of playing as well as understand how to create satisfying interactive experiences in 3D (Papazian et al. 12). The PlayStation’s superior ability to replicate cinematic experiences with FMVs rapidly attracted more players than the Nintendo 64’s more limited graphical abilities, and would ultimately sell 102 million units worldwide, compared to the Nintendo 64’s 33 million.<sup>9</sup> However, in the process of integrating these attractive filmic properties into their work, game developers replicated many of the conventions these films are now condemned for. For example, Rare developers admitted that they referenced Disney films in

creating the colorful and animated world of *Banjo-Kazooie* (1998) and its sequel *Banjo-Tooie* (2000) (“Playing”). The two games feature an indigenous American woman and a shaman who are named “Humba-Wumpa” and “Mumbo-Jumbo,” respectively, and their racist mannerisms are evocative of the stereotypes of people of color as mystical and subservient that are found in *Peter Pan* (1953), *Dumbo* (1941), *The Jungle Book* (1967), and others. Similarly, like the *Indiana Jones* series (1981-2008) upon which it is based, the *Tomb Raider* franchise perpetuates a “white savior” narrative, as its educated British protagonist continually “conquers” the Orientalized game spaces (Gray et al. 121, 122).<sup>10</sup> Another example can be found in the 3D platformer, *Gex: Enter the Gecko* (1998), which features levels based on (what were once) relevant movies and television shows. In a bonus stage named “In Drag Net,”<sup>11</sup> Gex finds himself in a parody of *Cops* (1989-2020) set in an urban environment at night. The walls are coated in graffiti, Gex is donned in a police officer’s uniform, and a parody of the *Cops* theme plays in the background. The level is abandoned aside from the corpse of a gang member next to a cop car, coated in blood (see Fig. 8). The scene is a drastic departure from the cartoonish environments of previous levels and suggests that the designers wished to emulate the “realism” of the TV show. “In Drag Net” functions similarly to the show by invoking a disgusted reaction from the player upon witnessing the carnage, which has been utilized by the show to “justify police force” and encourage the viewer to identify with the officers (Andersen 177). In this case, the disgust is meant to strengthen the player’s identification with Gex (dressed as a police officer) as well as provide a sense of power and control as they explore the imagined urban hellscape. These examples reveal that “video games mirror and embody the injustices we see throughout popular culture and in society at large,” and can replicate the same hegemonic pleasures (even within an entirely different medium) that have long been capitalized on by film

and television (Gray et al. 5). These games additionally prove Hall's point that the relationship between representations of people of color and the hegemonic definitions ascribed to them have, in these particular cases, "become naturalized so that *that* is the only meaning it can possibly carry" (20).



Figure 8: The carnage featured in "In Drag Net."

Like its contemporaries, *FFVII* was also marketed heavily as a cinematic experience, yet it had the distinction of being treated as a "tentpole film, or a film that could make or break a studio" (Craddock). Certainly, Japanese video game company Square<sup>12</sup> truly "spared little expense in its efforts to make and promote the game" (Leone). With a development team of 150, an unprecedented budget of \$60 million, and Sony spending \$40 million on marketing, *FFVII* was truly the gaming industry's first tentpole game (Leone).<sup>13</sup> As David Bamberger, the senior marketing manager of the American campaign explained, "This was the one that we felt would help define what our hardware is" (Craddock). Bamberger and his team worked as hard as they could to "show off the cinematic quality of the game"- they hired Don LaFontaine,<sup>14</sup> a voiceover artist whose signature deep-voice has narrated thousands of Hollywood movie trailers, to produce a similar "movie-style 'trailer'" that was shown on primetime television alongside *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) and *The Simpsons* (1989-), distributed renders of the game in

gaming magazines, and even partnered with Coca-Cola to feature characters on their beverages (Craddock). The TV commercials featured wisecracks at Hollywood tropes, like “They said it couldn’t be done in a major motion picture- they were right” and “The most anticipated epic adventure of the year will never come to a theatre near you!” (Craddock, see Fig. 9). *FFVII* was one of the first games to explicitly compete with blockbusters and succeed in the endeavor.

Certainly, *FFVII* contained many of these touted filmic elements- its opening scene in particular showcased a panning camera that gradually revealed the enormous urban setting of Midgar set to swelling music before zooming in on our heroes jumping into action, seamlessly integrating the first moments of gameplay. In all, *FFVII* boasts nearly fifty minutes of beautifully rendered FMVs, finally fulfilling the enduring dream of then-Square president Hironobu Sakaguchi and director Yoshinori Kitase to create a cinematic *Final Fantasy* experience (Leone).<sup>15</sup> However, amidst the motorcycle chases and swordfights are long discussions about self-identity and the “lifestream,” the literal lifeblood of *FFVII*’s world that is emblematic of elements of Japanese Shintoism (Consalvo 31). Indeed, *FFVII* contains many elements that are distinctly Japanese because its “primary market is Japan,” and these were purposefully and aggressively buried by its marketing campaign to attract audiences who longed for the action experiences provided by *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil* (Brookey 95, see Fig. 10). In fact, the marketing team was forbidden from using the term RPG in their advertisements due to its association with slow, calculated gameplay and long scenes of character development. To compensate, they focused solely on its Hollywood moments in advertisements (giant monsters, romance, explosions, etc.), and this attitude leaked into its American localization, especially when it came to writing for Barret.

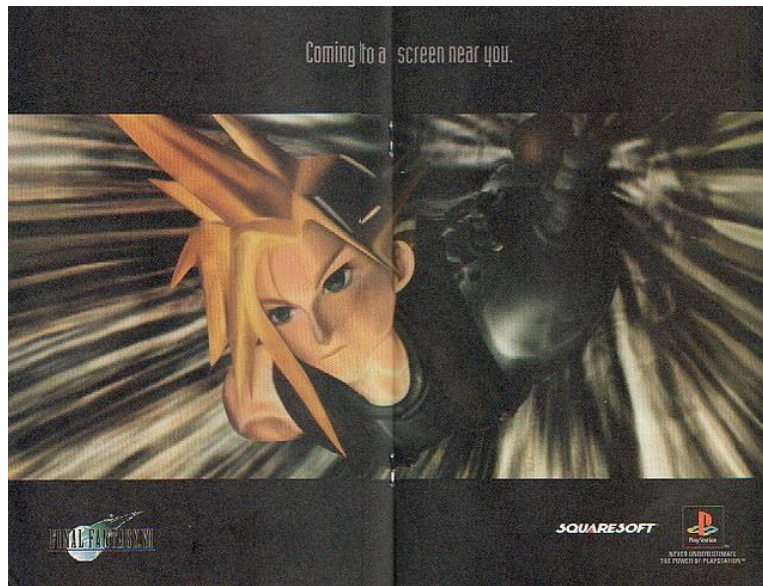


Figure 9: A magazine advertisement for FFVII that demonstrates the marketing techniques that capitalized on the game's cinematic elements. The central image is a still of one of FFVII's final FMVs (Craddock).

## Secondary Target

### 1. PlayStation gamers who might play RPGs.

- + The success of Resident Evil and Tomb Raider although strictly adventure games may indicate that these gamers are looking for deeper discovery-based games.
- + FF VII graphics and cinematic style both in exploration and combat may interest the Resident Evil and Tomb Raider gamer.
- FF VII RPG turn-based fighting system may be a major turn-off.

Figure 10: A screenshot of the marketing plan for FFVII that reveals the incentive for marketers to highlight the game's advanced graphics over its actual gameplay (Leone).

In a March 1998 article for the gaming magazine PC Zone, Randall Fujimoto, the vice president of development at Square's US division, was asked about *FFVII* and its English localization:

“PCZ: What would you say to the people who say that the in-game dialogue is a little bit ‘cheesy’?”

RF: Good – if it's what people want. We've had some criticism about Barrett's [sic] dialogue (*Barrett is the big black guy with a jive talkin' style of his own – Ed*)<sup>16</sup>, saying its racist an' all – but the way he speaks is supposed to bear some similarity to the tough

talking BA character in *The A-Team*! Our localization people thought it'd be fine to portray that kind of guy because he's already a big movie figure."

This quote has been overlooked by game scholars, which is a shame because it reveals much about the mindset behind the game's localization. First, it confirms that Barret was in fact consciously modeled after Mr. T, and secondly, it reveals that the localizers adopted tried and true stereotypes because of their successful precedence in the media, even if they did not realize they were stereotypes. In that sense, Black representation in the American version of *FFVII* is commodified to bring the game more in-line with a Hollywood film. Indeed, Mr. T, best known for playing B.A. "Bad Attitude" Baracus on *The A-Team* (1983-1987), a television show that was "one of NBC's few consistently highly rated series," also starred in the film *Rocky III* (1982) and had his own cartoon show, comic series, cereal, and other franchises (Marchetti 19, see Fig. 11). Fujimoto defends Barret's characterization by highlighting Mr. T's financial success as a media icon, believing that goes hand in hand with an acceptable representation. Stuart Hall contends that "the question of the circulation of meaning almost immediately involves the question of power," and in this case of circulation, Black voices did not have a chance to be heard (15). Truly, the localization effort for *FFVII* was headed by Michael Baskett, a white man, and several Asian-Americans "who [were] tapped into both Asian and American pop culture" to aid in the process of translating the game's many Japanese cultural references (Huffstutter). These localizers drew from Mr. T as a template for the kind of successful Black star they wanted to replicate, and, in the process, they turned what was a relatively subtle character in the original Japanese script into one that turned Black anger into a punchline. The marketing campaign thus penetrated the text itself, inserting hegemonic notions of Blackness while leaving the white characters relatively untouched. This can be seen in other magazines that were paid to promote

*FFVII*, as one issue of *GameFan* praises Barret's translation by arguing "it adds a nice touch, and is totally different from the usual 'everyone talks the same' translations most US RPGs get" (*GameFan*). Because previous RPGs had not been marketed as cinematic experiences, the translations were typically not modeled after established Hollywood tropes, and instead followed one influenced by the fantasy tradition established by Tolkien and *Dungeons & Dragons*.<sup>17</sup> At the time, these magazines were almost exclusively run by white males (a 1998 *GameInformer* article even references this, quipping that their "entire editorial staff consists of five white males"), and their complimentary attitude towards Barret helped fix an understanding of "positive" Black representation in video games ("African"). In fact, most of the criticism levied at Barret at the time of *FFVII*'s release came from newspaper reviews (with one noting his "street slang styles him as a crude Mr. T knockoff, sure to offend some") demonstrating the disconnect between gaming and mainstream cultures (Hicks). Indeed, these writers laid the groundwork for critical scholarship surrounding Barret's characterization in the English translation of the game, with many describing him as "a hulking brute," "dark, troubled," "cliched," "loud, obnoxious" and other negative attributes (Larose). University of Houston professor Mat Johnson explains that video games are lagging behind mainstream culture because they will achieve financial success "if the basic gameplay is good," but also because they point to precedents in more established mediums like cinema to defend their tropes ("Come On"). Indeed, due to *FFVII*'s enormous success in the West, video games (especially RPGs) unquestionably adopted more filmic elements, ensuring that they would continue to borrow trends and tropes established by television and film. Fujimoto's defiant attitude toward accusations of racism ("Good – if it's what people want") heralded a shift toward video games becoming "a mass market phenomenon that have an even bigger scope than movies ... so they're

not as worried about minority concerns as [other mediums] are” (“Come On”). This attitude has continued to this day, as Black games journalist Evan Narcisse wrote in 2017, “still, the huge untapped Black audience ready to see and create themselves in today’s games remains an invisible elephant in corporate boardrooms” (“The Natural”).



Figure 11: The Mr. T brand cereal demonstrates his popularity among children.

Marketing techniques that explicitly highlight the filmic properties of video games may seem alien now, as a major demographic of players are wary of purchasing “playable movies” that emphasize quick time events and dialogue trees in place of fluid gameplay. The backlash received by *The Order: 1886* (2015) in particular reveals gamers’ antipathy toward products that seemingly prioritize graphics and cutscenes over constant interactivity (Paul). One of the top comments on a YouTube review of the game quips, “I don’t like *The Order* because who would pay \$100 to watch a movie?” (AngryJoeShow). Additionally, Jenkins’ theory of cultural convergence continues to grow in relevance as films are increasingly adapted as tie-in video games (and vice versa), so developers are encouraged to stress the uniquely gamic qualities of their work. However, in the 1990s, such parallels were highlighted because of their novelty and huge evolutionary leap from the capabilities of fourth-generation (i.e. 2D) consoles. Even CGI in



film was just starting out at the time, with the first fully computer-animated feature film, *Toy Story* (1995), releasing only two years before *FFVII* in the West. Most of the games discussed thus far are commonly referred to as patent games, because they were so fundamental in innovating 3D gameplay mechanics and genres. Indeed, instead of comparing more modern games such as *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (2007) and *Dark Souls* (2011) to Indiana Jones and samurai cinema, respectively, reviewers would highlight how they were inspired by *Tomb Raider* and *Ocarina of Time*. Still, these games inherited the problematic tropes of their predecessors, as Game Studies Professor Mia Consalvo notes that “Orientalism persists as the default framework through which gaming depicts Eastern cultures” (12). In essence, the technically revolutionary video games of the 1990s provided a foundation for these tropes to persist in modern works, as they entranced burgeoning developers with examples of what they saw as the future of entertainment. Certainly, stereotypes existed in 2D games, but because 3D remains the standard for the gaming industry, the early 3D games are the ones that persistently influence modern developers.<sup>18</sup> Consalvo agrees that “various bits from those games become part of [developers’] cultural memory, shaping their ideas about what games are” (188). Thus, contextualizing these fundamental games much in a style similar to HBO Max’s evaluation of *Gone with the Wind*’s “painful stereotypes of people of color” and Disney’s warnings for the “outdated cultural depictions” found in their older films would help reveal this legacy of video games being “instruments of hegemony” (Spangler, Drury, Gray et al. 6). It would also aid in the decades-long effort to legitimize video games because, in Narcisse’s words, “any mode of creativity that wants to be called mature needs to grapple with the sociopolitical issues of the time and place” (“Come on”). However, in the case of *FFVII* and countless other games, achieving a full

contextualization of its racist tropes requires a deeper dive within the text and the relationship between Japan and America.

### **Barret Wallace: A Layered Stereotype**

“Anger- use it, don’t lose it!”

-Mr. T, “*Be Somebody... or Be Somebody’s Fool!*” Music Video (1984)

Just as Hollywood films inspired American games, and localization and marketing techniques, they also flowed across the Pacific and settled into the minds of Japanese creators already immersed in their home culture, birthing fusions of both worlds. While the phenomenon has led to innovations in the art world as exemplified by the films of Akira Kurosawa,<sup>19</sup> historically, this has led to an establishment of Blackness as the racial Other. Scholars agree that Japan’s imagined racial homogeneity and purity combined with racist European and American ideals like Eugenics during the country’s rush to modernize in the late 1800s and early 1900s positioned the Black person as “ape-like and subhuman” in the Japanese popular consciousness (Russell 6). Its occupation by the United States following the Second World War “resulted in Japan’s uncritical acceptance and indigenization of the racial hierarchies” that were projected by the imposed American hegemony (Russell 5). Stuart Hall characterizes the “global explosion in communication systems” that was just beginning during the Occupation Period (1945-1952) as elevating visual representation as the “saturating medium ... of communication worldwide” (5). Given America’s long history of degrading Black stereotypes in film and television, they provided plenty of material to the new generations of Japanese growing up in the Golden Ages of cinema and television, to disastrous effects. Professor of Communications Yuki Fujioka demonstrated in a 1999 study on Japanese international students that they were more susceptible to believing in stereotypes of Black people because of their relative isolation from them (Fujioka

55). She noted that the Japanese students relied “on television portrayals when making social judgements about [Black] Americans” (Fujioka 57). Black stereotypes are abundant in Japan, as scholar Suzuko Morikawa of Temple University recalls that growing up in Japan, he read *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899), drank juice that had a Black minstrel mascot, and played with a doll donned in blackface (423, see Fig. 12). He also acknowledged that “most Japanese people believe that is a homogenous country ... and therefore, it is not necessary to deal with racial and cultural issues” (423). Baye McNeil, a Black American writer living abroad in Japan, agrees with the sentiment, and notes with frustration how attempts to address discrimination have been shut down by a majority of Japanese people. For example, Naomi Osaka, a Black Japanese tennis star who, at the age of 22, is the highest paid female athlete in the world, was lambasted on Twitter by fellow Japanese users for tweeting in support of the Japanese Black Lives Matter movement. They argued that “she shouldn’t speak out,” and instead continue to uphold the Japanese myth of peaceful homogeneity (McNeil). However, the discriminatory experiences of McNeil and other Black people living in Japan prove that Japanese people desperately need to have a “national conversation” about race (Lee). This history of intertwined cultural racism is why, as Consalvo writes, “pursuing purity in cultural influence or form and trying to seek the essentially Japanese video game or essentially American game” is futile (184). For example, the creator of the *Final Fantasy* was inspired by the mythologies of J.R.R. Tolkien, an English author, and *Dungeons & Dragons*, an American franchise (Consalvo 46). Thus, *Final Fantasy*, considered to be the quintessential JRPG series, was never all that Japanese in the first place. Examining Mr. T’s character B.A. Baracus in both American and Japanese media further unpacks this idea of transnational influences and demonstrates how the process of translation can amplify stereotypes.



*Figure 12: A Dakko-chan doll that was a best-seller in 1960s Japan. Its grass skirt and exaggerated features are reminiscent of American cartoon stereotypes of Blacks as amusingly primitive and foolish (Russell 9).*

To review, B.A. (Bad Attitude) Baracus was a very popular character on *The A-Team*, a 1980s action-adventure television show that followed four mercenaries who fight against injustices in Los Angeles. As the character’s name implies, Baracus is perpetually angry and “plays out his hostility physically,” and Mr. T’s own public persona became inextricably linked with his character (Marchetti 22). Because of Baracus’ iconic look, the first similarity between him and Barret that most players notice are their appearances. Both characters are muscular and constantly scowling, and their outfits highlight their physique. Most reviewers and scholars do not go beyond noting those simple aesthetic similarities, and instead confirmed that they are both stereotypical without explaining how they satisfy hegemonic expectations. Indeed, Barret and Baracus have more in common than looks. For starters, they are both part of organizations whose “enemy is a larger, institutionalized force” (read: Barret fights against Shinra, and the A-Team tackles corrupt Los Angeles corporations) and both are subject to the “white, male voice of

military authority” (read: Hannibal Smith (George Peppard), a former Colonel, and Cloud, a past member of Shinra’s elite SOLDIER<sup>20</sup> squad) (Marchetti 22, see Fig. 13). Certainly, Cloud is effective at mitigating Barret’s anger and keeping the team together, suggesting “that without white, male authority, no work could ever be done” (Marchetti 22). While Baracus bickers constantly with his partner Murdock (Dwight Schultz) as if they were young brothers, Barret consistently insults and picks fights with Cloud and the rest of the party. Furthermore, Barret and Baracus both share an affinity for children that reveals their underlying “softness and appealing innocence” (Marchetti 24). Baracus works undercover at a day-care center with underprivileged children, while Barret is extremely affectionate of his adopted daughter Marlene. This association with children and underlying softness perpetuates the stereotype that Black people are childish and need “the paternal hand of a white leader for guidance and balance” (Marchetti 23). This is credited with Baracus’ popularity among children, as they desire a strong guardian figure who is also subservient. Ultimately, scholars conclude that B.A. Baracus is an attractive stereotype of Black people because he confirms hegemonic notions with his exaggerated “rudeness, crudity, stupidity, animalism and ignorance,” yet the stereotype is made even more explicit in the Japanese dubbing as he is given the sobriquet “Kong” (Marchetti 23, Russell 9). Japanese Studies Professor Rachel Hutchinson clarifies that stereotyping is often found in translated works in Japan because they “generally speed up production time and are adaptable to a wide range of markets” (72). Thus, much like the successful filmic precedence of stereotyping, Black characters in Western media are further stereotyped in their export to Japan for the financial reasons of saving on the translation process, as well as ensuring that the effort will be a success by appealing to hegemonic pleasures.<sup>21</sup> Certainly, by labeling Baracus as Kong, the translators negated any potential oppositional readings of him being of an embodiment of

American minorities “integrity and determination,”<sup>22</sup> instead presenting him as a pure “symbolic counterpoint to modernity, rationalism, and civility” by explicitly comparing him to an animal (Anderson 32, Russell 22). Stuart Hall explains that “meaning arises because of the shared conceptual maps which groups or members of a culture or society share together,” and because of their intertwined histories of racism, Black stereotypes are exceedingly accessible to most Japanese and Americans (9).

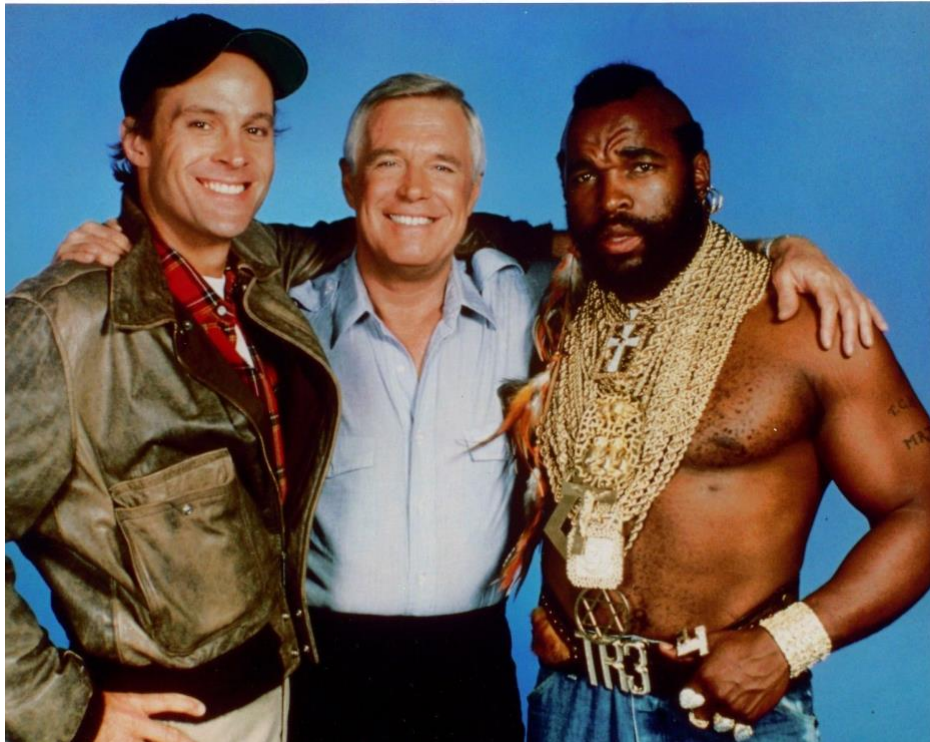


Figure 13: Murdock, Hannibal (the paternal figure), and Baracus posing in a promo shoot for *The A-Team*. Note that Baracus is wearing symbols of American minority groups, like the Star of David and indigenous feathers.

The American localization of *FFVII* demonstrates this feasibility of employing stereotyping. With approximately 130,000 lines of “fantasy-strewn” dialogue and hundreds of unique item and weapon names, *FFVII* is a tremendously rich and nuanced text, and thus a translator’s worst nightmare (Yin-Poole). Michael Baskett, the sole translator working at Square’s US offices, had only a little assistance from the Asian-American staff members and virtually no communication with the original Japanese developers. Baskett was charged with

“keeping enough of the game’s original content to preserve creator intent and yet at the same time making it accessible to as many American players as possible” (Consalvo 214). Sources differ on exactly how long Baskett had to complete the translation, and they range from two weeks to “a couple months” (Rogers, Leone). Either way, the range of timeframes provided are all extremely challenging demands for one translator, and so it is not surprising that the translation was so poor in quality. Indeed, typos abound in dialogue, character names are garbled, and the moments of comic relief that made the original script uniquely colorful are fumbled or missed entirely. The script was so poor in quality that one *FFVII* fan spent five years retranslating the original script, lamenting that he felt “short changed” with the original localization (Yin-Poole). Tim Rogers, a professional translator of Japanese and journalist for Kotaku, analyzes the translation choices for the first two discs<sup>23</sup> of the game in his in-depth YouTube series entitled “Let’s Mosey.” He concludes that Baskett misses the depth of Barret’s character in the original script and instead recharacterizes him as a comic relief and angry Black man stereotype in the vein of Baracus. For example, while Japanese Barret expresses empathy for Cloud’s depression, American Barret uses gruff generalities to forcibly help Cloud “get over it” (Rogers). More generally, Barret swears less, and speaks quieter and with less slang in the Japanese version. In one particularly illustrative instance, Barret yells at Cloud to sit down on a train after a bombing mission of a Shinra energy plant, while in the Japanese version he calmly asks Cloud to take a seat (Rogers, see Fig. 14). Obviously, the latter is the much better version, as being part of a resistance group, Barret should try as much as possible not to draw attention to himself. With all of these examples in mind, Barret’s loud and slangy dialogue more than just “amplifies” his negative characteristics from the Japanese script as translation scholars like Theo Gillberg argues- it completely redefines his character as comically unthinking and brash (22).

Gillberg is mostly congratulatory of Baskett in terms of his translations of Barret's dialogue because it is "recognizable and relatable to the American audience," and he cites it as "a good example" of creativity in video game translations (22). He selects a few conversations such as Barret's infamous "King VERMIN!" insult as key examples of the translator making Barret "wittier and more colorful" while still staying faithful to the original script (29). Gillberg does not go so far as to label American Barret as racist, as he argues that Baskett's use of slang only intensifies the "negative aspects of Barret's personality ... that might have been criticized either way" (22). However, Gillberg and other scholars miss the greater picture of Barret's mischaracterization in the English translation by focusing instead on a few particularly effective moments of comic relief. What's more, the English translation also draws unnecessary attention to his Blackness, reducing the ability for his character to stand on its own. As an example, at one point in the game, Barret yells at Cloud to move his "white spikey butt," insinuating racial tension that is not present in the Japanese version (Rogers). Racial conflict is not at all a theme of the game, and so these examples serve only to strengthen Barret's association with Black stereotypes. Furthermore, Barret highlighting these racial differences erode the spirit of team solidarity that was in the original script. These stereotypical mannerisms that are thoughtlessly employed throughout *FFVII*'s script are indicative of the convenience of drawing from a preestablished template of Blackness and stress the need for video game companies to provide their translators with appropriate deadlines and access to the perspectives of people of color.





Figure 14: Japanese Barret's calm and collected demeanor during their undercover mission (Rogers).

Of course, the Japanese script does not portray Barret in an entirely non-stereotypical manner, either. While he does not speak with as much slang, Barret's tone of speech is still terse and unfriendly in the original script (Rogers). Additionally, scholars have not yet written about Barret's continual emasculation by Cloud and the other white main characters that is present in both versions. While Barret starts out as the leader of the resistance movement, he is quickly overshadowed by Cloud and falls into the role of a comical sidekick. Indeed, in the discourse of pop culture, Barret is frequently listed as one of the best video game *sidekicks* (*Top 10 Tuesday*). Narcisse notes that Black characters are frequently relegated as sidekicks, and "their stories aren't the focus of the adventure players go on" ("Come on"). The game uses Barret's fall in status as a comic device, as at one point in the game, Barret exclaims that he should be the leader in an expedition to the nearest village, and he is instantly shut down by the others who demand that Cloud be their leader. The resolution of his own storyline is even achieved by another white male, Cid, the party's pilot and engineer. Barret has been rejected by the refugees of his hometown for supporting the construction of a power plant that results in the destruction of their village. When an out-of-control train is hurtling toward the refugees' camp, Cid is the one to stop

it, while Barret sits idly by. Nonetheless, Barret is forgiven and welcomed back into the community. Throughout the game, Barret's ineptitude when it comes to machines is played for laughs, especially in contrast to his teammates who are acquainted with the abundant technology within the game's diegesis. For example, during the first boss fight which is against a giant robotic scorpion, Cloud would normally warn the player not to attack the enemy when its tail is raised. If Cloud is knocked out, however, Barret will mumble "I dunno what's goin' on, but... it looks pretty bad." Also, when the player tries to teach Barret how to use an advanced skill when he is under-leveled, he will exclaim "D-d-d-damn! My head hurts!" At yet another point in the game, it is revealed that Barret shot a malfunctioning television out of frustration. Barret's lack of technological knowledge and skill is consistent with the perception of the technomascine figure that was especially prevalent throughout the 1980s and 1990s in movies such as *WarGames* (1983) and *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995). In general, the technomascine figure was a nerdy yet rebellious white hacker who used his technical skills for military victory. Video game historian Carly Kocurek notes that this disobedient and unorthodox behavior was celebrated in white youth, whereas in Black youngsters it was viewed as dangerous "delinquency" (Kocurek 84). This double standard continues to persist in the gaming and tech industries. Whereas other members of the resistance can hack Shinra computers and pilot giant airships, Barret is left with a machine gun grafted onto his arm that he uses in battle or whenever he is especially angry. He calls his gun "partner," and he is so defined by the weapon and the violence it brings that he was originally named Bullet. In terms of gameplay, many of Barret's attacks reference his rage, such as one of his final abilities, Angermax (see Fig. 15).<sup>24</sup> Thus, in both versions, Barret is characterized as unintelligent and unendingly angry, demonstrating a continuity of stereotyping across countries. Another problematic element of the game's script in both versions is that, after

Barret dons a white sailor suit, Cloud claims that he looks like “a bear in a marshmallow” (Rogers). This snarky remark may seem inoffensive by itself, but it belongs to a larger trend of both translations of the game dehumanizing Barret by mocking his intelligence and inextricably linking him to animalistic violence and destruction through his gun arm. There are many examples of his rage being played for laughs, but perhaps the most glaring one occurs when Barret and Cloud take a break from adventuring and watch fireworks together. While the scene is at first beautiful and relaxing, it quickly devolves into stereotypical nonsense as Barret starts shooting at the fireworks, yelling “Shut up!!”<sup>25</sup> These diegetic visual elements are often left out of consideration in scholarly work surrounding Barret’s characterization, and they instead focus on specific parts of the script. By taking all these elements together, one can better understand why Baskett based so much of Barret on Baracus. As Consalvo writes, “localizers act as cultural brokers and reinterpret that noise into something not just comprehensible but also enjoyable for players” (123). Baskett capitalized on the comical sides of Barret’s anger in the original script to provide players with a recognizable cultural trope that he himself was familiar with. Scholars agree that Baskett was inspired by Barret’s resemblance to Mr. T when crafting his dialogue,<sup>26</sup> but they rarely look beyond this physical resemblance, and thus miss the deeper framework that video games are “products of social contexts with their own assumptions and inequalities” (Consalvo 103).



Figure 15: Barret about to perform his special attack "Angermax."

Scholars also fail to consider the three other named Black characters of *FFVII*. Gillberg focuses only on select interactions between the main characters whereas Rogers skips over the scenes featuring these other Black characters in his relatively more comprehensive review. All the other named Black characters in *FFVII* are antagonists, and two of the three are criminals. The first one encountered is Kotch, who works as a guard in a harem that the player must infiltrate to rescue a female party member. While Kotch speaks in a neutral tone, he is still depicted as stereotypical in that he obeys a white overlord and is a sexual predator. Indeed, when Cloud and company infiltrate the harem, Kotch can be found pursuing one of the white female party members with the intent to rape her. Such stereotypes can be traced back to the Occupation Period of Japan, as while they were "once warned by government propaganda of the propensities of Americans for rape and carnage [during WWII], Japanese were now being told similar horror stories about Blacks by white American GIs" (Russell 20). Stuart Hall contends that "messages work in complex ways, and they are always connected with the way that power operates in any society" (3). The American occupiers, now in the position of power, instilled the Japanese with their own fears of Black sexuality, resulting in both Japanese disgust and curious objectification

of Black bodies. In fact, only a few scenes earlier in the game, the heterosexual Cloud is forced into a homoerotic encounter with a group of muscular men (many of whom are Black) that is supposed to be played for laughs (see Fig. 16). While these characters are unnamed, they are some of the few instances of Black characters in *FFVII* and point to the Japanese cultural fascination with “the trope of the [Black] American male as sexual athlete and priapic paramour, ... a forbidden fruit” that is explored in popular sexually graphic novels, such as those by Yamada Eimi (Russell 21). Other unnamed Black characters appear only in settings of squalor and neglect, and, with no diegetic acknowledgement of systemic racism, it naturalizes their societal standings. Thus, *FFVII* portrays many of its Black characters not as full people, but as sexualized objects, a continuing issue in both Japanese and American culture (see Fig. 17).

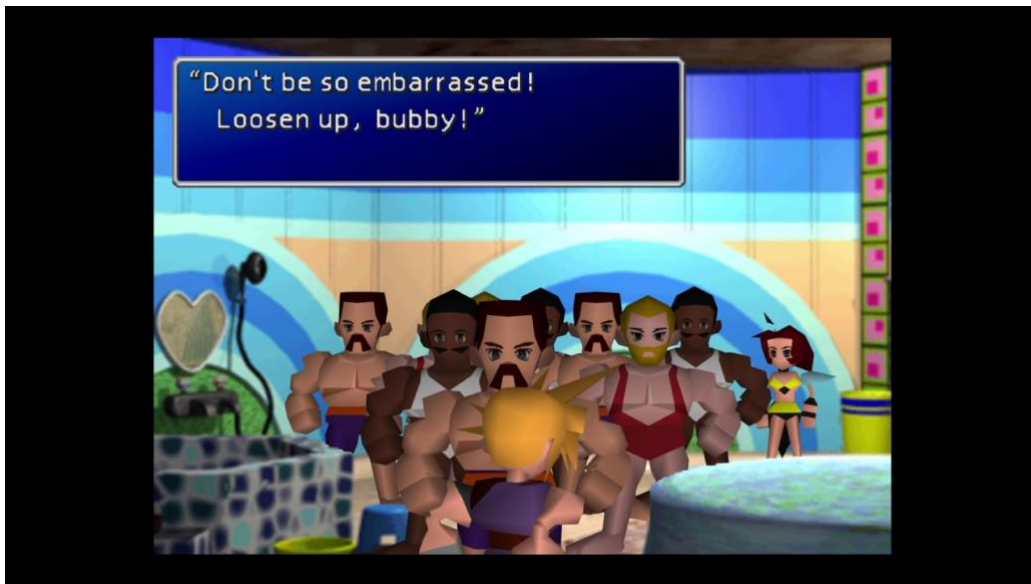


Figure 16: The group of muscular men who encounter Cloud in a love hotel.



Figure 17: A 1990 comic from the Hiragana Times that shows “jealous Japanese women guarding their prized possessions: Black people” (Russell 20). Note that the Black characters have no facial features aside from their mouth, representing their dehumanization.

The next Black character is named Mr. Coates, a crime lord in a desert prison who is dressed in the style of 1970s blaxploitation characters, complete with a deep V-neck and gold chain. Like Kotch, Mr. Coates also works under a white boss. The last one is Rude, a secret agent working for Shinra who speaks little and uses his brute strength to fight, even punching the ground to create shockwaves in battle (see Fig. 18). He is always accompanied by his partner Reno, who is white and handles the talking. All three characters have very minor appearances in *FFVII*, and follow the trend set by Barret of Blacks using only their strength to fight, following the lead of white superiors, and easily succumbing to impulses. It is understandable that scholars miss this trio when analyzing *FFVII* given their short appearances but incorporating them into future arguments will reveal that Barret is not an isolated case and poor representation of Blacks is endemic to both the American and Japanese version of *FFVII*.



Figure 18: Rude punching the ground to send a shockwave at Cloud.

In the years since *FFVII*'s release, character designer Tetsuya Nomura and writer Kazushige Nojima have expressed that they were unaware of the racial implications of their work and attempted to avoid further stereotyping by redesigning Barret for the *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* (2005) CGI movie, which depicts the aftermath of the events of *FFVII* (Leone, see Fig. 19). Additionally, Square has advanced their localization processes so that “it has evolved from game translation to a fully integrated part of multinational and multilingual development and operation” (Consalvo 104). During *FFVII*'s translation, Nojima explained that they “just let the translators do what they thought was best” and did not take the localization process seriously until after the game’s extraordinary breakthrough success in the West (Leone). Indeed, the translator of *Final Fantasy X* (2001), Alexander O. Smith, did not have to spend any late nights desperately translating line after line of Japanese text like Baskett, and he also had direct contact with the game’s head writer to ensure he kept their vision intact (Consalvo 104). Nonetheless, that game received criticism for its characters of color, who many viewed as Jamaican stereotypes, demonstrating that the industry is still excluding their perspectives during

the localization process (Sang). Certainly, Japanese developers are continually surprised by accusations of racism in their work, such as the creators of *Resident Evil 5* (2005), who were shocked when their game was criticized for featuring a white protagonist fighting off hordes of African zombies (Papazian et al. 132). These examples illustrate the need for Japanese developers and the country in general to engage in a national conversation on race, because, without it, “lots of well-meaning people can end up holding ideas that have been widely rejected elsewhere” (Lee). Not only do these ideas affect Black Japanese people like Osaka and McNeil, as *FFVII* demonstrates, they also rebound to the West and disturb Black American gamers like Narcisse. Because Japanese video games like *FFVII* are consistently more successful in the West than other exported mediums, it is critical to include them in these national and international conversations on race as case studies for the detrimental cultural ideologies of Black people both countries share.



Figure 19: Barret's redesign in the *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* movie.

### ***Final Fantasy VII* as Camp: Scapegoating the Other**

“All right, everyone, let’s mosey.”

-Cloud Strife’s rousing speech before the final battle, *Final Fantasy VII*



While some Western fans of *FFVII* lament the game's poor translation for inhibiting their full enjoyment of the text, others celebrate these very flaws in a manner that is akin to essayist Susan Sontag's concept of Camp, as outlined in her seminal essay "Notes on Camp" (1964). In summary, Camp is the "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration ... a good taste of bad taste" (Sontag 1, 10). Even outside of its shoddy script, *FFVII* has many farcical moments that tap into this Camp vein. Indeed, Cloud and his party can battle bizarre enemies like giant robotic houses and obese Shinra executives, ride a dolphin to infiltrate an enemy base, and even engage in dramatic "slap fights" and squatting competitions with the antagonists. However, it was the game's lengthy crossdressing sequence that prompted one journalist to question in a 1997 review "Is *FFVII* the campest game ever?" and "Is this game from the mind of a madman?" (Davison). The reviewer ultimately blames these strange incidents on the "East-West Divide" but still admits he enjoyed them, which foreshadowed the rise of "J-cool products" in the West during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Davison, Papazian et al. 131). Japanese anime, manga, music, and video games "now hold a significant place in American popular culture consumer consciousness" thanks to the country's efforts to extend its soft power in the years since its 1991 economic collapse (Papazian et al. 130, Consalvo 190). Japanese video games specifically appeal to gamers who view them as "goofy or comical in ways that make them endearing" (Consalvo 33). Games like *Katamari Damacy* (2004) that are highly stylized, humorous and "hyper-Japanese" have found a community of devoted fans in the West and are reminiscent of the fascination with Japanese art at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Consalvo 5, see Fig. 20). All of this is to say that many gamers find enjoyment in products that present Japan as the Other, a playground of exaggerated foreignness that inherently appeals to a sensibility like Camp that is "disengaged and depoliticized" (Sontag 2). As mentioned earlier, because the primary market for

*FFVII* was Japan, it is easily recognizable as a Japanese product. Indeed, Japanese characters and cuisines abound in the towns and markets the player visits throughout their journey, and certain action scenes play out like an anime. Additionally, the rushed translation by Baskett has led some players to believe that it was handled by a Japanese developer with a poor grasp of English. Certainly, laughable lines like “This guy are sick” and “Beacause [sic]... you are a puppet” are reminiscent of popular conceptions of so-called “English,” an offensive yet widespread term for inept attempts at English by Japanese speakers. The aforementioned *FFVII* fan who retranslated the game even received death threats by those who appreciated the Campy original script (Yin-Poole). Other examples of this include the Internet meme “All your base are belong to us” from the poorly-translated video game *Zero Wing* (1989) and the infamously unintelligible *Speed Racer* (1967-1968) English dub that has been parodied by American franchises like *Family Guy* (1999-).<sup>27</sup> Such campy appreciations of Japanese products have long been a staple in American culture, as evident by the fact that Sontag lists “Japanese science fiction films” as prime targets of this approach in the 1960s (6). By framing *FFVII* as a purely Japanese product, American gamers interpret Barret as simply a result of Japanese ignorance, and thus consider his stereotyping as “foreign to their own views” when in fact his characterization was largely influenced by American culture (Papazian et al. 131). Sontag adds that “things are campy when we become less involved in them” and when they are “naïve” (7, 5). This is exemplified in the commercial discourse surrounding *Pen-Pen TriIcelon* (1998), a Japanese racing game exported to the West that, like *Damacy*, appealed to gamers seeking a bizarre Japanese gaming experience. Indeed, in a September 1999 edition of *Dreamcast*<sup>28</sup> *Magazine*, a writer described it as belonging to a group of “weird-ass Japanese games [that have] this inexplicable gravitational pull” (“A Big Night”). An article published in the magazine two years later showcased

“forbidden games of Japan [that were] so Japanese they violated all import requirements for cuteness and weirdness” (“Forbidden”). Considering the magazine’s purpose is to sell games, the writers found success in ascribing imported Japanese with exotic qualities that present them as the mesmerizing Other in the Western gaming community’s imagination. *TriIcelon* features a grotesque caricature of a Black man named “Unga Pogo,” the leader of the game’s jungle course (see Fig. 21). With his exaggerated lips, fangs and straw hat, Unga Pogo is reminiscent of American cartoon portrayals of Blacks as animalistic, lazy and primitive. While he is not explicitly mentioned in the magazine review, by framing the game within the framework of an exoticized and intriguing product, the writer permits gamers to view him as strictly the result of the Japanese Other and thus not applicable to their own society. The fact that such a stereotype could even bypass the localization process in 1999<sup>29</sup> demonstrates the deflective power of scapegoating Japanese developers enjoyed by Western localizers. Furthermore, these interpretations “produce the same pleasure as patently offensive and even illegal forms of racism,” and result in the recirculation of stereotypes in fandoms (Papazian et al. 133).



Figure 20: The hyper-Japanese aesthetics of the popular *Katamari Damacy*, a key example of J-cool products finding success in the West.



Figure 21: The disturbing caricature of Black men found in *Trilcelon* that is representative of the enduring power of Black stereotypes in Japanese pop culture.

Certainly, in the years since *FFVII*'s release, American popular culture has embraced Barret's characterization as an amusing Japanese understanding of Black people in a playful yet harmful manner. They also view him as an Orientalized interpretation of Baracus while disavowing the character's racial implications in the original American text. For example, in a popular 2006 Newgrounds animation parody of *FFVII*, Barret continually calls Shinra goons "fools," referencing Mr. T's catchphrase, "I pity the fool," and rages with murderous intent throughout the entire video (van der Weide, see Fig. 22). In the *Final Fantasy 7: Machinabridged* series by TeamFourStar, a YouTube channel dedicated to anime and video game lampoons, Barret is named Mr. T before the player renames him Barret, and he additionally shouts and speaks in extreme slang (TeamFourStar). Square itself has played with this prevalent comparison, as the King VERMIN! optional boss enemy in *Final Fantasy X-2* (2003) takes its name from a popular ridiculous Barret quote, and part of its in-game description reads that "Its fire attacks are a dead giveaway that it's in charge, foo." Even when Barret is not

directly compared to Mr. T, parodies of *FFVII* always portray him as swearing and yelling excessively, such as in the obligatory *Robot Chicken* (2005-) *FFVII* parody (*Final Fantasy Burger Chain*, see Fig. 23). Within the realm of American pop culture, Barret is thus viewed as an alien understanding of Black people that is characteristic of the Orientalized Other. However, in impishly embracing this stereotype, *FFVII* fans belittle the discrimination faced by Black Japanese people as well as conceal the transnational processes that led to them in the first place. Furthermore, “otherings have historically been used to justify colonial domination,” and the hyper-Orientalized understanding of *FFVII* is a remnant of this legacy (Papazian et al. 141).



Figure 22: A stereotypical depiction of Barret in a Newgrounds animation.



Figure 23: Barret is portrayed in this Robot Chicken parody as constantly grimacing, yelling, and swearing.

Because of *FFVII*'s tremendous success and aggressive marketing in the West, it is viewed as representative of the JRPG genre as a whole by Western audiences, and thus it is used a framework for their parodying. Mainstream pop culture texts like "The Console" (2017) episode of *The Amazing World of Gumball* (2011-2019), a critically-acclaimed Cartoon Network series, that parody JRPGs frequently employ *FFVII* as a central source of ridicule, and so stressing to fans and mainstream artists alike the osmotic cultural influences on *FFVII*'s development will serve as a microcosm for better understanding Japanese video games in general (see Fig. 24). As Stuart Hall notes, "meaning is, in the end, interpretation," so presenting a more complete picture of *FFVII* will encourage white fans with the privilege of disengagement from these tropes to stop Othering Japan and recirculating stereotypes of Black people as angry and violent because of the consequences they hold on a global scale (18).



Figure 24: “The Console” episode of *The Amazing World of Gumball* that explicitly parodies *FFVII* and JRPGs in general. Note here that Gumball (left) is sporting Cloud’s iconic spikey hair.

### Conclusion: What Games Can Be

“There ain’t no getting offa this train we on till we get to the end of the line.”

-Barret Wallace, *Final Fantasy VII*

While this essay has touched on critical aspects of Blackness in *FFVII*, it is in no way a complete picture of the issue and should instead be viewed as a foundation for scholars to further unpack the game’s international influences and meanings. For example, the script produced by Baskett served as a reference for German and Spanish translators of *FFVII*, and so investigating the portrayal of Barret in those localizations will open up new inroads for understanding the osmotic cultural relationships those countries share with America. Additionally, this paper does not consider Black characters in other *Final Fantasy* games, such as Sazh Katzroy in *FFXIII* (2009) and Kiros Seagill in *FFVIII* (1999) and analyzing their translations could expose how Square’s localization practices have evolved or stagnated in the past few decades. Certainly, since *FFVII*, Square has tried “to create better localizations and see the process as integral to a game’s release,” and their portrayals of Black characters in more recent texts could measure their success as well as reflect changing cultural attitudes (Consalvo 117). Finally, comparing the 2020 Remake’s characterization of Barret with that of the original text could prove to be a more

concentrated case study of the progression of JRPGs and their localization practices, as well as the influence of more advanced cinematic techniques on development.

Unpacking the portrayals of Blackness in significant texts like *FFVII*'s robs them of their naturalization, and reveals the circular influences of other mediums, cultural forces and histories, and fan reactions that can be interrupted and reshaped to produce games that portray people of color as *people*. To aid in the longtime quest for the medium's legitimatization, developers need to look critically at their sources of inspiration and invite different perspectives to participate at each level of the creative process. Video games *can* provide stories that celebrate Black history and simultaneously empower Black gamers, such as *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012), a favorite of Narcisse that follows an 18<sup>th</sup> century slave rebellion ("The Natural"). Gray and Leonard cite *Hair Nah* (2017) as another example of a video game that uses the medium's full potential to address issues facing Black people, in this case their "hyperpolicing and surveillance" (1, see Fig. 25). Black gamers also deserve a space to relax and unwind without being affronted with distressing stereotypes and tropes. Indeed, journalist Ash Parrish "choose to process her pain" following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 by exploring the colorful and consoling world of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), a Nintendo video game focused on collection and customization ("Tired"). As a white gamer who has lovingly played and replayed *FFVII* for nearly a decade, I encourage other white gamers to take a second look at their treasured games and meditate on what exactly makes them appealing to reflect on their own unconscious biases and better support their fellow gamers of color.





Figure 25: A screenshot from *Hair Nah*, a game in which the player swats away white hands from touching the Black woman's hair, demonstrating the potential for games "to give voice to the experiences of Black women and other marginalized communities" (Gray et al. 4).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *Final Fantasy* games are (with a few exceptions) their own story and universe, meaning that they are not sequels to each other. This approach is credited with helping *FFVII* find such a large audience in the West.

<sup>2</sup> Jenova was actually planning on taking the name Cloud, the protagonist of *FFVII*, but his friend beat him to it.

<sup>3</sup> The 2020 Remake is actually the first in a series of remakes that each cover and expand upon one part of the original story of *FFVII*. The entry released in 2020 presents roughly the first quarter of the original game.

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, *Gone with the Wind* is still listed as the Fourth Best American Film of All Time by the American Film Institute, and remains the highest-grossing box office film ever, accounting for inflation (Spangler).

<sup>5</sup> The first film in the franchise also exploited her stardom, as it was titled *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001).

<sup>6</sup> The first *Silent Hill* even features a “blooper reel” during the credits, treating their CGI characters as if they were actors having fun on set.

<sup>7</sup> Also known as chanbara cinema.

<sup>8</sup> An earlier Nintendo console released in 1983 that was succeeded by the Super Nintendo Entertainment System and the Nintendo 64.

<sup>9</sup> By 1999, almost every major third-party studio would produce games for Sony because of the economic and practical advantages of working with CDs instead of cartridges (Oral History).

<sup>10</sup> This is especially true of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, the second installment in the series. The film features scenes of Indians dining on live snakes and “chilled monkey brains,” as well as ripping the heart out of a human sacrifice. The day is ultimately saved by Indiana Jones, the white college professor turned adventurer.

<sup>11</sup> While the level’s name is an obvious spoof of the *Dragnet* franchise, it exclusively parodies the *Cops* series.

<sup>12</sup> Square merged with its competitor Enix to form Square Enix in 2003. It is also worth noting that Square used to produce games solely for Nintendo consoles until *FFVII*, as its developers’ lofty ambitions necessitated the more advanced hardware of Sony’s PlayStation (Wolf et al. 180).

<sup>13</sup> Budgets are adjusted for inflation up to 2017.

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<sup>14</sup> LaFontaine is best known for his signature catchphrase, “In a world where...”

<sup>15</sup> *FFVII*'s Game Over screen fittingly features a torn film reel that represents the game.

<sup>16</sup> This insert was written by one of the magazine's contributors.

<sup>17</sup> Such fantasy tropes are now considered problematic because they suggest that some races (orcs, goblins, etc.) are inherently evil (Parrish). An examination of their role in the first six *Final Fantasy* games could be the subject of an entirely different paper.

<sup>18</sup> There are naturally exceptions: Due to their more limited budgets, Indie developers especially rely on the gameplay mechanics established by juggernaut 2D series like *Super Mario Bros.*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and *Castlevania*.

<sup>19</sup> Kurosawa was famously inspired by the films of John Ford. Years later, the Japanese director's films would rebound to inspire George Lucas' *Star Wars* franchise.

<sup>20</sup> In the world of *FFVII*, SOLDIER is an acronym for Shinra's top military force.

<sup>21</sup> In fact, the dubbed voices of Black characters in imported media to Japan are frequently technically modified to sound “coarse, deep-throated, or high-pitched,” even when the original speaker's voice is “race-neutral and dialect-free” (Russell 18).

<sup>22</sup> Baracus wears the attire of several other American minority groups, such as indigenous Americans, as represented by the feathers he sports.

<sup>23</sup> *FFVII* is such a massive game that it separates its story into three discs.

<sup>24</sup> It is mistranslated as “Ungarmax” in some versions of *FFVII*.

<sup>25</sup> Granted, the scene may be missed by first-time players, but it is still a significant display of Barret's anger being played for laughs.

<sup>26</sup> Baskett also seems to have included obvious references to Baracus as winks to the audience. For example, Barret's catchphrase “There ain't no gettin' off this train we're on” is oddly like

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Baracus' own catchphrase, "I ain't gettin' on no plane." In a conversation between Barret and Cloud, Barret exclaims "I was a foo' to believe you," clearly referencing Mr. T's iconic catchphrase, "I pity the fool!"

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1wLLRr8Cdc>

<sup>28</sup> The Dreamcast is a console released by Sega in 1998 to compete with the Sony PlayStation and Nintendo 64.

<sup>29</sup> *TriIcelon* was released in 1998 in Japan but localized and released in America in 1999.

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Leone, Matt. "Final Fantasy 7: An Oral History." *Polygon.com*, 9 Jan. 2017, [www.polygon.com/a/final-fantasy-7](http://www.polygon.com/a/final-fantasy-7).

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Nomura, Tetsuya, director. *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*. Visual Works, 2005.

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function in society, and how they both disgust and fascinate Japanese people. This paper provides crucial evidence on how *FFVII*'s developers conceived Barret and the game's other Black characters.

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Wolf and his coauthors describe the creation and success of the Sony PlayStation, specifically how it differentiated itself from competitors through its superior graphics.

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They also offer context on the transitioning video game industry in the 1990s, and how developers relied on film and television in devising their innovative games.

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Yin-Poole reveals that one *FFVII* fan was so disappointed with Baskett's English localization he retranslated the entire game himself. The angry reactions this fan received by the *FFVII* fandom suggests that some fans of the game found Baskett's translation to be endearingly horrible, and points to the larger phenomenon of J-cool products.

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