

Systemic Racism in Gaming: A Critical Race Theory Perspective on Representation and Customization

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Background

CRT is the theory that **racism** serves to uphold structures of **power** and government, and that it is embedded in the **core** of societal interactions and constructions.

- The belief is that racism is not only **taught** but socially constructed and **reinforced** throughout society to uphold the structure built to keep people of color out of power positions.
- Video Games have put Black and Latinx characters in demeaning and depriving roles such as villains **gang members** **slaves** and much worse.
- Online gaming culture also fosters racial harassment as many players of color deal with racism and social degradation with **slurs** limited character customization, or having to **pay** to use their skin or hair.
- The purpose of this study will be to examine how players of color perceive and experience racial discrimination and representation in gaming.

Research Questions

Male, Female, Other, Non-Binary?	What type of video games interest you? - What about them interest you?
Age Group? • 18-24	
• 25-31	Do you use console or computer? Tell me about it.
• 32-38	
• 39-45	Key Question : What is your ethnicity? How has this made you feel?
• 46+	- Have you ever received any backlash or discrimination for it?
Marital Status?	
• Currently not in a relationship	Have you ever had trouble customizing your character like yourself because limited access or other obstacles like paying for skin tone or hair?
• In a relationship	
• Married	What is your favorite comfort game of all time? - Tell me what's your favorite part about it?
Income Range Yearly	
• \$0 – 19,999	
• \$20,000 - 39,999	
• \$40,000 – 59,999	
• \$60,000 – 79,999	Before we conclude, is there anything you would like to add or say?
• \$80,000+	

References

<https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/leveling-up-representation-depictions-of-people-of-color-in-video-games>
https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/violent-video-games-and-young-people
<https://qz.com/1433085/the-era-of-white-male-games-for-white-male-gamers-is-ending>
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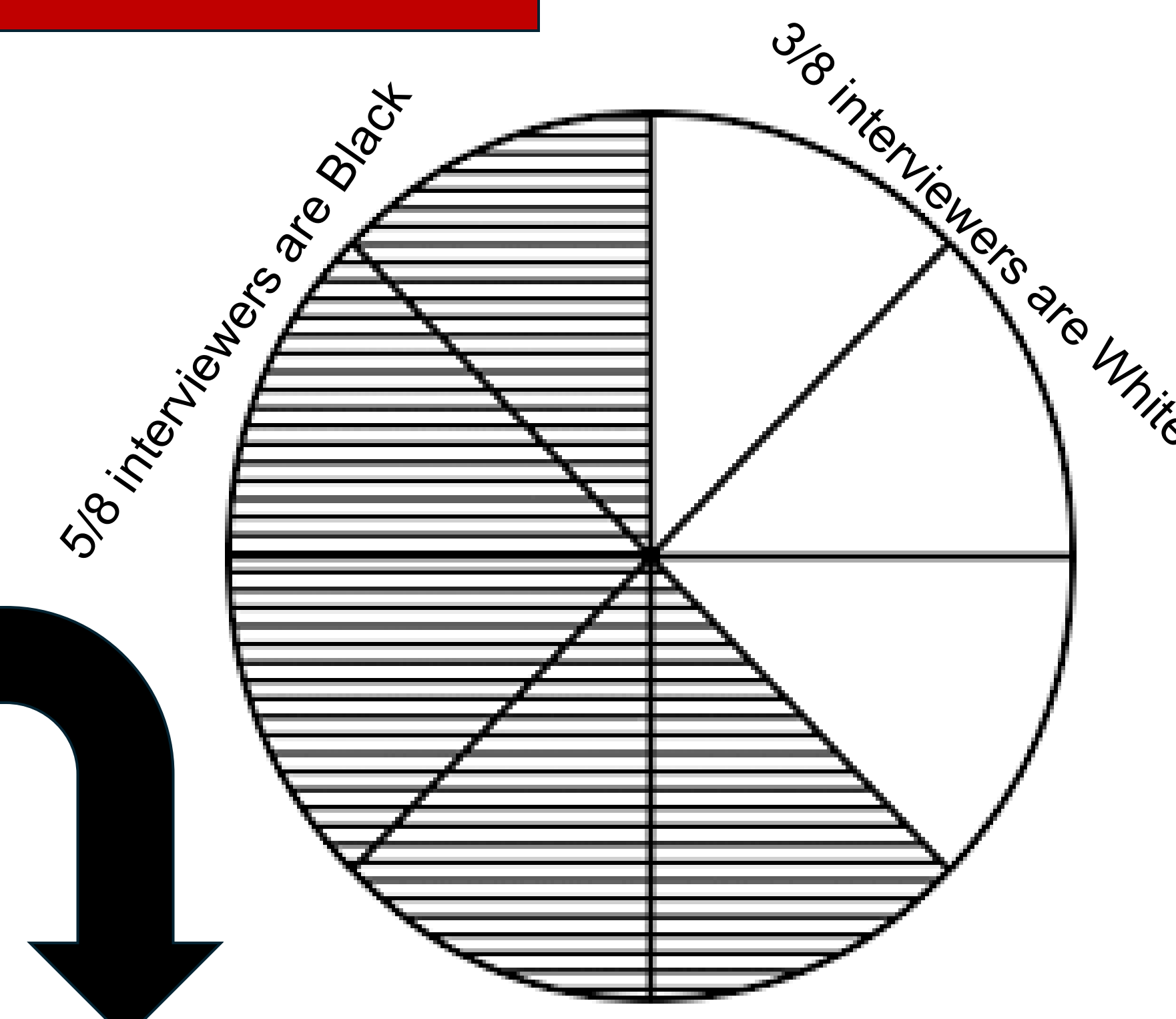
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Findings

Limited & Stereotypical Representation

"Every game I play, Black characters are either gang members or the main villain." - Malik Ridgely

- **87.5%** of interviewers could not name more than 5 games with Black or Latino main protagonist characters.
- "A 2015 study showed that **83%** of non-Hispanic Black teenagers play video games, compared to **71%** of Caucasian teenagers, with **69%** of Hispanic teens not too far behind." - Nadine Dornieden, Independent Lens in Lifestyle
- "In a 2001 report of the U.S. Surgeon General on the topic of youth violence made a similar judgment. Some meta-analyses of the literature — reviewing psychological research studies and large observational studies — have found an association between violent video games and increased aggressive thinking and behavior in youths." - Harvard Medical School
- Many young black and Latino people are being led by false narratives of only being in gangs and evil people with no positive Black or Latino main characters.
- According to the latest Independent Game Developers Association (IGDA) Satisfaction Survey, White or Caucasian people make up **68%** of video game industry workers while their colored counterparts only make up **13%**.



Paywalls to Be Me

"For years, there have been issues with customizing a character to look like myself. Especially hair and skin tone." - Jeron Porter

- "It's like when you're a kid trying to color yourself and you have either the brown or black crayon. I don't look like that and have **no** other options." - Mykhia Todd
- The community, even white counterparts, know there is a great disparity in customization options between different races.
- White characters tend to have around **30+** different options per game while Black, Latino, and other ethnicities can have around **8 – 12** options for hair and skin.
- Some Caucasian players did not know that Black people, in certain games, have to **pay** for their specific hairstyle to be useable.
- Ex: Monster Hunter Rise, The First Descendant, and NBA 2k.
- 100% of the Caucasian interviewers had no clue that African Americans had to buy hairstyles to be themselves.
- Customization is a core element to enjoying many RPG-style games as it allows for you to be apart of another world, but due to paywalls, those dreams have been cut short for many Black and Brown players of the community.

Racism: Skin Based Making

62.5% of interview participants have been racially **discriminated** against online through the gaming community or in-game.

- That **62.5%** was all minorities (Black and Latino).
- **100%** of interview participants have been witness to racial discrimination or worse.
- "Yes, it's very awkward and saddening as I wish there was more I could do, but I am scared." - Lynn Richards
- Many Black and Brown players get used to the discrimination, as there is nothing they can do about it.
- "You get used to it because what else can you do?" - Mykhia Todd
- More regulations need to be put in place to create a fair gaming community for all minorities.
- Caucasian males stand at the forefront of all groups of people in a power position no other race can think to obtain. Blacks and browns are **demoralized**, **villainized**, and used to keep the set white foundation in gaming.
- These three themes show a skim of the results that were found with these interviews, each one telling their experience in hopes of a more equal gaming community. Critical race theory is abused in almost every social construct or source of government.



Acknowledgements

Methodology

Participants: 8 avid gamers engaged in online gaming communities.

Recruitment: Voluntary sign-up; mix of in-person and Zoom/Discord interviews.

Data Collection: 30–40-minute semi-structured interviews; participants could use pseudonyms.

Analysis: Thematic analysis: identifying recurring ideas and experiences, then draw an informational conclusion.

Discussion & Future Research

- The purpose behind this research is to show how Critical Race Theory (CRT) applies to other social communities outside of government, such as the gaming industry. I felt it was a great demonstration on how racism is not only taught but constructed and reinforced within social systems.
- The video game industry provides a great example of this theory, as both in-game portrayals and player interactions reinforce racial stereotypes and inequalities.
- The objective of this study is to generate awareness and advocate for changes that promote equity in not only gaming culture and content, but other social communities facing the same racial issues as we are.
- In the future, these results can be used to refer back to experiences and use them as references towards bettering the gaming community, its equity, and the fair distribution of customization and positive roles between races.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research results confirmed that Critical race Theory is present in the gaming community from implications such as customization, paywalls, stereotyping, and blatant racial discrimination. These results can be applicable in the future towards more projects not only in gaming. They have the same structure & foundation that all social structures are created with. They could also be applied to video game studies that can help improve customization options, equal & fair representation of all races positively, and a welcoming community for all players.