

# Black Feminist Epistemology as a Critical Framework for Equitable Design

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**CURRENT  
STATE  
OF  
AFFAIRS**

**COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC**

More than  
**116,033,175**  
reported cases

More than  
**2,576,206**  
deaths worldwide

**CIVIL UNREST**

Police-sanctioned  
**BRUTALITY**

Murder by white civilians just for  
**BEING BLACK**

U.S. Capitol sieged by

**INSURRECTIONISTS**

# Critical Frameworks for Wicked Problems

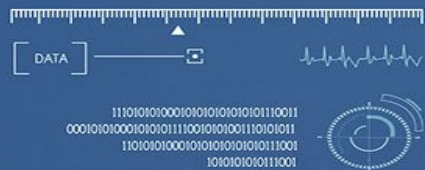
Critical frameworks:

- ***make salient the human condition***
- ***the manifestation of social inequities***

# How can we leverage Black feminist epistemology as a critical framework for equitable design?

## *Key Takeaway 1*

**Understand the role that technology and innovation play in the oppression of historically excluded groups.** (Benjamin, 2019; Brock, 2011; Brown, 2015; Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Eubanks, 2018; Everett & Watkins, 2008; Howard & Irani, 2019; Noble, 2018)



Jones, 2020

# How can we leverage Black feminist epistemology as a critical framework for equitable design?

## *Key Takeaway 2*

**Use our power and privilege to create more equitable experiences for historically excluded populations.** (Carey et al., 2020; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020; Dillahunt & Lu, 2019; Dombrowski, 2017; Martin-Hammond et al., 2020; Rankin & Irish, 2020; Pinkard et al., 2020)



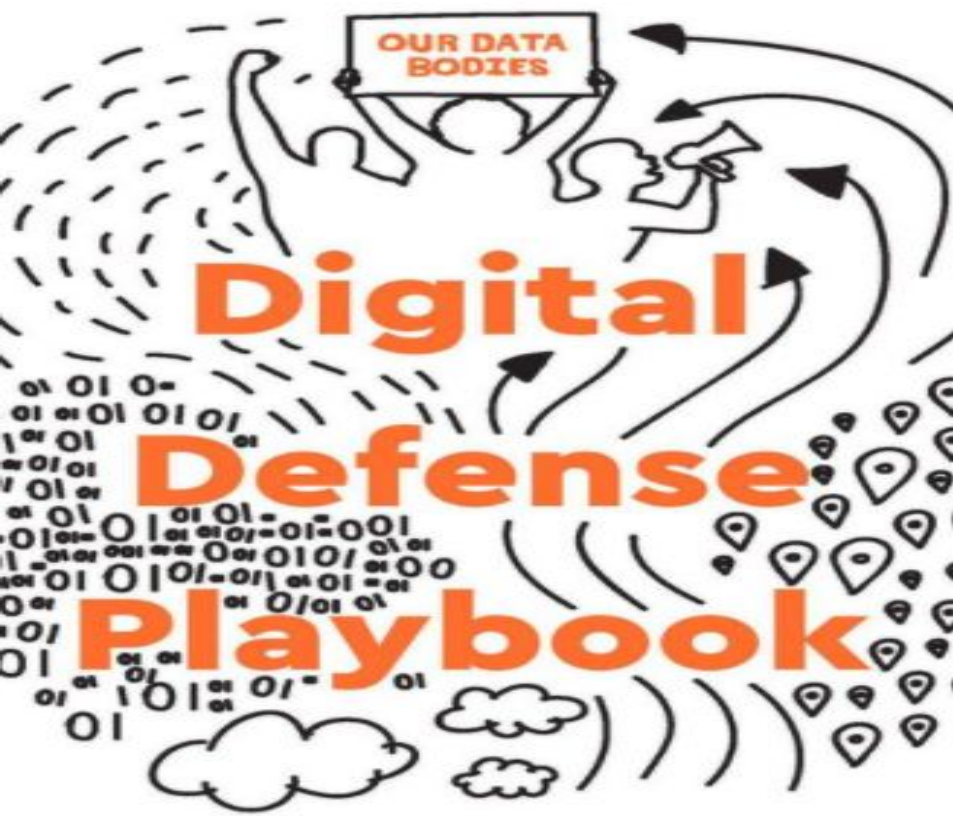
**Stern, 2018**

# How can we leverage Black feminist epistemology as a critical framework for equitable design?

## *Key Takeaway 3*

**Do the necessary work to ensure that the design and appropriation of technology does not perpetuate the oppression of historically excluded groups.** (D'Ignazio et al., 2020; Erete et al., 2020; Harrington et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2019; Rankin et al., 2020)





Community Power Tools  
for Reclaiming Data



Herramientas de Empoderamiento Comunitario  
para el Reclamo de Datos

# Roadmap

Overview of Black  
Feminist Epistemology

Exploring Black Women's  
Gameplay Experiences

Black Feminist Thought as  
a Critical Framework for  
Game Design

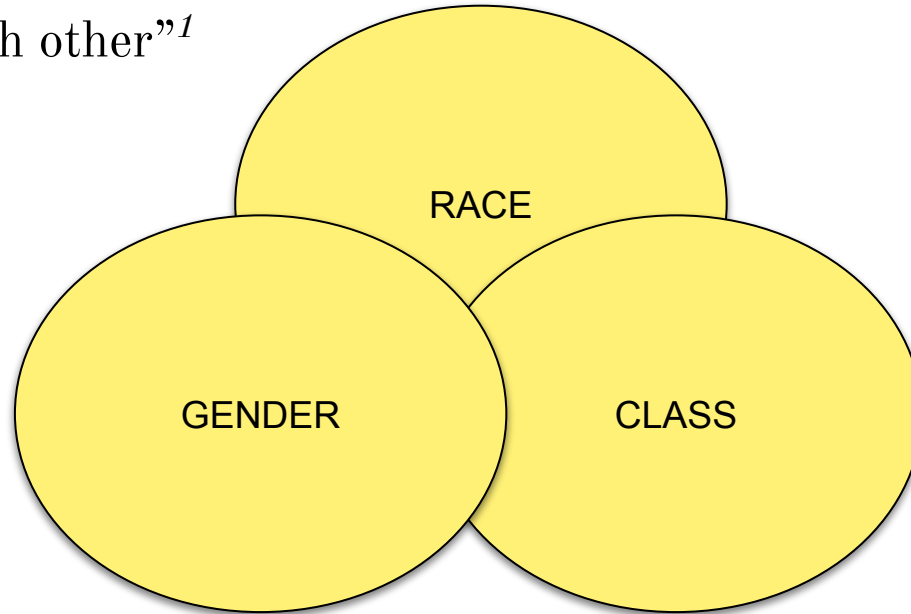
# Black Feminist Epistemology

- Ways of knowing are informed by **Black women's lived experiences.**
- Black women are **intellectuals** or **agents of knowledge.** (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984)
- Black women utilize **their "outsider within" status.** (Collins, 1986; Harding, 1984; hooks, 1989)



# *Intersectionality illuminates the human experience.*

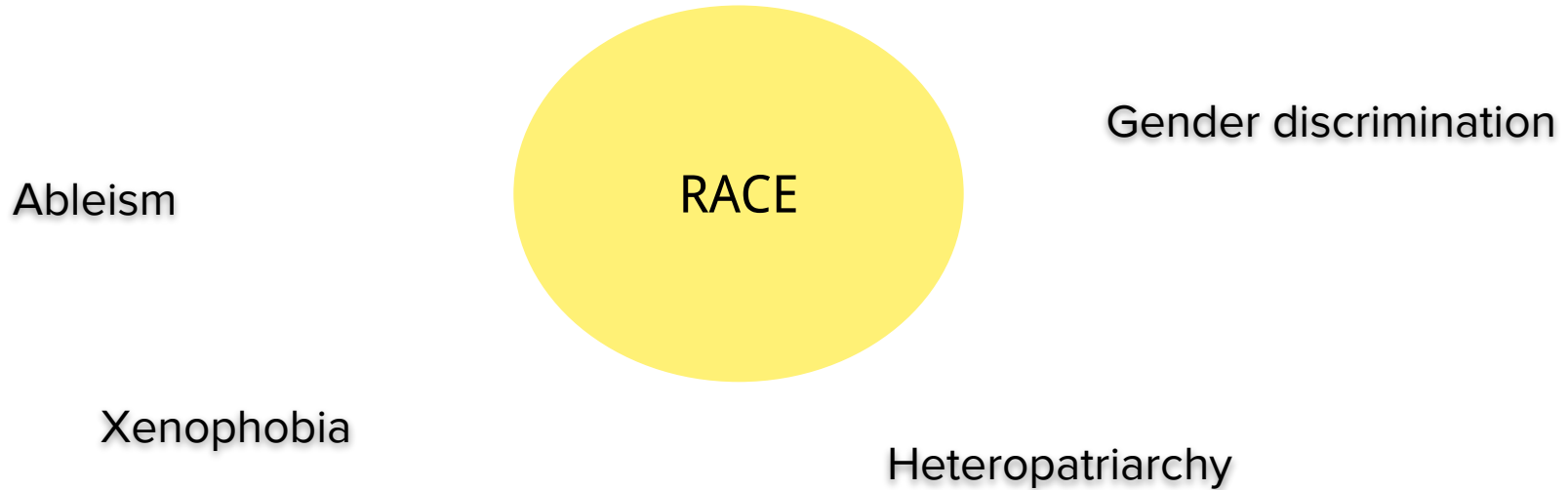
“When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other”<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>*Patricia Hill Collins & Sirma Bilge. Intersectionality. 2016*

# Intersectionality *is...*

“...a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences.” (Collins & Bilge, 2016)



# Black feminist thought...

*“For African-American women, the knowledge gained at intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the **subjugated knowledge of Black women’s critical social theory**. As a historically oppressed group, **U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression...** it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like - but the purpose of **Black women’s collective thought** is distinctly different...The need for such thought arises because African-American women as a group remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice.” (Patricia Hill Collins, 2000)*

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## Why does intersectionality in gaming matter?

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“Things that are my everyday experience as a woman, and as a woman of color, are things that the white dude I work with isn’t actively ignoring, but he just doesn’t have the experience...”

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Kim Belair, script writer for Assassins Creed (Ortiz, 2018)

# Exploring the Plurality of Black Women's Gameplay Experiences

(Rankin & Han, 2019)

RQ1: What are the gaming behaviors, practices and trends of Black women?

## Setting & Participants

- Game night on all-female historically Black college campus
- 69 Black women
- Ages 18 – 34 years old
- Completed game questionnaire

RQ2: What factors promote and/or inhibit Black women's gameplay experiences and why?

## Setting & Participants

- Focus group discussion
- 8 Black women
- Probed game questionnaire responses



# Summary of Findings

Played games more frequently when younger

Played games when bored or physically immobile

Shared social activity with family & friends

Reported no incidents of racial slurs or gender discrimination

# What did we learn?



- Black women prefer the ubiquity of mobile and puzzle games.
- Black women represent casual gamers who play games to kill time.
- Certain genres & social context contribute to a positive player experience.

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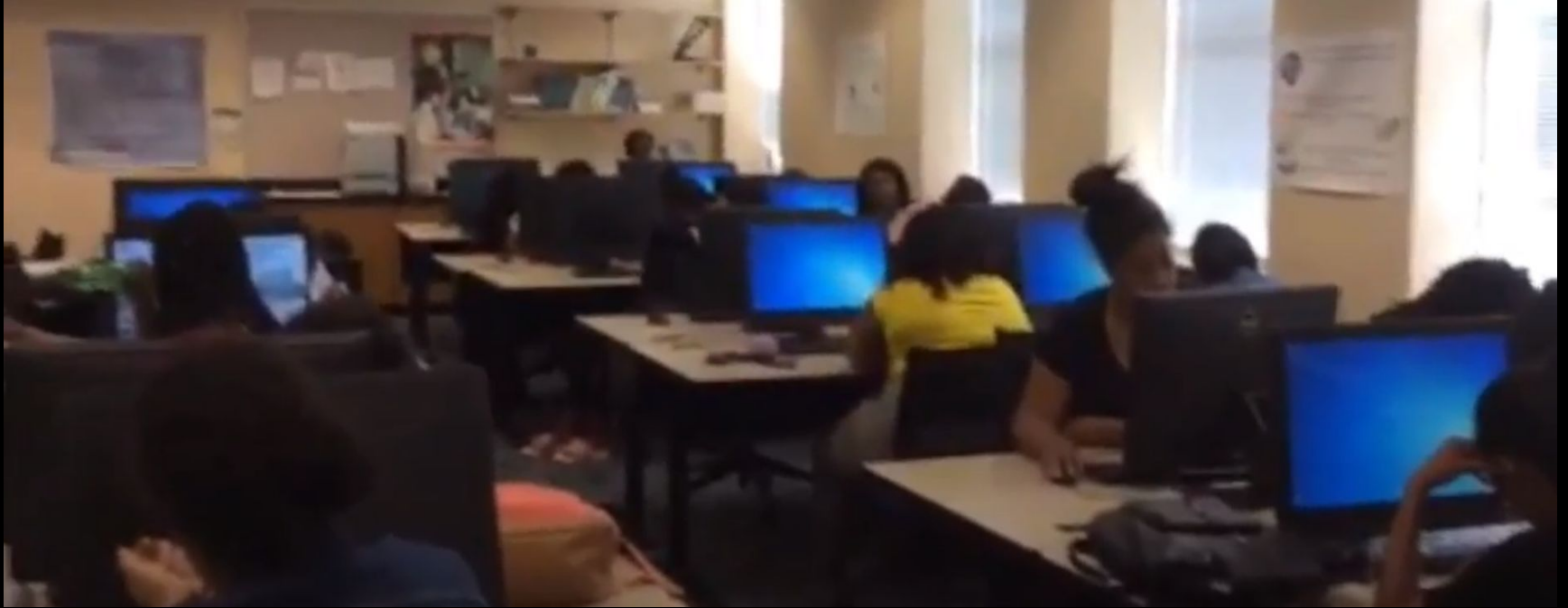
## *Key Takeaway 2*

**Use our power and privilege to create more equitable experiences for historically excluded populations.** (Carey et al., 2020; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020; Dillahunt & Lu, 2019; Dombrowski, 2017; Martin-Hammond et al., 2020; Rankin & Irish, 2020; Pinkard et al., 2020)



# Black Feminist Thought as a Critical Framework for Game Design

(Rankin & Irish, 2020)



RQ: How can we apply Black feminist thought as a critical framework for game design?

# Six Distinguishing Principles of Black Feminist Thought

- 1. Black feminist thought in the United States**
- 2. Black feminist thought and Black feminist practice**
- 3. Diverse responses to common challenges within Black feminism**
4. Dialogical practices and Black women intellectuals
5. Black feminism as dynamic and changing
6. U.S. Black feminism and other social justice projects



# 1. Black Feminist Thought in the United States



## 2. Black Feminist Thought and Black Feminist Practice

### Game design process

Week 1      Week 2      Week 3      Week 4      Week 5

#### Black Women design initial prototype

- Meet daily/weekly
- Define game concept
- Initial design specifications
- Define core game elements (objective, rules, etc.)
- Create game character sketches
- Select recipes
- Create mockups of multiple game scenarios
- Align game tasks w/L2 pedagogical practices
- Implement game on ARIS platform
- Test game to ensure it works
- Produce hi-fidelity prototype



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Sophia



Hola soy Sophia!

Hola, soy Sofia! I am a diecise assistant from Chile, South Ar what I want to be when I grov mundo renown cocinero and de heredar for me. My padre be able to make miles of Espe have a photographic memorie platos. I really hate cocina and and reassurance. Let's find out today!

08:56 98%

Soph

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Bizchoco y Fresas



**BIZCOCHO Y FRESAS** 1. 8" X 8" Onzas (125 ml) Vino de Oporto 3 1/2 tazas de medida (100 gr) Azu CUPS Fresas

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Torta Blanca



Torta Blanca:

Vino de Oporto >

Vino Tinto >



## 2. Black Feminist Thought and Black Feminist Practice



Week 6

Week 7

Week 8

### Black Women playtest prototype

- Complete pre-game questionnaire
- Playtest game for 30 minutes
- Engage in focus group discussion for 30 minutes
- Provide feedback via post-it note responses
- Suggest modifications to the game

### Black Women analyze feedback

- Review recordings
- Revise design specs
- Update mockups

# How can we leverage Black feminist epistemology as a critical framework for equitable design?

## *Key Takeaway 3*

**Do the necessary work to ensure that the design and appropriation of technology does not perpetuate the oppression of historically excluded groups.** (D'Ignazio et al., 2020; Erete et al., 2020; Harrington et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2019; Rankin et al., 2020)

# Findings

Intersectional  
game characters

Portrayal of the  
diversity of Black  
women's bodies

Culturally  
authentic game  
scenarios

# Games that accommodate intersectional game characters

"There are Black Spanish people and I feel like there is never any representation of them, so I think that would be interesting."

**Jennifer**



07:39 PM

## Meet Amara

Age: 24  
Gender: Female  
Focus(Skillset): Bilingual, creative  
Hometown: Miami, FL  
Backstory: Hola, I am Amara! An Afro- Latina American Singer from Miami, Fl. I love singing and dancing and incorporate my Dominicana roots in my songs and choreography. I also love to cook by blending many different cultural dishes all combined to make a style of cooking that is unique to my dominican culture and believe life should be a delicious experience both in and outside the kitchen.

07:39 PM

## Meet Jorge

Age: 42  
Gender: Male  
Focus(Skillset): Bilingual, Excellent pastry chef  
Hometown: Oyala, Equatorial Guinea  
Backstory: Hello, my name is Jorge! I am the head chef at my family's bakery " Sobrosos". From Tres leches cakes, to merengón we make all of your favorite sweet treats. One of my favorite inserts to make that is popular in my country is Nkate cake(Kongdoo) a delicious crunchy brittle made from peanuts. I love cooking with my family and believe there is nothing better than enjoying good food with the ones you love. Music is so a passion of mine and I enjoy writing it in my freetime.



### 3. Diverse Responses to Common Challenges within Black Feminism



Vanessa, a CS major and novice game designer, modeled NPC Sophia's physical appearance after her own.

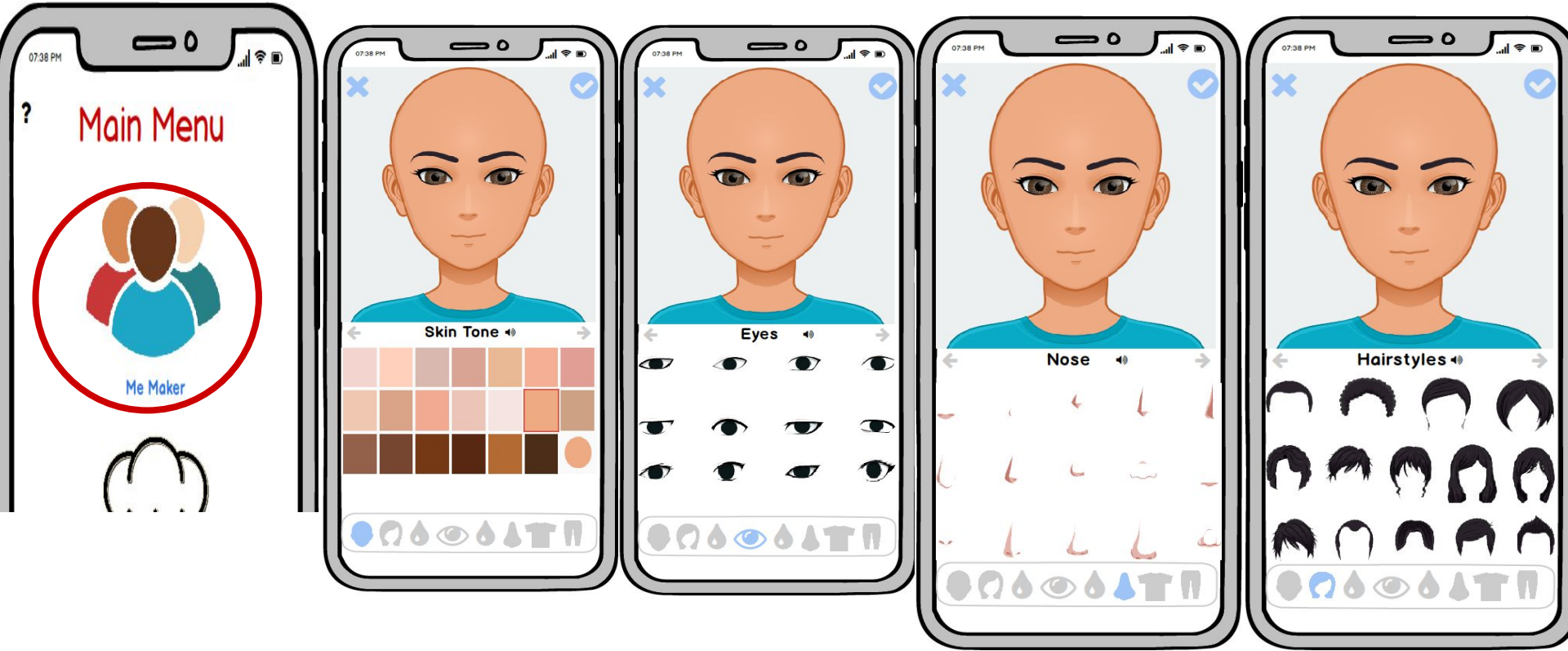
- a young Black woman
- light skin complexion with freckles
- blonde hair
- brown eyes

## Games that accommodate self-definition as virtual representation.

"You're going to get to a point where several different people are playing the game from other schools so it can be like the character can have different races and different like everything, like clothes and gender."

**Melanie**

### 3. Diverse Responses to Common Challenges within Black Feminism: **Portrayal of Black women's bodies in games (self definition)**



“Ceding the power of self-definition to other groups, no matter how well-meaning or supportive of Black women they may be, in essence replicates existing power hierarchies.” (Collins, 2000)

# What did we learn?



- Utilize safe spaces within the Black community as the site for game design.
- Engage Black women in dialogic interactions to support their testimonial authority.
- Acknowledge, respect and reconcile dissenting voices to accommodate different perspectives.

# How can we leverage Black feminist epistemology as a critical framework for equitable design?

## Key Takeaways:

- 1) Understand the role that technology and innovation play in the oppression of historically excluded groups.** (Benjamin, 2019; Brock, 2011; Browne, 2015; Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Eubanks, 2018; Howard & Irani, 2019; Noble, 2018)
- 2) Use our power and privilege to create more equitable experiences for historically excluded groups.** (Carey et al., 2020; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020; Dillahunt & Lu, 2019; Dombrowski, 2017; Martin-Hammond et al., 2020; Rankin & Irish, 2020; Pinkard et al., 2020)
- 3) Do the necessary work to ensure that the design and appropriation of technology does not perpetuate the oppression of historically excluded groups.** (D'Ignazio et al., 2020; Erete et al., 2020; Harrington et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2019; Rankin et al., 2020)

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