
Video Games and Slavery

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ABSTRACT

What are the implications of freedom and agency when a player exercises agency to prevent another player or a non-player character from acting freely? Such a scenario, taken to an extreme, would be that of slavery and in turn, would raise questions about the nature of freedom itself. Video games have recently begun to address questions of slavery in earnest although academic discussions on games have not yet caught up: the presence of slavers in *Fallout 3*, the portrayal of racism in *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2014) and the direct depiction of the Caribbean slave trade in *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft 2013) are extremely appropriate cases in point. This article compares the representation of slavery in video games to that of slave narratives in earlier media in order to examine how effectively digital games are able to con-

vey the horrors of slavery as a human condition and what they can teach about the notion of human freedom and agency per se.

Keywords

Postcolonialism, orientalism, empire-building games, alternative history, plurality

INTRODUCTION

One of the more controversial issues that video games have recently started addressing directly is that of slavery. Allowing the player to engage in choices that involve enslaving non-player characters within the games, liberating NPCs from slavery or experiencing the game from the perspective of slaves, video games are, arguably, the latest narrative medium to examine this traumatic aspect of human experience. The varied reactions of players to these scenarios bring out the complexity of human attitudes to freedom and liberty as well as the difficulty in describing or articulating the experience of non-freedom. This article aims to compare the video game experience of slavery to that of slave narratives in earlier media in order to examine how effectively digital games are able to convey the horrors of slavery as a human condition and what they can teach about the notion of human freedom and agency per se. In the light of this, the article will also move on to analyse the sense of freedom that video games themselves purportedly embody and offer a further comment on video game agency.

SLAVERY AS DEPICTED IN VIDEO GAMES

A notable early side-mission in *Fallout 3* (2008) has the protagonist involved in a scenario where (s)he is asked to help liberated slaves relocate to the symbolic Lincoln Memorial. As part of the 'Head of State' quest, the player can choose to help the leader of the slaves, Hannibal Hamlin (so named after President Abraham Lincoln's staunchly aboli-

tionist deputy) or reveal the location of the slaves' hiding place to Leroy Walker (named after the first Confederate secretary of war). The latter results in bad karma. If the player helps the slaves by killing the slavers, this has an impact on the end of the game and the video at the end shows a clip of the restored Lincoln Memorial. Siding with the slavers gives the player free access to the slaver settlement called Paradise Falls where (s)he can take up quests for the slavers.

BioShock: Infinite (Irrational Games 2013) is another prominent video game to critique slavery. Alejandro Quan-Madrid describes the gameplay, thus:

A nearby building has something different: A giant statue of Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, stands in the lobby. A painting in the dining room depicts Booth shooting a devil version of Lincoln. Where would you find such a statue? Unsurprisingly, it's Columbia's local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan [...] who dress in navy blue and have an occult flair. The giant emblem proclaiming "Protecting our Race" seems to be in the right place. (Quan-Madrid 2012)

Ken Levine, the creator of *BioShock* (Irrational Games 2007), has used the video game medium to highlight important, and often disturbing, issues; that he brings up issues of race and slavery, therefore, comes as no surprise. Levine has since been targeted by white-supremacist groups since he released his game and he states that "I had a very disturbing day where somehow I ended up on a white supremacist website," he told me. "And they said this is a game by — and I'm quoting them — 'the Jew Ken Levine' and it's a 'white-person killing simulator.' That's how they described it." (Quan-Madrid 2012).

Whereas *Fallout 3* and *BioShock: Infinite* address slavery as *one* of many issues in their vast open-world narratives, Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Montreal 2013) has the slave-trading island of Haiti as its setting and its protagonist, a liberated slave called Adewale has made it his mission to liberate the island from slavery. Like the other *Assassin's Creed* games, *Freedom Cry* is set in the historical context of the events that led to the Haitian revolution by Toussaint L'Ouverture.

As Adewale, the player gets to witness (and disrupt, should he choose to) slave-auctions and slave-beatings and to free captive slaves both within and outside the missions. Adewale also aids the Maroon revolution in overthrowing the French colonial rulers of Haiti and the game ends with him stating that although he will return to the Assassin's brotherhood, he intends to spend the rest of his life in trying to help all those who are fighting for freedom.

All of the above examples are those where the protagonist is a free man and has the agency to change the destiny of those who are enslaved. However, some games also tell their stories from the slave's perspective. The game's website describes it thus:

Thralled is an interactive experience that portrays the surreal journey of Isaura, a runaway slave separated from her newborn child and tormented by memories of a painful past. Set in 18th-century Brazil, *Thralled* follows Isaura as she traverses a nightmarish representation of the New World, reliving a distorted reminiscence of life in captivity and the events that led to the taking away of her baby boy. (Oliveira 2014)

The protagonist is stalked by a shadowy figure and whenever she comes up against obstacles, she must put her child down to climb over them. If the baby is left alone, he begins to cry thus alerting the shadow that is following them. The shadow steals the baby if he is left alone for too long. When interviewed about the characters, the developer, Miguel Oliveira, states that the shadow represents the slavers who might be chasing Isaura but that 'she's basically chased by this reflection of herself. And what that represents really is we're trying to base the visuals of the experience around cultural references that would relate to the character' (Oliveira 2014). What the video game does in representing the experience of slavery is indeed quite complex and relates to Isaura's experience of selfhood, vulnerability and the memory that haunts her.

The fourth example that comes to mind is the rather controversial *Playing History: The Slave Trade* (Serious Games.net 2014) game. In the game, the player is taken back in time to 'witness the horrors of the slave trade firsthand' as the slave steward on a slave-ship. The most contro-

versial part of the game is a section later named ‘Slave Tetris’ by players where the player has to stack slaves into the hold of a ship almost like the blocks in the cult video game *Tetris*. Not surprisingly, this has outraged people the world over and despite protesting that the game aimed to present the reality of slavery and that people were getting sidetracked by a ‘small 15 secs part of the game’ (Meier 2015), the designers have prudently removed the controversial section. Despite their protestations to the contrary, the depiction of the experience of the slaves is very problematic – to say the least. Especially, when instead of empathising with the slaves, as the game purportedly aims to make its players do, players are supposed to steer the slave ship to America, the conclusions are evidently disturbing. Likewise, when the player-avatar finds out that his sister has been enslaved and all he can do is to ‘stuff her into a slave ship and sail her across the Atlantic’ (Thomas 2015), then this causes further outrage. The horrific experience of chattel-slavery as it existed is impossible to depict and when an attempt to describe such extreme trauma is made, perhaps a different game mechanic, if any, needs to be employed. The fact that this game was designed for educating children is also worrying.

Playing History: The Slave Trade illustrates one key problem: the depiction of the experience of slavery is no easy task and whether it is at all possible is a moot question. This issue, however, is one that applies to all of the video games discussed here. Whether as the lone wanderer or the protagonist of *BioShock: Infinite*, the player engages with slavery second-hand. The horror of slavery is obvious, especially as a contrast to the protagonist’s sense of power to free slaves (or not, as the case may be). Both of these games plug into the history of slave trade in the Americas and refer to icons of the American Civil War to approach the question of slavery. The situation of slavery occupies only a small section of the game and the players move on to other parts of the vast open-world scenarios. In *Fallout 3*, the ‘Head of State’ mission is a side-quest and can be avoided by the player. In *Freedom Cry* and *Thralled*, the experience of slavery is more immediate, having been purportedly constructed from the memories of escaped or liberated slaves. Even by

stepping into the shoes of Adewale or Isaura, or indeed any of the protagonists, although it is possible to feel the deep trauma of the situation, the gameplay cannot present the horrors of slavery ‘first-hand’. A comparison with earlier slave narratives and the opinions on slavery across history would be helpful in exploring this question further.

THE AMBIGUITY IN TALKING ABOUT SLAVERY

Support and criticism of slavery existed concurrently from ancient history. Gregory Vlastos (1941) observes that Plato’s ideal republic contained slaves and that slaves were characterised by a deficiency of reason. According to Donald L. Ross (2008), Aristotle might have agreed with his teacher but his views are more ambiguous: for him ‘the anti-slavery position is wrong because slavery is based on nature, not mere convention; and the traditional pro-slavery position is wrong because the enslavement of war captives is based on convention and not nature’ (Ross 2008). As opposed to this rather notorious claim of slavery being *naturally* ordained, medieval theologians such as Augustine and Duns Scotus have proposed different theories. Augustine accepts slavery but as the result of sin rather than human nature and this he ascribes to the judgement of God. Duns Scotus sees two kinds of slavery as being just: ‘(1) voluntary servitude (e.g. to pay a debt) and (2) in the case of hardened criminals who might otherwise harm themselves or others. Yet, he says that (1) is “foolish” and still may go against the law of nature’ (Nielsen 2009). Later philosophers such as Locke would propose legislations stating that ‘every free man of Carolina shall have absolute power and liberty over his negro slaves’ (Rodriguez 2007; original usage), while ironically, writing that ‘the *natural liberty* of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule’ (Rodriguez 2007). Thomas Jefferson, famous for his declaration that ‘all men are created equal’, is believed to have owned six hundred slaves. In the Caribbean and the southern states of the U.S.A, there was widespread support for slavery. Samuel Johnson’s barbed query, ‘How is it

that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of slaves?’ would certainly be uncomfortable for many eighteenth-century American colonists. Many, however, would stubbornly deny the horrors of slavery on the grounds that the condition of the slaves was humane:

The slaves are all well fed, well clad, have plenty of fuel, and are happy. They have no dread of the future—no fear of want. [The slaveholder] is the least selfish of men. The institution of slavery gives full development and full play to the affections. (McGary and Lawson, 1993)

Against these positions, stronger arguments for abolition began to be voiced in later years and the tales of uninhibited cruelty and suffering began to be recounted about the Middle Passage journey of slaves from their African slavers to Europe and America. Olaudah Equiano, the author of one of the first popular slave narratives and abolition campaigner, describes his experience of being in a slave ship:

I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. (Equiano, 1789)

Quite a different reality often awaited slaves than the American plantation-owner quoted above seemed to have believed and again, the arguments pro and contra slavery were stated from these respective positions.

Bringing a considerable force to the abolitionist argument and at the same time countering the natural acceptance of slavery with the allegations of human guilt, William Wilberforce famously argued his case for the abolition of slavery in Britain in 1789:

I mean not to accuse any one, but to take the shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty—we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others; and I therefore deprecate every kind of reflection against

the various descriptions of people who are more immediately involved in this wretched business. (Wilberforce 1789)

The American reformer and former slave, Frederick Douglass, spoke in similar terms in 1852 in his famous Fourth of July speech where he criticised slavery in the American South stating that it was ‘inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony’ to drag a man in fetters to the temple of liberty. Nevertheless, even among abolitionist positions, there tended to be ambiguity. The agenda for *The New England Anti-Slavery Almanac* for 1841 seems to return to the philosophical positions of Plato and Aristotle on reason and slavery while, of course, advocating a different future for slaves:

Things for the Abolitionist to Do,

Speak for the Slave, 2. Write for the Slave, . . .

They can't take care of themselves. (Davis and Gates, 1991, iv; italics mine)

The history of the challenge to the slave-trade and its abolition in Europe, the United States and the Caribbean islands is too long and complex to recount in this discussion. What is obvious from this brief and incomplete outline is that the issue has, rather disturbingly, been one where there has been a lot of ambiguity. The experience of the slave, too, is not one that can be represented with ease. While the descriptions in the slave-narratives and the strong denunciations by the abolitionists make the trauma of slavery self-evident, as Douglass states:

The free human being “cannot see things in the same light with the slave, because he does not, and cannot, look from the same point from which the slave does.” The terms of the opposition here are “slave” and “free human being,” not black and white. (Davis and Gates, 1991, xiii)

The slave’s experience, including Douglass’s own, is described *after* the event and mostly from memory. The postcolonial scholar, Homi Bhabha (1994), describes the tragic lesson of slavery for the Haitian slave and liberator, Toussaint L’Ouverture and others as the realisation that they have a split consciousness, where, even in the egalitarian milieu of the

French Revolution and American Independence, for them ‘the reinvention of the self and remaking of the social are strictly out of joint’ (Bhabha 1994). To approach the experience of slavery in any sensible way, it is necessary to address the issues of selfhood of slaves and the memory through which they reconstructed their experiences in their narratives. As Bhabha points out, even in the reinvention of their selfhood, a split is evident especially when one considers how the ex-slaves see themselves within their social milieu.

Henry Louis Gates mentions the following anecdote to point towards the relationship between the absence of selfhood and enslavement:

It was a morning in April, sharp, crisp and clear, and we were rounding a bend in the Ohio River just below Wheeling when I caught sight of a strapping darky, an ax flung over his shoulder, jogging along on the Virginia bank of the river, singing as he went [...]

“Halloo, there! Where are you going?” I called to him. “Gwine choppin in de woods!” “Chopping for yourself?”

“*Han’t got no self.*”

“Slave, are you?” “Dat’s what I is.” (Wood 1897, 202)

Gates’s example poignantly illustrates the lack of selfhood and agency that characterises slavery; the slave’s experience when articulated is, therefore, a remembered experience and a description that is *after* the event. The slave-narrative is, it is being argued here, a *post facto* account and it is only when the transition from slavery to freedom has been made that this can be recounted from memory. The question arises now as to what happens in the video games that address slavery.

PLAYER REACTIONS TO SLAVERY IN VIDEO GAMES

The player’s experience in video games has been considered to be more immediate in that the player is directly involved in the context and has to execute non-trivial decisions to engage with the game; it has often been described as immersion (Murray 1997), involvement or incorpora-

tion (Calleja 2011) by various commentators. It is important to note that in the games that portray slavery, the player almost always plays as a free person – either as an outsider to slavery (*Fallout 3* and *BioShock: Infinite*) or a former slave (*Freedom Cry* or *Thralled*). For games such as the controversial *Playing History* episode, the player’s avatar is made into a caricature that scarcely has the player feeling involved in the scenario. One of the possible explanations is that it is impossible to play from the position of a slave as that involves an absence of agency and selfhood. Consider the anecdote that Gates narrates about the slave who is on his way to chop wood: even in a game such as *Freedom Cry*, the player can only engage with slavery by freeing the slaves and witnessing their condition, as they are either tortured, sold or imprisoned. On freeing the slaves, the interaction the player has with the NPCs (non-player characters) is limited to quickly said words of gratitude or mostly silence. What Adewale, the protagonist, thinks as he engages with the slaves he frees and what he remembers of his own previous enslaved existence are things that the player never gets to know. Isaura, in *Thralled*, is in turn, depicted as struggling to escape a shadow that may be her physical pursuers or the recollection of her past torments. For Adewale and Isaura, the experience of slavery is reconstructed through memory just as it is for the narrators of the slave-narratives such as Douglass. The player is forever unable to approach the trauma of slavery first-hand and to talk about it is to either reconstruct it through the remembered fears of Isaura and Adewale or to approach it as outsiders such as the Lone Wanderer or the protagonist of *BioShock: Infinite*, who are, as it were, tourists to the terrible world of slavery. Speaking about the issues of race in online and digital media, Lisa Nakamura has called the phenomenon of roleplaying other races ‘identity tourism’. In the games that address questions of slavery, however, if there is any identity tourism, it is certainly not possible from the perspective of the slave.

Whereas one would expect clarity in positions regarding slavery after its abolition in most parts of the world over a century ago, it comes as a surprise to see that the earlier ambiguities about the institution are as relevant as ever. *Fallout 3* actually has a mod that supports slavery and

enables those who do so to enslave NPCs. Just as Levine had remarked of the white supremacists who had criticised him, in *Fallout 3*, the *FFNCQ* mod boasts a ‘a complete new slavery system where almost every NPC can be enslaved, follow the player, be placed anywhere (also DLC spaces) and !! don’t !! get lost, aggressive or loose equipment [sic]’ (nexusmods 1999). The detailed attention to introducing a system of slavery clearly is symptomatic of rather problematic positions vis-à-vis one of the most tragic practices in the history of humanity. Often, the problem is not expressed in as clear-cut terms as a direct upholding of slavery. In the *Playing History* game, the designer’s aim ‘put the student in the middle of important and interesting points in history’ ended up being heavily critiqued across the world and called ‘at best, an inappropriate way of educating kids about slavery. On Twitter the game was called “dehumanising” and “sick”’ (Yin-Poole 2015). Similarly, *Freedom Cry*, as directly critical as it is of slavery, nevertheless turns the freeing of slaves into a rewards-system that has also been criticised as converting slaves into currency. As an article on *Kotaku* describes it:

Some of Chris Franklin’s comments touch on *Freedom Cry*’s biggest problem, namely the way the game’s mechanics essentially has the player treating freed slaves like a resource to purchase stuff. That mechanic is uncomfortably close to the way that slaves were used in the bondage that players are supposed to be freeing them from. (Narcisse 2014)

Clearly, from the extremely pro-slavery and racist stances to the more complicated inadvertent support, the differences in the reactions to slavery are quite obvious. Just as the philosophical positions on the topic show both marked polarisation and ambiguity, the same is true of video games. One sees a parallel in Alejo Carpentier’s fictional account of slavery in Haiti, at the end of which where his protagonist, the ex-slave Ti Noel, tries to make sense of his situation after returning to his country after slavery has been abolished. Just as he engages with his memories of slavery on a plantation on the island, he is drafted into forced labour by the former slaves who have now liberated Haiti. That Ti Noel is confused when faced with a situation akin to slavery by the so-called liberators of slaves is, therefore, hardly surprising.

CONCLUSION: THE VIDEO GAME AS A REMEDIATION OF THE SLAVE NATION

Akin to the slave narratives, as told in older media, the way in which the video games discussed here address the issue of slavery is fraught with both distance and ambiguity; yet, at the same time, the experience can be one of great trauma. When the player, faced with the ultimate non-agency of the situation of slavery thinks of the impossibility of play, the trauma is palpable not through the experience of play but the realisation of the absence of play. The video games discussed here illustrate the limits of play that are seen through the context of their own playing out. Taken in terms of larger questions of agency, the slavery video games also serve as a metaphor for the agency involved in play itself by pointing at the non-freedom or the always-extant other of the freedom that is perceived in play. Similarly, just as the slave-narrative serves as a genre that illustrates the limits of representation – in that it can only tell its story as a memory or a distant narration of its complex ambiguity and trauma – it can be argued that the video games discussed here too are a ‘remediation’ of this genre of narrative and carry forward its concerns and experience in similar ways.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin, probably the world’s best known novel about slavery, leaves its readers with the feeling of immense trauma, so much so that Abraham Lincoln supposedly greeted its author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, saying, ‘So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war’. Part of the trauma, however, is in the realisation that the trauma involved in slavery can never be expressed by any medium that allows freedom. The trauma is also one of ambiguity. Many contemporary readers denied the truth of the narrative and accused Stowe of fabricating unrealistic images. Some even sought support for slavery in the Bible. One and a half centuries from the publication of Stowe’s novel, video games such as *Freedom Cry*, *Fallout 3* and *BioShock: Infinite* face similar questions. Even walking in the shoes of the ex-slave or even the slave as an avatar, the trauma of non-freedom is palpable but still distant to the experience of play. Similarly, despite

the modern notions of diversity and respect, the support for virtual slavery within the games seems to raise the same old questions and the video game, then, remediates the narrative of slavery in its own way.

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