Videogames as Commemoration

When I tell people that I’m working on a project concerning videogames about slave revolt, the response is almost always one of surprise that such things exist. And I’m not speaking here of figurative representations, such as when an alien race enslaves humanity or a serving class of androids revolt. I’m looking specifically at digital games about historic transatlantic slavery and the strategies of resistance employed by the enslaved—games with badges for disobeying the master and points for freeing slaves and where an adventurous quest has been made of the journey of the fugitive following the north star to freedom. In some of these games, as the title suggests, the player must “kill the overseer” to advance.

Digital, interactive narratives may seem like a suspect medium in which to translate the experience of enslavement and resistance because of their association with entertainment and leisure and because of the poor optics of an enslaved person being reduced to an object directed by the player, whether the visual representation is literalized in a realist manner, or abstracted and suggested by a blinking dot traversing a plantation landscape, or never shown because the play is rendered in the first person point of view. Nonetheless, it seems productive that digital narratives can place limits on their own interactivity and thereby acknowledge the insufficiency of the medium to represent the particular historical trauma of transatlantic slavery.

Recently someone asked me if videogames can do anything that books can’t. Why, she asked, should we study videogames on this delicate subject matter, slave resistance? As this Forerunner will enumerate, videogames can enrich our complex relationship to the subject matter because, unlike a book, they are capable of
resisting the player. Imagine, I found myself saying to her, if you picked up a book and were reading the story of a rebel slave, but, at a certain point, the pages fought back against you: imagine that the page refused to be turned. Imagine if, at other points, you needed a password to reveal a passage. Imagine that you needed to prove to the text your worthiness to read it by solving a puzzle. Imagine if, after all of that, the ending erased itself, refusing to be legible. If the text could refuse admittance to the reader it would, firstly, parallel the themes of resistance and revolt described in the narrative. But secondly, and more importantly, it could underline the difficulty of our apprehension of the historic subject matter.

The recalcitrant text could point to the problems that exist with our historical record, as one kept by the oppressor, in the plantation ledger and the ship captain’s logs and bills of sale and notices posted for the recapture of runaways. The defiant book might resist contemporary readers’ consumption of the narrative as entertainment and prompt them to question their own investment in the character whose plight they are following. The obstinate narrative might mirror our culture’s resistance to memorializing rebel slaves in the same way that we laud other types of freedom fighters. But equally, such a book could respond differently to each reader, letting some pass to the next chapter where others were blocked, suggesting that some will have a different relationship to the material than others. The book’s intractability could be used to emphasize the historical distance between the contemporary reader and the person for whom enslavement was a reality. Finally, defying my easy translation to the simile of a book that refuses to be read, the videogame can operate as a meta-critique of its own form. In brief, it can call into question whether such important historical narratives should be translated into an interactive form at all.

Like most people of my generation, I grew up playing Nintendo and PC computer games—in the Ivory Coast in the late eighties and Morocco in the early nineties—but I have never been a gamer. My work to date, even when it was on zombies, has mostly side-stepped the medium of videogames for the simple reason that I’m
not very good at them. But I could not ignore these texts as objects of study when I discovered them because I am in the process of developing a longer monograph on commemorations of slave resistance. I'm particularly invested in those games that use a poetics of absence, what I'm calling here “the gap,” to foreclose the player’s complete immersion in the fiction, underscoring the problematics of the form’s interactivity and the illusory nature of the player’s occupation of the position of the rebel slave. Aside from my interest in what role the form of a videogame could play in enriching our relationship to the content, two questions motivated my interest in these digital texts, and the first was whether or not they could be considered “alternative monuments.”

Whereas many nations in the hemisphere (like Barbados, Brazil, Cuba, Guadeloupe, Guyana, Haiti, and Jamaica) have long celebrated histories of slave resistance in the public square, our own landscape in the United States is pocked with confederate memorials, and debate continues to rage about which histories are worthy of commemoration. Though we have memorials to abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, it is rare to find statues commemorating violent freedom fighters in the United States, and even the placement of historical markers has been protested at some sites, like the Great Dismal Swamp where Nat Turner purportedly hid after his rebellion. In contrast, one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who ordered the execution of every white man, woman, and child in the French colony that would become a sovereign nation, is honored in countless public memorials that stand watch over a country founded by the descendants of rebel slaves.

To get a sense of the disparity between our acknowledgment of resistance as compared to that of other nations, we might subtract the number of memorials from the number of known incidents of slave rebellion. Here's an extreme case: it is estimated that there were uprisings on one in every ten slave ships. David Richardson, director of the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation, counts 392 events of armed resistance against cap-
tors, with twenty-two foiled plots and still more attacks of slave ships by Africans ashore.\(^1\) And yet, there is only one memorial to shipboard slave revolts in the United States, the Amistad memorial in New Haven, Connecticut. Traveling in Haiti while writing my first book, I wondered, “where are our monuments to slave revolt, and if they aren’t, as in other countries, found in the public square, then are they to be found in other forms?” In brief, because mainstream U.S. culture is unwilling to celebrate slave resistance in the form of statuary and monuments, I wanted to explore media where this work was being done. It often falls to the arts to make up for this dearth, and works like performance artist Dread Scott’s 2019 slave revolt reenactment, Kerry James Marshall’s 2012 portraits of the leaders of the Stono Rebellion, and Colson Whitehead’s 2016 fantastical novel *Underground Railroad* reckon with this void.

The larger project that I am working toward will address material monuments that exist elsewhere in the Atlantic world, as well as alternative monuments to slave resistance in various forms, including the visual arts, literature, film, digital media like videogames and online resources, and memorialization in museums and upon historical sites. In particular, I’m interested in highlighting a productive use of absence in these commemorations. In a longer book project, I’ll attend to the work of memorializing and remembering, engaging specifically with theories of public memory more broadly, including how absences, lacks, and silences have been used to represent cultural trauma, as in Holocaust memorials. But I’ll also consider whether an absence of a monument can be considered an alternative monument.

Can monuments take other forms, including, even, the destruction of other monuments? Is the pulling down of a confederate statue by a group of protestors one of these “alternative monuments to slave resistance,” as I began calling them? Was one of

them the destruction of a stained-glass window depicting slaves that a janitor on the Yale campus had purposefully broken? Is the blank plane of glass that was installed in its place a monument to the cultural trauma of slavery and even, perhaps, a lament for our lack of memorials to slave resistance? If, in thinking about the gaps in our cultural landmarks as a kind of indicator, we make the immaterial material, that is, we take their absence as a thing worth thinking about, then we should also consider how absences within texts about slave resistance are themselves legible as signifiers. Indeed, the gap, the break, the blank space observed in many texts about slave resistance is a feature I want to read. In some places, lack may be a nod to the absence of concrete memorials. In others, it may be an acknowledgment of the non-status of the enslaved person. I want to stare not into the void, but at it.

In this study of videogames that depict strategies of resistance to transatlantic slavery, what I’m calling “the gap” creates a space to acknowledge the limitations of the text. In other places, I’ve written about the use of the gap to critique the archive and to highlight our dependency on a history written primarily by the slaveholder, where slave resistance is demonized when it is noted at all. The part of my research that I present here is my assessment of the role of silence, gaps, aporias, interruptions, fissures, and obstructions in the depiction of a historical reality that is problematically translated into a playable form.

I said earlier that two questions motivated my initial interest in these digital texts. My first concerned whether or not such games could be considered alternative monuments to slave revolt; my second query interrogates the problematics of rendering this history of


3. This is not like Fred Moten’s “break” but more like musical rest. Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
resistance *playable*. Diverse kinds of digital games can be counted among this cache: educational programs aimed mostly at children, with varying levels of interactivity and narrative, art games that we might consider among those “serious games” increasingly studied by videogame scholars, and major titles released for entertainment purposes, in which the player has direct control over slaves in revolt. The games defy easy categorization, as an art game may be more educational than an educational game, and an entertainment commodity might not entertain at all. But for the sake of the organization of this text and its readings of different types of games, I’ll rely, in part, on this inadequate taxonomy.

Some games invite the player to inhabit or control a runaway slave who is specifically based on the historical subject of the transatlantic slave trade while others aimed at mature audiences encourage the player to directly oppose and obstruct the mechanisms of the institution, for example by killing slavers and setting their human cargo free. In investigating the forms digital commemorations of slave revolt take, one aspect to be aware of is the level of engagement and interactivity they permit. Is the resisting slave fetishized? Is the avatar reduced to a commodity? The stakes of gamifying the historical rebel slave of the Americas is a vital part of this discussion. One issue that animates this study concerns the catharsis for the player or if, as an article profiling the last game I’ll discuss here suggests, such games foster empathy for the enslaved.⁴

I want to make it clear at the outset that empathy is and always has been a tricky issue in the consideration of narratives about the enslaved. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman gestures to “the assimilative character of empathy” in melodramas and abolitionist texts. The authors appealed to the readers to feel for the en-

slaved by performing an act of substitution, imagining themselves in the other’s place.⁵ This unfortunate operation is seen today in museum exhibits, such as when slave irons are displayed and patrons are invited to feel the heft of them, a larger phenomenon I’ve shorthanded with the phrase “Feel the Weight of these Chains,” in reference to a display at the London Museum of the Docklands exhibit, *London, Sugar, and Slavery.*⁶ It would be better, I would argue, to leave on these walls a blank space for the patron to wrestle with the incomprehensibility of the slave’s condition and the unfathomable choice to resist enslavement at considerable risk. My ultimate concern is not with how these games invite the player to incarnate the rebel slave, either to produce empathy or to wrestle with the past, but with how they productively *block* identification with the rebel slave.

This study includes most, but not all, of the videogames I’ve found in which a player is invited to play at slave resistance.⁷ The games profiled here make use of various techniques I’m gesturing to under the umbrella term “the gap,” devices that highlight the insurmountable distance between the contemporary gamer and the historical enslaved person in productive ways. There are many questions, which may only be raised at present, that demand a more substantive treatment by videogame scholars attuned to the

---


⁷. One game not addressed here is *Playing History: Slave Trade.* The game was lambasted for a scene in which the player had to stack bodies in a slave ship in a manner similar to the game *Tetris.* The backlash, in which journalists took to calling the game “Slave Tetris,” forced the game manufacturer to remove the scene in question, but the rest of the game is still highly offensive and not worthy of a lengthy discussion. See Dexter Thomas, “I Played ‘Slave Tetris’ so Your Kids Don’t Have To,” *Los Angeles Times,* September 7, 2015.
complexities of the mechanisms of play and ludic operations’ delicate control of the relationship between the player and the game. But I am not the person to take on this project. As a cultural historian with experience attending to the ways that the history of the transatlantic slave trade has been encoded in myth (specifically, in the figure of the zombie), my goal here is to provide a survey of some of the representations of slave resistance that I’ve encountered in a digital, playable form and to investigate how the poetics of such game narratives, and, specifically, the poetics of absence, limit the player’s role as a means of safeguarding the ineffable, the inexpressible, the unrepresentable nature of this history.

Bearing in mind both Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s acknowledgment that “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences”8 and Saidiya Hartman’s discussion of the historical personage’s “right to obscurity,”9 I observe the gap in these digital commemorations of slave revolt as productive spaces. These are found in an encounter with the digital that highlights, rather than seeks to fill, silences, lacks, and fissures. Moments of obstruction of the player’s absorption in the narrative (the blocked circuit, the closed path, the interruption, the failed challenge) work against the appropriation of the enslaved avatar just as a glitch, an interruption of the fiction, or a sudden perspectival shift serves to remind the player of the insurmountable distance between himself and the historical enslaved person. These devices are not unique to this genre; rather, I’m arguing that commonplaces of videogames as a form take on new resonances in games about historical slavery because they enrich our understanding of our relationship to the politically fraught matter of historical slave resistance.

By investigating the form of digital interactive narratives, such games show us how we see ourselves in relation to the history of slavery and slave revolt. This seems a particularly topical issue giv-

en recent events, in a time when “allowable” and “unallowable” forms of black resistance, the value of black lives, and the role of white allies have become central features of political debate. As we’ll see, the most effective of these games highlight the difference between playing at resistance and doing the work of resistance in the real world. The empty places where our monuments to rebel slaves should be speak volumes about the enduring legacy of slavery in U.S. culture. Digital representations of this history in game form draw on a semiotics of obstruction, absence, blockage, and aporia to leave open a space for what cannot be said; they speak of the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade and anticipate a future, as yet unarrived and perhaps unimaginable, when we will have fully reckoned with the past.