Invisibility Blues
Teaser Transcript

I'm Samantha Blackmon, and I'm Alisha Karabinus, and this is a special preview of Invisibility Blues, though not a totally accurate one. With your campaign support, we can increase sound and production quality, and create videos that are better than anything we've done in the past, including this one.

For the first video in our proposed series, we're discussing character generation engines, and we've decided to look at Bungie's post-*Halo* franchise effort, *Destiny*. In *Destiny*, players can choose only between male and female characters, and between Human, Awoken, and Exo, sentient humanoid robots. In this preview, we're looking only at Humans and Awoken. For each race/gender combo, there are seven pre-set faces, and players can alter skin tone, lip color, eye color, hair color and style. The only other alteration players may make to characters is the addition of, or not, a colored "marking" on the character's face. In this video, we'll look at these preset faces in terms of analyzing and coding for a breadth of representative racial features.

In many ways it seems odd to have a game (any game with customizable characters) fall back onto what is in essence a set of pre-set character faces with no customization of body shape or size, especially after games like Bethesda's *Oblivion*, now nine years old, that allowed so much more in terms of customization within races. While *Oblivion* may have limited customization between the races--something we'll talk about later with the *Elder Scrolls*-- there was lots of room for playing with feature shapes, sizes, and positions as well as scars, wrinkles, skin tone and shading.

The Human facial customization only includes seven preset faces and head shapes, nine skin tones, eighteen lip shades, and nine eye colors. It should however be noted that only one of the female presets had facial features that could definitely be coded as being of African descent (broad, flatter nose and fuller lips). While this might seem to be a lot at first blush, these limited choices feel just that, limited, when we compare them to games, like Oblivion, that work with these features on sliding scales and offer what feels like an infinite number of choices to the player and allows not only for changes in facial, but also in body, minutiae.

While the Awoken are, according to lore, humans who ran to the edge of human controlled space in order to escape The Darkness and found themselves changed by their environment, that change seems to have affected not only skin and eye color but also facial structure, because as a race the Awoken are even more limited than their original human counterparts. While they have the same number of choices for facial pre-sets, all 7 of the choices are similarly Anglo (though one of the proffered selections does have fuller lips).

The skin, lip, and hair color selections offer character variation and choice for both Awoken and Human characters, but there are limitations here, too. First, there are problems with the application of some colors, particularly with lip colors on fuller lips. Though this seems, like some features, to be better integrated on the PS4, we shot our footage on the Xbox One, where issues are presents. As seen here, the fact that lip shading does not completely color fuller lips is a problem, and one that should be better addressed by devteams across platforms. Hair, too, is different between systems, with a more natural texture on the PS4, but that is less of an issue than the actual selections available in hair type and texture here. While the dreadlocks look somewhat natural, particularly for non-Anglo characters, all the other hair selections are very straight, so anyone looking to create a Black character with natural hair may be limited to a hairless style or dreadlocks. Beyond that, one must make the assumption that there's a very good salon on the Tower, I guess.

Which leaves us looking at the final choice in selection: facial markings. Facial markings were a great opportunity for the dev team to really deepen history or lore here. Because as it is, these are just marks. Decorations. They don't seem to mean anything at all, and there's an issue with that, because some of these marks look like generic (quote un-quote) "tribal" face paint. And even that could have meant something if the narrative were to explore these races as "lost" races that have resorted to cultural appropriation as a means of re-defining themselves. We see many such cases of cultural mis-appropriation in our own society. These people are in many ways rebuilding their culture and their very identities in Destiny. It makes sense that they would draw on collective memory and use old symbology to build new. But there's none of that here. We have to hunt for interpretations like that; no work was done within the lore to draw a lost people looking for meaning. As is, these markings mean nothing, and so the only real conclusion we can draw is that the designers Googled some face paint and chose what looked cool. Which could be fine, except…. this becomes an issue because absent any kind of actual racial, cultural, or honor-based significance, the facial markings are reduced to being simultaneously purely decorative and culturally reductive to the peoples that that they are modeled upon.

When we were discussing games to cover in our exploration of character creation engines, *Destiny* was one of the first I thought of. I wanted to be sure we had a game or two that I felt good about, because so many engines are lacking when it comes to race, and I remembered *Destiny* as having included more than just European features. Somehow I'd built it up in my mind as this very diverse engine, but when we went in to study it, that wasn't quite the case. There's something worth considering there regarding how perceptions are created. Often the first face selected by the engine will be face #1, with a darker skin tone, a face that has features frequently coded as belonging to folks in the African Diaspora and while there's a certain amount of diversity promotion in considering the default selection may have African features, the reality is that the selection in terms of non-Caucasian features is a lot more limited than I had thought. There's a lot of discussion, academic and non, about majority groups' perceptions of

minority numbers and treatment, such as a study out of UNC about mens' perceptions of womens' advancement and promotion in companies versus the reality, and I wonder if something like that is at play here. There are *some* minority features, so as a white woman, I just assumed it was closer to equal.

There's so much more to unpack with this game and others, but to get into that, we've got to make this series happen. Follow us on Twitter and Facebook to keep up with campaign and series updates. Thanks so much for all of the support that you have shown us thus far and as always my friends, game on!