gamevironments

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Special Issue

This Time it's for all the Marbles.

Towards Social Justice in Digital Gaming

edited by

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This Time it's for all the Marbles. Towards Social Justice in Digital Gaming. Introduction to the Special Issue

Patrick Prax

Abstract: The previous special issues of *gamevironments*, issues #13 (2020) and #11 (2019), explored the connections of games and (anti-)democratic ideals (Pfister, Winnerling and Zimmermann 2020) and nationalism and identity (Kienzl and Trattner 2019). This special issue aims to examine the ways in which games and gaming are connected to and potentially accelerate undemocratic and bigoted movements while simultaneously highlighting projects and perspectives from games and games research that learn from analyzing these issues and then use that knowledge to work towards social justice and against oppression. This introduction presents the logic of the special issue and suggests a path for reading the contributions, starting with those articles which trace the relationship between games and oppression and then moving to those that occupy this problem space and offer potential steps toward solutions. This special issue contains nine peer-reviewed articles as well as a game review, an interview with a designer of games for media literacy education, and two reports that offer practical guidelines for anti-oppressive, reflexive, and revolutionary game design. Each contribution is briefly summarized here.

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This special issue aims to examine the ways in which games and gaming are

connected to and potentially accelerate undemocratic and bigoted movements while

simultaneously highlighting projects and perspectives from games and games

research that contribute to social justice. The impact that games and gaming have on human society is hard to define, but undeniable. We can see this in an encouraging light if we consider the increased access to cultural production and creativity afforded by games, which allows people to experience themselves differently and expands the social imaginary. At the same time, games and gaming are related to xenophobic movements that threaten democratic values and civic liberties through their content, or with ephemera generated by their respective fandoms. The gaming community has regrettably been found to be a training ground for alt-right politics that are successfully being used globally to destabilize democratic discourses and it is still a central recruitment pool for said radical movements (Bezio 2018). Thus, it is important to investigate the environment of games and gaming for understanding the current political changes towards xenophobia, white supremacy, nationalism, and fascism (Nieborg and Foxman 2018).

The existence of these prevailing issues is something that has been well documented by the games research community, including many excellent articles from earlier editions of *gamevironments*. The previous special issues explored the connections of games and (anti-)democratic ideals (Pfister, Winnerling and Zimmermann 2020) and nationalism and identity (Kienzl and Trattner 2019). This issue does see games as a part of contemporary political and cultural zeitgeist, and at the same time as material media objects that are produced and consumed in specific socio-economic and technological contexts. A central consideration in investigating the relationship between games and contemporary politics, and thus of this special issue, is that such analysis does not focus on games in isolation. Instead, it situates them in their specific environment, and potentially frames them as indicative of broader issues in society.

At the same time, games and game culture are also spaces that are brimming with

potential for critical and inclusive work. Some games can enable players to engage with different senses of their identity and their culture on a personal level. Others seek to extend the social imaginary more broadly by design, including activist games, which explicitly aim to inspire and inform direct action in one's daily life. Framed this way, games can be seen as a means for reaching a more humane future. In a more theoretical context, game literacy as both a pedagogical concept and a technique for imagining new futures is central to this conversation, as discussed in yet another issue of *gamevironments* (Berg Marklund, Loewen-Colón and Saridaki 2021). Games, play, and game design are materials and methods which educators and activists can use as stepping stones toward socially just ends. Any research which informs this critical work is vital for the ways it can lead to practical, lasting improvements to our present system. Given all of this, it is with both sadness and joy that I can say that this special issue and all of its contributions are closely connected to the contemporary political and cultural environment around games. They address some of the most important and controversial questions of contemporary games research, including gender politics, critiques of capitalism, design tips for avoiding cheap stereotypes, and even how to start a *game-based revolution*. At the same time, this special issue aims to bring nuance to the discussion of platforms and political economy. One article's critique of platform capitalism and its impacts on game design is tempered by a discussion of games as potential platforms for resistance in another. A case study of a difficult, but ultimately successful de-platforming of a group of bigoted content creators, grounds the theoretical considerations of both of these articles in reality.

The articles and reports that make up this special issue are arranged according to this logic. We begin with those pieces which diagnose specific issues in games and game culture before moving to those which acknowledge these problems and propose

steps in the right direction. These themes are, of course, not mutually exclusive; many of our contributions contain some overlap of both. Nevertheless, it is my hope that this way of arranging the special issue tells a powerful story which meaningfully connects the authors and their disparate topics. The second part of this introduction will attempt to achieve the same impact by offering details about the individual pieces that make up this special issue.

Diagnosing the Issues of Games and Social Justice

To open the section of this special issue which seeks to identify critical issues in games and game culture, Thomas Grønvoll offers an analysis of the game *Far Cry 5* (2018) in the article, *Far Cry 5 – Refusing its own Politics*. Grønvoll describes how the game engages with contemporary politics around the weapon ownership debate in the United States of America in a seemingly purposeful way. Through its approach to such a politically charged issue, *Far Cry 5* demonstrates that games are a medium for political discourse that warrants critical engagement. At the same time, though, the game serves as an example of why such engagement is needed. In his writing, Grønvoll shows that *Far Cry 5* flips the narrative of gun ownership and gun violence on its head through its portrayal of gun-crazed conservatives as reasonable. In the narrative of the game, it is the *liberals* who were coming for *their* guns and liberties, a design choice which troublingly echoes and implicitly endorses conspiracy theories that are connected to real-world violence in the USA!

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Next, Kristine Jørgensen and Ida Sekanina continue the analysis of politics outside of the text of games and into the gamer community. Their article *From Political Economy to Identity Politics: A Forum Study of Political Discussions between Players* investigates how gamers discuss politics in online forums. The #gamergate online discrimination

campaign that even bled out into party politics, with the most directly visible ties to the election of Donald Trump, makes studies like this crucially important. The somewhat encouraging findings of the study show that gamers in these spaces have civil discussions about political issues like corporate ownership and game regulation. Based on the findings of the study, issues like identity politics and political economy seem to be somewhat de-emphasized, albeit still present. It remains to be seen whether this is an indication that game culture has moved on from #gamergate, whether forum moderators are more aware and arbitrate the most controversial discussions, or if this is merely a calm before another storm.

A storm is what Mayara Araujo Caetano and Beatriz Blanco are documenting and analyzing in their article *They will do Anything to make You react: Deplatforming Racists from the Brazilian Gaming Community*. This piece takes a closer look at a case in the Brazilian gaming community where racist content creators were finally deplatformed in response to harassment targeting the Black Lives Matter movement. The article examines what was ultimately a victory for a social justice movement, but interrogates the technological and organizational infrastructure of the media platforms involved. The results of their analysis show that social media platforms can be a significant obstacle for social justice movements even when the aim of the movements is to get the platforms to enforce their own community guidelines. The core of this article is the case study, but it also offers important starting points to think about the ways in which platforms resist social justice movements and how this resistance can be overcome.

Sian Tomkinson and Tauel Harper's article, *Cultural Production of Video Games: Conditions of Control and Resistance*, is also concerned with analyzing how platforms can both be a means of control by corporations and a site for resistance. This article

uses examples of games and digital distribution infrastructure to complicate the argument that platforms consolidate control over cultural production upwards. In this welcome addition to an issue that is largely critical of them, Tomkinson and Harker show how these platforms can become sites of resistance even to the logic of profit maximization. In this article, resistance is mounted by digitally literate players who can use, or maybe subvert, the technology of the games they are playing, as well as player communities which can organize to challenge the logics of the systems in which they have taken shape. The central role of skilled players who can use the affordances of digital platforms for their own goals also connects this piece to the work of Prax and Coopilton, who propose visions of game literacy and game literacy education in the next section of the special issue.

The final article in this section continues the examination of the issues in the gaming ecosystem by investigating the perspective of game workers. One avenue of positive change related to games and social justice is the organization of game workers. In his article *International Solidarity between Game Workers in the Global North and Global South – Reflections on the Challenges Posed by Labor Aristocracy*, Emil Lundedal Hammar shows both the challenges and the opportunities in this area of game culture. Although it is a long-standing problem, the exploitation of workers in the game industry has become more a more prominent topic in the global North, which in response has caused a corresponding increase in the visibility of worker organization and activism. Even so, this exploitation of workers has not stopped. It has only been displaced to the global South. In a sense, the emergence of more acceptable working conditions in the North is the direct result of the intensification of labor exploitation elsewhere. Through the concept of *labor aristocracy* Hammar shows that the existing legal and nation-state structures are a significant barrier to international organization and solidarity, but also that some game workers have

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recognized this as a problem. The quote from interviewee Magnus at the end of the analysis shows this and highlights the importance of the current moment for how game worker movements in the North might develop. Worker movements in the games industry are standing at a pathway where they can either embrace internationality and solidarity or align themselves in a reactionary response with conservatism, imperialism, and white supremacy. The impact of this choice extends beyond just the relevant workers. It reverberates to the culture and games they make and thus to society more broadly. Cultivating international solidarity here seems to be a core aim in the struggle for social justice in and through games.

Steps in the Right Direction

As its name suggests, the second section of this special issue is concerned with working towards social justice in games, whether that means proposing ways forward or illuminating what is already happening. As such, these contributions embody a variety of approaches, including theory-based work that deals with philosophical debates alongside case studies, as well as more grounded discussions of concrete designs and design interventions.

The article by Patrick Prax titled *From Talking about Loot Boxes to Discussing Political Economy – Conceptualizing Critical Game Literacy* aims to formulate a concept of critical game literacy by combining previous work on critical media literacy with perspectives from game studies and reflexive game design. His vision of critical game literacy stresses three elements: 1) the need to make games to understand how they work, 2) the importance of learning about the political economy of game production in literacy education to be able to understand the injustices that result from them, and 3) the need for a reflexive approach to one's own position to see how one might

be marginalized or privileged in this setup. Prax then also offers two examples from his game design teaching to exemplify what an education that takes this approach might look like and why it is necessary to understand how to work towards social justice in these areas.

In their article *Critical Game Literacies and Critical Speculative Imagination: A Theoretical and Conceptual Review*, Matthew Coopilton also offers a vision of what critical game literacy should encompass. Their work is less focused on education than the article from Prax (although game education is still a part of the article and the piece is also written with a mind to educators). Instead, Coopilton offers an innovative, radical, and at the same time exploratory and generative approach to game literacy that is anchored in Afrofuturist development theory in addition to critical theory. The article stresses the need to nurture a critical, speculative imagination and argues that we may seek practical change through games and game design. Coopilton also does not shy away from controversy and uses the case of the movement to abolish the police and prisons as a part of the struggle for Black liberation to exemplify their work. The clear and explicit focus of using this work to empower and liberate young people to use games as a vehicle for imagining better futures is not only timely but inspiring.

Both Coopilton and Prax investigate a shared notion of critical game literacy, albeit from different perspectives. Taken together, they could possibly be used to both include the critical analysis of political economy and privilege as well as the productive focus on extending imagination through games and game design.

Next, Kenzie Gordon's article *Gaming against Violence: An Exploration of Video Games as Tools for Sexual Violence Prevention Education* investigates how games can be used

as an intervention, specifically with the purpose of combating rape culture. The article is informed by feminist game analysis in connection with game design research about values in games. It uses an experimental setup where players are surveyed before and after playing a bystander intervention game. Gordon's findings suggest that games can help teach players tactics that are applicable to real-world instances of harassment, but that some groups of gamers can be resistant to this kind of education. She also notes that the nature of games as interactive experiences as well as individual players' differences in interpreting the events in the game led to difficulties in interpreting the survey results. The attitudes and responses of those players who were most resistant to the values and lessons contained in the bystander intervention game require particular consideration given the wider context of alt-right recruitment practices in gamer communities and the #gamergate harassment campaign. The methodological considerations of Gordon's study, specifically her use of interpretation of games together with effects studies, are also of note for future interventions, including game literacy education where there might be similar resistant groups.

The next two articles deal with the potential of games to be safe spaces for self-exploration and rest. In *Counterspace Game Elements for This Pansexual Pilipina American Player's Joy, Rest, and Healing: An Autoethnographic Case Study of Playing Stardew Valley*, Erica Cruz uses her own play experiences to lay out how games can be counter spaces for marginalized individuals as well as safe havens where players can find rest and reprieve from oppression. The stories from her exploration of *Stardew Valley* (2016) illustrate in a clear and meaningful way how the game manages to be a space that allows healing and joyful belonging. The article offers game designers a set of perspectives that can be useful for interrogating one's design and that can act as guiding criteria or aesthetic aims. Cruz also formulates short design

principles that can be useful for game makers and ends with a call for counter space games.

Josephine Baird continues in the direction of exploring the potential of games as safe spaces. The article *Learning About Ourselves: Communicating, Connecting and Contemplating Trans Experience Through Play* makes a strong argument for using edu-larp to create spaces that allow marginalized communities, including LGBTQIA+ people, to experience and experiment with the possibilities of transformation. This resonance of this topic is of course not limited to LGBTQIA+ people as any person can benefit from reflecting on their taken-for-granted norms of gender, exploring other versions of themselves, and understanding their own culture (and its oppressions) better. However, the piece is grounded in a deep discussion of different kinds of game-based learning which concludes that edu-larp is suitable for creating a transformational safe space. Baird ends her article with an exploration of what edu-larp design for (trans)gender exploration could look like, discussing relevant cases and design examples. The core of the argument here, from my perspective, is that the intention of designing a space as a safe container for this exploration is important. Baird also offers suggestions for designing such a container for transformation that is fictionalized, but recognizable.

The last three reports of the issue are also the most related to practical game design. The first is Ian Sturrock´s *Not Space-Ninjas again! Transmedia Worldbuilding for Social Justice*. Sturrock takes on the issue of designing fictional races and word-building as a part of designing games. A close reading of *World of Warcraft* (2004) shows that there are considerable issues with the ways in which fictional races are designed based on stereotypical representations of real-world cultures, including limited perspectives on what women can be in these cultures. Sturrock then develops a

pragmatic step-by-step tool for game designers to create races in their games. This tool draws from previous examples in anti-oppressive game design, teaching experiences, and conversations with game designers and artists to be able to give recommendations for ethical game design. Following the steps of the tool to create fictional races of a game does not only offer prompts to go outside of the trodden path but also pushes designers to consider the environment in which a given culture has grown and what kind of effect it would have had on them more closely.

The second report called *Seven Levers for Social Change through Games: from Settlers of Catan to Autonomía Zapatista* comes from Cati Hernández, Noemí Blanch, Pablo Garaizar and Emiliano Labrador. Based on an analysis of a number of board games and some design work by the authors themselves, this report proposes seven areas where games could be contributing to positive social change: context, purpose, design, production, distribution, play, and expansion. Like Sturrocks´s piece, the authors' aim in developing this framework is to support game makers who want to promote meaningful social change by helping them think through the different facets of their game and its design. As a kind of guideline for this, the authors use the notion of the Game-Based Revolution. The report then performs a short analysis of the games *Settlers of Catan* (1995) and *Autonomía Zapatista* (2021) to show how their framework operates when applied to two very different games. Through its consideration of things like the material production of a game (the resources used and the working conditions of the humans making the game) and the design's openness to player-created modifications or expansions, the seven levers framework is shown to be concerned with making a real social change on both a material and discursive level. The way games are made and the stories these games tell should pull in the same direction: toward social justice.

The final contribution to the special issue, by Patrick Prax and Amanda Warner, is an *Interview with Amanda Warner, Designer of Influence, Inc.* Warner is the designer and maker of political learning games, including *Fake it to Make it* (2017), and has just published her latest game, *Influence Inc.* (2022). In the interview, Warner explains how she thinks about the message and impact of her newly released game. The notion of creating a dystopia that is not dark but that draws people in and then slowly shifts to more serious tones can be useful for designers, as is creating the game as a kind of hopeful dystopia where it is possible for the player to change directions and use their PR firm for the good of the people instead.

Acknowledgments

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