

SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION: Reloading an Old Save File.

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INTRODUCTION

As a scholar investigating the meaning of the Arcade for men of color, the topic of racism and sexism in virtual comic and gaming environments is timely and relevant. Some of us may hear tropey narratives about the less popular or socially outcast individuals reveling in their apparel, pastimes, and culture finally reaching mainstream approval years after the fact or being the subject of nostalgia baiting. From *Revenge of the Nerds* where the brainiacs try to get back at the jocks, to professional athletes and rappers like Tee Grizzley and Waka Flocka running twitch streams or organizing offline competitive gatherings, the upbringing that many of us had is now a future that can be widely enjoyed and even profited off of. We have come full circle as the horizon for acceptable mainstream pastimes has changed along with the identities of participants. This *Sociation* special issue highlights the role of gaming and comic books and introduces us to the same thematic conflict areas that larger industries like Hollywood or hip-hop now derive inspiration from.

As a scholar and a gamer, I join several of the contributing authors in the PC gaming community for the first time over the pandemic. Purchasing a stronger laptop to aid in my dissertation studies and remote teaching, my underpowered and outdated Asus gave way to a modernized Lenovo Legion, and I soon realized all the outdated technology and programs I had been so reliant on. My laptop allowed me to game, and I started asking questions about my 20+ year process as a video game fan: If I can insta-track my progress and boot up my save states, why would I ever really need a memory card in 2023? This issue can be the card that you look back on in 20 years and recall all those fond moments of struggle and progress. You get the time listing for when you last saved/published and can align key moments and arguments with the struggles of the times. Our contributors, unique in their own way, shows the journey that went into making the claims of recent trends, some articles even revisit works from the far past to offer critical updates. Collectively, the topics range in their emphasis and content, though we observe notable overlap within all our areas of analysis. We defy the common stereotype that your average gamer is some 'loner' who flees from society. While such individuals certainly exist, we also find there to be numerous misinterpretations of how hobbyists engage in means and in matters representative of their fields

We contest the expectations of whiteness across the market and in the production of the games and the marketing machine. Through the lens of the long lost save file, I also call attention to a major trend in gaming from the past several years: the remastering and remaking of former titles. The loss of source code¹ and valuable components demonstrates inattention to preservation methods from studios whose primary goal is profit. This is not to say developers could foresee a future where their contemporary productions would be resold for more advanced hardware- while remakes of storylines have been a thing for many generations, remastering is a demand that may deviate from other forms of upscaling, retouching and recapturing in both the window of time spanned from original release and the emphasis on hardware limitations theoretically making for an improved or smoother gameplay experience. Why would companies not just touch up in-game cutscenes and then release them on *YouTube* audiences to view for free? Such a conclusion would put the film industry out of business yet yield minimal returns for the gaming industry. There is a clear emphasis on taking the most beloved entries and trying them again to 'get them right'; you will notice many of the contributors in this issue want these series to continue but with greater reflection on their impact and awareness of their reach.

¹ <https://www.gameinformer.com/2021/02/02/bioware-explains-pinnacle-station-dlc-exclusion-from-mass-effect-legendary-edition>

Does Story Matter?

The question of ‘does story matter’ in games, or whether high quality script and character interactions are driving factors behind gaming purchases. While we can certainly agree that context matters – fighting games for example are notorious for treating overarching story and plot as afterthoughts- though it seems as though caring about the characters themselves and their placement in the local game world is ubiquitous across fields. I encountered similar difficulties within my studies, where the social ‘relic’ of only 30 years in arcades is mostly left to vocal history and exchange through participation on the original hardware. As more arcade cabinets close worldwide, onlookers may marvel at what it might take to keep those memory cards embedded in a new platform given that the hardware needed to read said card is largely obsolete, out of stock or difficult to maintain.

For jazz record companies, identity preservation is such a major component that studios may fledge social responsibility and embrace deception to distance themselves from illegitimate work production and to maintain incumbent identities (Phillips & Young, 2009). Everyone wants to be associated with highbrow products and gaming journalism similarly seems invested in making video games appear to be high quality art to the masses. Deception can also be a key tool for marketing purposes or to maintain ambiguity for maximum appeal. Games like the recent “Final Fantasy VII: Remake” emphasize a recreation of nostalgic moments in initial trailers and exposes before revealing greater emphasis on departure and even embrace of ‘new possibilities’ once production ends and the product is ready for sale. As academics, we demonstrate how coverage of gaming can yield similarly impactful findings as those who conduct social analysis of any work field or entertainment medium. Publications in gaming have a unique presence in an emergent field of gaming studies as part of the social sciences. Contributions to that literature place authors in a role unlike others within our various sections: technology is advancing at a pace that dictates, or at least in part influences, societal trends, and engagement. Coming off a pandemic, the frantic pace to corral our student body and structure classes in so few weeks of planning is owed directly to tech that had been advocated for years. But why?

Publicly, and I would argue not necessarily new, recent lawsuits have been filed on behalf of sexually assaulted gaming employees. We follow communal dialogues about *queer coded* characters and expectations. We tackle cultural narratives and lament on the construction of ‘fashionable personas’ within gaming akin to the fashion bloggers adoration and condemnation of new or returning trends (Titton, 2018). While we speak to pressing matters and trending topics commonly seen on Twitter, the production of this knowledge does not (often) come with lavish rewards or high marks. Think of your curriculum vitae or resume as aligned with the trophies or achievements that appear as you peruse a new title and either make your way through the campaign or experiment with its hidden features. You compile a list of all tasks, from the major to the menial, to show off to the world when they ask what exactly you’ve been doing for the last 60 hours (or months, in PhD land). Even if those share little significance in the long run, every detail added is part of a journey to reach whatever our highly competitive field deems a complete save file.

Amidst that quest, the shiny collectibles like the Legend of Zeldas Master sword tend to stand out. Merton (1969) and the studious critics of his work (Csiszar, 2021) take note of how the value of open disclosure and pathology has become institutionalized through a system increasingly dominated by goal-centric publishing timelines. An inevitable outcome for any industry involving sales or exclusivity in a capitalist market, publications on social life and ethnography focused on subcultures share a potential for becoming ‘pop charts for science’ as the akin to the music industry, not unlike the modern gaming industry itself

Economics scholars reflect on our rapidly changing contract for acceptable corporate to consumer engagement. Their scholars describe how in pandemics, company heads and vocal community leaders engage in tradeoff based on access to resources and their allocation in public sectors (Sadler, 2021). For those who make critique of the gaming and digital arts medium, they operate in a high desirable position: we tell you why the games you love suck so much and why the games you never heard of rewrote the book on representation. Like the hipster who always pushes indie games or the mixtape that drops at midnight, sociologists are at the cutting edge of analysis. Like journalists, we social scientists contribute towards data collection for the purpose of policing. How many folks found casual conversation, therapeutic discourse, collective reflection, and other forms of community through gaming over the pandemic? Sometimes a singular popular series making its return can create waves of impact at the right time^{2,3}? Though unlike the newspaper, sociologists aim to *contextualize* communication (Scher, 1999). The emphasis found in case study levels of specificity highlight the scope of our work, where character or environment creation systems

² <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.800683/full>

³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15554120211056125>

can be responsive and praised in one light while another demonstrates what such a system either misses or even painfully highlights how society sees certain people.

The pandemic was/is a strange time for communal gatherings, and now we find ourselves thrust back into the real or professional world with only a few months to make sense of it all. From the perspective of the arcade competitive culture, you don't complain but you adapt. Though considering the legacy of game genres that originated in the arcades, the pandemic is one of the most significant moments as it forced many companies to recognize the lackluster state of their internet infrastructure⁴. As our papers demonstrate, online play and digitalized communication apps are the backbone of the contemporary gaming generation. Online web comics permit faster and more direct communication, feedback, and revision than ever before. The genre can advance as far as developers push it. We see challenge against publishers and producers to believe in their community's visions of progress and the backlash that follows when the two lack harmony. Returning to a more traditional in-person work setting can feel like returning to a construct that no longer works the way you once understood it to. Mechanisms employed and strategies incorporated in our foray into a new structure conflict with prior knowledge, or perhaps assumptions, about the world.

Contributions to this Special Issue

Our works touch on trends in the gaming sphere in a timeline for audience to 'vote with their dollars' pertaining to spending habits that reflect social values or cultural zeitgeist. Our 'Zoomer' readers may enter the long running Let's Play' community and wonder why they feel so enticed to follow both the gameplay and personality of a Youtuber. One may associate that individual, who knows a game so well that they can vocally strategize in real time while offering entertaining commentary, as a cultural authority in that avenue. What happens when these trusted figures play games with anti-Black stereotypes or engage in racist perspectives while giving their thoughts on a game or its players? This is a generation with the nearest tangible iteration of parasocial relationships and the proximity to (Daniel Jr. & Kowert, 2021). Our analysis spans across multiple genres of games such as MMORPGs, Fighting Games, Dance enthusiast... We assess the roles of playable characters, both user generated and pre-determined archetypes in 'role playing games' where users influence more narrative choices and interactions rather than bodily builds and backstories

Our studies assess how participants themselves contribute to a larger culture that transpires within a digital realm and plays out in outward portrayals. The character development that the playable avatars embody transform how people look at the world around them. Just as game mediums often reflect real world dilemmas, often the answers for how to deal with social struggles may be emulated in the games they come to love. Our contributors discuss the role avatars play in the larger world, where corporations have become privy to the value of seeking digital harmony with an audience. For example, Smith and Thakore speak to the difficulties encountered when misrepresentations take off into the larger stratosphere and become synonymous with our view of BIPOC characters in visible roles. Stagnation of genres mirror how our lives often face unflinching resistance in areas of social change, and that change may demand a harsh look at some of our all-time favorite characters and titles. We investigate the avenues for those who play games to discuss amongst themselves, and how those networks transcend games and come to be the communal gathering places for dialogues of all sorts. Our studies reflect the danger of these social developments, and we assess the responsibility different levels of society hold over the assumptions we often place on video game creators and enjoyers. We assess how technological limitations and advances mirror and often precede changes in our cultural

We highlight an American norm of placing whiteness as the center for consumerism and as the object of desire for creators in telling stories. Our assessments can grant insight as to why the white consumer is focused on even in countries where whites are not the majority. Our analysis spans across multiple genres of games such as MMORPGs, Fighting Games, Dance enthusiast... We assess the roles of playable characters, both user generated and pre-determined archetypes in 'role playing games' where users influence more narrative choices and interactions rather than bodily builds and backstories. Similarly, Embrick's piece situates MMORPGs as not only white spaces, but white sanctuaries—spaces within the virtual realm that reify whites' understanding of the racial and social order and white normativity.

In assessing "The Virtual Geography of Racial Segregation", contributors analyze popular MMORPGs such as the *World of Warcraft* franchise to demonstrate how racialization, or perhaps racial characterization and construction, occur in the digital realm. Many games in this genre distance themselves from other role-playing

⁴ <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2021/02/how-guilty-gear-saved-its-online-play-in-a-post-offline-world/>

⁵ <https://www.superjumpmagazine.com/rollback-netcode/>

games (such as the JRPG) in that there is more emphasis on customization of playable avatars and in the dynamic traits of non-playable characters. Issues may arise when depictions of white characters (or decidedly non-racially divergent characters) gain hegemonic privilege in their depictions and relationships with other characters, while presentations of non-white or a non-human character are oft accompanied by racist tropes or allusions. Look no further than similarly groundbreaking *League of Legends* franchise and similar games where in-game power dynamics may reflect developers' intention for who they want to more commonly enjoy the power fantasy featured in their titles, rather than shaping designs among the most common demographics of their audience (like those found in China or Korea). When a racialized social structure configures our economic and political dynamics, it seems almost expected that entertainment media follows suit. But what occurs when it is an interactive, massive multiplayer medium? The proliferation of 'esports' as a career path demands challenges to the repetition of matters found in our real world and the implications for monetizing games with race issues in a racist world.

Cosplayers demonstrate how permeates into capturing a moment in fashion. As someone who has utilized DIY (do it yourself) cosplay ideas for the last 4 Halloweens, it is enlightening to see how many folks opt for constructed costume designs over the more traditional costume approach. Amidst a comic book renaissance where characters and even world building concepts like the *Multiverse* has never been more popular, conventions can be a great chance for intercommunal engagement and collective expression (Boillat 2022). Alternations and embedding occur across representations where messages and subtext may be found by tuned in audiences, though usually these interpretations are found among audience members who have reason to believe a message is directed to them. This can be co-opted for uplifting or degenerative purposes, and community members (such as cosplayers) may be aware of both outcomes and learn to incorporate reflective language for their success and survival in the field

Several contributors preface how the racialized attitudes gamers espouse in real life can be developed through shared play or dialogue with fellow gamers either voiced or through apps like *Discord*. Where community members create separate channels for more focused gameplay dialogue or even the beloved and derided NSFW channels ... you can usually find somewhere where your contributions belong, just keep it in that channel, please. In *Whiteness as a Racial Lounge*, a team of scholars trace the history of Discord and its explosion in popularity and its coinciding rise as a hub for racist dialogue and imagery. Moderation of communication channels can be an additional factor, given that most channels are not affiliated with professional development teams or software producers, so community members self-police and often must address issues internally without pay or any governing body to legitimize anti-racist reinforcements.

Gamifying Blackness reminds our audience of the experience of Black gamers, highly aware of racist attitudes and studios increasing engagement with socially contextualized messaging. Either done for commentary, parody, irony or outright critique, Black gamers promote content such as walkthroughs or guides like all others, though they may be unable or unwilling to overlook standout moments or imagery that still seem pertinent enough to arise in post-apocalyptic digital recreations, not unlike the mythical depictions featured in some of our other analysis of decidedly fictitious game worlds. Perhaps a study on titles like *Call of Duty* which recreate historical events could be a hub to address racism in war - internally from perspectives of Black soldiers or external and outward racism against natives to lands being invaded.

Our scholars offer a dynamic lens to what its like to have fun and become experts on the fun others consume. Sociologists have participated in this craft for decades, reviewing film, magazines, sports, and other pastimes. As a fighting game player, what really stands out about our craft of gaming is that I can meet my heroes and then play them in legitimate tournament matches. My admiration of Ryan Cooglers work wont get me added as a side role in *Creed III*, I cant eliminate Patrick Mahomes or Jalen Hurts from the playoffs. But it's the work of journals like these that can shape the gaming industry, from indie developers all the way up to impact on major titles. Our praise and critiques of works like *Forspoken* will translate to further development of Black women as leads in games, and push the game itself to better represent the experiences folks go through and the fantasy worlds we design. Fiction writing, science fiction, web comics and other literary fields have so much practice in reflexive experience that we can learn so much from, just check out the works of Eve Ewing or Rosie Brown (go Terps!). From the team at *Sociation*, I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce and organize these contributions and hope you all can continue this journey in writing about the issues and inspirations that left the biggest impact on you in the digital world.

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Author Biography

Rhys M. Hall is a doctoral student conducting his dissertation on the contemporary history of the Fighting Game Community as experienced in the city-based arcade. He has been a fan and supporter of competitive play for over a decade and began traveling across the country to compete over the last 5 years. A regular 1-2er and 2-2er who is proud of his days as an 0-2er, his foundation is derived from Black feminisms and studies of Black and Latino boys' education success and outcomes. Rhys is using these developments to implement arcade activities and culture as a compliment to middle and high school extracurricular activity and hopes that the stories and values of the 90s will carry on deep into the 2000s, for gamers and non-gamers alike across diverse race and gender cohorts.