CHAPTER 2.

"PUTTING OUR HEARTS INTO IT"

Gaming's Many Social Justice Warriors and the Quest for Accessible Games
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Griefing, the purposeful use of digital affordances to destroy another user's pleasure or freedom of movement, is a perennial practice, and women, people of color, and sexual minorities are targeted more than others (Gray, 2012; Nakamura, 2009, 2011, and 2012). This is true of the Internet, in general. Citing a recent study, Hudson writes,

> *In a 2013 Pew Research survey, 23 percent of people ages 18 to 29 reported being stalked or harassed online; advocacy groups report that around 70 percent of the cases they deal with involve female victims, and one study of online gaming found players with female voices received three times as many negative responses as men. (2014)*

GamerGate, the coordinated social media harassment of female developers and social justice game developers like Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, as well as feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian is part of a much longer history of sexual harassment of women in gaming. Its eruption into the news in 2014 only made this glaringly visible to the non-gamer world. Death threats, along with other abusive and misogynistic comments coordinated by users who gathered on Twitter and other social media using the #GamerGate hashtag effectively griefed these women in their personal and public lives, making it impossible for them to continue to work and even to move freely. These GamerGate targets and their defenders on social media were derisively labeled "social justice warriors," or "SJW's" because they publicly claimed the identity of "feminist" and asserted the need for more diverse games and game cultures. Men who entered the discussion to criticize misogynistic behavior in the gaming community were called "white knights" rather than SJWs, and were similarly dismissed as either "too sensitive" or "brainwashed" by the feminist movement.

This war over the meanings of gaming culture became a war of words and a war *over* words. This essay examines the complex identity of the "social justice warrior," and explores how game designers can avoid the stigma connected to the term while pursuing a social justice agenda. I conclude by examining the work of two independent game designers, Jenova Chen and Anna Anthropy, whose game designs illustrate this strategy[1].
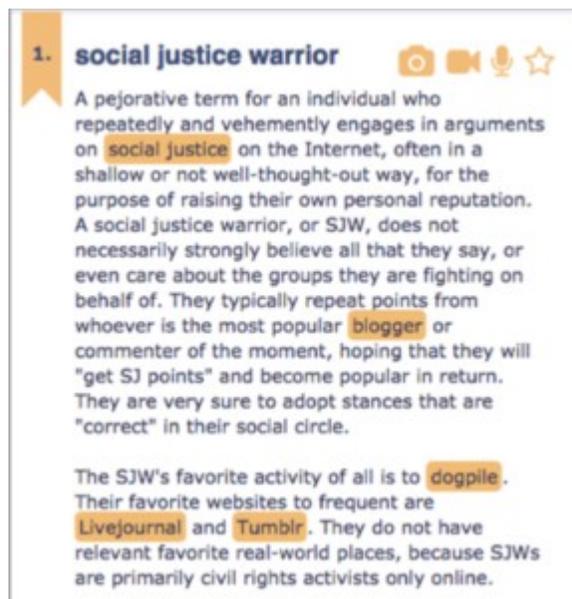

1. **social justice warrior** 📷 🎥 🎤 ☆

A pejorative term for an individual who repeatedly and vehemently engages in arguments on social justice on the Internet, often in a shallow or not well-thought-out way, for the purpose of raising their own personal reputation. A social justice warrior, or SJW, does not necessarily strongly believe all that they say, or even care about the groups they are fighting on behalf of. They typically repeat points from whoever is the most popular blogger or commenter of the moment, hoping that they will "get SJ points" and become popular in return. They are very sure to adopt stances that are "correct" in their social circle.

The SJW's favorite activity of all is to dogpile. Their favorite websites to frequent are Livejournal and Tumblr. They do not have relevant favorite real-world places, because SJWs are primarily civil rights activists only online.

Figure 2.1. Screen capture of Urban Dictionary's definition of
"social justice warrior."

The term "social justice warrior," now popularized in part by GamerGate, was previously used in the mid-2000s by Tumblr and Live Journal bloggers to refer to the struggle against forms of body-based social discrimination such as sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, and classism. Yet the term has a much longer history with strong connections to religious practice. The term "social justice" dates back to 1840, when Luigi Taparelli, an Italian Catholic scholar, coined it (Ziegler, 2013). "Social justice" activism online is fundamentally a product of contemporary feminist media theory that evolved in reaction to one of second-wave feminism's greatest weaknesses: its lack of intersectionality with other identities. Since at least the mid-eighties the U.S. feminist movement has suffered from its lack of relevance to and attention paid towards women of color. As woman of color theorists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa document in great detail, non-white women were not only excluded by the movement, they were pressed into service as de facto educators for

white feminists—serving as a "bridge" to span the racial divide (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1984).

Thus, social justice feminist practice online is a departure from earlier feminist identities because it encompasses a very wide set of concerns and forms of discrimination. "Social justice" feminists are a vocal and diverse group who are often stereotyped and dismissed as "PC," or "politically correct." This has led those who identify with the movement to come under attack as being too sensitive to forms of bias that do not directly concern them. This very willingness to consider race and sexuality, in conjunction with, rather than apart from, sexism has given the movement power and legitimacy among many feminists, particularly younger ones. It has addressed some of feminism's earlier myopia. Others reject it, since it is so often used within mainstream gaming culture as an insult. This push for additonal inclusivity becomes yet another way to grief other users in public digital spaces through comment sections and discussion boards.

According to "Know Your Meme," a widely used online resource that traces the genesis of popular Internet-native images and concepts, "social justice blogging" is a legitimate and respected part of online activism; however, the term "social justice warrior" is fundamentally pejorative. The site (n.d.) explains that the "stereotype of a social justice warrior is distinguished by the use of overzealous and self-righteous rhetorics, as well as appealing to emotions over logic." This definition of social justice as an overly "emotional" and irrational social movement sheds light on the dangers and rewards facing feminist, anti-racist, and anti-homophobic gamers. It also explains why some female gamers and game producers who may or may not identify as feminists distance themselves from the term "social justic warrior". Undeniably, the widespread public condemnation of GamerGate resulted in some material gains for feminist gamers. One example is Intel's decision to pledge $300 million dollars toward improving diversity in the technology industry, funding a professional women's gaming team in partnership with the International Game Developers' Association (Wingfield, 2015). Yet despite these broad calls for reforms, on a smaller scale, the use of the SJW term is still prized among many griefers as a sure way to stigmatize and dismiss a range of feminist and anti-racist critiques and attempted engagements.

Yet these critique and engagements have found their way into gaming culture via independent designers of color and transgender activists. *Journey*, by Jenova Chen of a Chinese-American game maker That Game Company, and *Dys4ia*, among other games, by Anna Anthropy, a transgender game designer, decenter straight white men

as players and as objects of representation within their games. These independent games by women and designers of color use the medium itself to create spaces for social justice discourse that exceed the boundaries of the game, stretching their design and content to encompass radical new, intersectional identities and new play mechanics. Anthropy produces work that addresses transphobia and the experience of sexual minorities overtly, and thus she connects with the social justice movement. Chen's *Journey* is almost never discussed in terms of racism, sexism, or homophobia precisely because it avoid overt reference to these identities, though its design is entirely informed by a social justice agenda.

Luckily for game scholars, both Chen and Anthropy are also eloquent writers who are entirely forthcoming about their intentions as game designers. Anthropy's book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-Outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (2012) is full of insight about the need for marginalized groups to reclaim gaming as a vital cultural medium. Chen has not produced a similar manifesto about the ways that games can redress misogyny, transphobia, and other forms of inequality in gaming, but he has given interviews (Smith, 2012) in which he has been quite clear about how game mechanics and avatar design can engineer social relations that are radically collaborative, curbing racist and sexist attitudes, and entirely in line with social justice goals. Though Chen and Anthropy's games address different audiences, reside on different platforms, and simply look very different, they exemplify the unacknowledged and uncoordinated growth of intersectional anti- racist and ableist feminist theory. Such games are redefining a wider gaming culture that is slowly and painfully evolving past the medium's continued struggle with incivility and hate speech.

As many researchers have argued, the majority of representations of non-white and non-male characters in video game fit familiar racial and gender stereotypes (Everett & Watkins, 2008); accordingly, women and minorities often choose white, male avatars in order to avoid harassment (Kennedy, 2007; Yee, 2005). Scholars and gamers have been pointing this out for years, and have usually been ignored, but GamerGate caused this stalemate to flare into overt conflict. The gaming world's hostility towards its critics from within and outside the world of video game journalism took the form of thousands of angry tweets, posts, and public statements. As gaming scholar Consalvo (2012) wrote years before GamerGate in her essay "Confronting Toxic Gaming Culture: A Challenge to Feminist Game Studies Scholars," the enthusiastic adoption of video games—particularly casual games—by

women players may have led to more sexism within the gaming community rather than less.

This claim was proven true when game journalist Leigh Alexander (2014) wrote an essay for the popular gaming blog *Gamasutra* entitled "'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over." Readers responded with hundreds of enraged posts blaming feminist players for destroying the culture by tainting it with cultural politics. As one commenter wrote,

> Get over yourself. Gamergate isn't going away, and no amount of temper tantrums will change that. The fake feminists thought that they could start shit with gamers, and now they're finding out that gamers don't really like being called misogynists and other names just because they ignore and/or ridicule the imbecilic political positions of fraud like Sarkeesian and Quinn.

Figure 2.2. Screen capture of user comment. (Retrieved in 2015 from Gamasutra.com)

This comment characterizes social justice activists as insincere or "fake," a claim that resonates with Urban Dictionary's definition, which stresses that SJW arguments are "shallow or not-well- thought-out".

Yet at the same time, games about race, gender, and sexuality have produced some of the most deep, beautifully crafted, and heartfelt play experiences to date. Transgender people who have played Anthropy's game *Dys4ia* have found the experience of embodying a transitioning transgender body by playing the game a supremely, affectively resonant moment: many report in comment threads that they cried after playing it (Anthropy, 2012). Games produced by Anthropy, Porpentine, merit kopas, Deirdra "Squinky" Kiai, Mattie Brice, and others who foreground transgender and racial identity in their work give players the experience of gender embodiment and gender critique. But, above all, they create games that can be easily played by inexperienced or non-gamers in order to give players new types of access: access to the pleasure of games, and to new types of feeling.

Chen also designs games that make players cry. And like games produced by Anthropy, Porpentine, and Kiai, *Journey* replaces one affective register—the pleasure of winning experience within meritocratic media—with another feeling: connection. He achieves this by creating beautiful environments where players embody disabled avatars, diversifying the identities available in games in daringly radical ways that nonetheless can be easily read as serving aesthetic rather than social justice purposes.

Chen does not self-identify as a member of a social justice movement. He has been recognized instead as a gifted innovator and producer of high-end independent games. The trilogy of games produced for Sony's PlayStation 3 platform—*Flower*, *flOw*, and *Journey*—are almost always discussed in terms of their innovative mechanics and affective power rather than in relation to social justice. Though critics have argued that his games are not very "game-like" because they are not technically challenging, or "hardcore," their aesthetic beauty and creativity are almost universally recognized and praised by critics and reviewers. Chen's *flOw* is one of twelve games held in New York's Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. He is certainly not categorized as a "social justice warrior"—his work was never targeted by GamerGate—and with a few exceptions, scholars who study race, gender, and gaming tend not to consider his work within their area of research.[2] Chen's explicit disidentification with mainstream game culture and emphasis on designing emotional experiences for players by designing "feeling" into gameplay aligns. In an interview with Chen for the widely read gaming blog Gamasutra, Ed Smith (2012) writes, "Feelings have always been at the centre of Thatgamecompany's work." *Journey* has also quietly engaged with an aspect of intersectional identity that is increasingly visible as a concern within the social justice world—ableism.

The avatars within *Journey* are beautifully stylized, non-photorealistic robed figures with jet-black faces and flowing robes, and they do not initially signify as disabled. The game is set within a desert landscape and the robes invoke Middle Eastern clothing; the animated movements of the robe and other pieces of cloth within the environment are hypnotic and soothing. Through these and other visual means, the game affords new ways of envisioning the body, violence, and social interaction in gamic space and, just as importantly, excludes others. For unlike most game characters built for high-end consoles, as the PS3 was in 2012, the avatars lack arms. As Chen explains, this was partly a pragmatic decision: Thatgamecompany has a 9-person development team (small by Triple A) standards, and "if we were the *Uncharted* team, the *Journey* character would have arms and have hands" (Smith, 2012). However, the decision to remove the avatar's arms and its mouth allowed radical forms of non-violent interaction to occur: "We cut the [character's] arms, because if

you have arms, you think about picking up some kind of weapon and hitting something," said Chen (Smith, 2012). Chen explains how he purposely created less-abled avatars without mouths or arms in order to fix the broken social relations that occur in networked games when people can grief other players. Chen doesn't mention women or people of color as his target audience, explaining instead that, "Our game is meant for average people to play, rather than just gamers" (Sheridan, 2013). However, because women and racial minorities are so often the target of griefing the mechanic protects as well as includes them.

This novel and intentional design decision also flies in the face of one of gaming's most aggressive genres: first person shooters (FPS). FPS games are defined by the persistent presence of the hand and arm of the player character within the frame of gameplay. As Alex Galloway (2006) writes in "Origins of the First Person Shooter," this visual convention gives audiences vital information about what kind of narrative to expect and, in the case of games, how players will approach the environment (p. 57). Providing the user with a body that purposely does less than it could within the constraints of the game's affordances calls attention to new ways of being embodied. No game contains avatars that are all powerful; this would neither be fun nor practical. But where Chen's design decision stands out is his explicit decision to engineer new ways of relating around race and gender by taking away features.

During game testing, Chen's team discovered that players tended to grief each other when given the chance, even in the context of their game, which lacked a war-like or overtly violent narrative. The removal of arms from avatars, as well as several other key game mechanics changes, ensured that harassment is impossible in *Journey*. Balancing the game so that friendly behavior and collaboration are rewarded by graphic displays and power ups while aggressive behavior is unrewarded by visual feedback or harm to another player produced a collaborative experience many players found deeply emotional. While it's certainly the case that independent games have the advantage of niche audiences that value the intimate feel and greater experimentation with form and content, Chen's anti-griefing innovation paid off. *Journey* was an immensely successful and popular game.[3]

Figure 2.3. Gameplay image from Journey.

The design thinking behind *Journey* buries its message within a gamic experience that has been praised for its aesthetic beauty, stirring music, and the production of strong feelings of empathy and connection with other players. As gaming researcher Patrick Jagoda (in press) writes in his analysis of posts from the "Letters to Journey Companions" blog produced by the game's fans, the experiences of collaborative play produced by these mechanics is intense and complex, and not all of them are positive. *Journey* exploits these feelings to provide the player with the experience of an intentionally dis-abled body, ambiguously gendered, and non-white body, a goal entirely in line with a social justice agenda.

Journey shows us that justice games don't have to be low-budget "indie" games; they can fit into mainstream norms, have high production values, and use this benefit to produce strong affective reactions in audiences who may not view themselves as "social justice" advocates.[4] Players who might never express interest in games like Anthropy's *Dys4ia* because of its challenging social message about transgender identity and indie look and feel might be appreciative of *Journey*, which couches its anti-violent and anti-ableist message within an ecstatic visual and affective multiplayer gameplay experience. As Chen told an audience at *Games For Change*, the

premier conference for serious game designers and scholars, that "he hopes to see more emotionally accessible games," and that "the only way we can do it is by *putting our heart into it*" (Lien, 2014, italics mine). Sincerity, commitment, open discussion of feelings, vulnerability, and a willingness to bring personal experiences to bear for the sake of social politics and activism are central values of the social justice movement.

It is exactly these traits that make them such perfect targets for gaming's anti-feminist factions, such as GamerGate. As Julian Dibbell (2008) has described in his study of griefers and trolls within *Habbo Hotel* and *Second Life*, irony is in its hegemonic discursive mode. Anything that presents itself with earnestness or "heart," such as the social justice moment, is to be mocked, dismissed, or destroyed. Hence the long-standing war on social justice warriors within some very public factions of the gaming culture, and the "toxic environment" for women and people of color who engage in it.

The critical reception of *Journey* however, shows us that games that underplay or even conceal their social justice agendas pass under the radar of gaming's most destructive players. Gamers and game developers should not be deterred from straightforward and rigorous criticism of gaming's problems with racism and sexism. Nevertheless, the history of the medium, starting with female game pioneers such as Kathy Sierra and Jade Raymond, and onto Quinn and Wu, shows us that the war on women within gaming culture has deep roots in the medium's history. Long before the "social justice warrior" identity was created, women game developers have been doxxed, hounded, and harassed into silence, many leaving the medium altogether. Some of gaming's most high profile creators, such as Sierra and Raymond, both of whom predated the social justice movement and thus the backlash against it, left the industry entirely. Chen's identity as a man has protected him somewhat against this kind of treatment, but it is equally important that his games are not perceived as gendered in the same way that Quinn's and Anthropy's are. Disavowing the "social justice" identity has given Chen access to a mainstream audience and in turn made an accessible experience available to gamers who hate the sexism and racism that often characterize griefing.

Griefing is a symptom of networked social relations within sexist and racist cultural regimes. Though not all griefing is identity-based, much of its most virulent forms are, producing a toxic environment for women, people of color, and sexual minorities. The games discussed in this essay produce feelings or affective registers that do away with these environments, demonstrating that games can mean something other than what they mean now.

Social justice warfare can occur in many different guises. Those who claim the identity (and many feminist developers and women within gaming culture choose not to) are voluntarily engaging in a toxic discourse with the intention of changing it. Others engage in less discursively aggressive ways. Design decisions like Chen's, Anthropy's, Brice's, the Fulbright Company and others mentioned in this essay "do" social justice by creating procedural media that engage sincerely, rather than ironically, with racial, gender, and sexual identity. Though their games have been critiqued as not really games, but rather as "casual" (or in the case of *Gone Home* derided as "walking simulators") these are categories that are growing as the traditional triple A hardcore game market continues to shrink in comparison, at least partly due to the lack of access they entail.[5] This increased access has resulted in the diversification and gender balancing of gameplay; despite the gendering of "easy" games as "casual" and thus less important than mainstream games, they allow all players access to forms of affect that un-grief the gamic experience.

Frank critique of gaming's inaccessibility to women and minorities is absolutely necessary; the resistance within gaming culture to overt identification with social justice is the "final boss" that must be beaten. It should not be necessary to disavow the "social justice" term or to distance oneself from the community that self-identifies this way on Tumblr and other social media. However, as GamerGate has proven, it is still personally risky to publicly articulate gaming culture's problems with misogyny, racism, and ableism. This is particularly so for women.

Social justice work occurs on many fronts. The measurement of impact upon gaming's problems should not be individuals' willingness to ally themselves with the term. It is in gaming culture's best interests, and by extension the interests of American culture as a whole, to create an affectively powerful and inclusive environment for all players.

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Notes

1. Retrieved March 3, 2015 from http://www.urbandictionary.com/ define.php?term=social+justice+warrior

2. For an exceptional example of critical work that analyzes the game's Orientalist imagery and politics perfectly with anti-racist, anti-sexist goals see: Chien, I. (forthcoming 2016). Journey into the techno-primitive desert. In J. Malkowski & A. Russworm (Eds.), Identity matters: Race, gender, and sexuality in video game studies. Manuscript submitted for publication. Chen's game Journey was designed explicitly "to address gaming's biggest problem—lack of emotional depth and engagement through collaboration with other players" (Smith, 2012).

3. Retrieved July 7, 2015 from https://gamecuriosity.wordpress.com/2013/09/04/6/

4. Griefing can and does occur in casual games as well. My claim here is that these genres hold the potential for a new and more inclusive type of gaming culture within these new forms and mechanics because they include new types of players and require them to interact differently. Trolls within Habbo Hotel and Second Life, irony is its hegemonic discursive mode. Anything that presents itself with earnestness or "heart," such as the social justice movement, is to be mocked, dismissed, or destroyed. Hence, the long-standing war on social justice warriors within some very public and active factions of gaming culture, and the "toxic environment" for women and people of color who engage with it.

5. Dimitri Pavlounis' (2015) brilliant reading of Gone Home as a queer text argues the game is structured as an "archive rooted in sentiment, emotion, and affect that validates the intimate and personal objects and documents of everyday life." This game's emphasis on feeling archives and, more specifically, the production of queer feelings diversify the medium in encouraging ways, but, as he argues, the game's straightforward mechanics ultimately undercut its radical potential.