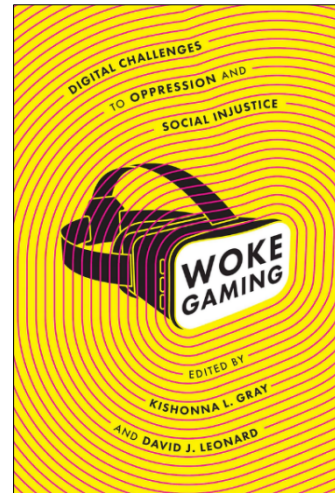


Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard (Eds.), **Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice**, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2018, 320 pp., \$30.00 (paperback), \$95.00 (hardcover).

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In August 2014, two movements dominated my social media feeds: the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, following the murder of an 18-year-old Black man named Michael Brown by a White police officer, and #GamerGate, which has since been understood best as a precursor to alt-right movements and backlashes against feminist and critical race critiques of fan cultures (Blodgett & Salter, 2018). Many critical race and feminist game scholars, as well as game critics and designers, asked at that time, With so much awfulness going on in the world, why even bother with games—particularly when critiquing them just makes us targets of harassment? Aren't there more important sites of change and oppression to which we could direct our energies? The collection **Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice**, edited by Dr. Kishonna L. Gray and Dr. David J. Leonard, provides some answers to these questions. The book points out, as games scholars have long pointed out, that such a framing presumes a mutual exclusivity between games and "real problems." Games, however, are as much a space for creating social justice as any other realm of culture and community.



Woke Gaming is coedited by one of the first people to publish work critically analyzing race in digital games (Leonard) and an influential intersectional feminist, critical race, game and digital culture scholar (Gray). The volume takes games seriously but does not reify their uniqueness. Gray and Leonard are thoughtful in not treating games as somehow separate from the broader world of social injustice, and very importantly they emphasize that games are not uniquely oppressive. As they point out in the introduction, games intersect with every other area of social injustice. The tactics of online trolls that have shaped global politics since 2016 were practiced and honed in #GamerGate. At the same time, social justice movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, both originating in communities of color, have also used digital tools to speak truth to power.

Where this book diverges from similar recent anthologies (e.g., Kafai, Richard, & Tynes, 2016; Malkowski & Russworm, 2017) is that it focuses specifically on how games might be deployed for social justice. As a case in point, while certainly the context that led to the volume was the concurrent violence and activism surrounding #GamerGate and #BlackLivesMatter, the editors start their introduction with a description of the game *Hair Nah* (Pixel, 2017). In this game, players use their mouse to smack away the white hands trying to touch the hair of their customizable Black woman avatar. In doing so, the authors want to "highlight and celebrate games and gamers that demand changes from within games and beyond" (p. 3). The book is critical but hopeful. It documents the many strategies gamers, designers, researchers,

and all those who overlap those categories can deploy to use games for social change and engage in social change within games.

In terms of audience, this book is very much designed for people already familiar with digital games and game studies. Not much time is spent explaining the games used as examples or offering a background on game scholarship. That said, the chapters are focused case studies that are in most cases accessible for people with less familiarity with games. The entire book is written in an engaging style and with limited jargon, and the chapters are all roughly only 20 pages long, making them the ideal length to be integrated into undergraduate syllabi. They work as stand-alone pieces or can be paired in conversation with one another. The book's 14 chapters are divided into five parts, though to be honest, I find the groupings to be the weakest element of the volume. The part titles do not always fully characterize the included chapters, and in some cases, I would have changed where individual chapters appear. This is a minor critique, however, as the chapters can be read in any order and each one individually speaks to the larger goals of the book.

The strongest chapters, and the general strength of the volume, build upon existing game scholarship, offer clean and accessible introductions to their topics, and articulate strong arguments for how scholars and people in the game industry might better advocate for change. The weakest chapters, in contrast, engage less with existing game scholarship, are less clear in explaining their examples, and are less focused in their core arguments. It must be noted, however, that even those chapters offer useful insights for game scholars.

In addition to grounding their analyses well, the three strongest chapters do a particularly good job at pointing to the importance of structural change, not simply demographic notions of diversity. For instance, in chapter 10, "Curate Your Culture," Amanda Cote builds upon her previous research with women gamers who experience harassment online. In this new project, she investigates game companies' online community management rules and their failure to improve the experiences of marginalized gamers. She finds that in large part, the community management systems "do little to undermine the normalization of discrimination and a hegemonic structure that ostracizes many players" (p. 208). Similarly, in chapter 3, "The Post-Feminist Politics of the 'Everyone Can Make Games' Movement," Stephanie Orme unpacks the neoliberal ideology of attempts to diversify the video game industry by recruiting more women and racial minorities. Movements like Everyone Can Make Games fail to rectify or even consider the structural barriers, like institutionalized misogyny and racism, that have rendered the game industry so homogeneous in the first place. Instead, they focus on the pipeline issue of getting a greater diversity of people interested in game design. True change, Orme argues, must focus on structural change and not just recruitment. Finally, in chapter 7, "Nancy Drew and the Case of Girl Games," Andrea Braithwaite uses archival research to demonstrate how the 1990s Girl Games movement critiqued the mainstream game industry. She responds to those who claim these games reinforced gendered norms of play by showing instead how Her Interactive and their Nancy Drew games worked within and against normative assumptions to create social change. This history, Braithwaite argues, gives the contemporary game industry a model for producing broader structural changes.

As noted, the weaker pieces connect less well to existing knowledge about games and the game industry. For instance, the book begins with what I think is one of its weaker pieces. Chapter 1, "The Corporeal Ethics of Gaming," by Rob Cover, offers a philosophical approach to embodied ethics in games, and as such, it is one of the more jargon-laden chapters in the book. Cover's consideration of the body's role in game play ethics is an important one, and he looks at this in purely digital/screen-based games like *Grand Theft Auto* as well as augmented reality games like *Pokémon Go*. However, the argument inadequately engages with existing game scholarship on games and bodies (e.g., Simon, 2009), and the assumed separation of the mind/body in game studies, upon which Cover's argument is built, feels like a bit of a straw man. Similarly, chapter 5, "The Sobering Reality of Sexism in the Video Game Industry," by Stanislav Vysotsky and Jennifer Helen Allaway, ignores many earlier studies of gender in the game industry (reviewed in Kerr, 2006) when they write that "little scholarly research focuses on gender relations in the game industry" (p. 103). That said, the data from their survey of women in the game industry reveal many important datapoints on how sexism manifests there.

In their introduction, Gray and Leonard assert that a central goal of the volume is to promote hope among gamers and game scholars. They write as follows:

Together, the essays in this collection look for hope; for the possibility in gaming, gamers, and in the industry to change not only the gaming world but the broader social inequalities that we experience both virtually and in everyday realities. (p. 16)

They and the authors they have pulled together have created a volume that demonstrates how critique can be generative rather than destructive. They want readers to realize that for all the oppressive moments within games, there are radical and emancipatory ones, too. Beyond those already mentioned, chapter 2 by Rowlands et al. shows how *Grand Theft Auto's* "creator mode" can lead to more engaged play (though not in the way the authors originally intended). Similarly, chapter 4 by Zixue Tai and Fengbin Hu shows how for Chinese "gold farmers" the practice of turning their play into work is itself a critique of how play is perceived in China. Although not all of the chapters are equally good at contextualizing their arguments, the strength of the volume is the bringing together of an international panel of scholars to write about games (including analog games), game design, and gaming communities around the central topic of social justice.

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