DIGITAL CHALLENGES AND

TO OPPRESSION AND

SOCIAL INJUSTICE

WOKE Gaming

EDITED BY

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CHAPTER 11

THE LEGENDS OF ZELDA

Fan Challenges to Dominant Video Game Narratives

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*T*HE *LEGEND OF ZELDA* is one of the bestselling franchises in video
game history, with more than 82 million games sold worldwide (List
of Best Selling Video Game Franchises). The series includes nineteen main
titles and roughly a dozen spin-off games. Many of these games re-enact
versions of the same story, which recounts the exploits of the heroic
Link, who saves the princess Zelda from the clutches of the evil Ganon.
Due to the unchallenged repetition of this plot, the Zelda series serves
as an archetypal example of what influential game critic Anita Sar-
keesian has called "damseling," a term she uses to refer to the common
trope of the disempowerment of female characters as a motivation for
the male player-protagonist. What do female-gendered players make of
this story? Is it necessary to take these narrative elements at face value,
or are other interpretations possible? How might the games look from
Zelda's perspective?

The games in the *Legend of Zelda* franchise have consistently enjoyed
an enthusiastic critical reception, and over time the series has developed
a large and constantly expanding fanbase. Fans from around the world
have been inspired by the *Zelda* series, creating their own parodies, com-
mentaries, and transformative works based on the worlds and characters

appearing in the games. This chapter investigates *Zelda*-related fan work from North America, Australia, and Japan, focusing on how fannish creators deconstruct the damseling narrative of the games and recombine its elements in ways that reflect larger conversations surrounding gender, culture, and media. I argue that the activities of these fans reflect a tendency in many international fan cultures to view media properties not as passively consumable content but rather as templates from which more personalized and individually meaningful stories may be created. I will begin by introducing the *Zelda* series and explaining its importance before justifying critical interest in video games in relation to contemporary political trends and social activism. I will then examine a sample of fanworks and conclude with a broader discussion of transnational fan cultures and the potential of fannish voices to shape and transform mainstream media.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA AS A BOSS
KEY TO A CULTURAL CONFLICT

The Legend of Zelda series began in 1985, two years after Nintendo released its first home video game console, which it called the Famicom, a portmanteau of "Family Computer" (*Famirī Konpyūta*). In the United States, this console later became known as the NES, or Nintendo Entertainment System. Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of Nintendo's iconic Mario character, the senior executive director of Nintendo Corporation at the time of this writing, and the general producer of the *Zelda* series, was working on a new *Super Mario Bros.* game, but a disc system periphery for the Famicom was slated to be released soon. Miyamoto was thus asked to help develop a new title that would take advantage of the technology, which allowed the player to "save" a game so that she could return to a previous moment in her playthrough, thus preserving her progress even after the machine had been turned off (Thorpe 2013, 2). The game that ultimately came out in 1986 was the original *The Legend of Zelda* (*Zeruda no densetsu*), which Miyamoto directed along with Takashi Tezuka, who wrote the game's script and scenarios.

A sequel, titled *The Adventure of Link* (*Rinku no bōken*), was released the following year; and, in 1991, the third title in the series, *The Legend of Zelda:*

A Link to the Past (*Zeruda no densetsu: Kamigami no Toraifōsu*), went on to become one of the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed games in the series (*The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*). As a testament to the continuing cultural relevance of *the game*, a YouTube "let's play" web series hosted by Arin "Egoraptor" Hanson and Daniel "Danny Sexbang" Avidan called *The Game Grumps* posted a thirty-seven-episode playthrough of *A Link to the Past* in the summer of 2015, and each video received more than two hundred thousand views within the first twenty-four hours of its release (Hanson and Avidan 2015). In 1993, *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* (*Zeruda no densetsu: Yume o miru shima*) was released for the Game Boy, significantly boosting the handheld console's sales and helping to ensure its longevity on the market (Rumphol-Janc 2014).

Despite the broad appeal and international success of these four games, the major turning point for the *Zelda* franchise came in 1998, when *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (*Zeruda no densetsu: Toki no okarina*) was released for the N64, a home console whose upgraded 64-bit processor facilitated 3D graphics. Although Miyamoto produced *Ocarina of Time*, the game was directed by Eiji Aonuma, who had overseen a 1996 Super Famicom game called *Marvelous: Another Treasure Island* (*Māverasu: Mō hitotsu no Takarajima*) that was strongly influenced by the *Zelda* series. Aonuma has continued to be involved with every main *Zelda* title, in part because *Ocarina of Time* immediately attained an appropriately legendary status. Not only did it break records for video game preorders and first-week sales in Japan, the United States, and Europe, but it also received perfect scores from game critics in publications such as *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Famitsū*, and *Edge*, as well as gaming websites such as *GameSpot* and *IGN* (*The Legend of Zelda* 2017).

As the *Zelda* series has continued to move from strength to strength across subsequent Nintendo consoles, each individual game has garnered respect and acclaim from critics and gamers alike, and the franchise boasts widespread brand-name recognition. Nevertheless, it is still worth investigating the question of why these games matter as narrative texts, especially when the attention of the gaming press has been primarily focused on their gameplay.

To begin with, the gaming industry as a whole earns a significant amount of money and only continues to make more as the market expands.

At the end of 2013, the information technology research and advisory company Gartner valued the worldwide video game industry at US$93 billion, with a projected increase of at least US$10 billion for every subsequent year based on past performance (van der Meulen and Rivera 2013). In other words, more people have been buying more games, and more types of games, with each passing month. To give a comparison, according to the professional services network PricewaterhouseCoopers, the worldwide cinema industry generated revenue of US$88.3 billion in 2013 (Global Entertainment and Media Outlook). Therefore, even if we consider nothing more than the revenue they pull in from eager consumers, video games are just as much of a cultural force as movies.

As with any such cultural juggernaut, video games are orbited by countless discourses and debates on the purpose, future, and validity of the medium. Many of the more troubling of these discussions within the context of the English-language gaming community have in recent years been amalgamated under the moniker "Gamergate," which has become shorthand for heated Internet flame wars over the role of gender in video games and gaming cultures. The Twitter hashtag #Gamergate originated on the online bulletin board 4chan, where anonymous users heaped abuse on female game developer Zoe Quinn, whom they pursued across the Internet on various social media platforms (Johnston 2014). This outpouring of vitriol was then directed at Anita Sarkeesian, the founder of the media criticism website Feminist Frequency. In May 2012, Sarkeesian had launched a Kickstarter campaign to crowdfund a video web series titled "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games." Sarkeesian was able to raise US$158,922 from 6,968 donors, but accompanying this positive interest and support were violent threats from people on the Internet who were angry that she dared to subject their favorite video games to critical thinking, which they saw as challenging their understanding and appreciation of texts that were meaningful to them as individuals and as a subculture of self-identified "serious gamers." This online behavior escalated, and in October of 2014 Sarkeesian was forced to cancel a talk at Utah State University after the school received an email from someone claiming that they would commit "the deadliest school shooting in American history" if she were allowed to present her lecture (Parker 2014). This series of events clearly demonstrates that people take the stories told by video games both very seriously and

very personally. Simply put, games and their stories have enormous cultural currency.

Although many outside observers may have once dismissed online communities of angry men as nothing more than ephemeral subcultures, their activities have coincided with an aggressive and transnational vocalization of libertarian and neoliberal ideologies associated with white supremacy and militaristic nationalism. YouTuber and game reviewer Matt Lees, writing for *The Guardian* in the immediate wake of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, argued that "The similarities between Gamergate and the far-right online movement, the 'alt-right,' are huge, startling and in no way a coincidence" (Lees 2016). Gamergate served as a focal point and rallying cry for economically and socially precarious young men, who collectively helped to boost the public profiles of media figures that supported their harassment of young women such as Steve Bannon and Milo Yiannopoulos, both formerly associated with the far-right website Breitbart News.

In her 2017 monograph *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-right*, academic political philosopher Angela Nagle points out that "what we call the alt-right today could never have had any connection to a new generation of young people if it only came in the form of lengthy treatises on obscure blogs" (Nagle 2017, 13). Nagle demonstrates that, regardless of the underlying political leanings of the people who participated in various hashtag-centric flame wars on Twitter, the appeal of an identification with conservative movements lay primarily with participation in online communities characterized by irreverent meme culture. In addition, sociologist Whitney Phillips has documented the connections between the mean-spirited nihilism of Internet humor within gaming subcultures and the aggressive sensationalism of conservative news media in her 2015 study *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. As Phillips explains, "Not only do trolls scavenge, repurpose, and weaponize myriad aspects of mainstream culture (all the better to troll you with), mainstream culture normalizes and at times actively celebrates precisely those attitudes and behaviors that in trolling contexts are aberrant, antisocial, and cruel" (Phillips 2015, 49). In other words, there is a feedback loop between online subcultures and mainstream news media that has

had the effect of radicalizing disruption politics. Disenfranchised young people on both sides of the political spectrum are increasingly turning to subcultures in order to find a guiding narrative, and so it is important to examine both the prevailing narratives of these subcultures and the ways in which they are challenged, subverted, and transformed.

REWRITING THE "LEGEND" OF ZELDA

Like any other narrative medium, video games are subject to gendered biases and interpretations. As previously mentioned, *The Legend of Zelda* is one of the video game franchises that Anita Sarkeesian critiques in "Tropes vs. Women," as many of the games are classic examples of an easily identifiable trope that she refers to as *damseling* (Sarkeesian 2013). Damseling, in its purest form, is the process by which a female character is rendered inert and thereby positioned as an object that will motivate the male player-character to complete his quest. The point of the game is therefore to rescue the damsel in distress, who is subordinate to the hero and not able to rescue herself, generally because she is "stranded in a hostile area, trapped, desperately ill, or suffering any number of terrible fates where she needs help to survive" (TV Tropes Contributors 2017).

In the *Zelda* series, Princess Zelda is frequently such a damsel. Although there are many variations, the *Zelda* games all share a basic story and a common mythology. The setting of these games is the land of Hyrule, which was created by three goddesses. As these goddesses departed from the land, they left behind a representation of their demiurgical power called the Triforce. The Triforce is a magical relic so powerful that it can grant the wish of any person who touches it, and so it has been hidden and sealed away. If it is threatened, however, the Triforce can split itself into three parts—Courage, Wisdom, and Power—with each part transferring itself to a chosen bearer who best embodies its virtue. Link, the player-character and hero of the games, is the bearer of the Triforce of Courage. Zelda, the princess of Hyrule, is the bearer of Triforce of Wisdom. The primary bearer of the Triforce of Power is a man named Ganondorf, who is described as a thief from the desert and can take the form of a monstrous boar called Ganon. Although Ganondorf is not in all the games, Zelda is in most of them, and she is variously

kidnapped, imprisoned, placed into an enchanted sleep, crystalized, zombified, and turned into stone. The player's job, as Link, is to acquire a weapon powerful enough to kill Ganon and save Zelda, thus returning peace to Hyrule. This is the eponymous "Legend of Zelda."

Fans from all over the world have created fanfiction, art, comics, crafts, videos, and cosplay based on the *Zelda* games. The English-language *Zelda* fandom of the 1990s and early 2000s primarily concerned itself with sharing gameplay tips, swapping information about glitches, and debating the chronology of the games in largely male-gendered online spaces (Duncan and Gee 2008, 85–101). As Mizuko Ito has argued, however, "The role of Japanese gaming in bringing girls into electronic gaming should not be overlooked," with franchises such as *Pokémon* and *The Legend of Zelda* appealing equally to male and female players (Ito 2011, 97). Since the rise of more gender-inclusive online communities on fannish blogging platforms such as LiveJournal and Tumblr, female fans have reconfigured canonical narratives to represent their own interests and experiences. Writing about the precedents of these female-dominated communities in the cultures of fanfiction writers who gathered around the *Star Trek* films and television series of the 1980s, Camille Bacon-Smith posits that, "In fiction, the women of the fan community construct a safe discourse with which to explore the dangerous subject of their own lives" (Bacon-Smith 1992, 203). Since Bacon-Smith's pioneering study, a growing body of academic literature has examined the works and cultures of English-language fanfiction writers, but very little attention has been paid to the self-published fan comics that started to pop up during the 2010s at conventions focused on Japanese popular culture, including Japanese video games. The games and characters of *The Legend of Zelda* series have emerged as popular subjects of these fan comics and fan art. Although everyone loves Link, the hero of the story, many of these comics give agency and interiority to the female characters of the various games.

In Canadian artist Louisa Roy's fanzine series *Zelda: The Dark Mirror*, a minor female character from *Ocarina of Time* named Malon is instrumental in saving Hyrule. In the original game, the young farmhand serves no other purpose than to introduce Link to her father and then to provide him with a horse. In *The Dark Mirror*, which is set several years after the events in *Ocarina of Time*, Malon has grown into a warrior in her own right.

11.1. A graphic image from the second issue of the fanzine prominently showing Princess Zelda being scoffed at by the commanding officer. Courtesy of Louisa Roy

When Link and Zelda vanish from Hyrule, she spurs the kingdom's soldiers into action. In the second issue of the fanzine, Malon rides into a military camp on the border between Hyrule and the Gerudo Desert, where Ganondorf's stronghold is located. Malon delivers a letter from Princess Zelda to the commanding officer, who scoffs at her.

Because Malon helped Link in the past and is fully aware of how precarious Hyrule's peace is, she will not allow the older man to dismiss her and her mission. "You may not take this seriously, but I do!" she asserts, forcing him to acknowledge the severity of the situation (Roy 2008, 23). Other female characters from *Ocarina of Time* are equally important to the story, and Roy's comic explores how they aid each other in achieving small victories in their shared struggle against Ganondorf. *The Dark Mirror* is

thus a story less focused on a single male hero saving the world than it is on the concerted efforts of multiple female characters, most of whom are only accorded a few lines in the original game. Although the player can only see the events in *Ocarina of Time* from Link's viewpoint, Roy's fan comic reminds the reader that Link was only able to succeed in his quest because of the help and support of the female characters.

Similarly, in Australian artist Queenie Chan's novel-length "prose manga" *The Edge and the Light*, Link is in grave danger, and it is Princess Zelda who must rescue him, along with the three oracles from the Game Boy Color Zelda titles *Oracle of Ages* and *Oracle of Seasons* (2001, *Zeruda no densetsu: Fushigi no kinomi ~ Daichi no shō* and *Jikū no shō*). In these two games, the young female oracles are kidnapped and must be rescued by Link, but in Chan's fan comic they take the initiative to team up with Princess Zelda in order to solve mysteries and fight evil. At the end of the story, Zelda is forced to make a difficult choice concerning the ultimate fate of Link, who is trapped within his role as a hero regardless of his personal desires. This twist emphasizes the difficulties faced by the Zelda characters in the original games, who must often manipulate events in order to propel Link forward on his quest. *The Edge and the Light* also exposes the frustration Zelda feels concerning her own role as one of the divinely chosen bearers of the Triforce. After she has made her decision at the conclusion of the story, Zelda laments, "As a goddess, Din can never understand the pain of mortals" (Chan 2013, 300). Although Zelda often functions as a mysterious plot device in the games, Chan's manga offers the reader a glimpse into her thoughts and feelings, demonstrating that, within the context of the games' narratives, she is just as active a character as Link. Like *The Dark Mirror*, *The Edge and the Light* thus foregrounds the female characters of the *Zelda* series, allowing them to shape and transform the story through their active decisions instead of their passive misfortune.

The *Zelda* series is just as popular with gamers in Japan as it is elsewhere, and in Japan there are entire fan conventions devoted to *Zelda*-themed self-published fan comics, or *dōjinshi*. Such fan comics form the core of an enormous collective fan culture in Japan, with larger *dōjinshi* events attracting hundreds of thousands of participants and attendees (Lam 2010). *Dōjinshi* tend to fall into two categories. The first is *dansei-muke*, or "directed toward men," which is characterized by its proclivity for graphic

heterosexual pornography; and the second category is *josei-muke*, or "directed toward women," which includes a broad range of genres, such as comedy, drama, and romance. A significant number of *josei-muke dōjinshi* based on the *Zelda* games are four-panel (*yon-koma*) gag manga meant to poke gentle fun at the characters, while others focus on the implied romantic relationship between Link and Zelda. As in the genre of *shōjo* manga, which is generally targeted at teenage girls and serves as an inspiration for many *josei-muke dōjinshi* (Hemmann 2015), relationships unfold through the eyes of the female protagonist—in this case, Zelda.

In Sakura-kan's 2012 *dōjinshi Wake Up!*, which is based on the Wii game *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (2011, *Zeruda no densetsu: Sukaiwōdo sōdo*), the reader is presented with several touching moments between Zelda and Link. When Ghirahim, the primary antagonist of the game, shows up to kidnap Zelda, she swiftly attacks him in order to punish him for interrupting her time with Link. This is an interesting reversal that exposes both how creepy the antagonist is for wanting to kidnap Zelda and how strong Zelda actually is in *Skyward Sword*, a game in which she undertakes many of Link's trials before he does. Although the artist plays the conflict between Zelda and Ghirahim for its humor, she seems to be suggesting that, in a world in which Zelda were not required to act as a motivational reward for the male player-character, she would have no trouble dispatching the game's villain herself.

Likewise, a one-page short manga included in Hiromi Shiroyui's 2004 *dōjinshi Kaze dorobō* (*The Thief of Wind*) offers a sardonic interpretation of a scene from *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (2002, *Zeruda no densetsu: Kaze no takuto*) in which Link storms into the final dungeon to find Ganondorf hovering over Zelda, who is lying in an enchanted sleep. *The Wind Waker*'s incarnation of Zelda has spent her life as a headstrong and highly competent pirate nicknamed Tetra, so it is disconcerting that she would be so incapacitated within the game's narrative. *Kaze dorobō* offers a symbolic resistance to this strangeness by mocking it, showing the brash and outspoken Tetra arguing with Ganondorf and refusing to sleep on his bed. In the process, she repeatedly insults him by calling him an *ossan*, a derogatory term for a pathetic middle-aged man. When Ganondorf and

11.2. A graphic image from another Princess Zelda fanzine where the artist is showing the challenge and refusal of portraying Princess Zelda as a kidnapped princess and damsel in distress. Courtesy of Shiroyui Hiromi

Tetra see that Link has arrived, they grudgingly assume their positions as villain and kidnapped princess, as if they were only staging a show for the player's benefit.
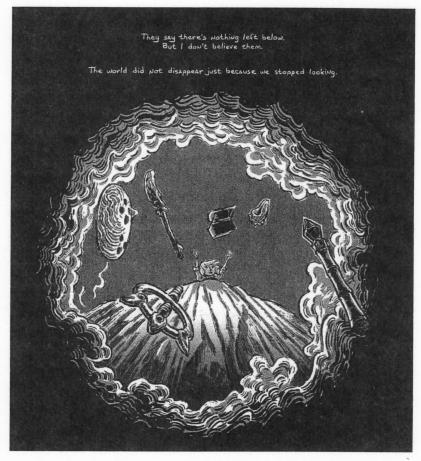
By highlighting the illogical artificiality of Tetra's damseling in her role as Princess Zelda, the artist offers her readers a veiled critique of a game that refuses to acknowledge the full complexity of its characters and themes, which it subsumes under the highly gendered tropes of male aggressor and female victim.

As many media producers are fans themselves, what happens in fandom spaces is of obvious interest to entertainment industry professionals, and a surge in feminist consciousness is fully capable of influencing the development of media properties. One response to female-positive discussions of the *Zelda* series is the 2015 graphic novel *Second Quest*, which is titled after a feature in the original 1986 *The Legend of Zelda* that allowed the player to start a remixed and more challenging game after she had mastered the first. *Second Quest*, which was funded by a Kickstarter campaign and published by Fangamer, was written by game critic Tevis Thompson and drawn by David Hellman, a professional game illustrator and concept artist. *Second Quest* is narrated from the perspective of Azalea, its Zelda character, who is torn between her desire to be a useful member of her society and her strident rejection of the "hero and princess" narrative that this society has imposed on her (Hellman and Thompson 2015a, 73). As Azalea struggles to come to terms with her place in the world, she tosses a treasure chest full of the hero's tools off a cliff and into a void, signifying that she doesn't want to be a damsel or the sort of hero who runs through the world killing things for fun and profit (ibid.).

By throwing away the standard set of adventure game items that allow the player to interact with the world only by destroying it, Azalea is symbolically discarding the narrative of the male play-character's progression toward omnipotence at the expense of the non-player characters given the artificial designation of "enemies."

Second Quest's website states that it was inspired by one of Hellman's paintings, which depicted a Hyrule that was open to the player, allowing her to create her own narratives as she freely explores the environment (Hellman and Thompson 2015b). In an interview with the feminist geek media website *The Mary Sue*, Thompson added that he was motivated to examine the fate of the "missing woman" prevalent in so many video games. He says, "It's not so much a question of whether a princess—or anyone—needs to be saved or protected. It's that no one ever asks the princess what she wants to begin with. It's really a question of agency and subjectivity" (Carmichael 2015). This conversation followed on the heels

They say there's nothing left below.
But I don't believe them.

The world did not disappear just because we stopped looking.

11.3. A graphic image from an artist showing character Azalea tossing her hero's tools, signifying a refusal to be a damsel or hero who kills things for fun and profit. Courtesy of David Hellman and Tevis Thompson

of the Gamergate controversy, making it highly likely that Tevis was responding, in part, to the work of feminist critics such as Anita Sarkeesian. *Second Quest* is therefore an example of how feminist discourse both within and supported by fandom has shaped the viewpoints and ideas of creators who have pushed their own fannish interests into the realm of professional production.

As a medium, video games are well on their way to becoming the same sort of big-budget, focus-group-oriented affairs with which Hollywood has made us familiar; but, as is the case with both live-action cinema and

animation, there are also many independent creators using open-source technology to perform their own artistic experiments, some of which later become commercial products.

A number of career and aspiring game designers communicate through online gatherings called "game jams," many of which are organized around a common theme. One of the most outspoken and prolific advocates of game jams, Anna Anthropy, has compiled a guide titled *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* that encourages amateurs to make their own games. She writes, "Every game that you and I make right now—every five-minute story, every weird experiment, every dinky little game about the experience of putting down your dog—makes the boundaries of our art form (and it is ours) larger. Every new game is a voice in the darkness" (Anthropy 2012, 160). For example, games like Alice Maz's *Average Maria Individual* (2014), a contribution to the defiantly anti-gaming-industry-themed Ruin Jam, reinterprets Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) and has been praised by the gaming press as having "denie[d] the traditional male power fantasy that so transparently defines what is considered a 'pure gaming experience'" (Joho 2014).

Feminist critique through media development is far from uncommon in the international gaming community. Twenty enthusiastic contributions were made to the 2015 Female Link Jam, which was organized partially in response to Eiji Aonuma's comment that the protagonist of the game then in development for the Nintendo Switch console, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017, *Zeruda no densetsu: Buresu obu za wairudo*), was definitely not female (Hilliard 2014). According to the game jam organizer, "Female Link is something fans have always had floating amongst their collective super-brain," and the development of a female character named Linkle for the 2014 spin-off *Hyrule Warriors* (*Zeruda musō*) game from Konami encouraged artists and game developers to imagine what a *Zelda* game would look like with a female protagonist (Female Link Jam 2015). Even though large game development studios such as those associated with Nintendo tend to be conservative in the way they handle their intellectual property, fans are more than capable of putting forth interesting and viable alternatives to dominant video game narratives that marginalize both fictional women and female-gendered gamers.

The fans who thrive in social mediascapes therefore have voices that are heard not just by their peers but also by the senior media producers and developers whose positions they may one day inherit. After all, it requires a high level of passion and dedication to attain the skills to express a reinterpretation of video game narratives through writing, art, and design. Fans read against the grain of games such as those in *The Legend of Zelda* series, emphasizing the agency and interiority of female characters while deconstructing and finding alternatives to stories that objectify women while confining men to a narrowly defined concept of masculinity. Despite their strong admiration for the original titles, the writers and artists creating fan comics and amateur games have demonstrated an understanding of these digital texts as open-access narrative platforms to be challenged, and these fans deconstruct and reconfigure dominant narratives to better reflect social and political concerns and their own personal identities.

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WOKE
GAMING

DIGITAL CHALLENGES TO
OPPRESSION AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE

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