

Introduction: games and sf

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Introduction to the Special Issue

Darshana Jayemanne and Cameron Kunzelman

This special issue began in a hotel room in Seattle between panels at a major international conference. We were discussing academic work and how strange it is that game studies and other fields of study sometimes seem so far from one another. As weirdly disciplinary scholars ourselves, (mostly) situated within game studies, we were trying to figure out exactly how we could write about the objects we wanted to while navigating the disciplinary conversations and their tendencies towards boundary-policing.

Deeper in the conversation, discussing the weirdness of *Final Fantasy VIII*, we laughed and agreed to write about the game. But where would it go? We floated a few journals, and returned immediately to the question of boundaries between sf studies and game studies. Who would want it? How would we have to phrase it to make it meet the right qualities? How often would we have to cite the archetypal European theorists of the types and functions of games before we'd be allowed to talk about the strange object in front of it on the interdisciplinary terms it demanded? "We should just edit a special issue," one of us floated. "Then we get to decide how these things fit together!"

While that conversation about publishing a paper on *Final Fantasy VIII* did not culminate in a paper it did produce many discussions based on both/and thinking. Eventually we pitched to a journal where the 'and' was already the basis of excellent work. The result is this special issue of *Science Fiction Film and Television*. It is an issue that opens up methodological reads that are not centered in game studies or sf studies, but instead show the linkages of thinking between these two already-interdisciplinary modes of engagement with their strange objects. Following trailblazing work by Paweł Frelik, Esther MacCallum-Stewart, Tanya Kryzwinska, Andrew Ferguson, and several others, we were interested here in finding authors and essays that were willing to push down into the fundament of how sf and games work in tandem together; at the other end of scale, we were interested in how games and sf each set conditions for how the other was figured and understood in the broad popular imagination.

Of course, when we write a phrase like "popular imagination," it's hard to not think of the particularly dystopian times we live in. This project began before the deadly COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the lives of many of us around the world. Now in a moment of unfettered proliferation in many countries around the world, and certainly in the ones we live in, our lives have taken on eerie connections to the games and literature that sf and game studies often swims in. We're not unique in this, and it spilled out into the production world of games, with the post-apocalyptic plague game *The Last of Us Part II* delayed into the fall of 2020 from the spring due to both pipeline problems and clear resonances with the world around us. COVID-19 had direct effects on this issue's composition. It had direct impacts on our lives, especially as

the educational sector prepared for austerity measures in response to the plague. We want to personally thank everyone who worked on, read for, and withdrew from this issue. You were integral for its creation, and your work thinking the relation between sf and games helped us make sense of this alien time.

The essays we have assembled here address the relationship between games and science fiction from myriad angles. Nick Bestor writes on *Star Wars*' various transformations as it is adapted (and re-adapted) through tabletop RPGs and ultimately produced as a set of canonical positions in the new Disney-controlled formation of the franchise. Similarly looking at how science fiction and games are in conversation with broader cultural maneuvers, Emilie Reed addresses the formation of video game moral panics and how concerns about games found their way into *Star Trek* and *eXistenZ*.

These cross-pollinative logics are on display across the other papers in the issue as well. Stefano Gualeni looks to the way that the game of Azad appears in the work of Ian M. Banks and how it allows us to think across game and sf studies, and Marc Bonner dives deep into this cross-media relationship as well by looking at the visual signifiers of science fiction that have been absorbed into the aesthetics of games. Finally, Colin Milburn and Melissa Wills work through the way that these mechanical and aesthetic modes from sf have been transformed when they enter the educational and transformative game sector.

In addition to these excellent essays, this journal issue also contains four interviews that we conducted during 2020. We wanted a stronger understanding of the ways that practitioners and theorists understood how sf worked for them, and so we took the questions directly to them. We spoke with the award-winning video game writer Meghna Jayanth, the fiction writer and PhD student Ruth Booth, *Friends at the Table* facilitator, storyteller, and critic Austin Walker, and the game studies scholar Souvik Mukherjee. Each of these interviews delve into how these people see sf in their own work in games, how they understand its politics, and the practical management of science fiction concepts as they play out in their heterogeneous forms. These interviews reveal some fascinating layers to the practical creation and management of the unruly genre that is sf, and each gives a unique perspective on how games and science fiction operate to open up (and sometimes close off) possibilities within the volatile game industries and cultures.

We hope that this issue functions as a helpful platform for sf studies scholars and game studies scholars to see where their research overlaps and looks to similar issues. We also hope that it makes clear what the gaps are, and where new methods or concepts might emerge to address what is present in sf games but which neither field has the exact right language to describe.

To return to the beginning, in a bit of time travel that so many sf games focus on: we never managed to write about *Final Fantasy VIII*. The time never seemed right, and COVID-19 ate

free and productive time indiscriminately. And so there is more for us here, too, that we hope to tackle at a later date, over the horizon of the now and somewhere in an undefined future.