

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:                   DIGITAL PLACE-MAKING AND  
  PLATFORM POLITICS: HOW USERS  
  TRANSFORMED AND RECODED THEIR  
  LIVES ONLINE IN THE WAKE OF COVID-  
  19

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Digital Place-making and Platform Politics: How Users Transformed and Recoded their Lives Online in the Wake of COVID-19 examines the political & cultural turmoil at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, where daily life for millions around the world shifted to digital platforms. Digital users turned to the unique affordances of these platforms for civic activism through what I term “digital place-making,” the rhetorical activity involved in cultivating digital places through specific technologies and practices. Drawing from an ecological rhetorical approach and an understanding of digital experiences as transplatform, Digital Place-making and Platform Politics utilizes a methodology that incorporates rhetorical space & place theory, textual analysis, visual analysis, digital ethnographic work, and “in situ” field work to capture the overlapping and simultaneous nature of place-making for digital users.

How does digital place-making impact the relations between users, platforms, and political culture? To render digital place-making as a concept, this dissertation navigates through three case studies between 2020-2022. The first chapter looks at the video game platform Animal Crossing: New Horizons, and how users experiencing lockdown conditions in 2020 repurposed the platform as a site for political expression. This first study establishes the foundational

relationship between infrastructure, user practices, and their engagement with broader political discourse through place-making. The second chapter builds upon this role of infrastructure and user practice creating place by looking at how the platform Twitch trains streamers on their platform to create places for community, and then how streamers leveraged these places for resistance and activism on the platform itself throughout 2021-2022. This second study illuminates the way rhetorical place is constructed through both discourse and infrastructure, and how digital place possesses vulnerabilities unique to the condition of digitality. The third chapter addresses Epic Games' fraught commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the 1963 March on Washington, held in 2021 on the popular video game platform Fortnite. This final study serves as a capstone illustration of the unique vulnerabilities that digital place-making poses for public memory and political discourse.

DIGITAL PLACE-MAKING AND PLATFORM POLITICS: HOW USERS TRANSFORMED  
AND RECODED THEIR LIVES ONLINE IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

by

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the incredible collective of women teachers, scholars, and mentors who inspired me to ask questions and taught me what it means to be an educator:

- Mrs. Jan Lavertue, 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade
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scholars who had mentored me and my clear enthusiasm for digital ethnography, digital studies, and media studies. She looked me in the eye and said, “Brooke, you can still make the people you care about proud with the work you want to do. Write what you want to write.” As silly as it sounds, receiving “permission” from someone I respected so much as both a person and a scholar empowered me to pursue this in-between space of rhetorical digital studies with confidence.

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## Imagining Digital Place-making

The COVID-19 pandemic, beginning the winter of 2019-2020, shifted daily life for millions around the world as digital platforms became the loci for education, work, sociality, and civic life. Platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet were sufficiently advanced to support business and educational endeavors. Users on other platforms, like Nintendo Online, Twitch, and Discord, mobilized for civic activism by other means, especially in the wake of George Floyd's murder in May 2020. I term this phenomenon, and the rhetorical activity involved in cultivating digital places through specific technologies and practices, "digital place-making." To more fully render this concept of digital place-making, I analyze three cases: first, how the video game infrastructure and transplatform network for *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* facilitated new potentials for place-as-protest throughout 2020; second, how content creators on the live streaming platform Twitch used transplatform networks to cultivate spaces for resistance and engagement during the first two years of COVID-19; and, third, how the failed Martin Luther King Jr. commemorative event in *Fortnite* illustrates the role digital places can play in public memory, and how this is influenced by platform technocultures.

"Digital Place-Making and Platform Politics: How Users Transformed and Recoded their Lives Online in the Wake of COVID-19," draws from rhetorical scholars of place who argue that places—situated locations with their own histories and cultures—enact powerful, politically persuasive forces. Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook explain, "Place-as-rhetoric refers to the material (physical and embodied) aspects of a place having meaning and consequence, be it through bodies, signage, buildings, fences, flags, and so on."<sup>1</sup> These material aspects of place—broadly speaking, the various constituents of a place's infrastructure—are what creates

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<sup>1</sup> Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook, "Location Matters: The Rhetoric of Place in Protest," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 3 (2011): 257-282, 265.

the persuasive nature of place. For example, the National Mall in Washington, D.C. is one of these places because “enough famous protests have occurred there to associate it with protest,” thus social movements gain credibility through association with a site’s specific history. Monuments, as physical embodiments of public memory, draw in publics looking to contrast or contest dominant remembering through protest.<sup>2</sup>

In a way, digital place-making has always been prevalent in internet-mediated communication. Digital websites and platforms have existed for decades, facilitating user communication through modes like chatrooms, forums, and even MOOs and MUDs.<sup>3</sup> Even in these early stages of digital life, users regarded these spaces as places with rules and societal expectations. For example, in Julian Dibbell’s account of LambdaMOO, one of the largest MUDs in the 1990s, he referred to it as “my second home.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout internet history, we have used analog terminology to refer to digital spaces; *webpages*, *homepage*, *chatroom*, etc. This dissertation considers how the convergence of technological and cultural conditions of the pandemic accelerated these place-making processes out of political necessity for users. This dissertation takes seriously the impact of the new technical infrastructures that became normalized through COVID-19—especially in terms of how users play with the affordances of digital technologies to press for social justice and participation in public life.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas R. Dunn, “Remembering ‘A Great Fag’: Visualizing Public Memory and the Construction of Queer Space,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 4 (2011): 435–60; Thomas R. Dunn, *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for Representing the GLBTQ Past* (Columbia, SC; University of South Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The terms MUD (Multi-User Dimension) or MOO (MUD, Object Oriented) is a reference to text-based online virtual reality systems where multiple users are connected at the same time. Throughout the 1970s-1990s, these sites were places to interact with players/users in real time.

<sup>4</sup> Julian Dibbell, “A Rape in Cyberspace or How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society,” *Annual Survey of American Law* (1994), 471.

I approach this cultural moment from the perspective of transplatform networks to understand how users participate and envision themselves as part of digital communities.<sup>5</sup> “Digital networks are most often visualized as linear connections,” Sarah Florini notes, which “fails to represent the dynamic and complicated social and cultural practices that both take place in and shape digital networks.”<sup>6</sup> Florini demonstrates how scholarly analysis of a communication network from just one platform obscures the interconnected nature of communication networks, which feature simultaneous and overlapping connections. As we saw during global protests in the wake of Floyd’s death, the transplatform networking capacities of digital platforms offer great promise for grassroots social justice organizing. However, the story I intend to tell also emphasizes the risks of hegemonic institutions (like the large technology firms that own and control these platforms) co-opting, appropriating, or otherwise colonizing these digital networks to maintain institutional power.

“Digital Place-making and Platform Politics” draws on several subfields within communication scholarship because of the vast variety of lived experience within the practice of digital place-making. As the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to demonstrate, the convergence of digital practices and the analog world asks us to consider how analog practices like place-making have migrated to digital contexts. Inspired by rhetorical theories of space and place, this dissertation relies on the assertion that places enact powerful and persuasive forces within political and social life. My understanding of “who” is impacted by this persuasion is drawn from theories of publics and networks, which I pair with a critical-cultural and infrastructural perspective on media theory.

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Florini, *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Florini, *Beyond Hashtags*, 3-4.

While these theories are often drawn from the discipline of communication, I am also drawing on a broader literature in the digital humanities. Critical code studies, critical race theories (particularly those related to technology), and game studies complement my rhetorical analysis. These fields contribute a robust vocabulary to describe digital, embodied, political experiences. One conviction guiding this dissertation project is that developing the lexicon around digitality and place necessarily requires traversing across the borders of academic fields. Culturally, we are wrestling with the language needed to understand a hybrid reality that blends the digital and the analog. Are we really on the cusp of a “Metaverse” as Mark Zuckerberg wants us to believe? What sorts of communicative and social problems are emergent in this liminal moment in which digital platforms are absorbing more and more of human life? How do people adapt to computational ecologies of practice, and how are their practices re-shaped by computation? How are digital infrastructures proposing sanitized, safe, alternative realities that obfuscate the political machinations they claim to absolve?

The concept of digital place-making is a pivot point for this critique of culture, digitality, and politics. The accessibility of the digital offers great organizational promise for users across the globe, but we need to better understand their own self-conceptions of civic engagement, or what public life looks like with digitality as an ambient condition. Highlighting platform infrastructure through a rhetorical understanding that uses digital place as the fulcrum in observing the flow of power, the limitations of platforms, and the promise of digital collectives organizing into imagined collectives reveals how unsuspecting platforms play pivotal roles in our political cultural lives.

This dissertation enters the scholarly conversation regarding digital community studies from a distinctly rhetorical angle and hopes to extend research in three key areas. First, this

dissertation contributes to our understandings of networked publics existing in transplatform networks by complicating the relationships between publics and digital infrastructures. Second, it seeks to recast space and place theories through the digital by complicating the production of place across digital infrastructures and through users' political practices. Third, it builds out how an ecologically attuned rhetorical framework develops our understandings of rhetoric's power and continued relevance in the context of digitality.

To construct this argument in favor of digital place-making, I navigate through three case studies centered in the time period of 2020-2022. The first case study looks at the video game platform *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, and how users experiencing lockdown conditions in 2020 repurposed the platform as a site for political expression. Beginning with Black Lives Matter protests held in-game throughout May/June of 2020, the case study charts how individual user practice becomes increasingly co-opted by larger and more formally organized entities on the platform. This first study establishes the foundational relationship between infrastructure, user practices, and their engagement with broader political discourse through place-making. The second case study builds upon this role of infrastructure and user practice creating *place* by looking at how the platform Twitch trains streamers on their platform to create *places* for community, and then how streamers leveraged these places for resistance and activism on the platform itself throughout 2021-2022. This second study illuminates the way rhetorical place is constructed through both discourse and infrastructure, and how digital place possesses vulnerabilities unique to the condition of digitality. The third case study addresses Epic Games' fraught Martin Luther King Jr. and the 1963 March on Washington commemoration event held in 2021 on the popular video game platform *Fortnite*. This final study serves as a capstone illustration of the consequences behind organizations creating digital *place* for the purposes of

public memory and political discourse but failing to account for the unique vulnerabilities of digital place on a platform. In this introduction chapter, I first outline the rhetorical frameworks used to interrogate the power of digital place-making and communities on situated platforms. I then sketch the methodological practices that inform my approach to each of my case studies. This is followed by a more detailed explanation of the data collected for each case study and a brief preview of the three case studies themselves.

### **Toward a Theory of Digital Place-making**

An orientation to the ecological dimensions of rhetoric offers a framework to address digital phenomena sharing roots with more traditional conceptions of rhetoric, place, and politics. My guiding research questions include: What role does digital place play in digital users' understandings of politics, participation, and identity? How do digital platform infrastructures shape these digital places, and how does power operate in these overlapping transplatform networks? Why are some digital places viewed as more appropriate than others for certain forms of communication, commemoration, and collectivizing? To answer these questions requires looking beyond a single rhetor's interventions, toward the broader infrastructures that make any given rhetor's interventions legible and suasive. This project is particularly timely, as COVID-19 presented a logistical and ontological challenge to much of the Western world as it pivoted deeper into digitality. This cultural backdrop produced circumstances that encouraged increased digital user participation and innovation as societies faced new limitations due to the pandemic.

To craft the foundations for my case study investigations, I develop a coherent analytical framework that synthesizes perspectives from rhetorical studies, media studies, and

critical/cultural studies. First, I outline the rhetorical dimensions of textual analysis and circulation. These rhetorical cornerstones inform the ecological approach this dissertation uses throughout each of the case studies. After establishing this foundation for ecologically oriented rhetoric, I pivot to two key ideas: publics/counterpublics, and the concept of place as a rhetorical force. Finally, I explain how media studies analyses of platform politics and digital labor offer new ways of thinking about the role of place and place-making in digital culture.

### ***Textual Analysis and Circulation***

To perform a “textual analysis,” we must first determine what qualifies as a “text.” The remixed, diffusive nature of the digital phenomena studied in this dissertation require me to intentionally coalesce a coherent text. There is historical grounding for this work, as rhetoricians have long wrestled with the most coherent way to study content across fragmented discursive realities.<sup>7</sup> Michael Calvin McGee asserted that “rhetors make discourses from scraps and pieces of evidence. Critical rhetoric does not begin with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore an essential role of a rhetorician is finding and recognizing the connective tissue between fragments, building a larger picture of an unending discourse. This approach to text collection is even more paramount with digitality, where virality and attention flow in waves of intensity. Indeed, no digital text is ever “finished” in the way that a speech or printed text is, as the broader digital media ecology can always extend, remix, and further craft intertextual fragments for subsequent circulation.

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<sup>7</sup> Leland M. Griffin, “The Rhetoric of Historical Movements,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 38, no. 2 (1952), 184.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54, no. 3 (1990), 279.

The term “ecology” infuses into rhetorical scholarship an attunement to the complex relational experiences between texts, infrastructure, and humans. William Rueckert connects rhetoric to ecology through Kenneth Burke’s understanding of humanity’s capacity for reason: “Ecology is the study of the relationships between organisms and their environments, and humans, because of their capacity for symbolic action, have a unique ability to alter radically their natural environment and, in fact, add a whole other human environment to a natural one.”<sup>9</sup> Rueckert acknowledges that this capacity to invent and modify the natural environment is a unique power of humanity. In Burke’s estimation, this logocentricity presents humanity with distinct tensions and responsibilities regarding their relationship to the built environment.<sup>10</sup> Burke’s analysis has continued staying power, as digitality has intensified this capacity of humans to symbolically craft ecologies that are themselves intensively coded with symbolicity. It is now possible for an individual to spend an entire day, week, even year, primarily engaging with interfaces, persons, and environments that exist through a complex web of code-driven infrastructures. This focus on the human capacity for organization as a key element of persuasion and lived experience expresses itself digitally through coding and platform infrastructures. As such, the rhetorical forces at work in these manufactured digital realities must account for human users and their relationships to both their built and natural environments.

Jenny Edbauer Rice further codifies the implicit ecological nature of rhetorical analysis. Lloyd Bitzer’s initial conception of “the rhetorical situation” proposed that a rhetor discovers and speaks into an exigency that already exists for an audience.<sup>11</sup> However, Edbauer Rice asserts that

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<sup>9</sup> William H. Rueckert, *Encounters with Kenneth Burke* (Champaign-Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 174.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1970); Rueckert, *Encounters with Kenneth Burke*.

<sup>11</sup> Jenny Edbauer Rice, “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 5–24, 6-8.

rhetoric is not a static model, but rather a dynamic operation at play within a variety of relations and actions. She explains, "... we *do* rhetoric, rather than (just) finding ourselves *in a rhetoric*. By extension, we might also say that rhetorical situation is better conceptualized as a mixture of processes and encounters; it should become a verb, rather than a fixed noun or *situs*."<sup>12</sup>

Conceptualizing rhetoric as a verb expands and complicates what is studied as rhetoric by a critic. If it is not the speech (noun) that emerges from mouth or pen of a rhetor (noun), then what "text" may we study? Edbauer Rice expands the actions that facilitate what fragments compose our texts for analysis in a way that is particularly helpful for this project. For example, *building*, *transforming*, and *modifying* the infrastructure of a digital island in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* for the purposes of protest are verbs (actions) that merit further rhetorical analysis. The process of transforming the infrastructure on the island is a rhetorical one as deserving of scholarly analysis as the final island those actions produce. Analyzing both the process and the result properly situates digital place-making as a rhetoric that is *done* by digital users, not just used by them.

How are we to modify rhetoric's traditional interest in and expertise around textual meaning and circulation in the context of a video game platform like *Fortnite*, or a live streaming platform like Twitch? Rhetoricians attune themselves to the inherently persuasive and powerful forces these complex relationships produce. Therefore, I draw from Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy's articulation that rhetoric if "approached ecologically, considers qualities of relations between entities, not just among humans, that enable different modes of rhetoric to emerge, flourish, and dissipate."<sup>13</sup> Within rhetorical theory and criticism, this opens relationships

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<sup>12</sup> Edbauer Rice, "Unframing Models of Public Distribution" 2005, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy, "Thinking Ecologically About Rhetoric's Ontology: Capacity, Vulnerability, and Resilience," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, no. 1 (2017), 3.

between technologies, platforms, interfaces, users, and companies for analysis. Stormer and McGreavy are advocating for conceptualizing relationality beyond the human agent. This dissertation proceeds from a similar post humanist spirit, stressing with Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett the urgency of re-imagining humans in relationships with all manner of organic and inorganic matter, which also have agentic force.<sup>14</sup> Within an ecological rhetorical framework, we must then take seriously the digital infrastructures as entities within these relationships. These infrastructures are not just connective tissue between entities—that is, they are not merely “containers” for other entities. Instead, these digital infrastructures influence and constitute the entities connecting to them. John Mucklebauer reinforces this idea in his claim that while a structure may not necessarily be an argument itself, “they are undoubtedly persuasive” and thus “it is important to consider these types of objects as crucial components of rhetoric.”<sup>15</sup> To remove a single text from this intermingled web is folly, as Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber note: “One single text or exigence cannot exist apart from its ecology any more than an animal or plant species can. Like human cognition itself, rhetorical acts are dynamic, ongoing, and open to influence.”<sup>16</sup> While an ecological attunement to rhetoric is beneficial to any rhetorical study, it is fundamentally *unavoidable* and especially useful within digital rhetorical projects. Studying digital fragments from outside their embedded context obfuscates much of their persuasive power and their persistence within digital cultures. Even something as comparatively simple as a tweet invites an ecological approach that sees a discrete rhetorical performance as embedded in a wider weave of communication and infrastructure. For example, a(ny) single tweet regarding

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<sup>14</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> John Mucklebauer, “Implicit Paradigms of Rhetoric: Aristotelian, Cultural, and Heliotropic,” in *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 2016), 36.

<sup>16</sup> Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber, “Ecological, Pedagogical, Public Rhetoric,” *College Composition and Communication* 63, no. 2 (2011): 187-218, 194.

*Animal Crossing: New Horizons* in 2020 would likely lack substance or relevance to broader political culture discussions. However, when you place the Black Lives Matter, Global Pride 2020, and Biden Island related ACNH tweets in conversation with each other, the rhetorical role the game platform played throughout 2020 political culture takes shape. Florini's work with the *This Week in Blackness!* podcasting network emulates this type of hyper-contextualized analysis. In her estimation, these spaces populated by digital collectives are "not limited by platform" and thus require a transplatform network analysis.<sup>17</sup> In a parallel move, the essential role of a rhetorician, opposed to perhaps a data scientist or journalist, is to fully situate fragments within their context to understand their rhetorical power. The expansiveness of this orientation is daunting, as it asks a rhetorician to attend to a multiplicity of contexts, connections, and convictions simultaneously. However, breaking down the modes of analysis to varying qualities of relations allows for distinctive relational patterns to reveal themselves. Through these observed relational connections, the broader ramifications of these relations across discrete platforms are realized.

One of the manifestations of these relations essential to this dissertation project regards affect. As a term, affect underlines ecological relationality, enriching our vocabulary to apprehend how infrastructures move audiences. Within the context of a digital environment, the loop of stimuli (visual, haptic, auditory, etc.) and sensation facilitate the movement of affect across networks. These technologies shape networks as "socioculturally shaped architectures" that attune affective intensities for those engaged.<sup>18</sup> These affective intensities are, as Brower

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<sup>17</sup> Florini, *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 120.

puts it, “the experience of a bodily intensity that we feel but have not yet named.”<sup>19</sup> The movement of these intensities is an essential part of affect, as it is “circulated among subjects.”<sup>20</sup> This circulation animates the relations between the digital platform users (both creators and consumers), the platforms, and their broader public reception. For the cases incorporated in this project, tracing the affective circulations across different platform-based phenomena will teach us not only *what* politically moves individuals in these online places, but how this movement occurs across networks that many not seem inherently connected. Part of the rise in digital place-making as political practice throughout the COVID-19 pandemic emerged from a need for affective interaction, as much of the world experienced social isolation. To compensate, users channeled their intense experiences through shaping, modifying, and adapting digital infrastructures that generated a unique affective environment. This production is dynamic, and these environments invite us to transform the way we think about affect as a force.

How does interface, remixing, and sharing content through transplatform networks illuminate the impact of digital circulation on affect? Affect circulates through the infrastructures of digitality that distribute content and captivate user attention at hyper-speed. While affect is linked to digitality through circulation, this relationship is expressed through emotion-based language. Language plays a fundamental role in understanding the relationship between affect and emotion, albeit an imperfect one. Brian Massumi argues emotion is “subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal.”<sup>21</sup> Affect, the felt bodily intensity, is named through language, thus losing its “not yet

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<sup>19</sup> Jay Brower, “Rhetorical Affects in Digital Media,” in *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric*, ed. Aaron Hess and Amber Davisson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 44.

<sup>20</sup> Ernst Van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel E. Smith, *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

named” quality. This process translates the intensity to a socially recognizable emotion. This transmission and transformation of affect through circulation functions as an “affective economy.”<sup>22</sup> We see this dynamic with content creators and platform users who simultaneously produce and consume affects through content circulation. Streamers host communities on their live-streaming platforms, creating places for users to engage with the streamer and each other through chat feeds, Discord servers, and other digital platforms. These communities circulate a variety of affects internally and externally through their transplatform networks. These intensities are embodied, but throughout the pandemic these types of digital infrastructures served as intermediaries between bodies forcibly kept apart. As such, the political and social expressions communicated through these transplatform networks circulated affective intensities between digital users. Tracing these intensities across transplatform networks illuminates the way affect contributes to the mobilization of these networked publics and their communal expressions. Digital place-making is both a result of and a perpetuator of these affective intensities across digital infrastructures, which brings us to my overarching research question: how does the mode of this circulation shape how affects are understood and mobilized in digital culture? What affects make a digital platform a *place*?

### ***Publics and Place***

The circulation of digital texts does not occur in either a vacuum or amongst unattached entities scattered throughout the cosmos. Rather, this circulation of fragments occurs within *publics*, which itself is a definitionally contentious term. Rhetoricians and media scholars alike have revised, remixed, and renewed the idea of what should be encompassed in the study of publics. The term “public sphere” originated from scholarship concerning the historical context

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<sup>22</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39.

of European power struggles: monarchy and revolution, with a touch of printing press and coffee stirred in. Jürgen Habermas’s generalized definition outlines the public sphere as “a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion.”<sup>23</sup> The core idea from this concept prioritizes the role of the individual in assembly, and these groups then work against the “public authority” of a society.<sup>24</sup> Sites like coffeehouses, town squares, and other public gathering places facilitated the political momentum in these areas. These centralized places to gather, engage, and speak through legitimated means (i.e., voting, media publication) demonstrate how private individuals used place to coalesce as a visible entity within the public sphere of political society. However, rhetorical studies on the public sphere historically focused on formal politics (citizenship, voting, and political address) and traditional, legible means of protest (marches, civic disobedience, and boycotts).<sup>25</sup>

This dissertation does not discount the importance of this conception of the public sphere in studying political culture; rather, I advocate for its expansion to digital culture in ways that meaningfully address oversights in more traditional public sphere theory. Digital platforms and the digital places that emerge from user cultivation and interaction with those infrastructures offer scholars civic arenas distinct from the state to analyze. The participatory limitations within the traditional bounds of the public sphere illuminated by Black, Latine, queer, and digital scholars alike address how communities not recognized by historically marginalizing social structures engage in public participation through alternative means. For example, Catherine

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<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974): 49-55, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox, “The Publics Sphere,” 52.

<sup>25</sup> For examples in which citizenship and traditional forms of enfranchisement (voting) are discussed as primary forms of rhetorical power in the political spectrum, see Catherine H. Palczewski, “The 1919 Prison Special: Constituting White Women’s Citizenship,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 2 (2016): 107–32; Whitney Gent, “‘Expensive’ People: Consumer Citizenship and the Limits of Choice in Neoliberal Publics,” *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 3 (2018): 190–204; Karrin Vasby Anderson, “Presidential Pioneer or Campaign Queen? Hillary Clinton and the First-Timer/Frontrunner Double Bind,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 20, no. 3 (2017): 525–38.

Squires places non-dominant participation within the context of multiple publics, noting that individuals experience and respond to various and simultaneously occurring economic, social, and cultural conditions. Squires' well-known typology of publics offers three different models that depart from the "dominant" public sphere: "enclaves," which are publics that withdraw in order to survive but circulate discourses internally, "counterpublics," which are publics that "engage in debate with wider publics to test ideas" and are also more likely to use traditional social movement strategies like boycotts, sit-ins, etc., and then "satellites" which seek separation from other publics but might still elect to engage in wider public discourses.<sup>26</sup> This multiplicity of publics not only emphasizes the various conditions impacting the formation and operation of any given public, but also underlines the importance for some publics of having a place to withdraw, selectively engage, or protect as part of their experience. This mobility of publics is particularly salient in a digital context, where digital platform infrastructure allows individuals to communicate across temporal and geographic barriers with greater ease.

The boundaries (or lack thereof) of these types of digitally influenced public arenas are further emphasized by Ashley Hinck's argument that digital contexts present publics with a fluidity of choice and affiliation through the mobility offered by technology.<sup>27</sup> Within each of the case studies I have identified, various publics migrate, transform, and overlap throughout the circulation of their discourses. Despite the fluid nature of digital publics, the groups I am studying also fall into established, distinct elements of what is understood as a public, following several key features of Michael Warner's conceptualization of a public. Digital publics examined

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<sup>26</sup> Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the black public sphere: An alternative vocabulary for multiple public spheres." *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (2002): 446-468, 447-48.

<sup>27</sup> Ashley Hinck, "Ethical Frameworks and Ethical Modalities: Theorizing Communication and Citizenship in a Fluid World," *Communication Theory* 26, no. 1 (2015): 1-20; Ashley Hinck, "Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, Communities, and Public Values," in *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric*, ed. Aaron Hess and Amber Davisson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 98-111.

in this dissertation are “publics” because 1) “a public is constituted through mere attention,” 2) “a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse,” and 3) “publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation.”<sup>28</sup> The role of attention is essential when understanding a digital public considering the way *captivation* functions in digital virality and activism.<sup>29</sup>

Given the proximity of many digital groups with toxic technocultures, I also feel the need to complicate my use of the term “counterpublic” in my research. Warner defines a counterpublic as a public in “tension with a larger public.”<sup>30</sup> This broader definition is useful, as many of the publics I work with align with this articulation. However, Kyle Larson and George McHendry helpfully complicate that definition in the context of alt-right and toxic publics seen online. They explain, “While this description can be appropriate, it is insufficiently attentive to the material conditions of power shaping public spheres.”<sup>31</sup> In studying publics, the relationships between publics and their identity as a counterpublic is not static. In their research, they observe how a “parasitic public” such as white supremacist nationalists, can hold “a privileged symbiotic relationship with dominant power structures, while not necessarily being central enough to be a ‘dominant public.’”<sup>32</sup> For example, the “hate raid” movement targeting the historically marginalized content creators I work with on Twitch, is generated by a parasitic public of racist, anti-feminist, ableist actors. The tensions between these counterpublics, and Twitch Inc.’s response to these issues, are illustrative of how platforms shape publics’ interaction and reveal flows of power.

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002): 87, 92, 96.

<sup>29</sup> Jiyeon Kang, *Igniting the Internet: Youth and Activism in Postauthoritarian South Korea* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 56.

<sup>31</sup> Kyle R. Larson and George F. (Guy) McHendry Jr., “Parasitic Publics,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 5 (2019): 517-54, 520.

<sup>32</sup> Larson and McHendry Jr., “Parasitic Publics” 2019, 519.

This ability for any public to reposition itself vis-a-vis another public underscores the fluid nature of public allegiances. Furthermore, within the context of digital platforms where groups exhibit fluid tendencies in their allegiances and public/private presence online, the lines between an enclave public and a counterpublic are further blurred. This lack of distinction between private and public, both institutionally and civically, presents the opportunity for digital scholars to extend how we think about publics within an ecological rhetorical frame. Nearly a decade ago, boyd proposed that “As social network sites and other genres of social media become increasingly widespread, the distinctions between networked publics and publics will become increasingly blurry.”<sup>33</sup> Florini’s work suggests this prophecy has come true. Drawing from Squires, Florini deploys the term “oscillating networked public” to describe how participants in Black Twitter function in relation to other publics. She explains, “At times, participants in Black Twitter wish to capitalize on the visibility created by the platform, strategically using trending topics and other affordances to make their voices and experiences more widely known. Yet, at other times, these same affordances bring unwanted visibility, particularly scrutiny from dominant groups, in ways that inhibit Black users from participating freely on the platform.”<sup>34</sup> Florini highlights how members of a public negotiate relationships with other publics whilst simultaneously attending to the power structures that shape those interactions. Oscillation is distinct from fluidity in that oscillation is a reorientation of the public within its multitude of contexts, whereas fluidity addresses the way individual members may associate with or leave a particular public. In both cases however, the movement of participants afforded by digitality is central. This dissertation features case studies of multilayered,

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<sup>33</sup> danah boyd, “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications,” ed. Zizi Papacharissi, *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, 2010, 52.

<sup>34</sup> Florini, *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks*, 69.

multiplatform networks, thus the concept of oscillation captures an essential function of group dynamics in digital ecologies.

Alongside oscillation, the concept of place is essential in understanding and analyzing digital phenomena. Locations evoke memories and produce affective experiences that effect political movement messaging.<sup>35</sup> Beyond memorials, the very layout of districts, topography, and transit pathways shape the nature of public memory and thus political discourse.<sup>36</sup> Physical structures that call forth intensely affectively charged public memories produce powerfully persuasive forces when harnessed by political movements. Endres and Senda-Cook's studies in *place-in-protest* entreat rhetoricians to consider locations as possessing their own unique rhetorical forces. As the case studies in this dissertation evidence, users often stylize computational platforms as places for political and social participation. *Place-in-protest* emphasizes how specific locations are chosen mindfully by social movements for public action, meaning scholars must attend to the location and its history to better understand the messages articulated by a social movement. Whether it is *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, Twitch, or *Fortnite*, digital places in these case studies fulfill the expressive functions like those that Endres and Senda-Cook document, albeit with the affordances and constraints of digitality including control, access, and visibility. These digital *places* for public, political discourse seem likely to grow in a post-COVID-19 context in which digitality is even more embedded in public and political culture.

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<sup>35</sup> Scott A. Sandage, "A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939-1963," *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 135-67. Laura Michael Brown, "Remembering Silence: Bennett College Women and the 1960 Greensboro Student Sit-Ins," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2018): 49-70; Thomas R. Dunn, *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for Representing the GLBTQ Past* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016); Thomas R. Dunn, "Remembering 'A Great Fag': Visualizing Public Memory and the Construction of Queer Space," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 4 (2011): 435-60; Endres and Senda-Cook, "Location Matters," 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Dave Tell, *Remembering Emmett Till* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

The powerful, persuasive forces places hold is not disrupted when places are translated to the digital. Doreen Massey illustrates that time-space compression, and its acceleration through digitality, still enforces disparities of distribution, interconnection, and access.<sup>37</sup> The site specificity of place is hyper-emphasized in a digital culture of hyperlinks and attentional capital. However, as Armond Towns warns, social media continues to rely on power structures that reinforce white, patriarchal hierarchies; thus, digitality cannot be removed from the historical infrastructures and cultural norms that precede it.<sup>38</sup> The replication and recreation of the material world in digital culture poses additional questions regarding what must be considered a “place” for the purposes of space and place theory.

Platforms offer infrastructure for users to engage with digital place-making. For example, digital mapping seeks to digitize the globe through image capture and coding (think Google Maps). Joshua Ewalt demonstrates how activist groups co-opt this practice to “countermap” or produce geographies that motivate social change by altering label conventions, captured imagery, and even access.<sup>39</sup> Interactive mapping offers a tie between digital place-making and traditional forms of social activism, but also requires a more ecological rhetorical framework to capture the production of spaces that exist outside of, yet are intrinsically linked to, the built environment. The topographical modification and network navigation unique to platforms like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* or *Fortnite* are, I believe, excellent case studies for interrogating these types of interactions between conceptions of place derived from the built environment and digital platforms that allow users to remix, reshape, and produce new places.

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<sup>37</sup> Doreen Massey, “Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place,” in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. John Bird et al. (London, UK: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Armond R. Towns, “Geographies of Pain: #SayHerName and the Fear of Black Women’s Mobility,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 39, no. 2 (2016): 122–26.

<sup>39</sup> Joshua P. Ewalt, “Mapping Injustice: The World Is Witness, Place-Framing, and the Politics of Viewing on Google Earth,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 4, no. 4 (2011): 333–54.

The popularity of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, Twitch, and *Fortnite* throughout the pandemic facilitated transplatform networks of players and fans primed for activism amidst the limitations of COVID-19. Of course, the infrastructure of online connection has long been seen as offering individuals dedicated places to cultivate a collective identity and form more cohesive networked publics.<sup>40</sup> But, as Hinck and Davisson argue, popular culture fandoms increasingly mobilize in ways that depart from traditional activist tactics, such as fan-led campaigns to decorate Harry Styles' concert venues with Black Lives Matter signs and flags to “reshape, adapt, use” Harry Styles' image for their own representation while simultaneously developing his political meaning through social media.<sup>41</sup> Networked publics are leveraging the unique affordances of the video game and transplatform networks for political expression and engagement. The potency of digital place-making is further emphasized in how their innovations are appropriated as traditional organizations “adapt to networked society.”<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the commercialization of user generated content within the internet's political economy exposes digital publics to exploitation from traditional capitalistic or state institutions.<sup>43</sup> Thus, my intervention extends the conception of what constitutes a “place” for the purposes of registering the persuasive forces of digital places.

### ***Platforms and Politics***

Platforms are themselves embedded in a complex matrix of power flows and infrastructure. Thus, this project understands that the publics involved in each case study exist in

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, *Counterpublics and the State* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).

<sup>41</sup> Ashley Hinck and Amber Davisson, “Fandom and Politics,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 32 (2020), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/1973/2433>.

<sup>42</sup> Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova, “Up, up, and Away! The Power and Potential of Fan Activism,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 10 (2012), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/435/305>.

<sup>43</sup> Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Social Text* 18, 2 (2000): 33–58, 63; Peter Dahlgren, “The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication” *Political Communication* 22, 2 (2005): 146-162; Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of Platforms,” *New Media & Society* 12, 3 (2010): 347–64.

a transplatform network, highlighting their overlapping and simultaneously occurring nature.<sup>44</sup> This is a recasting of traditional conceptions of a network, as Florini's work illustrates.<sup>45</sup> To better account for the multiplicity of networks seen in digital contexts, Florini revises the concept of a traditional network by complicating the interconnected nature of networks and how content moves across platforms through "sharing, remediating, and remixing."<sup>46</sup> These networks transform content, as content and conversations are reworked due to individual user preference, social group expectations, and the digital affordances of specific platforms. This process is what constitutes a "transplatform network" and these layered, dynamic digital networks mobilize rapidly, oftentimes occupying unsuspecting corners of the internet. In Florini's work with the *This Week in Blackness!* Podcasting network, she traces how various platforms, creators, and social media interactions exist as "imbricated, yet distinct" elements in a transplatform network.<sup>47</sup>

Analyzing a single platform like Twitch or Twitter is insufficient to understand how a contemporary public oscillates and otherwise moves through rhetorical action. As Florini puts it, "Twitter functions as a central clearinghouse to circulate materials posted on other platforms;" much of the content shared on one platform has a relevance and audience rooted elsewhere.<sup>48</sup> Second, platforms are understood as both locations and as political emissaries. Tarleton Gillespie and Dal Yong Jin explain that the definition of a platform must go beyond computational infrastructure to include an understanding of platforms as intermediaries between the users, the press, and commentaries.<sup>49</sup> Platforms afford their owner(s) ways to communicate, interact or sell

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<sup>44</sup> Florini, *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks*.

<sup>45</sup> Sarah Florini, *Beyond Hashtags*, 3-4.

<sup>46</sup> Florini, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Florini, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Florini, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Gillespie, "The Politics of Platforms," 2010; Dal Yong Jin, "The Construction of Platform Imperialism in the Globalization Era," *TripleC* 11, no. 1 (2013): 145-72.

within the broader public sphere. José van Dijck's studies on platform sociality see platforms as places of connectivity, where online companies attract users by catering to goals and opportunities or even constructing traps to keep users locked into a platform.<sup>50</sup> Platforms act as the synecdoche for whatever stakeholder(s) control the platform, meaning platforms should be understood as representing (and protecting) the motives of the venture capitalists and/or companies that own them. The obfuscated nature of this ownership often results in the exploitation of users and their digital labor because platforms are engaged in the project of capitalism and self-preservation within a globalized market economy.<sup>51</sup> For example, Twitch content creators receive mere fractions of the fiscal and social value for the work they produce, with Twitch pocketing millions in advertising revenue annually. Platforms claim to empower individuals to engage, or as Gillespie describes it, "lifting us all up, evenly," across digital mediums.<sup>52</sup> However, as Siva Vaidhyanathan illustrates in his analysis of the Google-owned platform YouTube, no platform can remain *truly* neutral.<sup>53</sup> The politicization of platforms is often two-fold: the first being tied to perceptions of platforms and their demographics, the other tied to the ideologies embedded within platform infrastructures themselves.

The politicized perception of platforms is predicated on cultural contexts regarding social structures and power associated with the platforms themselves. For example, Pinterest, an online social media platform that focuses on crafts, D.I.Y. culture, and aesthetics has been deeply

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<sup>50</sup> José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12–16.

<sup>51</sup> Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Dal Yong Jin, "The Construction of Platform Imperialism in the Globalization Era," *Triple C* 11, no. 1 (2013).

<sup>52</sup> Gillespie, "The Politics of Platforms," 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018).

feminized.<sup>54</sup> The predominant demographic on Pinterest are mothers, and it is through the display of domesticity and child-rearing that the categories of “woman” are reinforced to the platform’s user base. Despite the arguably positive findings on how the Pinterest community generates happiness in users, it is the platform’s conflation with gender norms supported by social and economic forces that lead to the mainstream critiques of “women’s media” as subpar media experiences and/or women’s use of specific mediums. Meanwhile, the politicization of platforms through infrastructure is tied to not only user affordances and access, but the very digital architecture that brings the platform into existence. Safiya Noble’s investigation into the deeply racist algorithms present in internet search engine optimization demonstrate how hostile digital networks are for Black users from the very code used to navigate the networks themselves.<sup>55</sup> Ruha Benjamin explains it best when she quotes the reports surrounding the “racist robots” conundrum: “[t]he simplest explanation for biased algorithms is that the humans who create them have their own deeply entrenched biases. Despite perceptions that algorithms are somehow neutral and uniquely objective, they can often reproduce and amplify existing prejudices.”<sup>56</sup> Lisa Nakamura has long advocated that racism is not a “glitch” in our digital infrastructures, but rather an embedded feature.<sup>57</sup> A critical emphasis on digital infrastructure’s human elements, “such as work practices, individual habits, and organizational culture” reveal how infrastructure “can structurally exclude some people from purportedly ‘universal’

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<sup>54</sup> Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim, “Pinning Happiness: Affect, Social Media, and the Work of Mothers,” in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (New York, NY: Polity, 2019), 50.

<sup>57</sup> Nakamura Lisa, “Glitch Racism: Networks as Actors within Vernacular Internet Theory,” *Culture Digitally*, 2013, <https://culturedigitally.org/2013/12/glitch-racism-networks-as-actors-within-vernacular-internet-theory/>.

services.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the infrastructure, organization, and design histories embedded with misogynistic, racist, and heteronormative assumptions are essential to bring to the forefront of digital history. However, despite these constraints, historically marginalized groups have also used these digital infrastructures for their own purposes, often contravening the oppressive histories that shaped any particular technology or medium.

Across the digital landscape, historically marginalized populations make networked publics, whether on a singular platform or within a transplatform network. André Brock’s work with Black Twitter, and Black technology users more broadly, traces a recent history of Black cyberculture.<sup>59</sup> He advocates for “a compelling vision of Blackness as an informational identity that avoids the essentialization of Black cultural identity despite the hegemonic influence of Western racial and technocultural identity.”<sup>60</sup> It is inaccurate to frame all Black user engagement online as “resistance,” since Black cyberculture practices would simply be considered digital practices if not for the overwhelming presence of white supremacist ideologies in the digital landscape.<sup>61</sup> Adam Banks offers additional language to better understand African American and Black activist use of existing communication technologies without falling into a “normative vs resistance” binary through his articulation of “remixing.”<sup>62</sup> In music, remixing is when a composer takes an original song and transforms it through changing the beat, extending or cutting music or repeating sections.<sup>63</sup> The resulting song is a new creation, capable of accessing a different audience or purpose than the original composition. In digitality, cutting and pasting

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<sup>58</sup> Jean-Christophe Plantin et al., “Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 293-310, 296.

<sup>59</sup> André Brock Jr, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020).

<sup>60</sup> Brock Jr, 25.

<sup>61</sup> Brock Jr, 170.

<sup>62</sup> Adam Banks, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Banks, 89.

abilities allow users to rearrange elements of infrastructure or discourse to repurpose existing content for different context or audience.<sup>64</sup> Thus, this dissertation investigates how historically marginalized users deploy a range of strategies to exceed the platform owner's intended or preferred use of platform.

This kind of user labor is an animating force behind the politically persuasive forces of *place* in digital culture. Considering the nature of the subjects in this dissertation, special attention must be paid to the way digital labor intersects with content creation across transplatform networks. Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig de Peuter claim for digital games industry institutions “to capture the attention of people, and even to involve and exploit new types of labor, they give people instruments for producing and reproducing media in a way that paradoxically diminishes capital’s monopoly of spectacular power.”<sup>65</sup> Essentially, they assert that the idea of biopower lingers in the way with which the “public” interacts with a spectacle. The digital games industry is animated by user engagement with gaming platforms themselves, but also user content produced on various other platforms to redirect attention back to specific gaming platforms. For example, a video game central to this dissertation is *Fortnite*. The millions of users who play the game itself are only a small fraction of the digital attention paid to the game across the internet. Millions of YouTube videos, thousands of streamers, and countless user posts on platforms like Twitter focus on *Fortnite*, thus redirecting user attention back to the game platform. In this way, the labor behind user generated content maintains the popularity and attention paid to the video game, contributing to its dominance within the industry.

Thus, this dissertation hopes to extend conversations regarding labor and the captivation of user attention in digitality through the concept of digital place-making. The maintenance and

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<sup>64</sup> Banks, 87–91.

<sup>65</sup> Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, 189.

curation of these spaces relies on tremendous labor from digital users. When platforms and networks are concretized as digital places by users, they become arenas for this interaction between spectacle and publics. Jiyeon Kang's concept of *cultural ignition* relies on users understanding their timelines or other digital communities as a bounded place they influence.<sup>66</sup> Users do not merely float in a digital ether waiting to be acted upon by hyperlinks or viral videos. Instead, users curate their own spaces on designated platforms, whether that be a Twitter timeline feed or an island in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Captivation occurs when forces perforate those places, crossing platform boundaries through the layers of transplatform networks. Users are captivated because content literally invades their places of dwelling on the internet. This content then proliferates across the network as it continues to be distributed, remixed, and consumed, crossing the thresholds of users inhabiting other platform spaces.

As such, content creators are the main source of production in this digital flow of power. Tiziana Terranova's concerns regarding politicized labor and internet culture gesture towards the idea of *playbour* as a key force in digital society's power dynamics.<sup>67</sup> As defined by Julian Kücklich, *playbour* is neither traditional work or traditional leisure, but a convergence of the two.<sup>68</sup> Content creators on platforms like Twitter, Twitch, and elsewhere exist within the tensions for-profit leisure production; churning out entertainment through expression and play that is commodified and politicized based on the constraints of the platforms they use and demands from their audience on that platform. These relations between users, platforms, and technologies are reliant on the infrastructure that supports platform culture. The divisions between infrastructural and platform perspectives within media studies have increasingly blurred

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<sup>66</sup> Kang, *Igniting the Internet: Youth and Activism in Postauthoritarian South Korea*, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Terranova, "Free Labor," 2000.

<sup>68</sup> Julian Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," *The Fibreculture Journal*, no. 5 (2005), <https://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>.

as “media environments increasingly essential to our daily lives (infrastructures) are dominated by corporate entities (platforms).”<sup>69</sup> Transplatform networks, regardless of the specific platform(s) (i.e., corporate entity) hosting their discourses, are reliant on the internet’s infrastructures to function.

The internet itself is constructed through code, wires, networks, server farms, and user devices bound together in a web of interlocked and overlapping infrastructures.<sup>70</sup> We access the internet through service providers and programs, and programs themselves are products of computational code. When asked what qualifies as a platform, Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort affirm Marc Andreessen’s explanation as paramount to defining a platform; “If you can program it, then it’s a platform. If you can’t, then it’s not.”<sup>71</sup> Here we see the blurring of the lines between infrastructure and platforms: infrastructure has been platformized through the digital, and platforms are only possible through codified infrastructures. Therefore, this dissertation understands the two as inextricably linked, but will defer to using “platform” because of the site specificity in my case studies. Platforms are inherently infrastructural, and we must likewise attend to the mechanics of how users engage with a platform as part of their situated context. Drawing from scholars like Chase Aunspach and André Brock, who enfold interface and form as part of their technology and publics studies, this dissertation imagines digital place-making as practice developed by publics through technological affordances unique to digitality.<sup>72</sup> As such,

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<sup>69</sup> Plantin et al., “Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook,” 295.

<sup>70</sup> Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Plantin et al., “Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook,” 301–3.

<sup>71</sup> Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort, “Platform Studies: Frequently Questioned Answers,” in *Plenaries: After Media — Embodiment and Context* (Digital Arts and Culture 2009, University of California Irvine, 2009); Marc Andreessen, “The Three Kinds of Platforms You Meet on the Internet,” 2007, <http://web.archive.org/web/20071018161644/http://blog.pmarca.com/2007/09/the-three-kinds.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Chase Aunspach, “Discrete and Looking (to Profit): Homoconnectivity on Grindr,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37, no. 1 (2020): 43–57; André Brock Jr, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York, NY: New York University, 2020).

particular emphasis must be placed on social media platforms and networks as complex architectures embedded in digital place-making practices.

Platforms are then understood as infrastructural, programmable, and bounded spaces existing within digital culture. It is essential to distinguish the relationship between place and platforms, as they are *not* synonymous in this project. *Place* is a rhetorical term, highlighting the situated locations of relations. *Place* exists in digital culture through user's treatments of digital platforms as specific sites, appropriate for intentional and nuanced sociality. Platforms, within their situated transplatform networks and political matrixes, are the vehicles by which *place* is constructed by users. The next section underlines the essential nature of this distinction, by describing how the methods used to research each of my case studies will specifically utilize situated contexts, infrastructure, and rhetorical analysis to analyze digital place and place-making on various platforms and transplatform networks.

## **Methodology**

A methodology for analyzing transplatform networks must consider the unique elements of digital discourse, transplatform networks, and user practices. As such, this dissertation uses a mixed methodology to articulate the layers of these complex relationships. The data collection process of this project could best be described as archival curation: for each case study I composed a corpus of data across several different platforms including Twitter, Twitch, public Discords, and media news outlets. My purpose in archiving rhetoric from digital platforms is to collect first-hand experiences of digital place-making. The purpose behind compiling an archive of news stories from prominent media outlets including *Kotaku*, *Polygon*, *Wired*, *IGN*, *Forbes*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* is two-fold. First, it anchors my case studies to

their broader circles of influence. Second, it reveals what conversations escape the transplatform network into more dominant networks of public discourse. As such, throughout this section I elaborate on how my approach is influenced by established methods to address specific issues in studying digital place-making such as rhetorical criticism and digital ethnography.

While each case study features a unique transplatform network, Twitter was a common platform across each phenomenon. As such, I utilized TAGS alongside other qualitative methods like rhetorical analysis of recurring patterns or strategies observed across the collected tweets to create an archive of user discourse for analysis. TAGS is a free Google Sheets application, designed to provide snapshots of recurring language, hashtags, themes, and direct user mentions on Twitter.<sup>73</sup> Twitter's API (application programming interface) has a set protocol that prevents software from fully archiving every tweet.<sup>74</sup> Thus, TAGS uses a structure of parameters to determine what to capture following a list of criteria set by the researcher. In each of my case studies, I set a baseline to capture content from Twitter users who have at least 100 followers, and over 500 tweets from their account. This is a boundary set to limit capturing bot accounts or duplicate accounts that users produce to harass or capitalize on incendiary language (a frequent tactic of alt-right digital communities.) For each study, I identified key hashtags and/or terminology (such as "Hate Raids") to further streamline my Twitter archive towards specific online discourses.

These Twitter archives are paired with collected screenshots and live-recordings of specific video live-streams and video on demand (VOD) content specific to each case study. These publicly available video recordings offer greater contextualization for the real-time

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<sup>73</sup> On October 27, 2022. Twitter was purchased by Elon Musk. In the following months, changes were made to the API of the site that made TAGS applications started pre-acquisition defunct. However, the archived tweets remained available, thus my collected data was unaffected.

<sup>74</sup> "Get TAGS," TAGS, September 22, 2014, <https://tags.hawksey.info/get-tags/>.

interactions occurring in these digital spaces between content creators, viewers, and their use of platforms like Twitch. Between these recordings and my own participation and field work through involvement in the various communities I studied, these act as the main archive of data that I draw from.

The second element of studying transplatform networks accounts for the site specificity of the various interconnected platforms where discourses circulate. The digital infrastructures and political economies undergirding a specific digital place merit the rhetorical attention affirmed by analog places in space and place studies. Rhetorical criticism's roots focus on the ideas circulated through speeches and often texts "related to shared governance" such as policies, statements, and letters.<sup>75</sup> However, rhetoricians McKerrow and Ono both articulate that the relationship between rhetorical criticism and cultural studies should be synthesized.<sup>76</sup> Understanding the embedded nature of digital texts requires innovation in our rhetorical attunement towards how the texts are developed and circulated, which further requires the evolution of certain critical traditions.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, this dissertation appreciates the critical and infrastructural emphasis placed on analyzing digital texts featured in methods like Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) and digital ethnography as way to extend rhetorical analysis into the realm of digital infrastructure.

While this dissertation is not a CTDA project, the way I approach digital users and digital user messaging across transplatform networks is heavily informed by CTDA. Brock developed this approach in response to frustrations to user technological practices presuming "White,

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<sup>75</sup> Celeste Condit, ed. Jim A. Kuypers, *Purpose, Practice, and Pedagogy in Rhetorical Criticism* (Lexington Books, 2014).

<sup>76</sup> Raymie E. McKerrow, "Criticism Is as Criticism Does," *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 5 (2013): 546–49; Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono, *Critical Rhetorics of Race* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> E. Johanna Hartelius et al., "Digitality, Diversity, and the Future of Rhetoric and Public Address," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 24, no. 1–2 (2021): 253–68.

middle class, Christian, heterosexual, patriarchal men” practices as the norm.<sup>78</sup> In his work, Brock specifically asserts that environment, culture, technology, and audience combine to create an internetworked experience of race in Black cyberculture through a critical theory lens. As such, CTDA “focuses on the ways that technology users perceive, articulate, and ultimately define the technocultural space in which they operate and exist.”<sup>79</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, CTDA informed the way I approach the power of digital user practice, as well as my attunement to the politics that influence, shape, and potentially exploit the users as they engage with technological platforms. Platforms are critiqued over their apolitical, self-preservationist politics despite political and social pushback, but the role users play in monitoring and/or renegotiating those spaces remains relatively unexplored.<sup>80</sup> The importance of situating online discourses like live streams, tweets, forum posts, YouTube videos, and Discord servers within their discrete platform politics add definition to a rhetorician’s ability to analyze the ideas circulated amongst various networked audiences.

The third element of studying transplatform networks must negotiate the realities of studying publics that oscillate between private and public. Considering the movement of these publics, and the preceding issues explained above, this project also employs fieldwork and digital ethnography as part of the corpus of data collected. Given this project’s overarching emphasis on digital place, the work of Endres and Senda-Cook on *in situ* studies of rhetoric is central.<sup>81</sup> In their study of protest in *place-as-rhetoric* they elucidate the importance of the

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<sup>78</sup> André Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (2018): 3.

<sup>79</sup> Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” 2018, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Gillespie, “The Politics of Platforms,” 2010; Yong Jin, “The Construction of Platform Imperialism in the Globalization Era,” 2013.

<sup>81</sup> Danielle Endres et al., “In Situ Rhetoric: Intersections Between Qualitative Inquiry, Fieldwork, and Rhetoric,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 6 (2016): 511–24.

researcher participating and engaging with the phenomena in real time.<sup>82</sup> The access issues and temporal uniqueness of digital phenomena means that rhetoricians engaging with *in situ* analysis are essentially required to deploy effective digital ethnographic practices.

The two scholars who most heavily informed my own digital ethnographic approach to this work are Adrienne Massanari and Kishonna Gray, who literally embedded themselves within the digital communities they study.<sup>83</sup> For the past three years, I have been producing my own content on Twitch and working with various other content creators as a collaborator and charity event organizer. Throughout this process I have taken notes about my own experiences navigating platforms and the social networks embedded in consistent content creation. This embedding in the broader digital cultures of Twitch has afforded me credibility within the community and opened avenues of communication alongside the communities I study. As demonstrated in Massanari's work, this type of multi-year engagement with a platform illuminates the way various layers of sociality on the platform produce unique technocultures. Gray's work with Black gaming communities is a template for working with a community and producing research with members as co-narrators. She spent years playing games with people, listening to their concerns, impressions, and reactions to news throughout the gaming industry.<sup>84</sup> She experienced their frustrations with them in real time, as well as their deflections. This type of shared experience makes Gray attuned to the contextual information surrounding the responses of her co-narrators, but also informs the way she cares for their representation in the research itself. Gray's method inspired my approach to working with other content creators and informs

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<sup>82</sup> Endres and Senda-Cook, "Location Matters," 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Adrienne Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit*, (New York, NY: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2015); Kishonna L. Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2020).

<sup>84</sup> Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*, 2020.

my own self-reflexivity in the position of researcher. I did not want to write about streamers, an essential aspect of the digital culture labor force, without sharing in the experiences of the systemic pressures and limitations shared by the community.

In summary, these three case studies are animated by curated archives of texts pertaining to each phenomenon and situate the recurring themes and discourses within their embedded infrastructural, social, and political context. In the following breakdown of my case studies, I delineate how this rhetorical criticism framework, informed by my digital ethnographic field work and the sensitivities to power informed by CTDA, will play out over the course of the dissertation.

### **Content Warning Regarding Language & Content**

Before I continue onto the case studies overview, I want to provide a content warning for the racist, harmful, violent, and bigoted actions directed towards digital users, specifically those from historically marginalized communities included in this dissertation. Throughout each case study, digital users experience and often these types of hate fueled experiences online. After reviewing the archives of texts I collected, and considering the approach other scholars take related to this type of material, I made the decision to reproduce these messages, tags, and emotes without paraphrasing or censoring the content.

I determined the need to reproduce this language verbatim for several reasons; first, I did not want to run the risk of “sanitizing” my documentation of these events and offer malicious actors any room for the benefit of a doubt. Second, understanding the real experiences within these toxic technocultures requires confronting the actual language used and the ways those words are expressed through non-standard use of letters, numbers and emojis. Third, to

understand how digital user communities respond to these incidents, we must understand their experience as accurately as possible. The inclusion of this content was not taken lightly, and I ask that readers practice their own self-care with their level of engagement with the specifics throughout this dissertation.

## Case Studies

My first case study establishes the concept of digital place, using *Animal Crossing: New Horizon*'s role in political discourses throughout 2020. With the threat of COVID-19 omnipresent throughout the year, many users turned towards digital platforms as sites for protest and political engagement. The immense popularity of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH) offers rhetoricians a unique case study to interrogate how networked publics create politically relevant places through innovative use of digital platforms. By synthesizing the rhetoricity of place in protest alongside a reconsideration of what constitutes civic engagement within digital networks, this case study seeks to reframe what "places" merit rhetorical study. Questions guiding this case study include: how do networked publics curate *place* on digital platforms? What role does digital place play in protest? How are these places mobilized for political expression?

To study *Animal Crossing: New Horizon*'s significance in U.S. political culture from May to November 2020, under conditions of pandemic, I collected data regarding three political phenomena—Black Lives Matter, Global Pride, and the Biden campaign—through user-generated content on Twitter, Twitch, and in ACNH itself. ACNH users politicized these digital platforms by leveraging "place-as-rhetoric" through avatar bodies, signage, flags, and other in-

game structures.<sup>85</sup> Players used the place-making tools offered in ACNH for political expression and shared their virtual ACNH protests across Twitter and other platforms. These spontaneous political gatherings gave way to more institutionalized political events, as seen in the Global Pride 2020 public Pride events hosted on ACNH in June. Then, during the U.S. Presidential election, the place-making possibilities of ACNH were further mobilized by Joe Biden’s presidential campaign. In October, the campaign launched a “Biden HQ” island in ACNH to use the popularity of the platform as a gateway for greater voter engagement. The continued use of ACNH throughout the political culture of the United States merits study because it clarifies the role of digital place-making as political practice for social movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The combination of these three ACNH phenomena and the threads they share across their deployment of platform infrastructures and networked publicity lay the foundation for the core concept of “digital place-making.” Through this analysis, I develop an understanding of how digital platforms exist as spaces that are fully situated, and how the persuasive forces of these digital places entail political consequences.

To that end, my second case study delineates more features of digital place-making, with a particular emphasis on the perspective of those who create, curate, and perpetuate these places. Whereas most of the data collected regarding *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* came from my perspectives of a viewer or from the testimony of others engaged with the platform, my work within the Twitch content creation community offers a firsthand accounting for the way these digital communities coalesce. One of the most obvious parallels between the Twitch content creator community and ACNH is the importance of aesthetics and form in shaping their community digital places. Twitch streamers regard their chat feeds, Discord servers, and other

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<sup>85</sup> Endres and Senda-Cook, “Location Matters,” 2011, 265.

platforms as “places” for their community to gather. They curate these platforms with that intention, visually and functionally, by customizing infrastructures like overlays, alerts, channel names, and emotes. These bounded digital places are then left for the content creators, and perhaps volunteer moderators from within the community, to safeguard from interlopers who wish to disrupt these spaces by antagonizing the community. The cultivation and protection of these digital places indicates the essential role digital user labor plays in digital place-making as a process.

This case study draws out the nuances of digital platform politics and community building through my own digital field notes, videos on demand, media reports, and the archived Twitter discourses mentioned earlier in the dissertation. Throughout 2020 and 2021, as the pandemic continued to surge, people confined in their homes turned towards live streaming in record numbers.<sup>86</sup> This influx of users in spaces like Twitch and Facebook Gaming exacerbated moderation and algorithm issues that demanded attention. One particular phenomenon, the act of a “hate raid” is of particular interest in this case study. Hate raiding is the act of a Twitch live streamer bringing over their audience to another content creator’s stream. They and their audience spam horrific messages in the targeted content creator’s chat to harass, antagonize, embarrass, or otherwise harm the targeted content creator. For months throughout 2020, Twitch Inc., refused to make infrastructural changes to prevent these occurrences, which were disproportionately targeting Black, trans, and femme content creators on the platform. As a

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<sup>86</sup> Sarah E. Needleman, “Everyone Is a Live-Streamer in Covid-19 Era,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/everyone-is-a-live-streamer-in-covid-19-era-11596965400>.

result, creators banded together to develop resources to help creators protect their streaming spaces through plugins, stream deck programs, and other infrastructure “hacks.”<sup>87</sup>

While not personally targeted by a hate raid in the time I streamed, I had multitudes of colleagues and friends targeted. I worked in collaboration with many of them to develop ways to protect their streams. This concept of a hate raid—infiltrating another person’s space with hostility—reveals a darker side of situated digital places, especially when the owners of a platform (Twitch Inc., in this instance) refuse to change or modify their infrastructure to protect content creators who produce content on the platform. This case study pursues questions about how a content creator curates their community through digital place-making involving an overlapping system of platforms like Discord, Twitch, and Twitter. What happens when those places are invaded? How do creators and community members resist the complex matrix of platform politics that permits such harassment in their spaces?

Having established how digital place-making should be regarded in political discourses and in personal lived experiences, the third case study draws out how a situated place has an “appropriate” use within digital place-making. In August 2021, *Time* announced that they would collaborate with the popular free-to-play video game *Fortnite* to create a “March Through Time Event.” The event was meant to commemorate Martin Luther King Jr. and the 1963 March on Washington. Within a week of its launch, *Fortnite* publisher Epic Games chose to shut it down due to the pushback from activists, news media, social media users, and the gaming community alike. The widespread discourse surrounding the event critiqued the platform as a mismatch for the seriousness and gravity of the subject. Drawing from these circulating critiques, and my own

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<sup>87</sup> Noam Gal, Limor Shifman, and Zohar Kampf, “‘It Gets Better’: Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity,” *New Media & Society* 18, no. 8 (2016): 1698–1714; Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of Platforms,” 2010.

brief experience in the event before Epic Games shut down access, I analyze how digital platforms are situated politically, economically, and ideologically within digital culture. Despite Epic's stated intent behind the recreation of the National Mall in Washington D.C., as a digital place, they were constrained by the toxic technocultures embedded within their platform.

This case study illustrates the value of a site-specific experience, but also offers an example of what happens when a transplatform discourse permeates into broader dominant discourses. The screen shots, tweets, and videos circulated across platforms like Twitter led to the media reporting and eventual take down of the event, demonstrating how studying this phenomenon requires an attunement to the transplatform networks involved. This study interrogates questions regarding the limitations of digital place-making. What differentiates a digital place from an identical analog place? How do rhetorical scholars benefit from approaching digital phenomena with these lenses?

These three case studies illuminate the ways that digital platform infrastructures shape the digital user practices that create *place* on these platforms. Likewise, each study follows the flow of power circulating on these platforms and through the related transplatform networks. These places produce unique opportunities for digital users to express themselves, but these places also possess unique vulnerabilities rooted in their digital condition. The ever-expanding ambitions towards augmented realities couched with the promise of a fully virtual metaverse in the future, shape much of today's technological innovation. Thus, understanding the promise *and* liability of digital place offers scholarship ways to anticipate and analyze technological user practices in the days to come.

**“Welcome to Your (Political) Paradise! Digital Place-making and Animal Crossing:  
New Horizons During COVID-19**

This chapter approaches the cultural moment of transplatform networks activating digital communities during COVID-19 through the lens of a video game platform, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. The fifth installment in the mainline game series, *New Horizons* released for the Nintendo Switch gaming console in late March of 2020. Just as COVID-19 lockdowns swept the United States and broader globe, individuals and families found themselves looking for ways to occupy their time indoors. The Nintendo Switch experienced unprecedented demand through 2020 due to this high demand for indoor entertainment.<sup>1</sup> At the center of this popularity high was *Animal Crossing*, a video game featuring a virtual world where players congregate with friends via the Nintendo Switch Online network. The interconnected nature of the game and community gameplay focus led to unprecedented sales figures for the franchise. By June of 2020, more than 20 million game copies were sold around the world.<sup>2</sup> The popularity of the game contributed to shortages of Nintendo Switch consoles across the United States as folks turned to screens for comfort and sociality during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

As a hobby, video games have grown and diversified over the decades to accommodate a variety of play styles ranging from complex action to collection, design, and simulation. Game critic Samuel Claiborn explained that *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH) “manages to

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<sup>1</sup> Takashi Mochizuki, “Coronavirus: Nintendo Likely to Suffer Global Switch Shortages,” *Bloomberg*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-17/nintendo-is-likely-to-suffer-global-switch-shortages-from-virus>.

<sup>2</sup> Nintendo Co., Ltd., “Consolidated Financial Highlights” (Nintendo Co., Ltd., August 6, 2020), <https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/pdf/2020/200806e.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Huddleston Jr., “How ‘Animal Crossing’ and the Coronavirus Pandemic Made the Nintendo Switch Fly off Shelves,” *CNBC*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/02/nintendo-switch-animal-crossing-and-coronavirus-led-to-record-sales.html>.

improve upon the virtual lives of each player type that I can think of,” pointing towards ACNH’s unique ability to appeal to a multitude of gaming styles with its various mechanics and systems.<sup>4</sup> Milner argues that “hang out” spaces in gaming demonstrate audience desires for participation in the digital age.<sup>5</sup> Within the context of COVID-19, Barr and Copeland observed that many families navigating pandemic stresses turned towards gaming as a coping tool to mitigate the stressful circumstances of a lack of support infrastructures like school and extracurricular activities to occupy their children’s attention and need for sociality.<sup>6</sup>

Considering these contexts, it is unsurprising that as governments continued varying stages of COVID-19 lockdowns, players flocked to ACNH to escape the isolation of their pandemic reality. In addition to COVID-19, the United States experienced significant political turmoil due to the continued exposure of police brutality throughout the year in conjunction with a contentious Presidential election between candidates Donald Trump and Joe Biden. This chapter specifically interrogates how the infrastructures of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and the transplatform network surrounding the game produced a space for users to negotiate their political realities throughout 2020.

To accomplish this, I first detail the specific infrastructure of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* itself and how it fosters certain styles of creativity and play within its community. After establishing how *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was established as a place for play, I overview the theoretical frameworks that shape my analysis of how this place designed for play was leveraged for political means and the specific method constraints by which I collected my data.

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Claiborn, “Animal Crossing: New Horizons Review,” *IGN*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.ign.com/articles/animal-crossing-new-horizons-review-for-switch>.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan M. Milner, “Contested Convergence and the Politics of Play on GameTrailers.Com,” *Games and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2013): 3-25, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Barr and Alicia Copeland-Stewart, “Playing Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Effects on Players’ Well-Being,” *Games and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2021): 122–39.

This framework will then be applied to three subsequent political phenomena on the platform—Black Lives Matter, Global Pride, and the Biden campaign—through user-generated content on Twitter, Twitch, and in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* itself.

### **Welcome to Paradise: Exploring the Infrastructure of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons***

The soothing sound of ocean waves greets players when their propeller plane lands on the waterside docks of a tropical island. The land before them appears lush with flowers, trees, rivers, insects, fish, and other wildlife. The only sign of sentient inhabitants is a small tent on a brick plaza in the middle of the island. This is the backdrop given to players at the beginning of their time in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. The island is a natural biome that shifts over time, reflecting the seasons based on the player’s chosen hemisphere at the beginning of the game. Over the course of the game narrative, players are asked to develop the infrastructure of their new home, attracting non-player characters (NPCs) and player visitors alike. Slowly but surely, players lay out new houses, new stores, a museum, and other venues that help legitimate the island as a “tourist destination.”<sup>7</sup> The extensiveness of the modification in every element of the game encourages players to develop their own aesthetics across the island. At first, players are encouraged to focus on their home, expanding rooms and collecting furnishings to make their own personal mansion. Beyond the confines of their home, players redesign the island itself by building bridges and roads, moving cliffsides and digging new rivers, planting new flora to attract different fauna to the island, and helping NPCs complete menial chores. All these features incentivize players to create and position infrastructure throughout the island, including signs, fences, banners, and light fixtures. The customization options extend to player characters

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<sup>7</sup> *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, (Nintendo Co., Ltd., 2020).

themselves, as in-game design tools can be used to create wearable hats, shirts, dresses, and signs using personal pixel art made by players.

This design suite is synchronized with a QR code system that generates unique codes for each player design. These QR codes can be distributed so other players can adopt the designs in their personal game worlds. In addition to the QR system, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* features an internal networking system rooted in the Nintendo Switch Online network. Nintendo Switch owners can pay for a subscription membership that provides them access to online connectivity to other Nintendo players.<sup>8</sup> In ACNH, players use this connection to visit their friends or even strangers through randomly generated “Dodo” codes. These codes whisk players away to other player islands, where players interact and converse through a proximity instant message chat feature. This interconnectivity encourages players to travel amongst the broader *Animal Crossing* community. The vibrant network of sharing the QR and Dodo codes formalized into a fan-run website called Nookazon to centralize the exchanging of codes and display of creations.<sup>9</sup> On the live stream gaming platform Twitch, hundreds of thousands of viewers watched an estimated 67.71 million hours of ACNH content, with streamers sharing island designs and creation tips during the first three months of the game’s release.<sup>10</sup> On Twitter, users organized around hashtags like #animalcrossing, #ACNH, and #ACNHDesign to share QR codes and pictures of their islands. Through these avenues, the community-driven networking of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* players gradually formed into a cohesive networked public. ACNH players combined the tools offered through the game platform and their connections on

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<sup>8</sup> “Nintendo Switch Online,” Nintendo Co., Ltd., <https://www.nintendo.com/switch/online-service/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Trade, Buy & Sell Animal Crossing: New Horizons Items,” Nookazon, 2020, <https://nookazon.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> These numbers are calculated from the monthly averages from March 2020 to June 2020 through “Animal Crossing: New Horizons - Twitch Statistics and Charts” TwitchTracker, January 13, 2021, <https://twitchtracker.com/games/509538>.

platforms like Twitter, Twitch, and Nookazon, to unify as a community. Through these layered connections, users were networked together within a complex media ecology across the game and adjacent social media platforms. This type of fluid networking developed through the purposes of play set the stage for more radical expressions and rhetorical action from the online ACNH community.<sup>11</sup>

The extensive malleability on the gaming platform and the integrated content sharing provided through the implementation of the QR and Dodo code infrastructure produced a platform for users to create, remix, and distribute their content. Pearce et. al explain ACNH was used as a coping tool for players during the pandemic because it offered interactivity and the “possibility for players to manipulate content” on the platform.<sup>12</sup> This modicum of control offers players opportunities to author their own connections with one another using the game’s infrastructure. This type of agentic play turned toward political expression several months into the game’s release.

On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by four Minneapolis police officers, inciting a new wave of Black Lives Matter protests across the United States.<sup>13</sup> With the threat of COVID-19 still present, many individuals turned towards digital means of protest that would not threaten the public health goal of curtailing the virus’ spread. In this pivot, ACNH users took to their platform of play for political expression. Through avatar bodies, signage, flags, and other infrastructures embedded in the platform itself, ACNH players used these place-making tools for political expression, subsequently sharing their virtual protests across Twitter and other

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<sup>11</sup> Hinck, “Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, Communities, and Public Values,” 102.

<sup>12</sup> Katy E. Pearce et al., “Families Playing Animal Crossing Together: Coping With Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Games and Culture* 17, no. 5 (2022): 773-794, 776.

<sup>13</sup> Evan Hill et al., “How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>.

platforms.<sup>14</sup> These spontaneous protest gatherings gave way to more institutionalized political events on the platform, as seen in Global Pride 2020, public Pride events hosted on ACNH in June. Then, during the U.S. Presidential election, the place-making possibilities of ACNH were further mobilized by Joe Biden's presidential campaign. In October, the campaign launched a "Biden HQ" island in ACNH to use the popularity of the platform as a gateway for greater voter engagement. These initiatives sought to take the affordances of play built into the *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* platform and leverage them for various modes of political expression and engagement. This chapter looks at these three phenomena through the lens of *transplatform networks* and the concept of *digital place-making* as a mode of protest. The following section provides an overview of these two central concepts and my data collection methodology before transitioning to a chronologically ordered analysis of each ACNH phenomenon.

### **Networked Publics, Platforms, and Place in Protest**

Although the term networked publics typically refers to discursive communities on tightly internetworked platforms like Twitter, Instagram, or Signal, the community forming around ACNH also ought to be conceptualized as a networked public. Following danah boyd, the ACNH community exists within a space constructed not with steel or mortar, but with networked technologies such as Twitter, Discord, and Nintendo Switch Online network.<sup>15</sup> Second, the ACNH community imagines themselves as a collective generated by the intersections of people, technology platforms, and digital mobilization.<sup>16</sup> This collective and communal rendering of

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<sup>14</sup> Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook, "Location Matters: The Rhetoric of Place in Protest," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 3 (2011): 265.

<sup>15</sup> boyd, "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications," 39.

<sup>16</sup> Karin Fast and Andre Jansson, *Transmedia Work: Privilege and Precariousness in Digital Modernity*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019); Florini, *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks*.

platforms pushes us to reflect on these places beyond digital infrastructure, but also as intermediary places between users, creators, other audiences.<sup>17</sup>

My understanding of the word *place* is heavily influenced by articulations of place and space theory. Kavada and Poell articulate space as a both product of and producing social relations allows us to view social media as rendering the “spatial dimensions of making things public.”<sup>18</sup> In their estimation, social media fulfills both the material and inhabitant requirements in the creation of space. In the case of ACNH, the users are inhabitants of their own digital spaces, which they use as places for political expression in the vein of place-in-rhetoric. Access to these distinct places dispersed across public social media platforms like Twitter, drawing other users and public attention back to ACNH. This choice of personal disclosure and distribution from ACNH users is a demonstration of digitized personal agency. de Souza e Silva and Frith observe that “personal mobile media have empowered individuals to engage with the public on their own terms.”<sup>19</sup> For networked publics, the transition from private spaces to public ones mimics collective action seen historically throughout social movements. For example, Mitchell notes that “making impressive appearances in the public realm” was instrumental to feminist movements gaining respect and confidence as they pushed for institutional transformation.<sup>20</sup> Social movements are where historical contexts, strategies, and timely innovations converge as participants learn through continued political expression. The ACNH community crafted places

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<sup>17</sup> Gillespie, “The Politics of Platforms.”

<sup>18</sup> Anastasia Kavada and Thomas Poell, “From Counterpublics to Contentious Publicness: Tracing the Temporal, Spatial, and Material Articulations of Popular Protest Through Social Media,” *Communication Theory* 31, no. 2 (2020): 190-208, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Adriana de Souza e Silva and Jordan Frith, “Locational Privacy in Public Spaces: Media Discourses on Location-Aware Mobile Technologies,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 3 (2010): 503-525, 504.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon R. Mitchell, “Public Argument Action Research and The Learning Curve of New Social Movements,” *Argumentation & Advocacy* 40 (2004): 209-225, 216.

for collectivizing by using the place-making affordances of their platform and these strategies were further integrated into public political culture throughout 2020.

As Endres and Senda-Cook demonstrate, place is essential to understanding the rhetoricity of social movements. Movements are “contextualized and situated” through specific events “at particular places.”<sup>21</sup> Locations have their own unique rhetorical force. The protest, solidarity, and campaign events of 2020 that I previewed surface not in traditional brick-and-mortar places but digital places, computational platforms that are stylized as places. Platforms like ACNH, with its rolling hills, babbling brooks, and carefully curated houses, grant players the capacity to stylize their “place-as-rhetoric” venues. In the site work highlighted by Endres and Senda-Cook, a multitude of sensory inputs are emphasized as part of a place’s rhetorical force. At first glance, a platform like ACNH would appear as only visual stimuli. However, the unique nature of digital platforms that emphasize user engagement through infrastructure, like a game, means a multitude of senses are invoked on a platform. Visual design, auditory design, and haptic technology, such as vibrations in controllers, provide real time feedback for player actions and immersion in these digital worlds. These specific stimuli influence how players affectively sense their islands, engaging their body and mind in an intensity of attachment and escapism.<sup>22</sup> By engaging with these features and customizing them for social purposes players open digital places that fulfill expressive functions like those that Endres and Senda-Cook document, albeit with the affordances and constraints of digitality such as control, access, and visibility. The choice of making ACNH a site for political expression requires us to think critically about a platform as a *place*. As Senda-Cook, Middleton, and Endres contend, the field “acts” as a co-

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<sup>21</sup> Endres and Senda-Cook, “Location Matters,” 2011, 277.

<sup>22</sup> Merlin Seller, “Ever-Lockdown: Waiting through Times of Playbour and Pandemic in Animal Crossing,” *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 14, no. 1 (2021): 100–116.

participant in the rhetorical activities.<sup>23</sup> Specific locations are chosen mindfully by social movements for public action, and therefore rhetoricians must attend to the location and its history to better understand the messages articulated by a social movement. The digital places of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* similarly shaped public expressions of dissent and celebration within U.S. political culture throughout 2020. These digital *places* for public, political discourse seem likely to grow in a post-COVID-19 context in which digitality is more embedded in public and political culture. In studies of place and protest, the sensory dimensions of locations evoke memories and produce experiences that affect political movement messaging.<sup>24</sup> While it is a fair critique to say that a platform like ACNH is predominantly visual, this immersive ethnographic study helps us understand the concerto of sensory dimensions at play on these digital platforms.

Furthermore, the replication and recreation of the material world within digitality poses additional questions regarding what must be considered a “place” for the purposes of space and place theory. From corporatized and governmental ends, digital mapping practices have sought to digitize the globe through image capture and coding. Platforms like Google Maps have fundamentally changed how people research, plan, and perceive the places around the globe through digital indexing.<sup>25</sup> Activists are able to highlight areas where deforestation, demolition, and redistricting have reshaped the analog world reflected in the digital index. By taking what is “known” about the world and then working within the digital platform to shape new

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<sup>23</sup> Endres et al., “In Situ Rhetoric.”

<sup>24</sup> Scott A. Sandage, “A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939-1963,” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 135–67. Laura Michael Brown, “Remembering Silence: Bennett College Women and the 1960 Greensboro Student Sit-Ins,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2018): 49–70; Thomas R. Dunn, *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for Representing the GLBTQ Past* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016); Thomas R. Dunn, “Remembering ‘A Great Fag’: Visualizing Public Memory and the Construction of Queer Space,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 4 (2011): 435–60; Endres and Senda-Cook, “Location Matters,” 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Joshua P. Ewalt, “Mapping Injustice: The World Is Witness, Place-Framing, and the Politics of Viewing on Google Earth,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 4, no. 4 (2011): 333–54.

understandings of the places indexed there, activists can revive histories that would be otherwise obliterated. Digital users co-opting digital mapping practices for this type of historical revival conceptually ties digital place-making to social activism. This is done through the production of digital spaces that exist outside of, yet are intrinsically linked to, the built environment. The topographical modification and network navigation unique to the platform of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* synthesizes these observations regarding place-making. The design of the base gameplay in ACNH offers users a stereotypical island paradise on which to project their relaxation and vacation fantasies. However, the robust modification and customization infrastructure allowed users to co-opt these places and cultivate them for purposes beyond gameplay. In addition, ACNH allows users to modify their body, as well as their personal and communal living spaces into an intentional place, and then traverse networks to experience other user's places in real-time. These three elements are the foundation of the digital infrastructure affordances that made ACNH a suitable platform for these place-in-protest experiences.

Beyond the digital infrastructure of the game platform itself, the social infrastructure centered in the popularity of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* connected a network of players and fans primed for activism amidst the limitations of COVID-19. Of course, the infrastructure of online connection has long been seen as offering individuals dedicated places to cultivate a collective identity and form more cohesive networked publics.<sup>26</sup> But, as Hinck and Davisson argue, popular culture fandoms increasingly mobilize in ways that depart from traditional activist tactics.<sup>27</sup> The ACNH networked public established a place to foster innovation in political expression by leveraging the unique affordances of the video game and transplatform network surrounding it. Innovations produced by these networked publics are appropriated as traditional

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, *Counterpublics and the State* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Hinck and Davisson, "Fandom and Politics."

organizations “adapt to networked society.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the commercialization of user generated content within the internet’s political economy exposes digital publics to exploitation from traditional capitalistic or state institutions.<sup>29</sup> In the particular case of ACNH, political entities attempt to utilize the platform and networked public to create places for meaningful political experiences that serve different agendas.

Throughout the three distinct social phenomena analyzed in this chapter, several different methods were employed to create an archive of texts and fieldnotes for analysis. The first wave of ACNH protests were spontaneous and held on mostly inaccessible private user islands. However, the networked public of *Animal Crossing* documented and shared their participation on Twitter and Nookazon. Through cross-referencing tags like #ACNHDesign or #AnimalCrossing with #BlackLivesMatter or #BLM, screenshots and statements were captured regarding these BLM protests. Of the posts collected, representative samples were identified considering user engagement metrics (likes, shares, retweets, etc.) as indicators of distribution across the network. Capturing these circulated discourses gives shape to the actions occurring within this private yet public space.<sup>30</sup> These posts provide thematic and visual evidence for the strategic placement of player characters to take the screenshots featuring the intentionally curated island places. The design choices for these island protests offer insight to how the places offered rhetorical value for the protestors.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jenkins and Shresthova, “Up, up, and Away! The Power and Potential of Fan Activism.”

<sup>29</sup> Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 33–58; Dahlgren, “The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication”; Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of Platforms,” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 347–64.

<sup>30</sup> Brock Jr, *Distributed Blackness*, 202; Catherine Chaput, “Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Overdetermination of Affective Energy,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 43, no. 1 (2010): 1–25; Rachel Kuo, “Racial Justice Activist Hashtags: Counterpublics and Discourse Circulation,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 2, (2018): 495-514.

<sup>31</sup> Endres et al., “In Situ Rhetoric”; Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook, “Location Matters: The Rhetoric of Place in Protest,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 3 (2011): 257–82.

For the Global Pride 2020 pride events, the organization created a Pride island as a place to host public Pride events throughout the month. They generated Dodo codes, randomized unique alphanumeric codes that users input to identify another island location, for the island and regularly opened the island for users to visit, publicizing the meetups through their Twitter account, @GPrideCrossing.<sup>32</sup> Users flocked to the island, creating videos and pictures they shared across Twitter. To further increase awareness of the island, Global Pride 2020 organized an “Island Tour” event on Twitch where LGBTQ+ streamers ZoeTwoDots, Loveabilities, and ShubbleYT explored the island live on their channels.<sup>33</sup> This media campaign to publicize the opportunities for players on the Pride Island resulted in thousands of visitors to the digital getaway. Throughout all of Pride month, players traversed the Global Pride 2020 island, visiting alongside friends and documenting their trips with photos. The public nature of these events meant real-time fieldwork was possible for many of the events and as such, I participated as a digital user myself.<sup>34</sup> The archive of texts for the Pride event was composed of TAGS captured Twitter discourse that utilized the official hashtag #GlobalPrideCrossing, the official Twitch “Island Tours,” as well as my own in-person experience.

A similar approach was used for creating an archive of texts regarding the “Biden HQ” island created by the Joe Biden campaign team. The campaign worked with popular game influencer Greg Miller, founder of KindaFunny Games, to host a “debut” live stream of the island in mid-October.<sup>35</sup> Thousands of viewers watched KindaFunny Games’ Twitch live stream exploring the Biden Island.<sup>36</sup> At the end of the live stream, they published the island’s unique

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<sup>32</sup> GPrideCrossing. Twitter Post. June 24, 2020. <https://twitter.com/GPrideCrossing/status/1275836083234799618>.

<sup>33</sup> GPrideCrossing. Twitter Post. June 20, 2020. <https://twitter.com/GPrideCrossing/status/1274522425443549184>.

<sup>34</sup> Endres et al., “In Situ Rhetoric”; Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play*; Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*.

<sup>35</sup> GameOverGreggy. Twitter Post. October 15, 2020. <https://twitter.com/GameOverGreggy/status/1316781253299896321>.

<sup>36</sup> “The Official Biden Island in Animal Crossing! @votejoe @bidenharris2020” (Twitch, October 16, 2020).

code so everyone could visit Biden HQ. With access to the island now open to the public, the *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* community traveled to Biden HQ and shared their own experiences across Twitter with the #BidenIsland and #ACNH hashtags. The hashtag related tweets were collected through TAGS. Again, the public availability of the island meant I was able to participate as a user and thus in-person field notes were also collected as part of this data collection process.

The unique infrastructures afforded by and surrounding *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* establishes it as a platform primed for political expression. The media ecology of this customizable game platform, nestled within a robust transplatform network, facilitated users experiencing similar affects (i.e. emotions) to align with one another. As Ahmed describes, “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, leveraging the concepts of a transplatform network and digital place-making to these platform affordances, the subsequent analysis moves through the three disparate political phenomena on the platform in chronological order. Each of the experiences developed by users share strategies related to infrastructure and execution, but the evolution of digital place-making practices over time reveals the potential for users to create deep, layered, distinct experiences. Through this analysis, we see how a platform initially cultivated for play pivots to political engagement through digital place-making practices and subsequent public distribution through transplatform networks.

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<sup>37</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 118.

### **Black Lives Matter on This Island: Animal Crossing Players Creating Place for Protest**

The continued brutalization of Black people at the hands of U.S. police is an ongoing and tragic issue in America.<sup>38</sup> In late May of 2020, shortly after a video of George Floyd’s death circulated on the internet, a resurgence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement protests swept across the country.<sup>39</sup> While there were physical protests, the looming threat of exposure to COVID-19 prevented many people from congregating to protest, especially the immunocompromised.<sup>40</sup> The intensity of the political discourse, circulating during a time of social isolation, produced an affective economy primed for digital demonstration. The sensation of outrage and loss, and the inability to gather in proximity due to COVID-19, led activists to innovate modes of expressions supporting Black Lives Matter through digital public networks to render this intensity legible. The networked public surrounding *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* “ignited,” using the pre-established connections and customization options available on ACNH to stage their islands as places of protest.<sup>41</sup>

Across Twitter, ACNH activists shared screenshots of demonstrations being held on behalf of Black Lives Matter on their personal islands. Using the in-game tools provided on the ACNH platform, players transformed their islands into places for communal protest by remapping the island topography itself. Players modified the local flowers of their island into fields of black roses, the only black flowers available in ACNH, to transform the typically bright

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<sup>38</sup> See Ersula J. Ore, *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2019) for how the brutalization of Black people has shaped American identity through violence and rhetoric.

<sup>39</sup> “Breonna Taylor: Timeline of Black Deaths Caused by Police,” *BBC News*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52905408>.; Allissa V. Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Dhaval M. Dave et al., “Black Lives Matter Protests, Social Distancing, and COVID-19,” (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w27408>.

<sup>41</sup> Kang, *Igniting the Internet: Youth and Activism in Postauthoritarian South Korea*, 4–5.

game aesthetics into visual solidarity with the movement.<sup>42</sup> These roses require significant effort on the player's part to grow, as they cannot be bought or found naturally in the game's flora. Instead, players have to "breed" the roses by strategically placing red roses at certain intervals on the islands so they will "cross breed" and produce black roses. This type of time investment for the purposes of intentional aesthetic is just one example of how they shaped the island deliberately. Users strategically placed furniture throughout their islands, staging outdoor candlelight vigils and bonfires, paralleling protests happening around the United States. Players treated these ACNH places like non-digital places by dressing their avatars with the face mask coverings ubiquitous in the offline world due to COVID-19.<sup>43</sup> Alongside the masks, ACNH players created QR codes to share Black Lives Matter clothing designs across the community, allowing players to express their solidarity through attire in-game as they traveled and shared pictures across their networks. There was no centralized organizing body or coalition for these BLM protest islands, rather they emerged from individualized efforts and gained exposure through the robust ACNH transplatform network on both Twitter and Discord. As such, each island experience was distinct and determined by the individual owner of the island. However, there were recurring similarities across the protest islands that indicate which digital place-making practices resonated with users at the time.

Transforming the islands of ACNH into places of protest was also done through robust digital sign work. In most of the posts, Black Lives Matter themed signs were prominently displayed. Players adopted two strategies regarding their island signs: either create signs that look analogous to the signs used in official Black Lives Matter protests or craft their own

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<sup>42</sup> ChocolateQuill. Twitter Post. May 28, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ChocolateQuill/status/1266186184134479673>.

<sup>43</sup> TutusNTinyHats. Twitter Post. June 4, 2020. <https://twitter.com/TutusNTinyHats/status/1268563768658796544>; IndighoulBLM. Twitter Post. May 31, 2020. <https://twitter.com/IndighoulBLM/status/1266463076271951874>.

personal designs. Drawing from the official BLM organization's branding style guide, players used signs featuring bold white text stating "Black Lives Matter" on a solid black background. Situated on the vibrant and colorful tropical islands of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, these signs deviated from the game's visual norms to draw attention through contrast.<sup>44</sup> The visual semiotics of contrast can implicitly, or even explicitly, emphasize political messages through comparisons between light and dark, cold and warm, or barren and bountiful.<sup>45</sup> For example, user TutusNTinyHats posted a picture of her player character between two of these Black Lives Matter signs, and the visual divergence between her colorful avatar and the black and white signs is striking.<sup>46</sup> The contrast drives home the stark and grim reality that makes "Black Lives Matter" necessary, even on a virtual island. AcnhStarlight posted pictures of their BLM sign-covered island with the caption, "

protest with red, green, black, and white. In other gatherings, players created smaller signs featuring the pan-African flag or used their own creations. CYDNee\_5 posted an image of their friend's island, where the entire front entryway was covered with the names of men killed by police brutality such as Tamir Rice, Amaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and George Floyd.<sup>51</sup> The other side of the island featured signs displaying other slogans affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement: "I Can't Breathe," "Hands Up, Don't Shoot," "No Justice, No Peace," and "Enough is Enough."<sup>52</sup> As Endres and Senda-Cook remind us, "the presence of bodies and signs" are clear markers of protest within a specific space or locale.<sup>53</sup> The clear historical and social contexts surrounding the sign selections and their strategic placement in screenshots shared across Twitter reveal how the signs function as place-making.

One particularly salient example of how these signs and bodies shaped places specific for protest comes from Twitter user Adellelin. In June of 2020, Adellelin decided to host a live stream ACNH protest on Twitch. Turning to the transplatform ACNH network on Twitter for publicity, she tweeted "I'm hoping to use my animal crossing powers for good. Please join my memorial + rally + fundraiser. Standing together with all of y'all out there right now. #BlackLivesMatter #equality #letsfixthesystem #acnh[.]"<sup>54</sup> Her island hosted a rotation of visitors, paying respects to victims of police brutality at an in-game memorial Adellelin designed using signs, flowers, and vigil-like candles. Visitors on the island use the proximity chat feature to shout slogans affiliated with the analog protests including, "No justice, no peace", "Justice for Breonna" and "Defund the police."<sup>55</sup> Over the course of the multi-hour stream, viewers on

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<sup>51</sup> CYDNee\_5. Twitter Post. May 29, 2020. [https://twitter.com/CYDNee\\_5/status/1266426393056944128](https://twitter.com/CYDNee_5/status/1266426393056944128).

<sup>52</sup> CYDNee\_5. Twitter Post. May 29, 2020. [https://twitter.com/CYDNee\\_5/status/1266426393056944128](https://twitter.com/CYDNee_5/status/1266426393056944128).

<sup>53</sup> Endres and Senda-Cook, "Location Matters," 2011, 267.

<sup>54</sup> Adellelin. Twitter Post. June 6, 2020. <https://twitter.com/Adellelin/status/1269443425117626374>

<sup>55</sup> "Adellelin's Twitch Channel," Twitch, <https://www.twitch.tv/adellelin>.

Twitch donated thousands of dollars to organizations like the NAACP, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Bail Fund Network.<sup>56</sup> Other users mirrored Adellelin’s actions by identifying their island spaces as places for action through sign work and demonstrations: “Organizing a peaceful rally on my Animal Crossing island to stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Together, we can create change both in-game and beyond! #AnimalCrossing #BLM”<sup>57</sup>, “Redecorating our #AnimalCrossing homes to display messages of support for the #BLM movement. Together, we can make a difference, one pixel at a time! [word bubble emoji] #ACNH #EndRacism”<sup>58</sup> and “Isabelle & I stood in solidarity on my #AnimalCrossing island today, displaying #BlackLivesMatter signs. Let's keep the movement alive, even in our virtual worlds.”<sup>59</sup> By transforming the island spaces of ACNH through sign-work, the BLM protestors effectively marked their places as one for solidarity and dissent across the platform.

The support for these kinds of actions from the players was strong enough that Nookazon, an official Discord communication channel for ACNH players, published an official statement in support of Black Lives Matter. Furthermore, they dedicated community threads to sharing resources to support the in-game designers as well as fundraise for organizations like the George Floyd Memorial Fund.<sup>60</sup> While there was no official co-operation with the Black Lives Matter organization, these spontaneous solidarity protests demonstrate the potential across the ACNH player networked public for activist activity. Through the access to customizable tools on ACNH itself, and the peer-to-peer media ecology of ACNH established across multiple

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<sup>56</sup> Adellelin. Twitter Post. June 7, 2020. <https://twitter.com/Adellelin/status/1269775360037715974s=20>

<sup>57</sup> ACNHbrea. Twitter Post. June 3,2020. <https://twitter.com/acnhbrea/status/1373778389891448833>.

<sup>58</sup> Phoephoe\_. Twitter Post. June 2,2020. [https://twitter.com/phoephoe\\_/status/1267667467184332802](https://twitter.com/phoephoe_/status/1267667467184332802).

<sup>59</sup> Residentrepcat. Twitter Post. July 3,2020. <https://twitter.com/residentrepcat/status/1279515181031309317>.

<sup>60</sup> Squishquin, “Announcements,” Discord, May 29, 2020, [discord.com/nookazon](https://discord.com/nookazon).

platforms, users could express themselves and produce digital places for that expression alongside others in their network.

As Hinck and Davisson remind us, “Fandom can be used in politics to activate fans' civic identities,” meaning, in this context, that previous participation in the ACNH network offered players resources to activate their civic identity as protestors.<sup>61</sup> The production of these island places offered an accessible place-as-rhetoric site amid the pandemic for players to perform their civic identities through dissent and self-expression. The tactics used in the grassroots ACNH movement in support of BLM demonstrated how this public network, unified through the game platform itself, produced places for political expression. As a platform, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* inspired other political entities to use it as a place-making opportunity to advance their own political agendas throughout 2020. As Mitchell contends, social movement collectives engage in an iterative learning process as they continue their advocacy.<sup>62</sup> In the example that follows, we see how Global Pride 2020 made use of the same platform affordances seen in the ad hoc Black Lives Matter protests across the ACNH transplatform network, though the infusion of a more centralized institution’s support changed the dynamics of place-as-rhetoric.

### **The Pride Island: Celebration, Solidarity, and Global Pride 2020**

The celebration of Pride month manifests in public events, memorials, parades, statues, and other initiatives in support of the LGBTQ+ community. These practices animate public memories surrounding the history of the contemporary LGBTQ+ movement and perform important affective work for members of the LGTBQ+ community.<sup>63</sup> For much of the world,

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<sup>61</sup> Hinck and Davisson, “Fandom and Politics,” 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Mitchell, “Public Argument Action Research and The Learning Curve of New Social Movements,” 217.

<sup>63</sup> Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 43.

Pride organizations and associations schedule their activities in the month of June. This timing coincides with the anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, the event frequently cited as the “origin of the gay liberation movement.”<sup>64</sup> While the political emphasis on Stonewall risks obfuscating other moments in LGBTQ+ history, it is undeniably a driving force for the Pride remembrances observed every year.<sup>65</sup> These public demonstrations during Pride month are deeply tied to cultivating a sense of pride in identity and connectedness for the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>66</sup> Global Pride 2020 was a partnership of Pride associations created to brainstorm opportunities for celebrating Pride in 2020 after the cancellation of hundreds of marches and events due to COVID-19.<sup>67</sup> Throughout the month of June, *millions* of people participated in Global Pride 2020 events around the world.<sup>68</sup> However, most of the events were hosted on platforms like YouTube or Facebook, which failed to provide the embodied experiences LGBTQ+ members expect from Pride events like parades, protests, and parties. Therefore, the Global Pride 2020 organization turned to digital place-making on *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Through a robust internet publicity campaign on digital platforms like Twitch, Twitter, and TikTok, the Global Pride island debuted in June of 2020.<sup>69</sup> When interviewed, organizer Arnaud Robin explained, “Pride is an important event for many—often, it gives hope, as well as a sense of community and belonging. There was a thriving LGBTQ+ community on Animal

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<sup>64</sup> Jean Bessette, “Queer Rhetoric in Situ,” *Rhetoric Review* 35, no. 2 (2016): 148-164, 158.

<sup>65</sup> Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 118.

<sup>66</sup> Erin J. Rand, “Gay Pride and Its Queer Discontents: ACT UP and the Political Deployment of Affect,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 75-80, 76.

<sup>67</sup> “About Global Pride 2020,” Global Pride 2020, April 2020, <https://www.globalpride2020.org/about/>.

<sup>68</sup> “More than 57 Million People Joined World-First Global Pride Event for LGBTQIA+ Community,” *Global Pride 2020*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.globalpride2020.org/news/more-than-57-million-people-joined-world-first-global-pride-event-for-lgbtqia-community/>.

<sup>69</sup> Jamie Wareham, “LGBT+ Pride Comes to Animal Crossing: Get Pride T-Shirts, Flags and Furniture on Your Island,” *Forbes*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamiewareham/2020/06/18/lgbt-pride-comes-to-animal-crossing-get-pride-tshirts-flags-and-furniture-on-your-island/>; Jeff Yeung, “Global Pride Brings Event to ‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons,’” *Hypebeast*, June 19, 2020, <https://hypebeast.com/2020/6/global-pride-event-animal-crossing-new-horizons>.

Crossing already, so it was the perfect opportunity for this to happen.”<sup>70</sup> Leveraging the transplatform network of ACNH and identifying its potential to orient LGBTQ+ community members online feeling similar affective intensities, Global Pride 2020 was able to produce a digital place for celebration that was accessible to a large online audience.

The creators of the Global Pride 2020 island used the topographical features on the ACNH platform to produce a bright, effusive aesthetic across the island. Because the island was designed by a centralized organization, the design was coherent across the entire digital landscape and remained consistent for every visitor. All the flowers on the island were organized in rainbows, alternating red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. These fields of flowers are enormous, covering a sizable portion of the island itself. In addition to the colorful flora, the brick laid pathways of the island also feature rainbow patterns, evoking a parallel with the rainbow crosswalks seen in cities around the world during Pride month.<sup>71</sup> Rainbows have been used as a unifying symbol for the modern LGBTQ+ movement since 1978, when Gilbert Baker debuted his rainbow flag design at the San Francisco’s Gay Liberation Day parade.<sup>72</sup> In 2017, the Philadelphia Office of LGBT Affairs revised the iconic rainbow design, adding black and brown stripes to call attention to the racism still threatening members of the LGBTQ+ community from both internal and external sources.<sup>73</sup> However, the limitation of the flower

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<sup>70</sup> Wareham, “LGBT+ Pride Comes to Animal Crossing,” 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Scottie Andrew, “Atlanta Defends Its Rainbow Crosswalks as Symbols of Pride. Federal Highway Officials Say It Impacts Road Safety,” *CNN*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/11/us/rainbow-crosswalks-safety-atlanta-trnd/index.html>; Emily S. Rueb, “The Government Says Rainbow Crosswalks Could Be Unsafe. Are They Really?,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/us/crosswalks-ames-iowa-safety.html>; Heather Loney, “Rainbow Crosswalks Welcome Visitors to Toronto’s WorldPride,” *Global News*, June 17, 2014, <https://globalnews.ca/news/1399149/rainbow-crosswalks-welcome-visitors-to-torontos-world-pride/>; Andrea Romano, “Australia Installed a Rainbow Crosswalk to Support LGBTQ Pride,” *Business Insider*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/sydney-australia-rainbow-crosswalk-pride-2019-4>.

<sup>72</sup> Gilbert Baker, *Rainbow Warrior: My Life in Color* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2019).

<sup>73</sup> “More Color, More Pride,” *Hello Tierney*, January 19, 2021, <https://hellotierney.com/work/more-color-more-pride-2/>.

colors available within ACNH prevented the Global Pride 2020 island from incorporating brown in the field. As mentioned earlier, there were ways to create black flowers by manipulating the flora on the islands, but certain colors remained wholly unavailable. This limitation demonstrates how the programming of platforms, even with options to customize interfaces, can still restrain the expressivity available. However, users were not restricted in other customizable aesthetic areas like signs and pathways, so the black and brown stripes flag variant was used for the pathways and other signage available on the island. Additionally, the trans-inclusive Pride flag redesign by Daniel Quasar, which features the transgender identity flag's light blue, light pink, and white in an arrow formation alongside black and brown stripes as a "hoist" to the original design appears on the island's signage.<sup>74</sup> Quasar believes the old Pride rainbow "should be separated from the newer stripes because of their difference in meaning, as well as to shift focus and emphasis to what is important in our current community climate."<sup>75</sup> Their flag design conveys a sense of recency and allyship within the LGBTQ+ community by acknowledging communities often underrepresented in LGBTQ+ issues. The fact it is featured throughout the island's decorations is a way to further mark the island as a place of expansive LGBTQ+ advocacy.

The prolific rainbow coloration sets the tone for the island, as the colorful pathways guide visitors to a series of staged tableaux crafted through the furniture available in the game. On the north side of the island, there is a sea-side wedding chapel, where visitors celebrated with partners and loved ones by re-enacting marriage ceremonies or roleplaying a future where they

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<sup>74</sup> Eva Reign, "This Pride Flag Redesign Is Going Viral," *Them*, June 11, 2018, <https://www.them.us/story/pride-flag-redesign>.

<sup>75</sup> Reign, "This Pride Flag Redesign is Going Viral," 2018.

could marry their same-sex partners.<sup>76</sup> This type of interactive gameplay offers opportunities for users to roleplay through emotional intensities that might not be afforded to them in their lived experience.<sup>77</sup> This is especially important for LGBTQ+ community members that might be denied such opportunities in the analog world due to political obstacles and cultural stigmas.

Just below the wedding chapel is the museum corridor, which features an outdoor portrait exhibit called the “Icons Gallery.” Using image scanning technology, Global Pride 2020 created pixel art in-game portraits of famous LGBTQ+ icons such as Laverne Cox, Megan Rapinoe, Chella Man, Hanne Gaby Odiele, Freddie Mercury, Marsha P. Johnson, Harvey Milk, and Frida Kahlo. Visitors walking amongst the pictures could reflect on past and present leaders within the LGBTQ+ community. Viewers can simultaneously grieve the loss of martyrs, like Harvey Milk, while celebrating the successes of superstars like Megan Rapinoe. By mixing deceased, historical icons with living, contemporary icons, the portrait gallery produces a sense of longevity and momentum for the movement. Both the wedding chapel and museum demonstrate digital place-making’s potential to create accessible experiences of place (an LGBTQ+ friendly chapel, a dedicated LGBTQ+ museum) that are not as accessible to the community in the analog world due to temporal, geographical, political, and/or physical constraints.

Across the island, along the southwest beach front, is a large beach dance club featuring a DJ music station, tiki bar, and illuminated dance floor for in-game Pride parties. Centrally located on the island is the “Merch Shop” where Global Pride 2020 designers created special fashions for the island events. Visitors gain access to custom designed rainbow dresses, sweaters, hats, and umbrellas to take back to their own islands. The clothing designs also featured various

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<sup>76</sup> Since it was an international event and organization, there are still countless countries that do not extend same-sex marriage rights to their citizens. Therefore, for some players this is part of an act of queering their future and envisioning a time in which they might be able to marry.

<sup>77</sup> Seller, “Ever-Lockdown,” 2021.

identity flag options, including those representing non-binary, trans, pansexual, asexual, and genderfluid community members.<sup>78</sup> The shop area features a long rainbow runway for players to try on new fashions and show off to others gathered in the area. This free, ad-hoc fashion celebration is noteworthy for two reasons. The first reason relates to ongoing efforts in fashion theory to decolonize and decapitalize the fashion space. As Slade and Jansen explain, “While fashion as a verb—the act of fashioning the body—is of all temporalities and geographies, fashion as a noun has come to refer to a temporality of contemporaneity, a system of power and a capitalist industry that was conceived in Europe and exported to the rest of the world through European imperialism and globalization.”<sup>79</sup> The robust transplatform network that created and distributed these fashion items, for free, so that users could literally fashion their body for Pride demonstrate the way ACNH offered a space for this resistive dress practice. The second reason is related to the first, in that these ACNH fashion elements remaining cost-free to users is deeply unusual in the video game industry. Since 1997, video games have incorporated a downloadable content (DLC) transaction model to commodify games after publication.<sup>80</sup> The vast majority of these transactions are cosmetic in nature, allowing users to change the appearance of their avatars, homes, weapons, etc. depending on the game. The cosmetics available in ACNH are developed by users and shared with others without monetary transaction, meaning the platform itself is subversive to both the video game and fashion industry expectations. This reality makes ACNH infrastructurally ideal for communities seeking to disengage from commodifying social celebrations like Pride, which has been a consistent critique of Pride celebrations in the past

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<sup>78</sup> “Flags of the LGBTIQ Community,” *OutRight Action International*, August 7, 2017, <https://outrightinternational.org/content/flags-lgbtqi-community>.

<sup>79</sup> Toby Slade and M. Angela Jansen, “Letter from the Editors: Decoloniality and Fashion,” *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 6 (2020): 809-814, 811.

<sup>80</sup> “DLC: The Story of Gaming’s Three Most Expensive Letters,” *Make Use Of*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/dlc-gaming/>.

decade.<sup>81</sup> The transplatform media ecology surrounding the content creation and distribution on the platform allowed users to fashion their bodies for a politically expressive purpose without financial exchange at the center.

Throughout the rest of the island, sitting areas with plushie rainbow pillows and rainbow picnic benches are interspersed amongst flowerbeds. In these places, players congregated with others and used their proximity chat to socialize in the virtual community. Other groups hit the dance floor with friends, a practice prevented in the offline world due to COVID-19.<sup>82</sup> The topographical redesign of the island allowed Global Pride 2020 to effectively transform the map, or countermap, the space to incentivize social activism.<sup>83</sup> While the randomly generated islands of ACNH are not designed for the purpose of staging live events, Global Pride 2020 produced a place to meet their specific needs during the pandemic through customization tools. They transformed the ACNH island, a place initially meant for recreational fun and escapism, to a politicized destination for the transplatform network of ACNH users and LGTBQ+ community members. By staging areas with flags, signs, and other markers of place-as-rhetoric, they produced an openly queer space to be enjoyed and distributed across media like Twitter. Visitors to the islands gravitated to these staged areas, sharing screenshots of their activities across their Twitter network, echoing the practice seen in the Black Lives Matter protests.

The sign work on the Global Pride 2020 island encouraged players to participate and share their pride across their public networks. Players took advantage of the areas covered in Global Pride signage, particularly the signs incorporating the Quasar flag redesign. Using

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<sup>81</sup> Shinsuke Eguchi, "Im/Possibilities of Queer/Trans Worldmaking Allies: The Commodification of GLBTQ Pride Movement in the Age of Liberal Capitalism," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 8, no. 2 (2021): 69–74.

<sup>82</sup> Grr\_Animator. Twitter Post, June 27, 2020. [https://twitter.com/grr\\_animator/status/1276824828620804101](https://twitter.com/grr_animator/status/1276824828620804101); NomanACNH. Twitter Post, June 28, 2020. <https://twitter.com/nomanACNH/status/1277439090435096577>;

<sup>83</sup> Ewalt, "Mapping Injustice: The World Is Witness, Place-Framing, and the Politics of Viewing on Google Earth," (2011).

hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, #TransIsBeautiful, #Pride2020 in conjunction with the #GlobalPrideCrossing, players used the Quasar flag redesign to visually mark their political advocacy.<sup>84</sup> Gathering on the island, groups of friends staged photos dressed in Global Pride 2020 and personal rainbow fashions to commemorate their visits.<sup>85</sup> Across these shared messages, players affirmed their enjoyment of these events with the text captions for their shared pictures. Amisometimes explained, “Earlier this week we visited Pride Island and today for #Pride2020 we had a Pride Fashion Show and Smole Wedding Ceremony all during beautiful sunset hours!!! Thank you @GPrideCrossing for your #globalpridecrossing event!!!”<sup>86</sup> Accompanying Amisometimes’ post were four pictures, featuring eight gathered players walking the rainbow pathways, posing in front of the Global Pride 2020 signage, frolicking through the flowerbeds, and attending a gay wedding at the seaside chapel.<sup>87</sup> K8tyK17 shared pictures of their visit with their partner on the island, extolling, “OMG! @GPrideCrossing’s island is amazing

still offered players the opportunity to visit a designated place to demonstrate their political agency and allyship.

One of the tactics shared between the ACNH Black Lives Matter protests and the Global 2020 Pride events is centered around the personalized sign and fashion options created in ACNH. The Global 2020 Pride Island featured a litany of “official” designs produced by the organization itself, but users also created their own complementary designs. By tweeting at the @GPrideCrossing account, and/or through using the #GlobalPrideCrossing hashtag, these designers were able to connect and distribute their designs across this established Twitter network. This additional layer of organizational support allowed the designs to disperse more widely across the ACNH networked public than their BLM predecessors. For example, MayorHoneyBee created signs that read, “Black Trans Lives Matter” to be shared across the community, which was subsequently retweeted by the official @GPrideCrossing account.<sup>89</sup> This retweeted post garnered significantly more Twitter engagement than many of the ACNH posts during the BLM protests, which may signal the racial stratification of online gaming communities.<sup>90</sup> MegsOnTwitch created rainbow dresses that were adapted to match different player avatar skin tones, which garnered hundreds of likes and retweets across the ACNH Twitter network.<sup>91</sup> EloquentMyDear created trans flag tank tops and button up shirts to be shared across the ACNH transplatform community using the ACNH hashtags, garnering positive community reception.<sup>92</sup> The formalized distribution channel through @GPrideCrossing offered ACNH designers both inspiration and an audience for their creations.

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<sup>89</sup> MayorHoneyBee. Twitter Post, June 28, 2020, <https://twitter.com/mayorhoneybee/status/1277314202219220998>.

<sup>90</sup> Significantly here meaning more than several thousand likes and retweets – ten times more than the most popular BLM retweets from the account.

<sup>91</sup> MegsOnTwitch. Twitter Post, June 18, 2020, <https://twitter.com/MegsOnTwitch/status/1273804722990837762>.

<sup>92</sup> EloquentMyDear. Twitter Post, June 19, 2020, <https://twitter.com/EloquentMyDear/status/1273990234741411840>.

Aside from iterating clothes design, ACNH players also shared how their personal islands were designed in response to motivation from visiting the Global Pride island. Jerry\_Villa created a rainbow flower bed, but at its center was a large black and yellow “Black Lives Matter!!!” banner stretched across the ground.<sup>93</sup> In the tweet caption, Jerry\_Villa claims the Global Pride 2020 island inspired his own island renovation. EPMajestic built their own rainbow pathway and shared the video on Twitter, which was promptly retweeted by the @GPrideCrossing account.<sup>94</sup> These customized fashion choices and island modifications point towards the importance of the players’ own agency in their political self-expression. While the Global Pride 2020 island created a more structured atmosphere to engage with, it also centralized the network around a specific place and offered opportunities to align users experiencing affects driven by connection and advocacy. The coherent design aesthetic across the island allowed visitors to engage the island however they wished, while maintaining consistency across the overall experience. Additionally, the designs inspired from the #GlobalPrideCrossing community, and the distribution of this content from the @GPrideCrossing account synthesizes these more customized forms of self-expression with the power of sponsorship through traditional organization systems. Celebrating the LGBTQ+ community’s past, present, and future is broad in scope and made for a more flexible experience and message as part of the Global Pride 2020 island’s existence. In this last case study, we see how digital place-making strategies evolved into a succinct, targeted experience for the purposes of participation in the U.S. Presidential election in 2020. The official Joe Biden Presidential Campaign island is the culmination and colonization of this growing political, spatial logic across the *Animal Crossing*:

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<sup>93</sup> Jerry\_Villa. Twitter Post, June 28, 2020, [https://twitter.com/jerry\\_villa/status/1277436230276222977](https://twitter.com/jerry_villa/status/1277436230276222977).

<sup>94</sup> EPMajestic. Twitter Post, June 24, 2020, <https://twitter.com/EPMajestic/status/1275975701720494080>.

*New Horizons* networked public, further deepening our understandings around the potentials of digital place-making.

### **Institutionalized Island Place-Making: Biden HQ**

The player driven political expressions demonstrated through the ACNH public network showcased the possibilities for other organizations to harness digital communities' energy amid the COVID-19 pandemic. During the final months of the 2020 Presidential election season, the Joe Biden campaign used ACNH to activate potential voters. This trend of more traditional organizations co-opting the spontaneous strategies from non-institutional powers falls in line with the common narrative seen in digital communication innovations.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the co-option of the Black Lives Matter and even the more centralized Global Pride 2020 strategies to create place-as-rhetoric on the Biden HQ island starts as early as a visitor's arrival on the island. From the moment a player steps off the plane, the Biden campaign curated an experience clear in its agenda: support Joe Biden and by extension, American democracy. Visitors to the island disembark their plane into a customized fashion store featuring shirt, hat, and dress designs matching the official Biden 2020 campaign paraphernalia. Shirts and hats referencing Vice Presidential candidate, Kamala Harris, were also included. Throughout the shared Twitter photos from players visiting the island, it appears these designs were taken up by the ACNH community, and even taken back for use on player's personal islands.<sup>96</sup> MsMela27 posted a screenshot of herself wearing a Biden/Harris hat and dress while holding a campaign sign back

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<sup>95</sup> Damien Smith Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics: Attention and Deliberation in the Early Blogosphere* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 85.

<sup>96</sup> ACNH\_Firethorn. Twitter Post, October 16, 2020, [https://twitter.com/acnh\\_firethorn/status/1317233678817259520](https://twitter.com/acnh_firethorn/status/1317233678817259520); Minxysshoes. Twitter Post, October 16, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Minxysshoes/status/1317177880447651841>; IamZorro. Twitter Post, October 18, 2020, <https://twitter.com/IamZorro/status/1317836722441314304>.

on her personal island after her visit, “I visited the Biden HQ island in Animal Crossing. Then, I bought some matching shoes! #VoteLikeYourLifeDependsOnIt #BidenHarris2020 #BidenHQ[.]”<sup>97</sup> Crossbollywood shared two photos from her trip on the island. The first featured her wearing a beautiful custom designed patriotic sari and the other with a “I’m Speaking” hat referencing candidate Harris’ quote during the Vice-Presidential debate against Mike Pence. “A closer look at my sari inspired by @KamalaHarris worn on the Biden HQ AC island

embodied sense of “busy-ness” or hard work was often obfuscated. Here, the campaign team constructed a digital place that works to remind players of the labor going on behind the scenes to get Biden elected as President. This performance is imperative to instilling confidence in voters, and potential donors, that Biden will work hard on behalf of his electorate.

Beyond working hard, the places are also crafted to convey a sense of intimacy with both Biden and Harris. Attached to the field office is a personal office designed for Harris. Visitors walk through rows of bookshelves to a backroom sitting area with a desk, a stove, and a large leather couch. The desk is covered with papers and pens, continuing this message of Biden and Harris working hard on behalf of the American people. Next to the couch is a stove with a frying pan filled with a red ratatouille dish. Knowledge of Kamala Harris’s prowess in the kitchen rose to prominence through viral videos, notably a YouTube video with actress Mindy Kaling where they cooked Masala Dosa.<sup>99</sup> This more humanizing context for Harris is driven home through the staging of the scene in ACNH for users to experience themselves. Additionally, Harris’s love for sneakers, particularly Converse brand shoes, is memorialized in a display of athletic shoes across the entire office wall.<sup>100</sup> These tableaux echo the double-bind expectations of women in political positions: Harris must be both hard working outside the home, but also must be seen as curating the home in ways expected of traditional American womanhood.<sup>101</sup> Sitting on the couch, players get the sense of a woman who is hard at work, but remains approachable through these humanizing aspects of her public persona.

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<sup>99</sup> Kamala Harris, *Kamala Harris & Mindy Kaling Cook Masala Dosa*, 2019, <https://youtu.be/xz7rNOAFkgE>.

<sup>100</sup> Susan Devaney, “How Kamala and Her Converse Rewrote The Rule Book On Political Style,” *British Vogue*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/kamala-harris-sneakers-fashion>.

<sup>101</sup> Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson, *Woman President: Confronting Postfeminist Political Culture* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2013); Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *Hillary Clinton in the News: Gender and Authenticity in American Politics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Brooke Erin Duffy and Urszula Pruchniewska, “Gender and Self-Enterprise in the Social Media Age: A Digital Double Bind,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20, 6 (2017): 843–59.

Across the hall, Biden has a similarly staged office. On the wall hangs a pixel art portrait of Biden's deceased son, Beau. Throughout the campaign, Biden's son came up as a frequent topic of conversation, and the presidential hopefuls frank discussions of experiencing grief deeply and personally was considered one of his strengths as a candidate.<sup>102</sup> This picture, for those who recognize Beau, evokes a sense of grief and empathy for a father, not just a Presidential candidate. Below the office is another room staged to further convey Biden's approachability. Named "Joe's Train Town," the room features toy train sets and other train-centric memorabilia available in ACNH. Biden is also known as "Amtrak Joe" for his use of the rail system to commute from Washington to his family home in Delaware throughout his political career.<sup>103</sup> Recontextualizing this anecdote into a place where players can walk amongst the trains and play with the toys gives players a tangible interaction with these parts of Biden's persona, cultivating a sense of intimacy through digital place-making. Leveraging technological affordances to produce intimacy in the public is a technique that politicians have used throughout history. Take for instance the use of the radio in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by politicians like U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt. At the time of his presidency, radio technology had thoroughly integrated itself into the daily life of most Americans, acting as a major source for news and entertainment.<sup>104</sup> Radios were most often situated in common spaces in the home, and Lim notes that radio technology blurred the lines between public and private intimacy expectations with the social public.<sup>105</sup> In his rhetorical analysis of how intimacy was invoked in the public memory

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<sup>102</sup> Michael Kruse, "How Grief Became Joe Biden's 'Superpower,'" *POLITICO Magazine*, January 25, 2019, <https://politi.co/2FVECZv>; Peter Wehner, "Biden May Be Just the Person America Needs," *The Atlantic*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/joe-bidens-superpower/616957/>.

<sup>103</sup> Dan Merica, Jeff Zeleny and Arlette Saenz, "'Amtrak Joe' Could Arrive for His Inauguration by Train" *CNN*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/07/politics/biden-amtrak/index.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

<sup>105</sup> Elvin T. Lim, "The Lion and the Lamb: De-Mythologizing Franklin Roosevelt's Fireside Chats," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2003): 1.

through the radio, Lim points to the production of parasocial intimacy radio produced between the speaker/broadcaster (in this case Roosevelt) and those listening to his words in their own homes. This manufactured parasocial intimacy does not presume that the producer of the message feels a relation between themselves and the public but focuses on the public's perception of being in relation with the producer. The Biden Island HQ is an evolution of this strategy, where players are in the safety of their homes during COVID-19 but engaging with a digital place curated to produce feelings of comfort, familiarity, warmth, and hospitality with Joe Biden and Kamala Harris.

Based on the content distributed across the transplatform ACNH network players took advantage of these personalized offices on the island, snapping screenshots of themselves wearing Biden/Harris 2020 shirts in these digital places.<sup>106</sup> The amount of time and labor behind the design of the island was noticed by players as well, with Slakqueen captioning her #BidenIsland posts with "Whoever made #BidenIsland needs a raise."<sup>107</sup> "Visited Biden HQ. The island is really nicely done, #AnimalCrossing #ACNH #NintendoSwitch" commented MochaMilk24.<sup>108</sup> PierceAH66 also lauded the campaign team's work, "Had a blast touring the Biden Island HQ in #AnimalCrossing!"

civic engagement like voting. Through the adoption of the place-making affordances innovated by the ACNH transplatform network over the months prior, the Biden campaign curated their own digital place-as-rhetoric specifically for voter activation. These places served as a proxy for meeting Biden or Harris in-person, an act prevented by the COVID-19 pandemic. As one player put it, “I hung out with @JoeBiden once. Kinda. #BidenIsland #Elections2020.”<sup>111</sup> Other users would post photo collections of themselves alongside the Joe Biden avatar or in his field office to share on Twitter commemorating their visit. “I visited Biden’s HQ Island last night” wrote meysuhr alongside screenshots of themselves in the field office, the ice cream shop, the voting plaza, and the campaign store.<sup>112</sup> Courtneybueller posted photos of her “trip to Biden HQ” with her talking to the Joe Biden avatar, posing in the voting plaza, and stopping by the field office.<sup>113</sup> By creating this digital place, the Biden campaign offered supporters an interactive location to enact their support for Biden and Harris, as well as develop a more intimate idea of each candidate.

Using the space to manufacture this sense of intimacy is only half of the Biden HQ story. The area in the left corner of the island focuses on the future. Using red flowers and customized fence designs, the Biden campaign staged a view of the “White House” from the perspective of Lafayette Park in Washington D.C. As Miller noted on his Twitch stream, “Hey, this is what we’re driving for, this is what we’re striving for with Joe Biden in general. Not just his Animal Crossing island, but what the goal is in general.”<sup>114</sup> The Biden campaign is visually calling forth a future in which Biden resides inside the White House as the President of the country. The fact

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<sup>111</sup> Zanneslaw. Twitter Post, November 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zanneslaw/status/1324202291747049472>.

<sup>112</sup> Meysuhr. Twitter Post, October 18, 2020, <https://twitter.com/meysuhr/status/1317848482435244034>

<sup>113</sup> Courtneybueller. Twitter Post, October 17, 2020, <https://twitter.com/courtneybueller/status/1317464282972540928>.

<sup>114</sup> “The Official Biden Island in Animal Crossing! @votejoe @bidenharris2020” (Twitch, October 16, 2020).

this view of the White House was from the perspective of Lafayette Park takes on special significance considering how it was the site of intense Black Lives Matter protests in Washington D.C. in June of 2020. Peaceful protestors were tear gassed early in the month, and eventually several protestors attempted to topple the Andrew Jackson statue located in the center of the park square.<sup>115</sup> However, here in the world of Animal Crossing, this space was remapped as the location of a hopeful and more peaceful future. This type of countertopography illuminates how the Biden campaign was able to adapt the strategies previously used by the ACNH community in their BLM and Pride events for their own campaign purposes to create their island as a place-as-rhetoric campaign destination.

This political agenda is also apparent throughout the digital sign work taking place across the island. Campaign signs are strategically placed along every major walking pathway, meaning players cannot effectively take screenshots walking around without a sign in view. As a game platform, ACNH must maintain what is known as “a field of view” for the player while their avatar moves across the island on screen. This infrastructural element of game design means that players typically have a limited range of motion of the “camera” that is capturing the image they are viewing. With the constraints on viewing embedded into the platform design itself, this limited view shapes user attention and creates opportunities for creators to control how their creations are perceived on the platform. For the Biden Island HQ, the thoroughness of the branding and signage is seen in virtually every frame of view on the island. Across the beach front of the island was a large ice cream stand decorated with a rainbow ice cream light and a

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<sup>115</sup> Tom Gjelten, “Peaceful Protesters Tear-Gassed To Clear Way For Trump Church Photo-Op,” *NPR*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/01/867532070/trumps-unannounced-church-visit-angers-church-officials>; Rebecca Shabad, “Protesters in D.C.’s Lafayette Square Try to Topple Andrew Jackson Statue,” *NBC News*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/protesters-d-c-s-lafayette-square-try-topple-andrew-jackson-n1231847>.

Pride themed Biden campaign sign. Standing between the rainbow ice cream and the Pride themed Biden sign, players had the opportunity to take situated pro-LGBTQ+ selfies on the island.<sup>116</sup> As kingbeansz demonstrated in their shared screenshots, there was no angle to take a picture with the ice cream cones that did not also capture the Joe Biden campaign sign that incorporated the rainbow Pride flag due to the field of view.<sup>117</sup> The signs are not only marketing strategy, but also continue to humanize Biden through their deployment in specific locations like this beachfront ice cream parlor. Biden famously loves ice cream, and since the 2008 election cycle where he was photographed at various ice cream shops wearing aviator sunglasses, his dairy passion has become something of a recurring joke across the internet.<sup>118</sup> This anecdote humanizes Biden, and his campaign team used the in-game ice cream to integrate a visual rainbow signifying Biden's support of the LGBTQ+ community.

However, it is the center plaza for the island where digital sign work and topographical transformation merge for political place-making geared towards mobilizing players. The main pathway that visitors follow across the island culminates in this central location, further emphasizing its importance as the final destination for the overall experience. This plaza's design is the only departure from the consistent Biden/Harris 2020 branding seen throughout the island. Using the branding featured in the "IWillVote.com" campaign, the entire plaza is decorated as a red, white, and blue polling center. Covered in voting booths, the floor of the plaza is painted with the "Voting Plan Checklist." The checklist covered three major points; "In person or by mail," "Where are you voting?," and "How are you getting there?" With COVID-19 impacting the safety and accessibility for people who voted in person in previous elections, this plaza

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<sup>116</sup> FLeybrock. Twitter Post, October 19, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FLeybrock/status/1318208393329299458>.

<sup>117</sup> Kingbeansz. Twitter Post, October 18, 2020, <https://twitter.com/kingbeansz/status/1317874820164431875>.

<sup>118</sup> Kenneth Bachor and Elijah Sinclair Walker, "National Ice Cream Day: A Look at Joe Biden's Ice Cream Obsession," *TIME*, July 15, 2016, <https://time.com/4408008/joe-biden-ice-cream-obsession/>.

reinforced the call for voters to develop plans to ensure their votes count if they used mail-in voting or planned to vote in person. This messaging asked players to proactively plan their voting and look towards a different future, one with Biden as president due to their participation. Players visited the islands and took screenshots in the plaza, specifically highlighting the “Voting Plan Checklist” on the ground.<sup>119</sup> Users made it a point to include the voter checklist in their photo collections shared on Twitter of their island visits, thereby further disseminating the message.<sup>120</sup> By sharing these screenshots, they also spread the message to prospective voters about creating a voting plan for the 2020 election. Jkru captioned her photo in the voting plaza as “dreaming of a better future on #BidenIsland #AnimalCrossing #ACNH.”<sup>121</sup> Melgotserved posted “Inspired by the Biden HQ island, I set up early voting on Pearadise #ACNH #Vote Early” alongside a screenshot of her own custom design for a polling booth on her personal island.<sup>122</sup> Swifty\_IMN posted their Biden HQ island photos on election day as a reminder for others to go out and vote: “#AnimalCrossing #ACNH #NintendoSwitch Went to Biden HQ dream island remember to vote!”<sup>123</sup> These places allowed players to situate themselves in the future promise of the Biden presidency, and then share that experience with others across their network. This example demonstrates how situated location performs rhetorical work. The topographical designs of the island create places for visitors to imagine connections with candidates and envision new political futures. The signs mark the island as political and inform

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<sup>119</sup> PlantedJess. Twitter Post, October 16, 2020, <https://twitter.com/plantedjess/status/1317256600868982784>; Pavipaints. Twitter Post, October 16, 2020, <https://twitter.com/pavipaints/status/1317279242929893376>;

<sup>120</sup> YuniethOracle. Twitter Post. October 16, 2020, <https://twitter.com/YuniethOracle/status/131725908822125363>; KellyODonn. Twitter Post, October 17, 2020, <https://twitter.com/KellyODonn/status/1317539388931309568>; PeoplepersonsP. Twitter Post, October 17, 2020, <https://twitter.com/PeoplepersonsP/status/1317587472944160769>; KristiKidA. Twitter Post, October 17, 2020, <https://twitter.com/KristiKidA/status/1317613718361067520>.

<sup>121</sup> Jkru. Twitter Post, October 17, 2020, <https://twitter.com/jkru/status/1317558966323310592>.

<sup>122</sup> Melgotserved. Twitter Post, October 19, 2020, <https://twitter.com/melgotserved/status/1318371959202369536>.

<sup>123</sup> Swifty\_IMN. Twitter Post, November 2, 2020, [https://twitter.com/Swifty\\_IMN/status/1323294286931128321](https://twitter.com/Swifty_IMN/status/1323294286931128321).

visitors about voting during the pandemic. The Biden HQ is designed to encourage visitors to engage with the civic process and imagine themselves as conventional political participants, featuring a direct capstone experience through the Voting Plan Checklist plaza that calls on visitors to vote in the upcoming election.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began by positing that place-making practices have migrated to digital platforms, with ACNH being a particularly popular site in 2020. Within the context of a global pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns, the necessary emphasis on the digital relocation of political life is especially salient. Digital place is beholden to the software and infrastructure used to create platform spaces for users. The places are both afforded and constrained by their relationships to infrastructural and programming limitations. Therefore, this chapter asserts rhetoricians should approach digital platforms as “places,” specifically in regards with how they are used by social movements for “place-as-rhetoric” strategies. Integrating Florini’s understanding of transplatform networks with a place-as-rhetoric study illustrates how digital places are produced through a complex network of communities, infrastructures, and platforms.

A core theme across this case study, and the future cases in this dissertation, is the importance of the media ecology of transplatform networks as the form of circulation for these digital publics. Through analyzing the transplatform network centered around an unlikely platform, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, I also illuminate how taking seriously digital space as *place* can reveal new iterations in social movement strategies across these distribution networks. Using ACNH specific platform affordances based in clothing, topography, and sign customization, individual users and organizations were able to transform spaces into meaningful

places for their own political purposes and then open those places to digital visitors through the transplatform media ecology surrounding ACNH. Ranging from the private BLM island vigils to the freely accessible Biden Island HQ, the ACNH infrastructures afforded political organizations the ability to curate a “place” on its platform that fulfilled their purposes. These designed locales were not stagnant productions, but interactive experiences to be shared with a broader community of digital users. The gameplay design provided ACNH users opportunities to express and circulate their affective expressions, thus aligning them with other users involved in the transplatform network. This type of experience is unique due to the access and distribution affordances of digital media ecologies and allows these places to function across geographical barriers, while still embracing the rhetorical importance of location.

Digital place, understood within a transplatform network, invites rhetoric scholars to account for the multiplicity of relations occurring online for digital communities. Positioning place as an analytical framework within the digital landscape allows us to see the qualities of the relationships more clearly between users, platforms, play, social movements, distribution, and civic engagement. Each of these relational elements interlace through a complex media ecology that demonstrates the layered reality of digital platforms and user practice. As the ACNH examples illustrate, applying a transplatform network framework to place reveals both how individuals connect with each other and how institutions capitalize on a digital collective’s labor. These organizations then adapt their own strategies from those innovated by collectives. Identifying these practices is essential for maintaining accountability for traditional powers as they acclimate to a digital political landscape. Digital place offers rhetoricians a foundation from which we can trace the complex transplatform networks involved in digitized social movements

around the world. It also invites us to consider how in situ research methods and rhetorical analysis might adapt alongside the digital.

Since 2020, we have seen other political groups, such as Stacey Abram's Fair Fight anti-voter suppression organization, turn to ACNH to create places for dialogue and promotion.<sup>124</sup> Gaming platforms that offer such customizable experiences for cathartic play have proven to provide unique platforms for political groups. This continuance of ACNH as a platform for place-making indicates how individual platforms, even those coded for "play," impact these broader transplatform networks.

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<sup>124</sup> "A conversation between Fair Fight Founder Stacey Abrams and Tanya Depass" (Twitch, January 4, 2020).

## **There's Some Hate in this House: Twitch Content Creators Place-making and Resisting Harassment Online**

At TwitchCon 2022, I stood amongst a group of bystanders in a dimly lit exhibition hall, observing a young woman clicking furiously at her computer. Surrounded by soundproof glass walls and bright neon LED lights, she ignored the crowd around her to focus on the camera and game in front of her face. Above her head, a live video feed streamed her Twitch channel for her online audience “direct from the convention show floor.” We, the observers in the physical room, played no role in the broadcast’s purpose or production – this was an analog space designed for a digital audience. After observing for a few minutes, the young woman behind me popped the lollipop out of her mouth and muttered, “This is some dystopian shit.” She cast a sidelong glance at her friend, and they left, re-entering the milling crowd of thousands of people meandering the convention show floor.

These streaming booths were scattered throughout the San Diego Convention Center exhibition hall. Between the streaming booth clusters are lounge rooms and cabana rooms for TwitchCon attendees to sit and relax. Retailers rented carpets, rugs, couches, pillows, LED lighting, and fake plants to decorate their floor spaces. These spaces are crafted as invitations to sit in a domestic type setting and learn how to “improve your personal brand” with the latest product or service. This strange *mélange* of work and play on the exhibition floor at TwitchCon perfectly captures the tension on the Twitch live streaming platform itself: the convergence of work, play, and home life in a single space.

To understand the social and political culture ramifications of a platform like Twitch, I contend that the application of an understanding of rhetorical theories around place and space

illuminates how digital users are engaging with these platforms and galvanizing the communities they cultivate there for political action. The infrastructural affordances and limitations of the platform inform how digital user practices are simultaneously shaped by and reshape the platform itself. A digital platform, such as Twitter or Twitch, is inherently beholden to the capitalist and exploitative structures that support the market of digital platforms.<sup>1</sup> Users and their content production are the fuel that sustains the cultural capital of a live streaming platform like Twitch through the marketplace of attention.<sup>2</sup>

In the previous chapter, I analyzed how a digital platform developed for recreational play, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* turned into a *place* for social and political engagement amid the COVID-19 pandemic. With that transformation, driven by digital place-making from users, the game platform took on new persuasive and rhetorical significance in U.S. political culture. This chapter will look at a digital platform also designed with the concept of “play” in mind, Twitch.tv. Twitch.tv (Twitch) is a live streaming service that features live broadcasts of video game competitions and gameplay to a large audience. More than 26.5 million users visit the platform daily, and Twitch boasts more than 6.9 million unique streamers monthly. During the global lockdowns of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, users flocked to Twitch as both consumers and producers. The platform experienced an unprecedented amount of growth during the pandemic lockdowns as creators and viewers alike sought new ways to create and engage from home. The number of active streamer channels from 2020 nearly doubled, from 3.6 to 6.9 million and then saw another massive increase in 2021, from 6.9 million to 9 million. These

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<sup>1</sup> Gillespie, “The Politics of Platforms”; Terranova, “Free Labor”; Plantin et al., “Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook.”

<sup>2</sup> Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*.

streamers used the infrastructures surrounding the platform to engage in place-making practices to establish themselves as content creators with a locatable community.

Through both digital ethnographic field work and a rhetorical analysis of the discourses emerging from Twitch and circulating through the content creator community, this chapter analyzes how concepts of digital place-making enhance our understandings of how live streaming communities understand themselves as such, and what occurs when these communities are invaded by malicious hate groups. Understanding Twitch as a *place* will not only increase our understanding of its rhetorical relevance and politicization in media but also offers a unique context to analyze the social tactics used to target and undermine activism in a digital landscape.

The rhetorical analysis applied to the discourses emerging from and around Twitch draws on the importance of situating digital platforms and communities within their specific media ecology. As such, I will be engaging these discourses across a transplatform network to better understand the social and infrastructural constraints navigated by users. This study pays particular attention to both the platform infrastructure of Twitch's streaming platform as well as the content shared through the Twitch content creator network across Twitter, Twitch, and Discord. The texts I utilized in this analysis are drawn from three key places: The videos promoted and circulated on the Twitch platform through the introductory "Creator Camp" program, discourses circulated on Twitter captured via TAGS, and my own digital ethnographic field work and notes.

To develop an understanding of the content creator experience on Twitch and invest in this online community, I committed to a digital ethnographic embedding in the live streaming community on Twitch. Starting in September of 2020, I started producing regular weekly content on Twitch as a charity streamer. Since that time, I have produced more than 635 hours of live

streamed content on the platform to more than twelve thousand viewers. My dedicated channel has more than 650 followers, which is considered small on the platform, but my average concurrent viewer count remains steady at 15 unique users. Considering the average Twitch streamer broadcasts to 0-5 viewers, this demonstrates a dedicated viewership and engagement with my content over the years on the platform. As part of this content creation, I participated in a “Stream Team” called the Radically Kind Gamers (RKG) for approximately six months until the group was disbanded due to management issues. The RKG experiences I incorporate as part of this analysis are either from my direct streaming experience or my experience as a viewer of publicly available content within the community. To maintain their privacy, no Discord or otherwise non-public communications from RKG members will be included as part of this analysis.

Additionally, creating content on Twitch and maintaining channel viewership utilizes a network of platforms outside of Twitch. As such, I have also produced promotional content on other platforms like Twitter to advertise the stream, and I manage a Discord server named “DocBrooke’s Study Hall” with 74 registered users. This Discord server is a public forum: anyone can join if they agree to abide by server rules like a subreddit or other chat forums. My community of followers refers to itself as “The Class” and themselves as students within the context of participating in the streams and engaging with one another on Discord. Curating this flow of content and communication across multiple channels is an essential part of acting as a content creator in the space of Twitch and elsewhere in digital communities. As such, these networks of dissemination and connection are used to contextualize the content produced on Twitch and its potential arenas of impact.

In the following analysis, I first analyze the ways that Twitch rhetorically shapes how streamers understand their communities as *places*. Then, through my own experience with the infrastructure, I analyze the streaming platform of Twitch itself, noting how the affordances of the platform shape both content creator and viewer's experiences on the platform. Together, these analyses contextualize how streamers rhetorically construct *places* for their Twitch communities through a transplatform network. After establishing the infrastructure and production of a rhetorically salient place on Twitch, I address the case study of a place-centric, politicized experience for many BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and otherwise underrepresented streamers on the platform throughout 2021: hate raids. Analyzing these experiences through a critical digital place-making framework demonstrates how users are simultaneously empowered and exploited by the infrastructures of Twitch.

## **Building Your “Place” on Twitch: How Streamers Produce Place for Their Communities**

### ***Building Basics & the Aesthetics of Place According to Twitch***

On the Twitch platform, Twitch offers a free program called “Creator Camp” for individuals interested in streaming on the platform. The program launched in 2020, as an additional resource for the new influx of creators launching on the program amid the pandemic. When I signed up on the platform to create my account, I was directed to the Creator Camp page to help “get started” with my journey on Twitch. The Creator Camp modules follow a format of “chapters,” which feature several pre-recorded video “lessons” per chapter. In these videos, Partner tier streamers dispense wisdom and offer advice about the tools and tactics individuals should leverage in their live streams.<sup>3</sup> Chosen for their demonstrated success on the platform,

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<sup>3</sup> The tiers of streamers will be discussed in further detail later in the chapter, but for reference, Partner is a highly sought after category amongst Twitch streamers.

Partner streamers play the role of a seasoned veteran in these videos, guiding newcomers towards best practices on the platform.

The Creator Camp begins with the chapter “Getting Started”, where the “The Basics” video lesson begins with the question “How do you attract viewers?” In the video, Partner LobosJR explains to the viewer, “People come to my channel for skill-based gameplay, but they also come for the community I’ve cultivated over the years. It’s important to create a comfortable space for your viewers...”<sup>4</sup> Alongside this video is a detailed description of how a streamer can customize their channel page as a central “hub” for their community. While LobosJR offers few specifics on creating a “comfortable space,” Twitch proposes content creators should leverage customized visual graphic designs on their channel pages to distinguish their communities and identify their content within a personal brand framework. Encouraging streamers to make their spaces visually distinct using the available customizable infrastructure features facilitates the platform’s drive to have desirable “destinations” for viewers to find while browsing content. This results in content creators transforming their channels into locatable *places* for their community to visit through coding and graphic design. On the platform, a common convention among many streamers is to borrow iconography from other recognizable analog places like a dojo, a tiki lounge, a cabin, or a living room to further reify this idea of their channel being a *place* to visit online. Unlike social media platforms like YouTube or Instagram, viewers on Twitch are actively engaging with the channel page interface through the real time chat functions while watching the live streams. This situated engagement is unique to live streaming, thus Twitch emphasizes this intentional curation of a content creator’s channel page

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<sup>4</sup> “The Basics” Twitch Creator Camp, <https://www.twitch.tv/creatorcamp/en/paths/getting-started-on-twitch/the-basics/>.

to maintain viewer interest and engagement. By visually defining a channel page, a content creator produces a place for their community to treat as a rendezvous point.

This concept of a channel page as a *place* is further reified by the use of the word “enter” throughout the Creator Camp content. The phrase “enter a channel” is used throughout the Creator Camp to describe the act of participating and engaging with a live stream. This digitized conceptualization of crossing a figurative threshold and thus entering a boundaried space dates to the progenitor online chat rooms that featured the notification “[username] has entered the chat.”<sup>5</sup> This entrance metaphor emphasizes the way viewers approach engagement with chat functionality on a channel as associated to a concept of *place*. The Creator Camp encourages streamers to directly “welcome” newcomers to the channel through verbal acknowledgement on stream. The Creator Camp videos coach streamers to extend hospitality to viewers who enter their channels the way you would welcome visitors to your home. In my experience with RKG, we abided by that convention and many of my team members had short welcome animations they play when a new username writes in chat. It makes the process feel like a celebration and an invitation, with the goal of making a viewer feel special and ideally more invested in the channel. Across the platform, it is common for content creators to reference those “hanging out” in chat, meaning viewers currently watching the channel live whether they are typing in the chat box or not. In a similar vein, there is an infrastructural command to allow viewers to notify a streamer of their presence within the place of the channel even if they do not wish to engage in the chat function specifically. The command “!lurk” can be entered into the chat box, producing a pre-programmed response from the streamer that acknowledges the viewer and thanks them for watching in the channel even if they are not directly engaging with the chat. Many content

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Wagstaff, “AOL’s Longest-Running Employee on the History of AOL Chat Rooms,” *Time*, July 6, 2012, <https://techland.time.com/2012/07/06/aols-longest-running-employee-on-the-history-of-aol-chat-rooms/>.

creators (myself included) customize this pre-programmed response to say something more personal, complimentary, or thematic to the channel. For example, my channel message reads, “Thanks for hanging out with The Class, we’re happy to have you here. Remember to hydrate!” These active lurking features provide an alternative for viewers to signal their presence within the content creator’s channel and allow them to dwell without other social pressures of participation within the space.

Aside from the place curation on the channel page hub itself, content creators are taught to invest in the aesthetics of the home studios from which streamers create their content. As T.L. Taylor explains, “One of the most important things to understand about individual live streaming is that the home as studio shapes the form, content, and experience of broadcasts for both streamer and audience.”<sup>6</sup> Streamers spend a significant amount of time and personal funds to build their “streaming set up” as Twitch refers to it.<sup>7</sup> Curating these studio spaces requires two different perspectives from the content creator: what technology will enhance my content and what does my audience want to see on the stream? For the former question, the type of content a person streams and their financial investment into the streaming technology is integral. Both from my personal experience and according to Twitch’s Creator Camp, quality lighting, audio, and gameplay capture software are all considered primary needs for a streamer. While not required on the Twitch platform, many streamers utilize a camera that is directed on their face/body during the stream. These are referred to as “face cams” in discussions of streaming set ups for live stream broadcasts. While there are streamers who utilize virtual avatars instead or forgo any bodily presence in the stream altogether, it is notable that Creator Camps focuses on

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<sup>6</sup> T.L. Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 100.

<sup>7</sup> “The Basics”, Twitch Creator Camp.

content creators who use face cams in content production. Twitch recognizes that the most popular (thus most profitable) content creators on the platform are those who use face cams. This facial identification is one factor that contributes to viewers building an identifying connection with a content creator. For example, the top ten most popular streamers on the platform all use face cams as part of their content creation.<sup>8</sup> The curation of the home studio then becomes an integral part of how a viewer experiences a channel in large part because of the prevalence of face cams on the Twitch platform.

When designing a home studio, a streamer is presented with two options: first, use a green screen backdrop or second, film in a more domestic setting (home office, living room, basement, etc.) Green screen technology offers streamers the option to remove the background and directly overlay themselves onto the gameplay they are playing. If one does not use a green screen, a new set of aesthetics and logistics play a part in developing the home studio space. These more domestic spaces afford a material and affective influence on the streamer and audience's experience of the content. For the streamer, "The domestic environment—surrounded by your things, items of affection or comfort, and your own fandom, often on display for the audience—provides a form of security and even safety to those who might otherwise find the idea of standing on a huge stage in front of thousands unthinkable."<sup>9</sup> These spaces serve to further distinguish a channel as a defined place, by echoing domestic scenes viewers recognize as familiar. Ideally, a streamer's domestic space produces parallel affective intensities that their audience might feel in their own domestic homes or safe spaces; emotions like belonging, security, comfort, or peace. For example, Partner KarimCheese streams from his living room,

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<sup>8</sup> Ryan Woodrow, "Find out Which Twitch Streamer Has the Most Followers," *Sports Illustrated*, June 28, 2023, <https://videogames.si.com/guides/top-twitch-streamers>.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*, 101.

where he uses LED lights to give his couch and indoor plants warm neon red and blue tones. The lights cast a glow across his living room, conveying feelings of balance and softness.<sup>10</sup> These same red and blue colors are echoed throughout his channel’s customized banner, features, and logo designs. KarimCheese refers to his channel as the “Dojo” and when someone follows, they are welcomed to the “Dojo” by a pre-programmed chat bot and by KarimCheese live on the stream. These forms of invitation into domestic environments echo the effective rhetorical power of intimacy observed in the way older technologies like radio created more hospitable, welcoming environments.<sup>11</sup> The transition to radio allowed public life to breach the intimacy of the private through audio and create parasocial relationships between a speaker and listener.<sup>12</sup> Twitch innovates on this feeling of parasocial intimacy by allowing the audience an intimate gaze into a content creator’s private space, from the safety of the audience’s own private space. Thus, two private worlds are connected through a public form. In a time of social isolation and lockdowns due to COVID-19, this ability to visit a space outside of your home, even virtually, held high appeal. For the majority of streamers using face cams and curating their home studios into desirable domestic spaces allows them to construct a knowable *place* for their viewers to connect with while watching.

The intimacy of facial recognition and domestic spaces are not the only ways content creators developed affective connections with their audience. Fandom also plays a major role in the point of connection and space curation in these home offices for streamers. Partners may receive sponsorship offers to incorporate certain elements into their backgrounds for promotion. The Twitch streamer Ninja famously installed a Red Bull mini-fridge, always conveniently

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<sup>10</sup> “KarimCheese’s Channel Page,” Twitch, <https://www.twitch.tv/karimcheese>.

<sup>11</sup> Mary E. Stuckey, *The Good Neighbor: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of American Power* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013); Lim, “The Lion and the Lamb”; Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public*.

<sup>12</sup> Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public*, 1–3, 73.

stocked with Red Bull, into the background of his home studio once he received a sponsorship deal from the energy drink company.<sup>13</sup> Red Bull eventually went so far as to design Ninja his own streaming home studio – which included domestic touches like dog beds, a snack stash, and mini bar.<sup>14</sup> Compared to KarimCheese's personal dojo, Ninja's home studio demonstrates how these domestic spaces can be influenced by commercial imperatives—there is no illusion that this is a bourgeois private sphere where intimacy thrives outside of market logics. However, both home studios are representative of how content creators are encouraged to cultivate their channels as defined destinations that audiences understand as a *place* to travel to and inhabit. By welcoming a viewer into a space that aesthetically and even functionally acts as a home, the streamer reinforces the connection between themselves and the viewer as authentic. This conceptualization of a streaming channel as a home engages how networked technologies continually engage the question of hospitality: who is welcome into a digital space, and how?<sup>15</sup> Within the unique context of the digital, “Prior to any attempt to make sense of our guest, that guest has already arrived, forcing a relation whether or not we have requested it.”<sup>16</sup> The guests are the viewers, and as such, Twitch frames their arrival as a positive experience to strive for, thus streamers tailor their décor and decorum towards cultivating hospitality. By developing a channel with a sense of belonging to a *place* the Content Creator camp program encourages this environmental development through the infrastructure it affords creators and their coaching of best social practices on the platform.

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<sup>13</sup> Ninja. Twitter Post, July 13, 2015, <https://twitter.com/Ninja/status/620405514925531136>.

<sup>14</sup> “Ninja Streaming Room,” *Round House Agency*, 2021, <https://roundhouseagency.com/work/ninja-streaming-room>.

<sup>15</sup> James J. Brown, *Ethical Programs: Hospitality and the Rhetorics of Software* (East Lansing, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Brown, 2.

### *Social Decorum in the “Neighborhood” of Twitch*

To further emphasize the concept of a streamer’s channel page as a defined *place*, Twitch refers to other channels as your “neighbors” on a platform. In their Creator Camp lesson, “Say ‘Hi’ to the Neighbors” the featured Partner streamers explain ways that new content creators can build bridges across the platform to other creators and their communities.<sup>17</sup> Rhetorically speaking, the power of conceptualizing a broad and vast community as a more intimate “neighborhood” has found relevance throughout political culture, particularly in the United States.<sup>18</sup> This concept of neighborhood relies on understanding a space as a refuge: safe, affirming, and animated through connection to others.<sup>19</sup> Neighborliness, operates under a few key presumptions: a sense of respect between parties and an understanding that neighbors inhabit a shared place and thus have stake in that place’s health and wellbeing.<sup>20</sup> Alongside the video, Twitch recommends best practices for networking appropriately across the platform and recommends seeking out Stream team opportunities like RKG. Stream teams, conceptually, were designed with these neighborly presumptions in mind. A team is managed by at least one Twitch Partner, with the idea being their experience and success can help other streamers learn and support one another as they create content. Stream teams get their own dedicated broadcasting page on Twitch where viewers can easily toggle through team members broadcasting at the time. In my experience with RKG, sponsors would offer deals to an entire team, further incentivizing team members to seek out and share opportunities with brands. The complex social architecture of the live streaming media ecology means such onboarding tools are crucial for amateur content

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<sup>17</sup> “Say ‘Hi’ to the Neighbors,” Twitch Creator Camp, <https://www.twitch.tv/creatorcamp/en/paths/growing-your-community/say-hi-to-the-neighbors/>.

<sup>18</sup> Stuckey, *The Good Neighbor*; Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Good Neighbors: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Alexandra Klaren, *On Becoming Neighbors: The Communication Ethics of Fred Rogers* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Stuckey, *The Good Neighbor*, 19–20.

creators to assimilate to not only a specific platform, but the broader live broadcasting community.

Furthermore, understanding a streamer's channel as a home within a greater neighborhood-like community reifies this push for an authentic connection and experience within the community. As Rosenblum explains how the intimacy of a neighborhood impacts connections between individuals; "Around home we are unguarded; we don't always think to arrange the face we present or to modulate our words and tones when we step out our door. Proximity creates cause and occasion for arguments, slights, acts of aggression. Family aside, we have no more constant or intimate stage for exhibiting graciousness or foul temper, or worse, than where we live."<sup>21</sup> Through Twitch's framing of acting as a good "neighbor" they are attempting to also establish a code of conduct on the platform that might emulate the idea of "fulsome reciprocity" described as "willingly engaging our neighbor on her terms, responding animatedly to her interests, and inviting her to appreciate ours in turn."<sup>22</sup> This type of reciprocity as an element of infrastructure embedded into the Twitch platform is seen in the ability for content creators to raid another person's live stream or create a "hosting" list of channels. Hosting is an extension of programming logics; for example, if Content Creator A wishes to support a group of creators on Twitch, Content Creator A can elect to preset a list of other content creators on Twitch whose content they wish to support. When Content Creator A is offline, their channel will pick another content creator from this list and feature that person's live stream on Content Creator A's channel. Especially within the Stream Team networks on Twitch like noir., RainbowArcade, Sidequest, and my own former team, RKG, hosting was used to

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<sup>21</sup> Rosenblum, *Good Neighbors*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Rosenblum, 4.

support other team members under the assumption that they would reciprocate these hosting privileges.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to these ideals of reciprocity and respect within a construct of neighborhood, enforcement also plays a role. Neighbors monitoring their communities emerges from a dependency on one another to maintain the community's overall wellbeing.<sup>24</sup> This neighborhood framework concretizes the role of moderators as essentially the “neighborhood watch” on the Twitch. Moderators are tasked with making the vast network of independent channels on the platform places where viewers feel both welcomed and involved in a community. In the Creator Camp lesson “Moderation on Twitch,” the Partners in the instructional video stress the importance of the role these enforcers play in a channel's ability to foster a healthy community. Partner Sacriel advises, “Moderators are one of the best ways to reinforce the values you want to uphold, and they really help shape your channel.”<sup>25</sup> The lesson further expands, quoting Partner Ezekiel\_III, “Moderators are the lifeblood of Twitch.” As a platform, the voluntary labor of thousands of moderators on Twitch is how communities are kept “safe during each stream” and it ensures “Twitch remains an excellent place for streamers and their communities to grow.”<sup>26</sup> Within the network of content creators on Twitch, the moderators act as enforcers and protectors of the neighborhood of content creators from malicious actors outside of the platform and, sometimes, from within the Twitch streaming community itself.

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<sup>23</sup> “Team Page – noir,” Twitch, [https://www.twitch.tv/team/noir](https://www.twitch.tv/team/noir;);  
“Team Page - Radically Kind Gamers,” Twitch, <https://www.twitch.tv/team/RadicallyKindGamers>;  
“Team Page – RainbowArcade,” Twitch, <https://www.twitch.tv/rainbowarcade>;  
“Team Page - Sidequest,” Twitch, <https://www.twitch.tv/team/sidequest>.

<sup>24</sup> Rosenblum, *Good Neighbors*, 134.

<sup>25</sup> “Moderation on Twitch,” Twitch Creator Camp, <https://www.twitch.tv/creatorcamp/en/paths/going-live/moderation-and-safety/>.

<sup>26</sup> “Moderation on Twitch,” Twitch Creator Camp.

This form of community policing is notable as a way digital platforms mirror flows of power akin to what is witnessed within the analog world. This form of community policing serves two purposes in the analog world: first, surveilling communities via community members allows the state to hide their monitoring presences more easily than if state forces, such as police, were used. Thus, it obscures the threat of applying violence to the population being monitored.<sup>27</sup> Second, it places the responsibility of community welfare on the community itself, asking members to act as “eyes and ears” of law enforcement to “exercise some degree of social control in the environments where they live.”<sup>28</sup> This promotion of community surveillance in the analog world has resulted in xenophobia, racism, and other forms of social bias influencing the public opinion of what qualifies as a “threat.”<sup>29</sup> In translating this problematic method of community management to the digital platform of Twitch, these underlying issues illuminate a core issue in digital platform management. Twitch offers limited moderation tools for protection but places the burden of labor in managing social behavior on the platform users themselves by relying on a neighborhood watch system. In their analysis of the ethics regarding harassment and prevention through digital infrastructure, Brown and Hennis acknowledge, “By pushing this responsibility to users, the rhetoric of libertarianism has simultaneously empowered abusers and asked victims to fix the problems themselves.”<sup>30</sup> Twitch fails to infrastructurally protect content creators and instead relies on moderators as the first line of defense on the platform.

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<sup>27</sup> Peter K. Manning and Mahendra P. Singh, “Violence and Hyperviolence: The Rhetoric and Practice of Community Policing,” *Sociological Spectrum* 17, no. 3 (1997): 339-361, 350.

<sup>28</sup> James Garofalo and Maureen McLeod, “The Structure and Operations of Neighborhood Watch Programs in the United States,” *Crime & Delinquency* 35, no. 3 (1989): 326-344, 327.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara A. Biesecker, “No Time for Mourning: The Rhetorical Production of the Melancholic Citizen-Subject in the War on Terror,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 40, no. 1 (2007): 147-69; Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> James J. Brown Jr. and Gregory Hennis, “Hateware and the Outsourcing of Responsibility,” in *Digital Ethics: Rhetoric and Responsibility in Online Aggression*, ed. Jessica Reyman and Erika M. Sparby (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 18.

Twitch's training for moderators is non-existent, as moderators can be appointed by any streamer and the Creator Camp offers no tools to orient a new moderator to the privileges granted them on the platform. It then becomes the duty of the users appointed moderators to develop their own tools to protect their community, and when something goes wrong on a platform-wide level, Twitch can place the burden back on the users themselves. The vision of Twitch as a neighborhood filled with homes for various communities is not only idealistic, but also driven with an undercurrent of exploitation embedded into the infrastructure itself. Social expectations are one major facet in understanding the qualities of relations within the media ecology of digital live streaming. How the users conduct themselves is important, as are the avenues by which they enact (or fail to enact) these community values. To that end, the following section interrogates how Twitch's interface and infrastructure reify the push for content creators to develop *places* for their communities, but also how Twitch commodifies this digital user labor from both creators and viewers.

### **Infrastructure Shaped Towards Play & Profit: Twitch.tv**

Twitch presents itself as a network of distinct *places* content creators construct for viewers on the platform. Within this neighborhood of communities, Twitch uses their onboarding materials and encouraged best practices to manufacture these senses of place. The *places* that are built by content creators through Twitch are deeply embedded within the specific affordances of the platform itself. This analysis of Twitch's infrastructure specifically focuses on how the platform creates bounded space through its infrastructural design. Digital users, both content creators and community members, use these affordances to create a place for themselves within these connected communities. Drawn through the lens of my own experience as a content creator, community member, and moderator within the RKG Stream team and on Twitch, I

identify how the interface of Twitch reinforces concepts of playbour and platform capitalism that shape digital user practices that perpetuate engagement on the platform.

When anyone pulls up Twitch.tv on their web browser, they are immediately directed to the Twitch homepage. The home page is broken into four distinct zones that are meant to guide viewers towards new content to watch. Sano-Franchini's research on Facebook has established the fundamental importance of a platform's interface design facilitating how users experience the platform.<sup>31</sup> Twitch's homepage follows the conventions Sano-Franchini identified as core to a digital platform driven by social playbour: promoting infinite content to captivate someone for an infinite amount of time.<sup>32</sup> Each of these sections on the home page is tailored to the information that Twitch knows about you as a user based on their algorithm's understanding of your user data. If you are not logged in, the sections and recommendations follow an algorithm related to popular content and IP address region. For my page, my left side of the screen features a "For You" section broken into two lists. The first is "Followed Channels" where Twitch lists the streamers I chose to follow on the account. Former members of RKG, other streamer scholars, and other content creators I enjoy watching on the platform already are listed according to their overall follower count and current live viewer count. This serves as a quick reference for users to immediately track if their preferred content creators are currently live on the platform. The second is an algorithmically determined "Recommended For You" list. Based on the content I watched previously, Twitch recommends new users for me to watch on the platform. These lists will use commonalities between identity markers of streamers (gender, race, language, etc.),

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<sup>31</sup> Jennifer Sano-Franchini, "Designing Outrage, Programming Discord: A Critical Interface Analysis of Facebook as Campaign Technology," *Technical Communication* 65, no. 4 (2018): 387–410.

<sup>32</sup> Sano-Franchini, 401.

games played, and affiliations, like sharing a Stream team, as ways Twitch makes their recommendations to a viewer.

As both a viewer and a content creator, the importance of these lists is related to something referred to as “discoverability” within the digital platform industry.<sup>33</sup> From a viewer’s perspective, you want Twitch to make it easy to find your favorite content and to make informed suggestions for their recommendations, so your time is not wasted. As a creator, these lists further gamify the hierarchy of the platform. Because a content creator is ranked according to the size of their following and their current live viewer count, this makes discoverability competitive amongst the creators on the platform. This type of competitive market, even for the content creators bringing profit to the platform, fuels the type of platform capitalism Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter identify in the digital entertainment industry.<sup>34</sup> Twitch encourages the viewer to consume more content by streamlining discoverability, and forces the content creator to produce more product for consumption without compensation. Gamifying through rankings and suggestions promotes this exploited labor from both branches of Twitch’s digital users under the guise of playbour. Playbour, a term coined by Julian Kücklich, refers to labor that fails to fit traditional categories of work or play.<sup>35</sup> Twitch content creators are playbourers in the most literal sense, where they broadcast recreational and/or social activities to entertain the viewers on the platform. For many digital platforms, this hybridized labor from users is essential to perpetuate content on the platform and maintain user engagement. Twitch’s efforts to gamify their interface to promote playbour from their digital users is a recurring theme throughout this analysis of Twitch’s interface.

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<sup>33</sup> Fenwick McKelvey and Robert Hunt, “Discoverability: Toward a Definition of Content Discovery Through Platforms,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>34</sup> Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Kücklich, “Precarious Playbour,” 2005.

Another section on Twitch's home page that relies on competitive playbour and hierarchy is the large "Front Page Carousel" placed prominently in the center of the page. This carousel features seven to eight different channels and auto-plays as soon as the home page loads to capture viewer attention through audio and visual feedback. Because of its prominent spot, the content channels featured here receive thousands of concurrent viewers. Receiving a coveted slot on the "Front Page" is regarded as a major success and validation of your legitimacy as a content creator on Twitch. In recent years, Twitch has used this carousel as an incentive to recruit less popular users on the platform that represent specific identities or charities. For example, one of my RKG teammates, IslandStyle, is Samoan American. He was approached by Twitch and featured during Asian & Pacific Islander Month in 2021 on the front page several times, exposing him to thousands of new viewers.<sup>36</sup> His channel's follower count doubled thanks to his heightened discoverability, resulting in several paid sponsorships from other companies. IslandStyle's experience illustrates how discoverability on the Twitch platform directly impacts ways content creators are awarded with financial and social capital on the platform.

These discoverability tools on the front page illustrate the prominence Twitch places on their most valued commodity: viewers. Viewership numbers are the primary metrics that determine a content creator's experience on the platform. In accounting for viewership, Twitch looks at the number of overall followers on a channel, the number of concurrent live viewers, and the overall number of hours viewers watch a channel. With these metrics, Twitch uses a gamified achievement style program to qualify content creators for their Affiliate or Partner programs on the platform. These two tiers are how content creators become eligible for advertising revenue from their channel, paid subscriptions to their channel, as well as other

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<sup>36</sup> "IslandStyle's Channel Page," Twitch, <https://www.twitch.tv/islandstyle/>.

sponsorship opportunities vetted through Twitch. These achievements “unlock” for a content creator as they meet certain milestones, following traditional roleplaying game formats used in video games. For example, to achieve the status of “Affiliate,” which I have done on my own channel, a content creator must complete the following: Reach 50 total followers, stream for a total of 8 hours, stream on 7 different days, and average 3 concurrent viewers. These achievements are noted with small badges on a checklist and upon completion. To achieve the status of “Partner” is significantly more difficult as the requirements are measured in 30-day increments: Stream for 25 hours, stream on 12 different days (so approximately three times a week in a month), and average 75 concurrent viewers. By turning these achievements into a quest-style list, Twitch places the burden of qualification for either Affiliate or Partner on the content creators themselves. This system gamifies the promotional structure, motivating smaller streamers to “beat” the requirements to qualify for higher standing on the platform.

In addition to these more intensive achievements, successfully completing these tasks on the platform only grants a content creator the *opportunity* to apply for the Partner program. All Partner applications are reviewed by Twitch internally, and less than 0.4% of all streamers on the Twitch platform have achieved Partner status through this application process.<sup>37</sup> Partner status is desirable due to the immense boost in discoverability and eligibility for exclusive sponsorship deals afforded to Partners on the platform. While Twitch does not publish the racial or ethnic demographics of the Partner tier, the top ten most popular Partnered streamers based on follower base are: Ninja (white cis-male), Auronplay (white cis-male), Rubius (white cis-male), Tfue (white cis-male), Shroud (white cis-male), xQc (white cis-male), theGrefg (white cis-male), ibai

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<sup>37</sup> Approximately 58,000 streamers as of 2022.

(white cis-male), Juansguarnizo (white cis-male), and Pokimane (biracial cis-woman).<sup>38</sup> As a snapshot, this list illustrates the dominant presence of white cis-men on the platform at the highest level. Furthermore, considering Twitch uses algorithms to suggest new content based on what is already popular on the platform, the prominence of white cisgendered men content creators further reinforce this dominance on the platform because the algorithm-driven discoverability infrastructure fails to account for possible racialized and gender disparities on the platform.

Direct channel monetization is an essential differentiator between status-less content creators, Affiliates, and Partners on the platform. Status-less content creators on Twitch are limited to bare platform infrastructure while producing content on the platform, hosting a live stream, and customizing their channel page. They cannot create customized designs or content for their chat communities, nor do they have access to any revenue through viewer subscriptions or advertising. Considering that there are more than 8 million active streamers on Twitch, and only 15% are Affiliates and 0.4% are Partners, which means most content creators on the platform are producing profit for Twitch with no fiscal benefit to themselves from the platform. Twitch encourages content creators to invite viewers into their creative play sessions, and then Twitch profits from the captive audience through advertising revenue. This vast disparity between status-less content creators on Twitch and those under Affiliate or Partner status further reifies how Twitch profits from a robust market of playbourers.

The front page is geared towards capturing a user's attention quickly, while providing filters and algorithmically curated content to attract and then sustain that attention. This is the base layer of the infrastructure on Twitch: to see and be seen. However, across the entirety of the

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<sup>38</sup> "Twitch Streamers with the Most Followers," TwitchTracker, February 10, 2023, <https://twitchtracker.com/channels/most-followers>.

platform, not just the front page, Twitch is designed to direct users to consume live stream content as quickly as possible. The drive to have someone “always watching” is propelled by Twitch’s aggressive relationship with advertisements during live streams. On every Twitch stream, no matter the size of the viewership or content creator following, advertisements play at intermittent time slots. These advertisements are chosen by Twitch and cannot be skipped (unlike advertisements on YouTube for example) to capitalize on these captive viewer audiences. In addition, once a streamer reaches Affiliate or Partner status on Twitch, they are eligible to receive advertising revenue from their time live streaming on the platform. These users can also elect to run 1-minute ad rolls to increase their (and Twitch’s) profits on the channel. The front page is geared towards capturing a user’s attention quickly, while providing filters and algorithmically curated content to attract and then sustain that attention.

Once a user determines which live stream they want to watch, clicking the video feed redirects them to the designated “channel” page. The channel page is where streamers host their live video feeds on a recurring basis. Channels feature a suite of customizable add-ons and subsections that streamers can brand based on their personal style and theming to tailor the channel from a blank web page to a distinct, locatable destination on the platform. The creative and customizable features are the first places content creators tailor to create their “home” within the neighborhood of Twitch. Colors, aesthetics, language, and iconography are deployed to direct viewer’s attention and set the tone for the channel community. For example, on my channel, my banners are all chalkboard style given the emphasis on educational content. I include specific information about the charities the stream currently supports and designed my page to be fully compatible for individuals who use screen readers to access technology. These types of choices related to aesthetics, accessibility, and the emphasis on the charitable/education

content on the channel are meant to keep viewers informed and engaged with the channel in real-time. Amid these design choices, a video feed takes up a large central portion of the screen for the live stream video broadcast itself. The prominence of the video on a channel page illustrates why content creators also brand their face camera home studio set ups in alignment with their digital page designs. The synergy between the two produces a coherent destination for viewers to engage with and return to in the future.

To the right of the video feed is the Stream Chat bar, the real time chat feed streamers use to engage with viewers. Viewers can write in the chat, use emotes, donate money directly to the streamer in the form of a digital currency called “bits”, or make requests through pre-programmed commands to interact with the stream. Typical streamer convention on the platform expects that a content creator will talk directly to the chat, responding to the typed missives in a form of conversation. Viewers also reply and continue conversations amongst themselves in the chat through a direct reply feature which allows viewers to create mini-threads to organize conversations happening simultaneously. By chatting publicly, the viewers are contributing to the content itself. I can attest from personal experience that having people interacting with you and each other in chat makes it easier to produce content over time. It turns a stream into a conversation with a community, albeit with serious differences in power and influence in the content. The Twitch platform has infrastructure to further incentivize this type of engagement playbour from the viewers. The Stream Chat panel offers a “Channel Points” rewards feature – for every 5 minutes of live watch time, a viewer receives 10 of these points. They can then be redeemed to interact with the stream chat or streamer by modifying emotes, playing sounds, or request the streamer perform an action live on stream like sit-ups, character impressions, drop all their weapons in a game, etc. Content creators control what actions are available for request, so

these are tailored to the streamer's content or preferences. This is another place where the identity of the channel and the community is further reified by tailoring these options to fit the theme of the channel or creator's content.

Directly below the video feed on the channel page, viewers can choose to follow a channel, turn on notifications for the channel's activity, and subscribe to the channel directly. Subscription is a privilege only available to Twitch streamers with Affiliate or Partner status because Affiliates and Partners split the proceeds of subscriptions with Twitch. Users who subscribe to a channel pay a base \$5 monthly fee for access to special chat emotes and a special badge signaling their patronage. Users can elect to pay more money to receive more emote privileges or otherwise support a specific content creator. While not required, the vast majority of Affiliate and Partner streamers create or commission artists to create customized badge icons for their channel to incentivize viewers to support their content directly. For example, on my own Twitch channel a new subscriber receives a black graduation cap next to their name. As they continue to subscribe, the hat changes colors from black to bronze to silver, to gold, to platinum at the one-year mark. These badges allow users to visually signify their commitment to a channel and/or a streaming community through continued contribution and support, another example of how the infrastructure of Twitch leverages gamification to derive more profit from the users.

Content creators and viewers are engaged within this playbour structure, but so too is another key voluntary role on the platform: moderators. All content creators have "moderator" status on their own channel, which they manage through the creator dashboard. This allows them to set privacy settings for the channel, ban users from their chat, censor words and phrases from their chat, report malicious content, etc. A content creator can grant access to these specific

moderator functions to other users on Twitch. These users are typically referred to as “mods” and in my experience as both a content creator and member of other streamer’s communities, mods are volunteers who have either established themselves as reliable members of a streamer’s community online or somehow share an offline relationship with the streamer.<sup>39</sup> A mod’s job is to watch live streams whenever possible and act as a level of security and back-end management for the content. Mods are asked to manage the community based on whatever criteria a content creator determines, so the content creator can focus on entertaining and engaging with their chat. They are also asked to enforce Twitch’s terms and conditions for the platform by reporting malicious users and removing violating content in chat. Depending on the frequency of streams and the size of both the moderation team and viewership of a specific content creator, this can be a tremendous amount of free labor on the part of a moderator. These users straddle a unique line within the playbour of Twitch’s platform because they are traditionally viewers who, through commitment to a community, become vested with the power of enforcing a content creator and the Twitch platform’s policies. With an understanding of Twitch as a neighborhood, the moderators fulfill the role of the neighborhood watch. They do not represent the platform directly, but their commitment to a specific community affords them a certain level of power on the platform through observation. The role of the moderator is an excellent example of how the media ecology around software, screens, user action, and responsibility is animated through infrastructural constraints.<sup>40</sup>

One last major infrastructural element that impacts all streamers on the platform is the “tags” function. Originally piloted as a concept to improve discoverability, “tags” have come to demarcate communities for particular identity positions on the platform. In the creator

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<sup>39</sup> “Moderation on Twitch,” Twitch Creator Camp.

<sup>40</sup> Brown Jr. and Hennis, “Hateware and the Outsourcing of Responsibility,” 2019.

dashboard, a streamer can choose from a list of predetermined tags related to gender, sexual orientation, race, language spoken on stream, nationality, ability, mental health, and more to identify themselves and their content on the platform. This function was initially introduced in 2018 on the platform as a form to boost discovery beyond the homepage infrastructure already described. As Twitch explains, their goal was “to help creators describe their content and to help viewers find streams they’re interested in.”<sup>41</sup> These tags are searchable terms on the platform once you have determined the type of live stream content you are interested in consuming. For example, if an individual was interested in watching a Black, English-speaking person play the video game *World of Warcraft*, they would first search for the game in the main search bar. Twitch directs the user to a page featuring all the Twitch content for *World of Warcraft*, including the channels currently live streaming. On this page, a “Search Tags” window appears, where a user could then search the terms “Black” and/or “English.” The feed for the live channels filters the content, bringing *World of Warcraft* streamers who have selected those tags as identifiers for their content to the top of the list.

The tags function facilitates both viewers and content creators finding specific channels on Twitch. This type of tagging system performs a similar function as a hashtag, allowing digital users to recognize and organize based on shared content affinities.<sup>42</sup> The ability to make an identity “locatable” has benefits in building community but as will be discussed later, also dangers. Regardless, this infrastructural feature is the first of many that has allowed coherent communities to coalesce on the platform. This infrastructural element becomes an integral part of the conversation regarding the precarity of discoverability on the platform. As Tessa and Brown

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<sup>41</sup> “Celebrate Yourself and Your Community with 350+ New Tags,” Twitch, May 21, 2021, <https://blog.twitch.tv/en/2021/05/21/celebrate-yourself-and-your-community-with-350-new-tags/>.

<sup>42</sup> Kuo, “Racial Justice Activist Hashtags: Counterpublics and Discourse Circulation.”

identify, “The key feature of precarity in digital spaces is the radical exposure to the arrival of others regardless of choice (a situation that is exposed but not created by digital networks), and this exposure is enabled by what we call “complicity interfaces,” the computation infrastructures that unavoidably open us to precarity but that also might be redesigned to reconfigure our relations to one another and to the systems themselves.”<sup>43</sup> The complicity interface here is the tags function, which inadvertently created a streamlined way for bad actors within the community of Twitch to locate and target creators from historically marginalized positions more easily. Like when a popular hashtag gets “hijacked” by digital users to undermine the initial hashtag’s community’s message, the tags were hijacked by digital users seeking to harm these self-identified communities.<sup>44</sup> This phenomenon, called “hate raids,” took over much of the content creator discourse around the Twitch platform throughout late 2020 and most of 2021. Within this playbour-driven, neighborhood vision of Twitch, certain infrastructural oversights related to the tags and other community building features opened content creator’s *places* for literal invasions. If digital place-making requires curation and care, these hate raids signified a mode of targeting the vulnerabilities of a digital place through digital infrastructural affordances. The following section analyzes how the digital user practice of hate raids, a phenomenon that targeted Black and LGBTQ+ creators on Twitch, exploited the platform’s place-making infrastructure to further harassment. Additionally, it investigates how streamers and their communities resisted these hate raids through the innovation of digital practices and implementation of new infrastructures.

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<sup>43</sup> Becca Tarsa and James J. Brown Jr., “Complicit Interfaces,” in *Precarious Rhetorics* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2018), 258.

<sup>44</sup> Curd Knüpfer, Matthias Hoffmann, and Vadim Voskresenskii, “Hijacking MeToo: Transnational Dynamics and Networked Frame Contestation on the Far Right in the Case of the ‘120 Decibels’ Campaign,” *Information, Communication & Society* 25, no. 7 (2022): 1010–28.

## Unwelcome House Guests: Hate Raiding as Invasions of Place on Twitch

RekItRaven was live on Twitch one evening in July of 2021 while I was lingering in their chat. RekItRaven and I were both in the Radically Kind Gamers together and I frequented their streams as a viewer in my free time even after our time as teammates came to an end. As a teammate, RekItRaven taught me a lot about interacting with a chat while live streaming and other ways to use channel points to create positive engagement on a Twitch channel. Their career as a content creator started on the platform as a COVID-19 project, but they quickly found an audience and niche for growth. As a self-identified “Black Goth,” their following had grown considerably since we met in RKG, and RekItRaven was making a push for Partner eligibility at the time of this July stream. Their chat room, often a lively place, exploded with an abnormal flurry of activity that caught my eye. Several names unrecognizable to me as members of RekItRaven’s community all posted the same message: “Hey, are black Goths called Giggers?” It took RekItRaven a few moments to process what was happening, as hundreds more of these messages flooded the chat from users with nonsense names like x2kdiscoozzpf, weekeper2975jmkbo, and w0lf3ndr05zauva. After a few moments, RekItRaven manually wiped the chat and said, “Oh, y’all are real cute. Time out.” As a viewer, I had no idea what was going on, but RekItRaven took to Twitter after the stream to warn others about their experience.<sup>45</sup> The tweet was retweeted a handful of times but otherwise stayed within the discourse of a small network of streamers on Twitch.

However, a week later, it happened to RekItRaven *again*. I was not present in the chat at the time, but reporter Nathan Grayson described the event: “During an Aug. 6 broadcast, the Twitch streamer RekItRaven — who is Black and uses they/them pronouns — emotionally

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<sup>45</sup> RekItRaven. Twitter Post, July 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RekItRaven/status/1421496156056604678>.

described a series of traumatic, real-life experiences that informed who they are today. In response, viewers in chat told [them] that they were ‘loved.’ This made what happened next especially hurtful. About 20 minutes later, Raven’s chat was suddenly flooded by dozens of users spamming the same message, which read in part: ‘This channel now belongs to the KKK.’<sup>46</sup> In another video that RekItRaven posted to their Twitter account after the event, the chat log was recorded from this moment on their stream. With names like “ravens\_baboon\_lips” and “ravencantbreatheofficer” there is no mistaking the malicious intent behind the accounts posting this message onto the channel.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, RekItRaven’s experiences on Twitch were not isolated incidents of targeted hate-based harassment. A new phenomenon, dubbed “hate raids,” were taking over the Twitch experiences of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ content creators. Hate raids utilized the raid function built into Twitch, where a host streamer sends their viewers over to another streamer’s chat while they are live. This raid feature, coupled with the discoverability made possible through tags, produced an infrastructural vulnerability encouraging harassment on Twitch by exploiting these interfaces.<sup>48</sup> By searching for users under specific tags, malicious streamers could identify a target and then raid them with hateful messages and automated users. These malicious streamers developed two avenues to conduct a hate raid: spam a particular message in the chat by programming “dummy” bot accounts on Twitch for the purposes of raiding *or* follow botting, which automatically enrolls the bots as followers on the new account. Essentially, a computer program is written to register thousands of fake accounts to follow a content creator

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<sup>46</sup> Nathan Grayson, “Marginalized Streamers Beg Twitch to ‘Do Better’ in Wake of Hate Raids, Poor Pay,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2021/08/11/twitch-do-better-hate-raids/>.

<sup>47</sup> RekItRaven. Twitter Post, August 7, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RekItRaven/status/1423828534133407747>.

<sup>48</sup> Tarsa and Brown Jr., “Complicit Interfaces,” 2018.

en-masse simultaneously. Because streamers typically program an alert that notifies the stream of a new follower, usually a cause for celebration, receiving thousands of these notifications creates auditory chaos on the stream and threatens to crash the streaming software as it is overwhelmed by thousands of inputs. Streamers caught off guard by a follow bot raid are forced into the tough position of either abruptly ending the stream (which has negative consequences for their performance metrics) or enduring long minutes of cacophonous notification alerts in the hopes the audience sticks with them. Aside from the emotional havoc this type of bot raid can cause a streamer, both options are likely to have extremely negative impacts on viewership numbers.

When hate raiding as a practice began on the platform of Twitch is hard to determine, although Internet scholars will point towards the consistent presence of toxic trolling and harassment practices across a variety of technocultures. The most famous of these was the #GamerGate campaign in 2014, where users targeted various women within the games industry (developers, journalists, scholars, and otherwise public figures) with organized hate campaigns threatening rape, death, and other terrible threats on a variety of platforms.<sup>49</sup> However, Phillips notes that #GamerGate was borne from other problematic technocultures on video game culture adjacent sites like Penny Arcade and reddit.<sup>50</sup> This legacy of toxic technocultures in gaming related spaces re-emerged on Twitch with newfound vigor shortly after Twitch implemented 350+ new terms into their tags system on the platform. This infrastructural development was the result of a long-term campaign from transgendered content creators on the platform who had

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<sup>49</sup> Adrienne Massanari, “#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit’s Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 3 (2017): 329–46; Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015); Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*, 2020.

voiced concerns that “ally” should not be included within the description of the “LGBTQIA+” tag, and that using the umbrella term for the entire LGTBQ+ community did not effectively signal if a stream was safe from transphobia for viewers as opposed to a specific “transgender” tag. In Twitch’s announcement of the new system, Twitch specifically addressed this organized community, “We’d like to thank our trans community for originally requesting the “transgender” tag, and for their passion and persistence in pursuit of that request. This has been one of the most popular requests we’ve heard, and the simple truth is that we should have done this sooner.”<sup>51</sup> Amid this announcement from Twitch was the foreshadowing of the hate raiding phenomena to come. At the end of their official blog post, Twitch included a section of the post that explained their primary concern with this new system:

Keeping your stream safe: Our hope is that these new tags help every community, but especially those that are underrepresented, grow and thrive. As with any means of discovery, there are bad actors who may use the ability to find streams for malicious purposes. Users that utilize these tags as a means to harass those displaying the tags will be subject to enforcement of our Hateful Conduct and Harassment Policy. In order to help protect against malicious behavior, we recommend creators familiarize themselves with the available Moderation Tools, utilize moderators on their channels, and please report anyone who violates our Community Guidelines.<sup>52</sup>

At the time of the post, the moderation tools available to streamers mostly consisted of several preset functions that a streamer could program before a live stream to help censor and manage a chat. These “AutoMod” rulesets offer pre-scripted filtering of different types of language under four different categories: hostility, discrimination and slurs, sexual content, and profanity. The ruleset uses machine learning to “detect potentially inappropriate or harmful messages based on the level you select” and then they are available for mods to review within the dashboard.<sup>53</sup> The default settings feature almost no filters, and there’s no list of what types of language are within

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<sup>51</sup> “Celebrate Yourself and Your Community with 350+ New Tags,” Twitch, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> “Celebrate Yourself and Your Community with 350+ New Tags,” Twitch.

<sup>53</sup> “AutoMod Controls,” Twitch, <https://dashboard.twitch.tv/u/docbrooke/settings/moderation>.

the scope of “no filtering”, “less filters”, “some filtering”, “more filtering”, and “maximum filtering.” Content creators are permitted to manage their own list of blocked terms and phrases from the chat to add as a supplement to whatever their AutoMod covers. Content creators and moderators are also able to ban users from the chat and report them for malicious action as well. Again however, the burden of protection is placed on the users themselves, with Twitch absolving themselves of any responsibility towards the harassers.

Twitch’s assertion that either the AutoMod rulesets or the labor of moderators would be sufficient to protect streamers from harassment on the platform as the result of embracing their identity through tags was refuted through the proliferation of these hate raids. The hate raiders utilized overwhelming numbers through bots, exploited loopholes in censorship rulesets, and their abuse of non-chat related functions like follower notifications demonstrated the platform’s infrastructural limitations to protect content creators. These hate raids weaponized the bodily intensities felt experiencing such overwhelming harassment, plunging content creators into an affective emotional barrage of fear, exhaustion, anger, sadness, and despair. CypherofTyr, a Twitch Partner and founder of the non-profit organization I Need Diverse Games, was a frequent target. She told the *Washington Post*, “I’ve only streamed twice in the last six days and have been hate raided three times....”<sup>54</sup> xSinSisterx was hate raided approximately 20 times over the month of August in 2021, and she explained how she intended to deal with the experiences, “I will be going back to clip every...single..moment I was raided/botted and I will send them to @Twitch because it’s ridiculous. Last night it got out of hand and I may or may not have told

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<sup>54</sup> Nathan Grayson, “Twitch Hate Raids Are More than Just a Twitch Problem, and They’re Only Getting Worse,” *Washington Post*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2021/08/25/twitch-hate-raids-streamers-discord-cybersecurity/>.

thus person to pull up to my home so that I could beat them to a bloody pulp...”<sup>55</sup> OoeyGooee, another Partner and full-time streamer recorded her experience in a hate raid where hundreds of accounts posted, “YOU LOOK LIKE A FEMALE GEORGE FLOYD OOK OKK [TriHard Emote].”<sup>56</sup> These comments compare OoeyGooee to a man murdered by police brutality and include the Twitch-unique TriHard emote, which features the Black streamer TriHex, and was weaponized by racists as early as 2016 on Twitch to target and mock Black content creators on the platform.<sup>57</sup> In response to this hate raid, OoeyGooee posted details about her experience in a tweet, “Live for a 24 Hr stream right now and this happens... First they follow bot me, then this... Guys, can we please stop the harassment of Black Streamers. People harass me because I'm female, they harass me because I'm black, they harass me as a part of the LGBTQ+ community..huh[.]”<sup>58</sup> OoeyGooee continued to keep record of each hate raid she experienced which included a new strategy for sabotaging the chat: bots flooding the chat with video clips featuring naked Black penises under the title “BBC ATTACK OOGA BOOGA” in an effort to get OoeyGooee banned for violating the Twitch terms and services agreement related to content nudity, thus ruining her ability to use the stream as a video on demand for her channel.<sup>59</sup>

Hate raiders took to the transplatform network of Twitch content creators to further circulate these attacks. Targeting other digital places dedicated to specific content creators allowed hate raiders to affectively influence their target by infiltrating their communities. OoeyGooee claimed that hate raiders found a way to hack into her Discord server and posted screenshots relaying the following conversation in her community channels:

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<sup>55</sup> TTV\_xSinSisterx. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, [https://twitter.com/TTV\\_xSinSisterx/status/1431724533577306112](https://twitter.com/TTV_xSinSisterx/status/1431724533577306112).

<sup>56</sup> “OoeyGooee's Channel Page,” Twitch, <https://www.twitch.tv/OoeyGooee>.

<sup>57</sup> Julia Alexander, “A Guide to Understanding Twitch Emotes,” *Polygon*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/5/14/17335670/twitch-emotes-meaning-list-kappa-monkas-omegalul-pepe-trihard>.

<sup>58</sup> OoeyGooee. Twitter Post, May 22, 2021, <https://twitter.com/OoeyGooee/status/1396088280030973953>.

<sup>59</sup> OoeyGooee. Twitter Post, May 22, 2021, <https://twitter.com/OoeyGooee/status/1396102359978168320/photo/1>.

“[Gogo Yubari]: curbstomp all you monkey mother fuckers  
 [a community member]: sorry everyone, toxxi got hacked  
 [Gogo Yubari]: you niggers arent even evolved enough to be considered human  
 [same community member]: by a bunch of no lives  
 [Gogo Yubari]: need to put your monkey asses on a boat and send you back  
                   to africa  
                   watch you starve to death  
                   or die of malaria and aids  
                   you filthy subhuman pieces of shit  
 [same community member]: No life  
 [Gogo Yubari]: cancer cunts”<sup>60</sup>

The screenshot makes apparent that the racist chat tactics were transitioning from Twitch chat channels to other spaces that fell under the purview of a *place* for OoeyGooee and her community members. How exactly the racist attacker located this Discord server is unclear, but the infiltration of the bounded space of a server should be regarded as an invasion of *place* in the context of contemporary transplatform networks. The hate raiders proved they were adept at traversing the transplatform networks a content creator might use to foster community. This ability to target specific platform destinations related to a content creator indicates the overlapping nature of how place-making operates in the digital. In this specific instance, the *place* in question was OoeyGooee’s dedicated Discord server for herself and her community. Other Black content creators, such as MDee14 confirmed the prolific nature of these hate raid campaigns across his own transplatform network: “In the last 16 days I've been hate raided, follow botted, banned over 400k accounts, my @discord hate raided threatened.”<sup>61</sup>

To fully understand the ramifications of what it means to hack into a content creator’s server, I should briefly explain how Discord functions as a platform. Discord is an application that allows an individual to host a server for their own communication purposes. The application sorts the server into channels that allow users to organize conversations topically and follow

<sup>60</sup> OoeyGooee. Twitter Post, May 22, 2021, <https://twitter.com/OoeyGooee/status/1396115048020418562>.

<sup>61</sup> MDee14. Twitter Post, September 1, 2021, <https://twitter.com/MDee14/status/1432950456192487426>.

specific threads of discourse. Access to a Discord server is determined through a temporary invitation link which can be shared directly by the original creator, thus maintaining some semblance of privacy, or a permanent access invitation can be published online for others to access essentially making it a public server. Within Discord's infrastructure, there are features that allow the creator to limit access for other users and many creators choose to implement a rules system, akin to a Terms and Conditions agreement but not legally binding, that a user must opt into to access the content within the server. For a person to "hack" a Discord server, two things can be implied: first, a relatively private server could be infiltrated by any number of malicious actors, who disingenuously engage the community on the platform. Second, a user who is already a member of a Discord community could have their user login credentials stolen by a malicious actor who then exploits this access to the server community.

These Discord servers play an essential role in cultivating content creator's Twitch channels as *places*. Think of the channel on Twitch as the living room lounge in a house, nestled in a neighborhood of the Twitch streaming community. Discord is the kitchen table or the living room couch; the place where community members deepen relationships with their cohabitants through sharing space and conversation. Hate raiders strategically targeted content creator's Twitch channels and then their Discords to disrupt the affective sense safety and security for the content creator and the cohabitants of these digital places they curate. Targeting these enclaves for historically marginalized content creators and their communities places the burden of protection on the content creators and the members of the enclave itself. Detune confirmed his own experience with multiple malicious hate raids in a short period of time;

"Another stream, another hate raid. Here's the thing, I'm numb to it. Ive been dealing with racial attacks since 6. It's become "normal" And that sucks –

But I will fight to the fucking BONE to protect my community. And I won't stop fighting until we make racists afraid again.”<sup>62</sup>

These types of targeted, transplatform attacks continued to proliferate and escalate across the Twitch community, growing in virulence throughout the spring and summer of 2021. As Salzano explains, “Despite the experience of affect as a bodily intensity, the circulation of affect ultimately points to cultural problematics. Affect orients people to certain ends and means.”<sup>63</sup> With the continued silence and inaction from Twitch Interactive regarding protections for the BIPOC and LGBTQ+ content creators targeted by the hate raids, the community oriented themselves towards an organized response against the hate raiders.

### ***Securing the House: How Twitch Users Protected Place Online***

Through Twitter, Discord, and other platforms, creators worked to combine knowledge and create resources for individual content creators to protect themselves. The continued lack of response from Twitch regarding hate raids led community organizers to develop new tools and ways of using Twitch’s existing infrastructural affordances to protect themselves and their communities. CommanderRoot, a Twitch Partner and programmer, created a free-to-use scripted program that would allow a streamer to input a set of parameters such as “Minutes between account creation and follow” or “Is a known bot” or “Banned from any chat” and remove qualifying followers from accessing their channel.<sup>64</sup> This type of scripted tool allowed streamers to recover more quickly from the targeted hate-raids that used follow botting as a tactical maneuver to overwhelm a channel. Other users developed program scripts to help individuals

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<sup>62</sup> xdetune. Twitter Post, August 18, 2021, <https://twitter.com/xdetune/status/1428038498196627458>.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew Salzano, “Lemons or Lemonade? Beyoncé, Killjoy Style, and Neoliberalism,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 43, no. 1 (2020): 45-66, 47.

<sup>64</sup> “Twitch Tools by @CommanderRoot,” Twitch Tools, <https://twitch-tools.rootonline.de/>.

ban accounts known for facilitating hate raids, “I am not a programmer... but I slapped together a quick script based on a list someone else made that will help you quickly ban most of the common Twitch hate raid bot accounts!”<sup>65</sup> These types of ad hoc scripts offered content creators a first line of defense in protecting their channel spaces on the platform. By removing the disingenuous accounts quickly and creating large ban lists of known bot accounts, content creators could mitigate the efficacy of the hate raids.

There was a concerted effort to make these types of ad hoc tools accessible. The greatest single aggregate resource for finding these solutions was the Hate Raid Response account on Twitter. The founder, JustMeEmilyP, is a Twitch streamer who dedicated her time to organize a coalition of 13 streamers, moderators, and viewers to administrate and organize a website featuring a variety of tools for streamers looking to protect themselves from hate raids. The contributors were all volunteers, and they committed themselves to educate, share, and create both “preventative and reactive measures to counter hate raids on Twitch—before, during & after they occur.”<sup>66</sup> One of the most popular solutions on the site, and one I developed for my own channel as a precautionary measure, was the “panic button.” Using the functionality of a common (and free to access) tool called a “stream deck” a content creator could program a series of actions that would execute simultaneously while they were live on their channel.<sup>67</sup> For example, I programmed my panic button to 1) erase my chat history, 2) automatically go into subscriber only chat mode and 3) disable visual and audio alerts on my broadcast by hiding my alerts. Instead of having to go into the Creator Portal and find each of these commands separately, I could program a single key stroke on my steam deck to execute these commands,

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<sup>65</sup> The\_real\_nagia. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, [https://twitter.com/the\\_real\\_nagia/status/1431494215381385217](https://twitter.com/the_real_nagia/status/1431494215381385217).

<sup>66</sup> “Hate Raid Response Tools,” Hate Raid Response Tools, <https://hateraidresponse.carrd.co>.

<sup>67</sup> “Hate Raid Response Tools,” Hate Raid Response Tools.

effectively clearing my chat of any profane or racist language and preventing hate raiders from spamming my alerts. However, these types of preventative actions only help streamers respond to a hate raid. Streamers and moderators still bore the burden of setting up these protective measures and executing them live while being harassed.

These types of ad hoc workarounds with Twitch's infrastructure demonstrated how users creatively negotiated the limitations and affordances of the structure on the platform. Moderators also organized on behalf of their streaming communities to push for Twitch to develop better preventative measures on the platform. For example, Lu Morrow is a Twitch moderator for KandidlyKayla, a BIPOC Twitch Partner. During her charity stream for Stand Up to Cancer on August 13, 2021, she was hate raided twice while featured on the Twitch front page. Morrow was "devastated" and as an IT professional, she started a petition on Change.org imploring Twitch to make infrastructural changes to protect the streamers, moderators, and viewers on the platform.<sup>68</sup> Morrow focused primarily on better security and authentication features for registering as a user on the platform, to stop bots, and the implementation of introducing "universal slurs" and customizable criteria for streamer moderation settings.<sup>69</sup> What is clarified in Morrow's petition, which garnered more than 18 thousand signatures, is the onus on Twitch to cultivate the practices they promote as being "good neighbors" on the platform. For all of their discursive work to frame Twitch as a neighborhood and friendly community, the platform was failing its residents through inadequate protection features.

On August 11, 2021, Twitch responded publicly through their Twitter account with the following:

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<sup>68</sup> "Twitch Do Better: Stop Hate Raids Against People of Color and Marginalized Creators," Change.org, <https://www.change.org/p/amazon-twitch-do-better-stop-hate-raids-against-people-of-color-and-marginalized-creators>.

<sup>69</sup> "Twitch Do Better: Stop Hate Raids Against People of Color and Marginalized Creators," Change.org.

“We’ve seen a lot of conversation about botting, hate raids, and other forms of harassment targeting marginalized creators. You’re asking us to do better, and we know we need to do more to address these issues. That includes an open and ongoing dialogue about creator safety.

Thank you to everyone who shared these difficult experiences. We were able to identify a vulnerability in our proactive filters, and have rolled out an update to close this gap and better detect hate speech in chat. We'll keep updating this to address emerging issues.

We're launching channel-level ban evasion detection and account verification improvements later this year. We're working hard to launch these tools as soon as possible, and we hope they will have a big impact. Check out more on our existing tools here: <https://safety.twitch.tv/s/article/Mana...><sup>70</sup>

For many within the content creator community, this felt like much too little, much too late.

Affiliate Megabyte Megan wrote, “That's not enough. It's talk and no action with them.”<sup>71</sup> The

ambiguous nature of the suggested timeline of “later this year” drew particular attention and

frustration.<sup>72</sup> One user’s emphatic reply illustrates many of the sentiments shared in response to

Twitch’s announcement: ““LATER THIS YEAR” ???? NO TWITCH WE AS THE VIEWERS

AND THE CONTENT CREATORS NEED SOMETHING RIGHT NOW???? this has been going

on for too long now literally its been YEARS since these types of raids have been happening

#TwitchDoBetter.”<sup>73</sup>

Initially, RekItRaven created #TwitchDoBetter to draw attention to their thoughts and experiences regarding the hate raids on Twitch. However, the hashtag gained momentum as part of the community push for Twitch to take substantive action against hate raids on their platform.

As the hashtag gained momentum, RekItRaven and Affiliate streamers ShineyPen and

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<sup>70</sup> Twitch. Twitter Post, August 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Twitch/status/1425550623215218689>.

<sup>71</sup> MegabyteMegan. Twitter Post, August 21, 2021, <https://twitter.com/MegabyteMegan/status/1429128000356982791>.

<sup>72</sup> RBLeMoynne. Twitter Post, August 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RBLeMoynne/status/1425567667155390466>; Sil\_WRA. Twitter Post, August 20, 2021, [https://twitter.com/Sil\\_WRA/status/1428623927526543364](https://twitter.com/Sil_WRA/status/1428623927526543364); Andthepoetwrote. Twitter Post, August 20, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Andthepoetwrote/status/1428825049574871044>; RealMistrfister. Twitter Post, September 9, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RealMistrfister/status/1435782255952244741>.

<sup>73</sup> Dracula\_23\_. Twitter Post, August 11, 2021, [https://twitter.com/dracula\\_23\\_/status/1425600397675311104](https://twitter.com/dracula_23_/status/1425600397675311104).

LuciaEverblack (both transgender content creators) organized a boycott utilizing a new unifying hashtag, #ADayOffTwitch. On August 20, 2021, RekItRaven first tweeted the following:

“We are continuing the fight.

Shout out to @LuciaEverblack and @ShineyPen for helping me with this!

#ADayOffTwitch  
September 1st, don't go live.”<sup>74</sup>

This tweet kicked off an awareness campaign across Twitter, spreading across the Twitch streaming community platform. It garnered thousands of retweets and quote tweets as Twitch viewers and Twitch streamers expressed their solidarity with the call to action. In the subsequent days after RekItRaven’s announcement, LuciaEverblack added her own contributions to the announcement:

“Racism has no place in gaming.  
Misogyny has no place in gaming.  
Ableism has no place in gaming.  
Transphobia has no place in gaming.  
Ageism has no place in gaming.

September 1st is just the start.

#ADayOffTwitch”<sup>75</sup>

LuciaEverblack maintained this “no place” messaging throughout the boycott. Despite the effort Black and LGBTQ+ creators underwent to construct *places* for themselves and their communities, Twitch was allowing malicious trespassers to wreak havoc. It was essential to redraw the boundaries of these spaces, discursively and through action to maintain them as *places*. Through Discord, content creators organized a concretized set of demands for Twitch

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<sup>74</sup> RekItRaven. Twitter Post, August 20, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RekItRaven/status/1428847935022841868>.

<sup>75</sup> LuciaEverblack. Twitter Post, August 23, 2021, <https://twitter.com/LuciaEverblack/status/1429598057394491392>.

Interactive.<sup>76</sup> Emerging from that collaboration, a graphic was developed for participants to distribute on their social media feeds that outlined the specific issues the boycott wanted Twitch to address on the platform. The graphic featured a top banner that read, “I am taking #ADayOffTwitch in solidarity with marginalized creators under attack by botting & hate-raids.”<sup>77</sup> Below that banner is the phrase, “We are asking Twitch to” followed by four boxes outlining the key demands:

- “Hold a round-table discussion with affected creators to assist with the creation & implementation of more proactive & comprehensive toolsets to combat abuse on their streaming platform.”
- “Create proactive projection to be implemented immediately, enabling creators to select account age of prospective chatters & allow or deny incoming raids.”
- “Remove the ability to attach more than three Twitch accounts to one email address. Currently hate-raiders can use one email account to register unlimited addresses.”
- “Provide transparency into the actions being taken to protect creators, the timeframe for implementing those tools, and the involvement of the Twitch Safety Advisory Council.”<sup>78</sup>

These demands circulated through tweets and retweets and news media outlets reporting on the boycott leading up to September 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>79</sup> Prominent content creators on Twitch joined the boycott

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<sup>76</sup> Vaspaan Dastoor, “ADayOffTwitch Trends as Streamers Boycott Over Hate Raids,” *The Gamer*, August 22, 2021, <https://www.thegamer.com/adayofftwitch-trend-streamers-boycott-hate-raids-twitch/>.

<sup>77</sup> ShineyPen. Twitter Post, August 21, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ShineyPen/status/1428897438908043268>; Andouilles. Twitter Post, August 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/andouilles/status/1432816234274377729>.

<sup>78</sup> TTV\_xSinSisterx. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, [https://twitter.com/TTV\\_xSinSisterx/status/1431724533577306112](https://twitter.com/TTV_xSinSisterx/status/1431724533577306112)

<sup>79</sup> Ana Diaz, “What Is ‘A Day Off Twitch’?,” *Polygon*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.polygon.com/22652063/a-day-off-twitch-streaming-platform-hate-raids-boycott>; Amanda Silberling, “Streamers Are Boycotting Twitch Today to Protest the Platform’s Lack of Action on ‘Hate Raids,’” *TechCrunch*, September 1, 2021, <https://techcrunch.com/2021/09/01/streamers-are-boycotting-twitch-today-to-protest-the-platforms-lack-of-action->

in solidarity, adding clout to the movement's claims. Twitch mainstays Kinda Funny, an entertainment studio of streamers and podcasters who host daily morning shows on Twitch that boast thousands of simultaneous viewers joined the effort, "Wednesday, September 1st, we're taking #ADayOffTwitch to protest the lack of action from Twitch to prevent hate raids towards marginalized creators on the platform."<sup>80</sup> Steven Spohn, senior director of the charity AbleGamers, Twitch Partner, and disability rights advocate, also spoke up in favor of the boycott and participated on his channel.<sup>81</sup> Amongst Partners, many took to Twitter to announce their intentions to join the boycott even if they had not been targeted by hate raids themselves. Partner Kim\_Justice wrote: "As it is, I don't stream on Wednesdays. But I'll certainly be helping to amplify people talking about this on the 1st. Hate raids are an awful experience. #ADayOffTwitch"<sup>82</sup> Partner JasonSulli, joined the boycott and amplified the written experiences of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ streamers impacted by hate raids to educate his viewers on what was occurring in the space:

"I will be participating in the #ADayOffTwitch on Sept 1. There are many ways you can help and make an impact.

I suggest reading the threads from @pleasantlytwstd @xdetune and @RekItRaven to decide how you will stand with us that day.

Fucking love you all

Limmy, another Partner streamer confirmed his participation in the boycott to his hundreds of thousands of followers as well.<sup>84</sup> Considering the stratified hierarchy of value within Twitch's technoculture, the endorsement from established channels and Partners gave the boycott necessary clout as legitimate.

Additionally, numerous smaller creators on the platform joined in as participants in the movement, even if they had not been personally impacted by hate raids.<sup>85</sup> KofDoubleK explained to his community on stream and on Twitter: "I mentioned this on stream last night but just to let everyone know that I will be taking part in A Day Off Twitch. So there will be no stream Wednesday next week."<sup>86</sup> MzGirly, an Affiliate streamer, joined the boycott in solidarity, "I will definitely be joining you all! This is not okay & should not be tolerated. I am so against any kind of racism or hate towards others! I'm so sorry for the people who have been dealing with this! #ADayOffTwitch #twitch"<sup>87</sup> AriCentauri had originally planned a month of special content on their channel starting in September of 2021, but then announced they would be boycotting along with the #ADayOffTwitch movement in solidarity.<sup>88</sup> The participation of streamers at all levels of Twitch's infrastructure demonstrated the ability for #ADayOffTwitch to permeate through the social strata that often keeps the Twitch streaming community divided. Boycott organizer ShineyPen specifically promoted awareness in how viewers could contribute to the boycott as well by refusing to watch anything on the Twitch platform:

"Remember folks, you don't have to be a streamer to participate in #ADayOffTwitch

As a viewer and a supporter you can participate by staying off the platform completely.

<sup>84</sup> DaftLimmy Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, <https://twitter.com/DaftLimmy/status/1431426283120971780>.

<sup>85</sup> OGNNot\_Killjoy. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, [https://twitter.com/OGNNot\\_Killjoy/status/143170783137222467](https://twitter.com/OGNNot_Killjoy/status/143170783137222467); SwiZzLE\_CS. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, [https://twitter.com/SwiZzLE\\_CS/status/1431665176726671362](https://twitter.com/SwiZzLE_CS/status/1431665176726671362); ReivilynTTV. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ReivilynTTV/status/1431707974012129287>.

<sup>86</sup> KOfDoubleK. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, <https://twitter.com/KOfDoubleK/status/1431543340202405888>.

<sup>87</sup> \_Mzgirly\_. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, [https://twitter.com/\\_Mzgirly\\_/status/1431560505823412228](https://twitter.com/_Mzgirly_/status/1431560505823412228).

<sup>88</sup> AriCentauri\_. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, [https://twitter.com/AriCentauri\\_/status/1431658828974542850](https://twitter.com/AriCentauri_/status/1431658828974542850).

If you can't participate, that's okay, you can still help by boosting and sharing”<sup>89</sup>

Beyond the diversity of Twitch social strata involved in the boycott, the movement involved the broader streaming community across various identity positions/lived experiences. Johanna Brewer, professor at Smith College and co-founder of the AnyKey organization that supports diversity, inclusion, and equity in gaming spaces, commented on the movement’s virality and intersectional visibility.<sup>90</sup> The powerful force of hate raids on the platform produced an exigence for a diverse coalition of content creators to organize for action.

The solidarity and virality of #ADayOffTwitch was met with resistance from within the content creator community. Affiliate streamer DragonBeaz explained, “Before I put my schedule out for next week I will be streaming on 1st September. I respect those who support the #ADayOffTwitch but for me it’s not in my nature to back down from the trolls or change what I am doing for them. I understand the movement is also to rattle Twitch...”<sup>91</sup> Partner JordanRasko worried that such a boycott was essentially letting the bad guys win:

“I'm not super down with #adayofftwitch.

As a trans streamer who tends to be near the top of the transgender tag page I get multiple hate raids and bots every time I go live and it seems that the intention of these actions is to drive marginalised creators off the platform.

I don't want to take action that sees me and others yielding the joyful and celebratory spaces we hold and protect.

I want marginalised and targeted people to take up more space during this time of protest.

I want to make twitch Agressicely [sic] gayer and weirder and more diverse.

If you're an ally and want to yield time and space then that makes sense.

Commit to hosting and raiding marginalised creators for the next month. Co stream with them, promote them, copy their ban lists or donate to them. Even invite to them take your channel over for a spell.

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<sup>89</sup> ShineyPen. Twitter Post, August 21, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ShineyPen/status/1428897438908043268>

<sup>90</sup> DeadRoxy. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, <https://twitter.com/deadroxy/status/1431599788944941056>.

<sup>91</sup> DragonBeaz. Twitter Post, August 28, 2021, <https://twitter.com/DragonBeaz/status/1431562326906482698>.

They want to drive us off. They want us silent. They want the platform for themselves; For their hatred, sneering and circlejerking.

Fuck em. I wanna be louder and have POC and queers to take up more territory and I want people who call themselves allies to help make it happen”<sup>92</sup>

Jordan’s comments highlight the difficulty for marginalized content creators and dealing with trolls. Trolling traditionally refers to individual or group deception regarded as part of an inflammatory practice on the internet. Infamous trolling hate campaigns like #GamerGate targeting individuals with memes, harassment, leaking personal information, and even swatting due to perceived injustices online.<sup>93</sup> However, as Phillips warns, the power dynamics between a troll and their target is asymmetrical; “They [trolls] get to choose the extent to which their statements match their personal beliefs... Targets of trolling, on the other hand, are expected to take trolls at their word, and are only trolled harder if they resist.”<sup>94</sup> The balance of power puts the target in a precarious situation, and in the context of hate raids, JordanRasko expresses that leaving the platform might be giving trolls the “win.” It also highlights the complexities of digital place in this type of online boycott. Does abstaining from one digital place, within a transplatform network of places, galvanize change? Or is it a concession to the very people trying to use these platforms to proliferate intolerant ideologies? There are unique affordances because these platform-based digital places exist within a transplatform network: a transplatform network diffuses attention more widely, making boycotts of one platform seem ineffectual. However, it also means content creators could successfully boycott a platform without fear of losing their community followings and/or fiscal livelihoods. It also means creators can clearly

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<sup>92</sup> JordanRasko. Twitter Post, August 30, 2021, <https://twitter.com/JordanRasko/status/1432149875727077380>.

<sup>93</sup> Massanari, “#Gamergate and The Fapping”; Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, “A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (2015): 208–20.

<sup>94</sup> Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*, 26.

articulate and publicize their reasons for participating in the boycott, as was demonstrated by RekItRaven and their collaborators. This means that despite refusing to engage with Twitch as a platform, they are not silenced from participating in the discourse.

Regardless of the dissidents within the content creator community, the boycott successfully launched on September 1<sup>st</sup>. On the day of the strike, Twitch's viewership recorded approximately 400,000 less viewers than average and recorded the second worst day of streaming of the month.<sup>95</sup> RekItRaven told the *Washington Post*, "Biggest takeaway: Don't count out us 'nobodies,'... We've made waves, and we will continue to do so. While people may try to take our achievement away from us, [#ADayOffTwitch] was successful."<sup>96</sup> In response to the boycott, Twitch did agree to meet with a roundtable discussion between Twitch staff and streamers regarding new anti-abuse tools that should come to Twitch. RekItRaven was included in that roundtable, as were other streamers including Partners like ChillboBagginz.<sup>97</sup> Approximately two weeks after the boycott, Twitch filed a lawsuit against two users on the platform that they identified as community members running automated hate raid campaigns. The two users, CruzzControl and CreatineOverdose were based in Europe (Netherlands and Austria respectively) and Twitch claims they were linked to more than 3,000 bot accounts involved in hate raids.<sup>98</sup> According to the lawsuit, Twitch explained:

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<sup>95</sup> Nathan Grayson, "#ADayOffTwitch Reduces Twitch Viewership by Hundreds of Thousands," *Washington Post*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2021/09/03/adayofftwitch-twitch-hate-raid-streamer-strike/>.

<sup>96</sup> Grayson, "#ADayOffTwitch Reduces Twitch Viewership by Hundreds of Thousands," 2021.

<sup>97</sup> ChillboBagginz. Twitter Post, September 1, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ChillboBagginz/status/1433105489982722051>.

<sup>98</sup> Andy Chalk, "Twitch Sues Hate Raiders," *PC Gamer*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.pcgamer.com/twitch-sues-hate-raiders/>; Oscar Gonzalez, "Twitch Files Lawsuit against Alleged 'Hate Raiders,'" *CNET*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.cnet.com/tech/gaming/twitch-files-lawsuit-against-alleged-hate-raiders/>; Taylor Hatmaker, "Twitch Sues Two Users for Harassing Streamers with Hate Raids," *TechCrunch*, September 13, 2021, <https://techcrunch.com/2021/09/13/twitch-hate-raids-lawsuits/>.

“While we have identified and banned thousands of accounts over the past weeks, these actors continue to work hard on creative ways to circumvent our improvements, and show no intention of stopping... We hope this Complaint will shed light on the identity of the individuals behind these attacks and the tools that they exploit, dissuade them from taking similar behaviors to other services, and help put an end to these vile attacks against members of our community.”<sup>99</sup>

The lawsuit points to the difficulty of tracking down online users who create accounts on platforms that do not require the collection of authenticated user data. As of February 2024, there has been no update to this lawsuit, with the identity of the users continuing to pose a problem.

Since the boycott in 2021, Twitch continued to work with these streamers in the creation of a new tool that launched in the fall of 2022: Shield Mode.<sup>100</sup> Inspired by the ad hoc tools developed by content creators like the “panic buttons” – Twitch developed customizable options to engage protections like a follower only chat, slow down effects, and increasing the level of moderation in a live chat with a single click. In addition, they added an ability to input a specific terms or phrase and then mass ban *all users* who recently used those words in chat. This alleviates much of the burden placed on streamers to filter through bot raids and cleanse their follower lists of malicious accounts. Also, Shield Mode offers a new mode for chat called, “no first time chatters” which prevents anyone from posting in a chat feed if they haven’t previously chatted in the channel. Both features greatly mitigate the efficacy of bot raids and offer ways to react as well as prevent hate raids.

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<sup>99</sup> Hatmaker, “Twitch Sues Two Users for Harassing Streamers with Hate Raids.”

<sup>100</sup> “Protect Your Channel with Shield Mode,” Twitch, [https://safety.twitch.tv/s/article/Protect-your-channel-with-Shield-Mode?language=en\\_US](https://safety.twitch.tv/s/article/Protect-your-channel-with-Shield-Mode?language=en_US).

## Conclusion

The phenomena of hate raids on Twitch serves as a demonstrative case study for how the concept of digital place-making highlights platform infrastructure, digital user practices, and digital user experiences within a transplatform media ecology. This chapter began with a breakdown of the rhetorical messaging and interface affordances that effectively assimilate content creators into the production of boundaried *place* on the Twitch platform. Content creators are encouraged to circulate positive affective forces to their community through the curation of welcoming, domestic spaces that are believably part of a rhetorical neighborhood on Twitch. As a platform, Twitch fuels this rhetorical construction of a “neighborhood” through their training materials and the infrastructural affordances of channel design and moderation. This continuance of understanding digital place-making as a practice where users perform labor to customize, modify, and circulate affective discourse through infrastructure further illustrates the way digitality shapes our understanding of the persuasive power of place. Furthermore, it illuminates how institutionalized powers can profit from this digital playbour from users.

However, these digital places exist within a complex media ecology, manifesting in a robust transplatform network that users leverage to support their curated places for their Twitch communities across the confines of a single infrastructural platform. Unfortunately, the precarity of digital infrastructure on Twitch and throughout the transplatform network poses a problem for digital users experiencing harassment. As the hate raids demonstrate, this interconnected media ecology poses hazards to specific publics on platforms due to infrastructural oversights from those in power over the infrastructure. The continuing hate raid incidents produced an affective alignment amongst impacted streamers, their communities, and their allies, resulting in a grassroots movement to leverage the available infrastructural affordances within this media

ecology into tools for protection. These targeted content creators collectivized through the transplatform network as seen in the #TwitchDoBetter movement and this community developed tools to protect their own places on the platform through collaboration and innovative infrastructure use, such as developing the “panic buttons.” Through this collective action, content creators and their communities influenced new changes to the Twitch platform itself, with the hopes that new infrastructure can prevent hate raid harassment on the platform.

This case study extends from the first in how we are developing an understanding of digital place-making. While it does not rely on a fully customizable game platform world (such as ACNH), the ability for digital users to adapt, modify, and personalize a platform’s infrastructure is essential to digital place-making. Moreover, digital place-making facilitates affective circulation and expression within a transplatform network. In the case of ACNH, this was done through the solidarity expressed by island visitors in the game platform and on Twitter. Users congregated to specific island *places* to share in grief, celebration, hope, and even fun. In the case of Twitch content creators, this was done through cultivating a sense of belonging for their communities through Twitch’s infrastructure, and then utilizing their transplatform network to collectivize and respond to the hate raids to protect themselves and their communities. The qualities of relations between digital user practices, platform infrastructure, and circulation through a transplatform network are all integral to digital place-making as a practice. The subsequent case study seeks to complicate our understanding of digital place-making by addressing an attempt at digital place-making from a corporate entity, Epic Games. In their pursuit to reconstruct a place bound in historical time, we learn more about digital user practices, transplatform networks, and the limitations of digital infrastructure.

## **Marching Through (White National) Time: The Commemoration of MLK in *Fortnite***

In the past two chapters, this dissertation addressed digital places ranging from tropical islands, to rhetorically constructed online neighborhoods, whilst interrogating the interfaces users wield to render these spaces legible as *place*. The case studies thus far illuminated fundamental aspects of place-making such as infrastructure, transplatform networks, and social relations between users, platforms, and places themselves. This chapter will incorporate a third element within this concept of digital place-making: time. Glimmers of temporality have emerged previously, but this chapter seeks to bring time to the fore of digital place-making. In the context of digitality, where fluidity and oscillation reign supreme, how do users relate to time through digital place-making? Similarly, can digital places be used to reconstruct time, and to what end? According to Yi-Fu Tuan, one can only understand the significance of a specific place through the process of time.<sup>1</sup> Even in the 1970s, Tuan expressed concern that societies would lose their temporally imitate knowledge of place due to the hyper mobility of peoples. Experiencing an event in “real time” impacts how those participating understand their relationship to both the spaces they inhabit and the other individuals cohabitating the space. Within rhetorical theory, time has been recentered as a focus for scholarship in recent years. Michael Houdek and Kendall Phillips explain, “Rhetorics of protest routinely invoke a sense of the now, a sense that the moment of address is particularly important in the broader scope of history.”<sup>2</sup> This investment in temporality has a continued throughline in rhetorical field work related to protests. For Endres and Senda-Cook, the sense of time is an essential reason why research related to protest events

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<sup>1</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 179–98.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Houdek and Kendall Phillips, “Rhetoric and the Temporal Turn: Race, Gender, Temporalities,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 43, no. 4 (2020): 369.

and social demonstrations requires a researcher to be present, or *in situ* for the work.<sup>3</sup>

Underlining the role of time within a digital experience expands and nuances our articulation of digital place-making's opportunities and constraints. At the base level, the amount of time a participant invests in actions and participation in a particular digital space renders it a *place*. This temporal investment leads individuals to take on ownership for platforms and spaces, as I have shown in the previous case studies like the islands in *Animal Crossing* or streaming communities on Twitch. On the next level, those who design the space (whether it be the platform owners or the participants themselves) use features such as day/night cycles, historically periodized clothing, architecture, biomes, and linguistics to demarcate a digital space as existing within a specific conceptual time. For example, in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* the game features a day/night cycle that mimics the player's chosen hemisphere and time zone. In-game characters react differently to players depending on the time of day or season. In another popular game franchise, *Assassin's Creed*, developers painstakingly recreate ancient and medieval cities with as much historical accuracy as possible including architecture, language, and fashion.<sup>4</sup> This form of evoking a time from the past is what Houdek and Phillips refer to as a "dominant temporal formation, one which draws from a deep history of racialized and gendered animosities, affects, and intensities."<sup>5</sup> This chapter is particularly concerned with the role of time in this second "dominant" sense, focusing on how a history of racialized animosity and those tied affects and intensities surface through these digital place-making practices on platforms. More specifically, I investigate how attempts to use digital place-making in the construction of a historicized event

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<sup>3</sup> Danielle Endres et al., "In Situ Rhetoric: Intersections Between Qualitative Inquiry, Fieldwork, and Rhetoric," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 6 (2016): 511–24.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Gault, "A Harvard Egyptologist Explains the Historical Accuracy of 'Assassin's Creed: Origins,'" *Vice*, February 21, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/59kwea/a-harvard-egyptologist-explain-the-historical-accuracy-of-assassins-creed-origins>.

<sup>5</sup> Houdek and Phillips, "Rhetoric and the Temporal Turn: Race, Gender, Temporalities," 373.

reveals embedded bigoted ideologies, as well as the limitations of digital place-making on platforms.

This relationship of time and place-making sits centrally within this chapter's case study: a special commemorative event held in the video game *Fortnite*. In August 2021, TIME announced that they would collaborate with the popular free-to-play video game *Fortnite* to create a "March Through Time Event." The event was meant to commemorate the life of Martin Luther King Jr. and the 1963 March on Washington D.C.<sup>6</sup> Within a week of its initial launch, *Fortnite* publisher Epic Games shut it down the event due to the pushback from activists, news media, social media users, and the gaming community on the platform. The widespread discourse surrounding the in-game experience critiqued the platform as a mismatch for the seriousness and gravity of the subject matter. Contextualizing this discourse with my own field notes from my in-game experience of the event, I analyze how Epic Games attempted to recreate a historical time through digital place-making and the hazards posed by inviting users to march through time. First, I contextualize the "March Through Time" event by detailing *Fortnite's* specific interfaces and infrastructures as a gaming platform. This is combined with an overview of the relevant social history of the platform's technoculture and a legacy of precursor events on the platform. Then, I analyze how these tools were deployed within the context of the "March Through Time" event to an overwhelmingly negative response within the game platform and the surrounding transplatform *Fortnite* community. The design and execution of this digital commemorative event offers a unique case study to further develop the implications of digital place-making as a relationship between digital platforms, place-making, users, and political culture.

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<sup>6</sup> Ethan Gach, "Fortnite Gets MLK Civil Rights Event, Epic Announces," *Kotaku*, August 26, 2021, <https://kotaku.com/fortnites-latest-crossover-is-martin-luther-king-1847563562>.

### ***Fortnite*: A Platform Embedded in Gaming Technoculture**

The gaming platform of *Fortnite* is divided into three discrete game modes, although all variants of *Fortnite* are built on the same game engine (meaning they share graphics, art assets, and overall game functionality). The original game mode, *Fortnite: Save the World* charges players for access to the mode and asks them to build fortress-like constructions to survive an overwhelming hoard of zombies. The second mode released, *Fortnite Battle Royale*, is free-to-play and the most popular variant of the game.<sup>7</sup> This mode features a player-versus-player design where 100 individual users work solo or in a team to eliminate all other opponents in the session. The last player(s) standing win a “Victory Royale” crown which then carries over to the next game they play.<sup>8</sup> The third mode, released in 2018, is *Fortnite Creative*. Typically referred to simply as *Creative*, this mode is a sandbox style experience where users are given direct control of the digital assets of the game engine. Users can create any item available on the platform of *Fortnite* and manipulate their positioning and functionality to customize battle arenas, racing courses, etc.<sup>9</sup> Users interested in more intensive coding can even utilize the Unreal Editor to directly modify the game’s code and create entirely new assets free of charge.<sup>10</sup> *Creative* users have designed analog world locations like a Dave & Busters arcade, revived defunct game titles from other platforms as playable experiences like *Flappy Bird* (known as *Droopy Floops* in *Fortnite*), and developed vibrant cities from fantastical worlds featured in movies and television. Epic Games hosts a robust forum site for these creators to share strategies, code, and creations

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<sup>7</sup> Free to play is a designation given to games that have no upfront fiscal cost to download or play from the user. These games produce profits through transactions related to purchasing in-game items, most commonly cosmetic items, as opposed to game sales in titles like *Animal Crossing* or the like.

<sup>8</sup> *Fortnite* (Epic Games, Inc., 2017)

<sup>9</sup> *Fortnite*, Epic Games, Inc.

<sup>10</sup> “Unreal Editor for Fortnite for Free,” Epic Games Store, March 22, 2023, <https://store.epicgames.com/en-US/p/fortnite--uefn>.

with each other.<sup>11</sup> Projects deemed particularly impressive by either the *Creative* community or Epic Games receive promotion and advertising in *Fortnite* to boost their visibility. Since September of 2020, *Fortnite* has recorded an average monthly active player base of more than 200 million players between these three modes.<sup>12</sup> The United States accounts for more than 21% of all players, with Europe and Canada the next closest regions, and more than 60% of *Fortnite* users are under the age of 24.<sup>13</sup> Epic Games does not publish other user data regarding gender, income, or race, so in describing the “target demographic” it is most fair to say that *Fortnite* is popular with a younger Western audience.

While the modes are distinctly separate, both *Battle Royale* and *Creative* are free-to-play and often engage in large scale “crossover” events to entice players to engage with different intellectual properties collaborating with Epic Games. For example, the licensed anime property *Dragon Ball Super* released a crossover event where *Fortnite* players could buy cosmetic avatar skins based on the show’s characters, interact with special show related items in the *Battle Royale* or *Creative* modes, and watch episodes of the anime in large theater-styled settings in *Creative* mode.<sup>14</sup> These types of events encourage players to engage with various modes of the platform they may not use as regularly. These events are promoted heavily by Epic Games on the platform itself, using notification features and dramatic loading screen art to inform players about events when they occur.

The crossover event infrastructure is a major part of the *Fortnite* platform and Epic Games leveraged these features for events unrelated to the standard gameplay of the platform

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<sup>11</sup> “Epic Developer Community Learning | Tutorials, Courses, Demos & More,” Epic Developer Community, <https://dev.epicgames.com/community/fortnite/learning>.

<sup>12</sup> “Fortnite Live Player Count and Statistics,” Active Player: The Game Statistics Authority, July 9, 2022, <https://activeplayer.io/fortnite/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Fortnite Live Player Count and Statistics.”

<sup>14</sup> “Fortnite x Dragon Ball Features Son Goku, Vegeta, and More,” Epic Games, August 16, 2022, <https://www.fortnite.com/news/goku-powers-up-fortnite-x-dragon-ball-your-power-is-unleashed>.

itself. In 2019, EDM producer DJ Marshmello hosted an in-game concert event that was approximately ten minutes long.<sup>15</sup> Epic Games heavily promoted this free experience and designed special cosmetic items for players to purchase in the virtual concert experience.<sup>16</sup> The success of this event led to other major musical artists hosting *Fortnite* concert events, including Travis Scott, Ariana Grande, and Kid Laroi. In response to the fiscal and popular success of these events, Epic Games developed a special map in the *Battle Royale* game mode called “Party Royale” to feature non-violent experiences.<sup>17</sup> These events are evocative of other digital platforms, like Meta, pushing an all-digital experiential universe (or “metaverse”) as an replacement for events typically enjoyed in community in the analog world like athletic games, musical performances, and travel.<sup>18</sup> Media companies like Facebook or Epic Games rely on the production and reproduction of their platform-related media to promote the experiences on their respective platforms.<sup>19</sup> Essentially, for *Fortnite* these types of events allow users to engage with these “spectacles” using game based infrastructures such as emoting, recording, and sharing screenshots across their transplatform networks to foster affective and intellectual attachment to the platform within those users. Epic Games desires this type of attachment to increase user engagement with the platform for fiscal and social capital gains.<sup>20</sup> The high number of monthly

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<sup>15</sup> Frances Perraudin, “Marshmello Makes History with First Ever Fortnite In-Game Concert,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/feb/03/marshmello-fortnite-in-game-concert-edm-producer>.

<sup>16</sup> Nick Statt, “Fortnite’s Marshmello Concert Was a Bizarre and Exciting Glimpse of the Future,” *The Verge*, February 2, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/2/18208223/fortnite-epic-games-marshmello-concert-exciting-bizarre-future-music>.

<sup>17</sup> Kim Lyons, “Fortnite to Host We the People Program Focused on Conversations about Race in America,” *The Verge*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/3/21312533/fortnite-epic-race-party-royale-jemele-hill-van-jones-killer-mike>.

<sup>18</sup> “Digital Connection in the Metaverse,” Meta, <https://about.meta.com/metaverse/>.

<sup>19</sup> Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, 189.

<sup>20</sup> Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*.

active users and their reported annual revenue in the billions of dollars indicates Epic Games' successful leveraging of these types of experiences into user attachment to the platform.<sup>21</sup>

With these non-competitive, creative, attachment bonding events and participation infrastructures established on *Fortnite*, Epic Games, increased their promotion of such events throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this existing infrastructure, Epic Games leveraged the platform in response to the wave of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. Collaborating with ØPUS UNITED, a marketing and advocacy collective focusing specifically on helping “white corporate America [...] to take a stand against the racial injustice and anti-Black prejudice built into the very foundation of America,” Epic Games announced they would host a special event in early July.<sup>22</sup> On July 4th, 2020, Epic Games staged a showing of *We The People*, a series of conversations to advance the dialogue around race in America with prominent BIPOC influencers in media, sports, business, music, and entertainment. Hosted by Van Jones, guests Elaine Welteroth, Jemele Hill, Killer Mike, and Lil Baby came together to speak on changing systemic racism issues in media, culture, and entertainment.<sup>23</sup> The video was approximately forty-seven minutes long, centering around Van Jones asking guests how they were feeling, responding, and thinking about the race-related discourses circulating in U.S. media in the wake of George Floyd's death.<sup>24</sup> The event was staged in Party Royale, at an alternate map location called the “Island's Big Screen.” Players could log in around the 45<sup>th</sup> minute of every hour to catch the conversation, which would re-air every other hour, for 24 hours, throughout July 4<sup>th</sup>.<sup>25</sup> The island was a large area surrounded by water with a massive

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<sup>21</sup> Mitchell Clark, “Fortnite Made More than \$9 Billion in Revenue in Its First Two Years,” *The Verge*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/5/3/22417447/fortnite-revenue-9-billion-epic-games-apple-antitrust-case>.

<sup>22</sup> “ØPUS United,” ØPUS United, <https://www.opusunited.com/#about-us>.

<sup>23</sup> “Watch We the People in Fortnite,” Epic Games, July 3, 2020, <https://www.fortnite.com/news/watch-we-the-people-in-fortnite>.

<sup>24</sup> ØPUS United Presents “We the People,” YouTube, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfYo6Ir-XgQ>.

<sup>25</sup> “Watch We the People in Fortnite,” Epic Games, 2020.

screen and speakers in the center. Users entering the experience spawned in front of this screen where a countdown labeled “Show Starts in X seconds” let users know when the showing would begin. The episode audio pumped through the speakers in-game, replicating the auditory feeling of an outdoor movie or show at a drive-in theater.

The auditory design for this specific *We the People* experience featured a distinct spatial element. Using sound design, Epic Games created a sense of presence and immediacy by changing the sonic experience of users based on their proximity to the speakers. As a player walked further from the outdoor screen and speakers, the sound naturally softened in volume, giving the effect of a spatial relationship to the source. Justin Eckstein’s studies on the rhetoricity of sound and sound design claim that if a sound serves to centralize our attention towards a specific focal or experiential point, these sound objects shape a listener’s understanding of both space and reason.<sup>26</sup> The spatial design of the sound incentivized players to stay within relative proximity to the screen if they wanted to hear the music and speakers featured in the showing. Thus, to watch and otherwise engage with the episode, users were corralled into a limited area of the large island. This forced proximity of all users within the event set the stage for rampant harassment from users throughout the episode.<sup>27</sup>

While weapons were disabled on the island, all users could move, jump, and emote within the realms of typical gameplay on *Fortnite*. As such, users quickly engaged with the event through a variety of in-game interactions outside the purview of Epic Games’ stated intentions for the event. Most prominently, users deployed an emote where the player launches a tomato through the air. If the tomato collides with an object, it lands on the surface with a large “splat”

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<sup>26</sup> Justin Eckstein, “Designing Soundscapes for Argumentation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 51, no. 3 (2018): 271–75.

<sup>27</sup> Griefer is a term used within various gaming communities to describe someone who destroys or sabotages another user’s in-game experience with little to no benefit to themselves.

sound and visual splash. In many viewings of the event, the screen was covered in tomato splatter, and games media and other digital users took notice. Games industry media critic Justin Carter discussed the chaotic behavior of the users on the island, tweeting, “At one point Killer Mike was talking with Jemele Hill. Meanwhile some players threw tomatoes at the screen. Someone was hitting everyone with a giant motorcycle[.]”<sup>28</sup> The lack of affective impact *We The People* had on the audience assembled was not lost on Carter, “If you wanna know how the Fortnite thing is going, I’m currently watching a music video showing police brutality and protests while other players kneel and someone just threw a tomato at me.”<sup>29</sup> The audience appeared invulnerable to the intensities *We The People* circulated as part of the episode. This apathy is perhaps unsurprising as Catherine Knight Steele and Jessica Lu contend the virality of Black pain has become a mainstay on digital media.<sup>30</sup> This response from Epic Games is indicative of a consistent issue posed to Black digital users: the burden of explanation for racism is still placed on Black folks for a hostile white audience. This juxtaposition is exemplified in the absurdity of the execution of the *We the People* event, where a guest like Elaine Welteroth could be explaining, “It’s been really heavy, it’s been really emotional, this is not new for Black people... it was so hard to get out of bed that morning...” while *Fortnite* players throw tomatoes at her image on the island screen.<sup>31</sup> These forms of harassment and trolling are certainly not unique or even unexpected in the digital gaming space. Gray observes that Black digital users navigate significant harassment in the gaming space due to the hypervisibility of Blackness in those spaces and the infrastructural oversights from many of the platforms.<sup>32</sup> The long-standing

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<sup>28</sup> GigawattConduit. Twitter Post, July 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/GigawattConduit/status/1279424384529285121>.

<sup>29</sup> GigawattConduit. Twitter Post, July 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/GigawattConduit/status/1279414695607316486>.

<sup>30</sup> Catherine Steele and Jessica Lu, “Defying Death: Black Joy as Resistance Online,” in *A Networked Self and Birth, Life, Death* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 143–59.

<sup>31</sup> ØPUS United Presents “*We the People*”; Epic Games, “Fortnite.”

<sup>32</sup> Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*, 78–82.

practices of racist, ethnocentric, and misogynistic harassment have a long and pervasive history within video game culture online.

The 2014 #Gamergate phenomenon was a watershed moment for understanding the depths of bigotry embedded within the technoculture of gaming online. While Amanda Phillips argues there were incidents of organized toxic gaming technocultures on platforms like reddit and 4chan prior to #GamerGate, it was this organized hate campaign that drew intense scholarly attention to this toxic technoculture.<sup>33</sup> For context, the inciting incident came after a video game developer named Zoë Quinn was falsely accused of using sexual relations to receive better reviews for their game *Depression Quest*, by their ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni.<sup>34</sup> Gjoni spread his defamation across various forums on the internet over several days, gaining traction as other popular male video game personalities picked up the story.<sup>35</sup> Within days, internet trolls launched a massive campaign to target Quinn with a torrent of verbal harassment including rape and death threats. Any women in the industry who spoke in support of Quinn quickly found themselves incorporated into the hate campaign, including other developers like Brianna Wu, media critics like Anita Sarkeesian, and even game studies scholars like Adrienne Shaw.<sup>36</sup> The continued organized harassment of women, femmes, and their allies in the gaming space related to Quinn lasted a full year. However, the vestiges of #GamerGate pervade the gaming spaces online, activating old communication channels whenever a new “target” presents itself through

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<sup>33</sup> Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*.

<sup>34</sup> “The Something Awful Forums - Leper’s Colony,” archive.ph, April 29, 2015, <https://archive.ph/J8tos>. Archive.ph is a webpage capture tool that allows researchers to see content that was posted on websites that are no longer actively hosted online.

<sup>35</sup> “Twitter / Totalbiscuit: What the Hell Just ...,” archive.ph, August 19, 2014, <https://archive.ph/okgdJ>.

<sup>36</sup> “The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need to Read,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergate-you-will-ever-need-to-read/?utm\\_term=.d5252ba37f92](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergate-you-will-ever-need-to-read/?utm_term=.d5252ba37f92); Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, “A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (2015): 208–20.

2016. These “targets” existed within communities considered historically marginalized within the gaming space, primarily targeting non-white or non-cisgendered men.<sup>37</sup>

While #GamerGate certainly drew more public attention to the harassment happening within digital gaming technoculture, Phillips explains that #GamerGate was only possible due to an extensive history of “gamer trouble” or the frictional relationships between entities within the “multifaceted condition” of video games that includes software, hardware, performance, and sociality.<sup>38</sup> The hypermasculine marketing of the computer and gaming industry in the 1980s and 1990s, combined with toxic and misogynistic work cultures present in the video game industry since its infancy, produced a technoculture primed for reactionary explosion whenever gender or equity conversations enter the discourse.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the racialization of games in both the virtual labor and within in-game representation of peoples and cultures, has further embedded problematic assumptions within the technoculture itself.<sup>40</sup> This matrix of ideological structures at work within digital games technoculture exists within both the social infrastructure as well as the platform infrastructure itself. Despite this very public history of harassment towards historically marginalized people in the gaming space, it appears Epic Games was ill-prepared for the toxic technoculture they wished to engage. In the previous example of the *We the People* event in Fortnite, Epic Games did not infrastructurally account for how digital user practices surrounding trolling, griefing, and other aspects of digital culture would impact their social issue awareness event.

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<sup>37</sup> Kishonna L. Gray, Bertan Buyukozturk, and Zachary G. Hill, “Blurring the Boundaries: Using Gamergate to Examine ‘Real’ and Symbolic Violence against Women in Contemporary Gaming Culture,” *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>38</sup> Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*, 10–12.

<sup>39</sup> Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*; Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Lisa Nakamura, “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009): 128–44; Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*.

Given the context of the broader issues within digital gaming technoculture and the digital user trolling within the *We the People* event, it was surprising that Epic Games sought to use the *Fortnite* platform again for the purposes of commemorating the 1963 March on Washington. In late August of 2021, Epic Games announced they were working in collaboration with TIME Studios to create a “new interactive experience” in *Fortnite*. Called “March Through Time” the announcement trailer centered TIME magazine photos from the Civil Rights movement in the early 1960s, set overtop the audio recording of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Scenery photos from the iconic 1963 March on Washington cut away, revealing a true to scale replica of the National Mall in *Fortnite* itself. Reconstructing the National Mall within *Fortnite* demonstrates the force of *place-as-rhetoric* behind the practice of digital place-making. Epic Games elected to celebrate the 1963 March on Washington by creating a digital *place* to echo the analog places’ affective intensity. For Epic Games to recreate historical time, they determined it was necessary to recreate historical place as well. The trailer cuts between historic photos and videos with other scenes rendered in the *Fortnite* game engine, including player avatars walking around museum-like experiences featuring the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Freedom Riders, and other Civil Rights history. The trailer ends with Dr. King’s statement, “I have a dream today” and a cut to a splash page that reads: “March Through Time/D.C. ‘63/Presented by TIME in Fortnite”.<sup>41</sup> In the official event press release, Epic Games stated that this event was intended to “celebrate the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Fortnite’s “March Through Time” Martin Luther King, Jr. Experience - Official Trailer*, YouTube, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Hq3xvxxwQIE>.

<sup>42</sup> Gach, “Fortnite Gets MLK Civil Rights Event, Epic Announces,” 2021.

Epic Games' use of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) as the focal point for their commemorative event presents several rhetorical conditions worthy of attention. First, the broader U.S. public memory surrounding MLK is complex and often framed for white audiences within a progressivist frame. Victoria Gallagher addresses how the creation of MLK Day as a federally recognized holiday in the United States positioned MLK's advocacy within a cultural memory that "relegates King to our past."<sup>43</sup> The U.S. public is encouraged to see his life as emblematic and apply his values, beliefs, and practices to contemporary issues, but his struggles are still definitively within the past.<sup>44</sup> However, the romanticized public memory of MLK is also leveraged in harmful post-racial progress narratives advocating King achieved "his dream."<sup>45</sup> In their desire to construct the D.C. '63 project as a space "out of time," the developers at Epic Games relied on the role of MLK as a guardian of the historical *past* of racial relations in the United States to contextualize their digital experience. Second, by rebranding the platform of *Fortnite* as space for an historicized experience of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, Epic Games was participating in a process of "new racism" by attempting to erase the toxic gamer technoculture present on the platform while simultaneously obfuscating the reality of the Civil Rights experience in the 1960s through a streamlined and sanitized portrayal.<sup>46</sup> As Beth Messner and Mark Vail witnessed in their analysis of cities responding to the process of renaming streets after Martin Luther King Jr., the hegemonic population of these spaces undergoing rebranding produce a rhetoric that further marginalizes Black American experiences through the collective

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<sup>43</sup> Victoria J. Gallagher, "Remembering Together: Rhetorical Integration and the Case of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial," *Southern Communication Journal* 60, no. 2 (1995): 109-119, 111.

<sup>44</sup> Gallagher, 111-12.

<sup>45</sup> Kevin Bruyneel, "The King's Body: The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the Politics of Collective Memory," *History and Memory* 26, no. 1 (2014): 75-108.

<sup>46</sup> Beth A. Messner and Mark T. Vail, "A 'City at War': Commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Communication Studies* 60, no. 1 (2009): 17-31, 18.

forgetting and then reconstitution of public memory.<sup>47</sup> Centralizing the D.C. '63 experience around MLK and his speech fails to properly reconstruct the in-time reality the activists faced on August 28, 1963. The men and woman who marched that day endured social stigma, violence, economic oppression, and countless other societally structured obstacles to their very presence on the National Mall.<sup>48</sup> The D.C. '63 event on *Fortnite* presented a march experience with no such adversity or perseverance for participants. This type of rhetorically constructed “memorial time” is articulated by Ersula Ore and Matthew Houdek as “white national time” wherein false progress narratives around racial relations are perpetuated through rhetorically relegating racism to the past.

The memorial experience of D.C. '63 incorporated three aspects: 1) a recreation of Washington, D.C. in 1963, specifically the United States National Mall and the Lincoln Memorial for the recreation of the 17 minute speech MLK delivered at the March on Washington, 2) an interactive “museum-inspired points of interest” which included curated displays and historical recreations of things like segregated bathrooms, and 3) co-operative mini game quests.<sup>49</sup> The event went live on August 26, 2021, but within a week of launch, Epic Games shut it down due to the pushback from activists, news media, social media users, and the gaming community on the platform. To study this “March Through Time” event, I used TAGS to identify tweets made after the Epic Games announcement until a week after Epic Games closed access to the event that utilized the #Fortnite and #MLK hashtags. I contextualize this digital user discourse with circulating critiques and commentary collected from news media press coverage around the event. These discourses are paired with my own experiences in the event

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<sup>47</sup> Messner and Vail, “A ‘City at War,’” 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Juanita Abernathy, John Lewis, and Julian Bond, *An Oral History of the March on Washington: A Smithsonian Collection*, interview by Michael A. Fletcher, July 2013.

<sup>49</sup> *Fortnite's “March Through Time” Martin Luther King, Jr. Experience*, YouTube, 2021.

before Epic Games shut down access. I was able to participate myself within the “March Through Time” experience on five separate occasions, taking notes and video capture of my time within the in-game event. Using these assembled texts, I analyze how a digital platform’s technoculture influences its political, economic, and ideological orientation within a media ecology. Epic Games’ ability to fully re-create the Washington Mall in Washington D.C. as a digital place demonstrates how the historical affectivities of analog place translate and emerge through a platform’s technoculture.

### **The Designed Experience of D.C. ’63.**

One of the essential infrastructural elements to discuss before we overview the operation and execution of the “March Through Time” event centers around the community of users engaged in creating spaces on the *Fortnite* platform. The *Creative* game mode is open access for all users on the platform and it allows users to produce any item that exists within the game. In this mode, a user has full license on their “Creative Island” which they can also make publicly available to other players in *Fortnite*.<sup>50</sup> Players can edit, copy, and manipulate props within the context of their designated island space. Similar to the affordances of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, these options for customization allow users to access galleries of fan-made and game developer-made content to reskin and visually adjust items in the game for more creative space curation. Players have created massive scale recreations of medieval castles, New York City blocks, and iconic movie scenes as part of a robust *Fortnite Creative* community that is operated on Epic Games’ own forums.

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<sup>50</sup> “What Is Creative Mode in Fortnite? How Does It Work? Games,” Epic Games, <https://www.epicgames.com/help/th/fortnite-c5719335176219/creative-c5719344003995/what-is-creative-mode-in-fortnite-how-does-it-work-a5720352367643>.

The unique element of *Fortnite*, compared to a game like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, is that creative mode participants are also given access to the base game engine if they choose. Whereas an ACNH player was limited to cosmetic changes on pre-existing items and innovative use of static furniture or flora in the game, an enterprising *Fortnite* user willing to learn the technical language related to operating the Unreal Engine program can literally create new digital assets in *Creative* mode.<sup>51</sup> This means that even if an item does not exist in *Fortnite*'s code, the Creative community on the platform has the resources to design and render new items for the platform. Epic Games even offers free downloads of the software and video tutorials so users can teach themselves how to operate the game engine.<sup>52</sup> It is this high level of design and customization that led Epic Games to task three popular Black community creators, Chasejackman, GQuano, and XWDFr with the job of designing D.C. '63 for the "March Through Time" event. This virtual experience in *Fortnite* was an extension of TIME's "The March," project launched at the DuSable Museum in Chicago. TIME stated they hoped the video game's wide platform would make the educational content accessible for a larger audience especially since schools and public museum were still inaccessible amid pandemic conditions.<sup>53</sup> Quoting the TIME executive producer on the project, Tomi Omololu-Lange, "The mission of this project is to introduce the legacy of Dr. King and other civil rights heroes to the next generation [...] We wanted to reach kids where they were and create inspirational content as interactive and engaging as what they have become accustomed to. With *Fortnite*'s

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<sup>51</sup> "Fortnite Creative - Getting Started," Epic Developer Community, <https://dev.epicgames.com/community/fortnite/getting-started/creative>.

<sup>52</sup> "Your First Hour in UEFN," Epic Developer Community, <https://dev.epicgames.com/community/learning/courses/Yl6/fortnite-your-first-hour-in-uefn>.

<sup>53</sup> "'March Through TIME' Brings 'I Have a Dream' to 'Fortnite'," *TIME*, August 26, 2021, <https://time.com/6092587/i-have-dream-speech-fortnite/>.

unprecedented scale and unparalleled immersive capabilities, we knew their platform would allow for the most significant impact.”<sup>54</sup>

Chasejackman, GQuandoe, and XWDFr were responsible for curating several distinct spaces within the overall D.C. '63 experience. First, they built a scale version of the space between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, a large screen was erected that played video footage of MLK delivering the “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. The audio of the speech played on repeat throughout the entire experience, differing from the spatial audio design Epic Games had used in the *We the People* event. For this event, the audio of MLK’s speech was played at the same volume throughout the entire National Mall landscape. Whereas a sound object, such as the speakers in the *We the People* event, directs attention, an all-encompassing, ever present sonic experience functions as more of a soundscape. Eckstein characterizes the influence of this type of sonic design as “immersive” and inescapable.<sup>55</sup> Because the speech audio played in an ever-present background soundscape, users could neither miss out nor escape the presentation throughout the event. Users were no longer bound by a need for proximity to experience the audio content of the experience. The sonic design of the D.C. '63 event also contributed to an understanding of being “in time.” Listening, according to Eckstein, indicates the passage of time throughout an experience.<sup>56</sup> The audio recording used in the event maintained the speech’s original recording quality: the crackling of auditory equipment customary of the 1960s, the crowd’s vocalizations and affirmations, and the crowd’s applause at key points. Thus, *Fortnite* users within the D.C. '63 experience were transported back to 1963 through the conveyance of the past with high audio

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<sup>54</sup> “‘March Through TIME’ Brings ‘I Have a Dream’ to ‘Fortnite’,” *TIME*, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Justin Eckstein, “Radiolab’s Sound Strategic Maneuvers,” *Argumentation* 31, no. 4 (2017): 663-680, 666-67.

<sup>56</sup> Eckstein, 667.

fidelity, while simultaneously moving through the passage of time within the experience as marked by the progression of the speech. These two experiences exist in parallel for the users until the speech concludes. As the auditory loop begins anew, the construction of the event existing “in time” is dispelled in lieu of users recognizing they are participating in a time experience rooted in repetition. This cyclical nature of a gaming experience, referred to as a “loop” demonstrates how the temporal historicity of the event was gamified for users. While the auditory design constructed a sense of being “in time” the infrastructural limitations of the platform eventually shatter the illusion.

In addition to the sonic design contributing to a temporal sense of place, the digital construction of the event must also be considered with full weight. Consider for a moment the rhetorical history of the National Mall within the United States’ conception of national identity. Rhetoricians spent decades reflecting on the situated rhetorical power of the one hundred and forty-six acres in the center of our nation’s capital.<sup>57</sup> As a site, it features infrastructures to commemorate the leaders, sacrifices and power that animate the public memory around United States history. It is the physical place where arguably the most important symbolic transition of centralized power in U.S. politics occurs: the inauguration of the U.S. President.<sup>58</sup> As Robert Aden explains it, “The sites signify to all who visit them that this nation is unique among the nations of the world, led by great persons who were inspired by noble ideas and a collective vision for a free and democratic society.”<sup>59</sup> These one hundred and forty-six acres exist within a

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<sup>57</sup> Scott A. Sandage, “A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939-1963,” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 135–67; Sara Hayden, “Family Metaphors and the Nation: Promoting a Politics of Care through the Million Mom March,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 3 (2003): 196–215; Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Allison M. Prasch, “Toward a Rhetorical Theory of Deixis,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 2 (2016): 166–93.

<sup>58</sup> Allison M. Prasch, “A Tale of Two Presidencies: Trump and Biden on the National Mall,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 107, no. 4 (2021): 472–79.

<sup>59</sup> Roger C. Aden, *US Public Memory, Rhetoric, and the National Mall* (Lanham, MD; Lexington Books, 2018), 2.

unique context of being forever bound by the historicity of the monuments that surround the land in the form of reflective Presidents, fallen veterans, and testaments to U.S. political advocacy across the years.

This enduring historical continuity in U.S. public memory emerges from what Kendall Phillips would describe as the effort to “contain” a memory as a preferred understanding of the past.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the layout of the National Mall, with its open green spaces, offer visitors the freedom to “willingly embrace the presence of those who wish to make their voices heard.”<sup>61</sup> Understanding this “felt presence” as an historical affectivity reinforcing a sentiment of value and reverence further contributes to the endurance of these monument spaces. Over more than a century of history, the National Mall has acted as the situated locale for protests, including the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s in part due to this affective intensity. While the March on Washington in 1963 was considered unprecedented at the time given the size of the crowd assembled, the National Mall has only grown in prominence as a site of protest within U.S. political history over the years. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the site hosted protests ranging from issues such as anti-Vietnam war sentiments, advocating for Women’s reproductive justice and labor rights, and LGBTQ+ civil rights. In more recent times, the site has persisted in its relevance as social movements such as the Women’s March or the March for Our Lives continue to demonstrate in the National Mall to align themselves with the gravitas imbued by the location.<sup>62</sup> This legacy of the National Mall as a site of protest continues in to shape narratives of social movements that harness the intensity of the space. Given its historic, and symbolic

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<sup>60</sup> Kendall Phillips, “The Failure of Memory: Reflections on Rhetoric and Public Remembrance,” *Western Journal of Communication* 74, no. 2 (2010): 218–20.

<sup>61</sup> Aden, *US Public Memory, Rhetoric, and the National Mall*, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Pamela Moss and Avril Maddrell, “Emergent and Divergent Spaces in the Women’s March: The Challenges of Intersectionality and Inclusion,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 5 (2017): 613–20; Emily Bent, “Unfiltered and Unapologetic: March for Our Lives and the Political Boundaries of Age,” *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 11, no. 2 (2019): 55-73.

prominence as a site for social movements using *place-in-protest*, the decision to recreate this space for users to engage with in a scale that emulates the analog space is important in understanding what D.C. '63 was attempting to accomplish as an event. The following section will recount, based on my direct experience participating in the event on *Fortnite*, a user experience of D.C. '63.

### ***Marching Through Time: Notes from the Digital Field***

When I turned on my PlayStation 5 and put on my headset, I was mostly unaware of what to expect from D.C. '63. While I had already seen initial reactions circulating on platforms like Twitter, I intentionally refrained from watching game play of the event until I could experience it myself in-game. After I loaded *Fortnite*, the event splash page made it easy to navigate to the experience. Once the experience begins, users are seen running into a frame that looks like a Time magazine cover with a picture of the National Mall (specifically facing the Lincoln Memorial). Once I crossed the threshold of the frame, I was transported into the D.C. '63 immersive experience.

I appeared at the bottom of the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and the audio recording of MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech started instantaneously. The audio quality of the speech was clear and featured omnipresent directional sound design. This means that for someone wearing headphones, like I was, the audio is filtered into the headphone speakers in such a way that there is no direction but rather the sound is coming from everywhere, thus inescapable. This complete immersion instills a historicized affect in the listener, I was literally surrounded by historical time through the cadence, delivery, and audio fidelity of MLK's address. As I ascended the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial, a smaller screen with video feed of MLK delivering his speech is placed in the approximate location where he stood while addressing the crowd in 1963. Turning

my back to the monument, I could survey the National Mall, including the trees and pathways that allow visitors in both the analog and digital world to navigate space. The Reflecting Pool has one key change however: a large grey concrete cube sits centrally in the water. Video recordings of protestors listening to MLK's address on August 28, 1963, were projected onto the sides of the cube.

After I descended the stairs of the memorial, I saw a large pedestal with "Welcome Instructions." Essentially, the instructions tell players that they will receive a "prize" if they explore the map for the event for at least 20 minutes and encourage teamwork for solving the puzzles and activities in the event. Throughout the map are small balls of light that players are encouraged to collect to "add your light" to the Pillars of Justice featured on the map.<sup>63</sup> Running parallel to the Reflecting Pool on either side, were built spaces for various "puzzle" activities for players themed around educational content. There was no specific order given for the puzzles, implying that users were meant to wander the space while listening to the audio recording, and engage with the puzzles at their own pace. I came across a hedge maze placed in a location to the southeast of the Lincoln Memorial. Navigating through the maze appeared to have no specific educational goal, but rather offered a way to occupy the player's time while they listened to the speech recording in full and collected their small orbs of light. Next to the maze was a "Climb the Mountain" experience where players could race up a mountain summit, alluding to MLK's use of mountains as a recurring thematic message in his "I Have a Dream" speech.<sup>64</sup> Nothing around the mountain offered any contextualizing information about their presence however, relying on the user's knowledge of the speech itself to intuit the reference.

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<sup>63</sup> Epic Games, "Fortnite," 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Mark Vail, "The 'Integrative' Rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' Speech," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006): 51–78.

Among the other structures lining the National Mall were several museum-like displays that explained the context behind key Civil Rights Movement milestones, including the Jim Crow laws enforced in the United States during the 1950s/60s. While moving through these museum spaces, users could interact with buttons on displays to answer questions in a quiz-like format related to Civil Rights history as well. For example, one room styled as a grand library had a plaque that asked, “On Dec. 1, 1955, she refused to give her bus seat to a white man. This incident helped spark the Montgomery Bus Boycott,” with three possible answers below: “A) Septima Clark, B) Joyce Ladner, C) Rosa Parks.” When I selected option C, I was notified of a “Correct” answer, and then teleported to a new digital space within the museum with more history plaques and quiz questions. Other spaces within the museum structures were geared towards a digital embodied recreation of Jim Crow laws in effect during the 1960s. For example, in the bathroom spaces of the museum area, a well-furnished luxury sink has a “WHITE” sign above it, while the smaller, derelict sink on that same wall has a “COLORED” sign above it. To the left of the sinks is an educational plaque that explains to readers, “After the abolishment of slavery, many state and local governments enacted new legislations to limit the rights of Black Americans. These Jim Crow laws enforced segregated and inferior public accommodations for Black Americans.”<sup>65</sup> The language for these educational quizzes and tableau scenes were drawn from TIME’s resources developed for the DuSable Museum.<sup>66</sup>

Throughout the various experiences within the “March Through Time,” the use of visual historicity and concise language tried to produce an educational experience about the Civil Rights movement in the United States. However, these activities did seemingly detract from the audio of the speech itself, and it was notable that for an event celebrating the legacy of MLK,

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<sup>65</sup> Epic Games, “Fortnite.”

<sup>66</sup> “‘March Through TIME’ Brings ‘I Have a Dream’ to ‘Fortnite,’” *TIME*, 2021.

there was surprisingly little context about his work, life, and legacy beyond the specifics of August 28, 1963. There was a small plaque dedicated to MLK's famous missive, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" but much of his advocacy and legacy were omitted. Aside from the omnipresent speech audio, the design focus on D.C. '63 appeared more focused on the spatial rendering of the National Mall and the re-created Jim Crow tableaux than anything else specifically MLK related. Considering the language used to promote this event being centered around a celebration of MLK, but the reality of the event using MLK as a detached icon, further reifies this concept of the "March Through Time" operating under the temporal assumptions of "white national time."

D.C. '63 appears to be accurately named, as the event ignores the five years of radical advocacy MLK engaged between the March on Washington and his assassination in 1968. This sanitization of MLK's legacy is in part what Gallagher witnessed as the rhetorical strategy throughout the process of making Martin Luther King Jr. Day a federally recognized holiday.<sup>67</sup> As a strategy of the political right, this romanticized version of MLK as a kindhearted, moderate martyr against a racist ideology that is "in the past" persists.<sup>68</sup> However, in the last decade, scholars and progressive advocates have pushed to recover MLK's radical political legacy in scholarship and public memory.<sup>69</sup> Despite these attempts, events like the "March Through

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<sup>67</sup> Gallagher, "Remembering Together."

<sup>68</sup> Philip Wander, "The John Birch and Martin Luther King, Symbols in the Radical Right," *Western Speech* 35, no. 1 (1971): 4–14; Laura Visser-Maessen, "Getting To That Promised Land: Reclaiming Martin Luther King, Jr. and 21st Century Black Activism in the United States and Western Europe," *European Journal of American Studies* 14, no. 1 (2019): 1–26.

<sup>69</sup> Andre E. Johnson, "Dislocations and Shutdowns: MLK, BLM, and the Rhetoric of Confrontation," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 8, no. 3 (2018): 137–45; Asafo Shaka Sekou, *The Radical Political Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Study Guide by Asafo Shaka Sekou*. (Atascadero, CA: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018); "Reclaim Martin Luther King the Radical," *Socialist Worker*, March 10, 2018, <https://socialistworker.co.uk/features/reclaim-martin-luther-king-the-radical/>; Jamil Smith, "Martin Luther King, Jr. Doesn't Belong to You," *The New Republic*, January 18, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/127879/martin-luther-king-jr-doesnt-belong>.

Time” propagate this sentimentalized version of MLK, which Jamil Smith aptly describes as, “King’s soft, fleshy face, either painted with a celestial glow or photographed in black and white... often depicted looking off into the distance as if in reflection or mourning... Once the commemoration of his birthday was first observed as a holiday, King not only became more image than man. He became ritualized.”<sup>70</sup> Epic Games’ commitment to rebuilding the National Mall on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1963, is emblematic of how MLK’s memory is reconfigured to fit white national time and used to place racialized issues in America firmly in a temporal past.

Throughout my personal experience wandering the D.C. ’63 event, I was surprised that it was relatively populated for a non-competitive event in *Fortnite*. I logged into the experience on five separate occasions over the course of three days, and there were never less than fifteen other distinct users (including myself) in an instance of D.C. ’63 at any time. I saw a large variety of avatar skins in use, including popular franchises like *Street Fighter* as well as a multitude of Epic Games’ proprietary character avatar skins. It felt a bit incongruent to see Rey from *Star Wars* running around with Captain Marvel from *Infinity War* while listening to MLK’s speech on the National Mall. For reasons that will (unfortunately) become evident in the subsequent section, I must explain that I was playing as an Epic Games character known as “Britestorm Bomber,” whose design is a white woman with a pink hoodie featuring a unicorn. At no point in my five experiences did other users directly interact with my avatar other than run around me while participating in an activity like the hedge maze. While navigating these spaces, I saw other users run through rooms, engage with the interactive museum experiences, and otherwise demonstrate a good faith attempt at participation with the event’s educational activities. If a user participated in the “March Through Time” event by maintaining an active login to the experience for at least

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<sup>70</sup> Smith, “Martin Luther King, Jr. Doesn’t Belong to You.”

20 minutes of time, they received an in-game cosmetic item: a spray paint “tag” you can place on structures within the competitive and creative *Fortnite* modes. Through this designated time allocation, Epic Games incentivized players to remain in the experience through at least one complete recording of MLK’s speech. There were several users who elected to jump up and down in the Reflecting Pool for what I assume was the requisite time to unlock their free cosmetics to qualify as an active login, and then leave the event. Offering a reward for meeting a temporal threshold indicates how the infrastructure of *Fortnite*, similar to Twitch, gamified the temporal experience of D.C. ’63.

Many users seeking to waste their “active time” in the experience relied on spamming emotes. An emote is a pre-programmed physical gesture that a user’s avatar can perform by inputting a specific command into their controller or keyboard. On the basic infrastructure level, *Fortnite* offers dozens of emotes for free and sells other emotes as part of cosmetic packages and licensed intellectual property bundles. Within the broader scope of *Fortnite*, these emotes have been at the center of controversy for Epic Games for years. In 2019, Epic Games came under significant public critique for their appropriation of Black dance culture in many of their commercialized emotes. Popular entertainers like 2 Milly, Marlon Webb, Alfonso Ribeiro, Donald Faison, and Blocboy JB all accused *Fortnite* of co-opting their dance moves without giving them credit or financial compensation.<sup>71</sup> As a result, 2 Milly and others sued Epic Games for infringement of copyright, but it was dismissed by a California judge who determined that individual moves and steps to dances cannot be copyrighted, citing a 2019 Supreme Court

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<sup>71</sup> Yussef Cole, “Fortnite’s Appropriation Issue Isn’t About Copyright Law, It’s About Ethics,” *Vice*, February 11, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/a3bkgj/fortnite-fortnight-black-appropriation-dance-emote>; Meagan Flynn, “Is Fortnite Stealing Black Dance Culture? The Creator of the ‘Milly Rock’ Argues Yes in a New Lawsuit.,” *Washington Post*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/12/06/is-fortnite-stealing-black-dance-culture-creator-milly-rock-argues-yes-new-lawsuit/>.

ruling.<sup>72</sup> While dancing in the Reflecting Pool or hitting a dab in front of Rosa Parks' portrait further separates the constructed time of D.C. '63 from its purported educational mission, there were even more concerning infrastructural oversights related to emote use in D.C. '63. Having contextualized the D.C. '63 experience from the field, the following tackles the transplatform response to the event and the controversy surrounding user emote actions within D.C. '63 itself.

### A Transplatform Response to the “March Through Time” Event

Epic Games never released exact figures for the number of *Fortnite* players who engaged with the “March Through Time,” but digital media and technology reporting outlets weighed in on the event early at launch. In gauging the public response to the event, Bilal Morris described it as “outrage.” “Unfortunately, many saw the move as tasteless, and a greedy way to profit from Dr. King’s legacy. The move seemed like it came from a good place, but questions who is in the room when decisions are being made at PlayStation and Fortnite,” he explained in his editorial.<sup>73</sup> Other technology and news outlets reiterated this general sentiment, citing discomfort with placing MLK’s likeness and speech alongside a violent video game platform.<sup>74</sup> As a platform, *Fortnite*’s reliance on large intellectual property deals, wacky dancing emotes, and a sense of escapism felt at odds with the gravity of the educational mission behind the “March Through

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<sup>72</sup> Austen Goslin, “Fortnite Dance Lawsuits Dismissed after New Supreme Court Ruling,” *Polygon*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.polygon.com/fortnite/2019/3/11/18260142/fortnite-dance-lawsuits-dismissed>.

<sup>73</sup> Bilal Morris, “Fortnite MLK Game Sparks Outrage as Playstation Debuts ‘March Through Time,’” *NewsOne*, August 26, 2021, <https://newsone.com/4190846/martin-luther-king-fortnite-playstation/>.

<sup>74</sup> Brianna Provenzano, “MLK Is Coming to Battle Royale Video Game Fortnite,” *Gizmodo*, August 26, 2021, <https://gizmodo.com/mlk-is-coming-to-battle-royale-video-game-fortnite-1847565479>; Jamal Michel, “An MLK Exhibit Came to ‘Fortnite’ and We Had a Lot of Questions,” *The Nerds of Color*, August 27, 2021, <https://thenerdsofcolor.org/2021/08/27/an-mlk-exhibit-came-to-fortnite-and-we-had-a-lot-of-questions/>; Tracie William Cowen, “‘Fortnite’ Celebrates Martin Luther King, Jr With ‘March Through Time’ Experience and People Have Thoughts,” *Complex*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/fortnite-celebrates-martin-luther-king-jr-march-through-time-experience-reactions>; Matthew Wilkins, “Fortnite Announces Return of Black History Enlightenment Event, Fans Say ‘Not Needed,’” *Sportskeeda*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.sportskeeda.com/fortnite/fortnite-announces-return-black-history-enlightenment-event-fans-say-not-needed>.

Time” event. Jamal Michel, writer for *Nerds of Color*, reflected on the cognitive dissonance of the event’s stated intentions versus execution: “... how thoughtful a conversation could players have if the space in which a civil rights event is held soon transforms into a battleground between Rick Sanchez of Rick and Morty and a dancing hotdog?”<sup>75</sup> The public dialogue around the appropriateness of the event forced the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center to issue a public statement on the use of Dr. King’s intellectual property on the gaming platform as being outside their purview.<sup>76</sup>

Aside from media outlets, gamers took to Twitter to voice their concerns and record their experiences within the “March Through Time” event as well. Of the thousands of Tweets circulating on the platform using the hashtags #MLK and #Fortnite, a few dominant themes appeared in the discourse. The first was discomfort echoing the concerns raised by popular news outlets regarding the use of Martin Luther King, Jr. on a video game platform typically known for violence. PeiceofNick wrote, “This has to be the most fucking hilarious collab Fortnite has ever done simply because of how fucked up it also happened to be. MLK preached nonviolence his whole life, now his speech is in a game where 6 year [old]s shoot each other as Master Chief, Superman, and Rick and Morty.”<sup>77</sup> The use of Rick Sanchez throughout these various clips is particularly notable since his character has been largely co-opted by conservative, alt-right adjacent online communities as an icon.<sup>78</sup> PeiceofNick highlights the affective dissonance of placing this type of memory experience within a platform culture that generates engagement and

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<sup>75</sup> Jamal Michel, “An MLK Exhibit Came to ‘Fortnite’ and We Had a Lot of Questions,” 2021.

<sup>76</sup> TheKingCenter. Twitter Post, August 26, 2021, <https://twitter.com/TheKingCenter/status/1430961473237491720>.

<sup>77</sup> PeiceofNick. Twitter Post, August 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/PeiceofNick/status/1432829321547223040>.

<sup>78</sup> Sebastian Muriel, “Rick and Morty Toxic Fandom, Explained,” *Medium*, October 5, 2018, <https://medium.com/@sebastianmuriel/rick-and-morty-toxic-fandom-explained-eedc3716b868>; Ray Evangelista, “Rick and Morty and Toxic Fandom: Factors Contributing to Toxic Communication in the Online Rick and Morty Fan Community” (Regent University, 2019), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2314065269/abstract/989E3C7498564AD2PQ/1>.

profit off of absurdity, violence, and recognizable intellectual property. Bernfiedl reflected on the irony of celebrating someone who was assassinated in a game centered around violence, “How did Dr. Martin Luther King Jr die again? What? Got shot? Ah ok, then it's of course "OKAY" when all the Fortnite kids go right back to shooting people in the face after his speech. gotcha! #FortniteMLKfail #MLK.”<sup>79</sup> Aqua15\_ expressed the incredulity at the lack of consideration of platform-appropriateness in their own tweet, “BRO WHAT!? Tell me who thought honoring MLK in a game where you shoot people was a good idea?”<sup>80</sup> Moving away from the violence angle, users pointed to the other cultural elements of *Fortnite*’s platform as being problematic. KalDore87 described the event as “one of the most pointless, crass, and tacky ploys ever used by a game creator.”<sup>81</sup> HunterKnottt, tweeted a video recording of his experience of the event that went viral with thousands of replies, retweets, and quote tweets. In the video, two other users wore avatar skins of Superman and Rick (from *Rick and Morty*) and proceeded to dance with the “raise the roof” emote in the Reflecting Pool while Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech plays in the background. HunterKnottt wrote in his tweet, “Nah this MLK fortnite event is comedy

stated purpose and the culture on their digital gaming platform. Considering the history of bigotry in gaming technoculture broadly, and the harassment present during the *We the People* event in *Fortnite* specifically, there was very little user surprise at how quickly players in *Fortnite* devolved into meme-ing or otherwise engaging in the event with a lack of good faith, “This is exactly wtf I thought it's going to be.”<sup>85</sup> AirKing\_of\_Eden explained his lack of surprise within the context of *Fortnite*'s infrastructure surrounding pop culture icons and emotes, “Lol ‘Why should the MLK stuff not be told in [F]ortnite’ Because there[‘]s a time and place for everything. Fortnite, a game where you can dress up as Rick Sanchez floss then crack a whip, is neither. Why would you even need to ask that? Its tone deaf as hell.”<sup>86</sup> As these examples illustrate, the very cultural aspects that made *Fortnite* so popular also made the platform inappropriate for a serious event oriented towards education and commemoration.

Alongside the incongruity of placing MLK's legacy on a violent video game platform, the “March Through Time” related Twitter discourse also focused on the tension between the importance of educating young people about history, particularly Black history, and whether a violent video game was the appropriate platform. RKzero10 retweeted the official “March Through Time” announcement with his own thoughts, “Imagine fighting for your own life for equality, getting assassinated, and then now your legacy will be a bunch of kids calling you ‘That guy from Fortnite’[.] Disrespectful if you ask me.”<sup>87</sup> However, there were users who noted the educational value of the event, especially within the context of American education system controversies surrounding Black history and Critical Race Theory in the classrooms. “[F]ortnite now has more material on MLK Jr. than most southern state textbooks[.]” wrote aliabdi in a

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<sup>85</sup> rafiqdanpie. Twitter Post, August 27, 2021, <https://twitter.com/rafiqdanpie/status/1431310943040905222>.

<sup>86</sup> AirKing\_of\_Eden. Twitter Post, August 29, 2021, [https://twitter.com/AirKing\\_of\\_Eden/status/1431838320322043905](https://twitter.com/AirKing_of_Eden/status/1431838320322043905).

<sup>87</sup> RKzero10. Twitter Post, August 26, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RKzero10/status/1430906753403686922>.

tweet that received hundreds of retweets and likes. ZAC\_IMPACT's two-part Twitter thread was shared hundreds of times, where he gives a more optimistic read of the event;

“Playing through this I’m actually surprised how informative it was, and honestly I think using a game like [F]ortnite teaching kids abt MLK Jr is a good idea seeing that American schools are trying to get rid of lessons about him. (1/2)

Yeah it’s silly seeing Rick Sanchez and the Xenomorph next to the colored drinking fountain but I’m surprised they talked about hate crimes that were committed against the civil rights movement and even MLKs famous letter from prison. More info than I got from my education[.] (2/2)”<sup>88</sup>

For users like ZAC\_IMPACT or aliabdi, the educational value of the event and its accessibility outweighed the cognitive dissonance that other critics registered between the content and platform.

Within this broader conversation surrounding the educational merit of the “March Through Time” event, the issue of burdening Black content creators with this mission for education came into question. As JaxxDynamite explained, “Making black developers create that MLK thing in fortnite is akin to when the job tries to make us lead diversity initiatives or teach white folks how to not be awful at work for free. Just...tone deaf as fuck. Smh.”<sup>89</sup>

Baddie\_5000's own viral tweet about the experience stated “MLK in Fortnite because corporate America thinks Black Liberation is a GAME.”<sup>90</sup> Users felt compelled to test the experience before rendering their judgement, “So I went to the MLK Fortnite Experience because I hate myself I guess. Uh.... they really did try to be pretty earnest about this but man this ain't it.”<sup>91</sup>

Other users took the tactic of pushing back against the frustration, saying these types of actions proved the reason why Epic Games should engage with more educational content, “Just what are

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<sup>88</sup> ZAC\_IMPACT. Twitter Post, August 31, 2021, [https://twitter.com/ZAC\\_IMPACT/status/1432686755036241921](https://twitter.com/ZAC_IMPACT/status/1432686755036241921).

<sup>89</sup> JaxxDynamite. Twitter Post, August 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/JaxxDynamite/status/1432572385098567680>.

<sup>90</sup> baddie\_5000. Twitter Post, August 26, 2021, [https://twitter.com/baddie\\_5000/status/1430916152667017217](https://twitter.com/baddie_5000/status/1430916152667017217).

<sup>91</sup> CHSSTFans. Twitter Post, August 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/CHSSTFans/status/1432587530419978245>.

you trying to say? Free speech it is poor taste definitely. All the more reason for education.”<sup>92</sup> Even educators on Twitter weighed in regarding the execution of the “March Through Time” event. Storymodebae wrote in a multi-tweet thread, “I have...many thoughts. Seeing that MLK is in Fortnite already feels like some sort of alternate reality, but I had to experience it for myself instead of reading headlines. As someone with a degree in Edu[c]ation, I understand creating relatable material for kids to easily digest [1/4].”<sup>93</sup> This first tweet gives Epic the benefit of a doubt as far as their intent with the experience, but turning to the *Fortnite* platform’s technoculture, she continues, “But...does that mean you should on this type of platform? Maybe I would appreciate the intent and opportunity to learn more so the game wasn't a first person shooter? There has to be so much care around such a serious subject and this just feels so...strange. Like...why? [2/4].”<sup>94</sup> Storymodebae then proceeds to evoke a new element to the conversation related to the actual execution of the “March Through Time” event itself: “I’ve also seen what Fortnite has the ability to do and create, like their interactive concerts events. This MLK "event" seems so clunky, rushed, and thrown together. The mini games provided were confusing and glitchy, and if we're really gonna do this, why not do it correctly [3/4]?”<sup>95</sup> She clearly calls into question why this event, which arguably has greater educational importance and value, received less attention from Epic Games than their live concert series. This acknowledgement, in conjunction with the slapdash execution of the *We the People* showing and subsequent fallout contextualizes the reoccurring oversights of Epic Games regarding their experiences and a lack of accountability for the ideological issues pervading *Fortnite* and broader digital gaming culture’s infrastructures. She concludes, “If someone is able to experience

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<sup>92</sup> iismoodly. Twitter Post, August 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/iismoodly/status/1432737315097649156>.

<sup>93</sup> Storymodebae. Twitter Post, August 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/storymodebae/status/1432569734956871692>.

<sup>94</sup> Storymodebae. Twitter Post, August 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/storymodebae/status/1432570521573474309>.

<sup>95</sup> Storymodebae. Twitter Post, August 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/storymodebae/status/1432571260043608069>.

this and walk away learning something new, then that's great! But with the event originally going viral for the memes, for ME, there's a lot that just seems weird, & leaves me questioning how seriously its going to be taken”<sup>96</sup> Storymodebae’s concerns regarding the reception to “March Through Time” was well founded especially as it relates to the use of emotes within the event.

Aside from the highlighted examples of users voicing this cognitive and affective dissonance related to the “March Through Time” event on the *Fortnite* platform, there was a specific infrastructural oversight from Epic Games that resulted in the event’s cancellation approximately a week later. When the event initially launched, emotes were enabled in the special event. As addressed in the field notes, plenty of users invoked emotes throughout the experience to entertain themselves while waiting to unlock the cosmetic prizes. However, dancing cavalierly in the Reflecting Pool or in front of Civil Rights leaders was just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Fairly quickly, users were leveraging a variety of emotes that involved acts of violence to target users in the experience, specifically those wearing avatars that appeared Black. One particular emote, where the user holds a bull whip and cracks it against the ground, gained prevalence amongst the harassers.<sup>97</sup> RoscoesPissuit posted a video of their *Fortnite* gameplay on Twitter with the caption, “New #fortnite concert is #lit 🔥 you know I had to hit the #whip one time for the squad

deploying imagery aligned with the Klu Klux Klan, is nothing new on gaming platforms. In her research related to asymmetrical games like *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, Gray found that many Black players witnessed this type of targeted action in their regular gaming sessions.<sup>99</sup> Within the “March Through Time” experience, users continued the harassment for almost 24 hours before Epic Games took any action. On August 27, a day after launch, Epic Games tweeted from the official *Fortnite* account, “All emotes have been disabled in the “March Through Time” experience except the 8 that are part of the experience.”<sup>100</sup>

The eight emotes that were part of the experience, according to Epic Games, focused on physical gestures someone might witness at a protest or rally: holding sign placards, marching, raising a single fist into the air. However, despite Epic Games’ statement, the harassment persisted. While Moon Knight players could no longer crack a whip, the emote was still accessible if players switched to Catwoman. Apparently, the whip cracking emote could *not* be disabled in this instance because it was programmed as a default emote for the licensed DC Comics Catwoman character bundle.<sup>101</sup> Infrastructurally, when *Fortnite* releases these thematized bundles for purchase, certain emotes are considered a key part of the character, and thus are always accessible to the player regardless of what they have equipped in their inventory. This meant that if harassers wore the Catwoman avatar skin within the “March Through Time” experience, they would maintain access to the emote regardless of any emote bans. Users quickly reported this exploit across Twitter, with tweets like Win98Tech’s garnering hundreds of thousands of retweets and shares across the platform, “so the Fortnite whip crack emote can't be

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<sup>99</sup> Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*.

<sup>100</sup> FortniteStatus. Twitter Post, August 27, 2021, <https://twitter.com/FortniteStatus/status/1431275274788876293>.

<sup>101</sup> Brennan Fielder, “Batman and Catwoman Just Split Up Again... In Fortnite,” *CBR*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.cbr.com/batman-fortnite-catwoman-split/>.

disabled in the MLK event because its part of a DC package with Catwoman so just fucking bang up job everyone involved[.]”<sup>102</sup>

Quickly the story took over the discussion on the social media platform, as well as the games news media discussion of the “March Through Time” event. Users continued to express shock that Epic Games would allow such an egregious oversight even after they had attempted to fix the harassment problem. “Fortnite disables almost every emote except the whip for MLK event a bruh moment,” wrote Kingpin9000.<sup>103</sup> Again, users questioned the rationale of using a platform like *Fortnite* for such an event given the commercialized, violent technoculture of the platform to begin with, “So apparently Fortnite disabled all emotes for their MLK event... Except the whip emote??? To be honest, I don’t know why Epic thought it would be a good idea to put MLK into a game about shooting people in the first place, but I guess that’s where we are as a society.”<sup>104</sup> Editor Brad Lang reported the exploit, citing a lack of response from Epic Games, DC Comics, and TIME even days after the exploit was first reported on Twitter from various *Fortnite* players.<sup>105</sup> Brendan Sinclair also reported the emote being used as a tool of harassment, but expressed surprise that Epic Games was unprepared for this type of user action in their experience. Citing the *We the People* events from 2020, he wrote “[t]he behavior of players likely would not have been a surprise to Epic. Last year the company streamed a Black Lives Matter panel discussion in the game, only to find players respond by using an in-game emote to throw tomatoes at the screen.”<sup>106</sup> Epic Games went on record stating that they had

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<sup>102</sup> Win98Tech. Twitter Post, August 29, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Win98Tech/status/1431814603512729601>.

<sup>103</sup> Kingpinover9000. Twitter Post, August 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/kingpinover9000/status/1432680394894168064>.

<sup>104</sup> \_ericdevries. Twitter Post, August 30, 2021, [http://twitter.com/\\_ericdevries/statuses/1432419576663396356](http://twitter.com/_ericdevries/statuses/1432419576663396356).

<sup>105</sup> Brad Lang, “Fortnite Under Fire for Not Disabling Whip Emote During MLK Event,” *CBR*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.cbr.com/fortnite-whip-emote-mlk-event/>.

<sup>106</sup> Brendan Sinclair, “Fortnite Disables Dance Moves in Martin Luther King, Jr. Tribute,” *GamesIndustry.biz*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/fortnite-disables-emotes-in-martin-luther-king-jr-tribute>.

anticipated racist and otherwise inappropriate user reactions prior to the launch of the “March Through Time” event.<sup>107</sup> For example, Epic Games confirmed that they had pre-emptively disabled certain emotes like the tomato throwing emote that had taken over the *We the People* events in an effort to prevent similar harassment in the “March Through Time” event.<sup>108</sup> To quote the Epic Games CEO on the matter, the studio built the “March Through Time” event using “everything learned from the *We the People* event.”<sup>109</sup> Apparently those lessons still appeared to be more reactive than proactive as far as Epic Games’ deployment of their infrastructure was concerned.

Herein lies the crux of the issue with digital place-making from an institutional perspective, in this case Epic Games: the technocultural racism and bigotry embedded in the video game platform of *Fortnite* remained unaccounted for in their creation. Epic Games designed this experience without attending to the encoded racism within their violent video game platform’s technoculture or the influence of the racist affects of their historicized time period. Digital place-making is a user driven practice, therefore when institutions co-opt the practice without taking user actions into account, they are bound to fail. The Global Pride island, also an institutionalized attempt at digital place-making, was much more attuned to the digital user practices within the ACNH player community, as seen by Global Pride’s use of fashion, signage, and staged tableaux to create affective modes of expression and celebration in-game. Even the Biden HQ seemingly understood the technoculture of ACNH as indicated by the community’s praise of the quality of the experience in-game by embodying user practices from within the ACNH community. Epic Games, despite previously failed experiences like the *We the People*

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<sup>107</sup> Zwiezen, “Epic Disables Disrespectful Fortnite Emotes in The Martin Luther King Event,” 2021.

<sup>108</sup> Zwiezen, “Epic Disables Disrespectful Fortnite Emotes in The Martin Luther King Event.”

<sup>109</sup> Zwiezen.

screenings, never interrogated the realities of digital user actions on their own platform. The result was a production of a *place* that failed to invoke the intended affective intensities of reverence and respect. Instead, digital user practices (re)created racist affects that targeted the very community the event intended to uplift.

Regardless of addressing specific exploits within the infrastructure of *Fortnite*, Epic Games could not remove the platform from the bigoted ideologies pervading the technoculture on the platform. In their attempt to build a digital place that positioned the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement within a temporal sense of the past, they inadvertently exposed the present reality of the platform's toxic technoculture. The transplatform publicity surrounding the event and the incessant harassment of Black digital users in the "March Through Time" resulted in the event's cancellation just a week after its launch.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began by asking how temporality might impact our understanding of digital place-making and its possibilities. Epic Games constructed historicized time through D.C. '63, wherein the racist affective intensities of the 1950s/60s re-emerged through *Fortnite*'s toxic platform technoculture. Despite Epic Games' claim that they attempted to produce a celebratory and respectful commemorative event, the racist ideologies embedded in the platform emboldened digital users invested in harmful practices within the experience. Digital place-making cannot remove the affective intensities of historicized time, and uncritical implementations of digital place-making might even exacerbate them. The gamification of time investment in these experiences is not enough to produce affects of attachment and care within the digital users on a platform. As such, when institutions construct a digital place without accounting for existing

digital user practices on the platform, these places become fraught sites of malicious digital user behavior.

In the previous case study regarding *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, we witnessed the gradual diffusion of user-driven digital place-making on a platform into a more institutionalized practice. However, because the digital place-making practices on that platform emerged from the users themselves, the ability to render the tropical islands of ACNH as spaces for protest and politics managed to affirm historically marginalized communities through their creation. In the case of the “March Through Time,” Epic Games chose to implement a recreation of a temporal past onto their own platform without accounting for their own technoculture. Furthermore, the gamification and sanitization of this historic event reified a sense of “white national time” regarding Black history in America. Uncritically reconstructing the analog place of the National Mall in 1963 fails to address the realities of protestors’ lived experiences in the past, fails to address how these realities might re-emerge on a digital platform, and obscures users from understanding how those issues persist in the present in both the analog and digital.

In 2022, Epic Games announced they would revive the “March Through Time” experience on the *Fortnite* platform. Reporters noted that Epic Games made several key changes, most notably preventing users from wearing any licensed avatars within the experience and having weapons and emotes disabled right away.<sup>110</sup> While these infrastructural changes seemingly addressed the emote harassment issues, they still fail to account for the troubling issuance of white national time within the construction of the event itself, nor does it hold the technoculture accountable for the harassment. This case study demonstrates the importance of

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<sup>110</sup> Ted Litchfield, “Fortnite Is Doing an ‘I Have a Dream’ Anniversary Event, Again,” *PC Gamer*, August 28, 2022, <https://www.pcgamer.com/fortnite-is-doing-an-i-have-a-dream-anniversary-event-again/>; Vaspaan Dastoor, “Fortnite’s Martin Luther King Jr. Event Returns, Hopefully with Better Moderation,” *The Gamer*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.thegamer.com/fortnite-martin-luther-king-jr-march-through-time-event/>.

understanding digital place-making as a process that requires attunement to digital user practices on a platform. Altering the infrastructures of a platform to transform a place on a digital platform alone is not digital place-making, but studying these infrastructural designs and alterations, alongside user practices and platform politics, renders a more complete concept.

### Digital Place-making & Beyond

In the beginning of this dissertation, I proposed digital place-making as a rhetorical activity involved in the cultivation of digital places through specific technologies and practices. Three distinct platforms and their related transplatform networks were analyzed to draw a sense of commonalities across discrete phenomena. For digital place-making to occur, a platform must offer some mode of customization or adaptation for digital users. While practices vary from platform to platform, digital *places* can only be constructed if digital users are able to influence the digital infrastructures of the platform through their actions.

Let us now return to the initial research questions proposed at the beginning of this dissertation. First, what role does digital place play in digital user's understandings of politics, participation, and identity? Digital *places* afford digital users a locatable "destination" in which to receive and circulate affective intensities. In the case of ACNH, these intensities could be understood as forms of solidarity or collective action. The platform provided infrastructure that allowed users to express themselves in-game through signs and fashion, and then distribute those expressions across their transplatform network. On Twitch, digital users felt an affective sense of belonging which transformed into the desire to protect their digital *places* from infiltration. Users leveraged their transplatform networks to collectivize for a boycott and develop tools to adapt existing infrastructures to protect themselves. In *Fortnite*, we witnessed how the affective intensities bound in historical time and platform technoculture influenced digital user practices. Despite the institutional intent behind the creation of a digital place like D.C. '63, the failure to account for these embedded bigotries meant the place-making facilitated malicious user action that undermined the institutional intent of the digital experience. As such, digital places cannot be divorced from the realities of the platforms on which they are constructed. This segues into

another research question: why are some digital places viewed as more appropriate than others for certain forms of communication, commemoration, and collectivizing? It is the infrastructural realities of platforms that provide both the constraints and possibilities for digital users. The inability to separate *Fortnite*'s toxic technoculture from its infrastructure is part of the reason the Martin Luther King Jr. event was doomed to fail as a commemorative event from the very start. Through the modification and innovative use of existing infrastructures, like repurposing commands and technology available to Twitch streamers to create "panic buttons" to fight hate raids, that digital users navigated Twitch's limitations to protect creators within their own infrastructure, so digital users created tools for themselves. The wide customization options in ACNH offered digital users a vast number of ways to express their political solidarity and identity throughout a tumultuous year in U.S. politics. The game platform's infrastructure allowed users to create digital places and then open them for access with their transplatform network on Twitter and Discord. These three case studies also instruct us on how despite their capitalist condition, not all digital platforms are "appropriate" for certain forms of communication or commemoration. The technoculture affiliated with a platform is important to understand, as it shapes the ways users understand themselves in relation to one another on the platform.

These examples demonstrate how digital platform infrastructures shape digital spaces, but this dissertation also addresses the role of transplatform networks throughout each case study. In the first chapter, I asked how does power operate in transplatform networks and how does this mode of circulation impact the affects understood and mobilized in digital culture? While a platform facilitates expression and galvanizes community participation through circulating affects, much of the labor organization and discursive communication happens

elsewhere. Following the way in which protests in ACNH, boycott promotion in Twitch, or the outrage and backlash in Fortnite is made known on a platform like Twitter contextualizes the labor and expressions of digital users on the platforms themselves. While platform stakeholders maintain fiscal and technological power through user engagement, the affective circulation throughout a transplatform network is done through digital users communicating with other digital users. Tracing these lines of communication through hashtags, retweets, replies, and screenshots as they circulate internally on a platform and transfer to the transplatform network offers scholars a glimpse behind the complex media ecology of digitality. Specifically, these case studies look at affective transmissions of emotions like grief, hope, solidarity, isolation, anger, and bigotry across these forms of transplatform discourse. Digital *places* are central in understanding these transplatform networks as they act as the incubator sites for these types of affects to build momentum and disperse into the discourse. For example, digital users feeling isolated during Pride celebrations amid COVID-19 turned to the Global Pride island in ACNH as a place to congregate, celebrate, and commemorate queer-centric past, present, and future experiences. The celebratory joy shared in this digital place transitioned to the ACNH transplatform network as users shared their experiences online and called attention to the Global Pride island experience for other ACNH users who longed for ways to celebrate with their LGBTQ+ community.

This complex media ecology of digital *place* demonstrates how rhetoricians must continue innovating our methods to attend to digital phenomena. This dissertation functions as a testament to the value of mixed methods work for those interested in rhetorical inquiry. My engagement as a participant in each of these case studies provided invaluable insight into the labor behind digital phenomena that are often disguised as features or part of play. Furthermore,

approaching these digital communities through the ethical lens exemplified in digital ethnographic work shaped how I made connections within the Twitch streaming community. This provided unique opportunities to witness the structures of content creation from both sides of the platform, giving this dissertation a distinct contribution to the existing literature around live streaming, labor, and platform politics. This project demonstrates one way a rhetorician can assemble an archive of digital discourse spread across transplatform networks into a coherent text for study. Furthermore, integrating the work from digital media scholars offers rhetoricians touchstones for how to negotiate the fluid, oscillating publics on the platforms we study. For digital media scholars, attuning to the rhetorical salience of digital infrastructures' role in shaping digital user practices brings the consequences of digital user actions to the fore.

In a world where massive Chinese technological companies just merged billions of dollars in assets to compete with Mark Zuckerberg's *Meta* in a race to stake claims on the "metaverse" scholars need to adapt our tools for this digital reality.<sup>1</sup> Digital place-making offers a framework for studying digital communities that attends to the power of digital user practices while maintaining a platform's accountability. While digital place-making was accelerated in the conditions of the pandemic, it has not fallen to the wayside. As recently as October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023, more than 275,000 digital users on the gaming platform *Roblox* attended a solidarity for Palestine protest in-game. Organized by Malaysian *Roblox* players, users could raise flags and protest signs as they marched in the virtual streets of an undefined city.<sup>2</sup> By November 6<sup>th</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Saul, "Meta Stock On Cusp Of Record High—How It Emerged From 77% Plunge And Metaverse Fiasco," *Forbes*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dereksaul/2024/01/19/meta-stock-on-cusp-of-record-high-how-it-emerged-from-77-plunge-and-metaverse-fiasco/>; Timmy Shen, "China Forms Metaverse Working Group with Huawei, Tencent, Ant Group and Others," *The Block*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.theblock.co/post/273492/china-forms-metaverse-working-group-with-huawei-tencent-ant-group-and-others>.

<sup>2</sup> Alyssa Mercante, "Kids Are Attending Pro-Palestinian Protests In This Popular Game," *Kotaku*, October 24, 2023, <https://kotaku.com/roblox-protest-palestine-israel-peaceful-1850954534>.

players reported that *Roblox* was forcing the Pro-Palestine experiences to switch to “private mode” making them no longer accessible. Phrases like “free Palestine” were flagged in game and on the *Roblox* forums, without clarity for how they violated the *Roblox* community standards of the platform.<sup>3</sup> Digital places are not only sites of expression, but also sites of contestation, and our scholarly frameworks should reflect this. As such, this dissertation concludes with the affirmation that rhetorical scholarly sensibilities are very much relevant to digital studies. As the lines between analog and digital experiences continue to blur, concepts like digital place-making offer us language and tools to better understand this reality.

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<sup>3</sup> “Roblox Community Standards,” Roblox Support, <https://en.help.roblox.com/hc/en-us/articles/203313410-Roblox-Community-Standards>.

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