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## A (Silent) Game of Words

*Notes on Jeremy Soule's Accusations and the Elder Scrolls Online Community*

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**ABSTRACT** When Jeremy Soule, composer for some of the most well-known video game franchises in the world such as *Guild Wars* and *The Elder Scrolls*, was accused of sexual misconduct by women in the gaming industry in 2019, the internet hosted reactions from several fronts. From questioning the victims' credibility to taking a neutral position while waiting for further development, gamers and fans made use of digital platforms to express either concern, astonishment, or doubt; these reactions point to the significant symbolic capital that Soule possesses in the context of video game music.

The *Elder Scrolls* franchise, and in particular *Skyrim*, is highly recognized for its soundtracks, and this franchise has given rise to the largest mods community to date. In previous research, I examined this mods community in order to consider music and sound in relation to immersion and modification in *Elder Scrolls* games. Since the data collected in that earlier research was limited to a time span until 2017, the recent developments concerning composer Jeremy Soule weren't addressed in that earlier setting. However, these allegations were part of a larger phenomenon of awareness and public exposure of negative and abusive practices in several labor contexts in the video game industry, shedding some light on a much-needed discussion about sexism and mistreatment toward women and nonbinary professionals in these fields and raising some pertinent questions concerning users' feedback and engagement.

This article aims to discuss the possible impacts these accusations had on the relationship between Soule's music and users in the mods community, including users' overviews of their own personal  *affective* engagement with the games, thus verifying the deep connection between music, interactivity, authorship and  *gamer* identity. **KEYWORDS** Jeremy Soule, sexism, video game music, online communities, engagement

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*Content warning: this article mentions and directly references terms and situations related to sexual assault, harassment, abuse, and rape.*

Covert but no longer in the shadows, sexual violence is currently a much-discussed topic in multiple industries, workplaces, and networks. Harassment, abuse, and other grave forms of assault are still common practices in the entertainment industry, mainly directed toward women and nonbinary people, and were brought into public light and to the forefront of the Western world's attention with the #MeToo movement in 2017.<sup>1</sup>

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1. It's important to remember that the phrase *Me Too* was coined by the African American civil rights activist Tarana Burke on Myspace in 2006 following her survival from a sexual assault. The popularity of the term in the form of a hashtag by the actress Alyssa Milano eleven years later was subject to criticism as she didn't (initially) acknowledge the previous work pursued by Burke in the support and visibility of women of color.

People from several backgrounds—mainly actors, musicians, and other famous public figures—used the internet to share their own personal stories and experiences about sex crimes inflicted upon them and created a global online wave of testimonies connected by a single hashtag. Expanding past Twitter and other social media, #MeToo transformed itself into a social movement that left the screens and marched on the streets in several countries.<sup>2</sup> While these phenomena encouraged an active discussion and reflection on heteronormativity, patriarchy, toxic masculinity, and empowerment, their points can also be seen as the results of a progressive colonization of feminism by neoliberal standpoints, reinforcing (or restructuring) class, race, and gender gaps among women who, in the context of #MeToo, shared the same initial purpose.<sup>3</sup>

With institutional reactions to the “Weinstein effect,” such as the founding of the nonprofit group Time’s Up in 2018, sectors in the entertainment industry—mainly cinema and TV—have started to not only pave new roads toward equality, diversity, and labor justice but also create new ways to expose and criticize when what is being done isn’t enough.<sup>4</sup>

The video game universe has had a slower start. In 2018, Keza MacDonald published an opinion in *The Guardian* stating that the video game industry “isn’t yet ready for its #MeToo moment,” highlighting a few isolated events: discreet dismissals of editors-in-chief from IGN and video producers from Polygon and accusations of a sexist working environment in the Quantic Dream game studio.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the gaming industry has continued to catch up with other entertainment sectors.

In 2019, several victims in the gaming industry came out with their stories and personal experiences of abuse and harassment; in the same year, studios and companies faced legal actions against gender discrimination and sexist culture in the workplace.<sup>6</sup> In

2. Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement* (London: Routledge, 2021).

3. Lisa Lazard, “Workplace Harassment, Hollywood’s Casting Couch and Neoliberalism,” in *Sexual Harassment, Psychology and Feminism: #MeToo, Victim Politics and Predators in Neoliberal Times*, ed. Lisa Lazard, 17–41 (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2020), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55255-8\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55255-8_2) (accessed November 10, 2021).

4. Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck, “Post Weinstein: Gendered Power and Harassment in the Media Industries,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 3 (May 4, 2018): 489–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1456155> (accessed November 10, 2021); Pamela Hutchinson, “#MeToo and Hollywood: What’s Changed in the Industry a Year On?,” *Guardian*, October 8, 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/08/metoo-one-year-on-hollywood-reaction> (accessed October 31, 2021).

5. Keza MacDonald, “The Video Games Industry Isn’t Yet Ready for Its #MeToo Moment,” *Guardian*, January 24, 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/24/video-games-industry-metoo> (accessed October 31, 2021); The IGN Team, “A Statement from the IGN Team,” IGN, November 15, 2017, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2017/11/13/a-statement-from-the-ign-team> (accessed October 31, 2021); Luke Plunkett, “Polygon Parts Ways with Nick Robinson Following Twitter Claims,” Kotaku, October 8, 2017, <https://kotaku.com/polygon-parts-ways-with-nick-robinson-following-twitter-1797735272> (accessed October 31, 2021); Keith Stuart, “Game Developer Quantic Dream Accused of ‘Toxic’ and ‘Sexist’ Working Environment,” *Guardian*, January 15, 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/jan/15/game-developer-quantic-dream-accused-of-toxic-and-sexist-working-environment> (accessed October 31, 2021).

6. Keza MacDonald, “Riot Games Employees Walk Out over Workplace Harassment Lawsuits,” *Guardian*, May 7, 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/may/07/riot-games-employees-walk-out-over-workplace-harassment-lawsuits> (accessed October 17, 2021).

a single day, three notable men in the game development world were accused of sexual assault, encouraged by the first testimony shared by game designer Nathalie Lawhead, who publicly named Jeremy Soule, composer for *Guild Wars*, *KOTOR*, and *The Elder Scrolls*, among other games.<sup>7</sup>

In almost 7,000 words, Lawhead posted on their personal blog an extensive account of their work process in a studio where Soule took advantage of their vulnerable position. Lawhead wrote:

He made advances on me and I explained that I didn't want this and wanted a friendship. He was very threatening, and didn't listen. He made it clear that it's "him or bust".

He raped me.

Throughout this time Jeremy acted like a victim, and blamed women he was in relationships with (or forced relationships on) for what he was doing.<sup>8</sup>

This statement was soon to be followed by the vocalist Aeralie Brighton on her Facebook page, where she shared Lawhead's blog post, declaring that she too was a victim of sexual assault and harassment by Jeremy Soule, and adding:

For all the people demanding proof in other posts, I hardly believe you'd like to see the video he sent me of him masturbating "for science" . . . or what about him asking me to come over to his home to demo mics at 11 pm at night and talk about other vocalists who all want to sleep with him.<sup>9</sup>

Commonly described as the "John Williams of video game music," Soule is an established name in the world of video game soundtracks, with a solid fanbase from various AAA video games.<sup>10</sup> These accusations—and what they evoked in the industry concerning the awareness of sexual crimes—were met with a diverse range of reactions and user feedback on online platforms.

In this article, I aim to briefly highlight the ways in which the shift in Soule's career and public figure following these accusations was met by users and modders regarding his music, both in-game and out. This article follows up on research conducted until 2017 on the Nexus Mods platform, in which I examined the musical production in the modding community surrounding *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *The Elder Scrolls*

7. The claims were first published by Kotaku in a tweet and a news article that were later supported by other websites, adding not only Jeremy Soule but also Alec Holowka (*Night in the Woods* developer) and Luc Shelton (worked on *Gears of War 4*) to the spotlight. Lauren Kaori Gurley, "Three Prominent Video Game Developers Accused of Sexual Assault in One Day," *Vice*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/vb5dp4/three-prominent-video-game-developers-accused-of-sexual-assault-in-one-day> (accessed November 10, 2021).

8. Nathalie Lawhead, "Calling Out My Rapist," *The Candybox Blog*, August 26, 2019, <http://www.nathalielawhead.com/candybox/calling-out> (accessed October 17, 2021).

9. Aeralie Brighton, "I wish I could say I was joking, but I have personally fallen prey to Jeremy Soule as well back in 2014," Facebook, August 26, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/Aeralie/posts/2800156463332203> (accessed October 17, 2021).

10. Jeremy Teo, "For Composers, Video Game Music Is about Living in the Moment," *Sound of Life*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.soundoflife.com/blogs/people/composers-video-game-music-about-living-in-the-moment> (accessed November 10, 2021).

*V: Skyrim*; this research was published in a previous article.<sup>11</sup> Did these accusations impact, in any way, the modders' relationships with Soule's music and their own musical productions? While the content on Nexus Mods does not display changing relationships with Soule's music, content on Reddit provides more insight into this question, and a wider range of perspectives and users' backgrounds. Taking into account Soule's own position in the video game music world, how did fans of both *The Elder Scrolls* and the composer's own works react to these statements, and how did these statements affect fans' relationships with these musical contents?

Marking its tenth anniversary in 2021 with several online initiatives, including a concert, *Skyrim* is one of the most well-known RPGs in video game history.<sup>12</sup> *Skyrim* and its 2006 predecessor, *Oblivion*, are also two of the most modded games, thus resisting the passing of time. On the Nexus Mods platform, more than 2,500 files appear in the audio and music categories for these two games combined.<sup>13</sup> A relatively small number of new mods have been added to these categories in the three years that have passed since my earlier research with this material; but updates to files, patches, or descriptions are still being made, as recently as the time of this writing (September 2021). The preceding investigation solely focused on original music (i.e., music composed to be added to the games) preexisting music, and "others," including mods related to the aural universe but without any music, which limited the data to under 600 mods. For the present context, I restricted the filter in the entire category to the most recent updates and added specific terms to be found either in titles, descriptions, file names and others, such as "rape," "assault," "accusation," or "charge." While some mods include the term "Soule"—and those that do so all refer to Jeremy Soule as the main inspiration for their own mod, in terms of style, aesthetics, and compositional patterns, or just to praise him—none had any update made in order to mention the offense.

Only the mod *The Northerner Diaries - Immersive Edition (Music by Jeremy Soule)* uploaded by akod—updated on November 16, 2019, and which inserts tracks from Soule's album *The Northerner Diaries* into *Skyrim*—included an edit to its description:

All credit goes to Jeremy Soule. Find the Northerner Diaries here: <https://jeremysoule.bandcamp.com/album/the-northerner-diaries-symphonic-sketches>

Edit: for some reason Jeremy Soule's bandcamp has been totally obliterated. The album is still available on amazon (sucks, but at least it exists).<sup>14</sup>

11. Joana Freitas, "Kill the Orchestra: On Music, Mods, and Immersion in The Elder Scrolls on the Nexus Mods Platform," *Journal of Sound and Music in Games* 2, no. 2 (April 2021): 22–41, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsmg.2021.2.2.22> (accessed November 10, 2021).

12. "The Elder Scrolls Skyrim 10th Anniversary Fan Celebration," official website, <https://elderscrolls.bethesda.net/en/skyrim10> (accessed September 7, 2021).

13. For the purpose of this article, I have also included in the search criteria the category of *Skyrim's* Special Edition.

14. Description for *The Northerner Diaries - Immersive Edition (Music by Jeremy Soule)*, mod uploaded by user akod, Nexus Mods, August 9, 2019, <https://www.nexusmods.com/skyrimspedition/mods/28108?tab=description> (accessed September 7, 2021).

The user myztrikrice replied to this edit in June 2020, commenting that “he’s had sexual misconduct allegations made against him,” but then two further replies dismissed the fact and focused again on Soule’s Bandcamp page.<sup>15</sup>

Since the Nexus Mods platform is primarily used for sharing, downloading, and keeping up with mods and their creators, this apparent discretion or even absence of Soule’s acts is relatively unsurprising. It’s most likely that both mod authors and users mainly access and engage with this platform for its general purpose, restricting it for mod-only related content and not any further discussion and/or posts that arise from external contexts. By contrast, this news was met with much more engagement on the biggest forum of the internet, Reddit.

**when you just finish replaying Oblivion  
for the first time in years only to find  
out the game's composer who you have  
the autograph of and who literally made  
your childhood is currently being  
accused of sexual assault**



FIGURE 1. A meme posted in the subreddit The Elder Scrolls by user DenRing with the caption “current mood” following the news on Soule’s accusations (August 28, 2019, [https://www.reddit.com/r/ElderScrolls/comments/cwj59n/current\\_mood/](https://www.reddit.com/r/ElderScrolls/comments/cwj59n/current_mood/), accessed September 7, 2021).

15. Myztrikrice, comment on *The Northerner Diaries – Immersive Edition (Music by Jeremy Soule)* mod, Nexus Mods, June 20, 2019, <https://www.nexusmods.com/skyrimspicealedition/mods/28108?tab=posts&BH=0> (accessed September 7, 2021).

By making a general search on Reddit, not restricted by any threads or subreddits, for combinations with Jeremy Soule's name, I encountered twenty-six entries spread across fifteen different subreddits, mainly on r/skyrim and r/ElderScrolls.<sup>16</sup> Some of these entries were directly about Jeremy Soule's allegations—either news or opinions from external sources—while others were discussion threads, including comments and memes (see Figure 1). Common points can be found in several posts, namely doubting the victim's testimony, stating “innocent until proven guilty,” shock or sadness in favor of the composer, and even the uncertainty of the soundtracks' quality for the next installments.<sup>17</sup> The dismissal of Lawhead's experience and discrediting of the designer's testimony are common but unsurprising messages in many of these comments; such stances are not exclusive to the gamer community and are integral to several misogynistic online spaces. The victims' “lack of evidence,” among other arguments, is assumed to be a futile attempt to be famous and to destroy Soule's career—these common accusations in order to discredit a survivor are “emblematic of how the economy of visibility functions.”<sup>18</sup>

Other comments and reactions focus on waiting for further development by Soule and/or Lawhead, aiming to stay on “neutral ground.” Still other users fully support Lawhead and the difficult process of telling a traumatic event that not only included sexual assault but also workplace abuse (from crunching to lack of payment).

On a curious note, the single thread about Jeremy Soule's accusation on the subreddit r/GirlGamers, titled “Yet another beloved game tainted for me,” directly mentions Lawhead's writings on the composer's inspiration for his music. Lawhead wrote:

He talked about the mystical power women hold over men with sex. How men are helpless and they need sex. How he needs sex, and a relationship, so he can write his music. He talked about how composing is sexual, and how he will write about sex as inspiration in his music. He talked about how performing music is very sexual. He wrote songs about women that he had relationships with this way. What he does to women, is what inspires his music.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to supportive comments for Lawhead and general discomfort over this situation in the “Yet another beloved game tainted for me” thread, user ryan0585 suggested two versions of the music mod *Immersive Music* in order to replace Skyrim's original soundtrack: “Here are two mods for Skyrim lovers on PC for replace the soundtrack. No game needs to be ruined on account of one moron. Can't believe people think

16. These are, namely, r/skyrim, r/ElderScrolls, r/Guildwars2, r/WeinsteinEffect, r/BethesdaSoftworks, r/stupidpol, r/GamerGhazi, r/SRSGaming, r/AfterTheLoop, r/GirlGamers, r/Games, r/Morrowind, r/gamemusic, r/VideoGamesArt, and r/Feminism.

17. Besides a few mentions in these entries about Jeremy Soule's work with Bethesda for *The Elder Scrolls VI*, I encountered another seven threads that were directly about the future of the upcoming sequel's music. In these, users manifest their concern about how these allegations will sever the composer's ties with the studios or whether the next composer (probably Inon Zur, due to his work with *The Blades*) will follow Soule's styles and aesthetics.

18. Nelanhi Hewa, “The Mouth of the Internet, the Eyes of the Public: Sexual Violence Survivorship in an Economy of Visibility,” *Feminist Media Studies*, May 5, 2021, 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1922483> (accessed November 10, 2021).

19. Lawhead, “Calling Out My Rapist.”



screen. It is not my objective to delve into this issue of art versus artist in detail, as it is quite complex and outside of the scope of this article. It is worth noting, however, that these defense mechanisms are shaped by the same political perspective seen earlier in the #MeToo movement. Feminists or not, many users actively pursue this argument in order to keep appreciating their musical daily lives, aiming to maintain their own guilt-free morale. In the wake of this movement, the issue of “what to do with the abusers whose art we like”—although not a new problem—appeared in many forms and applied to artists such as the Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson, and Kevin Spacey, among many others.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, even if users completely boycott Jeremy Soule from their personal bubbles of media and entertainment, most of them will follow their moral compass to annul the negative and oppressive background of the artist for their own cultural consumption. This internal process is also a result of a likely unawareness of the disconnection between feminist empowerment and patriarchal dominance:

So what we need is a non-zero sum approach to this question, one that can account for the fact that an artwork can be both aesthetically pleasurable and politically disgusting, and that because of historical and ongoing/worsening patriarchy in our aesthetic norms and artistic practices, this is the only way for us to engage with and consume art and remain accountable for white supremacy, patriarchy, and other ongoing forms of systemic domination.<sup>25</sup>

As previously mentioned, misogyny, sexism, and oppressive discourses are still ingrained in the gaming community. Most of the threads about Soule’s allegations refused to embrace the victim’s testimony or chose to wait for further details in the legal process that should have been followed. Some users expressed their discontent with the composer’s actions, but only *if* the allegations were true, thus negotiating internalized sexism with an idea of gender awareness.

Ultimately—as of the time of this writing—these charges fell into the void. Soule only replied a few days later to Lawhead’s accusation by denying it: “These 11 year old allegations are false. I am shocked and saddened that these outrageous claims have been made,” and also to Brighton by stating, “I don’t agree with her point of view, and I’m not at liberty to discuss.”<sup>26</sup> The composer’s media pages went inactive or were closed down after the allegations, and not much has been heard of Soule since; nine threads on Reddit were posted asking about his whereabouts and about the future of *The Elder Scrolls VI*, a project that will most likely not involve Soule.

24. Jeet Heer and Jo Livingstone, “Woody Allen, #MeToo, and the Separation of Art and Artist,” *New Republic*, February 2, 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/146876/woody-allen-metoo-separation-art-artist> (accessed November 10, 2021); Amanda Hess, “How the Myth of the Artistic Genius Excuses the Abuse of Women,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/sexual-harassment-art-hollywood.html> (accessed November 10, 2021).

25. Robin James, “Must Be Love on the Brain?: Feminist Responses to the ‘Can We Separate Artwork from Artist’ Question in the Era of #MeToo Popular Feminisms,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 32, no. 4 (November 2020): 75–94, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.75> (accessed November 10, 2021).

26. D’Anastasio, “Two Women Accuse Skyrim Composer.”

Nevertheless, these accusations were key for a much-needed awareness in the gaming industry, both in labor conditions and gender equality, with more people speaking out on sexism, discrimination, and harassment. A recent example is the case at Activision Blizzard, where a sexual harassment scandal started when California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a lawsuit claiming that the studio created a culture of "constant sexual harassment."<sup>27</sup> The industry has begun to concern itself with gender discrimination, but sexism in gaming is far from over. ■

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27. Sean Hollister, "California Sues Activision Blizzard over a Culture of 'Constant Sexual Harassment,'" *The Verge*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/7/22/22588215/activision-blizzard-lawsuit-sexual-harassment-discrimination-pay> (accessed November 10, 2021). It's important to note that this scandal is still highly covered at the time of this writing. Well-known people in the company, including the CEO, left their positions, as many streamers and other online users took a stand concerning the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*. Composer Russell Brower altered his Twitter page by "banning" Blizzard's logo and adding a second sentence to his biography: "Composer, Music Director, Conductor – World of Warcraft, Diablo III, StarCraft II. Wish I could get those 12 years of my life back." (July 26, 2021, via the Internet Archive, [https://web.archive.org/web/20210726130339/https://twitter.com/Russell\\_Brower](https://web.archive.org/web/20210726130339/https://twitter.com/Russell_Brower), accessed November 10, 2021)

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