It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity

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Abstract

#Gamergate is an online movement ostensibly dedicated to reforming ethics in video games journalism. In practice, it is characterized by viciously sexual and sexist attacks on women in and around gaming communities. #Gamergate is also a site for articulating “Gamergater” as a form of geek masculinity. #Gamergate discussions across social media platforms illustrate how Gamergaters produce and reproduce this gendered identity. Gamergaters perceive themselves as crusaders, under siege from critics they pejoratively refer to as SJWs (social justice warriors). By leveraging social media for concern-trolling about gaming as an innocuous masculine pastime, Gamergaters situate the heterosexual White male as both the typical gamer and the real victim of #Gamergate. #Gamergate is a specific and virulent online node in broader discussions of privilege, difference, and identity politics. Gamergaters are an instructive example of how social media operate as vectors for public discourses about gender, sexual identity, and equality, as well as safe spaces for aggressive and violent misogyny.

Keywords
Gamergate, gaming cultures, geek masculinity, online harassment, social media

At the end of August 2014, many online gaming communities erupted into vicious arguments—ostensibly about ethics in video game journalism, but more pointedly about gender, privilege, and gaming. #Gamergate has refocused popular discussions about gaming cultures into ones about gender, launched female game developers and critics into the public spotlight, and raised additional questions about social media as an avenue for gendered harassment and threats. #Gamergate highlights aspects of dominant gaming cultures that many of its participants already know: they skew toward straight White males, and calls to recognize the full breadth of who plays games are met with hostility from “real” gamers. As games become an increasingly popular pastime across demographic categories, conversations about who counts as a gamer increase—in number, volume, and, often, negative tone. #Gamergate provides one perspective on the cultural fissures around this redefinition.

From this vantage point, we can also see “Gamergater” as a gendered identity, tied to the popular perception of a gamer as a socially inept young White male. This stereotype’s inaccuracy generates many of #Gamergate’s defining anxieties. When tracking #Gamergate discussions across social media platforms, we see Gamergaters on a crusade to save an innocuous male pastime from killjoy critics. Pejoratively referred to as social justice warriors (SJWs), Gamergaters discipline and discredit these critics as the wrong kind of women, who need to be put back in their place. Gamergaters situate themselves as the “real” victims, oppressed by calls for diversity and at risk of losing “their” games to more inclusive ones. Thus, #Gamergate is about more than games: as a set of anxieties, rhetorical strategies, and targeted hate campaigns, #Gamergate is an articulation of technology, privilege, and power.

Gaming and Gender

Historically, game companies have imagined an audience filled with young, White, heterosexual males. Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) describe how “the young male niche… was perceived as the key to dominance in the whole business,” and game companies have tended to court this demographic (p. 250). This industry construction of “gamer” is often reflected in the content of games themselves. Many games center on powerful White male protagonists, with women as damsels in distress or sexualized background decorations (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Kennedy, 2002; Sarkeesian, 2013). Non-White characters are frequently villains or obstacles, if they exist at all (Brock, 2011;
Higgin, 2009). These patterns contribute to the dominant image of “gamer” as a White male, for the “lack of portrayals of marginalized groups in video games is often tied to the fact that the industry rarely recognizes members of these groups as gamers” (Shaw, 2011, p. 28).

Yet recent research suggests that gaming is a widespread activity. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) notes that 42% of Americans regularly play video games, their average age is 35, and 44% of them are female (ESA, 2015). Even with such popularity, “gaming publics remain a contentious area where identity, as viewed from the outside, is continually negotiated and bounded by the many groups which participate within the technological space” (Salter & Blodgett, 2012, p. 413). On discussion boards like Reddit and in the comments sections for YouTube videos, participants haggle over what the label “gamer” really means and who can use it. These conversations go beyond simple tautologies: a gamer is not just someone who plays games, and someone who plays games is not automatically a gamer. Rather, “being a gamer is defined in relation to dominant discourses about who plays games, the deployment of subcultural capital, the context in which players find themselves, and who are the subjects of game texts” (Shaw, 2013, para 1; see also Shaw, 2014).

These are all shifting categories. The ESA report, for instance, illustrates the gap between the image and reality of who plays games, a reality that cannot be easily read off the games themselves. Fans, critics, and players engage in often-contentious debates about these texts. Calls for different kinds of content reveal the importance of representation and the reluctance of many players to critically confront their games:

> [P]osters who want to engage in sociopolitical discussions face an uphill battle. The forum may overwhelmingly reject the idea that sociopolitical issues are valid concerns when it comes to entertainment and delegitimize posters who raise such concerns by launching *ad hominem* attacks and characterizing them as not true video game fans. (McKernan, 2015, p. 245)

Attempts to intervene in privileged discourses of gamer identity, or to draw attention to games’ often limited representations, regularly return sexist, racist, and homophobic slurs (Gray, 2014). This is not to suggest that everyone who plays games, participates in, or even lurks on gaming-oriented social media and websites is racist, sexist, or homophobic. Yet, as many have noted, such “toxic technocultures . . . are enabled and propagated through sociotechnical networks such as Reddit, 4chan, Twitter, and online gaming” (Massanari, 2015, p. 5; see also Braithwaite, 2014; Condis, 2014; McKernan, 2015; Nakamura, 2013a, 2013b; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). #Gamergate is another instance of social media’s ability to make misogyny public.

Concretely measuring the size of a movement like #Gamergate is challenging, since it is easy for a single user to create multiple anonymous accounts on Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, and 4chan. Some suggest #Gamergate comprised approximately 10,000 participants, based on the number of active subscriptions to key #Gamergate sites such as Reddit’s KotakuInAction (devomet, in FEMAcampcounselor, 2014), or the increased number of Twitter followers for vocal #Gamergate advocates (“So just how popular is #GamerGate?,” 2014). The largest estimate, of 400,000, is based on the number of views for the most popular #Gamergate YouTube videos and is admittedly “super generous” (De La Cruz, 2015, sec. 4b) since it cannot account for potential multiple views by a single person. On social media, however, prominence is not only a matter of size but also a matter of being heard and of who hears you. This is, as Tim Jordan explains, characteristic of online discourse, which “requ[es] a communicative subject to be ‘heard’ before they become able to communicate” (in Shepherd, Harvey, Jordan, Srauy, & Miltnr, 2015, p. 3). Increasingly, being heard means being hateful, as our “technologies and cultures of social media interpellate particular subject-positions, normalizing behaviours that would seem inappropriate in other contexts” (Shepherd et al., 2015, p. 3).

#Gamergate, notably, is heard not only by gamers but also by mainstream press. Recounted in high-profile outlets like The New York Times (Wingfield, 2014a), Rolling Stone (Collins, 2014), and The Colbert Report (Comedy Central, 2014), #Gamergate brings discussions about gaming cultures and gamer identity to the forefront of cultural commentary. Much of this attention zeroes in on #Gamergate’s treatment of women, emphasizing how “gamer” is generally contingent upon gender. Such misogyny is a key component in understanding Gamergater as an iteration of geek masculinity. Geek masculinity is a gender identity characterized in part by “a strong interest in technology and playing computer games . . . These performances of expertise, skill, and knowledge are not only sources of social connection and pleasure, but also work as important markers for inclusion and exclusion” (Taylor, 2012, p. 111; see also Dunbar-Hester, 2008; Kendall, 2011). Like other gender identities, geek masculinity is relational: it is understood relative to forms of femininity as well as hegemonic masculinity.

As Connell (1995/2005) explains, hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77; see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Geek masculinity expresses a different configuration of masculinity, incorporating some elements of hegemonic masculinity (such as judgment and mastery) while often renouncing others (such as sporting or athletic cultures) (Taylor, 2012). Formed and re-formed, geek masculinity is a way of doing gender in a specific situation and for a specific end (Connell, 1995/2005; see also Butler, 1990).
In this situation, geek masculinity is conditioned by practices that have historically equated technological access and prowess with masculinity (Wacjman, 1991), as well as popular perceptions that gaming is a “guy thing” (Burrill, 2008; Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). At the same time, geek masculinity also disavows stereotypically masculine interests in favor of technology and gaming, meaning “those who identify with geek culture often feel marginal, as their interests are marked by the dominant culture as odd or weird” (Massanari, 2015, p. 4). For the gaming industry, however, this dedicated male audience has been lucrative and courted nearly exclusively during the industry’s early years (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Kline et al., 2003). Gamergaters are working to maintain the dominance of this geek masculinity in gaming, as its position is challenged by SJWs’ arguments for equality and inclusivity.

Such arguments illustrate how the gaming industry is growing and changing. This is due in part to the increasing popularity of “casual” games like Candy Crush and Farmville, which are “easy to learn to play, fit well with a large number of players and work in many different situations” (Juul, 2010, p. 5). Often associated with women and femininity (Anable, 2013; Juul, 2010; Taylor, 2012), these games are helping redefine what counts as gaming and impacts who is able to lay claim to titles like “fan” or “gamer”... what happens when new users lay claim to those titles, and how some fans are reacting to the loss of their privileged relationships with content producers. (Condis, 2014, p. 199)

We can see some of these reactions in #Gamergate’s reliance on discourses of battle, exclusion, and victimization.

#Gamergate and Critical Discourse Analysis

#Gamergate is not bound within a single online space. Its discussions slide across social media sites, which are challenging to document fully: their content is constantly changing as threads may be deleted, user accounts removed, and links expired. Here, I stitch together an illustrative rather than exhaustive account of #Gamergate in order to demonstrate some of its most salient features. My goal, then, is not to establish a definitive listing of #Gamergate sites and networks. Such a thing is nearly impossible, and what I provide here is necessarily incomplete.

My identification of #Gamergate’s themes and targets is also partial. #Gamergate is a slippery set of conversations, only loosely oriented around issues and sites. With multiple entry points, there are multiple interpretations of what #Gamergate is and what it means, for both outside observers and its active participants. While #Gamergate discussions often contain vastly different stances, the consistent use of a single hashtag encourages us to treat these differences in concert with each other (Chess & Shaw, 2015). I offer one way of understanding #Gamergate: as a misogynist claim to games and gamer identity. The discursive conventions of social media enable this reading of #Gamergate; social media are spaces where vitriol is an increasingly legitimate vehicle for articulating a point of view, where “the cultural acceptance of hateful epithets [are] themselves constitutive of online interactivity” (Shepherd, in Shepherd et al., 2015, p. 7). This acceptance can preclude a closer look at such discourses, including what they can tell us about gendered power dynamics in online spaces. I am to treat such speech as “a discursive act in itself, not an obstruction of that act” (Nakamura, 2013a, para 2).

To do so, I entered #Gamergate discourse by looking at sites like Reddit, 4chan, 8chan, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube, where #Gamergate discussions are most active. I also relied on secondhand collections of social media materials. “Game fans are extremely valuable resources for scholars because they are obsessive chroniclers of their own experiences, opinions, and information,” and these archives help fill in the gaps left by the ephemeral nature of social media content (Nakamura, 2013b, p. 12). My path through this material most closely resembles the “snowball” approach—I followed the trails created by #Gamergate’s participants, who provide links to numerous sites, Twitter feeds, Tumblr accounts, and discussion boards as part of their own posts. I aimed to experience #Gamergate discourses as posters themselves seemed to: via a web of claims spun across social media sites. Along the way, I was looking for how “dominance may be enacted and reproduced by subtle, routine, everyday forms of text and talk that appear ‘natural’ and quite ‘acceptable’” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 254).

In particular, I focused on instances of aggressive, hateful discourse that are increasingly “natural” and “quite acceptable” online (see also Gray, 2014; Shepherd et al., 2015). I paid specific attention to how these discourses invoke gender since one of the primary ways #Gamergate has been characterized by participants and the popular press is as an attack on women (Collins, 2014; Dewey, 2014; Hathaway, 2014; Wingfield, 2014a). I discovered that #Gamergate discussions, which focus on gender rely on three particular rhetorical figures and storytelling strategies (van Dijk, 1993, p. 264): crusader imagery, disciplining unruly female voices, and claims that “real”—that is, male—gamers are the actual victims of #Gamergate. Like other examinations of discourse within gaming communities, my approach “emphasizes everyday interaction, thematic interpretation over the specifically linguistic, and the use of excerpt alongside argument” (Milner, 2011, p. 166; see also Condis, 2014; Dutton, Consalvo, & Harper, 2011; McKernan, 2015; Milner, 2009). My investigation thus incorporates text-, image-, and video-based arguments circulated in service of #Gamergate.

I have left these arguments intact by reproducing posts verbatim. In doing so, I mean to convey, as closely as possible, the tone and cadence of participants’ contributions. By tracking these conversations across social media networks, I
aim to contribute to larger conversations about social media and social justice. The presence and prevalence of misogynistic speech can be “viewed as a sign that a network is robust, and it is being used and used hard” (Nakamura, 2013a, para 2; see also Gray, 2014). Understanding how #Gamergate imagines “gamer” is part of a necessary interrogation of the intersections of identities, technologies, and power on social media.

The #Gamergate Crusade

Accounts chronicling #Gamergate usually point to the 16 August 2014 release of “The Zoe Post” as its beginning (Hathaway, 2014; Kain, 2014). Written by Eron Gjoni (2014), this blog entry details the messy and convoluted end of his romantic relationship with independent game designer Zoe Quinn, who had recently released a free game called Depression Quest. Gjoni accuses Quinn of cheating on him with, among others, a journalist from the gaming site Kotaku. The implication that Quinn had traded sex for a favorable review circulated on well-trafficked forums like Reddit and 4chan, despite evidence to the contrary (Totilo, 2014). When it seemed like no prominent gaming news sites were going to report on Gjoni’s intensely personal missive, these discussions turned into declarations of corruption in games journalism. Actor Adam Baldwin tweeted his concern about the situation, tagging it #Gamergate, and the hashtag stuck.

#Gamergate’s stated purpose—to advocate for more transparent and ethical games journalism—was overshadowed by a barrage of largely negative attention directed at Quinn, Brianna Wu (a game developer), and Anita Sarkeesian (a feminist pop culture vlogger who had already received rape and death threats for her Tropes vs Women in Video Games series; Sarkeesian, 2012). After following the #Gamergate hashtag from 1 September to 23 October 2014, Newsweek concluded that “Gamergaters cares less about ethics and more about harassing women,” based on a significant discrepancy between the number and nature of tweets aimed at critics like Wu and Sarkeesian, and those directed toward game journalists (Wofford, 2014, para 13).

Twitter is one of many social media spaces Gamergaters use. On YouTube, for instance, the video “#Gamergate: For Those Who Stand and Fight” (PowerIndustry, 2014) captures the bombastic tone of much #Gamergate rhetoric. Nearly 9 min long, the video features black-and-white gameplay footage from a variety of first-person shooters and wartime games, intercut with website headlines and stills from Sarkeesian’s Tropes vs Women series. A calm male voiceover establishes a moral trajectory for Gamergaters, scripting them as dauntless crusaders in a corrupt, uncar ing world:

The shield of deception and lies has never once stopped even the weakest parry from the sword of truth. For it is truth that has driven back the darkness of the primordial age. It has turned huts to nations and nations to civilizations. It has pumped electricity into your home and put the sun as the centre of the solar system. It has brought the world closer to becoming the sons of God we were meant to be. (PowerIndustry, 2014)

Here, Gamergaters have a manifest destiny. The video envisions #Gamergate as a battle between forces of darkness and light, in which Gamergaters fight to preserve the purity and goodness of games. Gamergaters’ references to war create a “narrative framing to set themselves as ‘the good guys’” on a quest for truth (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). This fervor recurs across social media networks. For example, a resource thread for Gamergaters on 4chan’s /v/ (video games) board is titled “World War /v/ Part 10” (2014). Similarly, when #Gamergate-supported group The Fine Young Capitalists (2014) resolved a dispute with frequent #Gamergate target Zoe Quinn, they titled the resolution “Peace Treaty.” Such binary logic is a typical tactic on social media, and Gamergaters employ it here to script #Gamergate as a “zero-sum struggle—justified as a moral struggle—against (perceived) threats” (Srauy, in Shepherd et al., 2015, p. 4).

8chan posters draw upon this same imagery in a thread about Sarkeesian’s 29 October 2014 appearance on The Colbert Report. Speaking as one soldier to many more, one commenter posts, “The war is still there for you in the mornin’ soldier. Rest when you can, fight when you must, but always, always keep your head in the game” (cited in Futrelle, 2014c, para 20).

The reminder to “keep your head in the game” anchors Gamergaters’ dominance in video games. Gamergaters see themselves at distinct advantage, their victory guaranteed by destroying your opponent’s assets, but by driving your opponent to fail cascade.

Piroko positions #Gamergate as a war game and holds up the large-scale assaults in EVE Online as a strategic model for Gamergaters. As commenter zabchob says, “Great post, thanks for this. Eve PVP really does demonstrate just how formidable gamers can be as opponents, and how a common identity can really strengthen resolve’” (in Piroko, 2014).

 Wars between rival alliances fighting in EVE Online, and the conflict between gamers and social justice warriors, are very similar. They are both culture wars, and are won or lost not by destroying your opponent’s assets, but by driving your opponent to fail cascade.

The idea of being at war colors much of #Gamergate rhetoric. “The projection of this heroic struggle into the subtext of the community’s discourse is reflected in the rhetoric of villains and enmity, of outsiders and insiders,” and of Gamergaters themselves as mythic heroes (Salter & Blodgett,
Disciplining the Enemy

#Gamergate’s status as a pitched battle between crusaders and SJWs relies on clearly defined boundaries: between Gamergaters and agitators, between customers and critics. In #Gamergate, gamers don’t criticize games, and critics don’t play them: “Who do you make games for? Do you make them for the perpetually and chronically offended? Or do you make games for gamers?” (Campbell, 2015). This exclusionary logic is central to social media, as a “toxic technoculture often relies [on] an Othering of those perceived as outside the culture” (Massanari, 2015, p. 5). A war game needs enemies to defeat, and #Gamergate has a range of strategies for discrediting its detractors.

Some of these directly invoke past wartime propaganda. Gamergaters have repurposed Nazi-era anti-Semitism, going after Sarkeesian on Twitter with slurs like “Jewkeesian” (McCormack, 2014). Gamergaters also create caricatures of Sarkeesian as the avaricious Jew, reproducing past forms of dehumanization to legitimize #Gamergate’s attacks (Nyberg, 2014; Savannah, 2014). Other tactics work similarly. In a post on the KotakuInAction subreddit, Luzarius (2015) offers a method for dealing with Sarkeesian: “Let’s praise her when she says something right and criticize her when she says something only a non-gamer with an agenda would say.” This rhetoric of obedience training frames critics as willful and stubborn, in need of “one man who is a real gamer to show her the ropes and she’ll tone down her ways” (Luzarius, 2015).

Game developer Brianna Wu also receives dismissive attacks. Many on 8chan, for instance, target her appearance: “Stop calling that rotten faggot a she, you are insulting every real woman in existence comparing them to that creature” (“Fuck Her,” 2015, no. 640646). Gendered pronouns and phrases are changed from her to him, from “woman-splain” to “freak-splain,” because “you only get to be called She if you can pass, this one cannot, what’s his real name again?” (“Fuck Her,” 2015, no. 640982). Here, #Gamergaters attempt to discredit Wu based on her self-presentation. By not meeting their ideals of sexual attractiveness and availability, Wu must be lying about her gender; if Wu is lying about her gender, then anything else she says cannot be taken seriously. These comments are meant to discipline critics, not only because Sarkeesian and Wu are vocal proponents of improving games and gaming environments but also because they are women. As Salter and Blodgett (2012) note, “Women within the hardcore gaming public are given tightly bound roles to play and punished for stepping outside them” (p. 411). Women can only be one of three things: sex objects, invisible, or the enemy (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Since Sarkeesian and Wu do not promote themselves as sex objects and refuse to remain silent or invisible, they must be the enemy.

For many Gamergaters, evaluating women’s sexual behavior takes precedence over critiquing ethical transgressions in games journalism: “Understandably, the focus was kept on her [Zoe Quinn] for awhile because even though the target should have always been Kotaku/Grayson, she’s a superhumanly awful whore and everyone was disgusted by her” (“#GamerGate—FLOOD #PAX,” 2014, no. 260980887). 4chan Internet Relay Chat (IRC) logs dated shortly after the release of Gjoni’s “The Zoe Post” illustrate Gamergaters’ preoccupation with policing female sexuality:

The 4channers express their hatred and disgust towards her; they express their glee at the thought of ruining her career; they fantasize about her being raped and killed . . . And then there is the ongoing discussion of her vagina, described variously as “wide,” large enough to “fit 12 dicks at once” and “a festering cheese-filled vagina” that leaves “a trail of cunt slime” wherever she goes. (Futrelle, 2014d, paras 15 and 18)

In #Gamergate, women’s primary value lies in service of a domineering, aggressive masculinity. For example, in 8chan’s “Women of Gamergate thread!” (2015), commenters post pictures of women associated with #Gamergate “to brighten our spirits . . . SO show off those tits, asses, vagina’s” (no. 213587). Some are panned based on appearance: “why are her breasts being raped and killed . . . And then there is the ongoing discussion of her vagina, described variously as ‘wide,’” large enough to “fit 12 dicks at once” and “a festering cheese-filled vagina” that leaves “a trail of cunt slime” wherever she goes. (Futrelle, 2014d, paras 15 and 18)

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women. Born from the video game subreddit (/v/) to support The Fine Young Capitalists’ game development project, Vivian James is drawn as a pale redhead, clad in jeans and a striped hoodie, and 4chan’s clover pinned in her hair (DrMobius, 2014). “Low-affect” and “loves video games,” Vivian James is meant to somehow mitigate accusations that #Gamergate is misogynistic (DrMobius, 2014). As a fictional female gamer, however, her actions and opinions are determined entirely by her creators. In some instances, Vivian James represents broader #Gamergate themes: a depiction of her as the goddess of war greets visitors to The Fine Young Capitalist’s website, and an image of her hollering “Get off your high horse, bitch!” appears frequently on Twitter and Tumblr.

In others, Vivian James is, like the other women of #Gamergate, considered solely as a sex object. 8chan posters swap images of Vivian James in sexually suggestive poses (“Mods Are Asleep,” 2015): her pants half-down; taking off her hoodie to reveal her bra; posing like a pin-up model in underwear and knee-high socks; playing video games in nothing but lingerie. Many are more explicit: reclining naked with legs spread; having sex with another woman; masturbating with a console controller; being aggressively penetrated by the male cartoon figure used to represent 4chan—Vivian James is calling him Daddy, while he yells “DON’T CUM SO FAST YOU FUCKIN’ CASUAL.” From 8chan offer Gamergaters the opportunity to participate in a discourse that reduces women, both real and fictional, to sex objects. When the shape of a woman’s breasts is enough reason to ignore her, the possibilities for generating a thoughtful conversation are greatly diminished. These tactics turn “the seemingly social spaces of Web 2.0 into tools for the exclusion and perpetuation of a male-dominated gaming social public” (Salter & Blodgett, 2012, p. 402).

#Gamergate’s Real Victims

Designed to demonstrate that they have been unfairly labeled misogynists, Vivian James is part of Gamergaters’ argument that they are the real victims. Gamergaters see themselves as besieged by SJWs whose critiques are personal and political, and part of an insidious plot to destroy gaming entirely. Gamergaters “refuse to stand by idly while the emphasis in gaming is taken away from quality and focused on social politics” (“An Open Letter,” 2014). As Condis (2014) incisively notes, “ideology or ‘politics’ is always the label given to what someone else cares about” (p. 207). SJWs are talking about ideology, while real gamers are talking about games.

Games are thus only the beginning, a culture war’s early salvo from which Gamergaters have the most to lose. Chess and Shaw (2015) argue that such logic can be more fully grasped “if we look at it in term of a combination of perceived persecution and an examination of the anxieties that a conspiracy is articulating” (p. 217). Some Gamergaters are haunted, for instance, by the specter of a gaming press complicit in the SJW agenda. This sentiment is a response to the publication of a handful of opinion pieces about the current state of gaming cultures and communities, with titles like “We might be witnessing the ‘death of an identity’” (Plunkett, 2014), “The end of gamers” (Golding, 2014), and “Gamers’ don’t have to be your audience. ‘Gamers are over’” (Alexander, 2014). These, and other similar articles, draw attention to the same kind of information contained in the ESA (2015) report: video games are increasingly popular and are being played by a diverse range of people. Ergo, the columnists contend, the label “gamer,” and the cultures around it, should adapt in turn. Gamergaters point to the stereotype of “lonely basement kids’” and “people who know so little about how human social interaction and professional life works” as evidence that gamers have been maligned and belittled for decades (Alexander, 2014, paras 3 and 12). At the same time, “gamer” is a point of shared history, solidarity, and often gender identity; predictions of its demise are taken personally: “By having male spaces where they can feel safe, they don’t feel like their refuge is under attack. Gaming is one of those refuges. Instead you’ve got feminists storming the castle walls and poking these guys with sticks” (DaNiceGuy, cited in Futrelle, 2014b, para 1).

“Gamer” is thus a protective barrier. For Gamergaters, more diverse and inclusive games can only come at the expense of their own sense of identity. This feels less like an industry’s evolution and more like an attack:

yes i may be an evil cis gendered “white” male, however through out my earlier life i was the outsider, the person to, while not out right shun, just not to be interacted with. It wasnt until, for the most part, i was able to get a constant access to the internet was i able to feel like i belong anywhere. even to this day due to the earlier outcasting do i have trouble connecting to anyone. Gaming/In emer has let me belong,not feel so alone and fuck these people for demonizing it and me over and over and over again. (CynicCorvus in gekkozorz, 2015)

In seeing themselves as the real victims, Gamergaters assume moral superiority. Their aggressive and misogynistic claims circulate on social media as an expression of this position, “disguis[ing] hate as a moral campaign against a perceived immoral threat” (Strauy, in Shepherd et al., 2015, p. 5). Gamergaters’ feelings of victimization also highlight the close ties between gamer as a gendered identity and gamer as a consumer category. As many comments suggest, “there is a genuine sense of loss, watching games become mainstream and accessible” (Juul, 2010, p. 151). This loss is bound up with geek masculinity so that arguments for inclusivity are understood as attacks on men:

Have you not noticed? GAMER is a proxy word for MEN. They want to eradicate GAMER culture? Yeah, guess who that really means. The SJWs won’t be happy until male culture as we know it has vanished, cosigned to the aether like a memory or a
fleeting moment of “what could have been.” (fingerjesus, cited in Futrelle, 2014a, para 7)

In some respects, Gamergaters are correct. Large video games companies have long benefitted from targeting young White males (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Kline et al., 2003). Now, the rage we see expressed by threatened individuals and groups seems to be based on at least two factors—sexist (as well as racist, homophobic and ageist) beliefs about the abilities and proper place of female players, and fears about the changing nature of the game industry. (Consalvo, 2012, para 8; see also Gray, 2014)

Expanding the range of audible consumer voices means capturing more effectively the types of games being played and the kinds of people who play them. Gamergaters see this as betrayal. As one Voat commenter says,

it feels like I’m running out of places to go . . . gaming is mine . . . it is the single hobby that takes precedent above all my other hobbies, even reading. I would sooner die than lost this bastion of nerdom. (AustNerevar in mnemosyne-0000, 2015)

The historically privileged position “gamer” has in relation to the gaming industry been internalized as a right by Gamergaters who identify with the term, and efforts to broaden the category are an incursion into the proper order of things.

Yet identifying how men have been favored as a demographic is not victimization. Making the conceptual leap from one to the other means ignoring the power imbalances the gaming industry has grown up with; “It is difficult to understand those involved in the GamerGate movement as ‘persecuted’—the movement is inhabited by people who, by and large, are representations of the power structures that have been built into gaming culture for decades” (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 216). The language of privilege, rights, and loss indicates that, at its core, #Gamergate is about power. Gamergaters’ threats to boycott games and companies—dubbed Operation Disrespectful Nod (Dewey, 2014)—demonstrate that video games are most useful as a staging point in a social media struggle over whose voices should be heard.

**The Futures of Online Harassment**

At the end of September 2014, Intel pulled its ads from game development news site Gamasutra, in response to Gamergaters’ campaign to have Leigh Alexander’s (2014) “Gamers are over” opinion piece read as bullying (Wingfield, 2014b). Despite their anxieties, Gamergaters—as the self-proclaimed vanguard of typical gamers—remain a visible and powerful category of consumers. Their intimidation tactics also take the form of threats against some of the most vocal female critics in gaming. For example, Anita Sarkeesian canceled a talk at Utah State University in October 2014 after the school received an email claiming, “If you do not cancel her talk, a Montreal Massacre style attack will be carried out against the attendees, as well as students and staff at the nearby Women’s Center” (Anon., quoted in Neugebauer, 2014). The invocation of the Montreal Massacre is telling, as it suggests these gendered anxieties persist beyond social media and gaming.

#Gamergate is a compelling and often frightening point on a continuum of male behavior Michael Kimmel (2013) calls an “aggrieved entitlement” to use violence to reclaim privileges seen as rightfully belonging to men. #Gamergate’s articulation across social media gives us a window into how Gamergaters’ grievances take shape via the righteous rhetoric of a crusade, the objectification and exclusion of women, and the argument that gamer masculinity itself is under siege. Such sentiments stick to #Gamergate, as it relies on social media as spaces in which aggressive, sexualized attacks against women are seen as reasonable, even moral modes of argumentation.

The “discursive environments of sexism, racism, and homophobia deserve critical attention because they are central to games culture,” and in #Gamergate these environments are leveraged to create an atmosphere of fear and paranoia among women who speak out (Nakamura, 2013b, p. 4; see also Gray, 2014). #Gamergate claims to be rooted in a desire for more ethical and transparent games journalism, and there are indeed many compelling questions to ask about the imbrication of the gaming press in publicity circuits engineered by massive media conglomerates. However, the repeated use of the #Gamergate hashtag in misogynistic performances of geek masculinity makes such a stance more difficult to see.

Instead, #Gamergate appears to be most adept at using social media to produce and reproduce reactionary narratives about gender, technology, privilege, and power. These sentiments move quickly across social media platforms, reinforcing the premise that women are not welcome—in gaming, or online. In many ways, #Gamergate is simply Internet business as usual; much of the vitriol chronicled here is routinely found in other virtual places. Yet, and importantly, #Gamergate made this kind of “ordinary” harassment newsworthy, calling our collective attention to the sustained abuse many people endure in order to participate in online spaces. By bringing “gamer” out of the basement and into the light, we can see more clearly the challenges we face as we work toward more inclusive communities.

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