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PCAS Conference 2014, New Orleans

Playing in the Shadow of Privilege: The Hostile Fandom of Videogames

Before I begin I just want to warn you that some of the content in this presentation will be offensive and might be upsetting. Please feel free to leave if you are uncomfortable.

When I proposed this paper in April, gaming's fandom had long been characterized by a low-grade albeit pervasive misogyny. Suggestions that female players should "Go make me a sandwich!" and requests for pictures of women's breasts were common enough occurrences in multiplayer online games, and the overall tenor of the gaming community was reflective of a junior high boys' locker room. In late August, a female developer by the name of Zoe Quinn became the target of an organized harassment campaign given the hashtag GamerGate. This particular scandal came to light when Quinn's ex-boyfriend, upset about her infidelity, posted nude photographs of Quinn to a thread on 4chan. The photos rapidly spread to Reddit's r/gaming thread, and from there to the rest of the internet.

Quinn's illicit relationship happened to be with a journalist from the gaming site *Kotaku*, and gamers on 4chan and Reddit immediately jumped to the conclusion that Quinn had slept with the journalist in order to secure a positive review of her text adventure game *Depression Quest* (2013). Within days it became clear that the accusations were ludicrous; not only did the journalist in question not review Quinn's game, but no one at *Kotaku* had done so. Nevertheless, gaming journalism came under fire, and *Kotaku*'s Editor in Chief Stephen Totilo announced



a change in policy for journalists, requiring them to divulge any personal connections to developers.

Yet this was not the end of GamerGate, which continues to fizzle on both Reddit and 4chan, and which caused harassment to be aimed at Quinn and her supporters. In early September, the FBI became involved as Quinn and feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian were both subject to direct threats against their homes and families. Sites like *GawkerMedia*, *The Mary Sue*, and *Feministing* increased the stringency of their online commenting policies, and Twitter instituted a new form for reporting harassment and threats.

In order to have any hope of understanding the contradictory mess that is gaming fandom, it is important to recognize the origins of both videogames and gaming culture. The “first” digital game appears to have been a computerized version of Tic Tac Toe, programmed by Alexander Douglas at Cambridge University in 1952; in 1958, William Higinbotham produced an oscilloscope version of Ping Pong at Brookhaven National Laboratory; and in 1962 a team of MIT researchers led by Steve Russell created *Spacewar*, the first computer game that was not a digitized version of something else.¹

At this point in time only military, research, and academic institutions had access to computers, all spaces dominated by male members of the military and the academe. As a result, games – which became more mainstream in the late 1970s into the 80s – are the direct product of the hyper-masculine U.S. military industrial complex.² Created in predominantly male-coded

¹ John Kirriemuir, “A History of Digital Games,” in *Understanding Digital Games*, ed. Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 22.

² Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, *Electronic Mediations* 29 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxix.

spaces, games reinforced, and even now often continue to reinforce, male “identities as citizen-soldiers, free-agent workers, cyborg adventurers, and corporate criminals.”³

Because of this, although the 1970s and 80s saw women increasingly present in media and the workplace, games remained identified with masculinity.⁴ This conception of gamer identity persisted into the 1990s and early 2000s. A 1998 survey found that 80% of videogame players were male, a demographic only reinforced by the industry: Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter note that these origins and marketing

The military origins of simulations, the monasticism of hacker culture, the bad-boy arcade ambience, testosterone niche marketing, developers’ hiring of experienced (hence male) players, game capital’s risk-averse adherence to proven shooting, sports, fighting, and racing formulae – all combined to form a self-replicating culture whose sexual politics were coded into every Game Boy handheld, every *Duke Nukem* double entendre, and every booth babe at industry conferences, where women appeared only as imperiled princesses and imperiling vixens.⁵

With the introduction of the Xbox in 2001, online play promised to expand gaming’s horizons. In actuality, however, the predominantly white male demographic immediately and hostilely otherized non-white and non-male participants in the new forum, and by the 2005 release of the Xbox 360, had already “establish[ed] a distinct hypermasculine – hard-core – ambience around the Xbox.”⁶ In turn, these “hard-core” subjects – straight white males between the ages of fifteen and thirty – came to represent the games industry as a whole, in terms of both production and consumption.

Yet this was not always the case. Tracy Lien notes that, originally, “Many of the games released were gender-neutral.”⁷ It wasn’t until the 1990s that industry marketers began to

³ Ibid., xxix.

⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁷ Tracy Lien, “No Girls Allowed,” *Polygon*, December 2, 2013, <http://www.polygon.com/features/2013/12/2/5143856/no-girls-allowed>, para. 33.

specifically target boys. She explains that “In [the] wake of the video game crash, the game industry’s pursuit of a safe and reliable market led to it homing in on the young male. Video games were heavily marketed as products for men, and the message was clear: No girls allowed.”⁸

Marketing continues to focus on the young white male demographic, creating and cementing the gamer stereotype among both gamers and non-gamers alike. The image of the angry teenage boy playing a violent first-person shooter has persisted in part, argues gaming academic Ian Bogost, “because of moral panics”:

In recent decades, when video games have appeared in the news, it's often been bad news. There were the reports linking the Columbine shooters to *Doom*. There were the stories linking Norwegian killer Anders Breivik to *World of Warcraft*. Most recently, Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza was reported to have played first-person shooters...The result is whenever video games come up in conversation, those are the games that people associate with the medium.⁹

The result of all this is that both gamers themselves and American society at large have a very specific conception of what videogames are and who it is that plays them – but this perception does not match reality.

The 2014 sale, demographic, and usage data from the Entertainment Software Association shows the gender distribution of gamers as 52% male, 48% female, with the purchase of games equally split between men and women.¹⁰ The ESA further notes that women over 18 make up 36% of gamers, in comparison to boys under 18 at 17%.¹¹ Adult female gamers have been playing, on average, for thirteen years in comparison to adult males at eighteen years, reflective of the male-oriented marketing of the 1990s.¹²

⁸ Ibid., para. 55.

⁹ Ibid., para. 69.

¹⁰ Ipsos MediaCT, *Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*, Survey (entertainment software association, 2014), 3-4.

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

¹² Ibid., 3.

Yet despite the almost equal number of male and female gamers, women make up only 22% of industry professionals.¹³ The continued dominance of men on the development side most likely contributes to the continued production of male-targeted games, like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty*, and the prevalence of male protagonists across all gaming genres.

Nick Yee notes “that 85 percent of all video game characters are male.”¹⁴ While 51% of protagonists are male, 45% of protagonists have their gender (male or female) left to the choice of the player, leaving only 4% of protagonists exclusively female.¹⁵ Yee observes that this disparity in content feeds into the gender gap in the industry:

Boys encouraged to play video games grow up to become men who are interested in making video games. Girls, on the other hand, are discouraged from playing video[] games and do not grow up with the desire to create games. The end result is that video gaming is dominated by male game designers making games for male players.¹⁶

Interestingly, this is also true of the *perception* of gamers; despite evidence to the contrary, most people persist in the assumption that the majority of gamers are young white males, since that is the image created by the vast majority of games. The disparity between the actual and perceived gender distribution among games has led to a recent surge in fan outcry for better gender representation.

The last five or so years have been highly productive in terms of increasing the diversity of both gamers and games, particularly in the so-called indie market. Indie – or independent – games, like indie films, are created by small teams and are generally released to smaller audiences

¹³ Kate Edwards et al., *IGDA Developer Satisfaction Survey 2014*, Survey (International Game Developers Association, 2014), 9

¹⁴ Nick Yee, *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us - And How They Don't* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 99.

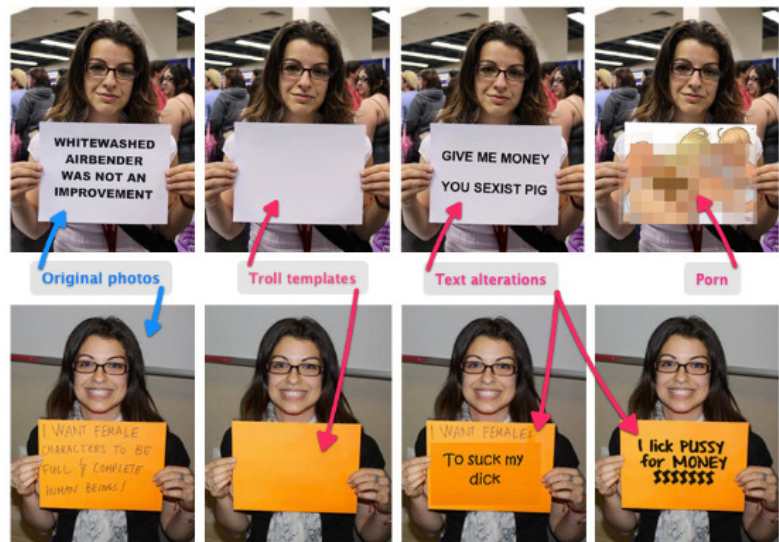
¹⁵ Ben Kuchera, “Games with Exclusively Female Heroes Don’t Sell (Because Publishers Don’t Support Them),” *Penny Arcade Report*, November 21, 2012, <http://penny-arcade.com/report/editorial-article/games-with-female-heroes-dont-sell-because-publishers-dont-support-them>.

¹⁶ Yee, *Proteus*, 99.

than the major AAA titles. Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter suggest that indie developers “are a key expression of the multitude’s ‘powerful desire for global democracy,’” an argument reflected by the wider diversity evident in both indie games and among indie developers.¹⁷ However, despite this, women within indie gaming also have a much higher incidence of harassment from the “hard-core” male fans who find something offensive about their creations or their presence in male-dominated cyberspace.

Similarly, gaming journalism and criticism has expanded to include women and people of color, both in online blogs and more traditional modes, including professional journalism and academia. In 2012, pop culture blogger Anita Sarkeesian – creator of the Feminist Frequency site – initiated a Kickstarter to produce a video series on games modelled after a series entitled “Tropes vs. Women” on tv and film which she had created with *Bitch* magazine.

Sarkeesian’s experience became emblematic of the treatment women in gaming could come to expect over the next two years and counting. The positive outcome is that Sarkeesian raised over \$150,000 for her project, well beyond the requested \$6,000.



However, in addition to this support, she became the victim of a hate-and-harassment campaign that continues today. She regularly receives antagonistic and offensive comments on her YouTube channel, website, Facebook, and Twitter, and via phone, email, and postal mail. I’ve chosen only

¹⁷ Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 188.

I hope you get cancer :)
 angrymarketing5 14 minutes ago 6 👍

I'll donate \$50 if you make me a sandwich.
 pat678457 14 minutes ago 4 👍

LESBIANS: THE GAME is all this bitch wants
 LoganCovers91 15 minutes ago 4 👍

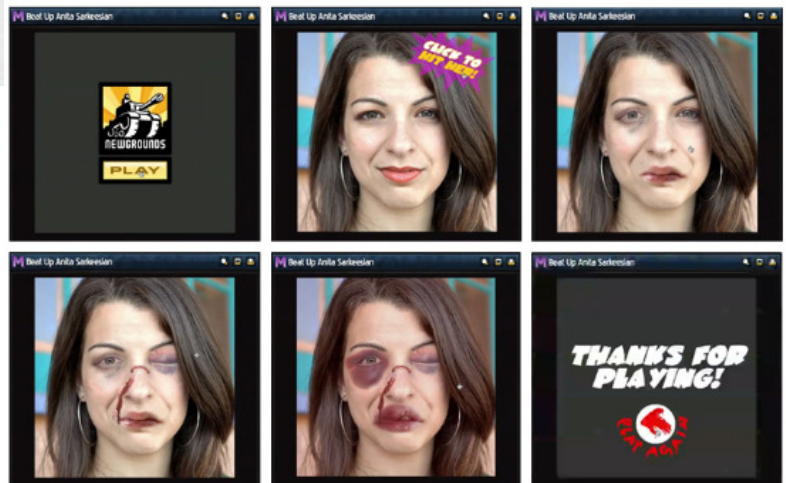
LOL NEXT THING THEY'LL WANT TO VOTE.
 iXmcXDIVinE 15 minutes ago 2 👍

Yeah, I can't wait for the day we get to play "ugly feminist ham planet: the game" That would sell millions of units
 94chrisconnor 20 minutes ago 3 👍

its just a game those girls arent real now arent they?
 theibol 21 minutes ago

a few of the less offensive options. She has been threatened with assault, rape, and murder; her family and supporters are regularly harassed; and one enterprising man even designed a Flash game in which players could click to punch a photo of Sarkeesian, which

would develop cuts and bruises. On a positive note, at the Game Developers' Conference in March 2014, Sarkeesian was presented with an Ambassador Award, given to people "who have helped the game industry advance to a



better place," in spite of a threat called in to the GDC convention center stating that "A bomb will be detonated at the Game Developer's Choice award ceremony tonight unless Anita Sarkeesian's Ambassador Award is revoked."¹⁸ The police swept the arena and found nothing, and the ceremony continued as planned.

Unfortunately, Sarkeesian's experience, although extreme, is not an isolated case, as my opening account of GamerGate suggests. Multiple industry professionals – including Phil Fish, Mattie Brice, Jenn Frank, and Samantha Allen – have left the industry entirely rather than deal with targeted harassment campaigns. This is not to say that there is no support for increased

¹⁸ Rebecca Pahle, "Hey, Remember that One Time Someone Sent Anita Sarkeesian a Bomb Threat Saying They'd Murder a Dozen People?" *The Mary Sue*, September 18, 2014, <http://www.themarysue.com/anita-sarkeesian-bomb-threat/>, para. 4, 2.

diversity in gaming – there is, and Sarkeesian has as many if not more supporters than she has detractors. But at present, I am more interested in exploring the origins of these campaigns.

Proponents of “saving games” from feminists and other so-called “social justice warriors” – a term designed as an insult but which has been widely embraced by those at whom it has been pejoratively flung – almost universally fall into the young straight white male demographic. Accustomed to being the central focus of games in terms of content, marketing, development, journalism, and criticism, these particular men see the voices of women, transpersons, and people of color as threatening to their heretofore unquestioned dominance. Sociology tells us “that women’s social status” – or that of any minority – “is highest where the sex ratio is low (i.e. when there is a surplus of women) and lowest in societies where the sex ratio is high.”¹⁹ The historically high sex-ratio in gaming meant that male gamers became, and became accustomed to being, socially dominant.

When the demographics of gaming shifted in the early 2000s, the perception of a high sex-ratio persisted, fostered in part by the mediation of online fora and avatars. Since it was difficult to perceive the demographic shift virtually, the presumption of male dominance established in the days of videogame arcades and military simulations remained largely unchallenged.

When it became evident in the last five or so years that women and feminists were not only aware of but actively engaged with gaming, the resulting culture shock produced defensive hostility. As Henry Jenkins explains, fandom is “about having control and mastery over art by pulling it close and integrating it into your sense of self.”²⁰ In the context of gaming fandom – gamer culture – this “control” manifests through an attempt on the part of both “defenders” and

¹⁹ Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 23.

²⁰ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 23.

“social justice warriors” to control the direction in which gaming as a whole will move in the future; on the one side, a push to remain dedicated to the same titles and themes that games have supposedly “always” followed, on the other, to become more inclusive and aware of their position relative to minority and gendered voices and experiences.

As a result, the notion that the content of games might change – that the majority will no longer reflect the expectations and fantasies of the straight white male – becomes identified as a deeply personal attack on these fans’ core identity. These fans have so fully integrated their sense of self with the content and culture of games that any call for change necessarily elicits a violent defensive response.

This hostility of privilege has more recently led to a call among some feminist members of the gaming community to reject or eliminate “gamer” identity, spearheaded by a piece written for *Gamasutra* by Leigh Alexander. “‘Game culture’ as we know it is kind of embarrassing,” she says. “It’s not even culture. It’s buying things, spackling over memes and in-jokes repeatedly, and it’s getting mad on the internet.”²¹ Although it seems unlikely that “gamer” as a term will disappear, Alexander’s piece points to the likely eventual outcome of the clash between old- and new-school gaming fans: “Traditional gaming,” she continues, “is sloughing off, culturally and economically, like the carapace of a bug.”²²

It isn’t that games have been hijacked by a progressive minority – as GamerGate supporters have suggested – but that the supposed minority has become the majority; gamer culture is shifting, and that shift is due in large part to a new face of gaming fandom, a face that is characterized more by its heterogeneity than anything else.

²¹ Leigh Alexander, “‘Gamers’ Don’t Have to Be Your Audience. ‘Gamers’ Are Over.,” *Gamasutra*, August 28, 2014, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_your_audience_Gamers_are_over.php, para. 1.

²² *Ibid.*, para. 16.

But although this change is inevitable, its inevitability should not produce complacency. As with any such sea change, the persistence of those advocating for inclusion and diversity is vital to their success. In gaming, it is important to continue to demand greater diversity and complexity in order to ensure not only that games come to reflect their wider fan demographic, but to secure through diversity the health of the industry as a whole.

Happily, modern games have far fewer barriers. Independent writers frequently publish personal pieces about the indie games that have inspired them—there's very little money to be made in either writing about or creating these things, which is liberating for people who've always wanted to approach games as objects of human, rather than corporate interest. Dialogue about games is more frequently considered by mainstream publications, and all this accessibility and diversity allows curators of game culture far more latitude to shape conversation about an exciting medium that's finally blowing off the must and dust of a prior age.
- Leigh Alexander, "Everybody is Losing in the Culture War Over Video Games," *TIME* (5 September 2014)