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## Negative emotions set in motion : the continued relevance of #GamerGate

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## **Negative Emotions Set in Motion**

### **The continued relevance of #GamerGate**

#### **Abstract**

This chapter aims at making sense of the #GamerGate (#GG) online harassment campaign that was particularly active in 2014–15, but to this day continues to produce hateful speech against certain ideologies and minorities in gaming culture. The campaign was especially successful at building online visibility through harassment, and the affective resonances of the issues it raised have since translated into general online campaigning how-to's, financial earnings, and even political action outside of the gaming sphere. Although the primary breeding ground for this movement was 4chan (and later, 8chan), it only reached public awareness and visibility – hence, effectiveness – through Twitter, and to a lesser extent, through YouTube. In order to understand the emotional charge and political relevance of this campaign, we rely on both quantitative and qualitative activity analysis of the Twitter users that use the hashtag #GamerGate between 2014–2019. In addition to analyzing who were the most active tweeters and what kind of resonance their tweets elicited, we looked into the emotional qualities of their communication.

The communication strategies of #GG tweeters took advantage of the language and cultural references of the target demographic to drive a set of topics into public discourse, and further, to political activism. This discourse utilized a combination of affective modes, based mainly on resentment and schadenfreude, that we see echoing in many places on the Internet. In the end, we argue that while #GG may have been only one instance of a campaign with harassment elements, the sentiments it cultivated and amplified as well as its operational logics have since been successfully employed in many similar online movements, including the current political campaigning associated with the so-called alt-right.

## Introduction

#GamerGate has become the go-to description of online aggression campaigns, where an outspoken minority behaves in a disruptive manner, spreading negativity and acting malevolently (Urquhart 2019). This kind of behaviour is not criminal, but it can lead to crimes as it verges towards harassment, slander, and incitement to aggression. In this way, online expressions of hate can have very real consequences (see Ging & Siapera 2018, 520–521). References to popular internet controversies and campaigns often pop up in the context of aggressive acts of anger and hatred, such as school shootings and terrorists attacks. For instance, just before the recent far-right extremist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, the shooter uploaded an 87-page manifesto littered with references to Internet phenomena and memes, engineered for maximum virality (Warzel 2019). Prior to starting a livestream of his attack, he said, ‘Subscribe to PewDiePie!’ – evoking an ominous connection between the “ironic” racist humor this popular YouTube star is famous for, and the shooter’s own white supremacist and islamophobic views (e.g. Cuthbertson 2019).

While there is no reason to assume a simple causation or correlation between PewDiePie and the tragic deaths in Christchurch, there is definitely enough evidence that online movements are important in the manifestations of offline aggression. Copious examples of harassment campaigns that turned into real-life threats justify looking carefully at the structure, development, political leanings, and development of aggressive corners of online culture. This is why we want to investigate the use of the hashtag #GamerGate (#GG) on the Internet, representing one of the better documented online harassment campaigns that caught the public eye in recent years, and see how the disruptive engagement it propelled was in fact orchestrated. On this background, we will look for patterns of malevolence and disruption through analyzing which topics the most active accounts were engaging with in 2019, and whether the disruptive practices and expressions of negative emotions are native to gaming, or a larger cultural segment.

In this chapter, we will find out how the online movement #GamerGate got organized around the manipulation and effective amplification of negative emotions. We will first ask, what the origin and composition of those emotions is, and how they are cultivated among groups active on certain online boards and platforms. We will then move on to showing how the language and cultural references shared amongst those groups have been utilized to drive a set of topics into the public discourse on platforms such as Twitter. The tweets involving the hashtag #GG will be analyzed in order to get a grasp of how wide-spread and active this movement was at certain points in time, and how much resonance the tweets of the most assiduous users elicited among their followers, critics, and general onlookers.

In mapping the development of #GG into a social media movement, we discuss transgressions, deviance, norm-breaking, and hate speech, in order to create an understanding of the negative, malevolent, and disruptive behaviors within the mostly playful leisure community of digital game players. We found that the most active participants had an angry or snarky tone to their Twitter handles, often sharing memes and other links poking fun at their opposition, regardless of the viability of the information shared. We also look at how #GG was used by those participants to align themselves with other groups that use negative emotions, mainly jealousy, envy, fear, and loneliness, to attract and engage participants by sharing stories of misogyny and ethnophobia. But before going into the

details of the emotional appeal of this movement, we will outline its basic structure and the events that led to one another. In order to understand what #GG was all about, we have to start in the beginning.

## What was #GamerGate

Late in the summer of 2014, people who followed games and gaming on social media started to notice a new hashtag #GamerGate popping up at various online locations. It was vague, but virulent, and making sense of what it actually was about was not easy. Asking publicly what it meant brought a wide range of responses, none very convincing, and since there was no newsworthy event to trigger it, no real core to the upsurge, few who encountered the hashtag got any authoritative answer. The use of the hashtag itself is therefore key to analyzing and understanding what this online campaign was about. Although the primary breeding ground for this movement was 4chan (and later, 8chan), it only reached public awareness and visibility – hence, effectiveness – through Twitter, and that is why we are also focusing on its emergence in Twitter in this chapter.

The #GG hashtag on Twitter brought together various kinds of actors, both very public, established figures and anonymous new-to-Twitter users, who felt attacked by calls to make games more inclusive (e.g. Shaw & Ruberg 2017). Twitter is a popular microblogging platform that has been researched extensively in relation to other similar social movements and protest purposes (Theocharis et al. 2015) as well as political communication (Bruns et al. 2016; Vaccari et al. 2015). A characteristic of all of these movements and campaigns is the use of a hashtag connecting both decided and seemingly random tweets together as a communication network that can then be analyzed as an instance of a self-organizing swarm, as we aim to do here.

#GamerGate was a far-reaching and significant online movement even in contexts that are seemingly disengaged from video games or gaming cultures. In our opinion, it represents a particularly effective way of building online campaigns: that of relying on emotional significations and affective resonances. Although the particularities of the events and emotions triggering #GG are related to games and gaming, there are several aspects to this campaign that can be generalized – for instance the fact that it was so successful at building online visibility through harassment. What was this harassment all about, and what were the motivations behind it?

In order to understand, how #GG effectively channeled negative emotions such as mistrust, jealousy, envy, fear, and loneliness into a targeted harassment campaign, we need to form a narrative that connects these seemingly abstract emotions to concrete events that managed to elicit a reaction from so many people, especially those passionate about games. In spring 2014, a bitter blogpost about a break up surfaced, in which the writer Eron Gjoni accused his ex-girlfriend, game designer Zoë Quinn of cheating. In this so-called 'Zoë post', Gjoni argues that Quinn traded sex for favorable media coverage for her newest game at the time, *Depression Quest* (Gjoni 2014). The post has since become infamous and many times re-edited after being picked up by social media aficionados and online discussion forums, where the issues it raises have been expanded into two intermingled strands.

First, the focus has been on the problem with benefits for positive reviews in game journalism, echoing the discussion on the (un)ethical behavior of game journalists accepting perquisites from game industry representatives (Nieborg & Sihvonen 2009). Second, the concerns raised by the Zoë post have given an excuse for some people to express their dislike of women game designers and female gamers in general, thus associating these concerns to the preservation of a particularly male-dominated hobby culture and history.

Despite the popular saying ‘actually, [#GG] was about ethics in game journalism,’ according to this as well as earlier research (e.g. Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández 2016; Ging & Siapera 2018), the more wide-ranging and long-term effects of the campaign have been misogynistic and anti-feminist in nature. #GG consisted of the two intermingled branches that both used the same hashtag – a word play on the Watergate scandal – since August 2014. However, since the majority of participants are anonymous and only loosely connected, it is difficult to know whether these are two separate campaigns, or if the same people participate in both activities.

The most public way the latter strand has been demonstrated is the criticism towards Quinn and later designer Brianna Wu for their work in game development, as well as bringing game critic Anita Sarkeesian into the negative spotlight by the users of the hashtag. As game critics started commenting on this and tried to defuse the discourse through claiming that the “gamer” identity was not important – see the “Gamers are dead” discussion (Massanari 2015, Mortensen 2016) – it actually gained more traction, and the debate got even more heated. By the end of August 2014, the harassment had spread to other designers and critics working on games, many of them female, as well as to anyone – even researchers – who were writing about games from a “wrong” perspective or using “wrong” terminology.

Supported by a few key meeting points, mainly the /pol/ board on the imageboard 8chan, the subreddit KotakuInAction (KIA), and the YouTube channels of a few important profiles, such as Sargon of Akkad (SoA) (now known to be a British commentator and political candidate Carl Benjamin) and Internet Aristocrat (account closed towards the end of 2014), the Twitter hashtag #GamerGate was the main point for demonstration of power and relevance for the topic. The hashtag was also functional in engaging other discussants, some politically motivated, such as provocateurs Milo Yiannopoulos and Christina Hoff Summers, in the ongoing conversations. In addition to the heated online activity, the campaign was visible outside of digital fora, and led to “doxxing” – making personal information available online – with the following threats in email form, telephone calls, and people finding the workplaces and homes of the targets. All of this led to a wide range of unpleasant and dangerous situations well documented in the news at the time (Hern 2015) as well as in Quinn’s own biography of the event (Quinn 2017).

Possibly the most important aspect of #GG, however, was the intensity and fervor of the online conversations, especially on the public platform Twitter. Aside from the strong language, the participants amplified their messages by going after the same few opponents with great force and silencing opposing voices through overwhelming them in conversations. A key dimension of #GG was a strong conviction that there was an active conspiracy to change games for the worse by introducing more strong female characters, by reducing the amount of sex and violence, and adding more diversity in general to the cast and topics of

games; and by digging into the lives and private activities of their targets, this conspiracy could be revealed and rectified.

#GG still remains an active hashtag on Twitter in 2019, and the Reddit subreddit *r/KotakuInAction*, #GG's face to the public, has more than 100,000 followers. For an involved description of the #GG associated events and their timeline, as well as the dissenting interpretations of these, apart from the works mentioned throughout this article, we recommend the Wikipedia article on the topic (Wikipedia 2019). The article is an interesting work in itself, as an example of how fragile online information is. It is typical of this controversy that the writing and maintenance of this Wikipedia article was and is one of the most contested processes we know about on the writing of Wikipedia, as participants would edit the page as well as the pages of the targets of #GG, and stalk and harass the editors (see also Marcotte 2015).

## #GamerGate past and present

During the #GG campaign, there were several "operations" that aimed at changing the face of game journalism, such as the attempt to get advertisers to stop promoting their products in a select few magazines with game reviews, or the attempt to read and review all the publications of the Digital Game Researchers Association (DiGRA) open library, in a bid to uncover the conspiracy through textual analysis. In fact, the first peer-reviewed article on #GG was Chess and Shaw's "A Conspiracy of Fishes" (2015), a description of how #GG started their attacks on the game scholars associated with DiGRA. The attacks on female game scholars and the conspiracy theory development around that has not received as much attention as the more massive attacks on game designers and critics, but still highlight some of the darker strands of the movement.

Chess and Shaw's article describes how an open document on Google with some notes from a fishbowl in a conference became a focal point for attacks, as people hanging out on the image boards – at this point 4chan – started to edit the notes, and later on copied and saved them in case they would disappear. This led to the publication of a YouTube video by Sargon of Akkad (SoA), or Carl Benjamin, who claimed that there was indeed a feminist conspiracy within gaming, and it was academics, organized in DiGRA, who were behind it. In their article, Chess and Shaw focus on the often hilarious #GG investigation of DiGRA, but there is another malignant note to the event. In order to get a grasp of the toxicity and maliciousness of these conspiracy theories, and to understand how they have been propelled into political activism by both the proponents and the opponents of #GG, we need to cast a look in their ideological basis.

In addition to feminism, the term *cultural marxism* is continuously used in the context of #GG to refer to the ideology of academia and of the DiGRA connected researchers. In subsequent videos, SoA kept returning to this term, inflating it with the Frankfurt School of thought. The connection to the Frankfurt School is to a certain degree correct, as the ideas of the Frankfurt School held sway with the British cultural studies tradition, which emphasized the importance of a contextualized knowledge brought up through a variety of methods, quantitative and qualitative, and critical reading of the cultural expressions in question. The emphasis on understanding the context of an expression of popular culture, described in seminal works such as Raymond Williams' study of television (Williams 1974) or outlined in

Stuart Hall's classic Encoding/Decoding model (Hall 1980), has been deeply influential on contemporary studies of games and game culture.

Game studies has similarly been shaped by the early call for understanding games and play independent of existing academic paradigms, by studying a game as its own object, and not a version of literature, television or other pre-existing modalities (Aarseth 2001). This is, however, *not* how SoA understood the influence of marxist thinking in game studies. Instead, it was presented in much the same manner as Anthony Walsh (2018, xii) presents cultural marxism, as an old and deeply embedded conspiracy that is toxic, anti-capitalist, and anti-moral, and the purpose of which is to destroy the Christian core of American (or more widely, Western) culture.

From a Nordic point of view this is sinister indeed. The terrorist attacks in Oslo and on the Utøya island on July 22, 2011, were carried out as a deliberate attack on cultural diversity and the Social Democratic political ideals of inclusivity and openness, and the terrorist's manifesto contained several direct references to cultural marxism (Tromp 2018). During #GG, cultural marxism was used as a dog-whistle for anonymous messages from online audiences using radical free speech as their justification for the often aggressive and hate-filled content with which they crammed the mailboxes and social media feeds of their targets. We can still see traces of this when we look at the current Twitter feeds of the accounts that were among the fifty most active #GG tweeters in 2014 and 2015.

The connection between #GG and a public reaching back to fascist ideology is a recurrent theme in articles discussing the event. Mortensen (2016) referred to #GG proponents as hooligans, although mostly to point out that aggressive mass movements surrounding games are not new. #GG does however come up again and again in articles discussing misogyny and racism online. Madden, Janoske, Winkler, and Edgar (2018, 72) point out how race and gender intersects in the harassment caused by significant participants of #GG, using the example of how Milo Yiannopoulos, Breitbart associate editor during #GG and prominent participant in the #GG event, "sparked a barrage of comments" of harassment and racist slurs targeting black comedian Leslie Jones for her role in the movie reboot of *Ghostbusters*. Topics concerning the intersection of racism and misogyny keep coming up in several discussions of #GG, either together or separately (Nieborg & Foxman 2018; A. L. Massanari & Chess 2018; Gray, Buyukozturk & Hill 2017). Racism and misogyny associated with #GG are also regularly brought up in discussions of gender and geek masculinity (Ortiz 2019; Salter 2018; Condis 2018, 3).

During 2015–16, there was a shift of several prominent agents of #GG to more mainstream, but no less contested, areas of political discourse. Particularly the representatives of Breitbart News such as Milo Yiannopoulos, now well known as a provocateur (Lynskey 2017), and head of the Breitbart board Stephen Bannon, Donald Trump's campaign advisor and a former owner of a *World of Warcraft* gold farming company (Peters 2018; Swearingen 2017; Lapowsky 2016) moved to the public eye as participants in the extremely politicized discussions that surfaced during Trump's campaign and presidency. Joshua Green (2017, 147) documents Bannon's thinking around bringing in Yiannopoulos specifically due to his success in garnering attention around central topics during #GG. This move has caused scholars and writers to consider the role of #GG in the larger political discourse (Nagle 2017)

and the many contentious topics concerning the role of social media in the Trump campaign (Condis 2018, chap. 4).

Another trend in the research on #GG is using it to demonstrate the problems of mapping and quantifying online movements. In a study published early 2016, Burgess and Matamoroz-Fernández (2016, 81) used #GG as an example of how to map issue publics, publics motivated by acute controversies. This is indicative of some of the work #GG inspired, as the campaign underscored the problems of studying events that move at rapid speed across platforms, including platforms rarely considered when studying publics (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández 2016; Buyukozturk et al. 2018; Mortensen 2016; Chatzakou et al. 2017; Amaize et al. 2018). Another platform-aware viewpoint, the use of Twitter bots and their rhetorical affordances to understand and protest against #GG activists, has been developed in an article by Holmes and Lussos (2018). In other research projects, #GG has been used as a case study for specific topics or problems, mainly concerning harassment, misogyny, and racism (Aghazadeh et al. 2018).

The political connection between activism and harassment and the appearance of key #GG participants in the campaign of Donald Trump may indicate why #GG got as much academic attention as it did. There have been several other scandals, for instance the hacking known as the “Fapping”, which Massanari (2015) describes in her discussion of Reddit’s algorithms, but not many of them have received the kind of scrutiny from researchers that #GG has, and still does. One reason for this may be that #GG activists made a target of a group of researchers who had a deep interest in understanding online culture, and had spent years studying the user practices of different groups on different platforms. Simultaneously, #GG skillfully used and exposed the flaws in social media platforms. By showing how social media could be manipulated, they pointed out how few tools the providers have or are willing to use to fight disinformation and harassment.

## Twitter hashtags and the formation of publics

Instead of allowing the formation of “groups” or “communities”, *per se*, hashtags on Twitter help create *ad hoc* channels that improve contextualization, content filtering, discoverability, and exploratory serendipity, among other things (Messina 2007; Bruns & Burgess 2011, 2–3). Through these kinds of channels, users can follow and take part in conversations they find interesting without joining or signing into anything. Most of the *ad hoc* publics that form around the emergence of a hashtag are naturally short-lived, but there are also very established and immutable hashtags that are being carried on in the long term. In this kind of a research setting, the hashtag #GG has many functions: it is the name of this online movement, a contextualizing tag for the discussion, a shorthand for discussing certain convoluted Internet politics, as well as a practical search tool.

In order to understand the importance of Twitter for the development of #GG, we rely on a large dataset that was systematically collected from Twitter, from three distinct time periods of tweeting, using the hashtag #GG as a search term. Randomly selected one-month timespans from 2014, 2015, and 2017 were chosen so that we could investigate how the online conversation around #GG had evolved over time. The primary period of interest to us is 2014–15, when #GG was constantly used on Twitter. The year 2017 was selected as a point of comparison, allowing us to see how much activity around #GG has declined since



the end of 2015. Our research data consists of all original tweets (retweets excluded) from 1–31 December<sup>1</sup> in 2014 (n=150,282), in 2015 (n=28,164), and in 2017 (n=9,742). From this data, we have filtered three sets of lists of the 10 most liked, most retweeted, and most replied to tweets. On the basis of these lists, we can determine what kind of behaviors were both most common throughout the group, and were seen as the most effective, and to which degree we can claim this behavior was disruptive and malevolent.

In addition to investigating how the discussion around #GG developed in 2014, 2015, and 2017, we identified the most active #GG participants in 2014 and 2015, and looked at what kinds of topics they engaged with in the present time (2019). As part of this work, we considered whether their participation was dominated by negative emotions, in order to determine whether #GG was rather a unique outlet for malevolence or more likely just one of many. What we question is whether the behavior of the movement was malevolent, rising from ill will or hatred (Merriam-Webster, 2019), or if it was ironic or humorous, and the participants unknowing victims to *Poe's Law* (Ellis 2017) – which states that participants of online conversation should clearly mark their use of parody or sarcasm (with a winking emoji, for example) to avoid confusion in others.

The matter of malevolence or irony can color the interpretation of the events themselves, whether they were part of a so-called astroturfing campaign, a deliberately instigated campaign designed to look like a grassroots movement (Fitzpatrick and Palenchar 2006), by unspecified instigators, or a 4chan/8chan trolling raid that was spectacularly successful, causing disruption so great that it even reached the awareness of the United Nations (Singal 2015). Determining intent is however very difficult, particularly since the material from 4chan and 8chan is lost to the nature of the imageboards, where inactive conversations are automatically deleted, so we will not try to go back in time to evaluate the motivations behind the actions of the participants. Instead we will try to follow some of the most active and influential participants and see where they are today, and what they are engaged in. If they have moved on to similar, politically flavored, activities, the argument that this was a deliberate, malevolent astroturfing event is stronger. If they have disappeared into obscurity or are still engaged in random acts of ironic ridicule, it is more likely that #GG was more of the same. This will still not be the same as uncovering their original motivation or intent, though, but it will offer another venue to follow in order to understand the behavior of online swarms (Mortensen 2016).

## Studying social activity through Twitter

The microblogging platform Twitter started in 2006, and it has proved a popular tool for people eager to amass a following, such as artists and writers, journalists and politicians. Its basic operational principle is simple; it allows users to post quick updates, or tweets, of a maximum of 280 characters (140 characters until late 2017). Tweets can be accessed by the user's followers, and, to a certain extent, by any Internet user without signing up, and any Twitter user can follow others at will. The most followed users are public figures like politicians and conventionally famous people such as actors, TV celebrities, and musicians

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<sup>1</sup> All the tweets for this study were collected on the basis of the dates. As the gathering took place in Finland, which is situated on the UTC+02:00 timezone, the timestamps of tweets are marked between 02:00-02:00, instead of 00:00Z–00:00Z.

(Marwick & boyd 2011, 142). Currently, Twitter is enjoying an upsurge in importance because it is widely used as a communication tool by President Trump as well as other political leaders who are relentlessly monitored by journalists and political strategists all over the world (Ott 2017). Twitter effectively mediates relationships between famous people or celebrities and their fans, and takes part in the overall structuring of the media and the popular culture industry (Baym 2018; Bulck & Larsson 2019).

Hashtags – typical to and requisite for successful continuing conversations on Twitter – are instrumental in the formation of what Bruns and Burgess (2011) call ad hoc publics around specific themes and topics. Whereas the breeding or “staging” ground of #GG was primarily 4chan (and later, 8chan), the arena it played out on and reached public awareness was Twitter (Salter 2018, 254). In fact, there is strong indication that many #GG proponents actually joined Twitter to take part in the debate (see Baio 2014). The importance of analysing Twitter activities such as “swarming” or “sea lioning”, highlighting the importance of vanguards and opinion leaders in the formation of these ad hoc publics, has also been pointed out by Mortensen (2016) in relation to the #GG campaign.

As early as October 2014, web developer Andy Baio (2014) collected and created a #GG dataset from Twitter to examine what he considered a swarming behavior of unprecedented proportions. In the blog post detailing his data analytic experiment and visualization from the early days of #GG, 21–23 October 2014, he explains that he wanted to understand the composition of the movement’s proponents and critics. In brief, his findings indicate that almost 70 per cent of #GG tweets at the time were retweets, with only 15 percent of undirected, original tweets. Although these preliminary findings have to be taken with a grain of salt, it is interesting that his visualization of three days’ worth of tweets shows that the proponents and opponents of #GG form as if two separate spheres that have very few social connections and links in between.

In order to develop an understanding of the Twitter community, or more precisely, of how Twitter functions as a mediator between different parties interested in getting involved in heated debates such as #GG, we amassed a sample of tweets and organized them in order to form a picture of how #GG has developed over the years. We collected all the tweets using the #GG hashtag from the month of December in 2014, 2015, and 2017, resulting in 188 tweets in total. Our arguments are based on both a broad analysis of the total number of #GG tweets from these three months as well as an in-depth analysis of the 50 users that were identified as the most active during 2014 and 2015.

The tweets were collected using the search function of the paid Twitter Developer Tools subscription. Tweet extraction was done using a Javascript program called Twit. The program utilizes the Twitter REST API (Representational State Transfer Application Programming Interface) to pass on queries to the Twitter search and in turn returns the information requested in Javascript format. Here, the REST functions were used to search for tweets within a specific timeline using the ‘#gamergate’ search entry. Three searches were made, from December 2014, 2015, and 2017. The search queries were sent to the API using a self-written code, which used the Twit program as a starting point. The code was run locally on a computer and the Twitter search was accessed remotely using the code. The returned information was trimmed within the self-written program and passed on to Microsoft Excel for further examination.

In Excel, we have manually organized and tagged the tweets on the basis of the number of retweets, quotes, favorites, and replies. Each tweet has furthermore retained the timestamp of posting, the public profile name (or description) of the Twitter user, as well as the user handle. In this manner we have had access not only to open profiles, but also to the activities on closed or suspended profiles. For closed or suspended profiles we could not use our regular Twitter accounts to check what they are doing today.

## **The most active tweeters, their tone, and what they are up to at the moment**

Our results indicate a number of tweets that were retweeted very often. Whereas the majority of tweeters only engaged in the conversation once or twice within a month, the 50 most active profiles had from 7,665 (the most active) to 371 (50th most active) tweets in Dec 2014, and from 2,407 to 72 tweets in the same period in 2015. Among the 10 most favoured tweets we find only two of the fifty most active tweeters in 2014. For 2015, we only find one of the most active tweeters being retweeted. This finding suggests that there was a “core group” of #GG enthusiasts that were exceptionally active and vocal, and another, even smaller group whose words were liked, shared, and retweeted, even if they were not that active participants on Twitter. What we see here is that a core of active profiles were amplifying the voices of others who were less active on the hashtag.

In order to find out, what the 50 most active #GG tweeters from 2014 and 2015 were up to in 2019, we looked up their profiles and analyzed the tone of the content they were posting. This work was mainly done in April-May 2019, with some more checks in August 2019. Since six profiles were the same in 2014 and 2015, this equalled 94 profiles, two of which were protected, one was suspended and one could not be recognized, leaving 90 we could look up today. Of these 9 are bots, and 4 are so automated in the retweeting that they may as well be bots (or at least automated retweets of a newsfeed curated by a human), leaving us 77 profiles to look into. We looked at their current tweets, and considered the tone. A display of negative emotions indicate anything that could be said to be angry, snarky or putting others down without fair consideration. This includes a strong degree of qualitative consideration.

*Aggressive* can be easy to recognize, if it is aimed at an adversary, uses strong language or imagery, and contains threats or accusations. It can however often be triggered by some context, and an account can be quite polite for most of the time, then make a strong, judgemental statement. An example of this is the account @HalfTangible, who was also among the most active in 2015. On September 1st, 2019, in a discussion in the aftermath of the suicide of game developer Alec Holowka, concerning the importance of people not being immediately judgemental, the owner of this profile wrote: “Any woman worried about being tried as a witch probably has legit reason to worry.” This is not a statement with strong words or imagery, but it communicates the idea that if society accuses a woman of “something”, she is guilty, which is a complete negation of the idea that we are all innocent until proven guilty and insinuates that women should not be believed. In the context of the #MeToo movement, despite the soft tone of this statement, the cited comment becomes an

aggressive accusation against women, and a claim that the #MeToo movement is a witch hunt.

Other displays of negative emotions are even more difficult to capture and analyze. Snarkiness is tricky, as a snarky comment does not have to be written and is always context-dependent. @sonicmeercat, who was among the most active #GG tweeters in 2014 and 2015, is a character we registered in April as funny, with a rough kind of humour, as their twitter stream was packed with retweets of not safe for work big-breasted anime characters. However, after the death of Jeffrey Epstein in a prison during the summer of 2019, this account retweeted several images and comments indicating, in an ironic and sarcastic manner, that his death was part of a conspiracy. The sideways aggression of these memes is an example of what we consider to be snarky. The overlap between snarky and funny is vague and fluid, it can easily change, and so the “funny” label from the spring of 2019 could as easily have been “snarky” if we had compared the profiles in the autumn.

Within this amount of profiles, we get a surprisingly low number of overlap, indicating that the most active participants in 2014 stopped using the hashtag as frequently, and there was a new group topping the active lists in 2015. Of the whole, only six of the most active profiles were not positive to #GG, then or now, demonstrating that the overwhelming mass of conversation was carried by a rather low number of those positive to #GG causes, while only a few profiles engaged very actively against them. Out of the 71 remaining profiles, 49 were fairly clearly still pro #GG, or were at some point when they either permanently positioned a pro-GG post on top of their profile, or stopped updating. The 22 remaining are either vague, absurd, or do not mention the topic at all, having moved on. Some are still discussing similar type of interests (games, fantasy fiction), but without any of the language or topical slants that indicate #GG (ethical game journalism, misogyny, anger at female developers).

The tone of tweets in 2019 is also relatively polite, although this is a bit harder to evaluate. There are 26 who are clearly angry, snarky or otherwise display negative emotions, two of which are arguing against #GG. Most of the others have a contained to polite tone. Only six are clearly friendly or funny, using humor, and one of the humorous ones is a bot. Among the ones falling into the large center, there are quite a few that lean towards the negative using irony or being insistent, with either intense repetition or strong wording while still refraining from hateful or unpleasant language, with just 12 being what we would consider casual (just chatting, no particularly loaded language or intensifying pattern of repetition).

When it comes to current topics, an overwhelming number are still interested in politics, with 13 clearly in favour of Trump, while only one actively promoting any of the opposition (Bernie Sanders). The ones who were/are against #GG are concerned with topics more typically followed by the Democrats in American politics, while the currently non-committed to a specific political candidate are either not discussing political topics (one previously pro-GG profile is for instance fully dedicated to car racing), or are clearly Republicans or even further to the right, as some of them (four) retweet or post with a clearly racist twist. Many of the more politically active are not outspokenly racist or misogynistic, but they attack the so called Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) and the anti fascists (AntiFa), and retweet memes and posts that indicate a resistance to a more inclusive society.

One of the more active tweeters is currently a great fan of the British UKIP candidate Carl Benjamin, who as Sargon of Akkad was perhaps most outspoken about the dangers of the Frankfurt School and of cultural marxism. SoA's account has been banned from Twitter, but through his followers, he still has a presence in our research data. The overwhelming impression of these most active participants is that they are in 2019 still concerned with "geeky" topics (games, comics, science fiction, and fantasy), but are also for instance climate change deniers, against feminism, against the AntiFa movement, and in general against social justice topics. At the same time, they are concerned with radical freedom of speech and worried about the fate of the Wikileaks whistleblower Julian Assange, after his arrest in the UK in summer 2019.

This demonstrates that at least for the most active participants in 2014 and 2015, the topics that rose to the front of the #GG discussions are still an important part of their political identities. This is a subset of geek culture which is not only worried about a more inclusive aesthetic in games, but about the inclusion of diversity also in other contexts.

## **Boundary keeping and other strategic uses of emotions in #GG**

#GG was a movement where it was not important to share exactly the same goals, despite the current apparent unity in political leanings. One goal was to bring greater ethics to game journalism. Another was to exclude certain game design content and certain styles of criticism from discussing games, while the event that lit the fuse was a blogpost by an angry ex-boyfriend (Chess & Shaw 2015; Elliot 2018; Massanari 2015; Mortensen 2016; Nieborg & Foxman 2018). In either case, #GG used wording and strategies that sparked anger strategically to obtain concessions from others. In all cases they expressed negative emotions, mainly resentment and indignation, which fueled the event.

#GG reflected the fact that games, while being (marketed as) spaces of freedom and unrestricted possibilities, can as easily be normative and oppressive, especially if we consider the situation from the perspective of marginalized groups of gamers. One marginalized group consists of female players, suggesting that in this imaginary, being a "gamer" entails masculine agency and discourse (Salter 2018). This gendered logic echoes the fact that although digital games have been considered a "useful hobby" since the 1980s, they carry a stigma of social isolation, outcastness, and nerdiness – all aspects that have been associated with geek culture. For several decades, games have provided a refuge for ostracized people, and "yet, this refuge is itself defined by norms that limit who is granted the privilege of accessing this space" (Shaw & Ruberg 2017, xxi). In addition to keeping boundaries between different groups of gamers, there has also been significant policing and harsh maintenance of hierarchies within the #GG community.

Boundary keeping and maintenance of hierarchies between different groups of gamers – as well as the fortification of the rigid dichotomy between men and women – were continuously and repetitively expressed through harsh, negative language on Twitter and other online forums. An important aspect of the #GG persuasion tactics got organized around the manipulation and effective amplification of negative emotions. In order to understand what kind of emotions were expressed during #GG, we will look into what Miceli and Castelfranchi call "anger and its cousins" (2019). They point to a "family" of hostile emotions, anger, resentment, indignation, contempt, and disgust, and then discuss three; anger, resentment

and indignation, based on whether they are caused by a harm – inflicted by another – or a wrong – inflicted by another who is responsible for the harm. The distinction between the three emotions is; anger is caused by a harm, resentment is caused by a harm and a wrong, and indignation is caused by seeing a wrong done to others. During #GG, what we saw expressed was all three.

Anger is not the most hostile of these feelings. As Miceli and Castelfranchi (2019,17) argue, violence and acts of revenge are more frequently caused by resentment than anger. This is because resentment, as defined here, is a feeling of anger being justified, and this justifies an action. This is why the narrative at the heart of #GG needed to contain a wrong – Quinn had to get her positive media attention in a manipulative manner. In order to fuel resentment, the entire campaign needed to appear to be justified. For a large group of participants, this was where the demand for better game journalism came in. The resentment and also indignation felt by gamers who had seen their hobby blamed for the most outrageous acts would easily fuel a strong response, which in this context ended up directed at a number of women and a few men with no real influence or power to change the situation.

Many of the negative emotions discussed here, such as fear, anxiety, loneliness, guilt, shame, and so on, can be used to manage social situations (Van Kleef & Côté 2014, 126), which is what we consider the #GG participants to be doing. Specifically, we argue that the strategic use of anger and aggression have been an attempt at influencing the behavior of the targets of the movement. As Côté and Hideg (2011) claim: “For example, if one person uses anger strategically to obtain concessions from another person, and the other person actually concedes, this represents a correct type of change.” #GG had a great number of operations, strategic plans of action for real change, such as the letter writing campaign to the advertisers for several different news media and magazines focusing on games (Dewey 2014). In order to get something like that to work, they had a system for letter writing, and kept reminding each other every day to write their letters. The different operations were most efficient when they were close to the core topics, and this one was fuelled by the resentment and indignation surrounding the ‘ethics in game journalism’.

The other side of #GG was rife with laughter. And while laughter is universally considered benevolent, to the point that it is being considered a form of therapy for both physical and psychiatric ailments (Battrick et al. 2007; Cassileth 2011, 197), it can also be weaponized and used as a tool for control. In a discussion about humor in the workplace, Barbara Plester (2016, 110) underlines how humor is a tool for maintaining power balances, pointing to the dark side of laughter. The most important site for those opposing #GG, the subreddit GamerGhazi, had as their very clear goal to ridicule the stupidity of #GG for comic relief in a trying time, but also to take back control of the unfolding events. #GG delighted in creating new memes, ridiculing their targets, and they considered death threats to be great fun, as demonstrated by some of the threats made during the campaign.

During #GG, many of the participants claimed they were in it “for the lulz”, from “laughing out loud”, an indication that they were laughing while participating. This would suggest the #GG advocates considered themselves as trolls, or the activity they were engaging in as trolling (see Phillips 2015). Nevertheless, one of the more dramatic events was the threats against game designer Brianna Wu, culminating in the rambling stream of threats from a character called Jace Connors, who claimed he was on his way to Wu when he crashed his car. Jace

Connors turned out to be Jan Rankowski, a provocative comedian, who was, according to himself, making fun of #GG (Bernstein 2015; Blaustein 2015). This is Poe's law in action, which states that on the Internet, it's impossible to tell irony from extremism (Ellis 2017).

Coleman's (2014, 5) and Phillips' (2015, 27) reporting from the imageboard 4chan and the culture of irony among the Anonymous, describe how hard it is to draw the line between trolling, transgressions, and activism. From simple social hacks and phone pranks by way of sophisticated online attacks to physical activism, jokes may transgress the boundaries of the Internet and gain importance in the flesh world. Similarly, the boundaries of a joke can be transgressed and the situation can become serious, as the example of Jan Rankowski's joke demonstrates. This kind of boundary-breaking humor became the trademark of the imageboards, which in turn lead to the development of new norms. The aggressive, offensive, homophobic slurs of 4chan's /b/ board were not only a way to shock, but also to confirm the unity of the group, and to police the strict norms of the board. The apparently extreme freedom of expression on the imageboards is only free within very clearly outlined norms, and the participants who do not speak fluent /b/ slang are asked to "lurk moar" – or observe more carefully how the conversation is running. (Bernstein et al. 2011, 56.) By looking at the social activities of #GG, it becomes clear that the strategic use of humor as well as negative emotions was a crucial part of keeping the ad hoc community around #GG together.

## **#GG as a malevolently creative movement**

The use of negative emotions in order to influence others indicates malicious intent, and is expressed through malevolent creativity. Malevolent creativity can be defined as an application of original ideas to gain an unfair advantage, as opposed to negative creativity, which is generally harmful to others without harmful intention (Hao et al. 2016). In using this definition we ascribe harmful intent to the participants in the #GG swarm, and one of our questions is whether the harm they caused was intentional. For the original participants, such as the ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni attacking Zoë Quinn, the malevolent creativity was fairly easy to recognize, but for others the intent is more vague. However, considering that the movement aimed to control some specific aspects of game culture, the intent for change using negative emotions was definitely there, and the harm caused, particularly in their attempts to silence targeted voices among designers, critics and researchers, is more likely to have been deliberate than unintentional, defining the actions as malevolent.

In studying #GG, it is important not to ignore the creative aspect of the movement. It sprang out of the kind of creative hotbeds for disruptive behavior that also fostered the occasionally malevolently creative group Anonymous, as well as countless online trolls, scammers and hackers, and caused thousands of more or less humorous memes.

But #GG got too transgressive for the group they had come out of. When #GG took off, Poole, or "moot", the founder – and at the time owner and sole moderator – of 4chan, banned it from this notorious board. #GG had managed to transgress against the norms of a place where transgressing against norms was the norm. In the book *Kill all Normies*, Angela Nagle discusses this tendency for norm-breaking and the connection between the new right-wing and the nihilism of the late 1960s, pointing to the slogan 'It is forbidden to forbid' as a slogan for the counterculture the right-wing assimilates into its messages (Nagle 2017, 28).

As both Nagle and Poe's law demonstrate, the boundaries of the kind of norm-breaking provocation #GG engaged in is hard to distinguish from actual activism, and the claim that freedom of speech must be absolute, also for those who want to forbid others the freedom to speak, could have had its source in both "alt-fascism" and nihilism.

The type of humor you find on the imageboards, whether 4chan or 8chan, which became the new home to the #GG discussions after they were banned from 4chan, is best described as extreme schadenfreude. Trolling is an aggressive type of humor, where others suffer to fuel the laughter of the perpetrators. The logic of this kind of humor in these communities appears to be that the more others suffer, the better is the laugh. The "an hero" meme is an example of this, as a reference to a so-called raid, an attack on the MySpace page of a young man who had committed suicide (Clarke 2018, 161; Phillips 2015, 28). The typo "an hero" became shorthand for suicide, and the ridicule the event spawned was enough to keep the interest and energy of the event up for considerable time, embedding the typo in chan language.

Ridicule is a disruptive, but also disciplining type of humor. The goal of this humor is not to improve on the discourse by using the ability of laughter and humor to disarm and unite, but to demonstrate their group connection and their mastery of the internal, culturally specific language, until "all that remains are the absurd, exploitable details; trolls do not, and in many cases cannot, connect their object of ridicule – for example, the phrase "an hero" – to the emotional context out of which it arises, resulting in highly dissociative and often rabidly antagonistic laughter" (Phillips 2015, 30).

## **From discussing ethics in game journalism to political provocation**

Some members of the #GG crowd undeniably acted as a more powerful force in shaping the core message and making the connections between seemingly unassociated events, people or symbolic domains, than others. Although we call the #GG movement a self-organizing swarm, it did have its internal hierarchical structure and modes of communication. For 2014 the most favoured post was written by @RWSbleeter, *Running with Scissors*, the Twitter presence of a game designer involved in a controversy around one of his games. As a tribute a large number of tweeters changed their names to *Running with Scissors* in December 2014. His top tweet had 1005 retweets and 1084 favorites, almost twice as many as the second in line. However, *Running with Scissors* is not among the most active users. Only Sarah Nyberg and Soleil (@\_wcs\_), were both active and highly favored. From 2015, the top favored tweet was from *Gamergate, etc* (@whenindoubtdo), who had three of the top tweets, but only one active tweeter was much favored: *MomBot* (@BestMomEva), an active anti-SJW tweeter. An interesting, much favored tweet among the top 2015 tweets was by @LOLGOP: "Trump is like if #GamerGate were a billionaire." This was clearly a relatable comment among the #GG swarm.

At the time when #GamerGate was raging at its most intense, there were a few indicators that it was used for astroturfing. Milo Yiannopoulos, much admired by the #GG participants, fired up under the discussions, and later used the large following and attention he gained through #GG to support a tour of North American universities and colleges. Yiannopoulos had shortly before #GG spoken of gamers in quite unflattering terms, but when #GG and the flare of anger started trending in social media, he appeared to be a stout defender of the



rights of gamers to have unbiased game journalism (Jilani 2014). Others who appeared to have a sudden interest in game journalism were pick up artist Daryush Valizadeh, also known as Roosh V., who attempted to draw traffic through designing a website for #GG, and American Enterprise Institute resident Christina Hoff Sommers, who was embraced by #GG for her videos of support. There was also a large group of less known participants who all benefited from the movement by fanning the flames of #GG, mainly financially (Allen 2015).

At the same time, thousands of gamers felt that they could finally speak about the things that were important to them, and share their anger and frustration out loud. There is no reason to deny that a large group of the participants in the discussions online were genuinely concerned. For decades, the public discussions around games had been largely negative. When games are in the public eye, the discourse tends to be followed with expressions of concern to the point that media and game scholars speak of a media panic (Drotner 2009; Ferguson 2008, 2010; Karlsen 2013). This one-sided coverage of a past-time that millions of people around the world embraced with enthusiasm, made the claims of a conspiracy (Chess & Shaw 2015) seem more credible, causing quite genuine concern in many of those participating. However, a good astroturfing operation is one that looks real enough that it is close to impossible to distinguish from the real thing, and the fact that quality game journalism is hard to come by, lent credibility to the claim that became a meme – that it was all about ethics in game journalism.

To conclude our remarks, the rootless movement of #GG was fueled by a set of emotions, mainly anger, resentment, laughter, and schadenfreude. These were the emotions elicited by the rhetoric which started and maintained the debate, and reflects a classic Internet flame war strategy (Dery 1994). Combined with the more humorous rhetoric of trolling, made famous by the Anonymous group active on the imageboard 4chan (Coleman 2014; Phillips 2015), #GG activated a complex set of references to reach a group of people who suddenly saw their own language and cultural signals spread and used beyond their ingroup discourses. Whether this campaign was astroturfing or not, and whatever the motivations behind its most vocal proponents, it managed to touch its target demography.

## **What #GG tells us about political propaganda tactics**

Through our analysis of the most active tweeters and the most popular tweets containing the hashtag #GG from 2014–15 we have demonstrated that certain topics and ideologies are still very much present in their Twitter activities at the moment. Many discussions that rose around #GG still form an important part of their political identities. The most active and favorited #GG tweeters were not only worried about a more inclusive aesthetic in games, but the proliferation of diversity also in other contexts. The communication strategies of #GG tweeters took advantage of the language and cultural references of the target demographic to drive a set of topics into public discourse, and further, to political activism. This discourse utilized a combination of affective modes, based mainly on anger and resentment, and incorporating elements of schadenfreude and controlling, boundary-keeping laughter.

In the autumn 2019, the gendered conflicts in game development are more visible and antagonistic than ever, and the conversations on Twitter remain aggressive in tone. The term “GamerGate2” has been used, and as a result of a recent controversy, game developer

Zoë Quinn has deleted her Twitter profile. New events have fanned the flames. This time, however, it is different.

Now it is commonly understood that the online discussions are not really about games, but about cultural politics. #GG was and is a hashtag for a range of agendas. Some of these are overt, like the criticism of diversity in games, some of them covert, like the introduction of the cultural marxism trope in a discussion about game research, a trope that leads directly to the conspiracies concerning the protocols of the Elders of Zion and the propaganda roots of the German National Socialist Party (Neuberger 2019, 117). All of this is discussed in the emotionally charged, pathos-rich rhetoric so common online, making it rife with painful and hurtful imagery, claims, and laughter. Why do we still take it seriously?

In the end, we argue that while #GG may have been only one instance of a campaign with harassment elements, the sentiments it cultivated and amplified as well as its operational logics have since been successfully employed in many similar online movements, including the current political campaigning associated with the so-called alt-right. The #GamerGate campaign can, in many ways, be interpreted as a sort of backwards canary in the coalmine. When it flared up, it uncovered other weaknesses in how people communicate online. It foreshadowed a body of research into anger in social media use, which for instance is used to discuss and uncover the extent of Russian interference with the 2016 US election (Miller 2019). This research reveals that anger may not be the natural state of online commentators, but a result of deliberate manipulation to gain attention and provoke action.

#GG demonstrated how speech acts (Searle 2002) are real acts even if they are not framed as policy or law, by making harassment strategies like “doxxing” – publishing personal details of others – and “swatting” – faking emergency to provoke attacks by the police – visible to a larger public. Horrible as this is, it makes it possible to start a conversation about the consequences and the cultural changes digital media has helped create that are based on politics and economy rather than the concern rhetoric of psychology. This is absolutely necessary if we want to understand where the new arenas of political debate are forming, with gloriously crowdfunded uplifting efforts side by side with sophisticated hostile propaganda and astroturfing campaigns. When the emotional temperature rises and we see the tweets of the angry mobs, we know it is not the time to look away.

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