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Trolls, Hackers, Anons

Conspiracy Theories in the Peripheries of the Web

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TITOLO ITALIANO: *Trolls, Hackers, Anons*: Cospirazioni e complotti nelle periferie del Web.

ABSTRACT: Conspiracy theories permeate through every level of the Web. The semiotic features of this medium lead to mistrust, misunderstanding, and aberrant interpretations entailing a mythological approach to meaning. The essay investigates the relations between conspiracy theories and the semiotic features of a peculiar area of the Web: its peripheries. In particular, the essay focuses on the so-called “A-culture”, hosted in the boards of sites such as *4chan* and *8chan*. In order to study the semiotic dynamics that promote the rise of conspiracy theories, the essay singles out a particularly challenging case study: the violent Web dispute about video games and feminism, known as #GamerGate.

KEYWORDS: Web and Internet; Conspiracy Theories; Play; #GamerGate.

1. Introduction

Michael Barkun in *A Culture of Conspiracy* (2003) outlines three principles of conspiracy theories: 1) nothing happens by accident; 2) nothing is at it seems; and 3) everything is connected. The first principle is strictly connected with what says Matthew Dentith (2014): a conspiracy theory is the attempt to explain a significative event with a significant cause — which, as Dario Martinelli reminded us, is one

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1. In the Meetings on Meaning 2014–2015, dedicated to Semiotics of Conspiracy Theories.

of the basic needs to whom humanity answer with the creation of myths. Conspiracy theories, therefore, are products of a desperate need of meaning facing the inability to easily interpret reality.

The second principle — on deception — is also firmly connected to semiotic activities: if nothing is what it seems, it means that everything is a symbol, or a clue, of something else. We can see the roots of this concept from the etymology of the word “conspiracy” itself, which means to “blow together” or to “whisper together”, implying, on the one hand, secrecy and on the other hand, conventionality among the conspirators.

Finally, the third principle, relates to an other word, often used to describe conspiracy theories: plot. This etymon, also used in many other languages to indicate conspiracies (“complot” Spanish, “Koplott” German) literally means to be “bent”, or “bent together” and therefore bound together. The word “plot” is also connected with the textile area, indicating “fabric”, or “cloth”, and to the textual area (from the latin “textus”, that means “fabric”, again) referring to the disposition of events in a narration. Similarly, the Italian word “trama” indicates, at the same time, a machination, the intricacy of a piece of cloth, and a story. Conspiracy theories, hence, seem to be inextricably related to weaving — as much as narration is.

In addition, there is one last word, semantically connected to these, “web”, which nowadays is used to metonymically indicate one of the most important infrastructure of our time: the World Wide Web, the enormous hypertext² that contains much of the information exchanged on the Internet.

Arguably it may be no accident, therefore, if the Web is one of the most productive cradles of conspiracy theories, being the very metaphor that we use to understand it, deeply connected with the genesis of conspiracies. Additionally, the Web also features characteristics that match perfectly with Barkun’s other two principles, consisting in a hypertext at the same time puzzling and soaked of secrecy.

In this paper we will approach the relationships between conspiracy theories and the semiotics features of a very peculiar area of the Web: its peripheries. In particular we will focus on the so-called A-culture (Auerbach 2012) hosted in some boards of sites such as 4chan and

2. As in Nelson (1965): a multi-pronged digital text which parts are connected by links.

8chan. In order to investigate the semiotic issues that promote the rise of conspiracy theories, will dedicate a paragraph to a particularly challenging case study: the violent Web dispute about video games and feminism, known as #GamerGate.

2. The Peripheries of the Web

In this chapter we will approach the Web with the tools and theories of semiotics of culture, which are, in my opinion, particularly indicated to map such a complex and ever changing reality such as the one that the Internet hosts. I have already proposed such approach on the pages of this very journal (Thibault, forthcoming), therefore this paragraph will be dedicated to a brief recap of its main assumptions, in order to be able to continue with our investigation.

2.1. *The Semiosphere of the Web*

The word “periphery” that I used to indicate a precise and characteristic area of the Web, is obviously borrowed from Juri Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere — i.e. the smaller working semiotic mechanisms, the minimum unit of semiosis (Lotman 1990) that surrounds every single culture. The semiosphere, hence the semiotic space of a culture, appears to both enclose the Web and be overtaken by it. On the one hand, the texts forming the Web are undoubtedly part of the culture, but, on the other hand, however they are not limited to a single culture³.

The Web, therefore, has to be considered as a transversal set of texts, delimited by the overlapping of the immense hypertext of the Web and the semiosphere. The presence of the Web in a single culture, hence, is determined by the intersections between its semiosphere and the hypertext, and therefore will be a two-dimensional section of a sphere. This section, however, follows the general organization and structure of the whole semiosphere, and presents all the features and dynamics described by Lotman in his works: the hierarchy

3. Let’s think at social networks such as Vkontakte or renren, which are internal to the Web but external to the semiosphere of western culture

between a rigid, but influential center and a free and dynamic periphery, the continuous movement of textualities from the latter to the first, the existence of an external border working as a porous space of translation and so on.

Regarding the Web, the periphery — described by Lotman as the most innovative, dynamic, and fertile area of culture, but also limited to a minority of individuals — hosts what we can generally call “subcultures”, including fandoms, religious sects, political extremists and, subcultures connected to the concepts of geekiness and nerdism. Their websites and texts are generally unknown to the majority of the public, and their ideologies are more often than not opposed, or at least alternatives, to those that we can find at the center.

2.2. *The Internet*

The situation that we have described, with the Web present in every area of culture, represents only our current situation. When the Internet was a novelty, known only to a small circle of experts, it was a peripheral phenomenon — as happens to all cultural innovations limited, at the beginning, to a set of individuals and/or to the younger generations.

When the Web was born a small community of users arose, strictly connected with geek and nerd subcultures, formed by individuals that, for passion or for profession, happened to surf in the all new World Wide Web. This community shared a system of values and of ideologies (notably including a radical separation between reality and virtual world) and a strong feeling of belonging to the medium.

With time, however, the Web underwent to a process that made of it of central importance in the semiosphere, maybe the most important medium of all. From the peripheries, the Web has been deformed towards the center of the semiosphere (see Lotman 1985). Millions of new users started surfing and the Web itself changed greatly. Not much of the original Web is still existing today.

The Web subculture, nevertheless, survived and it is still situated in the periphery of the semiosphere, mostly gathered around forums and imageboards such as gaia online⁴ or the infamous 4chan. The latter

4. Even if fairly unknown to the public, gaia online, forum dedicated to manga and

is an imageboard founded in 2003, whose users interact in complete anonymity sharing and commenting images, generally employing a wide range of highly formalized practices of textual production and sharing. Most of the Internet memes (Marino 2015) were invented there and, even if not much famous, it has a large influence, in the Web and even outside it — the infamous collective of hackivists known as Anonymous was born on 4chan’s random board /b/.

This part of the peripheries of the Web and its pragmatics is generally referred to by its users with the synecdoche “the Interent”. In this chapter, we too, hence, will use (improperly) the expression “the Internet” to refer to the same area as opposed to “the Web” representing the whole World Wide Web.

2.3. A-Culture

Auerbach (2012) renames “A-Culture” the subculture hosted on the Internet and tries to outline the features of this community and its users. He argues that the members of A-culture, are often individual suffering of a social stigma — as the aforementioned geek and nerds, but also Japanese otaku — that find in the Web a new home in a sort of parallel reality, where their stigma and separation from reality becomes something to be proud of. This pride, according to Auerbach, becomes the typical form of elitism that can be found in the Internet (see also Thibault forthcoming).

The “elite of the elite”, the most prominent examples of members of the A-culture are the Anons, the anonymous users of some boards of 4chan and 8chan — notoriously /b/, /v/ and /baphomet/.

A-Culture has the features of what Lotman defines a culture oriented towards the expression (i.e. a culture that believes that what is outside of it is wrong) and in particular, Anons strongly oppose the websites of the center of the semiosphere because such sites promote the Web as a prosthesis of real life. The identity of their users is strictly connected to their offline identities (e.g. the selfie, a way to “translate” oneself into the Web) which represents all the Internet hates: sharing

anime is believed to be the most prolific forum in history, with the highest number of post, among which one that counts more than a million pages of comments. In this case the hybridization between different subcultures is self evident

real data, not protecting one's identity, and mixing the real to the virtual.

2.4. *The Web between play and reality*

Peripheral Web is based on the fundamental distinction between Web and every day reality. The economy of unreality described by Auerbach is the core of the Internet: suspicion it's its natural consequence, and offense a way to protect it.

The Internet claims and protects the Web's unreality refusing any contagion with reality and antagonizing users and websites that promote such confusion. However, even if the Internet is structured as an alternative space to reality, with different values and ideologies, this distinction doesn't make it ontologically any less real than other parts of the Web. What we are facing, thus, is a different semiotic domain, and in particular a playful one.

The playful character of the Internet is intrinsic both to the texts it produces (e.g internet memes) and to its pragmatics (every interaction between users is oriented to jokes, irony, or complicity).

However, this feature of the Internet and of its texts is rarely communicated, but its taken for granted, making for an external viewer extremely difficult to correctly interpret it. The metacommunication of the playful intentions — for Bateson (1959) essential to any play — is entrusted to the context: for an internet user everything on the Web is a joke and should not be taken seriously. This also explains why the Internet is often seen from outsiders as a place of the Web full of harassers, misogynists, homophobes and porn maniacs oriented to violence, hate speeches and sadistic practices.

If we consider the Internet as inherently playful, then, we can claim that two different semiotic domains — the playful and the real⁵ — are competing to be hegemonic over the Web. The results of this quarrel, as we will see, can lead to significant misunderstandings.

5. Which is, of course, a rhetorical and narrative construction as well as the playful one.

3. The rules of the Internet: a constitution

3.1. *Welcome to the Internet*

The Internet's conscience of the separation between online and offline (which is absent in websites like Google or Amazon) is one of the things that makes the peripheries of the Web semiotically interesting, as it entails the awareness of the uniqueness of online communication. Tracing a sharp boundary between online and offline allows the users of the Internet to discern and describe more thoroughly the features that characterize it. These descriptions assume, of course, the form of the texts that are massively produced in these areas of the Web: Internet memes.

A particularly interesting meme is the so-called list of the "Rules of the Internet". This list, born in 2006 in the random board /b/ of 4chan, is both prescriptive and descriptive and mainly sarcastic and ironic. However, this meme sketches an interesting portrait of the Internet and of the Web in general. In this paragraph, therefore, we will focus on some of them, and in particular to those pertaining to anonymity and to the economy of suspicion — in other words: those related to conspiracies.

3.2. *The rules*

The first two rules of the Internet: «Rule 1. Do not talk about /b/» and «Rule 2. Do not talk about /b/» are clearly a parody of the "rules of the Fight Club" from the homonym film by David Fincher (1999). Their connection with conspiracy theories is self-evident: on the one hand they reveal a taste for fiction about conspiracies, on the other hand they are also symptomatic of a certain measure of xenophobia: these rules state that the community must be concealed from the outsiders who are perceived as potential dangers.

The next rules are «Rule 3. We are Anonymous» and «Rule 4. Anonymous is legion». They are also born as a joke: as most people on 4chan posted as "Anonymous" soon someone started to pretend that Anonymous was a single person, even if manifold (hence the diabolical claim of Anonymous being legion). These rules underline the importance of anonymity, which was common in the primordial Web,

but nowadays fought off by all the Web's big companies. Anonymity is, again, a typical trait of conspirators or, at least, to their more "romantic" images. The fact that the group of hackivists called "Anonymous" (born on 4chan and whose name was a direct reference to the Rule 3) uses as symbol the mask of Guy Fawkes — well known British conspirator and whose mask is used also by the eponymous character of *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2006) — is another proof of the Anons' love for conspiracy narratives.

Partially connected with the idea of conserving anonymity on the Internet is also the «Rule 30. There are no girls on the Internet» that can be interpreted as reinforcement of Rule 3: anonymity has no gender, no one should ever reveal it's own sex in 4chan (Manivannan 2013). On the other hand, however, this rule can be also interpreted in another (non exclusive) way, as stating that anyone claiming of being a girl on the internet is probably not — as well as everyone claiming to be a child is in reality an FBI agent, as another popular meme says. This concept dates back to the original Web, when the female users were very few, and many men exploited the complete obscurity of the empiric author to pretend to be females. Again, we are facing a culture of suspicion, in which nothing is what it seems, and the rule is to doubt in every occasion. On the same line is «Rule 32. Pics or Didn't Happen» that requires to provide proof for every claim made on the Internet, that will otherwise considered false.

Masks and unmasking appear therefore to be central to the Internet ideology, probably because deeply rooted in the medium itself. The empirical author being irremediably out of reach, the semiotic competence of the Web is (or has been) mainly the ability of interpreting correctly its hidden intentions and objectives. The Web makes it really easy for everyone to create their own mask, and thus, celebrating unmasking, "the rules of the Internet" are celebrating the ability to understand and use correctly the medium.

4. Roles and communities of the Internet

In order to be able to investigate the dynamics of Internet conspiracies, a last order of premises is needed, regarding their actors (in a Greimasian sense). In the next few paragraphs I will briefly approach

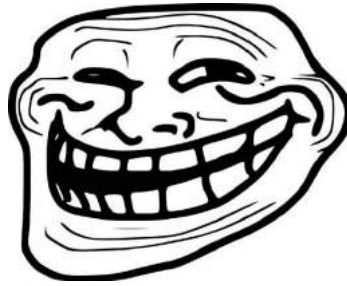


Figure 1. Trollface, meme used to explicit one's playful intention after trolling

some of the most important groups of users of the peripheries of the Web and try to sketch a sort of “semio-ethnography” of the Internet. These groups are often delineated by the pragmatics of their Web interactions, more that by any other feature. In other words, these groups are designated by thematic roles defining their communicative characteristics.

4.1. *Trolls*

“To troll” means to advocate in an aggressive and often illogical way an unpopular opinion, in order to start an argument with other users. The troll doesn't try to convince its interlocutor and will not change opinion: its sole goal is creating and maintaining conflict, and the more the argument becomes heathen, the better for the troll. Nowadays, the term “trolling” is used for any form of aggressive deception and hoax on the Web, if the goal is the troll's fun. This led some scholar to dramatically define trolls as “the sadists of the Internet” (Buckels, Paulhus e Trapnell 2014) and, more in general, to the idea that trolls are disturbed individuals.

From a semiotic perspective, a troll is someone who exploits the impossibility to reach the empiric author of a message typical of the Web, to hide his identity and his intentio, behind a very well defined (even caricatured) model author in order to delude the receiver of the message. The playful nature of this practice is evident, as it deals with illusion (from the Latin *ludere*, “to play”) and fun. This form of play isn't new, of course, it is what is generally called a “joke” (from the Latin *iocus*, meaning “fun”, “jest”), but, if for many jokes the

point is exactly the revelation of its playful nature (let's think of candid cameras), trolls do never reveal their true intentions.

Even if most trolls are part of A-culture, they generally operate on very central websites: primarily the Youtube comment section, followed by Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr. There are attempts of trolling also in the boards of 4chan, but they have a lot less success: after all there are two rules of the Internet that explain clearly how to deal with trolls: «Rule 11. All your carefully picked arguments can easily be ignored» and «Rule 14. Do not argue with a troll — it means that they win».

Even if the rule “Don't feed the troll” is universal, many of the users of the central areas of the Web do not have the competences to identify and avoid trolls, and therefore fall into their traps. This competence, is the competence is a semiotic domain (and, in particular, in a playful semiotic domain) and it is a fundamental trait required of any user of the Internet. The ability to understand if someone is trolling you, and hence to ignore every provocation, avoiding to become a “lulcow”, reflect the understanding of the playful nature of the Internet.

What we are facing, therefore, is the result of the war between two different conceptions of the Web, one as prosthesis of the real world, and another as virtual playground, free from every social norm. Trolls don't communicate their playful intentions, because on the Internet «Nothing has to be taken seriously» (Rule 20). The Web, according to them, is meant as a place to play into, and those who don't understand it and make the mistake of taking things seriously deserve to become lulcows, and to be “milked” for fun.

The Internet however, is peripheral, and the number of users that know the “true nature” of the Web is exiguous. Knowing this “secret” becomes for them being part of a sort of conspiracy, where only an elected few know what is really happening, while the others' judgment is clouded. That's why 4chan and Anonymous often employ trolling for their raids against people or organizations (as the famous raid against Scientology)⁶. In this way the troll become the agent of a conspiracy and uses the weapons of irony and sarcasm to fight those who fail to understand that the Web is only one big joke.

6. See also the Italian online joke “Gattini per Salvini”, a quite successful raid consisting in posting images of cats, the “true rulers of the internet”, on the internet accounts of extreme right politician Matteo Salvini.

4.2. Hackers

The hacker is thematic role much loved by the Internet and a quite common trope in many works of fiction, mainly focusing on him as a young genius (see *War Games*, John Badham, 1983) or a mystic figure (especially in *The Matrix*, Laurence and Andrew Wachowski 1999). Real life hackers are individuals capable of exercising an unusual control on the medium and to break its rules, generally in order to acquire information. They do not simply use the medium to communicate, but they can communicate with the medium, and hence manipulate it.

Really skilled hackers, however, are rather few, and the importance of this thematic role is more a mythological one than a social one. This role fascinates the Internet, not only with fiction, but also thanks to famous real life hackers and activists like Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks. The prestige of this role among the users of the Internet is probably due to its two major characteristics: the first one is the outstanding computer science competences he possesses; the second one is its ability to unmask, to manage the revelations. The latter is strictly connected with the economy of suspicion that permeates the Internet, from this perspective a hacker is mainly a debunker, someone capable of see under the surface and to reveal conspiracies by unmasking the actions of the conspirators and finding the proofs.

One of the easiest — and therefore more common — actions linked to hacking is doxing, which is the act of discover the real identity of a Web user and share online his data: personal address, family composition, e-mail, contact and, sometimes, even passwords. Doxing has a clear intimidating nature, displaying the force and ability of the hacker and leaving the victim exposed and defenseless. However, most of the times these information are used only to make fun of the victim, who will receive online-ordered pizzas at home in the middle of the night or will be unwillingly subscribed to many spam mailing lists. In other words: doxing is used to bring trolling outside the Web into the real world.

It could seem an oxymoron that people valuing very much anonymity are so willing to unmask others and reveal their identities online. I think that there are three, non exclusive possible interpretations that may allow us to understand better what is doxing:

- doxing is a test of someone’s hacking abilities, and thus is part of the qualification of the subject;
- doxing can be interpreted as a performance that excludes from the Web individuals that do not protect well enough their identities. At the same time it denounces the risk of sharing data on the Web, and claims the latter for those embracing anonymity;
- doxing may be seen as an invasion of the real world by the playful space of the Web. It brings trolling in real life, overturning the balance of power between real and virtual, and affirming the superiority of the latter.

4.3. Gamers

This is a quite vast thematic role, semantically derived by the action of playing video games. According to recent studies playing video games is mostly an adult occupation, and women play almost as much as men⁷. The prototypical image of the “gamer”, however, is completely different, and has its roots in an early stage of gaming and in an assimilation between the stereotypes of gamers and nerds. From this perspective gamers are often described as white teens with no social life who are generally porn-obsessed obese virgins. These stereotypes are still astonishingly alive and played an important part in the #GamerGate quarrel.

On the other hand, not every video game player consider himself or herself a gamer — term that, in fact, is not well defined. In many websites and boards populated by gamers, as the board /v/ of 4chan, there have been many discussions of what is to be a “gamer”. Many, for example, have criticized studies reporting that more adult women play video games than teenage boy (source: Entertainment software association), claiming that playing Candy Crush Saga as a pastime doesn’t make someone a gamer. If some of the criticisms to these quantitative analysis may have a point, they are also the sign of the strong xenophobia that permeates the gamers’ subculture. For many years very strong prejudices against gamers were quite common, and video games were thought to hurt the brain or to induce violence, even if recent studies claim the exact opposite (Ferguson 2014 and

7. <http://phys.org/news/2015-12-women-men-video-games.html>.

Przybylski 2014). This social stigma, thus, has probably boosted the cohesion of the group and reinforced the suspicion and hostility towards anyone outside the group.

The similarities between the subculture surrounding the Internet and the gamer's subculture may seem many. However, these two groups only partially overlaps, and many similarities are mainly due to the fact of their being communities situated in the periphery of the semiosphere. Gamers are not a primarily online community, but, at the contrary, considers themselves to be gamers also in everyday life.

4.4. *Sockpuppets*

Sockpuppets are deceiving enunciative devices typical of the Web. The term is used to indicate accounts reporting false information and hiding the identity of the user behind them. Sockpuppets are fake virtual prosthesis, marionettes, and may be used for many reasons: to troll avoiding recognition, to overcome a ban, to pretend to be of another sex or race, or to undermine an position in an argument by claiming to support it and making meaningless points. The same individual can use different sockpuppets at the same time, manipulating the perception of its individuality and presenting himself like multitude — a sometimes very useful meaning effect.

From a semiotic standpoint a sockpuppet is a particularly articulated and explicit model author that the empiric author employ to influence, through techniques on *émbrayage*, his model readers.

As for conspiracies, the mere existence of the possibility of creating a sockpuppet encourage suspect and mistrust on the Web, hence the actions taken by the most central Websites against all fake accounts.

4.5. *Social Justice Warriors and Feminazis*

On the Internet the expression “Social Justice Warrior” indicates Web users that hypocritically exploit the promotion of social justice as a way to ask for attention and to improve their offline image. The website Encyclopedia Dramatica, a Wikipedia parody describing the Internet, in the page dedicated to Social Justice claims:

The main purpose of SOCIAL JUSTICE is not to enact actual change or forward progress. If it were, no one would give a fuck. In fact the primary reason for its existence is to allow white people to impress other white people with how accepting and totally sensitive they are. Due to being over privileged teenagers with too much time on their Internet hands, they have never actually experienced OPPRESSION. So, they merely wing it. Utilizing their caresonas to yell at others about how they are ruining other peoples lives with harmful blog posts.⁸

This is a form of identity crafting that is strongly antagonized by the Internet. Needless to say that accusing someone of being a Social Justice Warrior is a very easy way to delegitimize his or her position and arguments, without actually engaging with them. However, again, the basic idea that on the Internet nothing has to be taken seriously, and that the Web is not the place in which to fight effectively for social justice may bring most of its users to believe that anyone defending liberal ideas on the Web is loosing its time.

One of the main issues of #GamerGate, as we will see, is feminism which, especially in its online forms, on the Internet is often coarsely associated with Social Justice Warriors. Because of the general ignorance on the topic (one of the common argument is: «if it is about equality, why isn't it called equalism?»), of some hard-to-believe hoaxes (as the false news of a feminist aborting her male child to avoid to “give birth to a monster”⁹ or the fake feminist movement to abolish “father day” orchestrated by 4chan¹⁰) and of some undeniable exaggeration (like the journalist shaming scientist Matt Taylor for his shirt in an interview about the successful mission of space probe Rosetta) the Internet is often not a feminist-friendly place, when not openly misogynistic on the topic.

Things, however, are more complex than it might appear. Emma Watson, for example, who is considered being the “crush of the Internet”, is a outspoken feminist, and her speech at United Nations (in September 2014, as Goodwill Ambassador for UN Women) was generally appreciated also from many users of the Internet. In addition, some feminist, as Christina Hoff Sommers, have taken the side of the

8. https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Social_justice.

9. Original blog post: <http://injusticestories.com/i-aborted-my-baby-because-it-was-a-boy/>.

10. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/endfathersday>.

gamers in #GamerGate, and are quite popular among them.

Hence, following (unintentionally) another kind of rule of the Web, the Godwin Law¹¹, the term “Feminazi” was born, in order to distinguish the Social Justice Warrior feminists and the “men haters” from the “true feminists” who advocate equality. The oversimplification and general confusion is blatant, but it is symptomatic: when a community based on communicative practices have to face a political idea the latter can appeal to some of its users and be disliked by others. In order to keep the community united, the idea is either articulated in one positive and one “nazi” side easy to deal with, or translated to a mere fact of communication pragmatics.

5. The #Gamergate: a case study

The #GamerGate controversy is an heterogeneous and extremely complex internet flamewar that started in august 2014 and to the day, it hasn't completely ended. What I will do in this paragraph is to try to outline the development and the features of this controversy¹² and to investigate how they were affected by the patterns typical of conspiracy theories and by the semiotic and communicative characteristics of Web communication in general, and the Internet's in particular.

The controversy has been extremely animated — death threats have been received in both sides — and has taken place mostly on Twitter, where between August and November the hashtag #GamerGate alone has been used 2 million time: almost 50000 times a day. Also the Wikipedia page of the controversy has become for some time a battlefield resulting on mass bans. The comment sections of many blogs and websites that have dedicated entries and articles to the subject has also become quite often hosting spaces of the discussions, again with many bans and, sometimes, explicit regimes of censorship.

11. «As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1».

12. The reconstruction will be based on the narrations about them build by the two sides (Kotaku, Gamasutra ecc on the one hand, Knowyourmeme and Enciclopedia Dramatica on the other) and on my personal, and hopefully more objective, observation of the phenomenon. I monitored the hastags #GamerGate, #Stopgamergate 2014 and #notyourshield from September 2014 to February 2015, when the controversy reached its peak.

5.1. *Genealogy of flame war*

What was the principal subject of all these discussions? It would appear that the main topic was the nature itself of the factions, in particular of the #GamerGate movement. On the one hand, people hostile to GamerGaters accuse them of being a misogynist hate group attacking women in the video game industry in order to intimidate them and preserve the straight, white, male hegemony in the world of digital playfulness. The people that identify under the banner of the #GamerGate, on the other hand, refuse these accusations, claiming to be a diverse movement (the hashtag #notyourshield has been created and supposedly used by women, minorities and homosexual that identify with GamerGaters — although the reality of these claims has been put into question by critics claiming that these accounts are, in fact, sockpuppets) fighting against corruption and dishonesty in the media.

It is clear that the narrations of the two sides of the quarrel are extremely different. In order to try to shed some light on the birth of such narratives, we will here try to reconstruct, very briefly, the events that made explode the quarrel.

In August the 16th 2014, Eron Gjony publishes a blog entry about Zoe Quinn, award-winning game developer with whom he was in a romantic relationship until that moment. In his blog Gjony claimed that Quinn had many affairs while still being with him, some of which with video game journalists — one of them being part of the jury that assigned the award to Quinn. To support his claims he published a series of screenshots which he claimed showed messages between him and Quinn.

The day after, Internet Aristocrat, a quite influential youtuber, released a video about the “Quinnspiracy theory”. In this video Internet Aristocrat accuses Quinn to be «using sex to influence journalists and for portraying herself as a victim to receive donations and support»¹³.

The reaction of this video and to Gjony blog entry where twofold. On the one hand many people started to question how her personal relationships affected her career, and if judges and video game journalists could still be considered trustworthy. In the subsequent days Quinn was victim of many ferocious and violent attacks, insults and even death-threats on the Web (mainly on twitter, but also on Tum-

13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4bILqkO7DY>.

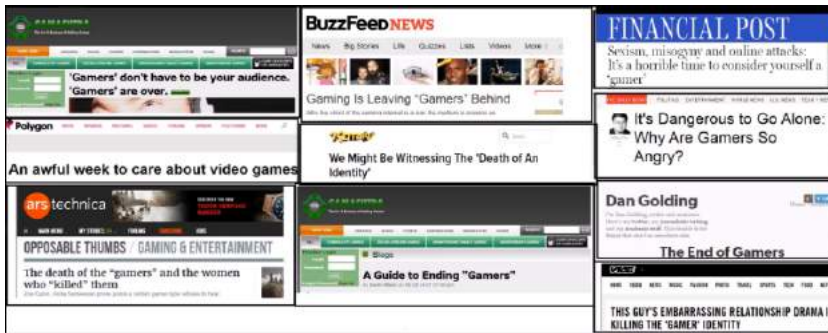


Figure 2. “Gamers are dead” blog title collection

blr). On the other hand, many people have been supportive with her, and accused Gjony of being misogynistic and of having written his accusations with the sole intentions to punish Zoe Quinn for having left him. In these days the hashtag #GamerGate was firstly created.

Few days later, the 28th — also following a wave of criticisms, mixed again with insults and threats received by feminist youtuber Anita Sarkeesian in response of a series of videos focusing on misogyny in video games — all the most important new websites and blogs dedicated to digital games (The Financial Post, Ars Technica, The Daily Beast, The Stranger, Beta Beat, Gamasutra, Polygon and Kotaku) dedicated articles and entries to the end of the identity of the “gamer”, accusing them to be a spoiled hate group of misogynists and online harassers, and stating that game developers shouldn’t consider them their target audience, anymore (Fig. 2).

The synchronicity of the response has been immediately interpreted as the proof of a conspiracy (“everything is connected”) and the discovery of a mailing list, called “gamejournopros” in which the authors of these articles were discussing how to respond to the vicious attacks against Zoe Quinn has been seen by many GamerGaters as a confirmation of their suspicions. 4chan’s board /v/, dedicated to video games become the basis for a counter conspiracy, in which GamerGaters coordinated attacks, actions and trolling operations. At least at the beginning, however, the majority of the posts on /v/ invited to avoid threats and insults, and focused on how dismantle the conspiracy they believed was held against them. One of their first actions has been to write to the companies that were advertised in the websites that had claimed the

“gamers” dead, menacing to boycott them if they continued to support the websites that, they claimed, were attacking their very consumers. This strategy proved itself successful, in a certain measure, entailing the cancellation of several contracts, among which those held by Intel.

Insults and threats however, continued, and soon where answered with other insults and other threats: rapidly the quarrel become a proper flame war, fought with screenshots, doxings, accuses of being sockpuppets or trolls and banning requests.

Most of the blogs dedicated to video games joined the cause of the “anti-gg”, while their opponents gained the endorsement of different personalities, as British tech journalist Milo Yiannopoulos and feminist writer Christina Hoff Sommers. Since then the attention to the quarrel started to slowly decline, but the flame war still hasn’t seen an end.

5.2. *Doxing, lies and paranoia*

The quarrel per se it is not very interesting, at least from a semiotic perspective. There are, however, two aspects of this quarrel, that in my opinion are worth further investigation. The first one is a cultural one: the two sides of the dispute seem to be absolutely unable to understand each–other systems of values and ideologies, and their semiospheres seem to be too different to allow any dialog. On the one hand many of the GamerGaters’ claims show a complete ignorance not only about feminism, about its history and ideas, but also about journalism, seeing as a conspiracy the fact that journalists might communicate and discuss their ideas between them, and even pursuing agendas different from pleasing their customers¹⁴. On the other hand, the anti-gg are blatantly unable to understand the workings of the Web. Redditor Spawnpointgard, on Reddit¹⁵ provided a lucid analysis of this cultural gap from the Internet’s point of view:

Like any problem, SJWs attempt to solve the troll issue by “raising awareness”.
To people who don’t understand the Internet (like every major news outlet),

14. Which probably tells us something about the state of digital capitalism and of the economic system of immediate feedback and online ratings.

15. https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/2sy4q3/a_history_of_chan_culture_and_how_it_relates_to/.

SJWs look like courageous individuals finally taking a stand against online harassment. To us, they look like morons trying to feed the trolls to death.

If you're the target of online harassment, don't promote it. Don't even respond to it. Don't be anyone's lulcow.

The second semiotically interesting aspect of this quarrel, is the importance that the characteristics of the medium play in the creation of opposite narratives which often reflects a conspirative way of thinking. We have already claimed that the fact that the empirical author of any online message is unreachable and hidden lead to question his nature, his identity and his agenda. In the narrative of the Web, this is mirrored by the impossibility to connect actors and actants, to identify with certainty who did what. A few days after the publication of the Quinnspiracy video, for instance, Zoe Quinn claimed to be the victim of an hacker attack and a doxing: a post on her Tumblr revealed her telephone numbers and was signed “/v/”. Eventually, blogger The spectacular spider-girl¹⁶, stated that, in her opinion, the doxing was staged and accused Quinn to be behind it. The spectacular spider-girl claimed that, seen Tumblr security features, which would disconnect multiple users on to the same account, it should had been impossible for Quinn to denounce the hack from her own hacked account. Additionally she stated that nobody from /v/ would never write the board's own name with an unacceptable capital letter, suggesting that Quinn herself staged her own doxing to gain more support. The virtual impossibility to proof or disproof this new conspiracy theory makes its acceptance inevitably a matter of faith, and only reinforces the existence of two different, incompatible narratives.

Interestingly enough, when to months later the personal data of game designer Brianna Wu were released publicly on /v/, the reaction of the Anons to the doxing where of two kinds: firm condemn of any doxing and ironical skepticism — many Anons responding something like: «Brianna, please, we don't care about your data. Stop pretending to be a victim».

16. <http://thespectacularspider-girl.tumblr.com/post/95179284529/zoe-quinn-fake-doxxhack>.

6. The ineffable nature of the Web

Without denying that online harassment is a problem — and a big one, what we are facing is a tremendous amount of texts, mostly contradictory, supporting two (if not more) different narrations with claims that cannot be verified by any means.

We don't really have any real data in our hands. Numbers can easily be faked¹⁷ and are, thus, insignificant: if identifying a single sockpuppet is, sometimes, easy, when one have to deal with hundreds of them it may become impossible. We also can't unequivocally interpret the *intentio auctoris* behind any of these texts, nor discern between honest authors and trolls supporting the same cause. In some cases, someone may use sockpuppets to cause more naive users to follow, honestly, their example.

Even if it is possible, sometimes, to reconstruct the goals and identity of the author of a text on the Web, being sure is generally a very difficult task, often requiring good computer skills. Most of the times, therefore, the user's approach to the interpretation of online texts is necessarily uncritical and based only on trust. If the latter is misplaced, then, being prey of hoaxes may be extremely simple.

Finally, the coexistence of different semiotics domains on the Web, poses an additional obstacle to straightforward online communication. The same messages can be radically different in different context or with different intentions, and the corpus of any online conversation, frequently, composed by hundreds or thousandths of texts, especially in social media, can be extremely heterogeneous and hard impossible to interpret.

All this semiotic issues increase suspicion, mistrust and misunderstanding on the Web, often resulting in the spur of conspiracy theories, which in this chaotic set of uninterpretable texts offer a simple way out from this interpretative impasse.

For this reason it is fundamental that Web users — and most of all Web scholars — approaching similar topics, especially when the Internet is involved, are fully aware of the twofold nature of the

17. There are evidences showing that Anons often started their campaigns mobilizing thousandths of fake Twitter accounts, see, for example: <http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2014/09/new-chat-logs-show-how-4chan-users-pushed-gamergate-into-the-national-spotlight/>.

medium. A single semiotic competence is not enough to be able to interpret and study the Web: a conflict permeates it and opposes two different online forms of life (Fontanille 2015), one associating online practices with real life, and the other with freedom and playfulness. Any attempt at approaching the Internet without recognizing this two-faced semiotic nature (the existence of two different frames of context) will be irremediably flawed.

It is indispensable, then, to remember that the Web is, unavoidably, a virtual place and not an extension of society. It might be used as one and it can be a mirror of society, but it doesn't necessarily do so. Failing to see the difference between reality and the Web, eventually brings to aberrant decoding and hence it easily entails mythological explanations and, thus, conspiracy theories.

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