

The Death of Gamers: How Do We Address The Gamer Stereotype?

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ABSTRACT

The clash of identities expressed in the Gamergate incident of 2014 was arguably intensified by the discourse of the “Gamers Are Dead” articles, which declared an end to gamers, meaning the prevalence of the gamer stereotype. This paper seeks to illuminate a novel angle of the Gamergate conflict by investigating how the gamer identity has been addressed through imagery in eight of the “Gamers Are Dead” articles of 2014. To do so, it discusses how the discourse of gamer identity, which is part of a larger ecology in game culture, may contribute to continued strife. To learn from the Gamergate crisis as a scholarly community, we unquestionably need to look at how discourse has been used to harm minorities, academics, and critics voicing their concerns about game culture. However, we also need to reflect on how critics affect the discourse of the gamer identity.

Keywords

Stereotype, gamergate, discourse, gamer, identity, stigma theory

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the term “gamer” managed to draw the attention of mainstream media as game culture became the stage for a series of violent conflicts relating to the right to claim the label or dispose of it entirely. Being the *right* kind of gamer or the question of being a gamer at all seemed to divide videogame players on a massive scale, with the social media prompt #GamerGate as the primary tool for division. In the aftermath, Gamergate remains relevant, largely because of its political implications (Mortensen & Sihvonen 2020). Game journalism has previously been discursively analyzed with a focus on journalistic paradigm maintenance (Perreault & Vos 2018), but scholars have mostly been interested in the communication of the gamergate movement, not their opponents. We therefore need to understand how the way we talk about the gamer identity as academics, critics, journalists, and game players relates to conflict and the ecology of player identities: What kind of imagery was used by anti-Gamergate journalists and bloggers to describe the gamer identity in the initial backlash to Gamergate during August and September 2014, and what is the significance of their discourse?

The notion of the gamer identity is not new, and its role in Gamergate can be situated in a historical, economic, and cultural context. Several works illuminate this development quite well already, describing the gamer identity’s characteristics and history with ties to specific discourses (e.g. Kirkpatrick 2013; Kocurek 2015; Salter & Blodgett 2017; Muriel & Crawford 2018), explaining how game consumers have been conditioned to expect an apolitical experience within virtual worlds (Condis 2014), discussing who identifies as “gamers” and why some do not (e.g. Juul 2010; Shaw 2010, 2011, 2014), outlaying the demographics, affects, and tactical approaches of the

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Gamergate movement online (e.g. Chatzakou et al. 2017a, 2017b; Buyukozturk et al. 2018; Trice & Potts 2018; Mortensen & Sihvonen 2020; Ferguson & Glasgow 2020), analyzing the journalistic paradigm of the time (Perrault & Vos 2018), and not least illuminating the development of Gamergate itself, along with its political implications (e.g. Chess & Shaw 2015; Mortensen 2016; Condis 2018; Blodgett 2020). The prevailing notion of gamers as somehow outside or beside the rest of society is especially interesting in these works. It reveals significant and prevalent issues with the gamer identity, despite gaming being enormously widespread (ESA 2019) and supposedly normalized.

Even before the digital era, people playing games in bars and other socially dubious spaces were associated with traits and milieus deviating from normalcy (Kirkpatrick 2013, 49), and deviancy has historically led to stigmatization in individuals and social groups (Goffman 1963). Playing games into adulthood, although normalized, arguably still carries a latent stigma by association in popular media. Stigmatized people are other than “normal”, according to Goffman (1963, 5), and so effectively “othered”, either through physical disfigurement, psycho-social traits, or so-called “tribal” stigma inherited from a related group of stigmatized people (2-3). By constructing a so-called “stigma theory”, we explain an individual’s or group’s inferiority and assume them to be a threat (15). In trying to manage the presentation of self, stigmatized people either attempt to hide their stigma, or react preemptively on the aggression of others (19). According to Goffman, the stigmatized also form groups based on common stigmatized traits, gravitating towards media figures like themselves (25). Accordingly, stigmatization and the stereotypical depictions of gamers can be seen in popular media, including television shows for comedic effect (Deshbandhu 2016, 49), with mixed reception related to “nerd shaming” (see e.g. Seitz 2014; Palmieri 2019).

Being especially vulnerable to judgement, the stigmatized have a strong incentive to seek influence over the way they are perceived by others, by way of situation definition and impression management (Goffman 1959, 3). According to Persson (2019, 138-139), seeking influence over the shared definition of a situation is a clear example of power dynamics despite Goffman usually not being associated with discourses of power. The vague definition and boundary of the gamer identity label invites confusion as to who do and do not share the undesirable traits of the stigma, resulting in what Goffman describes as *tribal stigma*. Those associated with the label are tainted by relation. *Psycho-social traits* identified in the gamer stereotype, and even the behavior of real individuals, are just as relevant and constitute another category of stigma explained by Goffman. Others have made similar observations: As Mortensen has argued, the Gamergate movement resembles hooliganism in its sense of self-narrative as persecuted victims, even martyrs (2016), and self-identified gamers have attested to the feeling of being “marginalized” (Goodchild 2014a; Buyukozturk et al. 2018) and “attacked” (Muriel & Crawford 2018, 162). This has arguably locked the stereotype together with the gamer label, as people who *do* play but otherwise identify outside gamer identity category are sometimes unwilling to label themselves as gamers (Shaw 2011, 40; Muriel & Crawford 2018, 165).

Gamer identity presents a “conundrum” in that it is “an identity categorization that does not define the identity of those who are defined by it” (Muriel and Crawford 2018, 166). As more people with different backgrounds play, and as the identity boundary is challenged and becomes increasingly vague and meaningless, it becomes harder to maintain a community around it (165). While this is not a problem for those who have a secure social base outside of self-identifying as a gamer, identity threats can be tied to radicalization in those who have an insecure life attachment at much larger scales (Ozer & Bertelsen 2019; Ozer 2020), and by taking on the narrative of being “victims of the left” (Peckford 2020), some “gamers” with strong emotional attachment to the

identity fulfil this criteria. A stigma theory is constructed through these self- and other-imposed narratives through influence, framing, and boundary work, most visible in the way the gamer identity has been constructed in social media spaces, not least during 2014 and after (Buyukozturk et al. 2018).

People who play games can and should be discussed in terms of their functions, motivations, and behavior (e.g. Bartle 1996, Aarseth 2003, Yee 2006, Sotamaa 2007, Juul 2010, Kahn et al. 2015, Cowley & Charles 2016, Holm 2017). Yet, while it certainly has its merits to build frameworks and outline types of players with the purpose of aiding in the production of games or cultural analysis of play, reducing players or their identities to simple characteristics may affect the construction of videogame culture in return, since media and academic discourses play a part in this construction (Shaw 2011, 31). Discussing players from a strictly categorical perspective, such as casual versus hardcore or other dichotomies (Juul 2010), arguably enforces existing narratives about what players or gamers can and cannot be, as seen in the characterization of “geeks” (Salter & Blodgett 2017) in popular television shows like *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre et al. 2007-present; Bednarek, 2012), *South Park* (Parker, Stone 1997-present) and *Chuck* (Schwartz, Fedak 2007-12). We can therefore critically engage with the overarching narrative of player stereotypes, and constructively discuss the gamer label, only by acknowledging that the way we talk about identities and cultures affects not only the debate about what it means to be a gamer, it also affects the social conflict between those invested in the debate. We, in the sense of both players of games, developers, critics, academics, fans, legislators, and even people not interested in games, are entangled in framing the identity.

As a concrete example of gamer stereotype discourse before, after and during the Gamergate event of 2014, several industry professionals were harassed on the presumption that their involvement in game culture constituted a threat to the gamer identity itself, which resulted in a backlash from within the videogame journalism industry (Golding 2014). The backlash did not come out of nothing. The backlash expressed in the articles was a reaction to years of systemic issues and discursive battling over the right of minorities to have a voice in game culture. Yet, their presumed claim that “gamers” had ceased to matter left a correspondingly significant impression on the community of people who play games (Goodchild 2014a; Mortensen 2016; Buyukozturk et al. 2018; Peckford 2020), which were and are made of people who both do and do not identify as gamers, and even fluctuate in-between (Mortensen 2016, 293-299). But what kind of imagery and discourse was employed in 2014 by the critics of the Gamergate event, and does it matter? Although some lists group together 12 or up to 18 texts as part of the backlash in and around August 2014 (Goodchild 2014b), this paper looks at the eight that were most widely circulated at the time with the explicit purpose of identifying and discussing the imagery constructing the gamer stereotype, and the role of this construction in Gamergate.

GAMERGATE: BUT WHY? AGAIN?

This paper presents a comparative analysis of eight of the written pieces known by proponents of Gamergate as the “Gamers are Dead” (GAD) articles¹. By analyzing them in relation to the concepts and theories of primarily identity (Shaw 2010; Shaw 2011), stigmatization (Goffman 1963), and the social construction of “gamers” as a stereotype (e.g. Kirkpatrick 2013; Muriel & Crawford 2018), the paper presents a different perspective on the conflicts of the gamer identity category. Focusing on this limited set of texts with representative themes of identity struggle provides a set of advantages and constraints:

- The eight GAD articles selected represent a tangible and uniform cluster of communication formed as a direct response to the events preceding Gamergate. The view presented in the eight pieces are one-sided, but since they are reactionary texts in the sense that they are produced as comments on and critiques of the toxicity of Gamergate and game culture in general, they can be analyzed as part of the overall contextual landscape of Gamergate.
- The point of this paper is not to discuss how Gamergate started, who benefits from the conflict, what the conflict is really about, or to argue that the GAD authors are to blame for the conflict. The selected GAD articles should be grasped in the context of the enormously harsh tone seen particularly before the discussion spread to more legitimate platforms, game journalists and mainstream news. A larger comparative analysis of the discourse in the GAD articles, *as well as* in comments, social media posts and imageboard discussions, would therefore be interesting and relevant in a larger study with a broader focus. This paper only argues that there is a cyclical relation between the gamer stereotype, emotional investment in the stereotype as an identity, and the way we talk about the stereotype.
- There have been a number of research pieces thoroughly discussing the texts or the claims of the Gamergate community (e.g. Chess & Shaw 2015; Todd 2015; Richard 2015; Kain 2014; Jones 2017; Quinn 2017; Bezio 2018; Salter 2018; Perreault & Vos 2018), and very detailed analyses of the event with a focus on the different agents related to the incident (Mortensen 2016), as they are related to studies on gender, games and minorities in general (e.g. Shaw 2010; Consalvo 2012). Yet there has been little to no attention to the type of communication *directed by* anti-gamergaters *at* the Gamergate community. Quinn (2017), for instance, advises to opt for anonymity online, as far as possible, to avoid conflict and targeted online harassment. In contrast, this paper seeks to draw focus to that gap in research, and complement existing studies on Gamergate, which also inform how online media can function as a platform for echo chambers and harassment (Mortensen 2016, 788).
- Lastly, this is not an attempt to play the devil's advocate or otherwise defend the actions of Gamergaters, but an attempt to look behind the conflicts and understand one facet of Gamergate that has not been tackled directly. Talking about identification and discourse cannot prevent the conflicts from continuing, as they are much more complex and involve many more facets than covered here. However, it may contribute to a broadened understanding of the phenomenon in general. Applying critical theory or drawing on research on radicalization in much larger contexts, for instance general life attachment (e.g. Ozer & Bertelsen 2019; Ozer 2020), might prove productive for tackling similar events than charting their effects, but that is outside the scope presented here.

Background: The Gatekeeping Hashtag

As games become more popular as a medium and more games for different types of people become available, diversification in gaming culture increases (Consalvo 2012; Todd 2015, 64; Juul 2010, 147-148). Yet with increased diversification in the mix between game development, consumption, media and player culture, the identity categories of gamers arguably also become more divided. While an expansion might seem as a wholly positive development, there has also been resistance to the influx of diversity within gaming culture (Consalvo 2012; Chess & Shaw 2015; Jones 2017; Quinn 2017; Mortensen 2016; Bezio 2018; Salter 2018). Instead of seeing merely an increase in the production, quality and appeal of games, there seems to be a fear of censorship, derailment and altering of games (Consalvo 2012; Jones 2017; Mortensen

2016; Bezio 2018; Salter 2018), which ties heavily into a similar core concern for the very identity of those who identify with the activity of gaming; the “gamers” (Chess & Shaw 2015).

These anxieties tightened significantly when, in the summer of 2014, Eron Gjoni accused his ex-partner, game developer Zoë Quinn, of corruptive liaisons with the gaming press for favorable reviews (Young 2016)². Then, on August 27, 2014, actor Adam Baldwin coined the term and hashtag “#GamerGate”³ after hearing about the conflict from a set of *Youtube* videos condemning Quinn. With the hashtag #GamerGate, self-identified gamers mobilized and vocalized their grievances online, claiming ethics of journalism to be their main cause. In August and September 2014, the movement and its activities began to come into the searchlight of mainstream news outlets in the U.S. (Chu 2014; Bernstein 2014; Kain 2014; O’Rourke). This transferred the debate over culture wars, cyber bullying, and sexism in the videogame industry to new platforms. It went from social media such as imageboards, *Twitter*, and blogs, to mainstream news channels. With this migration, the debate also became legitimized in new ways, from online aggression to quite serious real-life consequences. The issues and events arguably tie in with the general rise of the political alt-right (see e.g. Glasgow 2016; Bezio 2018), meaning it reflects a much larger cultural phenomenon. For those interested in the chronological details, Torill Mortensen (2016), provides an excellent overview and analysis, but in short, game developer Zoë Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian and other figures were the targets of mass harassment in 2014, after years of escalation. The harassers also had specific political motivations for enflaming and spreading the debate, drawing increasingly more attention to the conflict (Mortensen 2016).

With Baldwin’s handle #GamerGate, the event is simultaneously conflated with political corruption and cultural conceit. The day after the hashtag was coined, author and videogame journalist Leigh Alexander publishes the article “‘Gamers don’t have to be your audience. ‘Gamers’ are over” on *Gamasutra* (August 28, 2014). Her article transported the conflict from social media sites to the site of videogame journalism itself, spreading it to those unaware of it. In quick succession, a set of related pieces known later as the “Gamers Are Dead” articles (see endnote 1) were published, provoking more vivid discussions online. Since these were published hours apart, and are all on the topic of sexism and stereotypes in the videogame industry, speculations arose that they were coordinated in a cultural or political “attack” on gamers (Kain 2014), and intensified harassment of vocal critics followed. At this point, the IGDA Board of Directors issued a “Statement on Harassment” answering to and condemning personal attacks on game developers and affiliates (IGDA 2014). The term “Gamergate” is barely a day old while this unfolds.

The anti-Gamergaters mobilized against primarily online harassment and toxic behavior in the gaming community, as evidenced by the attacks on Zoë Quinn. Marginalized players and female game developers such as Brienna Wu argued that video games are intently developed for and by men, making male players think that gaming is their social domain, and that women asking to be represented are intruding on a space belonging solely to a specific type of men (Todd 2015, 65). Contrastingly, the Gamergaters mobilized against the idea of a rampant corruption playing out between the industry and videogame media through so-called “censorship”, in the defense of “artistic expression”⁴. Ironically, Gamergaters inevitably limit the expression of others by silencing critics. They then seemed to gain a stronger voice in videogame news media through, among others, Milo Yiannopoulos’ article for the online alt-right tabloid magazine *Breitbart* (Yiannopoulos 2014)⁵. Yiannopoulos wrote on his disdain for the terrorization of the gaming community by “an army of sociopathic feminist programmers and campaigners” (ibid.) shortly after the first Gamergate related

articles were published, on September 1, 2014. The Gamergate movement then spread to involve the game developer Brienna Wu and the then *Youtube*-focused videogame critic Anita Sarkeesian, who were both subjected to threats based on their feminist views and alleged disruptive cultural agendas. Yiannopoulos, who is known for inflammatory rhetoric, specifically highlighted the latter as women who “have no discernible higher purpose in life, except to bother innocent game developers” (2014). Sarkeesian had already been targeted and harassed for her cultural criticism of games several years earlier, so this was not new (Todd 2015, 65), but the format and range was.

The backlash against Sarkeesian in particular drew the attention of mainstream news outlets in October 2014, when Sarkeesian cancelled a speaking event at Utah State University after the school had received an anonymous threat of a mass shooting (Utah State University 2014). Up until December 2014, mainstream news coverage would often try to depict both “sides” as equally at fault and in the right, until it shifted into focusing on the gory details of the violence committed by the harassers, and in 2017 the mainstream press slowed down significantly in their eager to provide the movement with attention, after an alt-right supporter drove a car intentionally into protesters at a rally in Charlottesville, USA, killing one person (Blodgett 2020). By then it was clear that movements and handles like #GamerGate could be used quite successfully for political gain, as evidenced by the political careers of those involved.

There is far from a consensus on these goals and perceptions, since some alleged Gamergaters such as Eron Gjoni label themselves as a feminist or “Social Justice Warrior”⁶ (Young 2016). Some Gamergaters also focus on conflicts and use methods not approved by large Gamergate communities such as *KotakuInAction*, which, at least publicly, condemns online harassment (Reddit, n.d.), even though this is difficult to gauge since there is no official leadership. What remains is to analyze what this has to do with the gamer identity and the imagery surrounding the gamer stereotype, which leads us to the “Gamers are Dead” articles.

ANALYSING THE “GAMERS ARE DEAD” ARTICLES

The selected eight written pieces known as the “Gamers are Dead” articles, some of which are actually blog posts (Golding 2014; Wilson 2014), opinion pieces (Plante 2014) or comments on current events (O’Rourke 2014), contain variations on the same message. They display the reactions of the authors to the harassment cases of Quinn, Sarkeesian or other industry professionals prior to September 2014, ranging from horror and shock (O’Rourke 2014) to disappointment and disgust (Alexander 2014, Plante 2014). Some allude to similar harassment cases of women in the gaming industry in the past, or to analogous situations in other entertainment industries (Chu 2014, Bernstein 2014). All of them agree that the “gamer identity” is regressive and harmful to gaming culture, and that if it is not already a thing of the past, it is now or should be “over” or “ending” (Bernstein 2014, Golding 2014, Alexander 2014, Plante 2014, Johnston 2014, Wilson 2014).

The article on *Gamasutra* called “‘Gamers’ don’t have to be your audience. ‘Gamers’ are over” by Leigh Alexander, is thought to have incited the notion of the gamer identity’s “death”, even though Golding is the first to use that exact phrasing. Alexander wrote about game culture as an embarrassment to her, not only because of the harassment campaigns against Quinn and Sarkeesian, but because she argues that game culture as a phenomenon has produced a type of individual who lacks basic social skills and self-regulation, and that this image has become the face of game culture to outsiders (Alexander 2014). This face refers to what is generally known as toxic geek masculinity, which is identified and discussed in different ways by Braithwaite (2016), Salter and Blodgett (2017), Condis (2018), Humphreys (2019), and Blodgett (2020).

Alexander furthermore argued that many people refuse to label themselves “gamers” because of increasingly negative connotations to the label, which echoes with existing research on gaming, identity, and player self-categorization at the time (e.g. Juul 2010; Shaw 2011). Alexander declared gamers to be “over,” with “no side” to be on and “no debate” to be had in the conflict between those who are “okay with an infantilized cultural desert of shitty behavior and people who aren’t” (Alexander 2014). While having many valid points, such as people who play games not being a simple, uniform group (Alexander 2014), which is echoed by scholars such as Mortensen (2016; 799), Alexander’s article presents a strong example of stereotype enforcement and alienating discourse in itself. The identity category of gamers is kept visible and powerful despite the ostensible intention to strip it of its cultural influence because “they are not [her] audience. They don’t have to be yours,” (Alexander 2014).

The GAD articles seem to discursively enforce the very tropes and traits they condemn, and instead of inspiring self-reflection, the critique was arguably met with a mix of confusion, defensive attitudes, confirmation bias, and general discontent, as can be seen in empirical inquiries by for instance Goodchild (2014a), Muriel and Crawford (2018), Blodgett (2020), and Peckford (2020). Comparatively, a study from 2020 looking at demographic characteristics of a sample of 725 individuals self-identifying as members of #GamerGate, found that 41.8 per cent (303 individuals) identified with the gamer stereotype consisting of sub-labels like “white”, “male” and “heterosexual” (Ferguson & Glasgow, 2020). The study also found that the sample was generally politically left-leaning (3), and not primarily motivated by sexism or misogyny, which counteracts the narrative of the stereotype associated with the group described by Braithwaite (2016) and others. While the Ferguson and Glasgow suggest to “decouple” the concept of misogyny from the Gamergate movement based on these findings, this might be too drastic a move. However, accounts on the social media platform *Twitter* that self-identity as part of #GamerGate seem to belong, to a higher degree than expected, to existing and highly engaged users with established social networks, not throwaway accounts made for harassment (Chatzakou et al. 2017a, 2017b). Self-presentation and social media discourse strategies should be considered, yet there is some indication that the stereotype is not an accurate framing of the actual individuals in the group.

Stereotypical Gamers

The GAD articles express an identity threat through the use of stereotype narratives and distancing mechanisms, enforcing the stereotype of the gamer identity. By reproducing this identity type, the authors unwittingly assured its continued spread to new cultural spaces and audiences, and they sustained the narrative of the white, heterosexual, male, socially challenged, young and unsuccessful gamer type already familiarized in popular culture (Shaw 2010, 79; Juul 2010, 9; Crawford 2012, 48; Deshbandhu 2016, 49) and game marketing (Shaw 2011; 39), despite clearly renouncing it. Thus, they also maintained this type’s status as the default or “traditional” gamer identity (Golding 2014), even though the stereotype has been identified and deconstructed at length⁷ (e.g. Shaw 2011).

In Alexander’s article, such descriptions include: “video games themselves were discovered by strange, bright outcast pioneers,” “young white dudes with disposable income who like to Get Stuff,” and “a generation of lonely basement kids” (2014). This describes two opposing facets of the white, heterosexual gamer stereotype, *othered* in each their own way; namely that of the intelligent nerd and that of the social loser. The “strange, bright outcast pioneers” refer to the creators of the first computer games. The specific wording constructs an image of misunderstood geniuses, or individuals who pursue and attain progressive goals in a society that does not see their potential. This image is favorable and plays to a narrative of IT professionals that have become more

established in popular culture (Deshbandhu 2016) since the major successes of individuals such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg.

This stereotype description stands in stark contrast to “young white dudes” and “lonely basement kids,” which both refer to the gamer stereotype Alexander describes throughout her article (2014). Here, the tone is very different in style and valence; the contemporary gamer is framed as somewhat sad, materialistic, socially inept and overall simple, as opposed to the type of videogame player Alexander herself can relate to, which is merely “strange,” a term not decisively negative. Her text implies that the “pioneers” established game culture, and that it has been taken over by the “kids” and the “white dudes,” meaning that somewhere in the process the culture was either degraded or it shifted focus to something of lesser cultural value. “Game culture” is “kind of embarrassing” in its current state, and there is a “cultural vacuum,” where the type of people capable of the harassment seen in the Gamergate movement, the “trolls,” are left free to their own devices (Alexander 2014). She argues that the intense focus of the games industry and media on the “gamer,” or the negative stereotype she describes as “white dudes” and “basement kids,” as their core audience, is the reason why game culture has normalized and standardized the stereotype as the traditional gamer identity. Looking at the academic literature mentioned further up, Alexander’s observation in 2014 was very relevant and on-point, albeit the framing applied was direct and personal, which is not surprising given that journalism differs from academic writing precisely in this liberty.

Yet here is the main problem with her article from a communicative and inclusionary point of view. As Alexander describes the gamer stereotype, and argues why it has a damaging effect on game culture, she also enforces its effects through her own narrative, allocating the stereotype the roles of both fool (“childish internet-arguers”, “shitslingers”, being “mad”) and villain (“harassers,” “howling trolls,” “causing “genuine harm”) (Alexander 2014). Her descriptions are arguably reductionist, alienating and aggravating, such as when she describes the “typical” gamer’s motivations: “Have money. Have women. Get a gun and then a bigger gun. Be an outcast. Celebrate that. Defeat anyone who threatens you. You don’t need cultural references. You don’t need anything but gaming” (Alexander 2014). While she states that gaming culture and the people participating pro-socially in it have “grown up” by 2014, and that these people have created a more culturally relevant, inclusive space through “a healthy cultural vocabulary, a language of a community” (Alexander 2014), she also excludes and vilifies anyone identifying with the stereotype she has described. Through her writing, the stereotype is not only perpetuated, but also elevated; it becomes all-important, as when she states that people fitting it are not just “bad apples” but actually representative of the biggest gaming communities online (Alexander 2014). The piece is written in affect, with the background of the recent harassments in mind, and so it constitutes in itself an angry reaction to what can only be described as an attack on her in-group and thereby a tangible perception of personal threat. The difference, to iterate, is in the platform. This conflict was now happening through official news media channels.

Gamers as a Threat

Other GAD articles contain similar statements, stressing the significance of the Gamergate incident and the threat of the traditional gamer stereotype, while simultaneously dismissing self-identified gamers’ claims of being culturally excluded and symbolically attacked. The texts perpetuate a narrative of gamers as either childish or monstrous. For instance, Plante from *Polygon* (2014) wrote that games as a medium is at a “cultural turning point”; one side in the conflict has “folded its arms, slumped its shoulders while pouting like an obstinate child that has learned they are getting a little brother or sister” and the other side has “opened its arms, unable to contain its love and

compassion, because they understand they are no longer alone.” The traditional gamer is thus compared to a child throwing a tantrum, enforcing the stereotypical notion of gamers or games as childish and not to be taken seriously. Plante built on the imagery by noting that in the case of these children, it “is time to grow up” (2014). By rhetorically reducing the imagined “gamer” to an infantile entity either refusing or incapable of accepting progress, the claims of such gamers are made unworthy of debate or acknowledgement. Plante simultaneously claims that the “turning point” is significant while indirectly arguing that there is *no* debate to be had, because children cannot handle adult dialogue (Plante 2014). Incidentally, this phrasing is not unlike how mainstream media dismisses those who play games for being “childish” (Kirkpatrick 2013, 49).

Similarly, *BuzzFeed* reporter Bernstein observed that the harassers of the Gamergate community merely constitute a “small group” who is “probably angry, but also saddened and scared” at the development they are witnessing in the game industry (2014). He also built on a frame of the gamer stereotype, then dismissed the debate by minimizing and deflecting the grievances of one part. Academic and blogger Daniel Golding used similar imagery in his blog post titled “The End of Gamers,” when he called the behavior of Gamergaters “hysterical fits” (Golding 2014). As did Wilson, a blogger who attempted to write a sort of manifesto for revolutionizing game culture and abandoning the gamer label (2014). He encouraged gamers to care more about “the world and its inhabitants” than “clinging” to their “toys” (Wilson 2014). These descriptions all suggest that gamers are more to be pitied than feared, as they are likened to children who try to comprehend matters too complex for their minds, and fail catastrophically, resulting in a violent backlash aimed at their opponents, the videogame journalists and critics.

Yet gamers as a group were also stereotyped as villainous, powerful opponents in the GAD texts. For instance, Patrick O’Rourke from the *Financial Post* wrote that these people are “gatekeepers of the gaming community,” and that “the toxic attitude of much of the core gaming audience is disgusting and at times even terrifying” (O’Rourke 2014). Luke Plunket from *Kotaku* writes about gamers as something coming from the “dark corners of the internet” (Plunket 2014), implying they have monstrous qualities. Johnston of *Ars Technica* outright named them “stereotypical gamers,” clarifying that the most “poisonous” of them are to blame for the harassment incidents, which implies that the stereotype and living individuals are the same, and that they are all toxic to some degree (Johnston 2014). Chu’s article on the progressive liberal news site *The Daily Beast* also addressed the stereotypical gamer identity directly, saying, “You’re being misogynist losers who are making us all look bad” (Chu, 2014). He described gamers as people who tend to “care a lot about conflict and winning, [and they] aren’t content to just disagree with other people but have to “beat” them somehow” (Chu 2014). These statements fit the general idea of gamers being conflict-drawn and prone to use self-righteousness and total-warfare tactics for personal advantages in modern society, a description which has been identified (Carstens & Beck 2005, 24) and discussed before (Kirkpatrick 2013, 24-26). Like Alexander, who named them “howling trolls” (Alexander 2014), Chu also metaphorically allude to gamers as monsters when he wrote that “gaming culture is currently filled with hordes and hordes of regenerating monsters, each of whom has convinced himself that he is in fact the hero” (Chu 2014). The GAD articles thus collectively use distancing rhetoric in order to identify and contain the anti-social behavior ascribed to the gamer label by association.

A Discursive Cycle

This anti-social behavior ascribed to gamers, culminating in the harassment campaign most of the GAD articles refer to, is a threat to game culture from the perspective of

the GAD authors. It is no wonder, then, that there seems to be no distinction in several of the GAD articles between harassers and gamers, in the sense of the stereotype identity scolded by all of the GAD authors. Yet as Shaw has pointed out, we focus on gamers, or specifically the “audience for games,” in terms of this specific social construction because we do not acknowledge how the medium of gaming is constructed (Shaw 2010, 73). The gamer label, the stereotype, and the anti-social behavior have been conflated to such a degree that it no longer mattered to the GAD authors if self-identified gamers are offended by their rhetoric. Gamers have been reduced in the articles to a common enemy, guilty by association to the label itself. Yet this seems profoundly puzzling. How can an identity arguably not inhabited by any living individual, but merely an imagined stereotype (Bartle 1996; Juul 2010, 9; Hamari & Tuunanen 2014, 38; Meades 2013, 21; Shaw 2010, 86-87), provoke this much opposition? Although the simplified stereotype identity of gamers, as a type, only exists as a social construct, a label, and a set of ideas, it can create real-life conflicts when individuals and especially cultural groups begin to identify with it, to the point where this stereotype may become one of the defining frames for self-perception.

If their intention was to educate, engage in dialogue, or be inclusive, the GAD authors arguably failed their readers, but not simply because they misunderstood or misrepresented their audience. Their critiques are not irrelevant or wrong, and they identify several issues central to the problems experienced by them and others in game culture, which have been identified by others at length in the aftermath of the incident (e.g. Chess & Shaw 2015; Todd 2015; Richard 2015; Kain 2014; Jones 2017; Quinn 2017; Bezio 2018; Salter 2018; Perreault & Vos 2018; Mortensen 2016). The issue in this context is how stereotyping contributes to an already heated conflict. In other words, while the GAD articles carry a harsh tone, and arguably a much less harsh tone than used in the debate on social media before, during and after, they inadvertently supply more fuel to the conflict by focusing on the stereotype, drawing identity boundaries, and using aggravating language. The process is not dissimilar to the strategies applied during the War on Drugs in the US, which notoriously focused more on drug-users than the systemic issues of drug abuse, villainizing victims of the system and grouping them together with true offenders (Buchanan 2000; Paley 2018).

As Shaw argues, the more forcefully gamer identity is defined or attempted defined, the less malleable the identity or the understanding of the identity becomes (Shaw 2010, 79). It can be obstructive to the community as a whole when the stereotype of gamers is enforced because it prevents gamer identities in general from including those outside the bounds of the stereotype, and “thus these discourses shape who enters the industry” as well as who can participate in the culture (Shaw 2010, 79-80). Merely mentioning and characterizing the stereotype can thereby have a constrictive, negative effect on media and cultural ecology *in itself*. By reproducing and altering the framing of the situation, both in the narratives of the GAD articles, but certainly also in the narratives and strategies of the #GamerGate movement (Buyukozturk et al. 2018), framing itself becomes an instrument of influence, or a tool for exercising power (Persson 2019, 140). It is an interactive frame in Goffman’s sense, where there cannot be a universal set of mutual definitions because there can be no dominant definition. Either the gamer label is defined and limited, allowing a community to form from its basis, or it is vague and open to interpretation, which eliminates any necessity for a gamer-identity based community. Until the label is completely obsolete through the near-universal normalization of gaming, the struggle persists. Yet if there are communities based the label’s boundary, the struggle cannot cease.

We therefore arguably end up in a cyclical process: The gamer stereotype is imagined based on simplified characteristics, the stereotype becomes a reference for both developers and fans who evaluate the stereotype as a behavioral standard, games are

made targeting the stereotype, fans identify with the stereotype, and the stereotype is enforced through cultural production such as writing, which in turn enforces the image and presence of the stereotype as described by Shaw (2010, 81). This “virtual social identity” represented by the stereotype, meaning the identity constructed from assumptions about an individual or a group, is often the one society as a whole uses to evaluate unknown or strange elements (Goffman 1963, 2), even if it may vary significantly from any actual social identities. So if the stereotype becomes the only front of a cultural group, it becomes real in the sense that it becomes culturally relevant. If the stereotype is the outward face of game culture, this is problematic (Alexander 2014). Yet if the stereotype is enforced discursively, even if it is through critique, it only becomes more visible as a cultural front. Merely pointing out that other identity types than the stereotype exist, and berating the stereotype, is not sufficient for improving representation, as Shaw argues, it just enforces marginalization of already marginalized audiences (2010, 78), whether we talk about minorities in gaming or those (predominantly white, heterosexual men) who merely identify as outside mainstream culture. Other identities still stand in relation to the perceived standard of the stereotype, resulting in a hierarchy of identities with some of them perceived as superior.

Is Changing The Discourse Worth It?

Doubtlessly, the original intent of the GAD articles was not to provide fuel for the Gamergate movement, but to identify and reject a set of asocial and harmful practices in gaming culture, mainly that of coordinated harassment campaigns. However, the divisive rhetoric and in particular the perceived identity attack on gamers as a cultural group became the focus in August-September 2014. Attempts to criticize the stereotype for being only an identity label which harassers and other anti-social elements hide behind resulted in severe communication breakdowns. When Alexander stated that gamers are “over” and culturally irrelevant (2014), she refers to the gamer stereotype being replaced with a more contextual and diverse image of game players, with room for different identity types. Yet she also refers to actual individuals who identify with the stereotype becoming culturally irrelevant as game development companies start to develop games with other types of audiences in mind, and marginalized groups start developing more games with different content and narratives. In 2014, game journalists executed paradigm maintenance by centering on their ties to traditional journalism (as opposed to lifestyle journalism), and they emphasized a paternal role (Perrault & Vos 2018). However, outside journalism, the discourse of the GAD pieces carried more diverse implications.

A heavy focus on categorizations and rigid identities is not only obstructive to inclusion in the sense Shaw explains (2010, 78); it also has the side effect of constricting the discourse about gamers to a static, black-and-white arena, where grey areas or transfers between identity categories over time and with different contexts become inconceivable. Several scholars (e.g. Bartle 1996; Juul 2010, 9; Shaw 2010, 86-87; Meades 2013, 21; 86-87 Hamari & Tuunanen 2014, 38) have pointed out that real-life players cannot be placed permanently in only one identity category and that identities and individual’s connection to them change over time. Yet from the discourse of the GAD articles highlighted so far, and their use of the gamer stereotype in argumentation, we can deduce that this fluidity of identities is not broadly acknowledged outside academia, or perhaps even social science and the humanities. This also explains why the stereotypical gamer mentioned in the GAD articles is vilified and ostracized to such a degree. The authors use terms and rhetoric which is arguably useful for aggravation, but not particularly useful for initiating a dialogue, evoking empathy, or inspiring a change of behavior. Reactions to the articles have typically been negative by self-identified gamers as a result of this identity conflict (u/J91919 2014; Goodchild 2014a; Otton 2017; Adler 2018).

The imagery used toward a group can present significant problems. Emotional or cognitive pressure such as stress on an individual results in an impaired theory of mind (Lenton-Brym et al., 2018) which is necessary for cognitive empathy. Conversely, people are inclined to be more empathetic when their mood is positive, and when they are familiar and comfortable with the other person or group they are interacting with (Howe 2013, 86). While this is not an endorsement of “tone policing”, it does indicate that *if the intention* is to make an individual or group self-reflect and understand the grievances of others, establishing connection through discourse might be more valuable than discursive violence⁸. By perceiving offenders as simply beyond the reach of empathy, we merely enforce their stigmatization and othering, and we risk alienating those who are in a grey area between “us” and “them”. As mentioned earlier, the War on Drugs showed similar discourses, drawing the focus away from systemic issues to the stereotypical offenders. However, as indicated in Perreault and Vos (2018), empathetic connection with readers was likely not the primary intention with the GAD articles, due to journalists taking on the role of a one-way communicative authority.

As Alexander declared the stereotype insignificant, those readers who have no stake in the issue of harassment but have an emotional and socio-cultural attachment to the gamer label and its connotations, may see her statement as an exercise of power and aggression. Because the social group who identify with the stereotype arguably *feel* like lone heroes or bullied victims, according to the narrative of the gamer stereotype (Goodchild 2014a; Mortensen 2016; Chatzakou et al. 2017a, 2017b; Buyukozturk et al. 2018; Trice & Potts 2018; Mortensen & Sihvonen 2020; Blodgett 2020), their actions reflect those of the stigmatized. Gamer identity being conflated historically with transgressive and marginalized practices (Kirkpatrick 2014, 46-49) only adds to this motivation. Self-identified gamers may therefore perceive an attack in the GAD articles’ declaration that gamers are or should have ended, prompting defensive actions. As Goffman explains, the stigmatized are very apt in perceiving and reacting preemptively on attacks on their person, be it physically or verbally (1963, 19), which explains the intense backlash to the GAD articles by the Gamergate community. Whether the threat was substantial or not is irrelevant to the stigmatized who act in perceived justified defense (Goffman 1963, 19). Self-perception and identification therefore motivates the perpetuation of the gamer stereotype, but identification and stigmatization also define community boundaries.

The construction of the gamer identity and communities formed around it definitely reflect a desirable sense of belonging in a modern society where the struggle to define and sustain a coherent sense of self is increasingly dislodged from traditional social spheres such as family, nationality, work, and class (Kirkpatrick 2013, 20-23). Yet the gamer identity also marks a “negative symbolic boundary,” where the gaming community “sets rules for authentic participation and uses symbolic violence to carve out a new, exclusive social space” (Kirkpatrick 2013, 91). People not fitting the stereotype have thus traditionally been excluded from the gamer label (Shaw 2010, 73-74, 84, 91). Yet the stereotypical “angry young men” (Alexander 2014) are no longer the only acknowledged demographic for commercial videogames because the industry has specifically been targeting other groups (Juul 2010, 147), although with mixed effect. Therefore, the threat of change and invasion perceived by self-identified gamers is real in the sense that there “is a genuine sense of loss, watching games becoming mainstream and accessible” (Juul 2010, 151).

The perceived stigma associated with the gamer label is thus arguably a source of both community building and in-group identification, as well as gatekeeping and active out-group disassociation. When the GAD authors build on stereotypes, distance themselves from the gamer identity and encourage their readers to do likewise (Golding 2014,

Alexander 2014, Wilson 2014, Bernstein 2014, O'Rourke 2014), self-identified gamers who read the articles may be affirmed in their perception of themselves as outcasts. This creates a distancing process where self-identified gamers increasingly define themselves "against anyone who's Other in the gaming realm" (Chu 2014), and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

Because being a gamer is inherently reliant on notions of stereotypes, and because there is an emotional attachment to this identity category for gamers, declaring gamers gone, dead, or over may create a distancing effect between self-identified gamers and others. This distancing effect enforces and maintains current power relations, including the dominance of the gamer stereotype, which is counter-inclusionary. As shown by Muriel and Crawford through interviews with self-identified gamers (2018, 162), "many gamers felt, and probably still do, that their very identity and community was under attack", even those who did not identify with the misogyny described in the Gamers Are Dead articles of 2014. By grouping everyone using the gamer label together under undesirable and hostile characteristics, the articles invariably distanced many more than intended in the pursuit of destroying the label and its stereotype.

Not *only* Gamergaters act as cultural gatekeepers of videogame culture; critics of gamers as stereotypes, who express a longing for a more inclusive social space within game culture *themselves*, also act as cultural gatekeepers by way of distancing imagery and discourse. While there is no known solution to this conflict, acknowledging the responsibility of bridging communication and self-awareness in everyone involved might allow for better conflict management in future disputes within game culture. Ultimately, we need to acknowledge that the way we talk about games and players loops back and affects players in the ecology of game culture. As critics and academics, we have a shared responsibility to voice concerns, but also to reflect on our own practices and acknowledge how they may shape conflicts.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The list includes: Leigh Alexander for *Gamasutra*'s "'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over" (August 28, 2014); Chris Plante for *Polygon*'s "An awful week to care about video games" (August 28, 2014), Casey Johnston for *Ars Technica*'s "The death of the 'gamers' and the women who 'killed' them" (August 29, 2014), Devin Wilson for *Gamasutra*'s "A Guide to Ending 'Gamers'" (August 28, 2014), Luke Plunkett for *Kotaku*'s "We Might Be Witnessing The 'Death of An Identity'" (August 28, 2014), Joseph Bernstein for *BuzzFeed*'s "Gaming Is Leaving 'Gamers' Behind" (August 28, 2014), Patrick O'Rourke for *Financial Post*'s "Sexism, misogyny and online attacks: It's a horrible time to consider yourself a 'gamer'" (August 28, 2014), Arthur Chu for *The Daily Beast*'s "It's Dangerous to Go Alone: Why Are Gamers So Angry?" (August 28, 2014), and Dan Golding's "The End of Gamers" (August 28, 2014). Dan Golding's article was written before Alexander's, but it is lumped together with the others written only hours apart as background to the aftermath of her piece. Some lists include up to eighteen articles and pieces, but these eight cover the issues and themes adequately for the purpose of this analysis.

² The conflicts and concerns featured in the Gamergate incident have their roots in previous conflicts: For instance, Zoë Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian have been targeted for their political views and approaches to video game criticism previous to 2014, several years earlier in fact (Kain 2014, Yiannopoulos 2014), possibly as far back as 2007 according to the gamergate community (Mortensen 2016, 291), perhaps further. Gamergate as a whole should be contextualized within the larger scope of identity politics, political extremism, the rise of the alt-right in the West, as well as Russian influence on American politics; not to mention the role of games and play in history as imbedded deeply with a variety of values up to and including in networked society (Kirkpatrick 2013). Many of these things would be interesting to go into, but this paper will limit itself to the GAD articles and their discourse.

³ The original tweet on *Twitter* has since been deleted.

⁴ On one of the unofficial networking sites for Gamergaters, *KotakuInAction*, which is a "sub-reddit" or site on the website *Reddit*, part of the mission statement reads as follows: "We believe

that the current standards of ethics in the media has alienated the artists, developers, and creators who perpetuate the things we love, enjoy, and enthusiastically build communities around. We have taken notice of various incidents involving conflicts of interest and agenda-pushing within media which we feel are damaging to the credibility of the medium and harm the community at large. We believe the current media is complicit in the proliferation of an ideology that squashes individuality, divides along political lines, and is stifling to the freedom of creativity that is the foundation of human expression. KotakuInAction is a community that condemns willful censorship, exclusion, harassment, or abuse. It is a community that organizes to hold the media accountable to the concept of artistic freedom by standing up for the artist, the developer, the writer, the filmmaker, and all who enjoy the freedom to create, explore, and expand. It is a community that allows the exchange of information, supports the ongoing discussion of media ethics, and protects the right of the individual to embrace their personal interests in entertainment and fandom,” (Reddit, n.d., copied in September 2014). See also a description of the Gamergate mission statement in Trice, Michael & Potts, Liza (2018): *Building Dark Patterns into Platforms: How GamerGate Perturbed Twitter’s User Experience*. Present tense (New York, N.Y.) 6.

⁵ Yiannopoulos, as well as other prominent alt-right voices in the debate, have arguably only acted as voices for the gamer identity in order to gain political power, in complete contradiction to previous expressions. An analysis of how Yiannopoulos has mobilized gamer stereotypes at different stages in his career is a ripe angle for further research.

⁶ “Social justice warrior” or simply *SJW* is Internet slang, a term covering feminists, progressives and left-wing cultural critics. When ascribed to others, it is used to label someone presumably using social justice issues such as sexism to push a political agenda for personal benefits; it can also be ascribed to others negatively when they talk about social justice issues, regardless of having any agendas (Kain, 2014).

⁷ Shaw (2010) refers to Williams, Lee, & Kaplan (2008) “Who Plays, How Much, And Why? Debunking the stereotypical gamer profile” as one of many examples. Shaw argues that academia focuses too heavily on “disproving” the stereotype, and that so many research pieces with the same topic and the same conclusion are indicative of academia’s unwillingness to progress to a more advanced stage, such as exploring *why* the stereotype does not match many real-life players, and what this means for game culture (Shaw 2010, 73).

⁸ Empathy is not always desirable, as when civil rights movements fail to convince powerful institutions of the legitimacy of their grievances. Being systematically ignored, silenced, and violated by a government despite peaceful and non-violent protest renders empathetic strategies toward the opposition generally much less useful. However, the power dynamic seen in Gamergate is incomparable to that between a government and its citizens.