

Whither Harmony Square?: Conspiracy Games in Late Capitalism

HAS OUR WORLD become a vast game we can't win? The *Matrix*-esque premise that we are all trapped in some massive alternate reality game orchestrated by nefarious scientists or rogue supercomputers has grown in popularity in recent times. Championed by the likes of [Oxford philosophy professors and pseudo-intellectual billionaires](#), the most [sophisticated](#) version of the [theory](#) extrapolates from the growing power of computers and evidence about how easy it can be to trick the human mind. Conspiratorial versions of the theory [speculate](#) that the weirdness of our age, notably the election of Donald Trump in 2016, suggest that reality is broken because of a flaw in its intelligent (and malevolent) design.

Beyond such fantasies, the notion that we are all stuck in some sort of game we are not intended to win feels commonplace, with worrying results. Around the [world](#), young people are increasingly practicing forms of social [withdrawal](#) and pessimistic [malaise](#) based on their (generally well-founded) belief that the late capitalist world holds few opportunities other than [hustle, debt, and worry](#).

We should contextualize the recent rise of conspiracy theories, like the notorious and extremely popular [QAnon fantasy](#), within this pervasive mood of cynicism, suspicion, boredom, and defeat. Today, not only do games (of all types) represent a massive entertainment [industry](#), and not only have they become pivotal to the lives of billions of people, but they also provide a profound cultural front for meaning-making that shapes politics. It has long been [recognized](#) that recruitment for the American armed forces, and the skills of new recruits, benefit from a kind of pre-

training of mostly boys and young men. Alarming reports have recently revealed how the far-right are [using online games](#) to recruit the same demographic.

And so it should also come as no surprise that, in an age when conspiracy fantasies are [identified by the White House](#) as a major domestic and international threat, games and gaming should be proposed as an antidote.

In November 2020, the US Departments of State and Homeland Security, together with psychologists from the University of Cambridge, launched [Harmony Square](#), a free-to-play online game. The game is premised on the idea that one can inoculate players against conspiratorial fantasies by exposing them to “small doses” of political misinformation and thus help them develop “antibodies” with which to fight off the real world’s “fake news.” The metaphor of disinformation and conspiracism as a virus was potent even before the pandemic alerted us to the importance of collective, society-wide action of preventing contagion. It has the benefit of making us realize that anyone can be a carrier and can help spread something dangerous to the collective good.

“The idea is to empower people to make their own decisions — better decisions — by giving them simple tools or heuristics, simple rules that can help them,” [reports](#) lead author Anastasia Kozyreva, a research scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. By slotting players into the role of chief disinformation officer, whose job it is to lie and manipulate public opinion to foment political rifts in Harmony Square, an otherwise peaceful town, “obsessed with democracy,” Kozyreva and her team attempt to educate players by devising a mischievously benign game with which to treat a larger and more sinister one: the rising tide of bizarre conspiracy fantasies.

Yet as well intentioned as this [“social impact” game](#) may be, we see many limits in *Harmony Square*. Implicitly grounded in assumptions that

see conspiracism as an irrational emotive reaction that can be ameliorated by [more and better facts](#), the game glosses over the broader social, cultural, and economic contexts of conspiracy movements. If we're all trapped in a game we can't win, it should come to us as no surprise that people flock together to break the rules of truth, of law, or of convention to find, for a moment, fellow-feeling and a sense of purpose.

While games can and should be an important part of helping us chart alternatives, they cannot simply seek to return us to the norms, conventions, and attitudes of "late capitalism" — which so many people are trying, desperately and tragically, to escape. Addressing individuals solely as rational, calculating agents who must be empowered to judiciously navigate the "marketplace of ideas" reinforces a neoliberal ethos that has, writ large, created a world of precarity, alienation, and fatalism within which conspiratorial communities feel like a reprieve. To truly challenge them we need to not only debunk and "inoculate" people but to address the deeper systemic problems at play. Can games help us do so?

A game called Q

While concerns had been mounting for years, the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol has catalyzed media, academic, and policy-maker interest in conspiracy theories, in particular the dangerous obsession of millions of Americans and people around the world with the gospel of "Q." In what appears to some critics as a mass participatory [game](#) or a strange new millenarian [cult](#), followers believe that a secret government operative, codenamed Q, is using some of the raunchiest channels of the [dark web](#) to feed cryptic messages to them about a diabolical plot: a secret cabal of senior politicians, billionaires, and celebrities are trafficking children as part of a satanic sexual abuse ring, and (perhaps even more absurd) Donald Trump is dedicated to a selfless war against

them. Countless articles and exposés have interviewed tearful [friends](#) and [relatives](#) of individuals who have become completely infatuated with this story.

QAnon's popularity is certainly disturbing: a recent poll [indicates](#) that, if categorized as a religion (as advocated by some who have proposed the term "conspirituality") it would rank among the major faiths of the country, with over 30 million avowing its main tenets. And yet [as observers warn](#), analyses that highlight the jaw-dropping irrationality and millenarian zeal of this strange crusade, largely orchestrated on the so-called dark web, do us a disservice. Commentators have [noted](#) the high average level of education of many devotees. As numerous theorists of conspiracy [highlight](#), such fantasies usually stem not from gullibility and ignorance but from skepticism, curiosity, and distrust of the powerful, all important democratic virtues.

No mere passive recipients of absurd propaganda, supporters of Q are invited to follow the "breadcrumbs" regularly dropped by Q and apply their own sleuthing, critical thinking, and imagination to piece together their own never-ending narratives which, today, include numerous politicians, celebrities, and current events in a mindboggling kaleidoscope of often contradictory misdeeds. Theorist James P. Carse has called this kind of ever-expanding fabulation an "[infinite game](#)": a puzzle in which nearly every item of news becomes yet another part of a huge, nefarious storyboard.

It's not without reason that some game designers have [observed](#) with dismay that the QAnon phenomenon may be the largest ever mass participatory game, with potentially millions of players using the internet to egg one another on in dangerous fabulation. Concerned augmented reality game designer Reed Berkowitz introduces the concept of "guided apophenia" to describe how those behind the conspiracy take a devastatingly light touch, inviting "players" to "make their own

connections" between random information. The QAnon game is especially seductive in a world that appears increasingly chaotic and draws on adherents' intelligence and imagination while also providing a sense of a righteous moral community.

The infamy of the January insurrection, the collapse of the Trump administration, and credible revelations about the [squalid origins](#) of "Q" in a rats' nest of internet trolls seem to have put a damper on the phenomenon. Yet QAnon stalwarts have sought to preserve the movement and court mainstream opinion by repackaging themselves around a more generic "save the children" slogan, which taps into long-standing reactionary fantasies that once materialized around the world in the "[satanic panic](#)" of the '80s and '90s and inherit the paranoia of Europe's vicious [antisemitic](#) blood libels.

Perhaps for this reason QAnon remains profoundly popular, with [polls](#) indicating that even many who don't subscribe to every tenet of faith are still very receptive to the thrust of the underlying fantasies: that satanic ritual sexual abuse is rampant, that it is supported and enjoyed by billionaires, political elites, and celebrities, and that there is a secret order of "good guys" out there that are trying to stop it but who are being stymied.

Just a game?

QAnon is not only the most sensational of conspiracy fantasies on the menu today, but also part of a broader conspiratorial turn in popular and political culture around the world. Along with kindred concerns like "fake news" and "disinformation," conspiratorial thought is framed as a dangerous threat not only to infatuated individuals but to society at large. For many mainstream critics, these fantasies are threats to democracy and to the Enlightenment principles of rational, evidence-based judgment on which democracy is based.

But as media theorist Jack Bratich [points out](#), we should distrust the idea that today's phantasmagoria of conspiracy fantasies is a deviation from (or a bastardization of) an otherwise sane or rational social and political order. If anything, the last 30 years of neoliberal capitalism have delivered us a world of unceasing corporate propaganda (advertising and public relations) and bipartisan political bombast, compounded by a two-decade-long War on Terror, whose rhetoric of human rights was weaponized to sell a murderous form of imperialism. Since at least 2008, the triumphant discourse that a rising tide of economic growth would lift all boats, that corporate-friendly policy would allow wealth to "trickle down," has begun to sound more like a cruel joke. Wages [continue](#) their slump for most working people, and work-related stress escalates for nearly everyone (even, notably, the [wealthy](#)).

As writer Marcus Gilroy-Ware [notes](#), the narrative about a dangerous drift away from truth, facts, and reason is highly useful precisely because it distracts us from the deeper political and economic shifts that in so many ways gave rise to this drift. Dangerously, this narrative beguiles us into imagining that, if only we could better educate, sensitize, or "inoculate" people to disinformation and fake news, the withering tree of democracy would once again bloom. But in its focus on educating the individual dupe, it all too often ignores the broader structures — what education theorist Henry Giroux calls the "[public pedagogy](#)" that has previously educated all of us in a world of, to put it succinctly, bullshit.

The experience of being a compulsory gamer in a game which you can never really win helps explain the scattershot of ideology which animated the Capitol siege. What we are gesturing toward here is the way that the contemporary politics of conspiratorial and reactionary movements emerge and take strength from a gamified world where everyone on some level knows, whether they can admit it or not, that the game is rigged but we must play it anyway.

The QAnon movement's conspiratorialism offers moments of what appears to be collective gaming. In spite of the hatred and paranoia, participation offers a "joyful" social game in which, for a moment, rigged rules seem to be overturned. True enough: the QAnon phenomenon is also animated by paranoia, anger, rage, hate, and visceral disgust. But there is also curiosity, joy, solidarity, and a sense of righteous purpose to the way participants weave together an elaborate tapestry from the threads of popular culture, current events, received ideology, and imaginative play. These instances can be fruitfully imagined as the dangerous cooperative games of alienated subjects clinging to the vague promise of answers that can help to explain why their lives have turned out the way they have.

Conspiratorialism, in this regard, also provides what all games promise: a sense, even briefly, of community, of shared creativity, of the feeling of being part of something larger and more important, of moving toward some sort of horizon of change. In a world characterized by disaffection, isolation, and futility, conspiratorialism appears to offer the antidote, but not because it claims to offer an accurate compass that might allow one to chart meaningful social change — indeed, arguably the most successful forms of conspiratorialism offer a vague, contradictory, and unreliable cognitive map. This clouded form of mapping is effective precisely because it mirrors the confusing experiences of the game itself.

What conspiratorialism ultimately affords, then, is *a community of a dangerous play*. That the players may refuse to see it as a game is just part of the game. So too is the game of saying "it's just a game" when clearly it no longer is.

Prebunking and inoculation

The online game *Harmony Square* is a prominent attempt to offer an alternative gaming experience to the one permeating contemporary reactionary conspiratorialism. The concept is simple and the gameplay

fun, reminiscent of the text-based adventure games and pixelated graphics of early video games. The player is cast as a chief disinformation officer seeking to use a variety of online techniques to polarize the town of Harmony Square.

On the face of it, the game's attempt at consciousness-raising is a worthy goal, but in our view it is vexed by two key problems. First, the game approaches belief in misinformation as an individual pathology based on ignorance or carelessness, rather than a shared social conundrum symptomatic of the broader socioeconomic structures of our times. Second, in stripping the game's scenario of recognizable politics and in positioning the player as a nefarious outside agitator, the game implicitly invites its target audience to identify with a kind of vague, contentless "centrism." This may appeal to people who already tend to conform to mainstream political opinion, but not those who are perhaps most likely to embrace disinformation that targets what are framed as the "extremes."

Under the hood, the game applies a concept from behavioral economics known as "[nudging](#)" — designing environments to steer people toward better choices — to seek to create a healthier digital space. In theory, the same nudging practices used to push targeted ads or outlandish conspiracies on social media could provide a counter to rampant misinformation.

The behavioral nudges informing the game design of *Harmony Square* are largely based on "[inoculation theory](#)," the belief that exposure to a weaker dose of a particular stimulus — in this case, conspiratorial thinking and the techniques behind it — can help people become more resistant to disinformation in the future. By showcasing how you, the mal-intended actor, can work to incite political division using four manipulation techniques (trolling for outrage, abusing emotions to nurture fear and anger, deploying bots and fake social media accounts to

increase credibility, and polarizing users to create and disseminate conspiracy theories) *Harmony Square* aims to “prebunk” such attempts before they happen.

In contrast to “debunking,” which responds to fake news and conspiratorialism after it has already spread, “prebunking” seeks to achieve a kind of digital “herd immunity.” *Harmony Square*’s creators posit that prebunking prevents people from being taken in by lies because they can recognize messages that attempt to manipulate the public.

According to the game’s designers, prebunking has proven effective in achieving some of these aims. In a randomized, controlled trial [published](#) in the *HKS Misinformation Review*, *Harmony Square* developers asked 681 participants to rate the reliability of a series of tangible and falsified news and social media posts. Those who played the game showed a drop in “perceived reliability of ‘real fake news’” by an average 16 percent compared to those in the control group — who played *Tetris* instead. They were also 11 percent less likely to share fake news than the control group. What’s more, the players’ own politics — whether they identified as left or right leaning — made no difference in such outcomes.

However, upon closer examination, cracks begin to appear in the veneer of these promising results. A 2021 paper [circulated](#) by MIT researchers found that debunking a claim *after* participants were exposed to fake news was more effective in combating misinformation because no amount of prebunking was able to get people to ignore false, attention-grabbing headlines. It was feedback *after* the exposure, revealing the hoax and demonstrating to the participant how their attention had been manipulated, that made the correct information stick.

This raises several questions: How effective can the purported “immunization” of players be? Given that inoculation only works on people who voluntarily play such a game, how can designers incentivize

new players to challenge their beliefs by playing games? And importantly, can a reliance on prebunking — introducing questions about, for example, vaccine efficacy or climate change — in effect sow the very conspiratorial skepticism it is supposed to protect against?

Rational Facts versus Irrational Emotions

The issues with prebunking alluded to by such questions are glossed over by a simplistic moral universe that pervades all aspects of *Harmony Square*. Here, “bad” actors (trolls, foreign agents) seek to subvert democracy with narratives that run against the status quo, while “good” actors (politicians, journalists) simply want to get to the bottom of things.

Yet from Watergate to Pizzagate, the long shadow of conspiracy stretches across countless political actors and journalists actively proliferating misinformation for their own ends, or for ideological purposes. In “[White Lies: A Racial History of the \(Post\)Truth](#),” Robert Mejia, Kay Beckermann, and Curtis Sullivan point out that the accusation of disinformation has historically been used to both discredit activists seeking to address racial injustice and to normalize white supremacist disinformation. Similarly, many of those labeled as trolls or manipulators are often, in reality, working to hold power to account but are easily framed as malevolent.

Philosopher David Coady [analyzes](#) the underlying problems with approaches to conspiracism that draw on this simplified dualism. Conspiring, he argues, is a normal part of politics and business and, in turn, conspiratorial suspicions are an important part of the way people try to make sense of how power is working in their society. The deployment of the slur that such sense-making is a “conspiracy theory” is, actually, a kind of rhetorical play by those with power and authority which, ironically, adds fuel to the fire by rendering public opinion more cynical.

The treatment of “emotion” in *Harmony Square* is a case in point. Among

the characters in the game are trolls tasked with manipulating a local election by “putting out large volumes of emotionally charged content” that can trick voters into “acting on emotion.” Yet, by reducing emotions to the “rage bait” of extreme opinions, such rhetoric conceals the fact that emotional appeals are commonplace in politics. After all, Obama’s invocation of “hope” and “change” were just as emotionally charged as Trump’s twisted promise to “Make America Great Again.”

True enough: emotions can cloud sound judgment. But repeating the story that conspiracies proliferate because people don’t care about facts has, in many ways, become its own conspiracy fantasy, one that positions those who espouse it in a self-aggrandizing rational political center, beset on all sides by irrational extremes. But what if the centrist position is, as Tariq Ali [suggests](#), ultimately just an emotionally driven preference for an irrational status quo that amounts to a defense and normalization of an extremist form of neoliberal capitalism?

But there is a broader issue here. The game implicitly rests on the assumption that conspiracists and fake news sympathizers are de facto (cognitively) “convinced” by — and thus emotionally invested in — disinformation narratives. It presumes that they are unable to distinguish fact from fiction. But what if those in the grips of conspiracism and fake news are not the dupes we like to imagine them to be? What if they enter into these communities based on their belief in the same values of skepticism, rationality, and democratic principles the game, itself, promotes?

For instance, since the game’s release, we have seen the arrival of a powerful worldwide anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown movement that organizes itself around its own fervent calls for skepticism toward the narratives of the powerful, distrust of both legacy and online media, and the encouragement of citizens to “do their own research” and “engage in debate.” They don’t believe they are emotionally beguiled dupes of

disinformation (though in many cases it is probably true). What, then, can a game do?

A call for countergames

If such approaches, which presume that ill-educated, “emotional” thinking needs to be chased out by rigorous rationalism won’t work, what will? The question has proven vexatious to experts across the political spectrum.

Our sense is that, in an age when games are becoming part of the fabric of daily life, politics, and the capitalist economy, experiments like *Harmony Square* are vitally important. But they cannot be separated from their context, one where games and “gamification” are conventionally being used to entrench, rather than confront, established forms of power. As games are increasingly designed and used to sell products, “nudge” behaviors, cynically promote political agendas, and hook players for the benefit or profit of others, we should expect that alienation, cynicism, and fatalism will only increase. This is the fertile soil within which conspiracy fantasies grow, not because they prey on “weak” emotional minds but, rather, because they offer a sense of meaning, community, and urgency in a disenchanting world.

In [interviews](#) with QAnon “players,” for instance, we often hear how participation in the game has given otherwise isolated people a new lease on life and a righteous community of people who actually want to do something about the terrible state of the world. In a capitalist world that is almost completely shaped by the inhuman and banal power of money, the notion that real power is in the hands of a secret cabal of evil warlocks — and even better that one can join a secret resistance against them — is intoxicating. Trapped in a meaningless capitalist game the vast majority of us cannot hope to win, why not choose to play a different game? Why not apply all of the virtues of skepticism, reason, distrust of the powerful, and civic responsibility to this game?

Games will no doubt play an important role in the politics, economics, and culture of the coming decades, for good and for ill. But in order for them to open onto the promise of liberation, peace, and abundance, they will need to do more than inoculate players against fantasy. They will need to offer players the resources for better, more hopeful fantasies of a different socioeconomic system, and give them the tools to create it.

✎

*[Max Haiven](#), [A. T. Kingsmith](#), and [Aris Komporozos-Athanasίου](#) are convenors of the *Conspiracy Games and Countergames* research project and podcast.*