
Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate

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Abstract

The event known as #GamerGate (GG) emphasized the need to take the study of game culture seriously and pursue it across several platforms. It demonstrated how seemingly ephemeral media created echo chambers of anger, and how the outbursts of hypermasculine aggression exemplified by hooligans also can connect to games and play. Starting from how GG gained popular attention, this article outlines and discusses the nature of GG, the relation to the victims, the sense of victimization among the participants, and how it may have been provoked by the long-standing, general disregard of games as a culture and a cultural artifact of value. It discusses GG as a swarm using this metaphor to describe its self-organizing nature. Further comparing GG to hooligans, this article also introduces a class and marginalization aspect to understanding the event, opening up for discourses that complicates the image of game culture as mainly a culture of isolated consumption.

Keywords

gamers, #GamerGate, game studies, Internet research, harassment, activism, game culture, gender, hooligans, image boards

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Introduction

August/September 2014 saw the rise of the hashtag #GamerGate (GG) on Twitter. GG users had harassed and threatened several people engaged with games; journalists, designers, scholars, and critics, mainly targeting game designer Zoe Quinn (K. Stuart, 2014) and critic Anita Sarkesian (Wingfield, 2014); and the people who stood up for them. It followed several years of aggressive attacks on women and feminists in gaming in general and feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian in particular, and this time included game scholars.

GG was a surprise to the game research community for the conspiracy accusations against researchers (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Sargon of Akkad, 2014), and because it targeted what might be a preference in game studies toward identifying as gamers. This left many of us baffled by the attacks, a sentiment expressed in discussions online and off-line and on the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) mailing list—which was open also to people identifying with GG. DiGRA president Mia Consalvo's response to the conspiracy accusations was, "Ironically, Gamergate will help create more knowledge" (Straumsheim, 2014). This is perhaps the best reason for the game research community to care about GG. It is a unique chance to understand more about games and their culture. It exemplifies how certain structures of online media facilitate echo chambers and harassment, and it may contribute to the general understanding of Internet research.

At first the unrest leading to GG appeared to be just one of several gendered online harassment campaigns. Scholars with a greater focus on gender have been looking at this problem for a while (Consalvo, 2012; Shaw, 2013), but it did not get much attention. But this time the self-identified gamers organized to grab attention. There was no way to ignore this very visible group with members who acted aggressively and hatefully. They adopted ideas from the extreme right wing in the fear of the so-called Cultural Marxism, as can be seen from the video by Sargon of Akkad (2014) cited by Chess and Shaw (2015) but also from several different sources more or less in favor of GG (Bokhari, 2015; Cross, 2015; Frye, 2014; Orselli, 2014; SilverwolfCC, n.d.; L. Stuart, 2014; Wolfshead, 2015), ranging from *Breitbart.com*, the news site most in favor of GG, to random and anonymous bloggers. Several GG'ers embraced this conspiracy, and claimed Jews and western academics have joined forces to pacify White men, and planned to hand the power of the "western world" to the Jews or Islam by encouraging politically correct digital games, resonating with the claims against Cultural Marxists made by the killer Anders Behring Breivik in his manifesto (J. Wilson, 2015). GG also found allies among the men's rights activist (MRA) and pick up artist (PUA) community. The known PUA Roosh V created *Reaxxion*, "gaming news and reviews for masculine men" (Valizadeh, 2015).

Between August 2014 and 2015, the GG hashtag was used to spread misinformation about game studies (Unknown, 2014b), and efforts were made to discredit game scholars (The Leader of Gamergate, 2014). GG has been used to stalk female game

scholars, such as DiGRA president Mia Consalvo and game and gender scholar Adrienne Shaw, both repeatedly used as examples of writers who “started” the unrest causing the hashtag (IHE_Carl, 2014; Sargon of Akkad, 2014) and opposition to GG caused my own dox on the 8chan subboard /baphomet. The members of GG displayed some similarity to the popular gamer stereotypes research has resisted (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008, p. 995), and the emotional force of the campaign, which was driven by a language of pathos, defied rational argument and criticism. In this article, I attempt to describe GG, but a description cannot, due to the raw emotional rhetoric of the campaign, ignore the subjective impression the event made. I will still attempt to discuss what it means for the digital ecosphere and studies of gamers. What happened and does it change anything?

One cue to the progression of events lies in their swarm-like behavior. GG consisted of individuals not formally organized nor entirely aware of what was happening around them, but who acted in accordance with the individuals they could perceive in their online proximity. Like a swarm, their behavior was not determined by a clear plan but was given direction by the actions of some core individuals, often perceived at second or third hand, through the reactions of others in the swarm. Their organizing paradigm resembled an ant colony. Among ants nobody is in command, nobody bosses the workers, it is all a matter of each individual following simple rules in a self-organizing system (Miller, 2007). In GG, some personalities were more popular and their opinions were repeated more frequently than others. Still, when at one point the swarm heard the press was looking for “the leader of GG,” like Spartacus, all accounts associated with them gained the identifier “leader of Gamergate.” Self-organization and equality were the ideals of the movement.

Another way to understand the event is by comparing the actions, opinions, and attitudes to other play-related cultures, specifically hooliganism. The hooligans’ passionate relationship to the teams they follow combined with similarities in behavior between GG and hooligans may open for exploration of gamer culture along lines of class and race, directions which so far have been among the weaker approaches in game studies.

What Was GG?

As far as it is possible to tell, GG started as a harassment campaign aimed at developer Zoe Quinn, with her previous boyfriend Eron Gjoni as the initiator for the first accusations against her. Gjoni was drumming up sympathy for himself, justifying his anger through telling stories about Quinn in comments (later deleted) at forums *Something Awful* and *Penny Arcade* (2014c). It was discussed on the *Internet Relay Chat (IRC)* channel #burgersandfries (Unknown, 2014c), and while the available chat log has been disputed, it has so far not been disproved. According to this chat log Gjoni also posted on 4chan, and the stories he had been telling in his blog *The Zoe Post* (2014a) were refined and used to fuel the anger of members of these different forums. This log also indicates previous disagreements between

Quinn and members of another image board, *wizardchan*. Included in the chat log is Anita Sarkeesian, as it coincided with the release of her video *Women as background decoration II* (2014), a feminist reading of women's representation in digital games. Soon Sarkeesian was included in the GG attacks. Sarkeesian was later accused by John Bain (also known as [aka] The Cynical Brit aka TotalBiscuit) of having "inserted herself into the conversation" (2014) by publishing this video.

The barrage of hate messages online and off-line increased when a group of journalists wrote articles questioning gamer identity, the so-called gamers are dead articles (Alexander, 2014; J. Bernstein, 2014; Chu, 2014; Golding, 2014; Johnston, 2014a; Luke Plunkett, 2014; O'Rourke, 2014; Pearl, 2014; Plante, 2014; D. Wilson, 2014). Some of these articles are sharply worded, and the outrage that followed brought more attention and more participants to the case, now mustering behind GG on Twitter. It was in this shape the event caught the eye of most journalists and researchers, and so the first efforts to understand GG focused on Twitter. Despite being an event that resonated with the subcultures around games and gaming, it was mainly played out in different social media. Some of the lead actors were not gamers and had previously been deliberately critical of gamers, such as online writer Milo Yiannopoulos (2014a).

Despite their claim to represent all gamers—there are 155 million players of digital games registered by the Entertainment Software Association (2015) just in the United States—GG was mainly important to a relatively small group of the online community engaged with image board activism. The real size of GG is contested and hard to establish. Chris von Csefalvay published several studies both on the size and on the content of GG (2014), and his work was received warmly by GG. He estimated that GG had approximately 150,000 members (Unknown, 2015), but the article with the analysis is currently unavailable, along with his blog. Another quantitative study of GG was made in October 2014, when *Newsweek* hired *Brandwatch* to look at tweets tagged with GG (Wofford, 2014a). This study did, however, not address the size of GG, only their level of activity and the quality of the content. A study that does address the size was done by Andy Baio, and it shows that over the 3-day period he used for his study, 38,630 user accounts posted to the hashtag (Baio, 2014). Of other numbers we can see that KotakuInAction, the GG board on Reddit, has 55,332 followers (January 2016). The automatic Twitter blocker created by Randi Harper to block GG members from your personal Twitter account blocked between 9 and 10,000 accounts in 2014 (Wofford, 2014b), and it contained several false positives. This hints that less than 10,000 users followed the core actors of GG on Twitter and not all of these did so because they agreed with the ideas. Disregarding size, researchers Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw describe the GG event as "an important cultural moment" (2015, p. 209), and I agree. GG offers a unique lesson for the future in a society where the limits between private and public are shifting, time and place are close to irrelevant for communication, and we all have the power to publish at the tip of our fingers. It is a teaching moment for how ideals of freedom can facilitate

harassment and silencing strategies, and a clear lesson in how certain online structures support tight, self-reinforcing echo chambers.

Ethics or Harassment?

The hashtag GG was coined by actor Adam Baldwin in a tweet linking to a later removed YouTube video by “Internet Aristocrat,” August 27, 2014 (Gamergate Wiki, 2014). However, *Gamergate* Wiki and the Wiki curated by critics of GG, *Gamerghazi* Wiki (2014), both agree that this conflict started before the hashtag was coined.

According to the GG wiki the conflict dated back to 2007, and it was about ethics in games journalism:

Game reviewer and editorial director Jeff Gerstmann is fired from his position at GameSpot closely following his negative review of Eidos Interactive’s game *Kane and Lynch: Dead Men*. Due to the heavy advertising of *Kane and Lynch: Dead Men* featured on GameSpot at the time, rumors erupt that Gerstmann was fired due to giving the game a poorer review than what Eidos Interactive paid for. (Gamergate Wiki, 2014)

John Bain followed up the “ethics in games journalism” claim. With more than 400,000 Twitter followers and 2 million YouTube subscribers his support carried weight in the gaming community. His own criticism of the tight connections between game companies and game journalists, exposed in October 2014 (Kain, 2014), justified the ethics in games journalism argument. These justifications came after Gjoni’s accusations of Quinn having slept with five journalists for reviews of her game—an accusation later amended to “favorable coverage” when it was clear that the reviews did not exist. This justified further attacks on game journalists, particularly those connected to the earlier mentioned gamers are dead articles of August 2014, which inspired a persistent conspiracy theory in GG. *Breitbart.com* writer Yiannopoulos had access to an e-mail list for game journalists, and under a heading mentioning “gaming journalism elite” in September, he exposed that the journalists had wanted to do “something” to support Zoe Quinn (Yiannopoulos, 2014b). The e-mail to the list was dated August 19, more than a week before the articles on gamer identity started appearing online; and confirmed what GG saw as collusion. Jenni Goodchild (PixieJenni) wrote an overview of the articles in question and counts 12 articles as “gamers are dead” articles (Goodchild & @firehawk32, 2014).

However, Leigh Alexander doesn’t use that term in *Gamasutra* August 28th (2014) but claims that “gamers are over.” She discusses how “gamer” may not be the best word to use when describing people who play digital games. This article clearly referred to the movement Baldwin the day before had dubbed GG:

‘Games culture’ is a petri dish of people who know so little about how human social interaction and professional life works that they can concoct online ‘wars’ about social justice or ‘game journalism ethics,’ straight-faced, and cause genuine human consequences. Because of video games. (Alexander, 2014)

Alexander and other writers in game and tech media wrote about the problem with *gamer* as a demography describing people engaging with digital games. Disregarding a connection to the accusations against Zoe Quinn, the common point of these articles was the great distance between people who happen to play games and people who identify as *gamers*. For the game community to cater mainly to the self-identifying gamers would be to ignore a significant part of the actual players. The reaction was immediate online retaliation, where Alexander became a main target. Chess and Shaw (2015, p. 212) further describe how these articles contributed to what became known as the DiGRA/DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) conspiracy as GG was looking for a source of criticism against gamers.

The Gamerghazi Wiki focuses on Eron Gjoni, and the timeline links to examples of his bids for support to attack Quinn. One of these is an archived version (Gjoni, 2014b) of *The Zoe Post* (Gjoni, 2014a). In this post he introduces the “five guys” claims of Quinn having sex for reviews. Gjoni, at the time of writing under a restraining order concerning Quinn, later retracted the claims. But the original claims kept being repeated, citing the now removed video by the Internet Aristocrat (TheMalesOfGames, 2014). In response to the flood of online and off-line aggression toward Quinn and her family, Quinn left her home and lived in hiding for the entire autumn of 2014 (K. Stuart, 2014). This caused the critics of GG to name it a harassment campaign against women.

The evidence available in the mainstream media as well as from logs of discussions on IRC channels and archives from 4chan (Johnston, 2014b) favors the critics’ point of view. There are still voices from an academic background that disagree strongly, such as feminism critic Christina Hoff Summers, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and known by GG as “based mom,” who has supported GG since September 2014 (Growcott, 2014), and Nick Flor, associate professor at New Mexico University, who in an interview claims that GG was:

gamers pushing for free enterprise and free markets in the gaming industry; gamers asking for a competitive market free of collusion, free of corruption, and free of control of artistic creativity by authoritarians. In short, GamerGate is a freedom movement. (Bokhari, 2015)

Talking About GG

It is vital to keep in mind that GG was not a unified group—the individuals of the swarm were not the whole. Many of those arguing strongly in favor of GG never

knew how it had started, where the different “operations” were planned, and never agreed to the aggressive methods used since the beginning of the campaign. The swarm logic of GG allowed all participants to determine their own motivation.

It was near impossible to keep track of the individual opinions. A person could argue in favor of GG ideas in one instance and against them in another, agree with one part of the argument but not another, or argue with themselves from different sock puppet accounts. One notorious example was Joshua Goldberg, one of the more prolific participants in the GG discussions (Damion Schubert, 2015), who was arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in September 2015 (CBS Interactive, 2015; Moulitsas, 2015; Zavadski, 2015). Among his many online personae was a profile used to post on GG critics forum *Gamerghazi*. Goldberg specialized in this type of double-sided arguments, as he impersonated a Jewish lawyer and wrote in Israeli newspapers, while simultaneously participating in the anti-Semitic forum *Daily Stormer*.

Outsiders used the hashtag to discredit it, to harass others from the anonymity of a mob, or to attack GG’ers. Using the GG hashtag or agreeing with other gamergaters did not guarantee freedom from harassment, neither from GG nor from others. The women of GG were vulnerable to this, same as some of the male personalities. It is however difficult to determine the extent of the GG claims of harassment. They followed their own policy for online harassment, which included not admitting to it, and not involving the police. This means that unlike the cases of Quinn, Sarkeesian, and other targets like Brianna Wu and Randi Harper, there is very little reliable evidence of harassment targeting GG. Still, there were examples of “dogpiling” on Twitter if an account had been linked from the *Gamerghazi* forum. This caused moderators to change and restrict posting policies several times in attempts to avoid causing harassment.

Goldberg’s example demonstrates how the only thing limiting a person’s participation for or against GG was their creativity. Another important aspect is how GG emphasized anonymity. GG Twitter users expressed the danger of using their real names, as that would cause people to attack them. In one conversation on Twitter dated May 16, 2015, @codeGrit claimed people had sent e-mails to his workplace to have him fired, and also that his real name and address had been revealed twice. This fear of being exposed demonstrated a realistic understanding of the online culture GG belonged to and was understandable in light of what happened regularly to the opponents of GG.

Doxing, revealing otherwise hard to find information about individuals, happened frequently to opponents or critics of GG. Zoe Quinn, feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian (Wingfield, 2014), and game developer, Brianna Wu (Reid, 2014), were doxed early on and received protection or left their homes. Actor Felicia Day wrote about her sense of estrangement from the gaming community due to the fear GG generated (2014) and was promptly doxed (Hern, 2014). The terror of doxing isn’t having your address and phone number revealed but what may come after. The “doxer” leaves information in public, implying “do what you like with this.” When this game was

played as a prank, the doxed person would receive pizzas they had never ordered (Phillips, 2015, p. 61) or weird magazine subscriptions. GG's critics received groups of fully armed police officers ready to break down doors and shoot the people inside in what is known as "SWATing" (Hern, 2015). Several critics of GG were swatted or attempted swatted. It may have been the work of just one or two persons, such as the 17-year-old member of "the lizard squad," who was swatting and terrorizing girls who turned him down online (Harrison, 2015) but the threat was an efficient terror tactic.

The swarm nature of GG, with anonymous participants and active denial using the "no true Scotsman" fallacy (Dowden, n.d.), made it hard to prove that GG was behind doxing. They claimed no affiliation to the /baphomet doxing board, and when a person had something unpleasant happen to him or her after he or she had spoken out against GG, GG would claim no responsibility. No true gamergater would harass, threaten, hack, or dox other people, and if it happened, either in the name of GG or not, it was supposedly the work of somebody unaffiliated with the movement. At the same time, the anonymity made it impossible to *disprove* that GG was behind it, creating a paradox that was both useful and harmful to GG. The result was that talking about gamers meant putting yourself at risk if you were critical of GG, but also if they were critical of you, as demonstrated by the intense scrutiny of and attacks on game critics and game scholars. While risk is not a new thing to anthropology and ethnography (Calvey, 2008; Lauder, 2003), the risk GG added is not frequently encountered in media studies.

Players of digital games are an active audience group, used to participate through gaming and in meta-discussions, and known to act out if annoyed. There is evidence of angry gamers tracking producers or developers, doxing them and their families, trolling them, flooding their twitter with abuse, and posting threats against the family (Batchelor, 2014; Crecente, 2013). When this behavior was reported, they have attacked reporters, as when *The Guardian* reporter Jenn Frank was attacked for reporting on the aggression GG directed at their targets (Cox, 2014; Frank, 2014). This was not a behavior limited to GG but typical of image board culture.

Image Board Culture

A good description of GG was written by Jay Allen, and focused on the relationship to image board culture (2014), the culture on the discussion boards made famous by the activist and hacker group *Anonymous*. *Anonymous* grew out of 4chan and was named after every person discussing on 4chan's boards (Coleman, 2014, p. 4). On chans, it is a matter of pride to not rely on the ethos of a name but the logos of the argument. Ideally anonymity creates a pure meritocracy where arguments survive due to merit, not because of signifiers of power. Thus, anonymous image boards may facilitate exchanges of pure intellect and reason, free of emotional consideration or political correctness.

Totally free speech justifies the image boards' place in the online ecology, and the idea that every topic needs to be allowed a place for discussion has virtue. M. S. Bernstein et al. (2011), Coleman (2014), and Phillips (2015) all demonstrate that the anonymity of chan culture can create interesting new dynamics and release constructive, positive creativity. It can at the best of times be a catalyst for daring and important activism and create communities that support those who feel estranged in mainstream debates.

This ideal is only one part of the truth. As described in Michael S. Bernstein et al.'s study of the /b/ board on 4chan (2011), image boards use language and images to establish credibility. What this meant for 8chan, home to GG, was that sexual or racist slurs were common and swearing close to mandatory. Taking offense was proof of being a "newfag" and not yet able to deal, and offended users were considered too weak to survive the furnace of the chans. In this manner, language and images were used to silence unwanted voices and if that was not enough, the participants had other methods.

Doxing can be used to ruin the ethos of speakers. Sarah Nyberg, active GG critic, described her old writings as, "the decade-old account of a troubled young person raised on 4chan and internet edgelord culture trying to out-shock and out-troll the people around her" (2015). Her old lies and exaggerations came back with a vengeance, as other "edgelords" decided GG criticism made her a target. In this community supposedly dedicated to free speech and true meritocracy, winning an argument can be a pyrrhic victory, if the opponent can find your information. A focus for the attacks by "channers" is destroying the credibility of the individual, indicating an exceptionally strong concern about ethos. In the case of Nyberg, a transgender woman, they attacked her gender identity using her pretransition name and claimed she engaged in bestiality based on old posts. Channers spend their time focused on the status of others in time-consuming searches. Rather than meritocracies, many of the subboards of the different chans can perhaps be said to be *tempocracies*¹ controlled by those who have the most patience and time, strongest dedication to their own opinions, and most ruthless ways to silence their opponents.

Coleman describes the speed with which a message will be pushed off the board on the image boards; on busy boards it will be gone in minutes (2014, p. 43). M. S. Bernstein et al. (2011) discuss this feature more specifically and point out how it facilitates a particular kind of communication, turning the conversations on the board ephemeral. Naomi Baron uses the metaphor of not stepping into the same river twice, as with the coming of the digital media writing stops being enclosed and goes on to be fluid (2008, pp. 206–207). Considering writing as a fluid medium is traditionally paradoxical, as we are used to seeing it as the most stable of media. This has radically changed.

How long a message is available to others has proved to be important when it comes to the use of online media, and GG highlights how nothing is lost forever on the 'Net. One attack on Zoe Quinn distributed old pictures from adult photo shoots. Simultaneously Quinn, who says about herself, "If Gamergate had happened several

years ago to someone else, I would have been on that side” (Newton, 2015), was aware of where the “operations” would be planned, and when the members of the IRC channel *Burgers and Fries* discussed how to make Quinn’s life more uncomfortable, she was logging it (Johnston, 2014b), which is the only reason why we have these logs today.

On chans, uninteresting information is supposed to scroll off. If the image board motto “realz, not feelz” had any meaning, easily debunked, false information should scroll off the screen. However, if that false information is sufficiently entertaining or supports the agenda of participants on the board, what will scroll off is the debunking and the corrections. This way the system serves to retain entertaining information that supports the agenda or drama, while the less entertaining facts will be lost. The selectively ephemeral nature of chans supports the attitudes and feelings of the members, rather than the boring or even unpleasant facts they might want to ignore, and the medium itself supports and strengthens any existing echo chamber effect in the community.

The Hooligans of the ‘Net

Another way to understand GG is to look at other leisure-centered aggression. There are several parallels between GG and hooligans. Like the football hooligans, these gamer fans organized into groups and were ready to attack the other team. Like hooligans, they appeared to join the fight for the thrill, not because they always believed their actions would be the best persuasive tactics. They were not afraid to ruin the image of the leisure activity they followed or attack the infrastructure and the arena, and they were frequently criticized by those who wanted to see gaming taken seriously. Like hooligans GG language was hypermasculine, and they had little need for values seen as more feminine. That doesn’t mean GG had no use for women. Another GG phenomenon was the hashtag #notyourshield used by ethnically diverse and/or female avatars. Started by an African American participant of /v/ on 4chan, #notyourshield was supposed to show that female and non-White gamers did not want more diversity in games, stopping critics of game culture from using them as an excuse for more diversity. The design of this hashtag came with instructions concerning how White men could make non-White and female sock puppets (Johnston, 2014b).

Strategic maneuvering with language trending toward hypermasculine warfare rhetorics was common. From their plan for “Digging DiGRA”—an attempt to read all DiGRA’s open-access articles, “You must treat DiGRA website as ENEMY TERRITORY. We have been doxxed before because of IPs getting leaked, and rogue admins helping SJWs” (Unknown, 2014a). This aggressively defensive language had as strong a tone of machismo. GG’s protectiveness of the male space of video games resonates with the hooligans’ description of their own culture:

I honestly cannot remember ever seeing any women at matches - and so the male characteristics of swearing, lying, drinking and fighting were not only prevalent, they were almost compulsory. To be among thousands of young - men, all of whom, for those ninety minutes at least, had just one focus in life, was to be part of what Americans would call a huge male-bonding process. (Brimson & Brimson, 1996, loc. 132)

To many of the participants, GG was a bonding experience. On the board /kotakuinaction/ on reddit.com, one of the tags for posts is “meetups” where GG online participants meet face to face. The meetups happened mostly in the United States, but there have been descriptions of meetings in Australia and the United Kingdom. Many of these contain pictures, most of which show groups of predominantly young men, mostly White and of college/university age, sometimes accompanied by men of other ethnicities, and women. These posts are always positive and happy about meeting friends. *Breitbart.com* summary of the first year of GG bears witness to strong bonding among the participants:

At the time of writing this, I'm preparing to move in to a new apartment, which would not have been possible if not for the help of some very generous people that I've met because of GamerGate. Thank you for saving my family's lives, you ethical sockpuppets and gentlemen. (Bokhari, 2015)

Bokhari's article also shows several women, another similarity to hooligans. According to Dr. Matt McDowell, the first hooligans were female fans, fighting after a match in 1898 (The Herald Scotland, 2013), and there are still women among the hooligans in images in the news. The bonding experiences of intense, often aggressive mass events are not reserved for men. In what is termed *ladette* (Dobson, 2013; Jackson, 2006) or *raunch culture* (Levy, 2006), women are both unapologetically aggressive and obsessed with objectification of the female body. Both terms describe a femininity of excess and aggressive sexiness, where being part of the group and bonding with men and other, similar women is vital. Women in GG defended nudity, sexually explicit images, and aggression against women in games, and GG highlighted their female supporters, particularly the pornography workers.

Another similarity was GG's sense of martyrdom, of being persecuted victims, which is visible in recent hooliganism (Poupore, 2014). GG believed firmly in their own status as victims. The “death of the gamer” articles confirmed this as attacks on their entire culture. In this narrative, they were victims of consistent persecution, even if they have not experienced the actual violence seen by the Egyptian Ultras. To understand how consumers of time-consuming high-tech entertainment can even briefly consider themselves victims of a large-scale, global conspiracy to suppress them, look at how gaming has been treated.

While an economic success since the 90s, passing Hollywood box office sales in 2004 (Kerr, 2006, p. 49), digital games are not universally accepted. At best, gaming is viewed as a childish waste, at worst the topic of media panics (Karlsen, 2013). The

negative feelings toward games peak after mass shootings by young men, when games are repeatedly put forward as the cause of mindless violence. Jack Thompson, disbarred lawyer, blamed games for the 1999 Columbine killings (Giumetti & Markey, 2007). In the United States and Europe, one of the first things the media focused on would be whether perpetrators of mass shootings played games.

Disregarding the fact that digital games in the last 15–20 years have become ubiquitous, this created an image of gamers as either aggressive killers in training, addicts to the mind-controlling power of games, or socially inept losers, well described by Alexander in her controversial article (2014). The gamergaters had grown up actively engaging in a hobby where they were on the one hand catered to by increasingly inventive designers and creators and at the other hand vilified by the value-conservative who feared what this seductive new medium might lead to. They had been trained to be defensive.

Who Benefits?

Resonating with angry class overtones, one of the more interesting myths about the targets of GG was that they were wealthy. From an interview with Zoe Quinn:

Most targets of online harassment Quinn has spoken with are subject to conspiracy theories that they are secretly rich, she said. “It’s this thought that if what they’re going after is so powerful and so corrupt, they still get to be the underdog,” Quinn said. “They get to be the good guys.” (Newton, 2015)

This was a recurring topic in the descriptions of Quinn, such as in an article on the PUA website *Return of Kings*, where the author repeatedly pointed out how much money Quinn must have been making (Chubbs, 2014). Through it all GG was obsessed with money. They aggressively criticized Anita Sarkeesian because her kick-starter was overfunded. Since this happened during a period of prevalent and public attacks, they called her a “professional victim” who made money of the abuse she received (Yiannopoulos, 2015). This was also a common claim against Zoe Quinn.

Interestingly, they are to a certain degree right, the focus on both Sarkeesian and Quinn brought them attention and new options. This does not justify the treatment they received, but it is easy to imagine that if the haters had ignored Sarkeesian’s feminist criticism of games, the videos might have caught the attention of some audiences with a special interest in feminism but otherwise been a fairly low-key series of YouTube videos.

On the other hand, if GG had ignored Quinn, Sarkeesian, Wu, and Harper, several of their own would never have benefited. *The Sarkeesian Effect* is the work of Jordan Owen and David Aurini who received approximately US\$8,800 a month for close to a year in order to create a documentary to criticize Sarkeesian and demonstrate her supposed fraud (Owen & Aurini, 2014). In 2014, Sargon of Akkad was a minor

YouTuber with a Patreon account where he made approximately US\$200 per video. A year later each video made him US\$900. Considering the low-production costs and frequency of posted videos, this was not bad. Add the advertising revenue of almost 200,000 followers of his YouTube channel, the GG year was good to him. “Thunderfoot,” a dedicated Sarkeesian critic, makes more than US\$3,000 from each video he uploads to his Patreon. “The Honey Badger Brigade” is another group that found a new source of income through GG. These are women supporting the MRAs. Apart from gaining more listeners for their channel through the GG audience, they have also received donations. This is a sufficiently pronounced trend that Jay Allen talks about “professional victimizers” (2015).

While the wealth of the opposition is a myth, the GG attack may for some be slightly punching up. Many of the gamergaters are in safe positions and have more than enough money, education, contacts, and privilege that they are definitely punching down when attacking self-employed, often poor, and freelancing women. But several gamergaters are unemployed, very young, undereducated, or have social problems. They often speak about themselves as undesirable and express the opinion that if games change, they will lose the only thing that holds value to them. They see women gaining benefits in “their” field and attack the targets closest to them, the ones they can reach. Even their attack on DiGRA was an attack at those closest to them, as DiGRA members study topics GG could both understand and relate to.

A Weakness of Participatory Culture

It was easy to disregard GG, not the least because it was illogical and confusing. But GG demonstrated how complex game culture is. It is a child of the Internet, and gamers cannot be distinguished from the users of other social media. GG’ers were channers, tumblerinas, and redditors. They produced endless videos and live streams. They used Facebook and wrote blogs. Twitter was full of them, and they used tools that enhance Twitter: TwitLonger for when you need more than 140 signs and Storify when tweets need to be organized and structured. Through this variety and very visible exploitation of weaknesses in the different systems, GG taught us how technology designed for increased openness can be utilized to create echo chambers and to silence opposing voices. They also demonstrated very clearly what Leigh Alexander tried to say, that gamer culture is extremely varied and often in conflict with itself. They underlined the claim of the “gamers are dead” articles: We cannot assume that all who play games are one demography. Even fans of the same game can have widely conflicting values and desires.

GG showed us that the game culture doesn’t exist in isolation on the Internet, as the participants spread their messages over such a wide range of platforms. The particular key words and concepts such as “ethics in games journalism” had a far wider reach than was expected from a games topic and provoked discussion and change in platforms that until this point had not been obviously influenced by games, such as the massive social media networks. And while we still don’t know if games

somehow create an aggressive and obsessed audience, we do know they are sufficiently mainstream to spark an intense online debate.

GG reminds us that remaining focused on an exclusive game culture means dwelling on an ideal that perhaps never existed. Games have, through the engagement of players, been used as an example of the benefits of participatory culture, but very rarely to describe the dark, potentially hateful side. We need to be willing to go into such uncomfortable conversations and face the risk that comes with research. Playing games is not an isolated event. While Aarseth's seminal editorial (2001) emphasizes the importance of games being its own object, GG has underlined that no matter which platform games are played on, their communities go far beyond that. And as game elements and structures start being used elsewhere, it may be time for game research to live up to its interdisciplinarity and study cultures of play beyond the narrow circle of games.

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1. Not to be confused with Stanislaw Lem's definition of tempocracy, where the tempocrats are travelers from the hidden millennia, in his example from Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity*. Retrieved from <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/3/lem3art.htm>

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