

The Rise and Fall of #Gamergate. The Web-based Movement of Gamers

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Theme: [History](#), [Women's Rights](#)

"There seems to be a small yet vocal core of maniacs bafflingly resistant to the notion that women should have any say in the games industry at all." – Charlie Brooker, The Guardian, Oct 20, 2014

Those playing computer games are a special breed. Not perhaps pedigree, but certainly special. The Gamergate drive has been bristling and firing with misogynistic venom for some months now, but already, Chris Plante of The Verge can claim that the movement "is dead". Are such announcements, as they always tend to be, premature? The "remainders represent a hate group and its banner, associated with bigotry and cruelty." [1]

It may be one of the most pointless movements in recent years, even if pointlessness may have a good deal of lead in its pencil. Given the span of human history, this is saying something. Gamergate is an example of false significance, much like most social media activism. The illusion granted by such space is that of a gun that never truly goes off. The dangers become more acute when they spill off the application and the screen – much like the drone operator who suddenly wakes up to realise that a human target was just pulverised. Distance and detachment are everything.

The ubiquity of the media and entertainment scape for these games suggests an effect in all proportion to its users. Programmer Boy (Eron Gjoni) meets game developer girl (Zoe Quinn), and, instead of parting ways in quiet indignation, it has to be noisily furious and infantile – and public. Allegations were hurled Quinn's way, a public rage via cyberspace rant. Quinn, Gjoni said accusingly, had taken to bed with a journalist working for Kotaku, a video games news site. The bedroom sojourn, he alleged falsely, translated into positive reviews of Quinn's games. Private details of Quinn were released. A fire storm erupted.

Invariably, the movement became bifurcated, ignoring such fascinating hybrids as Charlie Brooker, who has managed to make gaming and criticism spell bindingly amusing. It became clear, however, that both forms were deemed alien. Both critic and gamer were going their separate ways.

As Taylor Wofford suggested, it was perceived as "a Web-based movement of gamers upset about a perceived lack of ethics among video games journalists." The other camp, as it were: "a Web-based harassment against women who make, write about and enjoy video games, masquerading as a movement of gamers upset about a perceived lack of ethics among games journalists." [2]

Then came the hash tag authoritarians as an example of the former, suggesting a protocol in how to re-tweet material on the snarky subject. "#GamerGate is about ethics in journalism. #NotYourShield is about women and minorities in games. Why is this so hard for

you?” Tweet correctly, or be damned.

It seemed that obituaries were being declared at greater speed than well founded concepts. David Auerbach, writing in *Slate*, decided to add one to the list in clumsy fashion. “Gamers are not over, but gaming journalism is.” Such a sentiment seemed fatuous, if only signalling, firstly, the credibility of the gamers’ acne driven grievances; and secondly, the meek stance of journalists who would make for the hills (presumably off the Internet), or at the very least, stay out of gamer territory. The technological pervasiveness of gaming should make writers ignore, at the very least, such “stay out” signs.

Writers of the games culture, like Leigh Alexander, have been targets of the gaming community, notably over an article in which he suggested that “Game culture” was essentially an embarrassment. “It’s just buying things, spackling over memes and in-jokes repeatedly, and getting mad on the Internet.”[3] Such a “culture” was essentially an assemblage of dysfunctional beings, “a petri dish” of such sorts hopeless divorced from actual “human social interaction and professional life”. More’s the pity for Alexander, who must feel that own sense of embarrassment. The critic can very often be degraded by the subject under review.

Whatever sort of petri dish of culture this might be, it has been prominent in targeting female figures, be they as critics, gamers or even celebrities. The feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian and software engineer Brianna Wu both had every reason to take the Gamergate movement, if it can be termed that, seriously, something beyond the cosy realm of reflective ethics. They were hounded and harangued. They sought police protection. Sarkeesian cancelled a talk at Utah State University heeding threats about inflicting “the deadliest school shooting in American history.”[4] The hermetic chamber of social media fury was spilling over.

It is precisely because of such technology that impacts ripple with menacing force. Distasteful events can magnify and multiply on Twitter, Reddit, 4chan, and, in this case, the gaming sites in question. Reputations are sullied. Even distant non-users can become the object of attack. They can also become participants, agents in a belligerent engagement that seems peripheral yet central.

Australian writer John Birmingham put it perspective. “Gamergate has become yet another front in the globalised Forever War against women, and the wider cultural enmity between progressives and reactionaries.” He issues a call. “If you understand that women, all of them, even [Australian Foreign Minister] Julie Bishop, who has no need for feminism, are still well served by the awareness that feminism brings systemic abuse of half the world’s population, and the call to action that awareness demands, then you stand at the centre of Gamergate.”[5]

Terrifyingly for the screeching movement, Gamergate has had to face a transformation of its own premises. On screen, picking a female character in a game is bound to, as Brooker suggests, lead to “a stealth game with nowhere to hide”. There are “respawning enemies” everywhere. Stereotypes there are king, rather than queen. But off the screen, there is something even more fundamental. The number of female players is on the rise, even outpacing male users in some cases. “Women,” surmises Brooker in devastating fashion, “are the hardest hardcore gamers there are, by miles.”[6]

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Notes

- [1] <http://www.theverge.com/2014/10/30/7131931/gamergate-is-dead>
- [2] <http://www.newsweek.com/gamergate-about-media-ethics-or-harassing-women-harassment-data-show-279736>
- [3] http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_your_audience_Gamers_are_over.php
- [4] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/29/opinion/anita-sarkeesian-on-video-games-great-future.html?_r=1
- [5] <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/gamergate-how-gaming-became-a-feminist-issue-20141030-11eixt.html>
- [6] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/20/gamergate-internet-toughest-game-woman-enemies>

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