

COMMENTARY: GamerGate and resistance to the diversification of gaming culture

CHERIE TODD

It is reported that there are now over one billion people worldwide who play multimedia video games, and the typical 'gamer' stereotype (mid 20s, single, white male) no longer applies (Reilly, 2015). Games are growing increasingly more pervasive as well as more social, and are now available any time on multiple platforms (PC, Xbox and PlayStation) and devices such as smart phones and iPads. Within less than a decade, video games have gone from being a niche area of entertainment for a few, to a mass medium that appeals to people of all ages and genders. Research continues to show an increase in the number of women who are now gaming, with the genders almost reaching parity. These statistics, however, tend to focus on gaming as a whole, and ignore gender splits within particular games and/or countries, where in many online games women are often a minority. As a result of this gender imbalance, the culture of games continues to be heavily influenced by highly masculinist discourse.

There is an increasing diversification of gaming culture that is occurring due to the growing popularity of games. While many perceive this to be a positive step, there are some who are resistant to these fundamental shifts and who do not want the culture of games to change. Users of the hashtag #GamerGate have been the most vocal in their resistance to these changes. In 2014 reports of GamerGate activities started to circulate more widely, becoming a topical issue in the USA where news outlets began to describe the emergence of a 'culture war' over the diversification of gaming culture. The most prominent debates centred on the topic of cyberbullying, including rape and death threats that were being directed primarily at scholars and women involved in the gaming industry.

The movement known as #GamerGate has evolved out of a series of incidents following the publication of an online blog written by Eron Gjoni (posted 8 August 2014). In this blog, Gjoni accuses his former girlfriend, game developer Zoe Quinn, of sleeping with a game critic journalist in order to gain a favourable review for her game *Depression Quest*. Gjoni's story was subsequently posted on several other forums where discussions were aimed at harassing Quinn and exposing details about her personal life. This saw Quinn's private details (including home address and phone numbers) become public knowledge, and shortly afterwards she began receiving multiple rape and death threats on a daily basis. Gjoni's accusations have since proven to be unfounded, yet the resulting backlash continues to impact Quinn's life and those closest to her.

Other notable media reports of harassment from the GamerGate movement involve game developer Brianna Wu and feminist cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian. These women have also received numerous rape and death threats, as well as having their accounts hacked and personal information published on websites. Sarkeesian gained the attention of the media in October 2014 after cancelling a speaking engagement at Utah State University, due to the university receiving an anonymous message that threatened a mass shooting on the campus if Sarkeesian's talk went ahead. While there has been harassment directed at men working in the gaming industry for voicing their support of their female colleagues, it is women in particular who

have become the primary targets. What these people all have in common is their critical stance against how girls and women are typically portrayed in games (as submissive, sexualised and victimized characters) and also their stance against the cultural embeddedness of misogynist tendencies present within the gaming industry, in which the majority of employees are men.

There is a growing body of work that examines various elements relating to this particular issue in gaming culture (see, for example, Consalvo, 2012; Fox & Tang, 2014; Gonzalez *et al.*, 2014). In a recent newsletter, the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) made it known that scholars involved in gaming and gender research are also receiving threatening messages. The newsletter also reported on GamerGate's attempts to discredit DiGRA by misquoting their material and accusing DiGRA members of participating in a plot to ruin video game culture by 'inserting a social justice agenda into game design' (ICA, 2014). Importantly, this newsletter also outlined some useful security measures for people who work in gaming and other communication fields, and who believe that they may be at risk of privacy invasion and harassment.

The harassment of women gamers and game critics is not new. Past attempts to discuss the issue include the hashtag thread #1reasonwhy, which began on Twitter with a tweet that simply asked 'why are there so few lady game creators?' Over the course of a day, thousands of women tweeted in response and shared their experiences of sexism, exclusion and harassment (Isaacson, 2012). The majority of these replies came from women who had experienced working within the gaming industry in various roles, including as developers, critics and journalists, and their answers covered a broad range of reasons why there are not more women involved in the production of games. In turn, some of the responding tweets reflected the unsupportive and often aggressive denial of women's experiences, with comments such as, 'if women are too sensitive and self-absorbed to deal with criticism it's good they don't design video games', and 'business is hard and needs strong people. Don't blame me or anyone else but deal with it if you want to be part of it. Comments such as these seem to be a common occurrence for women involved in gaming. In the past, these kinds of verbal assaults on women unfolded sporadically and died out quickly. For the first time, however, there are a number of people being harassed by one particular group and these attacks have been ongoing. Sarkeesian, for example, has been receiving ongoing threats since 2012 (before GamerGate) and has since felt compelled to leave her home in fear for her life. Women experience sexism and misogyny in various cultural arenas, especially in fields where the majority of participants are men, such as sports. Yet, in comparison, the level of hatred and abuse that is being directed at women like Sarkeesian and Wu from certain people in the gaming community is unparalleled.

So what are law enforcement officials doing to help? Also, what are gaming industry leaders doing to support their employees, and women in particular? The answer to both of these questions, unfortunately, is not a lot. With regard to legal consequences, no one has yet been arrested for harassment, whereas a small number of industry leaders have voiced their objection to the actions of GamerGate. Those caught up in this debate, such as Wu, argue that these events are a result of a culture that has been dominated by sexist values for too long. Across the industry of game development, the current gender split among employees is estimated to be around 20% women and 80% men. Yet, as Wu (as cited in Pakman, 2014) points out, approximately 15% of these women work in support or administration roles. Wu goes on to argue that 'GamerGate is a symptom of a deeper industry problem ... Right now games are made for men, developed for men, and marketed for men. And it's signalling to [others] that games are a space for men. That has the consequence that when women like myself come in here and ask to be represented, [male] gamers feel like it's their space' (as cited in Pakman, 2014).

The contexts of online games are now better understood as social and cultural environments that consist of a diverse range of social networks, where emotions, thoughts and concerns are a felt experience by those participating within these settings. Therefore, politics of difference can play a significant role in whether or not particular identities feel in-place within certain environments (Todd, forthcoming). Furthermore, research shows that the places of online games offer players new ways of 'trying out' different ways of being. Yet, these dynamic online environments are heavily influenced by offline dominant values and norms that players themselves carry with them while gaming (Todd, 2012). As a result, issues such as sexism and misogyny are also present in online games. The present climate of gaming culture tends to make women gamers feel excluded and out-of-place; this is particularly evident in games where the majority of players are men, and the dominant discourse reflects and reinforces heterosexist and masculinist values and norms. Some suggest, however, that a good starting point for change might be with addressing the ways in which gender and sexuality are assigned to storylines and characters within games, which will aid in establishing a more balanced perception of gender in games (Consalvo, 2012; Fox & Tang, 2014; Sarkeesian, 2015).

The GamerGate controversy represents a small group of gamers who do not want to see the culture of gaming change; however, their actions have brought attention to an important cultural shift that is occurring in the gaming community. Not only have these attacks on women heightened concerns relating to how gaming is being portrayed via the media (which in turn affects public perceptions of gaming) but they have also effectively demonstrated the extent to which sexism and misogyny have become culturally embedded over time. As pointed out by Edwards, one good thing to come out of these unfortunate events is how the impact of GamerGate has raised 'the conversation to a level that we've been wanting for a long time' (cited in Handrahan, 2015, para. 3). Consequently, as GamerGate supporters fight against the diversification of gaming culture, their actions and arguments also work to shine a light on an issue that has been swept under the proverbial rug for decades. Furthermore, critics such as Sarkeesian correctly point out that the corporations developing games need to take a more proactive stance in protecting their employees, stating that there is a 'need to enforce a zero-tolerance policy of sexism and racism and homophobia. ... Developers need to start moving away from the entitled macho-male power fantasy in their games. They need to recognize that there are wider stories that they can tell' (as cited in Kolhatak, 2014, para. 26). This is an ongoing issue and although changes are happening, they are occurring at a slow rate. Therefore, efforts to make gaming a more inclusive and diverse culture need to involve the continuous search for new ways and means of improving the representation and participation of women and other marginalised groups across gaming as a whole.

CHERIE TODD is a PhD candidate in the Geography programme at the University of Waikato. She recently submitted her thesis, which investigates how gamers construct sex and gender in the online game World of Warcraft, with a particular focus on connections between intimate relationships and gendered power relations.

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