Chapter 8

The #GamerGate Files:
Misogyny in the Media

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ABSTRACT

The GamerGate controversy exploded in late 2014 and seemed to pit feminist game critics against misogynistic male gamers who were defending their territory. GamerGate has been filled with intense anger on all sides, and has even resulted in threats of murder and rape. This chapter attempts to explain why so much hostility erupted over what appears to some to be a feminist critique of gaming and to others to be a misogynist-gamer critique of feminism. At heart is a surprising debate about mainstream gaming vs. indie gaming, and discomfort over changes to the notion of what counts as gaming and who counts as a gamer. The authors use online ethnographic methods to piece together the various elements of this cultural narrative from the online and social media contexts where it unfolded.

INTRODUCTION

On August 27, 2014, a Twitter user by the name of Adam Baldwin sends a short cryptic message composed almost entirely of a hashtag: #GamerGate. Below the tag are links to two YouTube videos posted on the account of someone named Internet Aristocrat. The videos are titled "Quinnspiracy Theory: In-N-Out Edition," parts 1 and 2. When viewed on a desktop computer, Twitter adds a preview of the video player with an image of an In-N-Out Burger franchise. The caption beneath the video reads "Whose [sic] a guy gotta fuck around here to get some fries with this?"

What is GamerGate? GamerGate is a culture war for the soul of the gaming industry. On the one hand, we have a nerd-centric gaming culture that is historically male dominated, whose members have been watching gaming transform as it goes mainstream and as women begin to join the ranks. On the other hand, we have a critique of gaming driven by feminist cultural critics who are increasingly gamers themselves, as players, designers, and game journalists (Hathaway, 2014). As the GamerGate Wiki site states: "Gamergate is a worldwide scandal" (GamerGate Wiki, 2015). Below, we provide on overview

of the history of video games, presented through the lens of the sociology of gender, before turning to the origin story of GamerGate itself. The GamerGate story is hard to reduce to text. As a supplement to this chapter, we have produced a collection of images, videos, and links related to GamerGate that can be found at https://www.pinterest.com/popculturefreak/gamergate/.

VIDEO GAME CULTURES AND MASCULINITIES

The computer games industry largely began with individual programmers or researchers tinkering with computer equipment as early as the late 1940s.[1] Primitive games developed along with burgeoning computer technology, largely as a hobby for technologically savvy students and workers. One major consequence of the historical development of video games as a field is its highly gendered, raced and classed nature. Because video game development, particularly multiplayer computer game development, stemmed from computer researchers in university settings (mostly in England), this industry bears the legacy of that origin. Those involved in computer research at universities would have been largely white, male, and upper-class. Those who created these games for fun were the ones who played them, and so this group was the original audience for video games.

   After this first era of video game programming and play, commercial video games first became available in the early 1970's at home, before transitioning into public spaces such as bars, nightclubs, and arcades (Williams, 2006). After this initial success, and a spectacular crash in the late 1970s and early 1980s, video games experienced a final (and lasting) resurgence in the late 1980s. Throughout this time, discourses around video gaming have helped shape our cultural stereotype of who a gamer is. In an analysis of news media coverage of video games, Williams (2003) found that from the 1980s through the mid-1990s media fairly consistently referred to video games as both masculine and for the young, with strongly biologically deterministic language in reference to gender difference and language which positioned video game play as something adults should be ashamed to engage in. In each case, the message changes around 1995, with coverage after this point emphasizing both female and adult play (Williams, 2003). This stereotype this earlier coverage created seems to largely persist today, despite a wealth of industry and academic research to the contrary (Shaw, 2011), and it is only in the last few years that media has reported women achieving parity in numbers among game players (e.g., Entertainment Software Association 2014).

   Video game and computer cultures have formed around the once reviled masculinity of the nerd. As larger changes in labor patterns have shifted middle class men from physical labor to mental, sedentary work in information technology (Connell, 1995:55), terms like nerd and geek are redefined in terms of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1995) argues this is evidenced by discourse that positions technology as "powerful," and by the popularity of violent video games. In reframing "geeks" or "nerds" as part of a masculinity that enacts hegemonic values through virtual strength, skill, violence, and the domination of women, video game cultures embody a form of resistant masculinity that simultaneously rejects the dominant "real-world" hegemonic masculinity, while simply recreating it in a new environment. Kendall (2000:262) argues, "as an in-group term, it [nerd] can convey affection or acceptance. Even when used pejoratively to support structures of hegemonic masculinity, it can confer grudging respect for technical expertise." Video game cultures reframe their qualities as positive (in control of powerful technology) while enacting fantasies of, and remaining complicit in, a (virtually) violent hegemonic masculinity that subordinates women.

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