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Reflections on the casual games market in a post-GamerGate world

Adrienne Shaw and Shira Chess

Introduction: A rapidly shifting industry

In the conclusion of *How to Do Things with Videogames*, Ian Bogost (2011) argues that ‘as videogames broaden in appeal, being a “gamer” will actually become less common, if being a gamer means consuming games as one’s primary media diet or identifying with videogames as a primary part of one’s identity’ (2011, 154). That was in 2011, though, before the Internet phenomenon known as GamerGate helped demonstrate that ‘gamer’ is still an important and salient identity for some. Bogost was not wrong to suggest that being a gamer is unimportant to some people who play games. As Shaw (2012) has demonstrated, playing video games does not always mean identifying as a gamer. Gamer has come to describe a very particular relationship to digital and non-digital game culture. It is an identity born from fandom, much like cinephiles or Trekkies, and like any identity it intersects with others such as gender, race, class, sexuality and so on. Norms of gamer culture mark certain types of play, casual play¹ in particular, as outside the bounds of gamer identity. Gamer identity is also experienced in relation to popular representation,

subcultural norms and social context (Bergstrom, Fischer and Jenson 2014). At the same time, the rise of casual, mobile and social games have helped to expand the digital game audience beyond the gamer audience (Chess 2013).

As we explore below, GamerGate is far too complex to be tied to any singular goal. However, one consistent thread in the GamerGate discourse² is pushing back on negative representations of gamers. Participants took particular issue with a group of so-called gamers are dead opinion pieces and used those pieces to rally others. GamerGaters have argued that the framing of gamer as an exclusionary identity and culture is offensive, insisting that gaming is a difference-blind community. The chain of logic might seem confusing, but it is vitally important to parse. On the one hand, journalists and scholars alike have argued that who plays digital games has expanded in recent years. Moreover, research demonstrates that playing digital games is not the same thing as identifying as a gamer (Shaw 2012; De Grove, Courtois and Van Looy, 2015). Moreover, for decades scholars and critics have pointed out that the construction of gamer culture around gender, sexual and racial norms has shaped who invests in game culture and the game industry. Yet when this was pointed out in August 2014, it was read as an attack on gamers. Through a letter-writing campaign targeting companies that advertised on the websites featuring these articles, harassment of anyone who supported the authors or their points, and conspiracy theories, GamerGaters sought to prove that gamer culture is inclusive.

Fascinatingly, GamerGaters argue that gamer identity is completely inclusive while being violently opposed to the discourse of inclusion. In the long term, GamerGate could serve to demonstrate what many have long suspected: that even if a person likes playing digital games, identifying as a gamer may not be for them. As scholars and critics then we have two, not mutually exclusive, options. One is to reclaim gamer identity as indeed for anyone. From *Diner Dash* to *Call of Duty* to *Madden* to *Skyrim*, anyone who enjoys playing games can call themselves a 'gamer'. Another option is to insist even more vociferously that not everyone *has to* identify as a gamer to claim a stake in games and the game industry (just as the film industry need not cater to film buffs alone). In either case we assuredly disagree with the assumption, present in much of GamerGate discourse, that 'gamers' are the only ones who get to care about games or that true gamers cannot critique games as cultural objects.

What is GamerGate?

At the start of 2015, GamerGate entered its sixth month and it is increasingly hard to offer a concise history for it. So much has happened, in so many venues, focused on so many issues, that we could not hope to capture everything in a

single chapter. Instead we focus here on its origins and the fight over the term 'gamer' as one prominent thread of discourse.

On 27 August 2014, actor Adam Baldwin tweeted a link to two YouTube videos along with the hashtag #GamerGate. The videos, posted by a user called Internet Aristocrat, were part of a series accusing game developer Zoe Quinn of using affairs with men in the video game industry to promote her free Twine game *Depression Quest* (Romano 2014). Those accusations proved baseless (Totilo 2014). All of this started because of series of blog posts by a former boyfriend of Quinn's, Eron Gjeni, which accused her of a litany of affairs and other transgressions (Kilma 2014). In short, a failed relationship became national news thanks to a cult favourite actor, a series of YouTube videos and an Internet harassment campaign that has yet to end – and that is but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding GamerGate.

For one, the origins of what became GamerGate started much earlier in August in a 4chan chat room. The chat room burgerandfries was started on 18 August on the topic 'The Zoe Quinnspiracy'. Building on salacious claims made against Zoe Quinn by her ex-boyfriend, members of the chat room were planning a coordinated attack on Quinn similar to the harassment of feminist popular culture critic Anita Sarkeesian (Chess and Shaw 2015). The members of this chat began making connections between Quinn and Sarkeesian to bolster claims that there was a larger feminist conspiracy plotting to destroy the video game industry. Later, in response to the much-publicized harassment of Zoe Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian, several journalists posted articles announcing the 'death of gamers' on 28 August (Auerbach 2014). The number of articles appearing all at once was used as evidence that there was an even larger conspiracy than already suspected, involving academics and the government, as we outline in more depth elsewhere (Chess and Shaw 2015).

The hashtag picked up steam as the critiques of gamer identity were deployed by GamerGaters as evidence that gamers, particularly heterosexual, white, cisgendered male gamers, were under attack. The response ranged from the mundane to the horrific. Many participants reportedly took part in letter-writing campaigns to companies that advertised on the websites featuring the 'gamers are dead' pieces and subsequent articles that painted GamerGate in a negative light. Anyone who posted to the hashtag, or elsewhere, critiquing GamerGate often faced harassment. Anyone associated with the supposed feminist gaming conspiracy found their mentions in Twitter filled with comments from GamerGate supporters. In particular, GamerGaters targeted people they identified as social justice warriors (SJWs) in games journalism and development as well as academia (Cross 2014a).

Journalists outside of the world of gaming, unsurprisingly, primarily focused their GamerGate stories on harassment of female game developers

and journalists. We say unsurprisingly as, lacking much evidence of corruption, beyond people in the same industry being friends, the most scandalous things to come to light during GamerGate were direct attacks on women who were identified as enemies of the gamers. The worst of the attacks came in the form of doxxing (posting of large amounts of a target's personal information online), swatting (tricking police units into raiding a target's home) and death threats. Doxxing and death threats drove Zoe Quinn and another game designer Brianna Wu from their homes. Wu's offense was re-tweeting image memes that made fun of GamerGate submitted to her by fans of her podcast (B. Stuart 2014). Moreover, feminist popular cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian, who had been receiving harassment and death threats since 2012 for her series of videos critiquing sexist tropes in video games, was forced to cancel a talk at the University of Utah following a mass shooting threat (Hern 2014).

Many GamerGaters asserted that there was no evidence that these threats came from GamerGate. It is an easy claim to make only if we ignore that GamerGate is far more complex than the simplified narratives of cable news or the 140-character limit of a tweet, can ever hope to communicate. GamerGate is much more than a Twitter hashtag. It is a constellation of websites: 4chan and now 8chan chatrooms, reddit threads, image memes, Tumblrs, Facebook groups, YouTube videos, articles, blog posts, comment sections and forum topics. The hashtag itself is used by two clear groups of users (those supporting it and those critiquing it), but hard numbers of participants are hard to come by because of the number of new/secondary accounts used to post to the hashtag (Baio 2014). Moreover, despite clear 'sides' on the hashtag, there are no clear sides given the variety of ways GamerGate is either supported or critiqued.

GamerGate as a gamer identity movement

Given this complexity, knowing what to call GamerGate is a bit tricky from a scholarly standpoint. Neither community nor movement seems to properly encapsulate it. Certainly, GamerGate seems to have been started and its momentum built with goals in mind (however vaguely stated) and some participants have referred to it as a consumer revolt. At the same time, participants often refuse to speak of GamerGate as a focused movement, so as to distance themselves from the violent fringe that also uses the hashtag and other web forums. It has the makings of a community, drawn together by a shared purpose and feeling of being threatened from the outside. Yet GamerGate discourse often includes 'war speak', with talk of 'operations' and 'campaigns' to vanquish

the foes of gamers and the game industry. According to Cathcart, a movement requires that 'there must be one or more actors who . . . cry out through various symbolic acts that true communication, justice, salvation cannot be achieved unless there is an immediate corrective applied to the established order' (1972, 87). It is tempting to frame GamerGate as a movement in this sense, but it is difficult to see a group of people who have ultimately profited over a lack of diversity for many years, as being persecuted by calls for more diversity. However, for the purposes of this chapter, it is important to acknowledge that GamerGate discourse positions it as a movement. In particular, participants see themselves as fighting the injustice of critics (supposedly) misrepresenting their identity, hobby and culture. Whether this is true is less important than the fact that it is the subject position adopted by GamerGaters.

If GamerGate is a movement then, what is it a movement about? When we pull away the hate speech, the clear attacks on feminist (in particular) criticism of games, the conspiracy theories and the hard-to-support assertion that 'it's really about ethics in journalism' the one thing that remains seems to be a need to defend gamer identity. Indeed in a KotakuInAction thread³ titled 'when did you join the cause?' nearly all of the responses identify what they perceived of as attacks on their gamer identity as a motivating factor. Based on our observations of the hashtag, a large number of users who are not directly involved in harassment (even some who identify as feminists or liberal) feel allegiance to gamer identity that is manifested in their support for GamerGate. Also, the targeting of academics and journalists is lent legitimacy by emphasizing the ways in which those parties have helped to question gamer identity. Sargon of Akkad, for example, has posted several videos specifically blaming Adrienne Shaw for the 'death of the gamer' articles by claiming that her work was an inspiration to several journalists. Specifically, Shaw's journal article 'Do You Identify as a Gamer' (2012) was cited as a primary node in how the feminist games movement and games journalists began to question the identity politics around 'gamer' in the first place (Sargon of Akkad 2014).

Furthermore, to demonstrate that GamerGate was not simply about misogyny, members of a subreddit suggested starting a new hashtag: #NotYourShield (Cathode Debris 2014). This hashtag was meant for people who did not identify as white, cisgendered male or heterosexual but who did not agree with SJWs (and thus did not want to be used as a shield by SJWs). According to a September 3 reddit post promoting the use of #notyourshield #gamerGate: 'Use these to talk about SJW hypocrisy. Be clearly in favour of #gamerGate. Focus on corruption and how your voice is silenced because you don't fit the agenda.' In the burgerandfries chat room #NotYourShield was celebrated for proving that, despite what they felt others had claimed, gamers were not simply heterosexual, white, cisgendered men. In doing so

#NotYourShield was used as evidence that gamer culture was completely inclusive, thus asserting all claims to the contrary false. At the same time, the history of the term 'gamer' illustrates specific connotations that helped make GamerGate possible.

History of gamer

It is fascinating that if we look at GamerGate as a gamer identity movement it shares many of the same goals game criticism and scholarship have had for years. Game scholars, for example, have spent many years dispelling the negative or limited stereotypes of gamers (though many of those doing that work were derided by GamerGate). At the same time, however, GamerGate discourse reinforces many of the norms of gamer culture that have helped limit gamer identity. We can see this by looking briefly at the development of the word 'gamer', as well as journalistic and academic critiques of the term.

Gamer is not a particularly old word, though its origins predate digital games. According to Jon Peterson (2014), one of the earliest variations was 'wargamers' which referred to people who played early twentieth-century military command simulations that were precursors to pen-and-paper role-playing games (RPGs) such as *Dungeons and Dragons*. Wargames had been around since the mid-nineteenth century, but it was not until the 1950s that fans of the genre began self-identifying as and engaging in activities specifically hailing wargamers. At the time, Peterson goes on to describe, participants in the subculture were largely male. That did not mean women did not play them or identify as wargamers early on, but that their participation was treated as an exception to the male rule. As he points out in an interview: 'I don't think the word was originally intended to exclude women, but female participation was surprising: thus we see lots of qualifiers like "women gamers" or "lady gamers" by the mid-1970s when the community began to diversify' (Campbell 2014).

Turning to digital games, by the 1980s, *Video* magazine's game centric column *Arcade Alley* had switched from referring to their target audience as 'fans' (Kunkel and Laney 1980a) and 'players' (Kunkel and Laney 1980b) to 'gamers' by 1981 (Kunkel and Laney 1981a). Fascinatingly, the first time they used the term 'gamer' was specifically in reference to people who were forced to play alone because those 'with average videogaming skills often bores the good players while frightening off the bad ones'. This semantically marked 'gamer' as more than a casual player but not yet an expert. A gamer was a fan, a hobbyist. And by December 1981, the columns point to 'gamers' as the ones would be receiving and shopping for video game cartridges in the holiday season (Kunkel and Laney 1981b). Two years later the holiday shopping guide was titled 'Super Gifts for Gamers' but at this point gamer

was used interchangeably with home arcader and player to refer to anyone playing the game (Kunkel and Katz 1983). It is important to note that this was around the same time the US game-playing market began to stagnate and ultimately collapse (Kent 2001). By the end of 1983, it is possible the columnists suspected that the only people left playing games were 'gamers'. The industry's collapse, moreover, is largely credited with the video game industry's turn to courting a 'hardcore' target market (Keogh 2014).

As several scholars have demonstrated, advertising and the early games press cultivated a sense of community, identity and culture around the playing of video games following the 1983 crash (Consalvo 2008; Kirkpatrick 2012). UK gaming magazines during this period, Kirkpatrick (2012) observes: 'address their readers more assuredly as teenage males'. Moreover, as Bergstrom, Fisher and Jenson (2014) demonstrate, early twenty-first-century popular representations of 'gamers' still often portray them as male and generally negatively. Although not everyone who identifies as a gamer is a middle-class, teenaged, white male, media portrayals have helped mark it as a classed, aged, racialized and gendered identity. In turn, game content is tailored to this imagined core audience, unless especially marked for another market (e.g. the 'girl games' of the 1990s). Being a gamer, in the sense of being particularly invested in and knowledgeable about video games, serves as an important gateway for entering into video game development (O'Donnell 2014). Thus, as scholars have pointed out, game texts are created with a particular (young, white male) market in mind, which helps shape (but does not determine) who feels called upon to play games, and ultimately shapes who feels welcome in the industry where these games are made (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2003; Kerr 2006). Over the past few years that has changed: a more diverse group regularly play, talk and write about games. GamerGaters seem to take issue with this, referring to it as an incursion on their pastime by outsiders. Yet women and other members of marginalized groups have *always* been part of the game industry and self-identified gamers have never been the only market for digital games. Moreover, with the explosion of mobile, social and casual gaming in recent years, gamers are far from the most important market anymore.

The role of mobile, casual, social games in expanding the market

How can we better understand mobile, casual and social games within a space that has previously been defined by a hardcore audience? Casual gaming often characterizes play styles necessitated by both mobile gaming (such as *Angry Birds*) and social media game applications (such as *Farmville*). The casual game

industry has expanded audiences beyond those who play on expensive PCs or consoles. The emergence and continued popularity of casual gaming shifted the market so rapidly and dramatically that there seems to be an undeniable link between the growth of casual gaming and the emergence of GamerGate. After all, the egalitarian styles of play afforded by fast-paced casual and mobile markets helped displace perceptions in both game culture and game industry that all video game players are necessarily 'hardcore'.

As game scholars we have often been amused by how readily people refuse to admit to playing video games, let alone being identified as gamers. Commonly, we hear people say they don't play video games, only to go on to talk about how much they play *Angry Birds*, *Just Dance* or *CandyCrush Saga*. Mobile, casual and social games do not look like what gamers are commonly represented as playing. Despite a seemingly endless number of articles claiming that more people are 'gamers' (Worley 1982; Casserly 2010; Harwell 2014), what we have actually seen is simply a consistent increase in the number of people who play digital games (K. Stuart 2014). Thanks to decades of niche marketing, and further thanks to the misogyny that participants in GamerGate both enact and attempt to distance themselves from, 'gamer' has come to symbolize much more than simply being one who plays digital games.

Of course, there is no question that the emergence of casual, mobile and social gaming opened doors to *some* gaming audiences. Much of this shift began with the Nintendo Wii and DS systems in the mid-to-late 2000s (Vanderhoef 2013). Additionally, the shift from dumb phones to smartphones in the last decade has meant that most people carry gaming systems with them always. Gaming is no longer physically tethered to spaces with sleek systems and fast Internet speeds. Several genres have emerged within casual, including time management games, hidden object games, word games and social games – just to name a few. Games such as *Diner Dash*, *Cake Mania* and *Mystery Case Files: Ravenhearst* have also introduced more female-friendly protagonists into gaming (Chess 2012; 2015).

Much has been noted about the dismissiveness often afforded to casual gaming – both inside and outside of the video game industry. When *Farmville* won Game of the Year at the Game Developer's Association in 2010, the industry responded primarily with indifference (Terdiman 2010). In 2012, the *New York Times* listed *Farmville* and *Angry Birds* as among the new kind of 'hyperaddictive' and 'stupid' games (Anderson 2012). Even within academia, there has been backlash with Ian Bogost (2010) parodying *Farmville* with his game *Cow Clicker*, which was meant to highlight and mock its simple game mechanics. Along with this kind of dismissiveness towards the games, is often dismissiveness of the players, with game columnists referring to casual

gamers as 'middle-aged women' who play video games when they are not watching Oprah (Kato 2007).

Yet, these games have clearly and deeply affected the industry. As the idea of the 'what' of video games expands – as we renegotiate what a video game might be and what the potential audience might be – there is the inevitability of anger and displacement of past audiences. It is impossible to think about GamerGate without considering the possibility that it is the diversity of market in casual, social and mobile gaming that helped to facilitate the outrage embedded at the core of GamerGate. What once belonged to a community that was specific, specialized and lacking in diversity can now belong to nearly everyone. And when it belongs to everyone, more people get to have a say in what games, and perhaps game cultures, look like.

The death of gamers?

Of course, digital games have never *just* been for gamers, nor have gamers been as completely homogenous or villainous as popular cultural texts suggest. So why so much uproar when journalists pointed this out in August 2014? Part of the answer might be the fact that one of the first articles was written by Leigh Alexander, who has received an obscene amount of harassment for being an outspoken critic of toxic game culture and a proponent of making the industry more open to marginalized groups. In describing changes to the industry, her article exposes a fear that perhaps some gamers did not even realize they felt:

This is hard for people who've drank the kool aid about how their identity depends on the aging cultural signposts of a rapidly-evolving, increasingly broad and complex medium. It's hard for them to hear they don't own anything, anymore, that they aren't the world's most special-est consumer demographic, that they have to share. (2014)

Alexander calls on the game industry to stop courting and promoting the most hateful version of game culture. GamerGate critiques of this piece often fail to see that she is not making universalizing claims about gamers being awful. But maybe that doesn't matter because what she is saying is that gamers do not 'own' games.

Indeed the biggest common denominator in the 'death of gamers' articles is not the assertion that gamers are dead; in fact with the exception of titles (many of which were added by editors) nearly none of the articles actually uses that phrase. What nearly every article emphasizes is that a particular

type of gamer is ruining games for everyone else. Moreover, they argue that the expansion of the video game market has made it so that gamers do not get to own games. As Liz Ryerson (2014) and Katherine Cross (2014b) have both pointed out, the critique of gamers and the idea games are not *just* for gamers anymore rubs up against a history of being told that games are a waste of time and that games cause violence and hate.

If trying to defend an industry that had long catered to them and a subculture that had long been the butt of media jokes or moral panics is what drove many supporters to GamerGate, it is easy to see how the casual, mobile and social games helped set the stage for GamerGate. It is possible that these small games, the very games that the industry has often been so dismissive of, could have caused the death of gamers. Casual, mobile and social gaming helped de-specialize the medium and helped us see once more what games can look like outside of gamer subculture. If gamers are indeed ‘dead’ (that is, if the identity of the gamer is no longer a salient one that carries meaning) then this is likely due to large cultural, infrastructural and networked shifts that have happened within – and apart from – the video game industry over the last decade. The emergence of the casual game market, though, certainly has helped to illustrate the power of the small game and how it can ultimately affect culture in a big way.

Notes

- 1 Here we mean casual in terms of a casual approach to playing, not simply the play of casual games.
- 2 When we refer to GamerGate discourse, we look at this holistically by including posts to the hashtag, reddit subthreads, 4chan and later 8chan, YouTube, GamerGate websites, as well as imgur images and image memes posted in these venues.
- 3 KotakuInAction is a reddit subthread where much of the conversation around GamerGate happens outside of 8chan and Twitter.

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