



SOCIAL MEDIA

FREAKS

DIGITAL IDENTITY IN THE NETWORK SOCIETY

DUSTIN KIDD

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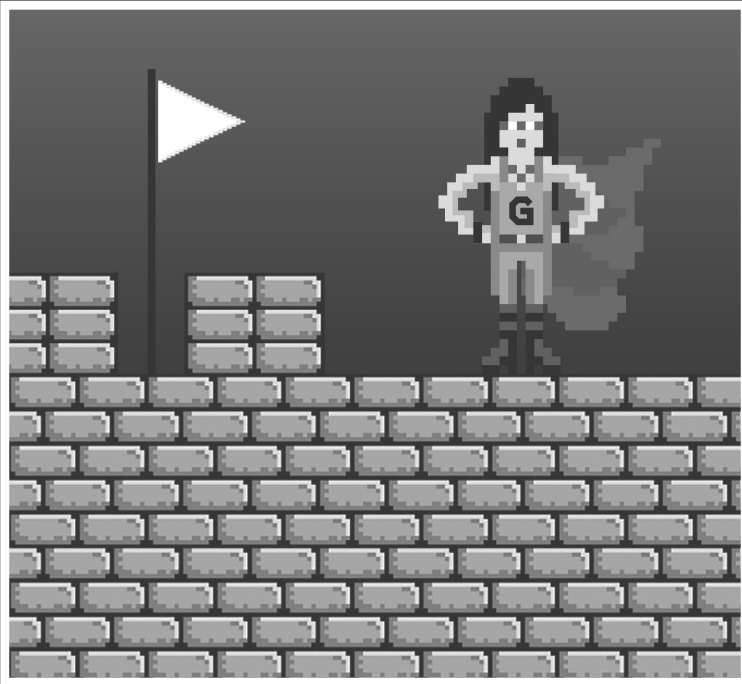
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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
1. Social Media, Art, and the Network Society	1
2. The Social Structure of Social Media	31
3. Leave Britney Alone: Sexuality Perspectives on Social Media	69
4. Disabling a Meme: Disability Perspectives on Social Media	97
5. GamerGate: Gender Perspectives on Social Media	121
6. Occupy Wall Street: Class Perspectives on Social Media	145
7. Black Lives Matter: Racial Perspectives on Social Media	169
8. Social Media Toolbox	193
9. Conclusion: A Social Media Revolution?	219
<i>Appendix: Digital Media Literacy</i>	<i>231</i>
<i>Glossary</i>	<i>233</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>241</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>257</i>

5

GamerGate: Gender Perspectives on Social Media



On August 27, 2014, a Twitter user by the name of Adam Baldwin sent a short, cryptic message composed almost entirely of a hashtag: #GamerGate.⁴ Below the tag were links to two YouTube videos posted on the account

⁴Much of this chapter is derived from my contributions to a book chapter that I co-authored with Amanda Turner (Kidd and Turner 2016).

of someone named Internet Aristocrat. The videos were titled *Quinnspiracy Theory: In-N-Out Edition*, parts 1 and 2. When the tweet is 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 essentially 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.”* Like many epics, GamerGate is a story of love, sex, and jealousy (Hathaway 2014). But its origins are unique and unlike any of the epic tales of old. It starts with one woman’s passion for coding and her battle with depression.

DEPRESSION QUEST

Zoë Quinn released the game *Depression Quest* in 2013. It is a text-based game that is designed to demonstrate the experiences of depression, also designed with the intent of helping people fight the effects of depression. Its style is reminiscent of the Choose Your Own Adventure novels, but the most important choices are the ones that the designer has stricken through. Those options cannot be selected by the player, and they highlight the fact that good options often feel unavailable to people who suffer from depression.

Depression Quest is found online at www.depressionquest.com, but it has also been released through Greenlight, a component of the online gaming platform Steam. Greenlight is a tool by which the Steam community can review new games and help good games find a wider audience. In an interview for *Vice* magazine, Quinn described what happened when she first released *Depression Quest* on Greenlight:

* The site has been taken down. An archive of the timeline can be found at <https://web.archive.org/web/20150310043424/http://wiki.gamergate.me/index.php?title=Timeline>.

When it hit Greenlight, people were leaving foul comments there, and suddenly I started getting stuff sent to my email. “Oh I saw your game on Greenlight and I hope you kill yourself.” I guess somebody who thought they were really clever figured out my address and sent a very detailed rape threat to my house. That was when I decided to pull it off [Greenlight]. (Kotzer 2014)

The article, entitled “Female Game Designers Are Being Threatened with Rape,” was published on January 23, 2014, and was written by gaming journalist Zack Kotzer. As GamerGate eventually unfolded later in 2014, the field of gaming journalism would turn out to be a central issue. While many would respond to this by scoffing at the very concept of gaming journalism, others would argue that if there is no integrity in gaming journalism, then there is no integrity in journalism at large and no integrity in gaming. A few weeks before Kotzer’s article appeared in *Vice*, another gaming journalist included *Depression Quest* in a piece he published online at the site Rock, Paper, Shotgun. That piece, written by Nathan Grayson and published on January 8, 2014, consisted of little more than a list of fifty new games released on Greenlight. The games were not reviewed or rank ordered. However, the list was illustrated with a screen capture from *Depression Quest*. At the end of the opening paragraph, the last line before the list reads: “Anyway, standouts: powerful Twine darling *Depression Quest*, surrealist Thief usurper Tangiers, and sidescrolling epic Treasure Adventure World” (Grayson 2014a). Twine is an open-source platform used in game development, including *Depression Quest*.

On social media, Quinn alleged that *Depression Quest* was particularly attacked by members of **Wizardchan**, is an online discussion board, found at wizchan.org, which describes itself as follows:

Wizardchan is a Japanese-inspired image-based forum (imageboard) for male virgins to share their thoughts and discuss their interests and lifestyle as a virgin. The name of our website is inspired by the wizard meme, which refers to someone who has maintained his virginity past the age of 30. In contrast to other imageboards, Wizardchan is dedicated exclusively to people who have no sexual experience and may be NEET or hikkikomori.*

* As quoted on the opening page of Wizardchan, <https://wizchan.org/>.

NEET stands for not in education, employment, or training. *Hikikomori* is a Japanese term for socially withdrawn. Wizardchan users have denied the claims that they attacked *Depression Quest* and allege that Quinn invented the attack to garner more press for her game.

The trail to GamerGate went quiet for a couple of months, until Rock, Paper, Shotgun posted a video on its YouTube account at the end of the Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco.* The video appeared on March 22, 2014, and featured Nathan Grayson sitting on a bed interviewing Hayden Dingman from *PC World*; Lucas Pope, the developer of the game *Papers, Please*; Zoë Quinn, developer of *Depression Quest*; and Matthew Ritter, developer of the game *Boon Hill*. They seem to be sitting around someone's bedroom, having a casual conversation about their current game interests. Each person is featured for a few minutes. Quinn talks for about three minutes (in a thirty-minute video) about sharing her game at the GDC. She discusses a talk she gave about what it is like to release a game that is so personal. The discussion of *Depression Quest* is pretty limited. At one point, the other interview participants congratulate Quinn on her success. When she expresses discomfort with the positive comments, Ritter says, "We take it back. Your game sucks." But when you watch the interview, it's clear that he is joking and the general spirit is one of support for Quinn. But there is no indication that the other participants have even played the game.

GAME_JAM

The next major event in the path to GamerGate happened in the week that followed the Rock, Paper, Shotgun video. Quinn was recruited to participate in a reality television show called *GAME_JAM* that would pit teams of game developers against each other as they raced to create new games. The premise of the show is a core element in indie game culture, the **game jam**. The show was being sponsored by Mountain Dew and produced by a production company called Polaris (owned by Maker, which is owned in turn by Disney) (C. Campbell 2014). The host for the show was Matti Lesham, whose previous credits include, according to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), *Dew-mocracy* (2008), "[a] web-based fantasy game that allows gamers to create a

* The video is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIKEJBHbLgg>.

Mountain Dew soft drink, including its flavor, color and label.”* Each team of developers also included a YouTube star, such as the video blogger (or vlogger) JonTron, of the *JonTronShow*.†

Production of *GAME_JAM* did not go well, according to pretty much everyone involved. Not surprisingly, the reality television style of the show resulted in pressures to create conflict between gamers. When these conflicts failed to materialize, Lesham began asking competitors questions about whether women could succeed in gaming. He is quoted in one article about the production as follows:

“Two of the other teams have women on them. Do you think they’re at a disadvantage?”

And then:

“Do you think you’re at an advantage because you have a pretty lady on your team?” (Grayson 2014b)

Participants left the set soon after this incident and refused to take part in the production any further. The production was derailed, and the show never happened.

The article that I use above to quote Lesham was written by Nathan Grayson, so it provides the next key point in a series of connections between Grayson and Quinn that would later become the linchpin for GamerGate. By this time, Grayson had started writing for *Kotaku*, a gaming blog owned by Gawker.

After *GAME_JAM* fell apart, Quinn took to her blog, *Dispatches from the Quinnsspiracy*, to reflect on the experience:

It’s a weird time for games, and it can be easy to lose sight of that when you’re working in the industry. . . . I’ve taken every speaking gig offered to me because I’ve read so much on how having someone who looks like you being visible in places you’d like to be in someday can do really powerful stuff for traditionally marginalized groups. (Quinn, 2014)

* His filmography can be found on IMDB at http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1139308/?ref_=nm_film_prd_3.

† His YouTube channel is found at <https://www.youtube.com/user/JonTronShow/>.

She did not directly address the show, which she explained was a result of a contractual obligation. But clearly the show's failure led her to examine the culture of gaming, including indie gaming, and the intersecting issues of gender.

Quinn noted in Grayson's article that the experience made her want to start her own game jam, and she began using the name Rebel Jam to refer to that goal. She was accused of derailing *GAME_JAM* as a way of promoting Rebel Jam.

THE FINE YOUNG CAPITALISTS

Throughout 2014 Zoë Quinn was also engaged in a somewhat public battle with a group that identifies as The Fine Young Capitalists (TFYC). On *Wikipedia*, TFYC are described as radical feminists (*Wikipedia* 2015b). But an article on CinemaBlend describes them simply as profeminist (Usher 2014). The group operates as an anonymous collective whose goal is to help women and minorities become more involved in gaming. The origins of the group are described in a YouTube video that features the group's founder, Matthew Rappard.* He is the only publicly identified member of the group, and he claims that he has only gone public as a result of Zoë Quinn and others sharing his personal information online—a practice referred to in the Reddit and 4chan communities as **doxxing**.

So an anonymous profeminist organization, founded by a male, and possibly consisting of mostly men, set out to reward female game designers. They recruited the help of a Colombian “transmedia production company” called Autobótika to help them launch a campaign. A video on TFYC's YouTube page features Autobótika's Lola Barreto, which gives the impression that women are actively involved in the campaign. Perhaps they were; it is difficult to ascertain the group's demographics. But there is no clear indication that women were active with the group from the start. In a defense of TFYC on their Tumblr account, Barreto is one of several women listed, even though she is part of Autobótika (The Fine Young Capitalists 2014). In one interview, Barreto clearly stated that she was not part of TFYC and that her company was contracted for its services (Morley 2014). The central premise of the group is that men, a group that is privileged in gaming, can reach

* The video is available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXHylDeOa0w>.

out and lend a hand of support to help more women and other “underrepresented labor” become game developers. Rappard did say in an online video that there were women involved as well, but those women were not named. The campaign that they launched with *Autobótika* solicited ideas for games from women. The women whose ideas were considered the best were then matched with concept artists to storyboard the game (Morley 2014). These storyboards were then made available online so that a broad audience could vote on which of the games should actually get made, with the plan being to make the games and sell them, giving 8 percent of the proceeds to the women who created the games and the rest of the money to charity.

Quinn became aware of TFYC’s project in February 2014 and contacted them with concerns. First, she was bothered that they were basically asking women to work for free, as they volunteered their creative gaming ideas (Seraphita 2014). Rappard stated in his YouTube video that he did not understand why this was a problem, because the group was essentially trying to help women, and the winner would be offered 8 percent of the proceeds. Quinn’s critique does seem legitimate though, as they were basically using a contest to generate free research and development ideas. Later in the year, Stephen Daly at *Gameranx* published an op-ed that shared Quinn’s concerns (Daly 2014).

Second, Quinn asked questions about TFYC’s policy regarding trans people. The question wasn’t random. They had a stated policy on their website. The name of the HTML document is “TransgenderPolicy,” and the headline at the top of the policy reads “Are you a boy or a girl?” The policy is as follows:

Although it has become an Internet meme, the question “Are you a boy or a girl?” is actually quite a complicated question. As TFYC is based in Canada we use the theory of self identification, where a person will be considered a man or a woman based upon on their own view of how they should be perceived in society. This can bother some people for some reason, so to put the record straight let’s lay out what exactly that means. The only question regarding gender we ask is.

Participant has self identified as Woman before the date of March 11, 2014.[†]

*The video and online campaign can be found on Indiegogo at: <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/the-fine-young-capitalists—2#/>.

[†] The policy is described <http://www.thefineyoungcapitalists.com/TransgenderPolicy>.

Quinn claimed that the policy was transphobic. Rappard defended the policy, saying it was a necessary way to prevent men from gaining access to the award by suddenly claiming that they identify as women. In an e-mail to a journalist, Rappard said “the text was approved by a lawyer and signed by a sociology student.”*

The theory of self-identification seems to be a fairly progressive approach. However, the concern that men would embrace a trans identity and declare themselves women simply to gain access to this award is unfounded and hints at a fear that trans identities could destabilize social action.

Zoë Quinn took her concerns to Twitter. Rappard says that it was at this point he was doxxed, when Quinn’s friend and associate Maya Felix Kramer released his name and Facebook account on Twitter. He says that Quinn’s reply to that tweet effectively alerted her followers as well, making her complicit with the doxxing. The launch of the fund-raising campaign for TFYC was delayed as a result. Quinn tweeted: “I love how a conversation between me and @legobutts resulted in accidentally killing an exploitative startup’s website.”† @legobutts is the Twitter handle for Maya Felix Kramer.

The launch was delayed into the summer. Rappard says that during this time Quinn was contacted and even offered a chance to work with TFYC as a consultant, but she rebuffed their offers.

By the time the fund-raising campaign launched, the battle between Zoë Quinn and TFYC had been waged fairly publicly, especially on Twitter and 4chan. Two of the boards on 4chan, /pol/ or Politically Incorrect and /v/ or Video Games began organizing donations to TFYC, explicitly to spite Zoë Quinn. According to Rappard, the 4chan portal on the giving site IndieGoGo was the strongest source of donations for their program. The Fine Young Capitalists and the 4chan users worked out a deal whereby the 4chan /v/ board could place its logo on the resulting game *and* choose the charity that would receive the donated proceeds from the game. They were even allowed to create a character that would be inserted into the winning game. The character they created is named Vivian James.‡ 4chan users selected the Colon

* A screen capture of an e-mail explaining this is found at <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/816444-quinnspiracy>.

† A screen capture of the tweet is found at <http://imgur.com/PFO1zJB,CU55Sd5,OH8flpw,Dwm6vvx#1>

‡ An image and overview of Vivian James are available at <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/vivian-james>.

Cancer Alliance as the charity recipient. CCA was one of six choices presented in a 4chan poll,^{*} the others being the Prostate Cancer Foundation, the Mankind Initiative (described as a “charity for abused men”), Survivors UK (“male rape and sexual abuse support”), the Jewish Internet Defense Force (a group described on *Wikipedia* as “an organization that uses social media to mobilize support for campaigns against websites and Facebook groups that promote or praise what it regards as Islamic terrorism or anti-Semitism” [2015a]), and the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces (a New York City–based organization that provides support for veterans of the Israel Defense Forces). The selection of possible charities is telling. If Zoë Quinn is seen as a social justice warrior—a hot button term in this debate—then these charities are meant to present an alternative vision of social justice that emphasizes the victimization of men.

4chan is an online image and message board that was started in 2003 by a fifteen-year-old named Christopher Poole. The primary purpose of 4chan is to share images and to create dialogue about those images. It was modeled on Japanese websites, particularly 2chan, and originally focused on Japanese popular culture. Its original catchphrase, according to an August 18, 2005, screen capture was: “What you need, when you need it.”[†]

4chan allows users to post images without registering. They can use any identity they choose, or they can post entirely anonymously. 4chan has been linked to the worldwide anonymous collective of hacktivists (hacker activists) known as Anonymous, and it is widely described as their original creation point. Anonymous has been linked to campaigns against Scientology and the Westboro Baptist Church, as well as attempts to direct greater media attention to a number of crimes (Gilbert 2014). 4chan explains its concept of Anonymous on an FAQ board:

“Anonymous” is the name assigned to a poster who does not enter text in to the [Name] field. Anonymous is not a single person, but rather, represents the collective whole of 4chan. He is a god amongst men.[‡]

^{*} An image capture of the straw poll can be found online at <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/816470-vivian-james>.

[†] The page can be viewed through the Web Archives at https://web.archive.org/web/20050818191647/http://dp.information.com/?a_id=35&domainname=4chan.com.

[‡] The FAQ is found on the 4chan website at <http://www.4chan.org/faq>.

A stroll through 4chan's boards reveals a sustained interest in Japanese anime and manga, as well as a variety of adult boards. Its most popular board is the random board, known popularly as /b/ (because that is the URL extension where it is found, i.e., <http://boards.4chan.org/b/>). Frequent users of /b/ call themselves /b/tards, a play on the slur "retards," and they are known for making heavy use of the word "fag."

The character created by the 4chan users for the game selected by TFYC is named Vivian James. She will appear in the game *After Life Empire*, which is being developed by Autobótika. The Fine Young Capitalists have a video about the game development on their YouTube account. In the video, five game designers and technicians—four males and one female—discuss the process of developing the game. The women who created the game are not named, but one of the men in the video comments on them. The comment is in Spanish but is translated in the subtitles as: "What I like about this project is that the ideas come from women."^{*}

The Fine Young Capitalists have come under fire for taking money from 4chan (Daly 2014), but at the request of 4chan users, they are now making videos about female game designers and have already released videos about Anna Kipnis[†] and Corrinne Yu.[‡] More recent projects by TFYC are being funded by an online porn stream, in partnership with the porn star Mercedes Carrera.

TL;DR

As the controversy over TFYC reached its zenith in August 2014, Zoë Quinn faced a new battlefield, this one much more personal than the others. This is the same month in which Quinn re-released *Depression Quest* on Steam's Greenlight service, after pulling it a year earlier due to harassing comments. As all of this was happening, her romantic relationship with boyfriend Eron Gjoni was ending. They had taken a break, gotten back together, and then

^{*} The video is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCRuu82DxcI>.

[†] The video is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAHdntHbPM8>.

[‡] The video is available on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQk_z_vnGGg.

called it quits again. Gjoni is also a game developer and was very aware of Quinn's struggles with *Depression Quest*, *GAME_JAM*, and TFYC.

He started a blog to publicly express his anger toward his ex-girlfriend, naming the blog *The Zoë Post*. The first post on the blog, dated August 16, 2014, was titled "TL;DR." **TL;DR** is a shorthand term used on Reddit and other sites (Sheets 2012). It stands for "Too Long; Didn't Read." If you jump in midstream to a lengthy thread, you need a summary to catch you up and save you from reading the full thread. Look for a post labeled "TL;DR," and you should find a summary of the thread up to that point. Gjoni's post about his relationship was meant to provide a summary of their breakup. He opened with a concise statement of his feelings toward Quinn:

I dated Zoë Quinn. I thought she was the most amazing, kind hearted person in the world.

Turns out she was bullshitting pretty much everything I fell in love with her for, and is actually an unbelievable jerk. (Gjoni 2014)

Gjoni listed twenty-four things he was holding against Quinn, including an accusation that she had a sexual affair with games journalist Nathan Grayson. In fact, he identified five men (some named, some left anonymous) who he believed Quinn slept with during their relationship or during a period when they were on a break but had a supposed commitment not to sleep with others. "TL;DR" was one of nine posts that Gjoni published on August 16 on *The Zoë Post*. The others are the "too long" versions, which elaborate on the breakdown of the relationship in great detail.

Within days the blog made national headlines. *Daily Dot* broke the story on August 20. Its coverage of the story highlighted the ways that an online gaming community had used Gjoni's blog to construe a claim that Quinn had traded sex for professional success:

All week, gamers have accused Quinn of trading sexual favors for career advancement from industry professionals and positive reviews from gaming journalists. Despite the lack of evidence for either of these claims—again, Gjoni's post never makes either allegation, and the gaming journalist he names never reviewed Quinn's game, *Depression Quest*—the idea has taken firm hold within the gaming community. (Romano 2014)

Vice published an article less than two weeks later that featured an interview with Gjoni, calling him “the guy whose tell-all blog entry about his ex-girlfriend sparked the recent flare-up of the notorious Quinnsspiracy debacle” (Pearl 2014). The *Vice* article did note that Gjoni allied himself with the social justice side of the controversies, but separated that issue from his personal romantic problems with Quinn.

METHODOLOGICAL MOMENT: Collecting and Sharing Virtual Ethnographic Sources Through Social Media

Unlike most other forms of ethnography, virtual ethnography allows us to reproduce many of the experiences we observe and to make these moments available to others. You cannot reproduce a moment on the street, except perhaps through a video recording, but the presence of a camera would likely change the interaction. Online and in social media, however, moments can be captured and shared with others. But the ephemeral nature of these spaces means that we need to be diligent in capturing the moment. Here are some tools that we can use in this process:

1. Screen captures. One method for grabbing images and text from the Internet and social media is to use the screen capture function that is available on computers, tablets, and phones. On a computer, the screen capture options include a cross-hairs function that allows the user to capture a specific portion of the screen. Capturing the full screen is a good way to record a collection of elements that may not appear together in any other moment. For example, the ads that appear online and in social media vary from person to person, and they are not likely to stay the same on a particular page over time. Capturing the screen in a given moment allows us to study the combination of particular content and particular ads in a specific moment. Screen captures are also a great way to visually grab specific tweets (although tweets can also be linked to individually), to save images on Instagram (which does not have an internal “save image” option), to seize a playlist from Spotify, and much more.
2. Image collections on Flickr or Google Photos. Image collections are a great way to share screen captures and other types of images in an environment that can be organized and curated.

continues

METHODOLOGICAL MOMENT: Collecting and Sharing Virtual Ethnographic Sources Through Social Media *continued*

3. Playlists on YouTube. A researcher studying video culture online can capture the videos being observed into a playlist that can function as a database for ethnographic observation.
4. Boards on Pinterest. Pinterest boards are one of my favorite resources for capturing, curating, and sharing information and for capturing moments in virtual ethnography. Pinterest allows users to create collections that include multiple types of content that can either be found online or uploaded to Pinterest. This content can include images and videos. Technically, as of the publication of this book, there is no option to include a link. But if a web page has an image on it, that image can be pinned to a board, and clicking the image will take the viewer to the original link. Pinterest allows the user to include comments for each item that is pinned, which allows for curation of the board. Screen captures can also be uploaded to Pinterest boards. An example Pinterest board that uses information from this chapter is available at <https://www.pinterest.com/popculturefreak/gamergate/>.
5. Prezi. Prezi is an online presentation system that allows presentations to be shared publicly. Prezis can include music, videos, images, and text. Prezi provides another way to collect and share observations and moments from virtual ethnography and allows the user to create a path for viewers to step through the information. An example Prezi that uses information from this chapter is available at https://prezi.com/uxk0mpe9z_bm/gamergate/.

MUNDANEMATT AND THE INTERNET ARISTOCRAT

After the launch of *The Zoë Post*, gamers began using the details offered by Gjoni to piece together a case against Zoë Quinn. YouTuber MundaneMatt posted a nearly sixteen-minute video later the same day, August 16. He opens with a lament about the accusations of sexism that have been leveled against the gaming industry. Then he turns to *The Zoë Post* as evidence, he believes, that the accusations of sexism are coming from a corrupt relationship between gaming journalism and **SJW** gamers. SJW stands for “social justice

warriors,” a term that is often used with contempt in a community that is now known as the GamerGate community, a group of gamers who want to rid the gaming industry of questions related to gender, race, and inequality.

MundaneMatt’s video was titled *Hell Hath No Fury Like a Lover’s Scorn (Zoë Quinn and Eron Gjoni)*. He reads the “TL;DR” from *The Zoë Post* and then begins his case against Zoë Quinn, asking: “How much of Zoë’s coverage for Depression Quest lately has been from actual merits—you know, ‘she earned it’—or people she was fucking to get it?”* He argues that Quinn is (1) sleeping with reporters to generate positive coverage of her work and (2) sleeping with reporters to protect herself from negative coverage. He cites Grayson’s pieces on Quinn from *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* and *Kotaku* as proof that the sexual relationship was generating coverage for Quinn. However, he never reads from those sources. The RPS piece, as mentioned above, is just a list of fifty new games released through Greenlight. The *Kotaku* piece was about *GAME JAM*. But it seems to be the existence of these pieces, and not their tone, that infuriates MundaneMatt.

In MundaneMatt’s YouTube video, we hear his voice but we don’t see his face. The visual part of the video is a screen capture from *Depression Quest*. Quinn used that screen capture to claim to YouTube that the video violated her rights under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 (DMCA). The video was removed a day after it was posted but then restored a week later when YouTube determined that the DMCA claim was invalid.

While the video was down, and partly in response to the video’s removal, another YouTuber posted his case against Zoë Quinn in a pair of videos. Internet Aristocrat posted *Quinnspiracy Theory: The Five Guys Saga* and *Quinnspiracy Theory: The In-N-Out Burger Edition*† on August 19 and August 22, respectively. The name of the videos is based on an element from *The Zoë Post*. Reflecting on the fact that he had a list of five guys with whom Quinn had allegedly cheated, Eron Gjoni had joked that he couldn’t stop thinking of her as “burgers and fries.” Thus, Internet Aristocrat named his first video after the Five Guys burger chain and chose a second hamburger restaurant, In-N-Out Burger, for the second video. At one point in the first video, he even posted pictures of the five men in question and stepped through their links

* The video is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5CXOafuTXM>.

† The video is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TezNpsXvUoo>.

to Zoë and how those links suggested problems in the worlds of gaming and journalism.

Internet Aristocrat largely repeated the arguments put forward by MundaneMatt. In one of the videos he says, “Gaming journalism has reached a low point. . . . It started to travel off into the areas of social justice and feminism and opinion pieces, and op-eds that had nothing to do with gaming.”* In comparison to MundaneMatt, Internet Aristocrat is even more focused on using the controversy to expose problems in journalism. He uses apocalyptic language, comparing problems in gaming journalism to Watergate and saying, “We watch as the fifth estate burns in front of our eyes.” He suggests that if Quinn and Grayson had a sexual relationship, perhaps another *Kotaku* editor, Stephen Totilo, was sleeping with cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian.

In keeping with his focus on journalism, Internet Aristocrat gives more attention to Grayson than did MundaneMatt, calling Grayson “the biggest fucking issue that we’re looking at.” He discusses the same RPS and *Kotaku* articles that were mentioned by MundaneMatt, also failing to actually read from them to indicate how the articles present Quinn’s game favorably. He adds a discussion of an item he found posted on Reddit by a user named SillySlader, who was later revealed to be Matthew Rappard,† describing Quinn’s takedown of TFYC. The video is a case not only against Quinn, but also against those he considers SJWs. Perhaps his frustration is best summed up in the line: “They have ruined our hobby.” It should be noted that Internet Aristocrat has since removed his YouTube and Twitter accounts, although the videos are reproduced elsewhere, and he has functionally left GamerGate, saying that he is uncomfortable with the notoriety and with the viciousness that occurs online (The Ralph Retort 2014).

Another video released on August 19 was called *Lies, Damned Lies and the Video Game Press*, by Sargon of Akkad. Sargon was also angry about both Zoë Quinn and gaming journalism, but he targeted his attacks toward SJWs:

The fundamental problem with social justice in video games is that social justice revolves around the concept of demonizing straight white men. As

*The video is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH1052F2ZaY>.

†The connection between Rappard and SillySlader is examined in a Zoë Quinn blog post “How Not to Run Your Games Education Programs,” <http://blog.unburntwitch.com/post/103251119644/how-not-to-run-your-games-education-programs>.

you can imagine, since the video games industry was created by straight white men, this leaves social justice warriors on the outside. Or at least, it should do if blatant lying, nepotism, bigotry, and corruption hadn't overrun the video game press.*

Sargon expresses grave concerns about how SJW journalism has misconstrued the very concept of gaming. He picks apart published data that indicate women are half of all gamers by pointing to other reports that indicate men and women play very different games. High numbers of women, for example, play *Candy Crush* and *Farmville*. "No one who calls themselves a gamer plays *Farmville* or *Candy Crush*." He insists that gaming only truly refers to competitive games and that women are averse to such games because of "inherent biological differences." What does he think true gamers want? "They want to be left alone to enjoy their games and they want objective video game reviews."

On August 20 *Kotaku* spoke up about the controversy and the implied role of its employee, Nathan Grayson. The blog concluded that he never reviewed *Depression Quest* and that he had only written about Quinn in the article about *GAME_JAM*, in March, prior to the beginning of Grayson's romantic relationship with Quinn in April 2014 (Totilo 2014). The post on *Kotaku* was by editor Stephen Totilo.

ME JAYNE

We finally get to the hashtag that launched a thousand tweets: #GamerGate. That hashtag was sent in a tweet by the actor Adam Baldwin. Baldwin has 114 film, television, and video game credits to his name, according to IMDB,[†] but in nerd culture he is best known for playing Jayne Cobb on the science fiction show *Firefly*. *Firefly* had just fourteen episodes, in 2002–2003, but it acquired a huge cult following that led to a film in 2005 called *Serenity*. Baldwin's character offered a particular archetype of masculinity, despite the name Jayne, that was gruff, quiet, and resistant to change. It was a personality that suited Baldwin as well. He opposes gay marriage, is skeptical about climate change,

* The video is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAJYmrKR8WE>

† Baldwin's filmography can be found on IMDB at http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000284/?ref_=tt_cl_t5.

and is a gun enthusiast who is an occasional contributor to conservative site Breitbart. (Breitbart posted an article about GamerGate on September 1, 2014, with the headline “Feminist Bullies Tearing the Video Game Industry Apart” [Yiannopoulos 2014].) Baldwin is active on Twitter, with over 209,000 followers. That’s an increase from the 186,000 followers reported on August 28, 2014 (McNally 2014). His Twitter feed is filled with political observations and stances against gay rights and feminism.

On August 27, 2014, Baldwin tweeted links to both of Internet Aristocrat’s videos, along with the hashtag (#) GamerGate. The size of Baldwin’s Twitter audience allowed this issue to reach a much wider audience, well beyond the limits of gaming culture. Baldwin is credited with essentially breaking the story with his simple tweet.

That same day, Anita Sarkeesian received a series of violent threats on Twitter. Anita Sarkeesian is a feminist media critic who operates as a public intellectual using social media spaces like YouTube, Tumblr, and Twitter. She holds a master’s degree in social and political thought from York University in Toronto, where she graduated in 2010. In 2009, while still a student, she launched the **Feminist Frequency** project, which began as a website that offered feminist media and media criticism. Her videos have covered a range of topics in commercial popular culture, including applications of the Bechdel Test to the Academy Award nominees and feminist critiques of children’s toys. She gained significant public attention in 2012 when she began a Kickstarter campaign to pay for a series of videos called Tropes vs. Women in Video Games. Her goal was to raise \$6,000. She raised over \$150,000. The video series, and other similar series that she has released since, have been very popular, and they are often used in college classrooms. Sarkeesian has appeared on numerous media outlets, including a widely seen interview with Stephen Colbert on the *Colbert Report*. Sarkeesian had just released a new video on August 25, 2014, two days before the threats appeared.

The threats that Sarkeesian received allude to rape and murder, and they reference her home address and the address of her parents. The account was listed as Kevin Dobson (@kdobbsz), and it was a newly created account. Sarkeesian tweeted a pic of the tweets, called authorities, and fled her home. Initially the group that came to be known as GamerGate insisted that she had posted the offending tweets herself. Two months later, GamerGaters claimed to have tracked down the harasser and discovered that he was a games journalist in Brazil (Schreier 2014). The timing of the incident in conjunction with Baldwin’s tweet made GamerGate a story that superseded the series of

events surrounding Zoë Quinn. Quinn also fled her home around this same time, after receiving multiple threats of rape, violence, and murder, and she stayed away from her home for several months (Lee 2014). She spoke with the *Guardian* from England in December 2014: “What am I going to do—go home and just wait until someone makes good on their threats? I’m scared that what it’s going to take to stop this is the death of one of the women who’s been targeted” (Stuart 2014).

In September 2014 Quinn, along with several journalists and a few Internet detectives, scoured the boards of 4chan to trace back the origins of GamerGate. The findings are summarized in an article on *Ars Technica* (Johnston 2014). The boards indicate that a few posters coordinated the controversy on 4chan and used fake Twitter accounts—known as sock puppets—to generate online attention. One 4chan user, OperationDunk, congratulated the group on their success in generating media attention, saying: “It took a few days of 4–5 of us doing it but it’s taking off.” According to the discussion boards, the group planned out a new hashtag to add to the conversation: #NotYourShield. The implication was that the women they called social justice warriors were using male gamers as a shield against attacks on their own integrity. 4chan responded by producing logs of its boards, claiming that the full logs would exonerate it. Blogger David Futrelle examined the logs and came to the following conclusion:

The 4channers express their hatred and disgust towards her; they express their glee at the thought of ruining her career; they fantasize about her being raped and killed. They wonder if all the harassment will drive her to suicide, and only the thought of 4chan getting bad publicity convinces some of them that this isn’t something they should hope for. (Futrelle 2014)

One week later, on September 17, 2014, 4chan began shutting down all discussion of GamerGate. Threads in which the term was mentioned were deleted, and users who posted about it were reportedly banned from the site (Gaming Admiral 2014).

8CHAN

The next major event in the GamerGate saga occurred in October, when indie game developer Brianna Wu tweeted pics of a meme that someone had sent her. The meme—of the sort often found at memegenerator.com—pictures a

little boy who seems angry and close to tearing his hair out. Text appearing above and below his head uses tweets from Wu to present a series of jokes about GamerGaters:

- Above: GamerGate is not
Below: About oppressing women
- Above: This is about corruption
Below: Tweets 500 things attacking women
- Above: Says “go start your own game studio”
Below: To a woman who owns a game studio
- Above: Lectures women on how to respond
Below: To the problems he causes
- Above: Fighting an apocalyptic future
Below: Where women are 8% of programmers, and not 3%
- Above: Bases entire identity in video games
Below: Feels like a badass (Scimeca 2014)

Wu tweeted out the meme on October 9, 2014, at 2:39 p.m. Immediately GamerGaters took the meme and flipped the script, prompting Wu to send a new tweet at 6:44 p.m. that read: “A fan made a meme of 6 of my Tweets. #Gamergate spent day filling it with 36 pages of garbage.”* The new variants of the meme were created by users of **8chan**, an offshoot and competitor to 4chan. When 4chan had banned conversations about GamerGate in September, many users simply migrated to 8chan, because 8chan promised not to impose any rules other than the law. Child pornography is banned on 8chan, but not much else. The quick response from GamerGaters to Wu’s tweeted meme was, at that point, all fun and games.

By the next evening, it was a different story. A newly created Twitter account called Death to Brianna (@chatterwhiteman) sent a series of threatening messages directed to Wu’s Twitter account @spacekatgal. Some highlights:

- “@spacekatgal Guess what bitch? I know where you live. You and Frank live at.”
- “@spacekatgal I’m going to rape your filthy ass until you bleed, then choke you to death with your husband’s tiny Asian penis.”

*The tweet can be seen at <https://twitter.com/Spacekatgal/status/520344200249090048>.

- “@spacekatgal If you have any kids, they’re going to die too. I don’t give a fuck. They’ll grow up to be feminists anyway.”

At 8:57 p.m. on the night of October 10 Brianna Wu tweeted an image of the tweets from Death to Brianna, with the message: “The police just came by. Husband and I are going somewhere safe. Remember, #gamergate isn’t about attacking women” (Scimeca 2014). Death to Brianna was shut down by Twitter.

Wu’s story was the basis of an episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* that aired on February 11, 2015. The episode was called “Intimidation Game.” In an essay on Bustle just before the episode premiered, Wu described how the intimidation she felt from a long series of threats had impacted her career. “The reality is, this circus has sucked every bit of joy from a career I once felt destined for. . . . There’s not a single day I don’t ask myself why I’m here” (Wu 2015). Since the initial threats came in October 2014, Wu has received over forty more threats and has reported all of them to the police.

OPEN CARRY

Just days after the threats against Brianna Wu, a new threat was made against Anita Sarkeesian. She was scheduled to speak about women in video games at Utah State University on October 15, 2014. The school received three different threats in the days leading up to the event. One threat, received on October 13, promised that unless the talk was canceled there would be a “Montreal Massacre-style attack,” referencing the 1989 tragedy when Marc Lepine killed fourteen women under the banner of “fighting feminism” (Hern 2014). A second threat, received on October 14, claimed affiliation with GamerGate. Then a third threat came in that claimed to be from a USU student, saying:

Anita Sarkeesian is everything wrong with the feminist woman, and she is going to die screaming like the craven little whore that she is if you let her come to USU. I will write my manifesto in her spilled blood, and you will all bear witness to what feminist lies and poison have done to the men of America. (Quoted in Alberty 2014)

Since the threats promised violence, and one of them mentioned guns and pipe bombs, Sarkeesian asked for metal detectors at the talk. The school refused, saying that Utah’s open carry laws prohibited them from removing

any weapons they might find. An additional Utah law restricts schools from banning weapons. Sarkeesian says that she could not guarantee the safety of her audience, so she canceled the talk.

THE END OF GAMING

The FBI confirmed in December 2014 that it was investigating GamerGate and the threats that have been associated with it (Rogers 2014). So far (2016), there have been no arrests related to the threats against Quinn, Wu, or Sarkeesian.

According to some, the beginning of GamerGate was the end of gaming as we know it. The GamerGate wiki page, which is clearly maintained by GamerGaters, provides a list of ten articles and blog posts that declare the death of gaming.* On Gamasutra, Leigh Alexander stated: “Gamer’ isn’t just a dated demographic label that most people increasingly prefer not to use. Gamers are over. That’s why they’re so mad” (Alexander 2014). Also on Gamasutra, Devin Wilson offered what he called a “Guide to ending gamers” (Wilson 2014). He presented a series of eighteen steps that gamers can take to transform the gaming culture, including more self-reflection about the games they play, and ending with “we all grow up.” *Kotaku* predicted that GamerGate would be the end of the gamer identity (Plunkett 2014). Other articles raised grave concerns about the subculture of male gamers (Chu 2014).

Of course gaming has not ended. Mainstream commercial games are just as successful as ever. Indie gaming persists as well. GamerGate may not have transformed the gaming journalism culture as GamerGaters had hoped, and it may not have eradicated misogyny from gaming culture the way that feminist critics may have wished. But it has brought mainstream media attention to gaming culture and has helped to renew attention to gender disparities across cultural genres. The world of gaming is now heavily intertwined with the anonymous world of social media and the Internet. That has created a culture in both places that is rampant with bullying and threats—an upsetting but logical result of the culture of anonymity. Anonymity, like the hacktivist group Anonymous, can be powerful and can effect change that might not otherwise happen. But it is difficult to hold accountable.

* This site has been removed. An archive of the page can be found at <https://web.archive.org/web/20150310043424/http://wiki.gamergate.me/index.php?title=Timeline>. The list of articles is under the entry for “28 Aug 2014.”

Jennifer Allaway, now a graduate of Willamette University, conducted a study of gender issues in gaming as part of a funded undergraduate research project. She interviewed 34 games professionals and conducted a survey of 344 respondents. She then began a new project, using an online survey method, studying the role of diversity in game development. In a post on Jezebel from October 13, 2014, she said she was close to completing her data collection when GamerGate caught wind of it (Allaway 2014). She received an e-mail on September 25 warning her that she had been targeted for “vote-brigading,” which is a coordinated attack of something posted on social media to get it voted down or taken down. One discussion I found of the practice described it as “the Reddit form of a lynch mob.”* In Allaway’s case, vote brigading resulted in a lot of fake survey responses. She explained: “In under four hours, the developer survey jumped from around 700 responses, which had been collected over the course of a month, to over 1100 responses. The responses . . . ranged in their degree of racism and misogyny, but they all ridiculed the project with dishonest mockery” (Allaway 2014). The new surveys that she collected were filled with phrases like “suck my dick” and “kill yourself.” Allaway concludes that GamerGate is a hate group, with Eron Gjoni as its initial leader, a series of recruitment practices online, propaganda tools that include YouTube videos and memes, and a practice of dehumanizing its victims.

Erik Kain, a gaming blogger for *Forbes*, has argued that GamerGate is not a hate group, but rather a consumer movement. He credited GamerGaters with organizing a revolt against a deeply unsatisfying marketplace by loyal consumers who deserve better. GamerGate, he argued, is “the natural outcropping of upset consumers who have long been at odds with the video game media” (Kain 2014). Is GamerGate a hate group, or a consumer movement? Can it be both?

Turning the lens from GamerGaters to feminist critics of the gaming industry, how do we make sense of the women who embrace a gamer identity while also challenging what that identity means? Do the women who make and play indie games like *Depression Quest* also participate in what GamerGaters call hardcore point and shoot games? If these women are part of gamer culture, what are the common threads across that culture? How does feminist

* This comment was found in a Reddit discussion board retrieved June 28, 2015, at http://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/24d8cj/whats_vote_brigading_and_why_is_it_illegal/.

participation in the gaming industry transform the practice of feminism? Can games be a useful tool for addressing questions of inequality?

CONCLUSION

This case study has shifted our focus from resistance identities to project identities, to use the language of Manuel Castells that I discussed in [chapter 1](#). Resistance identities, like those found in queer social media celebrities and the disability activists who critiqued the disability/miracle meme, are focused on defending individuals and groups against the oppressive impacts of hegemonic structures that privilege what Castells refers to as legitimizing identities: those that benefit most from the matrix of domination and oppression. Project identities do more than defend, they transform—or they at least seek social transformation.

In this case study we have at least one project identity at work, and perhaps two. The women who are leading the charge in both critiquing existing video games and creating new ones are seeking to transform the way that gender works within the field of video games—in terms of who makes video games, who plays them, and what the content and characters look like. These women are using art as a tool of social change, from the video games they design to the videos that Anita Sarkeesian has produced to give her audience new tools for thinking about women in video games. They are also using social media as one of their sets of artistic tools, including blogs, Twitter, and YouTube.

Are GamerGaters enacting a project identity or a legitimizing identity? That is a tricky question. On the one hand, many GamerGaters appear to be unemployed or underemployed, presumably living in their parents' basements, if Wizardchan is an accurate reflection of the movement. That would lead me to conclude that GamerGaters are part of a project identity seeking to transform the gaming field in exactly the opposite direction to that sought by the women game developers and game critics. On the other hand, GamerGate has been partially led by the successful actor Adam Baldwin, and the flames have been fanned by journalists at Breitbart. That leads me to believe that GamerGaters are actually just a backlash seeking to shore up the dominance of legitimizing identities, particularly of straight white men.

Are GamerGaters artists? They have generated a tremendous amount of creative, if also destructive, content online in the form of YouTube videos, tweets, memes, and much more. Their discussions on Reddit, 4chan, 8chan,

and Wizardchan constitute a kind of creative support group that generates energy and ideas for the project.

For both groups, social media has been incredibly effective as a creative and political tool. Social media has allowed Anita Sarkeesian to reach a massive audience with her work. Although she chose a path away from academia, toward a more public form of scholarship, her work is widely used in college classrooms. Her ideas are widely discussed, and she is likely a major influence on a new generation of gamers and game developers. Social media has allowed a seemingly ragtag assortment of male gamers to organize and fight back against feminist influences in gaming. And sadly, it has worked, in the sense that some women have left gaming entirely as a result of GamerGate. But social media has also been a very powerful tool for those who have fought back against GamerGate, and it has enabled them to expose the movement for the backlash that it is.