

## **Serious games & GamerGate: The myth of an online egalitarian utopia**

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Online socialisation is ubiquitous in daily life. This socialisation has the potential to reproduce or challenge offline inequalities. Gender inequality is one facet of offline socialisation that is transferred online. Using the recent GamerGate phenomenon, this paper examines online gender inequality, harassment, and agency through a feminist lens. GamerGate emerged online through blogs, with social media such as twitter providing evidence that dominant, aggressive male privilege manifests online, while simultaneously providing women the space to exercise agency and collectively resist. This paper explores GamerGate in relation to wider gender inequality and harassment online as well as the importance of online social interactions for feminist activism and collective identity. GamerGate showcases male dominance online and the ways women employ feminism to collectively resist harassment and support each other in the face of inequality.

Keywords: Feminism, GamerGate, Digital Anthropology, Gender Inequality

Gender inequality exists in many arenas of life and as our lives move increasingly online, so does this inequality. The virtual world is very much a part of our world and should not be thought of as separate to everyday life (van Deursen, van Dijk, & ten Klooster, 2015). The ubiquity of the Internet has made significant changes to everyday lives and sociality (Armentor-Cota, 2011). Although cyberspace inspired futuristic ideals of egalitarianism, this has proven not to be the case (Postmes & Spears, 2002). The vast nature of the Internet has the possibility to expand current knowledge and broaden discussions to include equal representation in online media, however this potential has not been realised (Mateos de Cabo, Gimeno, Martínez, & López, 2014). Women continue to be underrepresented across many forms of media. The Internet continues to perpetuate stereotypes of women, despite their commanding presence online (Mateos de Cabo et al., 2014; van Deursen et al., 2015). Gender inequality is present in not only the representations of women online, but media perceptions, characters and stereotypes, as well as direct harassment and abuse (Ševčíková & Daneback, 2014; van Deursen et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2015). This paper explores gender inequality online through the example of GamerGate, and discusses feminist collective agency in response to online harassment.

Recent online discussions about the prevalence of misogyny in the video gaming world, prompted by GamerGate, highlight unequal power relations online. GamerGate began in August 2014 when female independent video game developer, Zoe Quinn, launched a new game. She was publicly slandered by an ex-boyfriend who accused Quinn of exchanging sex with games journalist Nathan Grayson for a good review (Iverson, 2014). This accusation encouraged other male gamers to attack Quinn for her view that females should be better represented in video games. Vicious threats spread to the social networking site Twitter, and male gamers attacked Quinn with misogynistic slurs using anonymous and pseudonymous accounts. Quinn was attacked through a variety of online forums and social media sites including Twitter, 4Chan and Reddit (Nott, 2014). The threats escalated and Quinn was forced to leave her home under police protection when her street address was leaked and male gamers online threatened to rape her (Gleeson, 2014; Iverson, 2014; Nott, 2014).

Soon after Quinn began to receive threats online, she was publicly supported by Anita Sarkeesian, a female gamer, popular culture critic, blogger, and feminist. Sarkeesian published a YouTube video as the third instalment of her web series “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” which discusses the rarity of female protagonists in games. The harassment then focused on Sarkeesian and her feminist perspective of gaming culture, which she has voiced openly since starting the blog ‘Feminist Frequency’ in 2009 (Sarkeesian, 2015). Sarkeesian actively uses her blog, social media, and offline activism through attending protests and hosting lectures to resist patriarchal opinions in video game culture (Nott, 2014). Women supporting Sarkeesian and Quinn resisted the misogyny present in GamerGate on Twitter in an attempt to reclaim video games as a safe space for women. This is a direct example of female gamers and feminists exercising collective agency online to resist the oppressive force of the patriarchy.

### **Agency and Serious Games**

Agency theory can help understand both forms of oppression and resistance. Agency can be understood as both agency as resistance and agency as power (Ortner, 2006). Agency theory is useful in understanding gender inequalities in relation to the ways in which people and groups display their resistance to online harassment. Male hegemony operates from a position of power but is never total; there will always be resistance that exists outside of the dominant power structure (Ortner, 1989). Societies and cultures are not static and inequalities can be challenged (Ortner, 1989, p. 46). Ortner’s (2006) serious games theory is useful in understanding agency as cultural projects, or games, and how playing the game might reproduce or transform inequalities. Projects that were enacted by women in support of Quinn and Sarkeesian helped to transform the gender inequalities present in online gaming culture and resist male dominance (Nott, 2014).

### **No Girls Allowed: Gender Inequality Online**

Social categories such as gender organise people into certain identities and behaviours, which creates inequality. From a young age boys are conditioned to enjoy video games and although girls are not necessarily discouraged, gaming is still perceived as a masculine pursuit (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee, 2009). This perception is in fact no longer true, as 40-43% of all gamers identify as female (Eden, Maloney, & Bowman, 2010; Williams et al., 2009). Further evidence states that the largest demographic of gamers are adult women (Romano, 2014). In spite of girls’ large presence in gaming culture, gender inequality remains. Across various online pursuits it is clear that technology is still perceived to be a men’s only club.

Participation online can be an indicator of existing inequalities offline. In offline socialisation men tend to dominate conversations and can exercise this dominance by talking over the top of women (Armentor-Cota, 2011). These patterns translate online where men practice hegemonic masculinity through jokes and insults about women thereby controlling online communication

and reinforcing gender inequality (Armentor-Cota, 2011; Tilly, 2001). Online male dominance mirrors offline communication where males can speak authoritatively, sometimes limiting the input of their female peers (Bostock & Lizhi, 2010). Male dominance is expressed in online chat rooms through an autonomous writing style that consists of directive, confident and reactive statements (Baron, 2004; Postmes & Spears, 2002). Although these defamations are regularly met with resistance, initial optimism about egalitarian socialisation online has conceded to the reciprocation of offline gender inequalities as evidenced by the aggressively patriarchal dominance of the GamerGate online harassment (Baron, 2004; Ortner, 2006).

Opportunity hoarding is one element of unequal relations, which is evident online through the marginalisation of women and dominance of men (Tilly, 2001). Opportunity hoarding occurs when a dominant group controls the use of a resource, for example online communications, and prevents the lesser group from participating or contributing equally (Tilly, 2001). This does not require a conscious effort by men who are the dominant group, but it means the women who are restricted must actively resist this dominance and fight for their stake in opportunities online. GamerGate highlights how men hoard access to video games and online communication media, by dominating conversations and using threats to silence and exclude women. Ortner (2006) studied Grimm's fairy tales and argues that women are punished for exercising their agency as protagonists. Similarly women enacting agency and showing support for Sarkeesian and Quinn on Twitter were also punished for exercising their agency. In response to women pursuing collective agency online men reacted from their position of power and dominated the opinions of women in order to preserve some masculine notion of video gaming culture. The asymmetrical relationship between men and women ensured that whilst women enacted agency, there were ramifications for their actions.

### **Consequences of Online Anonymity**

One major shift social media affords is the possibility of anonymity or pseudonymity. This can influence gender fluidity and allow people to invert asymmetrical relations (Armentor-Cota, 2011). Pseudonyms are used online to compartmentalise identity and shift attention away from or towards a facet of identity. By gender swapping (male to female or female to male) online, people are able to invert their social position and experiment with identity. Armentor-Cota (2011) found that women frequently gender swapped their identity online to avoid harassment from men. This could be an effort to establish equality and invert their lesser social position as women. Where women are seen to gender swap and use pseudonyms to avoid harassment, men use these same tactics to harass women (Bodle, 2013). The Internet has allowed people to socialise anonymously more easily than ever before and this anonymity has been linked to online harassment (Bodle, 2013). The threats made to women during GamerGate were mainly from men using anonymous or pseudonymous accounts, which allowed them to remain private and in control. In contrast, men exploited women's identities online and used their position of power to leak women's personal information, robbing women of their anonymity and power (Tilly, 2001).

The opportunity for anonymity online can encourage people to believe there are fewer offline consequences for their actions. Pseudonymous and anonymous accounts allow people to participate online without any attachment to their offline, identifiable self which leads to depersonalisation (Postmes & Spears, 2002). Depersonalisation occurs online when anonymous identities reproduce stereotypic behaviour and reinforce existing inequalities (Williams et al., 2009). Lack of accountability can foster criminal behaviour online, as well as instances of deceptive self-presentation (Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Larsson, Svensson, & de Kaminski, 2012). In contrast, Bodle (2013) argues that anonymity and pseudonymity encourage honesty, which can be a positive attribute of online communication. At the same time this suggests that online harassment and abuse is an honest representation of peoples' motives and feelings.

Gender inequality online is linked to instances of anonymity and pseudonymity where commenters harassed and insulted women, threatening to release their personal information (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Defamation lawsuits are slowly helping to shape an online world where there is no legal protection for anonymous defendants (Bodle, 2013). Certain cases have set a precedent for online communication laws which could see the Internet being more heavily monitored in the name of protection and online communication more restricted (Bodle, 2013). The structure of online anonymity and multifaceted identity presentation may change due to legal reforms, but there is disagreement over whether this will encourage civility or not.

These legal changes have the potential to negatively affect those who use online anonymity for positive reasons. In opposition to the argument that anonymous online socialisation reproduces inequality, many argue that there are also outstanding benefits (Armentor-Cota, 2011; Bodle, 2013; van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). There is evidence that marginalised groups use online communities to discreetly discuss their identity, for example, people who wish to explore their sexuality but cannot be open and honest offline for fear of persecution (Bodle, 2013). Also professionals such as teachers might be interested in having both a public online profile and a private one (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). The advantages of anonymous identities here lie in their invisibility, and confidentiality which encourages users to be honest and seek out information without judgement (Nimrod, 2012).

### **Hashtags and Harassment**

The GamerGate hashtag acted as a uniting force: for males' misogynistic attacks on females; and for women who enacted their agency in order to resist male dominance and harassment on Twitter (Ortner, 2006; Saggese, 2015). The misogyny of gaming culture online is made public through GamerGate and the ensuing events. Women like Sarkeesian, who publicly voiced their support for equal representation in video games, were harassed online. Another female video game developer, Brianna Wu, tweeted about GamerGate, supporting Quinn and Sarkeesian's feminist perspectives and was also sent rape and death threats (Nott, 2014). Journalist for *The Guardian*, Jenn Frank, published an article about the events of GamerGate and was harassed so severely she chose to resign from her position (Backe, 2014). These women are representative of the many more who actively resisted misogyny online. Quinn, Sarkeesian, Wu, Frank, and the countless other women who enjoy video games should be allowed as much a claim in the production and consumption of gaming as any other fan (Backe, 2014). The few males who tweeted support for Quinn, most of whom are celebrities or famous public figures, did not receive harassment to the same scale as any of the women associated with GamerGate. William Gibson, an author, and Joss Whedon, a director, came to the defence of women on Twitter but were not harassed for their views (Backe, 2014). This provides compelling evidence of the misogyny of male gamers who were willing to viciously attack any woman who believed that gaming should be a safe space, but would barely pay attention to men who advocated for the same idea (Backe, 2014; Nott, 2014). GamerGate drew international attention to the misogyny present in gaming culture, trending on Twitter and Facebook, and being written about by gamers and feminists alike. It also managed to pervade news channels and popular culture. A recent (2015) episode of the television show 'Law & Order' called 'Intimidation Game' paralleled the GamerGate phenomenon to advocate against misogyny in gaming culture and showcase the extremism of the threats made to women online (Rosenberg, 2015). The episode follows a female video game developer, like Quinn, who was harassed online. The narrative privileges her perspective and highlights the lack of legislation in relation to online forms of socialisation (Rosenberg, 2015). The attention in mainstream media has shed light on feminist issues such as equal representation in video gaming and put the misogyny present in the backlash against Sarkeesian and Quinn on display.

In October 2014 the GamerGate phenomenon reached a peak when Sarkeesian was forced to leave her house under police protection and cancel a speaking event at Utah State University. This was the result of anonymous and pseudonymous accounts on Twitter that promised to attend the event and stage the largest school shooting in American history, threatening to kill her and the entire audience (Gleeson, 2014; Iverson, 2014; Nott, 2014). These male gamers displayed an extreme position of misogyny and potential physical violence, which starkly contrasts Sarkeesian's and Quinn's position of advocating for diverse female representation in video games. Male gamers not only leaked personal information of women who supported a feminist perspective on gaming but also accused women online of destroying gaming culture and not being "real gamers" (Iverson, 2014). This highlights another issue of a perceived 'purity' in gaming which has led male gamers to believe they have the right and responsibility to protect games from female input. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of May 2015 Twitter erupted into another series of misogynistic attacks against women in gaming (Wilson, 2015). EA Games launched the latest instalment of their popular soccer video game, FIFA 16, with the option to have women players for the first time and the Guardian published an article, which they posted to Twitter (The Guardian, 2015). This tweet attracted attention from male gamers who claimed the introduction of female avatars had ruined the game, blaming feminists for what they saw as an unwelcome intrusion into their world. Male gamers refused to relinquish any of their power within the gaming community and instead renounced the game, re-establishing their dominance.

### **Serious Games**

In the wake of GamerGate, female gamers are fighting back for their rightful stake in the production and consumption of video games. Serious games theory can be applied to gaming culture where female gamers exercise agency to resist traditional, patriarchal notions of gaming (Ortner, 2006). Nott (2014) reflects on an important point of the misogyny present in online gaming:

Gaming culture, where women are consistently degraded and pitted against one another for legitimacy or men's attention, is no different to how women are treated in society as a whole (Nott, 2014, p. 1).

Examples of women playing serious games include the use of talks, interviews and other public avenues to promote education around gaming culture and showcase women in gaming. Web series, like Sarkeesian's, are another popular method of using online media outlets to attract attention to women's input in gaming culture. At Forbes' "Under 30 Summit", Monika Lewinsky spoke about online misogyny and instances of slander, nominating herself "patient zero", and advocating for women to fight back against harassment through the media (Carver, 2014). Online avenues such as blogs and social media are important for building solidarity between female gamers and organising resistance against attacks like those carried out in the name of GamerGate. As women currently represent just under half of the video gaming community, the traditional identities and practices of gamers are being questioned (Nott, 2014). Although video games are still predominantly created by men for male consumers, female creators, like Quinn and Wu, are using online means to achieve their goals and make themselves known in the face of everyday harassment (Zhang, 2013).

Gaming culture has created a toxic ideology where female harassment is expected and male gamers believe that feminists are trying to take video games away from them (Carver, 2014). In reality, women are enacting agency to carve out a safe space in a community where they are constantly abused by men (Tilly, 2001). Women's resistance to the harassment during GamerGate consisted mainly of tweeting online support and blogging. Within the culture of video gaming women's desires to enact such projects stem from structural inequalities and male dominance both online and offline (Ortner, 2006).

It is clear that gender inequalities and biases exist online as they do offline. This is linked to an ability to use the Internet anonymously or under a pseudonym, and a general feeling of freedom and social distance that comes with computer mediated communication. When people use the Internet anonymously without fear of offline consequences, they reproduce existing inequalities (Tilly, 2001). In the case of GamerGate, anonymous identities were used to exploit and threaten women, resulting in online and offline consequences. GamerGate is a site in the serious game that pits the dominant hegemonic patriarchy against feminist collective agency (Ortner, 2006; Tilly, 2001). Female gamers used their collective agency to enact resistance on Twitter, hosting lectures to educate others, publishing blogs and web series, and appearing in mainstream media to speak publicly about the issue, in order to reclaim women's space in gaming culture.

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