

GamerGate As Metagaming

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GamerGaters were correct in their assessment of gaming culture and the games industry precisely because of the conspiracy theoretical nature of their campaign.

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GamerGate was a “swarm” (Mortensen, 2018, p. 793)^[1] harassment campaign against journalists, academics and content producers, perceived by GamerGaters as being conspirators in a culture war against games. It was a highly novel phenomenon in that it mainstreamed the use of knowledge projects as a channel of decentralised stalking. Following Boluk & Lemieux’s (2017)^[2] argument that GamerGate was a reactionary metagame, I argue that GamerGaters were correct in their assessment of gaming culture and the games industry precisely because of the conspiracy theoretical nature of their campaign.

Decentralised stalking behaviour is more typical of small, hyperspecific subcultures or spontaneous and short-lived witch hunts around some galvanising issue or news event. They tend to be inherently restricted in scope and do not last very long unless the target achieves (anti)celebrity status of some sort. GamerGate began the same way, with a witch hunt for a game developer who purportedly traded sexual favours for reviews from journalists. Additional dimensions such as free speech, journalistic integrity, and political factionalism emerged as both the movement and the list of harassment targets grew in size (Keogh, 2014).^[3]

GamerGate’s targets were selected based on their fit within a conspiracy theory about the games industry being overtaken by “Social Justice Warrior” infiltrators. This was despite the fact that most participants in GamerGate (ostensibly) did not believe in the culture war conspiracy. The extremists, seemingly,

exercised an outsized influence over the direction of the swarm. Mortensen (2018)^[1] argues that extremists have disproportionate influence over “tempocratic” environments, which are “controlled by those who have the most patience and time, strongest dedication to their own opinions, and most ruthless ways to silence their opponents.” (Mortensen, 2018, p. 795).^[1] Inasmuch as the marginalisation of gaming motivated a pre-existing sense of persecution among gamers (Chess & Shaw, 2015, pp. 216-217),^[4] GamerGate made the crucial move of both identifying and constituting the metagame. The metagame, as characterised by GamerGate, was the struggle for control over the tempocracy of culture and politics within gaming. Anita Sarkeesian’s “Tropes vs Women in Videogames” series was identified as a paradigmatic example of “meta game” by proto-GamerGaters (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017, p. 278),^[2] and the underlying logic was extrapolated through the development of the GamerGate metagame.

Journalists, academics, GamerGaters, and political activists all share the same experience of operating within tempocracies. Journalists chase seasonal and sporadic news cycles and events; academics must publish or perish; GamerGaters are highly literate users of ephemeral platforms; political activists specialise in building social momentum behind a political cause. It was natural for gamers and channers to recognise the tempocratic pattern of metagameplay in the world of journalism and academia; it was the same metagame they were used to playing themselves. The controversy that resulted from this recognition was twofold: first, cultural criticism of gamer culture was, accurately, interpreted to be an accusation of gamers as playing unfair metagames which make them complicit in social injustice in games and the games industry; second, such criticism was, also accurately, interpreted as part of a metagame played for control over gaming. Yet, “the standard metagame is an anti-metagaming metagame” which “disavows its own existence” (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017, p. 281).^[2] The self-consciously deconstructionist interventions by academics and cultural critics stand in stark contrast against GamerGate’s insistent denial of the same: within GamerGate, the charge of metagaming was reserved for the social justice warrior antagonists “making everything political”, introducing metagames where there were none, even as GamerGate meticulously and deliberately employed metagaming strategies.

Anonymity and fluid membership criteria allowed GamerGate to tactically embrace or disavow a broad range of participants and their actions. In tempocracies, credit and culpability are diluted through functional anonymity. The identity of the author is obfuscated either via platform design or lost in transmission as posts are reposted without context. Dedicated participants can exert outsized influence over the collective self-image of the tempocratic space by laundering their messages through these

anonymising processes. Mortensen points out that “the swarm logic of GG allowed all participants to determine their own motivation. It was near impossible to keep track of the individual opinions.” (2018, p. 793).^[1] The ephemerality of content and context that characterises tempocracies extend also to identity; users with stable identities were inherently disadvantaged in this conflict.

Chess and Shaw suggest that the “opacity and inscrutability” of academia helped “breed conspiracy and mistrust”, and that GamerGate bears resemblance to “counterknowledge”, which act “as a means for oppressed people to articulate fears that stem from cycles of persecution” (Chess & Shaw, 2015, pp. 214-215).^[4] Yet, opacity and inscrutability are not inherently negative traits for a platform and can be useful, such as by enabling anonymity, gatekeeping against low literacy users, or encouraging free exchange (Mortensen, 2018, pp. 794-797).^[1] Furthermore, the logic of tempocracies is not of true anonymity but of functional anonymity. Attention and engagement keep issues and identities afloat; transparency and anonymity do not sufficiently counter tempocratic obscurity, because anonymity and inaccessibility of information are not necessary conditions for tempocratic obscurity. The notion that a more accessible academe and better education for the layman would solve the problem of sociopolitical metagaming is wishful thinking too typical of academics. It takes for granted the primacy of the academic epistemology, which entails the conclusion that playing the same game better must be the solution. Yet, this is precisely the same “ideological avatar of play” (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017, ch. 1)^[2] which blinds GamerGaters to the metaludic nature of the anti-metagame metagame. As GamerGate made clear, the players in the current version of the game of gaming culture and industry cannot escape the metagame by playing the game as it was intended to be played. The games industry is complicit with maladaptive yet profitable metagames. New games and new metagames must be designed to replace it with something better.

Bibliography

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