

ISSUE NO. 2

Introduction: Feminist Game Studies

Nina Huntemann

Just over a year ago, **Anita Sarkeesian launched a Kickstarter campaign** (<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/566429325/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games>) to fund a video project exploring the representation of women in digital games. When the funding campaign for her project “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” began, Sarkeesian was already an established feminist media critic. Her videos touched upon a range of subjects, from liquor ads to BitTorrent, from LEGOs to Kanye West. Her **YouTube channel** (<http://www.youtube.com/user/feministfrequency>) had thousands of subscribers, and those of us who teach media and gender studies often turned to Sarkeesian’s short, witty, and accessible video essays for classroom examples of media literacy in action. My students were inspired by her work to make videos of their own.

Following a six-part series she created for *Bitch* magazine examining gender tropes in film, television, and comics, Sarkeesian turned to video games, and made an appeal to her subscribers and followers for capital support for her work. The now-infamous online harassment that Sarkeesian faced from thousands of anonymous abusers in response to her Kickstarter campaign was shocking in its intensity, but not at all surprising. In a space where sexism and homophobia is performed and reproduced as if it is part of the digital code, feminist attention to video games and game culture is threatening. Those who wield gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and other forms of social power in order to intimidate, silence, and oppress others will fiercely reject a feminist lens focused on the cultural products that serve as platforms for that oppression. The mere suggestion that these cultural products are not the domains of white, heterosexual men unleashes a torrent of vicious border policing.

So Sarkeesian, and many others before her who had far less social support, faced a predictable backlash. But what was new in 2012 was the vocal, public response to the backlash, and increased visibility to the issues that the backlash elevated. For Sarkeesian, the visibility led to a massive outpouring of financial support. “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” was funded more than 25 times over the initial \$6000 ask and has expanded into a 13-part series. For the world of games generally, the public response to the backlash highlighted that the work feminists and their allies have been doing since the first quarter fell into Ms. Pac-Man is needed now more than ever.

In the inaugural issue of this journal, **Mia Consalvo challenged feminist media studies scholars** (<https://adanewmedia.org/2012/11/issue1-consalvo/>) to confront toxic gamer culture, like that faced by Sarkeesian, through our research, by documenting, archiving, analyzing, and responding to sexism, racism, ageism, and homophobia in games and game spaces. I am thrilled to serve as editor of the second issue of *Ada* focused on feminist games studies. This issue features six original articles that, in unique and methodologically diverse ways, respond to Consalvo's challenge.

In the lead article, Adrienne Shaw asks a question fundamental to game studies: "What is a gamer?" The answer, Shaw explains, is often described in relation to how the video game industry constructs the audience for games and thus is wrapped up in marketing logics that do not reflect the gaming experiences of women and other marginalized players. Drawing upon feminist and queer theory, Shaw contends that understanding players' complex relationships to games must reject 'we game too' arguments intended to change how the industry speaks to and makes games for its perceived audience. Instead, she calls for taking stock of how people play games — or chose not to play games — in relation to their everyday lives in order to draw an inclusive picture of gaming as a lived experience regardless of who claims the "gamer" identity.

Aubrey Anable's analysis of time management games, like *Diner Dash*, contests the popular notion that casual games are frivolous pastimes played between work tasks. She traces the emotional value that these games provide players, and argues that, like the female "complaint genre" described by Lauren Berlant, time management casual games highlight the disappointments of 21st century work culture. Anable's application of affective labor also demonstrates a conceptual bridge between computational and representational frameworks, opening a space for more nuanced understandings of the cultural meaning of games.

Continuing the discussion about casual games, John Vanderhoef follows the gendered discourse circulated by journalists, developers, and marketers that marks casual games as feminine. While the genre boundaries around so-called casual games are not well defined by the industry or players, Vanderhoef illustrates how the gendered characterization of casual games, Nintendo Wii games in particular, powerfully legitimizes the reactionary assault by some hardcore gamers to any alternative to heteronormative, masculine gamer culture.

Jordan Youngblood provides a deep read of queer-coded characters in *Persona 4* in order to explore the possibilities for transgressing heteronormativity in game narratives. His intervention pulls Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric and Judith Butler's ideas about gender performativity into conversation, proposing new theoretical ground for assessing the transformative potential of virtual identities.

Kishonna Gray delivers a valuable account of the activities of marginalized Xbox Live players who use the online game space to create organizational and/or resistance activities to racist, sexist, and homophobic play. Gray is not interested in the efficacy of these tactics for changing game spaces universally – though that may be a hopeful outcome – but instead considers these virtual actions as strategies akin to those enacted by marginalized communities who must navigate racial profiling and misogyny in the physical world.

The final piece by Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon frames the online conversations about gender-focused events in gamer culture – such as the Sarkeesian Kickstarter campaign and the sexual assault narrative in the latest *Tomb Raider* title – into what they call “post-play narrative modding.” The authors propose that the talk produced around these events can alter the ways in which players read the meanings of games. Along with industrial discourses (marketing, game journalism, reviews, etc.) and dominant player discourses, Layne and Blackmon call for feminists to “becom(e) part of the discourse of gaming” and thus influence how players and non-players experience game culture.

This call by Layne and Blackmon reflects the conversational goals of Ada outlined by **Kim Sawchuck and Carol Stabile in the first issue introduction**

(<https://adanewmedia.org/2012/11/issue1-stabile/>), and certainly echoes the ambition I have for this themed issue. The Fembot Collective is a project that aims to bridge disciplines and institutions, and challenge traditional, closed publication structures. I invite you in this open, multimodal space to engage with the second issue authors and generate productive, progressive feminist discourses about games and game studies.

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The second issue of *Ada: Journal of Gender, New Media and Technology* is the first to employ a multi-level open peer review process that is central to the aims of the publication. The initiation of this process required time, patience and commitment that was voluntarily donated by many already busy people. As editor of this issue, I am

deeply grateful for the assistance, guidance and leadership provided by Carol Stabile, Radhika Gajjala, Bryce Peake, and Karen Estlund. At the Fembot Collective unconference in February hosted by the University of Oregon, generous attendees participated in a workshop review session of the issue articles and continued to contribute their thoughtful comments online. And finally, the **Fembot Advisory Board** (<https://adanewmedia.org/about/>) provided me with invaluable support, clarity and confidence during this exciting endeavor. Thank you to all.

—CITATION—

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2 THOUGHTS ON “INTRODUCTION: FEMINIST GAME STUDIES”

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