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Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars

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With increasing frequency the ugliness of gamer culture is being put on display for the wider world to see. While I was writing this piece, for example, a Canadian blogger created a game where one can punch and bruise the face of Anita Sarkeesian, creator of the popular website *Feminist Frequency: Conversations with Pop Culture* (Spurr, 2012). The game was in response to news of her Kickstarter campaign, where she proposed investigating portrayals of women in videogames over the past few decades. The game was only the latest in a string of attacks on Sarkeesian for her proposed project: she also received death threats, had her Wikipedia page defaced with pornographic imagery, and was repeatedly harassed on the Kickstarter page and elsewhere. About a month prior to that, in June 2012 a controversy erupted about Lara Croft's alleged past in the latest *Tomb Raider* game, where sexual assault had helped form her character according to one of the game's developers (Schreier, 2012). In May, the annual videogame expo E3 became the topic of controversy when multiple sources declared it a space hostile to women and juvenile in its approach to games (Alexander, 2012; Williams, 2012). Brenda Brathwaite tweeted while at the event about feeling harassed simply by walking the show floor, and games journalist Katie Williams related stories of industry PR reps that immediately discounted her ability to play their games, saying to her "I think I better play it for you," and then "prying my hands away and turning the keyboard towards himself" (Williams, 2012).

And we can keep going back. Earlier this year, Jennifer Hepler, a writer for BioWare titles like *Dragon Age* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, had sexist assaults launched at her for daring to suggest games might allow players to press a button to skip combat, much like some games allow players to press a button to skip cut-scenes. Around the same time the fighting game community became embroiled in a controversy about its history of sexist language and practices. During a reality television show about competitions, one team's coach proclaimed that sexual harassment is an "important part" of the fighting game community and it needs to continue (Hamilton, 2012). And over the span of many months beginning in August 2010 Penny Arcade became embroiled in a wide-ranging debate centering on a comic featuring a joke about [dickwolves](#) and rape. The initial strip led to protests by upset readers, followed by indifferent responses by the creators, real life threats of rape against some women who dared to speak out, and the creation by Penny Arcade authors of "team dickwolves" t-shirts that were going to be on sale at PAX East, but were later removed from circulation.

Each event taken in isolation is troubling enough, but chaining them together into a timeline demonstrates how the individual links are not actually isolated incidents at all but illustrate a pattern of a misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position. Of course harassment of female players has been occurring for quite some time—perhaps the entire history of gaming—but it seems to have become more virulent and concentrated in the past couple of years. Beyond each particular flashpoint and its response, what's happening in the world of videogame play to spark such continuing vitriol? And how

should feminist game studies scholars respond in terms of the research they do, and the stands they might wish to take to counteract those attitudes?

Slowly but surely and building upon one another in frequency and intensity, all of these events have been responding to the growing presence of women and girls in gaming not as a novelty but as a regular and increasingly important demographic. When I first began researching player culture in the early 2000s, it was considered news by the mainstream press that women played videogames. In 2003 I was invited to participate in a panel at the industry's main venue—the annual Game Developers Conference in San Jose—to explain that women did play games, and in fact even bought them (which turned out to be much more important for the publishers).

A decade later, women and girls buying and playing games seems like old news. The Gameboy DS and the Wii both bring huge numbers of female players to the gaming public, and the rise of casual as well as social games has done the same for PCs. Mobile gaming via iOS and Android devices has further integrated gameplay into ordinary or mundane segments of everyday life, where women and girls are regularly found playing titles like *Angry Birds*, *Words with Friends* and *Chaos Rings* alongside male players. And even the more traditionally gendered space of consoles has been augmented -- first through motion-based and gestural games like *Wii Sports* and *Wii Fit*, later through more advanced peripherals such as the Kinect and titles such as *Dance Central*, into smaller, indie offerings such as *Journey* and *Costume Quest*, and even into AAA titles like those in the *Mass Effect*, *Fable* and *Final Fantasy* series.

The “encroachment” of women and girls into what was previously a male-gendered space has not happened without incident, and will probably only become worse before it (hopefully) improves. Game industry journalists and critics have begun discussing this problem in depth, and writers such as Leigh Alexander have made excellent suggestions about the causes and potential solutions to confronting this issue (2012). Likewise, some game development houses have taken a stand against the sexist attitudes of some players (Bioware, 2011) while others have been slower to understand issues such as heteronormativity's persistent presence in online game spaces (Ashcraft, 2006).

So what can feminist media studies offer? How can scholars interested in videogames and gamer culture as well as the equal treatment of women in this space make a contribution? I believe this is an opportunity to demonstrate the usefulness of research and particularly how it can help to give us a firm foundation on which to stand in order to shed light on the persistence of particular issues, point to historical solutions for overcoming similar difficulties, and thereby push for a more welcoming kind of game culture for everyone -- not simply girls and women players. Likewise, scholars can build archives, databases and histories of such events as a way to encourage the broader perspectives and systems analysis that go beyond issue-based reporting and analyses that tackle only one or two issues, divorced from a larger context. What follows are several areas of research and scholarly activity that could help to engage with the problematics of gamer culture, and let us see in a more consistent manner how and why some players are threatened by changes to the game industry and gamer culture.

The zero-sum game and gamer identity

The rage we see expressed by threatened individuals and groups seems to be based on at least two factors -- sexist (as well as racist, homophobic and ageist) beliefs about the abilities and proper place of female players, and fears about the changing nature of the game industry. With respect to sexist beliefs and practices, we need more documentation of the extent of those activities and analysis of what responses or actions tend to mitigate or eliminate those issues. For example, in March 2011 the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab released a video online documenting hate speech in game communities. Although not set up as a rigorous research experiment or investigation, staff members at GAMBIT sought to document how “the vicious harassment directed at rape survivors was an example of an enduring atmosphere surrounding online interactions between game-players, where hate speech is tolerated, accepted and barely recognized in day-to-day play” (Tan, 2011). The video was released to coincide with PAX East, and was created in part to address the Penny Arcade/dickwolves controversy described above. The video features actors reading a litany of sexist, racist and homophobic comments that test players heard during the research phase of the project.

Such efforts are just one entry point into documenting and then perhaps analyzing and responding to sexism in online gameplay. The video received widespread attention, and helped facilitate further discussions on the issue. I would call for similar projects as well as more traditional research studies that not only document the prevalence of such speech, but that seek out and investigate those who engage in such practices, to see how and why they do so. Without a better understanding of their own beliefs, we can't adequately theorize their activities. Likewise, determining how networks of support for sexist attitudes and practices emerge, flourish or diminish can be valuable for suggesting ways to counter them.

In regards to the second point, some players are explicit in their complaints that growth in some areas -- such as casual and social games, which are often targeted to women -- means that fewer budgets and development teams will be focused on traditional titles and genres such as First Person Shooters and Action games. One component underlying this concern relates to the platforms on which such games run -- meaning that hardware development and how companies like Sony and Nintendo choose to design their consoles have important implications for the games that can or cannot be developed for them. Microsoft and Sony continue to promote the graphical and computational superiority of their Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 systems respectively. Nintendo has come under attack since at least the release of the Wii for “dumbing down” what a console could be, and (by association) for shrinking demand for potential AAA game titles (AAA games are generally considered high-quality games made by large studios with big budgets). Although Nintendo wished to broaden its audience to include lapsed, older and female game players, traditional console players saw the move as one actively excluding them, and reacted quite negatively to that perceived slight. “They” would have fewer games available to play, because those games would not be available (or made for) the Wii. If they did not appear on other consoles or players chose not to buy them, the games effectively would not exist.

Some game developers have actively bolstered such reactionary fears through their outspoken criticisms of technologies they deem inferior, such as the architecture of the Wii. Most famously, Chris Hecker quipped at the 2007 GDC that the Wii was a “piece of shit” and nothing more than “two GameCubes duct taped together.” Hecker went on to argue that Nintendo had created an underpowered machine in terms of its CPU capabilities, the Wii “doesn’t have the power to process things like complicated AI” and thus that “it’s not clear to me that Nintendo gives a shit about games as an art form” (Hatfield, 2007). Hardcore players likely saw Hecker’s comments as justification for their own complaints, and offered his statements as proof of the changing (and negative) direction of console gaming. Yet what I have just related is mostly anecdotal, relying on a cursory review of industry documents and forum flame wars. What we need is more in-depth, critical research examining how players understand and utilize such statements, and how they make sense of the wider game industry universe, how they conceptualize their choices, who is controlling those choices, and why they believe in zero-sum game outcomes. We also need to tie such analyses to industry-fueled rants such as Hecker’s, to see how players are linking as well as justifying their own beliefs and upset (as well as bad behavior) to what they see as sanctioned views.

Another area in need of critical feminist research is the role that alpha fans and player networks play in contributing to as well as often leading and magnifying (rather than defusing) toxic gamer culture. For example, after Penny Arcade ran its infamous comic “The Sixth Slave,” a cascade of events occurred in quick succession across a multitude of web sites, social media services such as Twitter, and private communication channels including email. As bloggers have chronicled, certain outspoken individuals worked to push the debate in various ways, according to their own viewpoints, with the “alpha fans” of Penny Arcade -- Gabe and Tycho -- pushing their own point of view and critics such as Courtney Stanton voicing the opposition. How did the various parties utilize the internet and social media to argue their points, and sway the opinions of others? How did the presence of trolls, quiet followers and committed groups influence the debate? How did sexist or antisexist attitudes get translated into limited formats such as 140 characters, or web comics? What still stands as a record of the events online? These are all questions that feminist game studies scholars can ask.

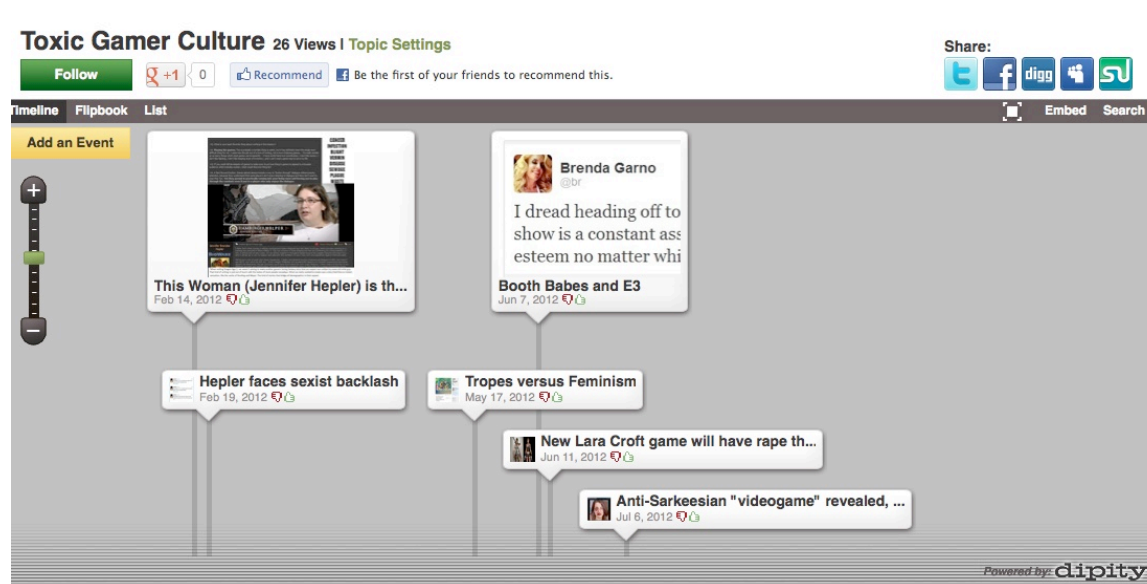
Likewise, feminist game studies scholars need to research the practices and beliefs of game developers and marketers through both promotional materials and game content to see how both work to shape resulting gamer attitudes and responses. If game content is sexist or marketing materials feature booth babes, is it a surprise that male gamers feel entitled to echo sexist remarks in their own gameplay? As Kennedy has likewise documented (2009), if companies do not actively and quickly respond to shut down sexist, sometimes pornographic uses of their game materials, can we expect players to respond to other players’ calls for better behavior? We need more such studies, and more accountability from developers and marketers about the impact their actions have on the wider gaming community.

Documenting a history of toxic gamer culture

A final call I make is for continuing documentation of these events and practices, to serve as a record and evidence of the widespread nature of such issues, so we can see how patterns

emerge, or how actions or attitudes change over time. Likewise, gathering or collecting materials allows for future researchers to have a baseline of archival materials available to them for later research and analysis. Despite the seeming persistence of online documents and artifacts, much is disappearing from the internet or becoming increasingly harder to find. Even with technologies like the WayBack Machine and library digital archives, it can still be difficult to locate or identify materials from even six months ago. By locating, storing at even simply taking screenshots of what we see now, we can provide real help to later scholarly work.

As a way to start this process, this piece includes an infographic of its own (image below with link to live site) – a timeline of selected events in toxic gamer culture, including the ones I’ve identified at the start of this article. Ideally we can keep this timeline going, adding to it as events unfold, to serve as a living document that puts isolated events into a larger perspective.



Screenshot of "Toxic Gamer Culture" available at <http://www.dipity.com/miaconsalvo/Toxic-Gamer-Culture/#timeline>

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