A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity

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Recently, the margins between gaming and feminism have become increasingly contentious (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). This article addresses a cultural moment where masculine gaming culture became aware of and began responding to feminist game scholars by analyzing GamerGate conspiracy documents and social media discussions related to the now infamous “DiGRA fishbowl.” Worries about the opacity of academic practices and a disparaging of feminist knowledge-making practices dominate these documents. By looking at these discussions and practices through the lens of conspiracy theories (Fenster, 2008; Hofstadter, 1952) and counterknowledge (Fiske, 1994) we consider the broader meaning of GamerGate’s attention to academia.

This is a story about how we—two feminist gaming scholars—became implicated in a conspiracy to destroy video games and the video game industry. We are sharing this story with the larger academic public, not because it is funny (although some aspects are), but as a case study of a cultural moment in which masculine gaming culture became aware of and began responding to feminist game scholars. Several aspects of this case study are deeply important within larger scholarly fields, including game studies, Internet studies, and media studies.

One reason for sharing the story is the most obvious—the case study that follows is a poignant example of the sexism, heterosexism, and patriarchal undercurrents that seem to serve as a constant guidepost for the video game industry. In referring to the video game industry’s patriarchal undercurrent, we do not mean to imply that all men working in the game industry or who are involved in gaming culture are personally guided by sexism—but rather that systemic sexism structures the industry

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and gaming culture as a whole to the extent that the very idea of integrating elements of feminism into video games is read as actual evidence of a conspiracy. Second, it helps illustrate to other scholars many of the current problems facing academia as a whole. The opacity of what we do, how we do it, and the language we use is often so far removed from the publics we are discussing that academia, itself, becomes part of the problem. Moreover it illustrates the extent to which feminist research in particular is devalued within and outside academe. Finally, this case study is a compelling means of addressing and understanding conspiracy theories as a mode of communicative practice. Instead of dismissing and laughing at those who have accused us of taking part in elaborate conspiracies, we choose to interpret the accusations as a means of understanding an important historical and cultural moment.

The Setup: Feminism, Gaming, and #GamerGate

Gender, feminism, and sexism are not new topics in game studies. Academics have been writing, presenting, and arguing about the inherent masculinity of the video game industry for over fifteen years (Jenson & de Castell, 2008). Early debates about gender, gaming, and feminism centered around trying to get girls more engaged in video games, since an interest in gaming often increases the likelihood of an interest in STEM and STEM-related careers (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Over time, scholars also addressed the game play of adult women, often advocating for major shifts in the video game market (Chess, 2013; Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo, 2007; Shaw, 2013; Taylor, 2006).

The number of women gamers has increased steadily over the years. Recent industry statistics suggest that women players now make up about half of the game playing market (Casti, 2014). Despite this increase, the number of women working in the video game industry has increased only marginally. At last survey, the video game industry was comprised of about 22% women (Makuch, 2014). Many have theorized reasons for the lack of growth in women developers (Consalvo, 2008; Fullerton, Fron, Pearce, & Morie, 2008) but in large part, the video game industry itself has not necessarily grown more gender-inclusive, despite a growing female audience.

Industry responses to these criticisms have been mixed, and there has been an increasing amount of hostility towards feminist game critics in recent years. In one well-documented incident, the game culture cartoonists and conference organizers of Penny Arcade battled over social media with critics after printing a rape joke in their comic. In response, many members of the community stood fortified behind the cartoonists, doubling down on the idea that they were not specifically trying to alienate women audiences, yet should have the right to make rape jokes (Salter & Blodgett, 2012).

Additionally, women who are connected to the video game industry have been targeted in recent years. In 2007, game developer Kathy Sierra received death

Given this history, it was unsurprising to most of us who study video games and gaming culture when things escalated in the late summer of 2014. Zoe Quinn, creator of the game Depression Quest, was accused over social media of having sex with a reviewer from the gaming Web site Kotaku. Although many accused Quinn of trading sex for positive game reviews, others defended Quinn and pointed out that the person in question had not actually reviewed her game (Romano, 2014). Things became heated on both sides of this issue and Zoe Quinn became harassed by people who publically associated themselves with 4chan and Anonymous, and her Tumblr account was hacked (Hern, 2014). The attacks on Quinn were perpetuated in part by a harassment campaign conceived on 4chan (Johnston, 2014).

On August 27, the actor Adam Baldwin became the first person to use a hashtag for the movement (#GamerGate) when he linked to two videos attacking Quinn (Cathode Debris, 2014). His 190k plus followers quickly helped the hashtag spread, which then spawned Web sites, reddit subthreads, additional 4chan and then 8chan threads, and a sustained online movement. Those in the GamerGate movement allege that there is corruption in video games journalism and that feminists are actively working to undermine the video game industry. Bloggers continue to argue on both sides of this debate (Dulis, 2014; Hern, 2014). Although it is difficult to characterize members of an anonymous group—particularly one that lacks structure or coherent leadership—we refer to those who post and partake in this movement as "gamergaters," for lack of a better term. Although not all gamergaters hold the same perspectives regarding games journalism, DiGRA, or the video game industry, their own use of a singular hashtag as a point of identification forces us to refer to them cumulatively at times. We also use the term to reinforce that there are individuals behind this movement, it is not an amorphous technological artifact.

The Fishbowl: What We Thought We Were Doing

Although feminist game scholars follow, research, and sympathize with the targets of this kind of coordinated hate campaign, it is rare that academic work becomes a target itself. That is why we were surprised that a conference event we organized became linked to conspiracy theories about Zoe Quinn and journalistic ethics. We, of course, have made similar arguments to those offered by what GamerGate calls Social Justice Warriors (SJWs). Moreover, we have shared some of their experiences in our own fields. Academic conferences often marginalize discussions of video games and diversity, and women’s studies in particular are regularly on the chopping block when budget cuts force universities to downsize.
In order to address some of the above concerns with game culture we proposed a “Fishbowl” conversation for the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference. The Fishbowl format is one that does not privilege a single voice of authority, but rather, allows for a larger group conversation. This format, we felt, might engender a more open discussion about not only issues we saw in the game industry but also issues in academia that limit research on diversity and games. When we started planning our Fishbowl, our initial goal was pretty vague: we wanted to do something about feminism in games. What we settled on was less about feminism, and more about making sense of how identity and diversity, particularly embracing intersectional approaches to both, matters to video game studies.

At the August 2014 conference, to our surprise, our event drew a fairly large and diverse crowd of scholars from different disciplines. We set up a public Google Doc so that anyone in the room could take notes on what was said. As with many non-traditional conference formats used in the digital humanities, we hoped the Google Doc could be a living document and continue conversations beyond the isolated conference experience. Little did we know that the document would be later used as “evidence” of a larger feminist gaming conspiracy.

As often happens, the Fishbowl got a bit off track. Questions about diversity and gaming quickly shifted to issues of conference access, keynote selection, academic funding (both graduate fellowships and grant opportunities for critical work), publishing norms, the dwindling academic job market, and an overall frustration with the barriers to entry for those doing cultural studies research. Some people in the room commented on Twitter that they had hoped for more “answers” or specific suggestions to be produced from the Fishbowl. Several people came up to us afterwards asking for us to “do something” with the collective notes. The “something” ranged from creating a list of action steps to a best practices guide to a manifesto. Ultimately we put it aside and decided that if someone else wanted to make it into something more we would revisit the document. Much to our surprise, a group of people we never expected did make “something” of our notes.

The Conspiracy Documents: How Our Little Fishbowl Became a Pretty Big Deal

On September 1, 2014 we began getting emails that indicated someone was commenting on our Google Doc. The one that caught our eye was a comment that read: “guys, use the comments thingy, leave the thing unedited please. It won’t look credible to anyone outside of 4chan if doctored around.” Reviewing the edits, it had apparently been edited and commented on since late at night on August 31. One edit simply replaced “identity and diversity in game culture” with the word “penis.” Another deleted the title entirely and replaced it with “I fuck kids- op.” That version also altered nearly every paraphrasing of participants’ comments to include something about “sucking cock.” Finally, someone reverted it back to the
original added a note stating: “It’s impossible for us to mess with it too much, because it can always be restored to a later version, like what I just did.” Another comment encouraged everyone to make a copy of the document, just in case. Being busy and uninterested in following the sophomoric edits via the log we made a copy of the original version and deleted the shared doc. We wondered, however, how anyone came upon our notes from an academic conference in the first place—or, for that matter, why anyone would find them interesting.

What follows is the logic of our involvement in GamerGate as best as we can reconstruct it. The 4chan IRC chat room Burger and Fries was started August 18 on the topic “The Zoe Quinnspiracy.” Building on salacious claims made against Zoe Quinn, members of the chat room were planning a coordinated attack on Quinn similar to the harassment of Anita Sarkeesian (Burger and Fries, 2014). The members of this chat began making connections between Quinn and Sarkeesian to bolster claims that there was a larger feminist conspiracy. The two were linked via a shared contact, Maya Felix Kramer, who is part of the Silverstring Media team. Silverstring was incorrectly identified by GamerGate as a PR firm; it is a game development company (Johnston, 2014). Later, in response to the much-publicized harassment of Zoe Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian in late August, several journalists posted articles questioning the boundaries of gamer culture. These articles supposedly announce the “death of gamers,” though mostly they suggest a particular type of bigoted gamer identity is no longer central to the industry’s audience (Auerbach, 2014). All of these articles were posted on or around August 28. The number of articles appearing all at once was used as evidence that there must be an even larger conspiracy than already suspected.

Delving into Silverstring’s Web site, GamerGaters found a post from a series of letters written by Andrew Grant Wilson and Zoya Street about their experiences at DiGRA’s 2014 conference (Wilson, 2014). They mistakenly assumed that Street and Wilson were describing a Silverstring corporate retreat. What led their researchers to look more deeply into DiGRA, however, was discovering a Google chat group of journalists who, among other things, discussed the work of Adrienne Shaw as relevant to rethinking gamer identity (Shaw, 2011, 2013). At least one GamerGater claimed that all SJWs journalists were part of “the Adrienne Shaw school of thought” (von Trotha, 2014) and it was even claimed that she was a former tutor of Quinn and Sarkeesian (Niggoslav Krawczyk, 2014). Participants began researching Shaw, collecting her publications, and reviewing her Twitter account. She was accused of having imposter syndrome which was intended to be a point of attack: “call them frauds, that’s a week [sic] point” (Burgers and Fries, 2014). Her tweets from the DiGRA conference led them to the Fishbowl Google Doc.

Rather than our Fishbowl being found as a result of “looking into” DiGRA, it turns out our Fishbowl was the main node used to connect Silverstring, and hence SJW journalists, to academia. Connections and conspiracy theories proliferated following this. GamerGaters tried to match twitter accounts and real names to the first name only Fishbowl notes. Conspiracists discovered that many of the keynotes and presenters at the conference worked on projects funded by DARPA (DryBones,
2014). Shaw’s own government-funded research project was raised as evidence of a larger government conspiracy.

On September 9 “Sargon of Akkad” posted a YouTube video titled, “A Conspiracy Within Gaming.” The video promises that “The smoky-room Communist meetings in gaming actually exist, they’re just done in the brightly lit halls of academia” (Sargon of Akkad, September 9, 2014). It documents this conspiracy via two primary foci. First, the video focuses on four Fishbowl participants (Adrienne Shaw, Shira Chess, Mia Consalvo, and T. L. Taylor), their research, their teaching, and their connections. Second, the video reads aloud—verbatim—the Google Doc. The video was reposted on other Web sites and social media outlets such as reddit. Although this transcript was clearly lacking context and (to some extent) content, commenters on the YouTube thread appeared to be genuinely convinced of the transcript as evidence of collusion. For instance, user Giglioti remarked, “By the Gods, Sargon! Magnificent and terrifying work, I’m glad you did it. Now the real question, what can be done to stop these people?” (Sargon of Akkad, September 9, 2014).

The popularity of the first video—at the time of this writing the initial video has over 40 thousand views—spurred more videos within the series. On September 26, 2014, Sargon published a video titled, “The Feminist Ideological Conquest of DiGRA (Part 1)” which disclosed the names of all of the DiGRA board members from 2003 through the current board, classifying each board member as either an “academic” or a “feminist,” making an argument that the board has been taken over by feminists, as well as implying that one cannot be both academic and feminist (Sargon of Akkad, September 26, 2014). Additional videos also continued to spotlight the work of Adrienne Shaw, directly blaming her for starting GamerGate as one journalist, Dan Golding, who penned a so-called “death of gamer” article cited her work and in turn many of the other “death of gamer” articles linked back to Golding (Sargon of Akkad, October 2, 2014). Although this video begins with his warning, “Please do not contact any of the people mentioned in this video” (Sargon of Akkad, October 2, 2014), the focus on specific individuals and the anonymity of the online forums suggests that those mentioned were to blame.

In IRC chats and on Web pages, the conference and Fishbowl are referred to as a type of “psyops” (or psychological operations), a phrase that points back to concerns over DARPA funding the group: “Fishbowl == DIGRA thing == classic use of PSYOPS tactics” (Burgers and Fries, 2014). There was an effort to uncover monetary ties between DARPA, DiGRA, and SJWs, including attempts to track down DiGRA’s Finnish tax records. The “smoking gun” of evidence against DiGRA was the Fishbowl: “DiGRA are suspect considering that Fishbowl stuff” (Burgers and Fries, 2014). In particular, the Fishbowl’s emphasis on creating change in academia and the games industry, despite being critiqued by attendees for not offering many specific suggestions, was cited as damning. As one commenter claims our discussion demonstrated a harrowing shift in game scholars’ focus: “Looking through old DiGRA stuff they were really just about studying at one point. In the last few years their agenda seems to have changed to actively fuck with the paradigm of games” (Burgers and Fries, 2014).
Making Meaning: The Fishbowl and Academic Practice

While many of the above theories appear outlandish, the discussion generated a unique insight into popular perspectives on academe. In part, what appears threatening about academia is an assumed social standing: “It’s going to be impossible to fight against, because academics are viewed as intelligent people with authority in their particular disciplines” (Sargon of Akkad, September 9, 2014). Evident in the IRC chat log, comments on the video, and numerous sites where the information was circulated, is that academia simply does not make sense from the outside. More than that it is perceived as threatening.

First, the very organizational structure of academia, and notions of corporate/government collusion is heavily “investigated.” Throughout the documents and Web pages, DiGRA is referred to as a SJW cult, a “thinktank,” a government shell corporation, an institute, a pyramid scheme, and an “enemy spawning ground.” It is also, ironically, referred to as a feminist organization, though the distinct absence of feminism from most DiGRA panels was a key factor in our plan for the Fishbowl. Extensive efforts were made to find connections between DiGRA and “other companies,” (Burgers and Fries, 2014) particularly around September 2 when DiGRA is identified as the “head of the octopus” (Burgers and Fries, 2014). The DiGRA chapters around the world are used as evidence of it being a cult, and one person on the IRC Chat even suggests “this is scientology getting revenge on 4chan for the scientology raids” (Burgers and Fries, 2014)—referring to an ongoing war between 4chan/Anonymous and the group Scientology.

Second, several DiGRA conspiracies focus on funding structures. There is a heavy emphasis on individual scholar involvement in government-funded research as evidence of larger connections to DARPA and social control experiments. One person in the IRC chat log argued that “digra is a feminist organization; feminist organization receive 100’s of millions of dollars from the government every year to waste on research projects.” Certainly the complex web of how funding affects academic research is a valid conversation, often broached by academics. We as academics are well aware of how desire for funding creates biased work. Yet, those biases rarely favor feminist critique and “social justice warriors”—certainly not for hundreds of millions of dollars. Generally, funded research projects reinforce dominant ideologies. So while a valid critique of academic practice it, again, shows the opacity of how those practices play out.

Third, there appears to be a fundamental misunderstanding of what the goals of critical theories are. Throughout online conversations the phrase “Cultural Marxism” is used to suggest that researchers conceive “of culture as central to the legitimation of oppression” (Sargon of Akkad, September 9, 2014). Although the Frankfurt School, which our Fishbowl is repeatedly connected to in this comment section, worked hard to demonstrate the power of dominant media discourse the commenters seemed to assume this meant academics planned to deploy media this way. Similarly, a video by “factual feminist” Christina H. Sommers, widely shared by GamerGaters, actively conflates direct-effects media theorists with cultural studies (American Enterprise Institute, 2014).
Related to this was the claim that scholars suggesting change is a form of social control. The comments on Sargon of Akad’s (September 9, 2014) video are rife with accusations that “this feminist’ moment in the gaming industry is in fact a conspiracy pushed, funded, and lead by Communist intellectuals.” Another asks “Does Adrienne [Shaw] plan to terrorize industry and paralyze its functions?”3 One commenter even points out that DiGRA president Mia Consalvo is writing a book on Japanese gaming culture, and took that as further evidence of things turning towards an international conspiracy; “If we don’t stop them here I promise Japan WILL be next.” Another responded to this by saying “It's the feminist Enola Gay on it’s way to Hiroshima?”

Collectively these pieces of “evidence” and conjecture illustrate how opaque our practices, language, and conceptual frameworks really are. In many ways, the critiques of academia—both founded and unfounded—provide an important moment for academics to take notice. To non-academics, we seem inscrutable; this is not a good thing. Opacity and inscrutability is what helps breed conspiracy and mistrust. Further, these specific conspiracy theories tap into a long history, both inside and outside academic departments, of treating feminist scholarship as unscientific (e.g., dividing up academics and feminists), ideological (assuming all other research is neutral), and frivolous (distracting from important research on games that should be done).

Making Sense: Conspiracies, Plots, Counterknowledge

For those on the outside, conspiracy theories are often difficult to parse. This inability to make sense of the practices of connection-making and link-building endemic to the genre becomes even more complicated when you find that you, and your colleagues, are placed within that conspiracy theory. We have both felt compelled, at times, to engage with the conspiracy theorists, attempting to explain our actions and words. To do so, of course, only provides further ammunition.

It would be easy for us to dismiss the theorists in question, chalking this all up to “paranoid style,” a term coined by Hofstadter (1952) to describe the mindset and rhetorical style of conspiracy speech. Critics of Hofstadter such as Fenster (2008) warn against this terminology because, “Although understanding conspiracy theory as a paranoid form of interpretation provides some insight, it displaces the cultural and specifically semiotic challenge posed by conspiracy theory’s interpretative practices onto a relatively simplistic notion of pathology” (p. 95). In other words, there are things that we can learn—a depth of understanding values and norms in a critical/cultural sense—from analyzing conspiracies. Instead, Fenster highlights the need to analyze conspiracy texts in terms of interpretative strategies, communities, and narrative structures. At the center of these endlessly interpretive practices, according to Fenster, is desire to make sense of the unknowable: “conspiracy theory wants to enjoy the pleasure of control, of finding the correct answer to the riddle of power, of mastering its desire of political order” (pp. 107–108).
Certainly, political desire is integral to the GamerGate conspiracy. Rapid changes to a formerly more stable video game industry are bound to upset those who are emotionally and financially invested in it. Yet, mapping academia to this desire is more complicated. The desire is linked to something taken away—something that once was and that seems to link back to academic opacity. For instance, one blogger linking to one of Sargon of Akkad’s video uses Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* as evidence of the problem. Showing progression images of different versions of Lara Croft posing the question, “does anyone out there know what happened to the sexy Lara Croft?” (Parriah Pottymouth, 2014). Images in the progression show the character’s transformation from less to more clothing, and from an unrealistic hourglass figure to a more normative woman’s body type. The final picture shows the action archeologist dirty and looking contextually suitable in clothing an archeologist/adventurer might wear. The implication seems to be that those of us in academia have directly influenced a character held dearly in hardcore gaming culture, making her less attractive. Desire, then, becomes a means of coping with and understanding changes that may equate to larger cultural shifts. These shifts can then be more easily blamed on concrete individuals and groups. Interestingly, this suggestion that players are not always complicit in the process complicates research such as Banks and Humphreys (2008) who suggest that often players can function in a co-creative capacity. This is to say—while sometimes a player might feel cooperatively aligned with industry needs, other times they feel that game design might be pushed at them in undesirable ways. Perhaps, embedded in this fear is that all games will turn to the more sanguine and desexualized modes of play that have been marketed to women or gender neutral audiences, as described by Chess (2012).

Other researchers have highlighted conspiracy speech as a means for oppressed people to articulate fears that stem from cycles of persecution. Notably, Fiske (1994) discusses this in his adept analysis of Black Liberation Radio and the articulations of conspiracy theories that AIDS is an act of genocide to eradicate black populations. He refers to the production of this information as “counterknowledge.” Fiske explains, “Counterknowledge must be socially and politically motivated: recovering repressed information, disarticulating and rearticulating events, and producing a comprehensive and coherent counterknowledge involves hard labor, and hard labor always requires strong motivation” (p. 192).

It is tempting, yet still problematic, to frame the GamerGate conspiracy as a form of counterknowledge. On one hand, the process of disarticulating and rearticulating historical moments and current events nicely sums up how the conspiracy theory is built and spread. On the other hand, it is difficult to understand those involved in the GamerGate movement as “persecuted”—the movement is inhabited by people who, by and large, are representations of the power structures that have been built into gaming culture for decades. It is difficult to see a group of people who have ultimately benefited over a lack of diversity, as being persecuted by calls for more diversity. To wit, Fenster (2008) remarks on Fiske’s necessitation of persecution suggesting, “Conspiracy theory can just as easily be used to promote oppression as it can be made to advance democratic or emancipatory politics” (p. 287).
It is less useful to consider the validity of a conspiracy in terms of actual persecution, and is more potent if we look at it in terms of a combination of perceived persecution and an examination of the anxieties that the conspiracy is articulating. From this perspective, we can look at gaming culture as a somewhat marginalized group: For years those who have participated in gaming culture have defended their interests in spite of claims by popular media and (some) academics blaming it for violence, racism, and sexism. A perceived threat opens a venue for those who feel their culture has been misunderstood—regardless of whether they are the oppressors or the ones being oppressed. It is easy to negate and mark the claims of this group as inconsequential, but it is more powerful to consider the cultural realities that underline those claims.

Conclusion: Embracing Hegemonic Masculinity (Sort Of)

In Andrew Grant Wilson’s (2014) now infamous blog about DiGRA—the magic bullet that helped link Zoe Quinn to DiGRA to DARPA and beyond—explains, “We talked a big game at DiGRA about dismantling hegemonic masculinity.” This phrase was quoted repeatedly as evidence towards the larger conspiracy. Although the notion of “dismantling hegemonic masculinity” might not have made much sense to those quoting it, it certainly sounded threatening and ominous.

In the wake of our conspiracy, we wonder about this phrase. Are we actually trying to dismantle hegemonic masculinity? If so what might we mean by “dismantle”—ridding the world entirely of masculine gaming culture or simply making room for other gaming cultures and increased diversity? We intend to mean (and hope we mean) the latter. Yet, in writing this essay we have also found ourselves wrapped up in the complexities of the conspiracy logic. It is impossible to look at our own language sometimes without agreeing with the conspiracy theorists. Perhaps we are the nefarious plotters they think we are, rather than two tenure track academics just trying to make sense of culture.

The focus that has been made on academic practice—specifically our work and the work of other individuals involved with DiGRA—is disheartening. It has become apparent how quickly academia can be misunderstood, and more specifically how feminist academic research can be misappropriated for non-feminist purposes. The breakdown between “academic” versus “feminist” illustrated in Sargon’s second video demonstrates how conspiracy speech can turn to hate speech, which can result in the naming and targeting of specific individuals. As U.S.-based academics, it is easy to forget that researchers and scholars across the globe are often censored and restricted in their research and scholarship. Even within the United States, right-wing politicians often suggest all social science and humanities research should be defunded (Matthews, 2014). Sargon and his followers have given us an important reminder to not take this publishing freedom for granted. Further, the lack of understanding about academic research suggests a need for an accessible and public intellectualism that helps to bridge the space between academia and non-academia.
The focus on DiGRA and our own work has given us a jarring reminder of how often feminist research and ideology become targets for hate speech, regardless of the specifics or context. As feminist research becomes a more prominent part of other research areas, we realize that the results are often mixed. While our research, and the research of other feminist scholars might help create more awareness, it also opens scholars up to the very harassment they are studying.

Additionally, the increased focus on game studies (and GamerGate critiques of it) highlights the growing importance of the field and the work that has been done by our peers. Researchers such as Mia Consalvo (2008), Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell (2008), Fullerton et al. (2008) (the Ludica Group), T. L. Taylor (2006), and Helen Kennedy (2002) have helped illustrate the need for feminist politics and research in game studies. Our fishbowl was meant to suggest a continuation of research on identity politics and intersectionality as it relates to game studies. Yet, the very structure of the fishbowl format, in many ways, speaks to the fears of many members of the GamerGate movement by privileging non-dominant voices. This structure is, in many ways, the antithesis of the dominant AAA gaming industry, which O’Donnell (2014) has suggested is a predominantly “broadcast” medium.

In fairness, many involved in GamerGate have balked at the DiGRA conspiracy theories. Some quip that the DARPA-DiGRA conspiracy sounds like a Metal Gear Solid plotline. Others think it harms the movement: “DARPA/DiGRA. Drop it. Even if it WERE true, it makes us look crazy” (coffeehadphone, 2014). Certainly, if they were to “drop it” it would make our lives less complicated. Yet if they were to drop our part in it, none of the other issues would get solved: Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkaseen, and other women working within and around the game industry would still be threatened and harassed, the video game industry would still be male-dominated, and many women would still feel alienated from an important cultural medium. Furthermore, academic practices would still be misunderstood as deceptive, plotting, and (oddly enough) feminist—despite being based on its own model of hegemonic masculinity.

We both love video games—playing them, thinking about them, and writing about them. That’s what got us into this line of research and what initiated these conversations. If Fenster’s notion that conspiracy theories can help to shed light on those who feel disempowered and disenfranchised, then, perhaps, we need to find a new way to look at the problem—before that problem becomes even more violent. Given that, we chose to both dismantle and embrace the hegemonic masculinity that has both given us an important cultural medium that we love, while simultaneously pushing us away from it. Bring it on.

Notes

1 We are now glad that we did not write a manifesto.
2 Adrienne Shaw has never met, let alone tutored, Anita Sarkeesian or Zoe Quinn.
3 She doesn’t, for the record.
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