"I NEVER USE HEADSETS": WOMEN, WARINESS, AND HYPERVIGILANCE FOR THE INEVITABILITY OF ONLINE HARASSMENT IN GAMING CULTURE

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Extended Abstract

The gaming community has been contoured by divisive issues around the exacerbation of sexism, racism, and harassment. These tensions culminated in 2014 in the shape of #gamergate: a decentralised online harassment campaign against women and feminism in gaming (Chess & Shaw 2015). This ongoing feminist ethnography has emerged from an imperative to create interventions into the increasing normalisation of online and offline harassment (Consalvo 2011; Humphreys 2017). In it, this research analyses the affective labour (Hardt 1999) of how people navigate and 'cope' with discrimination in gaming cultures. This work-in-progress research is based on data collected from fieldwork of offline gaming spaces, online digital ethnography, surveys, and semi-structured interviews, so as to develop a more nuanced understanding of participants and the roles afforded to marginalised groups in gaming and online cultures.

From game developers and public industry events, to private domestic homes shared by people who play videogames with their partners, this research project contextualises and compares 'social' gaming spaces and interrogates how the imminent threat of 'online' harassment influences 'offline' gaming spheres and relationships, and vice versa. The theoretical framework entangles the public-private and online-offline spheres of gaming, and ties together three concepts: affective networks (the balances, structures, and mediations of power), affordances (the delineation of the limitations and abilities of power to impact and be impacted) and gender dynamics (the influences of powers such as gender roles imposed by societal norms). Using critical identity theory, the research takes an intersectional, existential-poststructural feminist, and contextuality focused approach (c.f. De Beauvoir 2010/1949; Jackson 2012; Shaw 2013). Its approach privileges the experiences of its participants by building analysis on the

historical and cultural marginalisation of women in gaming (Abbate 2012; Kirkpatrick 2012). Conducting ethnography across domains affords an observation of how people 'game' the divide of online-offline and public-private spaces to navigate discrimination and harassment.

Rising in 2014, gamergate is a decentralised online harassment campaign against minority voices in gaming which operates under the guise of being 'a crusade against unethical games journalism' (Massanari 2015, 6) which continues to intensify a heightened climate of hostility especially felt by women and minorities (Cross 2014; Golding & Van Deventer 2016). Where harassment against women in gaming has been expected and normalised, it has become increasingly crucial to conduct feminist research and investigations into potential interventions against the toxic masculinity of gaming (Consalvo 2011; Salter & Blodgett 2012; Chess & Shaw 2015, 209-210; Kidd & Turner 2016, 119-121).

This paper will present vignettes of the larger research project of how online harassment has coloured people's lived experiences, through thick-descriptions of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 7 women who play videogames with their romantic partners. These interviews gesture towards a rich complexity of affective relationships at the nexus of gaming, romantic relationships, and the everyday lived experiences of women. This paper critically examines the dynamics of how the increasing normalisation and public gamification of online harassment impacts women's engagement with gaming, as well as how 'online' harassment may invade into their intimate relationships and domestic 'private' spheres.

Focusing on the interplay of gender and relationship dynamics constructs a framework which apprehends gaming as a culture situated within wider social contexts, rather than one which is insulated or segregated from everyday lived experiences. Previously, theorists have suggested that the restructuring of experiences through technology (Papachrissi 2010; Jenkins et al. 2015), such as 'networked publics' (Boyd 2010), reshape how women engage with their habitus (Bourdieu 1977) through the increase of affordances. However, this research will critique these assumptions by focusing on technological affordances as also being shaped by offline practices (c.f. Massumi 2002; Terranova 2004; Steinkuehler 2006; Dyer-Witherford & De Peuter 2009; Salter & Blodgett 2012; Shaw 2014). As such, gamergate is exemplary of how engagement and harassment 'online' floods into the 'offline' experiences of women in their everyday lives. To avoid bringing attention to their gender, harassment, and unwanted confrontations, women are hypervigilant. In similar ways to self-defence tactics, women constantly avoid using headsets to communicate with other players, keep clear of conversations about playing videogames, and minimise the performance of their femininity in public gaming spaces. This vignette puts forth findings on how women are constantly modulating their gender and gaming practices in limited 'modes' that are afforded to them in the limitations of 'gamer' culture under the thumb of seemingly inevitable online harassment.

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