

# What Gamergate should have taught us about the 'alt-right'

The 2014 online hate-storm presaged the tactics of the Trump-loving far right movement. Prominent critics of the president elect should take note



The similarities between Gamergate and the current so called 'alt-right' movement are huge, startling, and in no way a coincidence. Photograph: Getty Images/Science Photo Library RF

**Matt Lees**

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It's understandable that the world didn't much care about Gamergate. The 2014 hashtag campaign, ostensibly founded to protest about perceived ethical failures in games journalism, clearly thrived on hate - even though many of those who aligned themselves with the movement either denied there was a problem with harassment, or wrote it off as an unfortunate side effect. Sure, women, minorities and progressive voices within the industry were suddenly living in fear. Sure, those who spoke out in their defence were quickly silenced through exhausting bursts of online abuse. But that wasn't why people supported it, right? They were disenfranchised, felt ignored, and wanted to see a systematic change.

Is this all sounding rather familiar now? Does it remind you of something? If you're just discovering the world of angry, anonymous online dudes masquerading as victims - hi, come in. Some of us have been here for a while.

The similarities between Gamergate and the far-right online movement, the “alt-right”, are huge, startling and in no way a coincidence. After all, the culture war that began in games now has a senior representative in The White House. As a founder member and former executive chair of Breitbart News, Steve Bannon had a hand in creating media monster Milo Yiannopoulos, who built his fame and Twitter following by supporting and cheerleading Gamergate. This hashtag was the canary in the coalmine, and we ignored it.



Brianna Wu was one of women targeted for abuse and death threats. Photograph: Boston Globe/Boston Globe via Getty Images

Lest we forget, Gamergate was an online movement that effectively began because a man wanted to punish his ex girlfriend. Its most notable achievement was harassing a large number of progressive figures - mostly women - to the point where they felt unsafe or considered leaving the industry. Game developer Zoe Quinn was the original target. Anita Sarkeesian's videos applying basic feminist theory to video games had already made her a target (because so many people have a difficulty differentiating cultural criticism from censorship) but this hate was powerfully amplified by Gamergate - leading to death threats, rape threats, and the public leaking of personal information. Other notable targets included developer Brianna Wu, actor Felicia Day, and prominent tech-culture writer Leigh Alexander, whose provocative article on the tyranny of “game culture” offered stark warnings that still resonate powerfully: “When you decline to create or to curate a culture in your spaces, you're responsible for what spawns in the vacuum.”

Other than harassment, very little was achieved, with tiny changes held aloft as great victories: media publications felt the need to publicly clarify pre-existing ethical measures, others implemented small new additions to account for shifts in the ethical landscape caused by modern funding tools such as Patreon and Kickstarter; games writers were duty bound to declare their support for projects they financially aided in these ways. But it quickly became clear that the GamerGate movement was a mess - an undefined mission to Make Video Games Great Again via undecided means.

Many had embraced Gamergate because they felt it wholly matched their ideals, and yet -

quite consistently - no one in the movement was willing to be associated with the abuse being carried out in its name. Prominent supporters on Twitter, in subreddits and on forums like 8Chan, developed a range of pernicious rhetorical devices and defences to distance themselves from threats to women and minorities in the industry: the targets were lying or exaggerating, they were too precious; a language of dismissal and belittlement was formed against them. Safe spaces, snowflakes, unicorns, cry bullies. Even when abuse was proven, the usual response was that people on their side were being abused too. These techniques, forged in Gamergate, have become the standard toolset of far-right voices online.

In 2014, the media's reaction was often weak or overtly conciliatory - some sites went out of their way to "see both sides", to reassure people that openly choosing to be affiliated with a hate group did not make them in any way responsible for that hate. Olive branches were extended, but professional lives continued to be ruined while lukewarm op-eds asked for us to come together so we could start "healing". The motivations may have been sound, but it's the language Trump and his supporters have used post-election to obliterate dissenting voices.

In 2016, new wave conservative media outlets like Breitbart have gained trust with their audience by painting traditional news sources as snooty and aloof. In 2014, video game YouTube stars, seeking to appear in touch with online gaming communities, unscrupulously proclaimed that traditional old-media sources were corrupt.

Everything we're seeing now, had its precedent two years ago.



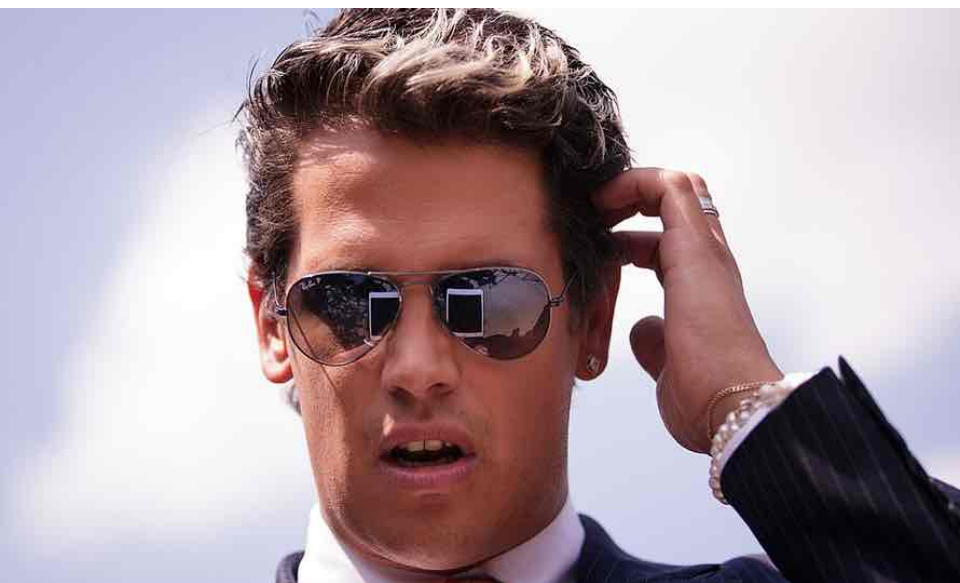
Steve Bannon and Donald Trump days before the 2016 US presidential election. Photograph: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

The stark parallels between Gamergate and the political atmosphere of 2016 may come as a surprise, but it shouldn't: both saw their impact and reach amplified by self-interested parties who underplayed the obvious nastiness they were also promoting. With 2014's Gamergate, Breitbart seized the opportunity to harness the pre-existing ignorance and anger among disaffected young white dudes. With Trump's movement in 2016, the outlet was effectively running his campaign: Steve Bannon took leave of his role at the company in August 2016 when he was hired as chief executive of Trump's presidential campaign. Despite Bannon's distance from Breitbart in an official capacity, the outlet's ideology and relentless support of Trump remained unchanged - with editor-in-chief Joel Pollak notably sending an internal memo to staff that ordered them not to support Breitbart reporter Michelle Fields after



allegations she was attacked by Trump's campaign manager Corey Lewandowski.

Breitbart's aspirations to directly influence politics extend a long way into Europe, too - Bannon is openly keen to collaborate with the far-right Marine Le Pen in France, and hired UKIP's Raheem Hassam to co-run the Breitbart London office. These movements are gaining ground by finding political figures who will legitimise them in return for the support of their swollen online communities. The young men converted via 2014's Gamergate, are being more widely courted now. By leveraging distrust and resentment towards women, minorities and progressives, many of Gamergate's most prominent voices - characters like Mike Cernovich, Adam Baldwin, and Milo Yiannopoulos - drew power and influence from its chaos. These figures gave Gamergate a new sense of direction - generalising the rhetoric: this was now a wider war between "Social Justice Warriors" (SJWs) and everyday, normal, decent people. Games were simply the tip of the iceberg - progressive values, went the argument, were destroying everything. The same voices moved into other geek communities, especially comics, where Marvel and DC were criticised for progressive storylines and decisions. They moved into science fiction with the controversy over the Hugo awards. They moved into cinema with the revolting kickback against the all-female Ghostbusters reboot. Despite colonising the world with pointless tech and plastering modern film and TV with fan-pleasing adaptations of niche comic books, nerds still had a taste for revenge. They saw the culture they considered theirs being ripped away from them. In their zero sum mindset, they read growing artistic equality as a threat.



Gamergate figureheads such as Milo Yiannopoulos weren't taken seriously. Now he is synonymous with Trump and the 'alt-right', we have no choice. Photograph: Drew Angerer/Getty Images

For a long time, we didn't take these characters seriously. Breitbart's Milo Yiannopoulos in particular seemed such a desperate opportunist that we never predicted his rise to prominence, having explicitly stereotyped gamers in the past as "overweight" and "embarrassing". A disgraced journalist and entrepreneur who had to close his tech site The Kernel due to unpaid debts, leaving staff uncertain if they would ever be paid, he'd then spent the next few years spouting insincere hateful ideas to a burgeoning Twitter audience who responded to his anti-feminist, anti-establishment invectives. He was eventually banned from the platform after finally abusing a woman who was apparently just famous enough for Twitter to respond.

Using 4chan (and then the more sympathetic offshoot 8Chan) to plan their subversions and attacks made Gamergate a terribly sloppy operation, leaving a trail of evidence that made it quite clear the whole thing was purposefully, plainly nasty. But the video game industry didn't have the spine to react, and allowed the movement to coagulate - forming a mass of spiteful disappointment that Breitbart was only more than happy to coddle. Historically, that seems to be Breitbart's trick - strongly represent a single issue in order to earn trust, and then gradually indoctrinate to suit wider purposes. With Gamergate, they purposefully went fishing for anti-feminists. 2016's batch of fresh converts - the white extremists - came from enticing conspiracy theories about the global neoliberal elite secretly controlling the world.

The greatest strength of Gamergate, though, was that it actually appeared to represent many left-leaning ideals: stamping out corruption in the press, pushing for better ethical practices, battling for openness. There are similarities here with many who support Trump because of his promises to put an end to broken neo-liberalism, to "drain the swamp" of establishment corruption. Many left-leaning supporters of Gamergate sought to intellectualise their alignment with the hashtag, adopting familiar and acceptable labels of dissent - identifying as libertarian, egalitarian, humanist. At best they unknowingly facilitated abuse, defending their own freedom of expression while those who actually needed support were threatened and attacked. Genuine discussions over criticism, identity and censorship were paralysed and waylaid by Twitter voices obsessed with rhetorical fallacies and pedantic debating practices. While the core of these movements make people's lives hell, the outer shell - knowingly or otherwise - protect abusers by insisting that the real problem is that you don't want to talk, or won't provide the ever-shifting evidence they politely require.



As with Trump, Gamergate appeared to represent many left-leaning ideals such as stamping out corruption and pushing for better ethical practices. Photograph: Evan Vucci/AP

The beauty of this anti-establishment standpoint is, when any mainstream media source seeks to challenge the collective beliefs of the movement, it's merely used as further evidence that journalists are untrustworthy and aloof. This is a challenge the press must be ready to face in today's political climate: confronting these movements comes with a cost - it has never been possible to write openly about Gamergate without attracting a wave of online abuse. In 2017, the tactics used to discredit progressive game critics and developers will be used to discredit Trump and Bannon's critics. There will be gaslighting, there will be attempts to make victims look as though they are losing their grip on reality, to the point that they gradually even start to

believe it. The “post-truth” reality is not simply an accident – it is a concerted assault on the rational psyche.

The strangest aspect of Gamergate is that it consistently didn’t make any sense: people chose to align with it, and yet refused responsibility. It was constantly demanded that we debate the issues, but explanations and facts were treated with scorn. Attempts to find common ground saw the specifics of the demands being shifted: we want you to listen to us; we want you to change your ways; we want you to close your publication down. This movement that ostensibly wanted to protect free speech from cry bully SJWs simultaneously did what it could to endanger sites it disagreed with, encouraging advertisers to abandon support for media outlets that published stories critical of the hashtag. The petulance of that movement is disturbingly echoed in Trump’s own Twitter feed.

Looking back, Gamergate really only made sense in one way: as an exemplar of what Umberto Eco called “eternal fascism”, a form of extremism he believed could flourish at any point in, in any place – a fascism that would extol traditional values, rally against diversity and cultural critics, believe in the value of action above thought and encourage a distrust of intellectuals or experts – a fascism built on frustration and machismo. The requirement of this formless fascism would – above all else – be to remain in an endless state of conflict, a fight against a foe who must always be portrayed as impossibly strong and laughably weak. This was the methodology of Gamergate, and it now forms the basis of the contemporary far-right movement.

We have no idea where this will lead, but our continued insistence on shrugging off the problems of the internet as “not real” – as something we can just log out of – is increasingly misled. 2016 has presented us with a world in which our reality is being wilfully manipulated. Fake news, divisive algorithms, misleading social media campaigns. The majority of people who voted for Trump will never take responsibility for his racist, totalitarian policies, but they’ll provide useful cover and legitimacy for those who demand the very worst from the President Elect. Trump himself may have disavowed the “alt-right”, but his rhetoric has led to them feeling legitimised. As with Gamergate, the press risks being manipulated into a position where it has to tread a respectful middle ground that doesn’t really exist.

Prominent critics of the Trump administration need to learn from Gamergate. They need to be prepared for abuse, for falsified concerns, invented grassroots campaigns designed specifically to break, belittle, or disgrace. Words and concepts will be twisted, repackaged and shared across forums, stripping them of meaning. Gamergate painted critics as censors, the far-right movement claims critics are the real racists.

Perhaps the true lesson of Gamergate was that the media is culturally unequipped to deal with the forces actively driving these online movements. The situation was horrifying enough two years ago, it is many times more dangerous now.

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