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ARTICLE

Blurring the boundaries: Using Gamergate to examine "real" and symbolic violence against women in contemporary gaming culture

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Abstract

Recent controversies in gaming culture (i.e., Gamergate) highlight the lack of attention devoted to discussions of actual violence women experience in gaming. Rather, the focus is often situated on in-game violence; however, we must extend discussions of in-game violence and increased aggression to account for the "real world," violent, realities of women as gamers, developers, and even critics of the medium. As such, we provide context with a brief introduction to the events of Gamergate. We then discuss the connections between the continued marginalization of women both in video games and in "real life." Drawing from a range of sociological and ludological research, especially Bourdieu and Wacquant's conceptualization of symbolic violence, we examine the normalization of violence towards women in gaming culture. We conclude with considerations for future work involving symbolic violence and other conceptualizations of violence. This focus allows for a more impactful consideration as to why and how codified simulated violence affects marginalized members of communities. Using symbolic violence to connect trends within games to the lived experiences of women in gaming communities binds virtual experiences to "real" ones.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent controversies in gaming culture (i.e., Gamergate) highlight the lack of attention given to discussions of actual violence women experience in gaming. Instead, the focus is often situated on in-game violence; however, we must transcend discussions of in-game violence and increased aggression to account for the "real world" violent realities of women as gamers, developers, and even critics of the medium. We must be inclusive of both the physical, digital, and symbolic threats of violence currently being levied against women who critique the hegemonic structure in gaming. Furthermore, the threats of real and symbolic violence that have been hurled at women must be examined beyond individual acts of discrimination and intimidation. Rather, this violence must be explored through the structural and institutional lenses sustaining a culture of inequality that has isolated women and other marginalized groups.

However, there is limited research on the symbolic violence perpetuated on marginalized bodies, women in particular, by the dominant, masculine, elite in gaming culture. As such, these small, sometimes negligible acts reinforce and maintain hidden, invisible boundaries of gendered and racialized hierarchies. This symbolic violence has remained hidden until recently with the events unfolding around the Gamergate movement. As will be discussed, these symbolic acts of violence have permeated in real, physical ways blurring the lines between the real and "virtual."

2 | GAMERGATE: A MOVEMENT, MOMENT, OR AN EVERYDAY PRACTICE?

Gamergate can be understood through a variety of lenses, depending on one's perspective. Centering Gamergate's perspective, it can be understood as the problem of ethics in video game journalism where intimate relationships influence the objectivity of video game reviews. From a feminist perspective, Gamergate can be viewed as the response of the default gamer being forced to accept the inclusion of women and increased diversity in game narratives. Also from this perspective, it is a movement that focuses on men's anxieties over losing ground in a once homogenous universe. No matter the framing, the rallying point emerged in retaliation to the recent increase in feminist critiques of video games and gaming culture (Chess & Shaw, 2015). This "toxic technoculture" and geek masculinity centered itself as a victim in the "social justice warrior" era (Braithwaite, 2016; Massanari, 2015). Whether or not it can be understood as a movement or everyday practice in gaming culture depends on one's positionality within the culture. But as scholars have noted, the culture and subculture within gaming is centered on men, targets men, and is dominated by male perspectives (Gray, 2012). When women breach this assumed norm, they have been previously targeted using symbolic violence, which has been traditionally relegated and contained as isolated incidents between a few individuals. The events of Gamergate, however, revealed that women, especially those who publicly oppose marginalization and symbolic violence, are met with real violence outside of these games. The examples of Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, and Brianna Wu are central to this argument. Thus, Gamergate serves as an example of how symbolic violence can transcend the boundaries of the games into "reality" and has the potential to become "real," physical violence.

Zoe Quinn represents the first Woman who was targeted and experienced violence in both physical and digital settings. She was accused of trading sexual favors with journalists for positive reviews of her game *Depression Quest*. Initially, the target of symbolic violence, Quinn, was shamed for crafting a nontraditional game and for suffering from depression. It was in this context that another act of symbolic violence occurred, this time, from former partner Eron Gjoni via *The Zoe Post*—a website on which he published his experiences with Quinn and claims she had sexual relationships with multiple individuals throughout their relationship, potentially including individuals in gaming journalism (https://thezoepost.wordpress.com/). Quickly thereafter, Quinn became the target of anonymous threats through Twitter and other social media outlets, and in August 2014, she was doxed—meaning her personal information (including address, phone number, and bank information) was published online (Parkin, 2014). These acts of violence jeopardized Quinn's safety, forcing her to flee her home.

Brianna Wu, a video game designer, became another public, high profile target of Gamergate. Wu became a target when she shared a meme poking fun at Gamergate on Twitter. This meme was reworded to mock her instead and came with a slew of death and rape threats. When asked about harassment from Gamergate, Wu stated "[t]he truth is, I'm a pretty visible woman in a very small field. I think they see the changes I'm advocating, and it scares them" (TransEthics 2016). Publicly visible and vocal, Gamergate embarked on a significant campaign to silence her. However, Wu has continued being an active participant in the game industry and an advocate for increasing diversity and equality in gaming.

Feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian, known for her "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games" video series, is the last target of Gamergate we discuss here. In addition to personal attacks similar to those targeting Quinn and Wu, Sarkeesian was accused of promoting feminism that led her supporters to also be targeted. The Utah State University incident of October 2014 is a prime example in which anonymous emails and letters threatened harm to both Sarkeesian and attendees of her presentation. One threat promised the lecture would become "the deadliest school shooting in American history" while another stated "one way or another, I'm going to make sure they die" (McDonald, 2014). In this

case, the threat of violence, and the lack of additional security measures by Utah State University public safety led Sarkeesian to cancel the event. Though no one was harmed, the threat of real violence was significant.

The attacks on Quinn, Wu, and Sarkeesian highlight the current context in which symbolic violence within video games have evolved into threats of physical violence in the "real" world. Though much of what we present here involved threats of violence, as opposed to physical violence, these threats are a form of violence in and of themselves.

Similar to Olson (2013), we use the term "violence" to denote words or actions used to negate another's value or being. It includes blows, verbal put-downs, and insults about the self. "Symbolic violence" includes representations of violence as well as threats "short of blows," physical destruction of objects proximate to or cherished by the other, and containing the other through intimidation or implication that force will be used unless there is compliance (p. 449). Within this framing, violence doesn't have to be actual harm caused; but rather, the rhetoric alone can constitute violence. Just as cultural imperialism forces marginalized groups to exist within a hegemonic structure, women are still subject to the relics of former social orders that rendered the second-class citizens; the remnants of this system are intact.

As such, it becomes necessary to examine women's existence within patriarchal systems, especially when the legal restrictions sustaining those systems have been rendered illegal and abolished. There are specific ways that maintain this gender differentiation and male domination in physical settings including diminishing women's labor, framing women as physical and mentally inferior, and relegating women to certain occupations. Within mediated contexts, the preferential treatment afforded to masculinity is significant and highlights this continuation of symbolic violence.

3 | WOMEN, SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE, AND VIDEO GAMES

Scholars have drawn attention to this explicitly created-by-men-for-men environment, questioning gendered character portrayals that have continued to underrepresent women. Williams, Martins, Consalvo and Ivory (2009b), for instance, argue that videogames systematically over represent males and underrepresent females. Similarly, Dietz (1998) found that of video games that contained characters in her sample, 41% did not include any female characters. Further, those games that did include female characters were reminiscent of stereotypical gender representations with women "portrayed as victims or as sex objects" and even female hero characters were presented as "subordinate to male characters" or sexualized (p. 438).

Other scholars examine the position of these characters within game narratives as well as their power in relation to one another. Miller and Summers (2007) found that video games gender characters not only in terms of appearance ("females were portrayed as sexier and more attractive compared to males" and "were also likely to be wearing more revealing clothing than males") but also in terms of playability as male characters were more often playable compared to female characters (p. 139). They also found that males were often given "more weapons and abilities than females" who were often relegated to supplemental, less active, and often less important positions (p.139). These are problematic representations as they simplify female characters, ridding them of their agency and power, reducing them to decorations or supplements to the important, male characters.

Unfortunately, the imposed invisibility of women does not end in the games (Consalvo, 2012; Jenson & de Castell, 2011; Jenson, de Castell, & Fisher, 2007). Many examples of the underrepresentation of women can be found throughout the gaming industry and gaming events and tournaments, such as major league gaming events (Taylor, 2012). While women are present within these spaces, perhaps more so now than ever, they are overlooked and rendered unimportant because of the presumed maleness of the video gaming culture or spaces (Gray, 2013; Jenson et al., 2007; Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee, 2009a). Even when women are visible in gaming environments, their presence is often viewed as a catalyst for men's access to video games rather than women's access to video games (Taylor, Jenson, & De Castell, 2009).

Casual and everyday female gamers face symbolic violence via the regular day-to-day multiplayer games that video gamers experience. Even though research has shown that some women play video games more frequently than men (Williams, Consalvo et al., 2009a), women continue to be marginalized and othered. In fact, gaming culture has

gained notoriety for its toxicity, with sexist (and racist) language and attitudes permeating the gamers and their multiplayer interactions (Consalvo, 2012; Gray, 2013). Sexist verbal attacks are often instigated through linguistic profiling whereby talking, female players break the assumption that all gamers are male and thus are labeled deviant and punished for this transgression (Gray, 2013).

Female gamers, due to the construction of the gaming space, are often pressured to conform to gendered stereotypes. For instance, Jenson et al. (2007) contend that girls reported only playing gender-inappropriate games when playing with a male gamer. Reducing women's agency also limits their ability to reshape gendered stereotypes as "transgressing gender 'norms' in relation to playing games, occurs most frequently when it is legitimated by male relations (boyfriends, cousins, brothers and fathers) and therefore does not transgress gender stereotypes nor jeopardize normalized, stereotypical feminine identity which is clearly outside of the masculine culture of video gameplaying" (Ibid, p.175).

Women's agency is limited within the gaming context, as the gaming culture seems to relegate them to the same supplementary positions their character counterparts are positioned in. Interestingly, men do not seem to be limited to, or penalized for breaking, gendered stereotypes as Jenson, Taylor, de Castell, and Dilouya (2015) find that they may engage in sex-swapping or playing as a character not of one's own sex. Men actually seem to sometimes benefit from playing as female characters, whereas women are punished if they are revealed to be sex-swapping (Jenson et al., 2015). These examples should help situate the phenomenon known as Gamergate less as a temporary, cultural hiccup in gaming culture, and rather as a normal operating procedure that has always existed and has been illuminated by social media having direct access to these once isolated individuals within gaming.

This everyday practice of gender differentiation and male domination has normalized symbolic and real violence in the lives of women in gaming culture, and it is important to privilege women's resistance practices to this domination. Women within these gaming publics do not just exist within this oppressive structure; they have implemented a variety of coping mechanisms and strategies to deal with the barrage of oppression and harassment they are often subject to. As Amanda Cote (2015) posits, women are an active audience and implement a variety of in-game strategies to prevent harassment; some of those tactics include leaving gaming altogether, hiding their gendered identity, avoiding strangers, and even emphasizing a high ranking or prestigious skill level (Cote, 2015).

Women who speak up are often met with even more resistance from the "boys club," and these hypermasculine responses range from the explicit creation of teams to oppose female voices, to the reduction or removal of safe spaces for women to participate in the dominant public, to deliberate reframing of discourse to avoid common ground (Salter & Blodgett, 2012, p. 411). Although most would agree that these acts are not overtly violent, the oppressive nature of this marginalization and exclusion over time has led to the devaluation of women in particular. Summarizing Iris Marion Young, marginalization can be viewed as the process of pushing a particular group to the edge through practices, policies, and through other mundane interactions. Further, through exclusion, the process of devaluation continues, and violence enacted upon that group may not be taken as serious (i.e., Rape culture). So by critically interrogating toxic masculinity and women's experiences in gaming culture, it is imperative to incorporate a discussion on the materiality of symbolic violence.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is useful in understanding how order and restraint are established and maintained through indirect mechanisms as opposed to direct or coercive control. It is a system that thrives on the symbolic transference of oppressive systems from the physical to the digital which are perceived to be legitimate power structures. Those who continue to exist within gaming culture perceive this maltreatment as normalized, so this symbolic violence continues to be enacted while the pervading power relations operate obscured. This often makes them unrecognizable or misrecognized as something else (Kim, 2004). Given Sarkeesian's "Tropes versus Women" YouTube series, highlighting a system that has remained unchecked, created such a break in the normalized system that the backlash was swift and immediate. The unchecked gender imbalance and discrimination that has been ever-present in gaming has fostered a climate of inequality and complicity in oppression.

Marginalized participants within gaming have to struggle and maneuver within a structured system of social positions that has predefined their existence. Within this system characterized by a series of power relations, where positions are viewed as more or less dominant, this reflects an individual's access to status, opportunities, and overall

capital within the space. Capital can take on multiple forms: economic (that which can be immediately and directly converted to money), cultural (such as educational or professional credentials), social (such as social position and connections), symbolic (from honor and prestige; Calhoun, 2003), and physical (the development of bodies in ways recognized as having value; Shilling, 1997). Thus, one's social position and access to equitable treatment and consideration is defined in relation to one's access to the relevant form of capital.

Similarly, when women do achieve positions of power within the gaming culture, these women can play an influential role in promoting the visibility and power of female gamers. For example, Jenson, Fisher, and De Castell (2011) found that women in a gaming club played more, took up more space, enforced rules, and displayed technological competence, interest in games, and knowledge of them when technologically competent female gamers were in charge (p. 165). This perhaps sheds some light on the violent reaction faced by Sarkeesian and the other powerful women targeted as a result of Gamergate. These women provide female gamers with visibility and may potentially shift the balance of power that is currently enforced within gaming culture.

While the controversy of Gamergate continues, it has become evident that there are two key issues. For some, Gamergate is a necessary gamer movement that responds to the perceived death of the idyllic gamer, as well as a cause in which ethical journalism in gaming is championed by the proponents of the movement. For others, who stand in opposition to these individuals, Gamergate is a movement that asserts its stances via threats of violence of varying degrees—particularly to its female opponents (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Dockterman, 2014).

4 | THEORIZING THE WHY OF SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE IN GAMING

Previous acts of symbolic violence have traditionally been rooted in violent representations of women within games, but this has transcended into physical spaces. As noted by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), symbolic violence is "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (p.167). They refer to this complicity as "misrecognition: recognizing a violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such" (pp.167–168). We contend that the symbolic and physical violence experienced within gaming culture is not misrecognized but rather normalized so victims endure its impact and affect.

Bourdieu and Thompson (1991) further explains that symbolic violence is violence embodied in language and images—the subtle forms of coercion sustaining relations of dominance. Symbolic violence is in some regards much more powerful than physical violence or coercion in that it is embedded in the very modes of action and structures of cognition in individuals—it is violence in both seeing and failing to see. It must be understood that systematic violence, and the daily articulation of its symbolism, sustains our economic and political systems. Zizek (2008) argues that in focusing on the overt forms of subjective violence, that is the violence that is most visible—we, as a society, ignore the more subtle, yet coercive everyday forms of symbolic violence that sustain forms of domination and exclusion.

Because of the hierarchy of hidden violence, we must define cultural violence to properly define symbolic violence. As Galtung (1990) explains, cultural violence includes

> *… those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence (pp. 291).*

This definition is useful because it explains the precursor conditions necessary for direct, physical violence to occur. While there may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure of cultural violence, the violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances (Galtung, 1990). This can directly lead to real threats and direct violence. Within digital spaces, as in physical spaces, the focus is on the inequality that causes the structural violence and neglect from institutional structures to curb the violence. This leads to the havoc wreaked on vulnerable populations of people specifically, and this directly is influenced by access, or rather lack of access, to power and resources (Bourgois, Farmer, & Fassin, 2009).

Gender differentiation continues to proliferate in our digital society. So in everyday practices, "female" is code for inferior in many of our social institutions and settings, and gaming culture is included (Krais, 1993). But as scholars have theorized, gender can be recognized as a social construction and a social relation emphasizing the symbolic order of the world (ibid), but these symbolic aspects of the social practice of discrimination and oppression are an essential part to the repression of women in social settings.

The symbolic aspects of the social practice of violence against women have had real ramifications for women in gaming. The concept of "symbolic violence," which was to inform Bourdieu's wider theorizing on power and domination, was developed to explain how social hierarchies and inequalities are maintained less by physical force than by forms of symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 2). The invisibility, isolation, and exclusion of women constitute an effective tool of silent (masculine) domination and the silencing of women (the dominated). Silence must be examined not in the physical act of hushing or not allowing someone to speak; rather, silence is a structural and systemic concern that renders groups powerless. Importantly, symbolic violence, while mostly invisible and ignored, creates the conditions of possibility for other more tangible and visible forms of violence (doxing, bomb threats, and so on). Understanding symbolic violence together with traditional discourses of violence is important because it provides a richer insight into the "workings" of violence and provides new ways of conceptualizing violence.

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