

Parasites to Gaming: learning from GamerGate

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ABSTRACT

I will offer a reading of the different positions occupied by academia in some of the stories surrounding the events of GamerGate. GamerGate is the name given to a series of misogynist accusations directed towards women involved in video game culture. The phenomenon escalated between Summer 2014 and throughout 2015, leading to personal attacks against some of the most popular female commentators who were defending their right to speak. My intervention will take as starting point a comment left on Reddit in March 2015. The thread collected accusations against academia, seen as an institution that spoils and disrespects gaming culture while defending women. The Reddit user contributed to the thread with the following comment: ‘academia is like a parasite to gaming at the moment. They produce nothing, they just try to make money and papers (prestige) off other people’s work. Usually by trying to shred it through a biased perspective that has no real application IRL’ (Reddit.com, 2015)¹

The comment, presented as an accusation against our role and profession, offers an interesting definition of academia. But to understand and accept the accusation we must first define the value given to the parasite, as a producer of ‘nothing’ and exploiter. However, parasites can be of many different kinds. Parasites kill living beings, but are also often vital for others. Parasites are mediators: they establish connections and transformations between already existing things, reframing structures of biological organisms and giving them new shapes, while certainly making something for themselves. From a broader perspective being a parasite is not a bad thing at all. Michel Serres, in *The Parasite* (1982), theorised that the parasite is a key character in the processes of communication exchange. The parasite is an exception or disturbance, it is noise, or the interference in a system. Parasitical interruptions also make the communication system possible, shaping its boundaries while also opening it towards the outside. The question is not whether academics are parasites, because we mostly certainly are, but how we can be good ones.

How can academics take the position of good parasites in relation to GamerGate? Probably, I suggest, by looking at the sources of authority and legitimation that make the difference between the oppressive and the oppressed. For instance, industry experts and journalists such as Leigh Alexander (2014) and Dan Golding (2014) have described GamerGate as leading towards the end or death of gamers, as a unified consumer category. However, justifying the appearance of women in gaming through market data appears as a similarly aggressive argument, one where traditional gamers are replaced by

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other, new and larger consumer categories. Furthermore, similar arguments uncritically replicate the existing structures of discourse that see the medium of the video game as an industry, its texts as products and its participants as consumers.

As noted by Claire Nooney (2013), the history of the medium of the video game has mostly been a *patriarchal narrative*: one where ‘fathers’ of the industry succeed each other and determine the evolution of the medium. But while a varied group of consumers might now be slowly replacing those actors, the structures that have granted authority to the previous category of gamers remain intact. If GamerGate is an event in the history of the medium of the video game, then it appears to be one that changes the role of women as characters in the narratives of the medium, by giving them legitimacy to speak. We are told that women *are happening* in the medium of the video game. But then the question is: who is making them happen? How are women entering the history of the medium? Or to refashion the same methodological question posed by Claire Nooney, ‘why are women in the history of gaming in the way they are?’

We can exercise our role of parasites to gaming by introducing and making differences: between those who are or are given positions of legitimacy, and those who are not; those who establish exceptions and rules, and those who are subject to the judgment of others. We can try to be good mediators and operate transformation and connections between existing discourses, thus producing ‘nothing’ and exploiting the existent but redefining it through our parasitical presence. Stories about the medium of the video game are *not all equally here*. How can we become parasites of the good kind, and question the processes of mutual interaction that make collectivities, identities and conflicts come into being? Ultimately, I propose that we make an effort to question our role and responsibility, by taking seriously the comment that was left for us on Reddit, and directing our production of ‘nothing’ towards questions about how authority is brought about in the contemporary discourses around video game culture.

Keywords

GamerGate, DiGRA, Gender, Cultural Studies, Parasites

ENDNOTES

¹Available at:

https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/2ygk0q/people_are_now_claiming_that_gamer_gate_is_killing/cpa6sjh [Last accessed 25th January 2016]

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