

Gaming's secret public: Nerdcore porn and the in/visible body of the female gamer

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INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the connection between pornography, social media and gaming cultures. It responds to the ongoing skirmish that has unfolded since mid-2014 about the status of women and minorities in gaming culture that has been widely described as 'gamergate,' by considering 'nerdcore' porn in relation to online harassment and toxic masculinity in 'gamer' culture. No neat causality is suggested; rather this paper argues that marking these connections suggests a libidinal circuitry in gaming culture that informs gamergate. Gamergate is ostensibly a 'popular' public backlash against a perceived lack of ethics in game journalism. Despite the 'majority' of gamergate followers claiming that they deplore such activities, the 'movement' has been widely characterized by forms of harassment conducted anonymously by men with women as the targets.

In the 21st century we are experiencing a politicization of absence and presence, of visibility and invisibility largely fueled by the growing significance of informatics and data in all elements of contemporary life (Galloway 2011). Gamergate illustrates something of the stakes of this politicization, as the social media sphere around gaming and gaming cultures becomes a place where for women visibility can be dangerous, while men engaged in gamergate are largely able to remain anonymous, unless they choose to make their presence known. Nerdcore pornography offers insight into the fetishization of the invisibility and visibility of the body of the gamer but as the techniques of nerdcore pornography render the female body an object for the male gaze; it also makes public the peculiar desires of its subject.

Nerdcore is made up of elements from both amateur and professional pornography; it has been developed and is applied by the interplay of these groups which have substantially different motivations and concerns. However, the label does effectively establish a mode of communicating about a pornographic genre characterized by particular forms and aesthetics which crosses the boundaries between amateur and professional. The work of developing this genre is often done by everyday users and takes place in photo sharing sites like Instagram and Tumblr. Work on the curatorial element of social media has suggested that curation challenges traditional understanding of content "creation", a final everyday acknowledgement of the collapse of the distinction between creation and curation in the sphere of art that was first earmarked by Duchamp. Indeed, a radical

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redefinition of the artist is currently taking place as the core conceptions of traditional artistic practice are challenged through collaboration, participation and interaction allowed by digital tools (Alexenberg, 2011). For art critic Boris Groys, the everyday activity of social media curation suggests a new unity between arts and audiences, as through social media everyone is now engaged in practices of 'self-design' (2010, 41). The curatorial dimension of Nerdcore intersects strongly with how users construct the self-identity both in relation to digital games (and other nerd artefacts) and in relation to a constellation of sexuality, desire, intimacy, gender and power, and the genre is flexible enough to provide scope for a wide variety of expressions of self.

The use of gaming to construct particular forms of masculine identities has been noted in previous scholarship. Consalvo's (2003) analysis of the media reportage of the connection between gaming and the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in the USA, argues that gaming provides a space where alternate forms of masculinity can be explored. Digital games provide access to a form of masculinity characterized by competition and skilled performance, using the iconography of masculinity (cars, guns, hunting, soldiers, sports, war etc.), to young men who are otherwise excluded from traditional masculine activities. Furthermore, not only are these gaming cultures serving as unsupervised spaces for developing notion of masculinity, they may also be characterized by a sense of exclusion or marginalization from traditional ways of expressing masculine prowess. These factors contribute to the potential toxicity of gaming culture, where a culture of dominantly white males re-enact exclusionary practices, in some cases to illegal extremes, towards women and minorities in gaming.

Susanna Paasonen (2011) calls porn a 'public secret,' but in the case of nerdcore pornography, porn also provides insight into gaming's secret public: a network of men that have developed a libidinal attachment to technology as an instrument for controlling woman's access to gaming spaces, social media and even offline public spaces through various tactics of harassment and abuse that rely on individual anonymity, while at the same time imagining elaborate fantasies that sexualize and subordinate women in relation to games, gaming culture and gaming history.

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