

Vivian James – The politics of #Gamergate’s Avatar

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ABSTRACT

Gamergate is a decentralised harassment campaign to keep women out of gaming while operating under the guise of being a crusade against unethical games journalism. The harassment is ongoing and has created a climate of hostility and fear in the gaming community which is especially felt by marginalised groups (Golding and Van Deventer 2016). This research observes Gamergate’s avatar Vivian James as another guise in which Gamergaters attempt to rally behind.

Vivian James (a play on “vidya games”) was developed in order to sponsor The Fine Young Capitalist’s crowdfunding Indiegogo campaign for “Women making Video Games for Charity” (2014). Vivian James’ supposed “average female gamer” appearance was constructed to troll “Social Justice Warriors” and reform an anti-feminist image with a ‘not-sexist’ one, since ‘How can Gamergate be sexist if their avatar is a woman?’ Vivian James is championed as the avatar which represents Gamergate as a movement – collectively developing her imagined personality through fan-art and cosplay. While “Ethics in Games Journalism” partly argues that there is no room for sociopolitical conversations within the discourse of videogames, Vivian James – herself – is a sociopolitical projection of Gamergate’s ideals. Vivian James is a politically charged tool and attempts to represent Gamergate as an ‘inclusive’ and sociopolitically aware group.

While Vivian James is assumed by Gamergaters to be the ‘every woman of gaming’, this critical reading observes the masculine performativity (Butler 1990) of Vivian James as a policing of women and feminine gamer identities which contemporaneously unravels the underlying sexist assumptions held by Gamergate. Policing gamer identities in this way reinforces a hypermasculine *status quo* which sees femininity as undesirable and incompatible with gaming. This alienates women from gaming, creates a homogeneous

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and static games industry, and perpetuates the toxic gatekeeping practices of arbitrary hierarchies and intensive regulation of gamer identities.

Her green and purple jumper is noted as a reference to 4chan's rape meme 'Daily Dose' or 'Piccolo Dick' (Know Your Meme Wiki). Similar to Penny Arcade's 'Dickwolves' incident (Salter and Blodgett 2012), rape jokes coincide with gamer slang (used in victory) and encourages a casual attitude towards sexual violence which may form a milieu which perceives victim blaming as an appropriate response to sexual harassment. "Shut up and play" seems to be the repeated slogan of Vivian James, for she is 'a girl who just wants to play video games' – "[s]he doesn't care about rights, agenda, or how you feel [...] she will only speak with you if you grab the controller and play," (Escapist Magazine Forum 2014). This resonates uncomfortably closely to archaic notions that 'women should be seen and not heard'. Moreover, it troublingly expresses the desire for women to stop 'complaining' and drawing attention to the harassment they experience. This dismissal of women is a reminder that it is their presence – not their voice – which is desirable within the gaming community (Salter and Blodgett 2012, 409).

The smoke and mirrors of Vivian James and 'Ethics in Games Journalism' avoid confronting the problems of harassment – even the discussion of (un)ethical journalism. These tactics derail conversations and halt progress while the majority of discourse pivots on whether Gamergate is or is not 'actually about ethics in games journalism'. Instead of critiquing Gamergate's intentions, this research critiques Gamergate's defenses. Gamergate consistently maintain that they have no leader, but Vivian James as a mascot – an avatar – acts as a personified place of worship and point of congregation. Gamergate's sexism is often attributed to 'extreme individuals', however Vivian James showcases how Gamergate stews in oblique, day-to-day expressions of misogyny which all members willingly assemble under. A critical analysis of Vivian James offers a different approach to critiquing Gamergate and the hypermasculine *status quo* of gaming.

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