

## **There is no such thing as a “gamer”**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to examine the identity of the gamer and whether it is still a relevant moniker. Since the 1980s we as a society have operated under the guise of the gamer, when it is not a true reflection of people who are currently playing video games. Studying the statistics for people who are playing games, the kinds of gamers out there and how they have deviated from the idea of the gamer are important in determining whether we should still be using the name gamer. This paper also examines the GamerGate movement and how the actions through that have corrupted what it means to be a gamer and what that has done for the identifier.

### **Keywords.**

Video games; gamer; GamerGate; identity; feminism; gender; race; age.

### **Introduction.**

In 2006, *South Park* released an episode called “Make Love, Not Warcraft” which was intended as a satirical take on nerd culture. In the episode, the main characters are all playing World of Warcraft and find themselves struggling against a griefer in the game. Whilst the characters never see this person, we as the audience do. What we see is what is intended to be the typical gamer, an overweight white male. We are not provided with any more information, but we can make assumptions that the character would be straight and the reason we say this is because this forms the idea of what a gamer is “primarily young, heterosexual, White/Anglo and male.” (Shaw, 2011). This is an idea we see perpetuated throughout media

and it has even led to serious and debate which we saw escalate in 2014 to the GamerGate movement. In response to this movement, we have seen a reluctance to take on the identifier of gamer from members of the community. When we look at who is playing games today, this idea of the gamer is not reflective of the actual demographic. The market is opening up to a new kind of gamer, mobile gaming is providing new opportunities. What it means to be a gamer has changed, the world has moved on from this stereotype and created a more diverse community, despite the attempts of what GamerGate embodied and has created the next step in how people who play games identify themselves.

### **What is a “gamer”?**

When we look to the history of what it means to be a “gamer”, we go back to the start of the video gaming market in the 1980s and 1990s to find that gaming was being advertised to the white, heterosexual, male adolescent boy (De Grove et al., 2015). When the industry was just starting out it had a strong dedication to this group as they became not only the core market for video games, but the base level standard to how it should operate (Fron et al., 2007). It is important to understand moving forward that this became the model of the everyday gamer. This excludes people of other races, sexual orientations, genders and ages. Yet being a gamer is not something that is inherently belonging to this one kind of people, it is a hobby that can be taken up by anyone. With the idea of the gamer as the young white male, it becomes highly exclusionary (Fron et al., 2007). There have been studies conducted into examining what the gamer looks like today and how they hold up against the stereotype, and even though the data shows that the image does not reflect in the people, the image holds strong (Kowert et al., 2014). Together with this idea of the who the gamer is, the types of games being played also relate very heavily to this identity. When looking at the genre of game

associated with the gamer, we most commonly see the genres of shooters, roleplay and massive multiplayer online games (De Grove et al, 2015; Kort-Butler, 2020; Paaßen et al., 2017). Because all of these elements become intertwined, a lot of this comes together to form the basis of the gamer's idea of their own masculinity. The identity and the space in which this play is occurring is a very masculine space, the importance of it grows in a perpetuating cycle (Paaßen et al., 2017). This leaves us with a highly masculinised space and focused on games that will tend to have a violent component. It is a very specific idea of what a gamer is and not at all reflective of that actual demographic of people playing games today.

### **So who is playing video games?**

Trying to find reliable information about gaming can be difficult, especially with the reticence to be identified as a gamer. There is an added level of complexity when there is a portion of people not wanting to be identified with the stigma of being a gamer (Shaw, 2011). The Interactive Games & Entertainment Association (IGEA) is an organisation in Australia that advocates for the video game industry. Their most recent report (Brand et al., 2019) found that the average age of the player was 34 years old, which has increased since their 2007 report which found the average age to be 28 years of age. We are also coming much closer to a parity in gender with 47% of players identifying as female, though it should be noted that this data was collected purely using the gender binary of male or female, therefore a more nuanced data collection could provide for more varied results. Finally, I would like to note that 42% of people aged above 65 years of age reported to play video games. A cursory view of the information gathered shatters the notion of the stereotypical gamer and yet we as a society seem determined to hold onto the caricature that has developed over the years as can be seen in television, online platforms, print media and even the news (Kowert et al.,

2012). A diverse crowd of people are playing video games, yet do not want or think of themselves as a gamer. As we study why people avoid the name of gamer, we need to examine a pushback from within the gamer community to see this definition change - GamerGate.

### **Even the gamers have a Gate moment**

It started with a forum on 4chan discussing allegations made against game developer Zoe Quinn by her ex-boyfriend and exploded into public discourse after actor Adam Baldwin made a tweet with two videos on the topic with the hashtag “GamerGate” (Shaw & Chess, 2016). It was started as a movement protecting the identity of a gamer because of a fear that the core market of the gamer was being diluted through appealing to minorities and feminism (O’Donnell, 2020). When this plays out, it becomes a struggle between one group of people wanting to keep gaming as a male-dominated space against what they see as the other, and then what is actually the wider audience of individuals playing games wanting to be recognised and acknowledged. However, within those wanting there not to be change, we see extremist elements.

When we study the GamerGate movement, we need to understand the perspective of those who were on the inside of the gamer identity during the time. While on the outset this is seen as a discussion about what it is to be a gamer and what that identity is, because of the way the gamer has been shaped previously, it is not just about the association with video games.

Tangential to the identity of a gamer is that of a nerd. Stereotyped much like the gamer, key characteristics of the stereotypical nerd is an understanding of technology, being socially inept and importantly, white and male (Kendall, 2011). We are not just discussing what it means to be a gamer, we are discussing what it means to be a man and masculinity.

It is important to also look at where these discussions were taking place and we can see how it was given the space in which it could fester. Many of the discussions happening around GamerGate started on the message board side 4chan as well as across Reddit and Twitter. Sites especially like Twitter and 4chan have often been used as spaces for harassment (Massanari, 2017) and it leads to very serious levels of action being taken. Zoe Quinn was the main target of the GamerGate vitriol and she notes “As soon as it hit 4Chan, they went into ‘get this bitch’ mode. They started doxxing me immediately, asking who had hacking skills.” (Stuart, 2014). Through the actions of doxxing, which is the public revealing of private information, and constant online harassment, her and other prominent names like Anita Sarkeesian were forced to cancel events and even leave their homes for their own safety. Of course, with these extreme elements, many within the GamerGate community would insist that these actions were taken by individuals not properly associated with the movement (Massanari, 2017). Yet all of these actions are taken within the accord of what the GamerGate movement was representing, with the conflation of gaming and masculinity being eroded with the incoming diversity into the online community of the types of games being made, the people playing them and the people making them (Dowling et al., 2020). The gaming community have come together to create a networked public, but as the GamerGate movement has grown, it has developed into its own new community group. While the people who play games have change, this original core market is holding on to what they believe their identity is so strongly that a divide exists almost to the point of two separate identities of gamer, yet the isolationist GamerGate ideology means they want to be the only ones with the title gamer.

## **The death of the gamer**

Angry Birds was released in 2009 by the team Rovio as a game for Apple products using the touchscreen technology. It is a game about firing birds at pigs and two years later, it has been downloaded over 200 million times (Wilson et al., 2011). Since then, the company has released multiple sequels and other games, all with millions of downloads. Mobile gaming itself is exploding and we are entering what Juul (2009) calls a casual revolution. This is changing the kinds of games we see being made and no longer is there such a focus on what the original core market for video games was. In an interview with game developer Warren Spector, Juul (2009) asked about the change that casual gaming was bringing into the industry and part of his answer highlighted how this changing identity is affecting the industry as a whole, “it is harder and harder to find people willing to fund games that only go after that narrow hardcore audience.” (Juul, 2009, pp 204). At the time of over 200 million downloads, it was shown that 53% of mobile gamers in America were women and there was a gender homogeneity developing (Bouça, 2012). Mobile gaming was opening doors to people to experience and enjoy gaming, and this begins to change who are gamers.

We can look earlier than Angry Birds to the mid-90s with the introduction of ‘pink games’ (Eklund, 2016). Early examples include Barbie Fashion Designer and Cosmopolitan Virtual Makeover, games which were designed and marketed to a female audience. It is important to note here that these are games that fall under their own category. The female game was treated as though it was a genre instead of part of the market, “This kind of targeting distances women from mainstream games” (Shaw, 2011, p.39). Other steps were taken such as the introduction of Nancy Drew games, which broaden the idea of the girl game, but the majority of the games for girls were packaged in pink (Dickey, 2006). Importantly as Dickey (2006) continue to discuss and point out, we need to examine what and whose notion of

femininity is being used as the model for what to make and for who these games are being advertised.

The other end of the spectrum to 'pink games' is the over sexualisation of women. Female characters, playable or not, will more likely be helpless, sexually provocative and in revealing clothing (Fisher, 2015). These representations of women provide a short-sighted and stereotyped view that cannot possibly reflect real life. This can lead to greater tolerance of these attitudes and reflections as being true to life and cause many female gamers feeling forced to hide their true identity because of previous negative experiences when engaging as themselves in gaming (McLean & Griffiths, 2013). Without wider representation, it is difficult to be able to take the entirety of gaming and channel them into a single category to be games for girls. The established gamers could be provided with a variety of options for their games, be it puzzle, action, adventure or any other such category, but girls are either given the single category or made to be a person with whom they share no similarities.

It is not just gender but age that is changing in this new time of gaming. Known as the Skyrim Grandma, Shirley Curry is an 85 year old woman who posts videos of her playing Skyrim to nearly a million subscribers (Shirley Curry, n.d.) and we are seeing studies take place into the socioemotional benefits of playing games for older people (Allaire et al., 2013). We have already seen the rise in the average age of the gamer and now we are seeing the scope of that age really widening. Another aspect of the widening age of gamers is the opportunities for generations of gamers to come together. Older players have been seen in positive lights by younger games for the efforts in playing games, and it also gives the opportunity for those people to connect with younger people through games (Quandt et al., 2009). This coming together works completely opposite to the isolationist quality that GamerGate brought upon the identity of the gamer. Much to the disappointment of those who

do not want to see any change, the idea of the gamer has shifted radically from what was first identified by the market.

### **Can we ever be gamers again?**

There has definitely been a push back to the identity of the gamer as society seems determined to hold up this idea of what a gamer is, even though we have plenty of research to prove otherwise. We have seen people publicly come forward and renounce being identified with what we call a gamer in the face of this growing minority within the identity and the exclusionary culture that exudes from it (Scimeca, 2014; Parkin, 2013). How will the old and new ideas of gamers come together? Chess & Shaw (2015) were some of the academics who became caught up in the GamerGate mess when it first started, were targeted for their involvement in the attempts to dismantle hegemonic masculinity. Yet their work is not an abandonment of what it means to be a gaming and the industry of gaming, indeed they “chose to both dismantle *and* embrace the hegemonic masculinity” (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p.218). What they and other academics recognise is that who we define as a gamer needs to evolve. Moving forward there needs to be more discussion about how the gaming community can include and accept this new idea of a gamer. Kowert (2014) proposes a number of ideas around the steps that can be taken to improve the image of the gamer, such as calling out the behaviour that has caused the identity of gamer to be so controversial. If we follow her ideas, the community of gamers can go through a change to become more accepting and going through a form of rebranding. Whether this will be possible given some of the extreme ideas and practices that grip the gaming community, time will tell. No matter what some people may want, the new gamer fits a new definition, but with a complicated history to the idea of

being a gamer, it may be too much for the idea of the gamer to have any relevance or acceptance.

### **A different kind of future**

In a 2010 episode of *QI*, Stephen Fry shared the fact that biologist Stephen Jay Gould had determined that as fish were so separate from each other that “there is no such thing as a fish” (Fry, 2010). In studying what it means to be a gamer, we can see that the idea of a gamer has changed dramatically since video games took hold of the public consciousness in the 1980s. With so much evidence against what we believe a gamer to be still existing, the idea of the gamer no longer makes sense with gaming becoming such a varied activity done by people across all manners of life. It may be time that the identity of the gamer be retired so that we can find the language for a better, more encompassing moniker or even a variety of monikers. A series of descriptors that could represent the wide spectrum of players from the grandma playing *Skyrim*, to the person playing *Angry Birds* on their phone and to the young, straight, white male.

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