

ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

GAMERGATE: A SCANDAL ERUPTS IN THE VIDEO-GAME COMMUNITY

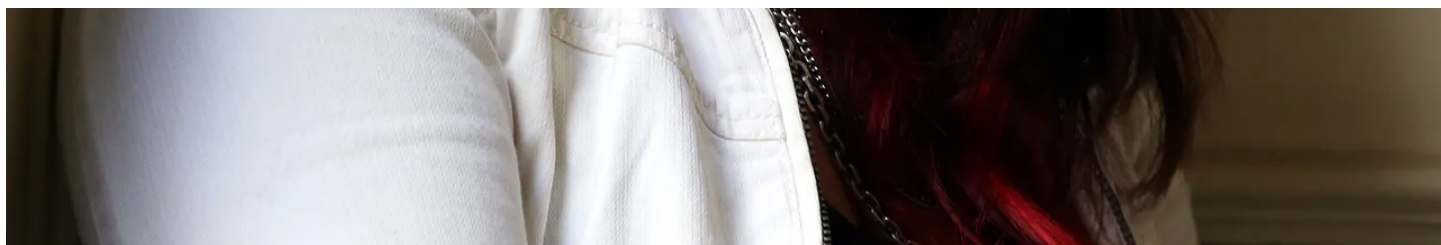
By Simon Parkin

October 17, 2014



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Anita Sarkeesian's criticism of misogyny in video games has made her the target of violent threats. Jim Wilson / The New York Times / Redux

At this year's Game Developers Choice Awards, the closest the video-game industry has to an Oscars ceremony, Anita Sarkeesian received the Ambassador Award, a prize that honors individuals who help the industry "advance to a better place" through advocacy or action. Sarkeesian, a Canadian-American feminist and media critic, won the award for creating a series of videos titled Tropes vs. Women in Video Games, which discuss and challenge sexism and misogyny in gaming. "My ... project was born out of a desire to ... take gaming seriously," she said in her acceptance speech, adding that game developers can "portray women as capable, complex, and inspirational."

Earlier, the award ceremony's organizers had received an anonymous e-mail that stated, "A bomb will be detonated at the Game Developers Choice award ceremony tonight unless Anita Sarkeesian's Ambassador Award is revoked. We estimate the bomb will kill at least a dozen people and injure dozens more. It would be in your best interest to accept our simple request. This is not a joke. You have been warned." The message was just one example of the many threats that Sarkeesian had received since launching her video series. In 2012, the Times reported that Sarkeesian had been sent images showing video-game characters raping her. Her Wikipedia entry was repeatedly vandalized. One man created a Web game called "Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian," in which players could punch Sarkeesian's image and watch her face become bruised. The violent threats have continued unabated; Sarkeesian fled her home in August after a Twitter user posted her address and threatened to kill her.

The most recent incident occurred on Tuesday, when the director of Utah State

University's Center for Women and Gender received an e-mail proposing "the deadliest school shooting in American history" if Sarkeesian's upcoming speaking engagement at the school was not cancelled. The e-mail, which was published online by the *Standard-Examiner*, read, "I have at my disposal a semi-automatic rifle, multiple pistols, and a collection of pipe bombs.... Anita Sarkeesian is everything wrong with the feminist woman, and she is going to die screaming like the craven little whore that she is if you let her come to USU." Sarkeesian cancelled her talk after the campus police, citing Utah's gun laws, refused to prohibit attendees from carrying concealed weapons to the event. The e-mail is being considered as part of an ongoing F.B.I. investigation into threats against Sarkeesian.

These death threats are clearly the work of troubled minds. More mundane and more prevalent are the tens of thousands of messages that Sarkeesian has received that attempt to debunk her work and force her to silence. Speaking to *Mother Jones* in May, Sarkeesian said, "The gaming industry has been male-dominated ever since its inception, but over the last several years there has been an increase in women's voices challenging the sexist status quo. We are witnessing a very slow and painful cultural shift. Some male gamers with a deep sense of entitlement are terrified of change."

Video games have, in recent years, begun to expand beyond the traditional themes of sports, racing, and warfare. The Cat and the Coup, for example, allows players to experience the life of the pet cat of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran. "Coolest Girl in School" challenges its players to get through the day with a period stain on their skirts. This new subject matter has allowed critics, who have traditionally judged video games based on their entertainment value, to broaden the lenses through which they approach a work.

But there are those who wish to close down these new lines of conversation and

creativity, whether by campaigning for the removal of a relatively obscure piece of interactive fiction about depression, or by silencing critics like Sarkeesian who critique games through a feminist lens. Now the fear of change that Sarkeesian has identified (which is ultimately a fear that one's power or position will be compromised) has coalesced into a movement of sorts. Some of its participants have clustered around the banner #gamergate, a cringe-inducing Twitter hashtag popularized by the actor Adam Baldwin. Baldwin, seeking to point out an example of unethical journalism, linked on Twitter to a video claiming that a video-game writer had promoted work by the independent game-maker Zoe Quinn while the two were in a relationship. (This claim that has since been proved false.)

The Gamergate hashtag has been used more than a million times on Twitter, for myriad purposes. Some denounce harassment but consider the tag a demand for better ethical practices in video-game journalism, including more objective reporting and a removal of politics from criticism. (Never mind that Gamergate itself is awash in politics). Critics see Gamergate as a hate movement, born of extremists, which has grown by providing a sense of belonging, self-worth, and direction to those experiencing crisis or disaffection.

The Gamergate movement is tiny relative to the mainstream audience for games, and its collective aims are ambiguous, but it has still managed to make itself heard. After the Web site Gamasutra came under criticism for its connection to the hashtag, Intel removed advertising from the site. (Intel later claimed* that*{: .apple-converted-space} it was unaware of the hashtag when it made its decision, but Gamasutra maintains that this is untrue. Intel ultimately apologized for pulling its ads.) Outside of Twitter, the tag's users continue to organize e-mail campaigns aimed at companies who advertise on gaming Web sites with whom they collectively disagree. Regardless of the aims and beliefs of any one individual using the tag, Gamergate is an expression of a narrative that certain video-game fans have chosen to believe: that the types of games they

enjoy may change or disappear in the face of progressive criticism and commentary, and that the writers and journalists who cover the industry coördinate their message and skew it to push an agenda. It is a movement rooted in distrust and fear.

For those who have found refuge and sanctuary in video games (in virtual worlds that are ruled through fairness and justice, in which everyone can succeed if they follow the rules), the fear is that criticism is the first step toward censorship. They worry that the games that have been meaningful to them will change. Some feel that Sarkeesian, in criticizing games for their misogynistic portrayals of women, is also accusing those who enjoy the games of misogyny. Some believe that they are at risk of becoming an oppressed minority.

Criticism of video games used to come primarily from those who saw them as a shameful, wasteful pursuit that, at its worst, encouraged acts of violence among vulnerable young people. That argument (which has also been aimed at theatre and film) has largely passed. This time, it's the progressive voices from within—the critics and creators who have given their professional lives over to the video games not out of hatred or suspicion but because they believe in the medium—who must be driven out of town.

I have first-hand experience of this mentality. When I wrote about Zoe Quinn's game *Depression Quest* [for this site last month](#), a piece that was commissioned before the coining of the Gamergate hashtag, my editor received a slew of messages from people who disagreed with the article and sought to discredit me by claiming that I had a financial connection to the story. I sponsor several writers with small monthly donations via Patreon, a crowdfunding Web site for artists. Unbeknownst to me, one of those writers, Jenn Frank, had been commissioned to write a piece for *the Guardian* about the harassment that Quinn had endured. This was enough for many Gamergate supporters to denounce my piece as part of a media conspiracy. I can't imagine how much

worse it must be to receive threats against one's life.

Video games, like all art and entertainment, are inherently political; they are created worlds that can't help but express the values of their creators.

Sometimes, those values are reflected in the demographics of the games: in how they represent, or fail to represent, women and minorities, or in the virtual foes they ask players to kill with their virtual guns. Other times, the systems and rules that govern games reflect and reinforce those that we experience on this side of the screen. The political nature of games is not something to fear, or to shy away from discussing. It is in part what makes them so fascinating. Strong criticism is neither an act of betrayal toward a work nor the first step toward censorship; it leads to illumination and improvement.

Those who wish to censor or expel certain creators and critics are often avid fans of video games, but their views are antithetical to its virtues. At their best, video games promote empathy and understanding by allowing us to experience virtual life from another's perspective. Those who stand against honest debate and dialogue may think that they are protecting a beloved pastime, but their actions compromise its vibrant future.



Simon Parkin is a frequent contributor to The New Yorker. His books include "The Island of Extraordinary Captives," which won the Wingate Literary Prize, and "The Forbidden Garden."