



## Why You Need to Know About a Gross Thing Called #GamerGate—And the Women Who Fight It

We can learn a lot about the future of culture wars from a “movement” of video game players angry about efforts to make gaming more welcoming for women.

by Christopher Zumski Finke, posted Oct 22, 2014

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Photo by Shutterstock.

The terrorist organization Islamic State recently released a glossy recruiting video targeted at young men, a fairly common practice for the tech-savvy ISIS. This time, though, was different. The video replicates *Grand Theft Auto 5*, the massively successful—it made over \$800 million its first day in release—and quite violent video

game, and offers gamers the chance to “do the things you do in games, in real life on the battlefield.”

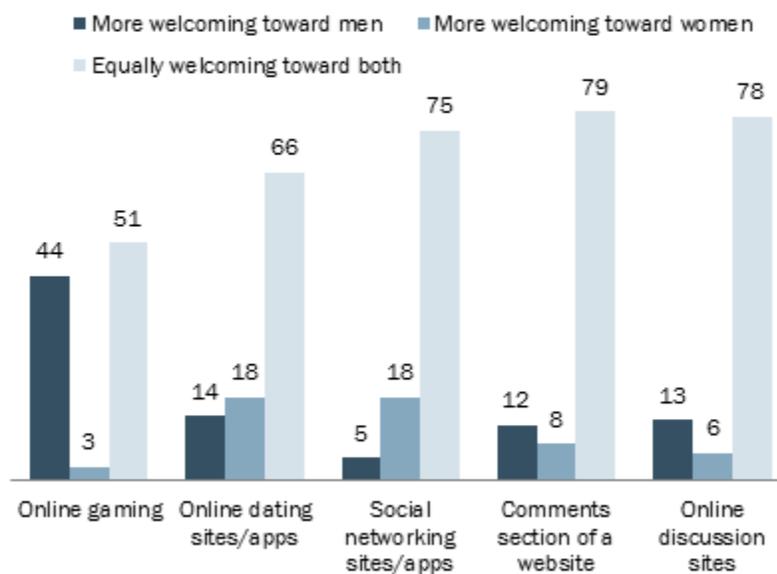
**What we're seeing now is how the mechanisms of a toxic and inhumane politics are being tested and improved.**

That ISIS would attempt to use the Internet to connect virtual combat with the literal kind may seem an unlikely move to some. But those familiar with gamer culture online may be less surprised. Compared with other “online neighborhoods,” the Internet gaming community is the “**least welcome online space for women**,” with 44 percent of participants telling the Pew Research Center that gaming is more welcoming towards men than women. We don’t need ISIS to demonstrate how gaming and culture wars overlap.

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### How welcoming are online “neighborhoods” to men and women?

*Among all internet users, the % who thought the following environments online were more welcoming to men, more welcoming to women, or equally welcoming to both ...*



Source: American Trends Panel (wave 4). Survey conducted May 30-June 30, 2014. n=2,849.

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In the past few months, the hashtag #GamerGate has become a banner flying over America’s current confrontation over feminism, male privilege, and cultural expression. Waged on the Internet, this fight began in the niche forums and blogs

reporting on the video game industry. But since August, the hashtag #GamerGate has appeared in over 2 million tweets, and the fight at last has bled into the mainstream media, with recent segments on [MSNBC](#) and [CNN](#), and a feature in [TheNew York Times](#). There's only so long that a cultural divide this disturbing can live in online anonymity.

## What is GamerGate?

GamerGate is a Twitter hashtag used in an ongoing confrontation among people who create, play, and care about video games. On one side are the supporters of GamerGate, whose professed targets are corruption in journalism, political correctness, and the excessive influence of “radical feminism” in gaming. This group wants to protect video games and gaming culture from interfering forces trying to change the content of games and the identity of gamers (for gamers, games are not only “what people like to do, but [who they are](#)”).



### The Trollslayers

Three women who took on the Internet's misogynistic underbelly—and came out swinging.

The other side consists of game players and developers, academics, bloggers, and journalists hoping to create a more welcoming and diverse gaming community. This group has focused on the industry's treatment of women, both within games and in gaming culture at large.

The split tends to fall along [traditional political lines](#) in the United States. The original use of #GamerGate on Twitter is credited to the actor Adam Baldwin (*Firefly* and *Full Metal Jacket*), whose libertarian politics and disdain for what he calls “Social Justice Warriors” or SJWs, referring to liberal ideologues pushing feminism and progressive politics, has made him a popular figure among many who see political correctness and evil feminists lurking everywhere.

If Baldwin didn't create GamerGate (that's unclear), he certainly gave it the [signal boost](#) it needed to capture the attention of the Internet. It's possible that without Baldwin's support, GamerGate would have remained at a simmer; a fight about an

indie-game developer few people had ever heard of and whether gaming culture could create an open space for women.

**GamerGate is about defending the gamer identity against an evolving landscape of gaming that is intentionally inclusive and diverse.**

Instead, GamerGate has become a much larger story; one that might carry, as Kyle Wagner of Deadspin has written, the blueprint for **the future of all culture wars**:

What we have in Gamergate is a glimpse of how these skirmishes will unfold in the future—all the rhetorical weaponry and siegecraft of an internet comment section brought to bear on our culture, not just at the fringes but at the center. What we're seeing now is a rehearsal, where the mechanisms of a toxic and inhumane politics are being tested and improved.

### **Where did it come from?**

In December 2013, 27-year-old game maker Zoe Quinn created a game called **Depression Quest**, an independent, text-based game about a young adult suffering from depression.

Eight months later, in August 2014, Quinn's now ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni wrote a 9,000-word blog post about their relationship and its end. Gjoni's post included details on five alleged infidelities committed by Quinn. One of these affairs, Gjoni alleges, was with Nathan Grayson, a video game journalist who writes for the website **Kotaku**, which is part of the popular Gawker family of sites. Gjoni suggested that Quinn slept with Grayson in order to receive favorable coverage for **Depression Quest**.

Grayson never wrote any articles about **Depression Quest**, though he once mentioned the game in a round-up of titles and news. Yet Gjoni's blog post and the accusations it made became fodder for debate on forums like 8Chan, 4Chan, and Reddit. Anger and conspiracy swirled over how **Depression Quest** was able to garner so much positive attention, while journalists generally ignored the story of Quinn's affair with Grayson (whether **Depression Quest** deserved the attention it got never seemed to be a consideration).

As a result of these discussions, Quinn's alleged actions became a rallying cry for angry gamers. Though the outrage carried the name of "unethical journalism," their prime target was not the journalist but the developer. Whether or not Gjoni's account was accurate, the perceived journalistic abuse (exchanging sex for publicity) resulted in a protracted hate campaign against Quinn.

Her personal life and sexual activity became a public conversation topic in articles, forums, and Youtube videos. For creating a game and having a sex life, Quinn was subjected to **rape and death threats**. Her father was harassed. Nude photos of her were stolen and distributed. Quinn was also privy to an attack known as “doxxing,” which is the search for and release of one’s personal information online (the word comes from the phrase “document tracing”). At the basic level, this includes releasing someone’s home address and telephone number, but has been known to include bank accounts, passwords, and even social security numbers. After Quinn was doxxed, she left her home and went into hiding.

What happened to Quinn coincided with the release of the latest entry in **Tropes vs. Women in Video Games**, an online video series that critiques the representation of women in video games. The series was created by the feminist cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian, known previously for her blog Feminist Frequency.

This particular episode, titled “**Women as Background Decoration, Part 2,**” goes into quite unseemly detail about the manner in which women and women’s bodies are treated in video games. Sarkeesian has won a Game Developer’s Choice award for her well-researched videos in this series.

Here’s what writer and director Joss Whedon had to say about the episode:

But her opponents believe Sarkeesian uses rhetorical tricks that unfairly label games and gamers as sexist and misogynist. For GamerGate supporters, Sarkeesian is the prototype of the “social justice warrior.”

For years, Sarkeesian has been a target of what is akin to **terrorist campaign of harassment**. She has been on the receiving end of death threats, rape threats, and all manner of violent tirades; she has **fled her home** after her personal info was shared; her image has been used in rape images and pornography. A video game called *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian* was published online. Just last week, **she canceled** a speech at Utah State University after an anonymous individual threatened the “deadliest school shooting in American History” if she was allowed to speak.

**For gamers, games are “not only of what people like to do, but who they are.”**

Proponents of GamerGate will attempt to distance themselves from these sexist, hate-filled campaigns. They will say that articles (like this one) that link GamerGate with online misogyny and terrorizing of women discredit their real concerns about ethical journalism and the dangers of political correctness. They accuse Quinn, Sarkeesian, and others of **falsifying and over-blowing threats** against them for

sympathy and publicity and money. They claim that such threats are the work of online agent provocateurs working to denigrate the real message of GamerGate.

There is a shred of truth hiding somewhere underneath the GamerGate claims. The call for open and honest journalism, in any industry, is hardly amiss. One discovery in the wake of GamerGate was the private listserv known as [GameJournoPros](#). The members of the now-defunct list were professionals in the gaming industry and journalists. Started by Kyle Orland of tech website [Ars Technica](#), the group held conversations that some have interpreted as collusion between journalists and the industry those journalists are paid to cover.

Orland did discuss the Gjoni and Quinn issue in [GameJournoPro](#), and the leaking of those private email conversations has provided GamerGate with ammunition in their accusations about the [insular and secretive](#) nature of video game journalism.

**The scales have tipped in part because of criticism leveled at video game journalism from the inside.**

But these complaints about ethics in journalism are not unique to video games, nor do they justify the actions that GamerGate supporters have directed at Quinn and Sarkeesian.

GamerGate is not about the ethics of journalism. It's about defending a cultural identity—the gamer identity—against an evolving landscape of gaming that is intentionally inclusive and diverse.

“Gamers are over,” [Leigh Alexander](#) writes. “That’s why they’re so mad.”

The gamers carrying the GamerGate mantle call for freedom from outsiders—“social justice warriors” and their crusades to fix games by taking out misogyny and sexism. But by trying to insulate gamer culture from outside influence, gamers enter a feedback loop of sexism and intimidation, waging misogynistic attacks on women who critique the presence of misogyny, or trying to silence their opponents in the name of free speech.

## **#StopGamerGate**

Women and men have spoken out against GamerGate since its inception on Twitter, blogs, as well as gaming and online news sources. Some high profile names in movies, books, and games have joined in. Geek icon [Joss Whedon](#) has thrown his weight against GamerGate. Sci-fi author John Scalzi has [written about GamerGate](#) at

some length. These voices are important for many gamers, and their vocal rejection demonstrates a path against tolerating abuse.

**Zoe Quinn has written about what she learned from being “the internet’s most hated person.”**

Anonymous online harassment won’t be stopped by celebrities alone. Yet, something appears to have shifted in the GamerGate fight in recent weeks.

The scales have tipped in part because of criticism leveled at video game journalism from the inside—by **journalists like Leigh Alexander** and **developers like Brianna Wu**. Wu runs the game development company Giant Spacekatgal, and is the latest woman in gaming to be subjected to the #GamerGate treatment. She has been a vocal critic of GamerGate since its origin, but a series of tweets **beginning October 9** sent her down the same path of harassment and abuse.

Within a day or two, she and her husband had **left their home** as a result of threats they received. But Wu did not go into hiding. **She went instead to MSNBC** to declare that she would not be bullied out of her own industry. She talked to *The Washington Post* and other news outlets, and she had a refrain: “I want to say unequivocally, Gamergate did this to me.”

**“Right now,” Wu said, “the result of #gamergate is this** : Every woman I know in the industry is scared. Many have thought about quitting. Three of us have been the victims of death threats, and some of us have been driven from our homes.

The failure of GamerGate is evident in Wu’s words: Many have thought about quitting; some have and understandably so. But others haven’t.”

Zoe Quinn has made the **news rounds** as well, and written about what she learned from her experience being **“the internet’s most hated person.”** Brianna Wu is still on Twitter, engaging GamerGate and being criticized by Adam Baldwin. She’s still talking to media about the physical danger posed to actual women resulting from this online battle over virtual ones. And she’s still calling out GamerGate’s false flag.

Anita Sarkeesian, too, remains, which is no surprise. Sarkeesian has always spoken openly about the threats she has faced, and lately has increased her presence in the national media, drawing ever-more attention to GamerGate and its basic purpose: harassing women in gaming. On Monday, she **told Democracy Now** what GamerGate is making clear to anyone paying attention: “We have a problem with sexism and misogyny, and we need to do something about it.”

What Sarkeesian and others have undergone in GamerGate would be enough to drive most people out of any industry or business. The police have even recommended that she leave.

But she hasn't. Neither has Brianna Wu or Zoe Quinn. And they're not the only ones. They represent countless other individuals attacked by a campaign of misogyny and hatred hidden in a pretend-movement built on reactionary sexism and the rantings of an angry ex-boyfriend. And they're are still speaking out against GamerGate.



Christopher Zumski Finke wrote this article for [YES! Magazine](#), a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas and practical actions. Christopher blogs about pop culture and is editor of [@christopherzf](#).