Psychology of Popular Media

Who Are GamerGate? A Descriptive Study of Individuals Involved in the GamerGate Controversy

Christopher J. Ferguson and Brad Glasgow

Who Are GamerGate? A Descriptive Study of Individuals Involved in the GamerGate Controversy

Christopher J. Ferguson
Stetson University

Brad Glasgow
Central Lake, Michigan

The GamerGate controversy emerged in 2014, ostensibly regarding concerns over journalistic integrity in the video games industry. However, it quickly morphed into discussions of sexism in gaming following several high-profile reports of harassment against women journalists and game designers. This has resulted in GamerGate being directly tied to sexism in games. Thus, it is common to hear that individuals involved in GamerGate are largely conservative White men motivated primarily by sexism and misogyny. However, few empirical studies have examined the composition of individuals who identify with GamerGate. The current analysis examined the demographic characteristics and social attitudes of 725 individuals who identified as members of GamerGate. Although individuals fitting the constellation of Caucasian, male, heterosexual, and non-Hispanic were more common than those in other categories, only 303 (41.8%) of the sample identified as all of these categories, suggesting many members of GamerGate do not fit the stereotype of a heterosexual White man. Further, analysis of study participant attitudes suggest they tend to hold more liberal attitudes than the general population. It is concluded that although it remains valuable to highlight specific incidents of harassment of women in gaming, caution is advised in using the GamerGate identity as synonymous with such behavior.

Public Policy Relevance Statement
Beginning around 2014, the concept of GamerGate became associated with misogyny, sexism, and right-wing ideology. However, the current evidence suggests that this narrative may have been a mistake. GamerGate supporters tend to be diverse in demographic background and more left-wing than the general population. It may be necessary to decouple the concept of GamerGate from the nonetheless important issue of misogyny in online spaces.

Keywords: video games, GamerGate, sexism, misogyny

In 2014, the GamerGate controversy erupted, focusing international attention to issues related to sexism and misogyny in gaming communities. Exactly how the controversy began remains an issue of debate. Arguably, both criticism of games journalism related to industry conflicts-of-interest and harassment of women in the games industry existed as separate issues (Chess & Shaw, 2015). These issues ultimately converged around 2014 related to harsh, threatening harassment campaigns launched against women in games journalism, the gaming industry, or game criticism. Several high-profile women such as game developer Zoe Quinn (publicly accused by an ex-boyfriend of cheating on him, an accusation that later morphed into wider accusations that she had traded sex for a positive game review) and game critic and feminist Anita Sarkee-

sian were particularly subject to violent threats, doxing, and other forms of harassment (Lewis, 2014). Although several high-profile women were targets of harassment, the harassment was not limited to a few. Even some academics came under sometimes paranoid conspiracy theories (Chess & Shaw, 2015). As a consequence, the GamerGate identity and even simply gamer identity often came to be equated with toxicity, misogyny, and antisocial behavior generally, particularly in games journalism (Alexander, 2014; Golding, 2014). Exactly how the parallel issues of criticism of games journalism and misogyny converged before and during 2014 remains a matter of debate, and it is beyond this article to resolve these historical issues.

Trying to elucidate the exact origins and sociology of a harassment campaign can be difficult. Harassers can be motivated by multiple issues. Some may truly have strong feelings about the particular issue at hand, in this case perhaps true feelings of misogyny toward women involved in gaming. Others may simply troll for the sake of trolling without actually caring about the issues. In other words, some harassers may harass not because they care about women in gaming or are particularly misogynistic, but rather because agitating someone, anyone, is amusing. Obviously, neither of these motivations is desirable, but they are an important

Christopher J. Ferguson, Department of Psychology, Stetson University; Brad Glasgow, Independent Practice, Central Lake, Michigan. No competing financial interests exist.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher J. Ferguson, Department of Psychology, Stetson University, 421 North Woodland Boulevard, DeLand, FL 32729. E-mail: CJFerguson1111@aol.com

distinction in our understanding of the origins of the harassment campaign directed at Quinn, Sarkeesian, and others and how this harassment can or cannot be used to make more general statements about gaming culture or the specific individuals involved in GamerGate.

In the current environment, the GamerGate label is commonly used synonymously with harassment of women, often with the implication that individuals involved in GamerGate are White, socially regressive, heterosexual young men (for examples in popular press, see Horgan, 2019; Romano, 2018; or in academia, see Braithwaite, 2016). A fair amount of research has been done on the potential impact of sexualized video games on players, albeit with unclear evidence for effects (Breuer, Kowert, Festl, & Quandt, 2015; Read, Lynch, & Matthews, 2018). However, in our review of the research evidence, we found no empirical studies of individuals involved in GamerGate. A search in PsycINFO for the term "GamerGate" turned up 26 hits, all but four of which referred to ants. The remaining four (e.g. Chess & Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2017) were largely anecdotal or theoretical in nature rather than empirical. The current study is designed as an exploratory study to examine the demographic characteristics of individuals involved in GamerGate as well as whether their sociopolitical attitudes differ substantially from the general population in the United States.

Method

Participants

Participants were 725 individuals who had experience supporting the GamerGate movement and identified with the hashtag #GamerGate. These were involved individuals who had specifically posted content in support of GamerGate, as explained under Procedure. As such, these were not merely spectators who had supported the movement. Although we will go into specifics on demographics under the results, the majority were male (89.2%) and Caucasian (74.5%). Regarding Hispanic ethnicity, 8.8% identified as Hispanic. Mean age of the sample was 31.27 (SD = 7.10).

Materials

The main survey instrument for this survey was a 55-item survey instrument designed to assess the attitudes and characteristics of individuals involved in the GamerGate movement. Of relevance to the current study, the survey includes demographic questions related to race, Hispanic ethnicity, gender, transsexual status, sexual orientation, education, marital status, country of origin, political affiliation, as well as experience with games. A number of other items related to participants' use of technology and experience with GamerGate were also included in the survey. Because most of these did not directly relate to the current article's purposes, these are not reported, but complete survey data will be provided on request. A copy of the full survey can be found at https://imgur.com/a/tnMlk.

In relation to social attitudes, the survey instrument contained six items related to social attitudes, ranging from gay marriage to marijuana legalization and global warming. These items were adapted from the Pew Research study on political typology (Pew Research Center, 2014). These items were binary in nature, requiring participants to choose between two opposing positions, one

more liberal, one more conservative. For most questions, the wording and scoring was such that lower scores indicated endorsement of more liberal views (the exception was for support of affirmative action, wherein the answer choices were in the opposing direction). Two other social items in the survey (on the death penalty and transgenderism) were not included in the Pew Research study and, as such, were not analyzed in this study. Comparisons of mean scores for the current sample with similar questions in the Pew Research study allow for comparisons between the sample of GamerGate supporters and a representative general population sample. Lastly, the survey included two Likert-scale items related to the perception that video games portray women and racial minorities negatively. These were summed (α = .721) to create a single negative gaming portrayal scale.

Procedure

Respondents for the survey were recruited from the primary locations where GamerGate supporters congregate: Twitter and Kotaku in Action, a forum created specifically to support GamerGate on the popular Reddit forum site. Recruitment began on December 3, 2015, and ended on January 31, 2016. Respondents were told that the survey was an effort to understand more about the people who support GamerGate. Because supporters commonly voiced concerns about anonymity throughout the movement's history, special attention was made to assure the respondents that their responses would be kept confidential.

To sign up for the survey, potential respondents had to send an e-mail or a private Twitter direct message to the survey administrator (Brad Glasgow). To eliminate possible brigading (e.g., advocates against GamerGate giving false responses to cast the movement in a negative light), potential respondents were informed that they needed to show support of the GamerGate movement at least 1 month prior to the announcement of the survey. To register for the survey, they needed to provide to the administrator a valid e-mail address as well as a link to a public posting they made in support of GamerGate. These public posts were mostly tweets from Twitter or posts on the Kotaku in Action subreddit, though a few respondents also displayed public support of GamerGate on Voat, a Reddit alternative, as well as Google+.

Each response was manually verified to ensure true support of GamerGate at least 1 month prior to the survey announcement. On Twitter, this was largely easy due to the use of the #GamerGate hashtag. The most common tweet supplied was a mass tweet that was coordinated through the Thunderclap page, where a large number of users can sign up to send the same tweet at the same time, maximizing visibility. An example of such a tweet reads as "I support ethics in gaming journalism, creative freedom and inclusiveness. Thndr.it/iCHmTe4 #GamerGate #notyourshield."

For supporters who did not use Twitter, the verification process was slightly more complex because they do not use a hashtag as an indicator of support. For those users, posting on the Kotaku in Action subreddit was itself seen as a major indicator of true support because users are explicitly warned that by posting in the subreddit they open themselves up to automatic banishment from other subreddits opposed to GamerGate.

Although posting the #GamerGate hashtag on Twitter and posting on Reddit despite possible repercussions were seen as leading indicators of support, special care was given to ensure that the

potential respondent's messaging was in line with common GamerGate movement goals. For those who did not show clear support with a single message, the respondent's posting history was examined for themes consistent with the GamerGate movement: criticism of gaming journalism, anticensorship, antifeminism, and/or messaging that disagreed with "social justice" issues were taken as indicators of true support.

Few potential respondents were unable to prove explicit support for GamerGate. In total, 827 potential respondents successfully signed up for the survey. Before the survey, the respondents were randomized, and 20% were sent an e-mail to verify that they were indeed the owner of the e-mail account and had signed up. A total of four were unable to verify, and they were removed from the sample.

Respondents who signed up after the survey went live also had to verify their e-mail addresses and accounts by sending the administrator a message through their Twitter or Reddit account that had been sent to their e-mail address. A total of 88 respondents signed up while the survey was live.

The survey was conducted on the SurveyMonkey website. All settings to ensure respondent privacy were turned on. To further protect from brigading, each respondent received an e-mail through SurveyMonkey with a unique link that allowed only one respondent to answer.

The survey went live in the early evening on Wednesday, January 27, 2016, and lasted until midnight on Sunday, January 31. In total, 725 respondents, or 87.7% of those who successfully registered, completed or partially completed the survey.

Results

Demographic Details

Our first research question regarded the degree to which GamerGate involved individuals could be said to conform to a specific demographic, particularly heterosexual White men as may often be assumed (Valenti, 2014). These data are presented in Table 1. As can be seen though for each category of White, male, and heterosexual, individuals in that category were, indeed, in the majority, such majorities were not necessarily overwhelming, and significant minorities of individuals were outside these majority groups.

We also conducted a frequency count of those individuals who were limited to the stereotypical White, non-Hispanic heterosexual male. Although individuals fitting the constellation of Caucasian, male, heterosexual, and non-Hispanic were more common than other categories, only 303 (41.8%) of the sample identified as all of these categories, suggesting that this stereotypical association with GamerGate is true for only a minority of actual participants. Although exact comparisons to gamers more generally are difficult to come by, these numbers appear to be reasonably consistent with data on gamers. According to the Pew Research Center, gamers tend to be ethnically diverse, skew young and male outnumber females as self-identified "gamers." Specifically, 15% of men of all ages identify as gamers versus 6% of women (Pew Research Center, 2015). Compared with the general populace, according to the U.S. Census data, roughly 29.7% of individuals living in the United States identify as White non-Hispanic. GamerGate supporters are slightly more likely to identify as White non-Hispanic males than the general public, with gender being the most pro-

Table 1

Demographic Breakdown of GamerGate Participants

Variable	Percentage
Gender	
Male	89.2
Female	10.8
Trans status	
Yes	3.0
No	97.0
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	74.1
Homosexual	4.0
Bisexual	16.7
Asexual	2.2
Pansexual	1.3
None of the above	1.7
Race	
White/Caucasian	74.5
Black/African	2.8
Indigenous	0.4
East Asian	3.6
South Asian	1.2
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.7
Middle Eastern/Arabic	1.4
Multiracial	10.5
Other	5.0
Hispanic ethnicity	
Yes	8.8
No	91.2
Political views	
Extremely liberal	7.8
Liberal	35.1
Slightly liberal	19.6
Moderate	23.6
Slightly conservative	7.0
Conservative	5.7
Extremely conservative	1.3

nounced demographic difference. However, the difference appears far smaller than the narratives equating GamerGate almost entirely with White men. Unfortunately, data were not available on sexual orientation for gamers or in Census data.

Comparison to the U.S. Population

Regarding whether the current population of GamerGate supporters differed from the U.S. population regarding political views, one-sample t tests were used with the national results from the Pew Research Center on political typology used as criterion values. Results are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, on each of the examined variables, the attitudes of individuals who identified with GamerGate were to the political left of the mainstream U.S. population.

Predicting Concerns About Portrayals of Women and Minorities

Lastly, to examine the issue of negative portrayals or women and minorities in games, we ran an ordinary least squares regression with concerns about portrayals as the dependent variable and sex, age, political beliefs, and gaming hours as predictors. None of the predictors were statistically significant, nor did they reach effect sizes that were nontrivial.

Table 2

Comparisons Between GamerGate and the U.S. Population on Social Values

Issue	GamerGate mean	U.S. population mean	*t* test	*p* value
Global warming[a,b]	1.17	1.44	18.86	<.001
Affirmative action[b]	1.84	1.52	23.40	<.001
Marijuana legalization[a]	1.10	1.38	25.31	<.001
Gay marriage[a]	1.05	1.32	33.11	<.001
Abortion[a]	1.09	1.37	25.52	<.001
Universal healthcare[a]	1.22	1.47	15.74	<.001

Note. Results should be interpreted with caution. In each case, with the exception of affirmative action, a lower score indicates greater agreement with more traditionally liberal or progressive perspectives.
[a] Lower values indicate more support. [b] Somewhat different wording used in the Pew and current survey questions.

Discussion

Concerns about an association between GamerGate and misogyny toward women in the gaming industry reached international attention in 2014. Despite this, few empirical studies have examined the GamerGate phenomenon. Although GamerGate is sometimes portrayed as largely populated by more conservative White males, few studies have examined the demographics of GamerGate supporters. Although entirely descriptive in nature, ours is one of the first studies to examine some of the demographic parameters of GamerGate. Our results suggest that contrary to some of the narratives, the demographics and attitudes of GamerGate supporters are more complex and nuanced than often portrayed. We note specifically that it is not the purpose of this article to either support or condemn the GamerGate movement, but merely to provide more data on its characteristics.

Although heterosexual White males are the most common group of individuals among GamerGate supporters, they are actually in the minority compared with individuals who do not fit within this stereotypical group. Indeed nontrivial numbers of women and homosexual and non-White individuals are included among GamerGate supporters. This conflicts with the image of Gamer-Gate as almost exclusively populated by heterosexual White males.

Related to sociopolitical orientation, the current sample of individuals who identify with GamerGate tended to endorse views that appear to be to the political left of the general U.S. population. This, again, conflicts with the common view of such individuals as socially regressive. By contrast, individuals who identify with GamerGate tend to lean toward socially liberal or progressive views.

Taken together, it appears that the stereotypical image of GamerGate as White, male, heterosexual, socially regressive individuals is more a stereotype than an accurate portrayal. We question whether portraying GamerGate in such terms is likely to constructively add to debates about the social environment of gaming. Naturally, more research is certainly welcome.

Further research on GamerGate may be challenging, given the degree to which GamerGate is something of an amorphous construct. However, particularly using an online format, it should be possible to identify samples of individuals who identify with GamerGate. Thus, it should be possible to conduct further studies

to examine issues such as misogyny or attitudes toward women and girl gamers among this population. We express that caution should be used in making negative attributions about GamerGate individuals until such time as these data become available.

Ultimately it appears that the common narrative associating GamerGate with right-wing, regressive White men (Braithwaite, 2016; Horgan, 2019; Romano, 2018) is not supportable, given the current data. Indeed, GamerGate supporters appear to be more left-wing than the general public and also diverse in terms of race, gender, and other demographic variables than is often assumed. Thus, it is interesting to consider how the narrative evolved to equate GamerGate with alt-right, misogyny, and other negative social ideologies. GamerGate criticisms of games journalism heated up concurrently with high-profile harassment campaigns of women in the games industry and overlapped very specifically in the case of Zoe Quinn. Thus, anecdotal evidence may have created a classical conditioning opportunity to associate the two phenomenon together, even if spuriously. Further, we observe that gamers appear to be, as a cultural force, historically subject to prejudice of their own (Kowert, Festl, & Quandt, 2014). As such, GamerGate may have served as an opportunity for some to promote gamer culture as "toxic" while simultaneously signaling their own moral virtue. This is not to say gamer culture is without toxic elements but that is true for any cultural group (not excluding academic culture). Thus, we express that it may be of value that academics themselves consider their own prejudices when dialoguing on gamer culture and whether these are derived from good data or based on anecdotes and assumptions. Passionately held views, in particular, may be among the least reliable.

One issue we note is that most discussions of GamerGate tend to be binary, reflecting either die-hard supporters or critics, the latter of which tend to most often associate GamerGate with the alt-right or other regressive traits. This is also true for academic works that tend to be anecdotal or critical rather than empirical. This is not to say such works are without value, but increased availability of empirical data would be welcome. Our analyses suggest that the narrative equating GamerGate with misogyny or repressive attitudes may not be satisfactory and a more nuanced dialogue may be warranted. For instance, in one recent study, time spent gaming was unrelated to sexual harassment, but self-identified gamer status was (Tang, Reer, & Quandt, 2020). However, this effect was rather small ($\beta = .18$), meaning that game identity was associated with on 3.24% of the variance in sexual harassment. Although such small effects need not be dismissed altogether, neither should they be used to imply that misogyny is a core or even common element of gamer identity.

We also wish to be clear that our results should not be interpreted as dismissive of real incidents of misogyny and harassment toward women in the game industry, broadly defined. It is clear that many women have been the target of harassment campaigns. Although such antisocial behaviors are often interpreted through the lens of gender power, it is not always clear whether gender politics are the driving force for such behaviors. For instance, some trolling for the sake of trolling may be occurring without those individuals engaged in antisocial behavior adhering to any deeply held set of values, hateful or otherwise. Engaging in empirical analyses of anonymous Internet trolls and haters is, by definition, a fraught process. However, assuming that such behaviors are informative of larger societal gender attitudes or those

among male gamers may themselves be fraught. Nonetheless, efforts to distinguish Internet trolls from GamerGate as well as to examine for any overlap would be welcome.

As with all studies, ours has limitations that are worth noting. Although our sample was designed to tap into adherents of the GamerGate movement, naturally our sample could be limited by self-selection and other biases. Second, our survey is entirely descriptive and exploratory in nature, and no causal attributions can be made. Third, two of the attitudinal questions differed from their originals in the Pew database. Although we are confident that the differences between this sample and the U.S. population are real, these analyses should naturally be considered with some caution.

Debates regarding the issue of GamerGate and misogynistic behavior directed toward women in the games industry are unlikely to abate anytime soon. Indeed, they should not. Tackling the issue of misogyny in gaming culture is worthwhile. We personally support an egalitarian environment for all players regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, and so forth. Likewise, we support efforts geared toward better representations of female characters in games. However, claims made about GamerGate and gamers more generally should themselves be based in good empirical data, lest further prejudicial stereotypes be promoted. We hope that our study presents one modest step in the development of such data.

References

Alexander, L. (2014). Gamers don't have to be your audience: Gamers are over. *Gamasutra*. Retrieved from http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_your_audience_Gamers_are_over.php?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=tumblr

Braithwaite, A. (2016). It's about ethics in games journalism? Gamergaters and Geek masculinity. *Social Media and Society*. Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672484

Breuer, J., Kowert, R., Festl, R., & Quandt, T. (2015). Sexist games=sexist gamers? A longitudinal study on the relationship between video game use and sexist attitudes. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 18,* 197–202. http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2014.0492

Chess, S., & Shaw, A. (2015). A conspiracy of fishes, or, how we learned to stop worrying about #GamerGate and embrace hegemonic masculin-ity. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 59,* 208–220. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917

Golding, D. (2014). *The end of gamers*. Retrieved from http://dangolding.tumblr.com/post/95985875943/the-end-of-gamers

Horgan, C. (2019). No one is silencing the far-right: It's louder than ever. *Medium*. Retrieved from https://onezero.medium.com/no-one-is-silencing-the-far-right-its-louder-than-ever-810584f2f851

Kowert, R., Festl, R., & Quandt, T. (2014). Unpopular, overweight, and socially inept: Reconsidering the stereotype of online gamers. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 17,* 141–146. http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2013.0118

Lewis, H. (2014). A quest for understanding. *The Lancet Psychiatry, 1,* 341. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)70386-4

Massanari, A. (2017). #Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New Media and Society, 19,* 329–346. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1461444815608807

Pew Research Center. (2014). *Beyond blue and red: The political typology*. Retrieved from http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/26/the-political-typology-beyond-red-vs-blue/

Pew Research Center. (2015). *Who plays video games and identifies as a "gamer"?* Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/12/15/who-plays-video-games-and-identifies-as-a-gamer/

Read, G. L., Lynch, T., & Matthews, N. L. (2018). Increased cognitive load during video game play reduces rape myth acceptance and hostile sexism after exposure to sexualized female avatars. *Sex Roles, 79,* 683–698. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0905-9

Romano, A. (2018). How the alt-right's sexism lures men into white supremacy. *Vox*. Retrieved from https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/14/13576192/alt-right-sexism-recruitment

Tang, W. Y., Reer, F., & Quandt, T. (2020). Investigating sexual harassment in online video games: How personality and context factors are related to toxic sexual behaviors against fellow players. *Aggressive Behavior, 46,* 127–135. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ab.21873

Valenti, J. (2014). GamerGate is loud, dangerous and a last grasp at cultural dominance by angry white men. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/21/gamergate-angry-men-harassing-women