

“SHUT UP AND PLAY”: VIVIAN JAMES AND THE PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN GAMING CULTURES

Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt, The University of Sydney
Thomas Apperley, Deakin University

Content warning: This paper contains discussion of sexual violence.

INTRODUCTION

A widely adopted fallacy is that the internet creates an inherently egalitarian utopia for online communication and communities. One consequence of this fallacy is that online interactions are considered gender-neutral, and that questions of gender equity in online communities are irrelevant. Conversely, early digital theorist Sean Cubitt has argued that a characteristic of online cultures is the rapid importation and re-inscription of pre-existing hierarchies.¹ In the case of videogames, notions of masculinity quickly became predominant in early gaming cultures in both the USA² and the UK³. The form of masculinity that was developed was in opposition to dominant forms of masculinity,⁴ creating a culture of the underdog where gamers were united against threats to their hobby from those ‘outsiders’ that did not ‘get’ videogames. This chapter addresses how recent controversies, namely *#gamergate*, have highlighted the need for gaming cultures to escape this highly limiting ‘us’ and ‘them’ model. This mindset of ownership and exclusion, and the dominance of a particular cultural of use and creation is a key area of digital culture that demands interrogation, as it limits the possibilities of games as a medium, and the impact of the technology as a medium for education, development, and diverse expression, because it can only include women and girls on the strictest behavioural caveats. The inclusion of women is based on an implied presupposition that they accept the heteronormative and male dominated status quo.

This chapter examines the sexism and misogyny embedded in #gamergate through a case study of the figure of Vivian James. Vivian James is a crowd-sourced game avatar, who also appears as a fictional character in several genres of communication, mostly widely in fan art. Through a visual analysis of Vivian James, this chapter marks out the everydayness of the normative policing that is championed by #gamergate, which is underwritten by the threat of sexual violence. We will begin by providing a brief introduction to #gamergate, before moving to more detailed analysis of Vivian James herself, and how she represents the constant threat of violence for outspoken women in gaming cultures.

#GAMERGATE

The events which constituted #gamergate were an intensification of the hostility towards women which was already an unfortunate element in gaming cultures. The events which occurred and the aftermath need to be contextualised against a long history of anti-women activities within this predominantly masculine hobby. Since the advent of smartphones and the emergence of popular and influential social and mobile games in the past decade, gaming cultures have been increasingly opened to women. The games industry has come to understand the importance of women as consumers, and more women have been encouraged to join the games industry as designers, developers and critics. Although gender parity is yet to be achieved these changes were viewed largely as positive steps by players and the games industry. However scholars also noted that this new inclusion of women in games culture as game players, developers and tastemakers was on particular terms. The “new gaming public” which included women, was quick to exclude any women who were critical of gaming culture, particularly those who spoke out against sexism in game cultures and the game industry.⁵ As women like Zoë Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, and Brianna Wu became more prominent and included in the industry, and influential in gaming cultures through crowd-funding their own projects, some male gamers saw their presence as an attack on games and gamers themselves. Sarkeesian’s work as a critic of the games industry was singled out at first as she was particularly critical of how the game industry portrayed women in games.

However, it was a specific event which precipitated the intensification of anti-woman sentiment, which quickly became known as #gamergate. This started with the deliberate and public ‘slut-shaming’ of Zoë Quinn, a game developer famous for the innovative empathy game *Depression Quest*. At 12:42 a.m. on 16th August, 2014, her ex-boyfriend posted a 9,425-word blog post—titled “The Zoë Post”—about their relationship.⁶ Methodically designed to inflict the most personal and professional damage on Quinn, the post was quickly shared and discussed on social media, particularly on 4Chan forums, which were notorious

for coordinating anti-woman harassment.⁷ The wide circulation of “The Zoë Post” prompted anonymous users to begin conspiring to coordinate attacks against Quinn in IRC chat rooms.⁸ It was seen as evidence of a widespread feminist conspiracy behind the recent progressive shifts in gaming that were being pushed from outsiders to gaming culture.⁹ This triggered outrage and a demand for coordinated retaliation against the infiltration of ‘political correctness’ that was dictated by feminists and their supporters who did not ‘get’ gaming culture. Angry gamers, incited by “The Zoë Post,” and conspiratorial commentaries began to target other high-profile women in the games industry including developer Brianna Wu, and game critic Anita Sarkeesian. The criminal acts that were documented during the harassment campaign included doxing,¹⁰ swatting,¹¹ death threats, rape threats, bomb threats, and a university massacre threat.¹² These life-threatening crimes against prominent women in games created a hostile environment for women gamers more generally, as it highlighted the precarity of their inclusion in gaming culture and vulnerability to harassment and further, more serious, crimes.

A key issue for people that supported these attacks was the notion that “The Zoë Post” revealed a conspiracy by left-leaning and feminist game journalists and critics to force change in the games industry. By August 27, conservative actor Adam Baldwin had coined the hashtag “#GamerGate” to reference the so-called scandal.¹³ The perceived collective of outsider feminists and their supporters were disparagingly dubbed “Social Justice Warriors.”¹⁴ While many parties actively involved in the #gamergate harassment of women presented themselves as motivated by a demand for ethics in game journalism, scholarly consensus has found that, rather than a cohesive movement calling for ethical practices, #gamergate is a decentralized harassment campaign that prevents women from working in the games industry and enjoying gaming as a pastime.¹⁵ This harassment creates an overarching climate of hostility and fear in the community, especially among women and other marginalized groups.¹⁶

The emergence of #gamergate merely reflects a wider problem of systemic sexism pervasive in the games industry and gaming cultures. Early gaming cultures were largely male dominated, and over time sexism and misogyny have been normalized to be almost unremarkable. The events of #gamergate is one of various anti-feminist guideposts throughout an already extensive history of harassment towards women¹⁷ and hegemonic masculinity¹⁸ that shapes the everyday experiences of female players, and convinces many potential players that gaming is ‘not for them’. For some gamers, gaming and game cultures had become a space where they could continue to escape from mainstream masculinity,¹⁹ such as sports, while still enacting “their private, escapist power fantasies.”²⁰ In game cultures, young men could embrace their underdog status, while also ignoring the progressive politics which

had impacted to a greater or lesser degree on almost every other element of public life. One of the key challenges for activists and scholars in the wake of #gamergate is to recontextualize the ‘naturalness’ of gaming as a male-dominated sphere. Destabilizing the hierarchical and binary thinking of “us” (traditional demographic of male gamers) and “them” (effectively anyone else — newer female gamers, but also non-white and genderqueer gamers) supports the diversification of gaming culture by opening it to multifarious participation.

CONFIGURING VIVIAN JAMES

The figure of Vivian James is an important one for #gamergate because it demonstrates the forms of inclusion that they believe are appropriate for women in gaming culture. In the wake of the controversy it offers an important perspective on the pervasive anti-woman attitudes in game cultures which drove the events. To recognise that the operation of sexism in these spaces can be both brutal and opaque, and subtle and insidious. Vivian James demonstrates the everyday and mundane sexism that is pervasive in some elements of gaming culture, and impacts on the everyday experiences of women gamers and women in the games industry.

The character, figure, and avatar of Vivian James was originally conceived as a crowdsourced avatar for the game *Afterlife Empire*,²¹ with her appearance collective configured in order to signal a fantasy of inclusivity, which clearly embodies deeply problematic notions of the place of women in gaming culture. The crowdfunding for Vivian James began shortly after the circulation of “The Zoë Post.” A collective of anonymous 4Chan users on /v/ forum decided to sponsor a Toronto based organization *The Fine Young Capitalists* (TFYC) through their crowdfunding campaign in the IndieGoGo platform. TFYC were running a competition supporting women game designers with the proceeds going to charity, and backers of the IndieGoGo campaign were allowed to choose which charity would receive their donation. As part of the highest tier of sponsorship (those who donated \$2,000 USD, or more) the donors could submit an avatar design that would be included in the game. Mobilized through the /v/ forum, the pro-#gamergate 4Chan users became the highest contributors to TFYC, raising over \$23,000 USD.²² As a result the avatar that they collectively designed, Vivian James, was included in *Afterlife Empire*.

The group that funded *Afterlife Empire* and design Vivian James only did so as an expression of solidarity with #gamergate. The /v/ forum supported the IndieGoGo campaign to spite Zoë Quinn, who had publicly disagreed with TFYC earlier in 2014 about the underpayment and exploitation of their female employees.²³ The fundraising project was called “Operation Chemo Butthurt,”

a reference to how part of their proceeds were donated to The Colon Cancer Alliance.²⁴ The reference to ‘butthurt’ in the project had a double meaning, it is both a potentially offensive way of referring to colon cancer, and also in subcultural parlance, slang for someone who is easily, or needlessly offended by perceived slights and insults. The naming of “Operation Chemo Butthurt” follows a common pattern of ‘edgy’ behavior and language among sexist and misogynist gamers: a deliberate provocation of ‘offensiveness’ that is a tasteless and unsubtle, even forced joke that contrives a barrier against accountability.

The design concept that the 4chan /v/ forum put forward for Vivian James as a representative of #gamergate in *Afterlife Empire* (see Figure 1), describes her as:

*Just an average female gamer to troll everyone... All the tards in the media will expect some sort of pedocrap or LOLSORANDOM shit and we will just give them a simple average girl.*²⁵

Consistent throughout the conceptualization of Vivian James was a logic that, by virtue of the designed avatar possessing female qualities, it could not be seen as sexist. The assumption among the funders and supporters of the IndieGoGo campaign, was that a combination of their support for the TFYC women in games competition, together with the design of Vivian James herself would reform the sexist and misogynist reputation that #gamergate supporters had aptly acquired through media coverage.



Figure 1

Vivian James emerged from an ad hoc collection of individuals who believed that it was appropriate to harassing female game developers, who also thought that they needed to suggest a more inclusive image for #gamergate in order to avoid bad press. The submission to TFYC describes Vivian James’s personality in a way which reflected their attitude towards inclusion: “Tough-likes video games; Loathes dishonesty and hypocrisy; Low-affect, grumpy, perpetually fed up and tired.”²⁶ She isn’t emotional (“low-affect”), values ethics in journalism (“loathes dishonesty and hypocrisy”) and importantly actually loves videogames, maybe a bit too much because they are keeping her up at night (“tough-love”; “perpetually...tired”).

This particular construction of women gamers acquired a very telling unofficial tagline: “shut up and play.” Her personality and attributes were further developed through various iterations by fan-artists,²⁷ which were shared and commented on in numerous gaming forums. Her personality was whittled down to describing her as *a girl who just wants to play videogames*: “[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.”²⁸ In this respect, Vivian James exemplifies how #gamergate wants women to ‘shut up’ about their negative experiences of gaming,²⁹ and the precarious inclusion that women have in the new gaming public.³⁰ The construction and expression of Vivian James thus provide scope for understanding and unpacking how deeply some men are invested in the forceful protection of what they perceive as ‘their’ territory.

SILENCING AND VIOLENCE

Vivian James is inextricably tied to toxic male cultures attempting to control the public perception of #gamergate, and policing female ‘intrusion’ into digital games and gaming cultures. The carefully designed appearance and one-sided persona of Vivian James promotes a mode of inclusion for women in gaming and game cultures that demands nothing short of the silent acceptance of everyday misogyny. Her unofficial slogan, “shut up and play” (see Figure 2), serves as a strong reminder that it is the presence of women in gaming cultures that is considered acceptable, not their active participation or voice.³¹ Palpably, Vivian James is deliberate manipulation of the media image of #gamergate to create the appearance that it includes women and accepts their inclusion in gaming cultures. But her slogan in particular has troubling connotations, which implies the desire for women to stop ‘complaining’ about the content of digital games and the sexist and misogynist practices of some men in gaming cultures, particularly by seeking to draw attention to the harassment they experience in those gaming cultures.

As self-perceived underdogs, some male gamers feel that criticism, critique or attempts to otherwise reform and/or undermine the carefully constructed “us” versus “them” mentality that can still be found in gaming cultures. The restraint on Vivian James’s vocal criticality suggests women should ‘play’ rather than use their voices to draw attention to harassment and toxic culture more generally. This functions to police the voice of women by implying the act of ‘calling out’ toxic behavior is an attack on the community of gamers, which exposes the underdogs to further criticism. The women who do speak out thus cannot be ‘true’ gamers because no true gamer would ever criticize gaming in this way. To be one of “us” means you must always be with “us”, or you are against “us” and

with “them”. For such gamers, if women want to be included in gaming cultures they should quietly enjoy their hobby without making a fuss. However, how this silencing is enforced has other more significant and concerning implications.



Figure 2

At the heart of Vivian James is the implied threat of sexual violence. A key design element of her iconic appearance is a deliberate embedding of a reference to the ‘Daily Dose’ or ‘Piccolo Dick’, a well-known *DragonBallZ* rape meme from 4chan’s /v/ board. The green and purple stripes on her hoodie are a subcultural reference to the colors of the involved characters. This point is in no way concealed, but is part of the deliberate hostility towards women that was embodied in Vivian James by the anonymous members of the /v/ board.³² Salter and Blodgett have pointed out that rape jokes coincide with gamer slang that is used in victory and serves to encourage a casual attitude towards sexual violence within male-dominated areas of gaming cultures.³³ This casual use of rape jokes forms a milieu where victim blaming is seen as an appropriate response to complaints about sexual harassment. The harassment coordinated against women in the games industry by #gamergate was characterized by rape threats, and other forms of suggesting the possibility of violence and exacerbating their vulnerability to violence through forms of harassment like doxxing. The threat of rape was one of the key tools in #gamergate’s harassment campaigns for silencing women that they perceived as outsiders.³⁴ In the context of gaming cultures, male gamers may feel that they can deny culpability for the hostile environment that rape threats can create, because they are made ‘in play’ with an understanding that they are ‘not serious.’

The power imbalance that underpins the threat of rape pushes such acts outside of the scope of play. Rape threats are “a form of violence in and of themselves.” A playful rape threat, may be written off as a ‘joke’ by the instigator, but the recipient of the threat cannot necessarily treat it this way, as the context that frames the exchange is one of overwhelming hostility, and pointedly emphasises perceived vulnerability. The persistence of rape jokes and rape threats in gaming cultures thus becomes a mode for disciplining women in games who refuse to ‘shut up and play.’ In this logic women gamers should ‘understand’ that the rape threat is just a normal part of gaming culture and not act ‘butthurt’ about it. Thus offering a very flimsy excuse for those #gamergate supporters who might need to justify this outrageous behavior.

CONCLUSION

Vivian James showcases how #gamergate survives and flourishes through everyday expressions of misogyny. Vivian James acts as a “regulatory fiction,” that polices women in gaming, particularly by commanding silence with the implied threat of rape.³⁶ This also suggests the general regulation of bodies in gaming through avatars, particularly what kinds of bodies are used as avatars in games. While Vivian James signals a very specific message and threat to women, avatars more generally are often criticized for the lack on inclusion of different kinds of bodies beyond the white, heterosexual male. While many games now include playable female avatars, they are often designed for the viewing pleasure of a male audience. Even fewer games include avatars who are non-white or genderqueer. These exclusion have an impact on who can see themselves as clearly included as a part of gaming culture.

If Vivian James demonstrates anything useful, it is to emphasize the importance of the avatar beyond a literal representation, as a signifier for acceptable inclusion and active agency. Just as Vivian James acts as subtle yet powerful tool for policing participation, the availability of different avatars in a game can also signal a claim of voice and space in real-world video game culture as much as in the fictional worlds they inhabit. The organization of the funding and design for Vivian James suggests a productive way forward that will potentially allow many different kinds of bodies to be playable avatars, as gaming cultures and communities become more directly involved in the funding and design of games through crowdsourced funding. The success that #gamergate had in using crowd-funding against women, suggests that larger coalitions of diverse bodies may use the same tools to destabilize and dismantle the masculine dominance of digital games.

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Mahli-Ann Butt is a doctoral candidate at the University of Sydney in the Departments of Media & Communication and Gender & Cultural Studies. She is the Diversity Officer for the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) and the Editor-in-Chief of Press Start Journal. Mahli-Ann researches the complex entanglements of online/offline and private/public spheres of gaming culture and its intersections with identity and affective labour.



Tom Apperley is a user experience researcher that specializes in digital games, education technologies, and experimental interfaces. He is an Associate Professor at Deakin University.

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“SHUT UP AND PLAY” FIGURES

Figure 1: Original crowdsourced custom character design of Vivian James created on /v/ for the *The Fine Young Capitalists* and the game *Afterlife Empire* (Autobótika, 2015), accessed from: <http://i0.kym-cdn.com/entries/icons/original/000/016/296/image.jpg>

Figure 2: Vivian James and her unofficial tagline: “shut up and play”, accessed from: <http://i0.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/000/838/944/f70.gif>