

Gamer Identity and masculinity: Narrative and Typologies in the use of the video game

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical Framework

Video games have become the premier cultural and entertainment industry of our times. With more than 3,2 billion players worldwide, video game's influence as a cultural product have become essential to understand the political and cultural scene. Videogames and its community is affected by different political cleavages of our societies. One of the most important is the genre debate and the rise of new far right-wing groups that have made mainstream certain neomasculinist ideas. We argue that this is not casual but rather a symptom of the historical context where the videogame was born and that today is still affecting our societies.

Neoliberalism was the source of huge social, economic, and political transformation that radically changed capitalism and it was also the moment where videogames were first created. But it was also the source of the crisis of the model of hegemonic masculinity that ruled the 20th century (Connell, 2005). A crisis of the gender regime that dictated what was supposed to be the "essence" of masculinity and their rules and a consequence the obsolescence of a specific model of masculinity that could not longer fulfill its role: legitimate and naturalize the existence and running of the patriarchal system. This didn't mean that the system was abolished but it opened the possibility of different solutions to the crisis: those who wanted to abolish it; those who tried to integrate aspects of subaltern models of masculinity or femininity in the hegemonic model that we could call hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014); and those who saw the crisis of masculinity as a subversion of the "natural order" and propose reactionary solutions based on trying to rebuild the traditional gender regime (neomasculinities).

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

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In this context, it started to appear a subaltern model of masculinity, meaning that it tries to become hegemonic or at least win some type of representation, known as “geek masculinity”. This model was based on the mastery of abilities related to the new digital technologies and later on the digital world itself. An alternative to the traditional masculinity that was supported by the traditional association between masculinity and rationality and that pushed woman outside certain technical fields (Connell, 2005).

This new model of masculinity, although it remains subaltern and complicit with the hegemonic one, started to shape from the beginning the digital space and its culture and as a consequence introduced certain masculinist discourse in the “common sense” of online cultures. A process based on the supposition that they were the only legitimate subject and as such they only who could make rules and be represented. Videogames were one of the fields affected by this process, where a hegemonic subject became the guardian and voice of the community. However, is not the only one, in fact, precisely as a consequence of this influence of the masculinist discourse over the Internet, the digital space was one of the first places where neomasculinist group could organize and growth. A whole online micro-universe of webs, blogs, forum and social media profiles or platforms have been growing and trying to develop an answer to the crisis of masculinity by proposing a reactionary solution, this space has been called “man-sphere” (Marantz, 2020; Kaiser, 2022). The man-sphere has effectively integrated neomasculinist ideas in the mainstream political debate provoking that ideas that were too extremist to be even thought are nowadays a perfectly valid position in the democratic debates.

As such, the videogame is historically constituted a space hegemonized by masculinist discourse that call into question the presence and participation of women in their communities by not accepting them as legitimate subjects making them invisible (Kocureck, 2015).

However, the growth of the video game industry multiplied its audience and made their products mainstream. One of the consequences is that certain parts of the userbase saw this as an opportunity to disrupt the historical hegemonic discourses about what video games should be and started to propose alternatives. The genre debate which has existed since the formation of the medium has been one of these disruptions and it has casted doubt on the classic narratives of video games, what kind of profiles has been represented by them. It questioned the position of the hegemonic subject who historically has represented the community, the American young male of middle class

(Jong, 2020), and that have tried to project the idea that there wasn't any other group worth of representation in the community.

The debated has generated genre resistance in some parts of the userbase which have adopted a traditional and technician vision of the medium to develop a gamer identity in order to support the hegemonic ideas that are being criticized. This type of conservative resistances has generated a series of violent mobilisations and episodes against certain groups because of their genre, race, and sexual orientation (Shaw, 2012). And it has also highlighted the relationship between a part of the userbase identified with these resistances and the political movement of the alt right (Nagle, 2018). By alt right we are talking about the new far-right wing groups born in the West, as the alt right itself is not a centralized and unified political doctrine although it has some common ideas: artificial nostalgia for a mythical past where gender norms were fixed and there was racial homogeneity; a rhetoric victimhood and betrayal; the idea of a degeneration of masculinity and the need to re-masculinise the self through the destruction of the feminist movement (Kelly, 2017). These groups are born as a response to the capitalistic crisis of 2008 and try to answer it with a reactionary political plan of defence of the capitalistic system and the attack on political and civil right.

Neomasculinistic and alt right groups both identify a common problem as the supposed source of the current crisis of our societies: the natural order that ruled our lives and made society works has been broken as it was based on a fixed gender regime that feminism along other movements and political-social changes such as the globalization have put into doubt provoking the current crisis. Following this logic, Western countries faces an internal enemy that "degenerate" the essence of the human nature, based on the traditional binary gender regime, which blocks any possibility of human happiness. For these groups the answer to the crisis is to rebuild the traditional gender regime by "remasculizing" men and destroying feminism because it is an existential menace to both society and the human nature itself (Márquez and Laje, 2016).

GamerGate is a good example of this working relationship between both groups as it saw the evolution from a discourse of fighting journalism corruption to the idea of women themselves being the source of degeneration of the industry because they started to put into question certain narratives and logic that were part of the hegemonic common sense. The alt right was able to influence a part of the community by building a discourse based on the idea of defending the community from both inside and outside enemies. And by creating the idea that feminism was an existential menace to the "essence of videogames", the gamer communities, and more importantly masculine

privileges related to an idea of society itself, it legitimates the escalation of violence against women, and it helped to radicalize a part of the community who started to share extremist ideas and the alt right political agenda. This is because thanks both to the tactics of victimhood and the discourse of the risk of degeneration that helped to draw a scenario where a part of the community feel threatened. This is something that later have evolved in a common tactic of the alt right to radicalize people into public acts of violence (Fielitz& Marcks, 2019).

Objectives

The objective of this these is to study the links sustained by the alt right and the neomasculinist groups with certain parts of the video game community. To do that we propose an analysis of how the classic narratives of video games works in the construction of neomasculinist identities and the link of the later with the discourses identified as hegemonic in the video game community.

In this sense, we propose the creation of a few categories of “archetypical” neomasculinist discourses and then use a selected sample of video games, who are both relevant to the mainstream and fulfil at least one of the created categories, to study their ideological discourses. We would also try to create an additional category to contrahegemonic examples that would allow us to discover alternative positions in this genre debate in the video game community.

These categories would be built during the research in two phases: first we identify the axes or key ideas that structure the neomasculinist and alt right discourse from the political theory perspective. Later, we will try to select a sample of mainstream videogames that we can identify as archetypical examples of each category although we understand that normally these ideological axes will be transversal across many titles.

The selection of the sample will be following a criterion that assure that they have effectively been relevant for the majority of the userbase, at least in Western societies where we focus our work, meaning that they have been mainstream. We want to focus in this titles because our premise its to study if hegemonic narratives in the gaming industry have been a possible support for the rise and naturalization of far right wing ideas in the public debate. As such, we want to study videogames that have influenced the” common sense” of the community meaning that we are not going to select more explicit political titles related to niche far right-wing communities, that while could

help to explain the creation and reinforce of these political identities, it doesn't help with our objective. Finally, following our objective of identifying this rise of the alt right, we understand that the sample should only contain videogames published between 2008-2016, the time between the crisis that generated these groups and their rise to power identified first with Trump's victory in 2016. While we understand that games published after this date might give us more information on certain discourses, we argue that after 2016 would be another type of analysis (the development of the alt right already in power or represented by important political parties in different countries).

A secondary objective of these is to study how this situation has escalated in social media due to their connection to the geek masculinity and the gaming communities. Our hypothesis is to consider this space, especially Twitch and, as new space for socialization but also where people naturalize ideological messages as "common sense". In this sense, we consider streamers as new type of public figures which plays a fundamental role in spreading, whenever they are aware or not, ideological discourses to the youth, in most of the times a neoliberal one. Our aim in connecting these two objectives is to draw a first draft of a map of how the alt right is successfully radicalizing a part of the youth.

Keywords

Game Studies; Masculinities; Alt right; Gamer Identity

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