

Merely Marginal? Gaming Culture and Reactionary Ideology

Rob Gallagher

Department of English
Manchester Metropolitan University
Bellhouse G.01, Lower Ormond St.
Manchester UK, M15 6BX
r.gallagher@mmu.ac.uk

Keywords

gamer culture, GamerGate, radicalisation, politics, artgames

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The relationship between videogame culture and reactionary political movements has been much discussed in the years following #GamerGate, which many commentators now see as an important catalyst for the emergence of the ‘alt-right’, the rise of the antifeminist manosphere, and Donald Trump’s election (Phillips 2018, 15). Gaming culture has furnished right-wing movements with aesthetics, tactics and terminology (Condis 2018, 97; Marwick and Lewis 2017), and evidence suggests that ‘gaming (adjacent) platforms’ are ‘increasingly used to propagate extremist ideology and disseminate propaganda, especially by right-wing extremist actors’ (Schlegel 2021, 4). Perhaps gamers drawn to these ideologies represent a fringe group, confined to gaming culture’s margins? Or is there something about gamers, or videogames as a medium, that has made gaming communities susceptible to reactionary ideas? This paper reviews perspectives on this question, proposes its own answer, and introduces a case study: Angela Washko’s *The Game: The Game* (2018).

Accounts of gaming’s relationship with reactionary politics frequently focus on representational content, noting that videogames often revolve around regressive fantasies of combat and conquest, perpetuate sexist and racist stereotypes, and sometimes openly invite players to ‘to re-enact right-wing practices’ (Salter and Blodgett 2017, 77-79; Mukherjee 2017, 56; Brett 2021, 233). Commentators have observed that online reactionary movements and “AAA” videogames share a target market in young white men, noting that the forms of ‘toxic geek masculinity’ (Salter and Blodgett, 2017) pervading gamer culture have much in common with the forms of white male ‘ressentiment’ (Brown 2019, 162-3) animating reactionary movements. If such analyses are unsettling in many ways, they are comforting in others. After all, scholars have long downplayed the importance of games’ representational content, and publishers have been concertedly courting audiences beyond gaming’s traditional target demographic for decades. Perhaps we can conclude that affinities between gaming culture and right-wing movements are largely incidental – a matter of how games happen to have been themed in the past, and who they happen to have been created by and for?

This paper argues, however, that we must acknowledge deeper parallels between right-wing ideologies and the values and habits that videogames inculcate. ‘[U]nited and organised around a concept of natural inequality’ (Finlayson, 2021, 183), reactionaries have long celebrated games as ‘space[s] where inequality rules’ (Robin 2011, 209). Given videogame culture’s tendency toward ‘toxic meritocracy’ (Paul 2018), it is little

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

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wonder that gamers have proven receptive to such ideas. Videogame culture's celebration of the ability to see through the interface to the underlying code (Wark 2007, 128-133), meanwhile, resonates with the master trope of contemporary right-wing movements: that of taking "the red pill" and seeing through the illusions propagated by liberals and progressives. The supposed "truth" that the red pill reveals - that of fixed, biologically determined and hierarchically organised racial and sexual classes (Stern 2019) - finds an echo in roleplaying and strategy games, which often restrict abilities to particular character races and sexes (Galloway 2011, 132). Given this, it makes sense that right-wing groups have employed gaming jargon to claim that some people(s) are inherently inferior to others – witness right-wing memes portraying leftists, women and ethnic others as non-player characters (NPCs) 'unable to have ideas and thoughts of their own' (Dafaure 2020). If we hope to understand why gamers have been drawn to the right, and why the right is deploying terms and concepts drawn from gaming culture, we need to recognise how videogames can serve as vehicles for profoundly reactionary visions of zero-sum struggle, where political victory comes down to cynically exploiting loopholes in systems invisible to the untrained eye.

Washko's *The Game: The Game* subverts dating sim conventions to interrogate such visions. In most dating sims players pursue NPC love interests, reverse engineering the steps necessary to win their hearts. The genre has been criticised for reinforcing a transactional attitude to relationships by implying that men can 'earn' sex from women by making the right moves (Khandaker Kokoris, 2015). These critiques have been borne out by the genre's adoption by 'pick-up artist' (PUA) Richard La Ruina, whose *Super Seducer* series (RLR Training Inc./Fair Play Labs 2018-2021) uses it to teach seduction techniques (Kretszchmar and Salter 2020, 4). PUAs position the acquisition of such techniques – or "getting game" – as a route to success in a Darwinian 'sexual marketplace' that they believe has been disastrously skewed in women's favour by feminism (O'Neill 2018, 37, 144). While other studios have attempted to 'queer' the dating sim, Kretszchmar and Salter (2020, 3) contend that it has 'def[ie]d' subversion, because regressive attitudes are so deeply ingrained in its mechanics.

Washko, however, succeeds in subverting the genre by casting players as a woman who is subjected to the seduction strategies of several prominent PUAs over the course of an evening, putting players in a role ordinarily reserved for NPCs. This scenario allows Washko not only to critique the culture of pick-up artistry, but to show how it is rooted the same forms of bigotry and biological essentialism that drive rightwing movements in general. It also invites players to acknowledge parallels between videogames and red pill philosophy, both of which hold out promises of mastery and control to those able to discern and exploit a hidden layer of rules and codes. Grounded in bogus forms of evolutionary psychology (Van Valkenburg 2018, 91), PUAs' seduction strategies reduce interpersonal interactions to videogame-style flow diagrams, promising to teach men how to beat the sexual odds. As Washko also shows, however, such promises of control obfuscate both the complexities of interpersonal interaction and the realities of game design – which is as much about manipulating and misdirecting players as it is empowering them. *The Game: The Game*, then, shows how readily videogames lend themselves to articulating reactionary ideas even as it demonstrates how critical spins on familiar ludic genres can help players to recognise, contest, and articulate alternatives to such a worldview.

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