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Untitled. Illustration by Mika Edström

Special Issue

This Time it's for all the Marbles.
Towards Social Justice in Digital Gaming

edited by
Patrick Prax

Issue 17 (2022)

This Time it's for all the Marbles. Social Injustice in Digital Gaming. Introduction to the Special Issue

by Patrick Prax, 1-14

articles

From Political Economy to Identity Politics: A Forum Study of Political Discussions between Players

by Kristine Jørgensen and Ida Sekanina, 15-57

They Will Do Anything to Make You React: Deplatforming Racists from the Brazilian Gaming Community

by Mayara Araujo Caetano and Beatriz Blanco, 58-98

Cultural Production of Video Games: Conditions of Control and Resistance

by Sian Tomkinson and Tael Harper, 99-140

International Solidarity Between Game Workers in the Global North and Global South: Reflections on the Challenges Posed by Labor Aristocracy

by Emil Lundedal Hammar, 141-182

From Talking about Loot Boxes to Discussing Political Economy: Conceptualizing Critical Game Literacy

by Patrick Prax, 183-221

Critical Game Literacies and Critical Speculative Imagination: A Theoretical and Conceptual Review

by Matthew Coopilton, 222-273

Gaming against Violence: An Exploration of Video Games as Tools for Sexual Violence Prevention Education

by Kenzie Gordon, 274-313

Counterspace Game Elements for This Pansexual Pilipina-American Player's Joy, Rest, and Healing: An Autethnographic Case Study of *Playing Stardew Valley*

by Erica Cruz, 314-354

Learning About Ourselves: Communicating, Connecting and Contemplating Trans Experience through Play

by Josephine Baird, 355-402

reports

Not Space-Ninjas Again! Transmedia Worldbuilding for Social Justice

by Ian Sturrock, 403-427

Seven Levers for Social Change through Games: From *Settlers of Catan* to *Autonomía Zapatista*

by Cati Hernández, Noemí Blanch, Pablo Garaizar, Emiliano Labrador, 428-448

review

Far Cry 5: Refusing its Own Politics

by Thomas Grønvoll, 449-455

interview

Interview with Amanda Warner, designer of *Influence, Inc.*

by Patrick Prax, 455-481

From Political Economy to Identity Politics: A Forum Study of Political Discussions between Players

Kristine Jørgensen and Ida Sekanina

Abstract: This article presents the results from a qualitative study of how players discuss political issues in videogames and game culture in two of the largest and most active English-language online forums for games in the aftermath of the #gamergate controversy. Taking a broad understanding of politics that includes ideology and tensions relating to the distribution of values and power, the study includes sociopolitical discussions spanning political economy and identity politics. Our results show that while gender and identity politics with little doubt remain important issues for many of the users of these forums, other ideologically or politically oriented topics of relevance for the users were issues of corporate ownership and proprietary issues, and game regulation. In light of the hostile discussion climate during the #gamergate controversy, an interesting finding is that the discussions in these forums are on topic and kept in a civil tone. While the relative absence of these hot topics may be due to forum policy and moderation and the possibility that the most outspoken #gamergate supporters have moved to other arenas, what this study shows is that gaming culture is a diverse subculture with the same political range as the rest of society.

15

Keywords: Forum Study, Qualitative Research, Game Culture, Game Studies, Sociopolitical Issues, Political Economy, Identity Politics, gameenvironments

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As we write 2022, the so-called #gamergate controversy of 2014 has faded into the recent past. Framed as a defence of ethics in game journalism, the #gamergate controversy was a harassment campaign against female game designers and thinkers,

as well as their sympathizers. The controversy left an impression that gaming and game culture are a generally exclusive environment restricted by misogyny, racism, and harassment (Massanari 2015, Mortensen 2016). #gamergate demonstrated that games and gaming culture are not void of ideology, values and politics. But to what degree was the polarized situation of 2014 a characteristic for this subculture, and how do game enthusiasts discuss games and politics today?

In this empirically-oriented article, we present the results from a qualitative study of how game enthusiasts discuss value-laden issues and other issues that they perceive to be political relating to videogames and game culture in two of the largest and most active English-language online forums for games in the aftermath of the #gamergate controversy. Our results show that while value-laden issues relating to game culture, diversity and identity remain important for many of the users of these forums, users are also interested in the political economy of corporate ownership and proprietary issues. Further, the study shows that discussions in the selected forums are relevant and on topic, even in the presence of polarized topics and harsh language. On these grounds, we will in this article address what users of these forums experience as political relating to game culture, and how these issues are being debated by the forum users.

Background

How can we understand *politics* in the context of videogames? The game industry has a strained relationship with the idea of political topics in games, and certain AAA developers explicitly reject the idea that their games should be understood as political because they fear that this could repel parts of their core audience (Ruch 2021, Schulzke 2020). This claim that videogames should be apolitical is based on a

narrow understanding of *political* as issues concerning the actual governments of specific countries in the contemporary world. From this perspective, games are

“non-political in that they do not have a specific, didactic political message in support of a particular, contemporary political viewpoint, but can convey these *timeless themes* which are, by any other definition, extremely political. Games can and should investigate these questions, the developers say, but only in the guise of ‘fiction’.” (Ruch 2021, 7)

However, such a narrow understanding of what can be understood as political has been challenged by research that has identified the presence of values and implicit ideologies in games and game development.

Research on the implicit ideologies and values of videogames and game culture spans topics such as the systemic ideologies present in videogames (Paul 2018), racism and sexism in games and game culture (Janz and Martis 2003, Jenson and de Castell 2013, Gray and Leonard 2018), the links between game development and military interests (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, Nieborg 2006, Payne 2014, Schulzke 2013), global inequalities and postcolonial issues (Harrer 2018, Mukherjee 2016, Mukherjee 2017, Murray 2018), climate change and environmental issues (Abraham 2015, Abraham and Jayemanne 2017). In terms of understanding videogames and game culture as a shared space encompassing different values, research has focused on games as a raced or gendered space and the expression of queerness (Ahmadi et al. 2019, Bulut 2020, DiSalvo et al. 2009, Krampe 2018, Ruberg and Philips 2018, Sunden 2009, Trammel 2020), and since 2014 much research on game culture and politics has investigated the phenomenon and repercussions of #gamergate (Aghazadeh et al. 2018, Blodgett 2020, Braithwaite 2016, Chess and Shaw, 2015, Chess and Shaw 2016, Dowling, Goetz and Lathrop 2020, Evans and Janish 2015, Gray et al. 2017, Heron et al. 2014, Massanari 2017, Mortensen 2016,

Perreault and Vos 2016, Trice 2015). Some research has also been conducted on the political engagement among gamers (Bacovsky 2021, Dalisay 2021), including how political extremists use videogames (Bjørkelo 2020, Condis 2019). Although certain game enthusiasts have expressed an opposition against political topics in games (Condis 2018, Pfister 2018), research also suggests that many gamers applaud the inclusion of such content in games (Jørgensen 2016, Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020). Recent findings also document anti-corporate activism among gamers (Chew 2022). Further, research has explored the potential for games to model political topics (Bogost 2008, Flanagan 2009) alongside the use of games in political campaigning (Bogost 2006, Šisler 2005). Researchers have also studied how videogames may promote civic and political engagement (Dalisay et al. 2014, Foxman and Forelle 2014), and there has also been attention towards the design of critical and activist games (Flanagan and Lotko 2009, Flanagan, Howe and Nissenbaum 2005). Most recently, a special issue in *gamevironments* has investigated the potential for digital games to represent democratic political systems (Pfister, Winnerling and Zimmermann 2020).

However, with respect to the intersection between games and politics, there is little research that explicitly investigates player experiences of political topics in games or the politics of the videogame industry; more specifically, we know little of how players deal with sociopolitical issues within game culture discourse. To investigate such topics, we take a broad understanding of politics. We understand *politics* in terms of a conflict of interests concerning power structures in game culture and the values that game enthusiasts want games and game culture to be built upon. This broad understanding rests on ideas in political philosophy that politics is not necessarily restricted to issues of the state, but that it also may concern contest and conflict relating to the distribution of values, resources, and power (Laswell 1936,

Mitchell 1985). This broader understanding of politics allows us to take into consideration sociopolitical discussions of the power dynamics and values associated with social dimensions of game culture, such as questions of inequality relating to issues relating to gender, race, and identity (compare Bacovsky 2021, Chew 2022), and enables us to view such discussions as debates with political dimensions because they concern ideological views relating to what kind of environment game culture should be and how it should be regulated, both through informal and formal means.

Method

Forum research has become a popular approach to studying communities online, but comes with certain methodological challenges. While the data on open online forums is easily accessible as written documentation online, people contributing to the discussions probably never considered the possibility that their communication would be subject to research. It is for this reason not clear that forum discussions can be considered public even though it is technically available to anyone (Elgesem 2015). For this reason, researchers wanting to use this data need to tread particularly carefully.

One issue concerns *informed consent*, which is a backbone of research ethics and also incorporated in EU legislation (European Commission 2013) as well as in national regulations (Staksrud et al. 2018). This means any research involving people should secure that those involved are informed about a study, its purpose, and that it is voluntary, and only then can they give their informed consent (Lüders 2015). This is however not always straightforward in forum research. It may be difficult if not impossible to track all involved forum users down, because their user accounts may be inactive, or connected to non-functional email addresses. Only basing the research

on those people who respond to a researcher’s request in a forum study may not be a satisfactory option as discussions tend to be contextual; thus erasing certain participants would not only break the flow of conversation, but would also in reality not be viable since other users often refer to arguments posted by others.

Another issue is *privacy* (Lüders 2015). A common assumption is that people are anonymous when using user names online. However, while user names may or may not include information that refers back to users’ physical identity, a user name may be used across platforms. Further, internally to a specific forum, one user name identifies individuals across threads and internally in discussions. Another issue relating to privacy concerns the way a researcher refers to the data material in question. While qualitative researchers typically prefer quoting participants directly, this is problematic for the privacy of forum users because the data would then be traceable through a simple search through a search engine.

In this study, we have dealt with these issues in accordance with the Norwegian Authority for Research Data and the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities (NESH). The ethical guidelines formulated by this authority stress the disadvantages of research participants over the researchers’ need to be transparent (NESH 2018, NESH 2022), and while the guidelines may be experienced as overly restrictive from the perspective of the individual researcher who is conducting the research as well as the research community who may be interested in reviewing the validity of the research, the non-compromising approach to protecting the participants should also be commended. In light of the many situations in recent years about online harassment, coupled with the searchability and ease of access of online information, researchers using the internet for their fieldwork must take into consideration the risks to which they are potentially exposing their

participants. If we cannot secure the consent of the participants, the least we can do is secure their anonymity. Since we have not been able to ask all forum users during the selected period for their informed consent, we have from this perspective chosen to anonymize both the forums in question and the users. Also, since we are interested in the topics and how they are discussed rather than the individual participants, we avoid quoting any users but instead narrate the conversations through paraphrasing. We are aware that this does lower the ability for other researchers to validate our interpretations, but believe that this is the best option we have under our current national regulations. To mitigate the lack of transparency caused by this process, we use direct quotation in a few cases where this does not compromise the participants' anonymity, and we also aim at being as transparent as possible in our description of the selection process and the analysis below. In cases where generic expressions are used in the original post, we have chosen to paraphrase the quote but italicize the specific generic expression for emphasis to show the tone that is being used in the discussion.

Using *Nvivo* (QSR International), a software tool for qualitative data collection and analysis, we gathered and analyzed forum posts active between the periods of 1st November 2019 and 1st November 2020. In our study, we were particularly interested in topics central in the #gamergate controversyⁱ, as well as discussions focusing on identity politicsⁱⁱ and politics and ideologyⁱⁱⁱ. The forums were first browsed for relevant threads, and we also did a search for relevant threads using pre-selected keywords that we evaluated as relevant for the discussions that we were interested in mapping. We then read the selected threads, from which we picked out additional relevant keywords that we used to search the full forums again. The relevant threads were then analyzed using a manual corpus analysis.

Forum Profiles

The two forums, which we will call Case 1 and Case 2, selected for this research are associated with two commercial online videogame magazines. Both were established in the 1990s and are today among the largest and most established English-language bulletin-boards dedicated to videogames and game culture. On face value, the two websites may appear as relatively similar both in terms of their profile, size, and position in game culture. Both provides access to news, reviews, interviews, and criticism and analysis, and host dedicated *YouTube* (2005) channels that complement the textual material on their sites. Both websites also feature personalized content and targeted advertisement. Both websites have large forum sections, featuring off-topic channels spanning from other entertainment media to current affairs, as well as specialized game channels dedicated to for example specific consoles or genres. Due to the large amount of data on the forums, we chose to limit this study to the subforums dedicated to general game discussions.

The two websites have a professional and mature appearance. In describing themselves, they focus on the journalistic integrity and the ethics of their writers, alongside a considerate environment for debate and a clear stance against hate speech and harassment. This is also expressed in how they treated the #gamergate controversy. In Case 1, the editor publicly denounced the movement, describing it as a hate campaign against women and calling for an inclusive and progressive future for game culture. Case 2 took a neutral stance. While editorial content about the event was published, we find no indication that the website issued a public statement about their standpoint. However, it did have one highly moderated thread on #gamergate consisting of 2502 comments. This thread was explicitly designated as the only one on the subject matter and was locked in 2016 and falls for this reason

outside of the scope of this study. While there may be many reasons for this including strict moderation, and the fact that the more politically angled game enthusiasts seek other arenas for debate, this will be examined in closer detail later in the article.

The two subforums in the study operate with an inclusive and open structure, where everyone can register to participate. Both operate with similar rules for what they accept in terms of expressions, behavior, and the general environment for discussion. A lively dialogue is welcome, and discussions about events in game culture is unproblematic so long as the users keep a civil tone. Abusive language, personal attacks and trolling are prohibited and may lead to exclusion. Users are encouraged to express themselves in a clear and relevant manner and are urged to think before they act. Users seem to follow this, although the language at times can be immature and the argumentation contentious.

Despite these similarities, the forums also appear different in terms of the systematization of discussions and moderation. In Case 1, there are long threads that date back ten years, but which are recurrently revitalized and thus remain active. It is not unusual for a thread in this forum to span hundreds of pages and feature a total of 20,000 comments. In comparison, Case 2 has shorter threads, which seem to be the result of a more active and stringent moderation practice. In Case 1, revitalization of so-called dead threads is not allowed. If someone tries to revitalize a thread that has been inactive for the last 14 days, the thread is locked by the moderator. Neither forum endorses promotional activities. Threads in which users announce or offer services for commercial or economical gain are handled as spam. These rules are more strictly enforced in Case 2, where the moderators are more visibly present, for instance by providing notifications to users when they moderate a conversation.

Threads that appear to have been posted in the wrong subforum are also moved.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Taking an overarching look at the forums, we find that the most frequent theme for discussion was the upcoming launch of the two new game consoles *Playstation 5* (Sony Entertainment 2020) and *Xbox Series X* (Microsoft 2020). Often featuring in dedicated threads, this topic was also included in other discussions. Other recurring topics are technical questions, including topics such as the processing power of different consoles, and the storage space of certain games. In both forums, threads of the *what game do you play now?* variety are popular. Threads relating to game preferences or games that incite emotion create a high degree of engagement. Case 2, in particular, features many debates in which users submit their lists of favorite games, most disappointing games, and so on, and the exchanges between users about differences in preferences sometimes result in a sarcastic form of communication.

In terms of topics that can be understood as political in the sense that they concern power structures and ideological conflicts of values in games and game culture, we have identified two overarching themes: Issues relating to the political economy of the game industry and by extension the gaming press, and sociopolitical issues relating to the identity politics of game culture concerning power dynamics connected to relations between identity, experience, race and gender. In total, we identified 26 relevant threads in Case 1 out of 260 threads (10%), and 32 in Case 2 out of 684 (5%), focusing on 67 keywords^{iv}. This suggests that Case 1 is the most politically engaged forum of the two. Since this is also the only one of the two forums that explicitly took a stance in the #gamergate controversy, this may suggest that

Case 1 is a forum in which players feel that they can discuss politics most freely and without the risk of harassment or being met with a less than civil tone. This is also supported by the fact that Case 1 is the one in which identity politics is the most popular value-laden topic; a topic that by far remains the most contentious in game culture.

	Case 1	Case 2	Total no of comments
Political economy	8	14	1,678
• Platform economy	4	10	935
• The integrity of the gaming press	4	4	743
Identity politics	10	3	4340
Other topics	9	10	3,322
• game culture and gamer identity	2	8	649
• government politics	5	1	1,555
• other	2	1	1,118

Table 1: An overview of politically oriented threads in the two forums. Note that some threads involve more than one topic and are for this reason counted twice. Also, the total number of comments include both politically and non-politically oriented comments.

If we consider the table above, we see that identity politics is the most engaging political topic in Case 1 with more than twice the number of threads compared to any of the three other topics identified. In Case 2, platform economy is most popular but also identity politics is also popular. We have included the total number of comments for reference to show the popularity of the threads, but note that these are not representative as the political debates are often limited to parts of threads that are ostensibly about other topics.

The Political Economy of the Game Industry

We have identified an interest in issues that can be associated with the political economy of the game industry in both forums. Political economy is an approach in

the social sciences that focuses on understanding the structures of power, profit, and prestige involved in the consumption and production of cultural goods within a capitalist system (Hesmondhalgh 2012, 42-43). The most frequent issue relating to the political economy of the game industry on the two forums in the selected period concerns the political economy of *platforms*. The power of platform has reaped increasing attention in media studies over the past decade, as media platforms such as Amazon, Google, Apple and others become infrastructures that combine and offer content across previously defined media as part of their business strategy. Platforms are digital infrastructures that posit themselves as intermediaries between users, service providers, advertisers, and producers, and offer tools that enable users to also create and distribute their own content (Srnicsek 2017). In the videogame industry, proprietary platforms have been a dominating business model since Nintendo released its first console and restricted developer access to it through licensing (Ernkvist 2008, 186). Today most games are distributed under a platform logic, either through Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo’s game consoles, through software platforms such as Valve’s Steam, or for mobile games through Apple and Google’s online stores. Platform economy can thus be understood in terms of a business strategy in which certain companies control a large segment of the market through ownership of a digital infrastructure that encompasses the full value chain. When we talk about platform economy as a political theme in the forum debates, this is a reference to the implicit political dimension of this form of economy in terms of the power dynamics at work in the game industry and its consequences in terms of what content is available for the consumers – the players.

The Political Economy of Platforms

Both case forums have separate subforums dedicated to specific game platforms. These subforums were initially reviewed but were excluded from this study on the

grounds that discussions here are largely about technical issues and specific platform exclusive games, although certain topics relating to the political economy relating to mergers and business strategies in the industry also receive attention. These dedicated forums suggest that discussions of platforms – both in terms of their content and the political economy – are important to players. When looking at the two subforums selected for this the study, we see that platform economy is also important here.

The discussions in Case 1 about industry politics spring out of debates about specific game titles and overarching debates about platforms, and we have identified four threads dealing with the political economy of platforms and the game industry. The first thread refers explicitly to political ideology, although only passing and does not raise any further discussion. The thread concerns the cloud gaming platform *Google Stadia*, in which a user briefly compares it to socialism arguing that they are both failed systems because they were never sufficiently implemented. The second thread discusses which company users would choose if they could only play games from one game developer. Here the original poster states that they want to discuss *games and not any politics*, although they do not specify what they mean by *politics* in this context. While these two threads make links between platforms, companies, and politics, their briefness and explicit refusal to discuss politics makes it difficult to analyze their relevance in detail.

More interesting from the perspective of the political economy are the two remaining threads. The third thread can be considered *political* because of its attention towards power structures within a game company. Consisting of 103 posts in total, the thread discusses the upcoming release of a particular game title for consoles. While most of the discussion concerns other aspects of the game’s release, one question concerns

why the forum owner does not allow comments on their front-page news story about the Creative Director’s exit from the company. Another user speculates that this may be due to the mentioning of harassment and discrimination; topics which they suspect are *too controversial* for the forum moderators’ taste, thus implying that the topic in itself would create polarized or toxic discussions. Deriving from organizational theory, the idea of *toxic behavior* can be understood as behavior that is harmful for the organization and its people (Housman and Minor 2015). The term has been used to describe how parts of online cultures, including game culture, have been characterized by negative behavior towards people who share one’s social space, such as harassment and bullying (Consalvo 2012, Paul 2018).

The fourth thread in the game industry politics category is a general discussion about the release of the *Playstation 5*, which includes 479 comments in total. Most of the comments concern the upcoming release, and some users discuss prices, including two users who expect the purchase to create tensions with the wife. Most interesting from the perspective of political economy is a discussion over a promotional event on the same day as the funeral of George Floyd, whose murder by police officers in Minneapolis led to the major US civil unrest in decades. One user finds the marketing strategy to be unfortunate and that no company would want their latest *murder simulator* to be associated with the events, referring here to how the promotion of a game console potentially could be interpreted in light of the recent unrest. A second user calls the event *bad taste* in light of the situation. A third user elaborates on the problematic aspects of the promotional event by stating that postponing this event would not hurt the strategy, while a fourth user explains that Sony obviously did not know how the situation would escalate. A fifth user adds that *the real problem is systemic racism*, suggesting that such oversights are allowed to happen due to an ingrained racism either in the game industry or society as a whole. A sixth user

responds that “I’m sick of (...) gaming news (...) being delayed by police brutality” (Anonymized Forum User 29 2020), revealing a tiredness of the increased merger between entertainment media and negative social trends. It is unclear whether this last comment reflects a reactionary attitude in which the user would prefer that game marketing campaigns ignore the contemporary social reality, or whether it reflects a wish for a better world in which no uncomfortable social issues would interrupt the more leisurely sides of life. The discussion in the thread is however interesting from a political economy perspective because it demonstrates attention toward the conflicts between commercial interests and social awareness within the logic of platform capitalism.

In Case 2, we have identified in total ten threads that concern the political economy of the game industry. While many of the threads also deal with issues of platformization, this focus is not as explicit as in Case 1.

Two of the threads can be considered borderline cases. One thread of 13 posts concerns the game industry’s relatively low status compared to other entertainment industries, and includes a discussion about whether quality and originality suffer for the sake of profit. The second is a discussion of 36 posts about the *most disappointing* game of the year. We flagged this as a game industry related thread because users attribute negative and sometimes sarcastic characterizations to particular companies. In particular, a user criticizes Sony for being pretentious, with *entitled douchebags* among their employees. The user also criticizes Sony’s *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), for being competently made but with no innovation. The game, which sparked attention and controversy for featuring gay, transgender, and female characters who defy stereotypical gender roles, is also criticized by another user for its content, claiming that gender politics has nothing to do in video games. This

thread is interesting because it demonstrates how social issues also become associated with industry logic.

Four threads are dedicated to criticism of the marketing strategies of the industry. One thread of 32 posts starts with a criticism of microtransactions, i.e. in-game purchases that unlock game content (Ball and Fordham 2018). The original poster finds the business model so disruptive for their gameplay experience that they might *leave modern gaming for good*. Responses vary from supportive, stressing that the business model is unethical and that it should be regulated; to oppositional, emphasizing the ideals of the free market. The three remaining threads concerning business strategies and the console market all deal with supply and demand in the game industry within the logic of platformization. The first thread, featuring 12 posts, concerns the shortage of new generation consoles and speculates whether this is a market strategy. The second thread, featuring 26 posts, also concerns supply and demand in the game industry and debates whether game publishers prioritize console platform releases over PC releases. The last thread that concerns supply and demand features seven posts starting with a rant over *scalpers*: people who buy new consoles for reselling them for a profit.

Another recurring theme in Case 2 is related to other consequences of platformization. Several threads make a link between industry politics and a toxic game culture. One thread of 26 posts is initiated with a rant about the how disagreements over the best game console infect other discussions, and the poster argues that this creates a negative atmosphere for the forum as a whole. Underlying this argument is the impression that platformization contributes to a divided community in which opposition and toxicity may thrive. While there is no explicit opposition to this claim, some users admit that this is why they are using the forum

less than before, and others state that they do not take the *console war* seriously or find that *it's fun*. Others find the situation puzzling, in particular since the consoles in question have the same performance and that players should appreciate that competition rather than market monopoly. Another thread of 34 comments starts with a long post criticizing the industry for disrespecting the consumers, and the gaming community itself for a toxic attitude. Despite of the confrontational attitude of the original poster who appears to want to create distance between themselves and what they see as the *average gamer*, the discussion remains focused on the topic. Most responses appear to approve of the analysis and add explanatory arguments claiming that this is the nature of capitalism, or that the industry is immature, but there is also the occasional derogatory name-calling as one user claims that game development and the gaming press are industries dominated by *man-children*. While one user points out that the gamers themselves are to be blamed, it is implied by the poster and those who agree with them that the toxicity of the industry is responsible.

The Political Economy of the Gaming Press

Looking at the discussions in the two forums, the politics relating to the power structures of the game industry is also associated with press coverage of videogames. Central to the #gamergate movement was a focus on the ethics of game journalism (Braithwaite 2016), and in the two forums the awareness of the press as an important informational gatekeeper is evident. While a free press is central to a liberal democracy, the gaming press must be characterized as lifestyle journalism in its orientation towards consumer information rather than towards the objective reporting of hard news for the purpose of securing enlightened citizens (Perreault and Vos 2016, Perreault and Vos 2019). Historically, the gaming press has focused on game reviews and there is little doubt that the bonds between the gaming press and the game industry have been tight. In certain cases, magazines have been owned by

game retailers or publishers to be little more than publicity channels, and in other cases publishers have sanctioned magazines for negative reviews of their games (Foxman and Nieborg 2016, Nieborg and Sihvonen 2009). While #gamergate’s claim that there was an agenda in game journalism to promote political correctness rather than focusing on game quality has been debunked and shown to be a way to legitimize harassment of women and minorities (Chess and Shaw 2015, Massanari 2017, Perreault and Vos 2016, Perreault and Vos 2020, Poirot 2019, Salter 2018), the practices described above have likely created a distrust in many game enthusiasts towards the integrity of the gaming press.

We identified four threads in Case 1 and threads in Case 2 dealing with distrust in the gaming press. Case 1 includes one thread of 33 posts about Japanese videogames. Parts of the thread discuss reviews of such games, and at a point the political view of a female reviewer is called into question. One user dismisses a specific review because of her byline, and is backed up by a second who finds that although the reviewer in question appears to know Japanese games, there is a tendency for *her gender politics to get in the way*. Another user criticizes the reviewer for *twisting reality to fit* by reading what they see as irrelevant gender criticism into the game review. The claim that reviewers prefer games that promote a *social justice agenda* is repeated by users in different threads. In Case 2, this claim is briefly made in a thread about the last game users played, while in Case 1, a user accuses the website that hosts the forum for double standards as it is not consistent in its criticism against the lack of diversity in the reviews of different games.

Claims that reviewers prefer socially aware games are generally not being discussed further, but in a 591 post discussion in Case 1 about *The Last of Us Part 2* (2020), such claims are called into question. While the thread includes both criticism and support

for the game, the thread is dominated by users who are genuinely invested in the game and unwilling to simply accept ungrounded criticism about the game. For example, when a user claims that the release was surrounded by “false advertising and questionable (...) review policy” (Anonymized Forum User 36 2020), another user asks what they mean. When explanation mentions hearing on *YouTube* that the publisher censored negative reviews, the opposing user finds the explanation unlikely, calling it *tinfoil territory*, with reference to the trope that conspiracy theorists wear tinfoil hats in defense against extraterrestrial influence.

For the selected period, there is also one thread in each forum that deals specifically with the credibility and trustworthiness of gaming websites. In Case 2, a user asks for advice about credible gaming websites and receives 30 responses by 18 users. Most responds with names of websites, and some explain why they find a particular website credible. Three users point out sites that are credible because they have professional journalists or do investigative journalism, and one claims that the quality of journalism has increased in the later years on certain websites. Six users point out the difficulty in finding good writing among advertisements and clickbait. One user describes game writing as generally polarized: if one points out activism among journalists, one is accused of being right-wing, and vice versa.

The thread in Case 1 concerning the credibility in gaming websites consists of 19 posts and is initiated with a list of games that have received very different review scores on different websites, indicating that this might point towards unethical review practices. The poster is initially accused of spamming, but they prove their authenticity by continuing to engage in the discussion. One user responds that reviewers have different opinions and do not need to imply foul play even though unhealthy review practices exist. Several users support this viewpoint, although one

claims that trustworthy websites do not exist because they believe the purpose of a review is to create hype around a game. Another user questions this assumption by arguing that trustworthiness may not be a good criterion for evaluation because reviews are supposed to be subjective assessments. Towards the end of the thread one user points out that they believe they have read this thread before, upon which one responds that this is known to happen, often with connotations to #gamergate

Identity Politics

Referring to political thought and action addressing the injustice of specific social groups, *identity politics* has become a contentious term in public discourse. The term is associated with diverse sociopolitical topics ranging from multiculturalism, postcolonialism, and civil rights (Bernstein 2005), and addresses the power dynamics relating to the relationship between identity, experience, power, and politics (Heyes 2020). Such questions can be considered political in that they deal with dimensions of power and equality relating to social factors, including how these are regulated by political and social structures. The broadness of the issues covered by the term leaves it open for criticism, and it is sometimes accused for having developed into a normative critique of existing political practices instead of a coherent area of study. In public discourse it has also been used as a derogatory term to describe non-inclusionary forms of feminism and anti-racism (Bernstein 2005, Heyes 2020). In game studies, the term has been used in connection with issues of gender, sexual orientation, and race, and became particularly relevant during the #gamergate controversy due to the misogynist and racist attitudes revealed and the dissent about the gamer identity and what can be said to characterize game culture (Apperley and Butt 2016, Braithwaite 2016, Chess and Shaw 2015, Phillips 2020, Shaw 2018).

For the selected period, we have identified ten threads in Case 1 and 3 in Case 2 that

deal with contentious issues relating to identity and diversity in games and game culture. Most of the identified threads are dedicated to the discussion of specific game titles (five in Case 1, and two in Case 2), or general discussions about recently played games (two threads in Case 1). With regards to the threads about recently played games, these only sporadically deal with issues that can be associated with identity politics. For example, in Case 1, two threads about recently played games have individual posts featuring comments about how the user finds that a game features *too many women*, or that *even fictional women* have all the advantages, but these comments do not generate any responses. An interesting short thread in Case 2 is one where a user wishes gay gamers *happy pride*, but this thread is immediately locked by a moderator for being *irrelevant* to the general game's discussion. While this may be a sign of the forum's strict moderation policy, it could also indicate a sociopolitical bias in the moderation of the forum given that they never issued a statement against #gamergate.

It is in threads relating to the discussion of specific games that identity politics becomes most explicit. In Case 1, a long thread involving 149 users features *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018), a game that allows the player to select between a male and a female avatar. From the thread it appears that the female avatar is a popular character; she is mentioned several times and almost exclusively in positive terms. Several users talk about her as the best protagonist of the *Assassin's Creed* (2007) franchise and that she is portrayed by a better voice actor than the male protagonist of the game. One user also comments on the female character as hot with a winking smiley and recommends other users to select her. One comment that is potentially dismissive of the character is a response to a user who states that they almost feel sorry for the male protagonist because he receives little attention, to which a user explains that this may be because of *wokeness*. While to be *woke* indicates an

awareness towards social injustice (Gray and Leonard 2018), it is sometimes used as a slur towards those attentive towards such matters, so it is unclear whether the quotation marks here indicate that it is the serious or the derogatory use they are putting in brackets.

However, the game that most prominently features discussions relating to identity politics in both forums is *The Last of Us Part II* (2020). Case 1 has one thread of 591 posts divided among 71 users dedicated to discussing spoilers in the game; i.e. information about the plot that may disrupt the sense of suspense of the game (Merriam Webster 2021). The thread is initiated by a long post in which the poster states that they like the story and the characters, but understand the criticism against the game because it breaks with fan expectations. The continued discussion is dominated by users who are genuinely invested in the game. The discussion tends to stay on topic and users rarely use slurs or ad hominem arguments against other discussants, focusing on how the game has been publicly debated and whether the controversies of the game are justified.

Due to the game's focus on diverse representation, many of the comments and responses deal with gender, sexuality and representation. While there is little in the discussions that deal directly with whether the diversity can be attributed to an *agenda* or a particular political message on part of the developers, some users frequently use negative characterizations in their description of characters and game events that they dislike. For example, there is a long discussion about the character Abby's muscular body, which some users find exaggerated, while others argue that it is realistic given her training and the harsh conditions of the postapocalyptic world she is part of. A sex scene featuring her and her former boyfriend is described by one user as *horrible* and *not arousing* at all, while other users call the scene *uncanny*,

awful, and *bizarre*. While such characterizations contribute to the sense that the forum is a toxic environment in which female bodies are discussed in terms of whether they please the audience, we observe that this hostility is not pervasive. Although it would not have been surprising if other characters that deviate from narrow gender norms were given similar characterization, the transgender character Lev is never talked about in negative terms in the thread; on the contrary one user stresses that anyone who has a problem with the inclusion of a transgender character in the story is narrow-minded.

Case 2 has a thread of 70 posts by 49 users debating whether users will boycott the game due to its *political agenda*. The thread is initiated with a poll responded to by 46 users, in which 24% voted for boycott and 76% voted for no boycott. The thread starter also asks users to share their thoughts, but includes no explanatory information as to what they mean by *political agenda*. Already the first response points this out, but continues with a response that indicates that they interpret *political agenda* in terms of *identity politics*. They state that they find the publisher a hypocrite for featuring lesbian sex while Japanese games often have sexualized content removed. Other users attempt to interpret the original poster's intention through sarcastic comments such as "Absolutely [boycott]. (...) Why can't they just go with non-political straight white male characters?" (Anonymized Forum User 112 2020) and explicitly formulated interpretations such as "I assume [the original poster] don't like lesbians in videogames" (Anonymized Forum User 113 2020). Four users ask for clarification, to which the original poster explains, the *SJW agenda* and elaborate that while they are for equal rights, they are not interested in game developers promoting their political views in their games. This response leads to further questions by several users. One asks for details: would they then also call for boycotting games that present heterosexual romances, or would they claim that there

is a difference between relations that have the right of representation and relations that are only political statements? The original poster responds vaguely by repeating their first response, and follows up by stating that his black wife agrees, presumably indicating that this fact should free them from accusations of narrowmindedness. Another user finds the original poster’s suggestion that gay representation is political nonsensical and points out that the existence of lesbians is not a political statement. A different user throws the vaguely defined term *political agenda* back at the original poster by stating that the poster is the one “trying to shove his political agenda down my sensitive throat!” (Anonymized Forum User 6 2020).

Other opinions flagged in the conversation are that there is a tendency among some to see agendas where they are not (two users), and that games should not deal with politics (two users). Some state that they will play the game regardless of any agenda (five users), even though one user does not find any appeal in playing the game in the role of a gay woman. While most participants in the thread are generally supportive of the game and skeptical towards the original poster’s motivation, there are three explicitly hostile responses: After having repeatedly been asked about what agenda they are talking about, the original poster states that the game has a *social justice warrior agenda*, and two users call the game *social justice bullshit*. One user also calls the game a *horror game*, using an exaggerated comparison to show his distaste for the game.

The thread is indeed one of the most contentious on both forums in the selected period, but it also serves as an illustration of how even contentious debates in this forum have the potential to maintain focus on the topic at hand. This thread explicitly deals with issues relating to identity politics, at the same time as it shows traces of a #gamergate rhetoric through terminology such as *social justice warriors* and *political*

agenda and by referencing Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist videoblogger and media critic who became one of the main targets of #gamergate (Braithwaite 2016, Mortensen 2016). At the same time, the amount of opposition given to the original poster also shows that intolerance is not accepted. There is no name calling or slurs in the thread, even though the original poster receives a certain amount of ridicule. However, it is also interesting to see that some take a middle ground: One user finds that while diversity is wanted in games, Anita Sarkeesian’s videos were problematic in that they opened up a right-wing response among gamers.

Other Topics

In addition to these overarching topics, we registered a number of threads as potentially relevant. These will only be briefly described here. Closely related to the identity politics debates above are two threads in Case 1 and eight threads in Case 2 that deal with the sociopolitical issues relating to the delimitation of game culture including the gamer identity (Shaw 2012). Case 2, features two discussions that explicitly debate about who games are for. The first is initiated with a statement that a certain platform is only for *babies*, and another for *racists* and *porn addicts*, but is accused of *trolling*, here understood as deliberately intended to provoke in order to get an emotional response (Phillips 2015). The second discussion concerns whether one ever gets too old for videogames, and is a sincerer debate about whether the stigma of videogames as an activity for the young still exists or whether it will go away. Four threads also involve discussions about the toxicity of game culture, briefly mentioned in relation to a toxic game industry as well as in relation to toxic language. In addition, in Case 2 references to toxic game culture were found in discussions of whether game culture is inherently toxic, and whether this is something to be accepted. Related discussions about game culture are also reflected in two references to #gamergate made in Case 1.

Additional nine threads were also marked as potentially relevant, but appeared secondary to our study during the closer analysis: One thread was about game violence and its effect on children (Case 2), one concerned the release of a particular game but became a discussion about partiality as one of the users involved in the discussion was a previous employee of the company (Case 1), and one concerned a request to participate in a study and demonstrated skepticism towards researchers and their agenda (Case 1). Last, six threads referred to government politics (such as characterizing a certain style of argumentation as similar to Donald Trump's) but without discussing politics directly (five in Case 1, one in Case 2).

Concluding Discussion

So, is there a difference between the two forums in terms of their political interests and engagement? While the two forums may at first glance look similar, it appears that Case 1 is more liberally oriented than Case 2. Case 1 took an explicit stance against #gamergate and thus signaled inclusivity, a profile that is reflected in the vivid discussions relating to identity politics. While the relaxed take on moderation in this forum could easily have led to users avoiding such topics, or to more polarized discussions, this is not the case. Case 2, on the other hand, did not issue a statement on #gamergate, but has through strict moderation been able to keep the discussions largely on topic. Even so, this forum includes fewer contentious threads, but covers instead a wider range of political topics, including more discussions about platform economy. If we take a closer comparative look at the content of the two forums, we see that the political discussions in Case 1 more often concern identity politics, while in Case 2 political discussions are more often about political economy. As mentioned, Case 1 is less active than Case 2, so even though they have fewer political threads,

this appears as the more politically engaged forum of the two.

Further, in the selected period, it is in particular *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) that inspires political discussion. These discussions concern questions of diversity and whether this is to be considered a political issue in itself, and it is in the discussions over this game that we see the highest degree of contention. It is also in the discussions about this game we most clearly see the differences between the two forums: In Case 2, the discussion is initiated with a rhetoric that implies an oppositional attitude, suggested by the idea that a boycott is a valid response to this game. In Case 1, on the other hand, while the discussion includes engaged language and discussants are not always in agreement, the flagging of the thread as containing spoilers suggests that the thread is initiated by and intended for fans who have played through the game and now need to share their experiences.

All in all, the discussions in the two case forums indicate that videogame enthusiasts are indeed engaged in value-laden and political issues that concern videogames. As discussions span, identity politics, the integrity of the gaming press, as well as issues relating to game culture and the gamer identity, the forum users remain interested in issues central during the #gamergate controversy. The general interest in political topics relating to game culture documented in this article reflects Bacovsky's findings that the interest in politics among gamers increase when the political topics are oriented towards their sphere (2021).

However, although different opinions are flagged and there certainly are disagreements in the two forums, the level of conflict is low, and users of the selected forums tend to keep discussions on topic. Of course, there may be a variety of reasons for this, and we cannot conclude that the low degree of polarization means

that game culture has dealt with problematic behavior, or that the attitudes that surfaced during the #gamergate controversies are gone. One explanation can be that the most radical or the most verbal do not frequent open forums like these. During the #gamergate controversy much of the debates sprang out of less accessible forums on *4chan* and *8chan* (Mortensen 2016), and it is likely that the most radical now keep their discussions there. It may also be that #gamergate supporters were never very active in these forums to start with, although the fact that Case 1 explicitly had a policy with regards to #gamergate and Case 2 has been very actively monitoring and moderating the discussions suggest that the atmosphere may have been harsher during the controversy than in the selected time period. Another explanation for the relatively low degree of contentious oriented discussions may be that the users themselves may be wary and tired of the #gamergate controversy and try and avoid it. This can be understood as a form of silencing: One example is the previously mentioned flagging of a thread in Case 2 in support of the pride parade as off-topic. Other examples are how certain topics are ignored by the community, which we see in several posts that explicitly flag standpoints associated with #gamergate.

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44

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48

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ⁱ These topics were: SJW, Feminazi, Ethics, Journalism, Female/Women characters, Sarkeesian, Quinn, Agenda, Snowflake, Politics.

ⁱⁱ These topics were: Feminist/Feminism, Gay, Trans, POC, Black, Working class/Blue collar, Immigration/Immigrant.

ⁱⁱⁱ These topics were: Left/Right, Liberal/Conservative, Socialism/Socialist, Trump, Putin.

^{iv} The keywords were: #metoo, 4chan, Activist, Agenda, Anita Sarkeesian, Anti-gay, Beta cuck, Capitalism, Console, Cucks, Cunt, Democracy, Douchebag, Ethics, Exhusband, Females, Feminism, Feminized, Gamergate, Gender politics, Gender reversal, George Floyd, Homophobia, Homosexuality, Ideologies, Ideology, Interracial, Journalism, Leftist, Lesbian, Lesbians, LGBT, LGBTQ, Males, Manchild, Man-children, Pedo, Platform, POC, Political, Politicians, Politics, Pride, Purity, Racial, Racism, Racist, Ranty, Retrogamers, Rowling, Scalpers, Scalping, SJW, Socialism, Tabloids, Toxic, Toxity, Trans, Transphobia, Transsexual, Trump, Wasteful, White-race, Wife, Woke, Wokeness, Women.