We Are All Fishes Now

DiGRA, Feminism, and GamerGate
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It is likely unnecessary, and in such a short space impossible to offer a recap of GamerGate. Most of you already know about the string of events and topics associated with this hashtag: conspiracy theories, the harassment of women, the attacks on feminism, the defense of gamer identity, "consumer revolts," and the never-ending insistence that this is about "ethics in game journalism." For those of you who need to catch up, we have written elsewhere on the topic (Chess and Shaw 2015). There are also many recaps of it in the news from Fall 2014 (Dewey 2014; Ryan 2014; Cross 2014) and many other researchers are working on ways to contextualize and understand this topic. We would be very surprised if there were not many GamerGate panels at DiGRA 2015.

Although it was not central to GamerGate's machinations, our Fishbowl (an event we collaborated on at the 2014 conference) pushed DiGRA into the periphery of GamerGate's vision. As such, after we wrote on the conspiracy theories around academia that came out following links made via the Fishbowl (Chess and Shaw 2015), an interesting point was posed to us. Given the negative backlash our Fishbowl seemed to have wrought for DiGRA members and the organization writ large, would it all have been better if the reviewers and conference planners had just rejected our submission? After all, it has caused a great deal of grief to many academics that were not primed for this fight. The Fishbowl was quite literally called the "smoking gun" that implicated DiGRA in the supposed feminist

or Social Justice Warrior conspiracy to "dismantle hegemonic masculinity" (whatever that means). DiGRA members whose research is funded by DARPA and other U.S. federal government organizations fueled accusations that all games researchers were somehow using games for feminist behavioral control experiments (whether their actual research was feminist or not). DiGRA itself was accused of conducting such research directly, using games to push a social justice agenda, rather than merely being a professional organization where some game scholars presented their work on occasion. Some of the more stalwart GamerGaters were eager to hunt down the organization's tax records, while others sought to engage DiGRA in a dialog hoping to ensure that future games research had only gamers' best interests at heart (i.e. finding out what makes games fun; sans critical research). Others initiated "Operation Digging DiGRA" –getting people to read and summarize articles to find material that that might be objectionable to them. Several DiGRA members who were not at the Fishbowl or present at the conference and even game scholars who are no longer official members of DiGRA, but might have once presented at the conference (and thus their work was in the digital library), became the targets of harassment for the seemingly unforgiveable offense of writing about sexuality, gender, race, or other categories of difference and video games. DiGRA as an organization and feminist games scholars around the world were suddenly mired in a surprising and unnerving kind of infamy that they were not prepared for.

Given all that has happened, we've been asked and occasionally ask ourselves, should we have even done the Fishbowl? Was it worth the toll this has taken on us, our colleagues and our friends? Although everyone who is harassed is told to simply ignore it, though we have our internal support systems, avoiding vitriol is as exhausting as reacting to it. For feminist game scholars in particular, we know many people have had to make the active choice of continue (or start in the case of some graduate students) to do their work in the face of potential future harassment. GamerGate has had a chilling effect on our online discussions, and it has raised the stakes of doing this kind of research. If we imagine for a moment that without the Fishbowl

DiGRA would have never been a GamerGate target, which may be giving our little event more credit than it deserves, was it worth it? If we knew what was going to happen, would we still have hit send on that submission?

Although occasionally we throw our hands up in frustration as our Twitter mentions become crowded with anger (about what, it isn't always clear) because of a new accusation, a new video, a new "finding" from GamerGater "research", it is hard to say we regret the event. Certainly on the day we regretted how "off topic" it became; how mired in the inside baseball of academia the discussion regularly found itself, we regret that the notes were taken in such a way that they were mistaken for a transcript. But do we regret the event or that the notes were (for a time anyway) publicly available? We do not, for reasons we describe below. Our Fishbowl at DiGRA 2014 ("The Playful is Political") ended up being both important and necessary – not despite the ramifications but *because of* those very ramifications.

For years now, many feminist scholars have debated and analyzed tensions in the video game industry, in regards to diversity. Early work in this field gave nod to the complexities of getting younger girls more involved in gaming (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Laurel 2001). Others debated over the hypersexualized bodies produced by hegemonic gaming culture (Schleiner 2001; Kennedy 2002). As time moved on, scholars began focusing on diversity topics more specifically on gamer culture, not only the positive aspects (Taylor 2006) but also sometimes some of the negative aspects (Consalvo 2011). Shaw (2012; 2015; 2013) has explored the ways marketing has constructed gamer identity in a way that shapes how people understand their relationship to gaming culture, leading even people who play a lot of games to not always call themselves "gamers." Jenson et al., (2011) argue that gaming innovations should bear in mind feminist ideologies, while Harvey & Fisher (2014) recently argued for post-feminist perspectives in game production. Still others have begun to pay attention to casual markets that are specifically geared towards women gamers (Chess 2012; Anable 2013). There are

dozens of important articles and topics in this area that space does not allow us to cover here.

Many of us feel strongly that this work is important. But, also, this research for a long time was largely siloed at academic conferences. Those of us discussing video games in terms of diversity and feminist theory are often relegated to our own tracks and panels. Indeed, at the DiGRA 2013 conference in Atlanta, a feminist track ran parallel within the larger conference. As the same people kept attending the same panels, we felt we were in an echo chamber. Feminist scholars expressed that they felt excluded from the larger conversation, and scholars that didn't specifically identify their research as "feminist" did not always feel welcomed in the feminist track. Although the topics of intersectionality and diversity were a primary theme of these panels, as has been true for a long time it is easy to assume (if not actually true) that in game studies, gender is the only category of difference we ever discuss. At academic conferences generally, is it not uncommon to hear someone say "I'd like to do intersectional research, but the studies I conduct are about white males so how can I?" Much work is left to be done if scholars do not yet realize that white male identity is an intersectional identity (all identities are).

At one point, the DiGRA 2013 conference had a plenary discussion about topics of diversity in gaming. The session was during a catered lunch and the majority of the audience talked over the speakers and ignored the larger conversation. The "Twitter-fall" projected on a screen at the front of the room displayed the frustration of those who felt those talking over the speakers were the very ones who needed to hear this discussion. If a truth bomb falls, but you are too busy asking someone to pass the ice tea pitcher, did any preconceptions ever really get exploded?

As the next DiGRA deadline rolled around, we wanted to organize something that could broaden the conversations about diversity in games and who was included. It seemed that discussing diversity was just as difficult in an academic setting as it was in the video game industry. This is neither surprising nor new – but we felt that DiGRA

as an organization could do better. Our president is a prominent feminist games researcher for goodness sake! If DiGRA can't talk centrally about questions of difference and diversity, what hope is there for other academic organizations or the mainstream games industry?

When the two of us first began our conversations about the Fishbowl, we discussed our mutual frustrations. We began contacting scholars that dealt with issues of diversity, intersectionality, and feminism to consider a new approach for the 2014 conference. We wanted to talk about the intersections of studying feminism, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and social class in gaming. Yet, we were troubled by the possibility that in creating a series of panels, we would just reinforce the problems of previous years. For example, it would highlight the same speakers who always tended to be highlighted, and while we recognize their importance we know that there are others doing games research around these questions and we wanted to include new voices as well.

We felt that presenting more of this research didn't really get at the heart of the problem. What we needed was an open conversation about the stakes of this research and the barriers to future work. As a solution, we opted for the Fishbowl format. The Fishbowl is one that does not privilege a single voice of authority, but rather, allows for a larger group conversation with those in the room. The format, traditionally, has everyone seated in a large circle with five chairs in the center. Participants sit in four of the chairs and one chair is left empty. If a person moves into the empty chair to speak, someone else leaves the circle, so that only four chairs are occupied at once. This format, we felt, might allow for a more open conversation about academic and games industry approaches to difference. In the spirit of digital humanities conferences we also created a public GoogleDoc where people around the Fishbowl could take collective notes on the discussion. It was meant to be a living document, allowing people who were not at the conference to add their thoughts as well (again, because our central goal was opening up this conversation).

We titled the event "The Playful is Political" with a bit of double-voicedness – we knew that feminist scholars would recognize the phrase (a play on the famous Second Wave Feminist slogan "The personal is political") but we hoped that it would also not alienate newcomers into the conversation. We wanted a conference event that would draw a broader group of attendees, and felt strongly that it was time for outreach and new voices. In our most unrefined explanation of what we wanted of this event we said: "A sort of looking backwards and forwards, open discussion on what feminist game studies has done and what we need to be sensitive to as we move forward (i.e. really discussing intersectionality)." Our Fishbowl ended up being less about "feminism" exactly, and more about identity and representation in gaming in general. We were pleasantly surprised when the room for our Fishbowl was packed. Not everyone spoke, which is not surprising, but we saw many new faces and many people came who did not necessarily do feminist games research. Success!

The outcome of the conversation was somewhat diffuse, though. As often happens with academic conversations of this nature, we got off-track and larger issues and critiques of academic structure, publishing, and conferences became the focus. Some people felt it was a useful exercise (it was even suggested that we turn the panel notes into a "manifesto") but others were more critical that we did not "accomplish" much. Immediately after the Fishbowl, we were largely ambivalent. It happened and maybe some good would come of it.

As most of you know, something did "come of it". We detail the specific process elsewhere (Chess and Shaw, 2015), but through Adrienne's tweets GamerGate found a link to the Fishbowl notes and between those notes and some blog posts they had already found about the conference an unwieldy conspiracy theory was born. When GamerGate found and targeted our Fishbowl, initially it was only a small number of scholars who were aware of what was happening. Only a few specific academics were called out, primarily via YouTube and Twitter. Overtime though, DiGRA as a whole became a target of operations called things like "DiggingDiGRA" where

GamerGate was going to perform a "peer review" of everything in the DiGRA library. Anyone who had ever written anything that might be accused of being feminist, Marxist, or really anything less that "Science" became a target of GamerGater ire. Some of our colleagues have received more vicious forms of harassment and attacks than others, but it is not our place to tell those stories. Many, if not all of us, have become much more aware of the importance of two-step authentication and protecting personal information online than we had been before (and as a group, we were already pretty savvy).

If the goal of the Fishbowl was a greater awareness of identity and representation issues in games and gaming culture, then we were successful in our goals. While perhaps, these goals were not met in the original event, the far-reaching conversations that came out of our Fishbowl have helped to establish this topic as both tangible and important. Certainly, not all of DiGRA has stood behind the outcomes of the Fishbowl – some have either shown indifference or sided more clearly with GamerGate. Yet, others who had not previously had any stake in issues of representation in gaming have gained a greater understanding of the research and the stakes of that research. Though we do not need everyone to agree with our positions, we are pleased that a topic that has been so long meaningful to us is becoming increasingly discussed: in DiGRA, in academia at large, and in popular press. If anything, the results of Operation DiggingDiGRA show just how small a percentage of DiGRA research is focused on these issues and in turn how much is left to be done. Moreover, while the toxicity of the GamerGate movement itself is jarring and upsetting, it provides a very clear "proof of concept" of what we have all been writing about for so many years. If ever there was a time for us to pay attention to the themes of diversity in gaming, this is that moment.

We never got around to writing our manifesto. But perhaps this is for the best – manifestos are so often full of anger and ire, and often only speak to specific, insider audience. Had our notes document been understood for what it was (and not vandalized with penis and cock-sucking jokes as it was) perhaps GamerGaters who interrogated

it could have entered into the conversation; it could have been an actual living document of this ongoing discussion of the stakes of representation and diversity. Instead, of it being used as "evidence" it could have been used as an entry point into dialog. In the end though, we did achieve what we had initially set out for in our goals: a larger conversation.

This conversation has not always been done in ways that we personally may have wanted, but we have had productive dialogues with self-identified GamerGaters around these issues. We have seen this play out on Twitter, some better faith than others. Dialog is not about building consensus; it is about learning to take seriously what other people have to say. And for those who will never take our work seriously, who rage against the injustice of us being feminists who dare to do research that others (sometimes even people in the games industry/journalists) might read and be convinced by—well that is not a position unique to GamerGate. Reviewers at journals often critique qualitative research in ways that unfairly compare it to quantitative research (though we do support the peer review process, when it works). Feminist research is rarely funded (at least in the U.S.), and questions of diversity and difference are always treated as peripheral and specialized in many of our home fields and even home departments. Feminist game scholars, really any scholars whose work that focuses upon diversity and difference (particularly if they are a member of a marginalized group), have always had to deal with more than our colleagues who deal with what are seen as more "neutral" topics. No one ever said this job was easy (except perhaps Scott Walker, (Herzog, 2015), and we hope that DiGRA members continue to treat these conversations as more central to the work we all do—whether you agree with what we have to say or not.

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