

University of Nebraska Press
Potomac Books

Chapter Title: MISOGYNIST MOVEMENTS: Men's Rights Activists and Gamergate

Book Title: Haters

Book Subtitle: Harassment, Abuse, and Violence Online

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Published by: University of Nebraska Press, Potomac Books. (2016)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1fq9wdp.7>

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MISOGYNIST MOVEMENTS

Men's Rights Activists and Gamergate

The previous chapters have featured discussions of online misogyny from a variety of angles but focused primarily on the everyday abuse women receive solely for being women online. That type of abuse is the most common—it is the background hum of the Internet, a persistent whine in women's ears, and one to which most men are deaf. What makes news headlines, however, are the targeted movements, the hate mobs, the truly dedicated groups of harassers and misogynists who devote their online time to making women's entire lives miserable. Men's rights activists (MRAs) and Gamergate are two of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon from recent years, although Gamergate itself was merely the largest explosion of a previous series of similar attacks.

This chapter examines both movements, including the core beliefs behind them and the misogyny that underpins their activities. These movements seem extreme, and they are, but it is important to keep in mind that the sexism they rely on is different from everyday sexism only in its expression and scale. The beliefs are exaggerated and the activities engaged in are more violent and threatening, but the foundational beliefs about women and women's role in society are the same.

THE CREATION OF A HARASSMENT MOB

A critical aspect of understanding how MRAs and Gamergate came to be requires the understanding that neither group is unique or unprecedented. In size, scope, and longevity Gamergate is perhaps unusual, but harassment

mobs and coordinated groups of abusers are far from uncommon in online spaces. The abuse tactics used in Gamergate were first practiced through 4chan under Operation Lollipop and others—and aimed primarily at black women—to far less fanfare and media attention than Gamergate received.¹ Hoaxes such as the Twitter hashtag #EndFathersDay began on 4chan, specifically targeted black mothers, and relied on stereotypes about black family life to aim harassment at women on Twitter, who have less support in the first place. Such abuses went almost unnoticed, except by a handful of mainly feminist websites, while the hashtag itself received some credulous mainstream coverage.

The tactics that rocked social media spaces in the form of Gamergate were practiced and refined primarily on black women. Although Gamergate began as an incident of domestic violence that spiraled into a vicious attack on marginalized voices in video game spaces and nerd culture more broadly, many of its participants were already primed for perpetrating abuse by prior abusive activity. Fake accounts are often created and reserved for the next round of harassment, whatever form it may take. Each time a hoax or harassment incident was carried out prior to and then during Gamergate, the efforts had been planned in plain sight, and the successes, failures, and response were discussed on the same forums used to launch the attacks. Due to the sexism, racism, and misogynoir that characterizes so many online spaces, these behaviors went unchecked.

Understanding the mentality that leads to the harassment mobs led by Gamergate and MRAS requires a grasp of not just what they say they're doing but also the underlying psychological reasons for their behavior, which may be unknown to the mobbers themselves. Deindividuation theory goes a long way toward explaining how harassment mobs develop and why they spiral so far out of control. According to a paper from 1998 by M. E. Kabay, deindividuation is common among anonymous online users. It involves a reduced sense of self-awareness, lowered inhibitions, and poor impulse control. In essence, deindividuated persons lose their sense of individual identity and, as a result, any idea that they have individual responsibility for their actions.² While anonymity is an essential

component of online life for many, the presence of mobs that rely on the effects of deindividuation to do harm must be taken into consideration.

In her paper Kabay notes that research on anonymous groups finds that unidentified members of a crowd show a reduced inhibition to antisocial behavior, as well as “increased irritability and suggestibility. One wonders if the well-known incidence of *flaming* . . . may be traceable to the same factors that influence crowd behavior.”³ Deindividuated users are more likely to feel that their personal identity is subsumed to a group identity and that responsibility for their actions can be transferred to the group, rather than assigned to individual actors on the basis of their actions. When examining the mobbing behaviors that emerge from sites such as 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit, an overarching identity—Anonymous, Gamergate, /pol/, and the like—is seen as the responsible actor, and criticism of individual actions is rejected as nonsensical or irrelevant. The occasional figurehead seems to wield immense power over the activities of the group and can direct members’ actions to a series of targets.

Further, Kabay connects what are called “autotelic experiences” to the harmful outcomes of deindividuation. Autotelic experiences involve “the loss of self-awareness that can occur in repetitive, challenging, feedback-rich activities” such as gaming, coding, or even scripted and structured patterns of harassment.⁴ Autotelic activity usually involves engaging in the same action repeatedly, escalating certain aspects of it, and receiving environmental responses that encourage certain behaviors and discourage others. In the parlance of a video game an autotelic experience might be created by an in-world environment in which a person plays a character that must repeatedly fight similar but progressively more challenging enemies and in which each success or failure is rewarded with points, money or progress, or death, the last requiring the player to start over at a previous point in the game. The combination of feedback for each activity, the repetition of movements to achieve success, and the subtle increases of difficulty work to keep a player’s attention on the game and can result in a feeling of timelessness or intense focus that leads to playing a game for hours without realizing it.

Online harassment mobs generate a similar repetitive experience that provides members with self-defined patterns of feedback and rewards. Harassment and abuse may be scripted or shared language patterns will emerge; the group will reward more and more flagrant abuses and encourage more invasive types of attacks (leading to things like doxxing or hacking); feedback is given in the form of in-group encouragement and other reactions. Any response to the harassment is interpreted as “feedback,” whether it’s encouragement from other abusers, being blocked or berated by targets, or having an account reported and deleted. When the sense of timelessness comes into play with harassment, the result is hours and hours of planning “raids” and engaging in hacking, doxxing, and abusing. The nature of Gamergate’s abuse was often described as a game by its proponents, and treating it like a game enhanced the sense of timelessness and focus that characterizes autotelic experiences.

Deindividuation and autotelic experiences are a potent brew and, when experienced in tandem, are repeatedly connected to increased aggression, a willingness to commit illegal and abusive activities, and a reduction in the capacity for self-reflection. Kabay and others theorize that deindividuation may be akin to an altered state, wherein engaging in high-level self-reflection becomes impossible, aggression is more keenly felt, dehumanization of a target becomes significantly easier, and the likelihood of having one’s behavior externally influenced is increased. As Kabay puts it, “These people may not be [the] permanently, irremediably damaged human beings they sometimes seem; they may be relatively normal people responding in predictable ways to the absence of stable identification and identity.”⁵ That is, those participating in harassment mobs are not mentally ill, as is sometimes theorized (a stigmatizing attitude that harms people who actually have mental illnesses). Instead, abusers are people who are reacting to their environment in an abnormal but contextually logical way.

The presence or addition of an authoritative figurehead, such as Gamergate’s Mike Cernovich, Christina Hoff Sommers, or Milo Yiannopoulos, thus also creates predictable patterns. Deindividuated people are more open to suggestion and have less impulse control; during Gamergate a

single mention from any of those individuals was more than enough to turn the mob's attention to a particular target for hours, days, weeks, or months. Similarly, those targeted by Paul Elam and other MRA figureheads can expect to receive waves of harassment from their followers. Everyone involved, from the figurehead to each individual harasser, is able to diffuse responsibility for the abuse among the group, claiming abuse was always committed by "someone else" and thus was not the concern of any one member, regardless of their own actions. The dehumanization of their targets makes it that much easier to engage in harassment without ever characterizing it as such.

While deindividuation theory is a necessary component of understanding how cybersexist harassment mobs form online, it is not a complete explanation for the behavior. Targets are not chosen at random by unthinking mobs. Instead, a complex set of sociocultural factors comes into play, including the demographics of both the mob and the targets, how easy it is to access the targets, and what types of support and recourse targets have in the face of abuse. It is for these reasons that mobs typically attack women of color, and particularly black women, before expanding their harassment to white women, women with a high-profile online presence, and eventually men, especially men of color. Harassment mobs are acting on the beliefs they hold—consciously or subconsciously—about their role and the role of their targets in specific cultural situations. Understanding how cybersexism and deindividuation interact is essential for understanding how hate mobs come to exist and for considering ways to circumvent or stop future mobs from forming.

MEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

Men's rights activists or MRAs are disparate groups of men who ostensibly work to support men's needs in what they often describe as a matriarchal or misandrist culture.⁶ Common issues raised by MRAs include women disproportionately receiving custody in divorce, domestic violence aimed at men, high rates of male suicide, and false rape accusations. Their primary mode of activism is writing angry forum posts about "sluts" and "bitches" and something called the "cock carousel," which women apparently ride

on for free until about the age of twenty-five, at which point they lose all sexual appeal.

Today's MRAs exist in a wide variety of overlapping and contradictory groups with few common goals, but most profess a shared belief that it is in fact women who hold social power and men who are oppressed. Despite the many variances within MRA thought and organization, many of them trace a loose history back to Warren Farrell, the closest thing they have to an intellectual leader. Farrell, the author of *The Myth of Male Power*, among other works, is a proponent of the idea that heterosexual men are powerless when confronted with an attractive woman (specifically, an attractive woman's attractive posterior) and that this imbalance gives women the upper hand in every aspect of society. His work often veers into the ludicrous and downright frightening; he has on more than one occasion engaged in victim-blaming rape survivors.⁷

Today MRAs can be found on a variety of websites, online forums, and, increasingly, college campuses. A Voice for Men is the largest MRA website, serving as a central hub where MRAs can gather and converse. Paul Elam, the owner and one of many writers for the site, is the most likely MRA to fill Warren Farrell's shoes as the leader for a new generation of MRAs. As he does not lay claim to academic status the way Farrell does, Elam relies on polemic and fundraising to keep his website afloat and his causes in the periphery of public consciousness. He has hosted one men's rights conference, in 2014, and had plans to host such events on an annual basis, although the 2015 event fell through. Several withering articles were published about the 2014 conference and its attendees on a variety of popular media platforms, including *Time*, *Vice*, and even *GQ*.

MRAs can be found in many forums on Reddit, the social media and news website, including men's rights-specific subreddits, as well as within the Pick-Up Artist and Red Pill communities. Pick-Up Artists are men who use and teach one another to use manipulative tactics for hitting on women, with the goal of getting them into bed. Such tactics are often indistinguishable from sexual harassment and include activities like "negging," or casually insulting women in the hopes of garnering a defensive reaction that continues the conversation. Red Pill groups, named after the red

pill in the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, are devoted to discussing the moment members decided women have all the power in society and complaining about this injustice.

There are often deep divisions between Pick-Up Artists and Red Pill forum members—Pick-Up Artists want to attract and use women, while Red Pill proponents often want to have nothing to do with them. Failed Pick-Up Artists often move to the Red Pill camp. Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) are yet another subset of MRAS; these are men who say they want nothing to do with women or the institution of marriage and yet spend a great deal of their time complaining about and harassing women in online spaces. An MGTOW, without provocation or response, once harassed me on Twitter almost nonstop for twelve hours.

While MRAS claim to have lofty goals and to support men in a society that is weighted against them, the reality is very different. An MRA is far more likely to be involved in harassing and abusing women than he is to be genuinely supportive of other men or working to solve the issues MRAS claim to care about so deeply.⁸ In my interactions with MRAS I have often noted that they are capable of identifying problems but incapable of figuring out the source of them or developing any actual solutions—or are merely unwilling to do so. Instead, MRAS will find any excuse to blame the issues they raise on women and, specifically, on young or feminist women.

Before moving into examining the ways MRAS dedicate their time to harassing women online, it's worthwhile to look at some of the issues they claim to care about and to explore more of the logic that underpins and informs their activities. In each of the major issues they raise MRAS begin with an existing problem and then completely misattribute the cause of the problem to women's supposedly nefarious influence in society. No amount of factual information is sufficient to cause an MRA to reevaluate the belief that women are the root of all male suffering.

For example, a prime complaint of MRAS is that mothers receive child custody more often than fathers do in cases of divorce. While true at first glance, the argument ignores a significant number of mitigating factors and fails to examine the reasons that mothers more often get custody. The stereotype that women are natural caregivers and nurturers is an old

one, and it still influences situations in which decisions have to be made regarding the custody of children. The assumption that a woman's "true" role is as a mother is a core part of the reason mothers are granted custody more often, even when the father might be a better choice. Courts still regularly decide that a man's work outside the home is more important than child-rearing, with the implicit assumption that the father will be better able to provide financial support, while the mother should be more focused on the children themselves. Far from being the devious work of women to keep fathers from their children, this attitude is rooted in old-fashioned sexism.

The doctrine that led to this belief, often referred to as the "tender-years" doctrine—an assumption that mothers are the more suitable parent for children under seven—was abolished by the majority of U.S. states prior to 1990, yet sexist attitudes in assigning custody persist. However, they lack the weight that they once had, and attitudes about parenting continue to shift. What MRAS fail to acknowledge is that much of this change is due to the work of feminists. In asserting that women's work is valuable both inside the home and out and that fathers can be and should be equally good parents (and in supporting the rights of people of all genders to parent children), feminists continue to work to make sure that primary custody is given to the parent best suited in each individual case, not according to gender.

MRAS often frame their activism as "fathers' rights" activism and focus most specifically on the issue of custody. A Voice for Men places a great deal of emphasis on women as child-stealing villains, and a whole host of fringe groups, websites, and forums feature men doing little more than bitterly complaining about their ex-wives. MRAS often discuss parental alienation syndrome as a key factor in their loss of custody. "Parental alienation syndrome" was a term developed by the psychiatrist Richard Gardner; it describes a supposed disorder that causes a child to withdraw from, insult, or dislike one parent during a custody dispute. The assumption is that the child has been coached or conditioned by the other parent (often, according to Gardner and in most MRA discussions, the mother) to help guarantee victory in court.

Despite the popularity of Gardner's coinage, the disorder itself has been soundly and frequently discredited by legal and mental health experts alike. Gardner's initial estimate was that parental alienation syndrome appeared in nearly all divorce cases—a claim he made without providing any supporting evidence. One scholar, in assessing the impact of Gardner's work on divorce cases, stated, "The overwhelming absence of careful analysis and attention to scientific rigor these professionals demonstrate, however, is deeply troubling. . . . This carelessness has permitted what is popularly termed junk science (pseudo science) to influence custody cases in ways that are likely to harm children."⁹ Although all reliable research notes that parental alienation syndrome is not a diagnosed or recognized disorder, a cottage industry has sprung up around it. Websites devoted to raising awareness—and, of course, money—are a dime a dozen, and more than a few books have been written by those looking to capitalize on the fury of divorcing parents.

One of the most troubling offshoots of the concept of parental alienation syndrome is a tendency for those who believe in it to deny or discredit children's claims of parental abuse. MRAs often assert that women force their children to falsify accusations of abuse or molestation to guarantee their fathers will lose custody—any discussion of the actual rates of child abuse is unsurprisingly absent from these conversations. A Voice for Men writers regularly refer to parental alienation syndrome as though it is a legitimate disorder that has been taken into account by the medical field, and the comment sections of these articles are littered with furious anecdotes about lost custody. Stoking the rage of these men by relying on a widely discredited and unsound concept is profitable.

One such article on A Voice for Men has a plethora of comments that refer to "the woman's viper tongue," noting that "women can be quite vicious with spreading propaganda everywhere," asserting that "this act of abuse (i.e. causing parental alienation syndrome) has been a ratio of 100/1 [*sic*]. That is 100% the bloody alienating mother against the father."¹⁰ One person who was banned for posting articles and comments critical of Gardner's theory received this comment from the moderator who banned them: "All-purpose bitch."¹¹ Aside from the sole person raising concerns

about the validity of the diagnosis, all of the comments confidently assert that not only is parental alienation syndrome real but that it is a tool primarily or even solely used by women.

In one post on divorce on *A Voice for Men*, Elam first described himself as a pacifist and then went on to describe his dream for divorce court: “The day I see one of these absolutely incredulous excuses for a judge dragged out of his courtroom into the street, beaten mercilessly, doused with gasoline and set afire by a father who just won’t take another moment of injustice, I will be the first to put on the pages of this website that what happened was a minor tragedy that pales by far in comparison to the systematic brutality and thuggery inflicted daily on American fathers by those courts and their police henchmen.”¹² The calmer, more academic-seeming articles about parental alienation syndrome on *A Voice for Men* provide at best a smokescreen for this violence and anger, which lurks just below the surface. Those attitudes don’t stay confined to the website, either; *A Voice for Men* adherents can be found using similar arguments to harass women in all corners of the Internet.

Beyond their violent fantasies, MRAs miss the mark about divorce in yet another significant way. What they repeatedly fail to mention is that the number of fathers who win custody changes dramatically for those men who actively pursue custody of their children. A full 50 percent of fathers who seek custody in a divorce case receive it.¹³ Since men who seek custody of their children have the same odds women have of receiving it, it’s hard to fathom what MRAs’ actual issue with the courts truly is and where the alleged “thuggery” Elam mentions comes from, other than being a convenient way to accuse women of stealing an ex-husband’s children and repeatedly painting women as abusive vipers. Men who are less likely to receive custody are those who simply don’t make any effort to get it, but the odds of hearing an MRA acknowledge that are slim to none.

The other issues so frequently raised by MRAs follow a similar pattern: the identification of a problem, followed by deliberately obscuring its true causes, presenting skewed information or outright dishonesty, and ignoring the complex web of factors that play into the reality of the situation.

Nowhere is this pattern more obvious than in the insistent focus MRAS place on the specter of false rape accusations.

Men who are falsely accused of rape, according to MRAS, are at risk of having their lives ruined, while women can freely accuse anyone they like without facing any serious consequences for doing so, despite the illegality of filing a false report of any kind. While the lives and careers of known rapists such as Jimmy Page, Mike Tyson, Roman Polanski, and many, many others have been at best minimally affected, MRAS cling to the idea that being falsely accused of rape is a scarlet letter that will haunt a man for the remainder of his life. Women, according to MRAS, can rely on spitefully accusing a man of rape to ruin him and often do.

In reality the rate at which rape is reported is already dramatically lower than the number of rapes that occur—nearly 70 percent of sexual assaults go unreported, and 98 percent of all accused rapists never spend even one day in jail.¹⁴ In the face of those numbers false reports are barely a blip on the radar. Despite that, MRAS are given to grossly exaggerating the number of false rape accusations that are made, insisting that close to half or even the majority of reports are false. To support this assertion they often cite a decades-old study from an unnamed small town in which more than 40 percent of reports were determined by the police to be false; in contrast, the number used by the FBI is roughly 8 percent—a figure that is in line with false reports for all other crimes.¹⁵

What is misleading about the statistics favored by MRAS is that the criteria for establishing that a report was “false” includes everything from a woman withdrawing the report due to trauma, to other or lesser charges being filed, to the opinion of the police officer taking the report in the first place. In mid-2015 a woman who was assaulted in a bar’s restroom reported that the police interviewing her in the hospital said, “Maybe you’re a party girl. You know regrettable sex is not the same as rape.”¹⁶ Despite the fact that she had been hospitalized and was visibly injured, the police continued to insist that her report was not convincing. Police officers who don’t believe that a woman’s initial report is true are unlikely to pursue it, leading to a report being marked as false based on nothing more than their initial assessment.

The assessment made by police is often skewed by poor training on how to respond to and understand the initial reaction to a trauma such as sexual assault; many people who have been assaulted react in ways that seem strange, such as displaying no emotion at all or even laughing.¹⁷ Many people are also unable to recall details of the attack, or they may only begin remembering details later. These factors can lead police to believe the person is submitting a false report, despite the underlying trauma responsible for such behaviors.

One study conducted in Britain by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) found that during a seventeen-month test period in which 5,651 reports of rape were prosecuted, only 35 of those cases were the result of someone making a false allegation.¹⁸ And yet CPS also discovered that many people believed the rate of false accusations was much higher than it was, leading to a tendency to discount reports. Of the 159 total claims that were believed to be false, the majority still contained evidence that a crime of some kind had been committed or resulted in lesser charges being filed as part of a plea bargain. Again, however, even if charges were filed for another crime, the initial report of rape would be listed as false.

What all of these details tell us is not that false rape accusations never happen but that what gets counted as “false” is far more complicated than MRAS would like to imagine. It’s much easier to drum up anger and fear about false accusations without examining the many reasons that a report can be discounted and the ways in which true reports get misclassified. Instead, we hear again and again that women are malicious liars who seek to ruin men’s lives, without any evidence that such a false report actually does ruin said lives. As with all of the issues they raise, MRAS acquire only a surface-level understanding of the concept and proceed to concoct a variety of reasons that the problem is, somehow, women’s fault. From there they continue to turn that anger on women in public and often dangerous ways.

A Voice for Men repeatedly posts and publishes inflammatory and hateful screeds about women. For years the website hosted the text of Thomas James Ball, a man who set himself on fire outside a courthouse and encouraged other men to bomb courthouses and police stations in a

revolt against the supposed war on men. Paul Elam himself wrote a piece, later described as satirical, encouraging people to make October “Bash a Violent Bitch Month.” In the piece he gleefully advises beating a woman and forcing her to clean up the resulting “mess” as self-defense against a world that he believes unfairly punishes men for domestic violence.¹⁹ In an article in which he described his refusal to take down a website that he and others would use to stalk and harass women, Elam wrote to a feminist that “the idea of fucking your shit up gives me an erection.”²⁰

In another incident so convoluted as to almost defy belief, A Voice for Men placed a bounty on a photograph of a professor at Kennesaw State University, where the MRA site’s main campus activist, Sage Gerard, had enrolled. In this incident a complaint was made about Gerard after he posted a video of himself placing stickers in various campus locations, including women’s restrooms, which he entered by posing as a member of custodial staff. At one point in the video he audibly fantasizes about putting one of the stickers over a feminist’s mouth to shut her up.²¹ The professor who filed the complaint referenced this video, as well as Gerard’s cartoons, which include drawings of guns pointed at feminist symbols, stating that these factors contributed to a hostile work environment. The professor also said she feared retribution from Gerard or other MRAs. The complaint, along with the professor’s name, was then passed along to Gerard.

Kennesaw State University took no action against Gerard, noting that his speech was protected, and merely requested that he stay out of women’s restrooms and avoid the professor’s department to prevent an escalation, which would in fact constitute a hostile work environment. In response, Elam and Gerard took to the platform of A Voice for Men to retaliate against the professor. Elam offered \$100 for a clear picture of the professor in question and issued a series of threats, starting with a demand that she apologize to Gerard or face an escalation of harassment with the goal of ruining her career. He went on to encourage his readers to contact her via her academic email address, warning her that they would notice if her contact information was deleted.

The escalation of the harassment continued on through a series of five articles collectively titled “Interdisciplinary Shaming Dept.” on A

Voice for Men. The fifth article, posted in early 2015, included a photo of the chairperson of the Interdisciplinary Department at Kennesaw State University—not the original target—and a similar group of threats aimed at her career should the group's demands not be met.²² The requested photo of the original professor who made the complaint was, apparently, never delivered, but Elam's language reflected someone who had become increasingly incensed throughout the writing of the series of articles.

It is important to remember that the entire harassment campaign was in response to Gerard being found innocent of wrongdoing but being asked to leave the professor and her department alone. In response, MRAS encouraged one another to repeatedly contact the professor and other members of her department and threaten to ruin their careers if the women they were targeting did not capitulate. In other words, they did exactly what the professor had initially said she was worried about them doing.

David Futrelle, owner of the blog *We Hunted the Mammoth*, has dedicated his online presence to tracking the activities of MRAS and presenting a compelling and thorough opposition to them. In a post about the harassment of Kennesaw State University professors he included a list of other harassment campaigns mounted by A Voice for Men. The list includes, but is certainly not limited to, starting a website called Register-Her in order to track, dox, and harass feminists; launching harassment campaigns against individual campus feminists and feminist groups; harassing and libeling the feminist activist and writer Jessica Valenti (in fact, A Voice for Men's social media director, Janet Bloomfield, has had multiple Twitter accounts permanently suspended for her unceasing abuse of Valenti); coordinating with Gamergate to attend and disrupt Calgary Expo, a comic and entertainment convention, in 2015; making a number of false accusations of threats and rape; and much more.²³

In another post Futrelle offers a succinct list of the ways in which contributors to A Voice for Men specifically, but MRAS generally, target women in online spaces. These methods include threatening or attempting to damage women's professional careers, offering money for their targets' personal information, creating and inciting harassment mobs on social media, participating in such harassment, engaging in DARVO—deny, attack,

reverse victim and offender—to paint themselves as the target, blackmail, doxxing, and more.²⁴ All of these methods play out well in online spaces because it's so easy to engage in online abuse. Harassment is made simple by the ease of creating new accounts on most websites, and MRAs can rely on the reality that their falsehoods about women will stay visible for long periods of time; women who are targeted often spend years dealing with the fallout.

And of course such fallout is precisely the point. Jack Barnes, a frequent contributor to *A Voice for Men* and cohost of an affiliated radio show, once tweeted that the MRAs' harassment “will continue and accelerate. We're not going to stop until no one will openly admit to being feminist”—a far cry from the supposed human rights activism *A Voice for Men* and other MRAs claim is their primary goal.²⁵ This apparent contradiction, however, is just part and parcel of MRA behavior: their goal is, in fact, to harass women into silence, to restore and maintain open misogyny as a positive trait, and to reinforce gender roles that appear to have been ripped from an imaginary version of the 1950s. Men's human rights, under MRA descriptions, require the subjugation of women.

A Voice for Men is far from the only hub of such harassment and abuse, however. Another MRA website, spearheaded by a man named Peter Andrew Nolan, doxxed a sophomore named Rachel Cassidy who was attending Ohio University, accusing her of falsely accusing a man of rape—except the woman he doxxed was not the woman who had submitted the report.²⁶ Nolan's website listed the young woman's name, address, social media accounts, and the name of her sorority; she was so thoroughly deluged with threats and harassment that she deleted all of her social media accounts and told reporters she was afraid to leave her home.²⁷

Nolan's website, *Crimes against Fathers*, features lists of other women who have been doxxed by stalkers and exes. Women who wish to have their information removed from the website are charged a fee. As noted in another chapter, a similar website hosting nude images of women shared without their consent saw its owner hit with a lengthy jail sentence for extortion; no such action has yet been taken against Nolan, but the site is less and less active as time goes on.

Return of Kings is a combination MRA and Pick-Up Artist haven. Run by Pick-Up Artist and self-professed rapist Roosh Valizadeh, the site is a haven for overt and toxic forms of misogyny.²⁸ Some sample articles on the website include such gems as “Protein World Enrages Feminists Who Hate Female Beauty,” “Why I Am Proud to Be Called a Misogynist,” “How to Game a Hot French Girl,” and “Why Most Women Didn’t Want the Right to Vote.” Writers for the site have composed pieces on the supposed inability of women to write, think, remain faithful in a monogamous relationship, or successfully achieve anything of note without having it handed to them by men; they have released screeds on why women are to blame for the mass murders committed by angry young men (because women won’t have sex with them). Article after article is devoted to criticizing women’s appearance, including offering “warning signs” to men who might be foolish enough to think there are more important things than what a woman looks like.

One Return of Kings contributor, Blair Naso, who got drunk at a White Power conference (the 2015 American Renaissance event), harassed a group of women at a nearby bar, and was summarily ejected from it, subsequently wrote a long post about quitting the “Manosphere” (MRAs often refer to their various websites and forums in this way).²⁹ With Naso at that event was Matt Forney, another Return of Kings contributor, who also acts as the editor for Reaxxion, Valizadeh’s contribution to the Gamergate debacle. The overlap between MRAs and active participants in Gamergate is extensive.

Forney has written such charming things as “girls with tattoos and/or piercings . . . are slags who fall in and out of guys’ beds at moment’s notice. . . . A girl who willfully disfigures herself [by getting a tattoo, piercing, or short haircut] . . . will generally be a moody, unlikable cunt.”³⁰ Such assessments are not uncommon within MRA circles, and any woman with short or dyed hair or visible tattoos or piercings in her online profile picture can expect to have it used against her by MRAs. In another unsurprising bit of overlap between MRAs and Gamergate, adherents of Gamergate also regard any nontraditional self-expression by women as a fatal flaw.

Return of Kings provides a safe space for these ideas, emboldening its readers and writers to go out into other online spaces and repeat them or

to harass women who diverge from the MRAS' ideal woman. As the ideal woman for an MRA would have to be an eternally youthful white woman with absolutely no mind of her own, any woman online can expect to come under fire if she happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In an incident in which MRA beliefs extended into physical space, a woman writing for *xoJane* recounted the story of going on a date with someone she discovered was an MRA. He then assaulted her. The man had asked for her number while she was at work, and although she was taken aback at how forward he was, the two agreed to go on a date: "Many of the texts focused on how excited he was for our date, as well as comments about my body. He would punctuate mildly explicit comments by stating how honest he was. Honesty, he would tell me, was his favorite quality."³¹ During the date the man described himself as a member of the Red Pill community; when he went to the restroom, the woman looked it up online and discovered the forums, subreddits, and blogs devoted to Red Pill discussions.

At that point she chose to end the date. As she walked away, the man grabbed her arm hard enough to leave nail marks and attempted to force his hand under her shirt. It was only after she punched him that she was able to get into her car and escape; at that point she started receiving text messages: "It was him, asking why I was playing hard to get. I ignored it as I did the following texts where he called me a bitch, a slut and a tease."³² While she was able to get away from him and share her story, the comments section of the article is filled with arguments about whether what she experienced was "really" an assault at all, with commenters blaming her for his behavior and insisting that feminism was responsible for her experience. Self-identified MRAS flooded the comment section with harassment, abuse, and even graphic pornography.

In addition to causing dates to go seriously awry, MRA rhetoric led to a female student at Queen's University being attacked outside her home. She had been speaking publicly in defense of women's rights and protesting an MRA event that was being held on campus. The student noted that she had received "multiple threatening emails related to her involvement" in the protests, and a few days later she was assaulted. Her attacker knew her

name and punched her multiple times in the face, resulting in significant bruising and a chipped tooth.³³

As with the *xoJane* article, the article reporting the attack on the Queen's University student received numerous comments (on a now-closed platform) calling feminism a "bigoted, reverse-sexist, female supremacist hate movement," accusing the victim of lying about her assault (despite the photo of the woman that she took in the aftermath of the event), doxxing the victim, and more. One of the people leaving such comments used the name Fidelbogen, the username of a longtime MRA who dedicates his online presence to harassing feminists. In one post on his own blog he insisted that "anybody who claims to care about men, but doesn't savage feminism pretty harshly on a regular basis, is either a damned liar or a lazy, muddled fool with his head up his ass."³⁴ MRAs might claim to care about men or human rights, but their actual activities will always betray their true motives; Fidelbogen is simply more honest than most.

What MRAs have in rage, harassment, and violence against women, they lack in actual activism. MRAs regularly complain about the lack of support for male victims of domestic violence and the scarcity of shelters for men in that situation, yet A Voice for Men—which regularly conducts fundraisers to keep itself running and Elam's pockets lined—has done nothing substantial to create or support such a shelter.

In fact, a quick search for the term "shelter" on the site returns fewer than 800 results (many of which are complaints and very few of which contain any actual information on how men can find, create, or support shelters for other men). In comparison, a search for the term "bitch" or "bitches" returns more than 3,000 results. Search for "cunt" or "cunting" (a favorite neologism of the site's writers) and you'll get 1,600 results, while "whore" and "slut" return nearly 1,500 and 1,200 results, respectively. Such results do not give A Voice for Men's claim to be engaged in human rights activism a lot of weight.

In 2012 the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), an organization dedicated to tracking, explaining, and combating hatred and bigotry, released an in-depth report on the misogyny and violence of the men's rights movement.³⁵ A Voice for Men receives a prominent mention as a

leader of the violence and abuse promoted by MRAS. The SPLC makes strong connections between the online diatribes of MRAS and the offline violence committed by those who connect themselves with the ideology espoused on sites like Elam's. The hatred that underpins MRA writing and harassment campaigns is visible to everyone but those engaged in it, who continue to portray themselves as crusaders for a righteous cause—not unlike the proponents of Gamergate.

GAMERGATE

In August 2014 the Internet blew up—or so it seemed to many people. A geyser of hatred that had been building mostly below the surface of various online communities finally broke through, and the explosion has yet to come to an end. While the initial earthquake of abuse has passed, its aftershocks are likely to continue for years. Gamergate is one of the most chilling and obvious examples of how everyday misogyny can spiral into something much uglier in online spaces.

It all started with what has become known as the “Zoe post,” a continuation of domestic violence that became the springboard abusers used to enact violence on as many marginalized people as possible. Written over a period of weeks about video game developer Zoe Quinn by Eron Gjoni, Quinn's former boyfriend, it is an inflammatory piece: more than nine thousand words long and filled with a mixture of hyperbolic accusations, personal information, and outright lies. It is exactly the kind of narrative angry and reactionary misogynists enjoy latching onto when looking for an excuse to harass and abuse a woman. Gjoni crafted the post to elicit precisely that reaction. He posted the screed in the comments sections of various game-related websites, most of which deleted it. Then, he created a Wordpress site solely for the post, and it ended up on 4chan.

4chan, and more particularly 4chan's /b/ and /pol/ boards, has long been a repository for the worst of the worst examples of online harassment. Despite being a source of many popular memes that spread across the Internet and even make it offline, 4chan and /b/ have been home to Anonymous as well—that amorphous group of unknowns who might as easily hack a corrupt government website as harass a teen past the

point of endurance “for the lulz.” The forums on the site, which rely on semianonymous posting, are a haven for gore threads, misogyny, racism and white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, violent fantasies, and those who refuse to acknowledge that engaging with and promoting such content can have serious consequences.

The Zoe post was right at home on 4chan, and the rage that it sparked spilled over into other areas of the Internet like an uncontrollable wildfire. In his writing Gjoni asserts that Quinn had multiple affairs during their brief relationship, referring to her as “burgers and fries,” after the popular burger chain Five Guys Burgers and Fries. In the early days of Gamergate the hate mob that was forming used the hashtag #burgersandfries. Harassment of Quinn began immediately. Quinn, who developed the award-winning video game *Depression Quest*, has been a target for sexism and harassment in video game circles. Her game eschews popular video game staples and places a greater emphasis on empathy and experience over graphics and gameplay; this fact alone was enough to make her a target for those who can only understand the hobby of gaming through mechanics and frame rates. Her success has been a thorn in the side of gamers who believe their hobby should have a “no girls allowed” sign hung at every possible entrance.

But when Gjoni’s post went live, the low-level whispers of harassment became a roar that drowned out everything else. In an article about the history of the event Quinn recalls the first night: “[Her] phone began buzzing uncontrollably. Angry emails from strangers flooded her inbox, calling her a ‘slut’ and linking to a blog she’d never seen before. . . . Within minutes, a friend warned Quinn that someone had altered her biography on Wikipedia. It now read, ‘Died: soon.’ . . . The next day, the real horror began.”³⁶ Gjoni’s post was out in the world, and the face of Internet harassment was about to change.

Gamergate didn’t get its name immediately following the release of Gjoni’s first overture in the harassment. Adam Baldwin, in fact, gave Gamergate the name it retains to this day. Best known for his roles in *Full Metal Jacket* and as Jayne in the popular but short-lived television show *Firefly*, Baldwin used his Twitter account to promote a variety of right-wing

viewpoints and to argue furiously with anyone he sees as an opponent. He still reminds people of Jayne, just without any of the occasional charm or heart his character could muster. On Twitter Baldwin linked to a YouTube video about the Zoe post, one that repeated the accusations Gjoni made, and his tweet included the hashtag #Gamergate. That became the rallying cry, and it is one that continues to be used.

Anyone who is familiar with Gamergate has become familiar with what is simultaneously a joke, a tired refrain, and an acknowledgment of the lies on which the mob was built: “Actually, it’s about ethics in games journalism.” From its initial burst of misogynist harassment, forums immediately began looking for ways to spin the abuse and hide it beneath a veneer of legitimacy. The burgeoning mob seized on an accusation of Gjoni’s that seemed to imply Quinn had slept with a video game reviewer when he was reviewing *Depression Quest*. Doing so, they felt, was an obvious breach of journalistic ethics: Quinn was sleeping with people for good reviews!

This story is not at all an uncommon one in tech circles, including gaming. The popular notion is that women who get ahead must be engaging in something underhanded to do so, because tech is a white man’s world (even as they will then describe it as a meritocracy of the best kind). Any successful woman can expect to be accused of sleeping her way to the top. It also provided further excuses to deny *Depression Quest* any legitimacy as a game, satisfying the long-held grudge within the circles where Gjoni’s words had found a home. The Zoe post continued to fuel the most retrograde and sexist fears men in gaming hold about women.

Most notable, however, is the fact that the story they felt they had—that Zoe Quinn had slept with a reviewer to get more attention for her work—just isn’t true. While Quinn and the games journalist, Nathan Grayson, did have a relationship at one point, he never actually reviewed *Depression Quest*, and the brief paragraph he did write about it was published before the two were more than professional acquaintances. This information, however, is irrelevant to Gamergaters (who are often referred to as “gaters” or “gators”): they have their narrative, and the narrative is all that matters. Even today this lie is circulated despite all available facts to the contrary,

including a statement from the editor-in-chief of the site where Grayson's work was published. As conspiracy theorists do, Gamergate's adherents see opposing facts as indications of collusion and scheming, rather than evidence that they might be wrong.

For the next several months the harassment was unceasing. It targeted not just Quinn but anyone who so much as hinted that Gamergate might be more about finding excuses to abuse women than about ethics. Aside from women, Gamergate's other major targets are men of color who are critical of the racism they experience and the sexism and other issues they see in gaming spaces. The harassment escalated from calling women sluts and whores to sending rape and death threats, doxxing, SWAT calls, and stalking, both online and off. Thousands of new Twitter accounts were created for the express purpose of engaging in this abuse, with their users swarming to attack each new target, and more were built to take their place after each new account was suspended. As Gamergate continued to grow, the abusers sought excuses to justify their behavior and women scrambled to find ways to cope.

"Actually, it's about ethics in games journalism" became the immediate and fervent reply to anyone discussing Gamergate's harassment of Quinn. As she fled her home in the face of horrifically detailed death and rape threats that included her address and other personal information, those watching in shock were repeatedly told that Gamergate did not condone harassment. A Gamergater on Twitter might politely assert the "actually" line in one set of conversations, while simultaneously saying in another set that Quinn or another target was a slut who should kill herself. This campaign continued through the identification of new targets and the broadening of the harassment from Quinn to anyone critical of Gamergate. The split between even-keeled if clearly scripted conversations and frothing, misogynistic hatred was apparent to everyone but those engaging in it, who would invariably pretend to be affronted when such discrepancies were pointed out.

Exaggerated politeness often signaled an oncoming mob. One person would include the Gamergate hashtag, and more and more of them would appear to insist that, actually, they were concerned about ethics in games

journalism and that a dozen or fifty or a hundred such messengers arriving in your Twitter notifications could not possibly constitute a harassment mob, because look how polite they were being. This form of mobbing eventually got its own name: sea lioning.

The webcomic *Wondermark* features a black-and-white image of a man and a woman conversing, with the woman saying, “I don’t mind most marine mammals. But sea lions? I could do without sea lions,” and, immediately, one appears behind the pair. “Pardon me, I couldn’t help but overhear . . .,” he begins, and he never lets up. The remainder of the panels feature the invariably polite sea lion invading every part of the woman’s life in an attempt to force her to discuss her dislike of sea lions.³⁷ The comic strip so perfectly captured the behavior that this mode of harassment will now always have a name.

In addition to the outright falsehood that Gamergate is concerned about ethics in games journalism, a few other things about Gamergate’s attitude toward journalism itself are worth noting. Gamergate has, at best, an entry-level grasp of what journalistic ethics encompass; when asked what ethical standards they would like to see, adherents are more likely to post a link to the Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics page than they are to offer their own argument, cogent or otherwise. What Gamergate has never noted, however, is that games journalism is enthusiast press—it is not held to the same standards of reporting that the AP, the *New York Times*, and other traditional media must adhere to. Games journalism is not required or even expected to be objective—another favorite request of Gamergate’s—and game reviews, specifically, are subjective by their very nature.

Gamergate’s ignorance about actual standards of ethical journalism and how or even if such standards should be applied to the enthusiast websites and organizations they favor would have been laughable, if the expression of their outrage had not taken the form of attempting to destroy the lives of women they disliked. And, further, one might wonder why the people so often mentioned by Gamergate as the worst ethics violators were so often women with a small presence within the games industry, rather than AAA game companies, the source of many actual ethical issues, such as

companies purchasing reviews and providing incentives to websites or even the writers themselves.

Gamergate's true enemy is anyone the adherents describe as a "social justice warrior" (SJW). Lofty claims about journalistic ethics aside, the true abuses they delivered were reserved primarily for feminists, especially women. An "SJW" is anyone who critically analyzes society, media, or pop culture—particularly video games—and most especially anyone from a marginalized group engaged in that type of critical analysis. The merest acknowledgment that video game culture and video games themselves have focused primarily on the thoughts and feelings of cisgender straight white men and that perhaps diversifying protagonists and storytelling would benefit the industry and its many members who are not cisgender straight white men is enough to earn the label SJW and therefore the hatred of Gamergate adherents.

To the Gamergate crowd the true issue has always been maintaining the status quo: a status quo in which appealing to cisgender straight white men should be the primary goal of anything related to video games. The push for gaming to become more inclusive of women gamers, disabled gamers, gamers of color, LGBT gamers, and more is perceived not as an attempt to help the industry grow but a way to oppress the "true" gamers and destroy their identity. Quinn, with her tattoos and dyed hair (both of which Gamergaters have a deeply misogynistic aversion to on any woman), her growing presence and acclaim in the industry, and *Depression Quest*, a game that challenges the standard notion of what a game should be, made an ideal first target.

A movement that was not about misogyny would have found a more realistic target than Zoe Quinn and the idea of SJWs, and yet the harassment just continued to ramp up. Gjoni spent months coaching Gamergate from behind the scenes—posting on forums, setting up a Twitter account, and feeding the harassers personal and private information they could use to destroy Quinn's life from the inside out. While Gjoni was eventually placed under a restraining order that prevented him from discussing Quinn publicly, much of the damage had already been done.

While everyone seemed to be at risk of sea lioning and more violent forms of abuse, including doxxing and threats, Gamergate adherents did not shy away from selecting larger targets to use as SJW figureheads and scapegoats for their misogyny. A wave of harassment might come and go for a person on the periphery of the events, but for many women it is constant and unceasing. Brianna Wu, like Quinn, is a game developer. She became an additional and deeply hated target. In May 2015 she wrote an article on *The Mary Sue*, an online geek-focused news and entertainment source, about the ongoing harassment and whether or not the State of Ohio would take action against someone who had sent her a threat.

“I’m coming to your fucking house right now,” says a man’s eerily monotone voice on the recording Wu made of one of the threats she received. “I will slit your throat, you stupid little fucking whore. I’m coming, and you’d better be fucking ready for me.”³⁸ In the article Wu describes her experience dealing with Gamergate: the threat quoted here is one of more than one hundred she received. She knows its origin is Columbus, Ohio. She knows it is legally actionable—Wu has an employee at her company whose sole job is researching and cataloging such threats, and she provided information to the FBI in August 2014, when it all began.

Wu’s article makes a simple request: for law enforcement, which has been largely absent from responding to Gamergate except when falling for the latest swatting attempt, to do its job and discover who is sending her these threats. An update to the article revealed that Wu had spoken with prosecuting attorney Ron O’Brien and was hopeful that there would be movement on identifying the perpetrator. Remember that for many women, involving the police in their experience of receiving online threats, Gamergate-related or otherwise, is not an option. While moving through legal channels may be an appropriate response to certain forms of online abuse, women often discuss not being believed or assisted when reporting harassment and threats; additionally, many women have other, valid reasons for not wanting a police presence in their lives.

Another favorite Gamergate target, to no one’s surprise, is Anita Sarkeesian. Creator of the *Feminist Frequency* series and the Kickstarter that

produced *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, a YouTube series about feminist analysis of sexist elements common to video games, Sarkeesian's continued presence was a natural outlet for Gamergate's ire. Many of the same arguments used against her initial series continue to be used, including, bizarrely, that she is a fraud, despite having delivered on her Kickstarter and then some. This argument is offered amid the misogynist, racist, and antisemitic arguments that have been continuously leveled at her for years, including showing her face redrawn to look like a famous piece of Nazi propaganda.

At the height of Gamergate, in October 2014, Sarkeesian was forced to cancel a speaking engagement at Utah State University after the university received a threat that said, if she spoke, there would be "the deadliest school shooting in American history." The threat included a list of the various weapons—including a semiautomatic rifle and pipe bombs—the person claimed to have.³⁹ When the school refused to put any additional security in place or prohibit weaponry from being brought to the lecture, Sarkeesian felt she had no option but to cancel her appearance.

Gamergate supporters continue to send threats, harassment, and abuse to Quinn, Wu, Sarkeesian, and all of the people who voice their support for Gamergate's targets or their opposition to Gamergate's behavior, including academics attempting to study Gamergate or any form of online harassment. Even when those sending the threats identified themselves as adherents of Gamergate, people accused Sarkeesian, Wu, Quinn, and others of falsifying the threats themselves to gain attention. A favorite line of Gamergate's is that such women are "professional victims," who concoct elaborate schemes to create the appearance of harassment, up to and including fleeing their own homes, in order to garner news attention and, somehow, money.

"I am a professional developer," Wu said in one article, responding to these accusations. "The quickest way I could think of to end my career and destroy my credibility would be making something like this up and getting arrested for filing a false police report."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Gamergate continues to assert that all harassment and death threats issued on the Gamergate hashtag and by Gamergate adherents are the work of the targets

themselves or third-party individuals attempting to make Gamergate look worse than it managed to on its own.

Gamergate took multiple steps to create a smokescreen between its own activities and the impact on the lives of women it targeted. In a laughably transparent and failed attempt to act like their movement was not based entirely on harassing selected women, Gamergate forums began referring to their targets as “Literally Who” (as in, “literally who are you talking about?”). The references to LW1, LW2, and LW3 were consistently and obviously coded to denote which woman was being discussed. Gamergate apparently failed to realize that not using a woman’s name to coordinate methods of harassing her is still harassment.

However, Gamergate supporters would rush to assure their detractors that they don’t hate women. Why, their very mascot is a woman! How could they possibly be misogynists, they seem to ask, when their entire movement is represented by Vivian James, a cartoon character they created to espouse their viewpoints for them and whose appearance is partially based on a rape joke?⁴¹ Where’s the misogyny in that, apart from everywhere?

Vivian James is a ubiquitous presence within Gamergate: she appears in avatars, website headers, in the memes and cartoons sent in lieu of actual arguments, and, not surprisingly, in pornographic renderings. What good is an utterly malleable imaginary ideal girlfriend otherwise? Vivian James is the kind of woman Gamergate would accept into its ranks, should she exist: she is “not like other girls.” The basic Vivian James template portrays her as red-haired, freckled, and green-eyed and wearing a green-and-purple hoodie and jeans. Her serious expression is often paired with Gamergate talking points about just playing the games, not stereotyping gamers, fighting corruption in games journalism, and women not being the “shields” of those criticizing misogyny in games and gaming. The irony of a group of men manufacturing a spokeswoman to make such arguments on their behalf was, apparently, lost on Gamergate.

While women do exist within Gamergate, few of them could live up to the standard set by Vivian James. Internecine fighting, transphobia, and misogyny drove many women out of Gamergate as soon as they questioned the methods, arguments, or goals of the group. Those who remained are

those who conform most closely to Gamergate's ideal behaviors—a tactic discussed earlier in this book as a method women use to cope with hostile online environments. Many of the women who successfully gained a foothold in Gamergate were those who sexually harassed other women and participated in doxxing, sending threats, and other forms of abuse.

Gamergate's absolute favorite woman is unquestionably the antifeminist's feminist: Christina Hoff Sommers. In a move that reveals even more of the underlying beliefs about women within Gamergate, she became colloquially referred to by its members as "Based Mom."⁴² Sommers is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a right-wing, pro-business think tank. Her version of feminism rejects what she calls "gender feminism," or any type of feminism that acknowledges, points out, or counters sexism in everyday cultural or social environments.

This rejection made her an ideal mother figure for Gamergate: she offered them a soothing lullaby that convinced them they did not have to wonder if misogyny is, perhaps, present in many video games or in video gaming as a hobby, because, according to her, the only people who see it are those who are trying to portray themselves as victims. For weeks Gamergaters who had decried feminism as antithetical to logic, reason, and discourse suddenly became experts in Sommers's version of it and would flood their targets' Twitter mentions and comments sections with links to her videos and books.

Sommers's role as Based Mom resulted in some truly revealing commentary from committed Gamergaters, as they inundated her with tweets asking her to cook them dinner, read them bedtime stories, and otherwise perform the menial support roles they expect of a mother. Somehow this behavior was never seen as an indication of how the mob might treat a woman who refused to meet their expectations. Instead, Sommers saw an opportunity to use Gamergaters' unquestioning support of anyone who agreed with them and has produced a number of videos in defense of Gamergate, claiming that it is unfairly maligned.

Sommers is far from the only person to see Gamergate as an ideal outlet for gaining a personal online army. Anyone with a large enough platform who posted in support of Gamergate, regardless of any earlier

comments they had made about gamers, was welcomed into the fold without question. Gamergate became their biggest supporters, their attack squad, and their bullhorn.

For example, Milo Yiannopoulos (who goes by the handle @Nero on Twitter) is a well-known right-wing columnist. He currently writes for *Breitbart* and has been embroiled in numerous controversies. He was once sued for failing to pay contributors to an online magazine he had cofounded, and in retaliation he threatened to release compromising information about and photographs of one of the contributors when that writer asked to be paid for contributing work.⁴³ His dubious past in the journalistic field might seem to make him an odd choice for a Gamergate hero, which purportedly cares about ethics in journalism, but Yiannopoulos is a Gamergate hero for his strong stance against the sjws.

While Gamergate raged against Leigh Alexander for writing an article that supposedly said gamers were dead (in fact, it said “gamers are over,” in the sense that the gaming industry must, to survive, move beyond appealing solely to entitled squabbling white men who form online hate mobs at any sign of change—so you can see where Gamergate got confused), Yiannopoulos was, apparently, utterly forgiven for some of his own comments about gamers and gamer culture.⁴⁴ “Few things,” he once wrote on Twitter, “are more embarrassing than grown men getting over-excited about video games”—a ringing endorsement for Gamergate, which is almost entirely composed of grown men and their heightened emotions vis-à-vis video games.⁴⁵

Alexander has written passionately about and in support of video games for years and now writes for Offworld, a video game-focused website hosted by BoingBoing. Her critique of the toxicity of gamer culture, reflected perfectly by Gamergate’s response to it, appears to be a worse crime than referring to gamers as “pungent beta male bollock-scratchers,” as Yiannopoulos has.⁴⁶ The difference between them, of course, is that Alexander supports diversity and empathy and Yiannopoulos does not. Such double standards are a core feature of Gamergate activities. While they desperately searched for ancient forum posts and conservative viewpoints previously held by those who criticized Gamergate (and, in some

cases, outright fabricated them), no malignant previous comment about gamers or gamer culture was enough to dislodge people like Yiannopoulos, as long as they remained supportive.

Yiannopoulos has long mocked gamers, but, like Gamergate, he is far more interested in harassing feminists than in practicing journalism. The sudden change in attitude was not seen as a cynical ploy for the unwavering attention of a highly gullible group of conspiracy theorists but a genuine shift worthy of respect and admiration. His first article on the Gamergate controversy was titled “Feminist Bullies Tearing the Video Game Industry Apart.” From start to finish it echoed Gamergate’s narrative of sjws “lying, bullying and manipulating their way around the internet for profit and attention,” focusing particular attention on Quinn and Sarkeesian, what he refers to as “death threat hysteria,” and positioning Gamergate adherents as the unsung heroes of the situation.⁴⁷ Yiannopoulos continued writing in a similar vein during the peak Gamergate period, and his unwavering support has ensured an audience.

The same pattern that started with Yiannopoulos held true with the “Based Lawyer” of Gamergate: Mike Cernovich. While Cernovich in the early days of Gamergate tweeted that he “had never heard of ‘gaming media’ until recently” and wished men would “put down the fucking video games,” he quickly recognized that Gamergate was not about games journalism at all.⁴⁸ In the fervent desire to maintain a conservative environment dominated by straight white men, Cernovich did not see just an audience—he saw a market. From August to October Cernovich went from scoffing at gamers and games journalism to being a figurehead within Gamergate, milking it for all it was worth.

Cernovich is a First Amendment lawyer based in California. He is also a self-styled juicing proponent and author of an as-yet-unreleased book called *Gorilla Mindset*, which purports to be self-help for men. Cernovich’s work has the flavor of a Pick-Up Artist salesman’s tactics—lots of pithy catchphrases about masculinity, gaming women, and “a man’s instinct,” without much reference to supporting scientific evidence or even success stories.⁴⁹

However, Cernovich's description of his own dating tactics leaves a lot to be desired. "Have you guys ever tried 'raping' a girl without using force?" he asked on Twitter. "Try it. It's basically impossible. Date rape does not exist."⁵⁰ In another conversation Cernovich described his strategy for building a defense in advance of being accused of rape: "After abusing a girl, I always immediately send a text and save her reply"—definitely the sort of ethical lawyer Gamergate would love.⁵¹ Like Yiannopoulos and Gamergate itself, Cernovich is far more interested in attacking women and feminism than anything else.

Cernovich's tactics within Gamergate have been among the most actively dangerous to the women targeted by the mob. He hired private investigators to dig into the lives of women such as Quinn and Randi Harper, who designed the Good Game Autoblocker that enabled people targeted by Gamergate to automatically block thousands of harassers' accounts. Cernovich began working with Gjoni after he received the restraining order that prevented him from continuing to coordinate harassment of Quinn. Cernovich and Gamergate regarded this restraining order as an attack on Gjoni's free speech. Remember from previous chapters that online abusers regularly regard any attempt women make to engage in self-defense as an attempt to stifle men's free speech; abusers do so not out of an actual concern for First Amendment rights but because of their desire to say anything they want online without facing any online or offline consequences.

Cernovich's reputation as a First Amendment lawyer, however, gave Gamergate fuel for the fire. Gjoni was not just the spark that lit the powder keg; he was now a martyr to the SJW conspiracy. Of course, these types of behaviors are anything but new for Cernovich. In an article on his history with Gamergate, readers could note that, "as far back as 2010, he was doxxing people . . . and often going above and beyond the duty of a criminal defense attorney . . . by actually defending the substance of what they [were] doing."⁵² As Cernovich credulously repeated Gamergate's claims about the various women the mob sought to target, he offered his legal resources to the group, engaged private investigators, dug through

legal filings, and generally bloviated about his plans to sue various people for various reasons.

As of 2015 Cernovich had filed no suits on behalf of Gamergate or in relation to Gamergate at all. The litigation he threatened a multitude of times did not materialize; instead, Cernovich uses his status as “Based Lawyer” to harass and intimidate those he sees as SJWs, relying on the Gamergate crowd to be his personal attack dogs—and, of course, to be a built-in customer base for the lifestyle guides he is so eager to sell. At the height of Gamergate’s existence, a mere mocking comment from him would be enough to inundate a target’s Twitter mentions and online presence with hostility.

For example, I regularly discuss online abuse on my own Twitter account. During Gamergate any such discussion—regardless of whether or not Gamergate was mentioned—was assumed to be about that mob. Those making that assumption were almost always adherents of Gamergate, which says quite a lot about how they saw their own behavior. One such tweet of mine came to Cernovich’s attention, and his screenshot, retweet, and comment were enough to point his hangers-on in my direction. I logged on to Twitter the next morning to find more than two hundred notifications, many of them referring to me as a stupid bitch, a pussy, and a cunt. On an ordinary night I get between twenty and sixty notifications; to get more than two hundred of them, and in the form of an apparently unending stream of hatred, was daunting.

Cernovich’s strategy remained the same throughout much of Gamergate’s heyday: repeat and support Gamergate’s claims, no matter how ludicrous, provide dubious legal advice, and offer a constantly rotating platter of targets to harass. As of 2015 Cernovich was continuing these behaviors, identifying SJWs and other individuals he believes are worthy of an online mob’s attention, all the while hawking his upcoming book. While the Gamergate hashtag itself may have declined in prominence, the rage unleashed by it, and stoked by figureheads like Cernovich, remains.

Cernovich, Yiannopoulos, and Sommers all found a marketing opportunity in Gamergate: a constantly active audience willing to buy whatever it was they felt like selling that day. No matter what their stance had

been previously, their support of Gamergate guaranteed that followers of Gamergate would hang on their every word. While Cernovich and @Nero were certainly responsible for coordinating a great deal of harassment, Gamergate also developed its own outlets for that activity. After being banned from coordinating attacks or even discussing Gamergate on 4chan, its members moved over to 8chan, a website built on the same principles as 4chan but without the modicum of humanity 4chan moderators have tried to enforce in recent years.

8chan and Kotaku in Action (KIA), a subreddit devoted to Gamergate and its pet causes, both became havens for organizing harassment plans, posting personal information on Quinn, Wu, Sarkeesian, and other prominent targets, creating defamation campaigns based on rumors, old forum posts, or outright fabrications, organizing SWATting, and more. Gamergate was responsible for multiple SWATting attempts on selected targets, and nearly all of those attempts were planned in advance on 8chan; at least one of them resulted in a SWAT team being sent to the wrong location.⁵³ 8chan itself was not only a home for Gamergate and its activities but is also a website that unabashedly hosts child pornography.

In an in-depth and damning article Dan Olson has offered the results of his research into 8chan and the unbelievable failure of the website moderators to eliminate such content from the website's message boards. "8chan hosts over a dozen boards dedicated to the trade of child pornography," he concluded, noting that site owner Fredrick Brennan, himself a major Gamergate supporter, and his moderators "float just out of notice, moderating themselves just enough that there's always a bigger fish to catch."⁵⁴ In a move that shocked many who felt Gamergate could go no lower, Gamergate adherents did not decry the website on which they had planned raids and tried to ruin women's lives; instead, they defended it. They circled the wagons around Brennan, accusing critics of his site's ethical failures of attacking him for being disabled, and many defended the child pornography itself as an issue of free expression.

KIA remains a major hub of Gamergate discussion where members continue to try to craft a narrative of caring about ethics in games journalism while fervently expressing their desire to attack and destroy the

SJWs they feel are a threat to their gaming hobby. An illustration of Vivian James graces the KIA header, in case anyone was confused about where the subreddit's focus is. A new thread was entered on KIA every hour or even more frequently throughout most of 2015, much more often filled with content about evil SJWs than anything related to games journalism.

While Gamergate's actions spread across the Internet and into every corner of women's lives, its most visible harassment took place on Twitter. Twitter, which has perhaps the lowest barrier to entry of any social media site, enabled Gamergate adherents to create multiple accounts and engage in harassment with all of them—when one account was suspended, another one would pop up to take its place. This pattern of activity had multiple effects: ensuring that targets spent a disproportionate amount of time blocking and reporting new accounts, as well as giving Gamergate the appearance of being a much larger mob than it truly was. A study conducted by Women, Action, & the Media (WAM!) revealed a few notable things about harassment that occurs on Twitter and Twitter's dismal failure to respond to it.⁵⁵

During the period WAM! studied, 12 percent of the reports of harassment, threats, and violence they pursued in partnership with Twitter could be directly linked to Gamergate. One estimate on the actual size of Gamergate found that there were roughly 17,000 accounts posting to the Gamergate hashtag, both for and against it, and that most of the pro-Gamergate accounts were under two months old.⁵⁶ Even assuming that all 17,000 accounts were individuals and not people using multiple accounts, and even assuming that all 17,000 accounts were Gamergate supporters, that still puts those accounts at a fraction of a fraction of 1 percent of all 302 million active Twitter users.⁵⁷

Globally, more than 1.2 billion people play games, and yet at an outside estimate only 17,000 people actively posted to the Gamergate hashtag, whether in support or otherwise.⁵⁸ Despite the infinitesimally small numbers of overall users aligned with Gamergate, they accounted for more than 10 percent of harassment that took place on Twitter—a figure large enough to be noticeable to the WAM! researchers and certainly noticeable to those caught in the crosshairs.

Since August 2014 Gamergate has morphed into a variety of new forms, choosing a multitude of new outlets for its rage at women and other marginalized groups. Gamergate harassment campaigns have spread into areas that have nothing whatsoever to do with gaming and continue to focus specifically—as always—on anything that looks related to SJWs. For example, in early May 2015 Gamergate attacked a Kickstarter project to make a deck of cards focusing on prominent feminists. A \$10,000 pledge was added to the account; Kiva Smith-Pearson, the creator of the Kickstarter, traced the pledge to 8chan, where she found comments about the donation and gleeful plans to cancel the pledge during the last minutes of the project, with a goal of ensuring it failed to achieve the fundraising goals.⁵⁹ Kickstarter worked with Smith-Pearson to cancel the spurious pledge, and the attempt backfired on Gamergate further: the attention brought to the Kickstarter campaign helped to ensure that it surpassed its funding goal.⁶⁰

A website called *What Is Gamergate Currently Ruining* was set up to track what the mob focused its attention on; many of the entries describe attacks on people, websites, and campaigns that are, at best, peripherally related to games or gaming. Just a few of the things Gamergate has participated in include creating a massive blacklist of journalists accused of ethical breaches, where the supposed breach was, more often than not, writing something critical of Gamergate; gaming the Hugo Awards, literary awards for science fiction and fantasy writing, to provide awards to a slate of selected writers; sending people to the Calgary Expo under false pretenses (and getting kicked out and banned for life as a result); and more.⁶¹

Gamergate as a massive tidal wave of harassment aimed at anyone and everyone has slowly come to something like an end. Although the Internet is still flooded with the detritus of Gamergate attacks and its adherents are still trying to make waves, its inescapable presence on social media has dropped down to a somewhat less intrusive new normal. Many of the original targets are still dealing with extensive harassment and threats, however, and Gamergate is unlikely to disappear entirely. While the harassment campaigns will continue to flare up and die down, one positive outcome of Gamergate has been a shift in awareness of the seriousness of online abuse, as well as attempts to finally, seriously address it.

