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Abstract

A Review of Adrienne L. Massanari's *Gaming Democracy: How Silicon Valley Leveled Up the Far Right*. Published by The MIT Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780262380331, 238 pages.

Keywords

Game production; game labour; game developers; project-based workplaces; work regulation; industrial citizenship

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Figure 1. Image from subreddit r/SocialistGaming.

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The above meme was posted to the subreddit r/SocialistGaming on January 7th, 2021, the day after an angry mob stormed the United States Capitol in hopes of stopping the certification of the 2020 presidential election (Tiny_Tim1956, 2021). The image is an example of the Domino Effect meme template, which is typically used to illustrate the ways in which a small, seemingly insignificant event can cause a chain reaction that results in far-reaching, unforeseen consequences (Philipp, 2022). This instance of the meme in particular is referencing #Gamergate, a social media harassment campaign that focused on female game creators and critics who, participants believed, were exercising undue influence in gaming culture and "ruining" games with their feminist politics. The "free game about depression" refers to *Depression Quest*, a project created by indie game developer Zoë Quinn (2013). In the summer of 2014, Quinn's ex-boyfriend Eron Gonji wrote a scathing blog post denouncing Zoë and accusing her of sleeping with a games journalist in exchange for favourable reviews of her project (Blodgett, 2020) despite the fact that said journalist never actually reviewed *Depression Quest* (Totilo, 2014). The post, which had been strategically seeded by Gonji on multiple gaming forums (Massanari, 2017), started to gain traction within some corners of the community. The post "triggered harassment (including death and rape threats) against Quinn and anyone who publicly defended her" (Blogdet, 2020), with the second round of targets including feminist games critic and YouTuber Anita Sarkeesian, indie game developers Brianna Wu and Phil Fish, and actress Felicia Day, all of whom faced harassment, doxing, and death threats. Sarkeesian in particular was the recipient of especially brutal treatment, as #Gamergaters vandalized her Wikipedia page, sent her drawings of herself being sexually assaulted, created a game that would allow players to "Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian" (Liss-Schultz, 2014), and even disrupted a planned speaking event of hers by emailing a threat to execute "the deadliest school shooting in American history" if the event wasn't cancelled (Marco, 2014).

The meme suggests that the #Gamergate movement, which was a fertile recruiting ground for the alt-right and was even explicitly courted by the Trump presidential campaign in 2016 (Condis, 2018), was a crucial factor leading to Trump's first election victory and therefore, it could be argued, is one of the key factors leading up to the events of January 6th. Untangling this history and the ties that connect esoteric fan discourse in obscure online forums like 4chan and 8kun to the rise of right-wing violence in America is vital to understanding the political landscape of 2025, a landscape in which unelected social media platform owner Elon Musk brags about his (possibly fraudulent) accomplishments in games like *Diablo IV* (Blizzard Team 3 and Blizzard Albany, 2023) and *Path of Exile 2* (Grinding Gear Games, 2024) from Donald Trump's White House (Tan and Isaac, 2025). But perhaps even more important, is understanding how the ways in which the gamified communication platforms upon which memes like these are distributed have paved the way for our current moment. And that is why Adrienne L. Massanari's book *Gaming Democracy: How Silicon Valley Leveled Up the Far Right* (2024), is such an important and necessary contribution to not only games studies and platform studies but also to the process of assembling the first draft of this era in American history.

Massanari details "how internet spaces structure our participation through their design and affordances … and how the unstated values that engineers, designers, and, most important, marketers hold are crafted into these platforms" (2024, p. ix). Internet platforms in the social media age use gamified logics to shape how we communicate, making every interaction a kind of contest for attention and engagement (Massanari, 2024, p. ix). Furthermore, an aesthetic of playfulness permeates these platforms, encouraging the development of new communicational formats like hashtags, memes, and trolling that enable serious political messaging to be masked in layers of irony and tongue-in-cheek mischievousness that is difficult for those on the outside to parse (Massanari, 2024, pp. 118–119). And, unfortunately for American democracy, the alternative right, a coalition of online conservatives whose politics revolve around a sense of aggrieved entitlement and a disdain for 'DEI' née 'critical race theory' née 'social justice warriors' née 'political correctness', has developed a talent for exploiting the games social media platforms encourage us to play.

The book focuses on three case studies that are expertly explicated in an engaging and approachable way. The first case study focuses on #Gamergate and the ways in which subsequent online harassment campaigns and even conspiracy theories like QAnon copied its synergistic melding of fan communities, right-wing rhetoric, and gamified platforms. The narrative of QAnon, Massanari compellingly argues, is delivered to its adherents in the form of an ARG, an alternate reality game that requires players to collaboratively assemble clues and solve puzzles in order to solve a mystery that exists in plain sight, just under the noses of ordinary citizens that are too apathetic, lazy, or cowardly to put the pieces together.

The second case study examines the cyberlibertarian philosophy that has come to be associated with Silicon Valley and its connection to the so-called "intellectual dark web." This cyberlibertarianism consists of "an uncritical technological determinism" (2024, p. 67) paired with a belief in "the sacrosanct nature of the individual and an unwavering belief in meritocratic explanations for success and failure" (2024, p. 68) as well as a commitment to free markets. When paired with notions of "geek masculinity" (Kendall, 2000) that pervade certain online spaces, cyberlibertarianism provides "brogrammers" with a convenient excuse to "re-entrench existing systems of inequality (around gender, race, and sexuality), perpetuating them in new and more pernicious ways" (2000, p. 75). This particular case study looks at two examples of workplace controversies: former Google employee James Damore's infamous 2017 antidiversity memo and the backlash over software developer Adria Richard's complains about sexualized comments at a tech conference that came to be known as "Donglegate." As Massanari points out, "while both Damore and Richards were later fired, Damore was welcomed into the alt-right fold, while Richards was silenced by her experience. … These cases exemplify how tech culture valorizes particular bodies over others" (2024, p. 25).

The third and final case study looks at the subreddit r/The_Donald, which, Massanari argues, are "engaged in a particular kind of memetic play that is best understood as

a form of dark play" with "the figure of Trump himself as a transmedia object" of fandom (2024, p. 25). Participants would post memes and replies (often times video game themed) to earn subcultural capital that was easily trackable within the Reddit infrastructure in the form of upvotes and awards.

Each case study provides crucial insights into the ways in which the alt-right is attempting to "use technology to metagame democracy" (2024, p. 26). The book is written in such a way that it is easy to follow, even for those who aren't "extremely online," and will be of interest to researchers, students, and interested citizens who are invested in understanding our current media ecosystem. Massanari's writing has me convinced that such understanding is necessary if those who are invested in American democracy are to have a chance at developing their own 'game plans' to save it.

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