

**Lessons from #GamerGate:
Complicating virtual harm and reassessing frameworks for virtual harm assessment**

by

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Abstract

Beginning in summer 2014, a series of sustained misogynistic attacks against women in the video game industry coalesced online under #GamerGate. In this study I conduct a virtual ethnography of various online fieldsites hosting #GamerGate discussions, with the goal of complicating prevailing understandings of virtual harm. I draw from Feinberg (1987) to operationalize harm as that which damages an interest. I suggest that discourses in public policy, popular media and popular culture can oversimplify representations of virtual harm, theorizing an ontology of virtual harm that acknowledges a more nuanced range of factors that can impact how harm manifests within virtual contexts.

I add complexity to prevailing narratives of #GamerGate by highlighting that users throughout my fieldsites consistently perceive a range of virtual behaviours, including criminal direct harassment (Lenhart et al., 2016) and the nonconsensual disclosure of private personal information, to be harmful. I submit that users' (infrequent) engagement in these "universal harms" is not, as prevailing representations of #GamerGate can suggest, reflective of community or cybercultural affiliation.

I move forward to examine how users participating in #GamerGate discourses can disagree in their conceptualizations of virtual harm. Based on these points of contention, I draw from O'Sullivan and Flanagan's (2003) model for harm assessment to advocate in favour of a three tiered framework to assess virtual harm. I argue, as socio-legal scholars advocate, that this framework should include an assessment of subjective experience of harm. However, I depart from single-tiered frameworks to suggest that harm assessment should also consider how violations are perceived and given meaning within the context of particular communities and subcultures, and, additionally, authorial intent.

Finally, I consider how notions of "the virtual" can impact how users perceive and make meaning of fantasy and reality. I highlight that users in my dataset tend to perceive virtual spaces as playful or fantastical, and are consequently less likely to perceive virtual harms as legitimately harmful. To account for these perceptions, I conclude by suggesting that virtual spaces can be theorized as an extension of Huizinga's (1938) "magic circle", adding a final layer of complexity to my more nuanced ontology of virtual harm.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 – GamerGate as a case study of virtual harm: Contextualizing the study

1.1.1 – Introducing GamerGate

Beginning in the summer of 2014, a series of sustained misogynistic attacks against several women in the video game industry coalesced online under the hashtag #GamerGate. These attacks had been slowly building for several years within various on- and offline gaming communities. They originally stemmed from wider tensions regarding a perceived infiltration of the gaming sphere by females, whose relatively new occupancy of gamespaces threatened a previously male-dominated status quo (Chess and Shaw, 2015). These tensions and attacks gained widespread notoriety and mainstream media coverage following independent game developer Zoe Quinn’s release of the interactive fictional game *Depression Quest*. The game, where players encounter scenarios as someone living with depression, received largely positive reviews (Savage, 2014). However, a vocal – and notably male – group of gamers believed that Quinn had received undue praise and attention and began to subject Quinn to an escalating campaign of harassment and backlash.

In August 2014, Quinn’s ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni published an online blog post alleging that Quinn had had a sexual relationship with Nathan Grayson, a journalist for major video game news site *Kotaku*, and that this relationship had influenced Grayson to publish a favourable review of *Depression Quest*. This post painted Quinn as a “social justice warrior”, or “SJW GAMUR GIRL who made a shitty non-game called Depression Quest [and] got outed for BRIBING THE MEDIA INTO LIKING HER SHITTY NON-GAME WITH HER VAGINA BY cheating on her boyfriend with 5 other guys, including Kotaku staff members” (Gjoni, 2014, n.p.). Gjoni forwarded or posted the blog entry to several websites and online forums, notably the

4chan boards /b/, /v/, /r9k/ and /pol/ and discussion forums Penny Arcade, Something Awful and The Escapist, which he knew to have a history of harassing Quinn (Jason, 2015).

After multiple websites republished Gjoni's post, an organized harassment campaign (largely co-ordinated via 4chan) emerged to fight against what users dubbed the "Quinnspiracy". Quinn and Quinn's family began to be subjected to increasingly frequent virtually mediated attacks, including doxxing (the public disclosure of their personally identifiable information, such as name, address, and social security numbers); hacks of Quinn's Skype, Dropbox and various social media accounts; rape threats; and death threats (Romano, 2014). Once 4chan made the decision to moderate the harassment campaign against Quinn and delete posts relating to the "Quinnspiracy" (and later GamerGate more generally), the campaign migrated to 8chan, Reddit, and Twitter, which did not have similar content restrictions (O'Neill, 2014). Although the claims made by Gjoni were ultimately false – Grayson had never reviewed Quinn's games (Totilo, 2014) and, as Gjoni himself later admitted, Grayson and Quinn had not had a sexual relationship during the period when *Depression Quest* was being reviewed by others (Wirtanen, 2014) – Quinn was compelled to move and change phone numbers out of fear for personal safety. Those who stood up for Quinn or who condemned the harassment campaign against Quinn (ranging from Reddit moderators to certain game journalists, bloggers or developers, such as Polytron founder Phil Fish) were held up as examples of "SJW" censorship or collusion, and often became the targets of similar harassment campaigns (Chess & Shaw, 2015).

Following the coordinated attacks against Quinn, actor Adam Baldwin took to Twitter to comment on these events, using the hashtag #GamerGate to critique the media for enforcing "arbitrary 'social justice' rules upon gamers & the culture" (Kaufman, 2014). #GamerGate was used to signify an unethically close relationship between game developers and game journalists –

such as Quinn and Grayson – and a ‘conspiracy’ amongst reviewers to focus on progressive ‘social justice’ issues (particularly misogyny and sexism, but also racism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism) within gamespaces. The #GamerGate hashtag thus came to signify the censorship or stifled free expression of those who oppose pro-social ideals such as inclusivity and diversity.

The #GamerGate hashtag went viral. By September 2014, over 3 million Twitter posts had been made using the hashtag #GamerGate (Wofford, 2014). After the #GamerGate hashtag went viral, co-ordinated #GamerGate discussions migrated from Twitter to other online forums like 4chan (eventually 8chan), and finally to Reddit. A range of gamers, members of the media and broader social networking users who have engaged in the GamerGate debate have faced virtually mediated campaigns of harassment. Targets of GamerGate-related attacks routinely faced and face consequences that transcend the virtual spaces where these attacks originally manifested, including threats to physical offline safety; campaigns of harassment by mail, phone, or directly in person; feelings of anxiousness, fear or stress; self-harm, and social marginalization (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Kaufman, 2014). It became immediately clear that #GamerGate was being used to cloak often misogynistic attacks in discussions about ethics in games journalism and was being leveraged to justify hatred or harassment, perpetuating harmful or violent behaviours under the guise of the promotion of free speech.

As #GamerGate-related sociological debates played out, its importance as a case study of virtual harm became impossible to overlook. In this project, I draw from Feinberg (1987) to establish my working definition of harm. Feinberg writes that harm involves someone acting “in a manner that is defective and morally indefensible, given both the risks it generates for the other person and the setbacks it causes to that person’s interests either intentionally or negligently”

(1987, p. 105). He expands that harm involves a person acting on a victim in a nonconsensual way that is “defective” or “faulty” regarding the risks caused to the victim, with either an intention to produce adverse consequences, or with negligence or recklessness regarding those consequences. A perpetrator of harm, under this framework, acts in a manner that is “neither excusable nor justifiable, and [...] is the cause of a setback to [a victim’s] interests, which is also a violation of [a victim’s] right[s]” (Feinberg, 1987, p. 106).

According to Feinberg, harm may take three distinct forms: harm in a derivative sense, harm as damage to an interest, and harm as wrong. Harm in a derivative sense involves the idea that anything animate or inanimate can be injured (Feinberg, 1987), where sympathies are generally extended toward those who have interests or investments in a harmed object rather than to a damaged object itself (unless the object itself is animate). Derivative harm is tangential to the current study but leads to a second, more relevant type of harm: harm as “the thwarting, setting back, or defeating of an interest” (Feinberg, 1987, p. 32). An interest, here, is any thing in which someone has a stake (in any variety of senses, but commonly financial, legal, health-related or, relevantly in the case of GamerGate, civil liberty-related). Collectively, one’s interests represent components of that person’s well-being. Harm occurs when an act or invasion against an interest results in the interest ending in a worse condition than if this act had not occurred at all (Feinberg, 1987). Harm in this sense may or may not involve derivative harm of an object, but always requires the presence of an interest (not merely a wish or preference) that is somehow damaged.

Feinberg clarifies that “wants, even strong wants, are insufficient to create interests” (1987, p. 42), providing the example of an outcome of a sporting event on its own not representing an interest, but becoming an interest if someone has, for example, invested money in

that outcome. Finally, the third type of harm identified by Feinberg, closely related to harm as damage to an interest, is harm as wrong. Harm in this sense involves unjust treatment that infringes upon fundamental rights or freedoms, where these rights usually represent an interest: “one person wrongs another when his indefensible (unjustifiable and inexcusable) conduct violates the other’s right, and in all but certain very special cases such conduct will also invade the other’s interest” (Feinberg, 1987, p. 34). Harm in the context of this project refers to Feinberg’s second and third working definitions, which have particular relevance to GamerGate: for the purposes of this study, harm is that which defeats, thwarts, sets back, or otherwise damages an interest, or that which wrongs by unjustly infringing upon fundamental rights or freedoms.

Much like conventional scholars writing on GamerGate (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Freed, 2017; Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017; Massanari, 2017), I was very familiar with the forms of harm that had been carried out in the context of GamerGate and had manifested as misogynistic attacks, including doxxing, SWATting, and violent rape/death threats against Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu and other women in the gaming industry. Like previous scholars, I entered the field with the working assumption that the most salient narratives related to GamerGate were those involving misogyny and anti-feminism, like those which I had seen reported in mainstream news sources. And, while those narratives are valid, I came to wonder whether there was more to the narrative in terms of identity, virtuality, and harm.

1.1.2 – Complicating notions of virtual harm

Developing a deeper understanding of virtual harm is a key application of this study. GamerGate illustrates how harm can “reach out” of virtual space to infiltrate offline space, complicating instrumental understandings of the virtual and “the real” as separate entities that can be understood distinctly (Ferreday, 2009). GamerGate-related harms – such as doxxing,

SWATting or online threats – bring together symbolic virtual cultural practices with “real” offline violence. Each of these acts may engender feelings of fear, insecurity, and anxiety in their targets. At the same time doxxing and threats, in particular, need to be understood in relation to online cultures, where meaning and weight of threats may differ from or lack the same degree of intent from other contexts and speech acts based on on-line subcultural norms. In other words, GamerGate has idiographic importance in that it provides insights into the ways in which on- and offline behaviours can be rethought as phenomena that are not distinct, but which complexly intersect to merge symbolic cultural meaning and normative assessment of violence; and also provides a stage for public negotiation of understandings of virtual harm.

Complicating the ways in which we understand virtual space and its regulation is evidenced by policymakers’ increasing positioning of online communications as potentially more harmful in some senses than offline harm, thus warranting legislative intervention. As a recent Canadian example, Nova Scotia’s *Cyber-safety Act* (2013) defined cyberbullying so broadly that it could include anything said or done online that could hurt someone’s feelings¹. While legal definitions of harassment under the *Criminal Code* already stipulate that criminal harassment must cause someone to feel threatened, to fear for their safety, or fear for the safety of others, the *Cyber-safety Act* did not include similar restrictions on how harm may be defined in an online context, essentially operationalizing harm as anything that could cause offence. Narratives that offensiveness is harmful can, in fact, be harmful in their own rights. In response to legal

¹ Section 3(1)(b) of the *Cyber-safety Act* (2013) defines cyberbullying as “any electronic communication through the use of technology including, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, computers, other electronic devices, social networks, text messaging, instant messaging, websites and electronic mail, typically repeated or with continuing effect, that is intended or ought reasonably be expected to cause fear, intimidation, humiliation, distress or other damage or harm to another person's health, emotional well-being, self-esteem or reputation, and includes assisting or encouraging such communication in any way”.

contestations of the *Cyber-safety Act*, for example, the Supreme Court found that imposing a definition of harm (or bullying, or abuse) that has little to do with empirically and clearly defined injury infringes upon the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* by unnecessarily restricting s. 2(b), freedom of expression, and s. 7, life, liberty, and security of the person (*Crouch v. Snell*, 2015).

This illustrates that failing to think critically about how harm in an online context can and should be conceptualized, and failing to consider what factors can shape potential violence or injury that results from users' virtual communications, can result in policy initiatives that violate fundamental rights of Canadians. There is clear utility in developing a more nuanced operationalization of virtual harm in that harm is increasingly being conceptualized both popularly and in policy as offensiveness, which can lead to legislative interventions limiting offensive speech. An analysis of GamerGate presents a timely opportunity to reverse this trend by beginning to think more deeply about the complexities of virtual harms and their particular implications. Discrimination, including misogyny, is offensive and reprehensible. Whether and how offensive online speech is experienced as threatening and harmful requires a further assessment of virtual space, subcultural norms and legal implications.

While doxing and online threats may result in the effects enumerated by the *Criminal Code*, so too may these acts be understood and experienced differently based on familiarity with online cultural norms, and with the ludic or fantastical connotations that virtual communications can assume. In policy initiatives, popular media narratives, and the broader pop cultural mindset, "the real" is more typically associated with that which occurs offline (Ferreday, 2009) than with the symbolic meanings embedded within virtual cultural practices. The fantastical, it follows, is more popularly associated with that which is virtual. Understanding online harm in terms of the fantastical tropes that can be associated with virtual interactions – something I urge later in my

analysis – can additionally allow scholars to understand online harm in more complex terms that consider these ludic contexts. Since fantastical connotations can impact how virtual communications are intended to be understood and the understandings that communications can evoke within particular subcultural terrains, it is important – while still considering how communications and behaviours can be experienced as harmful – to build this more complex understanding of virtual harm. It is important for this more complex understanding to acknowledge the fantastical connotations that virtual communications can invoke, and to make room for the idea that online spaces, and significantly the anonymity that they afford, can create ludic spaces grounded in fantasy play, which can impact the meaning of, intent behind, and indeed users’ experiences of virtual communications.

1.1.3 – Complicating popular media portrayals: Towards an intersectional analysis of virtual harm

GamerGate debates that had formerly been restricted to the context of gamespaces and online community boards soon entered the broader popular mediasphere, receiving widespread media coverage within both mainstream and independent North American syndicates. Narratives in this widespread media coverage typically linked GamerGate to misogyny and to acts of offline violence, constructing these acts of offline violence as symptomatic of broader misogynistic virtual cultures that were representative of GamerGate and its supporters. In the case of #GamerGate, as this dissertation will demonstrate, these media narratives oversimplified their coverage of the controversy, its victims and its perpetrators – inevitably reducing virtual spaces and online subcultures to sites of male on female violence and ignoring the complexity of identity and behaviour in spaces that are as real as they are fantastic, and thus casting the web of coverage too narrowly in some respects and too wide in others. This ultimately fostered a broader social

and mediated context where some threatening acts – for instance, those centered on axes other than gender – were apt not to be taken seriously (although they may be serious) and where some acts (such as the use of online threats with fantastical connotations) may be taken seriously despite a lack of an evidenced intent to follow through.

Media coverage on #GamerGate began with a focus on Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic who had vocally and publicly criticised the GamerGate controversy (see Abcarian, 2014; Day, 2014; McDonald, 2014; Schreier, 2014; Totilo, 2014). After releasing an instalment of her *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* series about women as background characters in video games, Sarkeesian – a previous target of online harassment – began to receive renewed rape and death threats alongside the #GamerGate hashtag. Much in the same way as Quinn, Sarkeesian’s private information, including her home address, was published online; she left her home, like Quinn, due to threats to her personal offline safety. Sarkeesian ultimately cancelled a speaking engagement at Utah State University after the school received three anonymous threats of terrorism, referencing GamerGate alongside the anti-feminist 1989 massacre at École Polytechnique. In mid-October 2014 the home address and other personal information of a third public figure, game developer Brianna Wu (who had mocked supporters of GamerGate and had publicly supported Quinn), was posted on 8chan. After her doxxing, Wu and her family became subjected to rape and death threats, both on- and offline, and, like Quinn, were forced to flee their home. Wu’s victimization, like Sarkeesian’s and Quinn’s, received extensive media coverage across North America, and Quinn, Sarkeesian and Wu came to be regarded as the first three victims of #GamerGate.

The harms targeted at Quinn, Sarkeesian and Wu are certainly serious and certainly threatening, and it is important that they be acknowledged and validated as such. At the same

time, it is worthwhile to question the GamerGate controversy by paying more attention to the impacts and roles of virtual space, online cultural norms, and virtually-mediated fantasy, in an effort to complicate how we understand harms not only in the context of GamerGate, but in the context of virtual landscapes more generally. As serious and threatening as the harms committed against Quinn, Sarkeesian and Wu are, it is therefore important to look at GamerGate-related discourses in the context of the affordances of virtual space and the nuanced understandings of virtual subcultures that can frame these behaviours and impact how they are understood. While acknowledging the fact that online threats can have very harmful impacts, it is also worthwhile to complicate these actions and to consider potential other ways of understanding how virtual behaviours can flow in complex directions and be rooted in diverse meanings.

Popular media has overwhelmingly narrated GamerGate as a site of harm perpetuated by misogynistic males. The *New York Daily News*, writes that “men make our streets into threatening spaces” (Blanchfield, 2014, para. 7), and *The New York Times* suggests that “bomb threats [from GamerGate supporters] are now routine” (Wingfield 2014, para. 1), despite also admitting that “extreme threats, though, seem to be the work of a much smaller faction” (2014, para. 4). Articles in *Gawker* focussed their attention on the doxxing of actor Felicia Day (Hathaway, 2014) – also covered by *The Washington Post* (Wheaton, 2014) and *The Examiner* (Knudsen, 2014) – and ambiguous “death threats, bomb scares, anonymous promise[s] of rape, and what often appears to be a manipulative desire [of pro-GamerGate] to spread distress for distress’ sake” (Johnson, 2014, para. 3). Often, the coverage of GamerGate only acknowledges threats made by male pro-GamerGaters against female gamers or developers.

Intrigued by this coverage, I sought to better understand the GamerGate controversy, its players, its relation to the virtual realm and its coverage by mainstream media. Was GamerGate

so easily reduced singularly to sexism? If not, what if anything did this mean for how we made sense of and responded to online practices such as doxing and threats? While it is important to acknowledge the reality of misogynistic GamerGate-related violence, media syndicates' and many academics' (see Chess and Shaw, 2015; Freed, 2017; Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017) overwhelming focus on misogynistic harm paints an oversimplified picture, one that my review of GamerGate complicates. That is, as this dissertation reveals, reports focus almost exclusively on extreme instances of misogynistic harm without considering how virtual space and on-line cultural norms inform these acts, how intersectionality impacts their analysis, and how harms are thus understood and defined. How, I wondered, did not only sex and gender, but also race, class, nation, age, ability, and community or subcultural affiliation factor into the debate, given that they are mutually co-constitutive (Crenshaw, 1991; Puar, 2013) and play interrelated roles in perceptions and experiences of victimization and discrimination? By asking this my goal is not to diminish the reality or significance of misogynistic harm, nor is it to deny the harmful impact of patriarchy: on the contrary, misogyny is a substantial negative force within GamerGate, the game industry and virtual spaces more broadly (see Chess & Shaw, 2015; Consalvo, 2012; Massanari, 2017). However, it is important to acknowledge the intersectional nuances and subcultural norms that are lost in popular media reports on GamerGate, and which in turn shape our understanding of virtual harm.

Under the #GamerGate hashtag, campaigns of misogyny and sexism – under the guise of discussions about video games ethics – also targeted other social minorities within gamespaces (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Dulis, 2014; Kain, 2014). It is important to note that many of the women initially targeted under #GamerGate, including Anita Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu, can be read as not white. Quinn, who had throughout GamerGate been subjected to a campaign of transphobic

speculation, disclosed in a 2017 Tumblr post that they are non-cis and non-heterosexual: “I don’t know what I am yet, but I know what I’m not. I’m not straight. I’m not cis, and I don’t think I can keep pretending to be cis just to get by. I’m not a man. I’m not a woman” (Quinn, 2017, paras. 18–19). The men who were involved in the initial GamerGate attacks also occupy social minorities, where Eron Gjoni, who is Albanian-American, can be read as racialized, and Milo Yiannopoulos is openly gay. It is imperative to question the oversimplification of harm in GamerGate to one of discrimination based on gender, when transphobia, racism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination also play key roles in these narratives.

The widely reported SWATting of game developer Grace Lynn, for instance, was motivated at least in part by transphobia rather than misogyny alone (see acknowledgments of the transphobia behind this act in Cush, 2015; Silverstein, 2015). Media outlets rarely if ever report the a range of transphobic harassment directed towards Zoe Quinn. News reports largely fail to mention trans game designer Rachel Bryk, who, before committing suicide following a lifetime of chronic pain, other health issues and months of online bullying (Cuen, 2015), explicitly posted on Twitter, Reddit and 4chan about “constant transphobia” within the gaming industry, GamerGate and broader social media (specifically 4chan). Similarly, few outlets appear to have reported on a GamerGate-affiliated transphobic and homophobic 8chan initiative to jam a transgender suicide hotline with fake calls and abuse in order to prevent legitimate calls; while in my data collection I came across evidence of this initiative, I did not come across any media reports that addressed it.

Similarly, syndicates rarely mention racist harassment, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism or white nationalist doxing and harassment in the context of GamerGate, either as perpetrators or victims of online harassment. Notable examples include GamerGate activist Joshua Goldberg

advocating for terrorist attacks via white supremacist social media accounts (Futrelle, 2014), which parodies a cartoon originally run in a neo-Nazi newspaper (Pitt, 2013). Another example is a Washington, D.C. meetup of GamerGate supporters (Schreier, 2015) and a Society of Professional Journalists panel in Miami featuring GamerGate activist Milo Yiannopoulos (Good, 2015), both of which were targeted with bomb threats. How are we to make sense of the doxxings, swatting, and sending of weapons to Yiannopoulos and other high profile male GamerGate activists including Mike Cernovich, Adam Baldwin, and Eron Gjoni, and other GamerGate supporters (Boogie2988, 2014; Roberts, 2015; von Karma, 2015; Roberts, 2015; von Karma, 2015; Liebl, 2014; Yiannopoulos, 2014)? What can a more complex understanding of GamerGate reveal about inequality, harm and victimization in the context of gamespaces, virtual spaces and contemporary media? How do intersecting identities and virtual space impact our interpretations of inequality, violence, and harm as manifested within GamerGate?

Of greatest interest to me is an examination of “What is virtual harm?” and, relatedly, “How do virtuality and mediated spaces relate to harm?”, which represent my central research questions in this study. Although I had initially wanted to use these research questions to build a definition of virtual harm, I quickly discovered that this task was not that simple. Instead, I learned that it was necessary to backtrack and, through the data I collected, to rethink and complicate the ways in which we conceptualize virtual harm, with the goal of engaging in more nuanced harm assessments. This will hopefully contribute to the development of public perceptions – and resulting policy-related expectations – that take into account the complexities of virtual harm, rather than adopting a “one-size-fits all” approach regarding virtual harm as misogyny alone.

It is my contention that we need to think through virtual harm in more nuanced, more inclusive terms, and to consider why this nuance matters. The goal of my qualitative analysis is to achieve precisely this: to build a deeper reading of virtual harm by thinking about virtual harm from multiple perspectives as a multifaceted, intersectional concept. It is important to clarify that my goal is not to provide quantified, statistical findings related to the prevalence of particular forms of harm, whether in terms of who these harms target (for example, women, other social minorities, feminists, or, as the case may be, social majorities) or who perpetrates these harms (for example, members of ‘pro-GamerGate’ or ‘anti-GamerGate’). Qualitative research concerns itself with illuminating the richness, meaning and contexts of subjective experiences of social life (Altheide and Johnson, 1994). As Saussure (1974) and Grbich (2004) have outlined, the notion of objectivity is omitted from qualitative research. This rejection of objectivity produces analyses that transcend positivistic worldviews (Denzin, 1994): the value of qualitative research lies in its subjective and non-linear exploratory and explanatory power (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

As such, my aim is not to ‘disprove’ or to quantify prevailing narratives of GamerGate, nor is my aim to ‘prove’ or quantify the narratives that I identify in this study; instead, it is to complicate the ways we think about virtual harm and to acknowledge the complexity of GamerGate as a case study of virtual harm. In other words, it is less important to count how many instances of harm within my dataset counter prevailing narratives of GamerGate-related harm as strictly based in misogyny, and is more important to assert the qualitative substance of potential counter-narratives. Quantified data related to these counter-narratives are not necessary in order to trouble the oversimplified ways in which harm in the context of GamerGate – and indeed virtual spaces more broadly speaking – is popularly represented. The qualitative data in this study raise questions of how we should think in more depth about the many dimensions of harm in the

context of GamerGate and about what harm-related narratives are typically given attention in the public and policy spheres, suggesting that there is more nuance to prevailing discourses on virtual harm than is popularly acknowledged.

This does not mean that researchers and reporters should not acknowledge the realities of misogynistic harm or not take misogyny up as a valid threat. However, it is important to be critical of narratives of contemporary – and even historic – virtual space as primarily rooted in misogyny. Narratives of online spaces as inherently misogynistic are problematic given that women have played crucial roles in building and participating in online environments (Harcourt, 1999; Sutton, 1994); advancing information and communication technologies for advocacy, global networking, and lobbying policymakers (Harcourt, 1999); and making seminal academic contributions to virtual studies (Haraway, 1991). Although sexism, pay equity and unequal representation of female designers and programmers are significant issues, virtuality is more than just a “male-dominated space”. Gray (2012) highlights, for instance, that despite the gaming industry catering to an elite white, young, heterosexual male gamer, a majority of gamers do not fit this profile (Gray, 2012; Sunden and Sveningsson, 2012; Johnson, 2013). Recent studies have found that “this majority consists of female gamers, people of different racial and cultural backgrounds, and gamers of varying ages” (Gray, 2012:273). Even the most conservative estimates suggest that females comprise roughly half of gamers, and by some estimates, more than half of gamers (Beavis and Charles, 2007; Royse et al., 2007; Cunningham, 2011).

While misogyny is certainly a real and serious source of harm, suggesting that women have no agency within and do not play a role in building online spaces writes women out of virtual narratives entirely, ironically erasing women from discussions of the virtual. Women’s contributions within virtual environments must be acknowledged, and narratives like those on

GamerGate which reduce women online strictly to victims of misogynistic males must be revisited. I am not discounting the role or importance of identity; quite the reverse, identity plays a key part in each segment of my analysis. Rather, I am “taking a break”, as Halley (2008, p. 9) suggests, from epistemologies that oversimplify identity as a monolithic theoretical axis from which to theorize power, with the goal of generating more nuanced and intersectional – yet still emancipatory – conclusions. Halley advocates that, particularly in analyses of harm, it is pertinent to avoid preconceiving objects of analysis along narrow, identity-based epistemologies (that typically reduce victims and perpetrators to representatives of sweeping and often binary identity constructs, such as male/female, trans/cis, or white/non-white). Avoiding conceptualizing objects of analysis in this way can allow scholars to gain more complex insights regarding intersectional power structures and for the recognition that identity is multifaceted and complex, rather than something that is deterministic or positivistic. I address this epistemology in more detail particularly in my discussion of intersectionality in Chapter 2 (section 2.3), the foreword to Chapter 5, and throughout Chapter 6 (see particularly section 6.3).

Existing literature on GamerGate, as I will highlight (see Chapter 2), typically does not adopt an intersectional framework and often considers the harm enacted and experienced by those involved in the debate strictly along identity-based axes. My approach, however, draws on an intersectional framework to provide a more complex analysis of harm as something that can be enacted along multiple junctures at both the micro level and of virtual harm on a macro level.

1.2 – ‘Pro-‘ and ‘Anti-GamerGate’

Discussions of GamerGate typically make reference to “pro-GamerGate” and “anti-GamerGate” communities; what these labels mean from context to context greatly differs. Widely generalized, the colloquial ‘pro-GamerGate’ community is primarily driven by an interest in

issues of video game journalism ethics and corruption. ‘Pro-GamerGate’ is concerned with what they view as censorship at the hands of journalists; game developers trading positive press or publicity for favours or compensation; a lack of disclosure regarding game developer-game journalist relationships; and a perceived tendency of games journalism to promote ideology, namely pro-social justice ideology that is often reduced to feminist ideology. This perception influences ‘pro-GamerGate’ to advocate for de-politicization of video game evaluation and for the removal of a “feminist agenda” in video games journalism and video gaming more broadly. ‘Pro-GamerGate’ urges journalists and reviewers to exclude ‘social justice’ criteria such as presence of misogyny, racism or homophobia from evaluations of the merit of video games. They are typically concerned with the establishment of standard ethical codes that regulate how information is obtained or sourced, acceptance of gifts, cross-promotion between game developers and media, or a host of other perceived ethical issues (Otton, 2014).

The colloquial ‘anti-GamerGate’ community, meanwhile, perceives ‘pro-GamerGate’ as an anti-feminist campaign to drive women and other minorities out of the gaming industry. They tend to argue that ‘pro-GamerGate’ uses claims of corruption and a lack of ethics to mask the targeting of female or minority game developers and game journalists. ‘Anti-GamerGate’ focuses on issues of violence, harassment and discrimination targeted at women and other social minorities seeking to diversify the video game industry (for example, when games include non-stereotypical or non-binary characters or when successful game developers are female). ‘Anti-GamerGate’ perceives ‘pro-GamerGate’ as a response to “gamers are dead” rhetoric (see, for example, Alexander, 2014), which argues that contemporary gaming is no longer only for ‘hardcore’ gamers who have historically represented social majorities and who have been overwhelmingly white, male, and heterosexual. Instead, contemporary gaming is dominated by a

new group of fans, creators, players and community members who represent diverse social demographics and who range from casual to hardcore. ‘Anti-GamerGate’ sees ‘pro-GamerGate’ as primarily male (or at the least anti-feminist) gamers who feel that their power and community (as male gamers who subscribe to patriarchal norms) are threatened and who as a result target, sometimes violently, those with whom they disagree – usually women and social minorities (Otton, 2014). Interestingly, ‘anti-GamerGate’ tends to put forth a narrative that members of ‘pro-GamerGate’ are exclusively male, when, as my data will show, members of ‘pro-GamerGate’ are diverse, including females and representatives from all demographics.

Derived from the Washington Watergate office complex that played host to a major political scandal under the Nixon administration, the suffix “-gate” has come to refer to a scandal itself rather than to any particular stance related to that scandal. One cannot, for instance, be pro-Watergate or anti-Watergate: a “-gate” is not a “cause”. GamerGate, however, is unique in colloquially representing a political cause that one may be “pro-” or “anti-“. Problematically, however, this representation positions ethics and social justice as mutually exclusive. By definition, if one is ‘pro-GamerGate’ (in favour of ethics in games journalism), one is not ‘anti-GamerGate’ (in support of social justice in gaming), implying that one cannot simultaneously be in favour of both social justice and ethics in games journalism.

This representation also problematically positions the colloquial pro-GamerGate community at the forefront of GamerGate discourses, to the ultimate erasure of feminist voices from these debates. Rather than being a descriptor of a debate that can have more than one side and is value-neutral, GamerGate comes to refer to one side of the debate – the ‘pro-GamerGate’ side concerned with ethical breaches in the gaming industry – as the axis of the debate itself, and thereby changes its terms. In other words, the word “GamerGate” typically refers to “ethics in

games journalism”, and ‘pro-GamerGate’ thereby becomes “those in support of ethics in games journalism”. Those against social inequality in the games industry, meanwhile, become defined by their alleged opposition to claims of ethical breaches in games journalism rather than by their opposition to social inequality (and are labeled “anti-GamerGate” rather than, for instance, “anti-misogyny in video gaming”). This ignores that gender-based inequality in the video gaming industry can also be seen as a “-gate” or “scandal” and dismisses those who value engaging in debates on social justice. As the following chapters will show, this can have a range of implications for the ways in which we can understand and make meaning from GamerGate discourses.

In my analysis I strive to move away from the use of ‘pro-‘ and ‘anti-GamerGate’ as community descriptors. Throughout this dissertation I will discuss GamerGate as a scandal that can encompass a range of issues, whether related to ethics in games journalism, social justice, both, or neither. It is less important to label groups or communities and more important to discuss agents and social issues in terms of their intersections and interrelations. During the course of these discussions it will, however, at times be necessary (due to the content of the data under analysis) to make reference to ‘pro-‘ and ‘anti-GamerGate’ (usually when these communities are referenced by participants or by media discourses). When I do, I will reference these ‘camps’ of GamerGate participants in inverted commas, denoting that I do not endorse these terms as accurate community descriptors. When I do employ these terms, ‘pro-‘ and ‘anti-GamerGate’ are meant to be understood in their colloquial senses, with the caveat that these meanings are problematic and can in fact be damaging.

1.3 – Chapter summary

I begin in Chapters 2 and 3 by situating this project within relevant bodies of literature. In Chapter 2, I focus first on this study's contributions to literature on GamerGate (see Chapters 5; 7), broader virtuality (see Chapter 7) and the “magic circle” (see Chapter 7). Emergent literature on GamerGate is beginning to look at the impact of ‘the virtual’ in GamerGate-related harms (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernandez, 2016; Salter, 2017) and the role of mainstream media reporting in the development of popular narratives relating to GamerGate, and by extension to popular perceptions of virtual harm (see Perreault & Vos, 2016). This project engages with these burgeoning areas of focus. I consider (see Chapter 7) the impact of virtual environments like my fieldsites upon how users perceive reality and fantasy and how this potentially shapes their online behaviours. Drawing on and contributing to the literature on the “magic circle” (Huizinga, 1938) I provide theoretical context for considering virtual spaces as gamespaces where users are more likely to perceive their interactions as playful, fantastical or ‘less real’ – and, consequently, to perceive virtual harms as less legitimate than offline harms.

In Chapter 3 I contextualize this study via literature related to virtual harm, commencing by reinforcing my operationalization of harm as that which damages an interest (Feinberg, 1987). I depart from conventional literature on virtual harm by moving away from preoccupations with how harm might be categorized (see Chapters 5; 6). Academic characterisations of various virtual harms tend to overlap and often describe the same behaviours (where the same behaviours, depending on which academic literature is referenced, can be varying referred to as abuse, harassment, bullying, flaming, grieving, “e-bile” and trolling), often losing the harmful impacts of these behaviours themselves amongst discussions that focus only on how they might be labelled. Although definitions are important aspects of making meaning since in order to implicate something we need to know to what we are referring, it is important during this process not to

lose an acknowledgment that a range of behaviours can be experienced, perceived or intended as harmful. To this end, I look at how virtual harm can relate to intersectional experiences of identity-based discrimination (where virtual communications are often founded upon the policing of identity-based boundaries such as those involving gender, race or sexuality), where both lived experiences of users and the intentionality of alleged perpetrators can situate inflammatory communications as harmful. I consider the impact of community and subcultural norms in contextualizing certain communications as harmful within certain virtual environments but not within others, before looking at how virtual harm can be impacted by technological design and “the virtual” more distinctly.

In Chapter 4 I outline my virtual ethnographic methodology. I highlight a range of contributions that my approach makes to virtual ethnographic methods, notably by advocating for unobtrusive virtual ethnography and by reconsidering research ethics in terms of their applicability to virtual environments, particularly when virtual ethnographic research is being conducted unobtrusively. I suggest that while it is necessary for virtual ethnographers to consider capital-E research Ethics (formal institutional ethical protocols), it is also necessary to consider lowercase-e research ethics, which I distinguish from formal protocols by their moral, rather than institutional, imperatives. I highlight my various fieldsites and data sources (Twitter, Reddit, 8chan, and electronic media sources) and explain some of the challenges of virtual data collection, reflecting upon the barriers presented by prolific data sources, technological unreliability, and financial burdens of data harvesting. I then outline my analytical framework, describing my qualitative thematic analysis-inspired strategy before moving into my data analysis.

In the first segment of my analysis, Chapter 5, I deconstruct prevailing narratives related to harm in the context of GamerGate in order to begin to develop an ontology of virtual harm. I contest the idea that ('pro')-GamerGate is normatively in support of harm. On the contrary, I outline that within my dataset, users collectively consider certain "universal harms" – namely, criminal direct harassment (Lenhart et al., 2016) and the nonconsensual disclosure of private personal information – to be harmful regardless of these users' community or cybercultural affiliations. I discuss how users in my dataset exhibit expectations of privacy and consent to the disclosure of personal information within online social spaces, and that that these expectations play a role in their assessments of harm. I highlight that users in my fieldsites who do advocate for or engage in "universal harms" such as criminal harassment do not reflect a common identity (for example, as men or as 'pro-GamerGate', as commonly portrayed in popular media). Instead, these users reflect radically anti-social or radically pro-social ideologies and engage in or advocate on behalf of harm (for example, doxxing or making online threats) as a form of retaliation, or engage in or advocate for harm in order to 'troll' other users.

In Chapter 6, I move beyond "universal harms" to further develop my ontology of virtual harm. I consider the myriad ways in which users, communities and cybercultures in my dataset disagree regarding whether other behaviours (notably hateful, offensive, inflammatory, or aggressive speech) constitute harm. Although it is imperative to consider identity and subjective experience in harm assessment (as my analysis will stress), I contend that it is also imperative to consider factors that are less directly related to identity, including contextual meaning, authorial intent, and dynamics of virtual space that give rise to a sense of play and ulterior-reality. In doing so, I draw from O'Sullivan and Flanagin's (2003) model for harm assessment to suggest a three-tiered approach. I advocate that harm assessment must consider how violations are experienced,

how violations are perceived and given meaning within the context of particular communities and subcultures, and how violations are intended. This approach departs from conventional single-tiered sociolegal frameworks for assessing virtual harm, which tend to prioritize subjective experience as the primary – or the only – determinant of whether behaviours are harmful (Craig, 2012; Nagoshi, Nagoshi, & Brzuzy, 2013; D. Phillips, 2015; Weait, 2005). This represents a key contribution of this study to literature on virtual harm (see Chapter 3), which often overlooks that harm is layered and complex, and should be assessed as such.

In Chapter 7, my final analysis chapter, I move forward to consider ‘the virtual’ in more depth. I consider how ‘the virtual’ impacts the ways in which users perceive and make meaning of fantasy and reality themselves. Namely, users tend to perceive virtual spaces and interactions as playful, fantastical or ‘less real’, and are consequently likely to perceive virtual harms – and by extension GamerGate-related harms – as less legitimately harmful than similar offline speech. At the same time, however, prevailing media discourses on GamerGate stress the legitimacy and realism of these harms. This can create conflict – much like the conflict created in light of prevailing media representations of GamerGate-related harms as strictly related to misogyny – when users must reconcile competing notions of fantasy and reality regarding harm in the context of GamerGate, and in the context of virtual spaces more generally.

I suggest that a way of resolving this conflict – alongside an acknowledgment of the more complex ontology of harm that I outline in Chapters 5 and 6 – can be to consider virtual spaces as extensions of Huizinga’s (1938) “magic circle”. Virtual spaces, I argue, can be seen as gamespaces that encompass systems of meaning-making distinct from those outside the magic circle; redefined rules governing symbolic interactions; and new forms of temporality, space, identity and social relations. Thinking through virtual spaces in this way can allow for more

nuanced accounts of harm that can allow for the reconciliation of the fantastical with the realistic, and that can accommodate simultaneous considerations of identity, community belonging, personal history and personal meaning-making, which I suggest play key roles in how (and whether) actions and speech are assessed as harmful. In my conclusion, I suggest several complementary means by which this can also be accomplished. Moving away from punitive solutions or censorship, I propose pro-social solutions ranging from educational initiatives to technological solutions that afford users not only greater awareness of prevailing community norms, but also greater agency over the content that they view online.

1.4 – Community and Culture: A Note on Key Terms

Before moving forward, like I have clarified my operationalization of harm, it is also necessary to clarify community and (cyber)culture, two terms which recur throughout my analysis of GamerGate. Building on the work of earlier sociologists who studied online communities in the late-1970s and early 1980s (see, for example, Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Hiltz, 1984), Internet scholar Howard Rheingold first explicitly identified virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on [...] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (1993, p . 5). Escobar highlights that virtual communities can have unique subcultural and community norms, introducing the concept of “cyberculture”, or “the idea that there are somewhat unique cultural constructions and reconstructions on which new technologies are based in which they, conversely, contribute to shaping” (1994, p. 211). These cultural constructions, which occur and coexist in close proximity to one another, include shared behavioural norms, enforcement of moral standards, and the establishment of community (Hine, 2015; Komito, 1998; Kozinets, 2010; Lévy, 1997; Macek, 2004).

Recent debates on cyberculture generally agree that online communities can be characterized by shared interests that mediate these communities' predominantly virtual interactions (Ferreday, 2009; Gauntlett, 2000). This represents a shift from theorizing community based on spatial delineations (Berreman, 1962; Hiltz, 1984; Rheingold, 1993) to theorizing community based on communication: through communicative processes, agents within virtual spaces come into proximity with "like-minded others" (Gauntlett, 2000, p. 13) regardless of where they are physically (or virtually) located. Means of communication in this way become points of coalescence for the formation of virtual communities since they enable these common interests to be shared, whether within one particular virtual environment (like Twitter or Facebook) or across several.

Specific virtual environments, for any variety of reasons (their terms of use, community guidelines, moderation policies, technological architectures) may represent points of amalgamation for particular virtual communities. However, it is a mistake to assume that these communities exist in isolation: 'anti-GamerGate' discussions on Reddit, for instance, cannot be analysed entirely distinctly from 'anti-GamerGate' discussions on Twitter or 8chan, which cannot be analysed distinctly from 'anti-GamerGate' discussions taking place offline or in the media. To do so is to reject the possibility that shared interest or ideology can transcend virtual location; rather, it is important to conceptualize community from the standpoint of these shared interests or ideologies themselves.

Alongside discussions of virtual community, it is similarly important to operationalize cyberculture, a concept that is often conflated with the shared interest that characterizes virtual community (Ferreday, 2009; Gauntlett, 2000). Cyberculture encompasses the wide array of technological, material, behavioural and intellectual practices, ways of thought, values, attitudes,

methods of expression, identities, roles, languages, and processes of meaning-making that run through particular online environments. Unlike virtual community, cyberculture is location-specific and is impacted by the behavioural norms, communicative norms and technological affordances of particular online environments (Lévy, 1997; Macek, 2004). Kozinets summarizes: “[Cyber]culture is learned and consists of systems of meaning [...] carried in specific technological contexts” (2010, p. 12). Cybercultures entail their own “sets of norms and values, with common understandings of humor, reciprocity, and [...] identity as a social formation distinct from others” (Hine, 2015, p. 34).

An illustration of these shared cultural norms in the current study can be seen in the cybercultural context of 8chan, where the suffix “-fag” is playfully added to adjectives or nouns as a means of identifying particular communities of users. “Newfag” refers to new users; “Eurofag” to users from Europe; “moralfag” to users who advocate for moral causes, et cetera. While within offline environments the term “fag” is generally considered a hateful slur, within 8chan and related online forums the same term is generally deployed endearingly and often self-referentially (for a more detailed discussion of the use of “-fag” on 8chan and 4chan, see Chapter 6). Another example of cyberculture can be seen on Twitter, where users are commonly expected to “follow-back” users who follow them: not to follow-back would represent a breach of cultural etiquette. Rather than indicating ties of friendship, then, lists of followers are instead indicative of adherence to prevailing cultural norms relating to following and following-back. Cybercultures, then, have distinct systems of meaning that regulate communication within these platforms (Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2010; Lévy, 1997; Macek, 2004). These examples highlight the importance of making sense of virtual space as a mediator of social interaction alongside other means of

mediation (for example, offline social interactions) that agents experience daily, which may or may not invoke similar cultural norms to those manifesting within virtual contexts.

Shared systems of meaning that run through cybercultures do not necessarily imply shared interest or shared ideology: cyberculture, then, does not imply community. For example, Twitter, Reddit and 8chan may be conceptualized as distinct cybercultures – since each platform has distinctly nuanced systems of meaning that moderate communication within them – but not necessarily as distinct communities, since within these platforms users have disparate interests. It follows that while cyberculture can be platform-specific (e.g. “8chan culture”), virtual community can encompass users that span a range of cybercultures yet share common interests (e.g. “the ‘anti-Gamergate’ community”).

For the purposes of this project, virtual “realms”, “spheres” or “worlds” invoke broader cyberculture to a greater extent than they invoke particular virtual communities: a virtual realm, world or sphere entails the technological context and virtual location within which a particular cyberculture manifests, in addition to the numerous virtual communities it envelops. It is necessary, here, to emphasize that technology does not determine culture or community. Rather, technology, culture and community are co-constitutive, complexly impacting upon and shaping one another in co-determinant ways. As Haraway (1991) famously argued, technology constantly shapes and reshapes corporeality, spatiality, meaning-making and senses of place and belonging, and in doing so shapes and reshapes human identity. In turn, technology is shaped to respond to these reconstituted needs and identities, locking culture, community and technology in a mutually formative, constantly evolving process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review I – GamerGate, Virtuality, and Intersectionality

Foreword

I begin this study by probing literature on GamerGate, broader virtuality, and intersectionality, building context for the epistemological and pragmatic applications of this endeavour. I begin section 2.1 by outlining major literature on GamerGate, describing how this initiative addresses gaps in existing literature by adopting an intersectional perspective, addressing media discourses on GamerGate, and considering the role of “the virtual” in GamerGate-related harms. In section 2.2 I deconstruct “the virtual” in order to better understand the fieldsites of the current study (and the communications taking place within them) as locales that should – or should not – be theorized independently from offline spaces. I draw from literature on ubiquitous technologization to suggest that virtual spaces are not entirely distinguishable from non-virtual spaces, despite the unique nuances of virtual spaces that can impact – in particular – how these spaces are often understood as more fantastical than offline spaces. I then turn to game studies literature, a closely related body of literature to GamerGate specifically, to link these understandings to the idea of the “magic circle” (Huizinga, 1938; Nieuwdorp, 2005). I theorize the magic circle as blurring the boundaries between the fantastic and the realistic, not only within gaming environments but, as I will argue in my analysis, within virtual environments more broadly speaking.

Finally, in section 2.3 I advocate for an intersectional analysis in the current study, given the recurring trope of intersectionality within literature of relevance to this initiative (see, particularly, the dearth of GamerGate-related literature that adopts an intersectional perspective and literature on virtual harm that I delineate in Chapter 3). Given the importance of diverse identity (whether this diversity is political, ideological, demographic or otherwise) in differentially framing the key issues of GamerGate and the harms that have been ascribed to its

advocates, I draw from Crenshaw's (1991) theorization of structural, political and representational intersectionality to describe how my own intersectional analysis will proceed.

2.1 – Theorizing GamerGate

It is necessary to commence with a discussion of literature on GamerGate. While, as I will highlight in Chapter 3, this project makes key contributions to literature on virtual harm, this project also makes key contributions to the existing developing body of work on GamerGate. Current literature largely analyses GamerGate-related harm as as a social phenomenon that is dominantly rooted in misogyny; my own analysis, however, strives to adopt a more intersectional stance to consider identity in a more nuanced sense alongside other factors that can play a role in harm assessment (namely subcultural context and authorial intent – see Chapter 6). This more complex analysis complicates popular understandings of (pro-)GamerGate as normatively misogynistic and normatively in support of harm (see Chapters 5 and 7). Additionally, while some emergent literature touches upon the structure of GamerGate-related media discourses and the role of “the virtual” in GamerGate-related harms, there is a dearth of literature on these topics that my study aims to overcome.

Chess and Shaw submit one of the first academic analyses of GamerGate, describing GamerGate as a “conspiracy to destroy video games and the video game industry [...that] is a poignant example of the sexism, heterosexism, and patriarchal undercurrents that seem to serve as a constant guidepost for the video game industry” (2015, p. 208). They focus on GamerGate as a representation of systemic sexism that structures the gaming industry, pointing out the problematic idea that integrating feminist elements into the gaming sphere in the context of GamerGate is read as evidence of a “conspiracy”. Chess and Shaw parallel this systemic sexism to academia, suggesting that feminist research and ideology is “devalued within and outside

academe” (2015, p. 209) and calling for scholars and gamers alike to embrace feminist politics and research.

Massanari submits a similar analysis of GamerGate, suggesting that GamerGate is a “toxic technoculture” (2017, p. 329). She links misogyny in GamerGate to the technological architectures and governance structures of platforms housing anti-feminist virtual subcultures (specifically Reddit, but also 4chan, 8chan and Twitter), suggesting that websites often “provide fertile ground for anti-feminist and misogynistic activism” (*ibid.*). Freed likewise highlights GamerGate as a “misogynist social network movement” (2017, p. 6) that enacts cyberbullying and harassment specifically against women. Gray, Buyukozturk and Hill (2017) also focus on the role of misogyny in GamerGate, highlighting that there is a lack of attention paid by the general public to actual violence experienced by women in gaming. They draw upon GamerGate to consider the symbolic misogynistic violence enacted against women in ludic spaces, concluding that virtual violence bridges “simulated violence” (2017, p. 1) with “real” (*ibid.*) violence by blurring “playful” symbolic harm and subjective experiences of harm. They argue that it is imperative to discuss offline subjective experiences of misogynistic violence in tandem with subjective experiences of virtually mediated violence.

Curiously, however, Massanari, Freed, and Gray, Buyukozturk and Hill fail to extend their explorations from misogyny to other forms of harm, neglecting to consider other forms of discrimination such as transphobia, homophobia, ableism or misandry that are at play within virtual spaces and within GamerGate specifically. Instead, these scholars choose to narrow their GamerGate-related focus to experiences of sexism. In a cursory review of current literature on GamerGate, this appears largely to be the trend. Evans and Janish are notable outliers for adopting a queer epistemology that acknowledges that “myriad intersectional identities continue

to queer game space” (2015, p. 125), proposing that “#GamerGate is an acknowledgment and reaction to this queering of game spaces, not just feminist criticism” (*ibid.*). In doing so, Evans and Janish draw upon queer, feminist, social movement, social media and gaming theory to argue that non-binary analyses are promising tools for bringing about change in virtual and gaming culture. In other words, as Evans and Janish (2015) highlight, prevailing discrimination-based analyses of GamerGate largely fail to adopt intersectional perspectives, like that which I adopt in my own analysis (see section 2.4), that move beyond an oversimplified exploration of misogyny alone. This represents a key contribution of the current study to existing literature on GamerGate.

Perreault and Vos (2016), like I do throughout my analysis, consider the shape of mainstream media reporting on GamerGate, hinting, as I suggested in my introduction, that it is necessary to reconsider the oversimplified nature of prevailing GamerGate-related news. They argue that journalists paternalistically frame news stories on GamerGate, adopting the roles of “disciplinarian and moral voice” (2016, p. 9). Perreault and Vos find that journalists, in adopting these roles, focus on “the motivations for the harassment of women [...] in some cases, by disregarding the ethical allegations aimed at the journalists [...]. Simply put, they [dismiss] the legitimacy of the GamerGate ethical allegations because of the widespread harassment that [accompanies] the charges.”

Finally, as I also explore in Chapter 7, select literature on GamerGate also explores the role of the specifically virtual in GamerGate as a case study of harm. Notably, Salter (2017) stresses the importance of looking at how technological design of platforms can facilitate, legitimate or rationalize virtual harm. He advocates for solutions to virtual harm (like those that I will propose in the conclusion to this dissertation) that consider technological architectures as an aspect of harm-related intervention, pointing out that “proposed solutions to online abuse that fail

to address technological rationality will ultimately leave in place the sociotechnical arrangements that make such abuse possible and impactful” (2017, p. 1).

Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández, meanwhile, focus on GamerGate in the context of “the role of digital media platforms and cultures in shaping public issues, and the issue publics that engage critically with those platforms” (2016, p. 93). Specifically, they consider how various sociocultural dynamics including race, gender and sexuality are ubiquitous in everyday social-media communications and are differentially rendered visible within GamerGate based on platforms’ architectures, including the ways in which platforms incorporate videos, images and hashtags. In turn, Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández argue that technological architectures impact these dynamics’ roles in “the life of issues and their publics [including] the roles of key media objects [...] in coordinating and progressing the [GamerGate] controversy” (*ibid.*), and thereby the genealogies of culture and politics that particular controversies such as GamerGate invoke. My own analysis complements this research by acknowledging not only the importance of these cultural and political genealogies (where I highlight the importance of subjective experience and subcultural context in assessments of harm – see Chapter 6), but also the role played by “the virtual” in situating these genealogies as realistic or fantastic in the eyes of users involved in GamerGate (see Chapter 7).

2.2 – Conceptualizing virtuality: Virtual spaces as an extension of the “magic circle”

I now turn to a discussion of “the virtual”, with a goal of rationalizing how virtual spaces should (or should not) be theorized distinctly from non-virtual spaces. This study is intimately related to virtual space since the communications under analysis all take place within primarily virtual fieldsites, including online discussion forums, online social networks and online media publications/commentary. Theorizing virtuality has implications for how the analysis of such

fieldsites can proceed, particularly for this project in terms of understanding users' conceptualizations of fantasy and reality (see Chapter 7). How agents perceive fantasy and reality in the context of virtual locales impacts how meaning is constructed throughout communications that take place within these spaces, and lends nuance to this study's theorization of virtual harm.

From this discussion of virtuality, I segue into the topic of Huizinga's "magic circle" in the interest of considering how virtual spaces can be theorized as ludic spaces where elements of play frame communicative interactions. This discourse is essential to the current project, not only due to GamerGate's relatedness to gamespatial interactions, but also due to my suggestion in Chapter 7 that it is useful to theorize virtual spaces as gamespaces. This theorization, I submit, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which differential perceptions of fantasy and reality within virtual locales can frame subjective experiences and perceptions of virtual harm.

2.2.1 – Theorizing “the virtual”

“Virtual reality” was first employed in Artaud's 1938 collection of essays on *la réalité virtuelle* to characterize the “unreality” of theatrical characters and objects (Artaud, 1938). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, popularized by patents for virtual reality technology (Virtual Reality Society, 2016) and mainstream use in science fiction books and films including *The Judas Mandala* (Broderick, 1982), *Brainstorm* (Trumbull, 1983) and *The Lawnmower Man* (Leonard, 1992), the term “virtual” came to signify illusoriness that was specifically technologically mediated. In other words, to be virtual meant not physically existing, but made to seem that way by a computer or other technology (Wilbur, 2000), linking virtuality to technologically mediated fantasy.

Massumi (2002) explains that the virtual is an atemporal realm of potential that reworks categories of past, present, future, real and unreal. In virtual spaces, futurity “combines,

unmediated, with pastness. [...] The virtual is a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect” (Massumi, 2002, p. 30). Examples of the atemporality of virtual space are abundant. Many virtual spaces do not organize discussions or community interactions on the basis of temporality, which is reflected in many of the fieldsites in this study (see Chapter 4). Rather than being sorted based on the date or time they were posted, posts on Reddit, for example, are generally displayed on the basis of upvotes or downvotes they have received. Comments on Facebook, Twitter or virtual media similarly are displayed by default on the basis of their popularity (number of likes or retweets). In other (or even within the same) virtual venues, posts might be displayed in order of geographic proximity, likely match with a particular set of search terms, popularity within a user’s social networks, or paid promotion from a corporation. It is therefore not always clear whether a comment has been made in the past or is being made in the present. Relevance of displayed content is often determined by technology rather than by a user her- or himself.

Virtual spaces can also blur temporal lines to present atemporal collections of content that collectively convey new meanings or new narratives. For example, the timeline of a social media account can draw from multiple temporalities – posts or photos spanning months or years – to convey aggregate insights about users’ identities or communicative intents (Embrick, Kukacs, and Wright, 2012). Some accounts (see Baudrillard, 1994) claim that at some point in the past that preceded ubiquitous technologization (Wilbur, 2000), there was more direct access to reality. These accounts link virtuality and atemporality to fantasy and position the past as an apex of realism since it was less technologized than the present. This is a key insight in the context of the current study. That, as I have explained, the concept of “the virtual” pre-dates digital technology and has existing associations with the fantastical impacts the way contemporary virtual spaces

and communications are popularly conceptualized, namely as less realistic than those that are non-virtual (see Chapter 7).

Today, the term “virtual” is colloquially used to mean “as-good-as” (Wilbur, 2000, p. 54), invoking Artaud’s earlier operationalization that did not explicitly specify technological mediation as an aspect of the virtual. This reversion signifies the ubiquity of technological mediation: in Western societies it is no longer possible to conceptualize existence in terms that do not imply at least a degree of technological mediation (Wilbur, 2000). This can be seen in the fieldsites that are under analysis in the current study (see Chapter 4), all of which are technologically mediated to varying degrees. While some fieldsites involve discussion logs from primarily online forums like Reddit or Twitter, some (for example, mainstream media fieldsites) involve electronic representations of publications that also exist offline, while others such as industry blogs extend discussions that occur offline – for example, in workplaces related to game development – to an online realm. Within virtual spaces, agents can at least partially dissociate themselves from their offline corporealities and experience new forms of subjectivity. However, as Ferreday points out, “the experiences one has in virtual reality can be claimed as practically real: that is, they are not ‘just’ fantasies, they have an authority which would not apply to overtly ‘fantastic’ activities such as day-dreaming” (2009, p. 50).

Virtual spaces, then – including online forums, web pages, social networking spaces, and as I will explore shortly, gamespaces – should not be analysed as discrete, separate spaces from the “real world”. Instead, virtual and technologically mediated spaces are better conceptualized as liminal spaces that involve ongoing processes of convergence, or interrelation and synthesis across diverse spatial geographies and between diverse forms of media, diverse actors, diverse community and cultural norms, and diverse systems of meaning making (Bhabha, 2012; Jenkins,

2006). Considering the fieldsites of this study as liminal, cosmopolitan spaces that can draw together the on- and offline allows for the acknowledgment that within these spatial contexts, competing experiences of fantasy and reality come together and can both simultaneously play a role in how meaning is made within the context of these spaces.

2.2.2 – Gamespaces and the Magic Circle

When thinking through theorizations of the virtual and the relationship between the virtual and the real in the context of the current study, it is important to turn to historian and game theorist Johan Huizinga's (1938) discussion of gamespace, or space that relates to games, gaming communities, gamers, or players' interactions and experiences with or relating to gaming systems (Jones, 2009). Theorizations of gamespace are relevant to the current study not only because GamerGate directly involves communications that pertain to gamespace and gamespatial issues. These theorizations are also relevant because, as I will elaborate in Chapter 7, my analysis contributes to this body of literature by advocating that virtual spaces such as the fieldsites for this study (in their invocation of the fantastic) can be seen as ludic spaces that allow users to "play" with reality and fantasy.

This ludic logic is not necessarily unique to virtual spaces and can also apply to offline spaces where play is possible. An example (to which I will return shortly) is workplaces where sexuality and sexual flirtation can be navigated playfully by employees and can even be governed by unique sets of rules or codes of conduct, much like rules for a game. However, virtuality, as my findings will illustrate, can serve as a conduit for engagement with the fantastical and engagement with play more generally. Since the virtual is popularly seen as less real (Ferreday, 2009; Markham, 1998), technologically mediated interactions occur amidst a backdrop of assumed surrealism. Virtual locales, in other words, are commonly seen by the agents who communicate within them as inherently creative, playful, fantastical, irrational or "less real" in

and of themselves (Ferreday, 2009; A. Markham, 1998). In many virtual spaces, ludic or fantasy-based interactions therefore become the norm rather than the exception that occurs amidst the backdrop of an otherwise real space (or are at least often perceived that way), with implications for how users make meaning of virtual harm.

In the earlier offline workplace example², employees may perceive sexual interactions themselves as playful or as a game (with formal or informal rules governing sexual interactions bounding a sort of gamespace around them), although the workplace itself is not typically perceived as a gamespace. But in broader virtual environments including the fieldsites for the current study (namely Twitter, Reddit and 8chan), the environment itself, in being perceived as based largely in fantasy due to its virtuality, becomes a type of gamespace where rules of play govern communicative interactions. As I will ultimately argue (see Chapter 7), it is useful, then, to theoretically frame interactions taking place within virtual locales – since they are perceived as inherently fantastical or playful – as gamespatial.

Huizinga theorizes gamespace as a “magic circle” that encompasses the distinct place in time and space created by a game. Once users enter the magic circle by engaging in gameplay – or, as I argue in the case of this project, by engaging in fantasy and entering into virtually or technologically mediated interactions – social interactions shift and acquire new significance, with new forms of temporality, space, identity and social relations coming together collaboratively to rearticulate and renegotiate meaning. Within the magic circle, Huizinga suggests that gamespace is materially or ideologically “marked off” to create a “playground” in

² It should be noted that this analogy does have certain limits with respect to power imbalances, inequalities and hierarchies that are built into a workplace in contrast to differently structured online environs such as the Twittersphere. See, for example, Schultz’s writings on the sanitized workplace (2003, 2009), which focus on systemic patterns of workplace sex segregation and hierarchy (rather than the articulation of sexuality itself) that underscore and enculturate workplace experiences of discrimination, inequality and harassment.

which gamespatial interactions take place according to specific rules, regulations or norms. As he clarifies, “the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground [...] within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (1938, p. 10).

Within the magic circle, there are particular systems of meaning-making that are distinct from systems of meaning-making outside the magic circle. This means that communication may function differently within the magic circle, where interactions, cues and symbols take on different contexts than they do outside the magic circle. A relevant example to this study can be seen in virtual communities that normatively employ particular ways of speech that may take on different meanings in other social contexts. As I will explore in Chapter 6, on 8chan, “fag” is commonly used to refer casually to groups of users representing particular identity or character traits: “newfag” refers to a new user, or “Eurofag” to a European user. While the term “fag” is in many offline contexts considered a homophobic slur, on 8chan, this same term is seen as playful or even as a term of endearment, and does not literally invoke sexual orientation. This illustrates just one way in which behaviours or language that may be seen as acceptable, normative or desirable within the magic circle may not be seen similarly outside of it, which in turn can impact engagement in and experience of harm. Some theorists go as far as to posit that the magic circle “can be considered a shield of sorts, protecting the fantasy world from the outside world” (Castronova, 2005, p. 147).

As I have introduced, the magic circle does not have to be a concept strictly applied to a virtual space, provided offline spaces involve elements of gameplay where interactions take place within the context of alternate or “special” meanings and rules. From an analytical standpoint, this can have two consequences: first, these alternate rules and meanings can be positioned by

theorists as superseding conventional rules, norms and meanings that govern social interactions, which, as game scholars point out, do not disappear within gamespaces or within the magic circle (Consalvo, 2012; Nieuwdorp, 2005; Samoylova, 2014; Zimmerman, 2012). This supersedence can take these more conventional yet still present systems of meaning outside of analytical purview, ultimately ignoring saliently meaningful contexts for communicative interactions that are still present within the magic circle. It is therefore imperative for theorists to acknowledge that the systems of meaning at play within the magic circle do not supplant existing systems; rather, they add to and complement them. My proposed three-tiered model for harm assessment (see Chapter 6) is an attempt to make this acknowledgment.

The magic circle should therefore be theorized as bringing the fantastic and the real together in new ways, premised upon the “relatively simple idea that when a game is being played, new meanings are generated. These meanings mix elements intrinsic to the game and elements outside the game” (Zimmerman, 2012, p. 4). For the purposes of this project (see Chapter 7), virtually mediated interactions can be considered a “game” where such meanings that are a part of the magic circle can notably involve the construction of fantasy and reality (for example, when certain spaces are perceived or experienced as more real or less real than offline spaces), the presence of ‘special’ rules (for example, terms of use or content guidelines of a particular platform or subculture), and the establishment of new communicative norms (for example, when certain types of speech are acceptable within a particular virtual context but would not be seen as acceptable in another, or would not be seen as acceptable offline).

Scholars including Downey (2015) and Salen and Zimmerman (2003) complement my own analysis, drawing from Jenkins (2006) to argue that the magic circle should be rethought to include not only virtual spaces, but all social locales where diverse forms of contemporary media

that become synthesized and converged. In contemporary sociology, ubiquitous digital technologies have conflated the online/offline divide to an extent where boundaries between the imaginary and the real are not immediately discernable, not only during gameplay or more deliberate engagements in fantasy, but also during face-to-face interactions. Boundaries between fantasy and reality are blurred and are shaped by a multiplicity of factors (some of which I will explore in Chapter 7) ranging from technological architectures (Ding & Lin, 2009) to fluid temporality (M. Jones, 2009) to physical location (Gies, 2008) to socio-communicative norms (Downey, 2015) to ancillary media (Jenkins, 2006), rather than being statically discernible as assumed by early theorists working in contexts that pre-dated contemporary technologization (as Huizinga, 1938 originally imagined).

2.3 – The importance of intersectional analysis

Finally, it is necessary to consider more deeply the importance of intersectionality to the current study, given its emancipatory nature. As Puar stresses, “identities are multicausal, multidirectional, liminal; traces aren’t always self-evident” (2013, p. 59). It is important, I argue, to theoretically destabilize identities, in addition to better explore the “forces that continue to mandate and enforce them [... helping to] produce more roadmaps of precisely these not quite fully understood relations” (Puar, 2013, p. 63). This flexible theorization of difference and identity is a crucial aspect of the current study. How subjectivities can be thought through as differentiated from others plays a major role in how various vested interests frame the key issues of GamerGate, and how various subcultures, groups and individuals experience and perceive harm. Many of these key issues, as my findings will illustrate (and as others’ findings have illustrated – see Chess and Shaw, 2015), are impacted by perceived differences in identity (for

example, in terms of gender or political affiliation). Thinking through these identity differences in a more co-constitutive and fluid way can allow for more complex insights into experiences of harm and more general meaning-making and community, helping to move away from oversimplified analytical frameworks that, as Halley (2008) has cautioned, can re-inscribe dominant and less inclusive ways of conceptualizing identity and difference. As I have highlighted above, such oversimplified analytical frameworks are often adopted in academic analyses of GamerGate (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Freed, 2017; Gray et al., 2017; Adrienne Massanari, 2017), a gap that I strive to overcome in my own analysis.

Intersectional analyses, commonly employed in feminist, queer, critical race and critical disability studies (McCall, 2005), “foreground the mutually co-constitutive forces of race, class, sex, gender, and nation” (Puar, 2013, p. 49). Intersectional approaches originally came forth from second wave feminist frameworks as a black feminist tool to challenge “hegemonic rubrics of race, class, and gender within predominantly white feminist frames” (Puar 2013, p. 51). My analysis shares this epistemological orientation: following the emancipatory tradition, I examine social issues through a lens that focuses on power relationships, human agency and forms of inequality (McCotter, 2001). Whenever possible, emancipatory initiatives acknowledge hegemonic realities that privilege certain populations while subjugating others, including (but not limited to) the influences of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism.

Crenshaw (1991) famously argues that all identities are experienced and lived as intersectional. Crenshaw sees three forms of intersectional analysis as critical to emancipatory (namely feminist) epistemologies, a heuristic for which she advocates via an analysis of American anti-discrimination legislation. First, Crenshaw puts forth that intersectional analyses must be structural: they must consider the ways in which identity, read as occurring along

intersectional axes (for Crenshaw, race and gender), can render experiences qualitatively different. Structural intersectionality acknowledges patterns of subordination that are entrenched in economic, social and political worlds that agents differentially inhabit on the basis of their identities. Crenshaw notes that a range of structural factors – for example, employment opportunities, availability of childcare, housing practices, language barriers, and citizenship requirements – intersect in subjects’ experiences of violence and discrimination. For example, she finds that those who are more economically or culturally privileged often have more opportunities to take advantage of structural affordances such as legislative provisions for cases of domestic violence. Policy that fails to consider structural intersectionality, Crenshaw cautions, can result in those who are most in need of help – as she argues, minority communities – failing to be acknowledged by or granted access to social and legislative services (1991).

Second, Crenshaw argues that intersectional analyses must consider political intersectionality. Multifaceted identities have correspondingly multifaceted political interests (that may or may not be conflictual) that necessitate dividing one’s political energies into multiple dimensions in order to work toward multiple forms of empowerment and political resistance. For example, Crenshaw argues that racialized men and white women experience different forms of oppression, which are further different from forms of oppression experienced by racialized women. Failing to adequately address the intersectional nuances of these forms of oppression, Crenshaw points out, can result in one cause being advanced at the expense of abandoning another: “The failure of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of [people of colour], and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252).

Finally, Crenshaw outlines the importance of considering representational intersectionality, or intersectionality in the cultural construction of identity. Pop cultural representations of minority subjectivities, Crenshaw cautions, tend to homogenize identity in a way that excludes intersectional considerations. She provides the examples of anti-rape discourses that position the case of black men who rape white women as primarily a race-related issue and the failure of some feminists to interrogate disproportionate punishment of black men who rape white women as illustrations that when race and gender converge, “the concerns of minority women fall into the void between concerns about women’s issues and concerns about racism” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1282) – in other words, intersectional considerations can be abandoned in favour of concerns about one particular homogenized identity.

In adopting an intersectional perspective, I will strive, as Crenshaw recommends, to conduct my analysis along axes that consider the structural, political and representational nuances that underscore the multiplicities of subjectivities and intersubjective communications reflected in the data set for this study, including various communities’ experiences and perceptions of harm. Researchers adopting intersectional perspectives must additionally, as Puar (2013) cautions, avoid reifying constructions of essentialized minority groups whose members may not have similar experiences. In the case of this study, for example, it is important to avoid assuming that all female gamers or community members, or all gamers or community members representing a particular social minority, can be homogenized. It is likewise important to avoid assuming that inequality manifests similarly among similar mediums, and to avoid assuming that forms of discrimination at work within communicative discourses will relate only to one identity characteristic such as gender when they more likely reflect a variety of intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Puar, 2013) that may not be consistent from user to user. It is also imperative

to advocate for intersectional awareness in research dissemination: rather than merely a theoretical tool, intersectionality is something that must be actively embraced and promoted.

2.4 – Conclusion

In this chapter I first summarized scholarly literature on GamerGate, outlining the gaps filled by the current study by its adoption of an intersectional perspective and consideration of the role of “the virtual” in harms related to GamerGate. I then operationalized virtuality, considering some of the unique nuances of virtual spaces and acknowledging that virtual spaces can be popularly perceived or experienced as more fantastical than offline or non-virtual spaces, while cautioning against analysing them entirely separately. I juxtaposed these discussions of “the virtual” with game theory to link virtuality to the concept of the “magic circle”, introducing the idea that since the trope of fantasy runs through virtual spaces, these spaces can be considered ludic and should be theorized as within the boundaries of the contemporary magic circle. I concluded by arguing for intersectional analyses of identity in the context of virtual environments, and describing the shape that my own intersectional analysis of GamerGate will take. Having outlined some of the key bodies of literature to which the current project contributes – literature on GamerGate itself, “the virtual”, the “magic circle”, and broader intersectionality in the context of GamerGate – I now move forward to consider literature on virtual harm, another major application of this study.

Chapter 3: Literature Review II – Virtual Harm

Foreword

In this chapter, I explore literature addressing virtual harm. A central goal of this project is to draw upon GamerGate to contribute to the development of an ontology of harm in virtual contexts. This chapter builds a foundation to contextualize my own proposed ontology (see analysis chapters), establishing a scholarly framework to better understand harm as it unfolds within virtual spaces like those under analysis in this initiative (see Chapter 4). In doing so, I identify gaps in literature on virtual harm that my own analysis will strive to fill. I begin in section 3.1 by presenting a range of academic definitions for virtual harm, outlining how virtual harms can be differentially categorized as abuse, harassment, bullying, flaming, grieving, or “e-bile”. In section 3.2 I consider in more detail the case of trolling (a particularly relevant concept to the current study – see Chapter 6), highlighting that trolling is a contested concept whose harm is debated. I highlight that academic operationalizations of virtual harm often bleed together and describe the same virtual behaviours. Questioning the pertinence of investing undue intellectual labour in how harm might be labeled, I suggest that it is more pertinent to place an epistemological focus on experiences and intentions of harm rather than semantic classifications of harm.

In light of the identity-based discrimination and violence that is stereotypically associated with GamerGate (see Chapter 1; Chapter 5; Chapter 7), I move forward in section 3.3 to look at how virtual harm can relate to intersectional experiences of identity-based discrimination. In doing so, I consider how the lived experiences of particular users and the intentionality of alleged perpetrators can both be used to construct particular identity-based inflammatory communications as harmful. I link this discussion to the diversity of community- and cultural-specific norms across different virtual environments, highlighting that the same behaviours may

be perceived or experienced in one setting as innocuous while harmful in another (a concept that plays a key role in this study's ontology of harm – see Chapter 6). I establish that virtual communications and popular media are often founded upon the policing of identity-based boundaries (such as those related to gender, race or sexuality) and can serve to reinscribe a white, male and heterosexual status quo. I make the case for a more nuanced consideration of intersectional identity and socio-cultural positionality in analyses of virtual harm.

In order to understand how harm relates more explicitly to the virtual settings of the fieldsites in the current study, I finally turn in section 3.4 to theorizations of how virtual harm can be impacted by technological architectures and other distinct elements of “the virtual”. I problematize literature that suggests that virtuality itself causes harm, notably critiquing claims that virtuality enables any true anonymity and that this anonymity is somehow more likely to result in aggressive or harmful interpersonal communications. I similarly problematize ideals of “radical transparency” as a necessary safeguard against alleged anonymity-related harms. In doing so, I caution against a potentially dangerous move toward forced identifiability in virtual social spaces.

3.1 – Operationalizing virtual harm

This study draws from legal scholarship as a starting point to conceptualize harm in a general sense as damage to an interest. To reiterate the operationalization of harm that I included in the introduction to this dissertation, Feinberg writes that harm involves an individual (or individuals) acting “in a manner that is defective and morally indefensible, given both the risks it generates for the other person and the setbacks it causes to that person's interests either intentionally or negligently” (1987, p. 105). Harm entails a person acting in a nonconsensual way that is “defective” or “faulty” concerning risks caused to the victim, where this person either has

an intention to produce adverse consequences, or exhibits negligence or recklessness regarding those consequences. A perpetrator of harm, according to this definition, acts in a manner that is “neither excusable nor justifiable, and [...] is the cause of a setback to [a victim’s] interests, which is also a violation of [a victim’s] right[s]” (Feinberg, 1987, p. 106)

Since precisely what constitutes many of these key terms – including what is meant by excusable, justifiable, setbacks, victims’ interests, and, as my analysis will illustrate, indeed victims’ broader rights – is debated (both in legal and other scholarly literature), the notion of harm is subject to fervent debate, and harm is a contested concept. A central objective of this study is to contribute to these debates, ultimately developing a more nuanced framework for assessing harm within specifically virtual contexts. Since commonly disputed cases of harm (whether legally or theoretically) include such broad experiences as discomfort, insult, nuisance, and offence (Blackburn, 2016; Feinberg, 1987), and since a commonly accepted rationale for legal intervention is harm prevention, it is important for academics to continue to explore and determine the limits of this concept. The concept of harm is particularly relevant to an academic analysis of GamerGate, which involves myriad potentially harmful behaviours ranging from violent or hateful communications to the public disclosure of identifying personal information to instances of offline harassment (see Chapter 1; Chapter 5; Chapter 6).

While many sociolegal scholars focus on audience reception as a key determinant of whether behaviours are harmful (see Craig, 2012; Jane, 2014; Lamarque, 2006; Nagoshi, Nagoshi, & Brzuzy, 2013; Phillips, 2015; Weait, 2005), O’Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) suggest that inflammatory online behaviours should be considered in terms of whether violations are intentional, why norms are being (or are seen by others as being) violated, the impacts of these violations, and the particular community or cultural contexts that surround them. This conceptual

approach has been problematized by some as an “intentional fallacy” (Lamarque, 2006) that implies that it is desirable and epistemologically practical to disregard non-authorial experience when determining whether communications inflict harm. In other words, Lamarque (2006) suggests that it is inappropriate for the experiences of victims of harm to be disregarded in favour of legitimizing perpetrators who may claim that their speech is not harmful, or at least not intended to be so.

Indeed, Feinberg’s (1987) operationalization of harm explicitly states that harm may in some cases be enacted when intent is not present – namely when harm is enacted negligently or recklessly with respect to potential consequences or risks. However, claims that experiences of victims are being theoretically disregarded by scholars who consider intentionality are often oversimplified or fail to acknowledge that these scholars advocate for simultaneous – as opposed to separate – consideration of intentionality alongside experiences of harm. In my own analysis (see Chapter 6) I adopt such a stance, advocating for a three-tiered system of virtual harm assessment that concurrently considers experience, perception and intent.

Harm in virtual contexts has been labeled and theorized varyingly as abuse, harassment, bullying, flaming, grieving, “e-bile” and trolling. Before moving forward to consider some of the intricacies of virtual harm in a more general sense, it is important first to parse these operationalizations in order to develop an ontology of harm to frame this study’s analysis. While these theorizations can be useful lenses through which to conceptualize harm, they are not universally agreed upon: as Chesney et al. point out, “Often, no objective measure [...] can be made, but it is assumed that people ‘know [harm] when they see it’” (2009, p. 530). This ‘common sense’ mindset regarding virtual harm is troublesome. Following this logic, claims of alleged harm can be made on any grounds, including those involving morality or ideology. This

line of reasoning can thereby promote censorship, particularly of non-normative communications or behaviours that are seen a harmful simply because they are different from prevailing sociocultural norms, even if they do not cause any actual injury.

As Kearney (2003) draws from Derrida (1997) and Mills-Knutsen (n.d.) to point out, forms of “otherness”, in causing agents to think about what they are not, call into question what individuals take for granted about themselves, their sociocultural positions and norms, and the broader social worlds that they inhabit. For this reason, what is “not-us” is often met with responses such as derision, fear or repulsion, among others. As seen in the context of virtual environments generally and of GamerGate specifically, this can result in accusations that members and communications of the “not-us” are somehow harmful, whether in their actions or their thoughts/beliefs themselves. In reference to GamerGate, this “not-us” differs from community to community and can refer to advocates for social justice, members of the alt-right, female gamers, male gamers, females in general, males in general, or a range of other positionalities that users perceive as varyingly harmful on the basis of subcultural norms or stereotyped beliefs.

3.1.1 – Abuse

Abuse, perhaps the broadest conceptualization of damaging virtual behaviour, entails the enactment of harm or injury (despite debate surrounding the precise meanings of these terms) upon someone else (Brodsky, 1976; Chesney et al., 2009). Temporally, academic definitions convey both that abusive online behaviour takes place repeatedly over an extended period of time (Olweus, 1991; P. Smith & Thompson, 1991) – an example of which would be online stalking – and that abuse can stem from an isolated event (Chesney et al., 2009) – for example, posting one offensive comment to a stranger. This idea, that a singular incident can be characterized as abuse

(even if it is deeply hurtful), can potentially be problematic. It can erase or diminish the sense of injury attributed to the repetitive nature of more traditional cases of abuse, and also encompasses a vast range of potentially different behaviours – each of which could have different impacts for those who experience them – under one vaguely defined term. This introduces a theme to which I will return throughout this chapter: academic operationalizations of online harm are often vague, often contradictory, and often bleed into one another. This can render it difficult for scholars to theorize harms and their impacts, since a consistent academic framework for doing so does not always exist.

Noting this, and with the goal of resolving this issue in my own analysis, I argue that an acknowledgment that behaviours or communications can be hurtful or harmful is itself more important than semantic debates. For example, I submit that it is less than pertinent to consider whether behaviours that take place only once can be considered abuse in comparison to events that take place repeatedly over time, or even precisely what behaviours might be considered abuse at all. Instead, it is more useful to acknowledge that both singular and repeated incidents can impart degrees of injury or damages to interest upon victims – and therefore to focus analyses on these experiences of harm themselves (as well as the perceptions and intents behind them) rather than how they might be semantically classified or hierarchized.

The intensity or type of harm caused by behaviours theorized as abuse is similarly as flexible as their temporality; the mere causation of harm is typically enough to qualify behaviour as abuse (Brodsky, 1976). It is contested, however, whether this entails harm as defined by an alleged victim or harm as defined by an observer, complicating the identification of particular behaviour as abuse. Suler and Phillips (1998), for example, highlight that a spectrum of virtual behaviours can potentially be characterized as harmful or injurious and therefore as abuse,

ranging from mild, mischievous behaviour to offensive language or images to (vaguely operationalized) socially problematic behaviour to cybercrime (see varying characterizations in Bergstrom, 2011; Chesney et al., 2009; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Phillips, 2011; Phillips, 2015; Williams, 2001). The spectrum of behaviours that have been academically classified as abuse is vast, again raising concerns about how these definitions overlap and contradict one another, and ultimately may not serve any fruitful academic purpose.

3.1.2 – Cyberbullying, grieving and flaming

Another term, cyberbullying (also referred to as cyberharassment), is often conflated with virtual abuse. Cyberbullying, which often becomes a catch-all for any aggressive, incendiary, reputation-damaging or “mean” behaviours online (Shariff & Johnny, 2007), traditionally involves aggressive behaviour by an individual or group (more often a group – see Shariff, 2008) that occurs over a prolonged period of time in the context of a relationship of imbalanced power (Olweus, 1991; Smith & Thompson, 1991). This imbalance of power can result from victims having smaller social networks or social support systems than perpetrators, being outnumbered by perpetrators, or being hierarchically subordinate to perpetrators, for example, by occupying a “lower” position within an organization or by having less social capital within a social network (Chesney et al., 2009). Cyberbullying, like offline bullying, can include acts of aggression that may have physical offline impacts, such as making threats, throwing insults or publicly releasing personal information (theorized by some scholars as “direct bullying” – see van der Wal, de Wit, & Hirasing, 2003). Academic operationalizations of cyberbullying can also include more covert acts of social isolation (Shariff, 2008) such as ignoring victims or talking about them behind their backs (theorized by some scholars as “indirect bullying” – see Rivers & Smith, 1994). Regardless of whether bullying behaviours are direct or indirect, however, they are deliberate, repeated and unwanted (Shariff, 2008).

The recurrence implied by cyberbullying hints at an ontological difference between traditional definitions of cyberbullying and of virtual abuse: although these terms capture many of the same behaviours, literature suggests that while abuse may be one isolated harmful incident that can be a one-off event (Brodsky, 1976; Chesney et al., 2009), cyberbullying behaviours must occur more than once. Although popularly the distinction between abuse and bullying is one of severity (with abuse commonly seen as more serious than bullying – see Chesney et al., 2009), some academics claim that this distinction of frequency is more key. Based on this definition, while all cyberbullying broadly speaking may be considered abuse – since it imparts harm upon victims – not all abuse may be considered cyberbullying. However, as I have argued above, this distinction is less important than an epistemological focus on the experience of and intentionality behind harm itself, regardless of the label it is given. Primarily considering frequency at the expense of overlooking severity can erase the real impacts of harm in cases where victimization occurs less frequently over time, although it is nonetheless important to reflect upon frequency as an aspect that can amplify experiences of harm.

In order for behaviour to be characterized as bullying, victims must have little possibility of avoiding perpetrators (Salmvialli et al., 1996); in a virtual context, this can include being the recipient of unwanted forms of contact such as email, text messages, or other online messages. Cyberbullying, like offline bullying, is gendered, with females more likely to be both the victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying behaviours (Shariff, 2008; Shariff & Gouin, 2006). Jane (2015) suggests that cyberbullying, while it can affect anyone or happen in any environment, is more likely to occur in specific circumstances, namely those involving young people or educational contexts. However, positioning these circumstances as distinguishing aspects of cyberbullying is tenuous, since offline bullying tends to reflect similar contexts (Rivers & Smith, 1994).

In fact, the label “cyberbullying” is itself contentious, since academic literature on cyberbullying often fails to distinguish how these behaviours in general are uniquely virtual, instead rehashing operationalizations of traditional bullying (Quine, 1999; Rivers & Smith, 1994; P. Smith & Thompson, 1991) and simply applying them to virtual contexts. This begs the question of whether theorizations of cyberbullying are a substantive scholarly contribution or simply rephrase older theorizations of offline bullying under a contemporary ‘buzzword’. In other words, there is often nothing “cyber” about cyberbullying, and the realities of harm and victimization can become lost in semantic debates about what terms should be employed to describe harmful behaviour depending on the various on- and offline spatial contexts in which it occurs. It is more useful, as I have argued, to focus instead on these realities themselves and to acknowledge that on- and offline behaviours are complexly intertwined, rather than to carry out analyses that treat on- and offline victimization as discrete occurrences.

Another term frequently conflated with (cyber)bullying and abuse is “griefing”. Griefing implies provocative or aggressive behaviour where an aggressor is not physically present (limiting it strictly to technologically mediated contexts) and where users do not know one another’s “real” identities (Chesney et al., 2009). In academia, griefing is most commonly discussed in the context of video gameplay, although griefing is not limited strictly to video gaming contexts and may occur in other virtual contexts as well (Phillips, 2015). Flaming, meanwhile, is another term that was originally employed by the hacker community to refer to incessant or rabid speech about a comparatively uninteresting topic with a “patently ridiculous attitude” (Steele et al., 1983, p. 63), not necessarily implying any harm whatsoever. This concept was adapted within computer mediated communication (CMC) literature to describe behaviour

within a strictly virtual context where users self-express more strongly than they would in other communicative settings (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984).

This stronger self-expression usually entails “emotional outbursts of rudeness, profanity, or even exultation” (Spitzer, 1986, p. 20), hinting that flaming necessarily involves inflammatory speech (Siegel et al., 1986; Spitzer, 1986). This inflammatory speech can include swearing, the use of offensive terms, insults, name calling, negative affect, or negative typography, such as typing with excessive capitalization or exclamation points (Jane, 2015; Siegel et al., 1986), which encompasses a vast range of communications. This definition achieves something that is not achieved in traditional operationalizations of cyberbullying and is often lost in academic discussions of online harm or violence: it acknowledges that all aggression (whether on- or offline) is not abusive or harmful, even if it is offensive. Instead, it attempts to address that virtual communications (like any other communications) involve complex webs of meaning, interpretation and classification that must be negotiated thoughtfully and with consideration of their differential impacts upon those who engage in them.

As Binns (2012) clarifies, what classifies as harm, abuse, bullying, harassment, flaming or grieving varies widely from virtual setting to virtual setting and even at times within the same virtual setting (for example, within online message boards hosting multiple distinct communities). This classification depends on community norms relating to a variety of factors, including but not limited to language, opinion, ideology, humour, gender roles, social sanctioning and emotional investment (Binns, 2012; Chesney et al., 2009; Downey, 2015; Finchman & Sanfilippo, 2015). Conflict arises when these community norms and audience expectations are not agreed upon or known by all participants: Binns (2012) offers that online communities valuing personal trust, emotional commitment, privacy and a close-knit sense of community can

find inflammatory behaviours particularly harmful or distressing. Harassment, for instance, is most likely to be reported by new users of online spaces with subcultural norms of lack of censure, free speech and experimentalism (Brail, 1996; Reid, 1999).

Similarly, communities valuing emotional detachment and with community norms prioritizing freedom of expression can be more likely to find inflammatory behaviours playful or ludic (Hardaker, 2010). In communities where users feel a sense of closeness, attitudes towards boundaries of acceptable behaviour appear to be more fluid, with distinct lines drawn between general mischief and behaviour such as harassment or abuse that is not playful and therefore considered more legitimately anti-social (Kirman, Linehan, & Lawson, 2012). This means, as my analysis will also show (see Chapter 6), that in order to understand virtually mediated experiences of harm, it is imperative to understand both community/subcultural norms relating to interpersonal communication and the community/subcultural identifications of subjects experiencing harm. Doing so can aid in assessing users' intents (or a lack thereof) to harm, any effects of these intents, and community- or self-enforced limits upon virtual behaviours (Kirman et al., 2012).

3.1.3 – E-bile

Jane (2015) criticizes academic characterizations of flaming for framing flaming as 'common sense' on the basis of researchers' own cultural and relational norms with regards to what types of speech may be considered inflammatory. As a result, she argues that much academic literature relies upon vague generalizations and fails to provide concrete examples of flaming, instead retreating into problematic moral criteria to categorize speech as flames or not as flames (Jane, 2015). This trend, Jane believes, can cause scholars to overlook real harms experienced by victims, to dismiss flaming as benign or inconsequential, or to celebrate positive aspects of flaming, which Jane positions as fundamentally problematic. Yet, in the absence of

evidence of subjective experiences, intentions, and perceptions of flaming (unless a researcher has made specific lines of inquiry to this effect), it can be difficult, if not impossible, to provide the concrete examples for which Jane advocates. Nonetheless, Jane laments that much literature on flaming “reads as an apologetic, a defensive response to what is frequently framed as a majoritarian view overstating the prevalence and impact of flaming” (2015, p. 73).

Jane (as I will continue to argue in Chapter 6) problematically adopts the stance that an entirely new term is required to capture the “variety of denunciatory forms that share characteristic, signal features and so demand a broad field of inquiry – one that is able to gather ostensibly variegated speech acts into a specific yet widely conceived theoretical reflection” (2015, p. 531). She suggests using “e-bile” to refer to invective, threatening, sexualized and/or violent “nastiness” (2015, p. 531), proposing that this umbrella term can include cyberbullying, cyberviolence, cyberstalking, cyberhate, abuse, harassment, trolling (see section 3.2), hostile wishful thinking, or any other online speech acts involving misogyny, homophobia, racism, prejudice, or cultural intolerance. Jane argues that the unifying feature of e-bile is that it involves “some element of hostility in such [vast and vaguely defined] forms as harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, and so on” (Jane, 2015, p. 542), whether in authorial intent, audience reception, rhetorical construct, or contextual impact (see Chapter 6). The term “e-bile” is intentionally broad, since Jane believes that it is neither methodologically nor practically necessary for a strict definition to be operationalized by academics (or presumably by legislators or regulators of online communications, such as web designers or moderators).

Jane acknowledges that this broad definition may classify some communications as e-bile when they are not (for example, the use of the suffix “fag” on 8chan – see Chapters 2 and 6). Notwithstanding, she suggests that this risk is less significant than the risk of under-coding

potentially harmful behaviours, which Jane suggests can deny or erase legitimate cases of harm. However, Jane neglects to consider that many inflammatory communications can indeed be benign or inconsequential, instead uncritically advocating that it is more useful to classify broad swaths of aggressive or inflammatory speech as harmful simply in order to ensure that some experiences of harm are not overlooked. It is unclear why Jane believes that such broad classificatory regimes should exist (presumably to “protect” users from potential injury), particularly when the possible socio-legal implications of these regimes are vast, restrictive and severe.

Concerningly, they could be used for a range of punitive or oppressive purposes that could restrict users’ freedom of expression within online spaces. For example, they could be deployed, despite a lack of “real” identified harms, to promote censorship, to impose unnecessary “rules” upon virtual communications (for example, establishing restrictive website terms of use or content moderation policies), or to justify expanding legal regulation of virtual spaces. In my analysis, I push back against such punitive or oppressive interventions, arguing in favour of more pro-social solutions to harm. In Chapters 5-7 I will look more closely at how communications can fairly and reasonably be assessed in terms of whether they are harmful or benign, arguing that the answer may lie in a range of factors spanning how users experience and make meaning from those communications, to the community and subcultural contexts of communications, to the authorial intent behind communications, to how users perceive virtual space itself. In my conclusion, I will consider how virtual spaces can be designed in a way that reflects these more nuanced assessments and allows users more agency over their online experiences.

3.2 – Trolling

The most expansive body of literature relating to inflammatory online communications deals with trolling. It is important to spend some time scanning this literature since trolling has popularly become conflated with harassment and abuse, and ultimately plays a key role in this study's analytical discussion of intentionality (see Chapter 6). In contemporaneity, trolling has become "an all-encompassing term for being an ass on the Internet [...where] trolling becomes synonymous with criminal activity" (Phillips, 2015, p. 153). This captures the precise problem with the tendency of Jane (and sympathizing academics) to advocate for overly broad definitions that capture a range of behaviours with vastly different impacts. Definitions are linked to responses, some of which may be outside the realm of virtuality (for example, criminalization and legal regulation of certain types of speech), and some of which may unnecessarily sanction behaviours or communications that are seen as offensive rather than harmful.

Hardaker provides the foundation for academic theorizations of a troll "as one who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group, while really aiming to cause disruption for their own amusement [...and who] seeks to influence the forum negatively, by continually starting arguments, criticizing or complaining" (Hardaker, 2010, p. 237). The term refers to trolling lures which are drawn through the water to provoke fish into a feeding frenzy (Binns, 2012). In contrast to flammers, whose goal is to incite any and all users simply for the purpose of eliciting offense or indignation (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003), trolls intend to cause trouble or aggravation, but at least partially in jest or to mock naïve or vulnerable readers. This speaks to intent as a defining aspect of trolling, once again suggesting that intentionality should be considered as a factor that impacts whether behaviours are constructed as harmful.

This playful or joking intent means that trolls do not actively seek to cause harm: rather, trolls seek to disrupt the sensibilities of those who they perceive as susceptible to mockery. If

targets become offended or upset by trolling, then trolls are achieving ludic goals of eliciting these responses (Phillips, 2011). This is not, however, necessarily harmful: harm instead involves more explicitly injurious behaviours, where perpetrators actively seek to inflict damage upon a victim (whether physically, psychologically, or emotionally). Instead, trolls seek to disrupt, even if this disruption is seen as unwanted or offensive (Phillips, 2011). It is important to note, however, that identifying perpetrators of certain behaviours as trolls can be used as a strategy to mask, excuse or justify harmful behaviour by framing it as playful or benign (Phillips, 2015).

Subcultural trolls, Phillips (2015) argues, self-identify as trolls and carry out trolling as an expression of their online identities. Subcultural trolls engage in outrageous and offensive behaviours strictly for “lulz”, or “an aggressive form of laughter derived from eliciting strong emotional reactions from the chosen target(s)” (Phillips, 2012, para. 4). Lulz, in effect, refers to laughter at someone else’s expense, evoking a sense of *schadenfreude*, or happiness at the misfortune of others. Whether lulz are harmful is subject to debate. If such misfortune entails injury and a degree of permanence, in theory lulz could entail harm. More often than not, however, lulz instead involve temporary discomfort, mockery or humiliation (Phillips, 2015) and therefore would not qualify as harmful. The precise identity of the person at whose expense lulz are being achieved is unimportant; they can be either friend or foe and lulz can serve as both punishment and reward, forming a “nexus of social cohesion and social constraint” (Phillips, 2015, p. 28). Exploitability is a key aspect of lulz: targets are often those who publicly display sentimentality and political or ideological conviction, since trolls believe that nothing should be taken seriously – which Phillips points out is a “highly ironic stance given how attached trolls are to the pursuit of lulz” (2015, p. 25).

Although trolling can be political (Dahlberg, 2001), selecting targets on the grounds of political or ideological conviction does not imply that trolls have a predisposition to target any particular stances over others; rather, trolls target those they perceive as having particularly strong convictions, regardless of what precisely those convictions are. This idea of exploitability highlights the ease with which trolls can engage in détournement, or the process of turning the existing meaning of a statement or artifact against itself (Debord & Wolman, 1956). For trolls, the most exploitable targets can indict themselves; trolls are therefore concerned with identifying these targets and facilitating this détournement. As Phillips highlights, “[t]hat lulz are achieved is said to be more important than where or from whom they are derived” (2015, p. 25).

Trolls can act offensively in any number of ways – such as threadjacking, making insulting posts or asserting contentious opinions – in order to create arguments, waste users’ time, and lure others into circular discussions. Trolling commonly encompasses the broader “online posting of deliberately inflammatory or off-topic material with the aim of provoking textual responses and/or emotional reaction” (Jane, 2015, p. 66) while poking fun at gullible or impressionable users. As Coleman summarizes, “trolls are the ultimate anti-hero, trolls fuck shit up. Trolls exist to fuck with people” (2012, p. 111). “Fucking with people” can involve a spectrum of behaviours: trolling can take place persistently or more ephemerally; some trolling can be aggressive or could even meet thresholds for legal intervention (even if meant playfully) while other trolling can be comparatively innocuous; some trolling adheres to certain ethical boundaries while some embraces and perpetuates racism, sexism or homophobia (Phillips, 2015).

By invoking characteristics that commonly describe other inflammatory behaviours (for example, where racism, sexism and homophobia commonly play a role in bullying or abuse – see CCSO Working Cybercrime Group, 2013), this operationalization of trolling illustrates again

how common conceptualizations of inflammatory virtual behaviours bleed into one another. This raises questions, which I will explore during data analysis, relating to these conceptualizations' differences, how different populations (for example, those who make inflammatory comments and those who receive them) perceive these differences, and the implications of these differences (namely, how they impact prevailing constructions of harm).

A successful troll is one whose posts are “cross-posted to and responded to on many different [online fora]” (Herring et al., 2002, p. 373) and disrupt as many different venues as possible while causing a troll to expend a minimum amount of effort. Trolls typically attempt to conceal their trolling intent, opting to deceive other users into believing that they are genuine group members in order to maximize their chances of success and to avoid being “outed” as a troll and subsequently ostracized (Hardaker, 2010). Herring et al. (2002) offer several criteria to determine whether content can be identified as trolling: messages must appear outwardly sincere, must be designed to attract predictable responses, must waste a group's time by provoking futile argument, and must be fundamentally uncooperative, for example, by seeking to confuse and deceive. Interestingly, Herring et al.'s criteria do not reference lulz, which Phillips (2015) stresses is a key component of a troll's identity.

Some particular types of trolling are widely condemned as harmful, especially in cases where trolling hinges upon misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, or other injurious behaviours (Mantilla, 2013; Phillips, 2015). While comparatively little academic research has explored both the potentially harmful impacts of these forms of trolling and the general intersection of trolling with forms of social discrimination, an emerging body of literature is beginning to look at gendertrolling. Researchers draw a distinction between gendertrolling and more generic trolling (like that studied by Phillips, 2015). Gendertrolls are motivated beyond lulz

by a desire to express sincerely held beliefs that are deeply rooted in misogyny and other forms of discrimination (Mantilla, 2013), beginning to move away from the playful intentionality identified by Phillips. Gendertrolling merges characteristics of bullying or abusive behaviour with trolling behaviour. It involves the co-ordinated participation of numerous people, gender-based insults (often in response to women speaking about sexism), vicious language, and a significant and credible component of threat (for example, of rape, death, or doxxing), in addition to unusual intensity, scope or longevity (Mantilla, 2013).

Gendertrolling goes beyond generic trolling to target women systemically and prevent them from freely occupying or self-expressing within public spaces, in a way that is “not dissimilar to street and sexual harassment” (Mantilla, 2013, p. 569), and in a way that, according to Feinberg, would damage to an interest and therefore qualify as harm. However, gendertrolling enacts this sexist harm under the guise of engagement in play and decentralization of hatred as a core aspect of identity. Misogynistic communications and behaviour typically associated with GamerGate can often fall into the realm of gendertrolling, since it is routinely positioned as lulzy regardless of its injuriousness. Mantilla stresses the importance of naming and understanding gendertrolling as an anti-feminist strategy to prevent women from fully participating in virtual spaces, stressing the importance of allowing women freedom to advocate for women’s rights in virtual spaces without fear of being bullied into silence.

It is worth questioning why gendertrolling should not be called what it is – verbal harassment – and the category of trolling left to refer to playful but annoying speech. Positioned as trolling, the abusive misogynistic behaviours of gendertrolls are constructed by gendertrolls (or their supporters) as “lulzy” or innocuous, even though they are “specifically and dramatically more destructive to [their] victims” (Mantilla, 2013, p. 565) than typical forms of trolling. That

these actors self-identify as trolls rather than misogynists is an important distinction, particularly when ‘troll’ typically refers to something that one does (trolling) whereas misogynist typically refers to something that one is (hateful, sexist, et cetera) (Mantilla, 2013; Phillips, 2015). The term “misogynist”, in other words, can subsume other aspects of identity and become a “master status” that becomes a primary identifying characteristic of an individual (Anselm Strauss, 1996), when “troll” does not typically serve a similar function.

It is of concern that while scholars such as Mantilla argue for the importance of identifying and understanding gendertrolling as a socially discriminatory phenomenon, similar importance has not been assigned to other forms of trolling that cloak hatred or discrimination as benign or lulzy behaviours, for example, when users are trolled on the grounds of sexuality, race, ability, or other forms of exceptionalism. Popular discourses related to GamerGate, as my analysis will show (see Chapter 7), illustrate this tendency to centralize discussions of trolling-related harms around gender at the expense of ignoring other intersectional forms of discrimination. This makes relevant Crenshaw’s (1991) concerns (see Chapter 2) that failing to adopt intersectional perspectives can result in one cause being advanced at the expense of abandoning another. This bridges this project’s focus on virtual harm to the following chapter’s discussion of broader intersectionality. In adopting an intersectional perspective, I will contribute to literature on trolling by conceptualizing trolling in more diverse terms that can better account for harms experienced by a wider variety of populations, and in doing so will lend greater nuance to scholarly conversations involving identity, harm and virtual communications.

Finally, the popular conceptualization of online spaces as less real than offline spaces (which I explore in more detail in Chapters 2, 6 and 7) can help explain the moral code (or lack thereof) adopted by trolls, griefers and flammers. Although “naïve and problematic” (G. Coleman,

2012, p. 182), morality is found for these users in the idea that inflammatory behaviour should be kept to virtual spaces where it is seen as less real than it would be offline. Those who do not adhere to this view of reality and fantasy as they relate to virtual space can face social disapproval from communities that would otherwise be sympathetic to online aggressors. Colloquial discussions of “Chronic Troll Syndrome”, for instance, chastise trolls who do not understand what one should appropriately “say and do when dealing with IRL [in real life] people [...] Symptoms include being inconsiderate and generally asshatty to friends and family, the common offensive use of racial epithets, and a tendency to interfere in other people’s business uninvited ‘for the laughs’” (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2014, para. 2).

As “Chronic Troll Syndrome” suggests, people who are unfamiliar with virtual spaces often do not share the normative view of the online as more fantastical than the offline. The offensive online behaviour of trolls, for example, even when meant and received relatively good-naturedly and popularly understood as such in virtual contexts, is routinely perceived by outsiders to virtual spaces as harmful, leading to accusations of abuse and harassment by “non-technologically-minded people” (G. Coleman, 2012, p. 113). This tension is a crucial part of the appeal of trolling, but can also be a key way in which differing perceptions of fantasy and reality can impact perceptions of virtual harm, a phenomenon I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7.

3.3 – Identity, intersectional discrimination, and mediated virtual harm

Imagining technologically mediated spaces as places where participants communicate strictly voluntarily and where all agents are equal (see, for example, Lange, 2006; Samoylova, 2014) can silence histories of violence, harm and marginalization that are reflected virtually, as they are offline (Ashford, 2009; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Phillips, 2015). Many victims of harassment during GamerGate reflect such histories of marginalization, namely those involving

misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism and/or ableism. Scholarly consideration of how intersectional and historically situated inequalities can play roles in generating experiences and meanings of virtual harm are imperative. Some scholars, however, seem to favour narrower analyses. Lange (2006), for example, argues in favour of focusing on how local norms can impact claimsmaking related to online harm or how this claimsmaking relates to online social ordering within microcosmic virtual environments like isolated discussion forums or message boards. In doing so, Lange seems to suggest that there is a monolithic definition of harm that represents a universal truth, and that those who subscribe to alternate meanings or have experienced harm that does not reflect this monolithic operationalization are somehow a product of exceptional deviations in sociocultural norms.

Theorists who adopt such perspectives can perpetuate rhetoric that victims misunderstand virtual harm, should not be taken seriously, or should “lighten up”, ultimately delegitimizing real harms suffered by targets while additionally implying that complainants are hypersensitive, humourless or blameworthy (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Lange, 2006). This does not mean, as I have argued above and will continue to argue in my analysis, that intentionality should be disregarded in theorizations of harm. Instead, it is important to work towards peaceful (even if inflammatory, dissenting or even aggressive) communicative interactions and peaceful social existence on a broader scale. I work toward empowering individuals to navigate social, community and cultural norms in a mutually supportive way alongside other participants who hail from diverse backgrounds, cultures and communities where these norms are not necessarily shared (Kirman, Linehan, & Lawson, 2012), much in the same way as in offline social spaces.

It is crucial, as I will advocate in more detail in the following chapter, for academics who investigate virtual harm to consider harm from an intersectional perspective (see Chapter 2,

section 3). Doing so can allow researchers to gain an appreciation of how diverse backgrounds and norms may play a role in users' experiences of virtual communications. Then, it is imperative for academics to actively make the case for intersectionality and engender intersectional regard through dissemination practices and future research initiatives, actively enculturating more nuanced and politicized analyses of harm rather than merely stating their merits.

Individual and group identity impact the ways in which virtual harm manifests and the ways in which it is conceptualized, validated, and intervened upon. Virtual communications are often founded upon the policing of gendered, racialized and sexualized boundaries, where anonymous users often adopt maleness, whiteness and heterosexuality as default subject positions in their online self-presentations and take it for granted that their audiences also reflect these positions (Phillips, 2015). When anonymous users present themselves as outside of these normative positionalities, they must explicitly identify themselves as such; in other words, they must differentiate themselves as markedly different from the status quo. This can be seen in the context of GamerGate by users who use #NotYourShield, where non-normative (non-male, non-heterosexual, non-cisgendered, non-white, and differently abled) identity is a key aspect #NotYourShield's online self-presentation.

Hegemonic majority-centralism, like that which is stereotypically associated with GamerGate, inherently others minority subjects and is "premised on repressions of diverse voices" (Milner, 2013, para. 8), where racialized, queer, non-male or other minority subject positions are silenced or become the targets of ridicule or harassment. Inflammatory virtual communications, as I have established, can reflect this majority-centralism by violently or threateningly invoking gender, race, sexuality, ability or other identity characteristics (Campbell, 2004; Mantilla, 2013; Shariff & Gouin, 2006), which can play a key role in experiences of online

harm (see Chapter 6). Such silencing is also characteristic of offline forms of communication, evidencing that offline marginalization can be reinforced in virtual contexts (Finchman & Sanfilippo, 2015).

The broader privileging of majority subjectivities has been theorized as manifesting in a more general sense across virtual cultures or communities. Most commonly, academic literature, such as literature on gendertrolling, explores online misogyny and gender-based discrimination, as is stereotypically associated with GamerGate. In the context of gamespaces, Consalvo (2012) argues that “toxic gamer culture” is a collective product of patriarchal game designers, players, and networks of players that collectively embed normative misogyny into both game design and social spaces related to gaming. In the context of virtual spaces more generally, when women gather online, particularly to discuss feminist issues, they have historically been subjected to negative attention or harassment, largely from men “who feel threatened or otherwise uncomfortable with feminism” (Herring et al., 2002, p. 322; see also Balka, 1993; Collins-Jarvis, 1997; Reid, 1999; Sutton, 1994). Many contemporary virtual spaces are similarly androcentric, naturalizing worldviews that can be violently sexist and misogynistic yet which become normative through “continuous, silent, invisible injunctions” (Phillips, 2015, p. 124) that extend male privilege throughout technologized space, much in the same way as offline space.

While academic initiatives traditionally focus on the negative aspects of this virtually entrenched male privilege (Consalvo, 2012; Mantilla, 2013; Sankey, 2015) some scholars attempt to identify positive aspects of misogynistic online aggression. For example, Walker suggests that misogynistic speech in online lesbian fan communities is “democracy in action” (2008, p. 204) and that placing restrictions upon this speech would be undemocratic. Lee (2005) claims that online misogynistic aggression can be a harmless ritual meant to be interpreted playfully and with

affection rather than hatefully, while Wang posits that misogynistic inflammatory speech “promotes good writing and effective communication [...and] scares away commercial advertising” (1996, p. 2).

McCosker (2014) similarly argues that online provocation can vitalize and sustain virtual publics on social media platforms and can represent acts of digital citizenship, even going as far as to suggest that racial bigotry can provoke aggressive defenses of racial identity that manifest as pro-social expressions of national and cultural pride. Some scholars (Jane, 2014; Keats Citron, 2009) suggest that such stances fail to address the fact that virtual agents can oppressively, harmfully and injuriously – not just deviantly or transgressively – act against other users to invoke identity traits such as gender in threatening or degrading ways (Keats Citron, 2009). Such arguments, however – which tend to advocate for legal intervention in cases of perceived harm – often uncritically assume that “legal speech” is not in itself problematically oppressive, patriarchal, white-centric, cisgendered, heteronormative, or otherwise forceful. This project, in advocating for pro-social, community based responses to virtual harm rather than punitive legal responses, recognizes that law can itself be a source of oppression, while simultaneously acknowledging the potential harms of communications rooted in discrimination.

Finally, academic literature also explores the relationship between virtual spaces and contemporary media (a relationship that I will explore more deeply in Chapter 7), Media, Dill (2009) argues, can perpetuate oversimplified, degrading and misogynistic images that at once encourage stereotypical thinking and render subjects less likely to see instances of harm as legitimately harmful. For example, viewers of misogynistic media are more likely to believe that victims of sexual harassment experienced less (or no) trauma and are more likely to blame victims for their own harassment (Dill, 2009). Trolls have a particularly complex relationship

with media outlets. Trolls and media are both focused on spectacle, merging business and entertainment and blurring the lines between the real and the fantastical in the interest of attaining profit (Kellner, 2002), whether financial (for media) or in terms of a payout in lulz (for trolls). Phillips suggests that contemporary media can be conceptualized as “vast institutions of trolling” (2015, p. 69), a concept that I will explore in more depth in Chapter 7’s discussion of contemporary news values, where stories are designed to elicit comments or responses from readers. Phillips points out that while the inflammatory behaviours engaged in by trolls are frequently condemned as inappropriate or damaging, media’s “similarly exploitative” (2015, p. 69) behaviours are accepted, obfuscating the sociocultural conditions that can produce these behaviours in the first place and ensuring that they will be perpetuated.

Media can be seen as indirectly to blame for popularizing certain types or targets of trolling via sensationalized reporting of distressing events. The most obvious illustration of this can be seen in memorial pages on Facebook, where pages for deaths with more media coverage attract larger masses of mourners, who are seen by trolls as “tragedy merchants”. A media-induced state of distress and emotional investment renders such users particularly vulnerable and exploitable to trolls (Phillips, 2011), not only validating the impulse to troll, but also providing trolls a national platform and ensuring “that the time and energy required to troll is well worth the effort” (Phillips, 2015, p. 158). It follows, then, that changes in the mainstream mediascape and changes in broader media culture could effect similar changes within trolling subcultures, providing digital scholars with an emerging field of study related to trolling and virtual harassment.

3.4 – Debunking technological determinism: Renegotiating causalities of virtual harm

Finally, I turn to the role played by technological architectures and the specifically virtual in experiences and perceptions of virtual harm. This role is a key aspect of the ontology of harm that I develop in Chapters 5-7, and is a key aspect of the next steps for potential virtual harm reduction that I suggest in my conclusion. Much academic work has focused on – and been subject to criticism because of – technological determinism, where antagonistic or inflammatory behaviour is analysed through the lens of specific affordances of virtual technologies and architectures, most commonly for allowing users to occupy false identities, for enabling anonymity, and for the allegedly reduced feedback structures and reduced interactive cues this can produce (for example, when users cannot communicate corporeally) (McCosker, 2014). This invokes earlier “computer effects” research arguing in favour of technological determinism (see, for example, Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Kiesler et al., 1985; Siegel et al., 1986). This trend continues despite scholars largely having discredited technologically deterministic myths by concluding that online communicative norms, rather than being observed universally, are “radically context-dependent” (Lea et al., 1992, p. 89).

An expansive body of literature on the role of technological mediation in online harm focuses on the ways in which virtual communications are allegedly deindividuated or the ways in which they allegedly facilitate anonymous depersonalization. Virtual spaces, the argument goes, by limiting intercommunicative cues (such as facial expressions) and enhancing the importance of group norms (by shifting the focus from the individual to a more homogeneous group of like-minded anonymous individuals), can enable a loss of self-awareness and sense of impunity. This stems from the idea that when individuals enter a group, they feel less identifiability and therefore consider fewer consequences for their actions (Chesney et al., 2009). This de-individuation has been theorized as encouraging subjects to act upon impulses that in theory

would be inhibited offline (Hardaker, 2010; Kiesler et al., 1984; Siegel et al., 1986). This could happen in both positive and negative ways, characterized by Suler (2004) as benign and toxic disinhibition. He argues that benign disinhibition can occur when anonymity causes users to disclose otherwise secret emotions, wishes or fears, or when users engage in atypical acts of kindness or generosity. Toxic disinhibition, on the other hand, is more harmful, involving criticism, anger, hatred, and rudeness, where users “explore a dark underworld they would never wish to encounter in real life” (Binns, 2012, p. 549). Toxic inhibition, in other words, encompasses the anonymous behaviours that are stereotypically associated with GamerGate-related harms (see Chapter 1).

Suler (2004) links virtual harm to users’ conceptualizations of virtual spaces as more based in fantasy than reality (which I will explore more deeply in Chapter 7). He suggests that virtual deindividuation and its associated disinhibition is driven largely by anonymity, where anonymous communications (whether real or perceived) are internalized as not being a part of the “real world”. Psychosocial literature (Joinson, 2003; Kiesler et al., 1984; Siegel et al., 1986; Wallace, 1999) perhaps represents the most expansive field where anonymity is theorized as facilitating harmful virtual behaviours. Much of this literature argues that anonymity can encourage inflammatory behaviour, suggesting that anonymity is associated with a perceived lack of visual cues, personal accountability and long-term “real world” social implications. As a result, anonymity could in theory cause users to engage in incendiary behaviour online. The idea that anonymity can facilitate inflammatory online behaviours is pop culturally accepted as true, giving rise to the colloquial “Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory”, or the idea that a “normal person + anonymity + audience = total fuckwad” (Tresca, 2004, p. 2). The deindividuation allegedly caused by anonymity is seen as causing users not to take responsibility for their communications

or actions. This means that within virtual spaces users could in theory be more inclined to adopt aggressive, negative or hostile identities, since they hypothetically face fewer repercussions for their actions (Downey, 2015).

Reduced social cues theory similarly argues that the virtual removal of social cues enables technologically mediated communication to be more unrestrained and less bound by offline social standards or behavioural expectations (Kiesler et al., 1984; Siegel et al., 1986). This is allegedly compounded by reduced self-presentation concerns, when users are not required or do not feel obligated to reveal their corporeal selves in virtual contexts (Chesney et al., 2009), another notion that I will shortly question. This theory suggests that as a result of the weakened social cues mediating them, virtual behaviours are seen by users as less inhibited because virtual interpersonal interactions are weakly regulated (Chesney et al., 2009; Joinson, 2003). Visually anonymous participants in Second Life, for example, have been found to be more likely to self-disclose during textual in-game communications. Joinson (2003) links this likelihood to a lack of visual cues within the game (and virtual spaces, it follows, more generally). He argues that this lack of visual cues lessens public self-awareness, resulting in players being less cognizant of the constraints or consequences that may deter certain behaviours or actions offline. As a result, users could in theory engage in incendiary or harmful behaviours.

The pop cultural impact of reduced social cues theory can be seen in major online platforms shifting from an emphasis on anonymity to an emphasis on identifiability in the interest of harm prevention. Facebook, for example, now disallows fake names and employs location-based technology to reveal users' geographic locations. Founder Mark Zuckerberg states that anonymity results in a "lack of integrity" (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 199) that is overcome by this shift towards identifiability, which Zuckerberg dubs "radical transparency" (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p.

209), or an obligation to virtually self-disclose. A transition towards radical transparency is being seen in many other technologized spaces, many of which are represented in the fieldsites for this study. For example, online newspapers or blogs routinely require identity verification in order for users to post comments (Knuttila, 2011). Of course, this has implications for harm and self-expression, where users are now required or expected to self-disclose (or to conceal more radically) certain aspects of their identity that they may not want to disclose (or that could bring them harm from disclosing), such as religion, political beliefs, acquaintances, sexual orientation, gender, cultural background, or location (Knuttila, 2011). Rather than using virtual spaces to experiment with identity and explore new aspects of self, this represents a contemporary shift where users are forced to conflate their on- and offline personas, in a marked reversal from the utopian promises of early cyber-research that advocated for the liberating, transcendent potentials of virtuality (see Haraway, 1991).

However, there is limited empirical evidence in favour of increased harm or inflammatory behaviour resulting from anonymity. Postmes, Spears and Lea (1998), for example, find that technologically mediated communications are not less inhibited than offline communications; in fact, anonymous individuals communicating virtually reflect situational norms more strongly than identifiable individuals. van Laer (2014) agrees, arguing that anonymous individuals are more likely to follow group norms – whether those group norms are inflammatory or otherwise – while identifiable individuals will depart from norms more readily as a result of their more individuated identity. This follows earlier findings evidencing that anonymity, rather than causing individuals to lose awareness of their identities, causes them to gain a heightened awareness of group social identity and thereby behave in ways that are accepted by a particular community (Reicher, 2001). Haslam and Reicher similarly find that anonymity does not play as

important a role in virtual harm as broader group dynamics, arguing that anonymity enhances group norms regardless of whether they are inflammatory or benign. As Phillips summarizes, “the problem isn’t anonymity; in other words, it’s the norms under which particular groups are operating” (2015, p. 156). In this way, banning anonymity has little impact on online aggression or harm, since groups that are “already steeped in violence and abuse” (Phillips, 2015, p. 156) will continue to perpetuate harm while the social and political benefits of anonymous identification continue to be overlooked.

Other literature focuses on some additional ways in which virtual technologies can causally impact experiences and operationalizations of harm. Coleman (2012), for example, posits that the fast-paced and atemporal nature of posts on 4chan and 8chan – where posts are not archived and “fall off” the site as more popular posts take their place – produces an increased need for inflammatory, shocking, unusual, objectionable or funny content in order for posts to stay remembered or visible. Some scholars (see, for instance, Phillips, 2011) hypothesize that the technological architectures of social networking platforms position users and their personal identities at the centres of social existence, in effect building self-involvement and emotional sensitivity into the code of a platform and priming users to “take things personally” (Phillips, 2011, p. 7). In addition to amplifying the injury felt by inflammatory behaviours, this can result in other users perceiving these users as easier to exploit, thereby rendering them more likely to be recipients of inflammatory behaviours such as trolling. At the same time, however, this increased emotional investment in identifiable users could correspondingly produce emotional divestment in trolls or other “less real” users, encouraging such users to engage in increasingly negative, aggressive, outrageous or potentially harmful communications simply as a means of being noticed (Coles & West, 2016; Phillips, 2011).

3.5 - Conclusion

This chapter has theorized virtual harm with the goal of further contextualizing the analysis I undertake in the current project. I began by establishing an ontology of virtual harm, describing a range of academic operationalizations for harm that frequently overlap and run together. I advocated for a scholarly focus on experiences and intentions of virtual harm rather than semantic definitions of virtual harm, acknowledging, as I will elaborate upon in the following chapters, that it is important to account for experientialism, context and intentionality simultaneously. Through the course of this discussion I elaborated upon the idea of trolling within virtual spaces, which represents a key body literature illustrating the role intent can play in assessments of virtual harm.

I then turned to how virtual harm relates to intersectional experiences of identity-based discrimination. I paused to explore the ways in which users' lived experiences and the intentionality of alleged perpetrators can come together with community and cultural-specific norms to position various virtual communications as harmful, highlighting, as my analysis will stress, that the same behaviours can be perceived or experienced as harmful within certain contexts but innocuous within others. I reflected upon the pervasiveness of a white, male and heterosexual status quo within virtual environments while advocating for integrating intersectional analysis into assessments of virtual harm. I then concluded by considering how theorizations of harm relate specifically to virtuality, questioning directly causal relationships between technological architectures and virtual harm (specifically those related to anonymity) and cautioning against ideals of radical transparency such as those endorsed by Facebook founder Mike Zuckerberg. Having provided context for the epistemological, analytical and pragmatic contributions of this study, I now highlight its methodological approach.

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter I canvas a range of methodological and analytical inspirations to contextualize this study's hybrid virtual ethnographic strategy. I consider the unique contributions of this initiative to virtual ethnographic research techniques, building a case for unobtrusive virtual ethnography grounded in qualitative trace analysis. I turn to a discussion of the utility of investigating online archival data before identifying the various fieldsites and data sources drawn upon in this venture. I recount some of the challenges encountered during data collection before moving forward to consider the role of reflexivity in virtual ethnographic approaches. I close by outlining my coding strategy and addressing virtual research ethics.

4.1 – Methodological inspirations

This section draws upon virtual ethnography and trace analysis to situate this study's methodological framework. While noting the conceptual amorphousness of virtuality and non-virtuality and on- and offline, I consider more closely some of the unique nuances of virtual spaces similar to those explored in the current study. Given these nuances, I discuss how ethnographic research can best be applied to particular virtual (or quasi-virtual) contexts, departing from conventionally obtrusive virtual ethnographic research to build a case for unobtrusive virtual ethnography. In the context of the current study and similar projects, I argue that it is both appropriate and effective – despite the reservations of some established virtual ethnographers (see Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2010) – to conduct virtual ethnographic research in a way that maintains distance between the ethnographer and the objects of ethnographic inquiry. I submit that unobtrusiveness alone does not preclude a study from being considered ethnographic (although it does raise a unique set of ethical issues, which I address in section 4.3.3).

4.1.1 – Methodological strategy: Virtuality and ethnographic methods

Ethnography is a methodological approach where researchers engage in a prolonged, immersive engagement with members of a community or culture (Hobbs, 2006). As I will explore in section 4.1.2, some scholars argue that this prolonged, immersive engagement can only be achieved by actively disclosing oneself as a researcher and eliciting data from research participants, ethnography. However, as I and as other scholars (see, for instance, Akturan, 2009; Hewer & Brownlie, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2006) acknowledge, ethnography can be either obtrusive (active) or unobtrusive (passive, where community or culture members are not aware that a researcher is conducting observations and/or a researcher does not interact with participants). Ethnographies are flexible, hybrid, exploratory methodologies with a common perspective that engagement with subjects is a key aspect of understanding particular cultural, social or community settings. This engagement may take a variety of forms, the most common of which is participant observation but which may also include elicited interviews, or more passive conversational, documentary or media analysis (Hobbs, 2006).

Ethnographies are tasked with discovering “how things make sense” (Hine, 2015, p. 59) in subcultural or community contexts, with provisional foci that are chosen because they offer significant or interesting opportunities for theoretical or analytical engagement (Hobbs, 2006). At the core of ethnographic research is qualitative description. Hobbs offers that “however this description is constructed it is the intense meaning of social life from the everyday perspective of group members that is sought” (2006, p. 101). Ethnographies convey their analytical realities “through ‘thick’, detailed, nuanced, historically-curious and culturally-grounded interpretation and deep description of a social world that is familiar to its participants but strange to outsiders” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60). This culturally-and community-oriented analysis is a central component of ethnographic research: ethnographies, as Kozinets explains, involve a “deep reading [...for]

cultural information, seeking to learn [...] how to live in this community and identify as a community member” (2010, p. 60). Ethnographers, tasked with the goals of “understanding [community or culture members’] behavioral patterns and profiling their decision-making styles” (Akturan, 2009, p. 2), work to “become a participant in the society and make observations as outsiders” (*ibid.*) in order to obtain this deep reading for cultural and community information. Again, as I will consider in section 4.1.2, whether this deep reading is achieved by actively or passively collecting data is less relevant than the fact that this deep reading is achieved at all, and is less relevant than the fact that ethnographers make observations of community members after immersing themselves in and familiarizing themselves with the communities that they are analysing. Establishing deep cultural and community familiarity and an ability to read particular cultures and communities for nuanced meaning is a key aspect of ethnographic research, and sets this research apart from, for example, non-ethnographic content or thematic analyses.

As I have expanded upon in Chapter 2, prevailing sociological sentiment is that the distinction between online and offline social worlds has become increasingly meaningless (see Castronova, 2005; Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Milford, 2015; Nieuwdorp, 2005). Rather than existing in isolation from offline worlds as early technothorists suggested (Haraway, 1991; Hiltz, 1984; Hiltz & Turoff, 1978), online communities and cultures instead complicatedly and co-constitutively interrelate with those that are offline. This means that it is not necessary to fully depart from conventional ethnographic methods when studying virtual fieldsites: although some academics have advocated for the creation of entirely new methodologies for virtually-oriented ethnographic work (notably Kozinets in his 2010 outline of “netnography”), such approaches have been critiqued as overly essentialist (see Boellstorff, 2010; Hine, 2000; Hine, 2015).

Virtual ethnographic methodologies consequently do not depart fully from existing ethnographic methods. Like all ethnographies, they are tentative rather than absolute; their effectiveness is assessed throughout the research process and they are adapted and revised accordingly. (Boellstorff, 2010; Courtois, Mechant, Paulussen, & De Marez, 2012; De Laet & Mol, 2000). In their flexibility, virtual ethnographic methods are almost always hybrid (Dumitrica, 2010; Garcia et al., 2009; Hine, 2015; Markham, 2004). While this hybridity usually involves transference of offline ethnographic practices or concepts into the online domain, it may also entail transference of other methodological practices that are complementary to particular virtual data sources (Beaulieu, 2010; Garcia et al., 2009). It is therefore useful to consider how existing ethnographic methods and complementary methodologies – in the case of this project, trace analysis – can be adapted to respond to the unique characteristics of virtual data sources (see section 4.2). This study employs a fluid process of planning, entrée, gathering data, interpretation, research representation and adhering to ethical standards, common components of any ethnographic method (Hobbs, 2006; Kozinets, 2010; Marcus, 2012).

An initial planning phase first defines central research questions and selects a broader social context to investigate (see Chapters 1, 2 and 3), including community and fieldsite identification and selection (see section 4.2.2) and choices of how to conduct community/participant-observation (for example, whether to conduct data collection obtrusively or unobtrusively). Kozinets (2010) and Hine (2015) argue that when investigating fieldsites with virtual elements, attention first must be paid to the “location question”. Since ethnographies involve “face-to-face interaction and the rhetoric of having travelled to a [...] field site” (Hine, 2015, p. 10), it is important to consider what these concepts mean in technologized contexts and

to remain reflexive regarding theoretical and epistemological assumptions surrounding constructions of identity, community and culture, as well as reality, fantasy, and on- and offline.

During this phase, Kozinets (2010) stresses the importance of considering potential virtual fieldsites in terms of alteration, or the ways in which virtually mediated interactions are altered by their virtual contexts and their specific technological architectures. Alteration includes how technological architectures symbolically or temporally alter topographies of social interaction, for example, the impact of any terms of use, content filters, content moderation, privacy settings or reporting mechanisms upon users' communicative exchanges. For example, virtual fieldsites can provide "more opportunities to engage in strategic control over information and self-presentation than face-to-face exchanges" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 69). The current study is particularly sensitive to alteration since, as I will highlight in Chapter 7, "the virtual" can play a key role in how users think about and experience harm, and thereby frame their online communications.

Alteration does not have an easily discernable offline equivalent. Offline alteration could entail considerations of how the manipulation of the setting or design of data collection could bring about different communicative nuances. For example, participants could be interviewed behind a screen or speak through a voice distorter in order to conceal their identities from the ethnographer, or could be prohibited from articulating certain words or phrases, mimicking virtual content moderation. While such alteration has played a role in some studies (Berreman, 1962; Donnelly, 2014), its impact upon offline ethnography has traditionally been limited.

It is also important during the initial planning phase to consider the alteration of online fieldsites in terms of anonymity. While some websites or platforms require some form of identity verification for their users and compel them to post using their 'real' identities, more commonly, virtual technologies can offer new opportunities for anonymity, facelessness, or identity

flexibility: “the medium makes it difficult to see the messenger” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 70). This can raise important questions relating to performativity and authenticity in virtual ethnographic research, since it can be impossible to discern whether virtual communications are intended to be taken literally or figuratively (at face value or as a fantasy/performance – see Chapter 7). The stated or assumed identity of a user can be more saliently meaningful than her or his ‘real’ identity; in online social contexts where users are not physically co-present, virtual identity forms the basis of social interactions and can communicate more meaning than how accurately this identity reflects a user’s offline self (Hine, 2015; Milford, 2015).

Virtual ethnographers, then, must consider anonymity and pseudonymity, where users employ pseudonyms or screen names rather than their actual names, in terms of how they may impact online interactions and any theoretical claims made on the basis of these interactions. Notably, while ‘common-sense’ rhetoric implies that anonymity can make harassment or abuse more likely due to the difficulty of personally linking users to content they post online, this link is not supported by empirical evidence. Anonymity can serve regulatory functions, where anonymous users are more likely to adhere to group norms in order to preserve their anonymity (Phillips, 2015). Virtual ethnographers must also consider anonymity in terms of how it relates to research ethics (see section 4.3.3).

The second phase of virtual ethnography, *entrée*, involves physically accessing data. Ethnographic *entrée* necessitates familiarization with the communities under analysis, including their members, language, interests, and practices, in addition to a willingness to refine or refocus research questions, including finding and reading related research studies and learning about particular data analysis software options (Kozinets, 2010). This process of community and cultural familiarization is a key aspect of ethnographic research, requiring that researchers

immerse themselves within the environments they are studying. Although I had existing familiarity with many of the data sources that I ultimately selected for this study, my exploratory period lasted several months before data collection began. During this period I immersed myself on a daily basis within the various communities I was considering studying, with the goal of gaining insights that could improve research design, familiarizing myself with community norms with which I was not already familiar, and ultimately producing a more rigorous analysis where I was able and qualified to deeply read my communities and cultures of focus.

Gaining entry into online communities or cultures may differ from face-to-face entrée in terms of accessibility and approach (Beaulieu, 2010; Garcia et al., 2009). Virtual communities may be more or less accessible than offline communities. While some may restrict access (for example, private discussion forums, which were not accessed in this study) or have registration requirements such as identity verification (for example, the comment sections on many online newspaper articles), others may be open-access and value anonymity (for example, 8chan). Choice of entrée ultimately co-influences available options for data collection. It is therefore necessary to structure entrée in a way that allows for as many different potential strategies for data collection as possible (Marcus, 2012). It is common in virtual studies for ethnographers to collect data unobtrusively by “lurking”, or reading online data without actually contributing to it (Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2010 – see section 4.1.2). Participants may therefore be unaware that they are being observed. This raises unique sets of both institutional and moral ethical dilemmas (see section 4.3.3). However, the choice to “lurk” is shaped by technological architectures: many virtual communities are closed or private and unobtrusive entrée therefore is not possible.

In this study, lurking allows for fast and systematic retrieval of a vast quantity of meaningful data (Markham, 2004). My fieldsites (see section 4.2.2) do not require private

membership and posts can be viewed by any members of the public regardless of whether they contribute to discussions themselves. Technology exists that can easily save and import data from each fieldsite (see section 4.2.3), allowing for expedient analysis. While virtual ethnographies have historically favoured obtrusive entrée and have focused on private online communities (see Boellstorff, 2010; Carter, 2005; Hine, 2000), I advocate for unobtrusive entrée in open-access fieldsites. In the following section I pause, before outlining this project's fieldsites and remaining methodological steps, to consider this novel methodological contribution more deeply.

4.1.2 – Toward unobtrusive virtual ethnography

Questions of obtrusiveness are unevenly explored in scholarship dealing with virtual ethnographic methods. In obtrusive ethnographic research, data is elicited directly from participants, often by interviews, surveys, or posting comments in an online discussion forum. Virtual ethnographers typically conduct their work obtrusively, registering with and posting within the communities they study (see, for example, Boellstorff, 2010; Massanari, 2015; Rosas & Dhen, 2011; Taylor, 2006). Unobtrusive virtual ethnographers, contrastingly, do not directly elicit data from participants, traditionally relying instead upon data that has been 'left behind' online.

Overwhelmingly, contemporary literature on virtual ethnographic methodology discusses visibility in terms that privilege obtrusive methods while sidelining unobtrusive methods, often under an assumption that obtrusive research is the best or only way to obtain rigorous or meaningful results (see, for example, Bruckman, 2006; Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2010). Much of this literature argues that the deep, nuanced cultural reading that ethnography demands is not possible from unobtrusive entrée, and that it is not possible for researchers to adequately familiarize themselves with communities and cultures without actively entering the field. Many virtual ethnographers, however, acknowledge the various strengths of covert studies of online

communities and describe that unobtrusive entrée is more desirable than obtrusive entrée under certain circumstances (Beaven & Laws, 2007; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Brownlie & Hewer, 2007; Füller, Jawecki, & Mühlbacher, 2007; Maulana & Eckhardt, 2007).

Hine (2015) and Kozinets (2010), for example, while largely criticizing unobtrusive virtual ethnography, both acknowledge that unobtrusive methods can be immersive experiences that are capable of producing large, rich fields of data. Hine states that unobtrusive data collection can produce an “ambient everyday account of a topic” (2015, p. 165). Using the Internet unobtrusively, she acknowledges, is “akin to hanging out in a public setting, catching the prevailing cultural currents, and listening to the way people talk about a topic” (Hine, 2015, p. 165). This practice can be academically fruitful: although they are not actively eliciting data, unobtrusive virtual ethnographers are active by “examining foreshadowed problems, questioning assumptions and trying to work out, in a more diffuse but very important sense, how it feels to be a part of this setting” (Hine, 2015, p. 162). This means that unobtrusive virtual ethnographers, as I have argued earlier, do undergo the process of cultural familiarization and immersion that is a key component of ethnographic research.

Unobtrusive virtual ethnographic methods borrow to varying degrees from trace analysis. Trace analyses traditionally look at more semantic records such as logs of edits or website updates, but can also look at regulatory documents (Geiger & Ribes, 2011) such as terms of use, privacy policies, or frequently asked questions pages. Trace documents can also include conversation or comment transcripts that, together with the aforementioned sources, form the bulk of the data for the current study (see section 4.2.2 and 4.2.3). Trace data sources, which are often by nature unobtrusively accessed since they have already been created in the past (as in the current study) and need only be harvested, can provide key insights into what it means to live as a

member of a particular culture or community, and can be turned into “thick descriptions of actors and events” (Geiger & Ribes, 2011, p.10).

It is important to note that if research involving virtual data sources relies upon trace data, it does not necessarily follow that it should be considered a content analysis rather than an ethnography. While content analysts might study online archives, they do not read them “deeply for their cultural information, pondering them and seeking to learn from them how to live in this community and identify as a community member” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 96). This responsibility instead falls to virtual ethnographers. Indeed, a range of scholars have validated virtual ethnography as the methodological framework of various research strategies that rely upon unobtrusively obtained trace data. Akturan (2009) explicitly highlights that virtual ethnographic research can be carried out obtrusively or unobtrusively, describing that virtual ethnographers can conduct both participant and “non-participant” observation, where “non-participants” are not informed that a researcher is conducting observations and where researchers do not necessarily actively elicit data at all, often relying instead (as in this study) upon archived trace communications. Many scholars additionally self-identify as conducting ethnographic research when employing these unobtrusive methods: relevant examples to the current study where virtual ethnographers rely upon trace data yet still stake claim to a deep, ethnographic cultural reading include Hewer and Brownlie (2007), Nguyen et al. (2006), Langer and Beckman (2005) and Nelson and Otnes (2005). Less commonly discussed or even acknowledged at all, however, as Akturan (2009) highlights, are the ethical implications of unobtrusive virtual ethnography: this is a trend that I strive to overcome in section 4.3.3.

There are cases to be made for unobtrusive data as a more meaningful than obtrusively elicited data. Archival data can be more frank and uninhibited than data produced in interviews,

particularly when it may be difficult for participants to provide honest or authentic answers about their behaviour, if certain answers could be perceived as socially undesirable, if participants believe certain details are too trivial to remember, or if lines of questioning could lead participants to frame comments in a particular way that they would not normally use (Harvey et al., 2007; Seale et al., 2010). This suggests that unobtrusive data collection methods can produce more accurate and robust research findings that more effectively capture community or culture members' authentic behaviour. Unobtrusive methods are productive practices in their own right: in dealing with far greater quantities of data and constantly shifting contexts, they demand contemplative engagement from an ethnographer. The prolific nature of trace data, it follows, necessitates a greater degree of analytical inquiry in addition to a higher degree of self-reflexivity during data analysis (Beaulieu, 2010; Beaulieu & Simakova, 2006).

Beaulieu suggests that obtrusive methods are ideal because documentary practices, and by extension unobtrusive data collection, are constitutive of "being global" (2010, p. 1). She argues that within virtual environments, archived records are the primary means through which agents in these communities not only know their communities but also act within them. Community members are not necessarily physically located near one another; participants may access communities at different moments and for any number of different reasons, or may not regularly or actively contribute to discussions at all. Virtual ethnographers should therefore, Beaulieu (2010) argues, shift their focus from being physically co-located with participants to being co-present. "Lurking" and learning about community norms and interactions by this unspoken presence is one method through which co-presence can be established (Beaulieu, 2010).

Hine also accepts that in certain virtual settings, specifically online discussion forums like those examined in this study, it is normal to lurk without posting, to remain invisible to other

participants, and, by extension, for ethnographers to collect data unobtrusively. Kozinets (2010) similarly recognizes that unobtrusive ethnographers are able to achieve certain ends that obtrusive ethnographers normally cannot, such as invisibly observing communal discussions to comprehensively track these discussions back in time and over precise time periods. This is particularly relevant to this study, since the discussions under analysis took place over a precise period in the recent past.

Unobtrusiveness in the current study is a best practice for a range of reasons. Academics are perceived by many affiliates of GamerGate as unsympathetic to the GamerGate cause or as siding with “social justice warriors” (see Chess & Shaw, 2015); prevailing community expectations and norms within ‘pro-GamerGate’ communities often enforce a lack of cooperation with or a strong distrust of members of the academic community. On the other hand, communities with an ‘anti-GamerGate’ stance may be more likely to speak with academics, but participants from these communities could be more likely to anticipate or desire a social justice or feminist research agenda and could therefore structure their responses accordingly.

If I entered any fieldsite actively in the context of the current study, participants therefore would be likely to adhere to their prevailing community expectations and provide responses that at best would be inauthentic and at worst could be deliberately misleading. Other virtual ethnographers have previously identified this risk of obtrusive entrée (Harvey et al., 2007; Seale et al., 2010) and offer that unobtrusive data collection is best suited to studies such as mine where ethnographers are interested in questions that they cannot ask directly (Hine, 2015). It is also useful to point out that since the GamerGate movement itself was founded upon and encourages anonymity or even invisibility (see introduction and data analysis), unobtrusiveness is essentially a community norm within my fieldsites and would be respected by participants.

Second, I have chosen to remain unobtrusive in order to minimize potential impacts resulting from my own epistemological and theoretical biases as a researcher. As a researcher who identifies as a critical feminist and does not identify as a gamer, it is unquestionable that at the start of this research endeavour I felt a greater affinity with the ‘anti-GamerGate’ community than the ‘pro-GamerGate’ community. While admittedly misogyny within GamerGate was a driving factor for engaging with this topic, it was my intention to allow my personal stance to evolve organically and inductively based on my research findings: if themes emerged relating to misogyny, I wanted to ensure that these themes could emerge because they were salient rather than because of my own interest in them. As Geiger and Ribes (2011) and Hine (2015) have established, unobtrusive ethnographers are likely to be self-reflexive to a higher degree and therefore less likely to allow personal biases to significantly impact their research findings; the unobtrusive stance of the current study therefore was selected in part to reduce potential personal bias.

Finally, it is important to be cognizant of risk and personal safety. Although ultimately it appears that violence is less prevalent within the GamerGate movement than prevailing narratives in popular media claim (see data analysis chapters), violence, harassment and abuse – whether by ‘pro-’ or ‘anti-GamerGate’ supporters or by those who are disaffiliated with both camps of supporters – can occur and has occurred. This violence, abuse and harassment has included threats to physical offline safety; the public release of identifying information, including location data; campaigns of harassment by mail, phone, or directly in person; feelings of anxiousness, fear or stress; and social marginalization (Chess & Shaw, 2015; see also data analysis chapters). I prefer to avoid putting my personal safety at risk, particularly when my academic, feminist or pro-social affiliations could potentially provoke harm. Similarly, it is also important to consider

the personal safety of all research participants. Entering the field obtrusively and asking certain questions – particularly those with a pro-social or feminist research agenda – could potentially elicit responses for which respondents could be negatively targeted. By remaining unobtrusive, I am ensuring that I do not personally facilitate victimization.

4.2 – Data collection

The third phase of virtual ethnography, data collection, entails making choices about which data should be collected, how much data should be collected, and the level of engagement with and immersion within the fieldsites by the ethnographer (Kozinets, 2010). In this section I establish the utility of analysing archival data in virtual ethnographic research, demarcate the specific data sources and data collection techniques I employ, and highlight some of their challenges, including specific strategies that I implemented to circumvent them.

4.2.1 – Data collection strategies in virtual ethnographic research

Virtual ethnographers typically consider communicative interactions by looking at three different types of data: archival data, elicited data, and reflective fieldnote data (Kozinets, 2010). Drawing inspiration from trace analysis, in this study I focus on archival data complemented by reflective fieldnote data. Archival data in virtual ethnographies involve sources “that the researcher directly copies from pre-existing computer-mediated communications of online community members, data that she is not directly involved in creating or prompting” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 98). Archival data are captured exactly as they appear via the technological interface in which they originally were created (Markham, 2004), encompassing overt representations such as text, drawings, emoticons, photographs, and videos in addition to more subtle representations such as background colours, font styles, and formatting nuances (Markham, 2004).

Specific technology used for capturing archival data must be selected on the basis of how effectively it captures different salient communicators of representational meaning. When data entail forms of media such as videos or images that go beyond textual communication, as is the case of my dataset, it is advisable to incorporate methods of screen capture that save archival data in computer-readable formats that capture data as it is seen on a computer screen (Kozinets, 2010) and capture the wide array of media that this data may encompass. Virtual archival data retrieval is context-dependent and is subject to change based on the technological architectures and community norms of the fieldsites being examined (Kozinets, 2010; Markham, 2004).

Virtual archival data are often high-volume and easily downloadable, which are varyingly perceived as both strengths and weaknesses. On one hand, archival data are often rich in depth and in number (Markham, 2004), can usually be harvested easily by qualitative data analysis software (see, as only one example, browser extension NCapture that can export web pages and .pdf documents for analysis in the qualitative analysis program NVivo [QSR International, 2015]) and are often more readily accessible than elicited data both in terms of obtaining ethical clearance (Bruckman, 2006) and having a relatively low financial burden (Hine, 2015). However, on the other hand, the collection of virtual archival data can become tedious, time-consuming, overwhelming or difficult to manage (Kozinets, 2010). For this reason, it is necessary during data collection to incorporate strategic filtering for relevance and manageability. In this study, I implemented strategic filtering based on search terms and keywords that emerged as saliently meaningful, in addition to certain keywords or themes based on salient themes in a review of literature (see section 4.3.1). Throughout the research process these keywords were revised or discarded as appropriate.

Virtual archival data may also be impacted by spam, or “unsolicited bulk messages [that] almost every type of online community receives” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 193). Spam often is not created by a human and instead is generated by ‘bots’ that create and promote vast quantities of messages, posts or data, generally for the purposes of advertising or marketing. Messages represented by spam cannot always be analysed in the same way as interactions between members of a particular community since they often do not always carry significant or salient meaning (Kozinets, 2010). Three different strategies can be employed to address spam during data collection; these strategies include ignoring spam, ignoring spam in most cases but attending to it when it is relevant, and treating spam like any other collected data. Most virtual ethnographers “will find themselves [...] ignoring the spam” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 104). Although saliently meaningful spam is unlikely, I remain open to this possibility, and opt to collect and analyse spam flexibly on the basis of inductive reasoning. For example, if a viral meme communicates salient cultural meaning by “spamming” search results with a particular ideological perspective or if tweets are being mass produced as a form of resistance they would be collected, whereas if a Twitter account has been positively identified as a ‘bot’ its data would be discarded.

4.2.2 – Situating the Fieldsite

The specific fieldsites examined in this study comprise a variety of virtually mediated spaces relating to GamerGate. Fieldsites are reshaped throughout an ethnographer’s pursuit of emergent connections between different sources and sites of interpretation (Hine, 2015): the shape of the field is the endpoint rather than the starting point of virtual ethnographic research (Marcus, 2012). In this study, this refocusing most often involves the addition of search terms (see section 4.2.3) or other emergently meaningful data sources (for example, forms of media referenced within existing data). When selecting a fieldsite, potential sites should be evaluated in

terms of how well they relate to a study's primary research questions; the recentness and regularity of their communications; their ability to capture flows of communication between participants; and their overall substantiveness, heterogeneity and data-richness (Kozinets, 2010).

The primary fieldsites for this study include a variety of archival discussions posted in virtual spaces where major discourses related to GamerGate have taken shape or have played out. These discussions may be between any variety of actors, notably including individual online users, collective online users, public figures within the GamerGate movement, members of the media, or media conglomerates more broadly speaking. The text, drawings, emoticons, photographs, and videos appearing within these discussions, in addition to more subtle representations such as background colours, font styles, and formatting nuances, all carry salient meaning (Kozinets, 2010) and are included in my data. In light of the importance of biographic continuity to the conveyance of meaning within virtual environments (see, for example, Rosas & Dhen, 2011), it is also important to consider usernames, avatars or other markers of biographic continuity that accompany particular comments or posts.

I additionally am investigating the impact of the broader (technological) architectures of the fieldsites, including how content and meaning are impacted by website layout, privacy policies, codes of conduct, or any other restrictions that users face on content that may be posted. In the case of sources where it is possible for users to comment (for example, on blog posts or newspaper articles), I am looking at any user comments in addition to the 'raw' data of the source itself. All fieldsites are temporally bounded, inclusive of any content generated between August 2014 and August 2015. This restriction has been put in place to ensure that the analytical process does not become unmanageable and that data has a finite endpoint. August 2014 was the beginning of the GamerGate controversy (Chess & Shaw, 2015); August 2015 as an endpoint

results in a full year of archival data. Upon completion of data analysis, the fieldsites for the study were as follows:

(A) Tweets from public Twitter accounts using the #GamerGate hashtag. Twitter is a key fieldsite since it was home to the first use of the #GamerGate hashtag and played a major role in the development of harassment campaigns related to GamerGate (cathodedebris, 2014; Chess & Shaw, 2015). For ethical reasons, private Twitter accounts are not consulted in this study (see section 4.3.3).

(B) Posts in GamerGate-related subforums on 8chan and Reddit, major online discussion forums that have had a salient impact upon the development of GamerGate (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Kain, 2014; O’Neill, 2014). Originally, the discussion forum 4chan had hosted some of the most prominent online discussions related to GamerGate, including some of GamerGate’s first instances of doxxing and the emergence of viral hashtags stemming from the GamerGate movement, including #notyourshield (cathodedebris, 2014; Chess & Shaw, 2015). However, following a 4chan-imposed ban on GamerGate-related posts that took effect mid-September 2014 (Kushner, 2015), these original discussion threads no longer exist. 4chan discourses have since migrated to 8chan and Reddit, English discussion language forums that do not prohibit GamerGate-related content (Chess & Shaw, 2015; see also Kain, 2014; O’Neill, 2014).

Branded a “free-speech-friendly 4chan alternative” (O’Neill, 2014, para. 9), 8chan receives over one million page views per day, 35,000 unique visitors per day, and 400,000 posts per week (O’Neill, 2014, para. 9). Specifically, this study examines the entirety of the four most prominent GamerGate-related subchans (community-specific 8chan subforums), all of which are typically affiliated with ‘pro-GamerGate’. These subchans include /v/ (<https://8ch.net/v/> - 22,575

posts), /gamergate/ (<https://8ch.net/gamergate/> - 29,775 posts), /gg/ (<https://8ch.net/gg/> - 11,700 posts) and /gamergatehq/ (<https://8ch.net/gamergatehq/> - 4,850 posts).

Reddit, meanwhile, receives 234 million unique visitors per day (Reddit, 2015), representing more than 36 million user accounts and 9,601 active ‘subreddits’, or community-specific Reddit subforums (Reddit Admins, 2015). Specifically, this study examines the top 100 most “upvoted” posts on the three most popular subreddits that relate to GamerGate. These subreddits include /r/KotakuInAction (<https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/> - 51,441 subscribers at the time of data collection, who largely identify as ‘pro-GamerGate’), /r/GamerGhazi (<https://www.reddit.com/r/GamerGhazi/> - 8,529 subscribers who largely identify as ‘anti-GamerGate’), and /r/AgainstGamerGate (<https://www.reddit.com/r/AgainstGamerGate/> - 1,137 subscribers whose members identify as both ‘pro-‘ and ‘anti-GamerGate’ but skew in favour of ‘anti-GamerGate’). Collectively, posts on the subreddits and subchans analysed in this study include 129,999 individual comments (63,630 on /r/KotakuInAction, 17,339 on /r/GamerGhazi, and 49,030 on /r/AgainstGamerGate).

(C) GamerGate-related articles, videos, reviews, posts and comments on the 10 most popular North American video game websites/blogs (eBiz MBA, 2015) – IGN (<http://ca.ign.com>), GameFAQs (<http://www.gamefaqs.com>), GameSpot (<http://www.gamespot.com>), Kotaku (<http://kotaku.com>), N4G (<http://n4g.com>), Escapist Magazine (<http://www.escapistmagazine.com>), PCGamer (<http://www.pcgamer.com>), NeoSeeker (<http://www.neoseeker.com>), GiantBomb (<http://www.giantbomb.com>), and GameFront (<http://www.gamefront.com/files/type/mods>) – and other video game websites of interest to GamerGate, notably Gamasutra (<http://www.gamasutra.com>), GameGrep (<http://www.gamegrep.com>) and Polygon (<http://www.polygon.com>).

(D) GamerGate-related articles, videos, reviews, posts and comments in the 10 most popular North American newspapers (4 International Media & Newspapers, 2015): The New York Times (<http://international.nytimes.com>), The Washington Post (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>), USA Today (<http://www.usatoday.com>), The Wall Street Journal (<http://www.wsj.com>), Los Angeles Times (<http://www.latimes.com>), The Examiner (<http://www.examiner.com>), Daily News (<http://www.nydailynews.com>), Chicago Tribune (<http://www.chicagotribune.com>), and The Globe and Mail (<http://www.globeandmail.ca>). Articles were accessed electronically rather than in print in order to capture online comments.

(E) GamerGate-related articles, videos, reviews, posts, comments and other forms of media in other miscellaneous venues of salient interest. This subsection of data is diverse and continually evolved based on inductive findings during data analysis. Notably, it includes GamerGate-related pages on Tumblr.com, publications on various independent gaming magazines, publications on various independent game review websites, publications from independent feminist blogs, and websites of or associated with public figures/groups in the GamerGate controversy (for example, <http://feministfrequency.com> and <http://www.crashoverridenetwork.com>).

4.2.3 – Data harvesting: Fieldsite-specific data collection techniques

This section details the specific technological strategies used to harvest data within the context of each fieldsite. Virtual ethnographies that make use of qualitative data analysis software can be higher volume than traditional pen-and-paper techniques and can enable wider-reaching analyses (Kozinets, 2010); however, software requires data to be harvested in readable file formats. Opting for as deep an analysis as possible, this study employs the qualitative software tool NVivo to facilitate data analysis. As such, it is necessary for data capture outputs to be compatible with NVivo.

Fieldsite A: Twitter data harvested in this study are particularly high volume: while Twitter does not provide statistics for the frequency of use of particular hashtags over time, between 24 and 25 January, 2016 – well after the peak period for GamerGate-related tweets had ended – 5,791 tweets containing the GamerGate hashtag were published (LOGIKA Corporation, 2016); daily figures for the duration of the study period are immensely higher. Extrapolating even this comparatively low number of daily tweets to the year long data collection period of the current study, data would encompass more than 2 million tweets.

Compounding the challenges of a range of data this high volume, Twitter no longer allows the exportation of historical Twitter data (for example, in Excel format); there is therefore no “easy” method to harvest historical tweets. Code can be written to harvest tweets; however, this requires a high degree of technological expertise and is only possible in real time (as tweets are published) unless Twitter grants explicit approval. If Twitter does approve historical tweet exportation (traditionally limited to application developers), this service is not free and Twitter retains ownership of any intellectual property relating to their use or analysis (Twitter, 2016). Technological expertise aside, in the interest of retaining ownership of my own intellectual property and avoiding corporate benefit from this project, this option was not feasible.

Independent software used to harvest tweets in bulk, particularly for a particular temporal period in the past rather than harvesting tweets as they are published live, is costly and restrictive (see section 4.2.4). The most practical and cost effective strategy for harvesting tweets in this study was to strategically filter my search based on relevant keywords and then conduct a hashtag/keyword search on Twitter itself, manually scrolling through the Twitter interface to reveal a stream of relevant tweets in its entirety. Searches ultimately included “#GamerGate” in combination with 126 variations on emergent keywords identified as saliently meaningful

throughout the data collection process; for a full list of these search terms, see Annex II. Search restrictions necessitated separate searches for different semantic variations of similar keywords, for example, separate searches for “#GamerGate” + “harasser”, “harassers”, “harassing” and “harassment”. It is noted that misspellings of search terms are by design excluded from search results; however, if particular misspellings or alternative spellings emerged as salient (for example, “doxing” and “doxed” as opposed to “doxxing” and “doxxed”), these were included in the list of search terms. I conducted this search using a Twitter account created expressly for the purposes of data collection; this account neither follows other users nor has any followers, ensuring that only public content is accessed. Conducting an advanced search on Twitter allows for specification of a particular range of dates, enabling me to restrict my search to the observational period of this study.

Search results were initially manually expanded within the web browser Google Chrome. Chrome was used in ‘incognito mode’, a more privacy-friendly browsing option that allows web browsing without saving local data for retrieval at a later date. This mode was employed in order to obtain a ‘cleaner’ set of data with minimal interactions with my own personal web browsing history. Data was imported for analysis in NVivo using the NVivo browser extension NCapture. However, at the start of data collection, NCapture for Mac was only recently released and was still under development. As a result, often this browser extension was ineffective and, due to the sheer volume of content, would fail to capture the collective tweets that had been expanded within the web browser or would restart the web browser entirely, necessitating that the manual expansion process be re-initiated. NCapture was ultimately for this reason abandoned in favour of exporting screen captures of the expanded data in .pdf format using Google Chrome itself, which was more effectively able to capture vast quantities of data. A drawback of this .pdf capture

method is that video content is not preserved; for any tweets containing saliently meaningful videos, this content was separately accessed and captured using NCapture.

Saving web pages in .pdf format preserves hyperlinks referenced within tweets, allowing for attached media or links to be accessed at a later date and adhering to Kozinets' (2010) recommendation that data capture methods encompass the array of media that are referenced within a particular data set. For certain keywords, search results were too numerous for exportation in .pdf format; in these cases, I specified multiple narrower time periods rather than one large time period (for example, separate searches for August 2014-October 2014, November 2014-January 2015, February 2015-April 2015, and May-August 2015).

Fieldsite B: 8chan data were harvested using 8archive (<http://8archive.moe>), an online historical archive of 8chan posts. Shortly after data collection was completed, 8archive went offline for technical maintenance and as of the writing of this chapter has not yet been restored. This portion of data collection therefore will not be replicable in the immediate future using the same harvesting technique. Searching within 8chan is not possible within a specified time period. All discussions must be scrolled through manually; harvesting large quantities of temporally bounded data is therefore only feasible using an archival tool such as 8archive. 8archive allowed for 8chan discussions on each particular subchan to be harvested chronologically in their entirety over the course of the specified time period, preserving discussions in largely the same way they appeared on 8chan.com. Subchan archives were saved using NCapture, effectively preserving the images and links that appeared in each post. 8archive results break search results into separate pages which each encompass 25 posts; this data source, while broken into pieces that were small enough to be captured managed by NCapture, was therefore the most labour intensive to harvest since each page of search results needed to be saved individually (in multiple cases resulting in as

many as 400 manually saved pages of results per subchan per month). Any relevant media posted within particular discussions were separately loaded and captured alongside their parent discussions, using NCapture. Posts that were deleted following their harvesting in September 2015 have been included in my analysis since there is no feasible way to ascertain that deletion has taken place.

Discussions on Reddit were loaded manually in their entirety within Google Chrome, with all responses to original posts expanded (responses are often truncated) and sorted by their number of upvotes (via a link at the top of the page for each particular discussion). In much the same way as fieldsite A, these expanded discussions were exported from Google Chrome in .pdf format due to their prolific nature and likelihood to be uncapturable by NCapture. Fully expanded discussions, since they did not contain embedded video content, were preserved as they originally appeared on screen. Relevant media posted within particular discussions were saved using NCapture alongside their ‘parent’ discussions, in the same way as media associated with posts on 8chan. Posts that were deleted after data collection had taken place have still been analysed, since, like 8chan posts, there is no efficient way to ascertain that their deletion has since occurred.

Fieldsites C, D and E: Articles, posts and comments posted on the 10 most popular video game websites/blogs and 10 most popular North American newspapers were identified by conducting searches for “GamerGate” on each syndicate’s website. I identified miscellaneous venues of interest inductively throughout the analytical process. Data were captured using two separate technological strategies. First, NCapture, due to its ability to capture video content as well as textual content, was used to save the “source” media as it appeared on screen. After the initial NCapture of the source content, any user comments posted on the source content were manually expanded and saved as a screenshot in .pdf form using Google Chrome.

4.2.4 – Data collection challenges

Harvesting virtual archival data involves several unique challenges, some of which have been touched upon in the previous sections. This section highlights these difficulties in more detail, offering suggestions for how virtual ethnographic research can address and overcome these constraints in a way that retains methodological and analytical rigor. The primary difficulties encountered during data collection in this study relate to three major constraints presented by virtual archive data, including the prolific nature of virtual data sources, general technological unreliability, and the financial burden of virtual data harvesting.

As section 4.2.3 has illustrated and as various scholars (Bowker & Star, 2000; Geiger & Ribes, 2011; Hiltz & Turoff, 1978) note, the collection of virtual archival data can easily result in significant problems of scale, where researchers are faced with data sets that are “vast, distributed and highly populated” (Geiger & Ribes, 2011, p. 5). While a focused analytical framework (see section 4.3) and data harvesting strategy (see section 4.2.3) can aid the process of decoding meaning and significance, it is also necessary for an ethnographer to ensure not only a manageable quantity of data, but also that data can be fully and meaningfully probed for the various meanings they articulate.

Virtual ethnographers have identified several strategies to ensure that data analysis remains manageable. Most notably, these involve employing technological aids to harvest data (Beaulieu & Simakova, 2006), strategic filtering of search results (Kozinets, 2010), limiting the selection of data sources to narrower, more specific archives (Geiger & Ribes, 2011; Star, 1999), or conducting simple random sampling across a broad data set (Geiger & Ribes, 2011). As I have outlined, my own data collection involved technologically mediated data harvesting (for all fieldsites), strategic filtering (fieldsite A) and the selection of specific, narrower archives (fieldsites B, C and D). Given this study’s use of qualitative data analysis software, it was

feasible and desirable – despite the prolific nature of the data set – to avoid simple random sampling.

Technological unreliability presents another very real constraint upon virtual data collection and is under-discussed in literature on virtual ethnographic research. All technology is fallible; however, this general acknowledgment is too frequently absent from technological discussions by virtual ethnographic researchers, who instead tend to focus on specific software that can facilitate virtual ethnography without cautioning that no piece of software is perfect (see, for example, Geiger & Ribes, 2011; Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2010). Unreliability is not the same as unsuitability; unsuitability relates to a disjoint between technology capabilities and research goals, and can be overcome comparatively easily merely by selecting a different, more suitable piece of software. However, software that is able to perform necessary functions for virtual ethnographic research can still be apt to malfunction. It is crucial for a researcher to anticipate that technological problems can and will occur, and to proactively guard against them.

I encountered diverse technological problems throughout my data collection process. Many related to the prolific nature of my dataset, which as I have highlighted, was at times too large to be handled by first-choice software tools (notably NCapture). That first-choice software tools can fail means that it is necessary to be open-minded to second-choice software tools (for example, generating .pdfs within Google Chrome). However, the sheer quantity of data also means that second-choice software tools can similarly fail, in which case it is necessary to restructure the data collection process entirely in order to guard against these failures (for example, by subdividing data sources into smaller temporal periods, which can then individually be collected as smaller files).

Technological failure can be unrelated to aspects of the data set itself and can occur for any number of reasons, many of which may be outside of a researcher's control. For this reason, it is always advisable to keep a backup file of any work; I maintained backup files of all raw data files exported from Google Chrome and of any files relating to data analysis, including the central NVivo project file. Although it can seem logical and adequate simply to keep a backup of all files relating to a particular initiative, this study highlighted that it is not enough merely to ensure that data is preserved in the form of a backup file. A backup file itself, as technology, is vulnerable to the same failures as the data that formed the backup. NVivo, for instance, auto-creates an automatic backup of all project files. For added security I had the backup file auto-save to a third party cloud storage service, imagining that if my computer malfunctioned and the file were lost, I could still access my project file via the cloud. However, since the version of NVivo that I was using was still in development, at one point an unforeseen software error corrupted both my project file as well as its auto-saved backup file, auto-saving a corrupt and unusable version of my project overtop of the third backup I had kept. Despite lengthy attempts by NVivo technicians to retrieve them, the data were ultimately lost, meaning that simply maintaining a backup file was inadequate.

Partly for this reason, I maintained detailed fieldnotes in the form of a combination field notebook and reflexive journal. Ethnographers – both virtual and otherwise – use fieldnotes to record research observations and personal insights regarding “subtexts, pretexts, contingencies, conditions and personal emotions” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 114) throughout the research process. In fieldnotes, ethnographers are able to document and analyse their journeys as researchers and community/culture members; their learning of rituals, languages or practices; and their other observations of or involvements with the communities and cultures they investigate. Fieldnotes

can offer key insights regarding the trajectory of thematic development throughout the course of data analysis in addition to key insights regarding the researcher's own personal or professional development.

Fieldnotes aid ethnographers in ensuring that their research is self-reflexive; in the context of virtual ethnographic studies, fieldnotes also serve as a hard copy backup of vulnerable electronic data. Recognizing this two-fold value of handwritten fieldnotes, I closely maintained handwritten academic fieldnotes as I conducted data collection, using these notes to mirror coding as it appeared within NVivo and painstakingly documenting relevant terms, quotations, and potential theoretical or thematic links in addition to stream-of-consciousness personal insights. The purpose behind doing so was not only to ensure a more rigorous and reflexive analytical process, but also to produce a backup file that was not technologically dependent. When my NVivo project file and its backup file became corrupted and lost, I was therefore not forced to begin the data collection process anew, as would have been the case if I had only maintained a technological backup. When possible, I advocate that pen-and-paper backups should therefore be maintained (or electronic fieldnotes and data files printed out as they are recorded).

A final constraint imposed by the harvesting of technological data is its associated financial burden. While obviously contingent upon funding or other financial resources and therefore more of a concern for certain researchers than for others, the most powerful and expedient tools to harvest and analyse technological data inevitably are also the most expensive. In my data collection, this was most evident regarding software to harvest tweets. Gnip, the most cost effective Twitter archival application at the time of data collection, offered plans beginning at a monthly cost of \$4,000 USD (Stravarius, 2011); I was privately offered a subsidized "student

rate” for analytical social media software Crimson Hexagon for \$15,000 USD for one year of access. Since data analysis for the current study is an inductive, ongoing process that was expected to last for up to two years, the total cost of such software therefore would have amounted to between \$30,000 and \$64,000 USD, well outside budgetary confines. Many other Twitter archival tools charge based on quantity of tweets harvested; given the volume of data under analysis, these tools are similarly prohibitive on grounds of cost.

Virtual ethnographers working on a budget are forced to trade off cost-effectiveness either for expediency, functionality or a combination of both. That is to say that more cost effective data harvesting/analytical strategies will necessarily usually be more time consuming, tedious or complicated to implement than more expensive strategies and/or will have fewer analytical capabilities than more expensive strategies. Specific research designs impact how researchers will handle this tradeoff; in the case of this study I was able to innovate cost effective methods of data collection whose reductions in functionality did not meaningfully impact the ability for data to be harvested or analysed. My chosen methods did prove to be more time consuming than more expensive methods that could have collected data quickly en masse; however, since my timeframe allowed for a comparatively long period of data collection and analysis, this tradeoff did not significantly hinder the research process.

4.3 – Analytical framework and additional considerations

Having contextualized the methodological inspirations, fieldsites, and data collection methods/challenges of the current study, I now turn to its analytical approach. I begin by describing the analytical procedures followed during the ‘interpretation’ phase of this study’s methodology. After highlighting the importance of self-reflexivity and acknowledging the

subjective nature of ethnographic research, I explain this study's qualitative thematic analysis-inspired coding strategy. I close by considering research ethics in virtual ethnography.

4.3.1 – Self-reflexivity and positionality in ethnographic analysis

Once data has been collected, the fourth step of a virtual ethnography involves interpreting data, or conducting data analysis. Data analysis encompasses “the entire process of turning the collected products of participation and observation [...] into a finished research representation” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 118). Virtual ethnographies, as a result of their vast and rich data sources, largely rely upon inductive approaches to data analysis. Inductive approaches employ logical reasoning to amass individual observations into more general thematic or theoretical statements about particular phenomena. The most common virtual analytical frameworks (Carter, 2005; Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2010) are inspired loosely by grounded theory (A. Strauss & Glaser, 1967), an inductive analytical framework involving the simultaneous generation of theoretical claims alongside basic steps of coding text, recording running notes or memos of conceptually important elements, and refining resulting theoretical conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Before continuing, it is important briefly to critique grounded theory in order to understand some of its limitations and provide context for how these limitations have been navigated in the current study. Most significantly to this project, grounded theory has been troubled for its claim (A. Strauss & Glaser, 1967) of being strictly inductive and without bias. Grounded theory originally involved a focus on replicability and a more quantitatively-oriented “scientific” approach to sociological research (A. Strauss & Glaser, 1967). Contemporary grounded theory, however, has moved into the realm of qualitative sociology (Parker & Roffey, 1997; Thomas & James, 2006). Qualitative approaches, rather than drawing their strength from claims of objectivity (which are problematic even in quantitative research), find strength in

context. Qualitative researchers conduct research via personal, self-reflexive engagement and through active processes of learning, inquiring and understanding (Parker & Roffey, 1997; Thomas & James, 2006).

To conduct ethnography without acknowledging the subjective nature of the research process would be disingenuous: ethnographic research, by its very nature, is “biased, and proud of it” (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 96). Ethnographic processes repeat upon researchers, and researchers’ own positionalities in turn repeat upon ethnographic processes. Ethnographies are not simply summaries of textual messages; researchers’ thoughts and actions can be affected by their objects of study and understandings of these objects are likewise affected by researchers’ thoughts and actions. Rather than attempting to limit their impact upon the research process, then, ethnographers must strive to maintain a constant awareness of the ways in which their own positionalities and the research process are co-constitutive (Hine, 2015).

Rather than limiting data analysis, I argue that the unavoidably subjective nature of qualitative research can be a source of strength enabling a more self-reflexive, rigorous research process. An acknowledgment and mobilization of this subjectivity can complement, rather than hinder, research processes that draw from grounded theory, moving away from more fundamentalist grounded theoretical approaches. The contribution of grounded theory to virtual ethnography in the context of the current study lies in its central tenet of inductiveness as opposed to any pretence of objectivity. While particular frameworks and theoretical leanings did bring me to the research process, as a social scientist I have a political commitment to allow those frameworks to be displaced by, accentuated by, or intersected by other frameworks that emerge inductively throughout the analytical process, even if they contradict my own proclivities.

Here it is necessary to acknowledge some of own identity markers and ideological penchants that could have a salient impact upon the ultimate framing of research findings. I am a white, comparatively socioeconomically privileged, able-bodied, cisgendered male who has been educated in North American post-secondary institutions. I am conducting research from a position of power; as an institutionally educated male, I experience a degree of symbolic social and academic capital, including the privilege to be listened to and association with a level of skill or expertise. Rather than using this position of power to further marginalize voices and identities that already experience silencing or oppression, I strive to mobilize my own privilege in a way that grants voice to those who may often be denied one, drawing upon my aforementioned symbolic capital to create a platform from which I am able to advocate for equality and amplify voices that can often go unheard.

As someone who identifies as a critical feminist, on an epistemological level I tend to approach social issues through the lens of (in)equality, acknowledging the myriad historical, social and cultural contexts that can shape forms of marginalization. Whether by nature of my comparative privilege or by nature of my gender, I have faced criticism that I am not qualified to conduct emancipatory research. However, I suggest the opposite is true: that there is a distinction between myself and traditionally marginalized populations is apparent; so apparent, in fact, that it necessitates heightened, constant self-reflexivity in order to counter these criticisms. In other words, because research is a dialogic performance (Dennis, 2013) that brings the researcher into analytical processes, it is necessary for the researcher first to understand him/herself. As Dennis points out, “when we listen to the claims of others, our interpretations involve position-taking, which intrinsically require our own self-commitments and positionings within the interpretations. Thus, it seems to me that the validity of our interpretations always involves a self-reflection”

(2018, p.112). I argue that since my own subject position is markedly different from that of many of my participants, my research requires more deliberate or active reflexivity in order to address serious concerns that my findings could potentially be shaped by this positionality (for example, by rendering me unsympathetic toward subjective experiences of harm or histories of marginalization to which I might not relate, as someone who has not experienced them personally).

While acknowledging these differences, it is simultaneously important to acknowledge that I do share commonalities with my participants – for example, identification as a critical feminist, an advocate for social justice initiatives, or an individual who has experienced marginalization on the basis of particular identity markers or lived experiences, even if this may manifest differently for me than for my participants. Qualitative research involves “the (ethical) labour of understanding the Self by recognizing the Self as Other, the Self in Other”, and the presence of obvious points of differentiation between me and my participants requires me to engage in this labour more actively. My positionality as a white male demands that I dialogically constitute myself-in-the-research-process as open to and cognizant of difference – and, indeed, to strive to relate to this difference – which, as Dennis highlights, is “intrinsically connected to one behaving ethically” (2018, p.112).

Further, as Tarrant (2009) has illustrated, prevailing social norms do not allow for alternative models of manhood that resonate with minimizing constraints upon gender, class, race, sexuality or ability. Prevailing social norms, particularly within pro-GamerGate communities (Chess & Shaw, 2015), additionally position feminism as radical feminism, where feminists are perceived as favouring liberty only for women rather than equality for all genders, a perception that can be difficult to reconcile with the fact that a researcher is himself male. My

feminism, however, is a moral belief that is not restricted to one gender (Tarrant, 2009) and which favours liberty and equality for all. As a feminist sociologist, I advocate for equality. Feminism involves the “common sense to believe in egalitarian values, to care for all people and to bring about a better world, [and to think] critically about gender, race and unearned privileges” (Tarrant, 2009, p. 1). In subscribing to these emancipatory ideals my identity as a critical feminist – an engaged social subject who is interested in equality rather than further oppression of any social group – is firmly established. This identity as a critical feminist is reflected in this study’s goal of generating positive change in favour of more equal social relations, not only in terms of gender but in terms of all social identity markers.

In the context of GamerGate, again I experience a degree of privilege. Unlike some of my research subjects or colleagues who have anecdotally recounted that as a result of their gender, academic interests, or identity as a gamer they would feel physically afraid to conduct research on GamerGate, I do not fear for my personal safety by speaking out about the issues I study. Aside from identifying as a feminist, I am not a member of any communities or identity groups stereotypically targeted within GamerGate-related harassment. I am not a public figure within the gaming sphere, am not an active member of the communities I investigate, and I do not identify as a gamer. To counter arguments that for this reason I should not be conducting work on gaming communities or gaming-related issues, again I suggest that the opposite is true. The very characteristics that differentiate me my subjects ensure that I conduct research with additional rigor and force me to consider more deeply and thoroughly my subjects’ positions in order to better understand their lived experiences.

4.3.2 – Coding strategy: Establishing qualitative thematic networks

Coding is the process where “codes, classifications, names, or labels are assigned to particular units of data; these codes label the data as belonging to or being an example of some

more general phenomenon” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 119). During coding, virtual ethnographers simultaneously engage in noting, where written reflections on data are maintained either in the margins of the data – known as “memoing” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 119) – or in a field notebook, as I have described in section 4.2.4. This process is accompanied by abstracting and comparing, or sorting through data to identify “similar phrases, shared sequences, relationships, and distinct differences; [building] categorized codes into higher-order, or more general, conceptual constructs, patterns or processes” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 119). Coding is a key aspect of the late phases of a virtual ethnography, generalizing and theorizing. This phase represents the ‘answer’ to the “so what?” question facing qualitative researchers (Kozinets, 2010), highlighting the unique theoretical applications of a study as well as potential areas for intervention.

The coding style used in this study is flexible, open-ended and inductive, allowing salient analytic (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994) and hermeneutic (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) meaning to emerge organically. This open-ended nature, however, can render the process of coding a complex and daunting affair, particularly when dealing with a prolific data set. As such, I draw from qualitative thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) to operationalize a coding frame that imparts a degree of structure that is necessary in order for analysis to be conducted expediently. Qualitative thematic analysis is a multidisciplinary research strategy that summarizes the main themes constituting a particular data source. Thematic analyses “seek to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 387) with the goal of illuminating the richness, meaning and contexts of subjective experiences of social life (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). This richness of meaning and diversity of context is a key aspect of qualitative research and, as I have established in Chapter 1, is a central component of this study’s ontology. As such, I have elected not to focus on quantitative data. My analysis is not focused on

establishing objective, statistical evidence – namely, I do not claim to ‘prove’ that prevailing narratives of GamerGate harms lack merit, nor do I attempt to statistically claim that the diverse harms that I identify (see Chapters 5 and 6) are more prevalent than harms identified in these prevailing narratives. Instead, I strive to paint a richer, more nuanced picture of harm in the context of GamerGate, and to mobilize this richer picture to suggest that these harms have more complexity than is popularly imagined. Quantitative evidence is not necessary to illustrate the multifaceted nature of GamerGate-related harms: instead, my data asserts the validity of this conceptualization via qualitative evidence.

The qualitative evidence that I harvested is “in depth, valid, reliable, credible, and rigorous” (Anderson, 2010, p.2). As Anderson establishes, validity and reliability in qualitative research refer to the honesty and genuineness of the research data, in addition to its reproducibility and stability. and thereby establishes that virtual harm is indeed complex, intersectional, and deserving of more nuanced analysis. There are traditionally three methods to substantiate validity of qualitative research, including respondent validation, triangulation, and constant comparison. Due to the anonymity of my participants and unobtrusive nature of my data collection, it was not feasible to have users provide feedback on my interpretations of their responses. Similarly, it was also not possible in the time frame of this study (and given constraints related to funding and the prolific nature of my dataset) to have other researchers triangulate my data.

In this study I rely upon constant comparison as my primary means of establishing validity. Constant comparison means that pieces of data are compared with previous data and are not considered on their own, which allows “researchers to treat the data as a whole rather than fragmenting it. Constant comparison also enables the researcher to identify

emerging/unanticipated themes” (*ibid.*). This allows researchers to continually check for inconsistencies between various pieces of data, challenge their assumptions, gain insights into data’s broader contexts, and continually re-analyse (Anderson, 2010). In reading my entire dataset and commencing my analysis from the moment that I began harvesting it (where I was required to read as I individually screen captured all of my data points), I was able to engage in a rigorous constant comparison process from the outset of my data collection.

By uploading all of my data to NVivo, I was able to read through my data a second time to bolster this constant comparison process. NVivo ensured that my entire dataset was always at my fingertips, which allowed me to continue to engage in this process. As I identified emergent themes, I highlighted them in NVivo similar to the ways in which qualitative researchers might highlight hard copies of interviews or focus groups. As new themes emerged and as potential previous themes changed or became less relevant, I was able to return to previously coded data and remove or add codes accordingly, allowing this constant comparative process to guide my analysis. I selected quotes for inclusion based on their representativeness of the emergent themes that this constant comparison allowed me to identify, their ability to be understood in context (where, for example, I selected quotes that would not require reproducing multiple pages of previous tweets or posts in order for them to be comprehensible) or to have their context paraphrased, and on the basis of whether they presented a suitably low degree of risk for participants (for example, in terms of identifiability).

It is important, here, to acknowledge the recognize the relationships between subjectivity, positionality and the validity of qualitative research processes. Dennis (2018) argues in favour of conceptualizing validity as contingent upon conceptualizations of truth. Dennis claims that

validity should be talked about in terms of the interpretive understanding that emerges. It should be complexly located throughout the process of engaging in research, with the

complexity serving as potential reflection points. Moreover, these validity practices and ideas are amenable to a continued blurring between researcher and researched as we find enacted through Critical Participatory Action Research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), for example. If our labor involves critical theories of meaning and social constructionist views of the Self, we might find the traditional orientations toward validity (the perpetuation of validity concepts which extract the researcher from the concept) to be problematic. If we are making interpretive claims about the lives, stories, and experiences of Others, we have to render an understanding of how those interpretations were located within the context they were offered up. It seems compelling to me that we should be willing to understand who the researcher is in the interactive context, and praxis connects the researcher and participants in a web of mutual understanding and social coordination (2018, p.117).

Through this lens, “truth claims are communicative acts which carry forth through particular kinds of communicative commitments always already emergent from within a host of cultural and linguistic practices” (Dennis, 2018, p.110). In other words, buried within the validity of all truth claims are self and identity validity, validity is self-reflexive, and the subjective positionality of a researcher is not “bias” – instead, this subjective positionality is a component of valid qualitative inquiry.

The external validity of this study (Berg, 2009; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002) is admittedly limited. It cannot be generalized outside of the context of my dataset – although, that being said, my fieldsites comprise some of the most saliently meaningful venues hosting GamerGate discourses and these constraints therefore still allow for a meaningful analysis of GamerGate, and for a meaningful complication of prevailing notions of virtual harm. As an exploratory study, the primary goal of this research is not to generalize findings to broader populations. Rather, it primarily investigates relationships and explores these relationships’ meanings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), as opposed to making causal assertions or broad generalizations. A potential lack of external validity is therefore not essential to the broader goals of this study, and does not imply a lack of other types of validity, for instance, internal or construct validity (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

The coding strategy of this study articulates salient themes via thematic networks, or web-like networks of themes at work within and across various data sources (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thematic networks include systemized extractions of basic themes, categories of basic themes organized together to summarize more abstract principles, and global themes that summarize principal thematic metaphors in the text as a whole and encompass the collective basic themes and organized groups of basic themes. These global themes form the rough thematic basis for this dissertation's data analysis chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 7). It is important to note that this process of thematic extraction does not occur in a linear fashion. Rather, basic themes, organizing themes and global themes are revised and restructured inductively throughout the research process, although for practical purposes this process will be discussed linearly.

I initially coded my data for basic themes. Basic themes are “simple premises characteristic of the data, and on their own say very little about the text [...] as a whole. In order for a basic theme to make sense beyond its immediate meaning, it needs to be read within the context of other basic themes” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389). In this initial coding process for basic themes, I strived for my reading to be as open-ended and inductive as possible in order to allow for the most saliently meaningful characteristics of my data to be identified accurately without the rigid constraints of a more categorical approach. During this reading, critical thinking framed questions such as “Why do some things get said and others do not?”, “How are things said, how do they relate, and what are their possible implications?” and “What is absent from the discourse?” (Gill, 2000). Coding therefore deliberately includes implicit speech acts, such as gaps in discussion, whether participants seem unwilling or less willing to talk about certain subjects, whether participants are ridiculed, harassed or criticized for expressing certain viewpoints, changes in demeanour, or sarcasm (Rosas & Dhen, 2011).

As I have established, even when approaching data coding inductively, researchers typically do have at least some skeletal codes already in mind (Gibbs & Taylor, 2005), although they are also looking for additional thematic ideas that arise from the data. These *a priori* ideas can be based on previous research or theory, questions or topics from interview schedules, key concepts of major research questions, or even gut feelings about the data or research settings. I did enter the field with several *a priori* themes in the back of mind, guided both in a comprehensive review of literature (see Chapters 2 and 3) and in my own pre-existing theoretical understandings of the GamerGate phenomenon (notably, its involvement with misogyny). These *a priori* potentials notwithstanding, I nonetheless made a deliberate effort to allow themes to emerge organically and to discard any of my pre-existing notions that were not empirically supported. The preliminary stage of coding to identify basic themes resulted in an exhaustive list of emergent basic themes that recurred throughout the various data sets. In the interest of space constraints, this list may be seen in full in Annex I.

Following this initial stage of coding to identify basic themes, basic themes are grouped together into broader “organizing themes” to summarize more abstract principles that link together related basic themes. Organizing themes are “clusters of signification that summarize the principal assumptions of a group of basic themes, so they are more abstract and more revealing of what is going on in the texts” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389). From this second round of coding emerged eight distinct organizing themes grouping together the various basic themes (which may be seen together in context in Annex II): criminal direct harassment and nonconsensual disclosure of private personal information as harmful, expectations of privacy and consent within virtual environments, justifications for engagement in harm, audience reception/subjective experience of

harm, community/subcultural context of harm, authorial intent of harm, role of media, and virtual spaces as less real/more playful than offline spaces.

The final step in coding a thematic network is to code for global themes, or “super-ordinate themes that encompass the principal metaphors in the data as a whole” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389), and that summarize and make sense of organizing and basic themes (although it must be noted that organizing themes can, and indeed often do, relate to more than one global theme). Global themes offer conclusive insights that mobilize emergent themes more broadly to relate them to a study’s major research questions and aid the advancement of theoretical claims.

My analysis identified three global themes. These include common conceptualizations of harm (encompassing the organizing themes of criminal direct harassment and nonconsensual disclosure of private personal information as harmful, expectations of privacy and consent within virtual environments, and justifications for engagement in harm), differential conceptualizations of harm (audience reception/subjective experience of harm, community/subcultural context of harm, authorial intent of harm), and virtually mediated perceptions of fantasy and reality (encompassing the organizing themes of newsworthiness and virtual spaces as less real/more playful than offline spaces).

While the following data analysis chapters largely attempt for the sake of readability to discuss analytical findings along the axes of these three global themes, this structure is not absolute and does not serve as a prescriptive doctrine regarding how this study’s findings must be framed. Rather, as a virtual ethnographic approach stresses, it is important to constantly move between thematic categories – not just global thematic categories, but also organizing and basic thematic categories – to reflect upon the ways in which they intersect, interrelate, and indeed are co-constitutive. Adopting this nonlinear approach ensures that resulting analytical and theoretical

conclusions will be as robust and holistic as possible in addition to specifically and contextually meaningful.

Finally, the concluding phase of a virtual ethnographic study is to compile research findings into a finished research representation. This step includes writing, presenting and reporting research findings; disseminating theoretical conclusions; putting forth policy recommendations; and/or developing educational or pragmatic initiatives. This final step is ongoing and will continue to take place after the publication of a written dissertation; this step is also fundamental in bridging the gap between academia and less esoteric realms where accessible forms of knowledge dissemination are a fundamental way to engage the public in scholarly research. These pragmatic applications will be discussed in more detail in the conclusion of this dissertation.

4.3.3 – Research ethics

Virtual ethnographic research involves distinct ethical considerations: as Kozinets has established, “there are few, if any, ethical procedures for in-person fieldwork that translate easily to the online medium.” (2010, p. 5). Ethical considerations are particularly complex in unobtrusive virtual ethnographic research, where participants are not formally recruited and may not be aware that their communications are under analysis, like in the case of this study. Institutional guidelines (namely the Tri-Council Policy Statement that governs all Canadian research with human participants, but also university protocols for ethical review) are varied in their approaches to virtual fieldwork, and in many cases attempt to apply existing offline ethical protocol to research conducted in virtual environments. This is problematic when online environments often have differing expectations of privacy than those which may be present in offline locales, and where data can be collected unobtrusively with a high degree of ease (where researchers can “lurk” more easily than they can offline). Questions surrounding virtual research

ethics are an emerging frontier as researchers increasingly conduct studies in online contexts. Virtual research ethics represent a novel methodological application of this study, filling a gap in existing methodological literature.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, or TCPS2 (CIHR, NSERC and SSHRC, 2014), specifies that research is exempt from review by an institutional research ethics board if it relies exclusively on publicly available information that is legally accessible and to which there is no “reasonable expectation of privacy” (CIHR, NSERC and SSHRC, 2014, p.16). The TCPS2 specifies that

research that is non-intrusive, and does not involve direct interaction between the researcher and individuals through the Internet, also does not require REB review. Cyber-material such as documents, records, performances, online archival materials or published third party interviews to which the public is given uncontrolled access on the Internet for which there is no expectation of privacy is considered to be publicly available information (*ibid.*).

Exempted research may involve identifiable information if there is no reasonable expectation of privacy for this information. There is an exception to this exemption when publicly accessible information does have a reasonable expectation of privacy. The TCPS2 clarifies that “when accessing identifiable information in publicly accessible digital sites, such as Internet chat rooms, and self-help groups with restricted membership, the privacy expectation of contributors of these sites is much higher [and] researchers shall submit their proposal for REB review” (*ibid.*). Under these guidelines, the virtual ethnographic work conducted in this study is exempt from formal institutional ethical review, since my fieldsites do not involve a reasonable expectation of privacy as operationalized under the TCPS2. My fieldsites are public message boards whose platforms explicitly specify that communications are public and can be read by any external users (rather than, for instance, Internet chat rooms where communications are posted and not archived, or message boards that require users to register in order to read posted content).

The idea seems counterintuitive that virtual ethnographic research, when it involves a deep reading for information on cultures and communities involving human participants, can be exempt from formal ethical review. This does not mean that research is not ethnographic in nature. Rather, this illustrates that formal ethical policy has not kept pace with technologization. Rather than falling to institutional research and ethics boards, ethical governance in (particularly unobtrusive) virtual ethnographic research is increasingly offloaded onto ethnographers themselves, which can often result in research ethics being downplayed or ignored entirely. This is a trend that various scholars have pointed out, including Kozinets (2010) and Akturan (2009), who highlights that in her analysis of 11 virtual ethnographies, only three included any mention of research ethics. For this reason, I argue that is important to distinguish between “Ethics”, meaning institutional ethical protocols, and “ethics”, meaning informal ethical rigor that is morally, rather than institutionally, imperative. While this study is exempt from Ethical consideration, it is not – and I advocate that no study is – similarly exempt from ethical consideration. Informal ethical considerations are under-addressed in virtual ethnographic literature, a trend that I strive to change.

Since I require no formal ethical clearance to collect and analyse data in my fieldsites, the responsibility falls to me, as both an academic and a human being, to ensure that my formally unregulated research nonetheless is ethically rigorous. In ensuring this informal ethical rigor, I do as the TCPS2 urges and provide “comments and discussion, and commit to the continued evolution” (CIHR, NSERC and SSHRC, 2014, p.4) of formal ethical procedures. In this study, four primary sets of ethical considerations are particularly substantial: whether online fieldsites are public or private spaces (or thought of as public/private spaces by users who frequent them),

issues of informed consent, how to properly cite or credit content that has been posted online, and potential sources of harm to actors within online fieldsites.

Various virtual scholars (Geiger & Ribes, 2011; Hine, 2015; A Massanari, 2015) have pointed out that even within online communities where posts or comments are publicly available and where users have no reasonable expectation of privacy as defined under the TCPS2, users can feel that they have an expectation of privacy. Kozinets (2010) is less than sympathetic to such users, arguing that their expectation of privacy is misplaced because those who use publicly available online communication systems are aware that these systems are constructed for the public storage, transmission and retrieval of content. Whether this expectation is misplaced or otherwise, I argue, is irrelevant to the conduct of ethical research. In offline public settings, for example, while agents' expectations that they will not be recorded are technically "misplaced" – at least in a legal sense – it would be unethical for a researcher to contravene this expectation by recording them without first obtaining permission. The same case can be made for virtual research: whether users have a reasonable expectation to privacy is less important than the fact that they may feel an expectation of privacy at all.

I have therefore structured my data collection in a way that excludes data to which users demonstrate any expectation of privacy. I have not accessed any message boards or forums that require registration or approval in order to view content; I have not included any private content such as personal or direct messages or tweets from private users. I have not included any content where users have stated or implied that they expect it to be kept private, and I have not included content that I have been aware that a user has deleted (for example, if a user screenshot a conversation on Twitter but the original tweet had been deleted, I have not included that content). I have ensured that the terms and conditions and frequently asked questions pages of the

fieldsites I have selected establish that these fieldsites are public modes of discourse that can reach wide, general audiences. While this establishment is important, it is also important that within many of the fieldsites in this study (particularly Reddit and 8chan) there are subcultural norms of transparency, publicness and disclosure rather than subcultural expectations that content should – or even could – remain private. Users in these online communities take care to conceal their actual identities but expect that their remarks are going to be read both by users within and outside of these communities, and, indeed, public circulation is a key imperative of most discussions related to GamerGate since participants desire that the issues being discussed receive public traction. Additionally, many participants in GamerGate are already public figures, who are readily aware that their virtually posted content is being read by the general public. That being said, I have approached all of my analysis on a case-by-case basis, and have omitted any communications where users demonstrate any expectation of privacy, erring on the side of omission if this expectation is ambiguous. It is therefore not ethically imperative to obtain explicit informed consent from users who will be quoted in this study.

It is, however, necessary to contemplate how to properly cite and credit online community members. This must be considered alongside the avoidance of potential harm: even though the data sources for this study are publicly accessible, posted content could potentially personally identify certain individuals whether they have posted the content in question or not. GamerGate has highlighted the potential risks of indentifiability even within online forums to which there is no reasonable expectation of privacy, illustrating how users can easily track down other users' personal information and then use that personal information to these users' detriment, for example, by posting it publicly or by advocating, threatening or initiating offline harassment. Virtual ethnographers must make a tradeoff between protecting privacy and recognizing that

participants do not have an expectation to privacy, and between balancing the subjective expectations of users with the value of the contribution made to greater society by the research in question.

In making choices of how to cite or credit online culture members, virtual ethnographers should consider a variety of issues, including both the need to protect vulnerable human participants who may be put at risk if they are identified, the accessible and ‘semi-published’ qualities of content that is shared online, and the rights of culture members to receive credit for their creative or intellectual work (Bruckman, 2006; Hine, 2015). Kozinets summarizes the complexity of this balancing act: “Listing names and disguising them both have issues in practice. Hiding denies credit where it is due. Providing actual names means that you are obligated to omit potentially damaging, yet theoretically valuable and insightful, information from your written accounts” (2010, p. 153). When deciding the degree of concealment to use when discussing identifiable online content, Kozinets advocates continuously evaluating potential risk to participants and the degree to which online actors are public figures, whether online or offline.

Bruckman (2006) identifies four degrees of concealment that may be used when dealing with online data. First, data may remain uncloaked, using the pseudonyms, usernames or real names of community members as they originally appear. Although the Tri-Council Policy outlines that researchers have no obligation to deviate from this stance when data does not have a reasonable expectation of privacy, Kozinets cautions that real names should only be used with explicit written permission from an individual, unless that individual is “undisputedly a public figure” (2010, p. 153) and any material that could potentially cause harm has been redacted. Second, data may be minimal cloaked (Bruckman, 2006), where the actual name of the fieldsite

itself is used but means of identifying particular users, including pseudonyms or other names, are altered. This degree of concealment still makes use of direct, verbatim quotes even though motivated individuals could use them to identify the research participants (for example, by performing a Google search that links to an original post with the username of the individual who posted it) or if group members might be able to guess who is being represented. In such cases, the benefit presented by the research must outweigh the harm that cloaking the data could potentially cause; reports must take care not to include details that may be harmful to the broader community or to individual participants.

Third, virtual data can be medium cloaked, mixing aspects of the previous two degrees of cloaking: for example, a message board might be named but a quote may not be included verbatim, or a quote may be included while its origin is not identified. Finally, virtual ethnographers may decline to include any identifying information, including the identity of the fieldsite itself, any pseudonyms or usernames used by those who post within it, or any direct quotes. This stance is taken only when other degrees of concealment would be ineffective at preventing probable harm, since it presents significant constraints upon the rigor and utility of data analysis (Bruckman, 2006).

The default degree of concealment adopted by the current initiative is minimum cloaking. The only cases where I will not make use of pseudonyms are when users have expressly articulated their desire to be identifiable and display a clear desire to be cited (for example, authors of major documents published by either side of the GamerGate movement) or when individuals are public figures (well known either offline or within the fieldsites in question - for example, professional writers, users who have played prominent roles in the development of GamerGate, or those publicly engaged in discourses on GamerGate, such as Zoe Quinn, Anita

Sarkeesian or Brianna Wu). In all other cases, I will omit or alter any identifiable information even if its disclosure would be unlikely to result in harm, erring on the side of anonymity rather than identifiability. Within the fieldsites I have selected, there are not community norms of ownership of posted content; any content to which a user has expressed a claim to ownership I either have not anonymized or have not included.

While I will assign users pseudonyms, I will still, however, quote users verbatim. While including direct quotes could potentially enable motivated individuals to identify a particular user, this is a necessary tradeoff in order to produce meaningful analysis. I take care, however, to ensure that direct quotes could only feasibly be linked back to an anonymous or pseudonymous online identity rather than a user's "real" offline identity (for example, if users' Twitter profiles can be linked to their offline names through their followers' posts or timelines of tweets – even if these users' profiles themselves do not mention their real names – I have not included verbatim quotes from these accounts). I also balance direct quotes with the potential benefits of the analysis that I mobilize these quotes to achieve. My analysis is not being undertaken, for instance, for the purposes of criminalization or to advocate for a punitive agenda: on the contrary, it is being undertaken for the purposes of gaining a more nuanced understanding of virtual communications, to think about the fantastical tropes of virtual space, and to trouble popular ways of thinking about online harm. Directly quoting users, in this way, is more likely to achieve positive ends than to result in negative consequences, even in the unlikely event that a motivated individual could identify a user who is quoted directly. I will move to medium cloaking or complete non-inclusion if data is at all likely to result in harm, for example, if its inclusion would be likely to motivate doxxing, harassment or other invasions of privacy or security.

4.4 – Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological and analytical context of the current study. After operationalizing virtual culture and community, I introduced the hybrid virtual ethnographic design of this project, emphasizing its use of trace analysis as a complementary methodological framework. I made a case for unobtrusive virtual ethnography before discussing data collection, outlining the specific fieldsites and data collection techniques employed in this endeavour and highlighting some of the challenges of virtual ethnographic data collection. Turning to my chosen analytical strategy, I then contemplated personal positionality in ethnographic research, moving forward to discuss this study's coding strategy and establishment of thematic networks. Finally, I closed by discussing issues of virtual research ethics. Having situated my methodological and analytical framework, I now turn to data analysis.

5 – Rethinking GamerGate to develop an ontology of (virtual) harm, part I: From conflict, consensus

Foreword

As I introduced in Chapter 1, I entered the field familiar with prevailing narratives that focus on the prevalence of misogynistic harm amongst ‘pro-GamerGate’ communities and advocates. These narratives typically frame GamerGate supporters as engaging in a range of violent misogynistic harassment (like that which was experienced by Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu and Anita Sarkeesian), including criminal acts such as doxxing and SWATting. Prevailing stereotypes in popular culture in this way tend to construct GamerGate participants as normatively partaking in harm. These narratives provide little room for alternate or more complicated ways of thinking through harm in the context of GamerGate and of virtual spaces more broadly speaking. Users throughout this study, however, challenge this mythology. As I looked at discourses across Twitter, Reddit and 8chan, I saw the emergence of narrative threads suggesting that harm in the context of GamerGate – and indeed within virtual spaces in general – is not that simple.

A central goal of my analysis is to draw upon GamerGate to develop a more complex ontology of virtual harm, with the goal of encouraging more nuanced public (and policy) engagement surrounding this concept. #GamerGate discourses on Twitter, Reddit and 8chan revealed to me that, contrary to popular portrayals, GamerGate supporters and opponents alike both typically denounce many of the behaviours that prevailing narratives construct GamerGate participants as endorsing. These points of agreement are an ideal starting point for building my more complex ontology of virtual harm through the lens of GamerGate. I begin my analysis in this chapter by looking more deeply at the behaviours that GamerGate participants collectively

agree are harmful, deconstructing prevailing mythologies that GamerGate participants are normatively in support of commonly denounced harmful behaviours.

In section 5.1 I outline that criminal direct harassment (Lenhart et al., 2016) and nonconsensual disclosure of private personal information are “universal harms” that users collectively consider harmful regardless of their community or cybercultural orientations – in other words, regardless of whether they belong to 8chan, Reddit or Twitter, and regardless of whether they identify as ‘pro-’ or ‘anti-GamerGate’. This observation is important in its implication that community and subcultural affiliation alone are not sole determinants of engagement in virtual harm. Beginning to develop my ontology of virtual harm, I describe how users’ online communications (for example, their posts in online forums like Twitter, Reddit or 8chan) informally enculturate ideas of what universal harms entail. Universal harms, I highlight, are additionally formally codified in platforms’ terms of use or codes of conduct, and although these (legal/corporate) rationales are different from users’ personal harm-related perspectives, they nonetheless serve as a secondary means through which harm-related norms are enculturated in my fieldsites.

The universal harms that users in Twitter, Reddit and 8chan identify are complicated by how users think about the ways in which their information is shared online. In section 5.2 I suggest that users’ assessments of virtual harm are related to their expectations of privacy and consent to the disclosure of personal information. I problematize the notion that users’ expectations of privacy and consent seem only to apply to online social communications, troubling the idea that spaces outside these realms are necessarily public. In section 5.3 I turn to the vocal minority of users who engage in or advocate for universal harms – in other words, to the contingent commonly referenced by pop cultural and popular media discourses on

GamerGate. I suggest that these users, rather than being united on the basis of identity (for example, as men or as ‘pro-GamerGate’, as popular stereotypes can portray) appear to fall into three often overlapping categories. These include users who reflect radically anti-social or radically pro-social ideologies, who engage in harm as a form of retaliation, and who advocate for or engage in harm to troll other users (to achieve “lulz” – Phillips, 2015).

As I read through discussions on Twitter, Reddit and 8chan, I saw that in addition to misogyny, complex webs of intersectional discrimination are pervasive across both ‘sides’ of the Gamergate controversy. For example, in my strategic filtering of Twitter data (see Annex II), I saw emergent themes demanding that I look at #GamerGate alongside keywords including (and related to) “albeism”, “antisemitism”, “bigotry”, “classism”, “homophobia”, “misandry”, “misogyny”, “racism”, “sexism”, and “transphobia”. These themes were also prevalent throughout data that I harvested from 8chan and Reddit; on Reddit, these themes were present irrespective of a particular subreddit’s ‘pro-’ or ‘anti-GamerGate’ affiliation (they were found across all subreddits, including /r/GamerGhazi, /r/AgainstGamerGate, and /r/KotakuInAction). Discourses that I investigated thereby suggested that both those who perpetuate and who are targeted by discrimination under #GamerGate represent a broad and intersectional range of actors, diverse demographics, and both ‘anti-’ and ‘pro-GamerGate’ affiliations, which complicated popular representations of GamerGate-related harms.

As discourses in popular media illustrate in their focus on high-profile victims such as Quinn, Sarkeesian and Wu, hateful and misogynistic speech alleging that feminists or ‘social justice warriors’ (SJWs) are “working to undermine the video game industry” (Chess and Shaw, 2015:210) is undeniable. My data suggest, however, that discrimination and victimization are not exclusively experienced by a narrow category of participants in GamerGate, nor are they the sole

domain of “white boy” gamers (Futrelle, 2015; Reyna, 2015). As I moved through the various discourses that I had collected from various sources, I saw – particularly when acts of discrimination and violence (notably including doxxing) arose throughout ‘anti-GamerGate’ subcultures including /r/GamerGhazi, /r/AgainstGamerGate, Tumblr, and networks of ‘anti-GamerGate’ users on Twitter – that harm associated with the #GamerGate hashtag is not exclusively perpetuated by those who oppose social justice ideals (namely gender equity) in gaming. Instead, both sides of the ideological spectrum suppress, silence, intimidate, instil fear in, or otherwise damage the interests (Feinberg, 1987) of those who disagree with any given ideological stance related to social justice, ethics, politics, gaming, or broader media.

As I made my way through my fieldsites, the discussions I read led me to wonder – as many users in my fieldsites wondered – how we were to make sense, for instance, of bomb threats against a Washington, D.C. meetup of GamerGate supporters (Schreier, 2015) and a Society of Professional Journalists panel in Miami featuring GamerGate activist Milo Yiannopoulos (Good, 2015)? Or the doxxings of Yiannopoulos, fellow GamerGate activists Mike Cernovich, Adam Baldwin and Eron Gjoni, and other GamerGate supporters (Boogie2988, 2014; Roberts, 2015; von Karma, 2015)? Or the SWATting of Cernovich (Roberts, 2015; von Karma, 2015)? Or weapons sent via post to various GamerGate supporters (Liebl, 2014; Yiannopoulos, 2014)?

While the #GamerGate hashtag is certainly used to perpetuate misogynistic or other identity-based discrimination, many users also use this hashtag to allege that others (often corrupt media, the alt-right, or men more generally) work to make the video game industry less diverse by entrenching misogyny, patriarchy or other forms of discrimination within gaming and broader technoculture. Posts throughout Twitter, Reddit and 8chan illustrate that these claims can be

associated with acts of online harm similar to those referenced in mainstream discourses on GamerGate, including intimidation, threats, and public exposure (see section 5.1 and 5.2; see also Chapter 1; Chapter 7). These acts of harm complicate dominant narratives of GamerGate-related victimization. It is imperative to think about these acts in order to build a more complex understanding of harm in the context of GamerGate, and within virtual spaces more generally. It became clear, as I more deeply engaged with GamerGate-related discourses throughout Twitter, Reddit, 8chan, and a range of other platforms, that #GamerGate is “a hashtag that can be used by anybody for anything” (Kain, 2014b:39).

Discussions in my fieldsites further complicate prevailing notions of harm in GamerGate by suggesting that harm is not regularly perpetuated alongside the #GamerGate hashtag. This led me to question: why do prevailing representations of #GamerGate suggest otherwise? Although I did encounter instances of unquestionable damage to interest (Feinberg, 1987) within all of my fieldsites – including doxxing, credible threats or offline invasions of privacy, these instances seemed exceptional rather than normative. Nevertheless, media reports of the inherently harmful nature of GamerGate are widespread (see Chapter 1; Chapter 7). Contrary to popular representations of the ‘pro-GamerGate’ community – and specifically ‘pro-GamerGate’ men – as supportive of harm (specifically of women), discourses that I encountered paint a different picture of GamerGate-related harms. Across all communities in this study – regardless of GamerGate affiliation, ideological affiliation, or platform – I was surprised to see that users consistently agree that a range of specific behaviours are harmful. These points of agreement are the starting point for my data analysis, and are an ideal starting point from which to begin complicating notions of harm in the context of GamerGate. I therefore begin this initial analysis

chapter by highlighting the ways in which users across my fieldsites share common harm-related perspectives.

It is important to reiterate that across discussions in Twitter, Reddit and 8chan, instances of engagement in or support for behaviours that are consistently conceptualized as harmful, while relatively infrequent, happen among both ‘sides’ of GamerGate. While my analysis is not quantitative, in comparison with members of ‘pro-GamerGate’ it is not rare or isolated for members of ‘anti-GamerGate’ to engage in these behaviours. My fieldsites that typically host ‘anti-GamerGate’ advocates (/r/GamerGhazi, /r/AgainstGamerGate and various independent blogs) feature instances of harm just like as those that usually host ‘pro-GamerGate’ supporters (the four 8chan subchans and /r/KotakuInAction), although these instances in both contexts are exceptional. More stringent moderation on Reddit, however, often results in Reddit-based harmful content being removed after it is posted (although it can still be identifiable by comment trails from users who responded to it before it was removed, and often posted screenshots of original harmful communications), perhaps contributing to the idea that ‘pro-GamerGate’ users, who favour 8chan, are comparatively more in support of harm. In fieldsites featuring a mix of ‘pro-’ and ‘anti-GamerGate’ supporters (such as Twitter and comments on media publications), users who engage in harm are just as often identified with ‘anti-GamerGate’ as they are with ‘pro-GamerGate’. In other words, quotes reproduced in my analysis chapters from ‘anti-GamerGate’ users are not overemphasized in comparison to those reproduced from ‘pro-GamerGate’ users, although instances of harm are exceptional within both ‘sides’ of the debate.

That I have elected not to focus on statistical, quantitative data is a potential point of critique for this study’s analysis. However, as I have stipulated in my introduction, the goal of this study is not to ‘disprove’ prevailing narratives of harm in GamerGate, nor is it to deny the

legitimacy of misogynistic harm by positioning instances of misogynistic harm opposite instances of ‘other’ types of harm. On the contrary, my findings illustrate that misogyny (in addition to other forms of discrimination) does play a key role in GamerGate-related harms. My goal is instead to complicate the ways we think about harm in the context of GamerGate, and to encourage a more nuanced, complex conceptualization of virtual harm more generally, moving away from oversimplified notions that prevail in popular culture. Communications that I analyse in this study, rather than ‘proving’ that harm should be conceptualized as only being enacted along particular demographic axes, instead qualitatively evidence that harm is complex and relates to a diverse range of factors that do include identity characteristics, but are not limited strictly to these. In doing so, my findings highlight complexities that are not generally acknowledged in mainstream discussions of GamerGate, suggesting that we need to trouble prevailing oversimplified notions of virtual harm.

Beyond “universal harms” upon which they agree, many users, communities and cybercultures disagree on whether other behaviours – most significantly hateful, offensive, inflammatory or aggressive speech – constitute harm. To make sense of this, in Chapter 6 I draw from O’Sullivan and Flanagin’s (2003) model for harm assessment to argue in favour of an approach to harm assessment that considers how violations are experienced by audiences, how violations are perceived and given meaning within particular subcultural or community contexts, and the authorial intent behind violations. Finally, in Chapter 7 I explore the virtual contexts of my dataset in more detail. I suggest that users’ fantastic associations with online environments can render virtual spaces as gamespaces that are an extension of Huizinga’s (1938) “magic circle”, complicating prevailing notions of harm within virtual spaces by granting virtual harm ludic, fantastical connotations.

5.1: Disputing GamerGate as collectively pro-harm: Universal harms under #GamerGate

5.1.1 – Introducing universal harms: Drawing from Feinberg to rethink GamerGate

I begin by considering how users across Twitter, Reddit and 8chan conceptualize harm, probing the various behaviours that their online communications position as harmful. In this section I move through my various fieldsites in sequence to illustrate the specific behaviours that users find harmful before putting these conceptualizations into dialogue with an academic theorization of harm grounded in the work of Feinberg (1987). In establishing common ground between my users' harm-related beliefs, my goal is to build a better understanding of how these conceptualizations can come together to shape a more nuanced ontology of virtual harm. Among GamerGate supporters on Twitter, @T1 responds to the widely publicized doxxing, stalking and rape and death threats of those who have spoken out against GamerGate, including Quinn, Sarkeesian, Wu and actor Felicia Day. Distancing GamerGate from these acts, as well as resisting popular claims that these behaviours are representative of GamerGate as a broader movement, he condemns “abuse like threats, doxxings, and swatting” and “literally illegal shit” aimed at these women, characterizing those who engage in such behaviours as “lone psychos” who do not represent the broader GamerGate community.

Following the similar SWATting and doxxing of GamerGate activist Mike Cernovich by an ‘anti-GamerGate’ supporter, @T2 calls upon GamerGate advocates to stand against criminal behaviour and to avoid turning to similar behaviour in retaliation even if others engage in this behaviour first: “Don’t let [...] swattings anger you, #Gamergate. This abuse is another thing we’ll make them [anti-GamerGate] answer for. But our weapon remains kindness,” adding, “If we do what they do, we’re just as bad.” @T3 expresses similar concern for those who were doxxed, SWATted or sent harassing mail for their support of GamerGate: “No one talks about the crimes committed against #GamerGate...who’s speaking up for [Mike] Cernovich, [Adam]

Baldwin, [Eron] Gjoni, [Milo] Yiannopoulos?”. @T4 responds to this tweet by calling for users to speak out against criminal harassment of GamerGate supporters, linking to an article about syringes and knives being mailed to Yiannopoulos and KingofPol (see Chapter 1) and tweeting that “Its far past time we quit being nice about [...] abuse + criminality”. @T5, like @T2, tweets that criminal harm is a serious problem on both sides of GamerGate, and that all users should “remember to respect the rule of law”.

Resisting the idea that GamerGate supporters broadly advocate for criminal harassment and doxxing (in general, and specifically in reference to Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu), @T6, in the same way as @T1, distances GamerGate from these behaviours: “#GamerGate are noisy, strident, desperate for a fair go, and will never shut up. BUT we DO NOT dox, abuse, or threaten.” @T7 reiterates that “#GamerGate denounces [...] Death-Threats, Harassment, or Doxxing, and we say so, constantly.” In response to criminal harassment and invasions of privacy of users on both side of the GamerGate debate (including widely known personalities like Quinn, Sarkeesian, and Yiannopoulos and other less widely known users who are not public figures), a network of GamerGate supporters on Twitter organized an informal network of users known as the “GamerGate Harassment Patrol”. The GamerGate Harassment Patrol intervenes by lending support to harassed users and alerting Twitter administrators to cases of abuse, resisting this abuse by lending community support without engaging in harm (such as doxxing) as retaliation. @T7 requests that users “use the #GamerGate harassment patrol to report doxing/threats/extreme harassment”, imploring, “don’t abuse please”.

Twitter users who are opposed to key GamerGate ideologies, like their GamerGate supporter counterparts, are similarly critical of criminal behaviours and invasions of privacy such as doxxing. Disagreeing with a user’s tweet that “Threatening the alt-right, doxxing ppl like

Cernovich, that's not abuse because they brought it on themselves" (@T8), @T9 counters such victim blaming narratives, stating that "doxing [...and] violent threats are [examples of] harassment and abuse". @T10 and @T11 describe threats and doxing, including those aimed at Quinn, Wu, Sarkeesian, and Cernovich alike, as "horrible" and "terrible", while @T12 tweets that "doxing, or supporting those that do, is HARMFUL, IMMORAL and REPREHENSIBLE".

@T13 distinguishes between articulating offensive opinions and engaging in criminal harassment or harmful invasions of privacy, positioning the latter as harmful by responding to an incident on Twitter where a user's account was hacked. In this incident the hacker, using the #GamerGate hashtag, "impersonated a kid to send rape threats" (@T14). Another user, believing the tweets were authentic, "emailed the company [employing the hacked user] with a link and a screenshot" (@T14) in an attempt to get him fired. Despite this contact of the user's employer being legal, @T13 compares this invasion of privacy to doxing, where the user's profile and tweets, seen as private (see section 5.2.1), were shared without consent. @T13 tweets that "opinions [like letting someone know that rape threats are unacceptable] are fine. Threatening to kill people, trying to get people fired, doxing people, that needs to stop." As @T15 summarizes, "Doxxing, threats and harassment are bad no matter who does it or who receives it, and this must be recognized."

Redditors in both 'pro-' and 'anti-GamerGate' communities likewise position criminal harassment and the disclosure of personal information as harmful, hinting at the offline impacts that these virtual behaviours can have. RAGG1, responding to the SWATting of the mother of a tech designer who had retweeted "anti-GamerGate" tweets, posts, "stop committing felonies because people on the Internet disagree with you. [...] This shit reaches you in real life [...] have insight as to how it feels for an Internet argument [to] lead to scary real life experiences."

RAGG2 expresses that contacting users offline or revealing users' personal information (in reference to doxxings of and/or harassing mail posted to Yiannopoulos, KingOfPol, Sarkeesian, Wu and Quinn) is going "waaaay too far."

In response to the Washington and Miami bomb threats targeted at GamerGate supporters and an anonymous bomb threat sent to the Game Developers Choice Awards for awarding an Ambassador Award to Anita Sarkeesian (Totilo, 2014b), RAGG3 expresses a desire to involve law enforcement: "I hope the FBI takes ALL harassment seriously [including...] death threats [...], doxxing and bomb threats of everyone on both sides". RAGG4 states that while it is not representative of any one community, criminality should be taken seriously: "Abuse [...] is a problem. [...] The vast majority of Gamergate supporters do not [criminally] harass, doxx, or threaten people. [...] the majority of Anti-GG supporters also do not harass, doxx, or threaten." The *GamerGate Operation Manual*, a widely circulated document on Reddit (first posted on /r/kotakuinaction), reiterates that users wishing to engage in GamerGate advocacy should "go after the ideas and actions, not the person" and stresses that "the doxxing of people [...] will only stoke the flames".

8chan users, despite prevailing media and academic narratives portraying these users as predominantly in favour of doxxing and abuse (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Day, 2015; Dewey, 2014; Massanari, 2017; NMR Staff, 2014; Rohwer, 2015; Totilo, 2014a - see also Chapter 1 and Chapter 7), are, like other users throughout my fieldsites, largely opposed to these behaviours. Responding to the GDCA bomb threats against Sarkeesian, 8CGGHQ1 states that the "biggest threat to GamerGate" involves users who engage in criminal harassment and "make bomb threats", arguing that such behaviour "is only going to deter us" from achieving goals of addressing ethics in games journalism. 8CGGHQ2 objects to the idea that doxxing could be

beneficial, responding to a post that “Doxxing [of Sarkeesian, Wu, Quinn, Day and others opposed to GamerGate] is a good way to advance the cause” (8CGGHQ3): “Trying to dox people, you think that’s a good idea? [...] Holy shit I can’t act like [doxxers] are a good thing”. 8CGGHQ4 agrees that “gamergate isn’t about doxing, doxing hurts people. doxing is never ok.”

Across all communities in this study, then, my data reveal that users consistently perceive a range of behaviours to be harmful in the senses described by Feinberg, namely, as nonconsensually causing or risking violation of, injury of, or setback to interests or rights (Feinberg, 1987), universally condemning them as unacceptable. Feinberg (1987) argues that certain types of harm are uncontroversially considered harmful “everywhere in the civilized world, and no reasonable person could advocate their ‘decriminalization’”(1987, p. 11) or lack of recognition as harmful. Users throughout all of the online subcultures and communities that I analyse interchangeably describe these behaviours, to which I refer as “universal harms”, as harassment, abuse, and violence, suggesting that the precise word used to describe them is unimportant, regardless of whether these behaviours happen once (Chesney et al., 2009) or repeatedly over time (Olweus, 1991; P. Smith & Thompson, 1991). This is not to say that users in my dataset conceptualize harassment, abuse and violence as only comprising the behaviours in this section; as I will discuss in Chapter 6, meanings of these terms are far more contested.

As I outlined in my introduction, I draw from Feinberg (1987) to situate harm in the context of the current study as that which defeats, thwarts, sets back, or otherwise damages an interest, including unjustly infringing upon fundamental rights or freedoms, where these rights usually represent interests. Universal harms identified by users in this study reflect this operationalization, where criminal harassment and non-consensual disclosures of personal information are seen as damaging interests and/or infringing upon fundamental rights. Feinberg’s

work distinguishes between harm as damage to interest and harm as wrong, where he argues that although most wrongs are also harms against interests, the opposite is not true: all harms against interests are not wrongs (Feinberg, 1987). Wrongs are emphasized in Feinberg's work due to his focus on the legal sphere, where much of his analysis is devoted to legal explorations of which forms of harm-as-damage-to-interest would classify as harm-as-wrong. Legal frameworks, as Feinberg shows, place certain restrictions upon fundamental rights and freedoms. Law can allow violations of particular rights if violations are justified or excusable (e.g., under s.1 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*), or can limit rights in order to protect other rights or values (e.g., where Canadians have a right to freedom of expression but not a right to engage in hate speech – see *Saskatchewan [Human Rights Commission] v. Whatcott*, 2013).

For Feinberg, the distinction between harm-as-wrong and harm-as-damage-to-interest is a legal one: wrongs are necessarily legal infractions, yet damages to interest are not in all cases. This can be a problematic distinction in the case of my users, however, when they perceive there to be certain rights or freedoms online that may not, in fact, be legally protected (for example, a right to privacy or a right not to be doxxed – see section 5.2 – or a right to unfettered freedom of expression – see Chapter 6). In these cases, rights may not be rights in a legal sense (although they are interests), yet they may be perceived or experienced as such. As I will show, the importance of both experience and perception to broader assessments of harm is a recurring theme of this study, with both forming central tenets of my proposed three-tiered system for harm assessment (see Chapter 6). For the purposes of inclusivity, then, it is important to note before moving forward that in the context of this study, it is pertinent to subsume harm-as-wrong under harm-as-damage-to-interest, which does encompass these not strictly legal experiences and perceptions. It is important, however, to note the importance of thinking through damages to

interests in terms of how they may also represent damages to legal rights or freedoms – and if they do not, whether this reflects legal frameworks that may not be optimised to address emergent rights within virtual spaces.

Broadly, communications in this study illustrate that the widely recognized “universal harms” that users identify fall into two categories. First, universal harms entail specifically criminal forms of direct harassment, or acts that “people do directly to one another” (Lenhart et al., 2016, p. 3) that are illegal in Canada or the United States and that cause demonstrable offline injury to physical safety or feelings of safety. These harms notably include credible rape or death threats, credible threats of violence, SWATting, or sending weapons or harmful substances via post. Second, universal harms encompass invasions of privacy involving the nonconsensual public disclosure of private personal information. Invasions of privacy in this context are harms inflicted “through the unauthorized access to and exposure or spreading of information beyond the owner’s control” (Lenhart et al., 2016, p. 3), which may or may not be against North American law. These harms significantly include doxxing, but also include unauthorized information and photo sharing (including where content may be obtained without a user’s authorization, whether via hacking or by unauthorized use of a user’s computer or social media accounts).

This idea of universal harms represents an important contribution to literature on GamerGate. As I have introduced, popular GamerGate narratives put forth in mainstream media (Day, 2015; Dewey, 2014; NMR Staff, 2014; Rohwer, 2014; Totilo, 2014 - see Chapter 1, above, and later in Chapter 7) and in academia (see Chess & Shaw, 2015; Heron, Belford, & Goker, 2014; Massanari, 2017) are consistent in their negative representations of GamerGate supporters. These narratives portray generalized, largely male ‘pro-GamerGate’ users and users from specific

online communities (particularly those from 4chan, 8chan, Twitter, and ‘pro-GamerGate’ subreddits) as normatively in favour of a range of forms of harm that my data show they in fact widely denounce. The roots of these narratives lie in a series of widely reported attacks (which I have highlighted in Chapter 1), by male assailants self-identifying as ‘pro-GamerGate’, targeted at female personalities including Zoë Quinn, Brianna Wu and Anita Sarkeesian. These attacks range from death and rape threats (Salter, 2017; Sullentrop, 2014; Wu, 2014), to other threats of violence (Nyberg, 2015; Salter, 2017; Schreier, 2014), to doxxing (Hathaway, 2014c; Knudsen, 2014; Oluo, 2015), to SWATting (El Akkad, 2015; Liebl, 2014). However, throughout my fieldsites, users consistently condemn these acts.

While these attacks did occur, my data qualitatively substantiates that they are not typical of GamerGate as a broader movement as depicted by popular media. Media portrayals tend to construct outlying sensationalistic examples of harm as representative of a broader group (for example, one male GamerGate supporter as representative of all men or of all ‘pro-GamerGate’). Often, these portrayals argue that the ‘leaderless’ nature of GamerGate allows users to “distance themselves from what they perceive as the more ethically dubious [and illegal] actions of others, suggesting that they are ‘not really part’ of whatever toxic technoculture under which they are acting” (Massanari, 2017, p. 333). My users’ condemnation of universal harms helps, however, to debunk these claims.

Behaviours that are universally considered harmful by users throughout my fieldsites occur exceptionally and no more routinely within one community than within another. In other words, users who endorse or partake in these behaviours (which I explore in more detail in section 5.3) encompass members of ‘anti-GamerGate’ or ‘social justice’ advocates in addition to ‘pro-GamerGate’ or ‘alt-right’ members or advocates. Again, this is not to deny that forms of

discrimination and hatred occur in GamerGate discourses, including misogyny, misandry, racism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism, nor is it meant to suggest that they not be taken seriously. They do and they should be, although my findings suggest they do not occur in the oversimplified way that tends to be described in popular culture, do not occur only within one particular community, and not, it would seem, with the same understanding of harm.

5.1.2 – Formalizing universal harms: Website terms of use and codes of Conduct

Universal harms, in addition to being reflected in user-to-user communications as I have shown in section 5.1.1, are also outlined with varying degrees of opacity in websites' terms of use or other policy documents such as mandates or mission statements. Users in Twitter, Reddit and 8chan all reflect a sort of reverence to these more formal forms of regulation and their potentials to mitigate harm, positioning the corporate imperatives that form the foundations of these regulatory schemes as human, protectionist endeavours, blurring the boundaries between these corporate policies and human sentiment within virtual locales. RKIA1, as one example, writes that platforms “have responceabilities (*sic*) to protect people from being attacked” while RKIA2 cites Reddit’s Content Policy in his condemnation of universal harms, denouncing content that “breaches Reddit’s policies of not harassing [...] individuals outside of Reddit [...or] posting people’s personal information”.

These formal norms, articulated in policy documents, are grounded in legal understandings of harm and are aimed at mitigating legal risks for platform owners and platform designers, and therefore are not meant to be collapsed with interpersonal, informal regulation of universal harms. Nonetheless, these formal policies are noteworthy because they reassert themselves within public spaces when they are enforced by designated content moderators, who are often seen by other users as community representatives (where, for instance, moderators on Reddit command a degree of authority within any given subreddit, and are looked to as

community leaders). This further blurs the lines between legal, corporate design of particular platforms and the subcultural norms of the agents who inhabit them, and shows how these legal or corporate understandings of harm can become woven into the fabric of broader community harm-related mindsets, and, by extension, popular perceptions thereof.

Twitter, Reddit and 8chan, as a strategy to mitigate potential legal action in cases of their users breaking the law, prohibit criminal direct harassment (as defined by legal frameworks in the countries where platforms are registered) to varying degrees of specificity. The official Twitter Rules (Twitter Help Center, 2017a) define as abusive and forbid direct or indirect violent threats; inciting harm or violence; unlawful harassment (with a distinction between unlawful use and more general harassment which may not be illegal outright, which I will outline in Chapter 6); impersonation; and the distribution of intimate photos or videos without a subject's consent. Reddit's Content Policy, applicable to all subreddits, outlines that content is prohibited if it "is involuntary pornography; encourages or incites violence against an individual or group of people; [or] threatens [... or] impersonates someone in a misleading or deceptive manner" (Reddit, 2017b). Since February 2015 (Massanari, 2017), "revenge porn" has been explicitly banned under this Content Policy (Reddit, 2017b).

At the time of this analysis, 8chan as a broader platform is unique among this dataset for lacking a detailed global terms of use, as stated on the 8chan home page, due to "the interest of free speech" (which I touch upon in Chapter 6), which is highly valued by the broader 8chan community. However, 8chan nonetheless broadly prohibits content that does not adhere to American law under its one global rule regarding content: "Do not post, request, or link to any content that is illegal in the United States of America and do not create boards with the sole purpose of posting or spreading such content" (8ch.net, 2017, para. 2). The subchan /gamergate/

reiterates this stance in its own subchan-specific rules: “Nothing will be censored here unless you post illegal shit.”

Platforms also prohibit invasions of privacy involving doxxing or other nonconsensual disclosure of personal information. The Twitter Rules state that users “may not publish or post other people’s private and confidential information, such as credit card numbers, street address, or social security [...] numbers, without express consent and permission” (Twitter Help Center, 2017). Reddit’s content policy prohibits posting public social networking pages and screenshots of social networking pages where names or personal information is visible (Reddit, 2017a), with a caution that the sharing of personal information can lead to vigilantism or “witch hunts” and that users will be banned if they do not edit personally identifiable information out of their posts. Public figures “can be an exception to this rule” (Reddit, 2017a), yet it is unclear who precisely is encompassed by this term.

8chan as a broader platform again does not explicitly prohibit the disclosure of personal information; however, most subchans codify this stance in their own rules, which contain stipulations such as “do not call for or advocate doxxing” (/v/) and “No personal (dox) information” (/gg/). A post from a moderator of /gamergate/ articulates these legal imperatives by explicitly outlining within expanded rules that the subchan prohibits criminal harassment and doxxing, linking these rules to broader behavioural expectations for users who migrate to other subchans. While this is not necessarily a harm-related perspective that the moderator endorses on a personal level, since it is presented to the broader community as posted by a human (rather than posted in an official terms of use or other policy document), it is conveyed in a way where it is accompanied by a tacit human endorsement. The moderator, in posting these guidelines, symbolically advocates for their legitimacy, and as a community leader, implies that the rest of

the community should similarly perceive them as legitimate and conform to their behavioural requirements. “Even if the information is legal,” this moderator writes, “there shouldn’t be any calls for raiding/harassment/dox of individuals or organizations. [...] We also want to make it clear that this applies to ALL ongoing on the site, not just doxing. So the general idea is that you shouldn’t be trying to get people to [criminally harass or dox] an individual you don’t like or a site you don’t like.”

All news sources consulted in this study are similarly accompanied by terms of use prohibiting criminal harassment and the sharing of other people’s personal information in the comments of online articles, including full names, addresses, workplaces, telephone numbers, credit card information, and social insurance numbers; for the sake of brevity, these terms of use are available via hyperlinks on the homepage of each respective source and will not be reproduced here. Secondary fieldsites in this study (including blogs and independent websites) likewise specifically prohibit or condemn criminal direct harassment and the disclosure of identifying personal information.

That my fieldsites all codify a condemnation of universal harms in their terms of use means that in my dataset, universal harms are established in two key ways, albeit for two very different reasons. First, as I have illustrated in the previous section, they are established informally in the course of users’ communications with one another, where users’ speech conveys that users perceive universal harms to be harmful without exception. This informal establishment reflects broader community sentiment regarding harmful behaviours, and illustrates how these behaviours are commonly perceived as harmful amongst most users within any particular online venue. Second, universal harms are also established more formally in the written policy documents that govern not only particular subcultures (for instance, codes of conduct that

apply to isolated subreddits or isolated subchans) but also entire platforms more broadly. These formal norms work alongside informal user-to-user behavioural regulation (where users can, for example, condemn harms if other users endorse or advocate them) to stipulate more authoritatively which communications are acceptable or unacceptable. In doing so, these formal norms serve as the basis for content moderation, where speech that does not adhere to posted regulations is removed by designated moderators or content filters.

This illustrates that universal harms are also universal in the sense that they apply to broader platforms in their entirety – for example, all of Twitter or all of Reddit – in addition to more specific subcultures, on the basis of legal and corporate rationales enforced by platform owners and designers. When users do not adhere to these universal values – regardless of whether they are informally enforced by community members or formally by corporations that operate particular websites – it follows that this lack of adherence is not the product of isolated subcultural or community norms, and those who do not adhere to these values (see section 5.3) must be considered in alternate terms than their subcultural or community affiliations. Namely, denunciation of universal harms is not unique to ‘anti-GamerGate’, and outlying support for universal harms cannot be attributed to identification as ‘pro-GamerGate’ or identification as a user of 8chan. As my findings show, these subcultures, in addition to my collective broader fieldsites, are all united in their disavowal of these behaviours, regardless of the rationales that produce this disavowal.

5.2 – Complicating doxxing: Consent and privacy in GamerGate

In light of the high profile of instances of doxxing on both ‘sides’ of the GamerGate conflict (where public figures such as Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu, Felicia Day, Milo Yiannopoulos and Adam Baldwin have had their personal information disclosed online), my users’ discussions

of GamerGate-related doxxing frequently raise the importance of consent regarding the disclosure of personal information. @T16 states that “doxxing is exposing private information to the public without consent.” @T17 reiterates that “doxxing implies lack of consent”; @T18 similarly offers that anytime personal information is “published without your consent that’s doxxing”. These tweets illustrate that, according to users in my fieldsites, doxxing requires a lack of consent to the disclosure of personal information, while it cannot be classified as such if this information has been published with consent. This complicates the issue of doxxing within assessments of harm, where users only consider doxxing universally harmful in absence of consent for publication.

Consent is not implied if users have first posted information themselves within online social spaces, suggesting that users have an expectation of privacy in these spaces even if they are public. Responding to widely circulated addresses of members of ‘anti-GamerGate’ (that were screen captured from these users’ Facebook pages and shared on forums including Reddit and 8chan), RGGZ1 writes that, “It’s never okay to post people’s personal info, even if they’ve put it online themselves. Posting it in the first place isn’t permission to repost it. I’ve seen a lot of spreading shit from people’s social media pages and that isn’t cool”.

RKIA3 similarly posts, “Social media shouldn’t be public domain. Reposting people’s address from their FB page, that’s doxxing. Just cause someone posts it first doesn’t mean you have permission to repost.” 8CGG1 directly states that legal frameworks do not account for the ethics surrounding consent (or lack thereof) as it relates to reposting users’ identifying information from social media: “The law might say it’s okay. I don’t. We [/gamergate/] don’t. It might be legal but that doesn’t mean it’s something you should fucking do, or something that you have consent to do.” 8CGG2 concurs: “Doxxing makes you an asshole, even if the person you’re

doxxing was stupid enough to post their address themselves first. People don't think about Facebook being public domain. They're guilty of dumbfuckery, sure, but that doesn't mean they should be doxxed for it."

@T19 illustrates the impact of having private information from online social media publicly shared, tweeting that "doxxing of the GG Facebook groups has led to harassing phone calls to my personal cell" while @T20 tweets that another user who posted screenshots of public GamerGate Facebook groups "is doxxing people". @T21 refers to the same user as "a heartless, doxxing thug", while @T22 questions why this user "is still here after doxxing people. Why is not [this user] suspended after doxxing?" Some users express more instrumental (rather than strictly ethical or experiential) views related to the sharing of personal information online, describing that articulating an anti-doxxing stance would benefit the broader GamerGate movement (namely by countering prevailing narratives of 'pro-GamerGate' as in support of harm). 8CGG3 states that "It would benefit GG to start acknowledging that the default should be that you don't have permission to repost people's private info. It will make us seem more compassionate and thoughtful." 8CGG4 posts, "Yeah, we need to have hard evidence that people have said it's okay before we do things like share screencaps of their addresses. That gives anti so much ammo against us because it makes us look like doxxing bullies."

Users across Twitter, Reddit and 8chan do not perceive self-disclosure of personal information in one online social space as consent for others to disclose this information elsewhere (or at all): as RGGZ2 summarizes, "Just cuz I post my name on Facebook or a pic of my house on Twitter doesn't mean that people can broadcast that all over the fucking Internet." 8CV1 similarly describes how they were comfortable with their personal information appearing within a 'pro-GamerGate' Facebook group, but were not comfortable when this information was

screencapped and tweeted by a user who was ‘anti-GamerGate’: “My name and picture were in a pro-GG group on FB and when some feminazi took that and spread it around Twitter, I was exposed. I felt violated, like anti[GamerGate] had a piece of me. It was doxxing. I’m gonna get hate for this, but I get how that bitch Zoe [Quinn] felt [when she was doxxed].” 8CV2 describes a similar experience, where their public Facebook profile, displaying support for GamerGate, was shared on Twitter: “I learned fast that I can’t be who I want to be on FB. I guess it was pretty naïve to think that I could actually stand up as who I am for what I believe in. But lesson learned. I can only be who I am when people don’t know I’m me. I’m sure all you fags agree anonymity is king.”

Users in my fieldsites therefore perceive that there is a right to privacy in online social spaces, even when these spaces are public. If personal information appears in users’ self-authored online social communications (for instance, Facebook profiles or tweets) but is not otherwise in the public domain, there is a default assumption that users have not consented this information being reposted elsewhere. This aligns with social science research arguing that users’ expectations of online privacy relate to a wide array of factors aside from simply the public or private nature of virtual communications, ranging from past experience with social networking platforms, to personality, to demographic variables, to context and content of online discussions, to potential audiences, to whether users are familiar with privacy policies (see Albury, 2017; Chen et al., 2015; Jeong & Coyle, 2014; Netter et al., 2013; O’Brien & Torres, 2012; Pure, 2013), which can often come together to represent a fundamental expectation of online privacy. In other words, an expectation of privacy is not related to whether a platform itself is public or private.

Particularly in online social spaces, my users' discussions on Twitter, Reddit and 8chan suggest that users have an expectation of being able to "control access to their private sphere and to regulate the flow and context of their information" (Debatin, 2011, p. 51). This is in line with previous research suggesting that users compartmentalize their online self-portrayals, with differing expectations of privacy from one online venue to another: as Albury concludes in her analysis of sexual rights and media responses to two well known hacks of personal sexual information in 2014 and 2015 and to current responses to teen 'sexting', "Just because it's public doesn't mean it's any of your business" (2017, p. 713) Users employ varied strategies of self-disclosure and self-presentation between different online spaces to present differently nuanced selves to each different online audience (Debatin, 2011; Simpson, 2005). Users can consent to their personally identifying information being redistributed, but without this consent, this redistribution is widely considered to be doxxing, and therefore to be harmful. Since users require consent to the distribution of personal information in order to effectively implement these varied privacy management strategies (and since nonconsensual disclosure, by impairing the ability to do so, damages this interest – Feinberg, 1987), privacy and consent are seen as key determinants of whether disclosure of personal information is harmful.

When personal information is publicly available outside of the realm of online social communications, however, there is debate as to whether these perceived rights to privacy and to consent to the disclosure of personal information still apply, and whether consent should be required for its dissemination. @T20, for example, counters accusations that he doxxed a GamerGate critic by posting her name (which he had found on a blog), tweeting, "I would like to stress the point that PUBLIC INFORMATION YOU CAN FIND IN A BLOG OR IN A MAGAZINE ISN'T DOXXING." Responding to another user who claimed that re-posting a

business publication disclosing information about former Reddit CEO Ellen Pao's family life "violates Reddit's site-wide rules, especially regarding personal info", RKIA4 sarcastically replies that this information is "so personal she told [the info to the author] in an interview. Much doxx." 8CV3 similarly argues that publishing a journalist's telephone number does not constitute doxxing because "personal information about her had previously been made public on [a game journalism website]". 8CGAMGAT1 laughs at the idea that publishing publicly indexed data detailing a game journalist's name, email and place of employment could be considered doxxing – "lol, public information on [a newspaper's] contact info page is not doxxing you fucking retards" – while 8CGG5 complains, "Just got accused of 'Doxxing' for posting the address of a publicly listed company that's in the Yellow Pages. I can't even".

As 8CGAMGAT2 posts, "If their name is on a website or in a public directory, they clearly want it there. They've given permission for it to be there." 8CGAMGAT3 concurs, equating the sharing of publicly available information to receiving 'views' on a YouTube video: "Fags clearly want to be known if their info is out there. It's like you're getting them more views by sharing their info. There's no harm in that. It's out there already, what's the harm in distributing it?" When information has already been posted in public venues outside of the realm of online self-authored communications, then – including professional contexts (e.g., "contact us" pages on a business website), legal contexts (e.g., transcripts of legal proceedings) or mainstream media contexts (e.g., mainstream newspaper articles) – users therefore tend to perceive that the republication of this information does not constitute doxxing. That most users do not characterize sharing these types of public information about persons as doxxing is noteworthy, since the same would not be true if this information were harvested from a user's self-authored – yet still technically public – online social communications (e.g., on Facebook or Twitter) and then shared.

As I have highlighted, my users' understanding of doxxing involves the absence of consent; these posts show, however, that users imply consent when personal information has first been published outside of the context of an online social space, and in these instances assume that there is no harm in releasing information that would otherwise be personal. This understanding aligns with the treatment of personal information in Canada's *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA)* (S.C. 2000). Principle 4.3 of *PIPEDA* requires knowledge and consent of an individual for the collection, use or disclosure of personal information. However, exceptions under Section 7 of *PIPEDA* operationalize personal information to exclude certain types of information whose collection, use and disclosure do not require consent. These exceptions include names, addresses and telephone numbers that appear in public directories (including telephone directories and business directories); information that appears in legal registries where public access is authorized by law; information that appears in judicial records; and information disclosed by individuals that appears in publications such as magazines, books, newspapers, or printed or electronic media.

My users describe similar exceptions as *PIPEDA* to the disclosure of information that would otherwise be personal, and do not qualify these disclosures as doxxing. These exceptions can be due to a belief that users have consented to information being publicly released, a belief that users desire to have it circulated, or to a more general belief that the circulation of already publicly available information will not damage an interest. These assumptions can be problematic, however, when users do not necessarily want their publicly available information to be widely circulated and/or have not provided consent to its initial publication (for example, in legal proceedings, when personal information appears in a public record where individuals cannot opt out of this disclosure, or when newspapers publish personal information without first

obtaining consent). GamerGate supporter @T15, for instance, argues that he was doxxed when a professional blogger for a well known website disclosed his address in a blog post, since the blog in question did not initially obtain consent to post his address. “I never posted my address online”, he tweets, adding, “I did not consent to the public posting of my address”.

Despite consent being implied when personal information is posted within non-social contexts, then, consent is not necessarily always present. *PIPEDA* acknowledges this, specifying under Section 7 that individuals must have willingly provided the information that appears in publications in order for the disclosure of this information not to require consent. However, that users in my study assume consent to be present despite this acknowledgment reveals a troubling trend (particularly within a contemporary convergence culture where diverse forms of media increasingly saturate daily life – Jenkins, 2006), which I have touched upon and will explore more deeply in the following chapters: that users have a degree of trust in the ethical sensibilities of legal, media and professional entities (see also: Brombacher, 2017; Stanford History Education Group, 2016), a degree of trust that can prove to be misplaced.

The expectations of privacy that users in my fieldsites outline are varyingly recognized in the terms of use of the various platforms in this study, which again relate to corporate and legal imperatives to mitigate platform owners’ liability for potentially illegal or harmful disclosure of personal information. These platform-articulated privacy rules may exist for corporate or legal rationales, but they nonetheless play a role in public sentiment regarding the legitimacy of expectations of online privacy, given the importance that platform users tend to place (see section 5.1.2) upon the values enshrined in these policies. Twitter acknowledges that “[p]osting someone’s privacy information online may pose serious safety and security risks for the person whose information is shared” (Twitter Help Center, 2017b, para. 2). As such, users “may not

publish or post other people’s private information without the express authorization and permission” (Twitter Help Center, 2017b, para. 1). Although “[d]efinitions of private information may vary depending on local laws” (*ibid.*), the Twitter Rules specify that this applies to “credit card information; social security or other national identity numbers; private residences, personal home addresses, or other locations that are considered private; non-public, personal phone numbers; [and] non-public, personal email addresses” (Twitter Help Center, 2017b, paras. 4–8). Information not considered private on Twitter include “name, birthdate or age, business addresses, places of education or employment, [and] descriptions of appearance” (Twitter Help Center, 2017b, paras. 10–14). Twitter cautions that a range of factors determine which content is entitled to privacy protections, including the context of the content itself and the intent behind it being shared (hinting that both context and intent impact harm, as I will argue in Chapter 6):

Please keep in mind although you may consider certain information to be private, not all postings of such information may be a violation of this policy. We consider the nature and public availability of the information posted, local privacy laws, and other case-specific facts. For example, if information was previously posted or displayed elsewhere on the Internet prior to being put on Twitter (e.g., someone lists their personal phone number on their public blog), it may not be a violation of this policy. However, if the publicly available information is being shared to harass or incite harassment, then we will take enforcement action under our abusive behavior policy (Twitter Help Center, 2017, para. 15).

The Reddit Rules, meanwhile, specify that “it is not okay to post someone’s personal information or post links to personal information,” clarifying that “[t]his includes links to public Facebook pages and screenshots of Facebook pages with the names still legible” (Reddit, 2017b, para. 1). Under this broad prohibition of personal information, posting such information will result in a user being banned, and any personally identifying information must be edited out of any screenshots posted to Reddit. On Reddit, “[p]ublic figures can be an exception to this rule, such as posting professional links to contact a congressman or the CEO of a company” (Reddit,

2017b, para. 3). Like Twitter, the Reddit Rules emphasize that intent matters, telling users, “don’t post anything inviting harassment, don’t harass, and don’t cheer on or upvote obvious vigilantism” (*ibid.*). 8chan, finally, as I have mentioned above, does not enforce any privacy protections outside of any “content that directly violates the DMCA or other US laws” (8ch.net).

Many platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter), however, by default render users’ communications public rather than private even if their terms of use to mention certain expectations of privacy or privacy protections, where users must manually alter privacy settings to conceal content from other users instead of altering privacy settings to render content publicly visible. Some discussion-based platforms such as 8chan do not give users the option to implement privacy settings at all, with all posts being publicly visible – in other words, if a user of 8chan chose to disclose their personal information in a post, they could not set that post to private. On Reddit, individual comments cannot be posted privately, although moderators can set an entire subreddit to private, where only approved users are able to read and post content. That users assume there is a right to privacy and a right to consent to the reposting of personal information originally posted in online social spaces is therefore significant, since the technological architectures of certain platforms do not guarantee that this perceived right is respected or protected.

5.3 - Accounting for support of universal harms under #GamerGate

Having established common ground regarding perceptions of online harm between ‘pro-GamerGate’ and ‘anti-GamerGate’ subcultures and between broader virtual communities, I now turn to an analysis of exceptional users who do not share these common perspectives. These users, as I have outlined, are not common within any of the online venues that I am investigating, but are found within both ‘sides’ of the GamerGate conflict, appearing within both

‘pro-‘ and ‘anti-GamerGate’ forums and across all platforms. RAGG5 laments that outliers are often stereotyped as representative of broader communities and subcultures involved in GamerGate: “Stop blaming groups for the actions of individuals. Seriously. Everyone on both sides. Fucking stop it. [...] Blaming a group for what its individuals do is [...] unfair and uncalled for.” This is not to say that broader communities and subcultures do not play a role in preventing, reducing and addressing harm; on the contrary, as I will argue in Chapter 6, they play critical roles in maintaining safe environments.

In a well publicized incident, GamerGate sympathizer and celebrated social media troll Joshua Goldberg was arrested by the FBI on suspicion of distributing information about bomb-making in order to incite terrorist attacks in Kansas City (Moyer, 2015). Known for his transphobic, misogynistic and white supremacist online personas, Goldberg’s radical viewpoints were noted by users on Twitter and Reddit well before his arrest, which had not taken place at the time of my data collection. @T23 tweets that “Josh Goldberg isn’t just a troll, he’s literally a terrorist” while @T24 tweets that “It’s not about ethics [in games journalism] or even trolling when you’re inciting racism and encouraging violence against minorities, like Goldberg”. @RKIA5 writes that “Goldberg is the most dangerous sort of mouthpiece, since he advocates for racist assault and makes GamerGate out to be a bunch of violence loving bigots.”

Perhaps influenced by Goldberg’s prolific public promotion of terrorism and radical Islam alongside the #GamerGate hashtag, other users – both ‘pro-‘ and ‘anti-GamerGate’ – also advocate for terrorism or use terrorism-related language while engaging in harm under #GamerGate. @T25, for instance, doxxes a GamerGate supporter while promoting Daesh, tweeting the user’s name, work address and telephone number alongside “#isis Islamic State Caliphate IS True Mujahideen holy warriors #StopGamerGate2014”. RKIA6 similarly uses the

phrase “vidya akbar” to advocate for violent action against those in favour of social justice in gaming, which 8CGG6 explains is “a bastardization of ‘Allahu Akbar’, a phrase rooted in the praise of the greatness of God but often associated with a call to action of Islamic suicide bombers”.

In addition to content that advocates for terrorism, radical anti-social agendas also appear in the form of violently misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic or racist content. @T26 doxxes another user alongside a series of misogynistic and racist slurs, rape and death threats, justifying these behaviours because of his target’s feminist affiliations:

Your mutilated corpse will be on the front page of Jezebel tomorrow and there isn’t jack shit you can do about it. [...] If you have any kids, they’re going to die too. I don’t give a fuck. They’ll grow up to be feminists anyway. [...] I’m going to rape your filthy ass until you bleed, then choke you to death with your husband’s tiny Asian penis. [...] I’ve got a K-Bar and I’m coming to your house so I can shove it up your ugly feminist cunt. [...] Guess what bitch? I now know where you live. You and [name of user’s husband] live at [address].

In one instance, a gay ‘anti-GamerGate’ journalist is mailed a homophobic threat alongside a syringe filled with an unknown substance, presumably in response to a similar threat being sent to Milo Yiannopoulos (Yiannopoulos, 2014). In another, a trans woman is doxxed by users who post her pre-transition photos alongside other transphobic content: “my dox and deadname were repeated loudly and repeatedly,” she recounts. “I was tweeted pictures of my house, along with messages asking if I would rather be shot or stabbed. [...] This is the kind of online abuse that could get trans women evicted, cause them to lose their jobs, be assaulted or even killed” (Nyberg, 2015, paras. 4–11).

Trans game designer Rachel Byrk, who posted on Twitter, Reddit and 4chan about “constant transphobia” within GamerGate and the gaming industry, committed suicide, tweeting on the day of her suicide, “Guess I am dead. Killed myself. Sorry.” Following her suicide,

8CGG7 posts that “we need to push more [trans individuals] to suicide, we need to make them afraid to leave their homes”, while 8CGG8 admits that they “want to see fags and transsexuals curb stomped and choked out”. 8CGG9 advocates that users “should volunteer at one of these tranny suicide hotlines and tell the trannies on the line to kill themselves”, while 8CGG10 suggests “doxxing as many trannies as possible”. While few studies at the moment explore how regularly extreme online threats are followed through offline, Awan and Zempi describe that these threats are likely to be experienced as real (for which I account in Chapter 6): “For victims,” they write, “it is often difficult to isolate the online threats from the intimidation, violence and abuse that they suffer offline. Moreover, victims live in fear because of the possibility of online threats materializing in the ‘real world’” (2016, p. 1).

Users who reflect more radical ideological agendas on the opposite end of the political spectrum – who passionately fight for social justice – can also promote criminal direct harassment and doxxing, using the perceived discriminatory or anti-social proclivities of their targets as justification for engagement in harm. RGGZ3 states that “I have more respect for ISIS than the anti-[Zoe] Quinn people” and sends a message threatening to doxx a user for her engagement in GamerGate debates that he perceives as “smug [and] misogynist”:

Friendly reminder that you are on the wrong side of history and you will not be tolerated any longer. I wonder what can be done to your friends and family...
Hmm...[link to Facebook profiles] Stop what you're doing. Don't make me dig deeper. This won't end well for you if you continue.

8CGAMGAT4 provides texts and photographic evidence showing that at a college recruitment fair, a gamer identifying as “firmly anti-GG” approached the booth of a video game club and, stating that this user was “part of the reason video game culture is sexist”, rushed at the booth and “sprayed mace/pepper spray, causing a bunch of people to have reactions, one even went to the hospital”. A post by RKIA7 provides screencaps of @T27, who was motivated by

GamerGate to create a Twitter code to block “the worst harassers on the Internet”, doxxing users who she identifies as harassers. Many other Twitter users identifying as ‘anti-GamerGate’ similarly doxx users for representing “disgusting belief systems” (@T28), arguing that they should “be brought to justice by any means necessary for being hateful, misogynist scum” (@T29). @T30 doxxes a GamerGate supporter while also tweeting a death threat: “[User’s name] lives at [User’s address]. Crime: being a pro-GG racist sexist transphobic asshole. [...] You deserve to know how this feels. You deserve to feel pain. I know where you and your family live and I just bought a G19 [handgun]. I’m coming for you and others won’t stop coming.”

These examples reveal that both popular figures within GamerGate and users who are not public figures often reflect radically anti-social (overtly hateful, misogynistic, racist, transphobic, homophobic, or ableist) agendas or radically pro-social (advocating for thorough or complete political reform or social change related to social justice, particularly for minority groups) agendas when engaging in universal harm. This is not to say that users who reflect ideological agendas, or who are passionately committed to ‘anti-‘ or ‘pro-GamerGate’ are likely to engage in universal harms: as discourses across all platforms in this study suggest, members of both ‘sides’ of GamerGate are unlikely to engage in criminal direct harassment or doxxing. However, when users do, users throughout this study illustrate that this behaviour is more commonly linked to radical ideological perspectives, whether these views are radically pro-social (‘anti-GamerGate’) or radically anti-social (‘pro-GamerGate’).

A second justification of outliers’ engagement in behaviours seen as universally harmful is when these behaviours are in retaliation for perceived harms. Most often these perceived harms involve hate or discrimination (which I will cover in more detail in Chapter 6). @T31, for instance, after doxxing a user for “being a misogynistic fucker”, tweets that “I’m going to come

to your house and stab you. I hope your children are there to see it and learn what misogyny gets you.”. @T32 similarly tweets to a male GamerGate supporter that “I’m going to come to [home address] and stick a blade in your anus”, also tweeting that “a knife won’t even come close to doing the damage done by the dicks that fuck the rape victims you hate on”, adding that “sexist fucks like you have it coming.”

@T33 tweets that she fears being doxxed by those with radically pro-social agendas because “people actively target who they consider ‘gender traitors’ or apostates,” expanding that she was sent death threats by feminist activists for her engagement in GamerGate discussions. Despite self-identifying as someone who supports women’s equality, she expresses concern that she is seen as anti-feminist due to the popular association of GamerGate and more general gaming with misogyny, fearful that this alleged anti-feminism can be used to justify threats against her: “I built schools for girls in Pakistan despite threats of death but apparently I hate women because I’m a gamer”. @T34 describes how @T35 “doxxed and threatened to stab a 10 year old boy” for making an online rape threat alongside the #GamerGate hashtag, to which @T35 responds that the doxxing was warranted: “Bluntly, the kid got off lightly. Light and richly deserved punishment.”

In one instance, already referenced above, a range of prominent GamerGate spokesmen – journalist Milo Yiannopoulos, actor Adam Baldwin, Zoe Quinn’s ex boyfriend Eron Gjoni, and two prominent YouTube personalities, Boogie2988 and JonTron – were collectively doxxed by social justice advocates in a post on Pastebin. The text of the doxx claims that the doxx is justified because these users committed a series of anti-social “crimes” including helping to “encourage the idiots harassing [...] women”, “misusing [...] Internet ‘fame’ to harass women, [and promoting] ableism”, “coining the term ‘gamergate’ [and] using celebrity to spread

misogyny”. @T36 argues that doxxing in this context is warranted, claiming that since it is in retaliation for a perceived harm, it is not, in fact, doxxing: “A #GamerGate asshole sends me threatening email. I publish his email address. This is not doxxing. It is 100% appropriate public shaming”.

Oluo points out that doxxing can be seen by some users as a form of pro-social resistance, arguing that the reason “doxxing feels so good is that it turns the tables. [... Doxxing is] a way to battle all those nameless, faceless hatemongers of the Internet,” (2015, paras. 3–4). 8CGGHQ5 reinforces this claim, highlighting that users who engage in doxxing as retaliation believe that they “take the moral high ground” by doxxing harassers. According to Oluo, “doxxing for good – as in sharing someone’s personal information online in the name of social justice – has started to happen more and more recently” (Oluo, 2015, para. 3). Throughout discussions on Twitter, Reddit and 8chan, users who engage in universal harms can reflect this motive for doxxing, and can thusly perceive doxxing as a form of vigilante justice that upends imbalances of power favouring a perpetrator over a victim.

That @T36 distinguishes between doxxing and public shaming is interesting, since most users in this study do not seem to embrace this distinction. Even if the purpose of doxxing is public shaming or punishment in retaliation for transgression of a perceived social norm, users believe that doxxing is still doxxing (since it entails a lack of consent for the posting of personal information), and refer to it as such. Public shaming and doxxing, then, are not mutually exclusive as @T36 claims and as prevailing operationalizations of public shaming suggest.

It is common for online public shaming to serve as a type of “norm enforcement” (Solove, 2007, p. 85) that corrects behaviour that does not comply with particular perceived norms or informal social rules of conduct. The informal norms sanctioned online can take a range of forms,

varying from “etiquette norms to perceived norms about one’s appearance and habits” (Gallardo, 2017, p. 726). However, online public shaming differs from state-sanctioned public shaming in that online public shaming typically sanctions non-criminal acts and can occur “silently, leaving the offender unaware of the alleged norm infraction” (*ibid.*). Virtual shaming can take a variety of forms, ranging from publicly listing violators’ names on websites (for instance, websites cataloguing bad men to date or the difficulty of college professors), leaving negative reviews on applications such as “Peepke” where users can ‘review’ third parties, “liking” or sharing content (such as tweets or Facebook posts) or leaving online comments that shame particular parties, or creating memes that passively indicate users’ disapproval of particular behaviour (Gallardo, 2017). Regardless of the forms it may take, Gallardo describes that online shaming “can be made cheaply, quickly, and indelibly, much to the detriment of shamed individuals” (Gallardo, 2017, p. 728).

The popularity of online shaming is aided by anonymity, which Solove (2007) argues can allow users to escape accountability and can mitigate potential negative repercussions from content they post online about others. Putnam (2000) describes that anonymity in this way facilitates “drive-by relationships”, where a user can post an attack against another user and then quickly leave the situation while escaping potential consequences. According to Gallardo, “[t]his leaves the victim of the drive-by stuck with unsavoury reputation-damaging content online, with little recourse to identify the poster” (2017, p. 728).

Instances of doxxing in this analysis can adhere to prevailing operationalizations of online shaming. It typically sanctions non-criminal behaviour, often misogyny or support for an opposing ‘side’ of GamerGate. Doxxing can aim to “correct” this behaviour by “punishing” users for violating perceived social norms (or alternately, as users in this study suggest, can aim to

restore perceived power imbalances, such as those favouring misogynistic male oppressors). Doxxing can occur silently (without users' knowledge, unless it is specifically brought to their attention), particularly when the goal of doxxing is to restore a broader power imbalance, in which case the doxx does not necessarily need to be brought to a target's attention. Those who engage in doxxing typically have access to the anonymity that can enable "drive-by relationships" (for example, by posting under pseudonyms on Twitter, Reddit or 8chan).

However, doxxing differs from other forms of online shaming in that it can often deliberately be non-silent: users are often tagged in the body of a doxxing post (for example, on Twitter, where a username is usually mentioned alongside the doxx itself). This serves a dual purpose. First, it links a user's potentially pseudonymous online account to the identifying information contained in the doxx, compromising the anonymity to which a target may previously have had access. This accents the differential identifiability of the "drive-by relationship" between the doxxer and the "doxxee", allowing the doxxer to remain anonymous while stripping the doxxed party of their own anonymity. Second, tagging a user alerts them to the fact that they have been doxxed, allowing this knowledge to build feelings of fear, anxiety, or unsafety that can stem from the knowledge that their personal information has been publicly disclosed (Liebl, 2014). In other words, awareness of doxxing (and awareness of an alleged norm transgression) can be an important objective of the doxx, and can allow identifiability essentially to be weaponized to cause damages to interest (Feinberg, 1987).

While an argument can be made that doxxing can be a form of public shaming, it is important to ask when users believe that doxxing as a form of retaliation is justified, particularly given the harms it can bring about. The answer to this question is not always evident. @T37 claims that "doxxing can be used for good. ie, outing people sending death/rape threats." @T15

argues that universal harms including doxxing can be justified in response to harms that are initiated by someone else, even if the initial harms are not as severe as these vigilante responses: “People call me a bully. Nah. I don’t hit first. I just hit HARDER. Go cry yourselves to sleep.” It is unclear, however, where users who engage in doxxing as retaliation draw lines regarding what behaviours are harmful enough to warrant such vigilante solutions. RKIA8, for example, posts another user’s home address, work address, vehicle, and children’s photos in retaliation simply for being a “PIECE OF TRASH CLOSET [Gamer]GATER”, spawning a series of viral memes known as “SJW Solutions” that playfully highlight the danger and hypocrisy of engaging in harm as retaliation for harm (in the context of this particular post, the resultant meme being “SJW solutions: Someone not backing down? Target their kids!”).

@T38 claims that “Doxxing is appropriate when revealing abuses of power, not when attempting to silence individuals so you can abuse power for yourself.” Users therefore can condemn doxxing as retaliation when the purpose of doxxing is not to restore an imbalance of power (Oluo, 2015); in other words, when doxxing creates a new power imbalance rather than ‘correcting’ an existing imbalance. However, this can be troublesome since, as Oluo (2015) points out, doxxing can be seen as always creating a new power imbalance. Hinting at previous links to public shaming, Oluo argues that doxxing “isn’t about accountability, it’s about silencing. Techniques designed to intimidate people out of the public sphere are wrong, no matter who is doing it. [...] It’s naïve to think that those of us fighting for equality aren’t as susceptible to the same zealotry and abuse of power as the groups we are battling” (2015, paras. 14–15). Retaliatory doxxing, in other words, does not restore equality; it creates new forms of inequality. A post on Tumblr echoes this concern, highlighting that since users do not always agree on what harm entails (as I will show in Chapter 6), doxxing in retaliation for harm can be a slippery slope:

“Any justification of doxxing usually boils down to ‘it’s ok when we do it because we’re right’” (the-eagle-atarian, 2015).

Finally, a third group of users who can endorse universally condemned harms can promote or engage in these harms in the course of trolling – or, namely, to achieve “lulz” (Phillips, 2015). Across Twitter, Reddit and 8chan, trolls are typically from the ‘pro-GamerGate’ community or are unaffiliated with GamerGate, and target members of the ‘anti-GamerGate’ community. ‘Anti-GamerGate’ community members are seen as more likely to react to instances of perceived injustice or harm and also as more likely to receive media attention when victimized or threatened with victimization (as I will explore in more detail in Chapter 7); in other words, these community members are viewed as most exploitable for lulz. 8CGGHQ6 describes the tendency for trolls to target this particular community: “Targeting aGGros [slang for particularly passionate anti-GamerGate supporters] is a lot more entertaining. You have to imagine you can false flag as an aGGro threatening GG and it doesn’t really go far. And then you threaten an aGGro and the media flips out and all this crazy shit starts happening. There’s a lot more troll reward for trolling aGGros and false flagging gamergate than the opposite.” 8CGGHQ7 sums up this perceived exploitability of anti-GamerGate ‘social justice warriors’: “SJW don’t even acknowledge it but they are easy mode troll bait.”

Discussions throughout my fieldsites therefore show that users who promote universally condemned harms fall into one of three often overlapping categories that do not relate to subcultural or community membership. These categories include users who hold extreme or radical views, where both radically anti- and pro-social ideological agendas can be used to justify criminal direct harassment or doxxing; users who engage in universal harms as retaliation; or trolls, who engage in or advocate harm for “lulz” (Phillips, 2015). Any users within the

discussions I surveyed who endorse the universally condemned forms of harm identified in this chapter are either easily identifiable as trolls (a concept which I will expand upon in Chapter 6) or, if they are plausibly not trolls, nonetheless fall into the other two categories that I have described. Precisely which category users may fall into – or whether they fall into multiple categories simultaneously – is less relevant than the fact that these three categories of users consistently encompass any endorsements of universal harms in the context of the current study. This again suggests that engagement in criminal direct harassment and invasions of privacy involving the nonconsensual disclosure of personal information is not an inherent component of any one particular community related to GamerGate.

Analytically centralizing harm without acknowledging the complexity and diversity of identity and victimization can result in tunnel vision or confirmation bias; can fail to acknowledge that harm exists across all communities and cultures; can selectively demonize certain stereotyped groups and position these groups as in need of sanctioning while positioning others as inherently vulnerable and in need of paternalistic intervention; and can ignore that harm can take varied, complex and intersectional forms. Puar cautions that institutional feminist and intersectional theory can troublingly be deployed with “an ironic reification of sexual difference as a/the foundational one that needs to be disrupted [...and] as the constant from which there are variants” (2013, p. 52), in the same way that “women of color are constructed in dominant feminist generational narratives as the newest arrivals among the subjects of feminism, [...to] the effect of re-securing the centrality of the subject positioning of white women” (Puar, 2013, p. 52). In other words, allegedly intersectional studies can construct difference as “difference from” a default subject position of white women rather than as a more intersectional “difference

within”, where identity and difference are recognized “as a perpetual and continual process of splitting” (Puar, 2013, p. 53).

Puar characterises this tendency to substitute the language of intersectionality for intersectional analysis itself (also observed by Lorde, 1984; Schueller, 2005) as “diversity management” (2013, p. 53). Erel et al. warn that diversity management can “displace the concept of intersectionality from any political practice and socio-economic context by translating it into a merely theoretical abstraction of slipping signifiers of identity” (2011, p. 66). It is therefore imperative for intersectional analyses to move beyond theoretical abstraction to continue “redefining difference” (Lorde, 1984, p. 1) by acknowledging and reconciling complex subjectivities, as Crenshaw (1991) has argued. Feminist theory is incredibly productive at rendering gender-based realities visible and changing circumstances to improve lived experiences for real women (Halley, 2008). However, it is important for researchers at the same time to expose themselves and remain open to a range of theoretical possibilities, with the goal of developing “new insights into power that are different, clashing perhaps, but possibly also emancipatory” (Halley, 2008, p. 9).

In their earnestness to adopt epistemologies focused solely on gender inequality to the (inadvertent) exclusion of other forms of inequality, analyses of GamerGate and of more general virtual harm (see Chess & Shaw, 2015; Consalvo, 2012; Jane, 2014; Massanari, 2017) can fail to produce new or complex insights into intersectional power structures. This is not to say that such initiatives do not have well-intentioned goals of “noticing instances of male power and female subordination [like those which do run through GamerGate] and working on behalf of subordinated female interests” (Halley, 2008, p. 8), and it is certainly not to deny that misogyny and gender-based violence play critical roles in GamerGate as a sociocultural event. They do, and

any researcher would be remiss not to acknowledge and consider their ramifications. However, analyses that do not at the same time recognize the complexities of harm, identity and victimization can minimize or fail to acknowledge other instances when harm is experienced by populations that do not fall into oversimplified identity constructs (in the case of GamerGate, a male-female binary) or where these constructs are not the only axis of subordination (for instance, when subordination is intersectional).

For these reasons, my analysis of GamerGate demands that I avoid deploying theory in an attempt to “describe reality and explain why different aspects of it are good or bad, and point out the only way to emancipation” (Halley, 2008, p. 6). To this end, I have organized my literature review along discussions of virtual harm and macro-level spheres of theoretical relevance rather than, for instance, along strictly gender-based epistemologies that do not as easily enable identity to be theorized in more complex and intersectional terms. In my analysis I continue this trend. Rather than looking solely at community identification or one form of identity-based discrimination as a determinant of virtual harm, I advocate that we should expand our conceptualizations to complicate prevailing ideas of virtual harm, and to begin to recognize and account for their complexity.

5.4 – Conclusion

This chapter has begun to make a case for building more complex understandings of virtual harm, deconstructing some prevailing myths about GamerGate participants being normatively in favour of harm. Drawing from Feinberg (1987) to position harm as that which damages an interest, I began to develop an ontology of virtual harm by outlining behaviours that are ‘universally harmful’ according to users across every fieldsite in the current study. Through

the lens of GamerGate, I illustrated salient points of concurrence that bring users from different communities and cybercultures together in their conceptualizations of common interests and how these interests may be damaged. Universal harms, reflected both in communications between users and in platforms' terms of use (which, despite differing rationales for doing so, both play a role in regulating prevailing harm-related sentiments), include forms of criminal direct harassment – notably SWATting, stalking, and credible threats of violence – and doxxing, or the public disclosure of private personal information. Due to the virtual nature of my dataset, I have considered universal harms primarily in terms of their virtual connotations, even though the distinction between virtual and non-virtual worlds is not absolute (Castronova, 2005). It is therefore unwise to think of these harms as uniquely virtual, although some may have uniquely virtual applications (such as virtual threats, which, as I will highlight in Chapter 7, can be more likely to have fantastical connotations).

I outlined that in order for the disclosure of personal information to be considered doxxing and therefore indisputably harmful, it must meet two requirements: first, this disclosure must be nonconsensual, and second, personal information must not have first appeared in a public, non-social forum. I linked these universal harms to to expectations of privacy and consent to the disclosure of personal information within virtual social spaces. When users perceive the disclosure of personal information to be consensual or when information has previously appeared in a public, non-social space (such as in legal proceedings, blog posts or advertising), it is less likely to be considered doxxing and less likely to be considered harmful. I closed by identifying that users who do endorse universal harms do not represent specific identity groups, cybercultures, or GamerGate affiliations, and instead reflect radical ideological beliefs, engage in universal harms as retaliation, or are trolling. I thereby began to debunk pop cultural portrayals of

those who engage in GamerGate debates as normatively in favour of harm, moving toward a more nuanced ontology of virtual harm that I continue to develop in the following chapters.

Chapter 6: Rethinking GamerGate to develop an ontology of (virtual) harm, part II – Towards a three-tiered approach to (virtual) harm assessment

Foreword

As I moved through discussions on Twitter, Reddit and 8chan, it became apparent that GamerGate illustrates how users, cybercultures and broader virtual communities do not always agree regarding what behaviours or communications should be considered harmful. Discourses that I outlined in Chapter 5 do reveal points of concurrence regarding ‘universal harms’ where users largely agree that certain behaviours are harmful, including criminal direct harassment and the non-consensual disclosure of private personal information. Commonly, however, my users diverge in their perceptions of harm, where certain users position certain types of speech (namely, offensive speech including identity-based slurs) as inherently injurious and object to their use, while other users staunchly defend them as non-harmful.

As previously discussed, GamerGate reflects a range of tensions related to social inequalities, social justice activism, self-expression and freedom of speech within virtual and mediated spaces. These tensions are apparent in the discussions under analysis in this study, where I saw that they played a key role in harm-related perspectives of users throughout the online spaces I was investigating. In this chapter I draw upon those tensions to reveal that amongst my users there is widespread disagreement as to whether offensive, insulting, inflammatory, aggressive or hateful communications constitute harm. I look at these points of disagreement to consider how an ontology of virtual harm can make sense of these disputes, further nuancing the ontology of harm that I began to develop in the previous chapter. I mobilize these points of contention to propose a more nuanced theoretical approach to harm assessment, illustrating the utility of accounting for these differences of perspective in a more complex way than traditional models for harm assessment (see Chapter 3 and section 6.4).

In this chapter I propose an approach to harm assessment that draws upon three aspects that impact how users in this study think through harm in different ways: experience of harm, perception of harm, and intent to harm. First, it is undeniable that users experience harm via experiences with identity-based discrimination, where identity-based slurs and threats that invoke identity are commonly experienced by my users as injurious or as damaging to interests (namely, to participate freely and safely in virtual spaces). Discourses in this study show through the lens of GamerGate that harm assessments must consider how users' experiences with identity-based discrimination – notably including misogyny, homophobia, transphobia and racism – can play a role in whether they experience particular speech as harmful.

Histories of discrimination and violence that have been – and continue to be – faced by social minorities can play a role in whether users experience particular communications as harmful. Discourses in this study reinforce claims commonly made by feminist legal theorists that harm assessment must consider audience reception: it must account for how violations are *experienced*, including the range of sociocultural and historical factors that can shape this experience. In section 6.1, I highlight the role of subjective experience in assessments of virtual harm. This includes a consideration of how violations intersect with identity and social location, including histories of discrimination or violence; and whether, on the basis of these intersections, behaviour or speech damages or impedes a legitimate interest or whether it is merely uncomfortable, undesirable or unwanted.

Next, GamerGate discourses illustrate that users do not always associate typically offensive speech with harm. The clearest example of this in the context of my fieldsites emerged on 8chan, where, as I will discuss, community members colloquially use the word “fag” as a term of endearment. Discourses in my dataset – both those related to the use of this term and to the use

of reclamatory slurs alongside the hashtag #NotYourShield – also illustrate how offensive speech can take on non-harmful meanings, for instance, playful, reclamatory or resistance-based meanings. These discourses reveal that initiated community or subculture members usually expect that audiences will understand alternate meanings behind otherwise offensive speech (for instance, on 8chan, where “fag” is used as a term of endearment or a marker of in-group identity) and will understand the community histories that have shaped these alternate meanings. Community members can have expectations that uninitiated users will respond to these types of speech by being offended (in other words, by being effectively trolled – see Phillips, 2015), but as Feinberg (1987) reiterates, this offense is not in itself harmful.

I therefore move forward in section 6.2 to outline that harm assessment must consider subcultural and community context: it must account for how violations are *perceived and given meaning within the context of particular subcultures and communities*. This includes a consideration of prevailing norms that regulate the use and meaning of various types of speech or behaviour; users’ degree of familiarity with these norms, both for initiated ‘native’ users and uninitiated ‘visitors’ to particular communities or subcultures; how norms in users’ ‘home’ communities or subcultures can shape their perceptions of speech within other contexts; and how public morals can shape wider public perceptions of harm. In certain Canadian legal frameworks that seek to balance speech and harm, I highlight that these considerations are acknowledged and community and subcultural context can play a role in whether behaviours or communications are assessed as harmful (for instance, hate propaganda laws, where contextual meaning impacts whether particular speech or media is likely to lead to a breach of the peace).

Finally, my users reveal a wide range of intents run through virtual communications. Intents behind offensive speech are not always to harm: in the context of this project, these

intents can range from a desire to reclaim terms, to highlight irony, to engage in play, to engage in resistance, to offend, to produce “lulz” or troll, or, more rarely, to inflict injury or damage to an interest. While there are methodological limitations to being able to ascertain intent, discourses throughout my fieldsites, and particularly in the context of 8chan, highlight that a salient point of conflict in GamerGate can be disagreement between users’ perceptions of the harmful impact of certain forms of speech, perceptions of intent to harm, and users’ actual intents. Users and broader communities throughout my fieldsites respond to communications differently on the basis of these perceptions of intent and actual intents, where perceived and actual intents not to cause injury are typically treated as less damaging than those that do (despite the fact that some innocuous intents may be experienced by some users in harmful ways). This diverse range of intents suggests that, third, harm assessment must consider authorial objective: it must account for how violations are *intended*. I account for authorial objective in harm assessment in section 6.3. This includes a consideration of the wide array of rationales that my data reveal can be behind users’ virtual communications.

I argue that these three aspects – subjective experience, subcultural/community context, and authorial intent – should be considered simultaneously in a more complex assessment of virtual harm. This three-tiered approach brings together previous work by scholars including Jane (2015), who advocate for subjective experience as a key aspect of harm assessment, and scholars such as O’Sullivan and Flanagin (2003), who submit that harm should be assessed along axes of whether violations are intentional, why norms are violated (or are perceived or experienced by others as being violated), the impacts of these violations, and the community contexts that surround them. While recognizing that subjective experience still should play a role in harm assessment, I advocate that a framework encompassing this more diverse range of factors can

overcome criticisms that popular feminist legal frameworks focus only or dominantly on victims' subjective experiences at the expense of disregarding other factors that can also play a role in assessments of harm. In taking this stance, I hearken back to Halley's (2008) reservations that theoretical frameworks focused solely on identity (and, in this case, identity-based experience) can ignore the complexities of intersectional power structures and attempt to acknowledge these intersections in my own proposed framework for virtual harm assessment.

6.1 – Subjective experience: Accounting for audience reception in assessments of harm

First, users throughout my fieldsites highlight that identity and identity-related experience can play a key role in whether users experience speech as harmful. @T39 describes the casual use of homophobic slurs within general GamerGate discourses as hateful and as harmful, comparing the use of these slurs to his experience of being outed in his offline life: “#GamerGate is a hate group. [...] I've been called a faggot more times for being against #GamerGate than after I was outed as bi in an all-boys church-run private school. It's real and it hurts.” RAGG6 makes a similar comparison between being called a “fag” online during GamerGate and his experience of offline homophobia in the conservative Midwestern United States, describing that his history of victimization impacts the way he experiences slurs in other contexts, namely, by eliciting feelings of revictimization: “In real life I've been beaten up, followed home, bullied, and tormented because I'm gay and out in [Midwestern town]. I thought when I moved to [large Western American City] I would be free of all that, but when #GamerGate calls me 'fag', it brings all of those memories back. It makes me feel scared and insecure. Hate is pervasive. It sticks with you.” RGGZ4 shares similar sentiments:

On 4chan people somehow think it's okay to call people 'fag' as if it's cute or funny. All that is is ignorance. Just because you don't know you're hurting someone by opening old wounds, making them relive old violence, making them feel afraid by pulling on old

memories, doesn't mean that you're not injuring them. You are. The hurt and hate are real.

Others describe similar situations with histories of offline transphobia intersecting with their experience of online transphobic slurs. RGGZ5 shares that the use of transphobic slurs in virtual contexts can invoke prior experiences of offline transphobic violence, and that this invocation can cause him to re-experience previous injury:

So much of my life has been spent feeling damaged. I was assigned female at birth and transitioned as a teenager, and I have anxiety and clinical PTSD from the misgendering, mocking, deadnaming, violence and ridicule that I've repeatedly been the victim of. #GamerGate might think that it's funny to throw around casual transphobia, but seriously, the hurt is real. Words hurt, especially when you've been hurt before. When I see that sort of shit online, it just brings all of the other shit I've dealt with before right back. It makes it so immediate and real. I feel panicked again, I feel scared again, I feel self-loathing again. It just all comes right back.

RGGZ6 posts that, "The hate I've endured since coming out as trans has changed my life. I've lost family and friends, I've been forced to move, I overdosed three times and was on suicide watch. Hate is not a joke. Transphobia is not a joke. Even online. You can say it doesn't mean anything, but until you've lived what hate can do, you don't know shit." RGGZ7 agrees, replying by linking the casual use of transphobic slurs under #GamerGate to cisgendered users' lack of knowledge of the lived experience of those who are trans. By using slurs casually, this user argues that these individuals perpetuate harm by diminishing past victimization and thereby denying its legitimacy:

That's absolutely correct. Cis privilege makes you think that words don't matter, that transphobia doesn't matter, that you can joke about hate and that nothing bad will happen. I've got news for people: bad things do happen. They happen because they've happened to us before and those things don't ever go away. Even if you didn't cause them to happen directly, they don't go away, and you're keeping them alive by making a joke of them. You're making people think they don't matter. They matter. They fucking matter.

Such insights illustrate that those who have experienced histories of identity-based victimization – in the examples I have highlighted on the basis of homophobia or transphobia, but

throughout my various fieldsites also including sexism, racism, ableism, and/or other forms of discrimination – are more likely to experience identity-based slurs as harmful in the sense outlined by Feinberg (1987), even when used in otherwise innocuous contexts (see section 6.2) or with innocuous intents (see section 6.3). These harmful experiences can involve damages to interest including the re-experience of past victimization; emotional injury such as feelings of insecurity, anxiety, or fear; or physical injury, such as self-harm.

RKIA9 highlights these harmful impacts, posting that, “What’s missing from GamerGate is an understanding that hate is actually damaging, and it’s damaging to the people who already suffer the most. It doesn’t matter whether it’s transphobia, racism, misogyny...people’s lives are at stake here.” RAGG7 argues that “Words matter. When someone calls someone else a c*nt or a n*gger or a tr*p, when they compare black people to monkeys, the meanings of those words are incredibly loaded. They cause way more harm than people in GG admit.” RAGG8 echoes that,

Hate is hate because it oppresses people even more when they’re already oppressed. You’re not just calling someone a n!gger because you think they’re an asshole. You’re deliberately bringing up someone’s background, a background you know they can’t change, that already opens them up to abuse. You’re preying upon that vulnerability to make people feel even more inferior for something they have no ability to alter. That’s what makes hate so reprehensible.

Users tend to see slurs directed at female, queer, trans and non-white populations as harmful due to the narratives of injury that this speech invokes – namely, histories and social realities of marginalization, exclusion, and identity-based vulnerability. As I have introduced, this invocation can cause setbacks to targets’ interests (Feinberg, 1987) by contributing to the experience of impediments such as fear, anxiety, stigma or revictimization (Chen et al., 1999) that can in turn produce adverse social or professional consequences. RKIA10 writes that when hate speech is directed toward marginalized populations, users “know they’ve probably been treated like shit previously. They’re bringing all of that back up, revictimizing them,” while

RAGG9 claims that “hate is history. It’s not just words, it’s decades, centuries of mistreatment. That shit lingers.” Blogger stavvers uses the example of misogynistic speech to describe the harmful impacts of perpetuating histories of gendered oppression:

Patriarchy [...] oppresses the fuck out of women, and there are few, if any men who are not complicit in this oppression. [...] Misogynists completely fail to understand how power works. They miss the fact that in this society, violence against women and girls is rife, that it is an everyday occurrence which is seen to at best be utterly unremarkable and at worst funny or aspirational. (2013, paras. 4–9)

Users in this way often tend to see offensive speech as particularly harmful when it invokes the identity of groups who are “cast in a position of being the most vulnerable in that society” (Chen et al., 1999, p. 391), regardless of whether they personally identify with these vulnerable groups. Commonly, users see slurs with misogynistic, racist, homophobic and transphobic connotations as harmful.

RGGZ8 writes that “the worst is when people use fucking all capitals to say something like KILL THE KIKE, it just seems extra harsh, and it’s extra harsh for me to read that”. RGGZ9 believes that “hate is absolutely more serious when it appears alongside a threat. Threats on their own are bad, but hateful threats are by far the worst.” RGGZ10 agrees that hate is particularly harmful

especially when [users] say things like ‘die, f*ggot’ or when they say they wish people would get raped. They’re literally encouraging violence. Using violent language like that alongside a hate slur makes people doubly likely to actually go and do those things. People can actually be encouraged to take irl action by reading things like that.

These users illustrate that speech is more likely to be seen as harmful when it invokes vulnerable identity aggressively (for example, using a violent word such as “kill”, advocating violence, using threats, or using caps-lock). RGGZ10’s sentiments are noteworthy since, as I have pointed out in Chapter 5, there is limited evidence that isolated incidents of speech do, in fact, cause or encourage “irl action”. RGGZ10 lends credence, however, to Awan and Zempi’s (2016)

observations that regardless of whether there is a causal relationship between speech and acts of violence, users – particularly users who have already experienced offline violence, threats or intimidation – can perceive that a causal relationship exists, with implications for how these users can make meaning from, respond to, and otherwise experience online speech. Harmful speech can also potentially be a question of culture, where if there is a particular subculture that uses language (for example, by using slurs as idle threats) to support harm (for example, misogyny or homophobia), this use can create an atmosphere in which this harm – which can be experienced as violence – is normalized. Although outside the context of my fieldsites, an example of this could potentially be seen in 8chans such as /baphomet/, where users are vocally opposed to “moralfags” (8CB1) or “social justice warriors” and can mobilize this opposition in violent or harmful ways, often including doxxing or SWATting. As the owner of 8chan acknowledges, “The real tragedy is that you can maybe get people killed in the US with a simple phone call” (8CB2). In this case, use of speech would be linked to actual harm and violence, because although most members of a subculture may not act on these subcultural linguistic messages, some potentially could.

8CGG10 states that “transphobic/homophobic/racist/sexist jokes are very much meant to harm”. 8CV5 calls 8CV4 “violently ableist” for resisting accusations that GamerGate supporters are hateful by joking that “GamerGate [is] standing up for dwarf planets against the hypocritical oppressive ableist NASA academics”. @RKIA11 condemns several users for promoting violence against women when they sarcastically post that GamerGate donations to women’s suicide prevention charities are “obviously promoting rape”, calling these users “violent cis scum” and claiming that they associate with “a bunch of misogynistic murderers”. 8CGG11 is accused of being a “misogynistic harasser” for joking that “games are fun for everyone because they make

us all white misogynistic future rapists”. Users in this way often see identity-based slurs directed at marginalized or vulnerable groups as harmful regardless of whether users demonstrate intent to enact violence offline (for example, if a user is joking, trolling or engaging in hateful speech without advocating violence), suggesting that harm lies in the experiences of violence or injury that speech itself can evoke. @T40 sees this perception of harmfulness as more deeply seated bias against supporters of GamerGate, concluding that “When the other side posts stuff that’s hateful, it’s a joke or sarcasm. When #GamerGate posts anything, it’s misogyny or anti-feminist”.

In the context of my fieldsites, hateful speech entails communications that are posted in a public place and incite hatred against any identifiable group, where this incitement is likely to lead to a breach of the peace (*Criminal Code*, 1985, s.318-320). According to the *Criminal Code*, an identifiable group includes “any section of the public distinguished by colour, race, religion, ethnic origin or sexual orientation” (1985, s.318). Hate is notable since it forms a bridge between universal harms that I have identified in Chapter 5 and speech that is inflammatory, aggressive and/or offensive but not necessarily harmful (in other words, that does not cause damage to interests). Hate speech represents a hotly contested area of legal debate and, as these quotes illustrate, is a contested concept throughout my fieldsites. While some forms of hateful speech are criminalized in Canada (namely, those that are public and likely to lead to violence against particular groups) and the United States (namely, speech that entails “fighting words” – see American Bar Association, 2017) and therefore meet the criteria that I have outlined for universal

harm, other forms of hateful speech are legal (particularly in the United States) and do not similarly qualify as such³.

Offensive speech that invokes identity, regardless of whether it is legally classified as hate speech, can draw upon deeply entrenched forms of discrimination to “refuse to allow [individuals] autonomy in how they identify” (Chen et al., 1999, p. 389) and can contribute to targets perceiving or experiencing these forms of speech as violence. Identity and social location play key roles in whether users involved in GamerGate experience certain forms of speech, namely identity-based slurs, as harmful or hateful. Users in my fieldsites expand upon the definition of hate under the *Criminal Code* to position bias based on gender, gender identity, or disability as hateful, drawing from the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, which additionally prohibits discrimination on the basis of age, sex, marital status, family status and disability (1977, s.3). Users who have experienced identity-based discrimination, violence or hatred are more likely to experience slurs as harmful and as hateful. These users are also more likely to perceive the more general use of slurs (and the intents behind them) as harmful, even when community contexts do

³ In the United States, hate speech is not criminalized and is constitutionally protected under the First Amendment, which prohibits any abridgment of freedom of speech (with the exception of “fighting words” that could provoke a reasonable member of a group to act violently – see American Bar Association, 2017). In Canada, however, some forms of speech are criminalized: s.318-320 of the *Criminal Code* (1985) impose penalties for spreading hate propaganda, advocating genocide, or inciting hatred against any identifiable group. Users can mistakenly believe that online spaces are governed under the same frameworks as their offline spheres, even if online spaces are hosted elsewhere or have explicit terms of use that state these differences. Often, this can result in American users accusing other users, moderators, or platforms more generally of contravening First Amendment rights or of supporting censorship (a particularly passionate accusation in the context of GamerGate, where condemnation of censorship is a key ideological tenet of GamerGate supporters). While this is not a legal dissertation and space constraints prevent a more thorough consideration of the vast legal and philosophical debates surrounding freedom of speech vs. hate speech, these debates are nonetheless useful to consider when attempting to devise an ontology of virtual harm.

not involve explicit hatred (see an analysis of this phenomenon in section 6.2), and even when they are not necessarily intended harmfully (see section 6.3).

As Chen et al. argue, “hate speech and violence are alike in the sense that they both hurt, and there is evidence that the aftereffects of hate speech are, in fact, more dramatic and traumatic than the physical violence of a victim of a non-bias crime” (1999, p.387). It is important here to acknowledge that the daily use of racist or discriminatory language does not necessarily meet thresholds set by legal definitions of hate speech and potential violence associated therewith. My goal is not to argue that hate speech as legally defined is experienced in the same way as more routinized or normalized forms of hatred, or to cast judgment upon which subjective experiences of hatred are ‘worse’ than others. However, I merely wish to highlight that communications experienced as hateful can have a range of potentially harmful or injurious consequences; users on Twitter, Reddit and 8chan have hinted at some of these effects.

Chen et al. (1999) describe that targeted individuals, in response to the consequences of hateful speech, can alter their behaviour to avoid encountering similar hatred. For example, someone who has experienced homophobia may avoid gay-identified establishments (or, online, gay-identified websites, subcultures or communities) – and can self-blame for provoking hate they have encountered, with a wide array of consequences including avoiding disclosure of victimization, avoiding public spaces and failing to seek medical attention in the case of physical harm. Chen et al. argue that whether physical harm or violence has occurred is not necessarily relevant if speech itself is experienced as harm or violence: “The way in which language and violence work together is [...] the word alone carries the threat” (Chen et al., 1999, p. 388). The setback to interests (Feinberg, 1987) in this sense is clear: “That sense of security and control

over your life, that you are able to change your behaviour or something about yourself to make sure you are not victimized again, is a loss” (Chen et al., 1999, p. 388).

Tensions relating to identity and histories of experiential violence or injury are particularly interesting in the context of this study alongside the hashtag #killallmen, a hashtag (created in response to the misogynistic hashtag #killallwomen) that positions men in general as proxies for those who perpetuate misogyny in GamerGate. RAGG10 posts that “#killallmen is not the same as #killallwomen. Violence against men isn’t a thing. Violence against women is.” RKIA12 similarly writes, “Men as a group aren’t victims. That doesn’t mean that men can’t be victims. But people who think that men are oppressed, generally speaking? That hate for men is actually a thing? Show me the receipts. That’s some crazy MRA shit right there.” Reminiscent of outliers who support universal harms as retaliation (see Chapter 5), some users argue that hate against majority groups is justified resistance to histories of violence or oppression committed by these broader populations. RKIA13 posts that “Men can’t complain about #killallmen. After how many men have abused women? Come on.” RKIA14 agrees, replying, “It’s true, men as a gender are guilty of so many crimes that none of them have a right to complain about that hashtag. It’s about time women started fighting back.” stavvers similarly asks, “Is it any wonder that sometimes women are angry enough to express a wish to see their oppressors dead?” (2013, para. 9).

Contrary to hate directed at marginalized groups, #killallmen and other similar hashtags articulating bias against social majorities (other viral examples in my dataset being #yessallmen or #diecisscum) are also dismissed as unlikely to translate into offline violent action (in comparison, as I have illustrated, to the idea – however potentially misguided – that hashtags articulating bias against minorities will translate into offline violence). @T41 states that

“#killallmen is just harmless”. RAGG11 writes that, “KillAllWomen is not the moral equivalent of KillAllMen. Kill all men does not equate to a call for genocide or actually killing all men”, suggesting that hashtags such as #killallwomen presumably do and should therefore be taken more seriously. Some users do identify this perception as a problematic double standard, pointing out that “#killallwomen = too sexist, #killallblackmen = too racist, [but] #killallmen = just right” (@T42) and that “REAL Feminists and REAL Egalitarians don’t hate men” (@T43). However, in my dataset these users are not the norm, outnumbered by users who believe that hate against vulnerable populations is harmful to a greater degree than hate against majority populations, or is harmful at all while hate against majority populations is not.

@T44 tweets, however, that constant use of the #killallmen hashtag and its association with violent threats have caused him to participate less in GamerGate discourses on Twitter: “#killallmen too vitriolic. Male GG supporter signing off here. Just cuz I have a dick doesn’t mean I should get death threats”. In the same way, @T45 tweets, “Peace out #GamerGate homies. 7 people have PMd me death threats this week for being male, so that’s my cue to leave.” 8CGAMGAT5 posts that “I can’t even have civil discussions with anti-[GamerGate] if I mention that I’m a dude. They accuse us of hating women, but they’re allowed to hate men? That’s so fucked up. They claim they’re targets for being women, well we can’t be who we are either.” RGGZ11 posts that he feels moderators treat him differently from female users on grounds of his gender, accusing moderators of not enforcing subreddit codes of conduct when other users harassed him:

I’m just letting everyone know that I won’t be posting on this sub anymore. For a sub that claims to be inclusive, against violence, it’s pretty hypocritical that that doesn’t extend to men. I’m not misogynistic, I don’t hate women, but that doesn’t stop me from being subjected to constant torrents of abuse, and the mods don’t do anything about it. I’ve sent the mods screencaps of death threats and threats of doxxing that I’ve been sent for identifying myself as male on this sub. This post will probably be removed, but I’m sick

of being targeted just because I'm a male. That's no different from what y'all accuse pro-[GamerGate] of doing to women

Discussions in my fieldsites thereby suggest that discrimination against majority groups can, in fact, cause users to experience harm. Namely, users can experience a loss of security and control over their online interactions and feel compelled to change their behaviour, self-presentation, or occupancy of online spaces (Chen et al., 1999) as a result of this loss. This is not to claim that comparable political, systemic and historical systems of identity-based discrimination and oppression exist in reference to social minority and social majority groups (they do not), is not to advocate that misogyny and misandry enact similarly oppressive forces (they do not), and is not to suggest that minority groups wield the same power or privilege as majority groups to deny or resist these systems (they do not). However, it is merely meant to point out that bias and discrimination against identity groups can exist in an array of forms, and that while social majorities are certainly not "oppressed, generally speaking" (RKIA15), they can still be recipients of bias or hate in ways that complicate the GamerGate debate and debates surrounding virtual harm, and that impact users' communicative experiences within virtual spaces.

As the quotes above illustrate, however, when speech is prejudiced against majority identities – for example, speech that is misandrist, anti-white, anti-cis or anti-heterosexual – it is less likely to be perceived by other users as harmful, and often not as hateful. Forms of bias against majority identities can also be seen as justified forms of retaliation or resistance against hegemonic power relations favouring these majorities, once again raising the theme of histories of violence impacting whether hate speech is seen as harmful. In this case of GamerGate, users position hateful speech against majority groups as non-harmful since deep-seated histories of violence related to these groups are not present. The significance of these histories should not be

downplayed: as I have established, the violent or marginalizing realities faced by many social minorities can play key roles in how members of these groups experience harm, where particular behaviours or forms of speech that invoke these histories can be experienced as violence or as revictimization (Chen et al., 1999).

Resistance toward the idea that majority groups, particularly white males, can be recipients of hatred or discrimination – like that exhibited by my users – has been noted by scholars including Straus, who describes that within both academia and within broader society, it is common to “deny, conceal, and distort the evidence on gender symmetry” (2010, p. 332). He attributes this trend to the emancipatory nature of identity-focused sociological research and a broader pro-social or liberal contemporary social ethos, in the case of his work, specifically in reference to family and intimate partner violence. Straus argues that since sociologists “tend to be more concerned with bringing about change in the nature of society” (2010, p. 353), they can favour analyses that highlight areas for macro-level social change, with social minorities positioned as in need of this change and social majorities as “targets” for it. Ideologically based solutions that are averse to the idea that majority groups can be recipients of harm or discrimination are therefore “particularly attractive to sociologists [...who] may be more reluctant [...] to acknowledge that male dominance in society and the family is only one of many risk factors for [...] violence.” (Straus, 2010, p. 353).

That majority groups can, however, be recipients of bias or hate is noteworthy to GamerGate since many prevailing media discourses, academic discourses (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Freed, 2017; Gray et al., 2017; Massanari, 2017) and social discourses at work throughout my fieldsites construct discrimination as a defining element of ‘pro-GamerGate’ and, indeed, of broader gaming subculture (Consalvo, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). These portrayals in my

dataset almost exclusively discuss targeted threats, largely based in misogyny, that male perpetrators level at female victims (see Chapter 1), constructing GamerGate and gaming subculture as discriminatory, hateful, and “toxic” (Consalvo, 2012; Cush, 2014; Hathaway, 2015; Miller, 2014; Wheaton, 2014). ‘Anti-GamerGate’, meanwhile – and the (female or feminist) victims of GamerGate-related harms – are constructed as the opposite: inclusive, accepting, empathetic, and pro-social (Abcarian, 2014; Day, 2015; Dewey, 2015; Wingfield, 2014).

Users in this study, however, suggest that the reality is not that simple. I have explained in Chapter 5 that users who are associated with both ‘pro-GamerGate’ and ‘anti-GamerGate’ do not routinely endorse or engage in universally harmful behaviours. I have also shown that exceptional users do exist among both ‘camps’ of those involved in GamerGate. Just like users who identify with ‘pro-GamerGate’, those who are associated with ‘anti-GamerGate’, who identify as female, or who identify as feminist can engage in similar discrimination or hate, and can engage in universal harms motivated by this bias (for example, doxxing, threats or SWATting). However, when these behaviours are directed toward groups or individuals with power or privilege who are not burdened with histories or genealogies violence, they are not popularly constructed as discriminatory or hateful and are not typically integrated into mainstream discourses on GamerGate.

This effectively exempts ‘anti-GamerGate’ from popular associations with discrimination while accenting discrimination that is perpetuated by ‘pro-GamerGate’, positioning ‘pro-GamerGate’ as a discriminatory force that is diametrically opposed to a more inclusive and accepting ‘anti-GamerGate’. This also contributes to discrimination or bias being erased, overlooked, minimized or ignored it occurs against those who wield social or cultural power or privilege – when, as I have pointed out in the case of doxxings or SWATtings of GamerGate

supporters, bomb threats against gatherings of GamerGate supporters, or weapons posted to GamerGate supporters, it can nonetheless have real harmful impacts. This trend has been noted by scholars including Rivest, Moreau and Negura, who argue that majority groups, while acknowledging power or privilege related to their majority status, can commonly “experience situations in which they felt overlooked, marginalized and even discriminated against” (2017, p. 67). This is an especially pertinent revelation when, as seen in the 2016 American presidential election and correlated increase in popularity of the emboldened American alt-right movement (Futrell & Simi, 2017), “‘silent majorities’ are becoming increasingly vocal in stating their dissatisfaction and feelings of discrimination” (*ibid.*).

Discourses across Twitter, Reddit and 8chan clearly illustrate that harm assessment must first account for how audiences subjectively experience and receive potential violations. The GamerGate discourses that I have highlighted in this section suggest that these considerations should involve two interconnected areas of focus. First, there must be an examination of how potential violations intersect with identity and social location, significantly including histories of discrimination, violence and hate. Second (as I will also elaborate upon in the following sections), harm assessment must account for whether violations are experienced as an impediment of an interest, or whether they are merely experienced as uncomfortable. The impacts of how communications gain particular meanings within particular contexts – in GamerGate within the framework of varying virtual community and subcultural norms (see section 6.2) – and of intentionality (see section 6.3) run through both of these considerations, once again underscoring the importance of considering my three proffered aspects of harm assessment simultaneously.

6.2 – Community context: Accounting for contextual impact in assessments of harm

In this section I move forward to argue that harm assessment must also acknowledge subcultural and community context. In the case of GamerGate, this notably includes how diverse members across a wide range of virtual communities and subcultures with widely varying prevailing norms perceive and give meaning to potential violations. Many subcultures (and some broader communities) in GamerGate commonly use otherwise offensive, aggressive or unpleasant forms of speech as a normal part of their online communications, where community norms render these forms of speech innocuous (non-harmful, and usually inoffensive and unaggressive). In most cases, posters assume that readers are ‘insiders’ who are initiated to these norms (or do not care if outsiders misinterpret what is being said). However, communications can cause conflict and can be interpreted as harmful when receiving audiences are not initiated to these norms, namely, when communications are directed to (or intercepted by) ‘outsiders’ who are unfamiliar with the subcultural contexts in which these norms prevail.

Using examples of the term “fag” and the hashtag #NotYourShield, I examine how otherwise offensive slurs used alongside #GamerGate can take on new meanings related to resistance, irony, playfulness or reclamation. I conclude that in order to understand virtual harm it is imperative to understand the meanings that particular forms of speech adopt within particular online communities. This understanding involves both how users enculturate meanings of speech through their online communications and how platforms may more formally impose restrictions upon permitted speech via terms of use or codes of conduct. Meanings of speech, it follows, are impacted both by the community standards that are articulated by members of a particular subculture and by the limits that particular platforms impose upon virtual communications.

6.2.1 – Renegotiated meanings: Resistance, play, irony and GamerGate “fags”

Users in my fieldsites, particularly within the 8chan community but also throughout GamerGate-related subcultures in general, commonly make use of the word “fag” as a term of endearment, and often use this term to greet other users in a friendly way. Users begin posts with “Hey faggots” (8CGAMGAT6; 8CGGHQ8; 8CGG12; 8CV6) or other variations (“Ahoy fags” [8CV7], “Listen up faggots” [8CGG13], et cetera). These evolutions of the term “fag” represent a fundamental instance of linguistic détournement: no longer, in these contexts, does “fag” refer to objectionability; on the contrary, it evokes playful amicability and community solidarity.

RAGG12 posts support for “calling out tropes and story elements [in gaming] that reinforce racist, sexist, or homophobic attitudes” while responding to a poster objecting to social justice criticism of misogynistic games with, “If you GG fags still don’t understand how criticism works then you’re probably never going to get it”. On Twitter, @T46 condemns a racist and homophobic video from a GamerGate advocate on YouTube, calling him an “out of touch right wing fag”; @T47 tweets support for queer members of GamerGate: “#GamerGate dgaf [doesn’t give a fuck] if you’re a fag or lez. All deviance is welcome”. Responding to a homophobic tweet discussing GamerGate without the #GamerGate hashtag, @T48 uses the term “fag” simultaneously to cast judgment against this user’s homophobia and to criticize the term’s pejorative use, using it instead as a playful form of resistance: “Fag forgot to tag #GamerGate, that guys a super fag, hate is so faggy”. @T49 uses the term “fag” despite identifying as gay, suggesting that the meaning of “fag” has shifted entirely and no longer connotes homosexuality or invokes homophobia: “here I am, another #gamergate fag. I actually AM gay, btw” Users in my dataset thereby exhibit that in these virtual contexts, the meaning of “fag” has been disconnected from homophobic or hateful connotations.

The use of “-fag” and “faggot” is widespread within GamerGate discourses, regardless of the specific communities in which discourse originates and regardless of users’ stances related to social justice. As @T46, @T47, @T48 and @T49 illustrate, in my fieldsites those who advocate for social justice are just as likely to use these terms as those who advocate against social justice, again indicating that their meaning has shifted away from one indicative of overt homophobia. The widespread colloquial use of “fag” can be attributed to the prominent role played by 4chan and 8chan in shaping the trajectory of GamerGate, where the discursive norms of these communities have become interwoven with GamerGate discourses themselves even when these discourses take place outside of 4chan and 8chan.

The colloquial use of “-fag” within virtual spaces predates GamerGate, rising to prominence in 2003 when Christopher “moot” Poole, the founder of 4chan, announced the registration of 4chan.net (later changed to 4chan.org) in an Internet Relay Chat protocol:

```
<moot> regging 4CHAN.net  
<moot> FOUR CHAN  
<moot> brace for faggotry (moot, 2003).
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moot’s use of “faggotry” was deliberate, reflecting 4chan’s “general ethos of hostility toward any practice seen by its users as even remotely gesturing toward sensitivity or political correctness” (Trammell, 2014, p. 6). This stems from moot’s belief that anonymity, a key feature of 4chan, affords users the ability to insult one another freely and to “speak our mind and share ideas and be judged for the content of what we write rather than who we are” (moot, 2013, para. 1)⁴.

⁴ This point of view, where anonymity allegedly facilitates freer speech, has since been largely debunked. In anonymous online spaces, anonymity replicates regulatory behaviours, normally associated with identifiability, that attempt to identify posters as either enculturated group members or as “outsiders”. These behaviours include accusations of unfamiliarity with community culture, claims to authenticity or community belonging, in-jokes, or other “in-group” references (see Trammell, 2014).

This distinction is noteworthy in its arguably false implication that “who users are” can be separated from their online communications, which scholars (see Bargh, Mckenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Cheung, Lee, & Chan, 2015; Schau & Gilly, 2003) suggest cannot so easily be compartmentalized. However, it reflects an important aspect of 4chan identity: the interest not to be censored and to be able to self-express free from external restrictions. Importantly, these external restrictions can arguably include the consequences of imparting harm upon others, where users of 4chan can be seen as desiring to hold immunity from being blamed for any potentially negative impacts of their communicative choices.

As 4chan grew in popularity, variations of “faggot” and “fag” became viral memes.⁵ It became common practice for users to respond to posts with “OP is a fag” to establish their disagreement with the ideas – as opposed to condemnation of the identity – of the original poster, “who is, as saying goes, always a fag” (Dankjavlar, 2016, para. 10). In other words, “fag” became used to identify any users with ideas – rather than sexual orientations – that were objectionable or worthy of contestation. And, since 4chan culture prioritizes free speech and difference of opinion, this means that essentially all users could be classified as “fags” at some point.

moot and broader 4chan cyberculture were seemingly unconcerned with the harmful iterative effects of associating “fag” with ‘negative’ expression, particularly in its potential to perpetuate homophobia or to cause injury for those who have experienced or are experiencing homophobia. While the meaning of “fag” on 4chan shortly shifted away from negative connotations, my data illustrate (see section 6.1) that users who come from histories of

⁵ The creation of these memes (elements of culture such as images, videos, or pieces of text that are copied and transmitted rapidly by website users) is encouraged by 4chan’s valuation of anonymity. Users who do not post in a similar way to other users – for example, by not using memes, reposting memes, or creating new memes – can become identifiable due to their lack of adherence to prevailing site-wide communicative norms, and thereby are encouraged to adopt these norms in order to remain anonymous.

homophobic harm can indeed experience distress or revictimization through the use of homophobic slurs, even when normalized or when slurs have taken on new meanings. While the discourses I analyse cannot respond to potential causal iterative effects of associating slurs with negative connotations, this is a troubling potential that is important to note. Once again I stress that it is therefore imperative to consider subjective experience in assessments of harm, through this process considering potential iterative effects of particular forms of speech. How speech is received and how speech can impact broader social inequality should not be overlooked or dismissed.

@T50 tweets that the meaning of “fag” has evolved and is no longer meant hatefully in the context of 4chan, and by extension GamerGate discourses more generally: “the definition of fag has changed in the past few years, and we should embrace it together.” @T51 concurs: “words change, times change. Fag doesn’t mean what it meant before, people need to lighten up. No one’s advocating homophobia.” This illustrates that users who engage in GamerGate discourses are often familiar with the historical context of the suffix “-fag” on 4chan and 8chan due to their familiarity with these platforms or the role of these platforms in the historical development of GamerGate. As a result, users are usually familiar with the idea that this suffix is not meant to express overt homophobia.

Amidst the backdrop of the broader ethos of resistance to censorship, then, over time “-fag” lost its negative connotations on 4chan. It grew into a suffix widely used colloquially to playfully signify an underlying subcultural interest (Phillips, 2015) – in other words, that users are “gay for something” (Dankjavlar, 2016, para. 11). For example, “Eurofag” would refer to a user from Europe, “oldfag” to a user who has been around for a long time, “newfag” to a new user, or “Ponyfag” to a user who is a fan of the television show *My Little Pony*. As Phillips

(2015) notes, “fags” and “faggots” also became common salutations or terms of endearment used to address posts to the community at large.

Some users, however, acknowledge that the term “fag” has not been completely orphaned from its original meaning, and that its use can be intended to invoke shock or offense. RAGG13 links these motivations to subcultural norms where communications are meant to elicit reactions from other users (a key aspect of trolling, which I will explore in more detail in section 6.3), hinting that evoking the homophobic connotations of the term “fag” can be a means of producing these reactions. This user shares, “I don’t care if someone [talking about GamerGate] calls someone else a faggot. They’re just participating in a sort of weird Internet subculture in which the more extreme and offensive someone is, the better. A lot of the people who do this are the ones calling for social reform and tolerance.” RAGG14 similarly posts that “people get so riled when they read fag. when you get riled you become engaged. even SJWs will use the word fag to get traction that way, I mean, wouldn’t it be disingenuous for a SJW to use the word fag if it was gay bashing?”

Some users also illustrate that “fag” can still be applied in an offensive context within the contexts of 4chan and 8chan, where this term can still be intended to be received as a homophobic slur. 8CGG14, for instance, responds to another user with, “I found your YouTube channel and you dress like a complete faggot, you have a lisp like a faggot, you just carry yourself like a complete fucking queer”. This use illustrates that “fag” may be used seriously or degradingly (rather than playfully) to invoke a user’s actual identity, often in contexts that link this identity to a “real” offline person (doxxing them alongside the use of this slur, as in several cases within my dataset). 8CGG15, as another example, threatens another user by posting, “Fags like you deserve to die from AIDS, if that doesn’t happen I’ll kill you myself”. This use

illustrates that the slur “fag” may also be used pejoratively or threateningly in explicit relation to sexual orientation, where it is clear that the term has homophobic connotations.

That being said, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that the normalized use of slurs is not necessarily harmful in all contexts (as many users in my data set – queer users included in the case of the slur “fag” – explicitly relate). Across my dataset, as I have illustrated earlier, users condemn the use of slurs when they are meant to promote or incite violence or other criminal behaviours. Yet within community-sanctioned margins of appropriate use, the use of slurs can be encouraged and reinforced by community discourse that informally delimits the boundaries of acceptable speech (Maratea & Kavanaugh, 2012; Messner, 2010; Ren et al., 2012; Trammell, 2014). The use of slurs, and the intents behind them (see section 6.3), can reveal community contexts that allow for a more nuanced understanding of harm and communications within online spaces, often illuminating historical narratives or political imperatives that result in speech manifesting with new meanings.

For example, I have described that on 4chan, “fag” was originally used as a form of resistance to broader social condemnation of offensive or hateful language. Within the context of 4chan, this reveals deeply entrenched community valuation of freedom of speech (with some restrictions, which I have laid out in Chapter 5 – namely, when speech is criminal or reveals private information) – which again, given the potential negative iterative effects of normalizing slurs, could in some cases translate to freedom to harm. 4chan users perceive broader social condemnation of offensive or hateful language to restrict a fundamental interest to engage in free speech (Phillips, 2015; Dankjavlar, 2016), an interest so widely valued that it has literally reshaped language by normalizing the use of “fag”. However, it is important to note that this interest can also be used as a shield to rationalize or justify hatred. As Levinson highlights in her

analysis of targeted hate speech and the First Amendment, valuation of freedom of speech can be leveraged to protect “virulent, outrageous hate speech that targets private individuals for the purpose of directly egregious psychological harm” (Levinson, 2013, p. 45), which she argues should not be constitutionally protected due to the damages that it can impart.

It is important, this aside, to acknowledge the potentially diverse interests that shape communicative interactions, to understand their nuances, and to avoid imposing external ways of knowing upon disparate community contexts. Doing so, as Feinberg cautions, would be to cast judgment upon which communities’ interests are morally valid: this is not my objective. This is not to say, again, that certain forms of speech may not still be harmful for certain audiences. However, to adopt the viewpoint that certain speech is always without exception inherently harmful – and that a community itself is harmful by nature of its unique speech patterns – is to ignore that interests are not always consistent between communities, and could potentially result in communications being unreasonably restricted or sanctioned. In mainstream community contexts it may be harmful to use the term “fag”; however, in the context of 4chan, I argue that the opposite is also true: it would be harmful to ban the use of “fag” under a global terms of use (and certainly under legal sanctions), since doing so would damage 4chan’s broader interest in non-criminal freedom of expression, an interest held equally as fervently as more mainstream interests in social justice, despite the potential damages that this could impart for uninitiated audience members.

6.2.2 – Beyond faggotry: GamerGate and #NotYourShield

Aside from the term “fag”, there are other similar examples within GamerGate discourses of discriminatory or otherwise hateful slurs that have ironic, affectionate, playful or resistance-based meanings – notably “cunt”, “nigger” and “tranny”. The most salient example of this trend can be seen in GamerGate alongside #NotYourShield. This hashtag refers to the idea that corrupt

journalists, bloggers, members of the media and the ‘anti-GamerGate’ community in general can use alleged support for minorities in gaming as a “shield” against criticism, often to deflect accusations of unethically. #NotYourShield was conceived in 2014 by an anonymous 4chan user as a response to “social justice warriors” on Twitter who, in opposing GamerGate (often by engaging in harm such as doxxing ‘pro-GamerGate’ users), claimed to be working on behalf of women and minorities. This anonymous user (and many other users) saw these claims as using support for women and minorities to justify or excuse unethical behaviours, such as doxxing ‘pro-GamerGate’. They urged that minority users should use “Something like #NotYourShield And demand the SJWs stop using you as a shield to deflect genuine criticism”. #NotYourShield highlights that women and minorities can share the views of ‘pro-GamerGate’, stressing that GamerGate as a movement is not comprised only of white, heterosexual males and resisting the idea that GamerGate is racist, misogynistic, transphobic or ableist.

Between its creation on 4chan in September, 2014 and the end of my data collection, #NotYourShield had been tweeted more than 622,000 times (Chess & Shaw, 2015). While it has been argued that “#NotYourShield is an astroturfing campaign designed to invalidate very real accusations of misogyny and racism in gamergate” (Lynch, 2015, para. 3) whose “end result is absolutely no different than Stephen Colbert’s long running joke that he’s not racist because of his black friend” (Lynch, 2015, para. 19), it has also been argued that #NotYourShield is a conversation-generating means of resistance “for minorities and women gamers [...] opposed to [...being] spoken for” (Kovac, 2015, para. 5). #NotYourShield is often posted alongside slurs that typically refer derogatorily to minority groups (such as “nigger”, “cunt” or “tranny”). @T52 uses slurs as terms of endearment to highlight the diversity of GamerGate supporters, tweeting “preesh all the fags, cunts, trannies and niggas of #NotYourShield”, while @T53 similarly sends

“Love to all my #NotYourShield niggers”. In response to a tweet where a racialized user argues in support of ethical standards in games journalism, another racialized user shows solidarity and resistance by joking about black support for #GamerGate: “Confirmed, everyone in #gamergate is a house nigger. #notyourshield” (@54). @T55 uses irony to reply to another user who had called her a racial slur with, “Don’t date me, I’m just a nigger #NotYourShield”. @T56 reclaims several slurs to support GamerGate self-referentially, tweeting, “I be nigger and #GamerGate be right. I be #NotYourShield” and “As a fat ugly nigger tranny cunt, I agree that I’m subhuman and inherently inferior. I am #NotYourShield”.

When used alongside #NotYourShield, then, identity-based slurs can take on renegotiated meanings that relate to resistance, solidarity, reclamation or catharsis. Slurs alongside #NotYourShield can also be used ironically, jokingly, or as terms of endearment rather than to inflict damage to an interest, as scholars (see Allan, 2015; Croom, 2013; Jaszczolt, 2016; Maitra & McGowan, 2012; Pryor, 2016; Zimmerman, 2012) have previously found. In the context of GamerGate, users often use slurs alongside #NotYourShield to playfully signify that they, while identifying with GamerGate, also identify with groups that popular media can claim are subjected to oppression or discrimination by GamerGate as a movement.

8CGAMGAT7 uses sarcasm to express feeling dehumanized by GamerGate opponents who have ulterior motives for supporting trans communities: “obviously trannies like me aren’t people #NotYourShield”. RKIA16 replies to a user who accuses her of being misogynistic due to her GamerGate affiliation by joking, “Sorry, I ‘cunt’ stop #gamergate #NotYourShield”. In response to a user who calls broader GamerGate supporters racist, RKIA17 similarly jokes, “Hm, sorry to disappoint you. #Gamergate is not into that, but if it helps as a Kraut I’ll call you a Kraut-named Chink. If you want.” 8CV8 resists mainstream media’s notions that GamerGate is

transphobic, racist and misogynistic by joking, “I love ethics, I hate video games, I rape women, I love minorities and trannies as long as they serve my interests, I AM #GamerGate #NotYourShield”. 8CGG16, a self-identified female user, draws together several slurs to highlight sarcastically that in the context of #NotYourShield, slurs are not always meant to invoke identity: “LOL these faggots think that the word cunt can only be used against women and is gender specific. What fucking NIGGERS #NotYourShield”.

Users throughout Twitter, 8chan and Reddit, then, illustrate that GamerGate supporters can also playfully or ironically use slurs alongside #NotYourShield to assert that they do not see themselves as hateful (as popular media discourses often suggest – see Chapter 1). Instances of resistance are often identifiable by users ‘reclaiming’ slurs and using them alongside expressions of solidarity or identification with groups to whom these slurs typically refer, as my dataset shows.

These reclamatory and resistance-based uses of slurs are noteworthy since they suggest, contrary to arguments put forth by Bolinger, that it is not always true that “in choosing to use a slurring term rather than its neutral counterpart, the speaker signals that she endorses the term (and its associations)” (2017, p. 439). Indeed, a vast body of literature (Allan, 2015; Bianchi, 2014; Bolinger, 2017; Brontsema, 2004; DiFranco, 2017; Herbert, 2015; Hom, 2008; Jeshion, 2013; Parks & Jones, 2008; Pryor, 2016; Saka, 2007) acknowledges that although slurs can serve as linguistic mechanisms of subordination, “re-appropriating these terms can be a strategy to fight back against social injustice [and], when successful, reclamation is the subversion of powerful mechanisms of oppression” (Herbert, 2015, p. 131). In academia, most often this phenomenon is addressed in the context of LGBTQ members’ self-referential re-appropriation of “queer” (Bianchi, 2014; Brontsema, 2004; Hom, 2008; Jeshion, 2013; Saka, 2007) and in black

communities' re-appropriation of the term "nigger" (Allan, 2015; Parks & Jones, 2008; Pryor, 2016). Failure to acknowledge the forms of protest or resistance that these reclamations of slurs represent, Herbert argues, can in fact produce new forms of harm:

attempts to re-appropriate slurs can fail to be understood as transgressive acts at all. When attempts at reclamation fail, their force is distorted; context and convention lead the hearer to give uptake to the speech act as a traditional deployment of the slur. The force of this traditional use is to validate and re-entrench the very norms the act was intended to subvert [...having] the ironic force of constituting [new] mechanisms of oppression. (2015, p. 131)

It is therefore imperative, in the interest of not perpetuating these new mechanisms of oppression, to acknowledge that slurs do not in all cases have injurious meanings. On the contrary, my data illustrate that the use of slurs can serve as a powerful tool of resistance, where reclamation is intended to "criticize attitudes promulgated by paradigmatic derogatory uses of these terms" (DiFranco, 2017, p. 372).

These non-injurious meanings, however, are not always clear to all users. @T57, for example, tweets, "At my bffs and her brother is on 8ch calling other ppl 'FAG!' Crying now. Just crying. #endhate #GamerGate"; @T58 similarly tweets that "GamerGaters calling ppl fag are part of a viral hate movement, homophobia is not a good look". Uninitiated users like @T57 and @T58, then, may not be familiar with the colloquial uses of otherwise offensive or hateful terms and in this way can be unaware that slurs may not – and in my fieldsites usually do not – have harmful connotations in the subcultural contexts where they are being used. Often, this can occur among users who are unfamiliar with prevailing subcultural norms (for example, regarding the term "fag"), or among users who are new to GamerGate discourses in general (regarding the use of slurs alongside #NotYourShield).

Users who are familiar with colloquial uses of offensive terms but whose own subcultural or community norms condemn them as harmful – in the context of GamerGate, notably users of

the subreddit GamerGhazi – can also disregard alternate community norms in favour of their own communities’ meanings, which they perceive as more legitimate. GamerGhazi is my only fieldsite explicitly to ban the term “fag” and other “phobic” speech under lengthy “civility” restrictions, even if other subreddits (notably /r/againstgamergate) informally widely discourage it. @RGGZ12 echoes GamerGhazi’s civility restrictions, writing that, “The language GamerGate uses proves that they’re a hate mob, if youre NOT a hate mob you wouldnt call someone f@g or tr@nny now would you”; RGGZ13 agrees that “When you read the slurs they throw around, I don’t know how anyone can think that GG isn’t filled with hatemongerers”.

Users who are based in communities or initiated to community norms where slurs are normalized can see these uninitiated users as overly sensitive, overly politically correct, and in favour of censorship of non-harmful speech. @T59 perceives these users as “butthurt over politically incorrect humor” and believes that they should “learn to take a joke”; 8CGAMGAT8 posts that “faggots are losing their shit cause words used by GamerGate hurt their feelings”. 8CV9 describes such users as “whiny PC faggots” while @T60 tweets, “I love you all, but that won’t stop me from calling you all faggots and fucktards. #FightCensorship”. These perceptions of oversensitivity can impact the authorial intent behind the use of slurs, which, as I will discuss in section 6.3, can result in users attempting to troll other users to gain “lulz” by evoking outrage or indignation (Phillips, 2015).

Prevailing stereotypes of GamerGate participants as male and white (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Adrienne Massanari, 2017) can influence other users not to see GamerGate participants as representatives of the marginalized groups to which identity-based slurs typically refer. This can translate to their use of slurs being seen as perpetuating harm, namely homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic or racist hostility. In addition, these perceptions are reinforced by the viral use of

the slur “fag” on 4chan having been initiated by Poole, who is not a visible or ‘out’ member of any marginalized groups. #NotYourShield, however, illustrates that members of GamerGate cannot so easily be stereotyped. While Parks and Jones (2008) suggest that slurs are always harmful when used by members of social majorities – who, they argue, in using these slurs, harbour implicit biases that predict discriminatory hostility – I and my data contest this claim.

Even if one takes as valid Parks and Jones’ (2008) claims that slurs are always harmful when used by members of social majorities, the use of slurs by members of GamerGate who identify as members of marginalized groups (for example, queer users using the term “fag” or black users using the term “nigger”) must be considered in terms of more nuanced non-harmful meanings, where the case for slurs as a source of harm cannot be as easily argued (see Allan, 2015; Maitra & McGowan, 2012; Pryor, 2016). As the discourses in this study illustrate, regular users of virtual communities are more apt to perceive communications as harmful if they do not adhere to prevailing norms that regulate the posting of offensive content. They also show that these norms can supersede competing norms when users venture outside of the subcultures or communities to which they are accustomed. In other words, users are more likely to see communications as harmful if they do not adhere to prevailing norms in the subcultures and communities that they do typically frequent, even within different subcultural or community contexts. When users from different subcultures or communities come together – for example, a member of 8chan venturing into /r/gamerghazi and casually using the term “fag”, or a member of #NotYourShield tweeting the terms “nigger” or “cunt” to a Twitter user who is not familiar with #NotYourShield’s ironic, playful, or resistance-based uses of these terms – differences between these prevailing norms can cause conflict, where some users perceive speech as harmful yet others do not.

The discussions highlighted in these two sections illustrate that those involved in GamerGate, like any other subculture or community, communicate using renegotiated meanings of speech, where speech takes on alternate meanings in specific contexts. Often, contrary to popular media discourses on GamerGate that position ‘pro-GamerGate’ communities as hateful and in support of harm (see Chapter 1; see also Martens, 2014; Nyberg, 2015; Reyna, 2015; Romano, 2014; Southey, 2014), the new meanings of incendiary, aggressive or unpleasant speech in the context of GamerGate can be distanced from hateful connotations. Users often explicitly articulate that they do not intend to harm interests by using otherwise incendiary speech with these connotations (although they may intend to offend, for example, when users are trolling other users; for a deeper discussion of how intent may be identified and of the possible limitations to this way of knowing, see section 6.3).

6.2.3 – Understanding community context: Formally encoded community guidelines

Platforms’ terms of use are varied regarding offensive content. While the rationales behind these terms of use are different from the motivations behind community members’ perspectives relating to offensive content (where terms of use are grounded in legal and corporate rationales), I have established in Chapter 5 that users nonetheless exhibit a sort of reverence to these terms of use, blurring lines between corporate policies and human sentiment in establishing virtual subculture. For this reason, it is necessary to consider how formal policies work to re-enforce understandings of community contexts that may position certain forms of otherwise offensive speech to have alternate innocuous meanings.

Community norms and standards in my fieldsites can be inaccessible or difficult to understand for users who are uninitiated to their prevailing norms, which require “cultural expertise to understand the myriad memes, in-jokes, and linguistic short-hand that serves [as] the lingua franca”(Massanari, 2017, p. 335) of particular platforms. While community norms, like

the broader condemnations of universal harms that I have highlighted in Chapter 5, are informally reflected by users' communicative interactions, they are also usually formally codified in platforms' terms of use or community guidelines, which "encourage certain kinds of cultures and behaviours to coalesce on platforms while implicitly [or explicitly] discouraging others" (Massanari, 2017, p. 335). Like terms of use serve legal imperatives related to platforms' liability in cases of potential harm, they also formally regulate the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable communications more generally. In doing so, these formal policies work in tandem with user-to-user communications to normalize types of speech that are seen as acceptable while discouraging or removing those that are not. Platforms' community guidelines serve as the basis for content moderation, where speech that transgresses community guidelines is removed (whether by content filters or by designated moderators). Content that adheres to community guidelines, meanwhile, remains visible, enculturating communicative norms and delineating the boundaries of acceptable speech within particular subcultural contexts.

I have outlined in Chapter 5 how terms of use generally prohibit speech that is criminal in the country where the website is registered (for example, if speech involves threats or inciting violence), even if (as on 8chan) only under blanket prohibitions of criminal activity rather than specific speech-related provisions. On Twitter, users "may not promote violence against or directly attack or threaten other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability or disease" (Twitter Help Center, 2017, para. 2). Twitter prohibits tweets that incite fear about "protected groups" (which are undefined, but presumably refer to the aforementioned identity groups against whom violence may not be promoted on Twitter). Twitter also prohibits tweets that advocate physical harm, death or disease of these groups; reference violent events where these groups have been primary

targets or victims; or repeatedly and/or non-consensually use slurs, epithets, racist and sexist content, or other content that “degrades someone” (Twitter Help Center, 2017, para. 3). Twitter’s Hateful Conduct Policy emphasizes that “context matters” – specifying that some tweets may seem abusive when viewed in isolation but not in the context of a broader conversation – and that hateful content can target both individuals and entire protected groups (Twitter Help Center, 2017).

During the time period of GamerGate, Reddit did not explicitly regulate offensive speech. Content policy amendments in August 2015 designed to curb hateful subreddits (Morrison, 2015), however, now ban content that encourages or incites violence, as well as content that threatens, harasses, bullies, or encourages others to do so (Reddit, 2017b). Under these content policy revisions, some forms of offensive speech are subsumed under harassment, which Reddit defines as “systemic and/or continued actions to torment or demean someone in a way that would make a reasonable person conclude that Reddit is not a safe platform to express their ideas or participate in the conversation, or fear for their safety or the safety of those around them” (Reddit, 2017b). In other words, on Reddit, speech is prohibited if it damages an interest (Feinberg, 1987) to fully participate or to feel safe on Reddit. 8chan does not ban offensive speech, with the exception of speech that is illegal in the United States (for example, entailing “fighting words” or making credible death threats). Community standards regarding offensive content, like those related to universal harms (see section 5.1.2) are enforced through content moderation by designated moderators (Reddit) or by technological design, including content reporting mechanisms (Reddit, Twitter, Facebook) and prioritized visibility on the basis of users’ collective likes or dislikes (Reddit, Facebook comments on mainstream media sites).

I have established in this section that harm assessment, in addition to considering audience reception via subjective experience of harm, must consider how violations are perceived and given meaning by members of particular (virtual) subcultures and communities. Both informal norms (articulated in user-to-user communications) and formal norms (articulated in policy guidelines of particular platforms) work to regulate users' and broader subcultures' perceptions and meaning-making of offensive speech and behaviour. Users' communications enculturate prevailing norms related to speech that is tolerated or seen as harmful within particular subcultures; familiarity with these norms, as I have explained in section 6.2.2, factors prominently in users' conceptualizations of harm. Formal policies governing acceptable speech, while they may be articulated for legal reasons, similarly shape these norms by impacting how content is moderated and thereby rendered visible (or invisible), complementing users' informal enculturation of renegotiated meanings of otherwise harmful or inflammatory speech.

6.3 – Accounting for authorial intent in assessments of harm: Lessons from trolling under #GamerGate

Discourses across my fieldsites finally suggest that intentionality plays a key role in whether speech should be assessed as harmful. While noting that across different disciplines and across different time periods intentionality has been differently operationalized, I adopt a relational model for my conceptualization of intentionality, as is typically adopted in sociological and anthropological scholarship (where feminist scholars such as Chodorow [1978], Miller [1987], Kondo [1990] and Gilligan [1993] have adopted similar models). These models run contrary to “drive” theory of intentionality, which is grounded in work by Freud and other psychoanalysts who suggest that intentionality involves alleged biological instincts that are seen as inherent in subjects and related to positivistic self-interests (Strachey, 1999). Relational

models of intentionality contrastingly argue that social context and social relations are significant aspects of what it means to be human, including the mind, which is “dyadic and interactive” (Joseph, 2012, p.5). Intentionality, under this frame, refers to the purposive or deliberate quality of a mental state – whether a thought, desire, belief, hope, or process of meaning making – that orients this mental state toward various social relations, social acts, forms of social interaction, or social actors.

Intent is a similarly contested topic within the legal sphere and within legal discussions related to harm, where intentionality, for example, is required under prevailing definitions of harm in criminal law but not required in discrimination law, where it is effect that is positioned as more important. Although this is not a legal dissertation, it is worthwhile, for instance, to note that under the *Criminal Code*, requisite intent is required in order for a crime to be committed. There is a distinction within criminal law between specific and general intent, where specific intent applies to acts considered in relation to their purposes (relating to the performance of an *actus reus* in addition to intent going beyond this performance) and general intent applies to acts considered apart from their purpose (relating to intent related solely to the performance of the act in question). Short of statements that explicitly stipulate otherwise, there is a presumption that offences are those of general intent, where an accused must have intended an act or omission (see, for instance, *R v. Greenshields*, 2014 ONCJ 35 and *R v. MacDonald*, 2014 SCC 3). Under other legal frameworks, however – for example, discrimination law under the *Ontario Human Rights Code* – intent is not necessarily required, where, for instance, “failing to consider many perspectives, or not planning to include all people, may result in barriers to access for persons identified by the *Code* [and] [s]uch barriers, even if unintended, are discrimination” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2008, para. 4).

Before moving forward, it is important to acknowledge that there are limitations to qualitatively knowing or identifying intent. Similarly, there are limitations to and significant questions surrounding inferring intent, many of which link back to issues of subject positionality. For instance, who can (or should?) be responsible for ascertaining intent? Does this task fall to the author of particular communications, and should authors necessarily be taken at face value when their stated intents could serve personal interests (for instance, to reduce responsibility for potentially harmful or criminal speech)? Does this task fall to a researcher, when a researcher's epistemological stance and personal positionality can similarly impact this task of identification? Or does this task fall to the recipient of communications – in other words, can intentionality be ascertained on the basis of subjective experience? As Butler highlights, “the problem of injurious speech raises the question of which words wound [and] which representations offend [...] yet, linguistic injury appears to be the effect not only of the words by which one is addressed but the mode of address itself, a mode – a disposition or conventional bearing – that interpellates and constitutes a subject” (1997, p.2). As such, there is performative character to intent – and, as Butler highlights, there is “no easy way to decide on how best to limit that totality” (*ibid.*). In this dissertation, it is beyond my scope to suggest precisely how intent may be inferred, and to consider the performative implications of this process of inferring. This is a complex discussion that could not be done justice given the theoretical (and length-based) boundaries of this study. Instead, I wish to highlight the complexities of this task, and to suggest that future academic initiatives looking at virtual communications – and, certainly, any policy initiatives that might relate to them – will need to consider and reconcile these complexities.

While noting these complexities, particular communicative identifiers can reveal intent (where for instance, asynchronous posting histories, overemphatic content designed to solicit a

reaction, or specific choice of username can betray an intent to troll). How users frame their speech can also reveal intent. Often this can take place before or during communications, where users, for instance, could mention to other users that they are going to troll another user. This can also take place retroactively, where users state intent after the fact or deny that their intent was to harm. This raises a significant point: that it can be difficult to ascertain, particularly after users have seen how others have reacted to their speech, whether users are sincere in their stated intents. However, this limitation arises in any ethnographic analysis, where it can never be objectively certain that participants are telling the truth (Beaulieu & Simakova, 2006; Berreman, 1962; Kozinets, 2010).

I caution against investing in an authenticity/inauthenticity or true/false binary (particularly) within online spaces, particularly when fantasy plays a key role in framing virtual interactions (see Chapter 7). Investment in this binary can be troublesome given users' abilities to account for potential virtual inauthenticity (Kibby & Costello, 2001), that users' online self-representations (rather than the authenticity of these self-representations – see Beaulieu & Simakova, 2006) grant meaning to virtual interactions, and the tenuous nature of claims that inauthenticity could lead to potential harm. Instead, I argue that more nuanced considerations of intent alongside both subjective audience experience and subcultural context can help to ascertain whether users' stated intents make sense, can expose what these stated intents reveal about users' own ways of knowing, and ultimately generate a more cohesive and layered assessment of harm.

Intentionality impacts the meaning of speech most apparently in this study in the case of trolling, a key component of GamerGate-related discourses. Users who troll other users employ offensive or aggressive speech in order to gain “lulz” (Phillips, 2015) and by drawing upon these conflictual points of disagreement to elicit a strong reaction. For example, @T64 applauds a troll

who supported doxxing: “A+ trolling...make em think you actually support the doxx and then you’ve got them. More passion, the better.” 8CGAMGAT9 similarly posts that “it never ceases to amaze me that every single time they believe you actually support things like raping and murdering women and minorities. Maybe it’s just obvious trollbait to us because the chans are enlightened, but they always fall hardest for the most extreme things”.

In the same way, trolls are likely to use identity-based slurs in order to elicit a strong emotive response from offended users. @T65, for instance, mocks a user provoked by his casual use of the word “cunt”, tweeting, “MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO IM BUSY ON TWITTER GETTING MAD AT JOKES”. RKIA18 posts that, “Some of the best trolls use hate speech jokingly to mock SJWs, I’d suggest using this with graphs and facts to attack their claims that we’re a hate movement and get a laugh at the same time”. 8CV10 writes, “It’s funny how angry SJWs get when you call them blackies, trannies or faggots”; 8CV11 similarly describes that lulz can be gained from using slurs: “I live from the indignation I get when I use words like fag or nigger or kike or gook, it’s funny because any chanfag knows that we don’t mean it literally” RKIA19 suggests that other users reply to accusations of discrimination by invoking the very language that accusers perceive as harmful in order to further provoke them: “to anyone who happens to think that you’re being a disgusting asshole and hating people for being different you can reply en masse with ‘found the faggy!’”. These quotes illustrate that in GamerGate, conflict is often visible when users attempt to troll those who do not understand or appreciate the colloquial meanings behind otherwise offensive forms of speech or who fail to recognize that broader communities condemn the universal harms that I have outlined in Chapter 5. Trolls throughout my fieldsites can endorse universally condemned harms such as doxxing or criminal

harassment, but do so because they perceive endorsement of these harms as most likely to provoke a strong reaction.

It is important to reiterate that I am not making a claim that language and communications are not “about identity” or that their use does not invoke cultural and political histories in a way that is laden with meaning, and often potentially harmful meaning. Slurs can be seen as “funny” by users like 8CV11 precisely because they have negative connotations, and these negative connotations, which are linked to unequal power relationships, are likely to provoke strong reactions. While slurs target minority identities, there are rarely linguistic equivalencies for majority identities (for example, to refer derogatorily to whiteness, or maleness, or heterosexuality). I am not arguing that harm assessments should disregard the subjective experience of how language is received or the power dynamics that imbue one word with insulting content and not another. On the contrary, histories of unequal power dynamics, as I have shown in section 6.1, play an important role both in how language is constructed and whether communications are received as harmful, and also play a role in shaping the subcultural contexts where language may adopt alternate meanings. These factors and unequal power dynamics must be considered in assessments of harm, which I argue can be achieved by assessing harm through my more nuanced three-tiered framework.

Here I again draw from Halley (2008), who advocates that emancipatory analyses, particularly of harm, must avoid preconceiving objects of analysis along narrow identity-based epistemologies (for example, where perpetrators and victims are reduced to falling within particular identity constructs such as male or female) with the goal of achieving more complex insights into intersectional power structures. Echoing Halley, I argue that popular claimsmaking regarding GamerGate can involve oversimplified preconceptions of gamer or virtual cultures,

namely, as primarily male and necessarily perpetuating misogyny. It is important to remember that gamer and GamerGate communities are diverse: female gamers in fact outnumber male gamers, and gamers represent diverse sexualities and racial/cultural backgrounds (Cunningham, 2011; Royse et al., 2007).

Trolling, then, is not necessarily an instance of a male making light of misogyny, insidiously suppressing women, or trying to deflect responsibility for engaging in misogynistic harm (Herring et al., 2002). In fact, discussions in my analysis show that trolls, like gamers, are diverse, with females and social minorities well represented: as 8CGAMGAT10 posts, “SJWs freak out so extra when they find out that I’m a woman. Like ‘why did you call her a cunt? you must know what it’s like’. People think I’m a liar, that I’m actually a man. But no. Damn right I know what it’s like. That’s why I know it’ll get the best reaction. It makes trolling more fun when they can’t process who you are.” This again speaks to power relations as an important component of trolling, where audiences’ inability to reconcile users’ self-presentations with their online comments (over both of which users typically have control) can be leveraged to solicit “lulz”.

Trolls obtain “lulz” (Phillips, 2015) when users, typically from external communities, perceive speech as an attempt to damage an interest and take offense at its use, appearing hypersensitive or over-reactionary when the meanings of or intents behind speech are not, in fact, to harm (and are instead to provoke outrage or a strong reaction). A desire to provoke outrage is not necessarily aligned with a desire to harm: outrage, like offense, may be unpleasant or emotional, but is not in itself damaging to an interest (Feinberg, 1987). Trolling is prevalent within online spaces and virtual forms of communication, perhaps due to the anonymous nature of online interactions where users can feel less accountability and can easily adopt alternate identities to generate reactions from other users (Phillips, 2015). The closest colloquial offline

equivalent to a troll, a “wind-up merchant”, is “a teaser, especially of gullible people” (Cranny, 2003, n.p.) who provokes reactions (not necessarily of outrage) through more lighthearted practical joking or teasing. Trolling, and its focus on provoking outrage for “lulz”, is a dynamic of social engagement that impacts understandings of harm by bringing outrage, offense and intentionality to the forefront of virtual communications. It is therefore imperative to consider trolling in virtual harm assessments.

My data highlight that in many cases, trolls are easy to identify. @T61, whose tweets I will not reproduce verbatim in order to protect anonymity, exemplifies several of these easily visible identification. His username includes the word “troll”; his previous tweets condemn forms of harm within GamerGate (specifically doxxing) yet he emphatically posts multiple tweets in support of doxxing alongside excessive exclamation points; and he also retweets users who angrily respond to his trolling. These indicators illustrate that ‘obvious’ trolls can post content that does not correspond to other content they have previously posted (for instance, endorsing doxxing in one post on an ‘anti-GamerGate’ forum and condemning it in another post on a ‘pro-GamerGate’ forum); can over-emphatically articulate their support for harmful behaviours in an attempt to provoke a stronger reaction (for instance, using excessive exclamation points); can have usernames that betray their self-identification as a troll (for instance, strategically integrating the word “troll” or the letters T-R-O-L-L); or can re-post “lulz” that have resulted from their trolling efforts.

In response to a tweet expressing outrage that another user posted homophobic slurs, for instance, @T62 tweets, “shouldn’t it be obvious that [he] is a troll? Their [user]name is ‘FAG’”. @T63 also points out that this user “obviously is a troll” because he had previously posted a Photoshop of a Sonic the Hedgehog game, exaggeratedly claiming it promotes drug use [when

this claim, to those familiar with the franchise, is far-fetched]. RAGG15 posts that, “I always get flooded with trolls saying faggot/drink bleach, its obvious when the hate is so OTT [over the top]”. Trolling also thereby can be indicated by usernames or exaggerated “over the top” posted content that betrays an intention to solicit “lulz” from other users. When such indicators are lacking, however, trolls are less easily identifiable. In such cases, it can be unclear whether users are trolls or whether they sincerely endorse otherwise universally condemned harms or sincerely mean to perpetuate violence or discrimination. These cases are complicated in the context of GamerGate by the vast range of community contexts that impact intents behind communications in the same way that they impact meaning-making (see section 6.2).

As discussions in this study suggest, there is a broad range of intents motivating users’ choices of speech (which I have highlighted already in this chapter), including to troll, to joke, to highlight irony, to express endearment, to offend, or to engage in resistance. While sometimes users can intend to inflict harm and can mobilize language to express power over others, these intents can also situate otherwise harmful forms of speech as benign, even if they may be shocking or unpleasant for other users to read. These alternate intents are imperative to consider in assessments of harm: while it is necessary to consider subjective experience, considerations of intent notably can suggest that alleged harms may have ludic connotations (where threats, as in the case of trolling, may be cases of ‘playing out’ bad behaviour online). Intent is a key component of moral responsibility for behaviour, particularly in light of the fantastical contexts that virtual communications can often assume (as I will explore in Chapter 7). Considering harm without considering moral responsibility for harm seems troublesome; I therefore advocate that intent should play a role in a more complex framework for harm assessment.

It is therefore important – as I have highlighted in the previous section – to avoid reproducing in reference to GamerGate the same frames of meaning-making used within dominant culture, to the ultimate failure of gaining more complex insights into harm, moral responsibility, and these power relations. In the case of GamerGate, this reproduction of conventional meaning-making can manifest as assessing harm solely along lines of conventional gender binaries (where researchers or reporters – see Chapter 1 – define perpetrators [or, as the case may be, trolls] as exclusively male and victims as exclusively female), much in the same way that Halley (2008) cautions against. This can also manifest as defining harm along conventional identity-based connotations of language that position some forms of language as harmful in and of themselves, without room for alternate meanings (where “fag”, for instance, is necessarily seen as harmful and homophobic in all cases).

Some users do advocate that certain forms of speech are inherently harmful regardless of the intents behind them – for example, RAGG16, a moderator of /r/againstgamergate, posts that

We see so many arguments about what someone intended to do, but who cares? If you say something racist you said something racist, regardless of your intent. That you don't mean to is arguably worse, because unless you accidentally used the wrong words (meaning you admit to a mistake), it means you are unaware of how your words are racist. That's casual, unconscious racism, and saying that you didn't mean to be racist doesn't change the fact that you were.

In rare cases in my fieldsites, it is also true that some forms of speech appear to be associated with harmful intents. 8CV12 posts that “Fags and cunts need to be doxxed”; 8CGG17 advocates that “People need to rough up Trannies when they see them, irl they cant hide from you like they can on the internet”; RKIA20 doxxes another user by posting, “This guy is a faggot SJW, have fun: [target's address]”). Intentional harm can also involve using slurs repeatedly or in organized groups to intimidate, cause fear, or to influence Internet searches for particular users or

identifiable individuals to be associated with potentially damaging or private information (for example, regarding sexual orientation, disability or gender identity). 8CV13, for instance, posts that “Everyone needs to go to [identifiable individual’s] blog and leave comments about how she’s a post-op tranny, it’ll come up whenever she’s trying to apply for jobs”. These examples illustrate that cases of a demonstrable intent to harm can include using slurs to call for targeted action that involves universal harms such as doxxing or criminal harassment; in these cases, users are undeniably morally responsible for the harms that their communications effect.

@T66 posts a series of tweets about the damage that can be caused by these intents to harm: “I’ve had harassers spam me with hate, calling me fag and nigger [...] also sending threats to my personal email accounts and Facebook and [...] responding to anything I post publicly with false information about me. [...] It makes me feel scared, humiliated and unsafe.” These ill intents, as I have illustrated earlier in this chapter, are, however, universally condemned throughout my dataset as harmful and are often against the law or against community guidelines. In addition, they fall under Feinberg’s (1987) definition of harm, since they damage interests rather than merely offending.

I have outlined that in the context of GamerGate, users from subcultures where traditionally offensive speech takes on alternate meanings can employ slurs reclamatorily, ironically, endearingly, jokingly, or as a form of resistance rather than with an intent to harm. In cases where users’ posts have not evidenced a demonstrable intent to harm, external users may nonetheless be offended due to a lack of awareness of community norms surrounding these forms of speech; a belief that there are motivations to harm behind them; or a belief that certain types of speech inherently cause harm rather than mere offense. GamerGate illustrates that this disagreement between users’ perceptions of the harmful impact of certain forms of speech,

perceptions of intent to harm, and actual intents can be a salient point of conflict, and is one that must be taken into consideration in assessments of harm.

It is therefore necessary in the context of GamerGate to consider the diverse intents that can impact the meaning of users' communications. Understanding these intents can allow for more insightful and intersectional analyses of harm that take stock of micro-level understandings of communication and culture. All subcultures do not define harm along the same lines, and most are comprised of a diverse range of individuals (much in the same way that gamers represent diverse demographics) with diverse intents behind their communications. Accounting for this diversity of harm-related meanings and intents can build more effective solutions to harm that still acknowledge the pervasiveness of broader systems of discrimination (such as misogyny or racism), but also avoid oversimplifying or pre-determining meaning in online contexts. Alternate forms of meaning-making must be acknowledged, where harm is not framed in similar terms as dominant culture and where intent can play a key role in whether communications should be assessed as harmful. Trolling, in the context of this study, is an apt example of this trend, where otherwise harmful speech can be used with an intent not to harm.

6.4 – Theoretically grounding a three-tiered framework for virtual harm assessment

Feinberg (1987) acknowledges that unpleasant acts or behaviours are not inherently harmful since they do not necessarily damage interests. He expands to say that:

... experiences can distress, offend, or irritate us, without harming any of our interests. They come to us, are suffered for a time, and then go, leaving us as whole and undamaged as we were before. The unhappy mental states they produce are motley and diverse. They include unpleasant sensations (evil smells, grating noises), transitory disappointments and disillusionments, wounded pride, hurt feelings, aroused anger, shocked sensibility, alarm, disgust, frustration, impatient restlessness, acute boredom, irritation, embarrassment, feelings of guilt and shame, physical pain (at a readily tolerable level), bodily discomfort, and many more. In all but exceptional cases [...] people do not have [...] interests simply in the avoidance of these states as such. And like various pleasures of the moment,

passing unpleasantnesses are neither in nor against one's interests. For that reason, they are not to be classified as harms (1987, p. 45-46).

For Feinberg, unpleasantness only becomes harmful “when its presence is sufficient to impede an interest” (1987, p. 47). This can occur when conditions are unpleasant to such an extent that they incapacitate (for example, by causing mental distress or ill health that renders someone unable to work or to perform other tasks) or hinder the pursuit of other goals (for instance, by causing fear, anxiety or stigma that produces adverse professional or social consequences, or by inciting violence). Unpleasant conditions may also be harmful if they are severe, prolonged, repeated, or occur at untimely moments (Feinberg, 1987). How and whether particular undesirable conditions constitute harm, as I have shown in the previous three sections, is hotly debated within GamerGate discourses, particularly surrounding the use of offensive or hateful speech.

Some scholars (Jane, 2015; Lamarque, 2006), whose claims I have critiqued throughout sections 6.1-6.3, emphasize the importance of audience reception as an arbiter of harm. These scholars argue that the harmfulness of unpleasant speech should be assessed in terms of how speech is rhetorically constructed to be objectionable or has a contextual impact of being objectionable, positioning audiences as key determinants of contextual impact and rhetorical construction. Contextual impact, in this case, refers to the factors that shape audience interpretations within particular communicative settings, including type and closeness of relationships between communicators, varying interactional norms, and how meaning may shift across different social settings (Jane, 2015; O'Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003). Contextual impact involves specifically whose interpretation of a message determines meaning of that message, where Jane (2015) and Lamarque (2006) focus on meaning as interpreted by audiences who receive particular messages.

Rhetorical construction, meanwhile, entails the “linguistic, historical, and broadly cultural resources” (Lamarque, 2006, p. 179) that audiences draw upon to make meaning of communications (in the case of GamerGate, for instance, histories of discrimination such as misogyny, homophobia or transphobia that can position identity-based slurs as injurious). Lamarque specifies that rhetorical construction does not entail “author psychology” (*ibid.*) – in other words, it does not entail authorial intent. Lamarque argues that less consideration should be given to intentionality than to whether victims experience behaviours as harmful, describing that assessing harm through the lens of intentionality is an “intentional fallacy” that disregards non-authorial experience in conceptualizing harm. Feinberg similarly argues that harm can entail risks or setbacks to interests that are caused “either intentionally or negligently” (Feinberg, 1987, p. 105), implying that intentionality is not something that must necessarily play a role in harm assessment.

That audience reception (or subjective experience) of harm should be prioritized to a greater degree than intentionality (or that intentionality should not be prioritized at all), as I have touched upon in the beginning of this chapter, is a major socio-legal argument endorsed by a vast range of legal and feminist scholars. In a specifically virtual context, Jane (2015) claims that harm assessment should focus on audience reception to a greater degree than authorial intent. She classifies a vast range of online behaviours that are not necessarily damaging to interests (Feinberg, 1987) – including trolling, intolerance, denigration, exclusion or unpleasantness – as harmful “e-bile” (Jane, 2015), regardless of the motivations for these behaviours. Jane argues that overclassifying certain communications or behaviours as harmful is a less significant risk than imposing a narrower definition that could potentially exclude certain forms of harm. However, I submit that this over-classification can itself be damaging, even if certain types of inflammatory

speech (for example, advocating genocide) could lead to a breach of the peace and ultimately result in harm. In broadly over-coding any inflammatory, offensive or aggressive speech as harmful, Jane's approach can potentially be used to support restrictions upon freedom of speech or even punitive legal sanctions against types of speech that are experienced as "nasty" (Jane, 2015, p.531), but not necessarily harmful. It can also simultaneously fail to acknowledge that "nastiness" is an entirely subjective concept that is not consistently conceptualized between different audiences.

Without delving too deeply into legal theory, it is useful to briefly mention some of the feminist socio-legal scholarship also emphasising subjective experience of harm over intent. For instance, Craig argues in favour of a legal theory of sexual integrity that acknowledges five key areas that impact subjective experience of harm. She argues that "kinship and family systems, economic and social organization, social regulation, political interventions and the development of cultures of resistance" (2012, p. 14) – and the subjective experiences of harm that result therefrom – should form the foundations of legal responses to harm, moving away from "norm-based judgments between right and wrong" (*ibid.*). Wait criticizes legal frameworks in the United Kingdom for failing to account for inter-subjective experiences of harm, particularly when these experiences fall outside the confines of "traditional gender roles and relationship types" (2005, p. 97). Phillips advocates for legal consideration of experience-based discourses on sexual violence, contending that "experiential accounts [...] hold the potential to shape, or 'reform', the law" (2015, p. 1), while Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy similarly stress an approach to law that foregrounds "the socially constructed, embodied, and self-constructed aspects of identity in the narrative of lived experiences" (2013, p. 1).

Online discussions on GamerGate, as I have illustrated in this chapter, show that audience reception does indeed impact harm, as these feminist socio-legal readings of contextual impact and rhetorical construction stress. However, assessing harm while over-emphasizing or only emphasizing this axis can be troublesome because doing so fails to account for other factors that can also impact harm. I have shown in this chapter that these factors notably include community context, where offensive speech can adopt alternate meanings that are grounded in play, resistance, irony or reclamation, in addition to authorial intent. Authorial intent is particularly important when intent is an aspect of blameworthiness and moral responsibility for harm, and when the fantastical connotations of online space (see Chapter 7) underscore that many allegedly harmful virtual behaviours may have ludic intents, which are not to cause violence or injury.

Feinberg points out that over-relying on audience reception as an arbiter of harm “places on us the burden, if we are to avoid vacuity, of distinguishing those of our interests that ground morally valid claims to respect and noninterference from our fellows, from those of our interests that do not. That task, in turn, would seem to presuppose a rather complete moral system” (1987, p. 111), when no such system, in fact, exists. My data – where users often do not intend to harm but can intend to reclaim slurs, joke, play, engage in resistance, or troll – emphasizes that harm assessment should also consider authorial intent. I therefore submit that when considering whose historico-cultural and linguistic resources and whose interpretation of a message determines the meaning of that message, broader harm assessment should look not only at the agents who receive particular messages, but also the agents who create and send them.

I am therefore reluctant to embrace frameworks for harm assessment that are completely audience-centric. Scholars such as Jane (2015) and Lamarque (2006) tend to conflate discomfort or objectionality with harm, which can lead to undue restrictions upon freedoms (e.g., of speech

or of expression) or to punitive responses towards behaviours or speech that various audiences subjectively deem offensive. It seems unreasonable to place a disproportionate emphasis upon audience reception at the expense of failing to consider a more nuanced range of factors and agents that can impact assessments of harm and shape its various contextual impacts and rhetorical constructions. Acknowledging this range of factors is a key aspect of complicating notions of harm not only in GamerGate, but within virtual spaces more generally – something that I urge throughout this dissertation.

It is undeniable that audience reception should play a key role in harm assessment. Yet within the contexts of broader cyber-communications, audiences are increasingly heterogeneous and blended (Jenkins, 2006), and newly prevalent forms of intent (such as trolling) have emerged that can impact experiences of harm. Harm assessment therefore must also account for context in a less restrictive or audience-centric sense, as well as intentionality. As such, I argue that existing frameworks for harm assessment, grounded in legal theorizations and legal rulings prioritizing audience-centric experiences of harm, must be revisited. I urge that emerging frameworks for harm assessment draw from my analysis, which reinforces previous work by O’Sullivan and Flanagan (2003), to assess harm in more complex ways that capture the range of nuances that underscore virtual communications (and, indeed, offline communications). As such, I suggest a three-tiered, rather than single-tiered, system for harm assessment: in tandem with considerations of subjective experience of harm, discourses at work in this study show that it is pertinent to consider community context and authorial intent.

6.5 – Conclusion

In this chapter I have drawn from GamerGate to advocate for a three-tiered approach to harm assessment that better acknowledges a more complex ontology of virtual harm. These three

tiers include an assessment of the subjective experience of potential violations; how potential violations gain meaning and are perceived within the context of particular subcultures and communities (where I highlighted that offensive speech can invoke alternate meanings that are not overtly discriminatory, including meanings that reclamatory, ironic, playful or resistant); and, finally, the authorial intent of potential violations (where I illustrated the significant role of trolling in GamerGate and have highlighted that otherwise harmful speech can also be intended jokingly, endearingly, or as a form of resistance). These three tiers, I argued, must be considered simultaneously and with equal weight in order to account for the diverse meanings of harm that can be encountered across virtual contexts.

Users across Twitter, Reddit and 8chan and on both sides of the GamerGate debate acknowledge that there are indeed certain contexts in which offensive speech is universally harmful (see Chapter 5): namely, where it is intended to advocate for literal prejudice, denial of rights, or violence against particular marginalized identities. Outside of these universally harmful contexts, I have established that there are legitimate damages to interests (Feinberg, 1987) that can be associated with offensive or hateful speech (for example, revictimization, fear, anxiety, self-harm, or feeling pressured to leave virtual spaces) and that users across my dataset do recognize the legitimacy of these harms. Speech can also inflict harm when it invokes power dynamics that oppress or otherwise cause injury to particular groups. The three tiers of harm assessment for which I advocate impact whether these harms are experienced as such, with significant roles played by subjective experience (for example, if users hail from histories of identity-based marginalization), subcultural and community context (for example, if a subculture typically perceives certain forms of speech as harmful and/or codifies them as such in its terms of use), and intent (for example, if users intend to advocate for or cause harm or violence).

However, within GamerGate, I have shown that there are just as many users who contend that slurs and offensive speech are not always harmful. This can occur when users hail from particular subjective experiences (for instance, when slurs do not invoke personal histories of identity-based marginalization), within certain community contexts (namely, where slurs take on normalized alternate meanings), and in the context of certain intents (where users are trolling, joking, or engaging in resistance). In these cases, damages to interest are not necessarily always present, and users can be offended rather than harmed (Feinberg, 1987).

It seems necessary, then, to balance and account for these competing sets of perceptions, intents and experiences. My suggested three-tiered approach to harm assessment is an attempt to engage in this process, by considering whether violations invoke personal identity in a way that causes speech to be experienced as impediment of an interest rather than a mere discomfort, while simultaneously considering community context and authorial intent. By acknowledging that contextual impact and rhetorical construction are related to these three tiers rather than simply to audience reception alone (Craig, 2012; Jane, 2015; Lamarque, 2006), it is possible to build more nuanced and intersectional considerations of identity, community belonging and personal history that can play key roles in accounts of harm. These more nuanced accounts of harm have relevance not only for GamerGate, but also for broader virtual (and offline) contexts. I will suggest in the conclusion to this dissertation several complementary means by which this may also be achieved. Rather than censorship or punitiveness, my proposed solutions range from educational initiatives to more visible codification of community norms to technological solutions that grant users more agency over the content they view online. These solutions include such innovations as user-activated content filters, variable visibility settings, increased privacy options, and the ability for users to select how communicative interactions take place (for

example, granting them the ability to control who may respond to posted content, read posted content, or send them private messages).

Chapter 7 – Finding the “game” in GamerGate: Thinking through the fantasy of virtuality and virtual spaces as an extension of the “magic circle”

Foreword

In this chapter, I add a final layer of complexity to my ontology of harm. As I moved through my data, narrative threads emerged throughout my fieldsites to suggest that users perceive virtual communications as having fantastical and playful connotations, where online interactions are commonly seen as ‘less real’ and more ludic than those that occur offline. Users commonly describe virtual space as a “different beast” (8CV17; RKIA21; 8CGG18; @T67) than offline space, hinting at qualitative differences between ‘the virtual’ and ‘the offline’ that make virtual spaces more fantastical. Within virtual spaces like my fieldsites, users notably frame threatening communications as having a low likelihood of offline follow-through (RKIA22; 8CGG19) and as having “less real” impacts than offline communications (8CV21; 8CV23), and perceive that users online are misrepresenting themselves (for example, to be in a position of power to carry out offline harm when they might really be “just some kid behind a keyboard” – 8CV18).

These fantastical, ludic connotations impact users’ experiences of, perceptions of, and intents to harm within virtual environments. Namely, these connotations mean that users can perceive virtual interactions as having less harmful (less ‘real’) impacts than offline interactions. These perceptions can in turn shape users’ intents behind their virtual communications, where these intents often become playful or fantastical (notably manifesting as intents to troll or intents to perform ‘bad’ behaviours in online contexts where they are not seen as not being ‘as serious’ as in offline contexts). As a result, these fantastical connotations complicate the ways in which we can understand virtual harm – and harm in the context of GamerGate more specifically.

In section 7.1, I first consider how users' understandings of 'the virtual' can impact their perceptions of reality and fantasy. Prevailing perceptions of fantasy and reality in turn shape how users perceive the legitimacy of virtual harms, including those that manifest in GamerGate. I outline that users tend to perceive virtual spaces and virtual interactions as fantastical, playful, or "less real", and, consequently, are likely to perceive virtual harms as less legitimate than offline harms. I link users' fantastical associations with virtual space to a perceived lack of virtual embodiment, in addition to ambiguity regarding intentionality and subjective experiences of harm within virtual contexts. At the same time, however, prevailing media discourses on GamerGate stress the legitimacy and realism of harms that occur within virtual locales. This can create conflict when users attempt to reconcile competing notions of fantasy and reality in their assessments of GamerGate-related harms.

I close by suggesting in section 7.2 that a way of resolving these conflicts regarding virtually-mediated fantasy vs. reality can be to think of virtual spaces as gamespaces that are an extension of the "magic circle" (Huizinga, 1938). I draw from Salen and Zimmerman (2003) to argue, as discourses in this chapter highlight, that virtuality encompasses systems of meaning-making that are distinct from those outside the magic circle; redefined rules governing symbolic interactions; and new forms of temporality, space, identity and social relations. Thinking through these aspects of the magic circle allows us to acknowledge that virtual interactions – not only in the context of GamerGate, but also more generally – can be seen as a "game" where fantasy *is* reality, with implications for how users make sense of harm and victimization in virtual environments.

It is important to distinguish that, as a range of scholars (see Castronova, 2005; Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Milford, 2015; Nieuwdorp, 2005) note, offline

spaces and online spaces are not distinct. As I have outlined in Chapter 2, and as my analysis in Chapters 5 and 6 have suggested, virtual and non-virtual subcultures and communities complexly intersect, and do not exist in isolation from one another. I do not attempt, in presenting users' fantastical connotations with virtual space as revealed by my data, to reify this false binary. The importance of this data is not that it in any way implies that on- and offline spaces do not bleed together: instead, it highlights that users can perceive or experience virtual spaces as having different – namely less realistic – nuances than offline space, which in turn can shape understandings of harm within online contexts. To clarify: virtual communications can be and commonly are experienced in very real ways, as I have illustrated in Chapters 5 and 6. However, that users can perceive them as being more fantastical or ludic than offline communications is important to acknowledge, since it lends complexity to the meanings assumed by speech within virtual locales, and potential harms that can be associated with this speech.

7.1 – Virtuality vs. “meatspace”: Considering notions of fantasy and reality

8CV19 sees virtual communications as distinct from offline communications: “when you’re posting on [8chan] you say things that you wouldn’t in real life. how we act on here isn’t how we act out in the world. [...] The Internet isn’t real.” 8CV20 agrees, hinting at a divide between online spaces and offline spaces. This user posts that, “I’m 100% against censorship in all forms, but you can’t pretend that what people say on here is the same as what they would say in real life. It’s not the same thing. If people make a threat [on 8chan], there’s no followthrough. things don’t mean the same here. Anti[-GamerGate] pretends that they do, but no one can seriously believe that.” 8CGG20 describes similar surrealism regarding the use of “fag” on 8chan, stating that,

When I call someone a fag on here and say that they should die, obviously I don't mean 'people should go kill that homosexual'. I mean obviously it's a joke, it's a meme. but even when it's not, the consequences aren't as real as they are in meatspace. censorship is inexcusable there too, but online it's a complete fucking joke to think that words create any real danger.

8CGG21 similarly opines that,

On [8chan] we talk about things that have real life implications. We make plans that we put into place in the real world. But until we go back to the real world and make the magic happen, it's all just talk. It's the Internet and people constantly say shit they don't mean. GamerGate has shown all of us that no one's what they seem, especially online. People lie. People are shills. People are cronies. People are fakes. Half of you could be pretending to be someone you're not. Maybe half of you fags are closet antis gathering intel for the enemy. Fuck. That's what people need to understand – real life is real life, and nothing else is real. You can never take the internet at face value.

8CV21 posts that “the internet isn't fucking real life, as much as some people wish that it was. SJWs and MSM [mainstream media] don't get that, or they do get that but its a long con where they want you to believe that they don't.” 8CV22 similarly posts that “MSM is more guilty than anyone on our side [pro-GamerGate]. Nothing but cronies spreading lies to try to sell papers to the masses who eat that shit up.” 8CV23 responds that “It's laughable that [media] tries to make everyone believe that fags saying shit online is the same as someone getting doxxed or having a death threat sent to your house. The sad part though is that people actually buy into that.”

8CGAMGAT11 posts that, “People who get butthurt about words on the internet should learn to take criticism. It's not harassment, it's just straight talk. Instead of talking about the fake violence behind words I use online, those shills should really be writing about their own unethical journalism.” 8CGAMGAT12 agrees:

If I call you out for your inexistant (sic) ethics and you're female you think I'm misogynistic because journalists have conditioned you to think that. That's not my fault. If I call you a cunt, maybe it's just because you're being a cunt. It's words online, get over yourself. MSM doesn't help by making people believe words online are the same as real life violence.

8CGAMGAT13 also concurs, posting that, “People are stuck so far up their SJW asses that they buy into MSM’s lies. The real story is about how the journalists whose shit they eat up are unethical frauds, not about how the chans are full of murderers and woman haters (they’re not).”

As these quotes illustrate, users popularly see ‘the virtual’ as distinct from the non-virtual, positioning virtuality as less real than non-virtuality, in line with other studies involving perceptions of virtual space (Ferreday, 2009; A. Markham, 1998). As I have established in earlier chapters, virtual spaces shift boundaries between fantasy and reality, where “virtual” suggests something that appears “as-good-as” real (Wilbur, 2000) and opens up new spaces of potency, potential and play (Wise, 1997). At the same time that they open up these new spaces, virtual environments enable users to claim these “as-good-as real” experiences as practically real with authority that does not necessarily apply to other fantastical activities such as daydreaming (Ferreday, 2009), further blurring boundaries between fantasy and reality and conflating “seeming” with “being” (Ferreday, 2009). Ubiquitous technologization in contemporaneity renders it impossible to separate the virtual from the non-virtual, further obfuscating these boundaries between the fantastic and the realistic (Wilbur, 2000).

Users throughout my fieldsites, however, appear to perceive virtual spaces as more distinctly separable from offline spaces, conceiving of communications, interactions and behaviours that occur within virtual contexts as playful, fantastical or occurring amidst a backdrop of assumed surrealism, despite the fact that they can be experienced in practically real ways. On one hand, many users do acknowledge (as I have shown in Chapter 6) that misogynistic virtual harassment, like mainstream media reports espouse, can be experienced in real ways and that these experiences should be taken into consideration in assessments of and responses to harm. However, on the other, users can perceive that the ‘less real’ impacts of virtual

communications mean that virtual harms should be treated less seriously than offline harms. They can therefore feel that, even when taken at face value (and even when media reports are taken as truth), virtual harms are less likely to translate to actual damages to interest (Feinberg, 1987) than offline violations.

Mainstream media portrayals of GamerGate emphasize the harmful impacts of online attacks, stressing the legitimacy of these practically real experiences of harm despite users' prevailing sentiments that virtual interactions are fantastical. In doing so, they create a juxtaposition of reality and fantasy that can cause conflict and tension when users engage in harm assessments related to these media reports or attempt to make meaning from them. Users above hint at this in their comments about "MSM" contributing to popular perceptions that online behaviours such as trolling are comparable in harmful impact to acts of offline violence, which these users do not, it seems, believe this to be the case.

While these users do support the idea that virtual spaces relate to fantasy and play and while this does represent a different way of knowing and being in online spaces, it is simultaneously necessary to acknowledge the other tensions that these narratives articulate. Namely, these statements can betray underlying misogyny or discrimination and displacement of responsibility for harmful words and threats. Users can legitimately believe that words in virtual spaces are more fantastical and less meaningful; however, these users also can potentially be misogynists who believe that media are liberal elites exercising a social justice agenda with the goal of suppressing men. Read this way, users' claims that words online are "just words" can serve to deny that these words are harmful, erasing the legitimacy of subjective experiences of harm that slurs such as "cunt" can evoke. I have highlighted similar tensions in Chapter 6, particularly relating to the slur "fag" on 8chan. It is imperative to keep these tensions in mind; it

is also reasonable to question whether users legitimately hold beliefs that the impact of words used online is not as ‘real’, or whether the idea that words online aren’t as realistic can merely serve to justify harmful behaviour.

RKIA22 links the surrealism of virtual interactions to a lack of embodiment outside of “meatspace” (a term which itself invokes the embodiment ascribed to offline, but not online, spaces). He argues that this lack of embodiment produces a lack of accountability for harm: “It’s not like you’re talking to an actual person [online]. There’s no one actually there, so you’re not accountable.” RKIA23 agrees: “You’re just talking at usernames, you’re not talking to anyone real. You can call someone a cunt or a nigger or a kike and there’s no repercussions. Unless you get banned or something, but then you just make a new account.”

Indeed, many users in my fieldsites reify an offline/corporealized vs. online/decorporealized binary. RKIA24 points out, in a similar way to 8CGAMGAT12, that,

people also need to know that the shit people say doesn’t mean anything. It’s just words. There’s no one there. It’s just the Internet. If someone calls someone a nigger sure he’s being a dick, but he’s not committing a hate crime or trying to start a lynch mob. There’s no real person to lynch and no real people to form a mob. We all talk, no one’s actually legit hurting anyone. It’s just words on the Internet.

In this instance, it is important to highlight that RKIA24 does not acknowledge, as I have illustrated in the preceding chapter, that slurs carry histories of violence and marginalization that can impact whether others experience them in harmful ways. RKIA24 fails to point out that words such as “cunt”, “nigger” or “kike” are chosen deliberately, and often for the histories of harm that they invoke – in this sense, it can be disingenuous to claim that words are meaningless, whether or not they are articulated within a virtual context.

@T68 expands upon the idea of disembodied virtual presence to draw parallels between the perceived fantastical nature of virtual identities and a lack of personal identifiability, noting

that, “Anyone can claim to be anyone they want on Twitter. I have no way of knowing who any of y’all are or if y’all are real”. This user also observes that “When your profile is a cartoon or a pic from the Internet, it doesn’t give me the impression that there’s anyone real behind there”. @T69 concurs that there is never a guarantee of identifiability on Twitter: “Even if you have a name on your profile, for all I know I’m talking to someone completely fake.” @T70 replies by revealing that since there is no way of verifying users’ identities, he feels freer to speak in potentially harmful ways since he perceives that there is no one ‘real’ who could be harmed: “ill say whatever the hell i want, cuz if im talking to a fake-o, it dont matter what i say [...] you cant hurt someone who isnt real, i can say ill kill you or fuck ur nigger cunt and it just means nothing.” @T69 shares these sentiments, responding, “You’re right, that makes me way less likely to care what I say on here”.

8CGG22 similarly posts that the lack of a corporeal presence makes users of and communications within virtual spaces less real, and means that online interactions have fewer potentially harmful impacts than offline interactions. “It’s different when you’re talking to an actual person,” this user writes. “On [the Internet], words don’t mean anything because they’re just words. There’s no face behind them, you know that they can’t lead anywhere. There aren’t any real impacts, it’s not like people are getting physically injured.” 8CV24 likewise posts that a lack of corporeal presence online causes users to perceive online interactions as less real: “We all call one another fags and shit. If I’m talking to someone irl [in real life], though, obviously I don’t say the same things. irl you actually have to think about the impact of what you say because people are real out there. When you’re talking to a real body you can appreciate that impacts might be legit.” 8CV25 agrees: “There’s a huge difference between online life and meatspace.”

In linking the idea of corporeality to legitimacy of harm, users convey that the presence of a “real” body is a requirement for there to be a perception that harm is real – in other words, harm is seen as more real offline, or within “meatspace”. This is intriguing when various scholars suggest that corporeal presence is not required in order for experiences or communications to be “real” or revealing. Virtual spaces, despite the anonymity that they can facilitate, can indeed be incredibly revealing: choices of diction and phrasing shed light on users’ social and cultural capital; vocabulary and idiom can additionally suggest certain material statuses, levels of education, or identity characteristics such as ethnicity, nationality, age, gender or sexual orientation (Gies, 2008). As Turkle has argued, “virtual cross-dressing” (1995, p. 212) is not simple, can be psychologically complex, and users can be identifiable in a multiplicity of ways that they may not be able to avoid, such as through the language they use, which gives the body a “social existence” (Williams, 2001, p. 154). Harkening back to early cyber-scholars such as Donna Haraway, scholars such as Gies, Turkle and Williams rightfully acknowledge that it is not easy or accurate to distinguish embodiment from virtual presence when, in fact, identity and virtual or technologized representations are complexly intertwined: as Haraway argues, “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (1991, p. 150).

While virtual spaces have the ability to shift the locus of human agency to allow for the transgression of corporeal boundaries to be experienced in very real ways (Bauman, 2003; McRae, 1996; Samoylova, 2014; Stone, 1995), the realism of this experience is not popularly acknowledged by those who frequent the virtual spaces that I analyse in this study. Instead, users tend to have an assumption that virtual experience is disembodied and because of this disembodiment, virtual interactions are popularly seen as less realistic.

Interestingly, the various users cited in this section illustrate that while scholars such as Phillips (2015) argue that technological architectures on social networking platforms encourage emotional investment by causing users to self-present in personal ways, users observe that these same self-presentations and the technological architectures behind them can be seen as conduits for the fantastic, the depersonalized, and the playful, where there is an expectation that users could be adopting “fake” identities or experimenting or “playing” with presentations of self. This expectation of users in my dataset has been noted by other scholars writing on virtual environments: virtual spaces offer the possibility for identity experimentation and rewriting enculturated codes relating to identity, such as expectations of norms associated with gender, race or sexuality (Kibby & Costello, 2001). The Internet creates a space “midway between fantasy and action that enables experimentation” (Adam, Murphy, & de Wit, 2011, p. 507), particularly with aspects of identity that users are reluctant to express in real life as a result of fear, stigma, embarrassment or rejection (Adam, Murphy & de Wit, 2011; Ross, 2005). For example, users can feel more free to try out or play with new sexualities, gender identities or cultural identities, ‘testing the waters’ in a comparatively low-risk environment (Bargh et al., 2002).

As Toma and Hancock (2010) and Whitty and Joinson (2009) suggest, the ludic and experimental connotations that users can associate with online self-presentations can embolden beliefs that virtual self-presentations are false or misleading. Campbell (2004) agrees, arguing that virtual spaces’ ability to allow users to transcend their physical bodies means that users can be apt to see virtual identities as false or fantastical. Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimmons (2002) directly link these fantastical associations with virtual identity to reduced social costs or sanctions for acting in particular ways within virtual environments, and specifically for engaging in online harm. My data reinforce this claim, where users in my fieldsites suggest that as result of their

fantastical associations with online self-representations, the emotional investment identified by Phillips does not always occur. Instead, users must buy into the legitimacy of virtual self-presentations in order for this emotional investment to take place, and thereby encourage users not to engage in acts that could potentially be harmful.

However, scholars just as often criticise ideas (like those submitted by Toma & Hancock, 2010 and Whitty & Joinson, 2009) that virtual spaces can create transient, fantastical environments that work to reinforce fears – like those expressed by users in this study – that users are more likely to self-present in inauthentic, misleading or patently false ways. These scholars suggest that virtual communications are no more likely to be inauthentic than offline communications (Ferreday, 2009; Phillips, 2015; Turkle, 1995; Williams, 2001), that the “portrayal of the virtual as invariably deceptive and inauthentic” (Ferreday, 2009, p. 318) is inaccurate, and, in the end, that deception itself is not necessarily damaging or threatening (Phillips, 2015). For these reasons, I have chosen not to engage in an authenticity/inauthenticity debate in this dissertation: disputes of authenticity or inauthenticity of virtual communications are less fruitful than the fact that these communications reflect identities, perspectives and intents that, like those offline, are multiplicitous and contingent. While acknowledging that users’ statements can reveal new insights into virtual communications, it is also crucial to carry forward the importance of subjective experience and subcultural contexts in assessments of harm, and to remain aware that forms of discrimination can play key roles not only in GamerGate, but in all online (and offline) communications.

RAGG17 highlights that, “one of the problems with GG is a problem with the internet, it’s that you never know what someone means. Someone might be a troll, someone might be legitimately harassing people. They’ll always claim that they aren’t, but maybe they’re just trying

to troll even harder by saying that. or maybe they aren't." RAGG18 ties uncertainty about intent to a lack of embodied presence in virtual space, responding that, "In the real world you can see someone's face, you can usually tell whether they're lying or what they mean. Online you don't have those cues so there's more of a question there." RKIA25 offers that the uncertainty of intent creates playful interactions based in ambiguity, describing that the fantastical nature of these interactions is a source of pleasure, particularly when it can be leveraged to troll more effectively:

I might get some judgement for saying this, but it's great when people don't know what I mean. I like to keep people guessing. You get way more of a reaction when people don't know whether you're joking or whether you're actually a huge racist or a woman-hater. You get so much more payoff when people don't know if you're being funny or whether you actually want to hurt someone. There's a sick sort of fun behind people not knowing what you mean. I know what I mean. But other people don't, and tbh I enjoy that.

Intent, as I have argued in Chapter 6, should play a role in harm assessments. Virtual spaces, however, complicate our understanding of harm if we understand virtual spaces within a primarily fantastical and play-based context. In this context, intent to harm, as these users exhibit, is difficult to ascertain.

The fantastical connotations of virtual space, in addition to impacting the intent of potential violations, are also linked to how violations are experienced. The most salient illustration of this can be seen in the use of the hashtag #killallmen, a viral hashtag in response to pervasive misogyny in contemporary culture more generally, and more specifically in the context of this study to misogyny in GamerGate and broader gamer subculture (Consalvo, 2012). @T71 establishes the ludic connotations of this hashtag, claiming that #killallmen is "just a joke"; @T72 agrees that "#KillAllMen is supposed to be in jest". RAGG19 draws this ludic context back to the lived experience of minority groups compared to more privileged majority groups who have not had to deal with the reality of identity-based violence:

Of course #KillAllMen doesn't advocate for actually killing all men. Because no one would ever take that seriously. Violence against men isn't a thing. Men aren't victimized just for being men. That's why it's okay to joke about it. Women though, women have to deal with the reality of violence just because of their gender. That's why jokes about that aren't jokes.

stavvers directly links the use of the hashtag #killallmen to the trope of fantasy and reality, suggesting that “this violent revenge fantasy remains just that – a revenge fantasy” (2013, para. 9). Tumblr user misandry-mermaid concurs with stavvers: “Misandry isn't real outside of the Internet” (2016). However, as I have argued in the previous chapter, if threats – even made in jest or even with fantastical connotations – are experienced as legitimate, this subjective experience must be considered, alongside intent and broader subcultural context, in assessments of harm. #KillAllMen additionally reflects some of the ludic intents that I have identified in Chapter 6, where the intents behind this hashtag are not overtly to kill all men or to advocate for the literal killing of all men, but to resist broader patriarchy in a playful, ironic way that can provoke outrage or an otherwise strong response (in other words, by trolling). This again returns to arguments I and countless others before me have made: it is necessary to consider harm and violence in context.

When potentially harmful behaviours or communications are seen as based in fantasy, as in the case of #killallmen, they are perceived as less legitimate sources of harm than those seen as based in reality. Communications seen as more based in reality include those that invoke offline forms of prejudice that are more pervasive and tied to offline histories of violence, discrimination and marginalization, and which therefore are perceived as more “real” and more likely to result in violence or a violation of rights or interests (Feinberg, 1987). In this instance, users are seen as unlikely to bring misandrist behaviours out of virtual realms but more likely to bring misogynistic behaviours out of virtual realms because misogyny is rooted in prevalent histories

of offline social inequality. Users throughout my fieldsites perceive misandry to be based in fantasy while perceiving misogyny to be based in reality. They therefore perceive virtual misogyny as more legitimately harmful than virtual misandry, even if misogyny is attached to ludic connotations, such as intents to joke or troll. Like Halley (2008), I argue that this assumption must be re-examined. I suggest that this can be achieved by considering virtual spaces as extensions of Huizinga's "magic circle", or as gamespaces.

7.2 – Expanding the “magic circle”: Rethinking virtual spaces as gamespaces

Virtuality, in shaping users' assessments of harm as fantastic and/or realistic, adds ludic connotations to users' online interactions. Within these ludic virtual contexts, alternate "rules", new ways of knowing, and new meanings govern communication, much like in a game. These fantastic or ludic connotations of virtual space have been noted by Massanari, who relates that on platforms such as Reddit, 8chan and Twitter "interactions [...] tend to feature elements of play and candor that one might not associate with traditional social-networking spaces" (2017, p. 331). The opening up of these ludic spaces, as I have shown in section 7.1, can influence users to perceive virtual interactions as "less real".

The ludic connotations of 'the virtual' are further amplified within a contemporary convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) where online spaces are saturated with mediated representations that have become a part of the very fabric of online social spaces. A range of media appear within users' social media timelines, in targeted advertisements, in comment sections on blogs or news sites, or can be embedded within posts on discussion forums such as Reddit or 8chan. As such, virtuality, mainstream media, users' social interactions, and notions of fantasy and reality are intimately intertwined. I close this chapter by arguing that it can be helpful to theorize these relationships by considering virtual spaces as extensions of Huizinga's (1938)

“magic circle”, and, it follows, as gamespaces, helping to provide further context for the ironic, playful, joking, resistant and trolling-based intents that I have outlined in Chapter 6.

The magic circle, as I have introduced in Chapter 2, refers to the distinct place in time and space created by a game. When a player enters the magic circle and engages in gameplay, social interactions shift and acquire new significance. The magic circle is a “playground” where interactions take place according to renegotiated rules, regulations, norms and meanings. As Huizinga explains, these renegotiations manifest as systems of meaning-making that are distinct from those outside the magic circle; redefined rules governing symbolic interactions; and new forms of temporality, space, identity and social relations. These elements of the magic circle can play a role in virtual interactions, virtual spaces and by extension virtual harm being seen by users as unclear, hypothetical, and less distinctly ‘real’.

It is important, before moving forward, to point out that the concept of the magic circle has been rightly criticized for being too rigid and for reifying spatial and cognitive divides that do not necessarily exist and that cannot be so easily reduced to an easily marked off space of fantasy. Consalvo points out that “the concept of the magic circle seems static and overly formalist. Structures may be necessary to begin gameplay, but we cannot stop at structures as a way of understanding the gameplay experience” (2009, p.408). Focusing only on these structures can lose sight of the simplex “contexts, justifications and limitations” (*ibid.*) that run through gamespaces, and can suggest a fantasy/reality binary that, when applied to virtual space, can suggest a similar on- and offline binary. This also has important implications for how subjective experience of harm within gamespaces and virtual spaces can be conceptualized. If virtual space is theoretically positioned as inherently playful, fantastical or “magic”, this can diminish the importance of subjective experience of virtual harm. This can also provide a platform for victim

blaming narratives where those who experience harms could, for example, be told that they are taking playful speech too seriously, be told that they should “lighten up”, or could have their real affective responses to virtual interactions be denied legitimacy.

My goal is not to mobilize the magic circle as a means of denying the importance of subjective experience of harm or denying the real affective impacts of virtual (or game-based, or otherwise fantastical) acts. On the contrary, as I have argued throughout chapter 6, subjective experience is an imperative consideration for assessments of virtual harm, and here I reiterate its importance. My goal is also not to suggest that virtual spaces are less real than offline spaces, or that virtual spaces and offline spaces can be separated. Virtuality – and gamespace, and fantasy – can be experienced in very real ways and prompt very real affective responses. My users, however, do illustrate the prevalence of these perceptions amongst those who inhabit online spaces, which are necessary to consider when thinking about harm, and particularly intent, related to virtual interactions. Employing the concept of the magic circle can allow us to understand that the considerations I have outlined in my approach to virtual harm assessment – not only subjective experience, but also subcultural context and authorial intent – can be impacted by the ways in which users can experience and perceive virtual spaces as more fantastical, as well as the ways in which technological design can impact these experiences and perceptions.

In the context of this project, redefined systems of meaning-making (Huizinga, 1938) involve a range of ludic meanings that manifest in the context of virtual locales. First, as I have described in section 7.1, users ascribe fantastical connotations to virtual space itself in comparison with offline space, where the meanings of virtual interactions shift from those based in reality to those based in fantasy. As the *Los Angeles Times* outlines, these fantastical meanings can influence users to perceive harm or harassment in GamerGate as part of a broader play frame

rather than as something with serious impacts: “Death threats and prank phone calls,” the *Times* describes, “became a part of [Zoe] Quinn’s daily routine, as if wreaking havoc on life became a game itself” (Martens, 2015, para. 8).

Within virtual contexts, a range of other ludic, fantastical or redefined meanings also manifest. The performance of identity may take on playful or fantastical qualities, for example, when users “try out” new identities (for example, a male self-presenting as a female), conceal aspects of self that may be apparent in offline contexts (for example, choosing not to disclose gender or racialization), or occupy alternate identities for the purposes of trolling other users (for example, portraying oneself as a misogynistic member of ‘pro-GamerGate’ to elicit outrage). As I have highlighted in Chapter 6 and in section 7.3, users’ communications can reflect a range of intents with playful meanings that do not always similarly manifest offline (notably trolling, but also adopting offensive speech jokingly, ironically, or as a form of resistance). Particular communities or subcultures can also establish redefined communicative norms that render certain types of speech normative or acceptable when in offline contexts they would be considered offensive (for instance, the use of “fag” on 8chan as a term of endearment and the reclamatory use of identity-based slurs by #NotYourShield – see Chapter 6).

Redefined rules governing symbolic interactions (Huizinga, 1938) in the context of my dataset include which particular forms of communication are permitted or prohibited via the terms of use of particular platforms, how communications are made visible (for instance, by relative popularity, by chronology, by content moderation, or by users’ ability to subscribe to or block other users), any impacts of technological architectures upon communications (for instance, whether communications take place privately or publicly and whether users are identifiable or anonymous), and specific informal subcultural norms where certain types of speech take on

alternate meanings (for instance, where the term “fag” is a term of endearment on 4chan and 8chan).

As I have established, users who are initiated to the communicative norms of particular virtual locales are aware that speech that would normally be intended or interpreted as harmful outside of these communities (for example, the term “fag”) can gain playful, metaphorical, fantastic or alternate connotations within these specific online contexts. Initiated users are familiar with the ludic connotations of otherwise harmful speech and use these ludic logics to “play” with fantasy and reality, abiding by alternate sets of “rules” (subculturally-specific communicative norms) that govern social interactions in the same way as rules for a game. These “rules” mean that in certain virtual contexts (for this study, a majority of virtual subcultures related to GamerGate), communications that could be harmful elsewhere (for instance, slurs such as “fag” that could incite violence or produce conditions of distress, fear or anxiety) take on alternate, fantastical connotations. These connotations only manifest within these specific virtual environments, making their harm less “real” for users who are initiated to these subcultural norms.

Finally, virtual spaces also reflect redefinitions of temporality and space (Huizinga, 1938). Within virtual environments, users are temporally “out of place” (Adams, Murphy, & Clarke, 2009, p. 247) – in other words, they are subject to a variety of influences that can dislocate them from their own temporality and spatial positionality. Virtual discussions, like those in on Twitter, Reddit and 8chan or those within the comment sections of online media articles, can take place over a range of time periods due to the capacity of technological architectures to archive virtual communications. They can be added to when they have seemingly ended; in many cases, users can “go back in time” and edit or delete their previous contributions. Discussions do not always

take place in real time, and when they do take place in real time, users can be situated in disparate real-world temporal and physical settings (for example, communicating from different countries or cities, within different physical environments, and across different time zones). Since some technological architectures permit users to pre-schedule posts or comments to appear at particular times, the time or datestamp on any given virtual communication may not be the time or date when it was actually composed. Virtual spaces also do not reflect the real-world offline physical locales in which users compose their communications, unless users choose to assign posts a spatial descriptor (for example, adding a “location” to a Facebook post or posting a photo of the location where they are typing), which may or may not be accurate.

Since technologically mediated communications, unlike face-to-face communications, are in these ways more temporally and spatially abstract, it can be more difficult for users to act upon the “present” of discussions, and communications instead must be thought of in terms of various temporal contingencies, like how users at particular points in the future may respond to certain posted content or how the potential for users to revise past content can alter the meaning of both existing and future communications. While offline temporality typically entails a commitment “in the name of the ‘present’ of particular locations” (Adams, Murphy, & Clarke, 2009, p. 247) – where the time and attention devoted to communications is focused on the here-and-now, or what is being communicated at any given moment in the present – virtual spaces abandon this commitment in favour of self-evident futurism where “presents are necessarily understood as contingent upon an ever-changing astral future that may or may not be known for certain, but still must be acted on nonetheless” (Adams, Murphy, & Clarke, 2009, p. 247). Through this process, communication is rendered something that is always anticipatory and, while always uncertain, something that always demands a response (Adams, Murphy, & Clarke, 2009).

Echoing my own theoretical stance, Salen and Zimmerman (2003) extend the idea of the contemporary magic circle as a metaphorical membrane that can enclose spaces relating to digital media more broadly rather than strictly to gaming in its traditional sense, bringing the concept of the magic circle to the foreground of the current study. Salen and Zimmerman link the magic circle to ubiquitous technologization (Wilbur, 2000), stressing the ludic influence of contemporary convergence culture. Convergence culture refers to the idea that contemporary social spaces incorporate a broad range of mediated content, requiring users (“active audiences” who are media consumers) to make meaning from and form connections between the dispersed media content that is synthesized by and within the social spaces they inhabit (Jenkins, 2006).

As Jenkins (2006) has argued, each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives” (2006, p. 3). In other words, new media and new social spaces, including virtual spaces, intersect with older forms of media, new forms of media, and other social spaces in complex ways that shape the relationships between media audiences, media producers, content, and competing systems of meaning-making. This can help to explain the fantastic associations that users in my study have with virtual space (see section 6.3) and with broader social interactions within virtual contexts, since these interactions and virtual spaces more broadly exist amidst a backdrop of mediated representations that may be at odds with one another, and indeed at odds with users’ notions of reality itself (for example, in the case of GamerGate, where media representations challenge common perceptions held by users in my dataset that virtual communications are fantastical and not harmful).

When contemporary social spaces are infused with diverse forms of media that generate new meanings and reflect complex interplays between fantasy and reality, it is therefore useful to

rethink the magic circle to include virtual spaces. Downey (2015) invokes Salen and Zimmerman (2003) and Jenkins (2006) to argue that drawing upon convergence culture to conceptualize the magic circle in this broader way is a necessity in contemporary sociology, where ubiquitous technologization has conflated the online/offline divide to an extent where boundaries between the imaginary and the real are not immediately discernable, not only during gameplay or more deliberate engagements in fantasy, but also during more general communicative interactions. This does not mean that boundaries between fantasy and reality are non-existent: as various scholars (Downey, 2015; Huizinga, 1938; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003; Žižek, 1997) point out, boundaries between the “outside” and “inside” of the magic circle must exist in order to give the circle its meaning. Rather, as my data show and as other theorists have suggested, boundaries between fantasy and reality become blurred within the magic circle – in the context of this study, within virtual space more broadly – rather than being statically discernible as assumed by early theorists working in contexts that pre-dated contemporary technologization (see Huizinga, 1938).

Conceiving virtual spaces as an extension of the magic circle sheds light on the ludic elements of virtuality: in incorporating the elements of play that I have outlined in this section, virtual spaces become gamespaces where users are invited to engage in fantasy, to step onto a playing field where temporality and spatiality take on new manifestations, to “play” by alternate rules, and to abide by alternate systems of meaning-making. This does not mean that any space where play is possible can be thought of as a gamespace in and of itself. Virtual spaces, as I and other scholars have identified, abide by unique logics, ranging from specialized impacts of technological architectures (Ding & Lin, 2009) to alternate manifestations of temporality and spatiality (Gies, 2008) to the presence of alternate socio-communicative norms (Downey, 2015) to the influence of pervasive ancillary media (Jenkins, 2006).

In the context of GamerGate, this ancillary media is particularly key. Since virtual spaces are a site of convergence (Jenkins, 2006), and since media representations on GamerGate reproduce singular and unnuanced narratives (see Chapter 1), active audiences' processes of meaning-making – which within virtual contexts already have fantastical or ludic overtones – become even more inseparable from the fantastical and the playful, and more distanced from the 'real'. The 'game' within virtual spaces therefore is less a game of determining what is real and what is fantasy, and more a game of determining how, when fantasy *is* reality, one can make meaning from – and formulate responses to – an array of social, communicative and mediated interactions. Thinking through virtual spaces as an extension of the magic circle – and as gamespaces where this objective plays a central role – can help shed light not only on virtual interactions more generally, but also on users' virtual communications related to GamerGate – and, by extension, that meaning they and we can make of GamerGate-related harms.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This dissertation has drawn upon GamerGate as a case study to develop an ontology of virtual harm that complicates and adds nuance to prevailing conceptualizations of virtual harm that are espoused in public policy, popular media and popular culture. Mainstream discourses on GamerGate-related harms typically present harm as simplified instances of misogynistic harassment committed by ‘pro-GamerGate’ antifeminist men against ‘anti-GamerGate’ feminist women. However, I strived to move my analysis beyond linear, single-axised notions of victimization and perpetratorship to question “what is harm?” and, additionally, how virtuality and mediated spaces relate to harm. The complex narratives in my dataset revealed that harm in the context of GamerGate cannot be reduced to gender inequality alone. Instead, GamerGate reflects complex tensions involving the social meanings of harm, inequality and victimization across virtual, mediated, and gamespaces. These complex tensions are complicated by an array of actors and subcultural contexts with contested interpretations of violence and damage to interest. In acknowledging this complexity, my analysis adopted an epistemological framework recognising that harm can be enacted upon multiple axes. Intersectional identity represents one of these axes, and indeed must play a key role in assessments of virtual harm. However, my data illustrated that harm cannot necessarily be reduced simply to instances of identity-based discrimination.

I began my analysis by deconstructing prevailing narratives relating to GamerGate, beginning to develop my ontology of harm. After positioning harm as that which damages an interest (Feinberg, 1987), I countered popular claims that GamerGate as a movement is generally in support of harm, and outlined that collective users across all of my fieldsites consistently consider certain behaviours to be harmful. These “universal harms”, which are considered as such

regardless of users' cybercultural affiliations, include criminal direct harassment (Lenhart et al., 2016) and the nonconsensual disclosure of private personal information. I outlined users' expectations of privacy and consent to the disclosure of personal information within online social spaces, explaining how these explanations play into users' assessments of universal harms. I then highlighted that users in my fieldsites who do engage in or advocate for universal harms are not united in a common identity (in other words, they are not exclusively male or 'pro-GamerGate', as popular media typically represents). It was interesting to note, however, they are united in sharing radically anti- or pro-social ideological views, engaging in or advocating for harm as a form of retaliation, or engaging in or advocating for harm in order to 'troll' other users.

I then extended my ontology of harm to consider how users in my fieldsites disagree regarding whether other behaviours (particularly hateful, offensive, inflammatory and aggressive speech) constitute harm. I drew upon O'Sullivan and Flanagin's (2003) model for harm assessment to submit that in addition to considering identity and subjective experience in assessments of harm (as espoused in conventional sociolegal frameworks), it is also important to account for contextual meaning and authorial intent. I argued in favour of a three-tiered approach to harm assessment, which considers how violations are experienced, how violations are perceived and given meaning within the context of particular subcultures, and how violations are intended.

In the final portion of my analysis I shifted gears to consider how 'the virtual' impacts the meaning users make of fantasy and reality, where users in my fieldsites tend to perceive virtual spaces as more playful, more fantastical, and 'less real' than offline spaces. I described that this can impact how users frame their perceptions of and intentions behind virtual communications, in addition to how they perceive GamerGate-related harms: namely, due to their fantastical virtual

connotations, as less legitimate than offline harms. I established the utility (in addition to adopting my earlier ontology of virtual harm) of conceptualizing virtual spaces as extensions of Huizinga's (1938) "magic circle". Virtual spaces, I posited, can be seen as gamespaces with distinct systems of meaning-making; new rules governing symbolic interactions; and new forms of social relations, temporality, space and identity. I concluded that thinking through virtuality in this way can enable more nuanced accounts of harm that reconcile competing notions of fantasy and reality and facilitate a more intersectional, inclusive ontology like that for which I have advocated.

In terms of next steps, on a fundamental level, it is first important not only to theorize the findings that I have presented in this dissertation. Within the academy these findings have value in their own right in their capacity to theorize harm; however, it is similarly important to mobilize these findings to help build public awareness that virtual communications and virtual harm are complex entities with deep layers of meaning, and then to mobilize these nuanced understandings of virtual space to build more effective public initiatives (or improve existing public initiatives). As such, I intend to work towards disseminating my research findings within public fora. By public fora I refer not only to postsecondary institutions, but also to more accessible venues where a range of publics reflecting diverse demographics can become better informed of the complexity of virtual interactions and harm within virtual contexts. Public awareness and popular understandings are foundational aspects of implementing change; it is therefore necessary to begin next steps with the public itself on a grassroots level. I intend, in other words, not only to theorize my findings: I intend to espouse them in public locales.

It is important in this process to deliver research findings in a way where they are easily understood and presented accessibly. The key theme of this dissertation – that virtual harm is

complex – is a succinct starting point that could begin fruitful discussions in public fora. Using this complexity as a starting point can lead to complicating broader ideas of what it means to be harmed online (in accessible terms, cyberbullied) and to considering the broad range of factors that my findings suggest are relevant, including subjective experience, subcultural context and authorial intent. Some of these concepts, due to their potentially contentious nature, could lead to uncomfortable discussions (where discussions of authorial intent could, for example, lead publics to confront the role of moral responsibility in a popular climate where subjective experience alone can often drive understandings of harm and suggest that intent does not matter). It will therefore be important to phrase public initiatives in a way that does not come across as insensitive or as de-legitimizing subjective experiences of harm or victimization. At the same time, however, having these discussions, and acknowledging the complexity of concepts about which we often make assumptions, is an important starting point for generating social change.

It is imperative to mobilise the ontology of harm that I have outlined in this dissertation via practical pro-social initiatives that enable a move toward safer, more agential online spaces. I do not endorse censorship or punitiveness: restrictive, disciplinary solutions do not build productive social spaces, which I contend should be founded upon inclusivity rather than exclusivity. This means inclusivity for all: I do not accept that it is the role of academics to dictate the boundaries of acceptable communications. This is better left, perhaps, to legal scholars. Once again, this can potentially bring about uncomfortable – yet nonetheless productive – conversations about, for instance, whether individuals do or should have ethical, moral or legal rights to engage in offensive speech.

As part of these public initiatives, it is important to begin having mainstream discussions about technological rationality, or how technology and virtuality can be thought of as “a mode of

production...a mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behaviour patterns, [and] an instrument of control and domination” (Marcuse, 1985, p.138-139). Salter (2017) points out that technological rationality involves how technological design – for instance, of various platforms like Twitter, 8chan and Reddit – embodies and reproduces social relations and hierarchies in a way that can reproduce certain forms of harm. As Salter writes,

the differential availability of platforms such as 4chan, 8chan, Reddit and Twitter for mass abuse and harassment speaks to the underlying rationales that informed their design and shaped their governance. Indeed, the sheer pandemic force of Gamergate as it spread virally across these platforms suggests a fundamental alignment between the structural design and administration of these platforms and the claims and abusive conduct of gamers (2017, p.10).

It is important, on a public level, to begin having discussions related to this technologically rationalized reproduction of harm. For instance, it could be pertinent to have public discussions about how platforms’ emphases on “likes” or shared content, tendencies to render content visible on the basis of views or popularity, or monetization of clicks or views (for example, on YouTube) can potentially result in the “‘gamification’ of online abuse, and arguably [encourage] gamers to accelerate [...] abuse as it [accrues] them ‘followers’ and other indicators of popularity” (Salter, 2017, p.11).

Technological rationality can also illustrate the intersections between forms of inequality, capitalism and technological design, where “technological systems structured according to such commodifying and alienating logics reveal and reinforce specific forms of masculine aggression and competition, often embodied in the ideal of the liberal ‘entrepreneur’ – the competitive ‘self-made’ individual achieving success in an aggressive marketplace” (Salter, 2017, p.11). These capitalist systems of masculine aggression that run through technological design raise certain ethical lines of inquiry that could be fruitful to investigate in the course of public discussions on

technological rationality. For instance, Salter questions the ethics of “the extraction of value from social media platforms by companies who treat their users as free-floating, atomized and largely interchangeable agents to whom the platforms do not owe any particular duty of care” (*ibid.*).

At the same time as engaging in public discourse on technological rationality it is important to begin to have public discussions about the illusion – or fantasy – of users having control within online environments. As a better understanding of technological rationality reveals, the narrow range of often hegemonic, capitalist or colonial options available to users is less a reflection of control, and more a reflection of the deep entrenchment of inequality within virtual space. Technological rationality dictates the boundaries within which users can communicate with one another and express themselves online, and it is necessary to break down ideas that platforms that allow user-generated content are fundamentally agential and afford choice or control.

Following these topics for public initiatives related to this study, digital literacy plays a key role in enhancing users’ agency within virtual spaces. Digital literacy involves “reading and writing in a digital environment” (Chase & Laufenberg, 2011, p. 535). In order to become digitally literate, users must be able to understand the meanings, intents and perceptions surrounding communications within particular virtual environments (and by extension harms that occur within them). This includes an awareness of community-specific terms of use that detail acceptable communications, the format and nuances of discussions that adhere to these normative standards, how communications are moderated, the abilities users have (or, sometimes more accurately, do not have) to control the content to which they are exposed, and the ways in which community members make meaning of and respond to particular types of speech (for example, the use of subculture-specific terms such as “fag”) as harmful or innocuous.

It is important to cultivate digital literacy through educational initiatives, both in schools (for example, curriculum-based digital literacy modules) and in the community (for example, information nights, seminars or webinars), that teach the skills, knowledge and behaviours that are required in order to navigate virtual spaces. Having carried out previous school-based initiatives that address digital literacy, I am in an ideal position to carry out this work. Accessibility should be a key aspect of these initiatives. In contemporaneity, technology is ubiquitous (Adams et al., 2009; Courtois et al., 2012; Munt, 2001); it is therefore imperative that the promotion of digital literacy not be restricted to particular ages, socioeconomic brackets, geographic regions, or identity markers. It would be prudent, however, for programming to address issues that are specific to particular social echelons (for example, to emphasise issues relating to technology and gender or technology and particular age groups). Programming should be open-access in order to allow it to reach as many individuals and groups as possible.

Alongside educational programming promoting digital literacy, it is also crucial to implement educational programming promoting media literacy. It is important for consumers of media to learn how to read popular media critically, and to become aware of the ways in which the media they consume can frame and shape social discourses. Understanding, for example, the roles played by traditional and contemporary news values (and the meanings that are popularly attributed to content addressed in media coverage on the basis of these news values) can allow audiences to become more cognizant of the complexity of social narratives relating to particular events, and to become more accepting of and open to the diverse meanings and complex intersections of social phenomena.

In addition to educational initiatives, platforms can play a role in allowing users improved control over their online communications (although it is important for users first to be made

better aware of the ways in which this control may be a fantasy). On a fundamental level, it is important for platforms to post more visibly and phrase more accessibly their terms of use and content guidelines. 8CV16 complains, for instance, that “im not going to spend 5 minutes trying to find out whats allowed and what isnt. and tbh half the time you cant understand what that shit says anyway bc its legalese. im just gonna post and hope for the best (sic).” Terms of use and codes of content must be posted visibly – for example, in prominent, intuitive locations and using large or bolded font. These policies themselves, however, must also be written in a way that allows all users to understand them easily. Policies written succinctly on a conversational level, rather than lengthy policies written in ‘legalese’, show promise to achieve these goals. The 8chan Rules are a particularly apt example of terms of use written in this style, taking up one page in length. Phrased as a numbered list, these rules address users conversationally, using phrases such as “keep it vidya[video game]-related” (para. 1) and “console war bullshit like ‘PC will never EVER get Bloodborne’ will result in thread deletion” (para. 8). Logs of updates to terms of use should be transparently noted so users easily can see changes that have been implemented; again, this is something at which 8chan excels, marking logs of latest updates at the bottom of the 8chan Rules.

While some platforms such as 8chan do make efforts to phrase terms of use accessibly or to display them prominently, very few platforms in my dataset provide users with assistance in understanding prevailing subcultural norms. Awareness of these prevailing norms, as my data show, is key in order for users to understand the community and subcultural meanings of particular communications (for example, words such as “fag” on 8chan that may be understood differently in these contexts than they typically are offline), in addition to the intents behind their use. This can impact, as I have shown in Chapter 6, whether users assess and experience

communications as harmful. Of my fieldsites, Reddit provides the best “roadmap” to these prevailing norms, posting an outline of “Rediquette”, or “an informal expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves” (Reddit, 2017c, para. 1). However, even this outline of Rediquette could provide more insights into community-specific forms of communication that may not be easily understood by new users, for example, acronyms such as “TIL” (“today I learned”), FTFY (“fixed that for you”), “QFT” (“quoted for truth”), or “TL;DR” (“too long; didn’t read”). Other platforms in my dataset similarly fail to provide any clarification for community or subcultural-specific jargon, clarifications that would go a long way – particularly on 8chan – to enlighten users regarding the nuanced contextual meanings of otherwise hurtful or harmful communications.

While education about technological rationalization and the fantasy of user control within online space is imperative – and while this fantasy of control will not immediately disappear – it is potentially possible for website designers to better allow users to set the terms on which their online communicative interactions take place. It is important to note that proposing these sorts of solutions can potentially substantiate the fantasy of virtual control and have the capacity to be damaging if users are not first well aware of how virtual spaces, in many ways, limit control rather than affording it. As such, education must happen first – but this education will not change experiences of virtual harm instantly. Therefore, following this education – or alongside it – technological design can additionally show promise to lessen instances of virtual harm more immediately without unduly restricting other users’ freedoms to communicate. In fact, many users in my fieldsites articulate that they would benefit from a greater degree of control over their online communications. As RAGG20 states, “I don’t want to dictate what people can’t say. I just want to be in charge of what I see myself and what people see about me.” In the context of

website design, this can be accomplished relatively easily in a range of ways, many of which are already implemented to varying degrees by particular platforms.

First, users can be granted the ability to control who sees and is able to respond to content that they have posted. Facebook is an example of a platform that already enables this, where users can restrict the visibility of photos and other content to specific friends, can hide their friends, can control who is able to respond to their posts and status updates, and can enable differential privacy settings for different groups of friends (where, for instance, one list of friends can access photos in a particular album while friends who are not on this list cannot). Some platforms offer less comprehensive versions of this ability: Twitter, for example, allows users to make their profiles private, where only their followers are able to see content that they have posted, where tweets are not publicly indexed, and where users' followers and who a user is following are hidden. However, on Twitter there is no way to sub-divide lists of followers and differentially restrict their access to content; it is not possible, for instance, to make a tweet visible to some followers but not to others.

Other platforms like Reddit and 8chan do not enable users to control who can see and respond to their posts at all. Posts made on Reddit, for example, are visible by any users who have access to a particular subreddit, and while entire subreddits can be made private by subreddit administrators (where users have to be approved as subscribers), posts themselves cannot be made individually private and will always be visible – and able to be responded to – by all subscribers. While an argument can be made that allowing users to make their posts differentially visible could detract from discussion or go against the communicative spirit of a platform, this is a change that could be made relatively easily, and that could allow users a greater

degree of security if they feel a particular post could result in them experiencing harm from other users.

Along with granting users the ability to control who sees particular content, it would also be pertinent to allow users control over whether other users are able to discover that they have an account on a particular platform at all. Certain platforms do offer this feature: Reddit, for instance, allows an option for users to disallow search engines to index their user profiles. Other platforms, however, index profiles even if profiles are private: on Twitter and Facebook, for example, although searchers cannot access private users' profiles, these profiles will still appear in search results if names or usernames are entered in these platforms' search bars. An easy solution could be for these platforms to allow a similar option to Reddit where users can opt out of having their profiles be indexed in searches, and instead implement a system where users are assigned private codes that correspond to their accounts (as used in the gaming application Discord), which other users must correctly enter in order to send them a friend request.

Like users should be able to determine whether they are searchable, they should also be able to assume control over whether they are 'tagged' in other users' posts. Many platforms allow users this option: Facebook allows users to review posts in which they are tagged before the tags appear on Facebook and before posts appear on their timelines. Twitter similarly allows users to disable other users from tagging them in photos, although there is currently no option to prevent accounts from mentioning other users (users can block users who tag them to prevent these mentions from being visible to friends; however, these mentions will still appear in publicly indexed search results for tweets). Reddit does not currently offer an option to disallow certain users from mentioning another user by username, which, like on Twitter, would appear in

publicly indexed search results (although blocking or muting would prevent this from showing up in a user's notifications).

Users should also be provided with the option to block or mute particular users, a feature already enabled by most major platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit included). By blocking or muting, users can ensure that those known to engage in communications they experience as harmful do not appear in their content feeds, thereby reducing potential harm. Similarly, users should also be provided the option to opt out of accepting messages from users who do not already follow them. Some platforms, like Twitter, require users to follow other users in order to message them, in which case users are able to vet who could potentially contact them. Other platforms, however, including Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram, allow users to send direct messages to any user regardless of whether they have a friend connection, effectively allowing any anonymous user to contact any other user. Again, this is an easy fix, which could be implemented as a simple check-box in a user's privacy settings, allowing them to opt out of receiving private messages from users with whom they are not friends (or to opt out of receiving private messages at all).

In addition to educational initiatives stressing digital literacy and media literacy, these best practices for platform design would be effective steps toward allowing users more agency and control over their online experiences. However, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, it is important to reconceptualise on a fundamental level how we popularly think about harm and virtual environments. Embracing a three-tiered ontology of harm that acknowledges the simultaneous impacts of subjective experiences, subcultural contexts, and authorial intents of harm is a necessary undertaking in order to craft and disseminate these initiatives and best practices. It is likewise necessary to move toward a more critical reading of popular media and

virtual space itself. As RAGG20 writes, “That’s the thing about the Internet. I don’t think a lot of the everyday rules and definitions can work because it’s such a different beast.” While recognising that virtuality is “a different beast”, however, it is also crucial to remember, as RKIA26 posts, that “we are all human beings first and foremost. No one should live in fear of violence, discrimination or ridicule.” This sentiment, shared by users across my dataset, is true in both on- and offline spaces, and is true of all agents, regardless of the range of intersectional identities they represent. As academics and policymakers continue to address issues involving online harm, it is perhaps most imperative to rethink approaches to virtual harm assessment in a way that remembers this pro-social ethic of inclusivity.

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Annex I – Twitter search queries

Search queries entered on Twitter for emergent keywords – “#GamerGate” + ...

ableism
ableist
abuse
abused
abuser
abusers
abuses
abusive
anti-Semitic
anti-Semitism
atheism
atheist
atheists
autism
autistic
bigot
bigoted
bigotry
bullied
bullies
bully
bullying
censorship
chink
chinks
Christian(ity)
Christians
class
classism
classist
collusion
corrupt
corruption
cronyism
cunt
cunts
depressed
depression
disability
disabled
discrimination
discriminatory

diversity
doxed
doxing
doxxed
doxxing
ethical
ethics
ethnicity
fag
faggot
faggots
fags
gender
harasser
harassers
harassing
harassment
hate
hatred
homophobia
homophobic
inclusivity
inequality
intolerance
intolerant
Islam
Islamic
Jew
Jews
kike
kikes
killallgamers
killallmen
minorities
minority
misandrist
misandry
misogynistic
misogyny
Muslim
Muslims
nigga
niggas
nigger
niggers
paedophile

paedophiles
paedophilia
pedo
pedophile
pedophiles
pedophilia
pedos
race
racism
racist
religion
sexism
sexist
sexuality
silencing
slut
sluts
suicidal
suicide
terrorism
terrorist
terrorists
tolerance
trannies
tranny
trans
transsexual
transgender
transgendered
transphobia
transphobic
transsexual
unequal
unethical
virgin
virgins
whore
whores

Annex II – Summary of Major Themes

Research questions:

1) What is virtual harm?

2) How do virtuality and mediated spaces relate to harm?

→ emergent research question:

3) What are we to make of a dataset that presents a more complex picture of GamerGate-related harms than those which are espoused in popular understandings of GamerGate?

The following major themes and sub-themes run through each of the data sets (Twitter, Reddit, 8chan, comments on mainstream media, video game media, misc. other websites), manifesting with some different nuances between each set and changing within each data set based on who is articulating the issues under analysis. I begin by listing the global themes (bolded, all caps) that link together various organizing themes (listed underneath each global theme, small caps), which in turn link together various basic themes (listed underneath each organizing theme).

GLOBAL THEME: SHARED CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF HARM

→ ORGANIZING THEME: CRIMINAL DIRECT HARASSMENT AND NONCONSENSUAL DISCLOSURE OF PRIVATE PERSONAL INFORMATION AS HARMFUL

- harassment
- abuse
- doxxing
- SWATting
- credible threats
- infiltrations into offline life
- victimization
- anonymity vs. identifiability
- investment in legal frameworks

→ ORGANIZING THEME: EXPECTATIONS OF PRIVACY AND CONSENT

- speech that happens in private not being seen as harassment
- personal information revealed in public documents/forums as not attached to expectations of privacy
- standards of harassment different for public figures vs. private users (backlash for engaging in controversial debates as a public figure vs. posting content on a private social media page)
- private content as unseen/unreported
- public content as allowing mobilization of broader support networks
- capacity for content to be flagged/reported by users
- technological architectures as facilitating differential publicity/privacy and impacting how/whether users experience harm

→ ORGANIZING THEME: RATIONALIZATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT IN HARM

- presence of radical ideological viewpoints (anti-social, pro-social – discrimination including misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, anti-Semitism, misandry, anti-cis, anti-hetero, anti-white sentiment)
- harm as retaliation (harassment as acceptable when it's committed against harassers)
- trolling (shilling, baiting, 'shitposting')
- trolling as diverse in terms of targets and perpetrators

GLOBAL THEME: DIFFERENTIAL CONCEPTIONS OF HARM

→ ORGANIZING THEME: AUDIENCE RECEPTION/SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF HARM

- misogyny
- racism
- homophobia
- transphobia
- ableism
- classism
- ageism
- anti-Semitism
- experiences of discrimination as impacting experiences of harm – influencing slurs to be received as harmful
- lack of experiences of discrimination as impacting experiences of harm – influencing slurs not to be received as harmful (misandry, anti-cis, anti-hetero, anti-white sentiment)
- tension between lack/presence of experiences of discrimination
- dismissal or denial of harassment when claimed by majority group members
- notion that discrimination is an inherent part of experience of social minorities/exclusively engaged in by majorities
- role of individual users in intervening when harm occurs (reporting mechanisms)
- “gamers are dead” narrative – insecurity/defensiveness/erasure re: identity as gamer
- social justice warriorship
- identity as intertwined symbolic events that interact with assemblages around them

→ ORGANIZING THEME: COMMUNITY/SUBCULTURAL CONTEXT OF HARM

- role of communities (writ broad, leaders/moderators, individual users – content flagging) in intervening when harm occurs
- mob harassment
- harm as articulating opinions people do not want to hear
- harm as articulating meanings with which users may not be aware
- technological architectures as facilitating harassment
- terms of use and whether terms are actually enforced
- certain virtual culture as inherently discriminatory
- “fag” (8chan)
- slurs + #NotYourShield
- role of ethics
- freedom of speech
- freedom to hate, to speak without criticism

- censorship
- role of content moderation
- multiplicity of GamerGate-related and subculture/community-related identities
- lack of clarity/consistency in broader GamerGate message/goals
- ‘leaderlessness’: actions of individuals, or broader subcultural norms, as representative of broader GamerGate movement

→ ORGANIZING THEME: AUTHORIAL INTENT

- blameworthiness/culpability for harm
- trolling
- how to identify trolling
- reclamatory speech
- irony
- joking/playful speech
- speech as resistance (to categorization, as participation in social movements, to claims to knowledge)
- character or hashtag bypass
- intent as linked to subcultural contexts

GLOBAL THEME: VIRTUALLY MEDIATED PERCEPTIONS OF FANTASY/REALITY

→ Organizing theme: virtual spaces (1) as less real/more playful than offline spaces (2)
(1)

- low perceived likelihood of follow-through
- potential for users to mis-represent themselves
- potential for users to troll (to “derail” otherwise productive discussions)
- communications as unsubstantiated (false claims)
- hurt feelings/discomfort/indignation
- as being associated with no demonstrable (offline) harm
- virtual speech as likely to be framed as trolling/joking/playing
- trolling as based in fantasy – intent not to harm but to “play” with exploitable targets
- misogyny/racism/homophobia/discrimination in games as less serious
- games as more grounded in fantasy than reality
- performativity within online environments
- likelihood to self-disclose online
- “truthfulness”

(2)

- doxxing as having high perceived likelihood of follow-through
- speech made by identifiable individuals seen as more harmful/likely to result in harm
- demonstrable (offline) harm: job loss, displacement, suicide, fear of occupying public spaces
- offline speech/speech with offline impacts more likely to be framed as harassment/harm

→ Organizing theme: role of media

- violent/sensational events (harassment, misogyny, doxxing) as defining GamerGate
- harassment narratives focused on misogyny
- virtual spaces as male-dominated and misogynistic
- suppression/ignoring of complex narratives and counter-examples
- GamerGate as lacking a coherent identity that can build an easily understood narrative
- erasure of discrimination when not misogynistic and when victim is not white/cis (racist, ableist, transphobic harassment as ignored/rarely discussed)
- media narratives as reflected in social media narratives
- role of objectivity/debate of objectivity being possible