The Digital Locker Room: Insecurity and the Rise of Toxic Nerdy Masculinity on the Internet

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Trigger Warning: This paper contains references to extremely violent and disturbing language and behaviors.

On March 15, 2019, Brenton Tarrant opened fire inside of two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 50 and leaving many more seriously injured. Before the attack began, Tarrant posted a 74 page "manifesto" to the online message board 8chan titled "The Great Replacement." This widely shared document was filled with a wide variety of memes and "inside jokes" that signaled his allegiance not only to the alt-right, but also to politically radical message boards like 4chan and 8chan. When he started his livestream of the attack, Tarrant also made sure to yell "subscribe to PewDiePie," before beginning to shoot.[1]

In Tarrant's 74-page document, he cited popular "copypastas," a term for paragraphs of text that circulate around many online platforms as jokes or references to outside material. He also spent a significant amount of time "trolling," or making ironic references in order to bait people who are not "in on the joke" into anger. One example of this behavior can be seen in his brief discussion on why he committed the mass murder: "'Were you taught violence and extremism by video games, music, literature, cinema?' Mr. Tarrant asked himself [in the document], answering with sarcasm: 'Yes. Spyro the dragon 3 taught me ethnonationalism. Fortnite trained me to be a killer and to floss on the corpses of my enemies.'" His references to video games are meant to mock those who claim that video game consumption has the potential to cause violent behavior, or that video games should be more closely regulated. According to his so-called "manifesto," the very nature of the attack was designed to become a

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[1]   Mike Wendling, "Christchurch shootings: The rising new threat of far-right violence," *BBC.com*, 18 March 2019, accessed 19 March 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-47596446
       Niraj Chokshi, "PewDiePie Put in Spotlight After New Zealand Shooting," *The New York Times*, 15 March 2019, accessed 31 March 2019.
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/technology/pewdiepie-new-zealand-shooting.html

meme itself, and claimed that "Memes have done more for the ethnonationalist movement than any manifesto."[2]

While the nature of the New Zealand shooting may initially seem bizarre, a closer look at Internet culture sheds light on Tarrant's violent behavior. For over a decade, the Internet has been a hub for political extremism and bigotry; while Tarrant frequented 8chan and 4chan, other sites also contain the same level of vitriol that he expressed in his manifesto. Many journalists, sociologists, psychologists, politicians, and social media executives are now discussing the issue of online radicalization, especially as it pertains to young, white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle class American men[3] – in order to get a holistic view of the situation, however, it is crucial that historians begin to do the same. In this paper, I will be outlining the rise of "nerd" communities on online forums in the 1980s and 90s, along with their subsequent descent into bigoted chaos. The period I'll be focusing on, from the 1980s to the 2000s, is significant because it demonstrates very clearly the way that these communities descended into one of the most intensely vitriolic spaces that can be found in modern society. The extremist stances taken by nerdy boys and men on the Internet have their roots in a deepset fear in U.S. culture that women and minoritized groups have been infiltrating traditionally masculine spaces. Online communities were heavily populated with young, white, nerdy men, who

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[2]   David D. Kirkpatrick, "Massacre Suspect Traveled the World but Lived on the Internet," *The New York Times*, 15 March 2019, accessed 31 March 2019.
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/asia/new-zealand-shooting-brenton-tarrant.html
     Brenton Tarrant, "The Great Replacement," in "Massacre Suspect Traveled the World but Lived on the Internet," *The New York Times,* 15 March 2019, accessed 31 March 2019.
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/asia/new-zealand-shooting-brenton-tarrant.html
[3] While the issue of internet radicalization is of course not limited to any particular country, the United States is in many ways the "origin" for this type of extremism. Despite his status as a New Zealand national, Tarrant actually referenced this in his rant: he said he wanted "'to create conflict between the two ideologies within the United States on the ownership of firearms in order to further the social, cultural, political and racial divide,' thus 'ensuring the death of the 'melting pot' pipe dream,'" (Brenton Tarrant, "The Great Replacement").

believed that they were subjugated by more "masculine" American men, women, and other minoritized groups. Communities of these men formed over time and, through a combination of both intense isolation and fear, began to create content that fed into their anger and sense of displacement. Their violent and explosive behavior, therefore, came from a place of defensiveness and fear that their claim to a traditional masculine identity was under attack.

Male Academia and Nerdy Insecurity

Computers first became a major part of daily American life during a period of massive social and cultural restructuring. When talking about the early stages of online communication, therefore, it is crucial to look at two groups that spent a significant amount of time working with computers in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. White, middle class, academic men drove the creation and development of computer hardware, operating systems, languages, and software in this period, and young, white, middle class boys were given access to basic computational knowledge through microcomputers, or video game consoles, that were first released in the 1980s.

Early computers were large, extraordinarily expensive, and used predominantly by the U.S. military, large corporations, and scientists to do simple but time consuming tasks, like large-scale tabulations. Additionally, access to computer hardware was typically reserved for university and institutional research: "universities such as the University of Southern California Los Angeles, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford, and Harvard" led the charge in computer research and development. Even early desktops, like the model built by Hewlett Packard in the year 1972, were "built for scientists and engineers." Commercially sold computers, both large and small, were considered hobbyist items, predominantly purchased by

the academics and businesspeople already working with the more advanced technology in

school or at work.[4]

During this period, these research institutions and universities began experimenting with

various ways for different computers to communicate with one another. The U.S. Department of

Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) created the ARPANET in 1969, and by

1972, the network "allowed for remote login to other computers, the distribution of

information by means of file transfer, and the sharing of resources between computers." While

ARPANET was a closed network, it allowed for the invention of email and the subsequent rise of

the first major online forum and newsgroup, Usenet. Other networks were developed in the

1980s, like UUCP and USENET, and the Transmission Control Protocol, or Internet Protocol

(TCP/IP), finally allowed these networks to communicate with each other in 1983.[5]

It is important to note that at this time that "the Internet was primarily used by

universities and the government – it had yet to burst onto the public scene." Because computer

research was done almost entirely in these institutions, the amount of access that everyday

Americans had to computers was very limited. General knowledge about the development of

various operating systems, programming languages, and network connections was limited to

those with the ability to access a college education. For example, "In the 1970s, white students

made up nearly 75 percent of the student body at UCLA."[6] Gender was a significant factor as

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[4]   Lyndall Baker Landauer, "The History, Development, and Importance of Personal Computers," in *Science and its Times*, ed. Schlager, Neil and Josh Lauer, vol. 7, (Detroit: Gale, 2001).
      Stephanie Watson, "The Internet Explosion," in *Science and Its Times*, ed. Schlager, Neil and Josh Lauer, vol. 7, (Detroit: Gale, 2001), 523.
[5]   Stephanie Watson, "The Internet Explosion," in *Science and Its Times*, ed. Schlager, Neil and Josh Lauer, vol. 7, (Detroit: Gale, 2001).
[6]   Thankfully, the percentages of Asian Americans, Latinx Americans, and Indigenous Americans actually increased significantly in the 70s and 80s. However, California Proposition 209, which was passed in 1996, dramatically decreased the enrollment of minoritized groups, hitting African Americans the hardest. This was because the proposition prohibited university admissions officials from taking factors like gender, race, and, most

well; according to researcher Linda H. Lewis, "in 1981, white males comprised 67 percent of the

computer specialists in the United States. Only 26 percent of the master's degrees and 8.4

percent of the doctorates granted in computers and information sciences in 1983 by American

colleges and universities were awarded to women." Of these women, very nearly all of them

were white. The low percentage of women and of other minoritized groups in the field was

particularly frustrating to those who did manage to get computer science degrees and pursue

careers in the field. Terry Winograd, a professor of computer science at Stanford University,

expressed her frustration with academic "boys-only clubs": "To use UNIX you have to have gone

through a kind of apprenticeship training period…And that occurs in environments that aren't

very hospitable to women. The route to having UNIX skills is going through a social environment

that is heavily male."[7]

While entering the computer science field was a harrowing experience for many, this

period did see the passage of various pieces of legislation specifically designed to help. Women

in particular began pouring into colleges and universities, and successfully proved that they

could easily fill the same working roles as men. Two key pieces of legislation were the Civil

Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972; the former stated

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importantly, socioeconomic class into account. UCLA still has a relatively low enrollment for minoritized Americans – especially African American students (Bridget Shackelford, "The changing face of UCLA diversity, in *The Daily Bruin*, September 23, 2006 http://dailybruin.com/2006/09/23/the-changing-face-of-ucla-dive/; Larry Gordon, "UCLA once again considering diversity class requirement," *The LA Times*, May 4, 2014 https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-me-ucla-diversity-20140505-story.html).

[7]   Linda H. Lewis, "Females and Computers: Fostering Involvement," in *Women, Work, and Technology: Transformations*, ed. Wright, Barbara Drygulski, et al, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), 268.

       David Plotnikoff, "Why men are hogging the digital highway: The promise that cyberspace would be a brave new world of sexual equality isn't panning out," *The Toronto Star*, August 1994.

       Bridget Shackelford, "The changing face of UCLA diversity," in *The Daily Bruin*, September 23, 2006. http://dailybruin.com/2006/09/23/the-changing-face-of-ucla-dive/

       Stephanie Watson, "The Internet Explosion," in *Science and Its Times*, ed. Schlager, Neil and Josh Lauer, vol. 7, (Detroit: Gale, 2001), 523.

that discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin was outlawed in the United States, and the latter prohibited sex or gender discrimination in educational institutions receiving federal funding. These policies (among others) fell under the term "affirmative action" to describe the process of admitting minoritized groups into workplace and academic environments with the goal of fostering diversity and inclusion. The term itself came from Executive Order Order 10925, issued by President John F. Kennedy, which stated that government contractors needed to "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin."[8]

Many white men did not see the expansion of the rights of women and minoritized Americans as progress – they instead saw this as a threat to established stability. Historian Michael Kimmel argues in his book *Manhood in America* that prior to the Civil Rights Movement, notions of manhood were defined primarily by being a "sober, responsible breadwinner, [an] imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero." The Civil Rights Movement and second wave of feminism, however, "offered scathing critiques of traditional masculinity and demanded inclusion and equality in the public arena," generating significant anxieties for men living in the period. According to historian Philip Jenkins,

> Women's participation revolutionized the workplace, while the enormous growth of day care transformed family structures. In 1970, about 43 percent of women age sixteen or over were in the labor force, a figure that grew to 52 percent by 1980 and approached 60 percent in the early 1990s. Women made particular advances in high-status professions: they made up just 9 percent of medical students in 1970 but 25 percent by 1980, and in law schools the proportion of women students grew during the decade from 10 to 36 percent.

[8]   *Legal Information Institute, s.v.* "Affirmative Action," accessed 18 April, 1019. https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/affirmative_action
       Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

This surge in the participation of women was seen as deeply alarming by many men, who claimed that the affirmative action policies aiding this school and workplace transformation were a form of reverse discrimination. After the passage of Title IX, for example, a collection of universities and sports teams "attempted to file federal sex discrimination suits with the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, claiming 'equal protection' violation."[9]

University jocks were not the only ones alarmed by the influx of women into formal institutions; the nerds were nervous as well. A variety of scholars published works that argued that patriarchy was necessary because of biological differences between men and women; an example of this was sociologist Steven Goldberg's *The Inevitability of Patriarchy,* published in 1973, that argued that "women's liberation ran counter to the forces of nature and cultural stability, that male domination was encoded in the superior strength of the male." A theme emerged in the American masculine imagination in this period; women were "feminizing" public spaces, and therefore were infecting men with feminine mannerisms. Popular pundits like George Gilder used faulty biology to argue that men tended towards aggressive and competitive behavior, and sociologists like Patricia Cayo Sexton claimed that American schools were feminizing men – her tests reportedly confirmed that academically-oriented boys scored lower on tests she designed to measure masculinity, and used this to argue that school "makes sissies out of many boys and feminizes many more by insisting they act like girls." It is here, then, that we see the birth of the idea of the socially inept, hyperintelligent "nerdy" boy or man widely considered to be inferior to the hypermasculine ideal.[10]

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[9] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

[10] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Patricia Cayo Sexton, "How the American Boy is Feminized," *Psychology Today* 3 (23), January, 1970.

Gender theorist R.W. Connell describes this phenomenon in his book *Masculinity*, where

he defines American masculinity as inherently hegemonic. In other words, its existence is reliant

on the subjugation not just of women and other minoritized people, but also of other men.

Associations with femininity frequently accompany subordination; an example of this that

Connell notes is that "gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is

symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity…gayness is easily assimilated to femininity."

Feminine men are also considered to be less likely to have sex or romantic relationships,

therefore making them inferior to the ideal. In other words, Connell frames the dominance of

men in American society as being tiered, with hypermasculine white men being regarded as

being on the top; all other men have to repeatedly prove their masculinity, typically by putting

down women, minoritized groups, or one another.[11]

The anxieties surrounding being a "nerd" or being viewed as "less" of a man laid out

above can be seen in the postings of academic, computer programming men in the 70s, 80s,

and 90s. Online chatrooms like BlueSky can reveal this concern. BlueSky was predominantly

used by white, middle class men in their 20s, the majority of whom worked in

computer-oriented professions. Many used the chatrooms while waiting for their codes to

compile. While conversational topics varied, many of them circled around sex and women; for

example, one user, Mike Adams, posted in the chatroom that he enjoyed going to anime and

comic book conventions (very traditionally "nerdy" spaces) in order to "ogle babes in barbarian

outfits." Another user, Drog, replied "*BABES*?...you need new glasses…pasty skinned

blubbery pale nerdettes," before claiming that he "wouldn't pork any women he's ever seen at

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[11]   Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 222.
        R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 77, 78.

gaming/other cons, not even with [another user's] cock." Other users who were online at the time of posting, like Locutus and Perry, push the joke further, making references to Moby Dick and comparing nerdy women to meat. Researcher Lori Kendall, a participant in BlueSky forums at the time posting under the username Copperhead, reflected on this interaction in an essay that she published in the 90s; in it, she claimed that Drog's response in particular demonstrates quite a bit about insecurities surrounding nerdiness. He implies that both male and female nerds "do not spend much time outdoors or engage in exercise," but frames his insecurity as a far worse thing for women than for men. In this way, male nerdiness is partially forgiven by computer prowess and technical know-how; women are instead valued entirely by their appearances.[12]

Academic, computer-using men also used the Internet to demonstrate their anxieties surrounding the increasing numbers of women entering computer and technology-related professions. One example of this is a post on a Usenet forum titled alt.feminism in 1993. The poster, Mark Sobolewski, was a member of the University of Pennsylvania's Computer Science department, as evidenced by his email address, which was included in his post. It is difficult to determine from the amount of information given whether he was a professor, researcher, or student. He posted in response to a poster named Wendy, who was arguing in favor of affirmative action policies. A section of his post is as follows: "These laws HAVE to go away sometime... You can't have your hand held forever…I would like women to have good careers, I just think that they should EARN them…" It is immediately apparent from Sobolewski's post

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[12]   Lori Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
        Multiple users on BlueSky, in Lori Kendall, "'OH NO! I'M A NERD!' Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum," *Gender & Society* 14 (2), April, 2000.

that he did not believe that affirmative action policies actually helped women get job positions they deserved; his stance was instead that most women were getting positions because of policies that focus on their gender identities and not their skills.[13]

Another poster from around the same period, and on the same forum, also expressed his frustration with affirmative action policies. While Sean Conlon's email address was with the provider Netcom, thus making it impossible to know what his profession was, he clearly shared similar views to Sobolewski's. His post was in response to another poster, Rich Payne, who stated that "feminism demands that sexism hurts men," feminists were "highly bigoted sexists," and that "requiring sexism in hiring is no way to stop [sexism]." Conlon agreed, and responded by saying "Why, if women and men are 'equal' do you need quotas and affirmative action? Harsh penalties against those who would discriminate seem far more fair, if a little difficult to enforce, than the current situation which attempts to correct *alleged*[14] injustices with indisputably real ones [sic]." It is clear from Conlon's wording that he found it doubtful that women face significant levels of discrimination in the workplace – his reference to "indisputably real" injustices are a pointed claim that he believes reverse discrimination has been taking place.[15]

One other male alt.feminism poster, however, had a refreshing take on the status of women in male-dominated fields like computer science. A woman named Donna Miller posted

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[13]   Mark Sobolewski, "Affirmative Action," *alt.feminism* Web forum, *Usenet*, June 13, 1993. https://groups.google.com/forum/?hl=en#!searchin/alt.feminism/programmer$20after$3A1972$2F01$2F01$20before$3A1999$2F12$2F02|sort:date/alt.feminism/LFX9bnG3KEU/KMxYR4UQpmYJ

[14]   The asterisks surrounding the word "alleged" are there to provide emphasis and demonstrate a certain level of sarcasm.

[15]   Sean Conlon, "WOMEN & COMPUTER SCIENCE," *alt.feminism* Web forum, *Usenet*, April 5, 1996. https://groups.google.com/forum/?hl=en#!searchin/alt.feminism/programmer$20after$3A1972$2F01$2F01$20before$3A1999$2F12$2F02|sort:date/alt.feminism/o7O8UHs_J-0/KtCaADn5PJ8J

about the difficulties of growing up in a society that discouraged her from pursuing her interests; Jaime Hoglund had a very insightful reply. He described an encounter he had with a woman he knew with a CS degree: "I felt very threatened by this women with the CS degree, and I had to prove to her that I knew a lot about computers…I acted extremely egotistical to her. But in my mind I was trying to show her that I too am worth something. I was defending my sense of 'self'…Perhaps males don't wish to 'Dominate', maybe they are scared of you? [sic]" Jaime's post demonstrates an awareness with masculine nerd fragility; he frequently mentions his personal insecurities both accepting any identity that frames him as "dominant" and working with the woman with the computer science degree. Jaime highlighted that, for him, trying to demonstrate that he had more knowledge than the woman was a self-defense mechanism. Lastly, he ended his post with a reference to the insecurity of Donna's male colleagues: "maybe they are scared of you?"[16]

There is actually a lot more to Jaime's post – he confronted the concept of masculine loneliness, particularly as it applies to nerdy men. "Computers and other technie things," he said, "won't reject you the way society so often does…they don't ever judge you, or reject you because you don't fit in…I think males have to deal with more rejection than females do, computers are an ideal place for people that fear closeness with others...[sic]" The emphasis Jaime places on male rejection and fears of intimacy are seen in posts all over the Internet from

16   Jaime, "Female Computer Nerds," *alt.feminism* Web forum, *Usenet*, January 29, 1995. https://groups.google.com/forum/?hl=en#!searchin/alt.feminism/programmer$20after$3A1972$2F01$2F01$20before$3A1999$2F12$2F02|sort:date/alt.feminism/okWJZbMM6Dk/UnhqCM0w86EJ

this general time period. Difficulty relating to women, frequent dating troubles, and aggressive language aimed towards women characterize these web postings.[17]

The Rise of the Gamer

While these conversations surrounding alienation, anxiety, and affirmative action were going on in academic circles on the fledgling Internet, however, computer use began to become more accessible with the introduction of the microcomputer. It is in this way that the development of video game consoles heavily influenced the development of personal computers; gaming culture and computer culture have been intrinsically linked ever since. Atari Inc. released the Atari 2600 in 1977 and the Atari 400 and 800 in 1979; these microcomputers contained both graphics cards and sound cards (unusual for computers at the time, as they were seen as unnecessary for business or scientific research) and were therefore capable of running more advanced games than any other computer being sold on the market. They also had ports to plug game controllers into, making them a household commodity in middle class American families. The Commodore 64, one of the most well-known and best selling microcomputers at the time, was released in American markets not that long afterwards, in 1982. It rapidly became one of the bestselling microcomputers, marketing itself as a vital source of fun in the home.[18]

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[17]   Jaime, "Female Computer Nerds," *alt.feminism* Web forum, *Usenet*, January 29, 1995. https://groups.google.com/forum/?hl=en#!searchin/alt.feminism/programmer$20after$3A1972$2F01$2F01$20before$3A1999$2F12$2F02|sort:date/alt.feminism/okWJZbMM6Dk/UnhqCM0w86EJ

[18]   Jimmy Maher, *The Future Was Here: The Commodore Amiga*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 3-17. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computing System*, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2009).

It was with the incorporation of both the Atari and Commodore systems into family life that video games became cemented in the U.S. popular imagination as a boy's pastime. One study conducted by researchers at Stanford University in 1983 found that 13 percent of the "87 middle- and upper-income students in grades five through eight" that they surveyed owned microcomputers – all 13 percent were boys. Additional studies conducted in the early 80s revealed that middle-school aged girls were three times less likely to use home computers than their male counterparts, and that enrollment at computer-themed summer camps was almost entirely filled by young boys.[19]

While both Atari and Commodore systems were capable of basic computational tasks, they did not have the practical capabilities necessary for office work or business. Many academic programmers and computer scientists looked down on microcomputing, and microcomputer users were seen as amateurs, hobbyists, and children (especially boys). "To the horror of real programmers, who advocated high-level languages and structured programming," computer and tech journalist Eugene Eric Kim says, "these hackers coded mostly in machine language or in Basic." This combination of factors meant that the market appeal of microcomputers was relatively narrow, and the market for video games rapidly filled itself with cheap, poorly made games.[20]

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[19]   Linda H. Lewis, "Females and Computers: Fostering Involvement," in *Women, Work, and Technology: Transformations*, ed. Wright, Barbara Drygulski, et al, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987).
         Irene Miura and Robert D. Hess, "Sex Differences in Computer Access, Interest, and Usage," Presentation, 91st Annual APA Convention, Anaheim, CA, August 1983.
[20]   Eric Eugene Kim, "Programming & the PC Revolution: On to the Next 25 Years…" *Dr. Dobb's Journal* 26, no. 1 (2001).
         Jimmy Maher, *The Future Was Here: The Commodore Amiga*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 3-17.
         Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computing System*, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2009).

The oversaturation of poorly made games in the budding video game market easily tore

a hole in Atari and Commodore's commercial success. By 1983 a vicious cycle was already in

place: "orders from retailers were overambitious, and cartridges ended up returned or deeply

discounted…retailers chose not to place new orders…consumers had a hard time discerning

which ones were likely to be enjoyable…the first wave of returns and ensuing sales slump

forced most of the third-party developers out of business." At the same time, there was a rise in

the number of games being produced for more business-oriented personal computers, like the

IBM PC XT and the Apple II. This combination of events proved fatal for the budding console

gaming industry, triggering the Video Game Crash of 1983.[21]

Game production in the United States screeched to a standstill after the crash; while

Atari began to fade, Commodore scrambled to find a new computer that they could market to a

more general audience. They found what they were looking for in Amiga, Inc., an independent

firm working on a computer that, unbeknownst to them, would fundamentally change the

nature of personal computing. Due to the addition of three custom-designed chips, significant

processing pressure was taken off of the Amiga's CPU, allowing users to multitask for the first

time ever. Because the Amiga had originally been in development as a console, it also contained

graphics and sound cards; in 1983, "Amiga simply began describing [its project] as a computer

rather than a videogame console and continued full speed ahead," comfortable in the

knowledge that its product had a mouse-based graphical user interface, keyboard, and disk

drive, alongside the joystick and television screen needed for gaming. It could do it all. The only

issue was the Commodore brand; because the Commodore 64 had marketed itself as more than

[21]   Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computing System*, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2009), 133.

an electronic, the brand name still carried the stigma of being a mere "toy" in 1985. While the

Commodore Amiga 1000 did not sell amazingly well, it still moved enough for IBM and Apple to

take notice and begin incorporating the Amiga's versatile traits into their machines. These

changes allowed PC users to use their machines in an incredibly diverse number of ways, and

dramatically expanded the popularity of PCs in the U.S.[22]

The Crash did not entirely halt console gaming, however. In 1985, Nintendo made its first

jump into international markets with the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), receiving an

unprecedented level of success. Nintendo's business strategy was multifaceted – in order to

convince American retailers to sell these systems after the failures of Atari and Commodore,

Nintendo decided to package the NES with a Robotic Operating Buddy (R.O.B.) and an

interactive plastic gun, called the NES Zapper. This made the NES very obviously a toy in the

eyes of American retailers and consumers. They also began cracking down on the third-party

game developers that caused the 1982 and 1983 flood of games. According to platform

researchers Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost,

> Nintendo devised a way to support retailers and third-party developers – yet also to control them. The company's first-party licensing method required outside developers to submit applications to qualify for third-party status, to buy official development kits from Nintendo, and to submit their titles for review, quality assurance, and release planning. Nintendo used the system both to police quality and to limit the number of games that each developer could produce per year, preventing another glut of titles.

By strictly controlling the games on the market that were compatible with their product,

Nintendo was able to moderate all official media being produced for the NES. Other emerging

video game companies, like Nintendo's rival, SEGA, adopted this method as well, setting a new

precedent for how games production took place.[23]

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[22]   Jimmy Maher, *The Future Was Here: The Commodore Amiga*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012).
[23]   Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016).
        Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computing System*, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2009), 134.

This increase in the number of personal computers in peoples' homes, the newfound gaming capabilities of PCs, and the strict market controls that successful game corporations like Nintendo put on the video game market all coincided with a major milestone in Internet history – the debut of the "World Wide Web" (WWW) in the summer of 1991. WWW was intended to be a network capable of being accessed by any computer in the world, and its emergence coincided with new legislation in the United States that allowed for the commercial use of the Internet. Within two years, "the number of Web servers sending data across the Net jumped from 50 to 250. The number of Web sites rose from 130 to 623, and the number of hosts rose to more than 1.5 million." The inventions of hyperlinks, the Windows Operating System, and Netscape were a tipping point, and by 1996 there were "over 10 million hosts worldwide." The Internet, and the World Wide Web, made communicating with others around the world far easier.[24]

The ability to communicate far more easily with people from around the world led to the increased usage of older forums and chatroom programs. While older, more academic and professional computer users had formerly dominated sites like Usenet, the younger generation of tech-savvy boys and young men who had grown up with the Atari 2600 and Commodore 64 began regularly posting in these forums and chatrooms. One of their primary motivations for this was linked to the heavy video game regulation that corporations like Nintendo and SEGA established. While some popular games, like *Donkey Kong*, required little to no translation, other games, like *The Legend of Zelda*, required translation and modification. Games that had a lot of dialogue were considered risky investments by video game firms – "developers and

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[24]   Stephanie Watson, "The Internet Explosion," in *Science and Its Times*, ed. Schlager, Neil and Josh Lauer, vol. 7, (Detroit: Gale, 2001).

publishers [would] consider how much money and time they [were] willing to spend on translating or localizing a game and to what extent it [would] be altered, relative to its potential profits in diverse markets." Because of the increasing demand in America for Japanese games, young gamers turned to the Internet to access video games that were technically only available for purchase in Japan. Users would develop software versions of consoles, called emulators, and would copy games' source codes and make them available as computer files. People on forums who spoke Japanese would also aid in translating these ROMs. It is in this way that forum and chatroom participants became dominated by two different groups of men: white academics and businessmen, and young video-game playing, tech-obsessed men.[25]

As the experiences of Internet-savvy men coalesced into a shared identity, bonding over topics like computer programming and gaming also became intrinsically linked to the demeaning and dehumanizing language used to describe women. Usenet forums dedicated to gaming and anime were littered with posts describing pornographic video games and animes – one such post, titled "Silent Mobius videogame" in 1991, contains six men (some of whom were using their academic email addresses) who discussed a series of video games in which anime women were forced, usually against their will or under heavy coercion, to strip until fully naked. Another post in rec.games.video by user Mark Newton John in 1991 describes a series of Japanese puzzle games where the objective is to solve puzzles quicker than the A.I. As the player solved more of the puzzles, the anime girls on screen progressively stripped more and more; if the player beat the A.I., they saw the full naked picture, accompanied by orgasm sound effects. If the player failed to beat the A.I., the animated girls on the screen would begin

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[25]   Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016).

screaming "no." Both of these posts demonstrate the fetishization of having complete control

over women's bodies, regardless of consent. They also were posted in anime and video game

related forums, instead of the many forums dedicated to porn that existed on Usenet at the

time, demonstrating the proliferation of this content all over Usenet. Not coincidentally, of the

top 40 forums on Usenet in 1995, 18 of them were dedicated solely to pornographic content.[26]

Nihilistic Nerds and Terrorizing Trolls

Despite the popularity of sites like Usenet, other domains were springing into being

extremely quickly. Even the dot-com crash of 2000, which led to tremendous financial loss in the

United States, was not enough to do more than minorly inconvenience the Internet's rapid

expansion. Many of these new sites were steeped in references to Internet culture that had

begun developing on earlier forums; one of the most popular sites was SomethingAwful.com,

which was created in 1999 by Richard Kyanka. Kyanka, who will be referred to in this paper by

his screenname "Lowtax," founded the site in 1999, after dropping out of high school and

working as a systems administrator and a writer for the site planetquake.gamespy.com. He

initially wanted a platform of his own to talk with others online about the first-person shooter

video game *Quake 2*, and his position working for GameSpy evolved into running a very popular

parody advice column titled Mailbag. He teamed up with fellow *Quake 2* enthusiast Kevin

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[26]   For some bizarre, inexplicable reason, one of these forums was titled alt.sex.wizards. After a little bit of digging, I found the old forum. If you value the sanctity of your soul, don't look for it or read anything posted there.
     Benjamin "Snowhare" Franz, "Usenet Arbitron Statistics: Top 40 Newsgroups in Order by Number of Readers (Jul 1995)," *Usenet*, July 1995.
     Multiple users, "Gals Panic," *rec.games.video* Web forum, *Usenet*, November 5, 1991.
     Multiple users, "Silent Mobius videogame," *rec.arts.anime* Web forum, *Usenet*, October 28, 1991.

Bowen (screenname "Fragmaster") to write these articles, and together, they got exposed to

some of the Internet's darker and infinitely stranger subcultures.[27]

Lowtax discussed these budding communities in a series of interviews about the

creation and development of the Something Awful forums,

> …If somebody said they really wanted to fuck a pillow with anime on it, if they went out in public and said that, they would be laughed at…They would keep it inside and say, 'Well, I want to fuck a pillow with anime on it but I can't tell anybody.' But then the internet came along and they could…go to rec/all/fuckanimepillow or whatever. Then other people would say 'I want to fuck anime pillows, too.' You had this community of people very intent on fucking anime pillows. The typical person does not want to fuck a pillow with anime on it….subcommunities would sprout up and their numbers would grow and pretty soon it's Pillowfuckers United, Inc…I found that whole process incredibly interesting, how the groupthink would manifest itself and increase exponentially over time.

When Lowtax was fired from GameSpy, he registered the Something Awful domain – he chose

the name specifically to emphasize this negative perception that he held of the Internet. The

majority of the site was initially dedicated to Lowtax's comedy writing, and his satire pieces

reflected his low opinion of frequent internet users. As moderator and admin David Thorpe

(screenname "Dr.") said about the humor posted to the site, "the only real rule [for hired

writers] was to write about whatever you want, do whatever you want, you're not fired as long

as it's funny."[28]

This comedic free-for-all led to the creation of a plethora of characters that represented

different dark sides of the web. One of Lowtax's satiric characters, Jeff K, was a teenager who

was nearly arrested for posting regularly about hacking. Jeff K's homepage, which is still

viewable today, has this message emblazoned on the top: "TEHY SAIDS I WOULD BE ARESTED IF

I KEPT HAX0RING SO NOW I HELP PEOPAL INSTEAD OF HURT THEM BUT IF YUO ARE A FAGOT I

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[27] "Fuck You And Die: An Oral History of Something Awful," Interviews by Taylor Wofford, *Motherboard: Tech by VICE*, April 5 2017.
[28] Richard Kyanka in "Fuck You And Die: An Oral History of Something Awful," Interviews.
David Thorpe in "Fuck You And Die: An Oral History of Something Awful," Interviews.

CANNOT TAEK RESPONABILITY FOR YUO IF YUOR COMPUTAR MACHIENE HAS TOO BE SENT

BACK TO GATEWAY BECUASE IT GOT WINNUKED[29] BY A SLY FOX!!! [sic]" Jeff K's poor spelling and

punctuation, alongside his twisted love for insulting other people and their interests, was

specifically written to replicate one of the most toxic and common communication styles that

was prominent on the Internet at the time: trolling.[30]

"Trolling," according to sociologist and cultural internet researcher Whitney Phillips, was

behavior that emerged in the early days of the internet but became "a point of

self-identification…in the early to mid 2000s." Its goal was "to essentially try to elicit the

strongest negative reactions from onlookers as possible." These individuals, or "trolls," as they

called themselves, scoured the internet for people that they knew they could easily rile up for

their own personal entertainment. Many trolls' tactics showcased their "white centrality, the

male centrality, that was taken for granted…[and] normalized the pretty fetishized, emotionally

detached tonality and mode of discourse." Insulting people for the sake of the joke was key, and

no concept was considered too offensive to touch.[31]

Having an audience was a key part of the fun for many of these trolls; it was why trolls

like Lowtax frequently posted to Something Awful's increasingly popular forums about the

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[29] "WinNuke" is an old term for crashing a computer's OS or blocking an IP address from being able to connect to the internet; it exploited a security hole in Windows 95 software that went unfixed by Windows until 1997. It was relatively easy to compile and run WinNuke programs, leading to many people on chat sites like ICP (Internet Relay Chat) to get WinNuked very frequently. Many considered it fun to WinNuke people they did not like – in the case of the fictitious Jeff K, he claimed he was willing to WinNuke anybody he spoke to online that he thought was homosexual. Additionally, many considered WinNuking to be annoying and childish behavior, which is likely why Lowtax incorporated this behavior into Jeff K's character (Dan Finkelstein, "The WinNuke Relief Page," *NAC.net*, accessed 5 May 2019).
[30]   Richard Kyanka, "JEFF K!!!" *SomethingAwful.com*, Accessed April 14 2019, https://www.somethingawful.com/hosted/jeffk/.
[31]   Ezra Klein, interview with Whitney Phillips, "Whitney Phillips Explains How Trump Controls the Media," *The Ezra Klein Show*, podcast audio, November 15, 2018.

interactions he had with various people on ICQ[32] where he did his best to frustrate them. His main trolling tactic was to pretend to be exaggerated caricatures of different minoritized groups. In one "ICQ [Pranks]" post, titled "Deep Phat Fryahs!" Lowtax recounted assuming a racist caricature of a black American to troll a rap fan he found. Throughout the chatlog, Lowtax messages the user "Hardcore" in a heavy, deeply offensive AAVE style: he frequently uses the n-word, like when he says "shit niggah, slow yo roll bizzatchitch! I gots yo link dawg money!" The so-called "prank" is several pages long – the reason for this, according to Lowtax, was because he had to "get the guy's trust" by pretending to be an up-and-coming rapper to capture Hardcore's attention, before turning the conversation on its head by saying that he rapped in diapers, pissed on female fans and "playah haters," and beat his grandmother bloody on stage during shows. This post, made in the year 2000, is a key example of white, hypermasculine trolling – Lowtax's use of an offensive accent and stereotypical language combined with his mentions of the violent abuse of women showcase his apathy in regards to Hardcore's feelings and Lowtax's dismissal of racism, sexism, or abuse as serious topics that should be handled with care.[33]

According to Phillips, this behavior accelerated for multiple reasons: first of all, their positionality as white, middle class men allowed them to "pick and choose the degree to which their personal beliefs lined up with what they did and said on the internet…[they could] engage in a kind of arms-length ironic racism, sort of detached…laughter, because their bodies were not under threat by any of the humor." Phillips frames trolling as a form of "play" or

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[32] This was another popular chatting service at the time – the letters do not stand for anything, and are instead a play on the words "I seek you."

[33]   Richard Kyanka, "Deep Phat Fryahs!" *SomethingAwful.com*, Accessed April 14 2019, https://www.somethingawful.com/icq-pranks/icq-prank-deep/1/.

experimentation, claiming that the increasing anonymity on the internet in the early 2000s had

little to do with the increase in racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and anti-Semitic

behavior; instead, she claims, the internet came with a decreased chance of trolls seeing the

direct impact that they had on minoritized people, and therefore experienced less social risk. It

is far easier, she says, to find harmful content amusing when one is unable to see how the joke

lands with others.[34]

This rapid proliferation of no-consequences, "edgy" humor was dramatically accelerated

by the creation of several forums on Something Awful dedicated to photoshop, before a regular

Something Awful user, Christopher Poole (the infamous user "moot") created the website

4chan in 2003. In an interview, Fragmaster discusses that one of the main reasons for

Something Awful's popularity in the early 2000s was due to "threads where people would start

Photoshopping and trying to outdo each other, what are now called Photoshop Battles. Back in

the early 2000s this was a more novel thing and Something Awful had some really talented

people at it." One thread from 2001, posted by Zack "Geist Editor" Parsons, features a series of

well-known historical images that were subtly photoshopped with the intention of "remixing

history." While Lowtax's initial post was innocent enough – it was of Robocop seated in the

position of Speaker of the House during a State of the Union address given by John F. Kennedy –

Hitler and other prominent Nazi figures were the most heavily recurring people throughout the

thread. One picture was edited to make it seem like Michael Jackson was dining with Hitler;

another showed Hitler and co. enjoying a day at Disneyland; yet another was edited to have

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[34]   Ezra Klein, interview with Whitney Phillips, "Whitney Phillips Explains How Trump Controls the Media."

daleks, from the popular science fiction program Doctor Who, helping with surveillance at

Auschwitz.
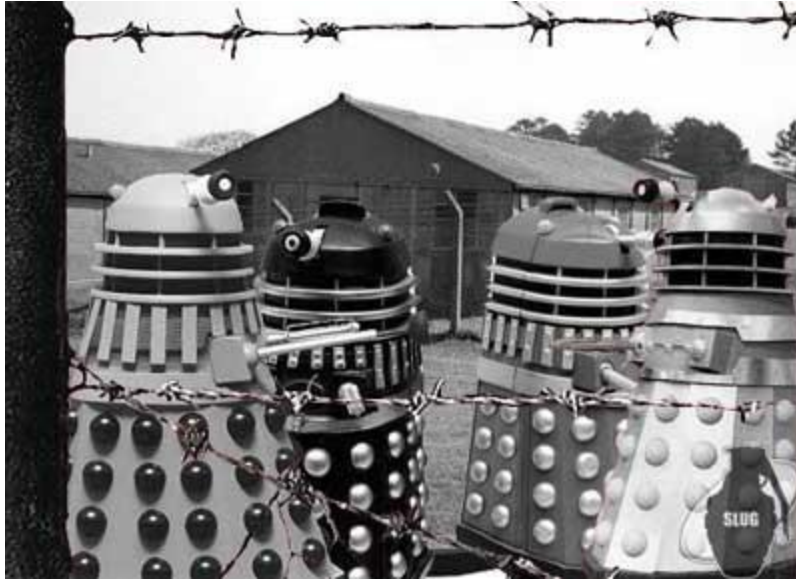
This image, from the "Historical Inaccuracies" photoshop thread, is captioned "When 'Slugworth's' Daleks
say 'exterminate!' they really mean it." (Source: SomethingAwful.com).

This mix of science fiction content and Nazi imagery demonstrates the many connections being

made in this period between "nerdy" interests and "edgy" topics, manifesting as

experimentation with an "edgy" and harmful form of humor.[35]

4chan, Gamergate,

When moot started the image hosting site 4chan, images like these were able to be

produced and shared at a much more rapid rate. While the full history of 4chan is outside of the

scope of this paper, it was the natural successor to sites like SomethingAwful.com and has

garnered intense media attention in recent years due to its turbulent and violent users.

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[35]   Kevin Bowen in "Fuck You And Die: An Oral History of Something Awful," Interviews.
       Zack Parsons, "Historical Inaccuracies," *SomethingAwful.com*, December 13 2001, Accessed April 14 2019,
https://www.somethingawful.com/photoshop-phriday/historical-inaccuracies/1/.

According to former admin Thorpe, "[4chan's] original population was also at least partially defined by the sorts of people that got kicked off SA." It is difficult to determine where the majority of 4chan's population originated from, however, or even who the majority of 4chan's population was or currently is. This is because of 4chan's structure. The site, based off of a Japanese message board by the name Futaba Channel, or 2chan, is formatted like a bulletin-board style forum. An "original poster" (OP) starts a thread with a post, usually with an image attached, to a board that has been assigned a specific topic. The post is made anonymously on a board with a specific theme – some of 4chan's most popular (and notorious) boards are /b/ random and /pol/ politics.[36] People can then anonymously reply to the thread, and are given the option of adding quote text, images, or references to memes or other posts. No account is necessary to post on any of 4chan's boards, and keeping track of one's posts is up to the user themselves. Threads are "bumped" up to the top of each board depending on how many others respond, and are quickly deleted if no other 4channers reply to the initial post.[37]

Controversy, therefore, was and still is rewarded on 4chan's many boards. This is because of a phenomenon known as "invisible" and "perceived" audiences. Technology and social media scholar Danah Boyd wrote in her book *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* that posters balance "what they say with how their diverse audiences might interpret their actions." Posters notice how the people in a particular group or community react to certain forms of media; people who feel neutrally about the content are likely to leave the post alone and not reply, constituting themselves as the "silent" or "invisible" audience. It is only those who feel the strongest – positively or negatively – who interact with the post itself.

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[36] While this board was originally named the "politics" board, it now has the name "politically incorrect."
[37] "Frequently Asked Questions," *4chan.org*, Accessed April 23 2019, https://www.4chan.org/faq.

This is the "perceived" audience. "In speaking to an unknown or invisible audience," Boyd says, "it is impossible and unproductive to account for the full range of plausible interpretations…[OPs] consistently imagine…potential readers or viewers and focus on how those intended viewers are likely to respond…As a result, the imagined audience defines the social context."[38]

Because 4chan was birthed into an Internet already rife with trolling and edgy memes, and its structure lent itself so easily to radicalization, it was not long before "trolling" became a more ritualized behavior for its users. The most popular board, /b/, began organizing what were known as "raids." The first large-scale raid took place in 2006, and involved posters on /b/[39] logging on to the website Habbo Hotel simultaneously, creating avatars wearing black suits and sporting an afro hairstyle, and forming Swastika symbols in order to block non-4channer Habbo Hotel users from using the virtual pool. Many of the users entered the phrase "Pool's Closed, Due to AIDs," into the chat. The afro hair style, swastika, and reference to AIDs demonstrate the flippant and "humorous" use of racism by those participating in the raid.[40]

Over the next few years, raids became a more common practice, and were coupled with a practice called "doxxing." Doxxing was, and unfortunately still is, a practice that involves finding a person's personal information, such as their full name, address, phone number, email address, etc., and threatening to publish or actually publishing that information publicly on the internet. While it originated on Usenet, it became a more mainstream practice in the 2000s. The

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[38]   Danah Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 31-32.

[39] Frequent posters on /b/ refer to themselves as "/b/tards." I will be sticking to phrases like "regular posters on /b/" instead for what I hope are obvious reasons.

[40]   "4chan Chronicle," *Wikibooks.org*, Accessed April 23 2019, https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/4chan_Chronicle.

majority of doxxing victims in the early 2000s were women, and nearly all of these women had

a public presence related to programming, anime, video games, or other "nerdy" interests

online. One prominent programmer and video game developer, Kathy Sierra, cancelled a

keynote speech she was going to give at a San Diego tech conference after receiving a flood of

online hate, including a "a post that featured a picture of her next to a noose," with a comment

that said "the only thing Kathy has to offer me is that noose in her neck size." Other

photoshopped images began to appear on her blog of her being gagged by a thong and with

shooting targets on her face. Her address and the addresses of her family members were posted

as well, leading Sierra to become concerned that "her stalkers might go through with their

threats," making many 4channers even angrier and more violent. Her abuse was seemingly

triggered by commentary on her blog that she felt like reader comments needed higher levels of

moderation – which "was seen as undermining the libertarian hacker ethic of absolute Internet

freedom."[41]

       Calls to harass feminist bloggers Cath Elliot, Dawn Foster, and Petra Davis began

appearing on boards like /b/ in 2007 as well, and they all started to receive graphic hate posted

to their blogs and filling up their emails. Elliot remembers how, at the time, she read "about

how I'm apparently too ugly for any man to want to rape, or I read graphic descriptions detailing

precisely how certain implements should be shoved into my various orifices." Elliot was not the

only one of these women to receive explicit rape threats. Davis received

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[41]   "Blog death threats spark debate," *BBC.com*, March 27 2007, Accessed May 15 2019, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6499095.stm.
       Tom Foremski, "Kathy Sierra, death threats and the Blogosphere," March 29 2007, Accessed May 15 2019, https://www.siliconvalleywatcher.com/kathy-sierra-death-threats-and-the-blogosphere/.
       Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, (Alresford: Zero Books, 2017), 15.

an email directing me to a website…with my address on the front page under the legend 'fuck her till she screams, filth whore, rape me all night cut me open,' and some images of sexually mutilated women. It was very strange, sitting quietly in front of my screen looking at those images, knowing that the violence done to those women was intended as a lesson…

Threatening physical assault, rape, and even death became a way for these men to assert dominance over the online spaces that they fiercely wanted to protect as their own.[42]

Anita Sarkeesian became a target of this vitriol and abuse in the 2010's: "her offence was creating a series of YouTube videos introducing viewers to some elementary concepts from feminist media criticism in an accessible and pretty mild-mannered style." After raising money via Kickstarter for her channel, feministfrequency, she produced a three part mini-series titled "Damsel in Distress: Tropes vs Women in Video Games." The backlash was immediate and relentless. While a sickeningly high amount of the hate she received involved threats of rape and violence, the biggest gripe that 4channers had about Sarkeesian was instead that she was barging into video game culture. One blogger stated that she "has set herself up as an 'expert' in a field she has no credential in; the Gaming Community…She does not play as often (and, frankly, probably not as well) as even casual-tier gamers."[43]

Sarkeesian's "Damsel in Distress" series was released in 2013, and was eerie foreshadowing for Gamergate, a controversy that would take the internet by storm in 2014. When the ex-boyfriend of video game developer Zoe Quinn posted a long series about her

[42]   Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, (Alresford: Zero Books, 2017), 16.
        Cath Elliot in *Kill All Normies*, 16.
        Petra Davis in *Kill All Normies*, 17.
[43]   Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, (Alresford: Zero Books, 2017), 20.
        Andy Lawell, "Why Anita Sarkeesian is the worst thing to happen to videogames since Sonic '06," *Medium.com*, October 5 2013, Accessed May 15 2019, https://medium.com/@andyghktweet/why-anita-sarkeesian-is-the-worst-thing-to-happen-to-videogames-since-sonic-06-1bc7bdbd217c.

emotional manipulation and behaviors cheating on him with video game reviewers, it sparked a

proverbial tidal wave of gamers from 4chan and reddit.com who protested the reviews that one

of her games, *Depression Quest*, received on gaming journalism sites like Kotaku. The fallout

from Eron Gjoni's blog post was tremendous; Quinn received rape and death threats, and had

pornographic content of her sent to her family members and friends. While many involved in

Gamergate claimed that they were defending "ethics in games journalism" and used that phrase

and their rallying cry, many of them used the opportunity to harass prominent women in

gaming communities like Brianna Wu, Felicia Day, Jennifer Allaway, and Patricia Hernandez. One

meme that reposted often on 4chan was this paragraph:

> A fat, wetback 'games journalist' with sausage fingers and a chin like Jay Leno who works for
> Kotaku…Patricia is a noted lesbian and feminazi who follows in Kotaku's proud tradition of writing
> countless articles about how various games either promote rape or literally rape their female players.

This post demonstrates the perception that women were trying to hijack online and gaming

communities, drawing inspiration from frustrations with women like Sarkeesian and Quinn; it

also shows that by 2014, the transition was fully made from "edgy" joking about topics like race,

gender, and sexuality, to unironic belief in the ideas being addressed.[44]

Defensiveness characterized the #gamergate movement. Many associated the word

"gamer" with a type of persecuted identity, and stated their firm belief that Gamergate was a

movement or revolution: "There's a fire in my chest… Anger at feminists and SJWs trying to

dictate what's in games and screeching when things don't meet a "diversity" quota. Anger at

corruption and nepotism in gaming journalism...someone is going to…get some kind of

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[44]   Eron Gjoni, "The Zoe Post," *Wordpress.com*, August 16 2014, Accessed May 15 2019,
https://thezoepost.wordpress.com/.
        Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*,
(Alresford: Zero Books, 2017), 21-23.

revolution started." In an IRC channel called #burgersandfries, which was up and running in the days following the blog post about Quinn, 4channers mostly discussed optics, framing Gamergate as a public relations challenge that they could "win." While the entire 3756 pages cannot be analyzed here, the majority of the chat revolves around trying to find political commentators to boost their message and credibility, and whether or not to push Quinn to commit suicide.

> Aug 25 07.18.18 <Logan> Any chance we can get Zoe to commit suicide?
> Aug 25 07.18.29 if we can get more daming evidence
> Aug 25 07.18.29 I think the [doxxing info removed by DF] is a good shot.
> Aug 25 07.18.33 <temet> like her fucking a train of lack dudes …
> Aug 25 07.18.39 <PaperDinosaur> fuck off Logan
> Aug 25 07.18.39 <temet> black
> Aug 25 07.18.51 <Logan> Nah 21st century doing a train is so 90s. …
> Aug 25 07.18.59 <PaperDinosaur> If she commits suicide we lose everything …
> Aug 25 07.20.34 <PaperDinosaur> If you can't see how driving Zoe to suicide would fuck this entire thing up then you're a fucking idiot
> Aug 25 07.20.41 Imagine the kotaku article …
> Aug 25 07.20.48 <temet> PaperDinosaur is right
> Aug 25 07.20.51 <temet> not the right PR play[45]

Conclusion

Unfortunately for the United States, 4chan's obsession with optics and political strategy did not go unnoticed. A young man named Milo Yiannopoulos' commentary on Gamergate attracted the attention of both 4channers and a political commentator named Steve Bannon, who was in charge of a website called *Brietbart News Network*. Years before Bannon became the White House Chief Strategist in Donald J. Trump's administration, he realized that the

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[45]   Unknown, "The Future of Game Journalism," *Escapistmagazine.com,* August 20 2014, Accessed May 15 2019, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/18.858604-The-Future-of-Game-Journalism.
        "Zoe Quinn's screenshots of 4chan's dirty tricks were just the appetizer. Here's the first course of the dinner, directly from the IRC log," *WeHuntedtheMammoth.com*, September 8 2014, Accessed May 17 2019, http://www.wehuntedthemammoth.com/2014/09/08/zoe-quinns-screenshots-of-4chans-dirty-tricks-were-just-the-appetizer-heres-the-first-course-of-the-dinner-directly-from-the-irc-log/.
        "#burgerandfries," *IRC Channel Log*, September 6 2019, Accessed May 17 2019, http://puu.sh/boAEC/f072f259b6.txt.

internet was primed for a candidate like Donald Trump. "I realized Milo could connect with

these kids right away," Bannon said in an interview. "You can activate that army. They come in

through Gamergate or whatever and get turned onto politics and Trump." A year later, in 2015,

Milo posted an op-ed to *Brietbart* titled "How Donald Trump Can Win: With Guns, Cars, Tech

Visas, Ethanol…And Chan."[46]

       We live in increasingly turbulent times. When I began writing this thesis, Brenton Tarrant

had just committed the Christchurch shooting. I am finishing writing this paper, on May 17,

2019, just a few weeks after another shooting, also accompanied by a manifesto, occurred at a

synagogue in Poway, San Diego. The shooter, 19 year old John T. Earnest, was recently charged

with 109 counts of hate crimes. He also attempted to set a nearby mosque on fire, and

published a similar manifesto to Brenton Tarrant's on 8chan prior to the Poway attack. As

horrifying as sites like 4chan can be, it is more important than ever to pay careful attention to

what these young men are saying and how they are communicating online. If we do not, there

is no way of saving ourselves or rehabilitating these men.[47]

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[46]   Joshua Green, *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency,* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 147.

[47]   Talia Lavin, "The San Diego shooter's manifesto is a modern form of an old lie about Jews," *WashingtonPost.*com, April 29 2019, Accessed May 17 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/29/san-diego-shooters-manifesto-is-modern-form-an-old-lie-about-jews/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c1603772e201.

    Doug Stanglin, "Feds charge suspect in Poway synagogue killing with 109 counts of hate crimes," *USAToday.com*, May 9 2019, Accessed May 17 2019, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/05/09/poway-synagogue-shooting-feds-charge-suspect-hate-crimes/1154892001/.

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