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Anita Sarkeesian’s Failed Rhetorical Approach:

Gender Relations and the Gaming Community

At best, women enjoy a tenuous, delicate relationship with the video game community, a community that’s easily angered if they receive criticism from just about anyone. In particular, feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian created the perfect storm of vitriol, bigotry, and harassment using her Internet-based series “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games,” hosted by her blog Feminist Frequency. Sarkeesian’s main argument is that the video game industry perpetuates sexist tropes and undermines gender inclusivity. To make this point, Sarkeesian developed the series of videos that illustrate examples in well-known intellectual properties such as *Super Mario Brothers*, *Starfox*, and *The Legend of Zelda* (Sarkeesian 2013).

Sarkeesian’s message was lost on her audiences almost immediately due to a variety of factors, namely her inability to understand who her audience was and what they expected from her as a commentator on the gaming community. In fact, her work as a feminist has resulted in threats of death and rape (Totilo 2014; Sarkeesian 2015), claims that her ideas are extremist (TheAmazingAtheist 2011), threaten people who might be involved with Sarkeesian or support her point of view (Wingfield), and the threat of being doxxed – or having her personal information leaked online – through the infamous controversy Gamergate (Wingfield). However, are her arguments really so revolutionary that we should be focusing on her message rather than how she chooses to speak it? The audience who received her message – whether her original, intended audience or not – is not willing to listen, which may lead to an answer on this issue.

# **Anita Sarkeesian and Her Controversy**

In 2011, Anita Sarkeesian launched a Kickstarter for her proposed web series, “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” (Sarkeesian 2012), which is a crowd-funding tool that asks people online to fund her project based on the proposal posted on the Kickstarter page:

“With your help, I’ll produce a 5-video series (now expanded to 12 videos) entitled Tropes vs Women in Video Games, exploring female character stereotypes throughout the history of the gaming industry” (Sarkeesian 2012).

If the creator receives enough funding, they can also create “stretch goals,” which are optional, additional parts of the project that they can create with more funding on top of the original project. Based on her proposal and “stretch goals” outlined, Sarkeesian raised enough to create 12 videos on the tropes found in video games from a feminist perspective, hitting a total of $158,922 (Sarkeesian 2012). Since being funded in 2012, Sarkeesian has produced three of the 12 promised videos: “Damsel in Distress,” “Ms. Male Character,” and “Women as Background Decoration.” They are published on YouTube and shared to her website, Feminist Frequency (Sarkeesian 2015).

In the first episode of “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games,” “Damsel in Distress: Part 1,” Sarkeesian starts with a montage of classic female characters in video games … in distress. They’re either actively crying for help or, in one case, chained to a wall, struggling to get free so the audience can get a “systemic big picture perspective” (Sarkeesian 2013) before she even begins to make her case using the unrealized character Crystal in *Dinosaur Planet*. The episode is set up to make an academic argument to what seems to be fellow academics; Sarkeesian uses a PowerPoint-like layout in the video, and presents her argument early on using an actual thesis statement:

“Welcome to our multi-part video series exploring the roles and representations of women in video games. This project will examine the tropes, plot devices, and patterns most commonly associated with women in gaming from a systemic, big picture perspective. This series will include a critical analysis of many beloved games and characters, but remember it’s both possible and even necessary to simultaneously enjoy media while also being more critical of its more problematic or pernicious aspects” (Sarkeesian 2013).

Based on the fact that the site was hosted on a site that specializes in feminism in pop culture – not a site that focuses on gaming – it appears her primary audience were other feminists or those she hoped to persuade to feminism, supported by a link to another talk she did for TEDxWomen on online harassment. However, the page itself linked to other gaming-related videos, including her speech at the Game Developers Choice Awards and other gaming-related videos including “Damsel in Distress Part 2,” “Ms. Male Character,” and two “LEGO & Gender” installments. As a result, her videos could easily draw the attention of people who *play* video games based on keywords caught by a search engine.

For this work, Sarkeesian has received both mainstream success. In 2012, Sarkeesian was invited to discuss gender politics on TEDxWomen (Sarkeesian 2012). In 2014, she received an “Ambassador Award” from the Game Developer’s Conference for her work on Feminist Frequency and helping to “[deconstruct] the stereotypes, patterns and tropes associated with women in popular culture, and highlighted issues surrounding the targeted harassment of women in online and gaming spaces” (Game Developer’s Conference 2014). Also in 2014, comedy host Stephen Colbert invited Sarkeesian to talk on the GamerGate controversy on his show *The Colbert Report* (Colbert 2014). In the cases of TED and university talks, it appears that she has succeeded with her peers, fellow intellectuals willing to discuss how she deconstructs a popular part of culture.

However, every step she’s earned some sort of success, she has also been threatened, as well as had others threatened because of her position in the video game industry. The Game Developer’s Conference was threatened by an anonymous person or group of people who tried to assure the event organizers that a “bomb will be detonated at the Game Developer's Choice award ceremony [that night] unless Anita Sarkeesian's Ambassador Award is revoked” (Totilo 2014). In 2014, a talk she planned at Utah State University was cancelled due to an anonymous threat that promised “the deadliest school shooting in American history” if Sarkeesian was allowed to speak (McDonald 2014). In January, Sarkeesian published one week’s worth of harassing tweets she received, a sample which included gender-based insults (e.g., “despicable whore”), rape threats, and death threats (e.g., “I hope every feminist has their head severed from their shoulders”) (Sarkeesian 2015).

Due to her videos and her perseverance in the face of the continued harassment she and her supporters have received, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* actor and self-proclaimed gamer Wil Wheaton wrote an article for *TIME’s* 100 most influential people focusing on Sarkeesian for being “a feminist for the digital age, using modern tools and platforms to engage thousands of people who want to hear her thoughts and respond to the challenges she raises” (Wheaton 2015).

Recognition as one of *TIME’s* most influential people is not specifically intended for those who have made a positive impact – just those who have made an impact at all. Given the evidence, it’s clear that Sarkeesian has turned heads and riled people in a very serious, large-scale way. However, it’s this separation of audiences that has gotten in the way of her total success rather than the fractured one she currently enjoys (or maybe doesn’t), and it may impact her ability to address any audience at all.

# **Intentional vs. Unintentional Audiences**

Hostile audience is a concept touched on by rhetoricians interested in teaching others how to overcome that obstacle, but there is a gap in scholarship with regards to rhetorical criticism about how rhetors deal with poorly-received artifacts after the fact, as well as what makes an artifact poorly received in the first place. Sarkeesian’s “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” is an excellent modern example of what a hostile audience looks like and how *not* to act when it’s discovered the audience is unwilling to be receptive.

Myers highlighted the possibility of multiple audiences in which a rhetor creates “statements that communicate distinct, and perhaps even incompatible, messages simultaneously to diverse audiences,” sometimes a necessary tactic in order to avoid “alienating audiences whose support the speaker needs,” even if it means saying something controversial (Myers 55). While the controversial nature of Sarkeesian’s official thesis – that video games continue to represent women as helpless – is up for debate, it does seem to be the case that she’s attempting to address to multiple audiences at once.

However, she doesn’t actually say who these audiences are. On the original Kickstarter page where she first posed the idea behind “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” (Sarkeesian 2013), as well as the video page on Feminist Frequency (Sarkeesian 2013), there is no mention of audience or audience analysis. She states her goals with the series as a whole and the individual video, but it’s not clear who she’s addressing besides the original 6,968 people who backed her project. She hints that academia may have been a part of her inspiration, but she doesn’t explicitly state that was her intention when she lamented that “academia tended to present feminist theory in disconnected or inaccessible ways” while she was a student at York University in 2009 (Sarkeesian 2013).

Her lack of attention to an audience analysis is supported by an interview hosted by video game publication IGN when she makes broad statements about her generation’s ownership of a “great many misconceptions and misunderstandings floating around out there about the word [feminism]” (Sarkeesian 2013), which may explain some of the heavy backlash she received. In fact, in the interview, she states her belief that millennials have a difficult understanding of the concepts behind feminism and still identifies herself as an “open and vocal feminist on the Internet,” which may even insinuate that she actively ignored the idea of analyzing her audience in order to communicate her message better; she implies millennials don’t understand, identifies as something she thinks they don’t understand, and then doesn’t explain what she believes feminism “really” is. According to Sarkeesian, the level of harassment she received as a result of “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” was not new or unique to her, but she continued on presumably using the same tactics as her predecessors; at the very least, she used highly politicized language when identifying as a feminist.

In her personal biography on Feminist Frequency, she appears to continue to appeal to a more academically-minded audience:

“Her work focuses on deconstructing the stereotypes and tropes associated with women in popular culture as well as highlighting issues surrounding the targeted harassment of women in online and gaming spaces. Anita earned her bachelor’s degree in Communication Studies at California State University Northridge and her Master’s degree in Social and Political Thought at York University” (Sarkeesian 2015).

Her language references feminism openly, but it also focuses heavily on her academic achievements, using rhetorical language such as “deconstructing” and “tropes,” insinuating her research is academic in nature. It doesn’t actually focus on those affected by her research – the gamers who may or may not participate in harassment, as well as the women who may be unaffected but silent witnesses to female harassment, as well.

But the icing on the cake of her rhetorical approach is the name of her site – Feminist Frequency – which is a loaded, specific word that uncovers deep-seated mistrust in the gaming community.

In this way, Sarkeesian’s approach can be compared to Malcom X’s approach in Lucaites and Condit’s article on culturetypal and countercultural voices where Sarkeesian takes the culturetypal approach using academic-based language and the use of controversial terminology like “feminism” to make her point on a broad scale, in spite of the fact that both may be problematic for her unintended audience – gamers themselves (Lucaites and Condit). Gamers themselves have a strong reputation of being misogynistic and unwilling to listen to the concerns of women no matter how “bad” it makes them look. Feminism and even being a known woman in the community become problematic.

It’s still not clear that Sarkeesian *didn’t* conduct an audience analysis. She may have actually intended an academic or feminist audience when she created her series. But given the scope and access of the entire Internet where she hosted her ideas, she had no real control over her audience anyway. Ede and Lunsford argue that “[m]any of those who envision audience as addressed have been influenced by the strong tradition of audience analysis in speech communication and by current research in cognitive psychology on the composing process. They often see themselves as reacting against the current-traditional paradigm of composition, with its a-rhetorical, product-oriented emphasis” (Ede and Lunsford 156).

In Lucaites and Condit’s piece, they investigate where Malcom X created “recharacterizations [that] led his listeners to recognize their own abilities by developing a sense of worth through accomplishment that led to entitlement” (Lucaites and Condit 10). Similarly, Sarkeesian reconstructs the image of women as gamers and as characters in games as having inherent worth outside of tropes, which led to a sense of entitlement in terms of more equality in games, whatever that ends up meaning in practice. If this is the case, like Malcom X, her audience is primarily through her peers – academics and *female* gamers – and not necessarily through the power structure that makes games (e.g., white men as the perception goes).

It may be the case that Sarkeesian had a mix of both – her charged language made her a problem with an audience she didn’t *intend* to have but had anyway. Ede and Lunsford’s model of audience analysis supports this by using a system in which audience (Sarkeesian’s academic peers), message, writer, and universe (Internet) (Ede and Lunsford 169) are all interacting at once at any given time. And considering Sarkeesian’s charged language was displayed all over the Internet, this interaction posed a problem.

## **Cases of Sexism in Gaming Which Ran Concurrent to Sarkeesian’s Research**

Gaming as a discourse community has many painful examples of widespread sexism even without looking at the recent GamerGate controversy. While Sarkeesian was developing her video series, several individual events that exploded unraveled to illustrate this point. And because of the potential reach of her audience – the *Internet* – these are the same people who may be digesting her videos, as well. This becomes a problem, as these same sexists are acting out in obviously misogynistic ways inside the gaming community at the same time Sarkeesian wants funding for the resources to point out said sexism in the gaming community.

The video game *Dead Island* received heat for an incident in 2011 in which code in the game revealed that main character Purna, a strong character tasked with surviving an island-themed zombie assault, was coded with the main ability “Feminist Whore.” While the trait wasn’t seen by users of the main game, early code using the “Feminist Whore” term as a placeholder for the character’s ability’s name was leaked shortly after the game’s release; in other words, the main ability the female lead character Purna would use to attack enemies was named “Feminist Whore” and not a name for Purna herself (Crecente 2011).

The pairing of “feminist” and “whore” is revealing about the specific developer’s understanding of feminism and women, choosing to alienate the women who may have wanted to play his company’s game. However, other gamers took to Twitter to defend the trait:

“@gameinformer Feminist Whore Purna? LOLOLOLOL...forget an apology. That's hilarious. Should have been in game” (AzumaSensei)

Rob Kimball, AzumaSensei on Twitter, himself was not a developer for *Dead Island*, but he identifies himself as a game developer for other platforms (i.e., iOS) and was apparently so amused by the trait name that he posted it early in the afternoon the same day the story of the leaked code broke. Brian Crecente’s article on Kotaku is full of commenters stating more of the same, including:

“I'm all for the equality and making women appear as something more than just a sex fantasy in games, but getting all up in arms over a story like this one will do absolutely nothing to further the cause” (Cactuscat222)”.

and:

“feeling better now after your evening rant? because it is a joke. if you take a game that damn seriously, you need to get out and get a lil session with the oldest and the best gaming console, called nature” (Yotian).

How does this relate to Anita Sarkeesian’s “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games?” It’s relevant in that even though this may not have been Sarkeesian’s intended audience, they became a part of the actual audience through their existence in the same space (digital), and this particular audience has a problem with gender relations.

*Dead Island* burned feminists a second time when they released the Zombie Bait Edition of the game *Dead Island Riptide*, a sequel to the first game,which came “packed with a statue of a mutilated bikini-clad corpse was met with shock and repulsion” (Crecente 2013), a corpse that featured a set of perfectly in-tact breasts on an anonymous woman who had her arms and head ripped clean off. This particular incident was met with more disdain than the “Feminist Whore” trait, but readers still came to *Dead Island* developer Deep Silver’s defense with:

“- It’s actually pretty cool, of course nothing I would display at my home though. It’s basically just a MODERN statue. In modern society it’s popular to have huge knockers, be in colors and guess what’s also popular? Zombies. Well sh\*t” (Jeberg)

and:

“So what if the industry is “under fire”? Is it the developers responsibility to abandon their core game play and sanitize so that it doesn’t offend some wingnuts or people who’ve never played a video game in their lives? Or do they it to themselves, their company, their family to leverage their core competency and experience make the best game that they can?” (Khamsinvera)

and:

“Not something that I would ever want. I can’t imagine most people would, though they must have some data which says otherwise. As for the whole “waah, we don’t want this to reflect the industry”, take that tired argument out behind the woodshed and shoot it dead. If respectability is such a big issue with you, go work in another industry or take up another hobby” (RomanMaroni)

Like rhetorical theory based around hostile audiences, the research behind sexism in the video game industry is still a budding one, part of what Sarkeesian was hoping to address herself as a rhetor. A more quantitative study by Fox and Tang found that “dominance orientation and two forms of masculinity, the desire for power over women and the need for heterosexual self-presentation” drove overt sexism in video games, and by extension, the culture behind it, questioning whether “positive changes can occur naturally in a hostile environment or whether more official interventions such as sexual harassment policies are necessary to evoke reform” (Fox and Tang 318).

In a case study that focused on the unfortunate “dickwolves” controversy in which popular webcomic *Penny Arcade* made a comic in which an unnamed character discusses regular, horrifying rape by wolves with “dicks for legs” (Holkins and Krahulik 2010). Salter and Blodgett make the point that while both characters in the comic are male, the comic is indicative of a culture that regularly misuses the word “rape” “as slang for victory over an obstacle or fellow player, part of a shared rhetoric of sexual violence within gaming culture” (Salter and Blodgett 406). One of their primary findings of the dickwolves controversy was that the case highlights an issue with gaming culture in that the roles of women “include the woman as sex object, exemplified by booth babes and services that offer virtual ‘dates’ with attractive girl gamers, and women as invisible, jokingly erased through memes like ‘There are no women on the Internet’’ or purposefully through self-sublimation of feminine identifiers” or by deciding “women is that of the enemy” (Salter and Blodgett 411). To make things worse, Holkins and Krahulik created and sold merchandise surrounding the idea of the dickwolves – pennants and t-shirts – which was apparently an effort to attack people they believed were trying to trample their right to say whatever they wanted (i.e., a violation of their “free speech”) (Hernandez 2013) moreso than their desire to make money (likely also a part of that decision).

Not mentioned by Salter and Blodgett, however, is that one large problems about the controversy was that *Penny Arcade* is a long-running comic developed by two men who are in charge of the PAX gaming convention (Holkins and Krahulik 2015). It wasn’t just perpetrated by random, unknown members of the video game community but rather two recognizable celebrities of the gaming world. Holkins and Kahulik have used their long-running comic, which launched in 1998, to cultivate a solid brand and personal clout, which they eventually used to create their own gaming convention amongst other ventures (Holkins and Krahulik 2015).

Krahulik wouldn’t let the issue die when he proclaimed that “pulling the dickwolves’ merchandise was a mistake” three years later in 2013 (Hernandez 2013), which is around the same time Sarkeesian was creating her first video. Krahulik’s statement was more about censorship – and considering his comic hasn’t shied away from other controversial subjects in the past makes this a real possibility – and the fact that both the addition and later removal of the merchandise were two types of “statements” they were making to the gaming community (Fernandez 2013). However, the fact remains that Holkins and Krahulik were discontent enough with the right to post the offensive material in the first place that they made merchandise for it after the fact and *continued* to bring it up three years later because people dared to call them out on their behavior as public figures with prominent roles in the whole community, not just role models for the small following who originally read their comic in 1998.

It is in this community that Sarkeesian was attempting to shed light on the need for feminist criticism in gaming. So it’s no surprise that the reaction – much like creating merchandise to trivialize rape – to Sarkeesian’s criticism was equally vitriolic, both sexual and violent in nature, and generated on a large scale.

As previously noted, in January, Sarkeesian herself published 157 tweets she received for her work on “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” over a single week (Sarkeesian 2015), which included “kill yourself feminists are a waste of air” (Adensma), “you are a despicable whore” (FenesOctavian), and “I HOPE YOU GET RAPED YOU FUCKING WHORE” (MCMorganFreeman). Many of the tweets were gender-specific and included both rape and death threats as part of their outrage that someone on the Internet had the audacity to disagree with them. Considering the gender-based violence involved and the gender-based insults that didn’t include violence, the main issue seems to be that it was a *woman* who disagreed with them. Would a man have been called a whore multiple times?

Probably not. Jack Thompson, a former video game critic himself, did face severe consequences for his role in the video game community, but they were career-based instead of gender-based. Thompson, who used his power as a lawyer to actually try and limit the availability of “violent” video games and their sale to minors, was officially disbarred in 2008 (Fahey 2008). Like Sarkeesian, the same publications covered the stories of Thompson’s own fall from grace. However, comments on the article about his disbarment were markedly different than the hatred levied against Sarkeesian. Thompson was actually granted *sympathy* when he lost his career:

“I feel kinda bad for this guy - he's advocating what he believes in and to be told the career you worked all your life towards is over forever is rather harsh. Is this disbarrment all states or just the one he currently lives in?” (Maximus9)

and:

“It saddens me to see someone lose all the credibility they earned over years of study” (outofreach)

Those were the top two comments. Now, that isn’t to say others weren’t happy to see him go, but the comments didn’t include threats of rape or death for stating his opinions even though he and Sarkeesian had basically the same foe:

“@Maximus9: I agree. As a gamer I'm glad this prick is out of business. As a person I hope he finds something else to do, like work at McDonald's” (DavidinMN)

Regardless of the scholarship available on audience and hostility, it’s clear that this discourse community *is* hostile and to women in particular. The Dickwolves and Feminist Whore controversies made it very, very clear how women and feminism were perceived within the community. Contrast that with Thompson and the non-use of caps, rape threats (admittedly, prick is a gender-based insult), or devaluing him to having *no* worth (waste of air vs. McDonald’s worker), and it’s easy to see how things differ between two members with a similar goal – improve gaming in some way (whether it was less violence in gaming or more inclusiveness for women).

Similarly, Chris Kluwe, a football player for the Minnesota Vikings, ranted against those who supported the GamerGate controversy in an aggressive, antagonistic way, characterizing GamerGate supporters as “slackjawed pickletits,” “slopebrowed weaseldicks,” and “basement-dwelling, cheetos-huffing, poopsock-sniffing douchepistol” (Kluwe 2014), originally posted to the online publication Medium (removed by the time this paper was written) (Romano 2014). In spite of the fact that Kluwe criticized gamers in an intensely caustic way (including other equally offensive, profane insults not included in this paper), gamers reacted the way they did with Thompson; they attacked the medium for publishing it rather than threatening to rape or kill the person or anyone involved with them. In 2014, gamers enraged by Kluwe convinced Adobe to remove advertising from Gawker, who owned Medium (Romano 2014):

“Leaked internal emails from the company also showed Gawker founder Nick Denton encouraging staff to dial back the Gamergate criticism on their own social media accounts” (Romano 2014).

Current scholarship supports this notion. In a study that looked at masculinity and how it drives the development and play of MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online role playing games), the authors first posit that “video games have traditionally been perceived as a male space, an activity created by men and for men” (Fox and Tang 314), which has led to players reporting that 10 percent of harassment received in-game has been sexual harassment (Fox and Tang 315) (e.g., the famous “tits or GTFO” phrase which demands nudes in exchange for being left alone in-game), which additionally led to “participants who endorsed masculine norms were more likely to report sexist attitudes about women’s participation in video games” (Fox and Tang 317).

## **Importance of Ethos in Gaming**

Sarkeesian’s third strike against her – the first two being that she was female and that she was a feminist to boot – was that she violated a strict “requirement” in the gaming community; to talk about gaming, one must be a gamer also. Whether she’s actually a gamer or not is up for dispute, and like those who dislike her, those that don’t trust her feel intensely about that opinion.

According to Sarkeesian on her Kickstarter page, she is an avid gamer but dislikes the portrayal of women:

“I love playing video games but I’m regularly disappointed in the limited and limiting ways women are represented” (Sarkeesian 2012).

She also continued to evoke an ethos as being a gamer and gaming “expert” on her own site by using images of herself at an arcade, The Rusty Quarters Retro Arcade & Museum. One of the images includes her posing with one of the old arcade machines, “playing” by holding the joystick (Sarkeesian 2015).

However, a video linked on YouTube in 2014 argued against her credibility:

“I’m doing video games. It’s not exactly a fandom. I’m not a fan of video games. I actually had to learn a lot about video games in the process of making this” (RiccanGamer 2014).

Unfortunately, at the time this paper was written, the original, full-length video showcasing Sarkeesian’s “confession” was no longer available from its original source, Flying Turkeys. The video was clipped and resubmitted by RiccanGamer so that the “confession” continued to be accessible.

The fact that the video was posted and reposted with only the “relevant” footage included is telling of the importance of ethos in the video game community; before one can criticize it, they must be a “gamer,” and if they’re not, they will be criticized for it. While the definition of a “gamer” is contested on forums and has been for years, it’s clear that some sort of ethos is required by the community. The 377 comments on the reposted video (by RiccanGamer) support this argument with statements like:

“How does anyone take Anita seriously when this video exists?” (JEmbr33)

and:

“SHE IS NO A GAMER, SHE CAN'T TELL ABOUT GAMES, A THING THAT SHE DOESN'T LIKE AND HATE SO MUCH. SHE IS THE NEW JACK THOMPSON!!” (Portal Celebrinando)

and:

“Anita reminds me of the girls back in my middle school years that would call me a nerd or chauvinistic pig for playing video games. The only hope she has is corporate sponsors and other privileged western feminists (I forgot, white knight beta male liberals as well). She belongs on MSNBC with the other dumbasses that get their own programs. The reason she blocks out all the comments in her videos is because she cant take criticism because *a real gamer with common sense would destroy her logic*, and that isn't on her agenda, or her corporate sponsors agenda” (Stan S, emphasis mine)

According to Michael Leff, rhetorical ethos “offers possibilities for speakers to construct favorable images of themselves, unfavorable images of opponents, and to do whatever else advances their purpose through reference to person” (Leff 304). This is especially evident with arguments against Sarkeesian based on the video that dashes her credibility alone. According to Stan’s comment from the YouTube video, the only people with the “right” to speak about games are the ones that would “destroy” Sarkeesian’s argument because she has no authority. In this video, other gamers use ethos to discredit her and simultaneously use their own perceived expertise to prop themselves up above her. Ergo, only those who have their own level of (again, perceived) expertise have a right to even talk on the subject.

Leff continues that “one of the key problems related to ethos has to do with understanding who has the authority to speak within a specific set of circumstances” (Leff 308). Again, in Stan’s comment, not only does Sarkeesian not understand video games, her non-understanding revokes her right to even speak about it *in spite of the fact* that she references researching them and attempting to learn about them for her research. Academic pursuits into gaming somehow don’t count. Only actual play time does.

Ethos is so important to the community that the only way one has the right to talk about the discourse community is through being a part of the discourse community first; the implication here is that anyone who’s “really a gamer” would agree with them and not Sarkeesian, because they actually play games. And if they agree with one another in this constructed echo chamber, they then get to speak. If we extend this commentary, there almost appears to be no room for criticism of gaming in this circular type of logic.

Supporting the idea that gaming is *and should be* echo chamber made of only experts, Holkins and Krahulik of *Penny Arcade* responded to criticism by selling merchandise that *makes fun of rape* just to make the point that criticism isn’t welcomed and “real fans” would support the medium no matter what content the medium or community produces. Furthermore, commenter Khamsinvera supported the same notion when they claimed those offended by sexualized violence as the center piece in the limited edition of *Dead Island Riptide* have never played a video game in their life. There’s an underlying assumption that anything that manages to happen, once it’s happened, is untouchable. Otherwise, they risk being discredited.

Even Kluwe cautiously attempts to quell any arguments over the validity of his position in the gaming community (which may have been positioned against him as an athlete) with a three-paragraph interlude containing his credentials as a member of the community:

“I grew up playing games. When I was six years old, back in 1987 (so long ago!), I got an NES, and there was no looking back. I played Battletoads, and learned that “faster computer reactions” is a cheap substitute for “harder difficulty.” I played Final Fantasy VI on the SNES, and watched an opera play out through a video game. I played Metal Gear Solid on PS1, and thought my game was freaking the fuck out. I logged on to Ultima Online the day the shards went up, and got pk’ed, and tried to figure out what this giant sandbox could actually do. I played just about every MMO after that as well, and first person shooter, and JRPG, and on and on (except for sports games; I hate sports games).

I *am* a gamer. I’ve had 24-hour LAN parties, fragging people in Duke Nukem and Quake, pounding Mountain Dew to stay awake, WinAMP playlist blasting my favorite songs at high volume. I’ve traded Nintendo Power facts and tips with my friends on the playground, and tried to figure out where the next boss was, or the best strategy to use (complete with horseshit stories from that one friend who just loved making things up and —NO! — you cannot save Aeris, goddammit). I’ve been made fun of by the jocks, even when I was on the football team.

Gaming is part of who I am, I can promise you that” (Kluwe 2014).

It says quite a bit that it took three paragraphs for Kluwe – a man who has a career and legacy – and possibly doesn’t fear threats against his person as an athletic man to feel the need to establish his “gaming cred,” namely that even *he* thinks he has to establish ethos before he feels he has a right to speak.

# **Conclusions**

The implications of the gaming community’s restrictions on criticism and what happens when someone doesn’t comply are grim: to have a voice in the community, one has to be a verified peer, one has to be a man, and one can’t criticize those who make the games lest one of the former two restrictions be levied against them. If the critic is indeed a woman, those who support the game, developers, or related media will threaten anything and everything under the sun.

Moreover, if someone does violate these restrictions and continues anyway, they will lose their “right” to speak whether or not the intended audience was even the gaming community at all. Considering the death threats levied against students of Utah State University and those at the Game Developer’s Conference, were made against people who may have had nothing to do with Sarkeesian’s choice at their institutions and may not have supported her either, it’s clear that even speaking out becomes dangerous especially in the case of Utah State – an academic institution full of her supposed intended audience (other academics).

Hatred of Sarkeesian spills over online to others as well. Other feminists and female gamers fall under the umbrella of anything Sarkeesian may have touched, which is apparent from the doxxing levied against Felicia Day, a prominent female gamer who refused to even comment on GamerGate in fear she’d be doxxed (McDonald 2014). Day didn’t actually do anything out of fear, and because of gaming’s anger against the GamerGate scandal, which has been linked to Sarkeesian, she was punished anyway for the crime of being honest in her fear when she spoke out.

If successful, this creates a discourse community free of any sort of criticism at all where the lives of women are null and void if they fight against the current rules and social norms.

It also means that Anita Sarkeesian may not be a failed rhetor after all. Considering her mainstream success with TED, *Colbert*, Game Developer’s Conference, and Kickstarter funding, it’s hard to say that she’s a failure at all. What’s left is that the gaming community is so angry, bitter, and sexist, there was likely no way for her to win against them once they found out the things she’d been saying about games (not gamers but games). As a woman, there was likely no way for her to win with gamers once the words “video game industry” left her keyboard and published to any website at all. And given her medium – the Internet – there was no way to avoid contending with an audience that hated her from the beginning. If the content was there for people to find, both the right (Colbert, Game Developer’s Conference) and the wrong (misogynistic gamers) audiences were likely to run into it at some point or another, especially as she used tools meant for the masses, namely YouTube and Kickstarter.

Even if it’s not Sarkeesian’s rhetorical failure that caused the interruption between her having a message and others hearing it publicly, it is worth noting that in this case, the distinction really doesn’t matter. If others’ lives are on the line, then her message eventually doesn’t get heard. Of course, there is a solution to be found in the entire controversy, but it probably can’t come from Sarkeesian anymore. I would suggest that it come from others in the community who have established rapport with *gamers* and not necessarily the others involved: journalists, developers, mainstream media figures, academics. I would also believe they would have to visibly portray characteristics for the *perceived* image of your average gamer (regardless of the actual truth behind what a real gamer looks like): white, male teens to early 20s, middle class, possibly a famous shoutcaster (someone who comments on eSports competitions live) or eSport participant (e.g., professional *League of Legends* or *StarCraft II* player who competes against other players).

I would also argue the absolute need for a Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X dynamic wherein one voice used culturetypal language (as Kluwe had done) to argue with gamers using their values, their dynamics, and their structure. The other would use countercultural language, much as Sarkeesian had done. If the latter was a member of an “other” group, their ability to prove themselves as a member of the community would have to be so extensive and so strong that it would override their other status – hence the suggestion that their voice would take the form of a shoutcaster or eSports participant, someone with clear and obvious investment in the community in a large way. Because of GamerGate, that investment could probably not come from the gaming journalism community.

The other, final thing to consider in choosing a “voice” for the community is that they would have to appeal to everyone, which includes the legitimate homophones, the legitimate misogynists, and the children who play video games but still have access to open forums. Rather, they would have to speak in such a way not to engage with the negative traits of those groups of people. (Not to say that children are bad for being children but that they probably aren’t in a place to accept the Master’s-level academic language that Sarkeesian was used to speaking in.)

Further research might include analyzing the reactions to those whose rhetoric has succeeded with gamers and see what tactics they use to find an “in” with their audience without succumbing to social “necessities” like being white, male, crude (e.g., everything Kluwe said about those disagreed with) before being heard, as well as without resorting to tactics like allowing gamers to continue to use tactics like misogyny, homophobia, and racism to scare off their support. Even in the Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. comparison, even King spoke to a (partially) white audience successfully (until his assassination) using tactics like associating his cause with stereotypical Christian and American values, value sets that were also important to his white audiences. Someone in a culturetypal position within the gaming community could do the same with a stress on the important of games as an art form or a reflection of popular culture, a medium that has the capacity to connect people over large distances, and the ability to teach skills the way “Portal 2” was found to do (Hill 2014).

At any rate, it’s clear that gamers won’t be ignored even if they weren’t the intended audience, and Ede and Lunsford have created a model where gamer’s interaction with a message even in places they’re not invited makes sense. To improve the gaming community and the kinds of games being created, rhetors have to contend with those who play the games. There’s no way around it. It is no longer reasonable to expect that unintended audiences won’t see a rhetor’s message if they use a global tool that people of all experiences have access to.

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