

The Tragedy of the Gamer: A Dramatistic Study of GamerGate

by

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Abstract

In August 2014, a small but active group of gamers began a relentless online harassment campaign against notable women in the videogame industry in a controversy known as GamerGate. In response, game journalists from several prominent gaming websites published op-eds condemning the incident and declared that “gamers are dead.” Using Burke’s dramatic method, this thesis will examine these articles as operating within the genre of tragedy, outlining the journalists’ efforts to scapegoat the gamer. It will argue that game journalists simultaneously engaged in mortification not to purge the guilt within themselves but to further the scapegoating process. An extension of dramatic theory will be offered which asserts that mortification can be appropriated by rhetors seeking to ascend within their social order’s hierarchy.

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Chapter 1: A Prelude to Drama

In August 2014, the videogame industry experienced perhaps the largest controversy of its relatively young lifespan. A small but very vocal and active group of gamers began a relentless campaign of harassment against videogame developer Zoë Quinn, feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, and other notable women in the games industry. The controversy began when Quinn's former romantic partner, Eron Gjoni (2014), published a lengthy blog post in which he detailed their troubled relationship. Criticizing Quinn, Gjoni accused her of extensive infidelity with multiple partners who were game journalists. At the time, Quinn was an emerging and critically acclaimed independent videogame developer, and Gjoni accused her of trading sexual favors for positive coverage and reviews of her upcoming game *Depression Quest*. The idea that game journalism had been ethically compromised through Quinn's actions enraged gamers, and they responded by harassing Quinn online, sending her insulting Twitter messages, comments, and emails, doxing her, which is the release of private information such as phone numbers, home addresses, and social security numbers obtained through hacking, and even threatening her with rape and murder. Ultimately, there was little evidence that Quinn engaged in this quid pro quo behavior, and most of Gjoni's accusations were debunked (Parkin, 2014). Despite a lack of evidence to support Gjoni's claims, angry gamers unleashed a relentless harassment campaign that would go on to be named #GamerGate, coined by actor Adam Baldwin (Mortenson, 2018).

Gjoni's post was not the first time Quinn experienced the wrath of angry gamers. When *Depression Quest* was originally released in 2013, she received hateful messages from gamers who thought that her game should not be considered a true game (Parkin, 2014). Unlike traditional games, the goal of *Depression Quest* was for the player to feel like someone

experiencing clinical depression. Rather than entertaining the player with guns, explosions, and level-ups, *Depression Quest* was a choose-your-own-adventure game that highlighted the daily and mundane challenges that depressed people face. From its initial release in 2013 to its debut on Steam in August 2014, the massively popular online gaming marketplace, Quinn had been targeted and harassed not only for the nature of the game itself but also because of the critical praise the game received from game journalists, which is why Gjoni's accusations rang so true for gamers.

While Quinn became the initial target of the GamerGate controversy, she was not the only woman who was harassed. Feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian had been targeted since 2012 when she began a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter for her video essay series "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games." As executive director of Feminist Frequency, an online organization that produces feminist media criticism, Sarkeesian wanted to investigate critically the ways in which videogames consistently disempowered women. A self-identified gamer, Sarkeesian said she was inspired to create the series after witnessing the same tropes of female representation in videogames for decades. Some of these tropes included the "Damsel in Distress," "The Sexy Sidekick," and "Women as Reward." Her Kickstarter was massively successful, garnering nearly \$160,000 with an initial goal of only \$6,000. Foreshadowing what would happen to Quinn two years later, Sarkeesian's series was a prime target for harassment from angry gamers. Sarkeesian's personal information was doxed, and she received countless rape and death threats from gamers furious about a feminist intrusion into their domain, especially one who claimed to be a gamer like them (Heron, Belford, & Goker, 2014). One angry gamer even made a game called "Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian" which allowed players to punch a photo of her face until it accumulated nasty bruises and cuts (Moore, 2012). Despite the attacks, Sarkeesian produced the

series, and each new essay further inflamed gamers, culminating in the August 2014 release of her video “Women as Background Decoration: Part 2.” Released shortly after Gjoni’s post, this video explored how women’s “sexuality or victimhood is exploited as a way to infuse edgy, gritty or racy flavoring into game worlds” (Sarkeesian, 2014). Sarkeesian’s new video along with Gjoni’s accusations against Quinn incensed gamers to unprecedented levels. Unlike prior harassment campaigns, the controversy Gjoni started ballooned into a sustained, dedicated effort that would last for months and turned the gaming world on its head.

In response to this harassment campaign, game journalists from prominent gaming websites such as *Kotaku*, *Polygon*, *Gamasutra*, and other gaming-centric sites, took a stand and wrote a number of op-eds condemning this kind of behavior and the people behind it (Alexander, 2014; Bernstein, 2014; Chu, 2014; Golding, 2014; Johnston, 2014; Moosa, 2014; O’Rourke, 2014; Pearl, 2014; Plante, 2014; Plunkett, 2014; Todd, 2014; Wilson, 2014). With righteous fury and indignation, these journalists attempted to symbolically exile the “gamer” that polluted their community with toxic and misogynistic behavior. These journalists rhetorically constructed a Burkean (1969a) drama with the gamer as the principle villain, declaring the “death of the gamer” to be the solution to the problems ailing gaming. Creating an archvillain against whom communities can rally in order to purify themselves is a common practice because it “reinforces belief in a social order” (Carlson, 1986, p. 448). If these toxic gamers can be successfully exiled from the videogame community, then the social order could be purified.

GamerGate is an intriguing event because it was a major crisis in the videogame community, even garnering mainstream media attention (Parkin, 2014; Takahashi, 2014). It has also received attention from gender scholars because of the rampant misogyny and threats of violence toward women in the videogame community (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Heron et al., 2014;

Mortenson, 2018). However, what is missing so far from studies about GamerGate is an exploration of the event from a rhetorical perspective. Like all communities, the videogame community is managed symbolically, and common terms have specific, connotative meanings that are rhetorically constructed. Denotatively, “gamer” refers to anyone who plays games, but in the videogame community it referred to a specific kind of gamer and served as a marker of identity. Debate around what the term meant within the community became a central focus of the GamerGate event, which is why dramatism is an appropriate tool since it prioritizes symbolic action.

Viewing GamerGate through Burke’s (1969a) dramatisic method illuminates the rhetorical strategies journalists used to banish the gamer because dramatism is a purposefully rhetorical way of understanding human social life, presuming that humans develop and present messages like a play. In this critical tool, every message is considered a deliberate symbolic act. As events unfold, audiences create a rhetorical story that resembles a play, one containing protagonists, antagonists, action, and an ending that brings resolution to the tensions within the story. This helps people not only to make sense of what is happening but also gives them a self-created narrative which aids in their understanding of reality. For example, Tonn, Endress, and Diamond (1993) used dramatism to explore how hunters justified the accidental shooting death of a woman in Maine. They noted how the hunters who defended the shooter characterized the scene as not being in the victim’s “backyard” but rather part of the “woods,” or land set aside specifically for hunting. In dramas like this, small shifts in terminology allowed hunters to move the blame to the victim for entering nature without wearing an orange vest, leading the shooter to mistake her for a deer. Therefore, the victim, not the shooter, was responsible for her own death and the hunter’s community was absolved of any responsibility. In essence, this rhetorical drama

was a story that hunters told to themselves and to their community that justified why hunting should be protected and why they could not blame a hunter for the woman's death. Rather than take ownership of the accident, hunters shifted blame to absolve themselves of the immense guilt they faced, weaving a story in which it was the woman, not the hunter, who made the fatal mistake.

A substantial exploration of dramatism's core concepts will be fully elaborated upon in chapter two, but a brief preview will help set the stage. All stories, rhetorical or otherwise, fall into one of two broad genres: comedy or tragedy. The genre in which a drama takes place defines the broadest themes of the story and directs the story toward a particular kind of ending. In both genres, the dramatic tension, what Burke (1969a) calls guilt, must be resolved in order to bring the drama to a close. Comedies identify social problems as emerging from mistakenness rather than malevolence, which allows for them to be corrected (Carlson, 1986). Often, this involves the process of mortification, which is a "symbolic attempt to purify or atone for pollution or guilt through confession or self-sacrifice for the sake of forgiveness" (Moore, 2005, p. 312). It is for this reason Burke (1984a) describes comedic sinners as "mistaken" because through mortification one can become aware of his or her sins and work toward fixing them. Tragedy, on the other hand, seeks resolution of the guilt through the victimage ritual, a process known as scapegoating. In scapegoating, a society symbolically transfers its guilt to an external object which is then slaughtered, thereby relieving the dramatic tension and absolving society of their guilt (Brummett, 1980). Burke (1984b) describes it as a "ritual unburdening of one's sins" since it requires a group to symbolically select a representative from within themselves that can bear and contain the sins of all (p. 16). An example of the victimage ritual can be seen in Howell's (2012) study of the birther movement. There, Howell noted that birthers blamed President

Obama for their own feelings of “guilt and alienation,” which is why the movement was able to maintain its momentum even after he released his birth certificate (p. 440). As a scapegoat he was “so ‘perfectly’ suited to his ritual role” that no documents or proof that he submitted to defend himself were enough to cleanse the guilt the birthers felt as a result of his ascension to the presidency (Burke, 1984b, p. 291).

The GamerGate controversy fits well within the framework of dramatism because GamerGate was itself a rhetorical construction. Game journalists such as Leigh Alexander (2014) weaved a story of abusive, misogynistic gamers who were determined to keep the videogame community an exclusive, male-dominated group. As antagonists, they harassed women in the community with excessive, hateful means in order to maintain their own dominance over the community. Game journalists cast gamers as a scapegoat and ascribed to them decades worth of misogyny, abuse, and other problems that the videogame community has experienced. According to Brummett (1980), the scapegoat can only work if it possesses two qualities: “First it must be anecdotal, i.e., it must be representative of ‘unwanted evils,’ the guilt felt by those who make of the representative a scapegoat” (p. 66). The scapegoat must fit the guilt that has been created, and gamers fit that form perfectly according to these journalists. Second, the scapegoat must be powerful. “Its power must be at least equal to the burden of guilt so that the sacrifice of the goat destroys a vessel strong enough to hold the transgressions” (p. 67). As defined by these journalists, the term “gamer” came to refer to a specific set of individuals—angry, white, males—who abuse and threaten women on the internet in the drama that is created. As a symbolic marker of identity, it is a fitting container in which to place the sins of gamers themselves.

At the same time that this scapegoating of gamers is occurring, many of these journalists also admonished themselves for allowing such sins to be committed. Since GamerGate spawned within the cultural space that these journalists occupy, they partially blamed themselves and other members of the community (e.g. community website leaders, videogame fans) for allowing such a toxic gaming scene to develop and persist over time. In so doing, some of these journalists appear to be committing mortification at the same time that they are scapegoating the gamer. Rhetorical critics have often assumed that the tools comedy and tragedy use to relieve guilt in dramas is exclusive to those genres. By definition, comedies see humans as prone to mistakes and seek ways to correct those mistakes. As Carlson (1986) writes, comedy “identifies social ills as arising from human error, not evil, and thus uses reason to correct them” (p. 448). She further notes that comedy rejects scapegoating because it is necessarily “violent” and instead opts for “social chastisement” (p. 448). In contrast, tragedies demand a sacrifice, typically in the form of the scapegoat in order to relieve the guilt within the drama. However, GamerGate serves as an example of a rhetorical drama that uses both scapegoating and mortification in order to achieve a specific purpose.

This project will apply Burke’s (1969a) dramatism to the “Gamers are dead” articles to examine how game journalists attempted simultaneously to scapegoat the “gamer,” a tragic tool, and seemingly commit mortification. The rhetorical drama of GamerGate as told by the journalists is an inherently tragic story featuring a clear scapegoat onto which journalists place the guilt the videogame community is experiencing. However, several of the journalists also appear to blame themselves for what happened, seemingly engaging in mortification. As this project will show, these journalists do not fully commit to the mortification process. Instead, they create a veneer of mortification in order to make themselves appear as a purified and therefore

better alternative to the sinful gamer. As this thesis will demonstrate, gamers were at the top of social hierarchy within the videogame community, which allowed them to act as the gatekeepers of videogame culture. As the GamerGate controversy emerged, journalists saw an opportunity to usurp the gamer's position within the community by scapegoating them and simultaneously demonstrating their own purity to the wider community.

The following chapter of this thesis will explore Burke's dramatisic method in further detail, examining its foregrounding of language and symbol-use, the negative and hierarchy, guilt, comedy, mortification, tragedy, and scapegoating. Chapter three will use these concepts to analyze how the "gamers are dead" articles simultaneously engaged in both the scapegoating of the gamer and a veneer of mortification in order to rhetorically usurp the gamer's position within the gaming community's social hierarchy. Chapter four will provide concluding thoughts on GamerGate and the journalists' rhetorical attempts to lay the blame on the gamer, arguing that mortification is not exclusive to the comic frame and can be used as a persuasive tool for the purposes of scapegoating.

Chapter 2: The Dramatistic Lens

The artifacts examined for this thesis combine together to form a coherent rhetorical story featuring protagonists, antagonists, and conflict needing to be resolved. Sharing the central theme of declaring that the “gamer is dead,” this collection of articles from game journalists construct a rhetorical drama in order to prescribe a certain course of action for the wider videogame community. As such, Burke’s (1969a) dramatistic method provides the most appropriate tool for examining how these journalists acted as rhetors to create the *agon* between gamers and the videogame community that the journalists represented. In the following section, dramatism’s foregrounding of symbolic action will be explored, along with its implications of the negative and hierarchy and how they produce guilt, or conflict, within the rhetorical drama. Afterward, the two broad genres of dramatism, comedy and tragedy, will be examined as well as these genres’ tools for relieving the guilt, which are mortification and scapegoating, respectively. Finally, an extension of dramatism is offered, suggesting that tragedies may be able to appropriate mortification for persuasive purposes.

Dramatism

At its core, Burke’s dramatism (1969a) is a way of viewing human action and drama through the metaphor of theater. It tries to answer the question: “What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing?” by considering that people develop and present messages like a play (p. xv). Through the lens of dramatism, every message people send is seen as a deliberate symbolic act that contributes and/or responds to the overall drama that is being

rhetorically created. Just as a play features characters, action, settings, and motives for those characters, so too does human social life as seen through dramatism. Dramatism looks at rhetors the same way a literary critic would study a playwright, asking why these elements are so conceived and to what end. As a purposefully rhetorical way of viewing human social life, it allows a critic to analyze the symbols people create, investigate how they use them, and discover for what purpose they were made. Describing the method, Appel (1997) writes, “To look at messages from the perspective of drama is to note how a speaker or writer goes about describing, narrating, predicting, or recommending an action” (p. 382). One function of these symbolic choices is to create, rationalize, and resolve conflict in the drama because “these names shape our relations with our fellows. They prepare us *for* some functions and *against* others, *for* or *against* the persons representing these functions” (Burke, 1984a, p. 4, emphasis in original). The symbolic choices that rhetors make in constructing the drama, such as casting certain actors in a positive or negative light, create a narrative course that suggests to audiences what actions should or should not be taken for or against those actors.

From this overview of dramatism, it is clear that foundational principle of the dramatic method is an emphasis on the symbolic nature of communication. Burke (1984b) argues that people are “specifically a symbol-using animal” because humans are the only animals capable of symbolic communication (p. 275). As a result, he asserts that any critical method examining human behavior must foreground “symbolism as a motive” in order to adequately understand all that happens in a drama (p. 275). For Burke (1966), what separates humans from all other animals is this ability to communicate symbolically. It is for this reason that he argues that using language constitutes action rather than motion. Motion is like “the slashing of the waves against the beach, or the endless cycle of births and deaths in biologic organisms” (p. 53). Sneezing is an

example of motion, but saying “bless you,” is action because it requires the speaker to use symbols to express an abstract idea. Implicit in “bless you” is a reflective, ethical choice on the part of the speaker. One *chooses* to say something to achieve a certain purpose. Importantly, whether or not an act is considered action or motion is determined symbolically by the rhetor. For example, Tonn et al. (1993) highlighted how a rhetorical drama can reduce one person’s actions to motion. Donald Rogerson, a hunter, mistook a resident on her property for a deer and accidentally shot and killed her. In defending one of their own, hunters symbolically transformed Rogerson from a “moral, thinking agent to an organism who merely responded to external stimuli much as animals...his behavior, rather than rational, was a reflex reaction” (p. 173). Rogerson’s actions, therefore, constituted motion rather than action, which is how the hunters defended him and blamed Woods for her own death. As this brief example has shown, language serves as the foundation of dramatism because it constitutes choices of symbolic action, working to achieve a specific purpose. As Burke (1966) notes, drama “is the culminative form of action” (p. 54). Dramatism outlines two major implications of the inherent symbolic nature of human existence: the negative and hierarchy.

The Negative and Hierarchy

Burke (1966) asserts that humans are the “inventor of the negative” because the negative does not exist in nature, “where everything simply is what it is and as it is” (p. 9). It is a necessary product of language, and it allows people to say that an object *is* one thing and *is not* another. More importantly, the negative is what allows people to create the “thou shalt not” statements that define some actions as positive and others as negative (p. 10). These hortatory negative statements are the basis behind all cultural mores, taboos, and laws. Working from this

implication, dramatism highlights how language and the negative work to create hierarchies. The negative within language allows people to order things in deliberate ways, valuing certain people, values, or ideas over others. This is why, for example, some crimes are considered more heinous and reprehensible than others. Running a red light at an intersection is wrong, but it is less wrong than grand theft auto, which is also less wrong than murder. The hortatory rules people create are always ethically charged, positively or negatively. A prisoner can serve time in jail for violating a rule but also be released early for “good” behavior. Taken on a large scale, this is how social structures, power, and privileges order human life. Burke (1966) writes that we are “goaded by the spirit of hierarchy” because the negative inevitably leads to the creation of hierarchy and humans are, as a result of symbolism and negatives, “moved by a sense of order” (p. 15).

Rueckert (1963) sums up these two implications writing that language “introduces the negative into human experience; with language and the negative man creates various kinds of hierarchic orders, all of which have hundreds of ‘thou-shalt-nots’ in them” (p. 131). He defines hierarchy as “any kind of order; but more accurately, it is any kind of graded, value-charged structure in terms of which things, words, people, acts, and ideas are ranked” (p. 131). Every hierarchy has its own set of rules and regulations that must be followed by its members, and one’s place in the hierarchy is determined by how closely one follows those requirements. However, perfectly adhering to all of these rules is impossible because “no man [sic] is capable of meeting all the terms of the agreement and in some way he will fail or disobey. Failure and disobedience—the ‘fall’—cause guilt” (p. 131). While people try as hard as they can to follow the directives of the hierarchy, ultimately, they will fail to do so. Appel (1997) argues this is because “no one can keep all the rules, laws, and commandments, negatively stated, perfectly” (p. 383).

The negative allows people to create pyramidal structures of order that are based on exhortations and hortatory commands. A hierarchy's rules, as Burke (1966) argues, always contain a negative principle, which is "often hidden behind a realm of quasi-positives" (p. 11). In telling people what to do, the rules necessarily imply "proscriptive principles," which leads to disorder when they are eventually broken (p. 11). When disorder occurs, guilt is produced and must be resolved.

Guilt and the Drive to Resolve It

When guilt is created, the rhetorical drama begins as rhetors start to find ways to relieve the guilt because an "offense against the social order creates in the transgressor the feeling or motive of guilt" (Brummett, 1980, p. 66). Simply defined, guilt is "an all-purpose word for moral guilt, all kinds of tensions, and any uneasiness from whatever cause" (Rueckert, 1963, p. 131). As Carter (1996) describes, "there are at least two guilt-inducing principles in the realm of words: the principle of the ethical negative *and* the principle of hierarchy" (p. 8, emphasis in original). These two principles coexist since it is the negative that allows for the creation of the hierarchy. He writes,

What is important is not where hierarchy begins but what happens to it when it is raised into the human realm of the moral negative. Information continues to be exchanged but now across ethically charged levels. High and low come to be seen in terms of good and evil...Those defined as not of our stratum are seen as misguided or wrong or morally degenerate or irredeemably malicious. (p. 9)

When rhetors start attributing guilt to certain individuals or groups, the conflict is further deepened because the guilt becomes ethically charged. What this causes is the creation of an

agon, or conflict, within the drama since there are necessarily some who are able to obey the hierarchy's laws and others who break them. Those who are still able to follow the laws become the protagonists of the rhetorical drama, while the lawbreakers are cast as the antagonists and bear the guilt that has been created. The symbolic creation of the *agon* and the guilt between the two parties constitutes a rhetorical story which must be resolved.

Protagonists and antagonists share a common substance as a result of being from the same hierarchy. One group ascribes to the other guilt and culpability, but both are from the same social order. Carter (1996) explains that "our identities, being formed of words, also develop as sets of terms defined against opposing sets of terms. We define ourselves against each other and the groups to which we belong against the groups around us" (p. 6). For every term a group uses to describe itself, its opposite is also implied in the outgroup. In this way, humans display their tribal tendencies because "individuals protect their own kind, their own community, society, or culture, against that which is alien" (Tonn et al., 1993, p. 215). The problem, as Terry (2015) notes, is that "individuals are made up of multiple partially conflicting identities that must be continuously negotiated" (p. 301). These conflicting identities make it even more difficult for one to follow all the commands and directives of a hierarchy, which inevitably lead to rule-breaking. Burke (1984b) calls this identity conflict "hierarchical psychosis," another term for guilt (p. 279). Rueckert (1963) explains that people are "goaded by the desire to mount the hierarchy" and at the same time "are goaded by the threat of descending the hierarchy" (p. 132). In both cases, guilt arises and must be resolved. "Guilt, therefore, becomes a motive because it must be removed" (Brummett, 1980, p. 66). Just as language allows for the creation of the negative, hierarchy, and guilt, "the removal or *symbolic purification*" of guilt is "made possible through language" (Scheibel, 1999, p. 170, emphasis in original). There are two primary "means

of purification” which are “mortification and victimage; and the end result of both is redemption, or the alleviation of guilt” (Rueckert, 1963, p. 131). Whether the drama ends in mortification or victimage is determined by the rhetor. Before delving into these two concepts, it is important first to consider the genre of the drama since each genre carries certain prescriptions that indicate how the rhetors, who are actively weaving the tale of the drama, want the story to end. Just as plays, film, and literature can all broadly be classified into the genres of comedy and tragedy, so too can rhetorical dramas.

Comedy

Comedy, also called the “comic frame,” is “the most humane frame for understanding and acting in society” (Carlson, 1986, p. 448). At its core, it sees “human beings as *human* and therefore imperfect” (p. 448, emphasis in original). Guilt in comedy is seen as “error,” and “the story of the comic drama restores the moral order by exposing the foolishness of pretensions and vanity” (O’Leary, 1993, p. 392). One of the ways a rhetor working within the comic frame accomplishes this is to “shame or humiliate the target into changing his or her actions” (Christiansen & Hanson, 1996, p. 160). The comic frame also believes that the “social order can be changed, but never at the cost of the humanity of those on the other side” (Carlson, 1986, p. 448). Thus, comedy does not see the guilty as evildoers but as a “comic clown” (p. 448).

An example of the comic frame can be seen in Carlson’s study of Gandhi’s independence movement in India. She notes that Gandhi, from the beginning, engaged in the comic frame because he believed that human beings were not inherently evil but could be “led astray by error” (p. 451). In describing his movement, Carlson notes that Gandhi repeatedly stressed to his

followers that they must treat British law enforcement officers with respect, dignity, and kindness. The officers were mistaken, not evil, being forced to apply and execute unjust laws. The movement was not concerned with hurting law enforcement officers but with changing the prevailing social order so that oppressive laws no longer existed. Additionally, Gandhi admonished his followers when they reacted violently, suspending the movement for a time until their passions were quelled. Through his rhetorical choices, Gandhi characterized his movement under the genre of comedy, persuading his followers to protest always without violence, treat British officers kindly, and punish themselves whenever they acted violently.

Another instance of the comic frame can be seen in Toker's (2002) study of public argument after it was discovered that the U.S. government's nuclear weapons plant in rural Ohio was contaminating the environment. A key aspect of the comic frame that Toker highlights is identification between both officials from the nuclear plant as well as members of the community. Lisa Crawford, a community leader, did this in order to allow everyone "to address the current injustices of assessment, decision and participation processes" at the plant (p. 64). Instead of emboldening the lines of division between the community and plant leaders, Crawford attempted to erase them so that both sides could work together to solve the problem. When plant management attempted to shutout the community's discourse by adopting a technical language, Crawford responded by learning and using the language herself in her arguments. Emphasizing their shared commonality through language, Crawford mocked the plant's attempts to exclude the community and prepared "all to dialogue for reform" (p. 75). The comic frame attempts to reform the social order by identifying "unjust social practices so they may be subjected to the reason of the larger community and ultimately purged from the order" (p. 63). As Burke (1984a) describes it, "In sum, the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while*

acting. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would ‘transcend’ himself by noting his own foibles” (p. 171, emphasis in original).

Mortification

As these examples show, one option rhetors have for purifying the guilt within comedies is through a process called mortification, which involves “punishing the guilt as it exists within ourselves” (Brummett, 1980, p. 66). Mortification requires those in the drama to understand their guilt and the imperfections in themselves that created it (Butterworth, 2008). It is “a scrupulous and deliberate clamping of limitation upon the self” (Burke, 1984b, p. 289). Burke (1961) acknowledges that mortification is difficult to achieve because it is often easier to blame an external party rather than blame oneself. He writes that one “in all sorts of roundabout ways, scrupulously circles back upon himself, unintentionally making his own constitution the victim of his hierarchically goaded entanglements” (p. 191). For example, Scheibel (1995) studied surfing culture by examining letters published in popular surfing magazines in order to see how surfers dealt with the problem of “localism,” which is the idea that only those local to a specific beach should be allowed to surf there. For years, some surfers had mistreated, harassed, and acted belligerently toward non-locals, victimizing them. As Scheibel notes, there were surfers in the community who believed that the beach should be shared by all, and the letters from this group illustrate how they rhetorically attempted to place the guilt on all surfers. In one particularly direct letter, a surfer admonished his fellows, arguing that rather than prohibit prospective surfers, all surfers should “share the wealth” of the waves. He repeated this phrase over and over again, showcasing how all surfers must share the guilt of their exclusionary practices that have prevented newcomers to the sport. Scheibel writes, “the guilt of imperfection

may be redeemed by mortification. To deny oneself *more* waves, and to instead ‘share the wealth,’ is to be redeemed” (p. 265, emphasis in original). Self-restraint is an inherent part of mortification, which allows the surfers to give up what they perceive to be “their” symbolic right to the wave and instead allow all surfers, locals and non-locals alike, to enjoy the sport. In demonstrating an awareness of their faults, blaming themselves for the mistreatment of non-locals, and attempting to correct their mistakes, surfers relieved the guilt within the surfing community.

Tragedy

The optimism offered by comedy stands in stark contrast to the trajectory of tragedy. The guilty party in tragedy are seen as enemies who “take on demonic proportions; they appear responsible for all the world’s ills” (Appel, 1997, p. 384). Rather than forgiving mistakes, the tragic frame “metes out condemnation and penance by tests far deeper than any that could be codified by law” (Burke, 1984b, p. 195). Law can be involved in punishing the guilt, but it is not necessary. Since guilt is symbolic, its punishment must also be symbolic. Turnage’s (2009) study of the Duke rape case illustrates the effects that the tragic frame can have on a community. In 2006, three Duke University lacrosse players were accused of raping a young woman at a house party. The case persisted for eighteen months, pitting the university and the community against each other until the state’s Attorney General dropped the charges when it was discovered that the woman lied about the incident. Turnage explains that the community, who she calls “The Prosecution,” and the lacrosse players and their attorneys, “The Defense,” simultaneously created two competing rhetorical dramas in which each side placed guilt on the other. Because

both sides were engaging in the tragic frame, there was no chance for “transcending the social issues that created the tensions” between the community and the university (p. 149). Ultimately the two sides were able to come together when it was discovered that the victim lied about her experience, but even in this moment the tragic frame was still implemented to enact the victimage ritual for the District Attorney who was eventually blamed for the entire incident. As a result, Turnage notes that neither the community nor the players ever accepted “individual culpability” for their actions and that the tensions between the two groups remained unresolved. (p. 153). Both sides continuously engaged in scapegoating, which is the primary way in which guilt within tragedies is resolved.

Scapegoating

If people do not commit mortification and absolve the guilt themselves, “then it must be objectified: a representative of the guilt must be found in the external world and punished” (Brummett, 1980, p. 66). If mortification involves society purging imperfections in themselves, then scapegoating is how a community “rids itself of its own imperfections” by symbolically placing them on an external object (Butterworth, 2008, p. 149). One important aspect of the scapegoat is that the community from which it comes shares identity with it. In order for the guilt in tragedies to be resolved, society must symbolically transfer the guilt to an appropriate vessel, one that is simultaneously consubstantial with society and also apart from it. The scapegoat mechanism only works when it “represents the iniquities of those who would be cured by attacking it. In representing *their* iniquities, it performs the role of vicarious atonement” (Burke, 1969a, p. 406, emphasis in original). The scapegoat is “dialectically appealing, since it combines in one figure contrary principles of identification and alienation” (Burke, 1969b, p. 140). Burke

(1969a) identifies three principles which guide the rhetorical construction of the scapegoat. First is “an original state of merger” in which the guilt is shared by both society and the vessel (p. 406). Second is a “principle of division, in that the elements shared in common are being ritualistically alienated” (p. 406). Finally, there is a “new principle of merger” that is defined “in dialectical opposition” between the purified and the scapegoat (p. 406). In other words, the “boundaries of the self are redrawn to exclude the scapegoat” (Carter, 1996, p. 18). What was once a guilty component of society is now symbolically divided and defined against the new, symbolically cleansed society. As Burke (1969a) describes it, “the alienating of iniquities from the self to the scapegoat amounts to a *rebirth* of the self” (p. 407, emphasis in original). One example of scapegoating can be seen in Brummett’s (1981) analysis of presidential campaign rhetoric during the 1980 race among Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and John Anderson. Running as an independent, Anderson blamed America’s problems on factionalism, thereby placing the guilt America had on the two major political parties. By voting for Anderson, Americans could resolve the guilt that the scapegoated political parties represented. Brummett argues that Anderson’s scapegoating was ultimately unsuccessful because Anderson was unable to define himself in dialectical opposition to the scapegoat. As a third-party candidate, he was a part of the very system that he attempted to blame.

The scapegoat mechanism is a symbolically violent end to the drama, mirroring its theatrical origins. Burke, (1969b) often describes it as a “desire to kill” someone symbolically (p. 13). The scapegoat “suffers, dies, or is banished by society in a symbolic attempt to rid itself of chaos, disease, and impurity” (Christiansen & Hanson, 1996, p. 160). As O’Leary (1993) notes, the plot of tragedies “moves inexorably toward sacrifice and the ‘cult of the kill’” (p. 392). Therefore, the way in which the scapegoat is symbolically constituted presages the end of the

drama; “The more fearful and sinister the image we paint of our enemy, the greater our corresponding sensation of endangerment and the stronger our need for redemption through vicarious sacrifice” (Ivie, 2007, p. 226). The intensity of the scapegoat provides a narrative trajectory for the drama and ultimately suggests a specific course of action “for the tragic symbol is the device *par excellence* for *recommending* a cause” (Burke, 1984b, p. 196, emphasis in original). Burke also suggests that scapegoating often drives toward perfection. He writes,

the *principle* of a ‘perfect’ victim is so implicit in the very concept of victimage, and because men have so ‘natural’ or spontaneous a desire for a ‘perfect’ view of their discomforts, they are eager to tell themselves of victims so thoroughgoing that the sacrifice of such offerings would bring about a correspondingly thoroughgoing cure.” (p. 293, emphasis in original)

Burke’s (1973) most famous example of this drive toward a perfect enemy is seen in his analysis of *Mein Kampf*. Here, he analyzes how Hitler was able to construct Jewish people as a common enemy shared by all Germans. He notes how Hitler deliberately blamed Jewish people for all of Germany’s problems, materializing abstract social and economic problems into a “point-to-able form of people with a certain kind of ‘blood’” (p. 194). When this externalizing occurs, “one can battle an external enemy instead of battling an enemy within. And the greater one’s internal inadequacies, the greater the amount of evils one can load upon the back of ‘the enemy’” (p. 203). Most disturbingly, Burke argues that this particular construction gave Hitler’s followers “a ‘positive’ view of life. They can again get the feel of *moving forward*, towards a *goal*” (p. 203, emphasis in original). Thus, Burke argues that Hitler’s rhetorical drama suggests to his audience to eliminate Jewish people from society through any means necessary, unfortunately illustrating the symbolically destructive potential of the scapegoat.

Mortification as Persuasive Tool

Traditionally, mortification and scapegoating have been studied as guilt-relieving tools exclusive the genres of comedy and tragedy, respectively. A rhetorical drama tends only to feature one or the other, but not both simultaneously. What this thesis will argue, however, is that within tragedies utilizing the scapegoat, mortification can be used as a persuasive tool. Since guilt is created when a hierarchy's rules are violated, an opportunity opens up which allows for positions within the hierarchy to be renegotiated. Suffering from "hierarchic psychosis" (Burke, 1984b), one group within the hierarchy may desire to ascend to the top because they have followed the laws of the social order better than those who have violated them (p. 279). This group, in scapegoating the guilty, could also commit mortification because it shows that the group understands its mistakes and can also learn from them, unlike the scapegoat which must be exiled. Used in this way, mortification becomes a persuasive tool that only furthers the scapegoating process, emphasizing the distinctions between the two groups and stressing one group's purity and hierarchic awareness over the other.

In summary, dramatism uses the metaphor of the theater to view and understand human life. Because of its emphasis on language and symbols, it sees every message people create as purposeful and therefore rhetorical. Language use is always ethically charged, allowing people to say that some people or things are good while others are bad, which inevitably create hierarchies. As this language use continues, people construct rhetorical dramas that help them explain and make sense of reality. Within these dramas, which fall broadly into either the comic or tragic genre, there is always conflict which must be resolved. Within tragedies, this conflict, or guilt, is typically resolved through the scapegoating ritual, which allows a community to ascribe to a

vicarious vessel the guilt it feels. Through its sacrifice, the guilt within the drama is resolved.

Mortification, which is a comic tool, has the potential to aid in the scapegoating process by making one party appear ethically better than the scapegoat. In the chapter to follow, the “gamers are dead” articles will be studied to demonstrate how game journalists, in scapegoating the gamer, attempted to also use mortification to persuade the wider gaming community that they should have more power than the gamer, who they position at the top of gaming’s social order.

Chapter 3: Gamers are Dead

The principles of dramatism discussed in the previous chapter can be seen in the GamerGate controversy. Seeking to make sense of what was happening in the wake of Gjoni's accusations and Sarkeesian's new video, game journalists symbolically constructed a rhetorical drama. Within this drama, they defined the social order of the videogame community and outlined the rules of the hierarchy. When gamers broke those rules, they produced guilt which had to be cleansed. Operating within the tragic frame, the journalists symbolically constituted the gamer as a scapegoat and simultaneously appropriated mortification to aid in their victimage ritual.

The GamerGate controversy spread like wildfire through the internet, and any website that serviced videogame culture felt its effects. Though these journalists wrote for different websites, their audience was largely the same and they shared a largely consistent message, albeit with a few deviations from writer to writer. Their principle goal was to scapegoat the gamer and banish that identity, along with anyone who fell under its umbrella, from the community and reposition themselves at the top of the community's hierarchy. Engaging in Burke's (1969a) victimage ritual, the journalists symbolically constructed the gamer as the representative scapegoat whose banishment would cleanse the gaming community of its guilt. Their symbolic construction of the gamer was extensive and thorough because the scapegoat must be a fitting container into which the guilt can be placed (Brummett, 1980). What is intriguing about this scapegoating ritual is in how the journalists also committed mortification, which is often a tool of the comic frame. In some instances, journalists attempted to blame themselves for what happened, placing guilt on themselves. However, as this analysis will argue,

this attempt at mortification was in fact part of the larger scapegoating ritual, serving as a masquerade for their larger persuasive purpose of ascending to the top of the videogame community's hierarchy.

Artifacts Under Consideration

As the GamerGate controversy increased in magnitude, intensity, and viciousness, game journalists penned op-eds to condemn the behavior of gamers. As mentioned previously, all of these articles shared the theme of declaring that the “gamer is dead,” and, as a result, they serve as a key insight into how game journalists attempted to rhetorically dramatize the event. One group of journalists came from prominent videogame news websites such as *Polygon*, *Kotaku*, and *Gamasutra*. *Polygon* and *Kotaku* regularly publish articles about upcoming releases, reviews of games, retrospectives, etc. and are major players in the game journalism field. *Gamasutra* is slightly different since it focuses more on the industry and business of videogames as well as the actual development and making of videogames. These three websites are core hubs within the videogame community, which is why their articles about GamerGate were so significant.

The “gamers are dead” articles were not unique to gaming-centric sites and spread to other publications. More general websites such as the technology-focused *Ars Technica* and the film website *Birth.Movies.Death*. also published op-eds condemning gamers since much of their audience is familiar with videogames. Expanding even further, more general news websites such as *BuzzFeed News*, *The Daily Beast*, and *Vice* posted articles admonishing gamers for their actions against Quinn and Sarkeesian. Additionally, the *Financial Post*, which is the business section of the Canadian newspaper the *National Post*, contributed to the discussion with an

article. Finally, two non-journalists are represented in this collection of articles: Dan Golding and Devin Wilson. Golding is a media and communication lecturer at Swinburne University while Wilson is an independent developer. Though neither are journalists, their posts, on Tumblr and *Gamastura*, respectively, still spoke to the same theme as the other journalists and worked toward the same goal.

This collection of articles comes from a variety of websites ranging from gaming-focused sites to more general publications, which indicates the pervasiveness of the GamerGate controversy across media. Additionally, all but two of these articles were posted on the same day, August 28, 2014. Pearl's article on *Vice* was published the day after while Todd's article on *Birth.Movies.Death*. was posted two days prior on August 26. Some articles referenced each other since they were posted at different points in the day. Plunkett's (2014) article on *Kotaku*, for instance, directly referenced and hyperlinked to Alexander's (2014) piece on *Gamasutra* and Golding's (2014) post on Tumblr. Finally, the titles of each article bear striking similarities, which indicates a collective push by game journalists to rhetorically dramatize the controversy. Because all of these articles appeared around the same time and engaged in the same anti-gamer discourse, they serve as a fertile ground for a rhetorical analysis. A table is provided below that displays each article's author, title, and place of publication.

Table 1

“Gamers are dead” Articles

Author	Title	Publication
Alexander, L.	‘Gamers’ don’t have to be your audience. ‘Gamers’ are over.’	<i>Gamasutra</i>
Bernstein, J.	Gaming is leaving “gamers” behind.	<i>BuzzFeed News</i>
Chu, A.	It’s dangerous to go alone: Why are gamers so angry?	<i>Daily Beast</i>
Golding, D.	The end of gamers	Tumblr – Personal Blog
Johnston, C.	The death of the ‘gamers’ and the women who ‘killed’ them	<i>Arts Technica</i>
Moosa, T.	Fanboys, white knights, and the hairball of online misogyny.	<i>Daily Beast</i>
O’Rourke, P.	Sexism, misogyny and online attacks: It’s a horrible time to consider yourself a ‘gamer’	<i>Financial Post</i>
Pearl, M.	This guy’s embarrassing relationship drama is killer the ‘gamer’ identity.	<i>Vice</i>
Plante, C.	An awful week to care about video games.	<i>Polygon</i>
Plunkett, L.	We might be witnessing the “death of an identity.”	<i>Kotaku</i>
Todd, A.	Video games, misogyny, and terrorism: A guide to assholes.	<i>Birth.Movies.Death.</i>
Wilson, D.	A guide to ending “gamers.”	<i>Gamasutra – Personal Blog</i>

This analysis will begin with demonstrating how the journalists scapegoated the gamer, starting with their rhetorical construction of gaming culture and how the past and current culture of videogames built the gamer identity. Second, it will then investigate the guilt-producing qualities that the journalists attributed to the gamer identity, specifically exclusivity, masculinity, consumerism, gatekeeping, and righteousness. Afterward, the journalists' superficial attempts at mortification will be examined, revealing itself to be a persuasive tool that contributed to scapegoating and their goal of usurping gamers as the leaders of videogame culture.

Scapegoating the Gamer

Bernstein (2014), Golding (2014), Alexander (2014), and Todd (2014) all described their interpretation of the beginnings of gaming culture and what it had evolved into in contemporary times. Writing for *BuzzFeed News*, Bernstein (2014) provided the most extensive rhetorical interpretation of the beginnings of videogames, arguing that most of the early creators in the late 1950s and 1960s were white, upper middle-class males who were able to go to colleges that had some of the earliest computers. The majority were computer engineers, and the only games they made were “science fiction” (Bernstein, 2014). For Bernstein (2014) and Golding (2014), these early male inventors made games based on the media that they liked, such as science-fiction and fantasy books and movies, and were thus masculine. At this point, they argued, videogames were masculine but not misogynistic, owing to the inspiration of these traditionally masculine genres. For example, some of the earliest videogames were called *Spacewar!* and *Computer Space*, reflecting the preferences of their creators (Barton & Loguidice, 2009). These games allowed

two players to engage in dogfights against each other in starships, illustrating early on the science-fiction influence in videogames.

As videogames expanded outside of research universities and into arcades and malls, these writers argued that videogame culture began to develop a “limited, inwards-looking perception of the world that marked them [gamers] as different from everyone else” (Golding, 2014). It is in this middle period that the gamer identity started to emerge. Golding (2014) wrote that initially, this identity “was constructed in order to define and unite the group” but that it later “became deeply bound up in assumptions and performances of gender and sexuality.” From this perspective, the initial culture of videogames began as a way for gamers, who were primarily white men, to unite on their shared love of videogames, not all too different from the way other hobby groups self-organize to mark themselves as different from others. However, these critics asserted that as time moved on videogame culture became increasingly insular and exclusive. Since it was originally composed predominantly of white men, it then became harder for anyone who did not fall into that category to join the culture. In defining videogame culture as exclusive, Golding (2014) argued that the gamer identity became exclusive, available only to white men. Simultaneously, as gamers were increasingly defined as white males, videogames themselves began to appeal directly to them. Alexander (2014) from *Gamasutra* wrote that games promised “high-octane masculinity” to gamers who wanted to see “bullets, bombs, and boobs” as Chu (2014) from *The Daily Beast* described. Thus, as these journalists argue, videogame culture became exclusive because the gamers themselves wanted to be exclusive. For the journalists, exclusivity was guilt-producing because it prevented outsiders from joining the community.

In continuing their history of videogame culture, journalists argued that it evolved into a consumer culture, which fed the masculine aspect of the gamer identity. Where other cultures

foregrounded knowledge, experiences, rituals, and social mores, the primary focus of videogame culture evolved into consumerism. For Alexander (2014) game culture was “not even a culture. It’s buying things.” In this stage, videogames began to be marketed almost exclusively toward white males, further emphasizing not only the consumer aspect of gaming culture but also its masculinity. Advertising and marketers started to have a strong influence on the culture, telling “a generation of lonely basement kids” that they “were the most important commercial demographic of all time” (Alexander, 2014). Golding (2014) argued that this led to gamers becoming the “consumer king,” correlating with their desire to be exclusive and insular. Along with being masculine, the gamer identity obtained a consumer aspect that caused gamers to be obsessed with knowing what to buy, and marketers worked very hard to tell them what they should buy (Alexander, 2014). Gamers, from the journalists’ point of view, argued that their primary duty in this consumer culture was to review games and tell them what to buy, a role that writers like Alexander lamented. Rather than describe the \$100 collector’s edition of an upcoming game, Alexander (2014) wanted to write in order to “curate a creative community.” Because videogame culture was masculine and consumerist, the “main cultural signposts” of videogames, as she (2014) wrote, were “have money, have women. Get a gun and then a bigger gun. Be an outcast. Celebrate that. Defeat anyone who threatens you.” In this masculine, consumerist videogame culture, journalists were allowed to write only about games as a product, not as cultural artifacts. Hinting at the masculine focus of the gamer and videogame culture, Alexander pointed out that women were objects to be possessed, not necessarily members of the culture.

Over the last decade, the journalists argued that videogames had penetrated mainstream popular culture but that gamers had remained stagnate and obstinate. Thanks in part to more

casual consoles and games such as the Nintendo Wii as well as the rise of smartphone gaming, videogames were now having to expand past the gamer in order to include these more casual players. As this was happening, Golding (2014) argued that the gamer identity had “remained fairly uniformly stagnant and immobile...the gamer identity did not stretch, and so it has been broken.” Whereas before gamers and videogame culture were co-evolving, videogame culture was now outpacing the gamer. The gamer identity was “not fluid” and not able to encompass new players, such as casual players and mobile users (Golding, 2014). The journalists, as they themselves said, openly welcomed these newcomers, but gamers were still holding onto their identity, refusing to widen their borders to accept newcomers. The gamer identity, being masculine and exclusive, prohibited newcomers from joining, which, for the journalists, created guilt. These two traits were negatively charged and further constructed the gamer as the scapegoat because only through the banishment of these traits could the guilt be resolved.

Citing research (“Essential facts,” 2014) from the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the industry trade group for videogames, Golding (2014) showed that adult women (36%) outnumbered boys under 18 years old (17%) among videogame players. For the ESA, anyone who played a videogame, be it on a console or on a phone, was considered a gamer. As Golding (2014) pointed out, the typical response from gamers was “what *kind* of games do they really play, though—are they *really* gamers?” (emphasis in original). That the gamers balked at people who entered the videogame world through casual, simple mobile games was indicative of how exclusive they were. Now that their identity was being challenged and diluted by newcomers, gamers were struggling to find ways to differentiate themselves and retain that exclusivity. Furthering his argument, Golding (2014) wrote “This insinuated criteria for ‘real’ videogames is wholly contingent on identity (i.e. a *real* gamer shouldn’t play *Candy Crush*, for

instance” (emphasis in original). Being a gamer was about more than just playing videogames. The identity carried with it assumptions about gender which were reflected in the games they played. “Real games” were ones featuring bombastic, masculine experiences like *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto*, not charming puzzle games like *Candy Crush*.

According to the journalists, a cultural shift was happening, but at the time it was being hindered by gamers who were looking to continue their dominance of the culture. As this rhetorical interpretation of videogame history and culture has demonstrated, journalists characterized gamers as predominantly white males who were coddled and pandered to by both marketers and journalists who wrote about upcoming products. These gamers, according to Todd (2014) from *Birth Movies Death.*, cultivated a culture of “harassment, abuse, and bigotry” that created “some of the most toxic individuals on the internet.” Todd, along with others, believed that the culture could be changed because there were good people working within it, such as themselves. It was this particular subset of the community, gamers, that were ruining the culture for everyone. In this way, the journalists were carefully attempting to delineate who was and who was not a gamer. Because one of the main principles of the scapegoating process is division, it was imperative that the journalists carved out and defined who the gamers were (Burke, 1969a). By arguing that the culture could be saved, the journalists gave the scapegoat rhetorical power since its expulsion would restore the community.

Thus far, these journalists have rhetorically constructed videogame culture as one that was inherently masculine, consumerist, and misogynistic. The gamer identity developed for decades unfettered and even encouraged by developers and marketers trying to sell a product, and game journalists had been complicit in this process because they had worked to tell gamers what they should and should not buy. The gamer identity provided a strong sense of self for its

members, and they refused to allow anyone into their circle who did not conform to their standards. Due to developers and marketers directly appealing to gamers as well as their exclusionary nature, gamers had developed a strong sense of ownership toward videogames. As a result, the journalists argued that gamers were gatekeepers who policed game culture and believed they had the right to do so.

Gamers as Gatekeepers

In continuing the scapegoating process, journalists moved from characterizing the scene of videogame culture and the general tendencies of the gamer to more specifically rhetorically constructing their role as gaming gestapo. Burke (1984b) writes, “*Symbolically*, there can be property to which one has, or claims, a “right,” though the possessing of it may not be biologically necessary” (p. 275, emphasis in original). As gatekeepers, gamers believed that they had a symbolic right to videogames, and the journalists rhetorically constructed this belief as an “iniquity” or a sin within their drama (Burke 1969a). Bernstein (2014) described gamers as “anonymous guardians of culture,” who believed that they were the only ones who understood the medium of gaming. Because they were gatekeepers, they refused to let videogames expand their borders. Plunkett (2014), from *Kotaku*, wrote that gamers were “reactionary holdouts that feel so threatened by gaming’s widening horizons.” Chu (2014) described gaming as the “last refuge of the straight white male” because videogames were left behind in the push towards inclusivity in other mediums. As other art forms such as film, television, and music made significant strides toward diversity and inclusion, videogames remained largely stationary. Gamers as gatekeepers were preventing videogames from reaching these levels of inclusivity because that would mean opening up the gaming identity for people who were not white males.

O'Rourke (2014) from the *Financial Post* described gamers "evangelizing" what it meant to be a gamer in comment sections of websites such as *IGN* and *Kotaku* to their own "twisted worldview." These websites, among others such as *4Chan*, from which many gamers hailed, serve as community hubs where gamers can spread their message and their identity, allowing gamers to interact with the videogame enthusiasts who visit these sites (Chess & Shaw, 2015). The "twisted worldview" (O'Rourke, 2014) that they spread was one in which women were subservient to gamers. Few women, if any, were allowed into their ranks because they had to prove that they were "real" gamers, creating more guilt. A woman who plays *Candy Crush*, for instance, is denotatively a gamer but would not have fit within the gamer identity because she was not playing a "real" game.

One goal that this gatekeeping function worked toward was helping the gamers maintain their place at the top of the community's hierarchy because, as Rueckert (1963) shows, those at the top of the hierarchy are afraid of descending in their position while those at the bottom have a desire to ascend. Following the journalists' argument, gamers felt that their position at the top of the social order gave them ownership of gaming. As Chu (2014) asserted, gamers exercised their sense of ownership by demanding that developers alter their games when they failed to meet the gamers' expectations. In particular, Chu (2014) highlighted an episode when gamers demanded that Bioware, a popular videogame company, change the ending of *Mass Effect 3*, a hotly anticipated game, to "make it the 'correct' ending." Because gamers were at the top of the videogame hierarchy, they got to define what was and was not correct, demonstrating the immense symbolic power they held over the creation and content of videogames. Chu and the journalists argued that this sense of ownership was being expanded to the entire culture of videogames, as seen in the enemies that gamers created, which only amplified their sins.

As gatekeepers, gamers were opposed to outgroups entering their territory. Since gamers and gaming culture were inherently masculine, as rhetorically constituted by these journalists, they were by dialectical definition opposed to femininity. As a result, gamers created evil enemies that justified their actions. Gamers saw women, feminists, and any who supported greater inclusion as villains and therefore resorted to any means necessary to defend their space. These actions, as portrayed by the journalists, created immense amounts of guilt that had to be resolved. Within their rhetorical drama, one of the laws that they implied was that excluding others and attacking women was ethically wrong. Guilt arose as a result of gamers' disobedience.

Gamers as Misogynists

Another iniquity that the journalists levied on the gamer was misogyny. Not only did gamers police gaming culture, but they also actively worked to keep women out of their community. According to the journalists, gamers believed that women did not belong in their space, seeing them as “morally degenerate or irredeemably malicious” (Carter, 1996, p. 7). In this drama, gamers argued that they did not share identification with women, which is why they were seen as a threat. In their own misguided way, they tried to “protect their own kind, their own community, society, or culture, against that which is alien” (Tonn et al., 1993). Golding (2014) wrote that the harassment of women was “dismayingly common” in the videogame world. Even prior to the GamerGate controversy, some writers, such as Chu (2014), referenced instances of misogyny from the past. For example, Chu reminded readers that Jennifer Hepler, a writer for Bioware, was criticized by gamers as being a “cancer,” which allowed gamers to justify “death threats phoned in to her kids, because her gamer cred got called into question” after admitting that she disliked combat in videogames. The journalists used this example, as

well as others, to demonstrate that what was happening Quinn and Sarkeesian were not lone incidents but part of a larger pattern of misogynistic behavior that demonstrated the fury with which gamers policed their culture and attacked women.

As for Quinn and Sarkeesian, the journalists spent a great amount of effort to depict how gamers relentlessly attacked them. In the wake of Gjoni's post, Quinn's personal information, including nude photos of her, were hacked and distributed across the internet. Gamers "constantly and relentlessly" sent her "crude, vile, harassing messages" (Chu, 2014) and vowed that she would never work again, all in the name of "corruption in videogame journalism" (Todd, 2014). Johnston (2014), writing for *Ars Technica*, said that some gamers claimed that Quinn "made up the harassment, that she used devious womanly wiles to get her (free) game some coverage, and that she portrayed herself as a victim to receive donations." Because Gjoni's accusations were quickly debunked, the journalists condemned this behavior and found it reprehensible that gamers would engage in such acts. That Quinn was also a woman and therefore an outsider only intensified the harassment. She may have been an independent game developer, but, as the journalists argued earlier, even developers were lower in the social hierarchy than gamers.

The attacks on Sarkeesian were equally hateful, if not more so. After releasing the "Women as Background Decoration: Part 2" video, Sarkeesian received countless threatening messages, with Plante (2014) from *Polygon*, as well as many others, noting that the death and rape threats were so severe that they "forced Sarkeesian to leave her home for safety." Gamers threatened Sarkeesian and her family because she outwardly identified as both a feminist and as a "gamer." For gamers, she represented not only the enemy in the form of a feminist but also a liar for daring to call herself a "gamer" like them. Journalists repeatedly mentioned that gamers

saw feminists as their mortal enemies, existing in dialectical opposition to each other. Johnston (2014) writes that feminist criticism about videogames “feels like a threat to a certain insular, and extremely vocal, community.” Gamers were afraid that their “beloved franchises will be influenced by the feminist masses” (O’Rourke, 2014). Because feminist criticism attacked the androcentric nature of videogames that gamers demanded, criticism of the product became criticism of the gamer identity by the principle of association. To say that the game was flawed was also to say that the gamer was flawed.

Though women received the bulk of the gamers’ hate, journalists like Moosa (2014), also writing for *The Daily Beast*, and Plante (2014) pointed out that the gamers’ misogynist campaign extended to those who self-identified as feminists. For example, Moosa (2014) noted that Joss Whedon, creator of many beloved science-fiction shows, and Tim Schafer, a highly regarded videogame developer, were berated on Twitter after coming to Quinn and Sarkeesian’s defense. Moosa (2014) was quick to show, however, that the degree of hate toward these male feminists was nowhere near as vitriolic as the hate women received. In both cases, gamers attacking and harassing feminists further contributed to the immense amount of guilt that the journalists described. Presenting the gamers as misogynistic is yet another way in which journalists were attributing a negative quality to the scapegoat in order to excise it symbolically from the social order.

At this point, the scapegoat has been characterized as being exclusive, masculine, consumerist, a gatekeeper, and misogynistic. Already, it appears that the journalists have created an enemy “so ‘perfectly’ suited to [its] ritual role” whose sacrifice would relieve the guilt in the drama (Burke, 1984b, p. 291). However, journalists went one step further and cast upon the gamer the sin of righteousness, contending that gamers were unyielding in their attempts to win

the war of videogame culture. As guardians, gamers had a misguided sense of loyalty to protect their domain from outsiders, which in this case were feminists and their defenders. They waged this war so fiercely because they feared that these newcomers would pollute and contaminate their kingdom.

Gamers as Crusaders

The use of war and religious language was no accident, as many, such as Wilson (2014), writing for *Gamasutra*, and Golding (2014) described the gamers' actions as a "crusade" against feminists. Chu (2014) argued that gamers were "doggedly convinced that their opinion is 'objectively' correct," which allowed them to resort to "total war tactics." In another instance, Chu (2014) stated that gamers believed so strongly that their opinion was right that they felt entitled "to use every dirty trick in [their] arsenal to attack people." Because gamers were at the top of the hierarchy and were able to dictate how games were made and for what audience, they believed that they were the only ones who could have a correct opinion. Hence, when outsiders and enemies began criticizing that viewpoint and trying to expand the borders of videogame culture, gamers felt it necessary to argue their rightness through any and all possible means, fearing that if they did not, they may end up trading places within the hierarchy (Rueckert, 1963).

In this struggle for control of the hierarchy, journalists also contended that gamers, being righteous and consumerist, had certain demands of game journalism. As Chu (2014) stated, gamers, as wielders of ultimate authority in videogame culture, demanded that game journalism be scientific and objective. Art criticism is notoriously subjective and yet gamers, in this line of argument, commanded that videogame reviews follow a strict pattern. Reviewers had to give

games the “correct” (Chu, 2014) score because otherwise it would hurt the game’s overall rating on aggregator sites like Metacritic. Concurring with Chu, Wilson (2014) also said that gamers wanted to protect “the perceived value of their investments.” Once again, because the product was such a vital part of the gamer’s identity, unfounded critique of the product was by association a critique of the gamer himself. As Chu (2014) noted, “the treatment of gamer consensus as objective truth tends to be directed squarely against anyone who’s Other in the gaming realm.” For example, because game journalism was supposed to be solely focused on whether or not a gamer should buy something, game journalists by decree were not supposed to talk about representation, inclusivity, and sexism (Alexander, 2014). Thus, Sarkeesian’s video series about the misrepresentation of women in videogames violated the rules the gamers had written for the videogame community. The journalists longed to be able to talk about games in any way that they wanted, which is why this mandate produced guilt. Appropriating the rhetoric of war and its metaphors only intensified the guilt within the drama. The journalists increased the scapegoat’s symbolic presence by ascribing to gamers this sense of righteousness and reiterating their status as the rulers of gaming culture.

As has been shown, journalists have constructed a rhetorical drama featuring an exclusionary, consumerist, and masculine culture that is regulated and controlled by misogynistic gatekeepers who so strongly fear feminists that they resort to the most extreme methods possible to keep their space pure and unsullied. They specifically characterize the gamer in these ways in order to lay upon them all of the guilt that has been building in the videogame community over the last several years. Reflecting Burke’s (1984b) assertion that the scapegoating ritual promotes the symbolic creation of a “perfect victim” (p. 293), gamers are clearly defined as a blight who must be removed.

Mortification of the Journalists

Interestingly, though the journalists wrote at length to construct the gamer as a scapegoat and symbolically lay the guilt upon them, the journalists also pointed to their own culpability in fostering the development of the gamer. As active participants within the consumerist aspect of gamer culture, they helped tell gamers what games they should and should not buy and consented to the gamers' forced consensus. Ostensibly, it appears that journalists attempted to scapegoat and simultaneously commit mortification by admitting to their own faults. Since mortification is often comedy's solution for guilt, it is odd that both would occur at the same time (Brummett, 1980). However, what seems to be at first glance a blending of two dramatic genres, tragedy and comedy, is ultimately just a veneer the journalists used to usurp gamers as the rightful gatekeepers of videogame culture.

In terms of the mortification process, journalists fell into two different camps. The first followed the traditional pattern of mortification, acknowledging that their actions created guilt that must be resolved. The second group, however, masked their scapegoating with a thin layer of mortification, often by showing how they had been able to correct the mistakes of the past. Though some journalists were rhetorically more capable than others in creating this façade of mortification, both instances ultimately served the same rhetorical purpose: scapegoat the gamer and simultaneously differentiate the journalists from the gamer, making them appear as a better and rightful alternative at the top of gaming's social order.

In general, journalists in the first camp accepted blame by claiming that they had a caretaking responsibility to the videogame community. Alexander (2014) wrote, "All of us

should be better than this.” Todd (2014), echoing Alexander, said “it is the responsibility of every gamer to behave better.” More specifically, O’Rourke (2014) acknowledged the need for critics to be “increasingly aware of the gender biases present in many of the titles we enjoy so much.” These journalists recognized that their articles—reviews, previews, etc.—were shared to a wide audience of gaming enthusiasts, and as a result, they had a responsibility to be more aware of gender and social issues that videogames sometimes present. Directly addressing journalists and other community leaders, Alexander wrote “When you decline to create or to curate a culture in your spaces, you’re responsible for what spawns in the vacuum. That’s what’s been happening to games.” In agreement, Todd (2014) asserted that “the more people who sit back and let injustice happen, the more injustice will happen.” As writers, Alexander and Todd argued that journalists and other leaders, such as those who run large gaming sites like *IGN* and *Kotaku*, needed to regulate the culture about which they write. Going even further, Alexander (2014) admonished those who have failed to be good custodians, saying “those in positions of power—community leaders, community hubs, game websites, etc., have an even greater responsibility.” Reiterating Alexander’s argument, Wilson (2014) agreed that gamers are the “organic results of the medium we’ve all played a role in cultivating.” These examples illustrate traditional modes of mortification because they have “internalized the imperfections” that have created guilt (Carlson & Hocking, 1988, p. 206). In other words, they admitted to their faults and recognized the importance of changing their ways for the betterment of all.

The second group of journalists attempted to integrate mortification by demonstrating to their audience how they had been able to fix the mistakes of the past. Since the comic frame sees “scenic problems in comedic discourse as real but negotiable” (Appel, 1997, p. 384), these journalists gave examples of how videogame culture had progressed toward greater inclusivity

and diversity. Plante (2014) for instance stated that despite gamers' cruelty, "good, positive and kind action happened this week, too," noting that GaymerX, a homosexual gaming convention, decided to rebrand to GX: Everyone Games so that they could include all kinds of gaming enthusiasts. In writing about how game journalism could help usher in this new culture, Johnston (2014) said that game journalism needed to incorporate more cultural critiques of the games that journalists reviewed. Chu (2014) also acknowledged that "game reviews have been, rather obnoxiously, attempts to rate games on a technical score and come up with a numerical rating for them that looks scientific." Finally, two days prior to the publication of these articles, the editor-in-chief of *Kotaku*, Stephen Totilo (2014) posted an article outlining his site's new conflict of interest policy. Stating that recent events had been "a good warning to all of us about the pitfalls of cliquishness in the indie dev scene and among the reporters who cover it," he outlined how *Kotaku* would be more transparent about the relationships its writers have with their subjects. *Kotaku*, as well as others, have learned from their mistakes and can be better.

The general argument that both groups of journalists made was that because they had for so long been hierarchically beneath the gamer, they had been derelict in their roles as cultural curators. Focusing too intently on the product had helped spawn the monstrous gamer that created so much of the guilt within the rhetorical drama. This lack of responsibility had also allowed the gamer to ascend to the top of the gaming hierarchy, allowing the gamer to reign terror upon would be challengers. Wilson (2014), admonishing everyone, wrote, "none of us are entirely innocent." In recognizing the part they played in the creation of the gamer, these journalists symbolically placed the guilt on themselves. Through mortification, they sought to be corrected rather than banished (Burke, 1984a). Yet, neither group symbolically placed all of the guilt upon themselves. At most, some said that they deserved part of the blame, but ultimately it

was the gamer who was truly at fault. The purpose of this mortification was not to punish their own mistakes but rather to differentiate themselves from the gamer.

Usurping the Gamer

As Burke (1969a) says, the first part of the scapegoating ritual is a recognition of consubstantiality between society and the scapegoat. Here, the “iniquities are shared by both the iniquitous and their chosen vessel” (p. 406). This pretense of mortification is in fact just a part of the scapegoating ritual because it showed that both sides shared guilt. Journalists and gamers love videogames, but gamers had been corrupted by their position of power within the hierarchy. As this analysis has demonstrated earlier, the journalists systematically scapegoated the gamer, attributing to them all of the negative characteristics that are a part of videogame culture, namely exclusion, masculinity, consumerism, gatekeeping, misogyny, and righteousness. In this way, journalists fulfilled the second part of the scapegoating ritual, condemning the gamer by “moral indignation” (p. 406). All that remains is the final stage, in which the purified journalists define themselves in “dialectical opposition” to the gamer (p. 406).

Instead of being exclusive like the gamer, the journalists defined themselves as inclusive. Game journalists were champions of inclusivity because they were helping to bring about “a far more expansive vision of gaming” (Bernstein, 2014). They attempted to “instate a healthy cultural vocabulary” and “curate a creative community and an inclusive culture” (Alexander, 2014). Rather than prevent casual players and outsiders from joining the community, game journalists welcomed them. Plante (2014) described how journalists and their allies “opened their arms, unable to contain [their] love and compassion.” Where gamers prevented videogame

culture from expanding beyond white males, the journalists announced their love and acceptance of any who wished to join them. Since inclusivity is dialectically opposed to exclusivity, journalists had to redefine themselves after condemning the scapegoat.

Furthering this process of dialectical redefinition, the journalists defended women and feminists when gamers attacked them. As Moosa (2014) wrote, “We should convey our support for women who have to be the lightning rod drawing out poison from the spheres we love; they shouldn’t have to stand alone.” Johnston (2014) asserted that attacking women only “advances the goals of the most poisonous ‘gamers,’ while regressing everything else.” Writing for *Vice*, Pearl (2014) highlighted how “Men can commodify representations of female sexuality to sell inferior games, and that’s making an honest buck, but if some women get to the top by commodifying their own sexuality, that’s corruption?” Plunkett (2014) was similarly appalled by the misogyny on display and was in shock that it was occurring “over...what? Video games? Women in video games? People who write about video games?” Finally, Todd (2014) championed women, feminists, and other outsiders, saying that the only way the “ecosystem can improve is through the involvement of more women, more LGBT people, more of anyone who doesn’t conform to the white gamer-bro stereotype.” In condemning the misogyny of gamers and highlighting their own efforts to support others, the journalists dialectically redefined themselves as opposed to the malice and misogyny that gamers, according to them, represented.

The journalists made it clear that unlike the gamer, they knew what was best for the gaming community. Under their reign, videogames would be “for everyone...Videogames, to read the other side of the same statement, are not for you [gamers]. You do not get to own videogames” (Golding, 2014). Instead of appealing only to white males, videogames under the journalists would provide a “safe space for experimentation and empathic experiences” for

people that were disadvantaged by the gamers' rule such as feminists, women, and other outsiders. Instead of focusing entirely on consumerism, journalists would be able to create "fertile spaces, where small and diverse titles can flourish, where communities can quickly spring up around creativity, self-expression, and mutual support, rather than consumerism" (Alexander, 2014). After describing at length how the gamers wrongly believe they understand the medium of videogames better than everyone else, the journalists position themselves as a better and more positive alternative to them, painting a portrait of what videogame culture would look like without the gamer. Where the gamer had a misplaced sense of righteousness that led to corruption and toxicity, the journalists dialectically argued that videogame culture would be pure and idyllic if they were in control.

By seemingly committing mortification, journalists further delineated the new rhetorical lines between themselves and gamers. This strategy of mortification became a persuasive tool and told their audience that unlike the gamer, who must be symbolically exiled, the journalists were capable of redemption and change. For the journalists, this was a deliberate rhetorical choice because their goal was ultimately to ascend to the top of gaming's hierarchy, believing that they were the rightful cultural custodians of this social order. This scapegoating ritual was extensive and clearly positioned the gamer at the top of the hierarchy, placing beneath them game developers, marketers, and game journalists. By symbolically constructing and excising this scapegoat, game journalists gave themselves an opportunity to claim the gamer's vacancy at the top of the hierarchy. The veneer of mortification worked not only to dialectically differentiate the journalists from the gamer but also showed them in a more positive light. They only wanted to appear to "suffer for their guilt or failures" (Spoel, Harris, & Henwood, 2012, p. 623). Since one of the key aspects of the gamer was that they were incapable of changing their ways, the

journalists showed their audience that they were able to recognize their mistakes by offering them a glimpse into what a gaming culture led by journalists would look like. Compared to their rhetorical interpretation of gaming culture under the gamers, the journalists' culture appeared far more positive, bright, and healthy. As such, the journalists completed Burke's (1969a) scapegoating ritual since they fully redefined themselves without the gamer being consubstantial with them. Now exiled from the videogame community, the gamer and the journalists were now part of two separate groups who were defined in dialectical opposition to one another. With the gamers gone, the journalists were able to advocate for a higher position within the videogame community's hierarchy.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The GamerGate controversy that began with Gjoni's accusatory breakup post enflamed gamers and sparked a serious crisis in the videogame community. Seeing an opportunity to ascend to the top of the videogame community's hierarchy, game journalists weaved a tragic rhetorical story that blamed gamers for all that was wrong in the community. Marking gamers as scapegoats, game journalists dedicated significant rhetorical resources to ascribe to them negative characteristics such as exclusivity, hypermasculinity, consumerism, gatekeeping, and misogyny. In so doing, game journalists argued for the gamer's symbolic banishment from the videogame community. As spun by the journalists, gamers positioned themselves at the top of gaming's social order. From this seat of power, journalists argued, gamers were able to control the culture, evening demanding what games were made and how they were made. Beneath them were game developers, leaders of community hubs such as *IGN* and *Kotaku*, and, of course, game journalists. Within the this rhetorical drama, gamers abused their power and overreached when they began their assault on Quinn and Sarkeesian.

While this kind of scapegoating has been seen in other communities facing rhetorical exigencies (Tonn et al., 1993; Turnage, 2009), what makes the "gamers are dead" articles unique and rhetorically interesting is the way in which journalists appropriated the comic tool of mortification. Game journalists strategically layered their articles with a thin veneer of mortification, which allowed them to appear as purer than gamers, who were corrupted as a result of their guilt. Though some game journalists engaged in mortification more than others, taken as a whole, the "gamers are dead" articles and their writers do not entirely place the guilt of GamerGate on themselves. They do not demonstrate "a gallant excess of self-control" and

instead manipulate mortification to function as part of the scapegoating ritual (Burke, 1952, p. 370). Since mortification allows rhetors to recognize their own sins and comedy in general seeks to correct mistakes, game journalists attempted to convince their audience that they would be more responsible leaders of the videogame community than the gamer. This goal explains why game journalists spent so much time not only outlining the history of the gamer identity and its rise to power but also documenting its abuses of power. That this collection of articles is referred to as the “gamers are dead” pieces is further evidence that their principle goal was to scapegoat the gamer, not blame themselves for what happened (Mortenson, 2018). Additionally, game journalists collectively created a rhetorical vision for what the gaming community would look like under their rule. Their paradise of inclusivity and diversity is sharply contrasted with the gamers’ polluted and toxic cultural swamp, a direct result of their immoral rule. Demonstrating the hierarchic guilt that is endemic within human social orders, game journalists’ scapegoating was reinforced by an appropriation of mortification.

Though the journalists’ rhetorical drama was extensive and complete, it was not without challenges. A recurring problem faced by these game journalists, as evidenced by the comment sections of these articles, was confusion among their audience. Though the journalists tried to delineate the gamer and the general videogame fan, their attempts were not always successful. Because “gamer” is both a denotative description and a symbolic marker of identity, the lines distinguishing these two meanings were not necessarily clear to audiences. In referencing Alexander’s (2014) and Golding’s (2014) articles, Plunkett (2014) addressed his audience by writing, “note they’re not talking about everyone who plays games or who self-identifies as a ‘gamer,’ as being the *worst*” (emphasis in original). Though the “gamers are dead” articles collectively created a rhetorical drama, they did not take into account the ambiguity of the word

“gamer” and as a result their goal was somewhat compromised. In the days and weeks after the release of these articles, these journalists were harassed and accused of collusion, with Alexander being the main target (Mortenson, 2018). One possibility the journalists had was to offer up a new term to replace “gamer” for those who love videogames. Golding (2014) provided a fitting replacement at the end of his article, writing “I am convinced that this marks the end. We are finished here. From now on, there no more gamers—only players.” Unfortunately, no other journalist proposed such a replacement term, which could have helped alleviate the ambiguity of “gamer.” Future research will need to explore more fully the reach and influence of these articles.

GamerGate continued to expand for years after the “gamers are dead” articles were published. Soon after the articles were published, gamers, led by conservative writer Milo Yiannopoulos (2014), accused the journalists of being part of a conspiracy to “operate with one voice and collude on major issues to distort coverage of ethics violations and to support figures to whom they are politically sympathetic.” This type of conspiratorial coverage counteracted the journalists’ attempt to scapegoat the gamer and helped the controversy drag on. Writing for *New York Magazine*, Malone (2017) noted that the attacks against Quinn slowed but did not cease in 2015. Describing how the movement expanded, she wrote that new targets emerged for GamerGate such as comedienne Leslie Jones and actor John Boyega, who were attacked for “ruining” *Ghostbusters* and *Star Wars*, respectively. It is debatable whether or not GamerGate fizzled out once supporters moved on from Quinn and Sarkeesian as some argue that it ultimately morphed into a conservative political base that had little to do with videogames (Malone; 2017; Rosenberg, 2015). What is not debatable, however, is the impact that the

controversy had in the videogame community, as evidenced by the amount of articles written about the controversy.

As with any research project, there were limitations that future studies could solve. One limitation was the time frame under study. The “gamers are dead” articles were all published very early during the GamerGate controversy before the term GamerGate was widespread, which is why it never appeared in any of the articles. The controversy expanded and grew for months afterward, so future research could expand upon the rhetorical nature of GamerGate by widening the length of time studied. Additionally, other scholars could compare and contrast the strategies these journalists used with the rhetoric of the gamers themselves. While the gamers did engage in many acts of online abuse, there was also a collective argument that they made concerning ethics in game journalism. Many of the “gamers are dead” articles addressed the gamers’ argument, but other scholars could examine the particular rhetorical choices gamers made from a more critical perspective. Finally, future rhetorical critics could expand upon the use of mortification as a persuasive tool in the scapegoating process. The argument presented here is just one instance of rhetors appropriating mortification to enhance scapegoating, so drawing definitive conclusions about the rhetorical impact of this choice is necessarily limited.

One potential avenue for future scholarship examining mortification within the scapegoating process is with certain types of public apologies. Recently, for example, Vice President Joe Biden responded to calls to apologize publicly for making women feel uncomfortable around him due to his physical communicative style. As reported in the *New York Times* (Lerer, 2019), Biden acknowledged his mistakes in a video posted to social media in which he said that he will be “more mindful and respectful of people’s personal space.” Notably, he did not apologize for his past actions and instead highlighted his ability to change and

referenced his past support of women through various legislative bills and initiatives. In a similar instance, comedian Louis C.K. released an apology in which he admitted to sexual misconduct accusations. In his statement, as reported on by the *Los Angeles Times* (Hill, 2017), Louis C.K. admitted to his wrongdoing and vowed to “take a long time to listen.” More so than Biden’s, Louis C.K.’s statement is full of remorse and the accepting of guilt that he created. Notably, however, neither Biden nor Louis C.K. used the word “sorry” in their apology. Similar to the game journalists who created a veneer of mortification, Biden and Louis C.K. appear to have used the same strategy of partially accepting blame. This type of pseudo-mortification may help rhetors maintain their place within their respective social hierarchies by admitting to enough fault to appease their audience. Future research could explore this phenomenon, especially as public apologies from prominent members of society become more and more commonplace.

Lastly, this project has illuminated the fecundity of videogames as a rhetorical field of research. All communities are managed symbolically, and the videogame community is no different. In the same way that researchers are able to study sports fandoms and political coalitions, so too can videogame audiences be studied. In this particular instance, a massive controversy provided insight into how a community attempted to manage symbolically the meaning of certain terms such as “gamer” and “feminist.” However, other areas of videogames could provide similar theoretical insights. For example, eSports are growing massively in popularity and provide an interesting intersection of both sports and videogames (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). How can eSports organizations, for instance, persuade audiences that videogames constitute a sport? What rhetorical strategies are available to them, and what issues present themselves in this context? No matter the specific area, videogames have the

potential to provide rhetorical scholars with new opportunities to understand a community that is largely managed online as well as how rhetorical theories function in the digital realm.

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