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The Paranoid Style of Internet Politics: Gamer Backlashes and ‘Politics’ as Imposition

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Abstract

The 2014 Gamergate movement has since become a model for backlashes and attacks against the inclusion of marginalized identities within the gaming industry. In the decade since the Gamergate movement, a number of similar backlashes have continued to occur, finding new reasons and rationales to attack the inclusion of marginalized people in the narrative of games as well as in the industry more broadly. In early 2024, one of these Gamergate-esque backlashes emerged around the company Sweet Baby Inc., first noticed by anti-woke movements in late 2023. This article examines two Reddit threads discussing Sweet Baby Inc. and analyzes the discourses produced around the company and how this reflects on the ways that anti-woke: gaming backlashes conceptualize notions of ‘politics’ and ‘diversity’.

Keywords: Gamergate, Anti-woke, Sweet Baby Inc., ESG

ASPECTER IS HAUNTING VIDEO GAMES, the specter of *politics*. Much digital ink has been spilled in bemoaning this scourge, hundreds of thousands of forum threads, angry articles, posts, and videos that denounce the ways that politics have infiltrated and indeed *infested* video games. Gamers remain vigilant against this ever-present threat. But what does this really mean? What are ‘politics’ in video games, for the anti-woke gamer, and what does this tell us about the broader conception of ‘politics’ in the world?

In 2014, the world was suddenly and violently introduced to the gaming community through Gamergate, a complex and decentralized backlash and harassment campaign nominally centered around “ethics in games journalism,” but realistically functioning as a way to police and punish the presence of women in games (Mortensen 2018). This followed years of anti-feminist undercurrents in the gaming culture, and Gamergate itself was in part mobilized against the critical feminist analysis of both games and game culture (Mortensen 2018). Specific women within the games industry and surrounding ecosystem, such as feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, were targeted for the perceived threat they posed to gaming as a hobby and institution (Mortensen 2018). Despite almost a decade of time, and the continued (if messy) integration of marginalized peoples into games through both depiction and industry, the shadow of Gamergate lingers as a force in the minds of gaming’s alt-fanbases. The afterlife of Gamergate has been a general anti-feminist and anti-woke milieu that lurks underneath the surface of online gaming cultures.

This undercurrent breaches the surface of gaming culture with semi-regular outbursts of Gamergate-esque sentiments, often manifesting around higher-profile games such as *The Last of Us Part II* (Letizi and Norman 2024). In the last few years, as the ‘culture war’ and anti-woke discourses have come to dominate the conversation around media and popular politics, gamer backlashes have become clothed in the same language. The terms they use have come to occupy their own

meanings, within this ecosystem, ideas like ‘wokeness’ divorced from their original contexts and instead understood by the anti-woke as social justice gone mad, inherently hollow, performative, and corrosively inauthentic (Davies and MacRae 2023).

In late February and early March of 2024, the latest echo of Gamergate arrived on the scene. Following the disappointing release of *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League*, gamers searched for a reason that the game was bad. For some, the blame was placed squarely at the feet of ‘Sweet Baby Incorporated’ (henceforward SBI), a Canadian narrative consultancy firm who worked on the game. The way that gamers responded to SBI presents a case study of how right-wing anti-woke movements conceptualize ‘political’ content in media, and how their conceptions of politics are used to bolster and reinforce right-wing opinions. Through analysis of two Reddit threads, we can see how the narrative about SBI evolves and how gamers conceptualize the way that ‘political’ themes and representation are manifested within video games. For anti-woke gamers, games are not inherently political, and thus they are *made* political. I argue that anti-woke gamers conceptualize politics as an imposition, something that undermines quality *inherently*. Thus, it must be tied to outside, malicious conspiracy against the presumed white male gamer.

Methodology

The main texts I am analyzing in this paper are two Reddit threads. The first is titled: “Have you felt as though that games have been written by the same exact people for the past few years? That’s because they have been, meet ‘Sweet Baby Inc.’, an ESG focused company in Canada.” (MrCalac123 2023) and was posted on Gamergate subreddit r/KotakuInAction. The second, “What's going on with the Sweet Baby Inc Controversy?” (Finnikk 2024) was posted on the general user subreddit r/OutOfTheLoop. Reddit has historically been an organizing space for a

number of right-wing backlashes, including Gamergate. The platform's construction and decentralized moderation structure enabled and shaped Gamergate, with that style of online campaign remaining entwined with the website (Massanari 2017). I have also examined the Steam Curator page 'Sweet Baby Inc. Detected' and used two media articles on the topic: "Sweet Baby Inc. Doesn't Do What Some Gamers Think It Does" by Alyssa Mercante at Kotaku (Mercante 2024) and "How A Small Video Game Narrative Studio Wound Up At The Heart Of A Massive, Anti-Woke Conspiracy Theory" by Nathan Grayson at Aftermath (Grayson 2024). These additional sources provide further context and commentary on the wider movement outside of Reddit, as well as the motivating factors for those posting about the conspiracy on Reddit.

Ideological Gestation

The r/KotakuInAction post dates to October 26 of 2023, predating the wider backlash to SBI by about four months. The text of the post read "Every triple-A American game studio has been outsourcing their game writing to this shitty ESG obsessed company, who sanitizes and 'diversifies' games to be more "progressive". This explains soooooo much..." referring to SBI (MrCalac123 2023). The title and text both reference 'ESG,' an initialism for Equality, Sustainability, and Governance¹ (Grayson 2024). The post was accompanied by a screenshot of a 4chan thread that examined the company and its presence in the credits of other video games. r/KotakuInAction offers a useful case study for the culture of anti-woke gamers, as it was founded during Gamergate and was an organizing space for the harassment campaigns (Mortensen 2018). Its culture has developed directly from that period and is a sort of living fossil for Gamergate-era mentalities and

¹ A management style adopted by certain corporations and encouraged by some financial investment firms. The style focuses on obtaining certain goals often related to social and environmental justice, such as equal opportunity employment (Grayson, 2024).

politics. So, what do the ideological heirs of the most impactful gaming backlash in history think about SBI?

Immediately notable is the theorization on what role SBI played in specific projects, especially *Alan Wake 2*. In fact, there was a *specific* action users imagined SBI took: “Wouldn’t be suprised[*sic*] if they were the ones who encouraged Remedy to recast Saga Anderson as a black woman and make half of Alan Wake 2 about her arc” (dandrixxx, October 26, 2023, 8:49 p.m., comment on MrCalc123 2023). Another user imagines the conversation that SBI had with the writers of the game:

ok, y'all didn't give us much to work with to enhance this game, but after working with your writers for eight months, we finally came up with a perfect update to the story. We replace this gruff, complex and nuanced FBI agent character with... A BLACK WOMAN!!! (KnikTheNife, October 26, 2023, 8:06 p.m., comment on MrCalc123 2023)

A common tactic of anti-woke movements is to make social justice positions inherently abnormal and alien to society, something from *outside* (Cammaerts 2022). However, the comments demonstrates that on r/KotakuInAction this kind of rhetoric has escalated to the presence of non- white women in general. The presence of a Black woman in the game, for r/KotakuInAction, is inherently foreign and imposed. This specific element would become a main talking point when the SBI scandal breached into the mainstream gamer consciousness, with the CEO of Remedy Entertainment, the developers of the game, having to state that this was not the case (Grayson 2024). The ‘gruff, complex and nuanced’ character that is imagined never existed, was never something that could be replaced. Despite this, SBI conspiracists felt that this was something *taken*, that the white (presumably male) version of the character *would* have been better and was made worse because

of ‘forced diversity’. Other commenters look at the people behind SBI, trying to tie the identities and histories of its leadership to the conspiracy they identify as driving the inclusion of content they oppose.

The CEO of said company is a racist+sexist leftist POC that somehow landed a writing gig at Ubisoft [...] She was promoted during the first great DEI wave following the Baltimore/BLM protests of 2015. She wrote for less than 3 years before leaving and becoming a "narrative" consultant that somehow gets contracted to shape the narrative of some of the biggest AAA² titles... She doesn't like games and she's unqualified for the job [...] she got rich by being given the chance to destroy your hobby with her deranged world view. (Dismal-Range1678, October 26, 2023, 7:31 p.m., comment on MrCalc123 2023)

Anti-woke crusaders often work to disconnect the work of people they consider “woke” from legitimate claims of oppression and discrimination (Davies & MacRae 2023). This approach can readily be seen here, where the anti-racist cultural moment of BLM is used to find the motivating factor for an ‘unqualified’ figure to enter the industry. The focus on how gaming is under threat, that this figure ‘hates games’ and is trying to ‘destroy the hobby’ also speaks to how gamers imagine the hobby as threatened by outside forces. Scholarship on Incels, another Reddit-entwined movement, has examined how its adherents conceptualize anti-feminism as emancipatory, perceiving feminist movements as already hegemonic and oppressive (Price 2024). Part of this is the phenomena of incels struggling to

² AAA is a term used in the games industry and fandom to denote games made by mainstream studios with large budgets. There are no universally accepted criteria for what qualifies as AAA, with the label denoting more of an intangible but present quality associated with these studios and games.

perceive women as human, seeing them only as agents of their imagined feminist hegemony. We can see this same kind of thinking in this comment, where a woman of colour is only understood in terms of “diversity hire”. The logic flows from the pre-established conclusion that these inclusions are corrosive: SBI must hate games because they are ruining games by adding content that makes games worse.

Overall, the thread is full of comments that invoke a myriad of anti-woke tropes and grievances: DEI (Diversity, Equality, Inclusion), ESG, Social Justice Warriors, and citing Anita Sarkeesian as a sinister figure a decade after Gamergate. Even conspiracies that are outside of the general anti-woke content sphere, like Pizzagate, are discussed in the thread, demonstrating the ties of this movement to wider far right conspiracism (Bleakley 2023). It’s easy to understand and dismiss this thread and the r/KotakuInAction subreddit as a whole as simply the impulse of hateful ideology, fundamentally opposed to diversity on principle. However, this view obfuscates the mechanisms that motivate posters against SBI. Hatred as a model for understanding the right-wing often reduces into nebulous, undefined conceptions that struggle to identify where movements and ideologies originate (Tetrault 2021). While hate undeniably plays a part in these kinds of backlashes, the adherents do not understand themselves as being motivated by hate. We can see from the examples that, instead of deriding the content on the merits of its content, the commenters are focused more on the motivations of SBI, how its acts as a mechanism to undermine their vision of games and what games culture should be.

Breaching the Surface

It is useful, before going into the next thread, to briefly look at the way that the SBI scandal played out. On February 2nd, 2024, *Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League* released, to widespread disappointment due to its flawed live-service design, monetization, and narrative choices that it made, especially regarding characters in

the much-beloved *Arkham* game series. Shortly thereafter, a Steam Curator³ emerged that began cataloging games that were worked on by SBI, tagging them as ‘not recommended’. This spiraled into a wider backlash when employees of SBI tried to get the Steam Curator removed out of fears of harassment, causing the anti-woke cadre to claim persecution and verification of the censorious nature of SBI (Mercante 2024). It is in this moment where SBI moved from a niche conspiracy theory for anti-woke gamers, into something that was being argued in more public spheres and by more high-profile creators such as popular Youtubers SomeOrdinaryGamers and Asmongold (Grayson 2024; Mercante 2024). It was into this context r/OutOfTheLoop thread was posted on March 6th, 2024, posted by a user seeking to try and understand the sudden outburst in discourse and conflict around the company:

I'm not really into the AAA gaming sphere. The most I play are Indie games, but I've been hearing a lot of drama about Sweet Baby Inc, and even saw some people calling it GamerGate2.0. I'm just so confused about what it's about, though, it's probably obvious and I'm just stupid. (Finnikk 2024)

Posted at the height of the scandal, the thread thus acts as a strong example of how these narratives were crystallized. Here, instead of theorizing as to the evils of SBI, users who are proponents of the SBI conspiracy theory are trying to argue for its validity in the mainstream. Unlike the r/KotakuInAction thread, there are many people who are trying to resist the narratives of post-Gamergate gamers. Here, we can witness those who subscribe to the conspiracy theories about SBI try and present their ideas in forms that seem reasonable to audiences that are not already

³ Steam is a popular online storefront and social service for PC games, and allows users to create Curator profiles to evaluate and highlight games for a public audience

within the sphere. One of the big parts of these arguments was arguing that the reaction SBI had to the “SBI Detected” Steam Curator was unwarranted. One argument, repeated by multiple people, was that the curator was simply pointing out what games were worked on by SBI so that gamers could make informed choices about the media they were consuming. The fact that the Steam Curator was explicitly marking games with ‘Not Recommended’ was something pointed out by opponents to the conspiracy, and swiftly dismissed by its proponents (Steam has an ‘informational’ category for curators to provide commentary without rating). Instead, anti-woke commenters pivoted to arguing that ‘curators are allowed to have opinions’. The argument that the identification of games that were worked on by SBI is not harmful is core to the mentality of anti-woke gamers: they have a *right* to know and that right cannot itself be harmful. Transparency is often depicted as something politically neutral, or even always beneficial, being in the interests of the nebulous “public” (Willmott 2020). However, as noted, this argument of transparency and consumer rights was swiftly contested when it was argued in a more hostile space, seeing anti-woke proponents need to pivot. Another recurring theme in the anti-SBI comments are attempts to divert from the idea that bigotry is the driver of the backlash. This can be seen in the following comment:

People aren't against this because they are all bigots. That's just an easy cop out. People are against it because they've spent years now seeing a direct correlation between the unsubtle, in your face diversity politics in media, and its general low quality, and they are tired of it. (Zaando, March 15, 2024, 7:26 a.m., comment on Finnikk 2024)

The comment focuses on the low quality of games, and several comments follow a similar trend. Often, anti-SBI posters and posters sympathetic to the anti-

SBI position would cite a number of high-profile flop releases and poor products being tied to SBI, casting the negative reaction to the company as motivated by a pattern. This, however, is false. As we saw with the responses to the r/KotakuInAction thread, games that SBI worked on were targeted. The manifestation of the SBI backlash within a wider sphere of gaming discourse resulted directly from a *specific* low-quality release, that of *Suicide Squad*. Many of the other games that SBI worked on, such as *Alan Wake 2*, were great critical and commercial successes, and despite attempts to build controversies out of those games, such narratives did not catch on (Mercante 2024). It was necessary for a game that did not meet general quality standards among gamers to emerge as a wedge issue, but once that game emerged it was possible for anti-woke gamers to recontextualize the entire catalog of games SBI worked on as inherently tainted and poor quality. These are placed into conversation with games like *Palworld* and *Helldivers 2*, recent releases that are from studios that do not fit into the traditional AAA style (despite these releases still being funded and published by massive companies like Sony). The core of the anti-woke gamer argument's core grievances and deflections is summed up in the following comment (responding to the top of the thread):

Answer: Because people are waking up to what SBI is. They force agenda and diversity into games. I mean they have people who defend them and say things like You can't be racist against White people. (Powerful_Ad_4233 2024, March 10, 2024, 2:35 a.m., comment on Finnikk 2024)

Much of the anti-woke movement finds its thrust by constructing working class identity as fundamentally white and thus fundamentally threatened by measures that challenge white supremacy (Davies and MacRae 2023). We see a similar

phenomenon here, where instead of the working-class identity being fundamentally white, it is *gamers* who are fundamentally white and men. Games are already serving their primary audience, cisgender heterosexual white men, and there is no need to expand gaming's appeal into different groups and experiences. Because of this, the diversity witnessed in games cannot be natural. It must be the result of an agenda, a scheme that is subsequently entwined with a wider culture war. This leads to the development of an identity that is under attack for being gamers and for being white. Antisemitic 'Cultural Marxist' and anti-woke conspiracies often dovetail, with a fundamental 'Them' being the party to institute things like anti-white racism and the fall of Western civilization (Black et al. 2024). These discourses can be seen here with the commenter bringing up the "forcing" of diversity in one breath and linking it to racism against white people with the next.

Conclusion

Politics are always entwined with culture, and as the culture of the internet is the culture of video games, the politics of the internet is the politics of video gamers. Gamergate was a site of innovation for how right-wing discourses could resist progressive themes and the presence of diverse peoples in media as a whole. Gaming-focused backlashes often mirror or foreshadow wider culture-war issues, such as the broader anti-woke movement. Looking at the SBI backlash, we can understand that any politics that cannot understand the *reasons* inherently collapses into conspiracy. It is not only a hate-fueled attack against nor a revanchist backlash against a changing culture, though those elements absolutely play a role. Instead, it speaks to a fundamental incomprehension of why social justice policies should exist and an alternative epistemology as to why the landscape of gaming is changing. It *must* be conspiracy, because why else would one insert policies that make games "worse"? Things were *good* so why do they need to change? What SBI actually does is immaterial to the role they must play in the ecosystem.

As of mid-2024, this backlash has reduced in scale but continues to simmer underneath the public gamer consciousness. Conspiracies often carry long afterlives and become canonical points for broader narratives even after they fade from the limelight (Bleakley 2023). It seems likely that SBI will be incorporated into the canon of woke institutions ruining gaming, cited over and over alongside the names of people like Anita Sarkeesian or Kotaku. Nothing that has occurred with SBI is new, and the discourses that fuelled the backlash against the company are reflections of wider culture war issues and age-old tactics. These all lead to a particular conception of politics, where anything that can be construed as “diverse” is “political,” and the ways that politics are played out in the world, one where it is *imposed* into culture by insincere actors. When an incident such as the SBI backlash occurs again, exploiting another bout of grievances (in gaming or any related culture sphere) it is important to recognise this playbook, and how it can be used in concert with other ideas to shut certain people and perspectives out of culture. We should not allow the paranoid impulses of the anti-woke to impose their vision of gaming onto us.

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