

# Vivian about ready to choke a b\*tch! – A cartoon character’s journey into a boundary-building resource and its perpetuating resemiotizations during Gamergate

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*Drawing on nexus analysis, this study seeks to analyse some of the discursive practices and visual material produced during the Gamergate controversy. This is achieved through examining the cartoon mascot Vivian James and the discussions related to the character. The treatment of the character is discussed through the resemiotizations the character faced. Initially the character was designed with clear goals in mind to serve as a resource to perform boundary work within the community. This was achieved through an easily definable process of resemiotizations. However, the character eventually became objectified and sexualized, showing resemiotizations that were not within the initial goals of the community. This process of further resemiotizations also documents how the community was unable to maintain control over the character, which is also symptomatic of the way Gamergate was not able to sustain its efforts.*

**Keywords:** Gamergate, resemiotization, nexus analysis, image boards, Vivian James

## 1 Introduction

In 2014, a controversy took off like a rocket in the gaming corners of the Internet. Eventually acquiring the name Gamergate, the controversial campaign involved attacks against feminists, against the gaming media and against critics who were calling for more diversity in major publishers’ games (Bezio, 2018, p. 7). Some of the attacks amounted to death threats (Marwick & Caplan, 2018, p. 3). At the same time, in the eyes of its proponents, the issues in the controversy were seen as positive. In their eyes, Gamergate stood as a fight against corruption, involved discussions on the ethics of journalism and advanced arguments enhancing the quality of video games (Braithwaite, 2016, p. 4; Marwick & Caplan, 2018, p. 5; Mortensen, 2018, p. 5). The controversy was unable to sustain its activities and most of its activities occurred during 2014 (De Kosnik & Feldman, 2019, p. 4). However, during this time the activities of the movement caused visible disruptions in the gaming media and digital culture (Perreault & Vos, 2018, p. 8; Read, 2016). Although a clear-cut equation between Gamergate and image board culture should be avoided, the controversy was one incident during which the subversive culture of the image board 4chan became into the public eye.

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eISSN: 1457-9863

Publisher: University of Jyväskylä, Language Campus

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<https://apples.journal.fi>

<https://doi.org/10.47862/apples.98324>

Employing an ethnographic (Hine, 2000, 2015) effort, this study offers a nexus analytical (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) approach to an Internet-based controversy. The observations in this study offer an insight to some of the ways in which the members of the controversy defined distinctions between themselves and their opponents.

This study discusses the journey of a cartoon character that emerged during Gamergate. We will see how the character Vivian James was created to be the mascot of the movement. The central interest during the course of the study are resemiotizations (Iedema, 2001, 2003; Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 170) the characters face. In this study, resemiotizations are regarded as the social processes during which meanings transform. After familiarizing ourselves with the background, theoretical framework and data used in this study, we turn to examining the first resemiotizations that are required during the creation of the character Vivian James. After the creation of the character, there was an effort towards authorization of the use of the character, although even during this stage, resemiotizations continued. For example, a contrasting character, Lillian White, was derived relatively quickly from Vivian James to represent and lampoon the views of the opponents of Gamergate. Simultaneous to the emergence and authorization (Scollon, 2008, p. 242) of the character, the character serves functions for the community that created it. Eventually, the community was not able to sustain control over the character and Vivian James became an objectified and sexualized item of fantasy. The findings and discussion in this study show that resemiotizations are not always working towards a specific goal but can continue after the initial goals are achieved.

## **2 Background**

More than five years after its inception and demise (Mortensen, 2018, p. 2), Gamergate still attracts attention and discussion. What started as a campaign generally regarded as a misogynist reaction toward feminism and feminist game criticism, eventually became also viewed as one of the battlefields for various factions in a polarized political climate (Bezio, 2018). The commonly accepted starting point of the Gamergate controversy occurred on the 16th of August, 2014, when the then 24-year-old Eron Gjoni published "The Zoe Post" (2014) on the blogging platform Wordpress, accusing his former girlfriend, the independent game developer Zoe Quinn of infidelity. The post was shared to numerous boards on the image board 4chan (Aghazadeh et al., 2018, p. 179), where the post ignited actions against Quinn. Gamergate's mascot, Vivian James, was created with the efforts of 4chan on August 22<sup>nd</sup> as an entry to a campaign where the audience could design a character in a forthcoming game by The Fine Young Capitalists (The Fine Young Capitalists, n.d., 2014). After August 25<sup>th</sup>, the critic Anita Sarkeesian posted on Youtube an episode about Women as background decoration (Sarkeesian, 2014b) and became a major target of Gamergate. One of the culminations of the harassment campaign can be seen to have occurred on August 27<sup>th</sup> 2014, when Sarkeesian and Quinn had to leave their homes in fear of the harassment (Quinn, 2014; Sarkeesian, 2014a). On the same day the actor Adam Baldwin coined the term #gamergate on Twitter (Baldwin, 2014). Baldwin has at a later date deleted his original Twitter account. From an early stage, there was an effort within the activists to reframe the movement as dealing with ethics of journalism (Aghazadeh et al., 2018, pp. 179–180).

The discourses Gamergate raised to attention include topics about gaming, ethics of game journalism, attitudes held in the games industry and by the gamers, the business models of the games industry as well as feminism and antifeminism (Bezio, 2018, p. 7). During the controversy, it seemed that Gamergate was a backlash against the aspiration to achieve more diversity in gaming. However, in the eyes of the Gamergaters, the issues they aspired to bring forward were more positive, such as promoting artistic freedom and calling for ethics in gaming journalism (Buyukozturk et al., 2018, p. 4). The proponents of Gamergate saw the activities as a movement, even referring to themselves as activists. The debate over the issues and implications of the phenomenon continues, with analyses of the controversy appearing in the media (e.g. Young, 2019) even five years after Gamergate occurred.

Although Gamergate was able to raise a heated, polarized debate, the debate waged only for a short while, roughly from August 2014 to spring 2015 (Mortensen, 2018, p. 2). It has been suggested that Gamergate was not able to sustain itself or perpetuate their movement-maintaining activities (Buyukozturk et al., 2018). Gamergate can be seen simply as a moment in time that involved a reaction of the “typical” gamers to the way they were shown that games needed more diversity (Gray et al., 2017). It is generally accepted that Gamergate was never able to believably shed the accusations of misogyny it faced (Braithwaite, 2016, p. 7; Kirkpatrick, 2017, p. 453; Topinka, 2018, p. 2051). The movement has been widely discussed in research publications especially through its effects and the repercussions it caused, but apart from a relatively few studies (e.g. Buyukozturk et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2017), little attention has been given to analysing the movement through the opinions, statements and actions of the proponents of the movement. While documenting the effects of Gamergate and the trends it epitomizes is necessary and worthwhile (Braithwaite, 2016; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Conway et al., 2019; De Kosnik & Feldman, 2019; Gray et al., 2017; Mortensen, 2018; Perreault & Vos, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2015), understanding Gamergate activism through a more ethnographic (Hine, 2015) approach, as suggested in this study and supported by nexus analysis, creates more understanding of the movement and develops ways of identifying potentially harmful discourses.

### 3 Theoretical framework

Nexus analysis invites research into a multitude of ethnographic, social and linguistic aspects of a given site of engagement (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 158). A fully realized nexus analysis is a research project that results in a book-length report. However, nexus analysis also invites the researcher to concentrate on certain actions in the nexus of practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 167), in a sense zooming in and zooming out of the material present in the nexus of practice. As such, this study should be recognized as one component of a research project that amounts to a more comprehensive nexus analysis. A thorough nexus analysis works through three activities: *engaging*, *navigating* and *changing* the nexus of practice. This study is interested in the process of how discourses transform into practices and further into new discourses (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 164) and looks at this process through resemiotizations (Iedema, 2001, 2003; Scollon, 2008; Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Therefore, as a single nexus analytical activity, this study works firmly in *navigating* the nexus of practice.

The focus of nexus analysis is mediated action, which proposes that any action is inherently social and is carried out by mediational means, i.e. cultural or psychological tools (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 12). In this study, the focus of attention is resemiotization (Iedema, 2001, 2003; Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 165). This is done by examining the cartoon characters employed during gamergate and regarding them initially as resources in the debate. Later in their development, the characters developed other functions. I explore the characters' emergence and how successfully the members of the nexus of practice internalized the characters. Focusing on the resemiotizations the characters faced, I will show one way in which the movement was unable to sustain its activities. Through the resemiotizations, I, in effect, describe the discourse itineraries (Scollon, 2008, p. 234) the characters faced and also show how these itineraries were not entirely successful in arriving at a goal. While a nexus analysis often can display resemiotizations in a teleological way (Scollon, 2008), this study shows that this sort of presentation cannot always be achieved.

Despite the fact that Gamergate's status as a full-fledged movement is disputed, in the terms of nexus analysis the phenomenon can be easily seen as a nexus of practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 12), which consists of numerous sites of engagement, i.e. points in time where the different practices come together in order for the participants to perform an action. In this study the examined sites of engagement are located online, in discussion groups and online art communities such as DeviantArt, in addition to a personal website of a comics author. As a result, these sites of engagement also represent *discourses in place*, or social arrangements in which people come together in social groups (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 19). The *historical bodies* and *interaction order* (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 14) found in the nexus of practice are at this moment left as the interest of other efforts within the larger nexus analytical research process. The activities studied in this text involve the creation, reception and discussion of visual contributions to the community. The central social action that this study investigates is the boundary work performed by the participants. During the boundary work social movements define "us and them": they situate themselves in opposition to non-movement actors, making distinctions between in-group and out-group actors (Hunt et al., 1994, pp. 193–194; Martinviita, 2017, p. 88; Silver, 1997, p. 489). Through an analysis of the boundary work that emerges in the cartoons, this study will also explore the self-image and the fantasies displayed by the contributing members and their images of their opposition.

## 4 Data

A vast body of texts was created during the Gamergate controversy. These include contributions to IRC channel discussions, discussion groups, 4chan, 8chan, news articles, comment sections and cartoons. I have been an observing member in a number of these sites of engagement (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 28). I consider myself a member of these sites of engagement due to the degree I followed them (Sun et al., 2014, p. 111), even though I chose to withhold an active, written participation in the community and I held a critical attitude toward the community. Many of these sites of engagement can be studied entirely through written data, although in this study I will bring in a visual interest by looking at the cartoons and the readers' reactions to the cartoons.

During the Gamergate controversy I was not looking at the phenomenon as an ethnographic researcher, but rather as an interested participant. I was extremely baffled by the outrageous activities of the proponents. Gaming was in fact not a central interest in my personal life, but I was intrigued by the activities of image boards, especially 4chan. During the controversy I saw how Gamergate's mascot Vivian James was instantly recognisable to the proponents of Gamergate and how the character was used productively within the controversy, through memes, comics and cartoons. Because I was not looking at the activities as an ethnographer, I did not save any pages of discussions during the controversy on 4chan or 8chan, and due to the nature of these boards, most of the discussions are lost today (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 478). Therefore, the choice of the material used in this study is a practical one: the chosen sources are relatively stable and still exist on the Internet. The cartoon character Vivian James was a clear item of focus because of its ability to generate contributions and new content.

There are three main sources of data in this study. In this text I will follow the capitalization practices followed by the users or authors of the contributions. Therefore, in the text below I will refer to *ashion* and *kukuruyo* (both explained in more detail below) with lower case lettering. The first source of data are the cartoons presented via Deviant Art by the user who uses the pseudonym *ashion*. *ashion*'s contributions are one-frame cartoons, some of which include the information that they are drawn by commission. *ashion* has made images about Vivian James from at least 2015. These images were chosen because they seemed to resurface in many discussions about Gamergate. According to the *ashion*'s Deviant Art bio, the author identifies as she / her (*ashion*, n.d.). The second set of cartoons used in this study is from the web comic artist who goes by the pseudonym *kukuruyo*, and whose personal website maintains a series of cartoons titled "Gamergate life". The series started in December 2014. For some time, I tried to make an effort to follow this comic, firstly because of its serial nature and secondly because I found it interesting that the author wanted to explain the contents of each contribution. These two sources are also sites for rich discussion, as the design of both sites invites comments and talkbacks. It is also noteworthy that especially *kukuruyo* opts to supply an explanation for the cartoons regularly, thereby steering the readers to the wished interpretation of the cartoon. *kukuruyo*'s contributions are mostly single-panel strips, although occasionally the author deviates from this form, most notably in the mock magazine cover created to celebrate the fourth anniversary of Gamergate (*kukuruyo*, 2018). The third source of the material is an "appreciation thread" on the Kiwifarms forum (Kiwifarms, 2016), which calls for picture posts about Gamergate's mascot, Vivian James. This thread was chosen because it appeared rather late in the course of the controversy and seemed to document some of the forms into which the movement had disintegrated into. In the case of Kiwifarms it has to be noted that reportedly, the forum was born out of the activities of a harassment group targeting one female web user (Pless, 2016). Since then, the harassment activities have grown to include even more "lolcows" (people unwitting to the fact that they are the target of considerable ridicule). The Kiwifarm thread especially presents the fantasies associated with Vivian James. As this text is an original work of analysis and criticism, images in this text are used transformatively. Using the images falls under the right to quote and is considered fair use (Netanel, 2011, p. 768). The copyright holder is indicated below the images.

## 5 Cartoon characters

In this section I will proceed to analysing the data and look at how two cartoon characters central to the communications of Gamergate were created and how the characters were used. In this process I will describe the resemiotizations the characters faced. I will focus on Gamergate's "mascot" Vivian James, who is often contrasted by her cousin Lillian White. Lillian White is often seen as a representation of the opponents of Gamergate. By using these characters as cultural tools within the nexus of practice, the community performs boundary work by showing the members some key characteristics expected from them and some preferable models of behaviour.

### 5.1 *The emergence of the character and first resemiotizations*

Gamergate's mascot, Vivian James, was created with the efforts of 4chan on August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2014 (Collage, n.d.) as an entry to a campaign where the audience could design a character in a forthcoming game by The Fine Young Capitalists (2014). During the creation process we can see the first resemiotizations, as the mode of creation in the online environment is done through written contributions and negotiations. The results of these negotiations were transferred to an image form, resulting in the first stage of resemiotizations. During the phase of creating the character, the resemiotizations repurpose features that are familiar to the community.

Not all features of the character were derived directly from the community. The characters' physical traits are not necessarily representative of the Gamergaters, as can be seen below that there is deliberate design involved in creating the character, with the aim of creating a "simple average girl". As we will learn below, the intention was to not adhere to the expectations aimed towards 4chan or Gamergaters. However, the designers also design aspects into the character that remind the members about the boundaries of the community: They give the members of the 4chan community signals of who is behind the character. For example, the colour scheme of Vivian James is said to resemble a rape joke that had become a staple on 4chan. The "Piccolo Dick" joke was posted so regularly on 4chan that it became to be referred as the "Daily dose". The joke is a GIF image, where the Dragon Ball character Piccolo has forced sexual intercourse with the male main character of the series, Vegeta. Piccolo's skin is green, and garments are purple. The image was often supplemented with other images that contained green and purple as well (*Daily Dose / Piccolo Dick | Know Your Meme*, n.d.; Melendez, 2014). According to Know Your Meme, the intention to this accompaniment was to make the colours remind readers of the rape joke each time the viewers see the colours. This resemiotization through metonymization (Scollon, 2008, p. 242) repurposes the colour scheme and acts as a feature commonly identifiable within the community.

In defining the characteristics of the mascot of gamergate, the contributors also in effect define features of Gamergaters, thus performing boundary work. One contributor on 4chan describes the appearance of the character as:

Just an average female gamer to troll everyone.  
All the tards in the media will expect some sort of pedocrap or  
LOLSRANDOM and we will just give them a simple average girl.  
(Collage, n.d.)

The short excerpt above is also an illustrative example of the vernacular used on image boards, containing several slang words. A “tard” is short for retard and “pedocrap” refers to images and texts implying paedophilia. Finally, “lolsrandom” refers to the culture on the “random” image board (on 4chan, the board /b/), where minimal rules apply, and the content often involves trolling, pornography, violence and even hints at paedophilia. The irreverent, cynical, and crude content on the /b/ board has a central attitude of trolling, where the goal of the posters is more often than not to make other participants angry or to fool them (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 487). The addition of the prefix “lols” in the term “lolsrandom”, fundamentally meaning “laughs”, implies that the activities on the random board are done with the intent of them being funny in the board users’ (or at least the poster’s) eyes.

Resemiotizing certain behaviour characteristics continued, with the board members giving Vivian James character traits (Collage, n.d.) such as “Tough-loves video games. Loathes dishonesty and hypocrisy. Low-affect, grumpy, perpetually fed up and tired.” The trait of being tired can be seen as self-referential, as the baggy eyes are believed to be an effect of staying up too long, reading 4chan. These features, however, are not necessarily instantly recognisable visually, as “loathing dishonesty” and being “perpetually fed up and tired” seem to require actions within the cartoons in order to be manifested.

The Fine Young Capitalists announced the design of the character on Twitter on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2014 (The Fine Young Capitalists, n.d.), see Figure 1. At this stage, the resemitizations resulted in relatively strictly and clearly stated features for the character. The discussions regarding the character were resemitized when designing the visual form of the character. Writing these features down and creating the first visualisation of the character resulted in a planning process that seemed to create constraints for the use of the character, similar to Iedema’s (2001, p. 36) findings of an architectural planning procedure. However, as I will show later, the successfulness of maintaining the results of this process is open for some debate.



**Figure 1.** Vivian James (c) The Fine Young Capitalists.

## 5.2 Efforts for authorization and further resemitizations

After the character Vivian James emerged, the following logical step can be seen in establishing the character as a stable item producing consistent content. This activity can be observed through some contributions the character was used in. I will examine this activity below.

Many of the cartoons in the material rely on the tension between Vivian James and Lillian White, who is related to Vivian. Often the characters play games together. They converse with each other, with Lillian White representing Gamergater’s views of what they refer to with terms such as “radical feminists” or “social justice warriors”. These views are presented in a simplified, exaggerated way, as will be shown later in this study. This time, some of the



resemiotizations while creating Lillian White originate from Vivian James. The resemiotizations also contrast the character Vivian James. The characters themselves are graphically almost identical, with the main differences being their colour scheme. As was suggested above, in the case of Vivian James, the colour scheme signifies cohesion within the group, whereas in the case of Lillian White, choosing a contrasting colour scheme signifies otherness from the group. The characters both wear jeans, a striped hoodie and a head band. Vivian James's hoodie is purple and green, Lillian White's hoodie is pink and white. While Vivian's hair is brown, Lillian's is blonde. Often the characters are seen near bottles of Mtn Dew and packets of Doritos. This, again, resemiotizes these snacks into a feature that acts as a way of framing the content to be familiar for a Gamergater. A central discontentment within Gamergate was sponsorship within gaming journalism, which they believed to have a negative effect on the independency of the gaming media. Sponsorship became blatantly obvious to them through product placement, when a games journalist appeared in an interview seated next to packets of Doritos and Mountain Dew (*Doritos and Mountain Dew | GamerGate | Know Your Meme*, n.d.).

In Figure 2. below, Vivian James is presented sitting on the left side of the image, while Lillian White is located on the right side of the image. It is noteworthy that often the characters look at the reader, sometimes addressing them directly. As a result, the characters break the fourth wall between themselves and the audience (Bell, 2008, p. 203). In Figure 2. this is seen as well, although the effect is alleviated by the fact that Lillian White refers to a live stream audience watching Vivian James. However, even in this situation, the audience of the cartoon is in an equal position with the supposed audience of the live stream: they remain the audience even with a level of distancing.



**Figure 2.** ashion: Commission: Vivian about ready to choke a b\*tch! Published September 29, 2016 (c) ashion.



The facial expressions of the characters display very different characteristics. As was described above, Vivian James is low affect and tired. Her grumpiness seems to be mainly displayed by her verbal contributions, which are often sarcastic, although her anger toward Lillian White's actions can be displayed with facial expression, as in Image 2. Lillian White, on the other hand, is often seen with an angry expression, red cheeks and her mode of delivery is often shouting. Almost always she is presented as the butt of the joke. Whenever playing with Vivian, Lillian loses, and after a loss she blames e.g. sexism, racism or misogyny for the loss (kukuruyo, 2014).

The discussion above over the origins of the character Vivian James clearly demonstrates the way the character was explicitly created to have certain distinct features. The creation of the character required resemiotizations that seemingly resulted in a codified portrayal, aiming at authorization (Scollon, 2008, p. 242) of the character. Below I will continue by looking at the functions the character served and how these functions evolved.

### 5.3 *Functions of the character*

After the creation of the characters, it was reasonable to expect contributions adhering to the predetermined features, as they were described above. While the creation was a successful effort, the functions the character later developed started showing features that suggest the clear vision for the character started to disintegrate. I will show the beginnings of this process below.

In some respects, the character Vivian James represents the idealized views held by the Gamergaters of what in their minds is a true gamer and a member of gamergate. In addition, it is also possible to view these features serving as a sort of a beacon that signals the members of the community that the character represents them. As a contrast, the character Lillian White is made in order to represent in an exaggerated way how Gamergaters view the "social justice warriors" (or SJW's) on the other side of the boundary. In the cartoons Lillian is represented as belligerent, feminist and an inept player. As presented in GamergateWiki's (*Lillian Woods - GamerGate Wiki*, n.d.) view, Lillian maintains "an air of smug moral superiority".

However, Vivian James's functions for the community are not necessarily restricted to serving as a mascot or even as an idealized image of a true gamer. Vivian James also represents the idealized views of the Gamergaters on what a woman should be: slender, sexy and similar to the gaming men in her behaviour. In this, the character is given functions other than as a symbol for the "movement". This suggests that the constraints (Iedema, 2001, p. 36) produced earlier are not upheld entirely successfully. While during the creation of Vivian James the aim was to give "a simple girl", it is clear that the character represents the fantasies of male creators, sometimes serving as a sex object (Braithwaite, 2016, p. 6). The character has long hair, wears tight jeans, is skinny but nevertheless has prominent breasts. These features, of course, apply to Lillian White as well. In the data examined in this study, the function of serving as an object of fantasy is stated clearly on a Kiwifarms thread, where the members are invited to post sexy or cute pictures of Vivian James (Kiwifarms, 2016, n. message #1). During the thread Vivian is shown with enlarged breasts, as a print on a pillow, and in an inhumanely muscular form as if the character has been through a "power up" in a game. She is also given the memetic phrase "Get

away from me you filthy casual!”, which is commonly used as a slur on casual gamers. It must be pointed out, however, that in the thread the character is not always sexualized: the character is also shown as a pony type character and wanting to hug the viewer.

In conclusion, the discussion above shows that Vivian James was able to serve as a symbol through being a mascot and an idealized representation of gaming women. However, this codification was not stable. In the history of the character, these functions later gave way to the character serving as an object of sexual fantasy as well. This may be seen to suggest that some members of the community have certain problems maintaining the distinction between fantasy and reality. I will turn to this feature in the following section.

## **6 Fantasy and reality**

As was discussed above, the codified functions of the character Vivian James did not stabilize and the character faced further resemiotizations, becoming objectified. In this section I will discuss how the further resemiotizations the character faced show that the control over the character disintegrated. In addition, I will show that the traditions of image board culture may have an effect in this development. This is also representative of how the nexus of practice within Gamergate lost momentum and dissolved into much smaller fringes of activists.

Much of the discussion between Gamergaters seems to argue from the point of view of male fantasy, or a very masculine ideal of gender roles. It also seems that the distinction between fantasy and reality is not very well maintained by the adherents of Gamergate, showing aspects of anthropomorphism. This feature shows particularly in the way the authors of the cartoons and the proponents of Gamergate seem to write about the characters anthropomorphically, as if the characters are active, independent humans. The findings below are also emblematic of the attitude adopted by Gamergate (Perez, 2013; Tomkinson & Harper, 2015), according to which a game is a work of art, and as such should not be subject to discussion of political issues. While a clever argument, this opinion also forgets the fact that games for the most part are not designed as art, but rather as commercial products. It must also be remembered that the design of the products is dictated by the business models of the game publishers. As was already shown, Gamergaters themselves were also involved in this kind of creation. The character Vivian James was deliberately designed and emerged from a group effort.

The way the character Vivian James left its origins and adopted additional functions to what it was initially given is worthy of some discussion. This will shed light to the way the character was internalized by the members of the nexus of practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, pp. 163-164). The fact that the character developed new functions shows how the character was again resemiotized (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, pp. 105, 150) in the time following the most heated controversy. What is interesting in these resemiotizations, and characteristic of the discourses within the community, is that while nexus analysis often shows a trajectory of resemiotizations where the result is a relatively fixed field of meanings (Scollon, 2008), in the case of Vivian James these discourse itineraries are not entirely teleological or adhere to the initially established design principles.

During the stage when Vivian James was designed as a symbol for Gamergate activism, the actions in the boundary work can be seen deliberate and require that all users of the character internalize the features and functions it is assigned with. This deliberate action was successful in a number of ways: the character appeared, the character's features and the tropes tied to the character (such as the "daily dose" and "Mtn Dew and Doritos") were recognized, and the character was adopted into use. This is similar to the findings regarding resemiotizations in research literature (Iedema, 2001, 2003; Scollon, 2008). Indeed, the adoption into use can be viewed as very successful, because Vivian James was taken from the symbolic use into use as an object. However, this development can also be seen problematic in some ways. The symbolic use of the character seems to require adherence to the design principles established when creating the character. When the character was taken into use as an object, some of the control regarding the character was lost and the actions regarding the use of the character became more spontaneous. The character was resemiotized with functions that were not necessarily seen advantageous to it when the character was designed as a "simple girl". These tendencies of deliberate design and spontaneous development will be discussed below.

Regarding a comic posted on DeviantArt, a user poses a question "How does Vivian stay so skinny when her diet consists of nothing but Doritos and Mtn Dew?", to which the author of the cartoon, ashion, responds with: "Exercise? \*shrug\*" (ashion, 2016). As the reply is formed as a question, it seems to signify the attitude that this is regarded as an unimportant question and the answer is given in such a way that it does not answer to the question. The addition of the gesture \*shrug\* emphasizes this point. Another user furthers the same attitudes and gives an alternative explanation with the answer "A high metabolism?". In this discussion the user poses the first question concerned with the realism of the image, and the replies seem to argue from the point of view of a fantasy not concerned with realism. This point is driven by the chain's last reply, which seems to argue against the two previous answers: "Powered by male fantasy, she will never gain weight. Unless it's wished." In this discussion it is noteworthy, that even the author of the cartoon seems to argue from the point of view that Vivian as a character inherently holds the attributes the original creators have given the character. In a sense, the author seems to argue against the view that the character appears in the cartoon in the way the author presented her - in the comment, ashion seems to regard Vivian as a free item that chooses to appear on the page regardless of the author's actions. In some regards this point of view seems to adhere to the way the character was designed: the traits of the character should be the same ones that were adopted in the initial design. Spontaneous development should be avoided. If this argument is examined as an action, the author seems to deliberately refuse to examine one self's previously held beliefs and regard features of a character as "natural".

Examining the discussion on the same cartoon further, another example of confusing reality and fantasy in the arguments can be seen. After being asked about the point of the comic, the author ashion replies with "Joke about how journo's and feminist/SJW are trying to tell women that wanting to show off and be sexy is wrong think and how all female characters, regardless of dress or purpose in game, as just there to objectified and fap material. Basically." (ashion, 2016) (The term "fap" here refers to masturbation.) The short exchange above bears a relation to the views of what can be referred to as postfeminism, or

power feminism, which Sarah Gamble summarises in an example as “women dressing like bimbos, yet claiming male privileges and attitudes” (Gamble, 2001, p. 36). This is shown especially in the way the author refers to women “wanting to show off and be sexy”. The postfeminist stance has been criticised with the fact that women showing their power is more often than not displayed through their ability to adhere to male fantasies or to traditional roles (Gamble, 2001; Lazar, 2006). This criticism is easily applied to ashion’s comment as well.

It is unclear whether ashion’s reply discussed above refers to how the gamer Vivian James is portrayed in the comic or to the way women characters are generally portrayed in games. Nevertheless, in the cartoon Lillian White claims to “protect your [Vivian James’s] virtue from their sexist, objectifying gaze”. In the cartoon Vivian James is represented with the “simple” style established when the character was developed: with a hoodie and jeans. Considering this, it is also possible that the author’s reply refers to the way women are represented in games. While “wanting to show off and be sexy” is entirely acceptable for a person wanting to act in that way, ashion forgets that in this case these characteristics are not given to a living person but to a character in a comic or a video game. The author’s reply seems to give the character some anthropomorphic abilities, while in reality the wants of such a character are entirely determined by the designers of the game or comic and the audience. This again suggests an ambiguity between fantasy and reality.

It has already been established that Vivian James represents an idealized vision of a woman playing games, in essence, a dream girl. This can be seen in the discussion of the Kiwifarms thread (Kiwifarms, 2016), where the writer of the first post describes Vivian James as their “waifu”. The term is a corrupted form of the word “wife”, but in addition to signifying a spouse, it also refers to a female character in a game, anime or cartoon, to which a person is attracted to (*Urban Dictionary: Waifu*, n.d.). Already in this meaning it is again visible that the distinction between fantasy and reality is unstable: a “waifu” is a character that cannot reciprocate any attractions or be a wife to human person. Similarly, the codified meaning that was a result of the resemiotizations presented in sections 6.1. and 6.2. is not adhered to. Later in the thread, the writer of the fourth post confesses to Vivian Being the writer’s waifu and the writer having a pillow of her. In the fifteenth comment, the issue of fantasy is raised directly with the poster writing: “>Your waifu will never be real.” (Kiwifarms, 2016, n. comment 15)

The participants’ troubles with the distinction between fantasy and reality show characteristics of spontaneous development of the character. However, at the same time, there is a marked tendency to actively control the character. In the material this is shown through the cartoon authors’ willingness to give explanations to their work. This feature is very apparent in the author kukuruyo’s work, who gives an explanation to the cartoons immediately below the panels and in the way the author writes a lengthy blog-type post documenting why the series “Gamergate Life” was created (kukuruyo, 2017).

As regards boundary work, the spontaneous evolution and deliberate control of the character Vivian James show the problems the activists face. It could be argued that if the Gamergaters wish to maintain Vivian James as their mascot, they would need to have clear, internalized functions for the character. However, they seem to be unable to maintain the deliberate functions of the character. Some of this may be attributed to the differing goals brought in by each participant. Taking this idea further, it may even be possible that there is no

particular wish to maintain any deliberate functions for the characters: If the view of Gamergate as an extension of the 4chan culture is accepted, this development can be seen as symptomatic of its mode of behaviour and the image board's discursive strategies. For example, on 4chan, the members on the one hand expect familiarity with the tropes inherent to the image board culture and at the same time they expect creativity and irreverence in contributions (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 488). This expectation may lead to resemiotizations that are not necessarily beneficial to the tropes in view of their original intention. While not to equate Gamergaters with 4chan, a built-in tendency in the image board culture can contribute toward problems maintaining control over Vivian's character - the control is constantly threatened by the spontaneity that is expected.

Of course, the way the character has developed is also symptomatic of the timeframe. The character was created in 2014 and the Kiwifarms forum thread started in 2016. Whether or not kukuruyo's habit of giving explanations is due to the objectivization the character has faced elsewhere, is impossible to establish within this study. Similarly, the inability to maintain control of the character cannot be seen as proof of the unsuccessfulness of Gamergate. However, it is representative of the lack of success in sustaining movement-maintaining activities in Gamergate, similar to what Buyukozturk et al. (2018, p. 14) found regarding Gamergate's activities on Reddit.

The way the creators of the cartoons either are not able or not willing to see their role in creating meaning for the character, also seems to suggest an inability to reflect on one's own actions. If this occurs on a more general level in Gamergate, this can be seen as a hindrance to the development of the movement: If the character is faced with new critical arguments and these arguments are shrugged off as unimportant, and if the Gamergate activists are not prepared to find new arguments against the criticism, this can lead to stagnation in the activism.

## 7 Discussion

In this study I have looked at cartoons that centre around Gamergate and how the characters are used in the boundary work performed by the proponents of Gamergate. This action contributes to the proponents' effort to define the boundaries of the movement, or what is regarded as "us" and "them". It was shown how the characters are used in the boundary work by giving the characters features that the Gamergaters saw as defining their movement and on the other hand their opponents. Vivian James can be seen as carrying both the characteristics of the Gamergate proponents and also the characteristics they wish a female gamer has. Lillian White was presented as a caricature of how the Gamergaters see their opponents. Simultaneously with representing these features, the characters are physically almost identical, bar their colour scheme.

Creation of the character was shown as an analytical group effort. It was also seen that the authors of the cartoons using the character seem to adhere to the rules initially attached to the character. However, this study also documents how the use of the characters evolved spontaneously. Scollon and Scollon (2004, p. 105) point out that discourses can go through multiple resemiotizations during their itinerary. However, because nexus analysis (and practically all analysis) by its nature is looking backward at events that are carried out before

they are reported on, the presentation of resemiotizations may seem to tell a teleological story. Concentrating on a bag of rice (Scollon, 2008) or on the design process of a mental hospital (Iedema, 2003) shows processes that result in physical monuments: a building or a packaging design on a bag of rice. While a sound choice pedagogically, this type of presentation may lead to believe that in a nexus analysis, the itineraries discourses face through resemiotizations should arrive at a certain goal. Considering the findings of this study, we could argue that the neatest point to end the analysis would have been to stop at the emergence of the character and the efforts of trying to authorize the use of the character. However, as was shown, the resemiotizations continued. This highlights to a certain extent the issue that in any given analysis, the presented itineraries also depend on the framing of the study.

The process of the story continuing past its seemingly logical conclusion may lead us to discuss another aspect of Gamergate. During this study it has been stressed that the culture of image boards and of Gamergate should not be equated. Considering this, it could be possible to argue that *for Gamergate*, the creation and authorization of Vivian James was a definitive process. However, *for the image board community*, this process could be interpreted only as a midway point during their efforts toward subversion (Gekker, 2018, p. 372). This can be seen to represent one of the reasons Gamergate was unable to sustain its movement maintaining activities (Buyukozturk et al., 2018). From the perspective of movement maintaining activities, the spontaneous development of the character, involving resemiotizations, can also be seen to contribute to confusion of the movement's initial goals. Because of the ever-present tendency towards subversion in the image board communities, the disintegration of the movement maintaining activities may also be seen as an implication of the practices within these kinds of communities.

Many other factors can contribute to the inability to maintain the community as well. A clear factor explaining this development is the timeframe: it was already established in this study that the activism regarding Gamergate reached its momentum in the autumn of 2014 and waned down considerably by the end of spring 2015. The material in this study extends to a much later date, for example "Gamergate Life" continues appearing today and the Kiwifarms discussion thread appeared in 2016. These facts do not affect the findings in this study negatively: they expressly document the developments presented in this study. Another, more noteworthy reason for these developments can be found through Gamergate's relationship with 4chan and 4chan's discursive strategies. It is widely established that much of the activism started from the image board, although it should be noted that Gamergaters were forced to move out of 4chan to a different venue due to their activities (Conway et al., 2019, p. 12). In addition, Gamergate as such should not be equated with image board culture, although it is heavily influenced by it. The way the character Vivian James was treated and eventually disintegrated, was influenced by the image board culture (Caron, 2016, p. 160) and their common practice of "shitposting", where the ultimate goal is to derail discussion (Evans, 2019). As Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) describe, the accepted way of posting on 4chan invites anarchical irreverence and originality simultaneously with strict adherence to expectations. (This, of course, is an unsolvable equation.) In addition to this, 4chan has no archival function, which leads to threads often being removed after only a few hours of existence. This, in its turn, causes a lack of history for the visitors of the platform (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 487). The anarchy and irreverence in



a community like this also suggests that in fact, above subversion, there are few long-term unifying goals in the activities of the community. Activities such as Gamergate may be maintained only as long as they are seen worth the “lulz” (or laughs). Bearing this in mind, it is no particular surprise that the original intentions reserved for the character evolved into more banal functions.

In terms of nexus analysis, this discussion of the characters contributes to the study of mediational means in that the characters can be seen as a cultural tools or objects. This text has concentrated on the portrayal of Vivian James, and to a lesser extent on Lillian White. During this, it was shown that the central issues involved in these portrayals are closely related to the wider issues of character portrayals in gaming, issues such as objectification and sexism. The characters used language and visual tools, although the platforms they were presented in favoured written linguistic talkbacks. The history of the character during the creation of the character was described through the activities on 4chan. The processes of resemiotization during the character’s development were discussed. Even though there was a wish to maintain the initial functions of the character, the character was altered in action through further resemiotizations. It was also shown that the lack of history on 4chan can contribute to the fact that the character is not entirely internalized by all participants.

As regards future research, it must be noted, that by forgetting that a character functions according to the wishes of the designers, the proponents of Gamergate seem to regard certain depictions of characters as “normal”. This can also be interpreted as a reflection of the tendency seen in some of the mainstream games publishers and their reluctance to introduce unfamiliar or even image-shattering characters. This stems from a business-centred understanding that drawing on past texts and depictions is also a way of mitigating financial risks involved in publishing games (Srauy, 2019, pp. 14–15). If conservatism is regarded as a wish to adhere to established norms and resist changes in them, this is very true in the case of Gamergaters. Zooming out to the method described in nexus analysis, this notion may point us to a further research avenue: a motive analysis for Gamergate is a logical step within nexus analysis to zoom in for further research.

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Received September 23, 2020  
Revision received January 11, 2021  
Accepted January 22, 2021