An assemblage of avatars
Digital organization as affective intensification in the GamerGate controversy

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Introduction: Meet Vivian James

In August 2014, a curious series of events led to the creation of Vivian James. This '…fictional everywoman of gaming […] wears a striped hoodie and drinks Mountain Dew Throwback. Her name is a play on "vidya games". She's a regular person who wears jeans and spends too much time on the internet' (Ringo, 2014). Vivian James, then, may seem like just another avatar, a figment of someone's imagination coming to life on digital platforms, but on closer examination things are not as straightforward as they seem. In particular, the origins of Vivian James are intricate and intriguing; the avatar was created by a group of purportedly anti-feminist gamers as a character for a game that would be developed through an all-female competition hosted by a self-avowedly feminist gaming collective (KnowYourMeme, n.d.). This makes Vivian James irreducibly polysemous; both a defence against accusations of misogyny in the gaming industry and a provocation of those advancing such charges. Contentious and contested, in a word, Vivian James is a tease.

Complex as the story of Vivian James may seem, it is only a small episode in the wildly sprouting controversy that has unfolded around, and takes its name from, the hashtag GamerGate. First used in the same month as Vivian James was developed, proponents of the hashtag claim to be speaking out against collusion and ethical misconduct in the gaming industry. Such 'pro-GamerGaters' purport to shed light on what they perceive as a scandalous conspiracy between certain (female) game developers and (male) gaming journalists who are accused of being in bed with each other,

literally and figuratively. This intimate relationship, users of the hashtag assert, leads to positive reviews of the involved developers' games, specifically, and rigid enforcement of a progressivist and politically correct tone in gaming, generally. Thereby, the culture of gaming and the identity of gamers are said to come under threat (Bokhari, 2015). Conversely, opponents of GamerGate say that the alleged concern with the politics and ethics of gaming is but a thin foil for misogyny and sexism. The accusation of collusion, 'anti-GamerGaters' say, is a cunning way of denigrating the few women who have made a place for themselves in the man's world of gaming; a strategy for excluding women – and other minority subjects – from the gaming industry (Sottek, 2014).

As the controversy developed in August and the remaining months of 2014, it took on a vitriolic tone with mutual accusations of harassment and well-documented examples of threats to the physical and psychological well-being of participants from both camps (Dewey, 2014). Interference with each other's online activities (hacking in various forms), publication of personal and/or sensitive information (so-called doxing) as well as threats of physical injury, rape, and murder were not uncommon forms of engagement. In this context, the sub-narrative of Vivian James exemplifies one of the more productive ways in which participants in the controversy used their advanced computer skills to 'get at' each other. What is more, the curious case of Vivian James provides an apt starting point for studying the digital intimacies of the culture and organization of gaming. Gamers are shifting from a relatively passive of role of consumers specific games towards active co-production of the field of gaming as such (Sokolova, 2012), thereby becoming more and more directly involved in the value production of the gaming industry. Thus, the controversy speaks to digital organization in several respects; first, and most obviously, the debate itself plays out in digital spaces; second, the main points of contestation have to do with the organization of the gaming industry and gaming culture; and, third, both pro- and anti-GamerGate groupings were

formed in the course of debate. The GamerGate controversy, then, was about digital organizing, it was digitally organized, and it produced digital organization.

Beginning from these observations, I will argue that developments such as those unfolding in the GamerGate controversy signal a broader shift in digital organizing: From relying on the free labour of participants (Beverungen et al., 2015) to being driven by processes of affective intensification. Here, I draw on affect theory as it is currently being developed and discussed within and across the fields of media studies and organization studies, respectively (see inter alia Dowling et al., 2007; Fotaki et al., 2017, Gregg, 2009; Karppi et al., 2016; Paasonen et al., 2015; Papacharissi, 2015). On the basis of a general review of this literature, I discuss the concepts of affective economies (Ahmed, 2004) and affective labour (Hardt, 1999) as these relate to the distinct mode of value production of the digital age (Fuchs and Fisher, 2015). Arguing that in processes of digital organizing, socio-economic value derives directly from the intensification of affect, the main contribution of this paper consists in the conceptualization of digital organization as the affectively charged assemblage of human and non-human actors.

To this end, I establish a conceptual framework for studying digital organization as *affective intensification* and apply it to the illustrative case of Vivian James' appearance within the GamerGate controversy. On this basis, I discuss the broader implications of digital organization, not only of specialized and/or contained settings like that of the gaming industry, but as a new form of social ordering, with its concomitant modes of valuation, making its mark on society at large.

The affective turn in organization and media studies

Just as in the social sciences and humanities more broadly (Clough, 2008; Hemmings, 2005;), the turn to affect in the fields of organization and media studies involves a reconsideration of the mind/body-duality. While the affective turn is not reducible to one specific trajectory (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010), affect theorists commonly reject the primacy of rationalization and, instead, focus on bodily sensations as these connect (to) thinking and action. In making this (re-)turn to the body, one influential group of scholars trace the lineage of their inspiration through the works of Deleuze and Guattari as well as of their English translator, Brian Massumi, back to Spinoza whose definition of affect as in- or decreasing the body's capacity to act is often invoked. Thus, Carnera (2012: 76) defines the affective turn for organization studies in Spinozian terms, referring '…as much to the body as to the mind', and within media studies Spinoza may be used to assert that '…to communicate is to affect and be affected by other bodies' (May, 2009: 204).

Within this strand of literature, a distinction between affect and emotions is established and maintained quite rigorously. Thus, affect is defined as transhuman intensity of feeling that is not reducible to clearly expressible human emotions (Thrift, 2004). Rather, affect arises before and beyond any linguistic denotation, let alone intentional communicative manipulation – it is outside human control (Massumi, 1995). Accepting affective intensity as an agential force has particular, and particularly important, consequences for media studies, which traditionally relies on a conceptualization of communication as the effective transmission of messages (McQuail and Windahl, 1993). With the affective turn, however, the field is challenged to reconsider its basic understanding of what it means to affect and be affected. In the words of Papacharissi (2015: 21), 'affect captures the intensity of drive or movement with a not yet developed sense of direction', meaning '…it fills the gap between content and effect' (Papacharissi, 2015: 16) with contingent and contentious forces of intensification. The challenge, here, is to develop a theory of communication that is non-representational in so far as affective effect derives form intensity, not direction (Thrift,

2008). That is, the challenge is to turn from symbolism to materialism (McGee, 2009; Packer and Wiley, 2012).

For organization studies, turning to affect may not be quite as radical a move. Rather, relational concerns with bodily and other sociomaterial dimensions of organizing are already familiar to those who have turned to practice (Gherardi, 2017). While not as directly challenging, or, perhaps more precisely, while addressing challenges that have already been identified within the field, the affective turn is no less important to organization studies as it posits desire as a – if not, indeed, *the* – central organizational drive (Kenny et al., 2011).

When turning to affect, then, intensity of feeling emerges as the driver of both communicative and organizational processes. That is, the intersubjective distribution of individually experienced intensities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 441) has the ability '…to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself mean[ing] that affect is itself a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as the factory' (Massumi, 1995: 106). While processes of affective intensification may seem immaterial (as will be discussed below), affect-itself is inherently material; it holds potential for value production 'without the mediation of meaning' (Clough et al., 2007: 62).

Affective economies – affective labour

The ability of affect to produce value – or 'an economic effect', in Massumi's words – has been taken up and discussed in various ways within both media and organization studies. Of particular relevance in the present context is how the notion of 'affective economies' has been used to explore communicative and organizational processes as the circulation of affect (Bjerg and Staunæs, 2011;

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Just, 2016). In affective economies, '…emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation' (Ahmed, 2004: 120).[1] Affective economies, then, are social orderings that are produced in and through affective transactions; the exchange of feeling in a social setting creates its own system of valuation and ordering, an economy.

Affective transactions are like economic exchanges in the sense that they involve '…relationships of difference and displacement without positive value' (Ahmed, 2004: 120); value is produced in and through the transaction, in the relation between the parties involved, and does not reside in that which is being exchanged. This ontology of difference facilitates a rapprochement between material and symbolic conceptualizations of communication; that is, the affective transaction does not hinge upon its material impact on the (human and non-human) bodies involved, but on the ability of material and/or symbolic entities, or affective signs, to circulate between such bodies, thereby generating and accumulating affect. Importantly, the value of affective signs does not reside in the signs themselves, but in the process of their circulation; it is established relative to other signs and, as such, may increase or depreciate as signs circulate (Chaput, 2010). Or as Ahmed (2004: 120) asserts, 'some signs […] increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to "contain" affect'.

Affective signs, then, are like commodities; their value is determined in the process of exchange. In her discussion of affective economies, however, Ahmed does not take Massumi's claim that affect produces economic effect literally. Instead, she builds her concept analogously; affective value accumulates in a manner that is similar to economic value, but it is not productive of economic

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[1] Note that Ahmed does not distinguish sharply between affect and emotions, a point to which I shall return.

value as such. Further, the analogy implies that affect is not in and of itself 'the drive to accumulate', but rather that which is 'accumulated over time' – it is the effect, not the cause, of social ordering (Ahmed, 2004: 120). This raises two questions: first, if we accept that affective economies do not generate economic value directly, what is the relationship between affective and economic systems of value production? Beyond the analogy, what is their exchange rate, as it were? Second, what drives the accumulation of affect if not, indeed, affect-itself? A desire for economic gain, perhaps?

The concept of affective labour, as introduced by feminist and Marxist scholars and developed within communication and organization studies (see inter alia Dowling et al., 2007; Gregg, 2009; Hardt and Negri, 2004; McRobbie, 2011), offers answers to both these questions. First, it highlights the direct relationship between affective and economic value; although some forms of affective labour, like house work and child care, have not traditionally featured within the circuits of economic value accumulation, producing intensities of feeling is a highly valuable form of labour in the 'attention economy' (Ash, 2012; Crogan and Kinsley, 2012). It is, as Hardt (1999: 90) notes, '…not only directly productive of capital but at the very pinnacle of the hierarchy of labouring forms'. Second, the concept of affective labour puts emphasis on the immaterial drive of affective intensification, turning our attention towards an economy of desire (Negri, 1999). This is not to say that affect-itself loses its materiality, but rather that the affective 'power to act', the ability to affect and be affected, is an increasingly autonomous source of labour value (Negri, 1999: 79-80). Thus, '…emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*' (Hochschild, 2012: 7, emphasis in original). Note, here, how emotional labour and affective labour are used more or less interchangeably as variations on the broader theme of immaterial labour; labour that produces feelings rather than things. That is, the concept of affective labour brings the relationships between

corporeal experiences of affect and the immaterial processes by which such experiences come about to the fore.

The affective economy of digital organization

Nowhere is the production of and capitalization on feeling more intense than in the organization of digital labour (Burston et al., 2010; Scholz, 2012). Here, processes of affective intensification and economic value production merge, producing a system of affective capitalism (Karppi et al., 2016) that may be understood as the literal parallel to Ahmed's affective economies. Thus, the affective investments of everyone involved in digital organization – whether as users of social media platforms, players of video games or participants in online debates, to name but three pertinent examples – are directly capitalized; their affective labour is the main source of economic value. Whether conceptualized as prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), produsage (Bruns, 2008), co-creative labour (Banks and Deuze, 2009), playbour (Beverungen et al., 2015) or some variation thereof, what is at stake here is the breakdown of traditional categories of production and consumption as well as work and leisure. Here, economic value can be produced by all participants and extracted from all forms of participation (Fuchs and Fischer, 2015).

When focusing on the affective dimension of digital organization, it is important to note that digital circulation of intensities of feeling is no less real than its analogue antecedents; to the contrary, the digital and the analogue are inextricably interwoven 'technologies of feeling' (Sundén, 2015), and the embodied effect of virtual affect is what connects these two modalities (Paasonen et al., 2015). One particular, and particularly pertinent, aspect of the corporeality of digital affectivity is how it is gendered and gendering. Thus, numerous studies have shown that the affective flows of digital

organization affect male and female bodies differently and are differently affected by actors perceived to be male or female (Duffy, 2015; Harvey and Fisher, 2015; Jarrett, 2015), just as queer and trans embodiments are specifically affected and affective (Raun, 2016; Sundén and Svenningsson, 2012).

The example of the affective effects on and of gender, once again, alerts us to the interrelations of the material and the symbolic, reconfirming that theories of affective labour and affective economies provide cogent accounts of the affective forces of digital organization, showing how affective circulation both works *like* the economy and is, itself, productive of economic value. What these theories do less well, however, is to account for the relationship between affect and emotions. In conceptualizing affective economies, Ahmed does not distinguish sharply between affect and emotion, meaning she does not posit affect as a social force. To her, affect is dynamic in the sense that its (emotional/economic) value may change over time, but it does so as the result of circulation – and this result is nameable in both its tonality (for instance, joy vs sorrow) and intensity (e.g. mild pleasure vs exuberant happiness). Similarly, the concept of affective labour is usually placed alongside emotion work as a form of immaterial labour, meaning the ability of immaterial processes to produce economic value (and other material effects) is highlighted, whereas the particular role of affect in these processes remains underspecified. Thus, both theories underplay the labour performed and value accrued by affect-itself.

Taking the Spinozian theory of affect seriously, however, involves a sharp distinction between affect and emotion. If affect is to be theorized as the main driver of value production, it cannot be specified in or as specific emotions. Rather, affect must remain abstract; an intensifying but itself indeterminable force of social ordering. In a similar vein, Beyes and De Cock (2017) propose a study of 'the affective constitution of organization', understood as '…a field of impersonal and pre-

cognitive forces that take hold of and shape what humans can do' (Beyes and De Cock, 2017: 66). Seeking to contribute to this line of research, I will establish a conceptual framework for studying the affective constitution of digital organization as the process by which agencies are grouped together in digital networks to create assemblages; that is, as affective instensification. The networked character of digital technologies, I will argue, is a key affordance that enables agencies to form assemblages and assemblages to become agential, and I suggest that affective intensification is the force that runs through and enables this process of digital organizing.

Conceptual framework: Digital organization as affective intensification

Affect, then, is an organizing force, sparking processes of intensified and intensifying circulation in and through which value is acquired and accumulated. Understood thus, affective signs need not refer to anything but themselves, and affective circulation is a potentially autonomous process. It may produce certain emotional and/or economic outcomes, but the process of circulation is not dependent on, nor does it end with, such outcomes; instead, it invests in and is invested by itself (Massumi, 2014).

Deleuze and Guattari explain the process of affectively charged organizing as the creation of assemblages. Defined as '…an ad hoc grouping of diverse elements' (Bennett, 2010: 23), '…multiple and diverse collections of objects, practices and desires…' (Wise, 2012: 159) or '…an intermingling and arrangement of heterogeneous elements' (Slack, 2012: 144), the concept of assemblage 'resists the dualism of the material and immaterial and suggests a conception of communication that attends to the conditions of possibility within which these interminglings occur and are affective' (Slack, 2012: 144). Further, the concept includes both the product and the process

of assemblage, the organization and its organizing; as such, 'assemblages are *real features of social organisation* that necessarily displace the subjects and its objects in empirical analysis of this organisation' (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017: 423, emphasis in original).

Gulbrandsen and Just (2016) offer a framework for such displaced analysis by combining the notion of assemblage with those of affordance and agency. Here, affordance is defined as the facilitation of and invitation to certain human behaviour by the nonhuman (e.g. technological) participants in the assemblage (Withagen et al., 2012). In digital organization, 'networks are the virtual links – that is, the potential articulations and ties – that connect subjects to assemblages' (Wiley et al., 2012). Thus, the invitation to relate, to form networks, is the key affordance of digital organization. Agency, as conceptualized in this context, is not to be understood as individual human actors' ability to act, but is, instead, linked to affect-itself. Thus, assemblages are agential, both conducive to and the result of specific uptakes of their agential potential, and specific uptakes, in turn, are neither entirely voluntary nor completely determined contributions to assemblages on the part of individual (human and nonhuman) participants (Miller, 2007; Just and Berg, 2016). In their original model, Gulbrandsen and Just do not explicate the role of affect, but it can be directly inserted as the force running through and connecting assemblages and agencies by means of affordances, thus adding a fourth A of affect to the conceptual framework, thereby explaining dynamics of digital organization as processes of affective intensification (see figure 1).

[Insert figure 1 about here]

Figure 1: 4As for digital organization as affective intensification (adapted from Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016: 329)

Applying conceptual framework to empirical processes of digital organization raises two methodological questions: one about the collection of relevant data, the other concerning analytical operationalization. Recent studies of the interrelations of organization and technology alert us to the extent to which processes of affective intensification are now beyond human control (see inter alia Clough et al., 2015; Fox and Alldred; 2015; Müller, 2015). In particular, social media sites and similar platforms lend themselves to nonhuman affectivity (and, hence, agency) – not because what goes on in the virtual environments of digital organization is any less real than what happens in so-called real life, but quite to the contrary because such environments appear to be more open to the organizing force of affective intensification (Blackman, 2016).

Any study of digital organization should focus on the organizing role of technologies (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008), but online controversies are particular hotbeds for affective intensification (Paasonen, 2015) and, therefore, particularly apt testing grounds for the study of how affect mounts in processes of socio-technical assemblage. This points to the issue of where and how to collect data, how to follow the affective intensification of a controversy, but the multifarious, dynamic, and fragmented character of today's mediascape immediately complicates the separation of the process of data collection from that of analysis. In consequence, establishing the object of analysis constitutes the first step of the analytical process (McGee, 1990).

That is, because the affective intensification of digital organization does not have easily identifiable temporal markers of beginnings and ends nor readily observable spatial boundaries, it does not present itself straightforwardly for investigation (Gulbrandsen and Just, 2011). Rather, analysis of affective intensities and intensifications must begin by tracing the affective circulation to be studied, not just as a matter of description, but as an active process of identifying the various fragments that are connected by this affective current or force. Thereby, an assemblage appears, not

as a 'mere' reflection of a pre-existing empirical reality, but as a result of the researcher's involvement with this reality (Fox and Alldred, 2015). In sum, the first step in the study of the affective constitution of digital organization is to put together the object of analysis. Thus, the analysis does not observe an already existing assemblage, but actively weaves various affectively charged fragments together by establishing the exteriority of their relations (DeLanda, 2006: 253).

What is at stake in this first step is the delineation of a particular affective interface between the human and the nonhuman (Ash, 2015: 23-24). This involves recognizing that '…methodological sensitivity is not an entirely human affair' (Blackman, 2015: 25), but requires human as well as nonhuman 'eyes and ears'. Thus, studying digital assemblages involves sifting through the debris of the internet, so to speak, moving from platform to platform, user to user, post to post so as to connect elements that emerge from Google searches with bits that appear by following links from article to article or can be excavated from delving into threads on Internet Relay Chats (IRCs), discussion boards, and image sharing sites also including those items that may be scavenged from comments sections on social media or from following patterns of posts and re-posts, etc., etc. Each of these strategies for data collection are digitally aided, offering '…the possibility of following each thread of interaction and showing how social life is woven together by their assemblage' (Venturini and Latour, 2010: 90).

In searching through and piecing together these various digital elements, we may distinguish between the arrangement and the direction of affective intensification, between the assemblage as a whole and the agencies involved. Given the undetermined and indeterminable force of affect, the ability of affect to act independently of its emotional specificity, the question of who acts and how to make sense of the actions, is a central analytical concern (Just et al., 2017). Here, two analytical distinctions may enable the analysis of digital assemblages: First, the process of realizing the

affective potential to organize may be distinguished from the available technological affordances on which this process is conditioned. Thus, we can identify the potential to act as invited by the available affordances from the specific acts that form the assemblage as the potentiality and realization of digital organization, respectively. Second, and to better understand the dynamics of potentiality and realization, we may distinguish between technological affectivity and human emotionality.[2] The former refers to the non-directed potentiality of affect as mediated by the available affordances and the latter to its actualization and, hence, the expression of particular agencies. Thereby, the distinction between affect and emotion is not only maintained but operationalized analytically to enable the study of technological affectivity and human emotionality as co-constitutive dynamics – the cause and effect of intensities of feeling. Technological affectivity, on the one hand, invites human emotion without determining how an individual will experience and express the felt intensity. Human emotionality, as experienced and expressed by individual participants in the assemblage, on the other hand, is not only the specific uptake of technological invitations, but also the driver of further affective intensification.

In this sense, the affective constitution of digital organization is a communicative process (Kuhn et al., 2017) in which participants continuously seek to shape the involved affective signs and steer their circulations so as to produce value; that is, to harness affective intensities towards desired (emotional and economic) outcomes. Any such outcome, however, is as Chaput (2010: 8) suggests, 'not an isolated instance or even a series of instances but a circulation of exchanges, the whole of which govern our individual and collective decisions.' Here, technologies of affective circulation carry an impact of their own, not as agentic per se, but as the affordances of action (Hutchby, 2001).

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[2] Hipfl (2018) makes a similar distinction between 'affects expressed by media', mediated intensities of feeling, and 'affections', human experiences of and agential uptakes of mediated affect.

The involved technologies are not only transmitters of human emotions, but also productive of intensities of feeling and must be studied as such. Thus, the second step in the analysis is to consider the facilitation of and invitation to certain human behaviour by the nonhuman (e.g. technological) participants in the assemblage.

Third, while human emotionality is never free of technological affectivity, nor is it entirely beyond the agential reach of individuals. Instead, it may be linked to particular expressions of feeling, to conscious attempts to sway other human participants and to push the process of circulation in one direction or the other. As the third analytical step, we may study such specific expressions as agential contributions to an assemblage that are both produced by and productive of the affective intensities of that assemblage.

In sum, the offered framework for studying digital organization as affective intensification consists of three-steps: First, constructing the assemblage to be studied; second, investigating the affordances offered in and through the technologies involved in the assemblage; and, third, examining the agencies emerging from the various uptakes of the afforded options. This analysis, as will now be illustrated through the case of GamerGate, may form the basis for discussing how signifiers of technological affectivity and signified human emotionality coalesce in processes of affective intensification.

Analysis: Affective intensification of the GamerGate controversy

The GamerGate controversy involves at least three distinct yet highly interdependent issues: 1) the politics and ethics of gaming journalism and criticism as e.g. expressed in reviews of games, 2) the culture of gaming and the identity of gamers, and 3) the tonality and temperament of the debate.

The ultimate aim of what follows is to uncover how these three issues evolved and were entangled in the course of the controversy so as to understand its assemblage; that is, how order and value were produced in and through the circulation of affective signs as the cause *and* effect of the process of circulation. This issue will be raised and developed in the discussion section below, but first the analysis will be conducted in accordance with the three-step framework as presented above, focusing on the role played by Vivian James, the avatar.

Assemblage of GamerGate

The GamerGate controversy centres upon the twitter hashtag from which it takes its name, but groups together a much wider set of objects, practices, and desires. As mentioned, studying assemblages always involves the researcher as an active participant in the process of identifying and relating various elements; thus, the following is a presentation of the GamerGate assemblage as I have pieced it together around Vivian James.[3]

The hashtag was introduced in August 2014 in response to alleged collusion within the gaming industry; the accusation being that some game developers and gaming journalists were in bed with each other, literally and figuratively, leading to favourable media coverage of the games in question. Accusations of unethical journalistic practices in the gaming industry were not new, but the sexual innuendo was intensified with the publication of the so-called 'Zoe Post' in which a

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[3] An assemblage focusing on, for instance, Zoë Quinn and/or her harassers would be very different from the one constructed here; it would involve other agencies and, perhaps, affordances. And, importantly, it would be a much darker arrangement of people doing horrible things to each other by technological means. See Quinn (2017) for an account of the affective assemblage of GamerGate as she experienced it; I will be making occasional references to this (partisan) testimony where relevant to my positioning of Vivian James within the broader assemblage.

former boyfriend of the game developer Zoë Quinn strongly insinuated that Quinn had exchanged sex for good reviews (Valentini, 2017).[4] People who were already angry at Quinn and likeminded feminist voices such as game developer Brianna Wu and media critic Anita Sarkeesian seized the opportunity to weigh down upon them, using all available practices of online harassment to vent their anger (del Castillo, 2015). While some people doubled down to make Quinn's life miserable, the public use of #GamerGate was linked to broader claims to be speaking up against excessive 'political correctness' and 'progressivism' within the industry. Pro-GamerGaters argued that they were engaged in a culture war to defend the values and identity of 'the gamer' against the onslaught of outsiders who wrongly perceived gaming to be socially exclusive (Costello, 2014).

Critics of the hashtag, however, associated it with 'misogyny and sexism', arguing that users of #GamerGate were only raising issues of journalistic ethics as a legitimizing front for their real agenda of keeping women out of the gaming industry and restricting their appearance in games to highly stereotypical and denigrating roles (Sanghani, 2014). These critics linked the users of the hashtag directly to harassment of women who had participated in the debate on gaming culture and/or contributed to the diversification of the gaming industry, claiming that the specific onslaught on Quinn and other feminist gamers and the general argument about protecting the gaming culture were really two sides of the same coin. While both pro-GamerGaters and commentators seeking to disentangle the many threads of the conflict sought to divide the 'real' issues of GamerGate from the harassment of some of its most vocal critics, anti-GamerGaters argued that the two were inextricably linked (Gertz, 2014). This connection, even if not always traceable to the level of individuals and, therefore, debatable, is a central feature of the GamerGate assemblage: discussion

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[4] One of the reasons for focusing on the (sub-)assemblage of Vivian James is that it allows me to steer clear of the intimacies and traumas of individual human lives. Therefore, this section refers to secondary sources – journalistic pieces or (meta-)commentaries – rather than partisan contributions to or positions within the general GamerGate controversy.

of politics and ethics ran as an official or 'overground' version in which arguments could be laid out openly for mutual scrutiny while an undertow of slurs and vitriol was constantly pulling at the process from below (Braithwaite, 2016).

Into these murky waters, Vivian James was born as the brainchild of several discussion boards of the 4chan image-sharing website.[5] Here, supporters of GamerGate conceived of the plan to sponsor an all-woman game design contest hosted by the gaming collective The Fine Young Capitalists (TFYC). TFYC had received negative publicity on the event after being criticized by Quinn for having a non-inclusive policy on transgender people and for not paying participants (Caccese, 2017; Halleck,[6] n.d.). This meant the event had become attractive to the pro-GamerGaters of 4chan, as a way of spiting Quinn and as a means of, in the words of one of the participants in the initial conversation, making them 'PR untouchable'. For days, 4chan users were the top-contributors to TFYC's Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign, and then participants in the /v/ (for video games) board embraced the idea of raising further funds in return for the option of having a character of their choosing inserted into the winning game of the event (Melendez, 2014; Riobux,[7] 2014).

Vivian James, then, was not only crowdfunded by, but also crowdsourced among /v/ members (see figure 2). Whether this makes the avatar 'an entirely ordinary, non-idealized female role model' proving that GamerGate supporters are not women-hating anti-feminists (Bokhari, 2014) or 'a

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[5] As I focus on the assemblage of Vivian James, more references to partisan sources will be included. However, I seek to clearly mark the positions expressed and to provide alternatives where relevant and possible. In particular, I provide context for anonymous and/or non-journalistic sources.

[6] Gurney Halleck is a fictional character from the *Dune* universe and, hence, an alias for the author of this particular chronicle of GamerGate, which is decidedly pro-GamerGate, but goes to considerable lengths to provide detail, documentation, and nuance.

[7] Like Halleck, Riobux is an alias; the position they express in this piece is quite nuanced, focusing on the politics of 4chan's PR-move and the pros and cons of (dis-)continuing a crowdfunding campaign when subject to take-over (as in the case of TFYC's campaign being flooded with funds for more or less ulterior purposes).

character masquerading as a feminist icon for the express purpose of spiting feminists' (Ringo, 2014) remains a contentious issue. An issue that has spurred heavy circulation of various Vivian James images, numerous contributions to the storyline/biography of the avatar as well as the appearance of a proliferating set of friends and relatives, all designed to defend or offend one or another of the many positions in the debate.[8]

In sum, Vivian James is an assemblage, bringing together such elements as a game design contest, an image sharing board, and an Indiegogo campaign as well as practices of ambiguous online activism (users of 4chan have a history of trolling for 'lulz' and similar ephemeral practices; McDonald, 2015), fan art as well as other, more generic, digital affordances like those offered by Twitter. This process is charged by intense but un- or underarticulated feelings looking for direction and purpose, which found an outlet as well as a source of further intensification in the creation of Vivian James.

[Insert figure 2 about here]

Figure 2: TFYC's presentation of Vivian James on Twitter

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[8] For an overview, albeit one that favours the pro-GamerGate side, see the reddit board KotakuInAction, which is dedicated to GamerGate and, among many other things, features elaborate introductions to the collection of characters that has been developed around Vivian James, each representing a fictionalized version a main position/actor group of the controversy: https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/4c1num/misc_an_introduction_to_vivian_james_her_family/. For an academic analysis of the 'identity politics' of Vivian James, see Apperly and Butt (2016).

Affordances of GamerGate

The GamerGate controversy encompasses more than a million tweets as well as fervent discussions in IRCs and on image and message boards; there are a multitude of posts on personal blogs and professional websites; the GamerGate Wikipedia entry has been revised more than 5,500 times by almost 500 contributors; searching Google for 'GamerGate' generates 1.280.000 results;[9] the controversy was the subject of heavy 'meta-coverage' in which commentators from various specialist and mainstream media explain the issues and intricacies to engaged readerships and bemused publics; it has produced countless memes, cartoons, and YouTube videos.[10] Thus, GamerGate is a highly interwoven, yet wildly proliferating assemblage of human and non-human actors, making use of all available digital affordances.

First and foremost, the affective intensification of GamerGate is networked (Paasonen et al, 2015); digital technologies offer opportunities for connecting and distributing through sharing, linking, liking, commenting, etc., meaning they provide an infrastructure for flows of feeling. The overall affordance of the digital network is characterized, more specifically, by affordances of persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability (boyd, 2011). Applying these affordances to GamerGate, we see that, first, the many contributions to the controversy remain available after things have calmed down, not only as a public archive of what went on, but also as re-ignitable kindle that may fuel future disputes. Second, contributions can be copied wholesale or mixed and matched in(de)terminably. Third, the process is highly visible and spreadable to audiences on a potentially

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[9] Combining the search terms of GamerGate and Vivian James reduces the results to 37.900, indicating that Vivian James is, indeed, a central node in one sub-assemblage of the controversy.
[10] In this section, I turn from piecing together the specific sources and contributions to the question of the affordances that invited these forms of participation. In the following section, I turn to detailing how these invitations were taken up, thus detailing the relationship between agencies and assemblage as mediated by the available affordances.

global scale. And fourth, anyone can find information about and/or gain access to the process through the gateway of search engines.

The GamerGate controversy also makes use of and is shaped by the affordances of digitalization, broadly speaking: it is negotiable and uncontrolled, it is time-space free, hypertextual, and hyper-public two-way mass communication (Gulbrandsen and Just, 2011). That is, although the bulk of contributions were made in the span of a few months in the fall of 2014 and while most of the participants were physically located in the US, the controversy had its own here and now. It was created by the participants in and through their creation and sharing of content – sometimes of a very personal nature and against the will of the persons involved. And yet the identities of individual contributors were often hard to discern and just as often specific contributions only became relevant as a result of their uptake and further distribution. Even when an originary source can be identified – e.g. the first use of #GamerGate can be traced back to a tweet by the actor Adam Baldwin on 27 August 2014 – the subsequent circulation is more significant than the first instance. Tensions of anonymity and exposure, then, profoundly shaped GamerGate's intensities of feeling.

Uncontrollable and unpredictable as these intensities and intensifications may be, centripetal forces are also at work (Gulbrandsen and Just, 2013). At the very eye of the swerving and swirling dynamic of GamerGate is the integration of online and offline realities. First noticed in relation to MUDs (multi-user dimensions) and MMOGs (massive multiplayer online games) (Dibbel, 1993), the ability of words uttered and deeds done online to impact on participants' physical and emotional well-being has received wide popular and growing scholarly attention (see inter alia Virtanen, 2013; Hmielowski et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2017). Having grown up online, gamers of today should be more aware of the affective powers of digital circulation than anyone else. Gamers, we might assume, will be especially sensitive to the real effects of virtual actions. Nonetheless, participants in

21

the GamerGate controversy neither showed reserve in terms of the vitriolic tone of the debate (threats and abuses) nor restraint regarding forced access to and public circulation of personally identifiable information (hacking and doxing). Instead, they used the full range of available technological affordances to exert their human agencies on each other, assembling GamerGate in the process.

More specifically, the assemblage of GamerGate is significantly shaped by a memetic logic (Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2012); meaning, it is open to imitation and circulation, repetition and change (Varis and Blommaert, 2015) as the introduction and spread of Vivian James perfectly illustrates. Images of Vivian James are mostly circulated on image/message boards, but can be transported to other social and digital media as well as avatars, generally, lend themselves to sharing and manipulation. Thus, Vivian James was soon transported from the initial pro-GamerGate context into other settings and appropriated by the opposition, but just as soon as the avatar was made to speak up against GamerGate was it re-enlisted by pro-GamerGaters. Besides this specific and direct use in the controversy, Vivian James took on a number of other forms and usages. For instance, the avatar became the protagonist of a cartoon and a proliferation of other forms of fan art, even the object of considerable sexual attention (see figure 3). Albeit born and bred in the context of GamerGate, Vivian James has taken on a virtual life replete with affective intensities of its own.

[Insert figure 3 about here]

Figure 3: Vivian James as an object of (sexualized) fan art

It is in this sense that the circulation of signs related to the controversy produced intensities of feeling beyond, but not independently of the emotional involvement of the participating actors. First, participants became more and more invested in the process, thereby intensifying the

circulation as well as their own stake in it. Second, affective intensities were built in and through the process, but had the potential to affect individuals beyond their participation in it. Quite simply, the higher the emotional stakes, the greater the risk; as the affective involvement of participants intensified, so did their potential gains and losses. These dynamics not only organized the controversy, but led to an increasing reflexivity within it; to a concern among participants as to who should be allowed to partake in the controversy and who were entitled to profit from it. That is, to an explicit discussion of the involved agencies.

Agencies of GamerGate

Specifically, this concern was expressed in the question of who could rightly be said to speak for whom and, relatedly, who had the right to define GamerGate – and to harness the agential potential of the assemblage. Thus, affirmative users of the hashtag not only claimed to be defending the gaming culture against the onslaught of progressivist politics, but also maintained that critics of gaming were tending to individual economic interests rather than to collective political interests of underrepresented and/or marginalized groups, thus using motives of social justice for personal gains (see figure 4).[11]

[insert figure 4 about here]

Figure 4: GamerGate as a source of income for its critics

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[11] In this section, reference is made to clearly partisan contributions, but I refrain from quoting directly abusive or hateful comments. As indicated, one point of focusing on Vivian James was to be able to stay clear of the nether regions of GamerGate while studying the affective constitution of the controversy. I hope to have succeeded in this regard.

Anti-GamerGaters, to the contrary, maintained that the issue of ethics in games journalism was only raised as a means of diverting attention from real and pressing problems of exclusion of minority individuals from the gaming industry; 'it's a mob aimed not just at killing critical thought, but which is mad crazy with the idea that critical thought is happening somewhere, about something' (Gera, 2014). Thus, the critics of GamerGate saw the hashtag as but a thin foil for misogyny and sexism, a pretty overlay for the deplorable practices of a rotten culture (Hathaway, 2014).

Specifically, the agency and motives of Vivian James, the avatar, were called into question; she was called out for being but a sock puppet of her makers and, hence, an unreliable witness whose contributions to the controversy could not be trusted (see figure 5).[12]

[insert figure 5 about here]

Figure 5: Vivian James as a foil for sexism

In a further twist, the term 'social justice warrior' (or SJW) was employed to ridicule those claiming to fight for cultural change in gaming (for an academic account of the SJW meme, see Massanari and Chess, 2018). Here, the hashtag #notyourshield was used by some minority (gender, race and/or sexual orientation) individuals to indicate that they resisted representation by such SJWs and, instead, identified with and felt included within the current culture of gaming (Michael, 2015) (see figure 6). Such contributors spoke up as 'real-life Vivian Jameses', claiming this position to be actual and valid – and deserving of not only a voice, but of agency to shape the controversy and the wider organization of gaming.

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[12] While I have generally avoided gendering Vivian James, at this point it seems relevant to use the pronouns 'she/her' as it is the (in)ability of the avatar to represent female gamers that is being discussed.

[insert figure 6 about here]

Figure 6: Expression of support for GamerGate from a minority position

The mutual accusations and tendencies to speculate about the motives of others rather than to lay out one's own position combined with the density of the circulation, replete with intertextual hints and ironic twists, are all signs of a highly stylized communicative community. A community in which mimicry and parody are figures of choice and in which ridicule and shame are preferred control mechanisms, but in which it is not always clear who is on which side of a debate and from where a particular statement emanates (for analysis of similar tendencies in different online controversies, see Sundén and Paasonen, 2018).

Ultimately, Vivian James and the SJW cousin Lilian Woods (one of the cast of fictional characters added to the GamerGate gallery) could wind up bedding each other (see figure 7). That is, as the process of mutual accusation continued, it became increasingly unclear what the discussion was all about – or rather, the positions became entangled to a point of near-indiscernibility. However, the very indeterminacy of the contributions, their potential to mean anything for anybody, is exactly what allowed for their continued circulation and, hence, intensification. The agential positions became increasingly muddled, but the technological affectivity spurred the controversy on, thereby shaping the assemblage and enabling it to continue exerting its affective force on the individuals involved as well as to put pressure on the broader assemblages of the industry and culture of gaming.

[insert figure 7 about here]

Figure 7: Lilian Woods and Vivian James make up

In sum, the iterations, imitations, and innovations of Vivian James all contributed to the intensification of feeling in the GamerGate controversy – and the affective circulation was immediately capitalized. Not only did TFYC raise money for its event because of how it tapped into the GamerGate controversy, the character of Vivian James was born out of the same affective energy – and the creation spurred further intensities on either side of the controversy, fuelling the continued circulation of the involved signs and the concomitant intensification of their affective value. Quinn (2017: 62) summarizes this matter: 'You can make a career from online abuse'. Further, flows of money followed the flows of affect with, for instance, Intel first withdrawing its advertising from a game developer site because of a pro-GamerGate e-mail campaign, then reinstating its advertising as the major industry players largely took the side of anti-GamerGaters (Douglas, 2014; Levy, 2014). Thus, GamerGate is an instantiation of how, in digital organization, emotional and economic investments are becoming increasingly entangled in and through processes of affective intensification.

Concluding discussion: The affective constitution of digital organization

Focusing on the interrelations of affordances and agencies in the assemblage of the GamerGate controversy reveals dynamics of affective intensification in which both pro- and anti-GamerGaters are equally implicated: first, each camp rallies around opposition to the other, forming allegiances based on a shared 'Other' rather than a common identity; second, their online mobilization has offline effects, adding injury to insult, as it were; third, each new contribution further intensifies the circulation, heightening the capacity to act of the assemblage as a whole beyond that of any individual contributor. These features are not unique to GamerGate, but have been observed in the rise of the alt-right (Nagle, 2017) as well as in efforts to resist it (Just and Muhr, 2018), indicating

more general tendencies of how affective intensification works to constitute digital organization. In fact, the events of GamerGate have been linked directly to the rise of the alt-right and, by extension, the election of Donald Trump (Lees, 2016; Bezio, 2018; Massanari and Chess, 2018). What is at stake here may be the detrimental entry into mainstream digital publics of socio-cultural norms and organizational practices that have hitherto been confined to the extremes of online subculture (Massanari, 2017; Mortensen, 2016; Nagle, 2017).

In focusing on Vivian James, however, traces of more productive engagement have also been found; the assemblage of Vivian James is both more creative and constructive than the controversy at large. It may also be said to be a more playful or, perhaps, less serious version of the controversy. Using avatars as stand-ins for competing positions arguably defuses or side-steps the important issues involved, but it could also be a means of engaging with these issues in a less hurtful format, of bringing participants with different vested interests into the same conversation without harassing each other. Rather than using so-called sock puppet accounts to flood comments sections with slurs and inboxes with vitriol, digital avatars, because they *are* sock puppets, can be used to play out the drama in a fictionalized space, one in which affective intensification will not cause as much emotional distress, and one in which the direction of the affective forces may shift.

In digital controversies '…success derives from a better understanding of differently situated positions and an enhanced ability to engage differently situated people, processes that open dialogues rather than win debates' (Chaput, 2010: 19). When judged by this criterion, the assemblage of Vivian James is far from ideal, but it does indicate a possibility for opening up a

space for different voices and new engagements; offering hope that the affective forces at work may slowly be turned in more positive directions.

In making these analytical points, the study advances the conceptualization of affective organizing in two respects: first, it shows that affective value production may be directly capitalized. Beyond Ahmed's analogy of affective economies, the circulation of affective signs both intensifies feeling and provides opportunities for economic value production. In the GamerGate controversy affective signs were not only exchanged for emotional response, but also for economic gain. Second, it shows that the affective labour of such value production is, indeed, not 'an entirely human affair'. While emotional responses may (still) be particular to human actors, digital technologies participate actively in processes of affective intensification.

Thus, affect is, increasingly, an autonomous force and continues to enhance its 'power of self-valorization' (Negri, 1999: 80), but even as this force frees itself from the traditional means of value production it continues to exert very real and material effects on the subjects involved. This has, as the case of GamerGate clearly shows, particular ramifications for the gendered and gendering performances of various participants. Put simply, the labour of female participants in affective economies is often more emotionally taxing and less economically rewarding than that of male counterparts. While other studies have attended fully to the gendered dynamics of this affective intensification (threatened masculinity lashing out at perceived threats from women and queers, see Humphreys, 2017; Marwick and Caplan, 2017; Massanari, 2017), I have been more concerned with the abstract forces that work on and through everyone involved. As Quinn (2017: 180) writes in her memoir of GamerGate: '…I've never seen a single instance where the people instigating abuse […] thought they were the "bad guys." There is always a righteous undertone'. Beyond the question of the individual troll or the particular victim, I hope to have shown how affective intensification

works on either side of a controversy to increase the level of conflict and perpetuate the process – to the emotional distress of some, the economic advantage of others, and for many, quite possibly, both.

The increasing autonomy of affective intensification has specific implications for digital organization, understood as a particular form of the affective constitution of organization. Digital organization, I have suggested, is best understood as assemblage; as the process in and through which the affordances of digital networks hold agential potential, the actualization of which is both constitutive of and constituted by the assemblage. Here, the potentiality of assemblage and the particular instantiation of it, the process and product of digital organization, coalesce in affective intensification. Each contribution to the assemblage is enabled affectively and, in turn, adds to the affective intensity of the assemblage. As such processes gain momentum, they also gain autonomy, meaning both emotional and economic value become increasingly derivative of affective intensification – for better and worse.

Conceptualizing (digital) organization as assemblage has been criticized for not offering enough critical potential (Rossiter and Zehle, 2014). As the analysis has hopefully shown, the framework does, indeed, find its strength in describing current arrangements and explaining their dynamics. Description and explanation, however, do not necessarily preclude critique; to the contrary, they may be its prerequisites. Specifically, focusing on affect as capacity to act not only facilitates our understanding of current actions, but also provides opportunities for seeing '…lines of flight that offer an escape from organizational-life-as-normal' (Beyes and De Cock 2017: 66); it directs us to what bodies can do with and for each other (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2015). We cannot escape affective intensification, but we can make it work *for* us to re-assemble digital organization so as to

make social arrangements more liveable and emotional-economic value production more sustainable.

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