

The Gamification of Conspiracy: QAnon as Alternate Reality Game

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ABSTRACT:

This article takes a ludological approach to QAnon and investigates the conspiracy phenomenon as an Alternate Reality Game. Drawing extensively on media reportage of QAnon and reviewing its discussion in the domains of digital culture, media scholarship and game studies, connections between the QAnon conspiracy movement and digital game rhetorics in far-right online spaces are highlighted, with attention to the notions of Gamification and Dark Play. Exploring the intersection of digital game cultures, online conspiracy movements and political extremism, this paper invites scholarly attention to various aspects of QAnon from the fields of games studies and play studies. With the QAnon phenomenon highlighting the significant political impact and import of games culture, this paper shows that the field of ludology has much to offer a range of researchers in interpreting the motivations and meanings of the online communities from which QAnon emerged.

KEY WORDS:

alt-right, alternate reality games, conspiracy, dark play, game studies, post truth, QAnon.

Introduction

QAnon emerged in 2017 as an internet conspiracy theory that evolved into a political movement that attracted many on the American right. Revealing the game mechanics and modes of play that propel QAnon's rise, popularity and engagement, this paper argues that QAnon began as an Alternate Reality Game, and that its playability accounts for some of its affective appeal. As others have already outlined, not only does QAnon resemble an Alternate Reality Game, but the phenomenon both exhibits and invites numerous of modes of ludic interaction, such as Live Action Role Play, Cruel Play, and Dark Play. Through reviews of the existent literature and digital ethnography into internet spaces, this paper seeks to highlight the correspondences between QAnon, Alternate Reality Games, and other elements of online games vernacular and calls for future research into the socio-political impact of participatory conspiracies, far-right politics, and the elements of games and play found within them.

A key question that arises in exploring the emergence and development of QAnon is intentionality. Was it constructed as a political movement, or did it evolve to become one? Lacking certainty as to who authored the Q posts, intentions cannot be accurately divined. However, in analysing the structure and mechanics of QAnon, this paper will outline how it represents a powerful instance of 'gamification', defined as: "using game design elements in non-gaming contexts".¹ The process of gamification often involves applying points systems, levels, and progress bars to non-game activities, but can also comprise implementing ludic narratives, player experiences of flow, or progression to make non-game scenarios appear game-like. The resulting effect should ideally see players navigate through gamified content unhindered by a lack of skill or knowledge. The goal of gamification is to reframe an otherwise uninteresting cause, product, or experience into the affective register of games, thereby rendering it more appealing to a user, thus,

¹ DETERDING, S. et al.: Gamification: Using Game-Design Elements in Non-Gaming Contexts. In TAN, D. (ed.): *CHI EA '11: CHI '11 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. New York, NY : ACM, 2011, p. 2425.

inspiring their engagement. In the case of QAnon, the purpose of gamification is to attract and radicalize potential supporters, to challenge progressive ideologies and institutions, and to normalise far-right conspiracies into mainstream political discourse.² As such, QAnon might stand as a vivid example of what N. Mahnič has termed 'gamified politics' as a cure for political disenchantment and alienation.³

In the growing body of research seeking to understand QAnon, the phenomenon has been studied through multiple and varied academic perspectives. These include QAnon's role in the spread of disinformation,⁴ its popularity amongst religious groups,⁵ its likeness to a cult,⁶ its evolution into a political campaign,⁷ its significant risks as an online hate community,⁸ a tool for radicalisation,⁹ and a terrorist threat.¹⁰ Indeed, much of the literature concerning QAnon explores the toxicity of the movement and the malicious forces propelling it. With that ground well covered, this body of research instead gives focus to its ludic dimensions with particular attention to its origins and status as an Alternate Reality Game, hereafter ARG's. By taking a ludic approach to QAnon, we can trace the game mechanics and playful practices propelling its toxic sentiments, cultures, and actions, and understand how these elements can be projected into broader culture both off and online.

Methodology

Both QAnon and ARGs originate in online spaces. This fieldwork recognises online domains as social, political and cultural spaces¹¹ in which virtual identities are formed,¹² and meaningful communities are constructed, often with a sense of purpose and belonging.¹³ Following in the methodological footsteps of A. Markham, this body

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- 2 DE ZEEUW, D. et al.: Tracing Normification. In *First Monday*, 2020, Vol. 25, No. 11. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i11.10643>>.
 - 3 For more information, see: MAHNIČ, N.: Gamification of Politics: Start a New Game. In *Teorija in Praksa*, 2014, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 143-161.
 - 4 HANNAH, M.: QAnon and the Information Dark Age. In *First Monday*, 2021, Vol. 26, No. 2. [online]. [2021-08-06]. Available at: <<https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i2.10868>>.
 - 5 PRINISKI, J. H., McCLAY, M., HOLYOAK, K. J.: Rise of QAnon: A Mental Model of Good and Evil Stews in an Echochamber. In FITCH, T. et al. (eds.): *Proceedings of the 43rd Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society: Comparative Cognition–Animal Minds*. Vienna : Vienna Cognitive Science Hub, 2021, p. 1757-1758.
 - 6 ROTHSCCHILD, M.: *The Storm Is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything*. London : Octopus, 2021, p. 60.
 - 7 MARGULIES, B.: *Even If It Wanted to, the Republican Party Can't Stop the Spread of QAnon Conspiracies and Candidates which Support Them*. Released on 8th October 2020. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2020/10/08/even-if-it-wanted-to-the-republican-party-cant-stop-the-spread-of-qanon-conspiracies-and-candidates-which-support-them/>>; ANWAR, A. et al.: Analyzing QAnon on Twitter in Context of US Elections 2020: Analysis of User Messages and Profiles Using VADER and BERT Topic Modeling. In LEE, J., PEREIRA, G. V., HWANG, S. (eds.): *DG.O'21: DG.O2021: The 22nd Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research*. New York, NY : ACM, p. 82.
 - 8 See also: BLOOM, M., MOSKALENKO, S.: *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon*. Bloomington, IN : Stanford University Press, 2021.
 - 9 For more information, see: BELLAICHE, J.: QAnon: A Rising Threat to Democracy?. In *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 2021, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 162-167.; CRAWFORD, B., KEEN, F.: The Hanau Terrorist Attack: How Race Hate and Conspiracy Theories Are Fueling Global Far-Right Violence. In *CTC Sentinel*, 2020, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 1-8.
 - 10 DICKSON, E. J.: *The FBI Declared QAnon a Domestic Terrorism Threat — and Conspiracy Theorists Are Psyched*. Released on 2nd August 2019. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/qanon-domestic-terrorism-threat-conspiracy-theory-866288/>>.
 - 11 See: MARKHAM, A.: *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*. Lanham, MD : AltaMira, 1998.
 - 12 For example, see: TURKLE, S.: *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York, NY : Touchstone, 1997.
 - 13 JONES, S., KUCKER, S.: Computer, the Internet and Virtual Cultures. In LULL, J. (ed.): *Culture in the Internet Communication Age*. London : Routledge, 2001, p. 216.

of research approaches the internet as both a research tool and a site of fieldwork.¹⁴ In exploring the diverse communities that participate in ARGs and QAnon, I do so with the understanding that not all participants of either recognise the nature or motivations of the gamified experiences that they engage with. These often-immersive experiences deliberately hide their ludic status and seek to blur distinctions between reality and fiction. The very ontology of these phenomena is shifting and uncertain.

QAnon is inherently nebulous. It forms and reforms, evolving and adapting according to the desires of its makers and participants. Like a Rorschach blot, what one perceives when viewing QAnon reveals more about the viewer than the thing itself. As observed by M. Rothschild in his study of QAnon, "Cult experts tend to see Q as a cult. Game experts tend to see Q as a game. Cybersecurity experts tend to see Q as a cybersecurity issue. But Q believers see it as a plan to save the world".¹⁵ Not surprisingly, as a games researcher working at the intersection of games, politics, and religion, I cannot help but to approach the complexity of QAnon through a ludic lens. However, I argue this approach is crucial to correctly fathom QAnon's origins, tactics, complexity, and popularity. The mechanical architectures of games and subversive practices of play offer a crucial theoretical framework to understand how conspiracy games like QAnon move from the margins to the mainstream.

This research project began in 2018. Identifying similarities between QAnon and ARGs at that time, I began reviewing QAnon literature and participant comments online. This included Q drops and their interpretation, discussion of QAnon on Twitter and Facebook, the reportage of QAnon in numerous media outlets, and the gradual emergence of academic scholarship into the QAnon phenomenon. My findings are based upon these online texts, and are supported by scholarship in Game Studies with attention to ARGs, gamification, participatory cultures, and dark play. Additionally, I drew on the body of research in the field of Media Studies, Religious Studies, Social and Political Theory, and Conspiracy Culture exploring QAnon in term of online harassment, alt-right politics, terrorism and hate speech. As a result, much of what follows appears as a review of the existent literature.

It must be said at the outset, this paper is not unique in comparing QAnon to ARGs. Numerous media articles, commentators, and game designers cited within have already made this comparison. Yet, there has been atmosphere of reticence to reduce the seriousness of QAnon as being game-like, or as somehow playful. In popular discourse, both play and games are frequently framed as purely childhood activities, enjoyable pastimes, and practices of social, emotional, and physical fulfilment. In uncritically focusing on these aspects alone, the darker sides of play are overlooked.¹⁶ As A. Trammell has reflected, play is not always consensual or constructive – it can equally take on tyrannical and traumatic dimensions.¹⁷ Play is neither inherently good nor bad.

Conversely, there also exists a media tendency to demonise digital games and the cultures that surround them. Such perspectives prove deeply unhelpful as they scapegoat digital games with false generalisations while failing to deal with the real issues at hand. The individuals and communities that engage with digital games are vast and diverse.

14 MARKHAM, A.: Internet Communication as a Tool for Qualitative Research. In SILVERMAN, D. (ed.): *Qualitative research: Theory, Methods, and Practice*. London : SAGE Publishing, 2004, p. 95-119.

15 ROTHSCHILD, M.: *The Storm Is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything*. London : Octopus, 2021, p. 185.

16 For more information, see: OSGOOD, J., SAKR, M., DE RIJKE, V.: Dark Play in Digital Playscapes. In *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 2017, Vol. 18, No. 2, p. 109-113.; GRIESHABER, S., McARDLE, F.: *The Trouble with Play*. Maidenhead : Open University Press, 2010.

17 TRAMMELL, A.: Torture, Play, and the Black Experience. In *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, 2020, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 36.

To equate games or their players as either inherently positive or negative is to misunderstand them altogether. There are few totalising things that can be said about games and play, other than that the people who engage in them knowingly and willingly, tend to enjoy doing so.

Whether announced or otherwise, people who engage in conspiracy theories also tend to enjoy doing so. Conspiracies draw on the taboo, the arcane and the occult, often reframing repugnant concepts and poisonous ideologies into mysteries that pique the psyche. Conspiracy fantasies along the lines that powerful elites control governments and the population through high finance and technological manipulation have enjoyed popular appeal for centuries. In numerous cases, such conspiracies been revealed as more than theories alone. Both conspiracies and games tend to bleed into reality. The affective dimensions of these two compelling activities are found at the heart of QAnon.

QAnon

QAnon is a conspiracy theory and political movement. Centred in the US but with proponents internationally, QAnon followers interpret the cryptic online forum messages of an anonymous poster known as 'Q'. Q claims knowledge of a secret cabal of powerful paedophiles and Satanic sex traffickers embedded in the highest levels of global governance. The Q posts began appearing in the 4chan forum in 2017, an online niche renowned for offensive content, but by 2019 the gamified conspiracy had evolved into mainstream internet discourse, leading to increasing numbers of people wholly believing in Q's claims, and their incredulity ultimately ballooned into a real-world political movement in the US and elsewhere. The implausibility of the QAnon conspiracy narrative, and the ease with which it could be disproven did not prevent millions from falling beneath its spell. As such, the QAnon phenomenon presents an instance of a mass delusion worthy of study.

Uniquely, QAnon is not a single conspiracy theory but rather a vast and elaborate mosaic of conspiracy theories. It presents an instance of what M. Barkun has defined as a "super-conspiracy theory"¹⁸ into which a rich spectrum of past, present, and emerging conspiracy theories, and their followers, can be conveniently folded. QAnon draws generously from traditional conspiracy tropes but also remains inclusive of novel paranoid fantasies that have flourished within internet culture.¹⁹ The internet provides a wide variety of epistemic sources and alternate knowledge claims allowing the suspicions of individuals to be confirmed, and outlandish interpretations to "welded into Grand Unified Theories of Everything".²⁰ QAnon summons, shapes and emboldens this sense of agency, entreating its exponents to "Do The Research" – thereby tailoring the meanings of the QAnon conspiracy theory for oneself. In this way, participation in QAnon closely resembles the co-creative engagement of an ARG.

18 BARKUN, M.: *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley, CA : University of California Press, 2006, p. 100.

19 CHIA, A. et al.: "Everything is Connected": Networked Conspiratorship in New Age Media. In CLARK, L. S. et al. (eds.): *AoIR, The 22nd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers*. Chicago, IL : AoIR, 2021, p. 7-8. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://spir.aoir.org/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/12093/10485>>.

20 KNIGHT, P.: *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2000, p. 204.

Alternate Reality Games

ARG's are a form of immersive internet-based mystery that invite online research, narrative speculation, community building, and collective problem-solving.²¹ Originating in early online culture at the turn of the millennium, and utilising the real world as a platform, ARG involve clues, puzzles, narrative elements, and opportunities for play across the internet as well as across everyday media and locations.²² ARGs are essentially epic scale story puzzles that take advantage of the distributed, networked and community building capabilities of the internet.²³ Media theorist H. Jenkins describes ARGs as "stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world".²⁴ For both ARGs and QAnon, the internet serves as the "central binding medium" providing both the technological platform and connective thinking from which each have grown.²⁵ Straddling offline and online spaces, both ARGs and QAnon appear all encompassing, unsettling distinctions between reality and fiction. As explored by ARG pioneer D. Szulborski, one of the central goals of an ARG is to disguise the fact that it is a game at all.²⁶ The aim is to provoke in the player a state of epistemological uncertainty in which reality itself falls into question. In this way, QAnon and ARGs both operate on the same affective register.

The experience of playing an ARG is highly immersive. Play typically begins with the discovery of an interesting or unusual clue (an online video or an out-of-place image, object or text) that invites investigation and leads to further clues and connections.²⁷ In the established terminology of ARGs, these initial connective elements are known as 'trail-heads' or 'rabbit holes'.²⁸ Individuals who go down one of these 'rabbit holes' and enter the game world, proceed by following 'breadcrumbs', (morsels of narrative) or by discovering 'dead drops', (hidden caches of information). By excavating clues and working to uncover the ludic narrative, participants inevitably encounter fellow players caught on the same journey of discovery. Working together, they form communities to solve the puzzles they encounter.

ARGs favour collective and collaborative detective work to progress through the story, each participant contributing with their own skills and expertise.²⁹ These skills might include programming, translation, or esoteric knowledge but may also involve more subjective aptitudes such as speculation, interpretation and 'apophenia' also called 'patternicity' – the intuitive tendency to find meaningful patterns in random noise, often where no patterns exist whatsoever.³⁰ As noted by H. Davies and V. Dziekan, these "paranoid

21 ÖRNEBRING, H.: Alternate Reality Gaming and Convergence Culture: The Case of Alias. In *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2007, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 445.

22 DAVIES, H.: Towards an Ethics of Alternate Reality Games. In *Digital Studies/le Champ Numérique*, 2017, Vol. 6, No. 3. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://www.digitalstudies.org/article/id/7306/>>.

23 Ibidem.

24 JENKINS, H.: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY : New York University Press, 2006, p. 95.

25 HARING, P. S.: *How Alternate Reality Gaming Changes Reality*. [Master Thesis]. Amsterdam : Vrije University Amsterdam, 2011, p. 13. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <http://www.priscillaharing.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/How-ARG-changes-reality_Masterthesis_Priscilla_Haring.pdf>.

26 SZULBORSKI, D.: *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*. New York, NY : New-Fiction Publishing, 2005, p. 1-16.

27 For more information, see: VEALE, K.: *Gaming the Dynamics of Online Harassment*. Cham : Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

28 SZULBORSKI, D.: *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*. New York, NY : New-Fiction Publishing, 2005, p. 47-56.

29 VEALE, K.: *Gaming the Dynamics of Online Harassment*. Cham : Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 50.

30 SHERMER, M.: *Patternicity: Finding Meaningful Patterns in Meaningless Noise*. Released on 1st December 2008. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/patternicity-finding-meaningful-patterns/>>.

hermeneutics are integral to the enigmatic quality of ARGs".³¹ Players are encouraged to embrace coincidence to such a degree that any serendipitous occurrence can be being interpreted as part of the game. Along similar lines, M. Montola et al. suggest that "players become paranoid, suspecting that everything relates to a game".³² Thus, while ARGs encourage discovery, meaning-making and epiphany, these games also intentionally dissolve the line between reality and fiction such that game and quotidian reality become indistinguishable. This is precisely how a phenomenon like QAnon can have begun as a game and then spun out of epistemological control.

Clearly, there are inherent dangers of such liminal play. To ameliorate this, ARGs incorporate a kind of safety guard to let players know that what they are experiencing is a game.³³ This is achieved through a rhetorical disavowal known as the TINAG rhetoric, whereby, through the course of play, the game will announce 'This Is Not a Game' (TINAG). This meta-communicative double-speak signals to experienced ARG players 'this *is* actually a game' without breaking camouflage and thereby highlighting the playfully subversive tone.³⁴ Although ARG's deliberately seek to conceal or disguise the frame of the game, they generally do so to immerse players, not to deceive them. This is the very purpose of the TINAG rhetoric. It represents a good faith relationship between ARG makers and players that has stood for past two decades.³⁵ Such declarations were also repeatedly made by the online poster known as Q:

"Everything has meaning.
This is not a game.
Learn to play the game."³⁶

But the TINAG rhetorical disavowal is not universally recognised. Situations arise whereby externalised participants, spectators and others without the knowledge or context of ARGs, misrecognise the fictional nature of the game taking place. As a result, in-game elements inevitably become mistaken with actual reality, a situation known as "Dark Play" whereby "intentional confusion or concealment of the frame 'this is play'"³⁷ leaves some players unaware that they are participating in a game.³⁸ Dark Play revels in deception and malice echoing what B. Sutton-Smith has previously termed 'cruel play', such as

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- 31 DAVIES, H., DZIEKAN, V.: Paranoia at Play: The Darkest Puzzle and the Elegant Turbulence of Alternate Reality Games. In SCOTT, J. (ed.): *Transdiscourse 2*. Berlin, Boston, MA : De Gruyter, 2016, p. 205.
 - 32 MONTOLA, M., STENROS, J., WAERN, A.: *Pervasive Games Theory and Design*. Burlington, MA : CRC Press, 2009, p. 123.
 - 33 DAVIES, H.: Towards an Ethics of Alternate Reality Games. In *Digital Studies/le Champ Numérique*. 2017, Vol. 6, No. 3. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://www.digitalstudies.org/article/id/7306/>>.
 - 34 For more information, see: MCGONIGAL, J.: 'This Is Not a Game': Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play. In MILES, A. (ed.): *MelbourneDAC : 5th International Digital Arts & Culture Conference*. Melbourne : RMIT University, 2003, p. 3-4. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://janemcgonigal.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/mcgonigal-jane-this-is-not-a-game.pdf>>.
 - 35 JANES, S.: *Alternate Reality Games: Promotion and Participatory Culture*. Abingdon, New York, NY : Routledge, 2019, p. 16.
 - 36 Remark by the author: The journalist collective Bellingcat has catalogued all of the almost 5000 Qdrops. The stated declaration was a response to a thread no. 592934. See: *Q Research Board*. Released on 9th March 2018. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://archive.ph/mTxf>>.
 - 37 SCHECHNER, R.: *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*. London, New York, NY : Routledge, 1993, p. 38.
 - 38 For more information, see: MONTOLA, M.: *On the Edge of the Magic Circle: Understanding Role-Playing and Pervasive Games*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Tampere : University of Tampere, 2012. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://trepo.tuni.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/66937/978-951-44-8864-1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>; STENROS, J.: In Defence of a Magic Circle: Understanding Role-Playing and Pervasive Games. In KOSKIMAA, R., SUOMINEN, J. (eds.): *DiGRA Nordic '12: Proceedings of 2012 International DiGRA Nordic Conference*. Tampere : DiGRA, 2012, p. 1-19. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/12168.43543.pdf>>; LINDEROTH, J., MORTENSEN, T. E.: *Dark Play: The Aesthetics of Controversial Playfulness*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2015.

the playful taunts of a bully.³⁹ Within Dark Play, deceived nonplayers become “essential for the playing to continue”.⁴⁰ These modes of non-consensual and pernicious play create a safe space for abusers to operate while allowing them to fall back on the alibi of ‘I was just playing’. Although these malicious forms of play have not been the historical domain of ARGs, more recently K. Veale has given sustained attention to how “alternate reality games and online harassment...overlap in the way their communities learn both social and technological ‘rules,’ in order to manipulate them as part of ‘playing the game’”.⁴¹ Following K. Veale, QAnon appears to be an instance of dark play within a malicious ARG.

Political Game

ARGs have existed for over twenty years and have been used to promote ideas, products and services, or have existed purely for art or entertainment.⁴² The specific type of ARG that QAnon presents is unique. While the Q-drops and the narrative fragments they deliver may have begun as an ARG, the experience and its player following appears to have been hijacked for political ends. Berkowitz remarks that the QAnon movement that swept across the United States and elsewhere is almost pure political propaganda⁴³ and is “[n]either advertising a product, an art project, or an exercise in entertainment”. Instead, according to Berkowitz, QAnon constitutes a deliberately crafted experience designed to play on existing discontents and to further lead people “to distrust mainstream media, politicians, and medicine, including COVID-19 vaccination campaigns. It also leads them to antisemitic and racist beliefs”.⁴⁴ D. Morrison furthers this point showing that QAnon’s fervent promotion of a political candidate in Donald Trump renders it “functionally indistinguishable from a professional campaign”.⁴⁵ D. Morrison draws focus to the “curious specificity” of QAnon’s policy agenda – of “attacking the Global Engagement Center – a new body devoted to fighting Russian meddling in elections” and its partially successful goal of convincing millions of people that Donald Trump is “quite literally God’s Gift”.⁴⁶

QAnon’s support of Trump is not simply literal and tactical, but conceptual and strategic. More than lionising Trump in its conspiracy narrative, the social, cultural, and political polarization that QAnon creates, ultimately works in his favour becoming precisely the kind of subversive parapolitics that it purports to oppose. These insights have led some to regard QAnon as entirely political propaganda, a Trump cult, or an attempt to erode democracy. Conspirituality researcher M. Remski casts doubt on the idea that Q is a structured propaganda campaign from any single individual or agency, but instead is “much more akin to a very large, online, ARG with ever morphing rules, objective, and tactics”.⁴⁷

39 See also: SUTTON-SMITH, B.: *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1997.

40 SCHECHNER, R.: *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*. London, New York, NY : Routledge, 1993, p. 38.

41 VEALE, K.: *Gaming the Dynamics of Online Harassment*. Cham : Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 70.

42 JANES, S.: *Alternate Reality Games: Promotion and Participatory Culture*. Abingdon, New York, NY : Routledge, 2019, p. 25-27.

43 BERKOWITZ, R.: *A Game Designer’s Analysis of QAnon. Playing with reality*. Released on 30th September 2020. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://medium.com/curiouserstitute/a-game-designers-analysis-of-qanon-580972548be5>>.

44 Ibidem.

45 MORRISON, D.: *Memetic Warfare: The Gamification of Conspiracy Theories, How the Targeted Propaganda of QAnon Weaponised COVID-19*. Released on 24th November 2020. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://bylinetimes.com/2020/11/24/memetic-warfare-how-the-targeted-propaganda-of-qanon-weaponised-covid-19/>>.

46 Ibidem.

47 BERES, D. et al.: *55: Games Against Humanity (W/C. Thi Nguyen)*. Released on 10th June 2021. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://conspirituality.net/philosophy/55-games-against-humanity-w-c-thi-nguyen/>>.

Likewise, writer K. Daly observes that QAnon echoes multiple immersive game genres, combining them to become an “all-encompassing” and “highly addictive experience”.⁴⁸ G. Boucher speculates QAnon to be a “crowd sourced conspiracy montage”, one that strongly resembles an online fan community, an ARG or a LARP.⁴⁹ It seems likely, as speculated in the C. Hoback documentary *Q: Into the Storm*⁵⁰, that the phenomenon was repeatedly hijacked by multiple individuals at various times, each shaping the games narrative to their own interests and purposes.

In this way, and as proposed at the outset this paper, it is likely that QAnon may simultaneously be many different things at once: a political campaign, a religious cult, a community, and a game. Its inherent malleability serves to fulfil a variety of purposes and needs. While some appear to be interacting with QAnon with an ironic disposition of play, others appear earnest. Complicating matters further, intents change, becoming sincere, ironic and interchangeable, depending on knowledge and setting. As discussed, and unpacked below, it appears likely that QAnon began as an irreverent game within a reactionary context but was then mistaken for and ultimately shaped into an actual political movement. This argument is made based on the far-right context from which QAnon emerged, but with attention to how the phenomenon evolved to become amorphous and co-creative, offering many different things to many different people.

The Pre-History of QAnon

The context from which QAnon emerged is crucial. As previous scholarship has extensively explored, QAnon, broadly speaking, grew out of the *Gamergate* movement of 2014.⁵¹ Gamergate was a conspiracy theory among a community of predominantly white male digital gamers fearing that a progressive agenda had hijacked digital-gaming culture. This conspiracy theory was in fact true in so much as the pre-2010 discourse of digital game marketing that predominantly targeted white males had become disrupted. Increasingly, diverse players demographics became recognised as major consumer demographics of digital-gaming culture and the industry moved to cater to them. Recognising this shift, many white male gamers felt marginalised from consumer choices they believed were theirs alone. Some of these individuals reacted violently against the diversification of game markets and culture, and what they perceived as the growing ‘political correctness’ of digital games.⁵² As articulated by S. Gomez, this reaction “marked the declaration of the online culture wars and the radicalisation of white men against what they perceive as a threat to the apolitical experience of their “just-for-fun” games”.⁵³

Throughout 2014, Gamergate festered across the internet, deploying a spectrum of assaults from playful rhetoric’s to extreme tactics. Virtual threats became actualised

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- 48 DALY, K.: *How Qanon Works Like a Video Game to Hook People*. Released on 18th August 2020. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://www.axios.com/2020/08/18/qanon-video-game>>.
- 49 SHARPE, M. et al.: *(Con)spirituality Colloquium – Keynote Panel 5: Conspiracy, QAnon and the Far Right, Part 1*. Released on 9th April 2021. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qozrAXdiUOY>>.
- 50 HOBACK, C. (Director): *Q: Into the Storm (series)*. [VOD]. Los Angeles : HBO Max, 2021.
- 51 KAMOLA, I.: QAnon and the Digital Lumpenproletariat. In *New Political Science*, 2021, Vol. 43, No. 2, p. 232-233.; MENDOZA III, F. G.: The End of the World According to Q. In *PANDION: The Osprey Journal of Research and Ideas*, 2021, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 6-8.
- 52 RICHARDSON, I., HJORTH, L., DAVIES, H.: *Understanding Games and Games Culture*. London : SAGE Publishing, 2021, p. 59-60.
- 53 GOMEZ, S.: It Was All Fun and Games: Gamifying Behavioural Control. In RAMBUKKANA, N. (ed.): *Intersectional Automations: Robotics, AI, Algorithms, and Equity*. London : Lexington Books, 2021, p. 66.

leading to violence in the real-world.⁵⁴ Ultimately, those assembled beneath the hashtag Gamergate were expelled from numerous online spaces including 4chan. Those who identified as 'Gamergaters' took refuge within the anonymous and unregulated digital enclaves of 4chan and 8chan.

The 4chan site from which later 8chan evolved was already notorious for its gallows humour, grotesque content, and bigoted memes. The reactionary diaspora on 8chan took 4chan's ghoulish irreverence to a new level. Celebrations of racism and extremist incitements to violence were the currency of exchange. The journalist collective Bellingcat has mapped the toxicity of 4chan and 8chan,⁵⁵ while Tuters has emphasised their role in shaping QAnon's xenophobic themes and conspiracy rhetoric. T. Thibault explores the semiotic cultures of 4chan and 8chan where every interaction "is oriented to jokes, irony, or complicity", yet the subtext is seldom made explicit.⁵⁶ Instead, complicity is taken for granted, rendering the irony or humour impossible for an external viewer or participant to correctly interpret. Within 4chan or 8chan, any comment or concept is, by-default, demarcated as ironic or 'in-game'.

The most outlandish behaviours on both 4chan and 8chan took place in the pol/, forums, short for 'politically incorrect'. Renowned for their white supremacist, misogynistic, paedophilic and transphobic content,⁵⁷ but also for its use of digital game vernacular, the pol/ forums cultivated darkly playful, and conspiracy infused politics. The cultural and political contours of QAnon were fully incubated on /pol/ well before Q began posting.⁵⁸

4Chan ARGs and the Emergence of Q

Q was not the first ARG to appear on 4chan. Throughout 2016 and 2017, several similar games featuring secret government officials leaking secrets appeared on the /pol/ message board. These ARGs, now widely understood as precursors to QAnon included *HighlevelAnon*, *FBI-Anon*, *CIA-Anon*, *Meganon*, and *White House Insider Anon*,⁵⁹ each operating as prototypes for the QAnon ARG to come. As ARG designer J. Stewardson attests, those engaging with these precursor QAnon experiences knew they weren't real, but they were fun to interact with. When in October 2017, a series of posts appeared on 4chan under the ominous username 'Q', it was clear to the community that QAnon was another

54 KIM, A.: *Gamifying Terror—the Alt-Right's Video Game Infiltration*. Released on 25th February 2021. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<http://uchicagogate.com/articles/2021/2/25/gamifying-terror-alt-rights-video-game-infiltration/>>.

55 *The Making of QAnon: A Crowdsourced Conspiracy*. Released on 7th January 2021. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2021/01/07/the-making-of-qanon-a-crowdsourced-conspiracy/>>.

56 THIBAUT, T.: Trolls, Hackers, Anons Conspiracy Theories in the Peripheries of the Web. In LEONE, M. (ed.): *Lexia. Rivista di semiotica, 23–24 Complotto*. Turin: University of Turin, 2016, p. 392.

57 For more information, see: BAELE, S., BRACE, L., COAN, T.: Variations on a Theme? Comparing 4chan, 8kun, and Other chans' Far-Right "/pol/" Boards. In *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2021, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 65-80.

58 *The Making of QAnon: A Crowdsourced Conspiracy*. Released on 7th January 2021. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2021/01/07/the-making-of-qanon-a-crowdsourced-conspiracy/>>.

59 BEENE, S., GREER, K.: A Call to Action for Librarians: Countering Conspiracy Theories in the Age of QAnon. In *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 2021, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 1. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346970558_A_Call_to_action_for_librarians_Countering_conspiracy_theories_in_the_age_of_QAnon>; ZADROZNY, B., COLLINS, B.: *How Three Conspiracy Theorists Took 'Q' and Sparked Qanon*. Released on 14th August 2018. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-n900531>>.

conspiracy ARG within the forum. As with previous 'Anon-style' games, it featured a White House insider offering high level information leaks, but this time with 'Q level security clearance' providing a name for the game.⁶⁰

The secretive government agent named 'Q' posted to the /pol board providing enigmatic narrative elements in a clipped prose that provided more questions than answers thereby provoking participation and interpretation. According to the game narrative, 'Q' worked directly with US president Donald Trump in a battle against deep state Satan-worshipping paedophiles that had overtaken the government.⁶¹ Q promoted the idea that ordinary people 'Doing The Research' would result in a 'Great Awakening', a collective enlightenment about the corruption of existing power systems. This enlightenment would fuel 'a Storm' – a day of reckoning that would lead to mass arrests and the total overthrow of corrupt governments and deep state elites. For the first month of its existence, QAnon remained just another unremarkable game in the 'Anon' genre upon the 4chan boards.

This remained the case until November 2017, when two 4chan moderators – taking Q at its word to bring about a "Great Awakening" – reached out to YouTube influencers in a deliberate and co-ordinated effort to promote QAnon to a much larger audience.⁶² Taking advantage of QAnons "game-like quality", over the next several months, they would work to make QAnon more "user-friendly", setting up a series of videos, a Reddit community, a detailed cosmology and even a lucrative business based on the 4chan posts of 'Q'.⁶³ QAnon was extensively discussed and promoted through already successful online venues and began filtering through Facebook networks where older users – lacking the frame-of-reference and the subcultural literacy to comprehend the phenomenon's game-ness – took it as real. QAnon had broken out of its game space.

Over the first six months of 2018, QAnon exploded in popularity. Q Reddit Boards gathered 30,000 members,⁶⁴ most of which had no idea of Q as part of an elaborate internet game. Reddit soon closed the Q message boards owing to incitements of violence that were posted, but the QAnon game had already transitioned to mainstream internet spaces such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, infecting pre-existing groups and good faith operators with its lurid conspiracies passed off as fact. J. Klein has uncovered how makers and players from the ARG community were also being channelled into QAnon spaces⁶⁵ suggesting that not all participants were unaware of its status as a game. M. Tuters posits that the intention behind popularising and mainstreaming QAnon was twofold: it cleansed the racist, misogynist, or otherwise bigoted QAnon content associated from its 4chan origins, while also bringing a new audience of "normies" into extreme right online venues and agendas.

60 Remark by the author: 'Q Clearance' is actually a Department of Energy term and has no relation to security clearance in the White House.

61 ZADROZNY, B., COLLINS, B.: *How Three Conspiracy Theorists Took 'Q' and Sparked Qanon*. Released on 14th August 2018. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-n900531>>; DE ZEEUW, D. et al.: Tracing Normification. In *First Monday*, 2020, Vol. 25, No. 11. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i11.10643>>.

62 ZADROZNY, B., COLLINS, B.: *How Three Conspiracy Theorists Took 'Q' and Sparked Qanon*. Released on 14th August 2018. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-n900531>>.

63 Ibidem.

64 BEENE, S., GREER, K.: A Call to Action for Librarians: Countering Conspiracy Theories in the Age of QAnon. In *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 2021, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 1. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346970558_A_Call_to_action_for_librarians_Countering_conspiracy_theories_in_the_age_of_QAnon>.

65 KLEIN, J.: *How This Obscure, Blockchain-Based Site Built a Playground for QAnon to Run Rampant on*. Released on 28th October 2021. [online]. [2021-10-28]. Available at: <<https://www.dailydot.com/debug/qanon-steemit/>>.

M. Tuters meticulously charts the appearance of the Q drops that began on 4chan, transitioned to 8chan,⁶⁶ then, following the revocation of 8chan's hosting due to the site's association with the 2019 Christchurch mass shooting, began appearing on 8chan's successor 8kun.⁶⁷ However, by this stage, most QAnon followers were not adhering to the Q drops, but instead were following different versions of the Q narrative as formed and reformed by various so-called 'bakers' – QAnon evangelists, interpreters and players that decoded the innuendo of the Q drops for consumption by a mass audience. Each of these bakers, through their subjective interpretation of the Q drops, becomes a co-creator of the QAnon plot, as well as a promotor through disseminating their messages across thousands of Q podcasts and YouTube channels.⁶⁸

By 2019, the efforts of QAnon evangelists to push the game narrative were no longer needed. Recommendation engines of social media algorithms were doing it for them. Millions of people had become caught-up in the lure and momentum of the internet juggernaut that QAnon had come to represent. Online QAnon communities surged with discussions as to which Hollywood actors, business magnates, medical experts, and democratic politicians lived sinister double lives as satanic paedophiles.

Alternate Realities and Political Games

QAnon is not the first instance of a 4chan conspiracy fiction spilling into reality. The incident known as 'Pizzagate', a key thematic precursor to QAnon, represents another well-known example. Pizzagate is a conspiracy theory that emerged in the lead-up to Donald Trump's 2016 election win. The debunked theory originating in 4chan alleged involvement of high-level democrats in a child sex and smuggling ring from the basement of a pizza restaurant. To those familiar with 4chan culture, Pizzagate was always recognised as a joke.⁶⁹ It would have remained as such had it not escaped its 4chan context to be swallowed whole as truth by many in the mainstream. Pizzagate should have been easily recognisable as fantasy, debunked by basic facts and common sense. But as correctly noted by D. Beran, "in a post-fact world, in which conspiracy was more fun and useful than reality", Pizzagate went viral and was widely misperceived as real.⁷⁰ Further destabilising reality and fiction in mediated environments was D. Trump's formation of 'alternative facts' in 2017. This saw Internet fringe theories embraced at the highest level of US government. Alternative realities had gone mainstream.

Although D. Trump never fully endorsed QAnon, he frequently retweeted QAnon adherents; refused to condemn the conspiracy theory; and praised its followers for their support.⁷¹ J. Tollefson points to debate in the conspiracy-theory research community over whether Trump had channelled people into QAnon, or whether he just emboldened

66 TUTERS, M.: *The Birth of QAnon: On How 4chan Invents a Conspiracy Theory*. Released on 9th July 2020. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://oilab.eu/the-birth-of-qanon-on-how-4chan-invents-a-conspiracy-theory/>>.

67 GLASER, A.: *Where 8channers Went After 8chan*. Released on 11th November 2019. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://slate.com/technology/2019/11/8chan-8kun-white-supremacists-telegram-discord-facebook.html>>.

68 ZUCKERMAN, E.: QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal. In *Journal of Design and Science*, 2019, Vol. 7, No. 6. [online]. [2022-05-25]. Available at: <<https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/tliexqdu/release/4>>.

69 BERAN, D.: *It Came From Something Awful: How A Toxic Troll Army Accidentally Memed Donald Trump into Office*. New York, NY: All Points Books, 2019, p. 219-221.

70 Ibidem, p. 219.

71 TOLLEFSON, J.: Tracking QAnon: How Trump Turned Conspiracy-Theory Research Upside Down. In *Nature*, 2021, Vol. 590, No. 7845, p. 192-193.

its believers. Eitherway, QAnon created a co-creative interplay between right-wing media and their audiences to playfully concoct false narratives. As noted by internet researcher K. Starbird: “Social media becomes a testing ground for ideas that then gain momentum and are often picked up by conservative media outlets such as Fox News”.⁷² The result was an ironic yet extremist rhetoric across a nebulous cultural milieu of establishment conservative media and far-right digital spaces. The success of QAnon, deliberate or otherwise, was in mobilizing Trump’s political base – and radicalizing the broader Republican Party.⁷³

QAnon as ARG

For the many observers in the international community of ARG designers, makers, and players, multiple elements of QAnon were deeply familiar. Several prominent ARG designers spoke out about QAnon, warning of its dangers. R. Berkowitz, a maker of ARGs and interactive theatre, states “When I saw QAnon, I knew exactly what it was and what it was doing. I had seen it before. I had almost built it before”.⁷⁴ R. Berkowitz draws attention to QAnon’s use of ARG nomenclature and techniques such as ‘rabbit holes’, ‘trail heads’, ‘drops’, ‘breadcrumbs’, ‘puzzles’, and the encouragement of apophenic hermeneutics filtered through a growing online community to solve them. Seasoned transmedia artist, writer, and ARG creator J. Matheny notes the close resemblance of QAnon to ARGs, claiming that some ARG players had already appeared in recent conspiracy movements, including Gamergate, Pizzagate, and QAnon. For J. Matheny, QAnon emerges at the confluence of political religious fundamentalism, toxic gaming communities and conspiracy culture forming what he terms “dark ARGs”.⁷⁵

Prominent ARG pioneers D. Hon and A. Hon have done much to elucidate the analogies between ARGs and QAnon.⁷⁶ Like R. Berkowitz and J. Matheny, A. Hon professes having felt a “shock of recognition” at witnessing the emergence of QAnon, stating the experience was, from the outset “behaving precisely like an alternate reality game”.⁷⁷ Likewise, for ARG veteran designer J. Stewartson, the parallels were clear. J. Stewartson identifies QAnon as near identical to *Live Action Role-Playing games* (LARPs) – ARG like experiences where players perform as in-game characters in the real world. J. Stewartson theorises that anyone familiar with LARPs “will recognise the gaming elements of QAnon”.⁷⁸ Author, Daniel Morrison, also identifies uncanny similarities between QAnon and other online political LARPs, concluding “when we look under the hood [QAnon] is essentially an elaborate game”.⁷⁹

72 TOLLEFSON, J.: Tracking QAnon: How Trump Turned Conspiracy-Theory Research Upside Down. In *Nature*, 2021, Vol. 590, No. 7845, p. 193.

73 Ibidem.

74 BERKOWITZ, R.: *A Game Designer’s Analysis of QAnon. Playing with reality*. Released on 30th September 2020. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://medium.com/curiouserininstitute/a-game-designers-analysis-of-qanon-580972548be5>>.

75 MATHENY, J.: *ARG Pioneer Joseph Matheny on the Counterculture’s Hijacking from Corporatization to QAnon*. Released on 5th August 2019. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://parallaxviews.podbean.com/e/ep92/>>.

76 HON, A.: *What ARGs Can Teach Us About QAnon*. Released on 2nd August 2020. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://mssv.net/2020/08/02/what-args-can-teach-us-about-qanon>>; HON, D.: *QAnon looks like an alternate reality game*. Released on 3rd May 2019. [online]. [2020-08-06]. Available at: <<https://danhon.substack.com/p/qanon-looks-like-an-alternate-reality>>.

77 HON, A.: *What ARGs Can Teach Us About QAnon*. Released on 2nd August 2020. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://mssv.net/2020/08/02/what-args-can-teach-us-about-qanon>>.

78 KAMINSKA, I.: *Is QAnon a Game Gone Wrong? | FT Film*. Released on 16th October 2020. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4vb6UWhf3o>>.

79 MORRISON, D.: *Memetic Warfare: The Gamification of Conspiracy Theories, How the Targeted Propaganda of QAnon Weaponised COVID-19*. Released on 24th November 2020. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://bylinetimes.com/2020/11/24/memetic-warfare-how-the-targeted-propaganda-of-qanon-weaponised-covid-19/>>.

Even for scholars well outside of the ARG development community, resonant comparisons were made. D. De Zeeuw and colleagues note that within the 4chan forums from which QAnon emerged, the notion of 'Live Action Role Play' is detached from its game origins instead coming to denote the ironic trolling of 'playing' at politics.⁸⁰ M. Tuters has likewise shown that self-identified 'anons' within the chans professed to be merely 'LARPing'⁸¹ while A. Vogelgesang suggests that "[i]n QAnon one can find elements of both LARPs and ARGs combining to create a new form".⁸² For Philosopher G. Boucher, the affinities of QAnon to an ARG or LARP are not only uncanny, but are likely genetic and certainly structural.⁸³

Participatory Conspiracies and Far-Right Games

Whether QAnon was designed for this purpose or evolved into it remains contested. But undeniably, the politics and tactics found in QAnon represent an ongoing effort by reactionary groups to tap into the aesthetics and communities of digital games to popularise extremist agendas. A. Kamenetz reports on the right-wing hate groups priming digital game players by echoing into the nationalist overtones and racist undercurrents present in militarised games they play.⁸⁴ T. Bart argues that the extremist communities within 4chan and 8chan often make use of game-like elements, memetic warfare and other vernacular practices to create a breeding ground of dangerous digital extremism.⁸⁵ M. Condis identifies the rhetorical strategies of neo-Nazis who target online gamers for recruitment by attempting to reconfigure their beliefs, desires, and fears grooming them into a white supremacist worldview.⁸⁶ In these ways, QAnon demonstrates how the transgressive appeal of games culture has been weaponized and gamified to promote what Parham has articulated as "toxic fandom".⁸⁷ Game communities represent recruitment domains for far-right political movements by honing the rhetoric of the digital game vernacular of disenfranchised white males.⁸⁸

Yet the game does not appeal directly to learning participants alone. The playful mode of forensic fandom that QAnon promotes enables a kind of crowd sourced conspiracy theory,⁸⁹ attracting people who, according to one former QAnon follower become 'united by

80 DE ZEEUW, D. et al.: Tracing Normification. In *First Monday*, 2020, Vol. 25, No. 11. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i11.10643>>.

81 TUTERS, M.: LARPing & Liberal Tears: Irony, Belief and Idiocy in the Deep Vernacular Web. In FIELITZ, M., THURSTON, N. (eds.): *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US*. Bielefeld: Verlag, 2019, p. 37-41.

82 News: *This Is Not a Game at MMF MMF MMXXII*. Released on 20th March 2022. [online]. [2022-05-30]. Available at: <<https://milanmachinimafestival.org/blog/2022/3/20/news-this-is-not-a-game-at-mmfmfm-mmxxii>>.

83 SHARPE, M. et al.: *(Con)spirituality Colloquium – Keynote Panel 5: Conspirituality, QAnon and the Far Right, Part 1*. Released on 9th April 2021. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qozrAXdIUOY>>.

84 KAMENETZ, A.: *Right-Wing Hate Groups Are Recruiting Video Gamers*. Released on 5th November 2018. [online]. [2022-05-25]. Available at: <<https://www.npr.org/2018/11/05/660642531/right-wing-hate-groups-are-recruiting-video-gamers>>.

85 BART, T.: *The Gamification of 'Lone Wolf' Terrorism on 4chan and 8chan*. Released on 21st January 2021. [online]. [2022-05-25]. Available at: <<https://oilab.eu/the-gamification-of-lone-wolf-terrorism-on-4chan-and-8chan/>>.

86 See: CONDIS, M.: *Hateful Games: Why White Supremacist Recruiters Target Gamers*. In REYMAN, J., SPARBY, E. M. (eds.): *Digital Ethics*. London, New York, NY: Routledge 2019, p. 143-159.

87 PARHAM, J.: *The Ultimate Toxic Fandom Lives in Trumpworld*. Released on 23rd July 2018. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://www.wired.com/story/trump-fandom/>>.

88 WILSON, J.: *Hiding in Plain Sight: How the 'Alt-Right' Is Weaponizing Irony to Spread Fascism*. Released on 23rd May 2017. [online]. [2022-05-25]. Available at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-facism>>.

89 MITTELL, J.: *Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text*. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/index.html#.Y0gcXS0Roac>>.

a shared culture of distrust toward institutions and a do-it-yourself approach to conspiracy theories".⁹⁰ Moreover, not all those engaged with QAnon were politically disenfranchised or conspiracists. A. Chang's analysis of QAnon enthusiasts on Reddit found that "most participants are relatively casual conspiracy theorists that participated for the fun of the immersive game and the community".⁹¹ For the QAnon Anonymous podcast, this gamified conspiracy is best understood as a fan fiction – as "an improvisational game" within the genre of "decentralized storytelling" the in which players compete, "looking for an interpretation that will go viral within the QAnon community".⁹² In this way, QAnon bakers and adherents are simply robust fan communities similar to other transmedia franchises such as *Star Wars*, the *Marvel Universe* or *Harry Potter*. Along similar lines, G. Boucher compares QAnon to fan communities in which membership hinges on worthy interpretation of the canonical text, a shared activity that rewards participants with feelings of agency, belonging and well-being. Because QAnon's cosmology is so supple, varied, and diffuse, it is easily shaped into whatever individuals desire it to be without destabilising the broad narrative. In this way, QAnon taps into contemporary consumption practices and logics within the online world.

A driving appeal of QAnon is the of collaboration between strangers to unpick the mystery of a conspiracy. Within the field of ARGs these dynamic communities of discovery are referred to "collective detectives"⁹³ – individuals assembled to cooperatively decode puzzles, contribute theories, or speculate solutions. In findings that are applicable to both ARGs and QAnon, S. Janes identifies the emergence of ARGs as evidence that content makers were developing tactics for responding to higher demands for audience agency and narrative complexity.⁹⁴ S. Aupers has similarly shown how conspiracy theorists in online environments are, in essence "(inter)active audiences involved in the decoding of mass media texts to, simultaneously, produce their theories".⁹⁵ Author W. Kirn identifies Q as having mastered the narrative logic of on the internet: "The audience for internet narratives doesn't want to read, it wants to write. It doesn't want answers provided; it wants to search for them." As noted by E. Zucherman, Q's literary style doesn't provide answers but questions. Like an ARG, it compels participants to fill in the narrative blanks in a co-creative process.⁹⁶

The emergence of ARGs at the turn of the millennium occurred against a backdrop of paradigm shifts in the entertainment industry that saw prosumers, hackers, modders and DIY content makers, become central to the nature of networked information and entertainment.⁹⁷ Once a fringe phenomenon, QAnon signals the mainstreaming of the ARG form. This participatory shift has not only seen fan cultures become central to the production and consumption of fictional texts, but more broadly, government agencies, news services, and other hegemonies of 'factual' information have become superseded by participatory elements such as the so-named wisdom of crowds, the hivemind, and

90 JADEJA, J., CARRIER, A.: *I Left QAnon in 2018. But I'm Still Not Free*. Released on 12th November 2021. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/12/11/q-anon-movement-former-believer-523972>>.

91 CHANG, A.: *We Analyzed Every Qanon Post on Reddit: Here's Who QAnon Supporters Actually Are*. Released on 8th August 2018. [online]. [2022-05-23]. Available at: <<https://www.vox.com/2018/8/8/17657800/qanon-reddit-conspiracy-data>>.

92 *Episode 66: C/CADA 3301*. Released on 17th November 2019. [online]. [2022-05-24]. Available at: <<https://www.stitcher.com/show/qanon-anonymous/episode/episode-66-cicada-3301-65329983>>.

93 WATSON, J.: Games Beyond the ARG. In GARCIA, A., NIEMEYER, G. (eds.): *Alternate Reality Games and the Cusp of Digital Gameplay*. London : Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, p. 193.

94 JANES, S.: *Alternate Reality Games: Promotion and Participatory Culture*. Abingdon, New York, NY : Routledge, 2019, p. 18.

95 AUPERS, S.: Decoding Mass Media/Encoding Conspiracy Theory. In BUTTER, M., KNIGHT, P. (eds.): *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. Abingdon : Routledge, 2020, p. 470.

96 ZUCKERMAN, E.: QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal. In *Journal of Design and Science*, 2019, Vol. 7, No. 6. [online]. [2022-05-25]. Available at: <<https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/tliexqdu/release/4>>.

97 For more information, see: JOHNSON, M.: Deep Play and Dark Play in Contemporary Cinema. In *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 2019, Vol. 17, No. 4, p. 405-422.

citizen journalism. The aesthetics and structure of ARGs is reflected in the nonlinear networked logics and fragmented sensemaking that H. Jenkins has analysed as 'convergence culture'.⁹⁸ Although these participatory paradigms have afforded unprecedented levels of audience agency, they also destabilised consensus notions of reality.

Conclusion

The January 6th, 2021, QAnon adherents stormed the US capital, destroying federal offices and clashing with security. For a moment, the incident teetered as a historical hinge point from which vastly alternate realities are possible to imagine. The attack on the capital resulted in six deaths and brought the dangerous potential of QAnon into sharp relief. In the wake of these events, the need to interrogate QAnon and its appeal from multiple perspectives became all too clear.

Tracing the evolution of QAnon from an obscure ARG from the deep vernacular web to its ultimate manifestation as a mainstream political movement, this paper has highlighted the social and political impact and import of games culture to QAnon's emergence and spread. As detailed here, QAnon was extensively shaped and moulded through communities of participation and promotion, becoming different things to many people. Yet its ludic provenance and mechanics evidence its enduring status as an elaborate game. Researchers will benefit from approaching it as such in several ways. The study of ARGs and other aspects of popular games culture may offer insights into the appeal and spread of similar future gamified experiences, providing possibilities for countering their impacts. Former QAnon adherents might also find affinities in the experiences of ARG participants recovering from immersion in game worlds.⁹⁹ Such anecdotes can be found in ARG designer and researcher J. McGonigal's discussion of the lingering effects of ARGs".¹⁰⁰ Finally, comprehending the ludic origins and context of QAnon brings to the fore questions concerning the ethics of fake news, conspiracy theories and alternative facts masquerading as either reality or immersive mediated experiences. Such questions invite the development of new frameworks for critiquing gamified phenomena, especially within propagandic political contexts.

Having connected QAnon to the domain of games and play, it is important to clarify that its popularity exceeds simple immersion in a game narrative. The mass delusion QAnon provoked occurs against a broader backdrop of disenchantment with mainstream belief systems, politics, and reality. QAnon afforded participants more than ludic engagement but provided affective sensations of involvement in a quasi-religious community. Moreover, QAnon was conjured and shaped by multiple competing and opportunistic forces: online trolling, alt-right recruitment, political opportunism, recommendation algorithms, the social media rewarding of polarisation, each propelled by nihilistic politics, predatory capitalism, cultic rhetoric and modes of play.

98 For more information, see: JENKINS, H.: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. London, New York, NY : New York University Press, 2006.

99 Remark by the author: M. Rothschild's *The Storm Is Upon Us* includes a chapter on how to rescue your loved ones from their immersion in QAnon conspiratorial thinking while M. Bloom and S. Moskalenko's *Pastels and Paedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon* devotes a chapter to recovery titled *Life After Q*. Within the Reddit community of *QAnon Casualties*, former participants post stories of returning to reality in order to assist others on the same journey. Meanwhile, the *ReQovery* forum supports ex-QAnon believers return to their lives. See: ROTHSCCHILD, M.: *The Storm Is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything*. London : Octopus, 2021.

100 McGONIGAL, J.: 'ThisIsNotaGame': ImmersiveAestheticsandCollectivePlay. In MILES, A. (ed.): *MelbourneDAC: 5th International Digital Arts & Culture Conference*. Melbourne : RMIT University, 2003, p. 3-4. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <<https://janemcgonigal.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/mcgonigal-jane-this-is-not-a-game.pdf>>.

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