



PRIMARY RESEARCH

Women in online gaming: The female experience within the gaming community

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Abstract

This paper analyses how women in online gaming are essentially treated and seen through online games, video game culture, and within the gaming community. As an industry, online games have seen exponential growth and have become increasingly diversified over the past decade, especially in esports, which includes competitive online gaming. Despite this, it is still stereotyped as a male activity. With that being the case, a survey was handed out to female respondents to understand how marginalized women really are in online gaming and about the gender differences in the video game industry and how exactly that affects women. The results following the survey showed that women are, in fact, treated very differently than men, which oftentimes includes harassment and misogyny.

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INTRODUCTION

There is no denying that a growing number of people participate in online gaming thanks to advancements in mobile technologies and the Internet. Online games have been growing exponentially as an industry and have been greatly diversified over the past decade, especially in esports comprising competitive online gaming. Players all over the world, regardless of gender, enjoy the competitive nature, mental contests, and the social interaction aspects of the games. Despite this, it continues to be stereotypically viewed as a men-only activity, specifically straight, white men “gamers” (Cote, 2017). This creates not only a hoard of issues for players who otherwise do not fit into that biased image but is also problematic for online game developers and companies looking to use games to their advantage for marketing. Multiple studies have also shown that gender differences between men and women of all ages continue to exist in online gaming, with said gender differences being in favor of men (Terlecki et al., 2011).

Research Objectives

The research objectives of the study are as follows:

- Understand and talk about the marginalization of women in online video game culture
- Find out about gender differences in the gaming community and how it affects women
- Find out if the general experience for most women in online gaming is negative or positive

Research Questions

Following are the research questions of the study:

- How are women generally treated in online games and within the community?
- How do women combat online harassment and misogyny within the community?
- How should we improve the online gaming experiences of women and address issues of inclusivity in the community?

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LITERATURE REVIEW

When you think of a “gamer”, what do you picture? For some people, it is often that the first thing that comes into their mind is a “skinny white boy in a dark space angrily screaming at their screens and mashing their keyboards” (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008). Although recent studies have found out that people no longer associate aggression and isolation with so-called gamers nowadays, it is still a fact that it remains heavily associated with masculinity and the male population. It is the gaming industry’s continuing tradition to develop games and create content on the market that appeals to the ideals of a predominantly young, male, heterosexual audience (Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017). As a result of these ideals, both a general absence of female video game characters and the oversexualization of the female characters that do exist are very prominent.

While it is statistically proven that gamers who fit into that stereotypical image now account for only a small portion of video game players in general (Association, 2022), the cultural perceptions of players have changed little over the years, and game audiences that do not fit into the traditional idea of who plays are still aren’t recognized as part of the gaming community. As a result, women, people of color, or people in the LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etc.) community, for example, are more likely to experience harassment (Cote, 2017).

Misogyny in the gaming community

The toxicity of gamer culture and online gaming environments for women has been alarmingly frequent. For instance, there was an online harassment campaign in 2014 called Gamergate that originally aimed to perpetuate sexism and anti-progressive attitudes in video game culture. The campaign majorly targeted three specific women in the video game industry a feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian and independent game developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu.

Quinn was subjected to several months of harassment before the controversy leading up to Gamergate. Her game *Depression Quest*, a text-based game intended to relay her own experience with depression, faced backlash in return from gamers who objected to the intrusion of “politics” into video game culture (Salter, 2016). The events that would eventually come to be known as Gamergate began as a personal attack through a blog post spreading malicious rumors directed at Quinn from her former boyfriend, Eron Gjoni, with members of the online gaming community who had previously been highly critical of *Depression Quest* par-

ticipating in renewed attacks on Quinn, even falsely accusing her of trading sex in exchange for advancing her career (Romano, 2014). Quinn then wrote online that “the Internet spent the last month spreading my personal information around, sending me threats, hacking anyone suspected of being friends with me, calling my dad and telling him I’m a whore, sending nude photos of me to colleagues, and basically giving me the ‘burn the witch’ treatment” (Mantilla, 2015).

Gamer gate supporters then started putting other women in the video game industry through the same harassment of leaking personal information and threats of sexual assault and death, which Anita Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu were undeservingly put through.

Anita Sarkeesian was victimized in a previous episode of online harassment because of her part in a YouTube video series named “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games,” which discusses video games’ misogynistic tropes. After the newest episode was released on the 24th of August, 2014, Sarkeesian started receiving death and rape threats and had confidential information about her leaked online by angered sexists, including her home address which she was forced to depart from for the sake of her safety (McDonald, 2014).

The same thing happened to Brianna Wu, a co-founder of the video game publisher Giant Spacekat, having her personal information, which too included her home address, leaked to the public, specifically on which was an image board website, and getting sent rape and death threats on the social media platform Twitter after mocking Gamer gate advocates who were making misogynistic remarks. Like Sarkeesian, she was forced to leave her home, considering the leak and death threats in fear of her safety (Hart, 2014). A few days after losing her dog in December, Wu reported that she was sent emails containing pictures of mutilated dogs from Gamer gate advocates (Beres, 2014).

The harassment experienced in these cases may be among the most extreme, but it isn’t limited to public figures or the workplace. The issues female gamers face daily when playing online video games are abundantly discussed among the female gaming community. In a study by Amanda Cote conducting in-depth interviews with women gamers, a lot of them felt that online gaming, like all forms of gaming, was still viewed as a male space, with women considered intrusive into such a space. Consequently, they were often harassed (Cote, 2017; Shahbaz, Sherafatian-Jahromi, Malik, Shabbir, & Jam, 2016).

In June 2020, dozens of women had come forward to speak out on sexism and harassment in the gaming industry via

statements posted on Twitter, YouTube, and Twitch using a tool called TwitLonger, which is a website that allows you to write longer than the characters allowed in a post. In response to the hundreds of stories from competitive gamers and streamers who live stream their gameplay on platforms like Twitch for money led to the CEO of a large talent management company for streamers resigning, marking a moment to reflect on an industry that has commonly faced allegations of abuse, sexism, and bullying (Lorenz & Browning, 2020; Jam, Akhtar, Haq, Ahmad-U-Rehman, & Hijazi, 2010). Female gamers started opening up about their experiences when Twitter user Hollowtide tweeted about a top player of the online game Destiny and referred to the unnamed player as "scum lord ". Afterwards, three female streamers known as SchiftyFive, SheSnaps, and Jewels Verne came across the tweet and collectively came forward stating their experiences with the gamer, who was known both as Lono and SayNoToRage. Using their streamer handles, the women shared their claims of nonconsensual touching, sex propositions, and harassment on Twitter.

In a YouTube video, Lono then responded to their claims, admitting that what he did was wrong and that there was no excuse for his behavior, apologizing for what he did (Splitscreen., 2020).

Following those allegations led to many other streamers opening up about their experiences with well-known men in the gaming industry, including YouTubers, game developers, and talent managers (Lorenz & Browning, 2020; S. Khan, Jam, Shahbaz, & Mamun, 2018).

Another example, one of the biggest FPS (first-person shooter) games dominating the world right now, Valorant, has a major community of players that are known to be especially toxic to women.

Several well-known female Twitch streamers and YouTubers, including a shoutcaster, also shared their experiences on Twitter, calling out the mistreatment women face on a daily basis in-game, getting called misogynistic slurs, and accusations of getting "boosted" in rank (for context, rank

in Valorant determines how good you are at the game, e.g., the higher your rank the higher-skilled you are), further reinforcing the harmful stereotype that women are "bad at games."

On the 27th of January 2022, Esports Shoutcaster, CozyJozie, posted a Google document to her Twitter compiling all of the harassment she has experienced within the Valorant community, which included getting sent rape threats, death threats, getting sexualized in a professional setting, getting discredited for advancing her career as a woman, and many others (CozyJozie, 2022).

Research through a survey conducted on 900 female gamers in the US, Germany, and China found that 59% hide their gender when playing online games just to avoid harassment (Sinclair, 2021; T. Khan, Akbar, Jam, & Saeed, 2016).

Based on these studies, women have been ostracised from the online gaming community and in online games for far too long, which not only negatively affects women who play recreationally but also women who are trying to pursue a career related to online gaming. According to the incidents mentioned above and thousands of others unmentioned, women with critical opinions in the industry will face disproportionately high levels of criticism, hostility, and scrutiny compared to men (Wu, 2014; Ahmad-U-Rehman, Haq, Jam, Ali, & Hijazi, 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

The respondents of this survey were given the freedom to write whatever they wanted with full honesty and discretion. Nicknames or fake names were asked instead of real names to let them know that their identity was completely hidden so that they would feel as open as possible to share their honest experiences answering the open-ended questions. The total number of respondents was 56. The survey also consisted of both open and close-ended questions. According to the results, the most common age amongst the participants were 19 and 20.

TABLE 1. Demographics

Response Summary	Count/56	Percentage
Age		
13	1	1.8%
14	1	1.8%
15	1	1.8%
16	4	7.1%
17	4	7.1%
18	8	14.3%
19	10	17.9%

Table 1 Continue.....

Response Summary	Count/56	Percentage
20	11	19.7%
21	7	12.5%
22	3	5.4%
23	3	5.4%
24	2	3.6%
25	1	1.8%

Data

TABLE 2. Survey queries and participants responses

Survey Queries	Responses
How much time do you spend a day gaming?	%
Less than an hour	0
1 – 2 hours	25
3 – 5 hours	46.4
6 – 9 hours	25
10+ hours	3.6
On a scale of 1 – 10, how would you rate your experience in online multiplayer/co-op games as a woman?	%
1	1.8
2	0
3	0
4	7.1
5	8.9
6	12.5
7	16.1
8	37.5
9	12.5
10	3.6
Have you, and how often, experienced any sort of online harassment, misogyny, verbal assault, stereotypical hate, or change of demeanor from other players after being identified as female/woman-aligned?	%
No, never	12.
Yes, but rarely	57.1
Yes, often	16.1
Yes, it is very common	14.3
Have you ever spent real money on online gaming?	%
No, never	17.9
Yes, but rarely	44.6
Yes, often	30.4
Yes, always	7.1

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As seen in the first quantity-based question, women in the survey seem to commonly play games for an average of three to five hours. The average rating for their experience in online multiplayer games as a woman is 8, only consid-

ering that they enjoy playing online multiplayer and co-op games overall. Among 56 respondents, 87.5% of the women have stated that they have experienced any sort of online harassment, misogyny, verbal assault, stereotypical hate, or change of demeanor from other players in-game after be-

ing identified as a woman. Taking into account the fact that they still rated their overall experience playing online games quite high, this means that even if they do experience such harassment in games, they still find ways to enjoy the game as they should. The majority of them (82.1%) have also stated that they have spent money on any sort of online

game, further reinforcing the fact that women are as likely as men to indulge in online games (Bhatia, 2019).

Moving on to the open-ended questions, starting with the question of what online multiplayer or co-op games did they play.

TABLE 3. Open-ended questionnaire responses

What Online Multiplayer/Co-op Games Do You Play?	Number of Respondents
Valiant	31
Genshin Impact	27

When the respondents were asked exactly what co-op games they played, the top two games that they played were Valorant (31 out of 56) and Genshin Impact (27 out of 56).

The participants were also asked how they felt and how they faced the situation after facing such harassment in-game (if they said yes to the previous question asking if they had ever experienced something like that). Multiple women mentioned feeling offended, disgusted, violated, ashamed, annoyed, uncomfortable, and hurt and reported the perpetrators afterward. Some respondents have also said that they would just either mute them or block them just to avoid unnecessary negativity.

Some responses include:

"Whenever I receive a misogynistic comment, I always feel annoyed and downgraded. I feel the urge to have to prove their stereotypes wrong. However, most of the time, I tend to laugh it off instead of defending myself because I think doing so would be pointless. A lot of the time, men do not even realize their misogyny and would play off their insults as mere jokes."

"It was a bit shocking, but I wasn't that surprised since usually, men often judge women for playing."

"I would normally answer back because most of the time they will be quiet after, but there are times that they will say much worse after, like about rape."

"Tbh, I don't tell the players that I'm a woman, so I could avoid receiving misogyny comments. I usually receive comments like "are u stupid" and "u suck," but I just ignore them."

"There were quite a few times when I spoke; men creepily and immediately changed the way they treated me. Either for better to gain favour with me, or worse because I'm a female. Both, in the end, we're incredibly uncomfortable. This was especially valorant. Usually, the way I faced the situation was to try to sound like a young boy due to my voice being low enough for that and confuse the men there, whether I'm male or female. Most other times, I ignore it."

"It sucks that when you are identified as a woman whose playing, they instantly either turns into a simp or straight out disrespects the shit out of you. and often, at times like that, I would just mass report their accounts for being abusive and would instantly mute them afterward."

"I have become almost numb to it; now, I avoid using my voice in games and fully enjoy the game. Being harassed is my expectation."

"Usually, before the game starts and some random players find out that they have a girl team mate, their reactions would vary: (1) they would assume that we are gonna lose since they have a girl on their team, (2) they ask if they can play with the girl often and add them on her socials."

As seen in some of these responses, women often hide their gender to avoid the harassment and mistreatment that comes with revealing their voice or revealing their femininity in any way. Oftentimes unfair stereotypes were also pushed into them (e.g., losing just because there's a girl on the team, etc.). They either got treated horribly or either treated with the intent of earning their favour in an assumingly sexual way, or in other words, "simply".

The respondents were also asked to share the details of their experience if possible, and multiple women have experienced being called various misogynistic slurs and being subjected to unsolicited sexual jokes in-game. Some respondents also shared that they have been verbally harassed by men asking for sexual propositions in-game. Multiple women were also belittled if their gender ever was revealed, with men downplaying their skill and even told to stop playing the game yet again because of the stereotype that women are bad at games.

Some responses include:

"The experience is bad. Tbh for example, I mainly stopped using my mic after a valiant game where I was being harassed by my own team and the enemy team after I said something and my teammate said in all chat, "gg we lost our KJ is a

girl" (it was some time ago so I dk exactly but) after that a few of them kept asking them for my Instagram and snap and I started getting fed up so I replied by saying I'm not interested I am a lesbian who made it even worse because they started calling me slurs and said I would go to hell. after that, I stopped using the mic"

"He told me to suck his shaft and that he would teach me to touch myself." "As soon as I said hello, I had at least two guys telling me to suck their dick."

"Other moments have been subtle acts of micro aggression, like people saying it's unbelievable that I'm doing better than them in the game because I'm a girl, getting told I'm "surprisingly" good at the game for a "girl," getting told to shut up and "get back in the kitchen" or "get some rights" whenever people just want to be toxic for some reason. Lots of instances that I've absolutely lost count."

Some respondents also said that men often tell women things they'd want to do to the women without thinking twice about how uncomfortable what they're saying would make them feel. Few of them shared that they have received rape threats and vulgar insults like slut, whore, gold digger, bitch, and misogynistic phrases like "get back in the kitchen" or "go back to cleaning the house" or just deadass asking them to quit the game because "they don't belong." A lot of respondents also shared that men often ask for their social media in-game.

These findings agree with the existing literature that proves women have always been ostracised within the gaming community. Women always have and will continue to be treated differently, oftentimes negatively, until society learns to fully accept women and eradicate harmful stereotypes that perpetuate long-rooted misogyny in online

games and within the gaming community.

CONCLUSION

After tedious research and literature review, it can be safely concluded that women are treated a lot worse than men by an exponential margin. To answer the research questions, the marginalization of women in online video game culture has long been rooted in misogyny that is perpetuated by the lack of representation and diversity in online gaming, whether it may be through shows, or video game tropes, characters, players, and many more. The gaming culture must be improved in order to pull in more diversity to the gaming community since the situational precedents that permit continuous harassment of women must be changed, but because video game audience throughout the years hasn't provoked cultural change, it would be better to redefine what gamers are and abolish stereotypes regarding those who play games as a better alternative. Rather than seeing women or marginalized groups as outcasts, game designers and players need to see them as essential members of the community. By doing so, they will not only be empowered to respond more strongly when they are harassed online, but they will also contribute to the general decline in misogynistic attitudes among gamers (Cote, 2017).

However, there is a limitation in this research that needs to be addressed, which is the lack of diverse ages amongst the female respondents, as all of them were mostly young women as opposed to having older millennial-aged women, perhaps 30 and above. This is because older women may have had completely different experiences in online games back then and might have had strong opinions about how women are seen and treated now.

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