
GENDERED BARRIERS IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

As of 2019, there are an estimated 2.5 billion gamers globally. Roughly half of all gamers are female. Despite the figures, there is a serious underrepresentation of female gamers in the professional gaming and game development community. It is thus important to examine the underlying causes hindering equally capable female gamers and game developers from pursuing a serious career in gaming, at par with their male counterparts. In this article, the author examines the impact of the cultural association of games with the male demography, stereotypes and structural barriers limiting women from realizing their full potential, female representation in video games and workplace, pervasive misogyny and sexual harassment of women across all levels in the industry, and lastly, the steps that can be taken to better the status quo in favour of women.

KEYWORDS

Female gamers, Esports, Video Games, Sexism.

1. INTRODUCTION

“‘You’re never going to be good at this game.’ ‘You’re always going to lose to a dude’. ‘You’re ugly.’ ‘You’re fat.’ ‘Go back to the kitchen.’ ‘You will die in the first ten seconds.’ or ‘You’re a fake gamer.’”¹

These are among the lighter sexist remarks amidst other forms of serious online abuses faced by female gamers. Despite this kind of abuse being a perennial problem in the gaming industry, a horde of such negative experiences and interactions encountered by female gamers and game developers go unnoticed. Evidently then, a female gamers’ experience remains one of the most

¹ Liz Clarke, *Silencing the haters: Female gamers compete in a space where basic rules of civility are lacking*, WASHINGTON POST (December 24, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/sports/toxic-online-culture-women-esports/>.

under-researched areas². The ‘gamer experience’ that people around the world resonate with is singularly that of male gamers’.³ The tragically high levels of targeted sexual harassment, doxing,⁴ death threats, rape threats, bomb threats, and hostility towards women in the gaming industry is rarely something a male gamer will experience.⁵ Such toxic behavioural patterns seen in male gamers against their female counterparts have been overlooked to the point that it has now become a prevalent culture in the industry.⁶

The present state is saddening because the gaming industry was originally conceptualized to provide family entertainment, gainful employment, honing of cognitive skills, game development skills, technological advancement and for instilling the spirit of sportsmanship for everyone without exceptions. Studies suggest that the sexist behaviour portrayed by male gamers aligns with their fear of disruption of their established positions in the social hierarchy. Thus, by lashing out and bullying female gamers, male gamers tend to prevent women from rising above them, maintaining the status quo. This behaviour is further confirmed in a 2015 psychological study⁷ conducted by Michael Kasumovic and Jeffrey Kuznekoff, which showed that male gamers with less skill respond with sexist behaviour towards female gamers simply because “*they cannot lose to a woman*” or cannot risk “*their masculinity being challenged by a woman*”. It was found in the same study that the same lower-skilled male gamer does not respond with hostility if a higher skilled player is a male, because losing to a man is acceptable but losing to a woman is not!

This psychology of male gamers forms the basis of the negative social interactions that women in the gaming world face on a regular basis. Such exposure leaves a strong psychological impact on women, actively dissuading them from being part of the industry, and immortalizing the toxic ‘video games are not for women’ cycle.

² Lavinia McLean & Mark D Griffiths, *Female Gamers’ Experience of Online Harassment and Social Support in Online Gaming: A Qualitative Study*, INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MENTAL HEALTH & ADDICTION, 970–994 (July 23, 2018).

³ Lopez-Fernandez et al, “*Female Gaming, Gaming Addiction, and the Role of Women within Gaming Culture: A Narrative Literature Review*”, 10 FRONTIERS IN PSYCHIATRY, 454 (July 10, 2019).

⁴ Ryan Goodrich, *What is Doxing?*, TECHNEWS DAILY (April 2, 2013), <https://web.archive.org/web/20141029095609/http://www.technewsdaily.com/17590-what-is-doxing.html>.

⁵ JH Kuznekoff & LM Rose, *Communication in multiplayer gaming: Examining player responses to gender cues*, NEW MEDIA & SOCIETY, 541–556 (2013).

⁶ Mary Elizabeth Ballard & Kelly Marie Welch, *Virtual Warfare: Cyber bullying and Cyber-Victimization in MMOG Play*, 12(5) GAMES AND CULTURE, 466-491 (2017).

⁷ Michael Kasumovic & Jeffrey Kuznekoff, *Insights into Sexism: Male Status and Performance Moderates Female-Directed Hostile and Amicable Behaviour*, 10(9): e0138399 PLOS ONE (July 15, 2015).

2. WHO IS A REAL GAMER?

A rough historical context in the changing audience of the gaming industry gives valuable insight into understanding the start of the cultural association of gaming with male gamers. As pointed by Krotoski,⁸ towards the start of the video gaming industry, games were aimed at everyone - men and women, old and young alike, seen as a source of family entertainment. However, that changed post the video game crash or the Atari crash of 1983.

It is worth mentioning that Atari controlled 80 % of the videogame market in 1982. Its crash was a result of various factors like competition from a growing home computer game market, the release of its glitch-ridden game Pac-Man resulting in lower consumer confidence, and its own business decisions.⁹ Following the crash, there was a mass burial of thousands of Atari's unsold video game cartridges of games like Extra-Terrestrial, Space Invaders, Centipede, and Asteroid in Alamogordo landfill in New Mexico.¹⁰

Post this industry-wide debacle, Japanese Nintendo revived the North American video game industry by releasing their Famicom (Family Computer) console, the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in 1985. As a foolproof method to avoid such a crash from happening again, Nintendo ran background research to accurately target the demography interested in playing their games. It accordingly aimed its products at children, foremost boys¹¹, to find a more secure and economically profitable audience. This shift in marketing and production strategy changed ideas about who the consumers of digital games were.¹² Thus, in the 1980s and the early 1990s, video games were considered a boy's toy and the game developers were predominantly men, leading to marginalization of women¹³ and birthing a stereotype that thrives till today.

⁸ Aleks Krotoski, *Socialising, subversion and the Self: Why women flock to Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games*, in DIGITAL GAMEPLAY: ESSAYS ON THE NEXUS OF GAME AND GAMER 174-188 (Nate Garrelts ed., 2005).

⁹ Ryan Lambie, *The 1983 videogame crash: Could it happen again*, DEN OF GEEK (Feb. 20, 2013), <https://www.denofgeek.com/games/the-1983-videogame-crash-what-went-wrong-and-could-it-happen-again/>.

¹⁰ Ted Trautman, *Excavating the Video-Game Industry's Past*, THE NEW YORKER (Apr. 29, 2014), <https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/excavating-the-video-game-industrys-past>.

¹¹ Tracey Lien, *No girls allowed*, POLYGON (Dec. 2, 2013), <https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/12/2/5143856/no-girls-allowed>.

¹² Lina Eklund, *Who are the casual gamers? Gender tropes and tokenism in game culture*, in SOCIAL, CASUAL AND MOBILE GAMES: THE CHANGING GAMING LANDSCAPE 15-30 (Tama Leaver & Michele A Wilson ed., 2016).

¹³ Leslie Haddon, *Electronic and Computer Games: The History of an Interactive Medium*, 29(2) SCREEN 52–73(1988).

Earlier, the term ‘gamer’ evoked the image of an “*isolated, pale-skinned teenage boy [sitting] hunched forward on a sofa in some dark basement space, obsessively mashing buttons*”¹⁴, however, this stereotype is slowly fading¹⁵ with the influx of a variety of games and gamers of all ages and backgrounds. A quick look into the meaning of the word ‘gamer’ will introduce an individual to the varied prevalent classifications within the term, for example, Core gamer, Hardcore gamer, Casual Gamer, Newbie, Gamer girl/Girl gamer/Female gamer, Professional gamer and Gaymer.

Broadly, these classifications are based on the player’s gender, type of games played, level of complexity, choice of the gaming device, level of competition, the amount of time spent playing the game, and awareness of development in hardware and software. Women are typically stereotyped into the ‘casual gamers’ category, as they are only believed to play easy and non-competitive games like *Candy Crush* on inferior gaming devices like mobile phones.¹⁶ Women are not perceived to possess the skill required to play difficult games to be considered a core/hardcore gamer. Due to such stereotypes around gaming, women are ridiculed when they self-identify as a ‘gamer’. Thus, a person who plays video games cannot easily self-identify as a gamer simply because the myriad classifications within the term have systematically evolved to be more exclusive than inclusive.¹⁷

The gamer identity itself is influenced by multiple external factors like parents, societal framing of gaming, self-perception, and institutionalized game marketing.

“Social Identity Theory¹⁸ posits that groups provide a sense of belonging to an individual. Furthermore, when individuals identify with a group, a process of in- and out-grouping begins. Individuals who belong to the same group are favoured over those who do not belong to the group. These effects can be positive for

¹⁴ Dmitri Williams, *A brief social history of game play*, PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2005 DiGRA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE: CHANGING VIEWS – WORLDS IN PLAY. VANCOUVER, CANADA: DIGITAL GAMES RESEARCH ASSOCIATION (Jan. 2005).

¹⁵ R Kowert, R Festl, & T Quandt, *Unpopular, overweight, and socially inept: Reconsidering the stereotype of online gamers*, 17(3) CYBERPSYCHOL. BEHAV. SOC. NETW. 141–146 (2014).

¹⁶ Benjamin P. et al, *What is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture*, 76 SEX ROLES 421- 435 (2016).

¹⁷ Mike Fahey, *Is Gamer a Dirty Word*, KOTAKU (Jan 14, 2011), <https://kotaku.com/is-gamer-a-dirty-word-5733811>.

¹⁸ H. TAJFEL, HUMAN GROUPS AND SOCIAL CATEGORIES: STUDIES IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 255 (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

facilitating in-group interactions and cooperation but potentially negative as the out-group people may be stereotyped and be treated unfairly.”¹⁹

This theory helps to explain the reason behind the hostility meted out to women, people of colour, and the LGBTQ community historically understood to be the out-group in the gaming culture. The out-group cannot be considered ‘*true gamers*’ by the in-groups for the simple reason that the term remains strongly associated with being male²⁰. And for this very reason, it is hard for women to visibly self-identify as gamers, a term exclusively reserved for an all-boys club for the past 30 years.

3. MISOGYNY IN THE INDUSTRY

Misogyny and hostility perpetuate itself on different levels within the gaming industry. Some of the most visible forms of misogyny in the industry can be seen in the representation of female characters in video games, online hate mobs exclusively targeting women, gender pay gap and the systematic exclusion of women from game developing roles.

3.1. REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN VIDEO GAMES

The Electronic Entertainment Expo or E3 is the world’s premier event for computer and video games. In 2015, the event celebrated women taking stronger roles, heralding the rise of women gamers. Big companies like Sony and Microsoft released games like *ReCore* and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* respectively, with female protagonists. On the surface, it looked like the change had arrived. However, Anita Sarkeesian and Carolyn Petit of an independent non-profit organization called the Feminist Frequency attended all the E3 events from the year 2015 to 2019 and conducted a statistical analysis to accurately record all the games featuring female protagonists to understand the change in representation, if any.²¹ They found that the representation only got worse from the year 2015 to 2019. The percentages of games featuring female protagonists recorded were: 2015 – 9%, 2016 – 3%, 2017 – 7%, 2018 – 8%, 2019 – 5%,

¹⁹ William T. Hove et al, *Concerning gamer identity: An examination of individual factors associated with accepting the label of gamer*, 24 FIRST MONDAY 3 (2019).

²⁰ Adrienne Shaw, *What is video game culture?* *Cultural Studies and Game Studies*, 5(4) GAMES AND CULTURE 403–424 (2010).

²¹ Anita Sarkeesian, Carolyn Petit, *Female Representation in Videogames Isn't Getting Any Better*, WIRED (Jun. 14, 2019), <https://www.wired.com/story/e3-2019-female-representation-videogames/>.

of the total number of games featured. These figures highlight the rigidity towards change and the non-inclusive nature of the gaming industry.

In 2013, ‘The Best Show in the Universe’ channel’s vlogger on YouTube, Maddox said “*video games are created by men for men*”²² as a justification towards the unfair portrayal of female characters in video games, either as a *damsel in distress (Princess Peach/ Zelda)* or a *hypersexualized (Lara Croft)* character, if at all. Maddox’s two-minute justification emphasizes that *a fair representation of women in media is not a man’s duty because men do not identify themselves with females or their point of view*. His statement is reflective of the idea that expanding a female character’s scope from her traditional portrayal as an object of sexual fantasy is a disruption or unnecessary interference in the gaming industry, limiting its real fan base (male) from fully enjoying video games in the hands of interlopers (female gamers).

This vituperative thought process often sums up the mindset behind the blatant objectification of female characters in video games. Keeping this audience in mind, game developers make impractical armour/clothing for female characters, resulting in their sexualization and portray them as subordinates²³ to male characters, which often need to be saved or romanced. Thus, effectively denying any form of independent existence to a female character in the game.

As pointed out by Anita Sarkeesian,²⁴ developers of games like ‘Halo Universe’ or ‘Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain’ provided very bizarre rationale behind the sexualization of their female characters in the games. For instance, in the Halo Universe series, *Cortana*, the super-intelligent Artificial Intelligence (AI) companion, is completely naked as opposed to her male counterpart, who wears clothes. Halo franchise director Frank O’Connor reasoned that:

“One of the reasons she does it is to attract and demand attention. And she does it to put people off so they are on their guard when they are talking to her and that she has the upper hand in those conversations. It’s kind of almost like the opposite of that nightmare you have where you go to school in the nude, and you’re terrified

²² Maddox, *Quick Rant- The solution to sexism in video games!*, THE BEST SHOW IN THE UNIVERSE: YOUTUBE (Jun. 7, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpJGkG1g-Lk>.

²³ Teresa Lynch et al, *Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Year*, 66(4) JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION 564-584 (2016).

²⁴ Anita Sarkeesian, *Lingerie is not Armor*, FEMINIST FREQUENCY (Jun. 6, 2016), <https://feministfrequency.com/video/lingerie-is-not-armor/>.

and embarrassed. She's kind of projecting that back out to her audience and winning intellectual points as a result."²⁵

Similarly, the developers of 'Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain' spun a ridiculous story about the game's female characters' past to justify the sexualization as essential to the game as "*she is breathing through her skin and clothing would suffocate her*".²⁶

As part of her doctoral project,²⁷ Teresa Lynch compiled 571 playable female characters from 1989-2014 to examine them for signs of hypersexualization, which included nudity, over-enlarged breasts or hips, and unrealistically narrow waists. It was found that the sexualization of female characters peaked in 1995 and then declined, but games still objectify female characters and feature them more often in secondary roles.²⁸

Lara Croft, the most famed female character from the Tomb Raider game series blew up the gaming culture, but predominantly with her sex appeal. Her oversized bosom was a result of a coding error, but the error was appreciated amongst the male game developers of the Tomb Raider franchise and thus kept in the final edit.²⁹ *Lara Croft's* sexualized character was both revered and marred with many legal battles and sexist ad campaigns. One famous ad campaign called "*where the boys are*"³⁰ plainly suggested that *Lara Croft* was a commodity solely for the consumption of straight male gamers. Such was the sexualization of *Lara Croft* that the character found its name and game logo printed next to nude models in the magazine by Playboy Enterprises. Ultimately a British High Court ruled in favour of the Tomb Raider trademark owners - Core Design Ltd, and barred the magazine from using the game logo as *Lara's* 'squeaky-clean image' would be 'tarnished for all time' by any association with soft-core pornography.³¹ In the same vein, it is worth mentioning that *Lara Croft's* character has seen a tremendous transformation in her appearance with more realistic body proportions

²⁵ Pete Haas, *Why Cortana Is Naked In Halo*, CINEMABLEND, (Oct. 30, 2015), <https://www.cinemablend.com/games/Why-Cortana-Naked-Halo-95967.html>.

²⁶ ANITA SARKEESIAN, *supra* note 24.

²⁷ TERESA LYNCH, *supra* note 23.

²⁸ Lora Strum, *Study tracks 31-year history of female sexualization in video games*, PBS NEWS HOUR (Jul. 8, 2016), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/study-tracks-31-year-history-of-female-sexualization-in-video-games>.

²⁹ Aja Romano, *Why we've been arguing about Lara Croft for two decades*, VOX (Mar. 17, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/3/17/17128344/lara-croft-tomb-raider-history-controversy-breasts>

³⁰ Tomb Raider Empire, *Tomb Raider 2 - Commercial - where the boys are? Long version*, YOUTUBE (Sep. 2, 2012), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ExFpdv_0C8&feature=youtu.be.

³¹ Vikram Dodd, *Lara Croft saved from Playboy*, THE GUARDIAN (Jul. 15, 1999), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/jul/15/vikramdodd>.

clothing, and armour since the change in the Tomb Raider franchise's game developers (Crystal Dynamics) in 2013.³²

As people are slowly becoming conscious of the issues faced by women in the gaming industry, they are coming forward with their support in effective ways. For instance, the Warehouse Group³³ in New Zealand stopped the sale of R18³⁴ games, their decision was influenced by the graphic sex scenes and extreme violence towards women in Grand Theft Auto (GTA) V. Similarly GTA V was taken off the racks³⁵ from the Australian branch of mega-retailer Target after a petition³⁶ led by former sex workers demanding its removal was signed by 48,142 supporters. GTA V provides the players with an array of options to kill female sex workers after engaging in various sexual acts with them. The premise behind the mindless killing is to steal the money paid to the sex workers after engaging in their services. The methods of killing the sex workers include: punching her unconscious, killing her with a machete, bat or guns, or running her over with a car, and even setting her alight.

In an age where gamers take cultural cues and influences from games, building tolerance towards sexually violent games and viewing them as 'normal' or playing them in the name of 'entertainment' is a very disturbing trend that is capable of leaving an irreversible impact on the society.

3.1.1. IMPACT ON FEMALE GAMERS

The blatant objectification of female game characters points towards a deep-rooted problem in the gaming industry i.e., the association of sexualization with power and meaningfulness in female characters. The idea that women can only be celebrated or deemed desirable by a

³² Rozanne Els, *The Evolution of Lara Croft*, VULTURE (Mar. 13, 2018), <https://www.vulture.com/2018/03/lara-croft-rebooted-the-tomb-raider-is-back-in-new-movie.html>.

³³ Jamie Gray, *The warehouse take R18 entertainment off the shelves*, NZ HERALD (Nov. 24, 2014), https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=11363676.

³⁴ New Zealand, *Classification Labels*, <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/find-ratings/new-zealands-classification-labels/>.

³⁵ Erik Kain, *Target Bans 'Grand Theft Auto V' Sales In Australia*, FORBES (Dec. 3, 2014), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2014/12/03/target-bans-grand-theft-auto-v-sales-in-australia/#1861fe3f66fa>.

³⁶ *Target: Withdraw Grand Theft Auto 5 – this sickening game encourages players to commit sexual violence and kill women*, CHANGE.ORG (2014), <https://www.change.org/p/target-withdraw-grand-theft-auto-5-this-sickening-game-encourages-players-to-commit-sexual-violence-and-kill-women>.

straight male if they are sexualized. This idea impacts female gamers negatively and reinforces itself even in the real world.

In some studies, it has been shown that as a result of such exposure, female gamers report self-objectification and consequently perceive low levels of self-efficacy.³⁷ Another study suggests that female gamers tend to suffer from stress and annoyance due to the unsuitability of video games on offer and its departure from something they would naturally select to play. This would suggest that women play less than men simply due to annoyance that video games are not developed with female audiences in mind, as much as their male counterparts.³⁸ Lack of role models is one of the important factors perpetuating the exclusion of female gamers in the gaming industry.

3.2.MISOGYNIST ONLINE MOVEMENTS

There have been a few prominent misogynist online movements in the gaming community that were an affront to women's dignity, worth, and capabilities. It brought to fore the inherent sexism and toxicity in the male-dominated video gaming industry. Quinspiracy or #Gamergate and #Notmybattlefield are noteworthy movements in this respect.

3.2.1. QUINSPIRACY OR #GAMERGATE, 2014

Masked as a campaign against corruption in video journalism, Quinspiracy was a faceless online campaign that systematically harassed, heckled, abused, and doxxed several female game developers and outspoken feminist women³⁹, threatened by the widening horizons and cultural diversification in the gaming sphere. The three main targets of this hate mob were *Zoe Quinn*,⁴⁰ *Anita Sarkeesian*⁴¹, and *Brianna Wu*.

³⁷ Meghan Gestos et al, *Representation of women in video games: a systematic review of literature in consideration of adult female wellbeing*, 21(9) CYBERPSYCHOL. BEHAV. SOC. NETW. 535-541 (Sep. 1, 2018).

³⁸ Christopher J. Ferguson & M. Brent Donnellan, *Are Associations between "Sexist" Video Games and Decreased Empathy Toward Women Robust? A Reanalysis of Gabbiadini et al.*, 46(12) J YOUTH ADOLESC. 2446-2459 (2017).

³⁹ Aja Romano, *What we still haven't learned from Gamergate*, VOX (Jan. 20, 2020), <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/1/20/20808875/gamergate-lessons-cultural-impact-changes-harassment-laws>.

⁴⁰ Sarah Jeong, *When the Internet chases you from your Home*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Aug. 15, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/15/opinion/gamergate-zoe-quinn.html>.

⁴¹ Emily Van Der Werff, *#Gamergate: Here's why everybody in the video game world is fighting*, VOX (Oct. 13, 2014), <https://www.vox.com/2014/9/6/6111065/gamergate-explained-everybody-fighting>.

Zoe Quinn, a game developer, was at the forefront of this harassment campaign for developing a game called *Depression Quest*⁴² in 2013. Although her game received good reviews⁴³ in the gaming media, she faced a backlash from faceless anonymous attackers on various internet forums. The backlash was a result of the game being a departure from the usual videogame formats in that there was nothing traditionally ‘fun’ or ‘entertaining’ and no provision of victorious endings in the game. Quinn developed the game with an aim to promote mental health discussion based on her own experiences with depression. However, this movement took an ugly turn and a faceless mob gathered on forums like *WordPress*, *4chan*, *8chan*, and *Reddit*, starting an online revolution against Quinn. The Quinspiracy hate mob gained further momentum when *Full Metal Jacket* actor Adam Baldwin posted two video links on his Twitter handle in support of Quinspiracy with a hashtag, #Gamergate.⁴⁴ Quinspiracy movement then morphed itself into Gamergate. The harassment and life threat by Gamergate intensified to the point that it chased Quinn away from her home for her safety.

Anita Sarkeesian, is the founder of Feminist Frequency,⁴⁵ a not-for-profit educational organization that analyses modern media’s relationship to societal issues such as gender, race, and sexuality. Around the same time that Quinspiracy was boiling over, Anita released a new video in her video series *Tropes v. Women* which criticizes the stereotypical and negative roles of female characters in video games and became another prominent target of the hate mob. She also faced harassment by the faceless mob in a similar fashion and was emailed images of herself being raped by video game characters.⁴⁶ An interactive online game was developed by the mob called ‘Beat up Anita Sarkeesian’ which allowed players to beat her until she bruised. She was also compelled by Gamergate to flee her home. Lastly, Brianna Wu, an independent game developer, was another prominent target engulfed by Gamergate. Wu in one of her weekly podcasts criticized the sexualization of women in games and disapproved the normalization of such treatment around the same time as Gamergate. The mob took note of it

⁴² DEPRESSION QUEST, <http://www.depressionquest.com/>.

⁴³ Phil Owen, *4 Video games that help you understand and deal with your depression*, KOTAKU (Apr. 19, 2013), <https://kotaku.com/4-video-games-that-help-you-understand-and-deal-with-yo-473476131>.

⁴⁴ ALISON NOVAK & IMAANI JAMILLAH EL-BURKI, *DEFINING IDENTITY AND THE SCOPE OF CULTURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE* 129-130 (IGI Global 2016).

⁴⁵ FEMINIST FREQUENCY, <https://feministfrequency.com/>.

⁴⁶ KARLA MANTILLA, *GENDERTROLLING: HOW MISOGYNY WENT VIRAL* 72 (Praeger 2015).

and along the same lines as Anita and Quinn, sent her rape and death threats, made her private information public, and forced her out of her own home.⁴⁷

3.2.2. #NOTMYBATTLEFIELD, 2018

America's second-largest video gaming company, Electronic Arts' or EA released a trailer of their Second World War-set game series, Battlefield V. The trailer drew flak from gamers and grew into a Twitter movement under the hashtag #NotMyBattlefield because it featured too many female characters as soldiers. Online petitions were also signed to reverse the new change in the game. Twitter critics complained of 'historical inaccuracy', 'revising history', 'political correctness of EA', 'disrespect towards millions of men that died', 'making the game unrealistic', and 'ignoring the fan base', as the actual reason behind their rage. According to the critics, women played a *minuscule role* in combat during WW2 and were mostly involved in the role of nurses, factory workers, and other 'logistically vital' fields but were never in the front line fighting the actual battle. They argued that the minority case (female troops) should not be expounded to outrageous proportions. As historically inaccurate⁴⁸ and uninformed as these opinions can be, this movement was yet another show of mindless and baseless resistance against women in the gaming industry.

3.2.3. ONLINE MOVEMENTS DEMANDING LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Amidst the negativity, there have also been many positive online movements in the gaming world demanding equality and fairness from time to time. For instance, #IreasoWhy⁴⁹ trended for many months on Twitter in 2012 where women working in the gaming industry tweeted about the harassment they faced from their male colleagues and paved way for discussion panels to highlight and address these issues. Similarly, #INeedDiverseGames⁵⁰ movement began as a backlash against games solely pandering to white male players and #Gamergate. #Everyone's Battlefield⁵¹ also emerged in response to the #NotMyBattleField movement.

⁴⁷ Brianna Wu, *A moment that changed me - Gamergate*, THE GUARDIAN (Aug. 21, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/21/gamergate-sexism-games-industry-women-trolls>.

⁴⁸ Christina Roeckenwagner, *The Invisible Soldiers Women in War II, Article 7*, UCN (2018), <https://www.ucn.ca/sites/mftn/spring2018/Pages/Article-7.aspx>.

⁴⁹ Mary Hamilton, *#IreasoWhy: the hashtag that exposed games industry sexism*, THE GUARDIAN (Nov. 28, 2012), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/nov/28/games-industry-sexism-on-twitter>.

⁵⁰ Emma Boyle, *Interview: Tanya DePass, creator of #INeedDiverseGames*, GADGETTE (Oct. 23, 2015), <https://www.gadgette.com/2015/10/23/interview-tanya-depass-creator-of-ineeddivegames/>.

⁵¹ Ravi Sinha, *Battlefield 5 Community Manager Says "This is Everyone's Battlefield"*, GAMINGBOLT (May 27, 2018), <https://gamingbolt.com/battlefield-5-community-manager-says-this-is-everyones-battlefield>.

3.3.FEMALE GAME DEVELOPERS

According to a survey by Statista⁵² in 2019, only 24% game developers out of the total number who responded to the survey worldwide, were women. This is an abysmally small number considering the percentage of male game developers' demographic, making up for an overwhelming 71% of all game developers worldwide. Game development is yet another sphere of the gaming industry which is difficult for any non-white, non-heterosexual or female entity to permeate through.

Artist Jane Ng in the book *Women in Game Development: Breaking the Glass Level-Cap (2016)*, highlights that her years of experience were often overlooked and noted how “well-meaning professionals could still perpetuate a sexist culture where women were continuously put through trials to prove their worth.”⁵³ So, Gamergate controversy summed up was nothing but an attack against a female game developer who developed a game moving away from the usual narratives of action and racing favoured by the straight male gamers.

Notably, a vicious circle of underrepresentation also exists in the industry, where fewer people of colour and women see themselves represented and as a result are less likely to apply for those jobs.⁵⁴ This toxic cycle continues to discourage women from even applying for jobs, lowering their chances of being hired or promoted. Thus, while the number of female gamers continues to grow exponentially, female game developers are seeing a slow rise in number.

Among the factors dissuading women from pursuing careers in the gaming industry, the gender pay gap remains on top of the list. Companies like Sony in their UK Gender Pay Gap Report 2018⁵⁵ have noted that the gender pay gaps are particularly prevalent in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) sectors because of the significantly higher number of men working in the industry. The reasons regarding the imbalance in the STEM industry are pointed towards the minuscule percentage of women enrollment in STEM courses leading to

⁵² Christina Gough, *Distribution of game developers worldwide from 2014 to 2017 by gender*, STATISTA (2018), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/453634/game-developer-gender-distribution-worldwide/>.

⁵³ *Women in Game Development: Breaking the Glass Level-Cap*, 64, (Jennifer Brandes Hepler ed., CRC Press, 2017).

⁵⁴ Chella Ramanan, *The video game industry has a diversity problem – but it can be fixed*, THE GUARDIAN (Mar. 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/15/video-game-industry-diversity-problem-women-non-white-people>.

⁵⁵ *2018 UK Gender Pay Gap*, SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT EUROPE (2019), https://www.playstation.com/en-gb/content/dam/content/dam/territories/en-gb/SIEE/UK_Gender_Pay_Gap_2018_FINAL.pdf.

fewer women entering STEM-related careers and, as a result, fewer women in line for leadership positions in later years. Eileen Pollock, a professor of creative writing at the University of Michigan, throws light on the struggle that young girls and women go through while trying to study subjects such as physics and mathematics. She argues that the lack of social conditioning, encouragement and paucity of opportunities prove to be the major reasons for the absence of women in STEM fields and not unfounded biological excuses such as the presence of an extra ‘X’ chromosome.⁵⁶

A survey⁵⁷ statistic as of June 2018 presents the mean salary (sum of every employee’s hourly rate of pay divided by the total number of employees) of employees in the game industry worldwide, broken down by gender at \$51.75 thousand for male employees, while in comparison their female counterpart earned a mean salary of \$46.7 thousand (In US Dollars). This gap is caused due to a lack of female representation in the senior levels and well-paid disciplines. Another underlying reason for the lack of female representation in the senior leadership positions at workplaces can be attributed to the fact that women in their later twenties are primarily and disproportionately responsible for childcare responsibilities at home and hence are more likely to choose homely duties over job promotions.⁵⁸

4. ESPORTS AND WOMEN

Esports or professional and competitive video gaming has seen immense popularity in the last decade in terms of revenue, participation, and viewership, turning itself into a billion-dollar industry.⁵⁹ This growth in membership and viewership is only going to peak with better accessibility to the internet infrastructure and the rampant development in technology, graphics and hardware around the world.

However, it does remain a matter of concern that despite women making up for half the gamers in the world one is hard-pressed for even a dozen female gamers’ names in the professional

⁵⁶ Eileen Pollack, *Why Are There Still So Few Women in Science?*, THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE, (Oct 3, 2013), https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/06/magazine/why-are-there-still-so-few-women-in-science.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&.

⁵⁷ Christina Gough, *Average salaries in the games industry worldwide as of June 2018, by gender*, STATISTA (Sep 11, 2018), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/882946/games-industry-salaries-by-gender/>.

⁵⁸ Jayita Poduval & Murali Poduval, *Working Mothers: How Much Working, How Much Mothers, And Where Is The Womanhood*, 7(1) MENS SANA MONOGR 63–79 (2009).

⁵⁹ James Ayles, *Global Esports Revenue Reaches More than \$1 Billion as Audience Figures Exceed 433 Million*, FORBES (Dec. 3, 2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesayles/2019/12/03/global-esports-revenue-reaches-more-than-1-billion-as-audience-figures-exceed-433-million/#c9c0a7313298>.

gaming community. The reasons for it are lack of role models, the fear of sexism, dearth of supportive institutional structures, and non-perception of women as a ‘target group’ of the gaming industry. Like any other sport, women teams in Esports do not receive the same coverage as the men’s team, and not due to lack of skill or physical disadvantage.

Realizing these challenges, many organizations have launched women’s-only events, and clubs like *Singularity*, *Counter Logic*, and *Gen.G* have aggressively added all-female teams to their rosters to spur women’s participation.⁶⁰ Further, women’s-only professional circuits have evolved to encourage women to play without the fear of discrimination.

4.1. ALL WOMEN ESPORTS TOURNAMENTS: PROS & CONS

Female-only esports tournaments took off as a stop-gap effort to “*provide a platform that offers opportunities for women to grow and develop their competitiveness in esports.*”⁶¹ They provide a stepping stone for women to participate in games without automatically comparing themselves with the opposite sex and judging their capability as a gamer. The participation of women has seen growth and representation due to such initiatives.

However, Female-only-leagues should not be seen as the only answer to solving the gender problem. For better representation, the goal should be to enable all-women teams to participate in all types of tournaments including coed tournaments and not segregate an already segregated community.

The gender pay gap also remains a persistent problem in Esports. Out of the 500 top esports earners, only one woman, *Scarlett*, a *Starcraft 2* champion, broke in at rank 301⁶² with \$296,000 earnings, in comparison to the winner, *KuroKy* with \$4.1 mil in earnings.

⁶⁰ Luke Winkie, *Women-Only Esport Competitions Are on the Rise — But Where’s the Money*, ONE ZERO (Jun. 21, 2019), <https://onezero.medium.com/women-only-esport-competitions-are-on-the-rise-but-where-s-the-money-35316acdebc6>.

⁶¹ Jay Castello, *Women-only e-sports events are building toward a future where they’re unnecessary*, THE VERGE (Oct. 22, 2019), <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/22/20925850/girl-gamer-esports-festival-madrid-league-of-legends-fortnite-overwatch>.

⁶² Ali Jones, *Only one female esports player makes it onto the list of the top 500 earners*, PC GAMES (Sep. 10, 2019), <https://www.pcgamesn.com/starcraft-ii/top-earning-female-esports-players>.

Dignitas Female has been one of the most successful esports women's teams on the planet⁶³. Yet after all their wins in prestigious all-women tournaments like 2018's *GIRLGAMER Esports Festival*, 2019's *Copenhagen Games*, and *Intel Challenge Katowice* in 2019 and 2018, their total earning amounts to \$65,524, a fraction of what they would make for similar victories in coed tournaments. The sponsors are relatively fewer for all-women sports tournaments and hence the prize money in such events. The all-women tournaments themselves are far and few in between and resultantly female esports gamers have to take on side jobs to sustain themselves as opposed to male gamers who can make a living off of professional gaming.

Thus, there is a strong need to balance out the representation of women and the gender pay gap while simultaneously fighting against the stereotypes that work against female gamers.

This stereotype plays out itself even when female gamers are being signed in teams for gaming leagues. Managers of many esports teams avoid hiring non-male players because they draw more flak than encouragement in doing so. Signing women in professional gaming are seen as a 'PR stunt' or a 'fake show of diversity' and so teams like to steer clear of such hurdles⁶⁴. The subtext is that hiring female players in professional gaming is seen as nothing more than a sort of tokenism for improving diversity with an underlying implication that they lack the requisite skills of a good player.

5. SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN IN GAMING

In a survey⁶⁵ conducted amongst 388 female gamers, it was found that 57% of female gamers experienced harassment while playing online games after revealing their gender. Sexual harassment in gaming is a form of Cyber-bullying. It is understood as unwelcome sexual advances or other conduct that targets someone based on their sex (inclusive of gender harassment) in the form of making suggestive or discriminatory comments, rape jokes, death threats, rape threats, and sexual coercion. It takes place over digital devices like mobile phones, computers, laptops, tablets, etc. through online chat forums, social media websites (Twitter,

⁶³ Shlomo Sprung, *Meet Team Dignitas CS:GO Fe, The All-Female Gaming Team Taking the Esports World by Storm*, FORBES (Jul. 3, 2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/shlomosprung/2019/07/03/meet-team-dignitas-csgo-fe-the-all-female-gaming-team-taking-the-esports-world-by-storm/#5b8403ec72b4>.

⁶⁴ Ashley Oh, *An Overwatch Women's League isn't the answer*, POLYGON (Jan 18, 2018), <https://www.polygon.com/2018/1/18/16896858/overwatch-league-women-esports-sexism-geguri>.

⁶⁵ *Women in Esports: Exploring Gender Inequality in Esports Participation and Viewership*, CASINO.ORG, <https://www.casino.org/gender-stereotypes-in-esports/>.

Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook, etc.), game platforms, text messages, or emails. Cyberbullying leaves adverse physical and psychological effects on the victims.

The most notable example of cyber-bullying and sexual harassment of women in the gaming industry was undoubtedly the Gamergate scandal of 2014.⁶⁶ The online attacks against the targets in Gamergate got so sinister that it posed a very real risk of its victim's physical safety. The helplessness in the victims and a lack of understanding of cyber-crimes in law enforcement agencies further emboldened the perpetrators to do anything they so wished, behind the veil of anonymity. Ultimately, in law vs. the faceless mob scenario, the Gamergate mob won and the victims were not remedied.

As can be seen from the Gamergate scandal, Cyberbullying is often difficult to effectively deal with due to the jurisdictional challenges and anonymity of the perpetrators in most cases. The principle of territorial jurisdiction does not apply because these crimes can also be committed through a server located anywhere on the globe. Most of the developing and developed nations in the world do not have specific legislation addressing the virtual crime of cyberbullying. Generally, criminal harassment statutes or existing laws provide a basis for prosecuting individuals suspected of committing cyberbullying. India too does not have special legislation addressing or defining the crime of cyberbullying. Reliance is placed on existing statutes like the Indian Penal Code, 1860,⁶⁷ and the Information Technology Act, 2000 for prosecuting perpetrators.⁶⁸

Thus, specific laws addressing the crime of cyberbullying need to be developed and regular training concerning the ever-evolving forms of cyber-crimes must be imparted to law enforcement agencies and police officials to tackle these issues effectively and make the internet a safer space for everyone.

5.1.TOP METHODS EMPLOYED BY WOMEN TO AVOID HARASSMENT WHILE GAMING ONLINE

Due in part to the desensitization in players towards harassment faced by female gamers, unregulated gaming chat rooms, and the lack of functional sexual harassment policies in place,

⁶⁶ See *Supra* Section 3.2.

⁶⁷ Indian Penal Code, 1860.

⁶⁸ Information Technology Act, 2000, No. 21 Acts of Parliament, 2000 (India).

women employ various non-confrontational methods to survive the sexist trolls in the gaming world. The findings⁶⁹ in a survey conducted amongst 388 female gamers revealed that women either;

- i. Block or mute Toxic players: 74.5%
- ii. Avoid verbal communication with other players: 70.4%
- iii. Avoid visual communication with other players: 57%
- iv. Gender neutralize screen names: 50.3%
- v. Lie about the real name: 27.8%
- vi. Lie about gender: 23.2%
- vii. Create a male avatar: 22.2%
- viii. Lie about age: 17.8%, or
- ix. Did nothing to stop harassment: 2.2%

6. WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Much can be done to remedy the current imbalance of gender representation and the allied issues in the gaming culture and bring about a spirit of community. A few important ones are as discussed below.

6.1. EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

The change should first be attempted at grassroots level i.e. quality education at the school level, targeting women and people of colour towards STEM courses and coding. STEM courses, computer games technology, and allied courses necessary for breaking into the gaming industry can be introduced through education fairs or made part of the curriculum to acquaint female students with the industry and boost their enrollment in such courses at the college level. Recently, the government of India introduced the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020, according to which students will be taught Coding as a subject from as early as standard 6th⁷⁰. Such progressive educational policies in place can enable students as young as 10-12 years to

⁶⁹ CASINO.ORG, *Supra* note 65.

⁷⁰ *New Education Policy: Students To Learn Coding From Class 6*, THE QUINT, (Jul. 30, 2020), <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/new-education-policy-students-to-learn-coding-from-class-6th-onwards#:~:text=The%20New%20Education%20Policy%20allows,coding%20from%20class%206th%20onwards.&text=According%20to%20the%20New%20Education,as%20early%20as%20class%206th.>

inculcate an interest in developing games irrespective of their gender and defy the established stereotypes.

6.2.REMOVING STRUCTURAL BARRIERS THROUGH INCLUSIVE COMPANY POLICIES

To enable working women in the gaming industry to effectively thrive in a male-dominated atmosphere, functional policies addressing workplace harassment, training for senior job roles, bridging of the gender pay gap, and formalizing of policies in the interest of working mothers like *work from home* or *part-time working options* should be brought in the work culture. Addressing these structural barriers will go a long way in making the industry more inclusive.

Companies should also actively address the concerns and complaints of sexual harassment by their employees and take proactive actions by introducing policies that can effectively tackle the situation. As was seen recently, gaming company *Ubisoft* conducted a thorough investigation into the tidal wave of sexual misconduct allegations that emerged publicly against the upper management across several of its studios. Resultantly, several of its top executives accused of sexual misconduct were fired. The CEO of *Ubisoft* also committed to bringing in sweeping internal changes aimed at addressing the culture issues at *Ubisoft*, including appointing a head of workplace culture and setting up an “*online confidential alert platform*.” It also planned to introduce a system of tying employee bonuses to “*their ability to create a positive and inclusive workplace environment*”.⁷¹ Gaming companies on their end can also introduce a system of reserved internship slots for female students to reduce their struggle in finding the right opportunity to build upon their interests, passion and gain practical experience.

6.3.ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, etc. have an undeniably important role to play in creating a safer space for female gamers. Twitter today serves as a platform where creators, streamers, and esports legends all share their opinions, reviews, and spark conversations around their respective fields which heavily engages gamers. However, it has been seen time and again that such conversations can easily take shape of an online hate mob and violent verbal attacks. Thus, Twitter finds itself in an important position to monitor such conversations or trending

⁷¹ Jay Peters, *Ubisoft reportedly fires one of its most influential execs following allegations of sexual harassment*, THE VERGE (Aug. 3, 2020), <https://www.theverge.com/2020/8/3/21353197/ubisoft-fires-tommy-francois-allegations-sexual-harassment>.

hashtags and block the ones that are racist, sexist, violent or violative in nature. Leader of streaming platform Amazon's *Twitch* is also looking at overhauling their internal policies and culture after being recently marred by a barrage of sexual misconduct allegations⁷² faced by its female streamers on a day to day basis. Such streaming services should ensure stricter chat room controls to provide a safer space for its female streamers. *Facebook Gaming* was also proactive in suspending⁷³ Michael 'THINND' McMahon's page which has close to 940,000 followers after allegations of abuse emerged from his ex-partner.

Therefore, seriously attempting to evaluate reports and complaints of sexual misconduct, impropriety, bad work cultures and actively pursuing such issues can aid in developing technologies, algorithms, and policies, which allow female gamers to consider themselves a part of the community.

6.4. ORGANIZATIONS SHOWING THE WAY FORWARD

Taking the matter into their own hands several NPOs and NGOs have been training and encouraging girls and women about technology with an aim to decrease the gender gap in areas such as technology, game development, and design in the video game industry. Some of these organizations are *Girls Who Code*, *Girls Makes Games*, and *Pixelles* etc. *Girls Who Code* work with a mission to “close the gender gap in technology and to change the image of what a programmer looks like and does” offers girls with school club programs, summer campus programs, and longer summer immersion programs among others. Recently, *Girls Who Code* was launched in India as well⁷⁴. Similarly, *Girls Makes Games* has partnered with major companies like Thomson Reuters, Google Play, Intel, Ubisoft, Sony, Xbox, PopCap Games, Humble Bundle, MIT etc. to provide an ultimate crash course to its students in game design and development by working alongside established industry professionals⁷⁵.

⁷² Jacob Kastrenakes, *Twitch Reckons With Sexual Assault As It Begins Permanently Suspending Streamers*, THE VERGE, (Jun. 25, 2020), <https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/25/21303185/twitch-sexual-harassment-assault-permanent-bans-streamers>

⁷³ Olga Kharif, *Game Streamers Suspended on Twitch and Facebook Move to YouTube*, BLOOMBERG QUINT (Jul. 29, 2020), <https://www.bloombergquint.com/onweb/game-streamers-suspended-on-twitch-and-facebook-move-to-youtube>.

⁷⁴ Rekha Balakrishnan, *Girls Who Code launches in India*, YOURSTORY (Nov. 7, 2019), <https://yourstory.com/herstory/2019/11/girls-who-code-india-launch-utc-technologies-reshma-saujani>.

⁷⁵ Liz Lanier, *How Girls Make Games Is Inspiring the Next Generation of Game Developers*, FORBES (Jul. 16, 2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizlanier/2019/07/16/girls-make-games-laila-shabir-profile/#514533f77532>.

Pixelles is “committed to helping more women make and change games.”⁷⁶ It also supports women in their mid-career and organizes free monthly workshops, a mentorship program for aspiring women-in-games, game jams, socials, etc.

7. CONCLUSION

It is nothing short of inspirational that despite all odds, women have continued their fight for an inclusive gaming industry. The responsibility also lies upon every stakeholder to not be a bystander or a mere spectator of unequal treatment of women, LGBTQ community, and people of colour in the hands of bullies and trolls. No member of the gaming community should be discriminated against simply based on their gender or nationality. The complacent attitude of the industry in dealing with toxic and unfriendly behaviour against women, LGBTQ and people of colour should also be challenged. Standardized gaming guidelines educating gamers about acceptable gaming behaviour should be developed by industry stakeholders in the interest of safe online gaming. Every attempt at removal of structural barriers which hinder women in the gaming industry, positive representation of women in video games, and diversity in the workplace by industry stakeholders should be appropriately rewarded to set an example and encourage others to follow suit.

Law enforcement agencies and lawmakers must also equip themselves with the ever-changing face of online gaming, and the myriad ways of online harassment to effectively develop laws and regulations to tackle this largely unregulated sphere and provide a safe digital space for all. Concerned government bodies should actively involve itself in regulating gaming companies from making or selling sexually violent games degrading women in the name of ‘entertainment’. Social media websites like Facebook or Twitter should be held equally responsible for regulating/blocking violative and sexist content and taking appropriate steps like invoking a ban against such defaulters from being able to use such platforms again. A thorough background check of streamers and players is thus essential on platforms like Twitch, Facebook Gaming, and YouTube etc for accountability purposes.

With the shift in ideas about ‘gaming’ and ‘gamers’, more women are slowly seeing themselves as capable of playing games and form roughly half the demography of gamers worldwide.

⁷⁶ James Batchelor, *Pixelles is helping mid-career mothers stay in games*, GAMEINDUSTRY.BIZ (Aug. 12, 2019) <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2019-08-12-pixelles-is-helping-mid-career-mothers-stay-in-games>.

Given the current demography of female gamers in the world, it will only serve in the interest of gaming companies to tap into this market and invest in making gender-inclusive and female-centric games. Gaming companies should strive to offer a wide range of choices for players from all age groups and gender without attaching any stigma towards who can *rightfully* play a game and *acquire* the status of a gamer.