Female Gamers and their Struggles with Online Gaming

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
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Introduction

Online gaming has reached the mainstream; some tournaments breach 1 million concurrent viewers (ESC, 2022). Nevertheless the climate of online gaming remains volatile, in part because players are typically less accountable online than in person. Women in particular have to fight sexism in online gaming, in the U.S. and elsewhere. Kuznekoff and Rose (2012) found that gamers (regardless of gender) react more negatively to a female voice than to a male voice. In their study, gamers were three times more likely to respond negatively to a female voice. Comparing female and male voiceovers for the same gameplay, Kelly et al. (2022) concluded that "female gamers were judged as less competent than male players."

Content moderation is no quick fix for online hate; it is only partially effective (Seering et al., 2017; Ganesh & Bright, 2020). Study of the struggle can reveal opportunities for effective activism.

The leading opponents of sexism in gaming are women gamers, but others are engaged as their allies. Many gaming based corporations act as allies, but their intentions may be for reputational or other business interests. Game developers are involved too, as their portrayal of women in games can influence the mindset gamers have towards women, or be uninviting to most women gamers. The oppressors include both deliberate perpetrators of explicit bias and relatively naive propagators of implicit bias.

Explicit and implicit sexism are not entirely separable. Those with implicit biases sometimes perpetuate sexism in the same way as those with explicit bias, and the response from women gamers may lump the two groups together. However, these two types of antagonists

operate under different intentions and influences. Thus they are considered completely independent groups of people.

Anonymous antagonists use either intentionally sexist behavior or actions driven by implicit bias to oppress women. In response, women gamers joined forces with each other, allied influencers, and allied corporations, forming a supportive network to combat their oppression.

Review of Research

Most of the research on sexism in gaming focuses on sexist behavior and its link to established psychology. Fox and Tang (2014) argue that "Social Dominance Orientation" drives sexist men to assert their dominance over women to maintain male control over online gaming. This effect extends beyond gaming; in a study of adolescent cyclists in France, Sayagh (2021) found that a dominant male presence in public areas deterred female cyclists. Some adolescents enforce male-dominant gender norms through gender policing (Young & Sweeting, 2004). Given a bias by which gaming is perceived as a male activity, boys may engage in gender policing to bully girls out of online gaming.

Tang et al. (2019) argue that the gamer identity is associated with heterosexual males, to the exclusion of others. They found that "Gamer identification" is "a predictor of sexual harassment perpetration," which is consistent with gender policing in which men engage in gatekeeping to enforce the male gamer identity. Johnson et al. (2016) contend that "cognitive stressors can increase implicit bias" in the emergency department of a hospital. The high octane environment of competitive gaming may elicit similar levels of stress, which could worsen implicit bias as it can in an emergency department. Sabin (2021) used implicit bias education to increase bias awareness in medical personnel, but also admits that current research on implicit

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bias awareness is limited.

Other researchers have looked at how depictions of female characters in games can influence the gaming climate for women. Henning et al. (2009) asked adolescents about stereotypes in video games, finding that increased gaming was associated with "greater acceptance and less critical evaluation of gender stereotypes," and that "boys were less critical about gender-stereotyped images" than girls. The researchers suggest that boys' greater acceptance of gender-stereotyped images may be due to greater total gameplay among boys.

Most research on sexism in gaming investigates the causes of sexist behavior without attention to how women respond. However, Cullen (2022) analyzed reddit comments on livestream themed forums to determine public opinion on feminism in gaming. She found that some feminist critiques were welcome, but feminism that "call(s) attention to any inequalities that may exist in streaming" was not. Such pressures may affect responses to sexism in gaming.

Study of the struggle over sexism in gaming may be useful in efforts to mitigate it. Studies of similar struggles have supported such efforts. For example, in a study of victims of domestic abuse, Spruin et al. (2017) found that support systems may not offer victims the tools they need – a finding of practical value to such systems.

Implicit Bias

RimWorld: Perpetuating Sexism

Implicit biases of game developers result in games and game modifications (mods) that sexualize women and depict them as weak or inferior to men. An example of this can be seen in a colony simulation game called RimWorld (Ludeon Studios, 2018). 'Sex Matters' is one such mod, created by CitizenKanye and Alexis Popcorn in 2021. The mod changes female traits to

have deficiencies in areas like strength, sharpshooting, and surgery, but have specialties in skills like social skills, farming, and persuasion. The positive and negative traits are roughly equal, but they are implicitly sexist by reinforcing historical stereotypes of women. For example, the mod gives women increased "Medical tend speed" but a reduced "Operation speed," reinforcing the belief that women are nurses and not surgeons (De Simone & Scano, 2017). The mod description also states that it "reoptimizes women to be more useful in support roles" (CitizenKanye & Alexis Popcorn, 2021), which reinforces the stereotype that women are caregivers or housewives (Ferrant et al., 2014). RimWorld is a single player game by default, but the modding community and its users interact frequently in online forums.

Community backlash reveals that some women gamers and allies perceive the mod to be sexist. The comments section under the mod's home page have players like GhostRonin471 (2021) declaring the mod's content as being "sexist and inaccurate" (p. 60), while others like Jimbo Slice (2021) "don't personally like some of the stat changes" (p. 41), that negatively affect women. Over all there are 61 pages of discussion in the comments, with the vast majority debating whether or not the mod is sexist. Most users against the mod took the stance of Jimbo Slice, opposed to how sex-based traits aligned with sexist stereotypes against women.

Women gamers and allies protested the mod on various reddit threads, notably r/GirlGamers and r/RimWorld. On r/RimWorld, users were supporting comments like "Stereotypes, the mod" (Few_Zookeepergame105, 2023), that directly point out the mod's implicit biases. They also supported comments that used humor and sarcasm, such as theseanbag's comment saying "It's a misprint, it's supposed to say Sexism Matters" (2023). In the r/girlgamers subreddit, the r/RimWorld discussion thread was shared (and heavily upvoted) with the caption "I'm so fucking tired" (s_hens, 2023), an allusion to the exhaustion of a constant

battle against sexism in online gaming. User your_favorite_wonkie replied to the post with "Wow, the levels of sexism here," shocked at how much blatant sexism they found (2023). Other users like Bareq99 expressed disgust, calling the mod "Pathetic" (2023). It is clear that women gamers view the mod as sexist, and care enough to share their thoughts both within their own community and in the mod's comment section.

Allied game developers have also helped fight against such implicit biases. WombatAstronaut created their own mod in 2021 called 'Gender Supremacy Expanded' (GSE) as a neutral alternative to 'Sex Matters'. Though GSE users can create a sexist environment, the mod itself has no predisposition for or against women. The mod acts as a 'what if' scenario rather than an attempt to model the real world. Wombat noted that this mod was inspired by 'Sex Matters', but also mentioned in the comments section (p. 6) that their motivation was out of frustration with the sexism in 'Sex Matters'. GSE's users have much more positive feedback than that of 'Sex Matters'. A user named Bubba said that GRE is "exactly what the other mod [Sex Matters] should have been" (2021, p. 4); other users like Mitokandria agreed - "After using this mod for awhile [sic] it is very much what I wanted" (2021, p. 3).

Competitive Gaming: Barriers to Success

In pop culture, depictions of hardcore gamers are often of an unhygienic and nerdy male, such as the world of warcraft nerd 'Leroy Jenkins' from the South Park episode *Make Love, Not Warcraft* (Parker et al., 2006). James Rolfe uses the nerdy gamer stereotype for comedic relief in his Angry Video Game Nerd (AVGN) series on his youtube channel *Cinemassacre*. Though not necessarily positive depictions, They are in line with the connection Tang et al. (2019) found between the heterosexual male identity and the gamer identity. Another highly cited article

concludes that "Numerous mechanisms, however, perpetuate the stereotype of gaming as a male activity" (Stratemeyer et al., 2016), agreeing with Tang et al.

The stereotypes against women gamers is undeniable, but its effects on their competitive gaming results are divisive. Some women gamers believe they aren't taken seriously because of their gender. A league of legends coach told one of their players that when women were added to the team, "the performance of their male teammates has dropped significantly" (Kenzieshinx, 2022). Judit Polgar, a retired chess super grandmaster, observed a similar lack of faith of female chess players. She found that after age 11 or 12, "a lot of girls drop out," partly because "coaches don't look at the girls as potential world champions" (Cox, 2019).

Other women and allies believe that stereotypes formed a cultural norm that discourages women from being competitive gamers. In another reddit thread, user Eyyya believes that "girls are not raised/socialized to be as competitive as boys" (2013). In a Counter Strike: Global Offensive forum (CS:GO), another user Qui9 found themselves arguing over the ethics of an all women's esports league, contending that "the reason esports has so little women is because competitive gaming is generally a very male thing, and part of internet culture, which is another very male thing" (2022).

Many users fall somewhere in between these two arguments, believing the issue to be more complex. Impact009 Believes that "Male pro gamers don't take girls seriously because there are none at the very top" (2013). In the same thread, Tossturtle (2013) argues that "Statistically, it's highly unlikely" to find a top level female competitor due to low player numbers, implicit bias against women, *and* explicit bias against women. The common message shared between women gamers and their allies is that stereotypes limit competitive opportunities and inhibit the success of female gamers.

Reddit user Rolf_Dom had a counterargument. They believed that there are few competitive women gamers because "female players simply don't seem to be that ambitious" and "It doesn't seem to be in their nature" (2019). Research from Niederle and Vesterlund (2007) claim that "women shy away from competition and men embrace it," which adds merit to Rolf_Dom's argument. In fact, the article finds that men may be up to twice as likely as females to be competitive. However, this two-to-one ratio is not comparable to the near zero presence of women gamers at the professional level of esports. This indicates that a lack of ambition is not the only contributing factor for male domination of esports. Rolf_Dom's latter statement does not invalidate the beliefs of women gamers that implicit biases negatively affect their status as hardcore/competitive gamers.

Efforts to support women gamers are more unified; the common approach is to fight against stereotypes by building up the competitive scene of women's esports. Competitive female gamers have worked together with gaming organizations to create all womens esports teams and tournaments. ESL, one of the biggest international esports companies and tournament organizers, created a women's league called ESL impact, which is now on its third season (Rizzolini, 2023). This league also gives female competitors an opportunity to play at a LAN (in person) tournament in front of a large crowd, as well as a $150,000 dollar prize pool. Valorant Game Changers is another league dedicated to women's esports, hosted by Valorant's developer and publisher, Riot Games (Rozelle, 2021).

Gaming organizations can offer more than just tournaments and prizes. They can provide women gamers with salaries, brand recognition, and competitive resources like full time coaches. The gaming organization Misfits has brought on sponsorship deals with gaming hardware company HyperX for their women's Valorant team (Lee, 2022). Lee also mentioned that G2

Esports has made efforts to negotiate equal terms for men's and women's sponsorship deals. Still, a lack of transparency or regulations for player contracts makes it hard to determine the merit of these efforts. In fact, the player and organization relationship is rife with controversy (Mitrevski, 2017). W7M Esports however made a guarantee that their womens and mens teams would be paid equally, such that "women players' salaries will rise by about 300% on average" (Frascarelli, 2022).

Women gamers view involvement of organizations as invaluable. In a BBC interview on esports, Valorant player Mel emphasizes that "it's really important to have like a really quality approach" to supporting women in esports, providing them resources like "a coach, a secondary coach, like a really good manager [sic], just a lot of support from the org in general" (Zuo and Williams, 2021). In the interview, the whole team agreed with the idea that access to the same resources as men's teams is imperative to the success of women's teams.

Reception of women's esports teams and leagues has been positive. CS:GO professional Goosebreeder tweeted that "what we're doing now is making a difference & setting the young up for success" (Dobie, 2023). Another professional in the Valorant scene tweeted that Cloud9 White was "my first team, my first home," but also that "Cloud9 White is just the first chapter in my story" (Katsumi, 2022). It's clear that current women's esports teams aren't viewed as equitable, but are still important nonetheless. The long term goal for many female esports professionals is to instead have women compete and win in mixed gender tournaments. In a few 2022 tweets, Katsumi stated that "[Her] goal has and always will be to compete with the best in the world," and to eventually "stop competing in the GC." She regards the Valorant Game Changers not as the ultimate level of competition, but as a means to support her climb to the top. This 'stepping stone' mentality is shared by CS:GO Pro BiBiAhn. She "[prefers] to play mixed

because they push [her] to do more," but also acknowledges that "[ESL Impact] is an integral stepping stone for women to ease themselves into the competitive process" (CarbonDogma, 2022).

Explicit Bias

Sexism with Intent

Antagonists with explicit biases against women gamers use sexual harassment and bullying to maintain male dominance over women gamers. Users will make vitriolic and sexual comments such as "I just recorded your voice and I beat my d— to it" or "you're lucky I don't know your address or I'd f— r— you" (Kayayluh, 2021). Twitch streamer Kyedae, who averages thousands of concurrent viewers (TwitchTracker, 2023), had a similar experience when a random Valorant player called her a "stupid, ugly, fat, b—" live on stream (Daily Twitch, 2022). These experiences are so common in online gaming that many women hide their gender online or avoid talking altogether. According to a survey in 2020 by Reach3 insights, "59% of women mask their gender when playing games online to avoid conflict."

Several livestreamers and esports competitors have spoken out on the hate they have received. Looking back at the BBC video from earlier, Valorant player Katsumi remarked that "People are especially sexist in game towards women and make very rude comments" and that "women every day just get like literally [sic] harassed in game" (Zuo and Williams, 2021). Based on the player cameras while Katsumi is talking, it's evident that her teammates feel the same way. In an unrelated interview, livestreamer and competitive gamer Hafu affirmed that "You [Women] just get harassed a lot" (Fusion, 2016), sharing Katsumi's belief that sexual harassment is constant. Hafu also emphasized that "People donate really nasty messages," including racial

and sexual slurs.

One way female gaming influencers resist oppression is by spreading awareness on sexism in online gaming. Hafu joined psychiatrist Dr. Kanojia on a mental health themed podcast (HealthyGamerGG) in 2021 to discuss her insecurities as a female streamer. Although Hafu conceded that livestreaming (on Twitch) has recently become a much safer environment, her reflection on past issues of sexism shares similarities with current issues facing women gamers in less tolerant environments. Another popular livestreamer Imane Anys recently tweeted out "it's bouta be 2022 and people are still mad about women in gaming?" (Anys, 2021), expressing her direct disapproval of women's status in gaming. It may not be as emotional as Hafu's interview with Dr. Kanojia, but it's still an earnest plea for equality that reached hundreds of thousands of followers.

An alternative approach by influencers is to use humor to disempower sexists. Livestreamer ItsBreEazyy taunts players that harass her, saying things like "Hey why don't you come and fight me like a man, honey" and "you don't have anything to say now, did you get nervous?" (ItsBreEazyy, 2023). Content creator SteffyEvans makes similar videos and uploads them to TikTok, which have accrued over 10 million total likes. In one such tiktok, an anonymous player can be heard saying "I k— women for fun," to which she retorts "Yea, that's because no woman wants you." (Steffyevans, 2023a). Responses like these have a twofold effect, empowering women and disempowering oppressors simultaneously. Steffyevans has found more ways to help empower women via her twitch stream. On Wednesdays, she invites some female viewers to play online games with her during the stream, giving them a safe space free from potential antagonists (Steffyevans, 2023b).

Anonymous women gamers play their own role in curbing oppression by forming

women-centric gaming communities. One such community is the r/girlgamers subreddit. r/girlgamers is an internet forum dedicated to being "a community space for ladies to hang out, talk about gaming, and game together" (reddit, 2023). On these forums, women gamers can speak freely without having to mask their gender or worry about sexual harassment. Women gamers can also find solidarity by sharing empowering messages and videos on the forum; some videos share striking similarities to the content of ItsBreEazyy and Steffyevans (SquargyBoi, 2021). Women can also form smaller and more involved communities using the social media app Discord (Discord, 2023). Discord servers can have verification systems that allow for women only servers, as well as features to kick or ban those intending to harass or 'troll' women. Servers like *League of Legends Girls* are dedicated to women's only tournaments and custom matches, whereas *Heavenly Haven* is a general safe space for any sort of women involved in gaming (League of Legends Girls, 2023; Heavenly Haven, 2023).

Conclusion

Oppression of women gamers is endemic and operates under implicit and explicit bias. Intentional sexual harassment is a frequent issue that poses a direct threat to women's ability to participate in online gaming. Meanwhile, implicit biases like gender norms have kept women's involvement in online gaming, especially competitive gaming, low. The combination of these two problems has resulted in a male dominant gaming environment; this makes biases against women even worse, creating a negative feedback loop. Psychological phenomena such as Social Dominance Orientation and gender policing give reason for why this feedback loop of oppression exists, but it does not offer a solution. Thus it has been the responsibility of women gamers to work with their allies in breaking the cycle.

The overarching idea between different groups of women gamers and allies is to create a system that treats women with fairness and justice. In the case of RimWorld, this means making a gender neutral mod to replace one imbued with stereotypes. For women's esports, it means creating all women's leagues that act as a stepping stone into mixed gender competition. Even the actions of influencers share the principle of fairness; their calls to action and comedy videos serve not to drag men down, but to lift women up. SteffyEvans even addresses this precise issue, condemning the "anti-men mentality" (SteffyEvans, 2023c).

Whether or not women gamers' efforts will be successful requires time, as cultural norms don't change overnight. However, with some gaming environments like Twitch becoming safer over recent years, there is hope that this trend will eventually become widespread.

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