

"I Can Defend Myself": Women's Strategies for Coping With Harassment While Gaming Online

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Abstract

Although video game audiences have greatly diversified over recent years, players who are not the stereotypical straight, white, male "gamer" are still frequently viewed as outsiders to online gaming and face harassment because of this status. However, many choose to play games despite this and have developed specific coping strategies they employ to avoid or respond to harassment. Using grounded theory and in-depth interviews with female gamers, this gender-based case study explores women's strategies for coping with online game-related harassment. It shows that women are first and foremost an active audience, carefully managing their media environment to help ensure positive experiences. At the same time, their strategies come with limitations, such as hiding their contributions to gaming or provoking further harassment. Although women are capable media managers, their continued status as "outsiders" deeply affects their gaming experiences and demonstrates a need for cultural change in online environments.

Keywords: video games, gender, online harassment, coping mechanisms, in-depth interviews

Introduction

As Consalvo (2012) points out, the current video gaming environment is toxic in many ways. Despite the rise of casual games and the changing image of gaming as “for everyone”, there is strong evidence that players who are not the stereotypical straight, white, male “gamer”¹ face harassment from other players, especially when playing online (Nakamura 2012, Salter and Blodgett 2012, Gray 2014). Although statistics clearly show that “gamers” now make up only a portion of overall video game players (ESA 2014), cultural perceptions of who plays have been slow to change accordingly, and non-traditional game audiences are still perceived as “outsiders”. Because of this, women, ethnic minorities, or LGBT players, for instance, are frequently targeted for harassment. However, this treatment does not stop all members of these groups from enjoying games; many still play and have developed specific coping strategies they employ to avoid or respond to negativity.

This article employs a grounded theory approach and in-depth interview data to catalog the strategies female gamers use to stave off game-related online harassment, as well as the limitations of these.² Through this research, it becomes clear that audience members are smart about their media environment and capable of manipulating it to their benefit. Specifically, female players have developed five main strategies to make online gaming more pleasant, and

¹ The term “gamer” comes with many stereotypes regarding identity and behavior— for instance, straight, white, male, and cisgender, as well as isolated, socially awkward, and potentially aggressive (Shaw 2012). Because of these associations, this article uses “gamer” in quotes to refer to the stereotypical identity. Self-identified gamers who do not fit these stereotypes are referred to free of quotes, while “player” is used more generally for anyone who plays games but does not necessarily see this as part of their personal identity.

² Harassment varies by game and genre, and players can sometimes gauge which games will be more positive than others. Among participants, for instance, *World of Warcraft (WoW)* was seen as more welcoming than *League of Legends (LoL)*, due to *WoW*'s cooperative aspects, relatively older players, and overall community structures. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the impact of genre, however, but to address strategies that can be useful in broad circumstances. *WoW* may be better than *LoL*, but it is not entirely free of problems, leading players of both to develop clear coping mechanisms for harassment.

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they apply these differently according to the situation they encounter. These strategies are: leaving online gaming, avoiding playing with strangers, camouflaging their gender, deploying their skill and experience, or adopting an aggressive persona.

However, interview data also show that many of these strategies have severe limitations. Some hide women’s contributions to gaming, helping to construct online spaces as “for men”. Other approaches are exhausting, requiring the player to manage every element of their online identity carefully to avoid harassment. Some strategies even have the potential to backfire and result in greater persecution. Although women are intelligent media audiences, they currently face an unfair burden when it comes to managing the online environment.

Meaningful solutions to online harassment in gaming can draw on current practices women engage in to mitigate the situation; for example, developers could choose to draw on the coping mechanisms described here to make intelligent design choices that cultivate stronger communities online. But potential remedies will also need to advance beyond these strategies alone. Women and other marginalized groups need to be perceived as essential members of the gaming community, rather than outsiders, if they are to be empowered to stop harassment effectively, a change that will require help from both audiences and developers.

Although online harassment affects diverse groups of people, this paper presents a gender-based case study, drawing on interviews conducted with women as part of a broader project on gaming culture. Many of these women have intersectional identities, being members of minority ethnic groups or the LGBT community as well as defining themselves as female. However, because of the study’s focus, they spoke most clearly about their gendered experience gaming, only rarely referencing other forms of harassment. Because of this, the resulting work cannot be seen as representative of all marginalized groups, but rather as a starting point in

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determining what current gaming practices look like, how audiences handle different situations, and what the limitations of their approaches are. Future researchers should build off this work by examining differences between groups, the harassment they face, and how they react to it.

Evidence of Harassment

Women have recently experienced many highly publicized incidents of game-related harassment. For instance, professional gamer Miranda Pakozdi quit her 2012 team due to sexual harassment from her coach, who focused the team’s web stream camera on Pakozdi’s body while making lewd comments (O’Leary 2012). In the same year, media critic Anita Sarkeesian proposed a project examining tropes surrounding women in video games. In response, angry “gamers” published her personal information online, threatened her safety, and even created a video game in which users could virtually beat her up (Sarkeesian 2012, Wingfield 2014). Her commitment to the project has meant continued threats, to the extent where Sarkeesian has been driven from her home on at least one occasion (Campbell 2014b). As recently as 2014, a female game developer stepped forward to discuss harassment in the industry when a male games journalist graphically propositioned her during a conversation about upcoming releases (Edidin 2014). She spoke under a pseudonym to avoid professional and personal consequences, such as those experienced by another developer, Zoe Quinn. When her ex-boyfriend claimed that she traded sexual favors for favorable press coverage of her game *Depression Quest*, Quinn became the center of a sustained harassment campaign that also caused her to leave her home, fearing for her safety (Auerbach 2014, Wingfield 2014).

While these events may be among the most extreme, harassment is not limited to public or industrial figures; female players speak extensively about the day-to-day issues they face, particularly when they play video games online. Many interviewees for this study felt that online

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gaming, and gaming in general, were still considered men’s spaces, with women thought to be interlopers into that space. Because of this, they were frequently harassed. Some participants stated that male players treated them as a “nuisance” (DT), while others described more offensive experiences. Players who attended in-person gaming events were often touched or photographed without their permission (Elayne, Feather), while those who played online recounted many sexualized insults such as “slut”, “whore”, and, “cocksucker” (Harley, Alissa). A few players even experienced threats of assault; Helix said, “The worst was when I won a roll on an item and the guild leader threatened to tear my breasts into bloody shreds.” Although interviewees were quick to recognize that many of the players they encountered were perfectly pleasant and were just focused on playing the game, most had experienced varying degrees of negativity.

The issues women are dealing with in video gaming are not new or even particularly surprising; research into workplace harassment, one of the most deeply studied contexts for this type of gender issue, shows that video games possess many previously discovered risk factors for harassment. For instance, harassment is more likely in male-dominated workplaces, particularly those which prize traditionally masculine qualities like toughness, aggression, and competitiveness (McDonald 2012). In these situations, women’s presence can be interpreted as potentially threatening to the masculine status quo; they are seen as interlopers who will interfere with male bonding or soften the workplace with traditionally feminine characteristics, such as emotionality or sensitivity. Furthermore, although sexual harassment was originally conceptualized as a behavior that men directed towards women they found desirable, in order to win them over, newer research has shown that gender and sexual harassment is actually directed most frequently towards individuals who are seen as violating gender norms as a mechanic for

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“fixing” their behavior (Berdahl 2007). Given that video games still have slightly more male than female players and that, as participants expressed, they retain their cultural definition as “for men”, online gaming is a prime environment for gender and sexual harassment. In this context, women’s gender marks them as potentially threatening outsiders, and their interest in a traditionally male-oriented medium may be seen as an instance of gender deviance that requires correction.

Harassment in online gaming is also increased by the anonymity of other players and the overall prevalence of trash-talk. Past research demonstrates that combining anonymity, a lack of immediate consequences, and a competitive game environment where emotions run high often means that players become more aggressive and offensive toward others (Chisholm 2006, Fox and Tang 2014). On top of that, multiplayer gaming, particularly online, is dominated by the presence of interpersonal trash-talking, defined as insults, threats, or profanity directed at other players (Nakamura 2012). Trash-talk is most common between opponents but can also appear in cooperative teams, especially if a member is not completing their assigned tasks effectively. This behavior is considered a fun but ignorable aspect of competition; players are expected to respond in kind, and those who react poorly are thought to be taking it too seriously. In fact, online game communities actively defend their right to trash-talk. Nakamura (2012) found that while trash-talk lacks “meaningful content that contributes to the game, many identified it as a distinctive and inevitable aspect of videogame multi-player culture, and thus to be defended” (4). The content of trash-talk is seen as non-serious, but the act of trash-talking itself is considered an inalienable right.

What this attitude ignores, however, is that trash-talk often takes on particular themes, tending towards racism, sexism, and homophobia, which can make it more offensive to members

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of targeted groups. Furthermore, trash-talk can be more threatening to women than to men, due to the prominence of rape-based terminology (e.g. “I totally just raped you with this shotgun”) (Nardi 2010, Nakamura 2012, Salter and Blodgett 2012, Gray 2014). Even careless comments of this nature can be upsetting, especially to people who have been assaulted. Research into sexual assault has demonstrated that it can result in post-traumatic stress disorder and that rape-related cues, such as language, can serve as trauma triggers for affected individuals, provoking anxiety and painful memories (Holmes and St. Lawrence 1983). While treatment can mitigate the impacts of sexual assault, “even in the strongest treatments more than one-third of women retain a PTSD diagnosis at post-treatment or drop out of treatment” (Vickerman and Margolin 2009, 431). Continued fears or anxiety are therefore likely even among women who pursue therapy.

Women who have not personally experienced sexual assault can also find it concerning. Chasteen (2001) found that women consider sexual assault to be “extremely common” (117). Men, on the other hand, are not socialized to fear assault to the same extent as women. As participant Feather stated, “[sexual assault is] not something that [men] have to really worry about. Guys don’t get catcalled on the streets, guys don’t have to worry about short skirts, guys don’t worry about those things.” Women are taught to police their appearance and behavior carefully to avoid the threat of sexual assault in a way that is not true for men. Therefore, even if male players also tell each other, “You just got raped”, it may be easier for them to treat this language as a joke than for women. The “just get over it” approach to trash-talk fails to recognize that offhand comments may significantly impact players, especially when it involves rape-based terminology that intersects with an individual’s past experiences or personal concerns.

In addition to experiencing harassment differently than men, women’s ability to respond to it is often highly limited. Internet research shows that the rhetorical tools used by men cannot

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be used by women to gain equivalent power. For example, Herring (1999) analyzed two online interactions in which male participants harassed women. When women resisted being demeaned, the perpetrators backed one another up and treated women’s complaints, even well-supported ones, as threats to their freedom of speech, drawing on the libertarian discourse often associated with technology. Logic was therefore not an option, and when women tried aggression, they were shouted down and silenced, or attacked for causing problems. Therefore, they were left without any real recourse other than to leave the online space. Comparing Herring’s Internet research to the gaming environment reveals numerous similarities. Responding to trash-talk and other verbal assaults in games often results in further harassment, where women’s concerns are dismissed as hysteria or over-reactions, drawing on historical tropes that connect femininity with overwrought emotions (Nakamura 2012, Salter and Blodgett 2012).

The high levels of harassment women face, the prevalence of gendered threats and rape terminology, and the difficulty inherent in responding to persecution all, unsurprisingly, make gaming unappealing to many women. However, a close examination of the women who do play can help demonstrate how they manage their media environment even though they are fighting an uphill battle against stereotypical ideas surrounding “gamers” and what gaming should look like. Women’s outsider status may limit their power in the gaming environment, but they have developed creative approaches to help improve their situation, showing impressive capacity as active media managers.

Methods

To determine how women respond to harassment, this paper draws on thirty-seven in-depth interviews with self-identified female gamers. These semi-structured interviews were conducted for a larger humanistic study regarding games and gender. Although that study did not

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originally ask about harassment, it quickly became obvious that it was a large part of female players’ online and even offline gaming experiences. Many participants related anecdotes about harassment, and almost all women who played online detailed their approach to socializing effectively in that space. Because these topics were clearly important to participants, questions about online experiences, both positive and negative, were added to interview guides about halfway through data collection.

Interviewees were recruited primarily through online video game forums, with some added via snowball sampling. Interviews were also conducted online, through chat services such as Skype or Gchat. Participants selected their preferred software, with the understanding that video chats would be audio-recorded. Following completion, text-based interviews were cleaned and audio files were transcribed. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts in line with Institutional Review Board (IRB) policy. Participants selected their own pseudonyms for the study, but were guided to choose a name that differed from any of their gaming identities, for extra confidentiality. All recruitment and interview procedures were approved in advance by the IRB and conducted in line with their regulations.

Rationale

The recruitment post used for the overall study was deliberately vague, simply asking female gamers to contact the researcher if they wanted to talk about their experiences gaming. No qualifications were given as to what a “gamer” was; potential participants just had to be female and over the age of eighteen, due to IRB restrictions. This broad approach may seem unusual for an interview based study, which would typically target small groups and specific, nuanced phenomena. However, an un-defined approach was useful in this case in order to account for the wide variety of issues female players might face, potential differences between

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games and genres, and the breadth of coping strategies. This is also why recruitment occurred online; Internet forums allowed for greater geographical diversity among participants, again broadening potential experiences.

Participant Characteristics

Participants ranged in age from nineteen to forty-five but averaged just over twenty-five. Most were from the United States, but three were based in Canada, two in the UK, and one in Bahrain. Early interview guides did not ask about race, meaning four women did not identify their ethnic background. Of the remaining thirty-three, twenty-five define themselves as non-Hispanic Caucasians, two as Arabic, two as Mexican, and four as Korean, Chinese, or Asian-American. Participants are primarily college-educated, with many either holding or pursuing advanced degrees. Of the thirty-seven participants, nine are currently undergraduates, two had completed “some college” but did not obtain a degree, and two possessed associate’s degrees. The rest all hold at least a bachelor’s degree.

Impact of Online Recruitment

Participants’ diverse backgrounds helped broaden the types of experiences they had to relate. Even among the regions of the US, culture and gender expectations differ slightly, potentially affecting women’s backgrounds with gaming, while variances across national borders are even more significant. The same is true of age; older women appear to handle harassment more aggressively than their younger counterparts, confronting harassers rather than avoiding them.

On the other hand, recruitment through video game-specific forums meant that participants were deeply involved in gaming, to the point where they would join online

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discussions. Therefore, this sample may leave out women who have stopped gaming, those who play less often, or those who do not necessarily identify as gamers. This could, for instance, explain the slightly younger age of the participants compared to overall industry averages. Although industry statistics show players’ average age as 31 years old (ESA 2014), many older women play primarily mobile games, social games on Facebook, or casual computer games such as Solitaire (Heyman 2014) and therefore may not visit online forums devoted to gaming as a general hobby. Future projects that build on this work may need to use offline recruitment techniques or more specific online spheres. For the purposes of early exploration and for examining harassment and coping strategies broadly across games and genres, however, an undirected sample sufficed.

Data Analysis

After transcription was completed, interviews were transferred to NVivo, a qualitative analysis software package, and analyzed using a grounded theory approach, in which theories and conclusions are generated directly from patterns in the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Lindlof and Taylor 2002). This is the most useful approach for this project because it ensures that the resulting work is rooted in female gamers’ daily lives, rather than outside theory or assumptions. Using this analysis process, five main harassment management strategies emerged: leaving online gaming, avoiding strangers, camouflaging gender, emphasizing skill, and assuming more aggressive personalities.³ Participants also described three strategies they did not generally find useful (technical solutions, relying on male assistance, and flirting), as well as the

³ Although this work cannot draw quantitative conclusions or make claims that are representative of female gamers as a whole, due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews and the limited number of participants, these strategies are listed and discussed in order of popularity. More women practiced various avoidance strategies (not playing online, for instance) than directly combated harassment through skill or aggressive responses.

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pros and cons of each approach.

Leaving Online Gaming

“I don’t have a Live account. I used to play on my brother’s account a bit, but then you get the nasty players. I used to play on my boyfriend’s account, and then I got my own nasty players. So yeah, I don’t really like the culture that’s involved with multiplayer games.”- Feather

Because the current study specifically targeted women who game, none of the interviewees avoided games entirely. However, many of them avoided online play, due to past negative experiences or even the perception that they were more likely to be harassed online. Playing single player games or in-person with friends was seen as a safer alternative, staving off problems before they could start. As one interviewee stated, “I don’t play a lot of online games, so I don’t really get harassed” (Buttsvard).

While it is positive that women are able to enjoy games even when the multiplayer experience is unwelcoming, the fact that some committed players are driven away from online gaming helps contribute to the perception that games are more for men than for women. Women who play single-player or at-home multiplayer are less visible than their online counterparts, and are therefore often overlooked, even if they play frequently or have extensive experience.

Because of this seeming absence, previous research has tried to explain how game content may be driving women away from playing or how technology in general is oriented more towards men (e.g. Cassell and Jenkins 1998, Kafai et al. 2008). However, newer research (Bryce and Rutter 2002 and 2003, Jansz and Martens 2005, Jenson et al. 2007, Jenson and de Castell 2011) and interviewees’ own responses show that it is frequently the social environments of gaming, rather than games themselves, that women find off-putting. They still game, but they do so privately, allowing the perception that gaming is a male pastime to continue unimpeded. This

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then results in higher levels of harassment directed at non-male players, who are seen as outsiders, and restarts the cycle, driving more female players into private gaming or away from playing entirely.

Although it is important to recognize women whose gaming is private, much can be learned from those who do participate in multiplayer arenas. These women overcome the perception that gaming is not for them and find creative ways to deal with potential barriers to participation.

Avoiding Strangers

“I avoid them whenever possible. I don’t like interacting with strangers at all”- Caddie

Among the women interviewed, not playing with strangers was one of the most common ways to avoid issues during multiplayer gaming. This strategy is popular because players assume that strangers are more likely to engage in harassment than friends are. For example, interviewees felt strangers reacted more poorly to mistakes committed while playing. As one said, “Strangers seem more likely to go off on you for not knowing something or playing in a way they don’t like” (Angela). Friends, on the other hand, were more likely to handle problems calmly, re-strategize, and try again.

It is of course true that all players, not just women, enjoy playing with friends. However, women also found an extra benefit, in that friends would not subject them to unwanted advances. Interviewees found that male players would often flirt with them or make overtly sexual comments, simply because of their gender. One interviewee, describing her experiences playing *World of Warcraft (WoW)* when she was in middle school, said that much older players frequently asked what color her underwear was (Katie Tyler). Another summed up male player’s reactions to her gender with the phrase, “Let me see your tits” (Alissa). These advances were

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seen as both creepy and frustrating, as they took time and effort to fend off.

All interviewees recognized that there were always a few male players who were there just to play, and that some had even become good friends. But many women spoke of how exhausting it was to wade through negativity in order to reach decent players. One said, “There are guys out there that I’m sure are fun and respectful and wonderful to play with, but I don’t have the time or the energy to slog through it” (Feather). Therefore, they stuck to playing with people they knew in real life or a handful of carefully vetted online friends.

Even in cases where strangers could not be avoided entirely, interviewees felt that playing with friends could be enough to overcome online harassment. For instance, although *League of Legends* (*LoL*) players can choose a computerized opponent, the most common game type randomly matches teams against other players of their skill level. Therefore, one’s opponents are almost always strangers, and strangers are sometimes needed to make up a full team of players. The *LoL* community is “pretty toxic” (Anna), but as Kay stated, “I have someone who’s here in the real world, who can say, ‘No, don’t listen to them,’ and that’s much more tangible to me than whatever those people say across the Internet”. Friends’ input helped players ignore or dismiss harassers.

Camouflaging Gender

“My username doesn’t really give away that I’m a girl, and there are times when I don’t use my mic when I’m playing, so people don’t really know that I’m a girl.”- Arya

“I won’t join anything where I don’t know anyone and it’s a voice video, meaning you have to communicate, because it’s been that bad for me. I’m afraid to talk randomly to random people I don’t know.”- Eva

Another popular method for preventing harassment is gender camouflage: carefully

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managing avatar attributes and the use of voice chat so that other players do not recognize one's offline gender identity. Almost all players who discussed their gaming screennames, for instance, spoke of how important it was that other players would perceive them as gender-neutral. This was true even if they were playing as a female character; because a high proportion of men play female characters, avatar gender does not necessarily match offline gender (Stabile 2014, 49). Avatar name, however, seems to matter. Interviewee Angela stated, “I remember once playing Team Fortress 2 with my ex with a Steam username that was feminine, and some random guy just started SCREAMING at me about being an attention whore. My ex thought it was hilarious, but I can't lie, I haven't used overtly feminine usernames since then.” Despite the fact that her opponent did not know she was a girl, Angela's feminine username was enough to trigger a negative reaction.

Players also avoided using microphones among groups they did not know, so that their voices would not reveal their gender. This not only prevented potential harassment but it also protected the player from dealing with repetitive reactions. Even players who described the online experience as positive expressed frustration that, when they spoke up online, their content of their statement was often ignored in favor of surprise. When Helix led a *WoW* guild, she had to speak frequently to other players and said, “Of the hundreds of times I've used [voice chat] with people who didn't already know me well, perhaps two or three I felt like it was not a big deal and/or extremely interesting that I was a woman”). This repeatedly excludes women from the general gaming community by treating them as anomalies, rather than as regular players. It is also frustrating because it defeats the purpose of using a microphone. Voice chat is meant to be a faster means of communicating with team members and coordinating assistance, but for women, it does not always work that way. When they ask for help, their colleagues' surprise at hearing a

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girl sometimes delays assistance to the point where their character or their team can suffer a loss. Therefore, many women find it easier to avoid microphones and sometimes even to avoid game styles where being competitive requires voice chat. This allows them to “play as a gamer, instead of as a girl” (Bubble), while demonstrating how these are culturally viewed as incompatible concepts.

Because “gamer” and “girl” were seen as very different identities, a few participants did play games under screennames that others would see as female or chose to use voice chat, treating these choices as a form of activism. Helix, for instance, said that she deliberately maintained a *LoL* account with a gender-neutral name and one which used the title “Lady” to mark it as female. Helix used the gender-neutral name the majority of the time, when her main goal was to play for fun. The feminine character she deployed more strategically, saying, “I sign on occasionally when playing, when I am feeling up to dealing with that kind of trash- because I feel like if women don’t do anything to show, ‘Hey, we’re here, we’re legitimate players, too!’ that the atmosphere won’t change”.

Women like Helix and Emily, who also deliberately chose feminine usernames, are willing to provoke harassment if it means showing other players that women enjoy video games and can be very good at them. At the same time, this activist role needed to be balanced with self-care; Helix only used her feminine username sometimes, and Emily often did not play the kinds of online games that are associated with the worst levels of harassment, such as *LoL* or first-person shooters. Simply asking all players to declare their gender identity in online spaces, to demonstrate that audiences are more diverse than is stereotypically expected, would do great deal to change gaming, but would also require players to cope with higher levels of harassment and employ different strategies for dealing with it, many of which also have limitations.

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Deploying Skill and Experience

“I always wanna make sure that people are wanting to play with me because of my playing skills, not just because I’m a chick.”- Elizabeth

“I’m good at what I do, I taught myself I’m not gonna do it any differently and I’m not gonna try any less because you feel insecure, I’ll go find other people who appreciate it.”- Katie Tyler

When women reveal their gender, their strategies move from avoiding harassment to stopping it or finding ways to brush it off. For this purpose, many women rely on their skill and experience.

Some used skill aggressively; when players harassed them, they laughed it off as jealousy and pointed out how their history with games or their skill level surpassed that of the negative player. Alissa, for instance, defended herself in *WoW* by pointing out that she was the highest possible level in the game. She also stated that she “had been playing since vanilla”, the slang term for the original iteration of *WoW*. Alissa’s long history with the game is a sign of skill and commitment that few other players have. By emphasizing this, she delegitimized other players’ insults and provided herself with psychological protection against what they were saying; rather than taking their harassment seriously, she was able to dismiss it as anger motivated by jealousy.

Other interviewees quietly ignored harassers and simply focused on the game. When the offending players found that the player was out-performing them, many stopped their negative behavior and apologized. Some even humbled themselves enough to ask for help. Helix stopped some extreme harassment from her guild members because she “was reasonably good at playing the game and extremely good at the sort of theorizing/strategizing/management needed to lead”. Misty did the same with *Call of Duty*, stating that she “got good at it out of spite... to shut

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anyone down who was tossing [her] aside on the sole basis of [her] gender”.

Although emphasizing their skill or high level of experience with gaming was often enough to stave off harassment, this strategy did have its downsides. Many women struggled to keep up the skill level they needed in order to prevent negativity successfully, both in competitive and cooperative games. Alissa, one of the most aggressive interviewees when it came to using her skill level strategically, explained that as soon as she could not be one of the best, she stopped playing *WoW* despite her long-time commitment to it. She said, “It definitely was tough being in a situation where I don’t want to have to compete, but I’m forced to and then forced to compete even farther just to make sure that I’m allowed to play”. If she was not one of the best, Alissa felt that she did not have a safe place in the game, and it stopped being fun. Other players spoke of feeling similarly pressured, like they had “to demonstrate [their] knowledge and prowess” (Jutte) in order to justify their status as a gamer. Unless they had tangible proof of their skill, such as a position in a high-level raiding guild or difficult-to-obtain gear, female players were always doubted.

Personality Strategies

“I never acted the way they thought I would act, so I didn’t cry and complain and be like, ‘OH MY GOD, YOU’RE SO MEAN!’ I was a dick back to them... a lot of guys are really surprised by that, but in a way, it’s kind of earned me a lot of respect because they know I’m not a pushover. I’m not just gonna let them treat me a certain way just because I’m a girl. I fight for respect.”- Elizabeth

“[Gaming] made me very sarcastic. It just gave me an edge over people cause I was either with them or it just went right over their heads and they were confused and just dropped it.”- Katie Tyler

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Deliberately adopting aggressive personality traits is the last coping method interviewees relied on frequently. Participants contended that showing men they could both take insults and dish them out earned them respect. When that occurred, insults stopped or changed from serious harassment to more joking banter (DT, Elizabeth). Sarcasm had a similar result, garnering allies who found it funny while driving away harassers who did not get the joke. Interviewee Taylor Ryan said, “I’m a big girl. I have a sharp tongue. I can defend myself, and make them feel about two feet tall with a few sarcastic retorts.” Assuming more aggressive personalities to cope with harassment shows male players that their female colleagues can stand up for themselves. For instance, when male players are overly chivalrous, treating women as if they need extra protection, gamers like Anna turn this behavior against them. As she stated, “In game, usually guys will take the hint to back off from babysitting me when I start doing it back to them!”

However, responding to harassment aggressively can be a double-edged sword. Women who chose this strategy sometimes faced accusations that they were “acting like an emotional female” (Laine), with harassers drawing on the familiar trope of hysterical women to try to dismiss the player’s response. As previous studies on online and game-related harassment have shown, women are not always allowed to use the same rhetorical strategies as men, at least not without provoking further harassment or accusations that they are being overly sensitive to something that was non-serious (Herring 1999, Nakamura 2012, Salter and Blodgett 2012). Interviewees employing this strategy felt that with confidence and a reasonable approach, it could be useful in many situations, but they carefully prepared alternative responses in case it backfired.

Unpopular Alternatives

In addition to the five favored coping strategies, interviewees referenced three other

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strategies that were less popular and far more controversial.

The first of these, employing technical solutions like blocking harassers, was used occasionally. Sophie, for instance, said, “I would either basically tell them to get lost or block them”. But for many games, blocking a negative player came with a high disadvantage, “because you can’t see what they type in-game, like if they sincerely tell you someone’s coming your way” (Kay). Not being able to see legitimate warnings or cries for help interfered with players’ ability to win in multiplayer games, and therefore was not a popular option. Technical solutions of this sort seemed to cause more problems than they solved, especially as many games make it easy for blocked players to start a new character and resume harassment.

Relying on male assistance to drive off harassers was also an unpopular option. While some interviewees felt that playing with male friends or boyfriends may have decreased the harassment they faced, only one player, Elayne, specifically mentioned relying on her husband or male friends to help chase off people who were bothering her, and she only did so at in-person gaming events. Because her husband was physically present, this strategy worked; other players found that relying on men online did not always help. Helix, for instance, faced the majority of her harassment at the hands of her boyfriend’s friends in *WoW*, even after he asked them to stop. This option therefore was ineffective in many situations, and it also seemed unpopular due to the independence of the interviewees. Most preferred to rely on themselves in order to deal with harassment, rather than needing assistance.

The final strategy for coping with harassment, the calculated use of flirtation to win over male players, was not employed by any of the interviewees. In fact, they largely looked down on others who chose this strategy, finding it to be an uncomfortable one. For example, when Elayne jokingly revealed her gender to a player who was trash-talking her, he immediately apologized

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and went from rude to flirtatious so quickly that she found it unnerving, describing it as “pathetic and ick”. Others spoke of how girls who flirted to get ahead in games changed overall expectations for female players. Vickie argued, “I feel that I should be represented as just a normal gamer too... You’ll hear some people talk about like... that was their impression of female gamers, that they always got something for free, or they did it to get help... I always tried to avoid having that connotation.” Players like Vickie and Feather, who described encountering similar perceptions of “girl gamers”, felt flirting to get help encouraged harassment from men because it became the expected norm for female behavior. Women who flirted were seen as behaving properly and were protected from harassment, while those who did not suffered. Helix agreed with this sentiment; although she was insulted on a regular basis while playing *WoW*, her more flirtatious female guild mates did not face harassment. Even though Helix was dating a fellow guild mate, she was still expected to perform a particular role because of her gender. The fact that this strategy was only brought up in negative terms indicates that flirtation, although it may be effective, was not seen as an acceptable long term solution to harassment. Instead, it was seen as part of the problem.

Analysis

From the strategies women employ and how they describe them, it is obvious that they are capable of managing harassment in order to find enjoyment in online games. But it is equally clear that coping strategies require work. Women must constantly be aware of how their behavior, username, voice, or skill will be interpreted by others, and they must carefully manage these aspects to ensure a positive gaming experience. Just like offline society requires women to defend themselves against sexual harassment or assault by managing their dress and behavior, the onus of online harassment management is put on the victim.

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Furthermore, many of the strategies in use come with potential complications. Taking on an aggressive personality to stop harassers, for instance, can result in a negative backlash, but blocking harassers or hiding one’s gender may further women’s perceived absence in gaming and the association of games with men. In turn, this perpetuates the cycle of harassment. Gray (2014) points out, “Gamers can stay away from players they choose to avoid. However, this creates a problem in addressing meaningful solutions to verbal abuse within this space” (xxi).

Because of this, none of these strategies is a final solution; they are a “Band-Aid” on the problem rather than a cure (Emily). Many participants were aware of this, and some took deliberate steps to try to change gaming, even if it meant further harassment. These women recognized that public gaming is necessary to changing women’s treatment in the online environment. As Emily said, “My gamer names have always proudly referenced that I’m a girl gamer. And I refuse to change that. I feel hiding my gender would make me complicit in victim blaming; i.e., I need to work harder not to ‘attract’ harassment rather than the bully needs to stop acting horribly.” At the same time, it is unfair to ask women to shoulder the entire burden of changing audience stereotypes and behaviors. Simply increasing their visibility and asking them to face the resultant harassment cannot be the only solution. For insight into other potential options, research on gender harassment in other venues may show how the limitations of women’s online harassment coping mechanisms can be overcome.

Current patterns of harassment partially stem from the perspective that male audiences are more important than women and other non-stereotypical players due to their association with “gamer” identity, and that men need to protect this social identity by using harassment to drive outsiders away. This is very similar to the patterns seen in workplace harassment research, which also reveals four coping method categories-- “(a) advocacy seeking—recruiting formal support

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from organizational authorities; (b) social coping—mobilizing emotional support and advice from trusted others; (c) avoidance/denial—avoiding the harassing situation physically (e.g., avoiding the harasser’s workstation) or cognitively (e.g., denying the seriousness of the situation); and (d) confrontation/negotiation— directly requesting or insisting that the offensive behavior cease” (Cortina and Wasti 2005, 182). Female gamers’ strategies fit into three of these categories— social coping (avoiding strangers/playing with friends), avoidance (leaving gaming, avoiding strangers, gender camouflage), and confrontation/negotiation (deploying skill, personality strategies). However, they show little evidence of advocacy seeking; mechanisms such as blocking, which are built in by developers, are unpopular, and players rarely or never mentioned turning to game companies or managers for assistance.

This is unfortunate, as a meta-analysis of past harassment works shows that avoidance or denial responses, the ones participants report using most frequently, are also least effective at preventing sexual harassment (O’Leary-Kelly et al. 2009). Social coping can be useful as a self-protection measure, as when players who have friends on their team can ignore harassment they face in *LoL*, but may not change harassment patterns overall. Finally, as participants have indicated, confrontation can provoke a backlash or require too much work on the part of the victim to be truly useful.

Therefore, greater structural support for advocacy seeking could be the best possible approach to changing gaming culture away from its current patterns of harassment. While some past research has seen advocacy seeking as ineffective, or even potentially harmful to the victim if their harasser discovers their request for help, newer analysis has shown that the usefulness of advocacy seeking is dependent on how the authority figures within the given organization respond. If authority figures take victims’ reports seriously and act on them, they can change the

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culture of harassment in their workplace and help protect their employees (O’Leary-Kelly et al. 2009). What this indicates is that greater support from developers could help effect social change in the gaming environment.

In fact, some current efforts to improve advocacy-seeking mechanisms have shown very encouraging results. Reporting mechanisms, for example, allow players to flag other individuals’ bad behavior, resulting in in-game fines, temporary suspensions, or permanent removal. Although such a strategy could backfire if unwelcoming players flood the system with positive reports for negative behavior, even notoriously toxic communities like *LoL* have seen reports result in improvements. When *LoL*’s parent company Riot started restricting chat abilities for players who were being reported, they found that “bad language, as a whole, dropped 7 percent and that positive messaging actually went up” (Campbell 2014a). Players who improve are given back their full chat abilities, while those who do not face increasingly severe punishment, even if they are popular or professional players. For instance, two professional players were banned for a six month period in 2014 when they continued to abuse opponents even after their accounts were restricted (Farokhmanesh 2014). Encouraging the community to help manage itself through reports, applying punishments evenly across all groups of players, and having a clear reward for behavioral improvement demonstrates that Riot is taking harassment seriously and that it finds all its players, even those who are more likely to be victims, worthy of the company’s attention and protection. This can help make online spaces safer for diverse audiences.

Conclusions

All evidence, both in gaming and in other areas where harassment has been studied, indicates that the likelihood of sexual and gender harassment is “determined by the interaction of a person’s and a situation’s characteristics” (Barak 2005, 81). Therefore, although women and

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other marginalized groups are capable of handling individual instances of harassment on their own, a change to the overall culture of gaming would be a more effective approach to opening up the gaming community to more diverse players, by altering the situational precedents that allow harassment to occur. It is possible that this change will occur simply as a result of audience demographics; as more and more players who do not fit the straight, white, male “gamer” stereotype enter into gaming, their presence may be enough to decrease discriminatory behavior.

However, because audience change has not yet been enough to provoke cultural change, a better alternative would be to redefine who gamers are and change expectations for who plays games. Women and other marginalized groups need game designers and other players to see them as essential members of the audience, rather than as outsiders or anomalies. This will not only empower them to respond more strongly when they face harassers online, but it should also help contribute to a decline of gaming’s overall culture of misogyny. When diverse groups are accepted as members of the gaming community, the kind of exclusionary language required for trash-talk is likely to fall out of use.

Many participants already felt that change was occurring; interviewees were almost invariably hopeful for the future of video games, largely believing that game culture is becoming more welcoming as audience demographics diversify and as companies like Riot start to take steps towards changing community behavior. Because of this, future research should evaluate whether harassment patterns change over time and how coping strategies adjust accordingly. It could also build off this work by exploring the experiences of other non-traditional player groups, to see if they face similar problems to women and if they handle them in the same ways. By exploring harassment coping strategies, it is possible to see how active audiences manage their media environment and carve out safe spaces, but it also reveals how cultural expectations

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continue to limit their power and how gaming will have to change if it is to be more positive moving forward.

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