Playing Online with Boys: Women's Strategies for Coping with Harassment While Gaming

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 face harassment within the gaming community. Women, ethnic minorities or LGBT players, for instance, can all be targets. However, harassment does not stop all members of these groups from enjoying games (Taylor 2003); many still play and have developed specific coping strategies they employ to avoid or respond to negativity.

But what are these strategies, and what are their pros and cons? While researchers are undoubtedly already familiar with many coping mechanisms, specific work detailing the most popular approaches to managing online harassment is lacking. To address this lack, this paper catalogues strategies gamers find most effective in staving off harassment. In doing so, it aims to help new gamers avoid negative experiences, indicate where marginalized groups need more support, and provide suggestions for designers who aim for inclusivity[1].

Although online harassment affects diverse groups of people, this paper presents a gender-based case study, drawing on interviews conducted with female gamers as part of a broader project on gaming culture. The resulting work may not be representative of all marginalized groups, but it serves as a starting point in exploring this issue more fully. Furthermore, many coping strategies and design recommendations apply broadly, as they protect control over one's identity as a whole rather than gender alone. With this knowledge, developers and individuals worried about gaming's cultural influence can both broaden markets and encourage reassuring change.

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[1] It is important to note that harassment varies by game and genre. Among participants, for instance, *World of Warcraft* was seen as more welcoming than *League of Legends*, due to *WoW*'s cooperative aspects, relatively older players, and overall community structures. Therefore, players can sometimes gauge which games will be more positive. The purpose of this paper is not to address the impact of genre, however, but to address strategies and mechanics that can be useful in broad circumstances. *WoW* may be better than *LoL*, but it is not entirely free of problems either. Therefore, gamers still deserve to know how they can cope with harassment when it appears, and designers could still use ideas on how to improve future offerings.

Evidence of Harassment

Focusing specifically on women, there have been many recent, highly publicized incidents of game-related harassment. For instance, 2012 saw professional gamer Miranda Pakozdi quit her team due to sexual harassment from her coach, who focused the team's web stream camera on Pakozdi's body while making lewd comments. Feeling this was unfairly distracting her teammates, and uncomfortable for her, Pakozdi removed herself from the team (O'Leary 2012). In the same year, media critic Anita Sarkeesian proposed a project examining tropes surrounding women in video games. In response, members of the gaming community published her personal information online, threatened her safety, and even created a video game in which users could beat up her virtual representation (Sarkeesian 2012). Her commitment to the project has meant continued threats, to the extent where Sarkeesian has at times been driven from her home (Campbell 2014). As recently as 2014, a female game developer stepped forward to discuss harassment in the industry when a male games journalist interrupted their conversation about upcoming releases to proposition her in graphic terms (Edidin 2014). Another has faced intense personal and professional attacks after an ex-boyfriend claimed that she slept with a games reporter to help her game achieve success (Auerbach 2014).

And harassment is not limited to public or industrial figures; female players speak eloquently about the day-to-day issues they face, particularly when they play video games online. Some interviewees for this study state that male players treat them as a "nuisance", while others describe more offensive experiences, such as threats of assault. These problems are particularly common in online gaming due to the anonymity of other players. Past research demonstrates that combining anonymity, a lack of immediate consequences, and a competitive game environment where emotions run high often means that behavior suffers, with players becoming more aggressive and offensive toward others (Chisholm 2006, Fox and Tang 2014).

Specific Issues

Two specific trends in multiplayer gaming, the key arena for social interaction, can be seen as particularly unwelcoming to women. The first is the overall prevalence of trash-talking, and the second is the use of specifically sexualized terms such as "rape" as casual stand-ins for "defeat", "overcome" or "kill" (i.e. "I totally just raped you with this shotgun").

Multiplayer gaming, particularly in online contexts, is dominated by the presence of interpersonal trash-talking, defined as insults, threats or profanity directed at other players. Trash-talk is most common

when a game pits players against each other but can also appear in cooperative teams, especially if a member is seen as not holding up their end. 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. However, trash-talk often takes on particular themes, tending towards racism, sexism and homophobia (Nakamura 2012, Salter and Blodgett 2012, Gray 2014).

When targeted groups complain about these trends, they are told that trash-talking is just a facet of the community, and they should be less sensitive. In fact, the community actively defends their right to trash-talk. Nakamura (2012) found "while profanity and abuse are 'trash-talk,' a form of discursive waste, lacking 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.

This attitude toward trash-talk ignores the fact that the particular forms of harassment directed at women are often more personal, virulent, and physically threatening than those directed to men, even if the language is the same. This is due to the prominence of rape or assault-based terminology (Nardi 2010, Salter and Blodgett 2012). Although this language is casually stated or phrased as a description of in-game action, rather than as a direct personal attack, even careless comments can be upsetting, especially to people who have dealt with sexual assault or who find it to be a more plausible threat in their daily lives. Although men also face the possibility of sexual assault, it is statistically less likely for them than for women. Therefore, even if male players also tell each other, "You just got raped!", their lower probability of facing sexual assault offline can temper the impact of that statement in a way may not be true for women.

A casual survey of female *Super Smash Brothers* players, for instance, found that one in four interviewees reported being sexually assaulted, frequently by another member of the *SSB* community ("Voices of Women" 2014). The study was not clear about how they defined sexual assault, a notoriously difficult concept to measure, and the sample was small and non-scientific. However, this percentage closely resembles accepted US statistics regarding women's odds of being assaulted (National Research Council 2014, Sexual Violence Statistics 2014). With this in mind, it is clear that the threat of sexual violence is a real concern for many women. The "just get over it" approach falsely limits trash-talking to the moment of conversation, failing to recognize that offhand comments may have impacts well beyond a single gaming session.

Even more troublingly, women's ability to respond to harassment is often highly limited. Internet research shows that the rhetorical tools used by men cannot be used by women to gain equivalent power. For example, Herring (1999) analyzed two online interactions, via a discussion forum and a chat channel, in order to understand the patterns of harassment faced by women in online spaces. "In both [incidents], male participants advanced views that were demeaning to women, women responded by resisting the demeaning characterizations, and the men then insulted and blamed the women as the cause of the discord. The ultimate outcome in both cases was that women complied with male norms or fell silent" (151). Herring found that men grouped together, 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 can be difficult and often results in further harassment (Nakamura 2012, Salter and Blodgett 2012). Women's concerns are frequently dismissed as "hysteria", the term historically used to connect femininity with overwrought emotions rather than logic (Salter and Blodgett 2012). When women struggle to respond to harassment, gaming culture is unlikely to change away from its current patterns, and a culture of trash-talking and the casual use of rape terminology is, not surprisingly, very unappealing to many women. Even those who are willing to look past misogynist language and behavior may, over time, find it exhausting, driving them to play less frequently or to avoid online play. Some women, unfortunately, even leave gaming all together (Nardi 2010, 155).

The Creation of a Feedback Loop

> "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 even start. As one player 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 gamers are driven away from online gaming helps contribute to the perception that games are more for men than for women. Private gaming is naturally less visible than public, multiplayer gaming. Therefore, women who choose to play single-player or at-home multiplayer are often not counted among the ranks of gamers, even when they play frequently or have extensive experience. And discomfort with online multiplayer often bleeds into in-person events too, adding to women's invisibility.

For example, Jansz and Martens (2005) found that a Local Area Network (LAN) event, where players interconnect their computers for a locally-based gaming tournament, was almost entirely attended by men, and this was treated as typical. In 2011, a Texas gaming league even banned women from an event entirely, stating "Nothing ruins a good LAN party like uncomfortable guests or lots of tension, both of which can result from mixing immature, misogynistic male-gamers with female counterparts. Though we've done our best to avoid these situations in years past, we've certainly had our share of problems. As a result, we no longer allow women to attend this event" (Good 2011). This LAN event was specifically marked out as "for men", assigning women to the role of "problem" rather than "fellow gamer". This exclusion occurred even though the organizers clearly blamed men's immaturity, rather than women, for past incidents.

The seeming absence of women in gaming, both online and at events, is one step in a feedback loop connecting games with masculinity. When gaming is perceived as a male pastime, non-male players are targeted for higher levels of harassment. This drives many into private gaming, or away from playing entirely. Their absence then reaffirms games as male, and the cycle resumes. This is evidenced by the fact that non-male players are less likely to identify themselves as gamers, even when they play frequently (Shaw 2012). Overall, this allows gaming to continue functioning as a misogynistic space.

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, breaking the loop of exclusivity. Furthermore, they have developed extensive strategies for managing harassment, ranging from avoiding strangers to deploying their skill and experience as a shield. Each of these coping mechanisms provides possibilities for game designers who aim to reach

diverse markets; well-crafted interaction mechanisms will make preventing harassment easier, while poor design choices can make it impossible. Through careful planning, gaming's negative culture could become more inclusive. This would be beneficial both economically for developers, who would widen their potential markets, and from a cultural perspective, in that this major media form and cultural power would be less discriminatory.

Methods

To determine how women respond to harassment and what can be learned from them, 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. Specifically, that study explores the experiences of women who play core games in the current gaming environment, where femininity is associated with casualness while core games are reserved as a masculine space. When analyzing the conducted interviews, harassment and coping strategies were broadly present, with almost all women who played online detailing their approach to socializing effectively in that space. This was true even when they were not asked directly about harassment, indicating the extent to which it resonates in daily experiences.

Interviewees were recruited primarily through online video game forums, with some added via snowball sampling. Because recruitment occurred online, interviews were also conducted this way, 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 University 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 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 gamers might face and the breadth of potential coping strategies. This is also why recruitment occurred online; localized recruitment would have meant greater geographical similarity between participants, while the use of online forums meant that they could come from all over the US and even around the world.

Participant Characteristics

The women who responded to the call for participants ranged in age from nineteen to forty-five but averaged just over twenty-five. This indicates that participants skewed young, with only five at age thirty or above. They were also primarily Caucasian, but hailed from six different countries. Most participants 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 background. Of the thirty-three who gave information on ethnicity, twenty-five were non-Hispanic Caucasians, while eight came from other ethnic backgrounds. Two define themselves as Arabic, two as Mexican and four as Korean, Chinese or Asian-American.

The sample of participants collected is 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. None of the participants were directly asked about their economic background, but this high level of education could be an indicator that many are well-off.

Impact of Online Recruitment

These demographic characteristics demonstrate that online recruitment came with some benefits and some expected limitations. The ability to recruit participants from 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; women who have been playing longer appear to handle harassment differently than their younger counterparts. In a study aimed at broad exploration, even small numbers of older women or non-Americans provide useful extensions of the work.

Online recruitment was, however, a likely factor in the similarities many participants share. First, the participants needed to have an economic background allowing them regular access to the Internet, which could explain their high levels of education. The use of forums specifically about video games also

meant that participants would be deeply involved in gaming, to the point where they would participate in online discussions. Therefore, this sample may leave out women who have chosen to quit the gaming community or those who play less often. Finally, the self-selected nature of the recruitment process meant that women who play games frequently but do not necessarily identify themselves as "gamers" may have opted not to participate. As Shaw (2012) points out, this means that the sample is more likely to lack women who are gaming minorities in a number of ways— women who are also of color or gay, for instance— because the intersectionality of these characteristics makes them less likely to identify as a "gamer" given the stereotypical associations with that term. Therefore, some perspectives may not be explored fully here. Future projects that build on this work may need to use offline recruitment techniques or find online forums that target minority gaming populations. For the purposes of early exploration, however, an undirected sample sufficed.

Data Analysis

After transcription was completed, interviews were transferred to NVivo, a software package that assists in qualitative analysis by allowing users to create a series of codes and use them to "tag" data. The interview material was 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 focuses clearly on women's lived experiences; drawing conclusions from the actual content of the interviews ensures that the resulting work is rooted in female gamers' daily lives, rather than outside theory or assumptions.

Successful grounded theory develops from systematic analysis. Therefore, the interviews were analyzed using a combination of open and axial coding, an approach that is sometimes described as "unitizing and categorizing" (Lindlof and Taylor 2002). In this process, each interview is carefully read and tagged for the ideas it contains; each line or short segment is marked with a one or two word code that indicates its meaning. These units are then grouped by similarities to form wider themes or categories. Categories are motivated jointly by the project's research questions and by patterns inherent in the data.

Unitizing and categorizing is an iterative process, particularly when combined with a grounded theory paradigm (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008). Interviews, units and categories are constantly compared to ensure that they make sense given the content of the data, and as each interview is analyzed, new topics are added to the coding scheme. The researcher then returns to earlier material to apply those codes as needed. This grants all interviews equal importance, regardless of when they were conducted or analyzed, and ensures that all relevant perspectives and ideas are considered.

Using this analysis process, four main strategies emerged as the most common methods for managing harassment during online gaming: avoiding strangers, camouflaging gender, emphasizing skill, and assuming more aggressive personalities.

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 play for fun. Although mistakes would be disappointing, friends would generally be willing to re-strategize and try again, while strangers would default to insults.

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 spoke eloquently of times when male players would flirt with them or make overtly sexual comments, without knowing anything about them other than 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 seen as both creepy and frustrating, as they took time and effort to fend off.

All interviewees were quick to point out that there were always a few male gamers 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.

From this strategy, it is clear that games which force players to engage with strangers are unlikely to be popular among female players or within other marginalized groups. More welcoming games give players the option to work with friends. This seems to be true even in cases where strangers cannot be avoided

entirely. For instance, although *League of Legends (LoL)* players can choose an AI opponent, the most common game type randomly matches teams against other players of their skill level. Therefore, one's opponents are almost always strangers. Although the *LoL* community is "pretty toxic" (Anna), many interviewees said that playing with friends was enough to make it fun, even when opponents were highly negative. As one *LoL* player 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" (Kay). In these cases, support from friends overcame online harassment.

Camouflaging Gender

Character Strategies

> "I don't ever give my gender just out of the blue. If something comes up, I might say, but if someone calls me 'he' in chat, I never correct it."- Chimera Soul

> "I never outright tell people that I'm a girl when I'm playing. If they ask, yeah, I'll answer because I'm a truthful person, but I never ran around *WoW* general chat like, 'I'm a girl, I'm a girl, hey everybody, look at me! Real girl gamer, right here!'."- Alissa

Another popular method for preventing harassment is gender camouflage: employing various strategies to ensure that gender does not even come up while playing. Almost all players who discussed their gaming screennames, for instance, spoke of how important it was that they had a gender-neutral name. 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.

Another player, Helix, said that she deliberately maintained an account with a gender-neutral name and one with a feminine name. 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… but you know, these are supposed to be games we play for fun. 95% of the time, I'd rather do something relaxing than 'fight' for my gender" (Helix). Similarly to players like Feather, Helix was rarely up to "slogging" through online negativity, and carefully chose when to experience it and when she would rather be camouflaged.

Voice Strategies

> "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

Players also avoided using microphones and voice chat among groups they did not know, in order to hide their distinctly female voices. This not only headed off potential harassment, but also protected the player from dealing with repetitive reactions. Even players who described the online experience as positive expressed frustration at the fact that, when they spoke up online, their content of their statement was often ignored in favor of surprise. One interviewee who led a *WoW* guild 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" (Helix).

This not only repeatedly excludes women from the gaming community by treating them as anomalies, but it is also frustrating because it defeats the purpose of using a microphone at all. The benefit of voice chat in gaming is that it is 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 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 entirely and sometimes even 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 the community constructs these as incompatible concepts.

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 female gamers reveal that they are women, 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 about their gender, 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 against harassment 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 history with the game, from its very start, is a sign of skill and commitment that few other players have. By emphasizing this, she delegitimized other players' insults.

Other interviewees were more subtle; rather than deliberately pointing out their skill, they quietly ignored harassing players and tried to avoid them. When the offending players found that the women and their allies were performing to a higher level, many of them backed off their negative behavior and apologized. Some even humbled themselves enough to ask for help. As Helix pointed out, she stopped some extreme harassment from her guild members via "stubbornness, mostly, combined with the fact that I legitimately was reasonably good at *playing* the game and *extremely* good at the sort of theorizing/strategizing/management needed to lead… 'Being good enough' will shield you from abuse to a large extent" (Helix). Misty did the same with *Call of Duty*, stating that she "got good of it out of spite… to shut anyone down who was tossing [her] aside on the sole basis of [her] gender" (Misty).

Although emphasizing their skill or high level of experience with gaming was often enough to stave off harassment, this strategy did have its downsides. For instance, many women spoke of how exhausting it could be 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" (Alissa). 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

The last coping method female gamers seem to rely on frequently is personality based, where they deliberately take on aggressive qualities in order to stop harassment. Interviewees 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). Deploying sarcasm had a similar result, garnering allies who found it funny while driving away harassers who didn't get the joke. Other women chose to stand up for themselves or gang up on harassers with friends. This response sometimes garnered accusations that they were "acting like an emotional female" (Laine), but at other times it staved off negative behavior. Women 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.

Assuming more aggressive personalities to cope with harassment relies on making male players see that their female colleagues can be just like them, both in attitude and behavior. For instance, when male players are overly chivalrous, treating women as if they need extra protection, gamers like Anna throw this behavior back into their face. 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!" (Anna). Like deploying skill, personality strategies demonstrate to male players that women can game as well as they do and that they fit into the community as well.

Unpopular Alternatives

In addition to the four favored coping strategies, interviewees referenced three other strategies that were less popular and far more controversial.

The first of these, employing technical solutions like blocking harassers, was used occasionally. 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 gamers' 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 for players, especially as many games make it easy for players to start a new character and resume harassment.

Relying on male assistance to drive off harassers was also an unpopular option, used only as a last resort. Only one player, Elayne, 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 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 femininity and flirtation as a means for winning over male players, was not used by any of the interviewees. In fact, they largely looked down on others who chose to do so, finding this strategy to be an uncomfortable one. For example, when Elayne revealed her gender to a player who was trash-talking her to an extreme extent, he immediately backed off and started asking her all about herself. She said, "Of course I was just jerking around, I wasn't trying to actually elicit sympathy, but it was just kind of like, 'Wonder what happens?'" The player went from rude to flirtatious so quickly that Elayne found it unnerving, describing it as "pathetic and ick" (Elayne).

Other players spoke of how girls who used their gender to get ahead made other women look bad. Describing a friend who had a number of men sending her expensive equipment in *WoW*, Feather stated, "I lost a lot of respect for her… it's not quite prostitution but it's not quite not, either, guys buying you things because you flirt and have online sex with them" (Feather). She felt using femininity to get help encouraged harassment from men because it changed their expectations 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 female guild mates who flirted with everyone did not face harassment. Even though Helix was dating a fellow guild mate, she was still expected to perform a particular, flirtatious role because of her gender.

The fact that this strategy was only brought up in negative terms indicates that deploying femininity, 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.

Relevant Issues

From the strategies women employ and how they describe them, it is obvious that this marginalized group is more than capable of managing harassment in order to find enjoyment in 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.

Because of this, none of these strategies is a final solution; they are a "Band-Aid" on the problem rather than a cure (Emily). For instance, 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).

Women like Emily and Helix recognize 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 gaming culture. Simply increasing their visibility and asking them to face the resultant harassment cannot be the only solution.

In order to effect real change, women and other marginalized groups need greater support from the system as a whole. Developers, for example, should help ease the burden of harassment management through intelligent design choices, while also increasing the consequences for gamers who violate expectations for civility. Both helping to shield marginalized gamers and teaching harassers that their behavior will not be tolerated are necessary steps for inclusivity.

Suggestions for Developers

Keeping both popular and unpopular strategies in mind, there are many possible game mechanics or characteristics developers can use to help players avoid harassment. In fact, many of these mechanics are already in use, which helps to explain why some women are able to face gaming culture's misogynistic tendencies.

Protecting Identity

The first, easiest possibility is to help players camouflage their identity. This means that designers need to ensure that avatar names can be unlinked from offline identities. For example, when *WoW*'s parent company Blizzard announced their RealID system in 2010, requiring players use their given names on official forums, players flooded the company with negative feedback. The outcry was so strong that Blizzard stepped back from the change, making RealID optional (Graft 2010). Although there were many reasons for players' negative reactions, such as not wanting to break game immersion, Blizzard's final decision was beneficial to minority players. Making the use of offline identities optional helped them maintain their anonymity and control what they revealed to their fellow players.

Developers also need to address the issue of voice chat, which makes identity control impossible. Although avoiding voice chat is easy enough, there are times when doing so interferes with multiplayer gaming. Not using a microphone means that one has to type to communicate. In fast-paced games like *Left 4 Dead*, a team zombie fighter referenced by one interviewee, typing may slow the player enough to get them killed, while simply calling for help over a microphone could get faster results. Players who want to succeed in the game and be among the best almost always end up needing to use voice.

Therefore, game developers, if starting at the basic design level, may want to include some way to call for help quickly without using voice. One option could be including pre-programmed phrases linked to a short keystroke, rather than requiring players to type sentences. Interviewees also spoke of using microphones only after they had a chance to evaluate the group they were playing with, using voice chat once they determined their colleagues were "friendly" (Misty). Therefore, including a short series of tasks prior to a fast-paced battle scenario could give players time to see if using a microphone with their assigned group would be positive or negative before voice chat is needed.

Building Reputations

As previously stated, however, simply hiding players from harassment is not a long term solution. There also needs to be a means for rewarding positive behavior and punishing negativity. Encouraging players to build reputations would be one possible approach. Designers could do so by connecting in-game identities to offline identities, but that comes with problems of its own. An alternative solution would be making avatar names permanent or very difficult to change, or by keeping records of players' behavior on their accounts. In this way, players become invested in the reputation of their character in the same way they would their offline identity, heading off some problems while still keeping camouflage an option. Permanent player names also allow people to remember who is positive and who is negative. Friend lists can then be used to keep track of this information and connect more easily with people who consider gender to be a non-issue.

Group reputation mechanisms can also help. Many interviewees spoke positively of games that had guild or clan structures. These semi-permanent groups of players often developed specific characters, allowing players to evaluate where they would be welcomed and where their skill level and commitment to the game would fit in. Guilds that do not allow female members, for instance, are very upfront about that information, while groups that do not tolerate insults or profanity also make that clear. Therefore, players can determine where they would fit based on the group's reputations, even if they do not have friends already in the guilds they are considering.

The suggestions above are based off of mechanics that are already widely used. For developers looking to do something newer, a ranking system for individuals or guilds could be employed, indicating how frequently the player or group was flagged for inappropriate behavior. Players who pass certain thresholds could face in-game fines, temporary suspensions, or even permanent removal. Alternately, players could be rated well for times when they go above and beyond as a teammate. Employing such a user-controlled system has its dangers; it could backfire if unwelcoming players flood the system with

positive reports for negative behavior, but a well-designed and carefully managed system could be a unique way to develop a community.

Grouping Mechanisms

Because playing with friends was seen as a safe way to approach multiplayer, games aiming for inclusivity should offer short-term grouping mechanisms as well as long-term guilds or clans. Through these, players can choose who to work with to complete immediate game goals. For instance, interviewees enjoyed the ability to sign up for a *LoL* match as a team, ensuring that they were with at least a few friends. *WoW* offers a similar option with their party systems, where players who have friends online can team up with them to defeat specific bosses or quests. Friend lists also help here, so that players can easily see who is online and directly invite them to play. These are already features of many multiplayer games and networked systems such as Xbox Live, so developers have an easy foundation for adding these capabilities to games.

Displaying Skill and Experience

Finally, as interviewees stated, using skill as a means of protection is difficult, requiring players to commit large amounts of time and effort to being the best. Game developers can help by providing means for displaying skill levels and experience, such as badges or player histories that appear upon inspection of their character. With markers such as these, even a player who is not extremely active at the time can still display their past achievements. Therefore, they have a defense when offline pressures such as school or work prevent them from committing time to continually being the best.

Another possible aid could be alterations to game play or leveling systems. *Guild Wars 2* uses a dynamic level adjustment mechanic, where a player whose level exceeds a particular map area will be temporarily dropped down to ensure that zone is still difficult. Part of the challenge interviewees described is that once a player reaches the top levels of a game, the time commitment required to continue progressing is enormous, which places a lot of pressure on them. A game in which progress can still be made and challenges met in more diverse ways, such as returning to old areas without being able to breeze through them, could maintain engagement and provide lower-pressure ways for expressing skill and commitment.

Conclusion

It is impossible to deny that gaming is changing, as more and more players enter the arena. However, many exclusionary trends have been slow to change, and online multiplayer has been particularly unwelcoming to minority groups. Female players have developed a number of strategies for heading off harassment online, but the theme of exhaustion and work comes through in many interviews. Furthermore, some possible strategies simply encourage further problems, as when protesting harassment results in being treated as "hysterical". Dealing with online negativity is difficult, even for well-prepared players. Therefore, some of the burden needs to be taken off of marginalized groups. Designers who want to reach a broad community should carefully consider the mechanics they employ in their games and include strategies for identity protection and skill deployment while also punishing harassers for their behavior.

There are many possible options already in existence that help women and other marginalized groups protect themselves from harassment, such as strategic use of friend lists and grouping mechanisms. In fact, these already contribute to some of the visible differences between games, such as interviewees' generally more positive experiences in *WoW* or *Guild Wars 2* than in *LoL*. However, developers looking to be more creative in their pursuit of a wider audience may want to test newer options, such as an inter-player rating system or unique ways of displaying skill and experience. With careful consideration of trends in gaming, including the coping methods women use and avoid, as well as their related costs, it is possible to develop games that make harassment far more difficult.

 In making these changes, developers will not only be able to broaden their market base, but they will also foster positive cultural change. As it stands, online multiplayer gaming is a bastion for sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination through players' tendencies toward aggressive trash-talk. Altering multiplayer interactions is therefore a first step towards greater inclusivity and diversity in this area.

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