Grace Petersen
Professor Liz Constable
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More Than Just a Game: Harassment and Enforcement in Competitive Gaming

It is 7:30PM on a Thursday evening, after a long day out in the 'real world' I log in to my Battle.net client to launch a session of *Overwatch*, Blizzard Games' award-winning team-based shooter. Before the game loads, I navigate to my message tab, wondering if the notification is from a friend who noticed my activity and wanted to team up with me. What greets me is a message from a user on my friends list- one of around 200 players ranging from good friends to the newest player I teamed up with yesterday- but the message is far from friendly. I grimace as I read its contents: "I bet you'd be fun to **** with how much you scream." It's an easy decision, and I block and report the sender, but I can't help but wonder exactly what I did to warrant such a message. It isn't the first of its kind, but typically these kinds of messages aren't sent privately. I make a mental note to make sure my microphone is set to push to talk so that no one can hear my reactions in game, already adjusting my behavior based on one message. Still, I enter the game and quickly become lost in the repetition of the match.

Weeks had passed, and I had received many more comments of harassment or 'toxicity' as it is sometimes called, but only a scarce few were anywhere near as sexual as the one described previously. Like most players in a competitive game, I had been insulted and mocked regularly as a player, but the element of gendered harassment felt like an insidious and special treatment due to my status as a female gamer. I knew I wasn't the only one who had experiences like this, and as I spoke with some of the women who I had become close to from years of playing together, I began to think up a way to get to the reasoning behind these phenomena.

Feminist Technology Studies

Technology is oft mis-cited as a wonderful force of progress, or as the nightmarish churning of our pending enslavement. While both of these reductionist analogies have a certain element of truth to them, technology *is* both useful and frightening after all, they ignore the simple truth that technology is a set of tools. Nothing more, nothing less. Nowadays, we associate the word technology with a post-industrial mechanized idea of computers, smartphones, self-driving cars or other advanced consumer products, but the word itself can apply even to Stone Age instruments or campfires. In undergoing this project, I intend to stay grounded in the understanding that all technology follows two essential characteristics: 1. That it is created by humans and 2. That it is informed by human priorities. It is all too easy to become lost in the objectified state of technology, removed from the greater social and relational signifiers, but as a feminist scholar I am all too familiar with the perils of objectification.

What does it mean to engage in a feminist practice of looking at technology? Judy Wacjman writes in her 1991 book *TechnoFeminism* that technology is not simply a 'thing' but a place: cyberspace. Donna Haraway notes in her *Cyborg Manifesto* that "the boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept" which lends itself to a feminist analysis of the ways in which we not simply use but *live* in virtual worlds. While much of the early writings in techno feminist or cyber feminist theory embody a naïve idealistic vision of a space without gender, class or race. Wacjman herself acknowledges that "the virtual community is a social vision that glosses over the fact that communities are also about material resources and power," affirming the relationship between the physical self with the cyber.

One of the more contemporary scholars of what could be called a feminist study of technology is Sarah Jeong, a feminist scholar who studies the internet. Jeong writes that much like the Greek polis which sprung from the agora, or marketplace, so too are the forums and sites we frequent becoming a sort of virtual marketplace. This comparison is especially apparent when one considers the debates around free speech, ownership, and usership that frequent these spaces when talk of harassment comes up. The concept of the anonymous agora is popular held among internet denizens, or netizens, but as Jeong illustrates that this space is not entirely anonymous, and especially so for marginalized groups. Identity is not reliant entirely upon outside cues that can be observed or discerned, and if that were not the case perhaps the online setting could be a revolutionary one without discrimination, but as we know our identity is a complex roundabout of various stops as well as the vehicle we navigate with.

Philips and Milner offer an overview of some of the more endearing as well as some of the less endearing aspects of internet culture within the past decade. Writing from a feminist cultural studies perspective, the authors take a grain of exasperated humor as they explain that "vernacular expression online, just like vernacular expression offline, is a spectrum; not all cases meet the threshold of outright harassment," in other words there is no ontological division between 'online' and 'offline' as an expression tied to a physical body.

Scholars of feminist theory offer useful insight into this matter, but as with all efforts in academia the definition must be specific and context-aware. When writing about the way people interact with games as a medium, one needs to incorporate not only games as a media subject but as an interactive site of virtuality. While video games have existed without online components, and in large part continue to exist in this form today, one of the most dynamic of elements about games is the interactivity offered through online connectivity. In studying not only competitive

games, but *online* competitive games, I invite an inspection of the nature of online spaces and interactions.

Media studies typically attempts to accomplish a minimum one of three goals, to connect the product to the viewers, to connect the product to broader culture, and/or to connect viewers to broader culture. For example, I can study *Overwatch* by asking players about their views on the game, by linking the characters in the game to real-world geo-political concepts, or by discussing *Overwatch* e-sports as an example of the rising global recognition of video games as legitimate activity. As a feminist, all of these questions are compelling entry points, but I seek to ask deeper questions about the relationships between individuals, how they organize along gendered or racialized formations, or how playstyle varies according to social identity.

As feminists, we are interested not only in the sanctioned areas of political examination, but also the overlooked areas of how we communicate, how we work, and yes even how we play. The personal is political, and playstyle is political too. My original goal which I had set out with was to understand how harassment works within online competitive gaming, and in order to do this from a feminist perspective I first need to ask how people organize their identity within the framework of online competitive video games.

Who is a Gamer Anyways? To answer this question requires some demographics. The popular understanding of a gamer is defined as someone relatively young, anywhere from childhood to around mid-30s in the popular imagination. There is some truth to this, and increasingly children are engaged in video games at younger and younger ages, but on average there are more adult players than children. However, according to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), women age 18 or older make up twice as many as boys under 18, and just under half of all players are female.

One of the reasons why I am interested in studying harassment links back to the formation of who is and is not a gamer according to a certain invested demographic. Going back in the past 5 years, one can see from the Gamergate incident just how tumultuous the culture clash between the (primarily white) men who seek to define gamers as an enclave away from the female influence, and those who simply want to play games. Of course, like all political topics, there are those on the left as well as the right, but the vast majority of people who consider themselves gamers do not want the gaming scene to be politicized. Someone should give them the bad news, and I suppose I can be that someone now: everything is political, even if it is not politicized.

Gaming as Identity Making

In undertaking a project centered on both harassment as well as identity, it is important to set up the boundaries of terms used herein. The primary identity category of study is the 'gamer' identity, and I am investigating how individuals define it in relation to themselves and others. The popular conception of those who play video games typically lumps them all under the label of gamer, but this does not address the differences between those who are simply consumers of video game media (players) and those who identify with the broader community of players (gamers). The gamer identity is unique in comparison to movie audiences or comic book fans, despite claims of comparison, and existing literature in game studies will confirm this. The gamer identity is not as simple as it appears from the outside perspective, and in actuality is highly contextual, and dependent upon other forms of identity making schematics.

I have been asked multiple times while beginning this project two recurring questions: 1. Why are you studying harassment in video games, and perhaps more pointedly, 2. Why do people play these games if the community is so awful? I would like to answer these both easily,

but the point of research is to provide a well thought out answer, not an easy one. I cannot claim

to have the perfect answer for the second, as the reasons are as varied as the people who choose

to continue playing. For some, the toxic brew of anger, hateful remarks and harassment *are* the

reason they engage in these games. For most players, this is not the case, even if they do engage

in these behaviors from time to time. In a more elegant answer, I will summarize and say that I

am studying harassment in video games in order to understand why and how people play in an

environment with such frequent harassment.

Beginning an Ethnography

Based upon my own experience in online competitive games where I have faced

harassment in conjunction with seeing sexist attitudes virtually everywhere that I looked in the

gaming community, I started to think about how I could collect more evidence and find out if

other gamers had noticed these sentiments, and if so, what they did about it?

The first step before interviewing, I drafted up a series of questions that would hopefully

begin to answer some of what I had been wondering. How did people experience harassment in

video games, what does it look like, and what do they do about it? Scouring through my contact

list, I began to ask for participants. Through snowball sampling, I ended up with seven

individuals who were interested in answering my questions on their experiences playing online

competitive games. I asked these seven individuals of varying backgrounds questions that started

off with a meek tone. 'What is your playstyle? What games do you play?' and so on, but after

these introductory questions we quickly delved into topics such as harassment and sexism in

gaming. I found that most of the players I interviewed had been on the receiving end of

harassment, and everyone except for the two men I interviewed understood this as a serious

problem.

The first of my participants was a young man named Marcel. Marcel is the picture of your 'average' gamer: a straight white man in his late 20s whose affect is characterized by a sort of vigilant indifference. When I asked Marcel about his playstyle and which games he preferred, I found that he had more experience with competitive fighting tournaments, precisely because "online kinda sucks." This sentiment was echoed in my other interviews, but especially so in my interview with David.

David, who is a Bisexual man also in his late 20s, has been playing games for most of his life. Like Marcel, David has extensive experience with fighting tournaments, although he has the additional experience of being an occasional tournament organizer. While both David and Marcel have experience in fighting game tournaments- online and offline- David was much more enthusiastic about online competitive games by comparison. I also spoke with Blaire, who like the former two participants was in her late 20s. Blaire had been playing games, like David, for most of her life; unlike David, Blaire's only offline gaming experiences were with friends rather than through tournaments. After Marcel, Blaire and David, I spoke with a player who goes by Bat, a 24-year-old demi-girl utilizing they/them pronouns. Unlike my previous interviewees, Bat had extensive experience playing online competitive games, but they were highly reluctant to use any form of communication when playing.

After Bat, I interviewed Cherry, Rose, and Faith. These last three participants were all women of color ranging from the ages of 18-21. Cherry identifies as a Latina, who spends over 5 hours a day playing games like *Overwatch*, *Rainbow Six Siege*, and other online first-person-shooter games. Rose is a trans-woman of Native American heritage who describes herself as a mostly casual gamer that plays competitively because the scene is "too fun to miss out on!"

Finally, Faith is the youngest player of the group I interviewed, and she has only started to play online competitive games in the last year.

While all of the participants offered stories and insights which were unique to their experience and identity, common themes emerged often overlapping or contrasting. Marcel and David had similar experience in terms of which games they played, but how they played them and how they communicated were markedly different. Bat and Rose as well both navigated online competitive gaming as trans and nonbinary, which distinctly colored their interactions with other players. For Faith, Blaire and Cherry, they played in what would be considered typical fashion, but found they were often singled out for being female when they would communicate in games.

In online competitive games, communication is essential. David shared with me that in both offline and online competitive events, "communication is really, *really* important," both for co-operative games as well as purely competitive offline events. David has, in his own words, "Had input into conversations" surrounding who is and who is not invited to play, and has firsthand experience regulating the environment of communication that occurs at his tournaments. It makes logical sense that is communication is so crucial, then why miscommunication can become so disheartening for players, as with Marcel, who preferred to spend time at offline tournaments where he can more easily communicate with other players in the same physical space. Similarly, Bat and Rose both preferred to use text over voice communication when playing online games.

For Bat, they prefer not to talk with their team members of the enemy alike, often opting to mute especially egregious trash talkers. For Rose, when I asked why she prefers to use text with strangers, "Mostly from discomfort. As a trans woman, speaking to strangers often garners

very undesirable attention." Communication in games, then, is not only a way to relay pertinent information but as well a relational system which interacts with identity.

On Identity

Nigerian Feminist Meremu Chikwendu introduces the term "circular consciousness" which builds upon Crenshaw's concept of Intersectionality. In using and continuing these road metaphors, I find Chikwendu's terminology to be far more illustrative of the ways in which multiple identity factors interact while moving along a sense of continuum. This is why in my own writing I refer to the 'roundabout.' What exactly are the cruxes of our personal and interpersonal identity? At the heart of it all, identity is an interactive experience shaped by how we understand ourselves in relation to others. It is not only a two-way street, but a roundabout with numerous on/off points between cultural practices, institutions, relationship networks, and other manifestations of the social sphere.

To fully explain how identity is formed could easily become the subject matter in entirety of a dissertation, but what we are interested in is how identity shifts in a virtual setting. Scholars and the general public both have argued at length to determine what role the anonymizing factor of online social realms plays into the social or asocial behaviors we see therein. The question sets up an important discussion regarding the role of accountability, reputation, and even history when one has their persona severed from their 'real' life, but it ignores the other aspect of online interactions: the creation of an online persona.

While not true of all online games, the vast majority of these games require users to represent themselves with a username often alongside an avatar or other such personally-identifying information. For some individuals, the online realm is treated as an extension of their

offline identity, choosing screennames and representations of themselves as close to their offline

lives as can be. This can also take perhaps a less expected form in which people choose to

integrate an online persona into their offline life, as some of the people I spoke with shared in

their accounts of introducing themselves at local on-the-ground events as their usernames.

Beyond these two archetypes of player identity, there exist those who live a sort of double life,

representing themselves online as someone different than they are offline. Most of the people I

interviewed would fall somewhere in between the second and the third categories: not entirely

separate in their online and offline personas, yet not blending the two into one seamless persona.

The Draw of Online Competitive Games

When I asked the players why they were drawn to play competitive games, I got a range

of answers. Faith, who had started playing the most recently answered that "For me, multiplayer

games are pretty much about playing with my friends," a sentiment which was echoed by Blaire

who has "always associated my gaming with socializing." This assessment of the appeal in

online games was shared by the majority of participants, who agreed that the social component

of online competitive games was a major draw.

For Marcel, "competitive fighting games and that sort of thing are the only games I feel

like I make real progress in." When I asked him to elaborate on his definition of progress, he was

quick to add that "if you learn a combo in a fighting game, when you leave the house, that

combo goes with you and even explain it to other people. It's an experience that is like not

unique to you that you can use other places." However, Marcel was notably one of two

participants who did not play games outside of the competitive genre. On the same topic of

progress, Blaire said that in her experience "team-based games have become sophisticated in a

way that they depend so much on split second decisions that it can change an entire outcome of a

game." The appeal is then both in one's technical skill developed as an individual as well as the social experience gained.

According to 2015 statistics from the ESA, four out of five households play games, and 42% of players who log three or more hours a week. Every one of my respondents would fall into this range, even those who would describe themselves as 'casual' gamers. Lastly, according to the ESA 54% percent of players use games as a way to connect with friends. Blaire and Faith are far from alone, as it turns out.

While over half of all players see gaming as a way to be social and connect with friends, there are those who prefer to be less social when playing. Cherry is one of these players, preferring not to talk with other players, even with some friends "due to shyness, insecurities, and negative past online experiences." Cherry is not the only one who shies away from the social element of competitive games, and most of my participants were explicit in their reluctance to write over chatroom or speak over voice chat when playing. Cherry, Bat, Rose, and Blaire all confessed that they preferred not to speak in voice chat especially, unless they were with people they knew. For Marcel, his reluctance to use voice chat is "mostly an effort thing."

Within my interviews alone, a pattern emerges: a reluctance amongst the women to speak in unfamiliar territory, either without friends or without other women present. One theory that has undergirded the formation of all-women's spaces in gaming has been the assumption that gendered homosociality, or affinity for one's own gender, would result in less criticism within these spaces. Looking at the interactions between players, a 2018 study which looked at in-game criticism in online competitive games found that lower-ranking players will exhibit homosocial patterns of criticism and praise. Within lower-ranked players, this fits the assumption as noted

above, but this study shows that the patterns of praise and criticism flip to a heterosocial pattern

when a commentator is reviewing a higher-ranked player. (Ruvalcaba, et. al)

Strategies Against Harassment Emerge

In Bat's experience, "If there are other girls in the group, I am much more likely to want

to play, and the boys are slightly less likely to say offensive shit on chat because of their

presence." This is the phenomenon of homosociality in action, and while this strategy may not

benefit a player in terms of climbing ranks per Ruvalcaba et. al, it seems to offer a reduction in

harassment enough to merit its use in finding a group to play with. "Often, in my experience,

female players will request to group up if they/we find each other in a match"

While all players receive harassment or 'toxic' behavior to some extent, the female

players received exponentially more sexist criticism and sexually charged messages than their

male counterparts amongst those I interviewed. While the gaming environment offers players the

opportunity to inhabit a persona detached from their online selves, there are still the ways in

which they are affected by the roundabout of identity even in an 'anonymous' setting. One such

example is provided by Rose, who noted that "If it ever came up that I may be a woman, I would

be flooded by messages and vocal reactions from most if not all the men present." Like Rose,

Cherry tends to receive more than her fair share of "sexist and or sexual comments" from men

she plays with.

> When I was younger, I handled the situations by reporting and ignoring the nasty
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> comments. But in turn I realized that it would only make the situation worst. Staying
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> quiet and keeping my ground labeled me as "quiet" and "submissive" to them which
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> brought on more of the sexist or just sexual comments.

While both Cherry and Rose have both been playing for considerable lengths of time, even Faith has noticed the adverse effects in her own games.

> Toxicity in games can translate to a form of cyberbullying, and that can have really bad effects for the person on the receiving end, especially if they are still in their formative years. I think it can also be harmful for people who already have self-confidence or anxiety issues.

This shows that the online 'anonymous' agora is far from removed from our identities, social relationships, and even the impacts on metal health. Far from the misconception held by those who cite in-game harassment as all in good fun.

Factors of Harassment

When I asked my participants for their theories of the toxic behaviors and harassment they had seen, they offered a few differing theories. Rose offered that "I'm more often than not certain they do it purely for a rise or cool points with their friends," while Cherry noted "Being in a group setting makes people more comfortable and inclined to behave in ways they wouldn't normally behave on their own." Not only is this motivated by social scoring or 'cool points' then, but also backed by confidence in numbers, which in some games constitutes its own form of anonymity. David observes from his experience that "anonymity is a big part" of the problem, "it adds just like one wall where if you take that wall away and it might scare off like 90% of people from making shithead comments on the Internet."

Anonymity. Is this the major culprit in the way people become emboldened to speak to each other in these ways? It might seem to be the case, as David rather humorously suggests one way to combat harassment would be "If there was some way to actually hold people accountable,

like fuck man, hook up someone's wall. Let's charge them $1 every time they get a report from being toxic." Most of my participants seem to agree, as Blaire shared:

> I've just been burned too many times by people hiding behind the safety and comfort of their anonymity to pass blame or inflict verbal abuse onto myself or others. Putting someone behind a faceless account with a competitive, team-oriented online game can be a toxic mix.

It is tempting to pin down the problem to one factor, but in solely addressing anonymity we risk overlooking the other causes which add fuel to the issue, such as the attitudes in society which give rise to sexist comments in the first place, and their connection with the gendered nature of harassment.

Zolides is an associate professor of digital media studies who explains that gender plays a significant role in professional gaming. Like all forms of labor, professional gaming or e-sports is inundated by politics of identity and image. While the players which I interviewed did not consider themselves professionals, over half of them had at one point or another participated in a tournament either online or offline. Zolides writes that women are marginalized in "both geek and sport culture" which creates an intersection of isolation in competitive gaming. What's more, women are typically highly sexualized in games, with many female characters catering to a sexed-up fantasy of femininity; and real women don't fare much better treatment. Not only is femininity highly regulated within gaming, but masculinity as well. 'geek masculinity' borrows much of its definition from toxic masculinity which is reinforced by ideals of hegemonic social order and heteronormativity. Geek masculinity itself operates as a form of homosociality, but unlike the female homosociality in games which is built upon a defensive strategy, male homosociality in gaming seems to be built with the propagation of harassment in mind.

As gaming is an inextricably commercial space, it makes a certain kind of sense that the displays of gender are so enforced given the economic incentive. As Zolides notes, gendering within competitive gaming carries "economic logic" While scholars within the field offer valuable critique of gendered play, I have to question whether or not these distinctions are in of themselves too rigid in their definitions of what a feminine activity is and what is masculine.

Harassment takes many forms, as noted above within this essay. Even within the same game there is a marked variance in the forms and patterns which emerge, and so I asked what my participants thought some of the factors for this variance might be. Rose answered that "It often changes in degree and even in form based on the game and it's respective community, but I have experienced several kinds; Be it over being a trans woman should that come up, simply just being a woman, or the most regular—My performance." On the other hand, Faith responded that in her experience "if someone is toxic about gender then it is typically them saying something gross about a female character, but not the player," but acknowledges "your playstyle can also encourage negativity." When I asked Bat about the factors that influence people to harass and target other players, they responded "It's all a part of the same shit women and queer people face in real life that continues to be enabled or reinforced" before continuing with "harassment in games is only a symptom of a much larger system of social oppression and silencing victims." Cherry very simply offered her reasoning: "Any person who feels comfortable in making such comments to anyone is at a new level of fucked up."

Responses to Harassment

For all of the concern over harassment, it can seem very bleak to be a gamer, especially as a gamer in a marginalized social position. In an Amnesty International study of experiences of women between the ages of 18 and 55 in Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Sweden,

the UK and USA, the results found 41% of women who had experienced online abuse or

harassment have at least on one occasion felt their physical safety threatened by these

interactions. Among other things respondents in this survey also had loss of self-esteem, stress,

anxiety, lost sleep and difficulty concentrating. Clearly, once again, the effects of harassment

online carry serious weight, and especially so for people of marginalized positions such as

female gamers, or gamers of queer identity. So, what can we do to address this?

If anonymity is one of the major factors, perhaps breaking down the barriers, as David

said, could provide an opportunity for change. In David's experience with this approach:

> You talk to them like they're a person and sometimes they just go, "Shit man, sorry I had
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> a bad day at work. I'm just being a dick online. I apologize, I'm just irritated right now."
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> And both people walk away from and you're just people, you know? And there's some
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> people that just are online to kind of piss you off and act like a dick because they get a
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> rise out of it, I guess.

While this approach may not always yield the results one would hope for, it seems a rather

promising start. Unless, of course, this isn't an option.

For Bat, how they handle harassment "depends on the severity and how tilted I am at the

time," which reveals that the interaction is indeed a reciprocal one. Marcel offers that in his

experience, players often seem to be harassing others when they are 'tilted.' "I think they are

angry at something, perhaps justifiably, perhaps not. And uh, it's, it's very hard to find a good

outlet for that, especially in the moment. So rather than restraining themselves, they say

something regrettable."

When a player becomes tilted, this typically leads to poor performance and an increase in 'toxic' remarks. Bat, Cherry, and Blaire all shared with me that they will at least occasionally respond to harassment with the opposite approach to what David offers, as Cherry notes:

> Gaining more and more hostility as the years went by, I decided that enough was enough. I became very toxic to sort of deal with and handle the situations. After it all I will block and report them for harassment. Is being toxic the right answer? No. But it has certainly eliminated the stereotype of being that "quiet" and "submissive" female.

Cherry's response may seem to be an oddity, but her reaction is more common than one might think. A longitudinal study conducted on young adults found that competitive games can increase aggressive affect, even among young women (Adachis and Willoughby). This should come as no surprise when one considers the nature of competitive games, where the goal is to dominate your opponents as frequently as possible.

For many women, being visible as expert players is in tension with erasing parts of oneself (dismissing aspects of voice, identity, and outlook) in order to persist "normally" in their leisure space. Blaire confessed that "When I first experienced harassment I would take it personally and maybe even fight back, now I just avoid the situation altogether by muting or blocking toxic teammates. I don't have the energy to get worked up over online harassment anymore." While some, like Cherry, may find a direct confrontational response may be effective to reduce personal instances of harassment, over time this becomes unsustainable as Blaire noted. For Rose, her typical response varies depending on who she is dealing with:

> It can be hard to find a good way to respond to them because they'll just fire back. Aside from ignoring, I will occasionally try killing with kindness and it usually works but

> getting yourself in the mental state to prepare for their harassment until you come out on
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> top can be harder than the initial harassment itself.

There is another strategy aside from attempting to humanize oneself as a player or outright

engaging in further harassment, as Bat offers that they simply "sometimes like to flirt with

people who do that too, but the best way to respond is to kill them in game."

<u>Harassment and Moderation</u>

     Regardless of the possible reactions one can take individually, this problem is a systemic

one which would be hard to solve with one-on-one solutions. The causes for in-game harassment

are motivated not only by 'cool points' or anonymity, as Marcel notes that "it's that spiral that

makes people quit or put them in a mindset where it would be best for them to quit," therefore in

order to address harassment the underlying frustrations of perpetrators needs acknowledgement

as well. On this note, Faith observes that "as nice as it would be to think that trying to counter

negativity with just responses is actually effective, I do not think negative people really care if

some stranger online says something about how their behavior is bad."

     In an online setting, it can become easy to lose sight of the stakes at hand. As David jokes

with me, "I mean from some guy whose screen name is, 'ILoveViews297' or whatever, you

know, like that you'd look at that and be like, if you take a step back, the situations just

inherently goofy" but notes that in his experience "it hits real life and as much more serious,

much faster than a ViewsLover279 saying gay in chat or whatever." In David's case, this is

likely true that the consequences of toxic behavior hold much more weight in an offline gaming

tournament where people have the ability to interact physically, not just virtually, but this

negates the real impact that harassment online can have on players. One of the other factors in this case as well, however, is the nature of the players who are drawn to these games.

Online competitive games come in a plethora of genres to appeal to their player base, and this can easily become a factor in the shape of the community which takes root therein. As Rose notes, "In a game where everyone fits a clear cut and specific mold, it's often drawing only to people who also fit or relate to those molds, so when someone who doesn't fit shows up, people just seem to react poorly to what is different." All of my participants agreed that certain games were prone to more accounts of harassment and toxicity than others, and most of them happened to name games with incredibly high numbers of players as some of the worst sites for harassment. Marcel shared with me that within his experience, smaller fighting game communities had almost zero instances of harassment, as he explained that "Smaller communities like *Quake* and *Rivals* care about their player numbers." Blaire seemed to echo these sentiments, noting that "it matters on what brought the community to that specific game. I've played smaller or dying online games where the community is just glad to be able to play and in turn it creates a pretty accepting and toxic-free environment."

Perspectives on Harassment

For someone with a relatively smooth ride on the roundabout of identity, their privilege allows them to skip past some of the bumps and merge lanes that marginalized people navigate every day, this applies to the online as well as the offline existence. Jeong writes that "the internet is experienced completely differently by people who are visibly identifiable as a marginalized race or gender," as noted above, occupying a position of relative privilege can make one unaware of the severity of harassment online and offline.

Looking at harassment as simply content, Jeong argues, ignores the problem underneath the content: the behavior of harassment. When we focus on the severity of a message, we can easily lose grasp of the impact an 'annoying' message would have when repeated, in a targeted manner, for months on end. Repeated without end every time you log on to play a game and enjoy yourself. My opening example is a particularly lurid and egregious instance of sexual harassment, and I chose it in order to illustrate the depths of which harassment in games can go. However, while it is far from the worst instance of harassment in terms of severity, it also is an example which fails to illustrate the more frequent remarks and how they can stack over time. One of the trickiest things about harassment, as Jeong notes, is that it isn't considered of importance if it is merely a nuisance, regardless of the measurable effects the persistence of trauma can take in the psyche.

When interviewing the seven players, I asked all of them to try and connect instances of online harassment to a greater scope of targeted harassment that happens offline. It was Cherry who responded in her blunt manner, almost incredulous that I would ask such a question, "harassment occurs in everyday life." It may seem a simple answer to those who live with that as their reality, but while all of the women I Interviewed would agree, both Marcel and David thought that the kind of harassment in games was simply quirk of the medium. This disconnect between the men and the women's experiences among those I interviewed is a stunning examination into the nature of how marginalized of privileged identity status can shape our understandings of the same lived reality.

Despite what Marcel and David may believe, it will not be long before we reach a singularity in terms of the integration between broader culture and virtual culture. T. L. Taylor writes that with the rise of new forms of media, and of particular note those which are fueled

through interactive engagement, our relationships with ourselves, media, and producers will

change drastically within the next 30 years. As the distinctions between our interactions with

media and our interactions with each other blur, it will become more important to investigate the

impact of our language, images, and messages that we send. So, while Marcel, for example, may

hold that "people have always been mean to each other since the beginning of time" offers a

sufficient explanation for harassment in games, it will become more and more urgent to critically

investigate past this simplified reasoning.

Towards a New System Against Harassment

It quickly became obvious that one the tell-tale signs of what community would

propagate harassment could start to be predicted as a formula based on anonymity, player base,

and player number, and yet none of these were enough to answer what can be done to combat

this in even the most popular of games spanning thousands of players online at any given time.

One of the key strategies offered by my participants was the usage of block and report features,

but not all games utilize these. Failing that, or often in conjunction, many games utilize chat

filtration systems. When it comes to the options afforded to moderation in chats, most of what

can be done falls under the category of filtering. With real-time chats such as those in games,

sometimes a system will be implemented that automatically blocks certain words or phrases from

being sent, or optionally with automatically censor them. This is where filter-avoidant behaviors

come into play. Players who are determined enough can bypass these filters, and the simple truth

of the matter is that no matter how many words are blocked or which account someone has

banned, there are ways around these methods of moderation.

My participants themselves had little faith in the moderation tools within the games they

played, all noting that they were generally ineffective aside from immediately having the option

to mute offending players. Even so, the majority of my participants continued to use these tools, finding them vastly superior to the alternative in simply ignoring the harassment. As Faith shared: "I recently decided that I might start reporting more, because even though I do not think it will really make a difference, there is still a chance the player might face some kind of consequences." Ultimately, what it comes down to is a need for developers to take stock of this problem and begin to find better ways to address harassment within their platforms.

As I spoke with the seven players in their respective interviews, I often formulated new questions away from my script. One of these questions which emerged repeatedly over multiple interviews was to ask how the players envisioned developers may address issues of harassment within their games. When I broached this question to David he responded:

> Obviously, *Overwatch* has these meetings and they discuss how do we deal with this toxicity. 'We don't want people being toxic because, um, well then players will leave. They won't keep playing our game. We want to, you know, build the community.' They want that, essentially and as a result, though those conversations aren't happening very often, in the end they're being had.

David's response is characterized by an optimistic form of indifference, one which assumes that given enough time, things might sort themselves out once developers gather enough data to implement a solution. On one hand, David's logic is fairly common among players who rely upon the developers to handle systems such as blocking and reporting, on the other hand there are critics of this same logic who ask for a more involved approach than what is being currently done. Bat directly criticizes the type of thinking David supplies, responding to my question with:

> These same gaming companies have office spaces where these types of interactions
>
> occur, and women are told to 'be cool' or 'one of the guys,' and may hold limited roles.
>
> Men have overwhelmingly been the face of the gaming industry and its demographic, and
>
> they're *still* adjusting to having to share toys.

In other words, the problem lies not simply within the community who plays games, but also

within the makeup of who is creating the games we play.

When I asked Rose the same question, she spoke among similar lines to Bat, offering a

solution which addressed the cultural aspect of games. Unlike Bat, Rose did not address the

office climate in game development, but instead offered that "developers should encourage a less

sport-based environment. It would encourage a less aggressive or hostile atmosphere." Rose's

solution shares an optimism with David's approach, but it also notes one of the major issues to

be found within the nature of harassment is a structural cultural one, encouraged by the

proliferation of eSports. According to Zolides' definition of geek masculinity, eSports are a

major contributor to the homosocial aspects which can create an environment rife with

harassment, and so Rose's solution may be on the right path.

Rose and Bat also may agree on another point: that there needs to be a more supportive

environment within major gaming communities. For Bat, this means encouraging "women and

queer people who feel comfortable using their voice in-game, either literally or metaphorically,

are much less likely to spew the same toxic stuff as straight men."

How does one accomplish the tall order of reducing harassment within competitive

games? For David, who in his offline life work in IT: "data is what enables a lot of responses to

most problems in modern technological concerns- it has to sort of be eventually figured out with

data," but what counts as data? There are numerous figures and statistics collected already within

most major game companies on their players, and there are untold numbers of reports which

must be processed by the daily, so my question turns toward this data and asks how developers

are utilizing and interpreting it.

While the perspectives among my participants is far from a monolith, it is agreed upon by

all that the developers have at least partial responsibility for the toxic behavior in their games'

communities. As Blaire notes, "I think it's the developers' responsibility to handle toxic players,

it's not expected, but it's in their hands if they want to change the community." Not expected,

but a responsibility nonetheless, Blaire acknowledges, "If they want to cultivate an open and

accepting community, they have to set certain expectations that the community will want to take

part of."

Once I concluded my interviews, and began writing the findings herein, I began to feel a

sense of frustration. Not for a lack of engaging and thoughtful responses, no, but for the

continued existence of the problem I had been investigating. In review of the collective

experiences of my interview participants, three major themes arise: first, the impact of identity

on who is targeted by harassment, second, the fallacy of the anonymous agora, and third, the

factor of homosociality in harassment. While almost all players have been subject to some form

of rude remark of toxic behavior playing online, it appears that those occupying a marginalized

identity are impacted more frequently regardless of their disclosure of this status. This directly

disproves the theory of the internet as an equalizing force in its capacity for anonymity, as it

turns out that identity is felt and internalized even if it is never expressed. Finally, connecting

this all is the surprising role of homosociality and it's use as a tool of either inclusion or

exclusion as both cause for and resistance to or stagey against harassment, highlighting the role of identity within this issue.

In summation, online competitive games are neither separate from the boundaries of identity as defined in the offline world, but neither are they extensions of these boundaries. The ways in which harassment takes shape within online spaces is familiar and unique and requires new solutions if we hope to address it adequately. Moving forward, there still needs to be more quantitative data collected which is sensitive to the nuances of player identity, and a study of large sample size may find corroborative data for the contents of this ethnography.

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