

## **Let Her Play**

*A report on gender-based violence in video games*

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**Abstract:** Globally, video games are a \$152 billion industry, and approximately 3.1 billion people, or 40% of the population, are players (Ingersoll & Anti-Defamation League, 2019, Price, 2020). Gaming is a huge industry, and it's only getting bigger. Unfortunately, women and other historically marginalized groups often face staggering levels of harassment and violence in these communities. This report aims to explore the issue of gender-based violence in video games by analyzing contributing factors and proposing gaming company interventions.

Ingrid, known as "Sol," was only 19 (Onder, 2021). She was a competitive e-sports player from Brazil, specializing in "Call of Duty" (Onder, 2021). And in February 2021, she was brutally murdered by her male competitor, Guilherme Alves Costa (Onder, 2021). Costa recorded the murder, sharing it on WhatsApp (Onder, 2021). The crime was premeditated: Costa was found with books outlining the crime and PDFs full of hate speech (Onder, 2021). Ingrid Oliveira Bueno da Silva loved video games, but online misogyny and hate made a brutal appearance in her real life, bringing tragic consequences. The challenging culture that exists for female video gamers has disastrous impacts and must be addressed.

Women gamers currently experience incredibly high-rates of gender-based harassment. This includes abuse in online gaming environments, like chat rooms, and offline offices, as the gaming industry reckons with streams of workplace sexual harassment allegations. Women are underrepresented in the gaming industry and objectified in games. Over and over again, women are subjected to discriminatory treatment and abuse in the video game world; reminded that it is a "boys club." This treatment has severe consequences.

The importance of this issue only grows as video games become more and more popular throughout the world. Globally, video games are a \$152 billion industry, and approximately 3.1 billion people, or 40% of the population, are players (Ingersoll & Anti-Defamation League, 2019, Price, 2020). In recent history, the gaming industry has grown every year, and it now makes more annually than the music and film industries combined (Price, 2020).

This report explores the issue of gender-based harassment in video games: its prevalence and impacts, where it comes from, and how gaming companies can intervene.

## **The Problem**

Approximately one in three female gamers in the United States and the United Kingdom experience harassment based on their gender (Ingersoll & Anti-Defamation League, 2019, Bryter, 2019).<sup>1</sup> 17% of American female gamers have received threats of rape from male gamers (Bryter, 2019). Clearly, many women experience severe harassment while playing video games.

Gender-based harassment can vary significantly in games: everything from name-calling, to sharing inappropriate images, to stalking (Bryter, 2019, Fox & Tang, 2016).<sup>2</sup> It isn't consistent in form either. Sometimes harassment comes through in-game chats, but it can also come through the game play itself. Players often exclude female gamers in collaborative games or excessively attack their avatars in combat games (Brehm, 2013, McInroy & Mishna, 2017). And the harassment doesn't end there. Especially for well-known gamers, harassment can leak into

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<sup>1</sup> This report refers to women and females as all individuals who identify as women. Although this report focuses mainly on those who identify as male or female, it should be acknowledged that this does not encompass all gender identities, and non-cisgendered folks often face significant challenges in gaming communities.

<sup>2</sup> In this report, gender-based harassment refers to all discriminatory abuse on the basis of gender, including sexual harassment. Sexual harassment refers to abuse that is sexual in nature. Gender-based violence is a type of gender-based harassment involving physical violence, and sexual violence or assault is a type of sexual harassment involving physical violence. Often, these terms overlap.

streaming sites (Twitch, Youtube), social media, messaging platforms, or into in-person interactions (Bryter, 2019, Ruberg et al., 2019).

The consequences of sexual harassment are massive: emotional distress, diminished self-esteem, anxiety, sleeplessness, depression, self-blame, suicidal thoughts, organizational withdrawal, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Fox & Tang, 2016). Female gamers can lose their hobby, their community, their income, or even their life because harassment drives them out of the gaming world (Fox & Tang, 2016). The consequences of harassment are even more severe when female gamers feel like they have no recourse to address their harassment (Fox & Tang, 2016).

Scholar's theorize that women are targeted in gaming communities because they are seen as intrusive outsiders (Fox & Tang, 2016). Gaming culture is still characterized as stereotypically male, young, heterosexual, and white, even though women now make up almost half of all gamers (Vermeulen & Van Looy, 2016, Ruberg et al., 2019, Yokoi, 2021).

Studies confirm this is not a random phenomenon: women are targeted for online harassment. The Women's Media Center's Speech Project found that chat room participants with female usernames received 25 times more threatening or sexually explicit private messages than those with male or ambiguous usernames (Clarke, 2019). One study looking at game voice chats found that when using generic statements, like "good game," in either male or female voices, the female voice received three times the number of negative comments, compared to the male voice (Brehm, 2013).

But, women are not the only victims of gaming harassment. 65% percent of all American players, regardless of identity, have experienced severe harassment, like stalking and physical threats (Ingersoll & Anti-Defamation League, 2019). Even though men also experience harassment in video games, this report focuses on women because women have been historically marginalized in the gaming world, and often face disproportionately high rates of harassment. Other historically marginalized communities, like people of color, religious minorities, and LGBTQIA+ folks, also experience notably high rates of harassment in video games, and those at the intersection of these identities often face incredibly hostile treatment in the gaming world as well (Ingersoll & Anti-Defamation League, 2019, Ruberg et al., 2019). While the scope of this report focuses on women generally, it is important to note that varying communities face specific challenges regarding video game discrimination and harassment.

This report does not argue that all video games are bad and should be banned. Gaming is a fun social activity, and over half of adolescents participate in gaming with friends (McInroy & Mishna, 2017). Gaming has also been linked to several other positive outcomes like social cooperation, memory retention, and improved attention; 88% of surveyed gamers report having positive social interactions online (McInroy & Mishna, 2017, Smith, 2019). Players use games to make friends online, find mentors, and meet romantic partners (Ingersoll & Anti-Defamation League, 2019). Politically, video games have been used for everything from sharing censored texts in authoritarian countries to spreading awareness about mental health (Lugris, 2020, Asher-Schapiro, 2020). By exploring the negative consequences women have faced in gaming

environments, this report hopes to urge change that makes the valuable video game environment more beneficial for everyone.

### **Contributing Factors**

Many factors likely lead to the prevalence of gender-based harassment that players face while gaming, but experts and advocates consistently point to several phenomena in the industry that they believe significantly impact the problem: (1) gaming is stereotyped as male and few women work in the industry, (2) games consistently sexualize female characters, and (3) the industry has publicly failed to wrestle with workplace harassment trends. Understanding these larger issues in the industry is crucial to developing solutions for online sexual harassment for everyday players.

### ***Industry Diversity***

Women are seen as a minority in gaming, both as players and as workers in the industry. A popular phrase in online gaming says, “There are no women on the internet” (Brehm, 2013). Unfortunately, this dynamic has consequences that likely contribute to the high rates of gender-based harassment in video games.

Women are not a numerical minority among players. In 2020, women made up nearly 41% of all gamers in the United States and 40-45% of those in Asia (Yokoi, 2021). And women play many of the same games as men: 88% of female gamers report playing “competitive” style games, like fighting and first-person shooters (Reach3 Insights, 2021). Despite this, gamers are still perceived to be predominantly white, young, heterosexual, and male (Ruberg et al., 2019, Fox & Tang, 2016). Women are consistently seen as inferior players and outsiders in the space (Easpaig & Humphrey, 2016, Ruberg et al., 2019, Fox & Tang, 2016, Clarke, 2019).

Despite making up a large portion of players, women remain underrepresented in the gaming workforce. A 2020 study of the top fourteen global gaming companies found that 84% of executive positions in the gaming industry are held by men, and only 24% of non-executive industry positions are held by women (Yokoi, 2021). 45% of women in the United Kingdom gaming industry feel that their gender has limited their career progression, according to a 2015 survey (Yokoi, 2021).

Women are marginalized in other offline gaming environments as well. Women are underrepresented in e-sports, and the industry is toxic to female players (Clarke, 2019). Female e-sports competitors and streamers, those who earn a living by playing video games, are often sexualized and seen as outsiders (Ruberg et al., 2019, Clarke, 2019, Brehm, 2013). At e-sports competitions, women are regularly placed in subordinate roles to male players, like as cheerleaders, for example (Brehm, 2013).

Some academics believe that by marketing and creating games by men and for men, the industry perpetuates the idea that gaming is exclusively a masculine space despite the diversity among players (Vermeulen & Van Looy, 2016, Easpaig & Humphrey, 2016, Burnay et al., 2019). When women are perceived as being of minority or secondary status, they are more likely

to experience harassment and other forms of marginalization in the video game world, both on- and offline (Macdonald, 2020, Fox & Tang, 2014, Easpaig & Humphrey, 2016, Fox & Tang, 2016).

### ***Sexualized Characters***

Likely due in part to the lack of gender diversity in the gaming industry, female characters are underrepresented in video games (Breuer et al., 2015), and when they are represented, they are often portrayed as sexist caricatures (Breuer et al., 2015, Fox & Tang, 2014, Brehm, 2013, Vermeulen & Van Looy, 2016). Studies show that playing video games with these depictions can increase various forms of gender-based harassment (Driesmans et al., 2015).

Several studies have found that less than 20% of video games feature female characters (Breuer et al., 2015), although this percentage appears to be growing. When female characters are in games, they are disproportionately background characters (Breuer et al., 2015, Yao et al., 2009, Brehm, 2013, Yokoi, 2021). Between 2015 and 2020, the percentage of game protagonists that were female ranged from 3% to 9% (Wood, 2020).

These female characters are also commonly stereotyped as either weak (damsel in distress, for example) or sexualized (Fox & Tang, 2014, Yao et al., 2009, Brehm, 2013, Vermeulen & Van Looy, 2016). Women are commonly shown in video games with revealing clothing and exaggerated proportions (Yao et al., 2009, Brehm, 2013, Burnay et al., 2019, Yokoi, 2021). One study of gaming magazines found that 59.9% of female characters were sexualized, while less than 1% of male characters were (Brehm, 2013).

But, male characters are not immune to stereotyping, it just comes in different forms (Burnay et al., 2019). Far from being immune to stereotyping though, male characters are instead shown in different tropes, with one analysis finding that 83% of male video game characters are violent, and many are shown as hyper-masculine (Brehm, 2013).

Concerningly, these stereotypical depictions of gender may lead to increased gender-based harassment in gaming. Studies suggest that playing video games with sexualized female characters increases rape myth acceptance and tolerance of sexual harassment (Driesmans et al., 2015, Breuer et al., 2015, Yao et al., 2009, Brehm, 2013, Burnay et al., 2019). Both male and female players tend to sexually harass female players more after playing a sexualized game and just 15 minutes of gameplay with a sexualized female character is enough to have negative behavioral impacts (Burnay et al., 2019, Driesmans et al., 2015)

Sexist content within games may be attracting players to platforms, or it may be reinforcing existing sexist attitudes (Fox & Tang, 2014). Either way, by leaning on gender stereotypes, the gaming industry is further cultivating a harmful environment for gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

### ***Workplace Harassment***

These harmful gender trends exist in the real world as well. In 2014, video gamers faced GamerGate (Wingfield, 2014). Anita Sarkeesian and other feminist advocates received death and

rape threats for criticizing the male-dominated culture of the gaming industry (Wingfield, 2014, Brehm, 2013, McInroy & Mishna, 2017). The incident exposed the workplace harassment faced by women working in gaming: from development, to streaming, to e-sports.

Discussions of workplace harassment facing those in game development peaked around #MeToo. Several employees resigned or were dismissed from big-name companies like IGN, Vox Media's Polygon, Riot Games, and Ubisoft after allegations of sexual harassment, misogyny, and rape in the industry surfaced (Macdonald, 2020). A 2015 survey of women working in the United Kingdom gaming industry found that 33% faced gender-based harassment and bullying (Yokoi, 2021).

Even after these two major reckonings, GamerGate and #MeToo, the video game industry has still been struggling to address workplace harassment and gender discrimination. In August 2021, Activision Blizzard, a major gaming company, faced a series of disturbing allegations: men walking into breastfeeding rooms, unequal pay, verbal harassment, inappropriate touching, and a "frat house" culture (Peters, 2021). Much still needs to be done to reshape the industry and protect women working in gaming.

Women in game streaming also face gender-based harassment and violence. In 2020, more than 70 people in the gaming industry, predominantly women, came forward to share their experiences of abuse online (Lorenz & Browning, 2020). The CEO of Online Performers Group, a talent management agency that serves streamers, stepped down after facing allegations of inappropriate conduct, and a number of prominent male streamers faced similar accusations at the time (Lorenz & Browning, 2020).

These toxic trends have also been noted in e-sports. AnneMunition and Jenna Weowri, two popular e-sports gamers, took public steps to bring awareness to the harassment they face on Twitch as women in the field back in 2019 (Holden et al., 2020). E-sports abuse has made headlines since 2012, when male gamer Aris Bakhtanians sexually harassed competitor Miranda Pakozdi at a live-streamed competition (Fletcher, 2012).

Women are not the only ones in the gaming workforce subject to this abuse, LGBTQIA+ individuals have also come forward. For example, Zoë Quinn, who identifies as non-cisgender and uses they/them pronouns, reported that their former boyfriend, fellow game developer Alec Holowka, sexually assaulted them (Penny, 2019). After coming forward, Quinn faced harassment from the larger gaming community, known as "doxxing" (Penny, 2019). Quinn had previously been harassed to the point of leaving their home during GamerGate only a few years earlier (Illing, 2017).

Quinn's story is tragically a common one. Not only do women and LGBTQIA+ community members regularly face assault and harassment while working in the gaming industry, but time and time again, when these individuals come forward to call for change, they are attacked on social media, facing even more abuse (Brehm, 2013).

This culture has numerous negative impacts. Workplace harassment has significant mental health effects and often causes victims to leave their industries (Fox & Tang, 2016). This is tragic: those working in video games may have to leave their passion, not to mention their

source of income, because of their victimization. And furthermore, in the case of the gaming industry, this exodus could lead to even greater gender disparities than those that are already observed (Yokoi, 2021).

It's a chicken and the egg situation: not only does workplace harassment cause women to leave the industry, but there also may be more harassment in gaming because it is a male-dominated workforce (Macdonald, 2020, Fox & Tang, 2016). Workplace harassment in the video game industry may also persist more stubbornly due to companies consistently not holding perpetrators accountable (Macdonald, 2020, Fox & Tang, 2016).

Workplace harassment in the gaming industry likely impacts the gender-based harassment faced by everyday players. When players see sexual assault and harassment go unpunished in offline gaming environments, it may make this kind of behavior seem acceptable online (Fox & Tang, 2016). Additionally, the hostile work environment may keep women out of the industry, and, as previously specified, the homogeneity of gaming professionals can impact the content and culture of video games.

## **Gaming Company Solutions**

Gender-based harassment in video games is a serious and complicated problem, but not an unsolvable one. While there are likely many ways to intervene in this phenomenon, this report outlines specific steps gaming companies can take to make a difference.

Can gaming companies really change anything? 87% of female gamers say at least maybe (Reach3 Insights, 2021). Gaming companies can take steps to address workplace harassment and diversity, while also transparently and appropriately enforcing content governance standards online to change gaming culture once and for all. 62% of online multiplayer games say that companies need to do more to make games safer and more inclusive (Ingersoll & Anti-Defamation League, 2019).

### ***Address Workplace Harassment and Diversity***

The gaming industry needs to be more diverse and safer for all people in order to address gender-based harassment in games. As previously explained, the real-world problems in the gaming industry likely impact players' experiences across the world.

**Diversity.** Women are incredibly underrepresented in the gaming industry. Companies need to take steps to diversify, and they must do so at the highest possible levels. Efforts should be made to diversify company boards of directors and executives. Furthermore, diversity initiatives should be overseen and publicly committed to by senior-level leadership. Some members of the industry are already taking these steps. For example, after hostile work environment accusations, the large gaming company Ubisoft appointed several senior leaders in diversity and inclusion roles (Yokoi, 2021).

Companies can also facilitate diversity by creating mentorship programs (MacDonald, 2020). Community building and mentorship can provide women with networks that support their professional development and understand the difficulties of existing in a male-dominated

industry. For example, Women in Games is an activist organization focused on creating a safe space for women in gaming (Women in Games). Companies can join Women in Games as corporate ambassadors or encourage their employees to join the organization (Women in Games).

**Workplace Harassment.** But, addressing industry culture means more than just diversifying. It also means that companies must publicly do more to address workplace harassment. If companies do not respond to sexual assault and harassment accusations properly, their inadequacy acts as a symbolic approval of such behavior, allowing gender-based abuse to persist on their platforms and in their offices (Fox & Tang, 2016). As a result, women will leave the industry and their games (Fox & Tang, 2016).

To respond to these situations properly, companies must have public no-tolerance policies for workplace harassment. These policies must be supported by rapid and robust procedures to respond to accusations. Utilizing third-party entities to investigate these situations would help ensure matters were handled without bias (MacDonald, 2020).

As Kenzie Gordon, a Ph.D. candidate in feminist gaming explains, real change will only come “if studios get to the point where people are actually being fired for these accusations and stepping down and there’s some actual structural change happening” (Lorenz & Browning, 2020).

As companies address the harassment at hand, they should also work to protect whistleblowers from internal and external retaliation (Holden et al., 2020). Those in the industry who have spoken out against gender-based discrimination have consistently faced attacks from the larger gaming community. When legally possible, companies should protect the anonymity of reporters from the public (Holden et al., 2020). Additionally, companies should stand in support of survivors who speak out (Holden et al., 2020).

For example, when several Twitch streamers were accused of sexual assault and harassment, Twitch C.E.O. Emmett Shear publicly spoke in support of survivors:

We support people coming forward, commend their bravery in doing so, and know there are many others who have not. The gaming industry is not unlike others that have had to reckon with systemic sexism, racism, and abuse that rewards certain people and disadvantages — even harms — others. The status quo needs to change (Lorenz & Browning, 2020).

By standing with survivors and against harassment publicly, Twitch signaled to the larger gaming community that this behavior is not tolerated. Companies in the gaming industry should publicly stand with survivors to try and mitigate online harassment.

Workplace harassment is a huge issue, much larger than the gaming industry (Human Rights Watch, 2020). While the above recommendations are particularly relevant, other civil society organizations have compiled much more extensive guides for addressing these issues that



may be useful to the gaming industry. Steps must be taken to address offline gender-based harassment in gaming to halt online harassment.

### ***Enforcement***

Proper responses to sexual violence and harassment are necessary in both the digital and physical world. If platforms do not transparently, fairly, and rapidly address gender-based harassment, it will persist. Experts say that unenforced content governance policies and a lack of support for victims in video games make this behavior appear permissible to players (Fox & Tang, 2014). Platforms must act to transparently enforce human rights-respecting content governance policies to prevent gender-based harassment.

**Content governance.** Companies need to employ content governance strategies that protect human rights of all people, especially historically marginalized and vulnerable groups. Gamers support content governance, with 55% of players agreeing that games should have in-game voice chat content moderation tools available to gamers (Ingersoll & Anti-Defamation League, 2019).

It's critical that content governance policies consider necessity, proportionality, and context (Pírková & Pallero, 2020, BSR, 2021). The industry should not utilize a "one-size-fits-all," and different kinds of offenses and platforms will require different policies (BSR, 2021). Companies should react and consider all allegations of gender-based violence and harassment while undergoing content governance efforts, but they should have a range of response mechanisms that consider various circumstances and infractions (Pírková & Pallero, 2020, BSR, 2021). Companies can utilize mechanisms like warning labels, downranking, and temporary suspensions to respond based on what is most appropriate (BSR, 2021, Yokoi, 2021, Holden, et al., 2020).

Whatever a company's content governance policies are, they need to be clear and enforced (MacDonald, 2020, Fox & Tang, 2014, Šimonović, 2018). These policies need to be easily available to all users and the public (Šimonović, 2018). Companies should use paid community management teams to ensure they have the capacity to handle complaints, and company policies and practices should prioritize addressing discriminatory misconduct (MacDonald, 2020, Fox & Tang, 2014). If users see conduct policies go unenforced, research shows that perpetrators will be more likely to perpetrate abuse and victims will be more likely to withdraw from gaming altogether (Fox & Tang, 2014). Therefore, rapid and transparent responses to allegations are critical (Fox & Tang, 2014).

Mechanisms for reporting harassment should be readily available to all users, and companies should review and respond to all cases in a timely manner (Holden, et al., 2020, Šimonović, 2018). Even with the most thorough review processes, mistakes can be made, so companies also need to make mechanisms for appeals readily available and affordable (Pírková & Pallero, 2020, Šimonović, 2018). There should be clear procedures outlining how parties can appeal content governance cases (Pírková & Pallero, 2020, Šimonović, 2018).

Thorough, intensive content governance can be a huge undertaking. Auto-moderating systems can be a useful supplementary tool, but they must be used appropriately. Whenever possible, human decision making should be utilized (Pírková & Pallero, 2020). Auto-moderating can be useful on platforms dealing with a large volume of user-generated content, issues of speed, and where problematic language is simple to identify (Pírková & Pallero, 2020, AnyKey, 2018). For example, an e-sports tournament doing a popular live stream chat might supplement human moderators with auto-moderating systems that block expletives. (AnyKey, 2018)

Auto-moderating can also be used in tandem with human decision making, rather than as a replacement: for example, a system can flag certain posts for priority review by human moderators, or it can ask users to pause before posting potentially hurtful language (AnyKey, 2018, Perez, 2021). To prevent abuse and censorship, companies must be transparent about their use of auto-moderating systems and allow users to request a human review of their case (Pírková & Pallero, 2020).

External review systems can be key to ensuring accountability and avoiding conflicts of interest. Third-party external review should be used to investigate repeated allegations of intolerance and assess gaming company content governance policies regularly (MacDonald, 2020, Pírková & Pallero, 2020, BSR, 2021). Gaming companies should also have regular communications with stakeholders, especially stakeholders representing vulnerable groups, to assess their content governance policies and mechanisms (Pírková & Pallero, 2020, BSR, 2021). Having these external systems will help protect vulnerable groups and prevent unintended consequences of content governance.

**Transparency reporting.** Companies in charge of massive personal data and/or undertake sizable content governance, like those in the gaming industry, should release transparency reports to ensure that the public understands how utilizing various platforms impacts their rights to privacy and freedom of expression (Access Now, 2021). Transparency reports can, and in this case should, include platform safety information.

However, few gaming companies seem to be releasing such reports. Access Now's 2021 Transparency Reporting Index (TRI), a cataloging tool for transparency reports, does not identify many in the industry as releasing reports (Access Now, 2021). More gaming companies should be releasing annual transparency reports to the public.

In the face of gender-based harassment and violence, transparency reporting is critical. Platforms may need to cooperate with law enforcement for investigations or moderate harassment, and users deserve to know when these kinds of actions take place. This transparency is important for protecting privacy and expression rights, but it also allows victims to hold companies accountable for not acting on complaints and clearly informs abusers of what content is unacceptable on the platform (Fox & Tang, 2016).

Companies in the gaming industry should employ transparency reporting best practices. In addition, gaming companies' transparency reports should specifically include data on interventions regarding gender-based harassment and violence. For example, Discord's transparency report includes data on non-consensual pornography removals, and Twitch's report

has incident and enforcement statistics on sexual harassment (Discord, 2021, Twitch, 2021). By providing this information, companies can be transparent specifically on the actions taken related to gender-based violence and harassment, rather than just on their moderation and legal actions more broadly.

### ***Change the Culture***

Often when talking about sexual harassment on gaming platforms, fingers are pointed at gaming culture. But gaming culture is not an unmovable, all-powerful being, it is heavily impacted by the actions of titans in the industry. Gaming companies need to take tangible, evidence-based steps to improve gaming culture to make it a safe and welcoming place for all.

**Representation.** The current depictions of female characters in games may be fostering a more harassment-based culture. Companies should take steps to improve in-game representation to truly reflect the diversity and desires of their players.

While 85% of male gamers say they are satisfied with the look of their characters, only 61% of women feel the same way (Reach3 Insights, 2021). Female game characters are too often one-dimensionally characterized as sexy or weak if they are included in games at all. Gaming companies should include more female characters in their games, not just in the background, but as heroes and protagonists. Their female characters should be diverse, showing varying personalities and physical characteristics.

Female characters in games should not exist as a sexualized monolith. This isn't to say that sexualized characters should not exist in games at all, many women find it empowering to play with such characters — but women should be represented in games in several ways, not solely as sexual objects (AnyKey, 2019).

When companies portray women sexually in games, they should also invest in education efforts. Games should educate players about the relationship between sexualized characters and online harassment (Burnay et al., 2019). They should also include information on how sexual harassment victims suffer (Burnay et al., 2019). Research shows that these strategies can mitigate harassment (Burnay et al., 2019).

Gaming companies should also consider the age of their audience as they design sexualized characters. Research shows that sexualized characters have a particularly notable impact on adolescents' rape-myth tolerance, so women's in-game representation is especially important for youth games (Burnay et al., 2019).

And, this issue of representation extends past the in-game experience. 71% of women gamers want companies to improve representation in advertising, by including more women in their voice-overs and castings (Reach3 Insights, 2021). 42% want companies to encourage women to be involved in e-sports (Reach3 Insights, 2021).

Companies should invest in consistent, well-rounded representations of women in gaming to foster a safe space for female players. Making these changes will work to change gaming culture for the better and help draw even more female customers to video games.

**Anonymity.** Some experts recommend removing anonymity from games. However, anonymity is critical to protecting players' human rights, and its removal would be harmful to female gamers and other historically marginalized groups.

Anonymity may make a user feel less constrained by antisocial behaviors, leading to mistreatment of outgroup members (Fox & Tang, 2016). For example, a gamer playing anonymously may be more likely to harass a female player because there are no face-to-face social interactions or perceived accountability systems. Additionally, some feel that anonymity limits recourse options for players, as they do not really know who is harassing them (McInroy & Mishna, 2017). This is why some experts believe that anonymity contributes to hostile video game environments.

However, as one United Nations report explains, encryption and anonymity “deserve strong protection” because they “enable individuals to exercise their rights to freedom of opinion and expression in the digital age” (Micek, 2015).

Anonymity online is critical to protect freedom of expression and privacy (Monteiro, 2014). Additionally, anonymous and pseudonymous expression is a historically protected right in international law and norms, and restricting such speech does not reduce inflammatory or offensive speech, but does limit the diversity of expression online (Monteiro, 2014, Patry, 2021). Those from historically marginalized groups, like people of color, often are the ones to suffer when anonymity options online are removed (Patry, 2021).

Furthermore, many female gamers rely on anonymity as protection from harassment. Women report “gender masking,” hiding their gender in gaming through username and avatar selections, for example, so that other players assume they are male and do not harass them (Fox & Tang, 2016, Easpaig & Humphrey, 2016). One survey found that 59% of women who play video games online hide their gender identity. To take away anonymity would take away this defense mechanism from female players (Reach3 Insights, 2021).

Crucially, experts identify that anonymity can be dangerous in games due to a perceived lack of accountability and recourse. Gaming companies can change this perception while still permitting anonymity by taking other steps to enforce community guidelines and standards. If players believe they are likely to be punished for their harassment, such as by being temporarily suspended from gameplay, for example, they will perceive an accountability system and be deterred from harassment (Fox & Tang, 2016).

While some experts recommend removing anonymity from video games to prevent harassment, games should continue to allow anonymous play as it is crucial for protecting human rights and female players. However, other steps, like better enforcing community guidelines, can make substantial differences in game culture (Fox & Tang, 2016).

**Badging.** Badging can be a good way to signal that harassment is not tolerated. By creating badging programs and signing on existing pledges, gaming companies can make it clear that harassment is unacceptable in the community.

When a gamer signs up for an anti-harassment badging program, not only are they making a commitment for inclusivity, but anyone who plays with or follows that gamer sees that

commitment. This signals to abusers that their behavior will not be tolerated, and lets survivors know they are not alone.

AnyKey created the “Good Luck, Have Fun” pledge for Twitch (AnyKey). So far, over 1 million gamers have signed the pledge, committing to standing against harassment and playing with integrity (AnyKey). When a gamer signs up, they are given exclusive access to a badge for their profile, signaling that they support an inclusive community (AnyKey). AnyKey even encourages gamers to spread the pledge by keeping a leaderboard of the gamers with the most referrals (AnyKey). Companies can create similar initiatives for their community members on their own games and platforms.

**Industry-wide Cooperation.** Addressing harassment in video games is no easy feat. That’s why the entire industry should work together to bring along substantial change.

To truly change gaming culture, rather than just addressing harassment in a single game or platform, companies need to create relatively standard policies across games, platforms, streaming services, and competitions that specify what counts as harassment, what will be done to prevent it, and what the appropriate corporate response to harassment allegations is (Clarke, 2019). These standardized systems should portray industry norms while not sacrificing adjustability when necessary (i.e. different platforms using different moderation tools).

The Executive Director of the International Game Developers Association herself believes that industry cooperation is critical. Kate Edwards explained that “[o]ne of the things that would be really cool to see is if all companies adopted similar standards for what constitutes harassment and behavior so they work more in tandem” (Holden et al., 2021).

Previously, like in the wake of GamerGate, gaming companies made united statements against gender-based harassment, but there was little follow through (Holden et al., 2021). The International Game Developers Association condemned the harassment attacks, but few member companies took tangible action (Holden et al., 2021).

More accountability for these industry wide efforts can be found in pledge programs. Companies can sign on to public pledges that clearly stand for inclusivity and against harassment. This can signal to members of the industry and players what behavior is tolerated and expected in the gaming world and hold the company accountable to its committed values.

For example, RaiseTheGame is a pledge initiative where gaming companies can sign on, agreeing that they are committed to equality, diversity, and inclusion (RaiseTheGame). So far, 200 pledge partners and supporters have signed on to the initiative (RaiseTheGame).

By creating systems of industry-wide collaboration and accountability, the gaming industry can shift the culture to make harassment universally unacceptable.

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<sup>33</sup> An earlier version of this paper including in text citations to this source but accidentally omitted it from the bibliography. The author apologizes for this error.



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