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Sexism in The Gaming Scene: Research Paper

Following the surge of the #MeToo movement, thousands of women have come forward to detail their individual experiences with sexism; be it in the workplace, in public, or, as the topic discussed here, in gaming. Although the #MeToo movement started in the acting and entertainment scene, it has moved on to inspire women across all platforms, including gaming communities, to speak up about harassment. These women have been bringing attention to the blatant harassment and sexist advances towards them as experienced throughout their time playing online through websites and online forums like Twitter, Reddit, 4Chan, and Twitch. Women linked to the gaming scene have taken the time to share their experiences to spark change and ignite a conversation. Because video games have been seen as a men's space and because laws do not adequately protect women from harassment online, a movement has emerged to change and resolve sexism in online gaming. However, a large portion of the gaming community argues that this is not the case, as women have the ability to play these games and the rates of sexist harassment they experience is supposedly minimal. These two arguments have led to vast amounts of research and allegations alike, which call for means of reform to create a solution.

The arguments surrounding the effects of sexism in gaming is common amongst those in the gaming community. Many believe the issue to be isolated to only a few toxic players in each game. Some resort to the argument that muting or blocking these sexist and/or toxic players is the responsibility of the women experiencing the offense, while others doubt the very existence of an issue at all. Recently, however, many women on the popular streaming website Twitch

have come forward with allegations of abuse and sexist behavior from their male counterparts. The allegations range from viewer to streamer, unwanted sexual advances to sexual assault to stalking. In order to fully understand the issue of sexism in gaming, it is important to look at examples of this behavior. Twitch streamer SheSnaps comments on the belief that these sexist microaggressions are part of a bigger problem, “when a girl speaks up in video games’ online voice chats,” she says, “it either turns into this gross lust-fest or it turns into ‘go make me a sandwich... Give the controller back to the man.’” Sayings like these are a normalcy for women in online gaming, and SheSnaps believes that, “people don’t realize that stupid comments and microaggressions feed into this overall culture to feeling unheard and unsafe.” In another situation, popular Twitch streamer MethodJosh was known for flirting with young women on his channel and in his Discord server. In these servers, these same women were called demanding names like “whores” and “thots,” actions that MethodJosh claims was part of his entertainment to his fans. Actions like this, spurred on by big names in the community, influence others to act in a similar manner, and so the sexism spreads. SheSnaps comments that, “you want to be surprised by it, but as a woman you’re not surprised at all,” an indication that behavior such as this is a common occurrence for many women in gaming. Aside from verbal abuse from those on Twitch, as well as the abuse of power from big name streamers and Twitch staff, the issue runs far deeper and treads into physical territory. Once-popular Twitch streamer Sam “IAmSp00n” Earney has been accused by multiple smaller female streamers of abuse of power, using his large following to attract, date, and have sex with women. One of these female streamers is Avery “LittleSiha,” who dated Earney and eventually became aware of his sexual messages and intentions with other small streamers, which she believes, “seems a little predatory. He specifically uses his power with smaller streamers... as opposed to streamers who are more on

his level.” The harassment exists on a greater level, too, spreading into the professional scene. Miranda Pakozdi, a female gamer, entered a gaming tournament for a chance at winning \$25,000. During the tournament, however, Pakozdi’s coach Aris Bakhtanians, “interrogated her on camera about her bra size, said “take off your shirt” and focused the team’s webcam on her chest, feet and legs.” Pakozdi has commented that although she expects a certain amount of trash talk during gaming, “as the only woman on the team, this was too much, especially from her coach,” which once again shows an abuse of power from those in high positions such as a gaming team’s coach.

In a different ongoing situation, Twitch streamer Anita “SweetAnita” has detailed evidence of her stalker using the platform to harass and threaten her, as well as visiting her home, trespassing, and even assaulting her in one instance. Anita has come forward about her situation on Twitter, posting screenshots of text from her stalker in her Twitch chat reading, “I’ll kill you soon. Not with the cheap kitchen knife I had last time. No, I’m gonna bring something special for you,” among other threats of violence. Anita comments in her YouTube video “How Can I Stop My Stalker? Please Help!” that she has had a stalker for over a year now, “I have been assaulted, I’ve been chased, and people have had to restrain my stalker out in public as he wouldn’t leave me alone... I finally got a restraining order, but he breaches it constantly.” Although Anita has reached out to law enforcement for assistance, she notes their involvement and inaction as underwhelming and unhelpful. In yet another instance, the gaming conference SXSW in Texas cancelled two panels that would discuss gaming culture in relation to sexism due to threats of violence. Even in my own experience on Twitch as well as on different online games’ voice chat, sexism is an apparent unavoidable aspect of gaming for women. After submitting reports to Twitch for the pedophilic and sexual harassment I had experienced from

ages 14 to 16 on Twitch, I expected a response, but nothing occurred and the report was lost in their files. It is instances such as these that show that this sexism in relation to gaming is not simply isolated to a small number of individuals, but rather it is forged in the very culture of gaming. With the inaction of both the staff at Twitch as well as the law enforcement in the instance of Anita's case, it becomes clear to see why women like SheSnaps say this kind of behavior is unsurprising. As inaction remains prevalent in assisting these victims, the sexist behavior will continue.

With these men being called out for their inappropriate behavior towards women online, it is important to understand the potential reasonings and backgrounds of such behavior, as understanding such thinking paves the way forward into fixing the issue at its core. Alice E. Marwick provides several examples of potential reasoning, citing revenge porn, Reddit and "geek masculinity," and general lack of concern or care for their actions against women. Revenge porn encompasses the idea of "non-consensually sharing an intimate image of another person," and is often sent when men feel that a woman has wronged them in some way (Marwick 179). Marlisse Silver Sweeney, author of "What the Law Can (and Can't) Do About Online Harassment," details her own experience with revenge porn in which she went on a date with a man, decided things weren't going to work out, and ignored his texts. What followed was a video of the man masturbating, which she describes as, "it wasn't a 'let's fuck.' It was a fuck you. And most importantly, it felt like a threat." Revenge porn is a subset of Reddit or "geek" masculinity, in which men feel the need to express their masculinity online in sexual ways. Marwick explains this concept, writing, "to teenagers, [geek masculinity] often involves sexual harassment, rape jokes, and homophobic insults to mark the boundaries between feminine and masculine behavior. Such behavior continues into adulthood, as men publicly sexualize women to challenge their

authority...” of which revenge porn is included in (Marwick 180). Also mentioned by Marwick is the idea that posting stolen intimate pictures of celebrities is acceptable because they are famous, “this perspective holds that the celebrity leaks are justified either because the victims are celebrities and rely on positive publicity for their careers, or because the subjects of the photos are famous and wealthy,” which is followed by an example of this thought process as posted by a Reddit user, “these people profit off seeking our attention. They cannot then cry privacy rights,” which ignores the fact that these images were stolen and illegally uploaded to the Internet without consent (Marwick 185).

It is possible that these thought processes lead to the sexism that many women face in gaming and in gaming communities, which are largely popular on Reddit, 4Chan, Twitter, and Discord. The situation of “Gamergate” also resonates with many male gamers: “Gamergate” focuses on issues of sexism and anti-progressivism in video game culture. ResearchGate’s Rachel Kowert and Johannes Breuer explain the thought process of those that rally behind this harassment campaign, “it seems that people are afraid that diversification of the gaming community and the games industry is taking something away rather than enriching the field... people seem afraid to lose something if others have the same rights as they do.” Sexism in gaming culture isn’t just rooted in the idea behind Gamergate, though: historical and cultural implications also play a part in this issue. Historically and culturally, gaming has been stereotyped as a male-dominated activity: created, produced, and provided with the idea of men and the male fantasy in mind. Even though female gamers make up more than 44 percent of the gaming population, men tend to be more vocal during games (which is also likely a result of sexist tendencies: women tend to keep their voice chat off if it means avoiding sexist remarks from other players). Kowert and Breuer understand that, “sexism in gaming cultures will most

likely not dissipate until gaming is understood and treated as an activity that can be enjoyed by anybody,” as although the times are changing towards a more equal and inclusive environment, these ideals of women versus men in gaming remain. Reasons such as these are what lead researchers to believe that sexism in gaming is still a pressing matter.

Branching off of the research conducted and the evidence provided about the actions and behavior of sexist men in gaming communities, the information on cultural and historical backgrounds as a catalyst to sexism in gaming serves an important role. Gaming has been portrayed as a male-dominated activity by the media for years, thus creating the social stereotype that is a male-only sport or club. However, trends show that the number of female gamers compared to male gamers is increasingly moving towards being equal, with women comprising more than 44 percent of the gaming population. Despite this, studies have shown that men are typically more active in gaming than women, “on average, [men] spend more time and money and gaming is a more important part of their social identity than for most female players,” according to Rachel Kowert and Johannes Bruer, which may add to the common stereotype. This adds to the existence of gaming culture, since more men find gaming to be a portion of their identity and culture than women. Kowert and Bruer also argue that, “as such, we would argue that noting the overall change in the number of female players is only tapping into one aspect of game involvement and gaming culture,” in order to separate the stereotype from the facts and, hopefully, change the appearance of this all-inclusive activity. Another aspect of this centers around the belief that, as Jesse Fox puts it, “in this case, women are seen as weak, precious, and incapable of accomplishing the same things as men, and as such should be disempowered and protected by men,” which revolves around the historical belief (in most instances) that women are overall lesser than men. Researcher Jolien De Letter states that, “[online platforms] can also

give voice to destructive individuals set on humiliating, even terrorizing, certain populations and, in the long run, stand in the way of social progress,” which adds to the social aspect of sexist behavior in gaming, as these “certain populations” include the whole of the female sex.

Correlating to this stands De Letter’s belief that, “witnessing peer harassment, which means frequenting toxic social environments, causes sexual harassment victimization as well,” once more adding to the social behaviors expressed by men that eventually leads to this sexism.

Overall, the historical, cultural, and societal implications serve as another piece of evidence behind the reasons why men in gaming engage in sexist behavior.

As the effects of these behaviors against women become more apparent, it becomes clear that action is required to protect and assist those experiencing the effects of sexism. Anita’s YouTube video doesn’t just show inactivity from the police in the United Kingdom, where she lives; it also shows inactivity from the police in other cases by other Twitch streamers around the world, showing that this is not an isolated incident, but rather a foundational problem. Other Twitch streamers experiencing sexual harassment on the site say that Twitch failed to respond to their allegations, such as in the case of Erin “YourStarling” Hall, who reported her ex-boyfriend after he revealed private details of Hall’s background without her consent. Hall stated that, “she never received a response from Twitch,” which in itself shows another side of the problem: companies meant to protect their workers and partners have failed to do so. Avery “LittleSiha,” following the previously mentioned events with “IAmSp00n,” stated that, “men get away with [sexist behavior]... which I think is another reason why it happens. If they know there’s no repercussions, then what’s stopping them from doing it?” Although the recent Twitch allegations do not directly correspond with the process of the law (as many of these women have not or are

not proceeding with legal action), they do involve the terms of service and regulations of Twitch, which have not been upheld, in the eyes of many.

On the other side of things, the legal process that comes with allegations such as these can be difficult to pursue unless you have the proper resources. Following the events of the leaking of actress Jennifer Lawrence's nude pictures, Sweeney writes that taking the necessary actions against your perpetrator(s) isn't as easy as it is made out to be, "unless you have Jennifer Lawrence's resources this isn't exactly realistic: Filing a case like this is a very expensive and time-consuming process, not to mention emotionally draining." Likewise, professor Danielle Citron of Maryland's Francis King Carey School of Law, an expert in the area of cyber-stalking, stated that they, "can only think of three or four reported cases in America, where victims have successfully been awarded a monetary judgement against their online harassers," which goes to show that not only is the legal process these women take everything Sweeney already stated, but it is also not taken as seriously as cases where these same actions occur outside the Internet. Thus, once more, the expectations of the law has been set, and yet those that have experienced the events of harassment not only in gaming, but online as a whole, are dissatisfied with the underwhelming response. In all, the law is supposed to protect those in need: and yet, the victims of this sexual harassment have been ignored and abandoned.

Since laws, regulations, and terms of service on websites like Twitch and Reddit do not fully protect nor ensure the safety of women's privacy online, many women have stepped forward to present a call to action for reform and solution. Regarding Anita's case wherein the police have been inactive and unhelpful, Anita believes that, "being an entertainer is always going to be dangerous and life threatening until the platforms we use and the police start finding systems and means to protect us and take it seriously." Anita believes that a call to action and

reform is the way forward to spark change, “if we can encourage the police to do better... and every platform possible to communicate better and to have rigid, proper policies regarding communicating with the police in instances of harassment it could save lives,” as it is evident that the situation at hand is more complicated than just being able to mute or block or ignore your harassers and/or abusers. In her video, Anita references several cases of stalking where women took extreme precautions including moving houses and legal action, and yet these women were either murdered by their stalkers or are still being stalked today. On the other hand, Sweeney believes that this issue is one that is not able to be resolved through legal reform, as it is clear that even with some laws in place, the police remain unresponsive in many cases, “it seems to be a conversation that needs to be pushed both inside and outside the courtroom. No amount of legal updating is going to solve the problem of gender-based harassment online.” Others, like Tom Cannon, co-founder of the largest fighting game tournament, EVO, have taken action by pulling sponsorships from tournaments and events wherein broadcasters have made light of things like sexual assault, sexual harassment, etc. Cannon stated, “the nasty undercurrent in the scene isn’t a joke or a meme. It’s something we need to fix,” which acts as an action of support to those women that have experienced such events. Similarly, game designer James Portnow wrote in one of his animated web series, “right now, it’s like we gave the school bully access to the intercom system and told him that everyone would hear whatever he had to say. It’s time we take away that megaphone,” which serves as an expression of support and allyship to those experiencing sexual harassment online and in gaming. Although the issue standing before us is monstrous and one that takes time and patience to resolve, actions such as these aid to the movement. It is time to take action and responsibility in order to create a safer space for women online and in the gaming scene.

Even with this era of change towards equality and acceptance, the existence of sexism in gaming remains a constant and prevalent endeavor for many women. Since video games first emerged in the 1960s, they have been viewed as a men's club of sorts, where women have been excluded and even harassed for enjoying the activity. Since laws do not adequately protect women from harassment in the gaming scene, a surge of voices has emerged to spark change and reform in order to solve the issue of sexism in gaming. Many studies have shown the effects of sexism in gaming, as well as the consequences of this sexism when it is taken too far. With more women coming forward with allegations and stories of sexist harassment on gaming platforms like Twitch and Discord, the movement has taken a sort of inspiration from the #MeToo surge. The importance of this issue is one that requires time and effort, and perhaps starts with recognizing and understanding the problem at its roots: the influence behind these sexist behaviors. It is only after assessing the source of the issue that we can begin to formulate possibilities for reform and solution. Studies have shown that these behaviors are often caused by factors including historical, cultural, and societal aspects, but can also range from geek masculinity to revenge porn. Thus, as many women have come out to say publicly, platforms and law enforcement alike must become more serious in order to fix this problem and secure the safety of thousands of women across the gaming community. This is an issue that has been evolving for years, and it is about time we take a stand to change the course of action.

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