

The Women Video Game Character
and the
the Women Gamer Experience

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The gaming community is stereotypically made up of greasy men, potty-mouthed teens, and introverted future felons. But in reality, it is so much more than that. Women are rarely considered to be a substantial part of the gaming community even though they make up almost half of it. And despite making up almost half of it, they are rarely accurately represented. Women in video games are often portrayed as hypersexualized “idealized” versions of what gaming companies believe men want to see. The over-sexualization of women characters in video games leads to a negative self-efficacy among women and the increase, promotion, and acceptance of violence towards women.

Women make up almost half of the gaming community, “In 2021, women accounted for 45 percent of gamers in the United States, up from 41 percent of U.S. gamers identifying as women during the previous year” (Statista, 2021). Even though they make up such a large portion they are often overlooked. When one goes to play a video game, they can expect a few things: a male lead, an interesting storyline, and a hypersexualized female character who, oftentimes, is nonplayable. One concern that pops up when a woman plays a hypersexualized version of what a “real woman” is supposed to look like is self-efficacy issues, “Self-efficacy relates to how well an individual feels they can do something, it reflects one’s confidence in their ability to accomplish something” (Morawitz, et al.). When a woman’s self-efficacy is low, they go through life feeling like they can’t do anything. “Playing a sexualized female videogame

character negatively affected feelings of self-efficacy in women, compared to playing no video game character” (Morawitz, et al.). A slight worry is that some girls are starting to game at a younger and younger age, which can lead to self-efficacy issues occurring at a more rapid pace. Since it was proven in Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz’s study that women already experience low self-efficacy when they play video games, there is a concern that young girls will develop low self-efficacy at younger and younger ages.

A lot of the times women and girls face these low self-efficacy issues is due to the type of cyber aggression they experience in online chats. According to an article by Arvin Jagayat, “A survey by the World Wide Web Foundation found that 52% of young women and girls report some form of online abuse, with most believing the problem is getting worse” (Jagayat, et al). A lot of the cyber aggression faced by women and girls in chats is based on their genders, this includes sexist comments, their capability of being able to play, and threats of sexual abuse. Though these are extreme cases, they do occur in many online gaming communities making women less likely to enter voice chats when gaming with men. It is shown that “recent evidence has confirmed that men’s body-biased gaze behavior toward women is correlated positively with their self-reported objectification attitudes” (Hollett, et al.). So when a man sees a hypersexualized female character they are more likely to treat women in the real world with disrespect and are more likely to sexualize them online. The reason many feel comfortable with cyber-bullying, in general, is due to the fact that they are hiding behind a screen. The threats and criticisms are a lot easier to say when a voice and face can’t be held accountable. Some of these threats and criticisms lead to the embracing of rape myth acceptance.

“Rape myth acceptance” is a term used to describe the hostility towards rape victims, primarily those who are women. It has been shown that “exposure to violence against women in

media has been linked with reduced sympathy for female victims of violence, increased rape myth acceptance, increased attitudes in support of sexual violence, increased negative attitudes towards women, and increased aggression towards women” (Borgman, et al.). When discussing the role of women in video games the Virtual Violence Against Women Scale was proven to be a “reliable and valid measure of players experiences of violence against women in video games” (Borgman, et al.). The main reason men act this way towards women is that they feel threatened by their presence. In a podcast created by *Ball State Daily*, interviewee Blake Chapman says “It boils down to the simple belief that, they [men] don’t like women and they don’t like people impeding on this space that they have found sacred.” Since more and more women are playing video games, this quote suggests that more men feel threatened in their “safe space” which could lead to more sexist behavior to try and squeeze women out. The main reason this hostility is often overlooked is that rape myth acceptance is not accurately represented by gaming companies when promoting their games. “This is due, in part, to how little information is available regarding the depiction of violence against women in games” (Borgman, et al.). The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) also does not acknowledge sexual violence. “Any game, therefore, that displays both sexual violence and gore will only have ‘gore’ displayed on the ESRB label, as it supersedes the portrayal of sexual violence in terms of its importance, according to the ESRB” (Borgman, et al.).

Throughout most of the research for this topic, some data was inconclusive or disproven, “Our study could not replicate negative or positive effects of sexualization on women’s bodily self-concept in a video game environment, raising the possibility that the framework of objectification theory might not be applicable to games” (Skowronski, et al.). This research concluded that sexual objectification of women could not just be targeted back to video games.

Other external factors are at play. Most of the studies analyzed suggested that more research in the area needed to be done, that the experiment sizes were too small, and most studies only used one video game in the test, leading to inconclusive results. While this quote does not deny women experience low self-efficacy, it says that it is not applicable to video games. However, the Cyber-Aggression Towards Women (CATW) scale counteracts this. “Despite observed decreases in hostile sexism over time, CATW by individuals and organized groups have reached critical mass in that same period, with some arguing CATW in the gaming community in the mid-2010s created a blueprint for engaging in cultural warfare with groups with opposing views online” (Jagayat, et al.). So, even if women are not reporting lower self-image issues due to the games they play, it is proven that being in an environment where cyber aggressions towards them occur creates a gendered tension. A lot of this tension goes back to what was mentioned earlier, which is men not wanting to share what they consider to be a “sacred space”. Normalizing female gamers and creating realistic portrayals of female video game characters could be a start to help end CATW in gaming. Female video game voice actors have already noticed a slight difference and have witnessed a new acceptance of women in the field.

Voice actress Laura Bailey, best known for her roles as “Rayne” in the *BloodRayne* series and “Abby” in *The Last of Us 2*, says “I was always cast as the wife, the sidekick, or the chick you were rescuing, it was really frustrating, but to see the progression, even in the last decade to see the roles offered to females has been pretty phenomenal” (Reid and Bleyaert 19:36). With this being said, Bailey also notes that one of her first female game characters, “Rayne” had their own PlayBoy spread. “It was awesome she was a really badass character, but it can only be that if it has that sexual aspect as well” (Reid and Bleyaert 21:16). This is the perfect example of even the “strongest” female video game characters being showcased as nothing more than an

object. Bailey is grateful that more and more roles for women are opening up in the industry and the woman in these games can just be “human beings.” A lot has changed since the dawn of the female video game character, but that does not mean work still does not need to be done.

In conclusion, it is no surprise that woman gamers are a target for a lot of hostility in the gaming community. It is shown that they experience a lower self-efficacy and a more sexual environment, whether they are playing as a hypersexualized character or being a woman in a chat room. Though women are becoming more and more confident in the gaming community, sexism and misogyny are most definitely still there. While women make up almost half of the community and that number will most likely grow, they are still one of the most underrepresented groups in video games. Stronger female leads might be getting created, but woman gamers’ skill levels are consistently being critiqued by male counterparts. As well as their purpose for being there. The gendered divide in gaming is something that unfortunately might always exist. With more and more women being the lead characters in games there is a chance the hypersexualization of women video game characters can dissolve. Until then though, it is still showcased that a lot of woman video game characters, leads or not, will most likely continually be overly sexualized and used as the prize for the male video game counterpart. As for the CATW, the only way that could change is to have men no longer be misogynistic and or sexist.

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