

## A Discussion About Toxicity Towards Women in Video Games

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*(Trigger Warning: Mentions Harassment and Suicide)*

As a young girl, I've always been captivated by video games. In my young eyes, it was more than entertainment or a medium to stave off boredom. For me, it was a new, immersive world that everyone could enjoy. I can vividly recall the bright and chilly Saturday morning when my father woke me up in a hurry to get to the local flea market. That day my dad and I walked away with a game that would change me forever, *Super Smash Brothers* for Nintendo 64. Since then, video games have become a serious part of my life, and I began to enjoy more online games like *Quake III Team Arena*, *Halo*, *Black Ops II* (mostly the zombie mode), and *Minecraft*. These groundbreaking games gave me so much fulfillment, that is, until the implementation of local communications (or comms). The violent threats, harassment, and demands to return "to the kitchen" were regularly endured until I disconnected from comms and changed my username to something more masculine. I felt humiliated and deeply wounded, but I wasn't alone. Other women who dared enter comms to make in-game callouts were quickly berated, and nothing was off the table. The experience of female gamers is wrought with hatred despite making up almost half of the multi-player gamers.<sup>1</sup>

In 2022, Women in Games Argentina ran an experiment used to raise awareness of gender-based harassment in cooperative and online gaming.<sup>2</sup> It featured three male gamers who were tasked with playing *Valorant* using their normal voices, then with a modulator that made them sound more feminine.<sup>3</sup> The result? Cooperation and teamwork disappeared, their win-rates plummeted, their teammates belittled them, launched slurs, and told one of them they were a "girl in a men's game."<sup>4</sup> The male participants were shocked, but this is an all-too-common reality for female gamers.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to who is targeted, harassment is not exclusive to non-famous players. For example, who could forget about Anita Sarkeesian, founder of Feminist Frequency, who dared to expose harmful tropes of women in video games.<sup>6</sup> Her videos featured deep educational dives into the offensive portrayal of women in video games and ways in which developers can improve these portrayals (one of which included simply putting more clothes on female characters).<sup>7</sup> Because of her activism, however, she became the target of vicious online harassment including

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<sup>1</sup> David S. Cloud, *Women in Games Swaps Male and Female Voices to Highlight Harassment in Gaming*, CAMPAIGN (Nov. 16, 2022), <https://www.campaignasia.com/article/women-in-games-swaps-male-and-female-voices-to-highlight-harassment-in-gaming/482231#:~:text=It%20had%20three%20professional%20male,teamwork%20went%20out%20the%20windo> w.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Anita Sarkeesian, *Tropes vs Women in Video Games*, FEMINIST FREQUENCY, <https://feministfrequency.com/series/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games/> (last visited Nov. 19, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

death threats.<sup>8</sup> Anita Sarkeesian's content became the target of so much hatred, in fact, that it helped spark a harassment campaign called "Gamergate".<sup>9</sup> "Gamergate" was a misogynistic campaign spearheaded as a backlash against feminism and diversity in video games.<sup>10</sup>

With all this egregious behavior on public display, what has been done to mitigate it? According to sources like StopBullying.Gov, women in gaming are recommended to stop playing the game for a time, block the player, respond firmly to the abuser, report the player, or remove themselves from comms for a while.<sup>11</sup> This puts the onus on the player getting harassed to take responsibility for responding to the harasser's behavior and lose out on certain in-game benefits to disconnect themselves from the harassment. However, is this enough to stop sexist bullies in their tracks? Veriff, an anti-bullying software company, seems to think their product can do just that.<sup>12</sup> Veriff's software combines multiple technologies "to make circumventing a suspension or ban as difficult as possible, significantly reducing bullies' motivation"<sup>13</sup> To do this, Veriff offers network fingerprinting and identity verification technology to prevent multi-accounting.<sup>14</sup> In other words, when accounts get banned, an abuser's usual course of action is to simply create a new account and continue their tirade. That's where Veriff comes in. It provides a service to prevent this multi-accounting abuse.<sup>15</sup>

The issue with this technology isn't in its effectiveness, it's in the effectiveness of the banning systems put in place before it is needed. A banning system is a tool developed to remove abusive accounts and to promote civility in games.<sup>16</sup> In order to maintain this civility, developers must maintain robust banning systems, as well as other punishment tools such as suspensions, where abusive content is reviewed and punished in a timely manner.<sup>17</sup> This is certainly easier said than done. Some developers have struggled to moderate their in-game communications and the effect on women, people of color and members of the LGBTQIA community has been considerable.<sup>18</sup> According to StopSpying.Org, "44% of Black gamers, 40% of Asian American gamers, 37% of LGBTQ+ gamers, and about 30% of Jewish, Muslim and Latino gamers have been harassed for being who they are."<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps there is an opportunity to engage the U.S. legal system by implementing policies to require systems or procedures to prevent harassment and abuse. Outside the U.S., countries

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<sup>8</sup> Jordan Erica Webber, *Anita Sarkeesian: 'It's Frustrating to be Known as the Woman Who Survived #Gamergate'*, THE GUARDIAN (Oct. 16, 2017, 11:05 EDT), <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/oct/16/anita-sarkeesian-its-frustrating-to-be-known-as-the-woman-who-survived-gamergate>.

<sup>9</sup> *Gamergate*, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate\\_\(harassment\\_campaign\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate_(harassment_campaign)) (last visited Nov. 11, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Cyberbullying and Online Gaming*, STOPBULLYING.GOV (Sept. 14, 2021), <https://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying/cyberbullying-online-gaming#:~:text=Report%20the%20player%20who%20is,adult%20and%20get%20some%20support>.

<sup>12</sup> Chris Hooper, *How to Give In-Game Bullying the Red Card*, VERIFF (Mar. 23, 2023), <https://www.veriff.com/blog/video-gaming-stop-bullying-harassment>.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Eleni Manis et al., *Banned For Being: Moderating Online Game's Public Sphere*, S.T.O.P (May 19, 2023), <https://www.stopspying.org/banned-for-being>.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

like South Korea, have taken a firm stance against online bullying both in the gaming space and on online forums.<sup>20</sup> Following the suicides of two celebrities who were harassed online, South Korea has instituted a policy that requires online users to provide ID verified names when communicating online.<sup>21</sup> In this way, legal action or civil enforcement is easier to pursue as abusers are more easily identified. This ID is an online identifier similar to a social security number and is used to play online games like *Overwatch*.<sup>22</sup> The basis for these protections falls within South Korea's anti-defamation laws.<sup>23</sup> Since the implementation of these measures, Japan has begun to follow South Korea's lead after the suicide of Hana Kimura. Kimura endured hateful comments and harassment online following her participation in the popular Japanese television show, *Terrace House*.<sup>24</sup> Could the U.S. follow suit as well? According to Liz Lanier for GameDaily.Biz, it is unlikely, due to the provisions of the First Amendment to protect free speech.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, legal expert Sean Kane argued that unless the in-game harassment rose to the level of something akin to illegal 'cyberbullying' (which I think would be difficult), it is very unlikely that the government will take any action."<sup>26</sup>

Who's to say the fate of future legislation in the world of cyberbullying. In the interim, game developers must work with the community in effective ways to combat sexism and harassment against women and other minorities in online gaming.

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<sup>20</sup> Christine Suniti Bhat et al., *Cyberbullying in Asia*, ASS'N FOR ASIAN STUD., <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/aaa/archives/cyberbullying-in-asia/#:~:text=Anti%2Dcyberbullying%20legislation%20is%20being,celebrities%20who%20were%20victimized%20online> (last visited Nov. 19, 2023).

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> Liz Lanier, *Online Game Harassment Could Soon be Punishable by Law in South Korea*, GAMEDAILY.BIZ (Sept. 18, 2018), <https://www.gamedaily.biz/online-game-harassment-could-soon-be-punishable-by-law-in-south-korea/>.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> Hiroshi Minegishi, *Cyberbullying: How Japan is following in South Korea's footsteps*, NIKKEI ASIA (Jun. 7, 2020), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Cyberbullying-How-Japan-is-following-in-South-Korea-s-footsteps>.

<sup>25</sup> Lanier, *supra* note 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*