STUDENT SESSION

GENDER INEQUALITY PRESENT IN THE GAMING COMMUNITY

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to explore gender inequality present in the gaming community. The paper is split into three major topics. We will take a closer look at the position of women in gaming as a hobby, gaming as a professional career and gaming development. In the first part, where we focus on women who game as a hobby, we will explore the general atmosphere in gaming and how women fit in it. A separate section here will be devoted to strategies women implement in order to protect themselves. In the second part we will look at the professional gaming scene, and discuss the position of women as professional players. In this section we will also take a closer look at the streaming platform Twitch.tv and explore the position of women who have a career in streaming. In the third part we will discuss the position of women in the gaming development industry.

Keywords:

Women, gaming, discrimination, sexism, harassment.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender inequality is present in all aspects of life everywhere in the world. We cannot deny the fact that, through the ages, women have won some rights for themselves and have elevated their position in the society. But what has been done is simply not enough, and true equality between genders still does not exist. Women still face discrimination, just in different, more hidden ways.

Mary writes about the fact that just because women made important changes in their lives in the past hundred years, that does not mean those changes can be called progress. She notes that the fewest changes have been made in the workplace where women are still highly discriminated against. [1]

The workplace is ripe with gender inequality. Regardless of their profession, women face discrimination in the workplace, but in some professions, discrimination is more prevalent. Cecilia talks about this in her book in which she elaborates that there are professions which are considered primarily male and female. And this segregation is closely tied to the cultural understanding of gender roles. [2]

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If a woman works in a profession considered male, she will be discriminated against and considered an intruder. One such profession is the IT industry, which is closely tied to the gaming industry. When it comes to the gaming community, it has been considered male territory since its very existence. If we imagine a developer or a gamer, we will most likely imagine a man. Regardless of whether we are talking about gaming as a hobby or gaming as a career, the first image that will appear in our minds is that of a man.

Despite the fact that women have always been involved in gaming, and in the recent years their involvement has become more visible, the stereotype of a gamer being exclusively a man is still unbreakable. It does not take a lot of research to conclude that the gaming community is a world created by men for other men. The majority of gaming developers are men, and they are the leaders of gaming companies. In professional esports women are almost non-existent. Even though women are very much interested in the gaming world, to this day they struggle to be included.

When it comes to gaming as a hobby, the situation is not any better. The belief that women are not interested in gaming is unfounded and completely false. But still, there is this widely accepted belief that women are simply not interested in gaming. It is understood that women have other, gentler, interests. Despite the fact that research shows that women are interested in gaming, the stereotype that women do not belong in gaming remains steadfast.

Gaming is a very problematic area for women and leaves much to be desired. The gaming community is infested with abuse, sexual harassment and misogyny. The aim of this paper is to uncover all of these issues and present the problems women have to deal with daily if they are a part of this community.

2. WOMEN AND GAMING AS A HOBBY

In its early years gaming was considered a peculiar hobby which usually attracted young men. But in the present, gaming has developed into one of the largest and most profitable industries on the market. Nowadays gaming has become a universal hobby. Technology has also advanced greatly and now gaming is available on various devices, including mobile phones, making gaming more accessible for a variety of people. Despite this fact, gaming is still considered male territory. The gaming community has isolated itself and stubbornly refuses to accept that the times have changed and now gaming

is for everyone. We are still fighting this outdated notion that gaming belongs on PC's and consoles and only to men.

Alison and Tamara point this out in their article and say that video game marketing is still solely focused on young, white, heterosexual men. They point out that this makes it so video game content is tailored exclusively to their tastes and it leaves little room for considering what women would like to see in video games. [3]

This atmosphere creates a "digital citizenship" where only certain people have the right to participate and be a part of the community. In this context digital citizenship means a person's capability to be a part of the gaming community freely, without being disturbed by others or afraid of harassment and retaliation. Currently, women do not have that status, despite the fact that research proves that women make 41% of the gaming community. [4]

It is no longer possible to deny the fact that women are a part of the gaming community. But since the existence of women in this community is still undesirable, new ways have been invented to exclude women. Thus, the definition of a "true" gamer has been created. Namely, there is a stereotype that women are casual gamers, who like only certain video game genres. They usually game on their mobile phones and play puzzles, word games, or dress-up games. Thus, women are not true gamers. On the other hand, men are considered hardcore, true gamers. They play difficult PC and console video games which require a lot of skill, time and dedication to perfect. Genres typically assigned to men are first person shooters, RPGs (role playing games) and MOBAs (massive online battle arenas).

This segregation between hardcore and casual gamers clearly shows the discomfort of the gaming community to accept women into its ranks as equals. Since their presence in the gaming community can no longer be denied, they somehow must be made inferior. Research shows that women are present in all genres of gaming, on all devices. [4] But despite this fact, this stereotype is widely accepted.

In the last couple of years, it has also become increasingly difficult to deny the presence of women in PC or console video games, especially male dominated genres like MOBA's and first person shooters. Just how women have been delegated the role of casual gamers who like easy video games, another mechanism designed to make women inferior has been set in place. When it comes to first person shooters and MOBA's, it is widely accepted that women only play support heroes. That is a class

type in video games, whose primary purpose is to stay behind the team, heal and take care of teammates. This class is wrongly considered the easiest class to play and women are always delegated to it. It is considered that women can't play damage or tank heroes, because they require a lot of skill, which women do not possess. If a woman is discovered in a match not playing a support, she will be immediately called out and told to go back to "her role". When women game together with men, it is automatically assumed that they will fill the role of the support. It is also assumed that women only play female characters who look pretty, and that they are more interested in customizing the character's appearance than gameplay. A good example comes from the multi-player video game *Overwatch*. It is assumed that women only know how to play a female support hero called Mercy, with an angelic appearance and kind nature.

When a woman claims to be a gamer, the first reaction she will get is disbelief. She will be told that it is a weird hobby for a woman to have. This disbelief will become even greater if a woman says that she is interested in PC or console video games and not in mobile phone video games. It will get even worse if she likes genres typically considered exclusively male, like first person shooters or MOBA's. Regardless of whether a woman says she likes single-player or multi-player video games, she will be met with confusion and deprecation. The only difference is that when playing single-player video games players are alone and thus protected from direct abuse, and while playing multi-player video games the atmosphere is very hostile. That is to say, women will always be considered intruders in gaming, and with multi-player video games, especially certain genres, comes the added bonus of direct abuse.

When it comes to the general atmosphere in gaming, sexism, stereotypes, sexual harassment and misogyny are widespread and normalized. There is a myriad of stereotypes women have to face. The most prevalent stereotype is that women are bad gamers. Women simply do not know how to game, and no matter how hard they try, they will never be as good as men. If women play together with men in a team, it is assumed they will be the weakest player. Everyone hates losing, that is no secret, but losing from a man, while irritating, is considered normal, but losing from a woman is considered an embarrassment. This stems directly from the belief that women are inferior to men and are naturally bad gamers, so losing from them means that you are worse than a woman, and there is no greater shame than that.

Women are also accused of having secret motives for gaming. Namely, if women game, they do not do it because they truly like it. As Bròna and Rhi say in their paper, two secret motives are usually tied to their interest in gaming. The first motive is that women are actually searching for a romantic partner, so they use gaming since they know a lot of men like to game. The second one is that women want to appear special as opposed to other women. Researchers cite male respondents in their paper who said: "Some girls have a need to state how different they are from other girls [...] as if that somehow makes them superior, some try to latch on to 'guy stuff' because they've noticed that typical female stuff is trivialized". Another respondent said: "It seems outrageous that female gamers like to game just because it's fun! Surely it must be for an alternative reason?" [5]

Women are in a very unfavorable position because they can either keep quiet and take the abuse or speak up and be shut down. Women who speak up are told to become more resilient. They get the explanation that gaming is very competitive and emotions get high, so it is normal for people to become toxic and abusive. If they refuse to accept abuse as normal, they are told that they are too emotional. Instead of attacking the abuser and shutting him down, the spotlight is brought onto the victim and she is told to accept being abused.

Sexism and various stereotypes discussed above are not the only problems women have to deal with. Oftentimes women deal with open hostility and misogyny. Apart from sexist comments telling them to "get back into the kitchen", women are exposed to blatant misogyny. They are primarily attacked for their appearance. They are told that they must be ugly and disgusting seeing how they sit and game alone in their room like losers. It is interesting to note how the first thing the abusers focus on is the women's physical appearance. The fact that they do not know how the victim looks like is unimportant, what matters is that they assume that a woman's most important feature is her looks. Women have been historically considered sexual objects, whose defining function is to look beautiful and keep quiet. Sadly, this fact remains unchanged to this day. If an abuser was to insult a man, he would not go after his appearance, but his skills.

Just because abuse is done online does not mean it hurts any less. And those who abuse online, most certainly do so in real life too, since it is in their character. And if they do not behave abusively in real life, the sole reason they are deterred is the fear of consequences. Thus, it is a very dangerous practice to normalize abu-

sive behavior. Abusers must not be given free rein to do as they like, they must be sanctioned.

One way to explain the ever more abusive communication online is that it alienates people. It is easy to forget that you are talking to another human being while staring at a computer screen. Thus, it becomes easy to dehumanize the other person, which in turn creates brutality.

2.1. WOMEN'S STRATEGIES FOR DEFENDING THEMSELVES FROM ONLINE ABUSE

Since the atmosphere in the gaming community is very hostile towards women, they have adapted certain strategies in order to shield themselves from the abuse. The most widely used tactic is to hide their gender when playing multi-player video games. When playing video games that have voice communication, which is usually available in fast-paced video games which require quick reaction times, women don't use the microphone. They know that as soon as they speak, and everyone in the lobby hears that they are women, abusive will follow. So, they give excuses such as: "my microphone broke" or "I'm sick and can't talk". There are a lot of testimonies from women who say that before their teammates knew their gender they behaved normally. As soon as they spoke and revealed their gender, the attitude of their teammates would change in an instant. Normal men who laughed and joked only a second ago would become cruel. They would immediately start sexually harassing them, insulting their appearance and behavior and mocking their gameplay. They would often mock their voices, comparing them to little boys. If they decided to defend themselves, they soon realized that it was a losing battle. They would be told that they are too emotional and that they cannot take a joke. Or, they would be told that they should feel flattered that they are getting so much attention. Oftentimes, when men realize they have a woman on their team, they start blaming her for everything that goes wrong in the match. If they lose, it is her fault. It is also possible that they will throw the match on purpose and blame it on the woman, saying that she provoked them.

Apart from hiding their voice, women are also reluctant to use gamer tags that they want, if the desired gamer tag is feminine. So, they usually use gender neutral gamer tags. Women who have feminine gamer tags get abused even more, since they reveal their gender upfront.

Other, drastic measures are also implemented. Some women decide to quit gaming altogether or transition solely to single-player video games where they cannot be abused by anyone. Women who transition to single-player video games become invisible, and thus contribute to the stereotype that women do not exist in gaming. Women who stay in multi-player video games limit themselves to playing only with friends, thus they can't create new friendships. [6]

Amanda also points out that many women cope with online abuse by drastically changing their character. Since they do not want to quit online gaming, they must adapt. Women report becoming aggressive, impudent and sarcastic. When abusers see their violent nature, they leave them alone, since harassing them becomes too much work. [6]

Refusing to use the voice chat, changing gamer tags, quitting gaming, limiting themselves to playing only with friends and drastic, forced changes of character are catastrophic consequences brought about by the hostile atmosphere in the gaming community towards women. These strategies and their necessity clearly show that something is very wrong with this community.

The current situation in the gaming community drastically limits women, and prevents them from behaving normally. They are seen as intruders and treated as such. Women are denied the opportunity to behave naturally. Instead, each day is a warzone.

It is important to mention that such abusers are a minority. The majority of men behave normally. But despite this fact, witnesses of such abuse do not speak up and defend the victim. Thus, abusers know they can say and do whatever they want, which makes their abuse more brutal. The silence of others makes them feel justified in their actions.

Research conducted by Benjamin et al. shows that while women make 40% of the gaming community, only 14.4% of women called themselves gamers, as opposed to 85.6% of men. Women are reluctant to identify themselves as gamers since they know how unwelcome they are. [7]

Niklas and Hampus researched the video game *Overwatch*, and clearly showed the extent of gender-based violence and its consequences. They found that 81.40% of women were abused because of their gender, as opposed to 27.60% of men. Additionally, 72.5% of women felt the need to hide their gender, as opposed to 0.9% of men who expressed this same need. It is important to mention that men get abused too, just not for their gender, but their gameplay. 94.60% of men and 80.40%

of women reported being abused because of their skills. 90.9% of all respondents said that abuse was a major problem. [8]

The results of their research are dire, showing that women primarily get abused due to their gender as well as their gameplay, and men primarily get abused due to their gameplay. Despite the fact that almost the entire community of *Overwatch* recognizes how extreme the problem with abuse is, nothing has been done to change this.

3. WOMEN AS PROFESSIONAL ESPORTS PLAYERS

As we have seen in the previous parts, the gaming community is quite hostile to women in general. Especially in multi-player video games where they are directly exposed to violence and even more so if they play certain video game genres. Since women are generally considered not to belong in these genres, it is very hard for them to become a part of the communities in those video games. For women who would want to become professional esports players, and thus become visible to the public eye, the situation is much worse.

Esports has developed tremendously in the past couple of years. It has amassed millions of fans, and has become a successful business which attracts many talented young players. The issue here is that women are, for the most part, completely excluded from this scene. Becoming a professional esports player is very hard. For women it is even harder due to their gender. In traditional sports, men are considered superior due to their greater physical strength, but in esports, where physical prowess means nothing, women are still considered inferior to men.

Women are a minority among professional esports players. Top leagues, teams, tournaments and positions are reserved solely for men. It is not that women do not want to become professional esports players, it is that teams, for the most part, d not want to hire them. They are excluded solely because they are women.

It is a long and difficult road to become a professional esports player. It takes a lot of talent, dedication, effort and time. Honing this skill to perfection, like any other, is life's work. With the increasing popularity of esports, the influx of new players wishing to make a name for themselves is greater than ever. For a talented player considering this career, attending tournaments and getting recruiters to notice them is the first step. The

problem for women is that recruiters do not objectively look at their performance in game, but will immediately eliminate them based on their gender. That is why women talented enough to become professionals often report avoiding such events and giving up on pursuing this career altogether.

In their research done on 511 women, only 69 (13.5%) reported considering professional gaming as a viable career. When asked why they gave up on this career, women reported that they knew the hostility that awaited them, and they were unwilling to surround themselves which such abuse and discrimination. They didn't want to torture themselves with such a hard life and instead chose other, more welcoming careers. Another important reason they stated was that they believed that they were not good enough to become professional esports players. One respondent stated that she did not want to torture herself to create a steel façade in order to deal with men attacking her. [9]

As for the women who responded that they considered this a viable career path, they discussed many issues they predicted would await them. The first issue mentioned was the atmosphere of constantly having to prove your worth just because you were a woman. They would constantly feel pressured to prove that they were good enough to be there. The spotlight would always be on them, every single mistake they made would reflect badly on the entire gender, and they would feel like they failed other women. They did not like the fact that their gender defined them to such an extent and that they could not escape from it. They would never be just gamers, they would always be women first, gamers second. [9]

As Simone De Beauvoir says: "If I want to define myself, I first have to say, "I am a woman"; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious". [10]

When asking the general public why women were so underrepresented in gaming, the researchers met with two interesting answers. The first answer was that women's biology limited them, made them bad at gaming and inferior to men. The second answer was that cultural reasons and the general atmosphere in the society were to blame. Women were largely considered to be weak, gentle and lacking a competitive streak. Respondents said that women were not aggressive, had slower reflexes and bad spatial orientation. Women were created to be caretakers and they did not possess the drive to defeat enemies. [9]

Research done on 16,821 *League of Legends* players showed that women had the same potential as men to perfect their video gaming skills. The only difference was the players' self-assessment. Namely, when describing themselves, women were very self-critical of their skills, saying there were not good enough, as opposed to men who were extremely confident in their skills and boasted about their talents. The main reason women were less skilled that men was because they played less. Women who spent the same amount of time gaming as men had equal skills. [9]

The amount of time women spend gaming is directly linked to their status within the gaming community. They are largely considered bad gamers who are inferior to men and they are constantly sexually harassed and abused. This makes women very self-critical and unsure of their skills. So, the amount of time they dedicate to gaming decreases. These results clearly show that women's biology does not limit them and make them bad gamers, but society does. They are socially excluded from gaming, abused into believing they are unskilled and unsuitable for gaming. This makes women give up from this career and retreat since they do not see a different solution and society has not done anything to integrate them.

Taking all of this information into account, it can be concluded that women are extremely discriminated against, their gender being the primary factor that serves as their downfall.

3.1. WOMEN ON THE STREAMING PLATFORM *TWITCH.TV*

Another viable career option for gamers is streaming. Playing video games for a mass audience and having that as your primary source of income is a dream come true for many people. Much like with professional esports it is a long and difficult road. Streaming has become increasingly popular in the last couple of years, and making a name for yourself in a sea of creators is harder than ever.

As with other categories previously discussed, women have a much harder time becoming respected streamers than men. There is a big difference in the way female and male streamers are treated. If a woman becomes a successful streamer, it will always be attributed to her appearance. For a man, his success is always attributed to his talents.

In his research, Jonathan concludes that fewer women than men are streamers, they are less popular and have fewer active viewers. Women are exposed to a lot of sexism, sexual harassment and misogyny, and only women suffer comments directed to their appearance. In his research he equally visited channels of female and male streamers and found 207 female streams and 1 male stream where the streamer was insulted based on their appearance. Additionally, searching for sexism 852 female streams where infested with sexist comments and sexual harassment, as opposed to only 7 male streams. [11]

The stereotype that women are bad gamers especially comes into the light while streaming. If female streamers are also very talented gamers, they will constantly face disbelief about their skills. Viewers will wonder if they are cheating, or if their boyfriends are playing in the shadows while they are on the camera. [11]

These results confirm that female bodies are viewed as sexual objects, and are subject to constant evaluation. Since the only important feature of a woman is her appearance and everything else is negligible, this is the first thing that will be insulted. To the abusers, it goes without saying that women are untalented for gaming. Of course, they will mention that she is a bad gamer too, but first and foremost they must let her know that she is ugly, meaning she has no value. Men on the other hand, are abused solely for their gameplay, their appearance never being a part of the insult. Because for men, it goes without saying that their primary value is their intelligence and not their appearance.

4. WOMEN IN THE GAMING DEVELOPMENT INDUSTRY

When it comes to women who exist behind the scenes, as a part of the gaming industry, the situation is also problematic. In the USA, 18% of IT graduates are women and they make 29% of the IT job market. Despite this, only 4% of gaming developers are women. Research shows that men are more likely to get hired as gaming developers and get assigned leading positions. For women, it's a question if they will get hired by a gaming company at all, and getting leading positions is virtually impossible. [12]

Amanda says that "women were viewed by supervisors as less promotable than the men because the performance of the women was less likely to be attributed to ability and effort, and more likely to be viewed as emanating from help and luck". [12]

Women are also subject to different standards than men. When it comes to their appearance no matter how women dress, they will be criticized. Women who dress feminine, wear heel and skirts are accused of using their appearance and charm in order to reap special benefits. And those who dress conservatively and wear oversized clothes in order to hide their bodies and prevent being seen as sexual objects are accused of being unsightly and unkempt. Women reported situations at company hosted parties where people automatically assumed that they were someone's arm candy. They had to repeatedly explain that they attended the party because they were gaming developers too. The companies are also more lenient towards men and their behavior. Men are allowed to joke and laugh more at work and be generally less serious, it is also tolerated for them to get drunk at company parties. But for women it is expected that they must remain serious, dedicated and graceful at all times. [12]

Double standards follow women everyone in the workspace. Behavior which is rewarded in men is criticized in women. So, if a woman is outspoken, ambitious, has ideas and pushes for their realization in meetings, she will be called aggressive, impudent, emotional and hysterical. If a man behaves in a such a way he will be praised as a motivated, hardworking employee who exhibits outstanding leadership qualities. Women are regularly silenced in meetings and their ideas ignored.

Women are sabotaged right from the start. When they apply for IT colleges and show interest in engineering even professors doubt their intentions. One woman reported that during her first day at college the professor openly asked her if she entered the wrong classroom since software engineers were there and she probably lost her way. Another woman reported that her professor openly asked her if she were a man hater and if she came to their department to stir trouble. Some women even reported incidents at interviews, where the recruiters openly told them that they would not hire them because they were not looking for female developers. [12]

5. CONCLUSION

The main goal of this paper is a detailed analysis of the position of women inside the gaming community. Regardless of whether women game as a hobby, as a professional career, streaming included, or if they are working in the gaming industry, women are exposed to sexism, sexual harassment and misogyny. The gaming community is filled with stereotypes. Women's skills are constantly doubted. Due to the amount of gender-based violence women are exposed to, they resort to hiding their gender in gaming or quitting altogether. In esports women are heavily underrepresented, and completely missing in professional leagues of many video games. Women who aspire to become esports professionals are heavily discriminated against and their gender makes it almost impossible for them to pursue this career. In the gaming industry, women are underrepresented as gaming developers and have a very hard time securing jobs in gaming companies. If they do secure a job, it's a low-level position and they are discriminated against. They are also faced with a myriad of double standards.

Women are equally capable of learning and excelling in gaming as men, but they are limited by "environmental factors of male dominance and external factors of sexual harassment". [13]

The main problem is the atmosphere of the gaming community and its open hostility towards women, alongside a myriad of stereotypes women are exposed to which are designed to make them seem inferior. The only way this problem can be solved is if the gaming community actively starts working on including women into its ranks and sanctioning abusers who target them.

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