Women's experience of sexism and objectification in the Esports and gaming community.

Gabdulkhaeva Leysan A., leisnalara@gmail.com, Far Eastern Federal University, Korean Studies, 3rd course;

Suprun Elizaveta V., kenlor1407@gmail.com, Far Eastern Federal University, Korean Studies, 3rd course;

Malenkova Elizaveta V., 00harrypotter13@gmail.com, Far Eastern Federal University, Korean Studies, 3rd course;

Women's experience of sexism and objectification in the Esports and gaming community.

Video gaming is one of the most thriving entertainment industries with nearly 227 million (Entertainment Software Association, 2021), 250 million (Interactive Software Federation of Europe, 2021) and 255 million players (Game industry report, 2021) across the U.S., EU and SEA respectively. Over 45% of game players in the U.S. and Europe identify as female (Entertainment Software Association, 2021; Interactive Software Federation of Europe, 2021) and are regularly exposed to sexualization and objectification of women and girls.

According to the American Psychological Association sexualization occurs when a person's value is defined by her or his sexual appeal or behavior, without any consideration of other characteristics, and a person is sexually objectified, he or she is made into a thing for another's sexual desires (APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007).

Female protagonists are rare and even if they appear they are mostly heavily sexualized. Moreover, they are usually the ones in need of help or saving. Most female models lack body diversity and tend to have hyper-realistic bodies that are more appealing to men rather than emphasizing their personality traits. More than that, female models are often given too revealing and impractical outfits that are unfit for the game background and context, while male characters appear fully clothed. In the 50 Best Video Game Characters of All Time list (Langmann & Sherrill, 2020) only 4 characters are female, 2 of which — the most iconic representations of female body sexualization. The model of Lara Croft, who is one of the most iconic female protagonists, has always been wearing too revealing clothes for an archaeologist, and in the Tomb Raider: Definitive Survivor Trilogy her model appears noticeably skinnier. But it is not only game developers — players are a part of the problem too.

Even though, as it was mentioned earlier, women make up almost half of the gaming community, Esports is still mostly considered a male-dominated field. Because of that female online video game players often experience negative feedback and sexual harassment from male players. Moreover, though male and female gamers performance in online games is equally good (Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017; Shen, Ratan, Cai, & Leavitt, 2016), male players tend to call into question women's gaming skills, which leads to women being excluded from Esports and struggling prove their skill level (Jenson & De Castell, 2010; Zolides, 2015).

Natalie Denk, scientist, gamer, and co-founder of the "League of Girls", states in her interview for owayo.com website that women often fear that their skills will be judged according not to their performance but to their gender. "If a woman does badly in a game, it quickly means she plays badly because she is a woman. Of course, all this has something to do with gender-specific socialization and the transmission of stereotypical role patterns" (Owayo.com, 2019).

The prevalence of gender-specific expectations becomes clear in situations such as a League of Legends match between a high profile all-female (Team Siren) and all-male (OMGRankedFives) Esports team. Not only OMGRankedFives's members' behavior included audible disses on Team Siren "trying" to play well but also during opening minutes male team underplayed, falling into greed attacking without resorting to usual strategic standards, because they did not take the all-female opponent team as a serious challenge. When OMGRankedFives realized they were going to lose the match, their discussion focused on embarrassment and negative impact to their reputation (Canossa, Witkowski, & Ozkaynak, 2018, p. 4).

Not only women's skills are underestimated and sometimes mocked, but also female gamers must deal with objectification and sexual harassment. Recent Journal of Sport and Social Issues's study shows that 37% of all the positive comments women playing and streaming online games received were focused on appearance (compared with 7,5% for men). It also showed that Sexual harassment comments directed toward female streamers were observed at 11 times the percentage of those directed toward male streamers (1.66% vs. 0.15%) (Ruvalcaba, Shulze, Kim, Berzenski & Otten, 2018). Comments that include sexual objectification and harassment messages not only adversely affect their performance but also have negative implication on women's self-esteem and mental wellbeing and contribute to a generally hostile attitude towards female gamers in the community.

In the field of professional Esports, there is also a lot of injustice towards the female half of the audience. According to a study conducted by PayPal , there's a huge gender pay gap between male video game content creators and female video game content creators in the USA (PayPal, 2018). According to a report made by BBC, among the top 300 highest-earners there are no female gamers, the first woman only rankes 338rd (BBC, 2021).

Moreover, from the whole amount of prize money won by Esports gamers only a small portion belongs to women. The difference might be explained by the fact that female championships are poorly promoted and therefore such smaller prizes make it harder for women to upgrade their gaming gear, fully concentrate on developing skills and therefore successfully continue their eSports career.

In the field of mobile games there is also a problem with lack of representation and objectification. App icons in the Google Play and App Store predominantly feature

male-identified characters, creating the illusion that women have a less important role in mobile gaming.

Many app advertisements show overly sexualized female characters or female characters engaging in provocative scenarios and at the same time, do not present gameplay or only show a small glimpse of it. This kind of marketing is guided by the "Sex Sells" rule. Such advertisement not only exploits the sexualized portrayal of women, but also heavily relies on clickbait and misses the whole point of the game — demonstrating its gameplay.

The survey shows that numerous female mobile gamers feel underrepresented, therefore they develop an impostor syndrome and shy away from identifying themselves as gamers. Because of many factors like a game advertisement, character design, lack of diversity and the plot, female mobile gamers think that less than 30% of mobile games are made for women. It leads to fewer women joining Esports teams, but still playing games that are presented in Esports competitions and even trying out gaming as their hobby (Why we play – The world of women and mobile gaming, 2017).

As we can see, despite mobile gaming being a platform women dominate in (FinancesOnline, 2020), they still face sexism. Therefore, it is logical to assume that women discrimination and sexualisation is a systematic problem and has no connection with how many men or women there is in games. Women face quite a lot of troubles in gaming, be it lack of adequate representation, injustice in professional Esports and unequal distribution of awards, questioning their skills as players and even sexual objectification and harassment. However, some actions to address these problems are already under way and are showing success. For example, while many female-gamers express their opinion that competitions shouldn't be

segregated by gender, women-only competitions turned out to be a great start towards equal representation of men and women in Esports competitions. Game.tv, an Esports tournament platform, created a weekly women-only tournament called "Diva Scrim Wars" to financially support and assist emerging female players in India. Tournament prizes range from 2000 to 20000 Indian rupees every week.

Interactions that emphasize hostility may discourage women from pursuing Esports and affect their views of their own abilities and their actual performance (Kaye & Pennington, 2016). To overcome this Esports players and sponsors should join forces to create a healthy, safe, and inclusive environment for all players regardless of gender, nationality, race, sexual orientation, and other aspects.

References

Canossa, A., Witkowski, E., & Ozkaynak, D. (2018). Over-lenient and over-aggressive

behaviors: Gender play in League of Legends. Unpublished manuscript.

Denk N. (2019, August 2). Women in the Gaming Industry - Nine Questions for Scientist and

Gamer Natalie Denk. Retrieved from

https://www.owayo.com/magazine/esports-women-us.htm

Entertainment Software Association. (2021, November 22). 2021 essential facts about the video

game industry. Entertainment Software Association. Retrieved December 3, 2021, from

https://www.theesa.com/resource/2021-essential-facts-about-the-video-game-industry/.

Gilbert, N. (March 26). Number of Gamers Worldwide 2021/2022: Demographics, statistics, and

predictions. Financesonline.com. Retrieved December 3, 2021, from

https://financesonline.com/number-of-gamers-worldwide/.

Granic I., Lobel A., Engels R. C. M. E. (2014). The benefits of playing video games. American

Psychologist, 69, 66–78. doi:10.1037/ a003457

Interactive Software Federation. (2021, August 24). Societal & Cultural Impact. ISFE.

Retrieved December 3, 2021, from

https://www.isfe.eu/game-industry/societal-cultural-impact/.

Jenson, J., & De Castell, S. (2010). Gender, simulation, and gaming: Research review and

redirections. Simulation & Gaming, 41, 51-71.

Kaye, L. K., & Pennington, C. R. (2016). "Girls can't play": The effects of stereotype threat on females' gaming performance. Computers in Human Behavior, 59, 202-209.

Langmann, B., & Sherrill, C. (2020, August 20). The 50 greatest video game characters of all time. Esquire. Retrieved December 3, 2021, from https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/g33266628/best-video-game-characters-ranked/.

Ruvalcaba O, Shulze J, Kim A, Berzenski SR, Otten MP. Women's Experiences in eSports: Gendered Differences in Peer and Spectator Feedback During Competitive Video Game Play. Journal of Sport and Social Issues. 2018;42(4):295-311. doi:10.1177/0193723518773287

Paaßen, B., Morgenroth, T., & Stratemeyer, M. (2017). What is a true gamer? The male gamer stereotype and the marginalization of women in video game culture. Sex Roles, 76, 421-435.

PayPal. (2018, September 24). Digital Gaming Global Overview [PowerPoint slides] https://www.paypalobjects.com/digitalassets/c/website/marketing/global/shared/global/media-resources/documents/PayPal_Global_Gaming_Insights_2018.pdf

Shen, C., Ratan, R., Cai, Y. D., & Leavitt, A. (2016). Do men advance faster than women? Debunking the gender performance gap in two massively multiplayer online games. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 21, 312-329. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12159

Skowronski, M., Busching, R., & Krahé, B. (2021). The effects of sexualized video game characters and character personalization on women's self-objectification and body

satisfaction. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 92, 104051.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104051

Why we play – The world of women and mobile gaming. (2017, November 15). Change the

Game. Retrieved December 3, 2021, from

https://play.google.com/about/changethegame/research/why-we-play/.

Zolides, A. (2015). Lipstick bullets: Labour & gender in professional gamer self-branding.

Persona Studies, 1, 42-53.