

Gatekeeping game culture: what's wrong with this picture?



Illustration by Aiann Oishi

Text transcript (left to right)

Behind the scenes: surveillance structures and visibility

Surveillance structures have existed in arcades and cybercafes and more recently, in live streams on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube. A quick scan of Twitch and YouTube videos show cameras recording not just the player's screen but also their faces. These structures:

- Affirm (white) male privilege
- Marginalize female gamers within the same space as their male counterparts

Behind the scenes, female gamers have taken safety measures such as avoiding the camera and muting the microphone during gameplay. In game culture, full visibility is a given as a masculine pursuit (Witkowski, 2018, p. 191).

Behind the scenes: reporting failures

In the case of misconduct allegations at Ubisoft, Toronto-based game design studio, conflicts of interest, power imbalances and poor reporting process made it easy for the toxic workplace

behaviour to continue (Gach, 2020). Fear of retaliation, the bystander effect, and an emphasis on masculine culture that permits sexual harassment are linked to reasons why so many incidents go unreported (Johnson, Kirk & Keplinger, 2016). As a result, female gamers in particular have to be more discreet in their critical commentary towards the esports industry or game culture.

When it comes to the same behaviour among players during gameplay, victim-oriented safety measures (i.e. muting verbal abuse, self-reporting) put the responsibility on the person being harassed. Avoidance is nearly impossible, with online multiplayer titles relying on live conversations and synchronous play to strategize (Smith, 2019). Even with in-game methods of reporting abuse, the lack of clear oversight and further recourse have left harassed players with limited options to work with.

During the scenes: gender power relations

Compared to traditional athletics, gamer masculinity is defined through technological mastery rather than the hardness of the physical body (Choi, Slaker & Ahmad, 2020, p. 1129). While the number of female gamers are significant, making up almost half the gamer population, only 5% of pro gamers are female. If we look at positioning in esports and being female by proximity:

- A female player's excellence and recognition as a player is qualified by their "maleness" (i.e. how they compare to male athletes or pro gamers).
- Top players are positioned as a feminist hero, a token gesture in a space vastly occupied by male privilege.

Women are seen as "intrusions" into the male dominated space of sports, where their skill and expertise is often reduced to just their position as a "girl".

Scene productions: all-female leagues, equal but separate?

All-female leagues have shown promise in releasing players from the "pressure to do gender" (Witkowski, 2018, p. 198), allowing the focus to be on the gameplay. Praise for all-female leagues has included the potential to reduce harassment and create a foothold for younger, inexperienced female gamers to launch their careers. It is important to note that even within the all-female league space, BIPOC (black, Indigenous and people of color) and the LGBT+ community continue to be excluded.

- In 2016, [Garena eSports tried to limit the number of gay and transgender players](#) in its all-female league events.
- A 2017 study revealed the [number of African-American pro players are disproportionate to the number of fans](#) (Peterson, 2018). The researchers suggest looking at the PC/console divide and lack of financial investment from sponsors to understand the gap.

While promising, there is still work needed to ensure equal production values as low sponsorship and audience turnout does a disservice, reinforcing the "equal but separate" game culture.

During the scenes: harassment

A 2019 study by the Anti-Defamation League revealed over 65% of players experienced severe harassment while playing games online, with marginalized groups being targeted the most.

- 53% reported being targeted based on their race, religion, ability, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.

Being presented as a woman and receiving unwanted harassment, abuse and threats is not uncommon in current game culture. Most notably, the [2014 Gamergate incident](#) which “featured brutal, orchestrated harassment campaigns against women” (Smith, 2019) shed a light on the toxic behaviours occurring on a regular basis. In pro game leagues, the only female players on a team are often singled out, receiving excessive blame for a team's loss or being placed in the background upon a victory (Dot Esports, 2015).