



NAVIGATING SEXISM IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY

A Report

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EVENT OBJECTIVE

The objective of the event was to provide a platform to female gamers, game designers and other gaming enthusiasts to discuss the challenges that they face on a regular basis. We also aimed to bring about discussion around the larger points of representation and misogyny in game development. There has been a noted lack of conversation around these forms of discrimination in the Indian context.

INTRODUCTION

A virtual roundtable panel discussion titled ‘Navigating Sexism in Online Gaming Communities’ was held on the 20th of August, 2021. The conversation was structured around 4 segments, with a total of nine speakers- including two professional gamers/streamers, four casual gamers, a game designer and two journalists.

The discussion was structured in four segments:

1. The Gendered Disparity in Online Gaming (25 minutes)

How deep do the gendered differences go in gaming communities? Does casual sexism make room for more harmful stereotyping, and even harassment in many cases?

2. Case Study (25 minutes)

Two cases involving harassment and othering of female gamers were inspected. Speakers were allowed to voice their opinions about the same.

3. Representation of Women in the Gaming Industry (15 minutes)

How are women depicted in video games? Does this further harmful stereotypes and add to harassment? Will having a larger number of women in game development help?

4. Towards Feasible Solutions (25 minutes)

How may we bridge the divide and make these spaces more inclusive and welcoming?

The Gendered Disparity in Online Gaming

The discussion was opened by a male professional gamer stating that success in the gaming industry depended on hard work and determination, and that gender was not a determining factor. He tells us that male gamers don't have an edge over female gamers in an industry that values performance so heavily. Going further, he admits that there is rampant sexism and harassment of female gamers within the industry at micro levels. He tells us that he too has been witness to this several times in live streams, super chats, private chats or gaming groups. He points out that "immature audiences" comprise a major part of this industry. He makes a point stating that this section of the audience doesn't know how to respond to female gamers and how they should be treated. He adds that influencers are morally responsible to bring forth such change. He blames influencers for making sexism so casual, that harassment is becoming invisible. It is often seen that young children are exposed to streams and videos that influencers put up on social media. It becomes inevitable that they pick up the behaviour they see being promoted in these videos, be it abuse, rage, sexist comments or treating females as outcasts.

The second speaker was a college student who shared her experience playing games as a hobby. She tells the room about how even her own teammates would use tactics such as 'friendly fires' to inflict intentional harm on her and set her back when she refuses to answer intrusive questions. She also made the observation that this experience is not universal, and that it is not the case when she plays under a gender-neutral alias.

The next panelist was a student, who shared similar stories from her experience in the community. She mentions that she often found her male counterparts passing unnecessarily vile comments on the way female characters look or dress, and points out that this was done with the primary aim of making female players uncomfortable.

The notorious case of 'online daters' on Roblox, which is an online gaming platform that lets you play and develop games, was also discussed. This platform is open to players as young as 6 years old. There are groups of 'online daters' that join these social networks to find romantic partners. Young girls are often approached by these 'online daters' on the pretext of helping them get better at the game, before they badger them with intrusive conversations. Not only does this sour the experience for young children, but could also have more far-reaching implications on their mental health.

The next panelist spoke about the disadvantages women face in the industry from her experience as an avid gamer and game developer. She spoke about how she had been trying to record gameplay for her YouTube channel for about 9 months but has never been able to because of her chat being flooded with offensive comments and misogynistic slurs. She mentioned that she limits herself to Indian servers while recording gameplay because she wants to make good content in her native language. She adds that if she doesn't answer personal questions that are directed at her, men try finding her online on other social media.

She also shares an anecdote about how she was trying out a new game, and ended up winning it first. She says that her male opponents became visibly bitter by her victory and tried to mess with her gameplay or 'body block' her going forward.

Speaking about her experiences getting into game development, she mentioned that the proportion between male and female candidates was heavily skewed. She mentioned that this was in part because of how parents view gaming communities as inherently male spaces and do not see it fit for their daughters to pursue careers in the field.

Case Study

We invited panelists to voice their opinions on 2 particular cases of female harassment in gaming. The first case we inspected goes as follows:

Nico Deyo, a 33-year-old e-commerce specialist from Milwaukee, used to enjoy mixing it up with players from around the world in the popular online fantasy game “World of Warcraft”. Then a stalker began harassing her in the game’s forums, impersonating her in the game and, later, sending her barrages of Twitter messages, some threatening her with graphic rape or murder.

While the stalker didn’t drive her from the game, the experience helped sour her on multiplayer gaming. ‘There’s a lot of things about the community that are very hostile,’ she says of Warcraft. Deyo largely gave up the game almost two years ago and now mostly spends her time on playing other games by herself.

Deyo is far from alone. In the male-dominated world of multiplayer online games like “Grand Theft Auto”, “Halo”, and “Call of Duty,” many women say they’ve had to take drastic steps to escape harassment, stalking and violent threats from male players. Some quit particular games. Others change their screen names or make sure they play only with friends.

Case 2:

“.. It makes women invisible in the gaming community. Gaming companies assume that there aren’t many female players or that women aren’t interested in online games when they’re really just hiding their identity,” she said...

The representation gap begins at university, where more men have, historically, studied video game design. According to Higher Education Statistics Agency data, 88% of students on video game courses were male in 2017-18.

“My course was very male-dominated. I think there were four or five women and maybe 25 men in my year,” recalls Kate Killick, a senior designer at Mojiworks who studied video game design at the University of South Wales. “At the time I don’t think I understood how it affected my experience, but looking back, I can see I had imposter syndrome.”

The next panelist to speak was a tech journalist and video game writer. Referring to the first case on Nico Deyo, she stated that *World of Warcraft* is one of the most divisive games in terms of how female characters were represented. She brought up an instance where a female gamer was mocked by an all-male *World of Warcraft* panel when she spoke up on the discrimination and harassment she faced in the studio. She went on to stress that in cases like Nico Deyo’s, we need to start holding platforms responsible for this kind of harassment. Instances like these can quickly turn what was possibly meant to be a leisure activity bitter and scary. She also spoke about how she saw the gaming industry as a double-edged sword, as a woman, and touched upon how masculinity has been perpetuated over the past few decades in the industry. Adding to this, is the danger that anonymity lends online, making this an even more difficult nightmare to navigate through.

She also shared how playing *World of Warcraft* completely soured her gaming experience for a long time.

Representation of Women in the Gaming Industry

We had two video game writers, and one game developer on this panel.

The first speaker, who engages in game design, described the events that led to the Activision Blizzard harassment suit. She said that the sexualising of female characters in games like *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* and *World of Warcraft* were partly to blame for women's treatment in the industry. She went further to acknowledge how games like *Destiny 2* were making changes in how female representation was handled- making the character's arc less gender-focused. Her observation was that *Destiny 2's* communities and forums were more welcoming than what she would traditionally expect. Another example she drew on was *Red Dead Redemption's* Sadie Alder character. She speaks of how good the character development was throughout the game. She also mentions *Life is Strange's* depiction of a lesbian relationship and how it defies hetero-patriarchal views of WLW relationships.

One of the journalists shared that she had interviewed voice actor Ashly Burch and how this conversation helped her understand how voice actors, and other such individuals had the power to address the misogyny that studios sometimes tend to overlook by practicing autonomy over who they collaborate with. She also mentions how many popular game remasters are being taken up, in response to criticism from consumers and critics. She brought up the example of *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, where some of these concerns were addressed by attributing similar physical and mental characteristics regardless of the gender assigned to the character.

Another writer on the panel spoke about how the industry perpetuates stereotyping of femininity and non-male genders in games. He spoke about this in the context of the Saints *Row IV* Character Creator. One can choose their desirable features from many different features that the interface provides. He mentioned how many Youtube tutorials are posted where gamers like showing their creations off. These videos usually invite gendered remarks on female characters' appearances. This is an example of how stereotypical male gamers view the world, and how they view images of women when they are given the power to tailor these images according to their fantasies. His next point shed light on the complexity of gendered violence in video games. He used *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2016) as an example to draw his point. In the third-person action-adventure game, the protagonist Lara Croft, was tortured to death. As is, Lara Croft has always been a character that has been heavily sexualised, and the scenes of such extreme violence that were allowed to remain in the final version of the game speaks for itself.

He went on to speak about how spaces are gendered too. The *Grand Theft Auto* series is notorious for having strip clubs and other areas where typically male characters move around in ways that present women in these spaces as play things or blank slates onto which male players can project their fantasies. This naturally influences how we view women in the real world too.

He also spoke about the gendering of protagonists. Lara Croft, for example, as mentioned earlier, is known to be sexualised to a great extent, and that none of it has to do with her role in the story. On the other hand, in a more recent edition of *Horizon Zero Dawn*, protagonist Aloy is trying to reclaim her position in her tribe and is seen forging her own path. Consequently, there was an increase in the number of male players who appreciated the nuances of Aloy's story, rather than focusing on her gender. It is, thus, interesting to look at how the portrayal of protagonists affects the way they are received by users.

He closed his presentation by saying that the way women and minority gender groups are represented in video games reflect and distort the way women are interacted with in the real world.

Further in the discussion, the concept of tokenism in the gaming industry was brought up. One of the panelists shared how job advertisements sometimes expressly mentioned that they are looking for male game designers alone. It was also brought up that organizations in the sector often fulfill gender quotas by appointing women in departments like public relations and marketing, which are viewed as less important.

The example of Parvati in *The Outer Worlds* was also brought up in the course of conversation. Parvati is a bisexual character, and her story is told through the writer's own experiences. It was stressed that in order to be good allies to gender minorities, men in the industry have to support such initiatives in order to build more powerful narratives for female and non-male characters. After all, investment in characters isn't just about representing certain people in certain ways, but to genuinely make them well-rounded characters.

Towards Feasible Solutions

This round was open for all the panelists and everyone's opinion was welcome.

One of the journalists suggested that we may need more women and other gender minorities in leadership roles. It was stressed that we need to demand accountability from gaming platforms like YouTube, Twitch, and Discord in addition to game studios. Platforms should update harassment policies, and take action on a case-by-case basis, holding defaulters accountable for their actions.

Another panelist suggested that we can set participant quotas in team events. After much back and forth on the topic, it was suggested that newer leagues that are more focused on creating healthy environments for all of their participants should be promoted and brought to the forefront.

Several other suggestions on stereotyping, and gender parity were also brought up during the discussion. It was also suggested that more conversations of this kind should be brought to the forefront, as gaming communities can sometimes tend to become echo chambers.

Conclusion

The problem of sexism in online gaming can be eliminated. It will, however, take time, and the combined effort of all kinds of stakeholders. Misogyny is so deeply rooted in so much of how the world moves, that it seems gargantuan to combat at this level. However, in India, this industry is still rather young. Taking appropriate and consistent action to tackle sexism at this stage will be crucial to how this community evolves.