An Uneven Playing Field: Women in Gaming

Representation can be understood as 'a construction or a *re*-presentation, rather than a mirror, or a clear "window on to the real."'[1] When considering representation from the perspective of videogames, Adrienne Shaw says that 'representation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible.'[2] The representation of women in videogames has been poor but there has been an increase in the inclusion of female characters in modern games. Most videogames glamorise and sexualise women when considering their appearance and their role within the game. This can make some women feel disconnected from certain games when they cannot relate to the portrayals of the female characters displayed on their screen. Shaw says that 'in many ways, digital games seem to be the least progressive form of media representation, despite being one of the newest mediated forms.'[3] Women are not only represented poorly within videogames but also in many aspects of gaming industry. Taking this into consideration, this essay will be analysing the representation and treatment of women in eSports, streaming, game development and everyday gaming.

Juho Hamari and Max Sjöblom define eSports as 'competitive video gaming that is often coordinated by different leagues, ladders and tournaments, and where players customarily belong to teams or other "sporting" organizations which are sponsored by various business organizations.'[4] It has grown in popularity significantly in recent years in both competitors and in viewership. Research says that Electronic Sports or eSports is 'one of the fastest growing forms of digital entertainment.'[5] There are a multitude of videogames which have a competitive league with the most popular being

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[1] Gill Branson and Roy Stafford, *The Media Student's Book,* 5th edn (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), p. 106.

[2] Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 4.

[3] Shaw, p. 6.

[4] Juho Hamari and Max Sjöblom, 'What is eSports and why do people watch it?', *Internet Research,* 27(2) (2017), 211-232, 211.

[5] Eleanor E Cranmer, and others, 'Esports matrix: Structuring the esports research agenda', *Computers in Human Behavior,* 117(106671) (2021), 1-13, 1.

League of Legends, DOTA 2 and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive.[6] eSports also has a large

viewership with viewers typically watching the competitions via live streams which allow them to

interact with one another using the chat features on these streams.[7] Hamari and Sjöblom say that

'spectating on eSports can be superficially seen as a similar activity to spectating on any sports.'[7] This

helps us to understand the appeal of watching eSports, those who enjoy football will watch football

matches and those who enjoyed videogames will watch eSports. Fans may also watch eSports to

learn how professional players play and try to copy their strategies.

While there is a female scene in eSports, there is a significant imbalance between males and

females within the industry.[8] Lujie Hao and others give an example of this when they discuss Chinese

eSports, their research states that 'female participants account for only 24.3%.'[8] eSports are male-

dominated and there are a lot of stereotypes surrounding female players such as being less

competent and not being as skilled as males at videogames.[8] This stereotype is very common

amongst the gaming and eSports scene. However, Omar Ruvalcaba and others highlight in *Women's

Experiences in eSports: Gendered Differences in Peer and Spectator Feedback During Competitive

Video Game Play* that 'evidence suggests that female gamers perform equally well in online games

when equal time is spent practicing.'[9] This disproves the stereotype that women are less skilled or

less competent than men and that the ability to exceed at a videogame is determined by how much

time is spent practicing and not based on your gender. Female professional players are also

discriminated against when considering the amount of money they are paid and awarded from prize

winnings. In 2017 it was reported that 'there are no women among the top 300 prize earning

players.'[9] Even female players who would be viewed as being at the top of their league are still not

[6] Hamari, p. 212.
[7] Hamari, p. 213.
[8] Lujie Hao, and others, 'Conquering Gender Stereotype Threat in "Digit Sports": Effects of Gender Swapping on Female Players' Continuous Participation Intention in Esports', *Scientific Programming,* 2020 (2020), 1-7, 1.
[9] Omar Ruvalcaba, and others, 'Women's Experiences in eSports: Gendered Differences in Peer and Spectator Feedback During Competitive Video Game Play', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues,* 42(4) (2018), 295-311, 297.

paid nearly as much as their male counterparts. These factors can discourage women from wanting to partake in eSports or attempting to have a career in the competitive scene of gaming.

The lack of female players competing in eSports could be linked back to the stereotypes surrounding them and the unfair treatment they receive. The underrepresentation and discrimination towards female players could deter other female players from trying to compete in eSports.[10] According to Hanhan Xue, Joshua I. Newman and James Du 'there are ongoing stories about the esports culture that is surrounded by sexism, misogyny, racism and homophobia.'[10] Some examples of this is male players sharing racist emotes, using homophobic slurs and in some cases female players have found themselves victims to sexual harassment by coaches and managers.[11] Male eSports players do not have this experience or have to tolerate it to the same extent. Joe A. Wasserman and Christine E. Rittenour suggest that stereotypes surrounding female players 'have the potential to impair performance, impede learning, and reduce participation.'[12] This can be considered a major factor into why female participation in eSports is significantly lower than male participation. To see an increase in female players in eSports, it is vital to eliminate these stereotypes so that females are encouraged to get involved and compete in the competitive scene.

Online videogame streaming has become increasingly more popular over the last decade. [13] According to Bonnie Ruberg 'videogame live streaming is the practice of broadcasting video game play in real time, often to audiences of viewers who can interact with streamers and each other.'[14] Streamers not only show their game on screen but also will usually include a small camera of themselves and will be interacting and responding to their viewers. Some of the most popular

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[10] Hanhan Xue, Joshua I. Newman and James Du, 'Narratives, identity and community in esports', *Leisure Studies,* 38(6) (2019), 845-861, 854.
[11] Xue, p. 855.
[12] Joe A. Wasserman and Christine E. Rittenour, 'Who wants to play? Cueing perceived sex-based stereostpes of games', *Computers in Human Behavior,* 91 (2019), 252-262, 252.
[13] Yung-Chi Shen, 'What do people perceive in watching video game streaming? Eliciting spectators' value structures', *Telematics and Informatics,* 59(101557) (2021), 1-15, 1.
[14] Bonnie Ruberg, '"Obscene, pornographic, or otherwise objectionable": Biased definitions of sexual content in video game live streaming', *New Media & Society,* (2020), 1-19, 3.

streaming platforms are Twitch, YouTube Gaming and Facebook Gaming. [13] People will stream for different reasons such as wanting to show their skill at a game, to be entertaining or to give reviews of videogames. Twitch is currently the most popular streaming platform with over 2 million streamers and over 15 million viewers on their website every day.[13] The appeal of watching other people play videogames can be a confusing concept for those who do not play videogames. Max Sjöblom and Juho Hamari summarise this appeal as being because 'it offers a unique relationship between the media creator and media consumer, thus facilitating communication between the two.'[15] Streaming videogames on platforms such as Twitch is one of the few types of media a person can consume where they can interact directly with the creator and the audience in real time. Similarly, for the streamer, this is one of the few types of media a person can create where they can interact directly with their audience in real time.

All of these streaming platforms are saturated with both male and female streamers, however female streamers tend to have a more negative experience while trying to grow their communities on these websites. Bonnie Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen, and Kathryn Brewster state that 'women streamers are frequently the targets of gender-based harassment.'[16] This can come in many different forms such as having negative comments and abuse towards them in their chat. Most of the time this abuse will be surrounding their appearance, their clothes, or their skill at the game they are streaming.[17] The reason as to why women face this scrutiny could be linked back to the stereotypes surrounding female gamers. Research suggests that this harassment could be because women 'do not fit the image of the stereotypical "gamer."'[15] One of the most common derogatory terms given to female streamers is labelling them as a '"titty streamer"'.[15] This label is given to female streamers who viewers 'perceive them as drawing undeserved attentions and

[15] Max Sjöblom and Juho Hamari, 'Why do people watch others play video games? An empirical study on motivations of Twitch users', *Computers in Human Behavior,* 75 (2017), 985-996, 985.
[16] Bonnie Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen and Kathryn Brewster, 'Nothing but a "titty streamer": legitimacy, labor, and the debate over women's breasts in video game live streaming', *Critical Studies in Media Communication,* 36(5) (2019), 466-481, 467.
[17] Ruberg, p. 4.

donations from viewers by presenting their bodies in sexualized ways.'[15] This label has a large

negative insinuation behind it. It implies that the streamer does not deserve their success as they

use their looks to gain more attention rather being entertaining, being skilled or having high quality

content. Those who would regularly use the term "titty streamer" would hold the belief that female

streamers are 'using their breasts to "gain unfair advantage" and taking the "easy" route to success

rather than working hard to gain followers.'[18] There is no male equivalent to this label. Male

streamers will still receive some negative feedback on their streams, but this does not compare to

what female streamers undergo.

Gamergate was one of the pinnacle moments for abuse towards females who were involved

in the gaming industry. Gamergate occurred in 2014 after male gamers began to attack multiple

people but focused their attack on game designer Zoe Quinn.[19] This was one of the first events to

occur which demonstrated 'the lack of attention given to discussions of actual violence women

experience in gaming.'[20] Violence against women in gaming is usually assumed to be that of violence

against female characters within videogames rather than threatened real life violence against

women.[19] There are varied opinions on the happenings leading up to the Gamergate movement,

however, the threats made towards the female involved in the event were very real. Zoe Quinn, the

game designer who created *Depression Quest* was 'accused of trading sexual favours with journalists

for positive reviews of her game.'[21] She was first the victim of abuse from people for creating a non-

traditional style game and because she had a mental illness.[20] This was followed by one of her

previous partners creating a blog where he wrote about her having sexual relationships with

multiple men within the gaming journalism field. [20] After this blog was created, she became the

victim to a multitude of abuse across all social media outlets and eventually someone doxed her.[20]

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[18] Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster, p. 468.
[19] Torill Elvira Mortensen, 'Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate', *Games and Culture,* 13(8) (2018), 787-806, 788.
[20] Kishonna L. Gray, Bertan Buyukozturk and Zachary G. Hill, 'Blurring the boundaries: Using Gamergate to examine "real" and symbolic violence against women in contemporary gaming culture', *Sociology Compass,* 11(3) (2017), 1-8, 1.
[21] Gray, p. 2.

Doxing is 'the intentional public release onto the Internet of personal information about an individual by a third party, often with the intent to humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish the identified individual.'[22] After all of her personal information, including her home address, was public knowledge, Zoe had to leave her home in fear of her safety.[20] Gamergate was an eyeopener into the level of abuse and scrutiny females within the gaming industry, especially the game development industry experience.

It is not only females who are in the spotlight within the world of gaming who experience abuse. Everyday female gamers are also regularly victims of verbal abuse via voice chat and text chat in online videogames and also across social media platforms. Shaw says that 'online harassment of women in digital games culture is hardly new.'[2] The harassment of female gamers or the stereotype that videogames are not for girls has been around for a very long time. Some members of the gaming community hold the belief that game culture is still exclusive to males.[23] Women are often discriminated against by male players which in turn discourages them from partaking in playing videogames.[24] This outdated stereotype could be the reason why male players are so hostile and toxic towards female players they encounter. The social element of online gaming is one of its many appeals.[25] Lavinia McLean and Mark D. Griffiths conducted research on female gamers and their experience playing online videogames. They state that 'the research has consistently suggested that they (female gamers) often experience general and sexual harassment from other players.'[26] Due to the poor treatment that female gamers experience, is it not uncommon for them to attempt to avoid or lessen the harassment they undergo. They do this by 'hiding their identity and avoiding communication with other players.'[26] Considering that one of the main appeals of online gaming is

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[22] David M. Douglas, 'Doxing: a conceptual analysis', *Ethics and Information Technology,* 18 (2016), 199-210, 199.
[23] Shaw, p. 6.
[24] Olatz Lopez-Fernandez, and others, 'Female Gaming, Gaming Addiction, and the Role of Women Within Gaming Culture: A Narrative Literature Review', *Frontiers in Psychiatry,* 10(454) (2019), 1-14, 3.
[25] Lavinia McLean and Mark D. Griffiths, 'Female Gamer's Experience of Online Harassment and Social Support in Online Gaming: A Qualitative Study', *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 17 (2019), 970-994, 973.
[26] McLean, p. 975.

the socialisation with others, it is unfair that women feel they cannot partake in this aspect of gaming in fear of being harassed. Mary Elizabeth Ballard and Kelly Marie Welch state that 'players report that less experienced/lower ranking players, women and gay players often receive a hostile reaction from male gamers.'[27] This demonstrates that most of the toxicity towards women and other players who do not fit the norm for a gamer comes from men. This suggests that most men will not experience the level of harassment that women do while they are playing online videogames.

In conclusion, women are not viewed or treated equally when considering all of the aspects of the gaming industry mentioned in this essay. Most of the unfair and unequal treatment of women stems from the outdated idea that videogames are not for girls. One would hope that this ongoing issue is resolved in order to make women have not only a more enjoyable experience while playing videogames but also to encourage more women to not be fearful about showing interest in any part of the gaming industry. eSports is a huge part of the gaming industry and is only predicted to get bigger in future years. It is vital that women start to become more involved in the scene and are welcomed by competition organisers, fans, and other players so that more females are encouraged to follow their dreams of being a professional eSports player. We also must see a change in how female streamers are viewed and show the same level of respect we do to their male counterparts. Gamergate was a huge moment in the history of female gaming as it truly showed the level to which people will go to harass women within the game development industry. Finally, we must treat all gamers regardless of gender, sexuality, ethnicity etcetera, with respect. Videogames are not just made for males; they are made for everyone to enjoy.

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[27] Mary Elizabeth Ballard and Kelly Marie Welch, 'Virtual Warfare: Cyberbullying and Cyber-Victimization in MMOG Play', *Games and Culture,* 12(5) (2015), 466-491, 472.

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FYP Reflection:

I made the decision to cover the topic of females and the gaming industry very early on in my final year as for my placement in 3rd year I was given the opportunity to stream for the semester on Twitch. My experience on Twitch was eye opening in terms of how I was treated because I was a female. I began researching the topic of female streamers last year and knew it was something I was passionate about and wanted to make more people aware of the injustice women face on these platforms. From researching this I started to investigate female eSports and game developers. I noticed there was trend within the industry when considering the females involved.

I chose to make a video edit as I have always loved video editing and wanted to showcase my skills. I also felt this would be the most effective way to highlight each point I was making regarding each aspect of the industry. I tried to tell the story from what I saw to be the largest part of the industry to the smallest part of the industry from a gamer's perspective.

 I found it difficult in the beginning to find research on specific topics such as female esports because it a contemporary and niche topic. However, I did manage to find an abundance of them with the aid of my supervisor and checking regularly for new sources to be released. While in the process of editing my video, the graphics car in my computer failed. This was the biggest hurdle I faced but I was lucky enough to be able to borrow one so I could finish editing my video.

DL837 BA in NEW MEDIA STUDIES

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