

GIRL GAMERS AND TOXICITY

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of Sociology

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts

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By Jonathan Khandaker

August 2019

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## ABSTRACT

People who play online video often experience toxicity, a term used by those who play video games, and scholars, to describe various forms of hostility people encounter from other participants in this environment. Researchers have recognized that girls and women are more likely targets of toxicity, with toxicity having potential negative mental and physical health outcomes, while acknowledging that the way targets of toxicity perceive organizational responses can affect whether they stay or leave the environment. For these reasons, it is important to understand how online video game participants, whose presentation of self is perceived by others as feminine, perceive toxicity and organizational efforts to reduce it. Using qualitative interviews with participants who play Overwatch and are perceived by others as feminine I investigate how participants perceive toxicity and organizational efforts to reduce it. I use “girl gamers” as an umbrella term to refer to my participants, a term widely used and understood in the video game environment. My specific research questions are: (1) What are girl gamers’ experiences of toxicity in competitive online video games? (2) What themes in the game do girl gamers find attractive? (3) How do girl gamers construct their identity and carve out space in the online video game environment? (4) How do girl gamers identify with characters in-game? (5) What are girl gamers’ feelings towards the in-game mechanics for reducing toxicity and do they perceive that more could be done? Results show that participants have varied feelings about their own identities and the ways others perceive them, with both affecting how they perceive toxicity and their environment.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### **Introduction 1**

### **Literature Review 5**

- Sociology of Gender 5
- Gaming Background 10
- Toxicity 12
- Negative Impact 16
- Literature Gap 22

### **Theory 24**

- Feminist Theory 24
- Tokenism 25
- Disinhibition and Anonymity 25

### **Methods 27**

- Data Collection 27
- Game Selection 28
- Sampling 30
- Data Analysis 31
- Consent and Anonymity 32

### **Analysis 34**

- Gender Inequality 34
  - Treatment of Girls 34
  - Guys' Behavior 42
  - Conclusion 44
- Stereotypes 45
  - What is it to be a Gamer? 45
  - Girl Gamer Stereotypes 50
  - Conclusion 57
- Toxicity 57
  - What is Toxicity? 58
  - To be a Girl on the Internet 61
  - Boys will be Boys 75

No Faith in Humanity	79
Conclusion	83
Positive Experiences	84
Getting into it	84
Coalescence	87
Conclusion	91
Anxiety Online	91
Online Sneakiness	91
Feeling Limited	94
Conclusion	98
Identity	98
Self-conception and Gamer Identity	98
Community Identity	100
Conclusion	103
Characters	103
Sex Still Sells	104
Getting into Character	105
Diversity and Inclusivity	108
Conclusion	115
Views Towards In-game Moderation	115
Faith in System	116
Things Done Differently	120
Conclusion	125
<b>Discussion and Conclusion</b>	<b>127</b>
Discussion	127
Conclusion	136
Limitations	136
Future Research	138
References	141

## INTRODUCTION

Recent studies on video games is starting to address how toxicity affects players in the video game communities. Through a range of different hostile interactions, communities can come to be seen as toxic by its members, owners, or outsiders. Behaviors such as trash talking, griefing, and sexual harassment are commonplace in many games, to varying degrees. Research is also looking more at how players' perceptions of the response of video game organizations to this toxicity affects whether the players continue to play those video games. Over the last decade, according to the Electronic Software Association's (ESA) annual reports, the video game industry has grown from about 9 billion dollars in 2007 to an estimated 100 billion or more by the end of 2017. This pattern of growth has been consistent during this time and there is little reason to suspect it will not continue to grow, as new avenues for making money are emerging. Gaudiosi (2016) claims eSports generated \$175 million in revenue in 2016, predicting it would rise to \$1.5 billion by 2020. An increasing number of teams are forming in more games to play at the professional level. In terms of having salaries, coaches, practices, match announcers, and broadcasts, eSports is becoming very similar to traditional sports. As video games become more popular and online multiplayer becomes a bigger part of the video game world interactions between human players increase and the opportunities for toxic behaviors also increase.

Several researchers explore how video games help players gain real life social capital, as well as providing new forms of social capital within the video games themselves through gaining levels, skill rating, and other rewards (Castronova 2008, Shen, Monge, and Williams 2014; Burch and Wiseman 2014). This new kind of social capital creates something of worth to the individual that can be lost or gained, such as skill rating. This has profound effects on the way the gamer feels about matches where this social capital is at stake in a different way than when

they are not, it is a more serious loss, they are not losing only the match, but some of what they have earned and something that may be valuable to their construction of identity as a gamer.

Toxicity becomes a problem in these games when people become upset with the actions or performances of others. There are many forms of toxicity, but according to a Pew Research Center study in 2014, women receive the most severe forms of toxicity online. This study found that men actually received more harassment, but it was not as severe. Some of this may be due to what Conmy, Tenenbaum, and Eklund (2013) describe as “lighthearted” trash talking. This is the idea that some harassment is friendly teasing, instead of harassment aimed at hurting another. While both genders experience toxicity such as griefing or trash talking, women were more frequently the target of sexual harassment and stereotyping (Pew Research Center 2014, Kuznekoff and Rose 2013).

The kind of toxicity that targets women more frequently is associated with performance decreases within the games (Littleton et al. 1998, Littleton et al. 1999) as well as performance decreases in school (Paino and Renzulli 2013). For women, reduced performance in school and lack of interest in computers and the development of computer cultural capital is also linked to a decrease in performance in particular subjects, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). The reduction in performance in STEM classes is linked with a decrease in entrance into STEM fields for careers (Mayo 2009, Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2017).

Toxicity also affects mental health, with the most serious effects coming from sexual harassment. Most sexual harassment is directed towards women (Pina, Gannon, and Saunders 2009) so most of the negative effects are felt by women. Sexual harassment leads to mental health deficits such as depression and PTSD, and rumination may occur (Fitzgerald et al. 1997, Fox and Tang 2017, Pina, Gannon, and Saunders 2009). Rumination may lead to withdrawal

from the environment increasing the damage to opportunities provided by video gaming (Fitzgerald et al. 1997, Fitzgerald 1997, Fox and Tang 2017). Even when not directly experiencing sexual harassment, observing it or feeling that it is inherent in an environment can lead to these negative outcomes as well (Fitzgerald 1997).

Research on women and girls who play video game's perception of the video game environment has been done, looking at the world of LAN (large area network) parties and World of Warcraft (Beavis and Charles 2007, Eklund 2011). Patterns of stereotypes are consistent with what was found in other studies (Dietz 1998, Paaßen et al. 2017, Vermeulen 2016). The ideas that girls or women shouldn't play video games, and that if they do play they should fit certain roles or perform certain duties, is salient (Beavis and Charles 2007, Eklund 2011). In Beavis and Charles' (2007) study, girls and women who play video gamer perceive that they are not wanted in video games and that gaming is a male activity. Eklund's study (2011) finds that when they are able to play, girls and women may find themselves being put in gendered roles, such as tending to the emotional needs of a gaming group.

For this study I use the term "girl gamers" to refer to girls, women, trans-girls, trans-women, non-binary individuals perceived as girls or women, and any other person who would fall into the category of people perceived in the online video game environment to be a girl or women. I do this due to the numerous ways in which my participants, and people in the online video game environment, identify and the difficulty of finding terms that capture everyone. "Girls" is used instead of women due to the informality that is present in the online video game environment, with girls having a "girls and guys" type of catchall meaning, rather than being demeaning as with "boys and girls" vs "men and women". Participants felt that "women gamers" or "female gamers" sounded awkward, preferring "girl gamers" for use in the study when asked



their opinion on the matter. The term “girl gamer” is also an established term in the online video game environment, with communities and groups with “girl gamer”, or some variation, in their name or title. This term is not used to imply that the participant identifies as a “girl gamer”, but that they are okay with this term being used to describe a group of individuals with some common traits. By using this term, as well as criteria based on others’ perceptions of the participants’ presentation rather than they self-identification, this study was open to more than just girls and women, allowing for the possibility of non-binary individuals, and even self-identifying boys and men, to participate. This sets this study apart from previous studies, where samples consisted of self-identified girls and women. This study’s approach gives a broader and deeper view into what experiences of toxicity look like.

While research does exist on the perceptions of the gaming environment by girl and women video gamers, there is little research on their perceptions of toxicity, specifically in competitive video games, where prior research and theory suggest that there is more toxicity. There is also little research on the actual perception of organizational responses to toxicity. Research up to this point has been focused on the effect of perceptions of institutions’ responses to harassment (Fox and Tang 2017), but not on the actual perception of these responses or opinions about their effectiveness. I try to fill this gap by asking several questions. First, what are girl gamers’ experiences of toxicity in competitive video games? Second, what themes in the game do girl gamers find attractive? Third, how do girl gamers construct their identity and carve out space in the online video game environment? Fourth, how do girl gamers identify with characters in-game? Last, what are girl gamers’ feelings towards the in-game mechanics for reducing toxicity and do they perceive that more could be done?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Sociology of Gender*

*Identity, Construction, and Performance.* Erving Goffman's (1959) way of analyzing the construction of a self and its subsequent performance with dramaturgical analysis has shaped the way that many gender theorists have looked and thought about gender. The performative aspect of Goffman's theory was influential in West and Zimmerman's (1987) piece "*Doing Gender*", where they argue that gender doesn't exist until it is performed. West and Zimmerman use the terms "sex", "sex category", and "gender" to differentiate between socially agreed upon criteria for status, the perception of performance based on appearance, and the actor's performance based on social norms, respectively. An important distinction is made here between the actor's intended performance, gender, and the perception of the audience based on their appearance and displays, sex category. Within the world of online video games either of these may be missing, and "sex" is almost always undeterminable, though often assumed. A presentation of self can be built upon solely gender, as sex and sex category may be invisible, through communication and behavior in-game. Alternatively, it could also be built entirely from sex category, through the use of avatars, screennames, and other displays of identity.

While influential and groundbreaking at the time, West and Zimmerman's "*Doing Gender*" has been criticized for not addressing gender outside of a binary thoroughly. More recent works, such as Catherine Connell's (2010), have looked specifically at gender as it is performed by transgender individuals and how this is different and similar to how gender is conceptualized in West and Zimmerman's article. Connell uses the term "doing transgender" to describe how transgender individuals construct and perform an identity when sex, sex category, and gender may not line up in the socially normative ways. Connell looks at and discusses how a

transgender person may choose which of the three to emphasize or hide when constructing their presentation of self in an interaction, adopting the same way of looking at the self as constructed in the interaction that Goffman (1959) used. While changing and challenging the ways that gender is created and perceived, transgender individuals also inadvertently reproduce gender norms in the process of constructing their identity and performance.

Candace West, along with Sarah Fenstermaker, expanded on West and Zimmerman's earlier work "*Doing Gender*" with their article "*Doing Difference*" (1995). In this piece they included race and class, arguing that quantitative methods oversimplified the intersection of the three constructs, and would not lead to a deep enough understanding of the experiences of those in those intersections. They argue that the dominant group sets the frame of reference for interactions and that those from intersections of minority constructs experience things through this frame, in turn reifying the essentialized traits they are thought to have by the dominant group in a cyclical fashion. While seen as common sense, essentialized traits of gender and sex are not as clear cut, or natural, as they are presented to be by society. Fausto-Sterling (2000) discusses in depth how the different constructions of sex do not necessarily line up, even seemingly clear criteria such as "sex" chromosomes can be complicated by other variables to make a determination of "sex" difficult. Fausto-Sterling demonstrates how sex is also socially constructed through examples of combinations of factors that make sex determination and gendering unclear.

Judith Butler (1990) criticizes essentialist ideas of sex and gender, attacking the notion that sex and gender are distinct due to the "biological basis" of sex and socially constructed nature of gender. Butler argues that a distinction of sex cannot be made without the gendering of the individual, and that both sex and gender are social constructions. Butler also takes issue with

popular ideas about identity, arguing that gender identity does not exist, but is created through performance. Gender is not the expression of an authentic internal identity or self, but a contextually constructed expression of behaviors and norms to present gender in an interaction. The consistency of this performance gives the illusion of stability and innateness, but is a product of the consistency of the contexts of interactions, not of a self or identity. Similarly, Judith Lorber (1994) argues that sex, sexuality, and gender are all social constructs in her work *“Paradoxes of Gender”*. While sex is often thought of as being rooted in nature or biology, and coming before gender, Lorber contends that not only is sex socially constructed, but that gender is the overarching status, similar to Butler’s (1990) claim of sex not existing without gendering. Lorber establishes gender as a standalone institution that affects sexuality and sex, creating ways of thinking of sexuality and sex, and expected behaviors for individuals according to those categories.

Both Butler and Lorber attack gender itself in later works. Lorber (2000) argues that men and women cannot become truly equal so long as ideas of gender, even the very act of thinking in terms of gender, exist. She criticizes feminists for calling for gender equality, but not suggesting doing away with gender as an institution altogether. Lorber calls for feminists to create a “degendering” movement to eliminate the binary system of gender that causes the distinctions between people that in turn causes their inequality. In essence, as long as men and women are thought of as men and women, as being different in some way, they will be unequal. Butler (2004) continues her attack on the self in her work *“Undoing Gender”*. In this work Butler makes the claim that while gender may be performed without being conscious of it, that doesn’t make it automatic or natural. Butler argues that some of the things we want or desire do not originate within ourselves, but have an external origin, being socialized into us. She states

that the self is created through interactions and that there is no “authentic self”. Gender and sexuality norms and identities are shown by Butler to be constraining and restrictive. Butler argues for doing away with these norms and identities in favor of having more freedom. Combined, these two perspectives on gender paints it as an extremely undesirable institution, causing more collective harm than individual good, as well as more individual harm than individual good, begging the question “why do we still gender?”

The approach taken in this study deals with others’ perceptions of the gendered performance of the participants as the categorizing criteria. The lack of a visible body leads to the irrelevance of notions of biological sex. This combines with the freedom provided by video games to play as a female or male characters (or any other imaginable sexes) and to present one’s self in nearly any way they wish to create an environment where gender and sex are communicated purely through behaviors and performances. While Butler (1990) speaks of gender identity as being created through performance, in the online video game environment the perception of that performance is what is most important. Certain behaviors, traits, or chosen characters may be perceived by others as a performance of gender that is not intended by the actor. Without being able to see the physical body of others in video games, gender becomes even more than an overarching category that Lorber (1994) felt it was, becoming essentially the *only* category in some situations. While in some circumstances sex may be inferred from perceived gender, the idea of a sexed body is not always relevant in the online video gaming world. Due to these issues, looking at participants’ self-identified gender and others’ perceptions of their gender is important for understanding how toxicity works in this environment. Referring to these video gamers as simply woman or female gamers is, therefore problematic. What

“woman” captures and what “female” captures are different, with neither being able to adequately capture all those potentially affected by this kind of toxicity.

*Masculinity and Patriarchal Structures.* Focusing on how masculinity is constructed and functions in society is critical for understanding gender relations, with Butler (1990) discussing gender as contingent within a binary system. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) discuss the idea of “hegemonic masculinity”, which frames masculinities in reference to an ideal collection of masculine traits making up the ideal masculinity. While this idea of masculinity is self-contradictory, such as with the case of being sophisticated and being primal both being considered masculine traits, hegemonic masculinity works to justify and legitimize the hierarchy of different masculinities and their valuation, as well as to maintain masculine dominance over what is considered feminine. Through the idea of an ideal type of masculinity, and its dominant valuation over other traits, gender and power inequality are socialized into members of a society, allowing the creation of a patriarchal society and the cyclical reproduction of a hegemonic masculinity. This theoretical approach allows for analyzing gender and masculinity across time and space, rather than treating it as a fixed or static idea. This approach also helps to explain how masculinity can change in response to threats to its legitimacy, as well as how individuals can rationalize contradicting ideas of masculinity in identity. This is especially useful when looking at video games, as the ideas of a video gamer can be that of a nerd or “no-life” (someone who plays video games so much they have no life outside of them, often having higher skill than average) while also considering that video games are considered a masculine activity with girls and women viewed as not belonging in the video game environment. This toxic and contradictory masculinity that is present in some video games is similar to masculinity and sexuality observed by Pascoe’s (2012). In their work high school boys were observed frequently

using homophobic slurs or implications of feminine, or simply non-masculine, traits as attacks on other boys. Within the boys' interactions the ideas of hegemonic masculinity can be seen, where hyper-masculine traits are glorified, even if they are not truly exhibited by individuals, and traits that do not match up with those considered to be ideal in terms of masculinity are deemed less valuable or damaging to social status. These works, taken with the works of Clarke (1998) and Anderson (2002), where homosexuality in sports and competition are studied, help explain why there is, and why one would expect there to be, so much gender based toxicity in competitive online video games. The behaviors that make up this toxic kind of masculinity can also be exhibited by girls, who may adopt masculine behaviors individually, or from being part of a group of guys. A guy who does not fit the masculine ideal in an environment may also become a target for attack. While their experience of toxicity is likely different than what a girl would experience, they are also victimized because of the policing of gender norms. With the competitive nature of the games, and the online video gaming environment itself, being masculine spaces and parts of a masculine identity, feminine, or non-masculine, traits or individuals in this space are a threat to the legitimacy of this identity and the perception of the masculine nature of these entities.

### *Gaming Background*

There are important differences between competitive and ranked competitive online video games and other types of online video games. Understanding these differences is important to understanding my study. Here I will briefly define what these online video game types are and why it is important to understand them. Competitive online video games, as I am defining them, are online video games where human players are playing against human players, either in direct or indirect competition. This provides different meaning to winning a match than a cooperative

game, where human players compete against opponents controlled by artificial intelligence. In competitive online video games human players win, but this type of game necessitates that there must be human players losing. While human players can lose in a cooperative online video game, it is not a necessary condition. Ranked competitive online video games add the element of a persistent skill rating. Ranking is different than level, as a player plays, regardless of performance in most cases, that player will accumulate experience points, in some form, and level up. Many games, Overwatch included, employ both a leveling system and a ranking system. The player's level is contingent mostly on how long they have played and does not necessarily reflect the player's skill level. While in some cases a better performance may lead to faster accumulation of experience, this is not necessary for leveling up and thus the player's level is not taken as a reflection on their skill, though it may be seen as an indicator that they *should* be more skilled simply because of the time they have spent playing the game. Ranking, or skill level, is differently constructed. This is tied in to how well they play, not how long they have played. Human players who play well or win games gain rank and those who lose or do poorly lose rank.

Castronova (2008) states that the hierarchy of ranks, such as level or skill level rank, is the basis for social capital within the video game environment. Other researchers also agree that the performance of a player in video games or simply the participation in video games and identifying as a gamer leads to the accrual of social capital (Shen et al. 2014; Burch and Wiseman 2014). Skill rating in these games is a rank that is given not just for time played, but for performance, in essence it is earned by playing better and a higher skill rating shows that you have more ability than others. Skill rating or rank as a source of social capital means that a player wins or loses more than just the match, they win or lose something that is valuable to them that



persists long after the game is over. Shaw (2012) argues that the act of identifying as a gamer may depend on a person's self-perception of gaming skill. Combining these ideas, in the ranked competitive world of online video gaming, a loss is not only damaging to one's social capital, but a threat to one's very identity and perception of self.

### *Toxicity*

Current research on toxicity in video games falls into four main categories, trash talking, griefing, stereotype and identity, and sexual harassment or other forms of prejudicial discrimination.

*Trash Talking.* Trash talking is common in shooters (games where shooting is a core gameplay mechanic) and competitive video games in general. Trash talking can range from joking around with friends you are playing with to insults intended to hurt or anger a person (Conmy et al. 2013). Lighthearted joking with a friend on your team is common in competitive video games and is similar to what might be experienced in sports. Players may say things to each other such as "don't pull a \*playername\* this match" when teasing another player on their team about a previous performance or things that are seemingly more hostile such as "oh god, now we are gonna lose, look at this sack of shit that decided to join" when talking about a friend that just joined the lobby (the staging area before a match starts). While saying things such as this may seem to be hostile, they are an accepted part of the environment and are not intended to cause harm to their target. They can be seen as being comfortable enough with a person and that person being comfortable enough with them to joke in this manner without anyone's feelings being hurt. This is different than constructive criticism that is intended to highlight actual performance deficits for beneficial purposes. If this trash talking can be called non-malicious, then the other side of things is malicious trash talking. This is trash talking that is intended to

cause harm to the recipient. This type of trash talking is not meant as constructive criticism or bonding. Trash talking of this kind is considered “toxic” and has become a large enough problem in some video games to garner attention by developers and publishers. Jeff Kaplan of Blizzard Entertainment, who oversees development of the game Overwatch, explicitly states that this kind of toxicity is a problem and in-game mechanics have been created to help reduce toxicity, with options for reporting players for harassment (Zeibart 2017).

*Griefing.* Griefing is an intentional act aimed at reducing another’s enjoyment of a video games. Foo and Kivisto (2004) use this definition with the addition that it must increase one’s own enjoyment, however I do not feel that this addition is necessary and excludes many acts, such as those done out of spite. Griefing is a large part of the toxicity in many video games currently. Even in non-competitive games, such as Minecraft, griefing has become a huge problem, with many mods (player created modifications to code) being developed as anti-griefing tools. In games like Overwatch, griefing has become a big enough problem to be addressed by Blizzard itself. A common practice of “throwing” matches, where a person intentionally plays poorly or doesn’t participate at all, has become a bannable offense, meaning players may have their accounts suspended for this form of griefing. The problem of griefing is a larger problem in the ranked competitive game modes, as people would throw games to reduce their rank or place (gaining initial rank) at a lower rank so that they could play with lower skill players. Throwing affects not only the individual who is throwing, however, it also affects others on their team and their experience of the game. In a team based game such as Overwatch when a player throws, they cannot lose on their own, the whole team must lose for them to lose, thus when a single person engages in this or any kind of griefing, they affect the way that every other person in that match experiences the game and they also affect everyone’s social capital.

*Stereotype and Identity.* Video games are known to contain many gendered stereotypes. Dietz (1998) states that video games are heavily stereotyped along gender lines, portraying women commonly in particular ways, such as the damsel in distress, the romantic/sexual object, and as the villain. Many other instances female characters were simply placeholders, with no lines of dialogue, meaningful interactions with the player, or contributions to the story (Dietz 1998). This socializes a particular idea of what it is to be a man or a woman in children and adolescents who play video games (Dietz 1998). Chess (2017) talks about how the gaming industry “designs” an identity for female gamers, constraining them through a limited selection of games and game types. Chess speaks of how the idea of a “gamer” is that of a white, middle class, cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, male, referring to women gamers as “player two”. Chess explores the identity that the gaming industry perceives women gamers to have, and tries to make them have, and the women gamers’ actual identities. According to a survey of 234 participants by Xeniya Kondrat (2015) the majority of people (76.9 percent) felt that female characters and gender was stereotyped in video games. Beyond the stereotyping that exists in the design of the game, the idea of what it is to be a gamer is also stereotyped. Shaw (2012) found in their study that male interviewees were more likely to identify as gamers than female gamers, with white males being more likely to identify as a gamer than any other group. Shaw argues that the video gaming world is marked as a white male space by marginalizing other groups through advertising and in-game character representation. Paaßen et al. (2017) argue that the stereotypical gamer is perceived as being male and that this idea that gaming or the video gamer identity is male has harmful effects on women. One of the participants from Beavis and Charles’ study (2007) experiences this stereotype when her boyfriend tells her that girls aren’t supposed to play video games and that video games are for guys, wanting her to stop playing. Similar to the

idea that girls or women should not play video games, was the idea that girls and women should only play a certain role if they do play, such as the typecasting and emotional labor duties that participants in Eklund's (2011) study experienced. Kanter (1977) in her work on the theory of Tokenism states that it is easier to accept a stereotype than it is to fight them. Acceptance of this stereotype can limit a person's ability to express themselves or limit their ability to demonstrate competence according to her. Paaßen et al. (2017) claim that this stereotype of the idea of a gamer as being male is cyclical, in that it maintains its own existence through feedback loops, the association between gaming and males leads to lower visibility of female gamers and the marginalization of women in gaming culture. This stereotype has a negative effect on girl gamers performance according to Steele and Aronson (1995), the salience of stereotypes, such as that girls perform poorly in video games or that they do not fit the stereotypical idea of what a gamer is, reduces their ability to perform in the games and this lower performance helps to feed the stereotype that cause it. Vermeulen (2016) also argues this, saying that the "girls can't play" stereotype might play a role in the differences in video game performance between genders.

*Sexual Harassment.* A Pew Research Center survey in 2014 on online harassment finds that respondents viewed the gaming community as the most inequitable in terms of treatment of women. Men were more likely to experience general harassment, such as trash talking, but women experienced more severe forms of harassment, including sexual harassment. Women also reported higher levels of emotional distress than men did. A field experiment by Kuznekoff and Rose (2013) using pre-recorded voice lines show that the female voice line received three times as many negative comments as the male voice did. While the results of these two studies look to be in contradiction, it is important to understand that not all trash talking is considered a negative. In a controlled environment, such as an experimental setup, the effects of camaraderie

that drive playful teasing and non-malicious trash talking would not be present, since respondents could not develop a relationship with the pre-recorded voice. Pryor and Whalen (1996) state that sexual harassment can be viewed as “an expression of hostility toward a recipient perceived as an outgroup member”. Sexual harassment then can be looked at as a way of enforcing the masculinity of the environment, and in turn, through their perception of this hostility, shapes the way that girl gamers are able to interact with the environment. Theories of sexual harassment suggest women are targeted for sexual harassment due to power inequities in structures and for purposes of policing behaviors (Tangri and Hayes 1996). Sexual harassment, according to Pina, et al. (2009), is mostly perpetrated by men towards women. Sexual harassment is linked to anxiety, sleeplessness, depression, and PTSD, and victims often dwell on the harassment long after the incident occurred (Pina et al., 2009, Larsen and Fitzgerald 2011). Fitzgerald et al. (1997) state that sexual harassment becomes more prevalent when men outnumber women in an environment and when the tasks are perceived as masculine. While there is no definitive demographic data on the ratio of male to female gamers in competitive online video games, according to the Electronic Software Association (ESA) (2016) 59 percent of video gamers are male. Fitzgerald et al. (1997) also claim that sexual harassment is more prevalent when the chance of being punished is low or the punishment is light. Taken with the stereotype of video gaming as masculine and the idea of the gamer as being a male, it is clear that the conditions that Fitzgerald et al. set forth are met by the online video gaming environment.

### *Negative Impact*

*Performance Decrease.* Studies have corroborated that stereotyping reduces performance in video games. Littleton et al. (1998) conducted several studies that compared boys’ and girls’

performance on a task, changing the context of characters in a game. In this study there was a task that was presented in two different ways, though the mechanics of the task were the same in both conditions. In one condition, “Kings and Crown”, the characters in a game were all notably masculine, but in the second condition, “Honeybears”, the characters were bears and did not have clear distinctions of gender. There were no differences in performance on the tasks amongst boys, but girls performed better on the Honeybears task. Gibson (1977) provides a theoretical way of looking at this phenomenon by looking at things in terms of the girls’ and boys’ perception of the task through the concept of affordances and effectivities. The properties of the task allowed the children to read the “affordances”, or “the contributing properties of the system and overall environment”, and then use their “effectivities”, or abilities, to make use of the affordances. In looking at the game, the girls saw that the characters were masculine and did not identify with them as well, leading to lessened effectivities applied to the game. Through not being able to identify with the characters in the Kings and Crown condition, since they were specifically framed as opposing in identity to the girls (masculinity versus femininity), they performed more poorly than when they did not perceive there to be a conflict of identifying with the characters, as was the case in the Honeybears game.

Another study by Littleton et al. (1999) finds that calling a task a “task” versus calling it a “game” had significantly different effects on girls’ and boys’ performance on the task. A task was presented either as a skills test or as a game called “Electric Eel”. The task was identical in both cases, but when the task was presented as a game there was a significant performance difference between boys and girls, with boys performing better than girls. A theory by Snow (1994) considering the way that people “attune” themselves to the requirements of and opportunities of a task is useful in understanding the results of this study and tying the 1998

Littleton et al. and 1999 Littleton et al. studies to video games in general. Snow (1994) says that the “tuning of particular persons to the particular demands and opportunities of a situation, thus resides in the combination of person-in-situation, not ‘in the mind’ alone”. A person looks at what the task demands and makes judgements about their abilities in the context of the task and then through this attunement they can understand the affordances of the task and their effectivities. Taking Gibson and Snow’s theoretical approaches in looking at these studies they become important for video games in general for two reasons. First, as Dietz (1998) shows, the majority of video game characters are male, and second, as Paaßen et al. (2017) show video games are viewed as a masculine activity and gamers are viewed as stereotypically male. The prevalence of masculine characters and the perception that the task of playing video games is a masculine task, considering the results of the Littleton et al. studies, could result in girl gamers performing more poorly.

*Scholastic Performance.* Beyond the performance decrease within the games themselves, lack of time spent on a computer has been linked to lower performance in school. A study by Paino and Renzulli (2013) shows that the expectations of achievement of a student by their teacher was increased if they had had cultural capital associated with computer proficiency. When the teachers expected the students to perform better, they got better grades. This can be due to the teachers giving these students more attention or because the teachers judged the students as more competent and there was a self-fulfilling prophecy effect. Beavis and Charles (2007) claim that girls’ involvement with computers is lower than boys’, they also claim that the world of LANning (LAN gaming) is majority male. The ESA (2017) supports this claim, with 59 percent of general video game players being male. This pattern shows that outside of regular use,

males are getting more socialization into computer life than females through the use of computers for playing video games.

Usage is not the only determining factor in scholastic performance. Pynoos and Nader (1990) show in a study that exposure to trauma as a witness can lead to negative outcomes for mental health and that these negative outcomes can lead to decreases in academic performance. Girls and women experiencing co-victimization may also ruminate and withdraw from activities and experience the negative mental health outcomes that the direct victims experience. Even without being the direct recipient of harassment online, they can experience the harms from it. Either from leaving the community, and losing out on the socialization into computer culture, or from mental health decreases, negative interactions online can lead to decreases in academic performance.

*Careers.* A study by Mayo (2009) links video game play and easier access to technological fields of study and work, such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Mayo provides evidence that playing video games can reduce the differences in performance in science between d-grade and b-grade students. These students show higher enjoyment and motivation in science classes compared to non-science classes. In this way girls' and women's lower involvement with video games and lack of socialization into computer culture can lead to lower interest and performance in STEM classes, and may be partly responsible for their lower participation in STEM programs and careers. Paaßen et al. (2017) came to the same conclusion arguing that the male gamer stereotype is harmful to women and prevents their "enhanced" access to the STEM fields. Beyond the effect that video gaming has on academic performance, participation in video game culture can affect career outcomes.



*Rumination.* One of the biggest differences between general forms of harassment and sexual harassment is the lingering effects that sexual harassment has on the individual and co-victims. Fox and Tang (2017) claim that general harassment does not trigger rumination offline, perhaps because it doesn't need a response from the developers or publishers. Pina et al. (2009) claims that this rumination is the reason that sexual harassment is more "devastating" to the victim, their reflection on the incident long after it has occurred leads to greater stress on the victim than if the stress were related to only the time and place of the harassment. Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, and Lyubomirsky (2008) find that rehashing the negative experience amplifies the symptoms of depression and feelings of helplessness and can cause feelings of self-blame. Nolen-Hoeksema et al. also find that this rumination leads to depressive symptoms and other negative mental health outcomes. Fox and Tang (2017) demonstrate that sexual harassment significantly affects withdrawal from an organization and reduced perceptions of institutional responsiveness. Withdrawal was both indirectly affected by sexual harassment through its effect on perceived institutional responsiveness as well as directly, both significantly so. Without a system in place by the organization for reporting harassment there is very little that a person can do about a sexual harassment incident, besides ruminating or withdrawing from the environment, increasing feelings of helplessness, perceptions that the institution isn't doing enough, and worsening mental health.

*Withdrawal.* Gutek and Koss (1993) argue that withdrawal behaviors are costly not only to the individual, but also to the organization the individual is a part of. In terms of the workplace they argue that this is costly to the individual through lost pay, opportunities for advancement, and missing out on assignments. For the organization there is the loss of productivity as individuals withdraw and increased costs for replacement if withdrawal is permanent. Gutek and

Koss make the important argument that information about a hostile work climate could threaten a company's reputation and damage their ability to hire new employees. The effects of sexual harassment and the institutional response are similar between online video games and the workplace, both involve people working together towards common goals and a perception of the organization as responsible for the state of the environment. Therefore, the way that sexual harassment works is similar between video games and the workplace. Miner-Rubino and Cortina (2007) make the argument that withdrawal behaviors are more likely if victims feel that the organization is not protecting them. They use the term "organizational responsiveness" to talk about the perception that the organization takes the harassment seriously, attempts to prevent harassment, addresses it when it occurs, and takes steps to punish harassers. This threat of damage to reputation and organizational responsiveness are particularly important to video games, as Jeff Kaplan's and Blizzard's response to claims that Overwatch has a toxic environment and the perception that there is too much harassment in their game demonstrates. They have publicly stated they would do more to reduce harassment and have introduced new mechanics for reporting into their game (Zeibart 2017). Adding to the harm that withdrawal causes, Fitzgerald et al. (1997) argues that withdrawal is significantly related to health and psychological conditions, agreeing that sexual harassment leads to withdrawal Fitzgerald et al. (1997).

*Mental health.* Fitzgerald et al. (1997) find that sexual harassment has a direct and significant effect on psychological health. While they did not find a direct effect on physical health, they find an indirect effect on physical health through psychological health. Supporting the co-victim effect that Pynoos and Nader (1990) argue for, Sorenson, Luzio, and Mangione-Lambie (1994) found in a laboratory experiment that the role of witness to sexual harassment can

lead to depression and decreased motivation. Fitzgerald (1997) established the concept of “ambient” sexual harassment. Ambient sexual harassment refers to an environment where sexual harassment is occurring and people perceive it as happening, even if it is not happening to them, creating an environment of sexual harassment, or ambient sexual harassment. Fitzgerald (1997) finds that there is a different effect for ambient sexual harassment than direct sexual harassment, but that there is still a path from ambient sexual harassment to declines in psychological health, they argue that higher levels of ambient sexual harassment lead to greater levels of psychological distress. After accounting for ordinary job stressors Fitzgerald (1997) finds separate and independent effects on the job and physical and psychological health for sexual harassment and ambient sexual harassment. This means that perceiving the environment as one where sexual harassment occurs can have its own effect on mental and physical health and withdrawal, separate from that of directly experiencing sexual harassment or being a co-victim of sexual harassment.

### *Literature Gap*

While there is plenty of research on the forces that cause the environment to be hostile towards women, and the effects of this hostility on their participation in video gaming, and other institutions as well as its effect on their health, there is not a great deal of literature dealing with women’s perceptions of hostility in the environment. Most of the literature on girl gamers’ perceptions is based on how hostility affects their participation collectively. Of the research that deals with individuals’ perceptions of this environment through interviews, none that I have found dealt with this specifically in terms of toxicity, or by looking exclusively at competitive online video games. I feel that this is an important area of study and an important gap that needs to be filled. With competitive online video games having more themes of masculinity, and fewer

representations of femininity, I feel that this will lead to different effects on the perceptions of the girl gamers of the environment than would be observed in non-competitive games, such as World of Warcraft.

While there is research on the withdrawal from video gaming due to harassment and studies linking perception of a lack of institutional response with withdrawal and other negative outcomes, there are no studies that I have found that go into depth on actual individual's perceptions of the systems currently in place in video games aimed at reducing harassment. I feel that this is important not only in that it is a gap in the research, but in terms of its possible use to improve the currently employed mechanics in-game for reducing hostility. The experience of actual individuals and the way that they perceive the toxicity, their feelings and ideas towards harassment, and their feelings and attitudes towards institutional responses for toxicity in video games is not covered in current studies that I have found.

Even more troubling is the lack of studies performed by those familiar with video games. While studies such as Mafe's (2015) content analysis of "Bioshock: Infinite" go into great depth discussing the content of the game in a way that demonstrates a good understanding of the game as a result of a large amount of time invested interacting with the game, other studies don't show this level of understanding. With this study research is being done by a researcher who has significant time invested in video gaming as a hobby, as well as in the particular video game being studied. I feel that the perspective of an insider is especially valuable for qualitative research of this nature.

## THEORY

### *Feminist theory*

The feminist approach to looking at sexual harassment is useful as a framework for looking at why sexual harassment occurs and how sexual harassment in the video game world is generalizable to the real world. Through the feminist perspective sexual harassment can be seen as a form of gendered power expression (MacKinnon 1979). Taking Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) idea of hegemonic masculinity and applying it to the perception of video games as a masculine space, policing of masculine norms is to be expected in the video game environment. With competitive game types such as shooters, that have heavier elements of aggression and violence, higher levels of hostility would be expected, and I predict that this will be the case. Verifying these ideas that competition is masculine in nature and ideas of hegemonic masculinity Clarke (1998) states that gay men in sports are thought of as deviant participants, they defy the culturally established norms that traits of masculinity are important to success in competition. Anderson (2002) expands on this idea talking of how gay male athletes face violence and hostility in an attempt to silence them and make them less visible in an attempt to police what norms are associated with competition and the sports environment. Anderson (2002) also notes that homophobic discourse is used to "maintain the virility of hegemonic masculinity". This is similar to what happens in online video games, with insults such as "faggot" and calling things that people don't like, both in terms of game mechanics and players' plays, "gay". This helps to establish the traits and norms of heterosexual masculinity as the traits and norms of the video game environment, excluding and silencing those who do not fit in with these values, either physically by being female, or behaviorally by being homosexual or generally not exhibiting masculine behavior.

### *Tokenism*

Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism is also very useful for understanding how girl gamers, in the sense of my definition of "girl gamer", perceive the environment and their position within it. Kanter's term "skewed group", that she defines as a group consisting of a roughly 85:15 ratio, is applicable to competitive video games. In this group, the 85 percent make up the dominant group, while the smaller group makes up the non-dominant group. While I was unable to find definite numbers on the gender composition of video games, and microphone use is not mandatory, from my experience playing video games I would estimate the gender ratio of competitive games to fall within the parameters for a skewed group. Kanter also coins the term "token", that she uses to describe a member of the smaller group. Tokens are then seen as representative members of their group, representative of the stereotypical ideas that the dominant group has bestowed upon their group as a whole. Girl gamers become tokens under this model. While there is no way of determining sex of a gamer over voice chat in-game, gender is still salient among some who use their mics, this becomes the ascribed characteristic that Kanter talks about that is used to group them. According to Kanter's study, men acted more dramatically masculine when in the presence of a token woman and token women were noticed automatically. This larger share of attention drawn to them based on their status as a token girl gamer combined with the effect of dramatization of masculinity in the male gamers, taken with what we know of the nature of sexual harassment in the video game environment, would seem to indicate that the video game environment is a breeding ground for toxicity towards girl gamers.

### *Disinhibition and Anonymity*

The Online Disinhibition Effect that Suler (2004) establishes has mostly been used to explain how the effects of anonymity, through reduced non-verbal communication, lack of

observable authority, and hypermasculine atmosphere, leads to increased harassment and negative behaviors in online environments. Fox and Tang (2017) argue that this leads to toxic disinhibition due to the lack of consequences. This disinhibition and blanket of anonymity is also important for understanding girl gamers' experiences online. The effect of being disinhibited and anonymous also *enables* girl gamers, instead of just having negative consequences. Girl gamers may not feel as constrained by norms of gendered behavior. Girl gamers are free, thanks to the mechanics of many games and platforms, to present any kind of self that they wish, including physical representations in the form of avatars (cartoonish, sometimes animated, representations of yourself) where they can even present themselves as a different race or sex passably. This effect of being disinhibited by the anonymous nature of the online environment frees girl gamers of many social constraints they would otherwise perceive in the real world. They can abandon these norms or embrace them even more if they wish, having near total freedom in constructing their identity within games.

## METHODS

### *Data Collection*

This study used qualitative semi-structured interviews. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews was the best method for collecting the data that was needed. By allowing participants to explore their experiences, ideas, and feelings, and not keeping the interview to a strict path, I was exposed to ideas and themes that I would not have been if the interviews were stricter in structure. Qualitative methods were necessary for this project, the feelings and attitudes that I explored could not be captured in enough depth with quantitative methods. By using qualitative interviews, I was not limited by the questions I have presented, as one would be with surveys. Participants were able to give me not only what they feel or how much they feel something, but how they feel it and why. Most importantly, the participants were able to tell me how and why they feel certain ways *in their own words*. I used the grounded theory approach described by Charmaz (2014) to conduct these interviews and their analysis, the freedom this approach affords the interviewees and myself was important for the success of this study. The freedom for interviewees to explore ideas and feelings that I had not anticipated exposed themes, concepts, and terms that were relevant to the study and that I had not accounted for or considered. These new themes were used to create new questions, or probes, that helped to explore those themes in greater depth, and generated richer data for analysis. The interviews were conducted using the VOIP (voice over internet protocol) program Discord. Interviews were recorded using OBS Studio, a recording and streaming program, and a transcription service was used for the transcripts. Transcriptions were audited and edited by myself to ensure that they are accurate and reflect the tone of the participants. After these interviews have been analyzed the rest of the



interviews will be conducted. Interviews ranged from half an hour to nearly two hours in length, with the majority lasting around one hour.

Questions used in the interview were designed to get at several themes important to my research questions. The theme of harassment and what participants consider acceptable and non-acceptable harassment made up one section. In this sections questions get at the participants experiences and feelings towards harassment, as well as how they respond to harassment and how harassment changed the way they behave in the online video gaming environment. A section of questions was devoted to how these gamers construct their identity in the online video game environment and how they present themselves in this environment. Solidarity amongst girl gamers, community formation, girl gamer identity formation, and gender presentation were major themes in this group of questions. What these things mean to the participants and how they navigate their online video gaming environment were questions this section attempts to answer. Another section was devoted to questions asking about characters and themes of video games and Overwatch specifically that are appealing to the girl gamers. This section explores if and how girl gamers identify with characters, what traits and themes they like in these characters, and what about the games or Overwatch specifically appeals to them. Finally, a section was devoted to participants' feeling towards in-game and institutional mechanisms for reducing toxicity online and what more they feel could be done to make online gaming a better environment for them. This section gets directly at my second research question and could possibly lead to better methods for dealing with harassment and toxicity online.

### *Game Selection*

The criteria I decided to use to select the games I sampled from were popularity, perceived toxicity of the community, online competitive gameplay, and having some form of

communication in game. I define popularity by how many active players there are in a given game, rather than its critical acclaim. This is important because of access to participants for sampling as well as these games being industry leaders and trendsetters. Perceived toxicity of a community was on a word of mouth basis as there are no metrics for toxicity among current games. As an avid player of the types of video games used in this study, I am confident this method of selecting games for the study was effective. With these four criteria in mind I chose to look at Overwatch specifically, while having questions allowing participants to discuss other games as well. In 2018, at the time of my research proposal for this study, Overwatch was in the top ten most viewed list for Twitch, which is a good indicator of popularity due to the popularity of Twitch as a viewing platform (Statista 2018). Overwatch is an online video game that has a reputation of making efforts to make itself more appealing to many genders and trying to reduce toxicity. Overwatch game director Jeff Kaplan, during a presentation at a D.I.C.E. Summit, claimed that "...diversity is a beautiful end result that you get when you embrace inclusivity and open mindedness", talking about Overwatch's development (Bratt 2017). These things combined made Overwatch a perfect candidate for this study. Beyond those things, Overwatch is a trendsetter, having formed their own professional gaming league and modeled it after mainstream sports, such as the NFL, with teams assigned to cities and NFL style commentary. They made an effort to make professional online video gaming appealing to mainstream sports fans, and other video game companies are followed the model that Overwatch had set forth. Currently, in 2019, Overwatch League (OWL) is still quite popular, with some matches airing on cable television channels. Due to these factors I believed that the path Overwatch blazes in different areas will be followed by other games. Currently in 2019, Apex Legends, a very popular "battle royale" style game, has included a non-binary character as one of its playable

“legends”, showing that in at least some popular games diversity and inclusivity are made a priority.

### *Sampling*

Sampling was conducted by posting on the forums and playing Overwatch to try and meet people who would be interested in being interviewed. All of the participants in this study were recruited via meeting them in-game, or with snowball sampling using participants referred by those already interviewed, by reaching out to those I perceived to have a feminine presentation and asking if they were interested in participating in a study on girl gamers and their experiences of toxicity. I did not target any specific age, race, or SES of participants as these factors do nothing for my questions and are not necessarily salient factors in video games. I am confident that my sample was diverse and representative due to the random nature of matchmaking in Overwatch, and the consequential randomization of who I encountered in matches, though Overwatch is region locked, meaning that I was limited to meeting people who were playing on the North America server. I do not feel that being limited to North American participants is a drawback. There was not a language barrier problem, as would be the case if other server regions were included, with my only being able to speak English. Cultural differences between the participants and myself were also fairly minimal, making interpreting their ideas, and coding and analyzing the interviews, less difficult and more likely to be an accurate judgement of meaning. Due to the difficulty of acquiring participants 10 participants were interviewed. Initially about twice as many people agreed to be interviewed, but half either decided not to participate after being asked to sign the consent form, or simply were never heard from again. Signing the consent form, and giving out their name, was given as the reason for not wanting to continue with the study, as I explained that the consent form was necessary to

continue. None of the potential participants named any part of the actual interview process or study as their reason for not wishing to continue. This was not surprising due to the anonymous nature of online video games and the cautiousness of girl gamers. Participants' age ranged from 18-31. Eight participants self-identified as a girl or woman, one self-identified as a trans-woman, and one self-identified as non-binary.

### *Data Analysis*

Data was analyzed using Atlas.ti. I did not use intercoder reliability for the study due to lack of access to coders, though I had one interview coded by another coder to make sure my codes are sensible. Themes were developed as they arose from the data, these include themes of Gender Inequality, Stereotypes, Toxicity, Positive Experiences, Anxiety Online, Identity, Characters, and Views Towards in-game Moderation. Coding was done in three major passes. During the first pass memorable quotes were highlighted and organized together if possible. After the first pass I looked at the codes and quotes and organized them together into families. The second pass involved looking at the codes that had already been established and looking for any other quotes that fit into these codes. After the second pass all remaining uncoded quotes were either put into groups with other codes, or given their own code name. This resulted in several codes being broken into separate groups, such as Identity being broken into Identity Self and Identify with Character. The third pass involved going back over the transcripts looking for other quotes that might fit into the newly created codes. These codes were then organized into three groups of different scope, which I call themes, codes, and sub-codes. "Themes" are the broad over-arching themes that describe the codes and sub-codes contained in that section, these came from the families in Atlas.ti. "Sub-codes" were the actual codes and codenames from my analysis in Atlas.ti. These are the most specific groupings. "Codes" were groups of sub-codes

which had a similar theme, fitting together logically. Themes make up the second level headers in the analysis section, with codes being third level headers.

After analysis, all voice recordings were destroyed to ensure the privacy of the participants. During the write up of the study participants were given pseudonyms in place of their real names and gamer handles. These pseudonyms were chosen by the participant after the interview, or chosen by myself if they did not choose one.

### *Consent and Anonymity*

My consent documents and all information that I gave participants was written in plain English with the aim that anyone with a high school education can understand what they are reading and signing. These documents were signed and emailed back to me. Copies of all documents were made available to all participants online through an email sent to participants as well as a link to an online copy sent through Discord to participants who did not remove me from their contact list. Any identifying information was excluded from the study and all recordings were deleted once they were no longer necessary.

I avoided causing any harm to the individuals that I interviewed. I did not think that it was likely that serious harm would occur to participants, but due to the nature of toxicity and the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder that the literature suggests I was cautious during interviews. I made efforts to keep track of the state of participants as they were interviewed to prevent any harm coming to them, however, there were no incidents that required stopping the interview or removing interviews from the data set. All participants' interviews were included in the study. This study required no form of deception during the interview process, however, due to my recruitment involving my screenname and online gamer handle

“Kitty”, as well as my being agender, and thus not presenting myself in a notably masculine way, there was the risk of the perception that I was a girl during my online interactions during recruitment. There was little that I could do to prevent the assumption that I am a girl, I used my microphone when interacting with players online to make my status as a male as salient as possible. Participants gathered through snowball sampling may have been unaware that I was not a girl, though I asked participants to tell them I was agender when they made referrals. I made sure not to use exploitative rewards, giving participants who accepted 11 Overwatch lootboxes (boxes with a randomly generated in-game reward, such as a skin). I treated all participants as equally as possible. Do to the relatively low risk of harm of this study there was little trouble getting approval from the IRB.

## ANALYSIS

While the girl gamers interviewed had many common feelings towards a wide variety of things, there were also a surprising amount of differences. While some feelings were split between groups of girl gamers, some ideas and feelings were divided so far as being unique to the individual participant. Many different themes arose in each section of questions, revealing a great deal to me about how girl gamers perceive themselves, their environment, others they interact with, and social ideas about themselves and others. The analysis is divided according to which research questions were generally addressed in the section.

### *Gender Inequality*

This section, along with the three after it; Stereotypes, Toxicity, and Positive Experiences; make up the sections dealing with the first research question, “What are girl gamer’s experiences of toxicity in competitive online video games?”. This theme deals with participants’ feelings and experiences of unequal treatment related to gender and gender norms in Overwatch or generally related to online competitive video games.

*Treatment of Girls.* Participants’ feelings related towards how girls (used as a catchall for people perceived to be a girl or woman online, if used in a general context, from this point forward), or gender itself, are treated in the competitive online video game environment (which I shall shorten to gaming environment from this point forward) were captured in many different ways during the interviews. Many of the participants felt that there was differential treatment present in the gaming environment. When asked if she felt her gender identity was important or relevant online, Alice said she thinks so and “I do think people treat me differently” (because of her being a girl). Alice’s bluntness in coming right out and saying that she was treated differently

based on her gender is a perfect summation of the feelings of participants. This differential treatment based on gender had a formative effect for Angela, who said when talking about how her identity as a gamer formed:

“Having to play a team-based FPS game made me aware of how there are stereotypes out there towards female gamers and stuff like that. That's why I say that it's important to me that females are not disrespected or someone stands up for them if they're getting abused. I would say that in that way, my gender identity got stronger. I felt it was more important to notice that there is a difference between a female gamer and a male gamer in terms of what we're going through.”

Angela's gender identity has a strong effect on the formation of her identity as a gamer, with her using the term “female gamer”, emphasizing how she felt the distinction between the experiences of male and female gamers is important. Through experiencing toxicity based on her gender, Angela's gender identity, and sense of duty to stand up for other female gamers, was strengthened. Instead of shrinking away from a fight, Angela was emboldened, taking more of an activist stance against this differential treatment.

While not necessarily shying away from conflict, Roary discusses another tactic for dealing with differential treatment. When asked if she felt like she needed to find girl-friendly spaces in the gaming environment, she responds:

“Yes. Definitely, because you can't always join a group and be treated like you exist. You're usually either treated like you're a girl and it's incredible or it's bad. So it's never just normal. That's when you're like, ‘Okay I need to make friends with these people because they don't treat me like I'm different.’”

Roary brings up the interesting point of differential treatment either being more positive than normal, or worse than normal. Differential treatment may also manifest as above normal friendliness due to their being a girl, such as a guy being extra friendly to a girl, in addition to toxicity. Roary discusses being treated differently, as a girl gamer, as being treated as though you don't exist, as though a girl gamer isn't a thing that is normal in the gaming environment. This



drives Roary to sometimes seek out spaces in the gaming environment where her gender will not have an effect on her treatment, or even be cared about.

Further complicating things, non-binary participant Nova responds that their gender identity is important, saying:

“I feel as though in some cases it can be really important and in other cases it is important to lie. Since I go by non-binary, sometimes in the field I have to say that I'm a female. I have to go by my appearance or else you can get a lot of backlash for it.”

While not wishing to conform to *Enforced Gender Norms*, Nova is forced to adopt a conventional gender role in some instances to avoid complications. While they care about their gender identity, making the effort to be recognized as non-binary, in some instances they conform to conventional gender norms to avoid backlash.

Some participants had feelings that girls don't belong in the gaming environment. This was due to stereotypes of girl gamers that exist and are salient, as well as their treatment by other gamers. When asked how stereotypes about girls in video games or video gaming made her feel, Angela responds:

“...There is that part of it and also when it comes to females playing competitively, there's also that stereotype as to women aren't good enough to play competitively and that's why they are not in eSports and stuff like that. Of course, there are less women in eSports, not necessarily because they are not good enough, but just because there is less women in general that play the game. Of course, there will be less in eSports if there is less in general. It's representative of the actual community of the game.”

Here Angela talks about how fewer salient examples of girl gamers doing well, caused by there being fewer girl gamers in general, leads to the judgement that girl gamers are not as good.

Though not referring to it directly, Angela is describing the availability heuristic, an effect of the mind sacrificing accuracy for speed when making judgements, which in this case relies on salient examples. This feeling of not belonging, or not having confidence due to this stereotype, could

lead to girl gamers not devoting time to, or even entering, the gaming environment, and thus cyclically feeding this stereotype.

Julia, who is very highly ranked in the ranked competitive mode, was for the most part aware of the girl gamer stereotypes, but did not ever link them to herself. When telling me how gender played a role in her identification as a gamer, she said:

“Honestly, this suddenly hit me a couple of weeks ago that, let me use this as an example. I've been playing competitive *Overwatch* since the game first came out and it never hit me until a couple of weeks ago that I'm the kind of, People generally don't want a female on their team. It only hit me that I'm the kind of person that people don't want on their team. I never saw it before as, "I'm a girl and I'm playing with most likely these five other guys." I saw it as I'm playing competitive *Overwatch* with people that are like me.”

Julia is aware of the stereotypes surrounding girl gamers, and is aware that female gamers are less desirable in the gaming environment, but only recently realized that this meant she might be viewed as less desirable as a teammate. This a strange feeling to have given her Top 500 ranking in the North American region, both for her and for her teammates, considering that there should be no doubt of her abilities at this rank.

Audree discusses the logical fallacy that is often employed by guy gamers when thinking of what it is to be a “real” gamer mentioning the “no true Scots” logical fallacy. When asked what her feelings were about the term girl gamer, or gamer girl, she had this to say:

“I would say gamer girl feels more of a pejorative, it might just be because on Reddit I am on girl gamers. Its separate there. I think a lot of times, girl gamer is used in a way to indicate that we're not really part of the culture, that we're interlopers. That we are invading. All the words literally means or all the phrase literally means is a female gamer, but gamer girl you end up with no true Scots and fallacy type situations that a female gamer can never be a true gamer. Not sure if that makes a lot of sense.”

Here Audree discusses a perceived difference between girl gamer and gamer girl that others expressed as well, with gamer girl being the more insulting of the two terms. While the term girl

gamer is used as a sort of hyphenation to indicate that one is not a “normal” gamer or is “interloping” as Audree puts it, gamer girl was felt to be more negative in connotation. Audree feels that the terms gamer girl is more of an attack on the idea that a girl can be a gamer. Generally, gamer girl was viewed to be insulting and conjuring up imagery of an e-girl, a term I was not familiar with until this study, surprisingly. An e-girl is a stereotype of a girl who doesn’t know much about gaming or isn’t interested in gaming besides using it as a way to get attention. Girl gamer, on the other hand, was sometimes viewed as a negative, in that it made their difference from the “normal” gamer salient, but could also be just a more specific label.

As mentioned by Julia, there is an idea that girls suck at video games. This stereotype may be cyclical, with the uncommon presence of girls in this gaming environment leading to fewer examples of girls playing well, due to fewer girls in general, causing hostility towards girls that prevents them from entering and staying in this environment, in turn causing there to be less examples of girls playing well. When asked about how her feelings on stereotypes of girls in video gaming, Angela replied”

“It kind of bothers me, though some of them can be true to a certain extent. I know, like if we take Overwatch, most female players will be support players and not a lot of them will play DPS. With that comes a stereotype that girls can't aim or girls can't play aggressively or stuff like that. I would say this is case by case. It kind of bothers me that it's the first reaction guys have when they think of women playing games, though it might not be all wrong, but still I feel like everyone should be given a shot before you already classify them as, ‘You can't aim because you are a girl.’”

Here Angela discusses the stereotype that girls don’t play DPS (damage per second, the damage dealing role) characters and are always support players (in this context healers). While this may be due to the healers’ role or their personalities being easier to identify with for girl gamers, the stereotype itself that girls don’t DPS may be to blame. Before even being given a chance, girls are viewed as bad at a role. Kinetics mirrors this sentiment, having created an alternate account

so she can play competitive matches as a DPS and practice, so as not to be attacked for not playing well in a role she is discouraged from playing while practicing in the competitive setting.

Julia, who mains (plays a character the majority of the time, or exclusively) Mercy, a support character, describes being looked at as a lower skill player for playing support, which is viewed as a lower skill role than DPS, even though positioning and game sense (knowing where you and other characters are at a given time and what abilities, attacks, and ambushes are set up at a given time) are more important to this role.

“Yes. Sometimes it's actually worse because I'm Main Mercy which people consider to be the 'easiest character'... ..in the game. Yes, I disagree heavily. I could go into that but that's not what we're here to talk about. It's worse for me because I'm female and I'm playing Mercy. People degrade me on that but then if I ever decide that I want to play with a duo, or a trio sometimes, it will be like, ‘How much is your e-girl paying for the boost?’ It's like, ‘Come on man.’ Because I spent a year, I think, getting from high gold to much higher in the skill rating system. I did that solo queue. Whenever I decide, ‘I'd love to play with one of my friends or something that is also high-rated,’ it will be like, ‘Oh, you're getting boosted.’”

Here Julia is suspected of having been “boosted”, or helped to climb to a higher rank, by her friend she is playing with, since it is viewed that she could not be skilled enough to do so on her own due to being a girl. While “solo queueing”, or not playing in a group with friends or known players, to attain her high rank, her skill is still brought into question, with her being anxious to group up with others due to the prejudice that she is piggybacking on the other player, or being “carried”.

Nova, when asked about experiences of toxicity, describes having their mistakes blamed on her gender during matches.

“I've had people that at first, didn't make my gender a big thing, but as soon as they got mad at me, that was just the immediate thing to go to. First they'll just be talking to me just fine. We were playing the game and then like, I'll miss a kill, and it's just like, ‘Oh

my God, you stupid woman, can you do anything right? No, you need a man to do it for you.' It's like, we were Friends a second ago.”

Nova describes their gender as being the thing that others go to first when attacking her for poor play, whether that play was unavoidable or not. Even when playing with people who are friendly or positive at first, things can turn toxic quickly for Nova when playing as a DPS. This isn't due just to the idea of DPSing being a “guy thing”, or rather not a “girl thing”, but more generally due to the idea of girls not being good at video games, as evidenced by their attacker asking if they can “do anything right”.

Related to the idea of girls not belonging and stemming from the idea of girls sucking was the trend of scapegoating girls. The ideas presented by Julia and Nova in previous sections show that girl gamers are viewed as being undesirable and of lower skill. This leads to their being blamed for the team's poor performance, even when their mistakes or play could not be avoided or when it would be unreasonable to expect them to improve the team's performance alone. When asked about her feelings towards gender roles in Overwatch, Roary sums up this sentiment concisely:

“As far as like, equal go who play on it again, there's a weird be my wife crap and then there's again they expect you to be Healer, if you're a girl. Then if you don't play Healer, and you're a girl, if you're not, if the team isn't doing well, it's your fault or you're kind of the scapegoat.”

If a girl isn't playing “her role” as a healer she is automatically at fault for the team doing poorly, showing the idea that girls aren't supposed to be DPS. Even when playing the role they are expected to play, if the team is doing poorly blame is placed on them before looking to other players' performance, character picks, or positioning.

Mirroring Roary's being blamed for other's poor performance, Alice talks about how she is blamed for deaths of others, with them attacking her more because of her gender. When asked how she felt gender is treated in Overwatch, she responds:

“For the most part, it's very normal. Not a lot of people really care. They treat me pretty okay. But, every once in a while I get a very toxic group, who'll just keep talking and just keep treating me very badly because I'm a girl. If I mess up, they'll rip on me because I'm a girl. Today, for instance, there was these three men and I was trying my best as the healer but they were feeding and they just kept blaming me. I feel like for the most part, it's okay, the gender thing. At the same time, it's not something I exactly want to shout out in every game.”

Here three players were feeding (playing with incredibly poor positioning and game sense and dying for it, “feeding” the other team kills) and blaming her for being unable to heal all three of them as they got themselves killed. While she states that this is not the norm, she expresses hesitancy at making her gender known because of the possibility of this gender-based mistreatment.

While girl gamers are not always treated differently, with their gender often going unnoted or not cared about, there were many situations described by participants of their being treated differently because they were girls. Literature (sources) explains how this differential treatment and toxicity can be due to the minority status of girls or women and can serve as a way of policing a masculine space or protecting ideas of masculinity from counter-examples. While it is positive that all of the participants still played Overwatch after receiving this treatment, the voices captured here are of those who did remain. We should not make the same mistake that the guy gamers made in taking what is available as what is representative, it may be the case that many leave because of this treatment and were thus not captured. For those who were interviewed, at least, the fun of playing the game and spending time with friends outweighed the toxicity they received for being girls.

*Guys' Behavior.* Guys are the main source, nearly the sole source, of gender based toxicity and gender inequality in the gaming environment. This makes sense, as guys are policing an environment and protecting the social power that gender status (sources from last paragraph). As such, participants mentioned guys' behavior directly when asked about their experiences, talking more broadly and generally about guys, going further than mentioning specific instances. The general sentiment was that guys are more toxic. When asked about her experiences of toxicity in general, Julia states that girls are less toxic than guys.

Just people calling each other names, telling them to kill themselves. I always try to stand up for people that are being called out. Even if I think that they're doing a horrible job. We have a Tank that just keeps feeding. They're just doing so bad. Even if they're called out on that, someone's like, 'Will you stop fucking feeding. Can we fucking switch?' I'll call them out. I'll be like, 'Dude. Chill. Chill out. It's a game.' I try to dump, lower the toxicity, but then a lot of times you get, I think a lot of girls are less toxic than guys. I just think that we just are more nurturing and more empathetic because sometimes you'll get the, Then you become the new target of toxicity because you're the girl or trying to calm everyone down and everyone's like, 'Shut up, bitch.' I'm like, 'Okay. Sorry.'"

This is an interesting quote, here Julia claims that girls are more empathetic and nurturing, both extremely valuable traits for teamwork in Overwatch, but she also says this has made her a target for toxicity. A trait that would be helpful in a competitive or ranked competitive situation is targeted for attack perhaps because it is feminine gendered, though it may just be redirected toxicity due to the anger of the toxic player.

Audree, who is a transgender woman, comments on her earlier socialization into masculinity before transition, and how it relates to teenage boys' socialization.

"Something that I really noticed is that toxicity within online gaming really reflects how teenage boys socialized. I remember that the same type of rules such as unwritten rules the go-to insults, the go-to themes for insults, are very reflective of sports in men, and how males in high school interact. I guess that's just it. I'm sorry I'm rambling."

This is in line with findings by Anderson (2002) and Clarke (1998) who argue that in sports men use heteronormativity heavily in their construction of identity and femininity and homosexuality are used as insults, protecting the heteronormativity of the environment and the legitimacy of the idea that masculinity is necessary to do well in this environment.

On top of being more toxic, participants also noted instances of guys minimizing toxicity or sexism. Kinetics experiences situations where the friends she is grouped up with, who are guys, do not understand why she is upset, viewing harassment as “just kidding”.

“I’ve had that happen a couple of times where I am duo-queueing with a guy. I’m trying to express that a certain situation is making me uncomfortable and they don’t understand why. I try to explain, but they sometimes just don’t get it. Honestly, they just don’t understand why someone telling me to go play Mercy or to go back to the kitchen would make me uncomfortable.....I think a big part of that is they think it’s a joke. Like I said, I should develop a thicker skin. It’s just the internet, joke around about it, but I think another part of it is they don’t get comments like that. How many times does someone comment to a guy about being a guy playing games? That doesn’t happen ever. Usually, when it does, it’s about them being like feminine. It’s weird. I’m sure if I were to take a while to explain it to them they might get it. It’s surprising to me the number of times where I will have to explain to a close friend of mine, why don’t feel like that’s okay.”

Here kinetics raises the point that guys do not understand how it feels to be harassed in this way since they are considered the default in the gaming environment. Without their gender being made a central and salient point when discussing their status as a gamer, or its legitimacy, they are not made to feel like an outsider. By only commenting about being a guy playing video games when referencing feminine traits, they are further reinforcing the idea that gaming is masculine and the environment is a masculine space. When asked about further experiences of toxicity, kinetics recalled another situation with guys brushing off toxicity.

“There’s this one time, I was playing on a smurf and I was playing Zarya. I was focused on calls, we were this three stack. There’s this kid, I swear he literally sounded like he was 14 or younger. He was making go back to the kitchen comments, ‘Why aren’t you playing Mercy?’ and he and his friends were laughing and I couldn’t tell if they were



saying that because they were joking or they were really serious about being sexist towards me. I was joking with someone that I was playing with a bit earlier, and you seem like a really chill guy. I didn't want to say, I didn't want to cause, start stuff, so I just laughed with them and tried to keep it chill, but I typed out in our group chat, saying this is uncomfortable. I'm not sure how I like this. He's like, 'Oh, what's wrong?' I was like, they're making woman comments about me. I'm not sure how I feel about that. He's like 'You know, they're just kidding.' It was weird because I know he probably sees it as just like a child play. It's one thing though for like a person to make fun of you for your gameplay or, if you like, I don't know, if you sound high or something. It's another one they're making remarks specifically about my gender, which is something that I cannot change on."

Without the constant, or even occasional marginalizing that girls experience, guys are unable to understand how something small can come to be bothersome. Viewed as just one individual instance of relatively small harassment, "back to the kitchen" style jokes aren't viewed as serious. Without understanding the "death by a thousand paper cuts" nature of this harassment, guys try to brush it off, either because they do not understand or they do not care. While they may be trying to make her feel better by saying it's just joking, trying to get her to take it less seriously, this ends up doing more harm than good with Kinetics losing trust in her friends.

Guys' behavior is the main source of gender inequality in the gaming environment, with very few instances of girl gamers being toxic towards each other on the basis of gender. The problem is complex, with some guys being toxic intentionally or unintentionally to police the environment, and others minimizing and ignoring these toxic interactions, supporting it in their inaction. The direct toxicity has the effect of making girls feel less comfortable or happy in the gaming environment, while the minimization can cause them to lose trust in their friends, who should be allies to them. However, even with the hostility of this environment, participants continue to play the game, finding a variety of ways to cope with toxicity.

*Conclusion.* While girl gamers make up a larger portion of the gaming environment than many may think, the community is still far from an even split, especially in competitive online

video games. Even with games like Overwatch making efforts to create an inclusive and diverse environment and game, there is a lot of progress still left to be made before gender is no longer the source of problems in the gaming environment. While the disinhibition and anonymity of being online has some positive effects, allowing individuals to present themselves any way they wish and create any identity they want, it also has the effect of allowing toxicity and sexism to go relatively unchecked. Even with reporting and moderation mechanisms in place, if the general feeling is that harassment is not a big deal, these mechanisms are not going to be used and will not be effective.

### *Stereotypes*

This section deals with stereotypes surrounding what it means to be a “gamer”, and the legitimacy of identity in the gaming environment, as well as stereotypes of girl gamers. Here participants’ feelings of how gamers and video gaming are perceived by others, as well as their thoughts on how girl gamers are perceived are explored.

*What is it to be a Gamer?* There are many different viewpoints to consider when asking what a “gamer” is. There is the viewpoint of outsiders, people who don’t play video games and the viewpoint of those who do play video games. The viewpoint of those who do play video games can be subdivided into many more groups, those who claim the identity of a “gamer” and those that do not, gamer identity based on gender, and even the legitimacy of a claimed “gamer” identity with so called “softcore” and “hardcore” gaming. In this section the ideas of what a “gamer” is in general are explored.

When asked how they felt gamers are perceived by society many participants expressed they felt society had negative views towards video games. Alice responds saying that society feels gamers are:

“Lazy, very lazy, unmotivated, antisocial. Like we are wasting away our lives. In a way, they are kind of right but, it's the only life we have for enjoying something. I don't see the problem with that too much.”

Here Alice expresses a theme that would occur multiple times, the idea of those who play video games as not contributing to society, of video games being a pointless activity. The feeling that this sentiment is common is supported by Julia, with her answer to the same question:

“...Not very highly [viewed by society].

...Because you can't, Well, it's not that you can't, but it's hard to make a career out of something like that and the big idea of society is like, ‘Hey, if you can't make a career out of it, you're wasting your time and why are you doing it?’ People are like, ‘Why play video games if it's not going to get you anywhere or it might not get you anywhere?’”

The idea of video gaming being a waste of time reoccurs here, with Julia tying that idea to that of careers. Without a way to make a living off of something, she feels other perceive it as being a waste of time, a reflection of the capitalistic and meritocratic views of the societies of the participants (Canada and The United States). Julia also brings up the point that you can in fact make a living out of playing video games, but that it is difficult.

Ophelia introduces the aspects of which culture and generation you are talking about.

“I guess it would depend on the generation that you approach. People are going to be people, but I think mostly, Well, in this current generation, I feel it's okay. People don't really look down on it as much as the older generations. I think also the society you grow up in because I'm half Korean. My Asian side of the family really don't look highly on gamers. They think it's a waste of time. You're like wasting your time. You should be out studying and becoming a doctor and making bank, whereas I'm not doing any of that and I'm just video games and chillin’.”

Ophelia brings up the point that her generation (millennials) would have a different view of gaming than older generations, they are more likely to have experienced video games in some

way. Along with older generations, Ophelia also feels that Asian family members look down more harshly on video gaming, also referencing the time wasting and lack of economic productivity that others did. Brining up her Korean heritage is also interesting since South Korea has a large professional video gaming community, as well as a larger internet and lan café community. A stereotype exists of South Koreans being the most skilled at video games in the world, originating with the game “Starcraft” and associated tournaments.

Kinetics expands on the idea of views being relative to the society in question, and Asian video gaming culture.

“That's an interesting thing because I think it depends on the culture you live in. At least in American society, I find that it's pretty looked down upon, you [inaudible], a lot of people I meet when I say I'm a gamer, I'm like a stereotypical, I live in my mother's basement. I don't go outside and socialize or don't have a life outside of games. I'm pretty sure if you go into, Korea has a huge PC gaming industry and even Japan, you see the commercials using video game characters and that's usually not even thought of in America. Since I'm technically American over here, it's usually looked down upon.”

Kinetics mentions how in places like Korea and Japan video gaming is much more acceptable, with video game characters being used as spokespeople for some advertisements. She also mirrors the idea of gaming being a waste of time, going on to talk about what a stereotypical gamer looks like as well, mentioning the idea that gamers are social failures with no social life outside of video gaming.

When asked specifically about what they thought a stereotypical gamer looked like, or how society perceives gamers, many participants had similar answers. The consensus was that the stereotypical gamers is a guy, a social failure of sorts, living in their parents' basement, has poor hygiene, and is overweight. This image matches the image of a gamer that shows such as South Park have used to satirize gaming and the stereotypical gamer. When asked, Z responded

concisely that stereotypical gamers were “Nerdy losers who live in their parent's basements.”

Others mirrored this view, with Angela saying:

“When I was younger I guess I would see a typical gamer or I would see this stereotype of gamers as some guy in his basement playing Call of Duty and screaming at his TV. I feel like as soon as I started playing games I detached from that initial stereotype”

Alice agree with her, adding weight as a component:

“I feel like there is a big stigma where they’re either total nerds, where they fit the perfect example of what is, glasses, dorky, scrawny smaller, or 300 something pound dude sitting at home in his mother's basement.”

Julia agrees as well, but adds age:

“I know that there is obviously a stereotype that people associate with gamers. The kind living in your mom's basement, male, in his 30's or something like that, but to me it's anyone.”

Nova goes in to more detail, adding less savory details:

“A stereotypical gamer, oh God, if we're going to go to the extreme, a chubby guy eating cheetos and crushing down soda while he has a piss bottle right next to him. He's got grubby fingers. He's talking like this or (uses creepy voice), he's just whispering into the mic all the time. He's making a whole bunch of sexual innuendos because he can't get laid.”

Finally, Kinetics expresses a bit of discontent with being a gamer with the stereotype that exists:

“A lot of people I meet when I say I'm a gamer, I'm like a stereotypical, I live in my mother's basement. I don't go outside and socialize or don't have a life outside of games.”

The consistency between the participants in their idea of what the stereotypical gamer looks like is no huge surprise to me. With insults such as “no-life” (a gamer that has no life outside of gaming) and the term “Otaku” (a Japanese term for a person with poor social skills who spends a large amount of time playing video games or on the computer) existing, the idea that a gamer is a hermit isn’t mind-blowing. Here the participants feel that there is a very negative view towards a “gamer”, and most depict a male gamer. It is interesting that the participants’ views of what a gamer stereotypically looks like is dependent on whether they are asked what a stereotypical

gamer looks like versus being asked about female gamer stereotypes. The overweight, socially stunted, slovenly image arises only when tied to the idea of a male gamer.

Related to the stereotype of a gamer is the idea of the softcore/hardcore gamer. This is an idea that is related to the legitimacy of the gamer identity, with some (mostly guys) feeling that only certain games or types of games or only certain types of players are legitimizing for a gamer identity. “Softcore”, or casual, games, such as candy crush on phones, or less competitive games, are not viewed as “real” games and their players as not really gamers. Hardcore games or gamers would be those that are competitive, require more skill or attention, and make up more of one’s spent free-time. Rachel brings up the point that this is a sort of self-policing definition, meant to exclude some from the status of gamer as well as to rob them of their power to define “gamer.

**Me:** Okay. Why don't you call yourself a gamer?

**Rachel:** I don't know because I'm not- I guess cause I'm not as hardcore as some people are. I haven't played super hardcore games. I feel like people would be like, "You're not a true gamer". People are like that. They're elitist. So I'm just like, "I'm just a casual gamer". "I play video games". That's what I say.

Interestingly, Rachel does not identify herself as a gamer, choosing to identify as a “casual” gamer, even though she plays the kinds of games that would be considered more “hardcore” such as Overwatch. This is due to her viewing herself as not being as “hardcore” into the games, or as consumed with playing them. Her feelings are similar to Audree’s earlier mention of the “no true Scots” fallacy, with an elitist group setting the definition of what a “gamer” is, and making it so those they wish to keep from this status are inherently excluded.

When asked about how the kinds of games she plays affects her identity as a gamer Angela talks about being judged based on the kinds of games she played.

“I feel like some people might have opinions about what classifies someone as a gamer or not according to the types of games they play. Before I played Overwatch, I had never really played any type of FPS game and I was only playing Hearthstone or soft games like that I would say, or stuff that was more solo. I would get judgments from friends or people I just know, acquaintances, that would say, ‘Why do you identify as a gamer if you don't really play any games?’ Then they would compare it to someone playing Candy Crush and saying that Candy Crush isn't a game and people playing Candy Crush aren't gamers, which I can understand to a certain extent, but I feel like, it's like they wouldn't let me be part of this elite that would be considered gamers just because I didn't play the games that they thought was appropriate for the term gaming.”

Angela mirrors Rachel's idea of elitism and elitists controlling the gamer identity's definition.

She also mentions the FPS genre specifically when talking about the “hardcore” games that would earn a person “gamer” status. Angela, however, agrees to some degree with the idea that games like Candy Crush do not qualify a person as a gamer. As someone who agrees with this sentiment, and from the participants' responses, I feel that this is due to the idea of what is a “video game”, and what it means to “video game” (as a verb). It appears that the intensity of the game itself, and the person in their playing of the game, are the main criteria used for determining if a game is legitimate for earning gamer status.

The ideas of what it means to be a gamer, and the variables and criteria involved in each, are numerous and complex. I am still unable to pinpoint anything precise or definite as the dividing line between a softcore and hardcore game/gamer, which bothers me immensely. Ideas such as this and the elitism seem to be more “know it when you see it”, making them harder to dismantle. The views and stereotypes towards gamers in general are problematic for those that play video games, but are somewhat beneficial to guys who play video games, as they are negative, but nearly exclusively male in nature.

*Girl Gamer Stereotypes.* More specific than stereotypes of what it is to be a gamer in general, stereotypes exist for girl gamers specifically. These stereotypes are not simple modifications of existing stereotypes, but are almost completely different. As girls are often

viewed as outsiders, or inherently not gamers (no true Scots fallacy), these stereotypes are constructed as completely separate from ideas of a “gamer” in general. This serves not only to marginalize girl gamers, but, even though the stereotype of a gamer is negative, by keeping it separate it keeps the idea of a gamer that is conjured in people’s minds to be one of a guy. The female gamer stereotype is the main and most general of stereotypes of girl gamers, being the idea of what a girl gamer is in general. While initially meant as a question to figure out if “girl gamers” in the title of this study, “Girl Gamers and Toxicity”, was appropriate, participants responded differently from each other and differently than I expected when asked how they felt about the term “girl gamer”. When asked this question, Rachel introduced me to a new term, “e-girl”, which was what she associated with the term “girl gamer”. When I asked her what an e-girl was, she responded:

“Oh no, e-girl is horrible. It's like when people are always like, "Looking for an e-girl to boost", stuff like that and e-girl like a girl that pimps out being a girl. She's acts flirty and usually sends nudes or revealing pictures and all that to get attention online. It's a dis.”

An “e-girl” is the stereotype of a girl gamer who is playing games to get attention. With the advent of “streaming”, or broadcasting the game one is playing for others to watch, many streamers have included a webcam feed of themselves sitting at their desk as they play. Some girl or woman streamers have featured this feed more prominently, with some in more revealing clothing, as Rachel mentions, possibly in an attempt to gain more viewers or attention. This idea of an e-girl is used as a further way to delegitimize the gamer status of girls or women, questioning their motives for even playing.

Roary claims that “e-girl” is now the more common term opposed to “girl gamer”, which was surprising to me, as I heard girl gamer more often than e-girl. I believe that is due to my



sticking more to the video games themselves and not being as into watching streams, where this term may be more prevalent. Roary defines an e-girl as:

“Primarily E-girl is what I hear as opposed to girl gamer and it's not good. It's essentially like an online whore or really is the way they're perceived. Just a girl that tries to get a lot of attention from guys online whether they're good at playing or not.”

Roary likens an e-girl to a whore, similar to Rachel comparing them to being pimped out, in the way they are perceived. This idea that they are selling themselves as an image or using their body profit in the online world is central to the idea of an e-girl, where as their ability to play video games is irrelevant.

Ophelia’s answer supports the idea that the stereotype of a girl gamer incorporates a lack of skill or knowledge of video gaming.

“I feel they kind of put me into this selection or this grouping of your stereotypical, really hot girl with freaking big boobs hanging out. Oh, my god, with her headphones over her hair instead of over her ears. I don't know. I'm not a fan of it because that's not what it's supposed to be. It's not how it should be. I just don't like it.”

Ophelia also talks about attractiveness and revealing clothing as part of the stereotype, but she goes on to talk about peripherals, such as headphones, not being used correctly by the girl gamer, either out of ignorance or to avoid messing up the appearance of their hair.

Kinetics offers a different view of the girl gamer stereotype. Rather than focusing on e-girl type stereotypes, she talks more about stereotypes that exist within the games for girls who play them.

“The idea that most women are support in a lot of other older games, they are support, they usually are there to help the main character and while that's cool and all they usually like help them and they are like, "Yes, you do it" instead of like actively helping and I get, I wrote a whole paper on that, dude. It was a passion project.”

Kinetics mentions the stereotype that women characters comprise the support, or healer role, rather than as being the main character. Here she is referencing the stereotypical roles women characters have in the games themselves, talking about older video games where there was more of a problem with women only filling certain roles.

Alice takes this stereotype of girls only being supports or healers and applies it to the girls playing the games.

“It is extremely irritating but it's so accurate. 85% to 90% of the female gamer that I meet online are support players or are lower ranked, very rarely would I meet a high ranking female player. I'm the definition of the stereotype. I'm a girl gamer who plays Mercy, which is the most stereotypical, who mains and basically one tricks Mercy, which the definition of stereotypical girl gamer and Overwatch. It's very annoying because, as soon as they hear my voice, they are like, "Oh, so you're a Mercy main, oh she is, haha look at that." I can't really be mad because it's kind of true, it's kind of accurate.”

Alice finds it frustrating that the stereotype exists, but at the same time feels that it is true, fitting the stereotype by being a Mercy main. She also talks about the absence of girl gamers in higher ranked competitive play, with most of them being supports. This would serve to reinforce the stereotype of gamers as being guys, girl gamers being lower skill, and girl gamers being supports for anyone playing at her skill rank.

Angela fleshes out the idea of lower skill and the girl gamer stereotype, saying:

“They were saying that of course, I wasn't going to be skilled because I'm a woman. When I told them my rank, they didn't believe me. They said I was probably boosted or whatever. No, they didn't say I was boosted but they said, ‘I guess you play support?’ Like, ‘Yes, I do but that's not the point.’ I felt mad because I'm like, ‘Yes, I do but what do you mean I guess you play support?’ You don't have to assume that I play support only because I'm a woman. I wished I'd played DPS just to prove them wrong but at the same time, why would I force myself to play something I don't enjoy just to prove some people wrong?”

Angela is also frustrated with the stereotype, while also fitting it. She is torn between playing the role she enjoys that supports the stereotype, the support role, and playing a role she doesn't enjoy

as much that breaks the stereotype to prove people wrong. Angela is also ranked higher than average, but experiences doubts about her having gotten there on her own, because she is a woman and must be lower skilled according to the stereotype. Accepting that she got there on her own would not only be threatening to the stereotype of what it is to be a “gamer”, but also would be emasculating to guy gamers, as they are supposed to be better since they are male and have built video game skill into their identity as guys.

One of the more interesting themes to pop up was when a participant does not get along with other girls. I expected more of a feminine solidarity stance, but it was naïve of me to expect “girl gamers” and girls or women online to be such a homogenous group. While Angela does espouse more feminist and female solidarity ideas, when asked if she was more open to being friends with people of her own gender, she replied:

“I typically tend to get along more easily with men than women. I think that's just me. Only because it can sometimes be hard to get along with girls. I can't really explain why I feel like sometimes I guess myself, I stereotype other women by saying that they bring a lot of drama and stuff. I just don't want any of that. Even though I know this is really an anti-feminist way of thinking, I feel like I should probably give them more of a chance but I sometimes don't bother. Though like I said, I do watch female streamers more often and I befriend them. I don't really befriend any male streamers. I just don't feel a connection to them as much. That's my online persona. I guess online, I tend to connect more with females I guess because they're the same as me. They enjoy playing games that I won't feel judged by playing video games. That's something in real life that is a reality if you're a female, your other female friends might be like, "You're playing video games? What?" I guess that might be why I tend to get along more with females online than in person.”

Angela feels that there is more stress and drama involved with being friends with girls in video games, also feeling that it is hard to discuss video gaming with real life female friends. The drama that Angela describes is not enough to stop her from identifying more with female gamers than male gamers, however, with her still feeling more connected to other females.

Julia ends up making more friends that are *male*, however, for similar reasons. When asked the same question, she responds:

“Yes. I wouldn't say it's a conscious effort, but I end up making more friends that are male, just because, this is going to sound horrible, but a lot of the females that I run into, whether in-game or out of game, they are the opposite of me. I run into the kind of female that's very stereotypical, the whole drama and over-the-top and overenthusiastic. That's a lot of the kind of person that I run into, and even in game, females can be very, very rude.”

The drama that both Angela and Julia mention is enough to drive Julia away from befriending females, though it is not a conscious effort for her. Julia also connects more with male gamers, opposite of Angela, due to different interests. Alice similarly connects more with male rather than female gamers.

“I want to say no, because, I don't really run into that many female gamers. I usually don't like other female gamers. I understand why there's a stigma with girls because, the high pitch voice feels like you're playing with a kid and it just feels immature. I have been that person that doesn't like a girl just because of her voice. I try not to be too toxic. I've tried to be friends with a few girls online, but it just usually doesn't work out because, I have a very guyish kind of humor, very offensive and a very insulting kind. The dark humor kind and not a lot of girls can identify with that or can relate to that.”

Alice blames some of the dislike for playing with girl gamers on their higher pitched voice, mentioning this makes it feel like playing with younger gamers, something that is disliked by many gamers. While attempting to get along with girls, Alice feels that her personality makes it harder to develop friendships with girls. Interestingly, when talking about this incompatibility, Alice blames a “guyish” sense of humor, claiming it is more offensive and insulting, which implies that she feels the nature of “guys” is somewhat toxic.

Some participants also expressed being viewed as fitting bitchy stereotype, with guys reacting harshly to participants' reasonable responses to their actions. Ophelia, who is in a

relationship, expresses being viewed as “bitchy” when trying to defuse a situation where a guy is flirting with her.

“Then this guy, he messages me and he's like, ‘I'm not trying to’ I know he's trying to, I don't want to say get in my pants because we're in completely different countries but, he was trying to creep and I didn't want to, I wanted to say, ‘Hey, I have a boyfriend. Let's get that out in the open,’ but I also didn't want to be the girl, who's like, ‘I'm stuck up and I got a boyfriend,’ don't talk to me kind of attitude, that other stereotype that girls have, ‘That girl's a bitch.’ This dude was literally creeping. He was saying stuff like, ‘Let me sing to you. I'll sing for you,’ and I was just like, ‘You got to stop now please’ My friends and I had a good laugh.”

Sadly, the stereotypical joke of girls immediately responding with “I have a boyfriend” when a guy talks to her serves to disarm girls who wish to be left alone, leaving them with few options to escape such an encounter. Ophelia feels that in this situation, even though she has a boyfriend, feels uncomfortable, and does not want to be flirted with, she can't mention being in a relationship without being viewed as bitchy.

Rachel states that there is a fine line between not sounding bitchy and not coming off as a “slut” or being open to advances.

“I think a lot of girls struggle with not coming off as that psycho girl, like that stereotype that's like the feminazi. Do you know what I mean? Because you still want to seem cool and chill and like, ‘I can hang with the guys.’ But you also don't want to come across as, ‘I'm a fucking slut, and I will do whatever you want to make you happy.’ It sounds like not a fine line, but it's a fine line sometimes. It's a hard balance.”

Rachel mentions the stereotype of the “feminazi”, a stereotype popular among guys referring to a feminist who is angry about some issue. This term is used to delegitimize women's concerns and to make them out to be irrational and unreasonably angry when they are upset about an issue. Similar to the problem with the “I have a boyfriend” stereotype, this serves to remove a tool for addressing things that make girls and women uncomfortable in online spaces. Rachel portrays getting along in video games as a struggle to fend off unwanted attention and behavior, while still being liked by those she plays with.

Girl gamer stereotypes exist to make it harder for them to find acceptance in the gaming environment as well as to delegitimize their status as gamers. Those that do manage to attain a gamer identity that is perceived as legitimate often do so through adopting some of the behavior or traits of the guys playing video games. This allows them to be seen as “gamers” and as belonging in the gaming environment, but also serves to reinforce the masculine stereotypes surrounding the gamer identity, both benefiting and hampering them. Unfortunately, many of the stereotypes and unwanted behaviors present in the gaming environment for girls or women are built in such a way that fighting them is taken as evidence that the stereotype is true or as fuel for those behaviors.

*Conclusion.* Taken with the nature of some stereotypes and statuses having no definite criteria, the problems for girls or women in the gaming environment are very hard to combat. Ideas of what it is to be a gamer are self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing. Built off of a logical fallacy, and with rational and reasonable complaints being twisted into evidence of girls’ and women’s outsider status, forming a rational plan to change the idea of what it is to be a gamer is almost counterproductive. Irrationality is the nature of the stereotypes and ideas of video gaming and the gamer identity that police the gaming environment.

### *Toxicity*

Hostility and harassment are a big problem in online video games currently. With the ability to talk to, follow, and gang up on people anonymously and with little threat of punishment there is little reason for someone who wants to be toxic not to be toxic. The same online disinhibition and anonymity that allows people to recreate themselves anyway they wish to ends up allowing people to express their most negative behaviors and traits, perhaps encouraging or

amplifying them. While games such as Overwatch can be a great way to find and interact with new friends and experience teamwork, they are also a hotbed of toxicity.

*What is Toxicity?* To the uninitiated, toxicity may not have a clear meaning or conjure up a specific image in the way it does for those who play video games such as Overwatch. To the participants in this study, however, toxicity meant something specific, it was an immediately recognized and understood term. This section discusses what toxicity means to the participants and what their experiences of toxicity are like.

While there was not a precise and all-encompassing definition established, participants' definition of toxicity was fairly similar, though there were some differences between participants in what was considered toxic. Audree concisely sums up what "toxicity" means to her saying, "Toxicity is someone taking their negative feelings and trying to make others around them feel negative." Here Audree attributes a toxic person's toxic behavior to their negativity, with them wishing to spread those negative feelings to others. Toxicity to Audree is people who feel negative wanting to make others feel bad, and whatever actions they take with that intention is toxicity. Roary, on the other hand, does not have any intentionality or reasoning requirement for toxicity. Her definition is also concise with her saying, "That same stuff. People being huge jerks for no reason. Just being really obtuse." Roary views toxicity also as negative behavior, but views it as without reason. While Audree's definition is good, Roary's definition captures something it does not, toxicity can sometimes be "just because", a person may be toxic without negative feelings, "doing it for the lulz" or just for kicks, taking pleasure just from annoying or angering others. While Audree's definition could be interpreted in a way that encompasses this, interpreting "doing it for the lulz" as negative feelings, these two quotes taken this way represent

an important difference in opinion on what toxicity is. Some felt that it is upset people trying to upset others, while some defined it as just people trying to upset others.

Kinetics offered a more in depth definition, providing examples that are helpful to understand what toxicity would look like in a video game:

“Usually a negative attitude towards others. It can be anything as something as bad as calling your, like flaming, like why are you losing on your teammates? Calling your teammates rude things, calling the enemy rude things. I had a game today where our team wasn't doing that well and I messed up one of my ultimates and someone called me trash. I was like, ‘That's toxic, don't do that’ It usually is being negative towards others, I feel.”

She brings up an important point that some might not think of, toxicity doesn't have to be aimed at the opposing team, it is often aimed at teammates. Kinetics defines toxicity broadly, as a negative attitude towards others. Her examples, however, give insight into a specific aspect of toxicity, frustration. In her examples people are frustrated with losing and lash out by blaming and attacking others. While Overwatch is a teamwork-based game, considering how identities and self-worth can be constructed off of self-perception of gaming skill, it is clear why one would attack others, rather than accept any blame.

Angela offers an example of general toxicity from her own perspective. When asked if *she* had ever been toxic, she said she had, saying:

“I was even once silenced for being reported too much for toxicity. When that happened I took a hard look on myself and said, ‘You know this has to stop.’ I'd be lying if I said I totally stopped. I'm still toxic from time to time, but I'm trying to control it. When it happens, I try not to attack the person, because that's what hurts really.”

This brings up another interesting point, while many people dislike toxicity, many are toxic themselves. The nature of the competitive online video gaming environment, what is at stake in some situations, and the inability to read the intentions of others due to video games not being face to face make this hard to avoid for even the nicest people. Angela herself has been silenced,



or banned from using voice or text chat for a period of time, for being too toxic. She admits this didn't totally stop her toxicity, though it did reduce it. The realization that she was being so toxic that she was getting reported and punished was hard for her, with her modifying her behavior so that if she is toxic she does not personally attack the person. Angela's experience here is especially interesting as she was the only person interviewed who mentioned having action taken against them for being toxic, being able to provide a first person perspective on what being toxic is like, and how the moderation in-game affects toxic players. Though, it should also be noted, that Angela is different than the average player, caring more about improving the gaming community and environment, so she is not an exemplar of a toxic person.

Angela also presents another interesting form of toxicity related to computer hardware:

"... Then she said, 'By the way what type of graphics card do you have?' or something more specific than this about my computer and I personally don't have any knowledge when it comes to the inside of a computer or even what's going on that more like IT related. I don't have a lot of interest when it comes to the computer in general, I'm interested in the games and I feel like there are a lot of men as well that don't know a lot about computers but still enjoy playing games. As soon as I told that person I don't know they immediately laughed at me and brushed me off saying, 'You can't claim you're a gamer girl if you don't even know what's in your computer.' Then I said, 'How does that matter to you, what I identify myself as?' Then she said that it was people like me that made other gamer girls look bad and she was talking about herself and I felt sorry for her because I'm like, 'We're so few girls online why do you feel the need to tear down other girls? Only because you have the feeling that they're tearing down by not knowing enough about computers?' It's like again, trying to prove that there is an elite of gamers out there and there's an elite of gamer girls, which isn't true."

Her attacker is interesting, in that she is also a girl, and because she reinforces the stereotype she wants to break by using it to attack and try to delegitimize Angela's identity. By saying that girls like Angela are making gamer girls look bad, she is trying to draw attention to Angela's supposed illegitimate gamer status and fitting of a stereotype, as well as distancing herself from Angela. While she uses the term "gamer girl" instead of just "gamer" she is still alluding to her similarity to gamers and dissimilarity to girl gamers, essentially saying "I'm not like other girls".

Roary has a similar incident, though she was on the giving end:

“There's two more recent ones that come to mind. I don't fully remember what the first one was that the guy had said. It was something about how the character was getting chosen so quickly so someone had mentioned getting an SSD drive as opposed to his hard drive and the kid had no idea what an SSD drive was or what it had to do with computers or anything like that. Pretty much the entire match, everyone in there from both his team and my team were all going off on him about how he could have a computer and not know what any of the parts were or what they meant. Pretty much we all just really let that poor kid have it.”

While this attack wasn't directed at the person's identity, knowledge of computers was still used to initiate toxicity. Here merely having a computer is considered enough to require understanding the parts that are in it, though here the person is being attacked for not understanding basic computer parts, rather than specific parts' specs.

These definitions and examples give a basic understanding of what is meant by “toxicity” in the gaming environment, but there are many other ways that toxicity can manifest. Toxicity for girl gamers includes the general toxicity that everyone experiences, but also more targeted attacks. These attacks are often explicitly aimed at them, focusing on their gender or sex. Toxicity can also be more subtle, such as language or behavior that could make a girl gamer uncomfortable or feel unwelcome, but allows the perpetrator plausible deniability.

*To be a Girl on the Internet.* Added to the general toxicity that people who play video games often experience, girl gamers experience additional toxicity directed at them because of gender. Not only are girls not encouraged to participate in many online activities, or computer activities in general, but in places like the gaming environment they are often discouraged from participating and even attacked for participation. The lack of girls in certain video games is more likely due to socialization into different desires and behaviors combined with the encouragement/discouragement for participation.

Along with this more targeted hostility is the more specific stereotypical notion of girl gamers. This stereotype may be actually believed by some, but is often used as an insult, regardless of its truth. Angela has a negative experience of this stereotype in a real life situation. While buying some gaming equipment with her boyfriend, who is carrying the items, a guy assumes he is the gamer and asks why his equipment is girly, finding out it was hers, initiating the following:

“They were immediately pretty condescending saying, ‘What type of games do you play?’ When I said Overwatch, they were surprised like they were expecting me to say Sims. As soon as I said that, they looked surprised but then they said, ‘What rank are you, are you silver?’ They were saying that of course, I wasn't going to be skilled because I'm a woman. When I told them my rank, they didn't believe me. They said I was probably boosted or whatever. No, they didn't say I was boosted but they said, ‘I guess you play support?’ Like, ‘Yes, I do but that's not the point.’ I felt mad because I'm like, ‘Yes, I do but what do you mean I guess you play support?’ You don't have to assume that I play support only because I'm a woman.”

The interaction starts off with the stranger trying to establish a lack of legitimacy in her status as a gamer by assuming she will play a game considered “softcore”. When that fails he next tries to attack her based on skill, asking if she is silver (a very low rank). When that also fails, as she is higher ranked than average, instead of accepting that a girl can be a gamer and not a *girl gamer*, he attacks her by saying she must play support, appealing to the female gamer stereotype to group her separately from “real” gamers.

When asked about how they felt about the term “girl gamer” Nova talks about how female gamers stereotypes are insulting.

“I feel as though it's very degrading because it comes with a lot of stereotypes. It also comes with a specific image that a lot of women don't fit. Some of those stereotypes are like female twitch streamers with big boobs and comms playing and doing ASMRs. That's a girl playing a game and doing her job, yes, but she's not a ‘girl gamer’ it stoops us down to a title. It's like we're nothing more than that title. We're actual people.”

Nova feels that the female gamer stereotype objectifies women and that the term “girl gamer” is reducing and degrading. Nova looks at the usage of the term “girl gamer” and making women and girls who play video games viewed less as people, and more as a thing. It is interesting that Nova includes streamers and the idea of the “image” of a person, as this is not something that always exists outside of people’s imaginings in the gaming environment, since most of the time they cannot see you in real life. With streamers, their bodies can be viewed, if they are using a webcam as part of their stream. This allows them to sexualize themselves in ways normally not possible, such as the “big boobs” stereotype Nova mentions.

Kinetics both addresses those who believe the stereotypes and attacks the truth value of these stereotypes when asked how she feels about girl gamer stereotypes.

“Overall, I usually don't like it because most of the time I'll, first of all, not only girls I know play Support. Then the other thing is it's usually they think I'm doing it for attention. I'm doing it to get guys to like me. Like, ‘We have something in common, now I'll suck your dick.’ [laughs] That's not exactly how it works. I'm not doing it for attention, I'm doing it to have fun.”

Kinetics brings up the point that not all the people who play support that she knows are girls.

While it doesn’t follow that not all girls play support, with support being one of three possible roles, and making up a third of many team compositions, it is not surprising that a large amount of support players exist, quite a few of which would be girls. She also discusses the idea that girls are just playing video games for attention, similar to the idea of the e-girl, and that there is a weird expectation of sexual or affectionate interactions. This takes the idea of stereotypical sexualization even further, where some expect girl gamers to *act out* the sexualization in some form.

Related to the idea that girls are just playing to get guys to like them, girls’ friendliness being viewed as flirting, is also common. Rachel attributes this misinterpretation as possibly

being due to gamers not knowing how to or having much experience with interacting with girls.

Below she expands on that idea:

**Me:** You mentioned that you think that maybe a lot of the gamers don't really know how to interact with girls. Do you think maybe that since you're so friendly, they're not reading that right?

**Rachel:** Yes, totally, completely. Some of my guy friends have told me, they're like, 'You're too friendly. Guys are going to think that...' There's a meme that one of my friends had made. They're like, 'Can't tell if she's flirting with me or if she's just being friendly.' They're like, 'This is you because you are so...' I go out of my way to be super friendly and open and honest and make everyone feel welcome to play with me. I think a lot of times, people think I'm coming onto them. That's why it's hard to set boundaries. I'm working on it.

The meme about not being able to tell friendliness and flirting apart sums up this mistake perfectly. Rachel, through trying to be more positive, ends up making it harder for herself to establish limits to her gaming relationships, and instead of blaming the guys for their assumption tries to work on her ability to balance these things.

Audree has a more extreme experience of this mistake, with a friend professing love for her. When asked if she was more willing to be friends with people of her own gender, she says she is not more open to women, but more closed off to men.

"I wouldn't say more open, I would say I'm slightly more closed off towards to men because there's, I have a lot of bad experiences of people with some men, not all men hashtag. I had a guy tell me that he was in love with me. I've had male friends that I enjoyed their company, and then I found out that they were mad at me because I didn't- I'm not reciprocating enough affection because, frankly, I don't think of them with the type of affection they want me to think of, and then you end up losing a friend."

Male friends of Audree have actually gotten angry that she did not share their feelings, leading to the end of their friendship. Here Audree's male friends are not only mistaking friendliness for flirtation, but feel their feelings of affection deserve to be reciprocated.

More surprising than guy gamers not understanding how to interact well with girls was when a participant did not get along with other girls in the gaming environment. I had expected that there would be more of the solidarity that Angela wishes for. Considering that the way gender is constructed, with women set against each other in competition emphasizing the femininity, rather than falling into a place due to a hierarchical valuation of masculinities, I should not have been surprised, however (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Julia is similarly confused by this, not avoiding, but also not seeking out girl-friendly spaces online.

**Me:** Do you feel like you have to find a certain place online or seek out girl-friendly spaces?

**Julia:** No, I wouldn't say so, just because a lot of my run-ins with females online aren't particularly friendly...

...It also baffled me that I've had run-ins with females before, and one where one of them intentionally wanted to lose the game because I was trying so hard. Yes, go figure that one out, but she was calling me names. She admitted to intentionally trying and wanting to lose the game. I was like, 'That's crazy.' It baffles me that some people are just actually like that and that you could make, I understand guys, it's a horrible thing, but they make me feel unwelcome more than anyone, but I understand it less when it's a girl because we're the same gender and we play the same kind of heroes and it's like, that's kind of horrible to make somebody else that is the same gender and that plays the same characters to make them feel like you've probably felt a million times in the past.

While others mentioned “weirdness” or incompatibility as reasons, Julia’s quote is more interesting due to her playing ranked matches, where losses are taken more seriously. Julia feels that she understands guys more, while also feeling they are more toxic towards her. Julia is willing to put up with harsher hostility from some guys to avoid more frequent hostility from most girls she interacts with.

This feeling of being unwelcome was common, with other participants talking about times people tried to make them feel like girls do not belong in the gaming environment. When

asked if anyone had tried to make her feel like she didn't belong in video gaming Audree responds:

“People have tried. Obviously I've had people I don't know, just random people that you happen to get grouped up with for one game. So I'm talking off in comments, I don't remember the person who said it and I don't remember exactly what they said, but I know I've been given, I know it's been implied before that I'm just there for the attention or I'm there to invade their space and break up their friendships and shit like that. That I'm not welcome because girls are just a bunch of drama, but the thing is that I tend to go out of my way to find spaces where people like that don't exist. So I don't experience it very often except from people I don't know who I don't really, Mentally, anytime someone tries to trash-talk in game, I picture a 14-year-old boy with acne, so it's hard for me to get upset, and I just said it doesn't get to me enough for me to say that I've ever actually been made to feel unwelcome.”

Audree does not take attempts to make her feel unwelcome seriously, due to her viewing the making of the attempt as delegitimizing for her attacker. She also makes an effort to avoid places and people who would make her feel unwelcome. Rachel, however, feels girls are less welcome than guys in general in video games, though there are places where she doesn't feel unwelcome.

“As a general whole, no. I don't think girls are as welcomed in the gaming community as guys are, but in certain games, yes. I feel, like WoW. It's not weird to be a girl on WoW. It's Overwatch is more so weird to be a girl or people are like, ‘Oh my god. A girl.’ You know I mean? It's different. I feel like games that take more skill like first-person shooter games, they are less friendly towards girls, but games like WoW and ARK where you can also be like into RPing. You don't necessarily have to be hardcore. There's a much more casual element to it, then girls are much more welcome. Does that make sense?”

Rachel attributes the more welcoming nature of some communities to their being less hardcore. This makes sense when considering the relationship of gender and the relationship of the hardcore/softcore distinction to the legitimacy of one's “gamer” status. She also discusses the level of skill as being related to how welcome one is in a gaming environment, with girls being less welcome because of this. This is due to the idea that girls suck in the gaming environment.

When asked if anyone had ever been toxic to her specifically for being a girl Z says,

“Again, it just goes back to the consistent trash-talking of ‘this is why we're losing, it's because you're female. We have a girl on our team’”. Z talks of this kind of toxicity as being common, the go-to insult in the gaming environment. Supporting the idea that this kind of toxicity is common, Alice needs think no farther back than the same day I interviewed her for an example.

“For the most part, it's very normal. Not a lot of people really care. They treat me pretty okay. But, every once in a while I get a very toxic group, who'll just keep talking and just keep treating me very badly because I'm a girl. If I mess up, they'll rip on me because I'm a girl. Today, for instance, there was these three men and I was trying my best as the healer but they were feeding and they just kept blaming me. I feel like for the most part, it's okay, the gender thing. At the same time, it's not something I exactly want to shout out in every game.”

Even though Alice is a highly ranked and highly skilled support player, she is blamed for the team's poor performance by the three men who are playing poorly in her match. The commonness of “girls suck” toxicity is enough to make Alice not broadcast her gender in any way, though she does not go out of her way to hide it (it should be noted her name is gender neutral in-game).

In Roary's experience, the realization that she is a girl is enough to make people leave matches.

“... sometimes people will hear you're a girl and all of a sudden they'll freak out. It's like, ‘Okay, I'm gonna leave right now.’ Other times people get aggressive because they'll blame the fact that they're losing on you for being a girl and you're like, ‘Alright I'm doing my job though’, but you know, gold medals don't mean anything anymore.”

Even though Roary is getting gold medals, which are more often than not an indicator of good performance, she is blamed for the team's poor performance. Angela is attacked before any actual gameplay has occurred for picking a character that is out of comp (does not synergize with the other characters on the team). Interestingly, this happened during a match I was playing in and is how I met Angela.



“I feel like what happened to me that person basically I decided I wanted to play support because that's the role I was feeling more comfortable with and there was already two supports and since I wasn't supposed to pick support and I still did. Mind you this was in quickplay not in competitive player of any kind. I was asked nicely but not really nicely, I was kind of ordered nicely to change hero and I said, ‘It's not your place to tell me what to play’ and it's really not. I said, ‘That's what I'm going to play, I'm sorry.’ They didn't really accept that answer, so they immediately attacked me on my gender and they started telling me that I was garbage the game had just started and nothing had happened yet.”

While he was almost reasonable at first, politely ordering Angela to switch, immediately after she refused he attacks her on the basis of her gender, saying she was garbage, before the match had actually started. While you could make the argument that out of comp picks invite conflict, he attributes her out of comp pick to her being less skilled in team composition due to being a girl, rather than politely asking one of the other healers to switch. While irrelevant to the quote, I would like to note that I was the first person to pick support, and was mildly annoyed, but about to swap when I saw a third support locked in. The guy's toxicity caused me to change my mind, as I wasn't willing to try hard or play in ways I didn't want to in order to aide his chances of winning, even though they were also my chances.

General sex or gender based toxicity was a very common theme, appearing multiple times within each interview. This is no shock as girls' experiences of toxicity is central to this study, though some themes developed in interesting ways from questions exploring participants' experiences. One instance of this kind of toxicity I was initially very surprised to hear about was how toxic people were at higher skill rankings, where I would think the necessity for very high levels of coordination and effective communication would make it necessary for toxicity to be reduced. When asked about this Julia responded, “Yes. Sometimes it's actually worse because I Main Mercy which people consider to be the 'easiest character’”. Even though at the high levels where Julia plays even an “easy” character would require a great deal of other skills to play, she claims that it is worse than at a lower skill rank. Julia expresses disgust when asked how she

feels the community treats gender, “By the community, it's pretty disappointing. Obviously, it's a video game and there's going to be toxic people everywhere. It's almost disgusting how much emphasis some of the players will put on what your gender is”.

Nova also felt disgusted by the way gender is treated in the gaming environment, when asked if gender plays a role in their identification as a gamer, she responds,

“I feel as though it depends on who you end up talking to on the other side, you know what I mean? A lot of people I have met, and thank God for these people, they haven't really cared. They just talk to me as though I'm just another human being in the room next to them. There are those people that make it like a serious thing. Then there's other people that, they don't take it as a serious thing, but they make jokes out of it. Then they just make a YouTube video about just harassing this gamer girl. It's disgusting really. I wish it didn't play a huge factor in the gaming industry because what does it matter what your gender is if you play the game, just play the game.”

While Nova has encountered people who don't care about what their gender or sex may be, they mention how some people take it farther, even going as far as making videos about harassing girls. If the person producing this content has enough viewers, this could have substantial socializing effects on the gaming community. Angela compares gender to a weapon in how easy it is to use for attacking people in the gaming environment.

“Because of my username and as soon as I do something that makes them mad or that contradicts what they asked me to, or if I don't listen to what they asked me, they will immediately attack me and try to be toxic towards me, and the means that they use to be toxic towards me is often my gender. First thing that they come up with is the gender because it's a easy thing to use. It's like using someone's sexuality, let's say someone would be openly gay. It's easy for someone that's toxic to use that as a weapon against that person. I feel like in Overwatch people use gender as a weapon to try and hurt someone.”

Angela's in-game name is feminine, though it could go unnoticed or be interpreted in another way, making it very hard for her to avoid these kinds of attacks. She also alludes to homophobic slurs being used, which is very common in masculine environments such as this (Pascoe 2012).

Both homophobic and gender/sex based toxicity are used because they are easy, but also because

they help to reinforce the power dynamic between guys and everyone else, as well as reinforcing the association between video games and masculinity through reinforcing the association between heteronormative masculinity and prowess in competitions.

Sex or gender toxicity can be much more extreme or shocking, however, with the blanket of safety the online world's anonymity provides exposing the worst in people (supposedly they don't get worse than this). Audree provides one of the more extreme examples of this kind of toxicity given by a participant when asked if people were ever toxic to her because of her gender.

“Absolutely. If they judged me to be playing poorly, it was because I was a girl. I get people who were just being straight up overly sexualized, creepy. I would say one of the ones that sticks out the most is someone who was quite nice at first, polite, and we were on the same team and, no, we were playing on opposite teams and it was just a really enjoyable match, there wasn't being killed by, if he killed me it didn't bother me because there was like, ‘Hey, that was a good play.’ It was like that type of appreciation, like a mutual respect. So he sent me a friend request, and I usually don't take friend requests, but I took his and he was pretty cool for like a week, and then he found out that I would never be interested in dating him and I got a lot of toxicity from that guy. Objectively, what he was saying was vile. He was, rape threats, not like a rape threat like, ‘I'm going to come rape you’ but like, ‘I hope you get raped’ type thing, that whores can be raped because once you have slept with so many men it's unfair not to sleep with other men, you're being discriminatory, like a bunch of crazy, red pill bullshit.”

Audree does mention gender toxicity based on her poor performance, and instances of people being sexual or creepy, but then tells a story of a specific encounter she had. In this encounter the idea that reciprocation for affection or feelings is not only wanted, but deserved returns, though in a much more toxic form. The attacker is not only angry that she is not interested in dating him, but wishes her considerable harm. He goes on to say that she is obligated to sleep with him, because she has slept with others and it is unfair to him that he is being left out. Audree calls this “crazy, red pill bullshit”, referring to the men's rights movement or meninism, a sexist far-right movement and ideology where men target women for attack for their perceived injustices against men. This includes ideas such as that men are disadvantaged by systems designed to reduce

women's disadvantage, that men have a harder time in life than women, and generally blaming women for the social inequalities that gender itself, as a system, creates, which they, as men, are responsible for creating and continue to reinforce.

Another theme that was common was sexual toxicity, toxicity that was of a directly sexual nature. I choose to call this code "sexual toxicity" instead of "sexual harassment" for a few reasons. Sexual harassment is a much broader term that many other codes would fall under, causing trouble for coding. I also wanted to capture with this code only the directly sexual toxicity. In the gaming environment there is a considerable amount of sexual harassment of varying types, but there is a specific type of sexual harassment that is common. This would be considered more extreme sexual harassment, such as propositioning someone for sex or exhibitionism. Roary encounters this kind of toxicity frequently.

"Guys'll just start making things weird, hitting on you, asking for nudes and stuff. There was one guy I had played with, and he kept trying to get my Snapchat, and I was like, 'No I don't want to give that to you. I don't fricking know who you are dude.' He would say things like, 'Oh you'll regret it, I'm really hot. You're making a mistake.' I'm like, 'Why do I care?'"

It is not a common occurrence for strangers to come up to you on the street and ask you for nude pictures of yourself, or for personal contact information, simply because you are female, but Roary demonstrates that this is almost everyday life in the gaming environment.

When asked if she had witnessed others being sexually harassed, Z recalls a girl "being berated to suck the guy's dick" so he would "carry" her (play well enough that you make up for someone else's poor performance), then offering to teach her how to play better instead. While you would might hope the response to such behavior would be negative, with at least some people standing up for the girl, that doesn't always happen. Alice remarks that this kind of behavior is seen as expected for girls, though she said it happens to her less often than other girls.

“It's more like, they would realize I was a girl and they would just make me feel very uncomfortable with, you know, advances or mocking or basically, just overall harassment. You're a girl playing video games, what did you expect? Mostly, that kind of thing, but not too often.”

Immediately making advances on or sexually harassing a girl was not viewed as acceptable by any of the participants, but Rachel offered an explanation for why this kind of behavior might be occurring.

“I woke up this morning to an unsolicited dick pic. For sure. From someone I met on Overwatch. Yes. You get that just because I think that video games, a lot of people that play video games have some sort of social anxiety. Not everyone, of course, but a lot of people do. A lot of them don't really interact with girls. A lot of them will have anxiety about talking to girls. When they do, they come on too heavy. Do you know what I mean?”

Rachel feels that a lack of social skills or social anxiety may be to blame, at least for their unwanted advances. A lack of experience flirting, or even interacting at all, with girls could be to blame for the far too direct sexual advances and behaviors of some guys online. This however, doesn't explain the more malicious sexual toxicity. This more severe toxicity is more likely due to guys feeling the need to display expected heteronormative masculinity, as well as being used to police the environment to keep out certain groups.

Kinetics also has a real-life experience of sexual toxicity, having met an online friend in the real world.

“There was this awkward moment, I call this the, I don't know if should use their gamer name, but I going to call them Josh. There's this guy named Josh and we've gone to a group. He learned that I don't live that far from him. We've gone through a couple of games for a couple of days, and it was towards my winter break, and he asked, ‘Do you want to meet up?’ I was like, ‘This is so cool. I get to meet up with a friend.’ I said, ‘Yes.’ Then I started realizing when we were talking, he was looking more for a hookup, but I wasn't in for it. I ended up just saying, ‘I'm gay.’ He said, ‘I can change your mind.’ I was not happy with that.”

Here Kinetics ironically misinterprets Josh's flirtation as friendliness. Even after Kinetics has asserted she is gay, thus eliminating any possibility of a hookup, Josh blunders forward with his

flirtation, making Kinetics very uncomfortable. This could be taken as support for Rachel's idea that guys overly blunt and direct advances are due to their lack of experience and understanding of interacting with girls. Audree takes a different approach, feeling it is the women who are inexperienced or unknowledgeable.

“All the time. Maybe not all the time but I definitely see it and it definitely catches my attention. I don't remember every specific incident. It's a recurring theme. Especially when, since it's almost always females who are being sexually harassed, obviously, it's not a female exclusive problem, but it's mostly female and at least on, definitely online, especially. A lot of times the, I'll see or I'll hear guys sexually harassing a female player that she doesn't know how to handle it. She doesn't know how to, she doesn't, I mean I feel weird, assigning her, you know trying to, saying what she's doing, but to me what it looks like she's doing, I guess I can say that. Women are being sexually harassed and in my opinion don't know how to cope with it, so they go along with it, or they don't stand up for themselves and tell the person to stop because it's supposed to happen or they're so used to it happening and it bothers me every time.”

Audree feels that women don't know how to cope with these extreme levels of sexual harassment, if there is even anything effective they could do, or start feeling like it is normal, causing Audree to be upset.

Related to sexual toxicity, creepiness was also a problem for participants. Rather than being overtly sexual or direct, some of the things said to participants were weird or creepy to them, causing them to feel uncomfortable. Often this takes the form of “jokes”, though whether they are joking, or only half joking is rarely clear. When asked how she felt about sexual harassment in video games, Ophelia thankfully hasn't experienced any, but says,

**Ophelia:** I haven't experienced that yet and I really hope I don't. Most of the time that weird, creepy things happen is when my friends are being weird, creepy, but only to be funny because apparently that's a funny thing now.

**Me:** How do you feel about that being a funny thing now?

**Ophelia:** I think it's a little much, but everyone seems to think it's funny and they just laugh at it. Like I said, I was raised sheltered. I don't get most of the dirty jokes that they talk about and they just laugh at my expense when I don't get it.

Ophelia doesn't find the jokes that are made funny, and is made uncomfortable since she doesn't understand many of them. It would be tough to be comfortable in an environment where creepy jokes are being made about you frequently, but the added unsureness of not getting the jokes likely makes this worse for Ophelia. While many who make these kinds of jokes minimize their seriousness, and excuse them, Ophelia shows that their recipients feel differently.

Rachel also has experiences of jokes making her feel uncomfortable. Some of her friends are admittedly toxic or sexist, so this is a common occurrence for her.

“A lot of my friends on Overwatch or a lot of random people I meet on Overwatch, they all have that opinion. I'll joke around sometimes because I joke with my friend Mike because he's so sexist. He's the one that thinks girls should only play support. I'll joke. I'll be like, ‘Yes, I know my place. I was in the kitchen making you sandwiches talking to you as Mercy.’ I joke with him but when other people hear it like someone that's grouped up with us for the first time, they'll be like, ‘That's so hot. A girl that knows her place.’

You would not believe how many times I get that.”

While trying to defuse the situation, or simply play along and be one of the guys, Rachel jokes back with the person making sexist jokes. This causes some guys to react positively (positive from the guy's perspective) saying “that's so hot”, making the sexist idea from the joke into a sexual thing.

Playing competitive online video games can be a very toxic experience on its own. Adding in the component of being a girl in a space that is perceived as masculine and protected by anonymity, and that already toxic experience can become extremely toxic very quickly. The girls interviewed have thankfully been able to deal with the more personal toxicity that was directed at them because of their gender or sex. While these interactions are far more than I would, or could, tolerate, girls have little choice other than to leave or constantly be in a state of being attacked and stressed.

*Boys will be Boys.* The age old expression “boys will be boys” has been used to excuse boys’ terrible behavior in many different situations. It simultaneously excuses their behavior, rather than addressing and correcting it, and also reinforces the idea that it is biological, natural, or somehow inevitable. In the social sciences this is known to be false, but the idea still lives. The internet may be the best example of guys misbehaving in markedly heteronormative masculine and sexist ways. As Audree mentioned, guys’ behavior online reminded her of being socialized as a guy as a teenager.

Guys’ minimization is one of the main mechanisms keeping toxicity from being addressed more broadly, or as a community in the gaming environment. By pretending or, for the truly oblivious, not understanding how a “joke” is sexist and problematic or how it could make someone upset, the behavior is approved and continues. While it may be invisible to guys, this makes the environment palpably hostile to those who aren’t heteronormatively masculine, or are in another minority group of lower social power. Kinetics gives her friends the benefit of the doubt when it comes to minimization, but still feels uncomfortable.

“There’s this one time, I was playing on a smurf and I was playing Zarya. I was focused on calls, we were this three stack. There’s this kid, I swear he literally sounded like he was 14 or younger. He was making go back to the kitchen comments, ‘Why aren’t you playing Mercy?’ and he and his friends were laughing and I couldn’t tell if they were saying that because they were joking or they were really serious about being sexist towards me. I was joking with someone that I was playing with a bit earlier, and you seem like a really chill guy. I didn’t want to say I didn’t want to caught start stuff so I just laughed with them and tried to keep it chill, but I typed out in our group chat, saying this is uncomfortable. I’m not sure how I like this. He’s like, ‘Oh, what’s wrong?’ I was like, they’re making woman comments about me. I’m not sure how I feel about that. He’s like ‘You know, they’re just kidding.’ It was weird because I know he probably sees it as just like a child play. It’s one thing though for like a person to make fun of you for your gameplay or, if you like, I don’t know, if you sound high or something. It’s another one they’re making remarks specifically about my gender, which is something that I cannot change on.”



Kinetics remarks that she isn't sure if the guys are just joking or if they are actually sexist. To her the intention is important to her, though unintentional sexism still makes her uncomfortable. The guys' toxic behavior is protected by the idea of "intention", and is then not addressed or corrected, which in turn allows it to continue and be perpetuated. Even when Kinetics does address this toxicity, the guys make it clear they do not have her back by excusing the behavior, indirectly calling her complaints unreasonable. Kinetics feels more hurt by these jokes due to not being responsible for her gender. Choice and responsibility are important factors for Kinetics when dealing with guys' toxic behavior.

Kinetics goes on to mention other incidents where she was duo-queueing (grouping up for matches in a pair) with a guy.

"I've had that happen a couple of times where I am duo-queueing with a guy. I'm trying to express that a certain situation is making me uncomfortable and they don't understand why. I try to explain, but they sometimes just don't get it. Honestly, they just don't understand why someone telling me to go play Mercy or to go back to the kitchen would make me uncomfortable."

Here Kinetics makes it clear that she truly believes they don't understand how they are hurting the girls in the gaming environment. If they do understand how, they don't understand why the girls *would* feel hurt, which implies they feel girls *should not* feel hurt. This can be seen by her taking the time to explain how it is hurtful to them with them still not getting it. Kinetics is unable to get her point across, but considering how effective she is at communicating, it is hard for me to believe that the guy doesn't understand what she is saying. In these instances, the guys understand what she is saying, but cannot identify with being upset by such things, or refuses to.

Many of the participants said they felt that guys are more toxic than girls. This makes sense, since even if there is no difference between guys and girls in terms of general toxicity, gender based toxicity is almost entirely perpetrated by guys and aimed at girls. Rachel feels that

girls are more empathetic and nurturing, however, and therefore not equal in terms of general toxicity.

“Just people calling each other names, telling them to kill themselves. I always try to stand up for people that are being called out. Even if I think that they're doing a horrible job. We have a Tank that just keeps feeding. They're just doing so bad. Even if they're called out on that, someone's like, ‘Will you stop fucking feeding. Can we fucking switch?’ I'll call them out. I'll be like, ‘Dude. Chill. Chill out. It's a game.’ I try to dump, lower the toxicity, but then a lot of times you get, I think a lot of girls are less toxic than guys. I just think that we just are more nurturing and more empathetic because sometimes you'll get the, then you become the new target of toxicity because you're the girl or trying to calm everyone down and everyone's like, ‘Shut up, bitch.’ I'm like, ‘Okay. Sorry.’”

While trying to make peace among her teammates Rachel is attacked. She blames this on her being a girl, or because she is the one trying to stop the toxicity, though it is more likely the former. While the more nurturing and empathetic traits of girls are socialized, and not inherent, they are relevant here.

Agreeing with Rachel in a way, Audree says that the gaming environment is reflective of the society its community is comprised of.

“Everything that exists in society is going to be reflected in the game, so there's obviously homophobia and transphobia and this racism, and this toxicity is surrounding all that. Really, I'd say the most toxic behavior is around gameplay and I think something should be mentioned about, or at least it's something that should not be forgotten, I should say, that toxicity impacts men too. Men are also subjected to toxicity and I guess, that it hurts men too. So both being perpetrators, but also being victims. Something that I really noticed is that toxicity within online gaming really reflects how teenage boys socialized. I remember that the same type of rules such as unwritten rules the go-to insults, the go-to themes for insults, are very reflective of sports in men, and how males in high school interact. I guess that's just it. I'm sorry I'm rambling.”

She makes an interesting point that the toxicity that stems from men's masculinity is harmful to men as well. Even though they are advantaged by gender, gender hurts or limits them, almost paradoxically. Audree feels that the ways people are raised and socialized shape their behaviors, and then shape the gaming environment, drawing a parallel between men in sports and guys in

video games. She also calls the insults they use “go-to”, getting at the automaticity of masculine toxicity in the gaming environment.

Homophobia and racism are common in the gaming environment, being mentioned by Audree as “go-to” insults. These types of insults are so common Audree’s vision of the stereotypical gamer explicitly includes one, describing him as, “A 16-year old boy playing League of Legends screaming at everyone that they're a faggot.” Audree again mentions her socialization as a male, discussing experiences of toxicity as a male.

“...what I'm trying to get out is that back in the day when I was socialized male, that same toxicity actually impacted me more because I wasn't allowed to, if you have a problem with it, you're a bitch, you're gay or you're whatever. I think that was as damaging as it would be to any girl. I think one of the reasons toxic masculinity has to die is because one of the victims of toxic masculinity is men...”

Having a problem with being called a “bitch” or “gay” in this scenario would serve to prove that you are what they have called you. Not only are guys making the gaming environment toxic for girls, but also for themselves, while at the same time removing any ability for *anyone* to challenge the system they have set up.

While no participants felt that sexism, homophobia, or racism were okay, racism received the strongest response from participants. When asked what changes she would make to Overwatch’s moderation system if she could, Alice says, “It would be a great idea to not be allowed to type slurs because, you are allowed to say certain words that should not be said.”, wishing that racist slurs would be banned or blocked. Angela feels similarly saying, “I feel like there would be definitely levels. Like someone who's getting reported for abuse of chat just because they used slurs. When I say slurs, I'm not talking about the N word, because I feel like

that should be insta-banned.”. Angela takes it further, wishing for people using the “N word” in chat to be instantly banned, and to be able to report people for racism specifically.

While not bothered to the point of leaving Overwatch, participants were in general upset with toxicity in the gaming environment. Most viewed the problems being caused mostly, or entirely, by guys in the gaming environment. Some even went as far as blaming gender or masculinity directly as the source of the problems. With problems being so ingrained in the environment and social institutions, some ended up with bleak outlooks for the gaming environment.

*No Faith in Humanity.* The frequent toxic encounters had an effect on some participants, with some seemingly losing faith that things would, or even could, ever change. Participants often either lacked faith in people’s ability or desire to change, or felt that it was human nature to be toxic in certain circumstances. Many ended up feeling that toxicity is just part of the environment. Angela felt that toxicity could never be completely stopped, with it being in people’s nature.

“I feel like we're never going to be really able to get rid of it completely, people are going to be people. People are going to be mean, it's always going to happen. There are ways to mitigate it and that way is just through a report system. I do feel like the report system could be a bit more harsh on people with multiple offenses. There should also be something that's done a bit more for sexual harassment. I know it's not accepted, as soon as there are reports going in, but I don't think that's something the game can do about it. It's really us the community.”

While she views toxicity as people being people, viewing people as inevitably mean, she also feels that it is up to the people that make up the community to stop toxicity, not the game itself or developers. While wishing for harsher moderation and better reporting, she feels that the social acceptability of toxicity is the main problem.

Nova also feels that it is human nature to be toxic, associating competitive nature with toxicity.

“I think it's just because it's a competitive game. If you have a competitive game, you're bound to have competitive people and if they are not surrounded by competitive people to the same level as themselves, they're going to get toxic to the people that aren't as good as them.”

They feel that the competitive nature of games like Overwatch will naturally lead to toxicity, as people wanting to win and play their best will get angry at those of lower skill or performance.

Taken with the stereotype that girls suck, if this were true, it would explain much of the toxicity towards girls.

Audree viewed the mere ability to communicate with each other as sufficient for toxicity saying, “Overwatch definitely has toxicity. Especially because you can talk to the other team, you can go into just the match chat. I think any game that allows you to trash talk will have toxicity in it.”. Audree feels that the possibility of trash talking guarantees toxicity, even without the ability to talk to the opposing team. Kinetics feels that toxicity is inevitable in an online video game.

“Honestly, I feel like it's something that's really hard to avoid, especially if it's an online platform. Not online platform, but just any online platform game that you're going to come across. There's going to be toxicity. That's not the game's fault. That's a society, community issue. There's really not much you could do about it. There's just nothing you do. You're always going to come across it. In the most non-rude way possible, you have to develop a bit of a thick skin if you want to play these online games because it's going to happen.”

Kinetics also feels that toxicity is the responsibility of the community to address, not being the fault of the video game. She feels, however, that there is not anything that one can do to eliminate it. Kinetics also mentions the idea of developing a thick skin to deal with toxicity online. When asked how the kinds of video games they play affect their identity as a gamer, Nova also mentions having a hard outer shell.

“I think depending on the game that you get into is dependent on how you look at the real world around you, if that makes sense. If you get into really bloody gory games, you get a hard shell. That's what I've noticed about myself, I have a really hard outer shell that I put up there intentionally. I don't normally have a hard outer shell that people have to crack to get to really know me. I'm normally very open and wear my heart on my sleeve. After playing a whole bunch of games, specifically online games, you develop this outer shell because you have to because people say a lot of mean things on the internet and over multiplayer games and if you let that affect you, you're not going to have a good life and you're not going to enjoy gaming. You have to get an outer shell to survive. It sucks, but it's the real world.”

While Nova is very open with their feelings in the real world, they have developed an outer shell when on the internet and in the gaming environment. They feel that not letting toxicity affect you is necessary to enjoy video games, as well as for life in general. Not allowing anything to upset you is a difficult, if not impossible task, however. Kinetics discusses her options for when not letting it get to her is not possible.

“A lot of the times if I'm online and I'm playing Overwatch or just any game really and I'm having a hard time whether someone is, like, talking to me in a way that's sexual harassment, or they're making fun of the fact that I'm a girl, uhm if I'm in competitive I'll either mute them and just till the, game out and then just get off, just get offline. Uhm or I'll get in a Discord and talk with friends. So, I have things to do if I get upset by it. A part of it is I had to develop a thick skin. I have to be able to laugh it off.”

Rather than allowing someone's harassment to affect her performance, Kinetics will mute that person so she can continue to play, or if things are really bad seek the comfort of talking with friends. Like Nova, she feels that developing a thick skin and being able to work through toxicity is important.

Unfortunately, not everyone could, or cared enough to, develop a thick skin, with some choosing instead to leave the environment. Sometimes that means leaving a group of players, while other times it means quitting playing a game entirely. Ophelia attempts to join groups that have female players in them, which makes her feel more comfortable. She feels that there is a decent amount of girls on Overwatch, but doesn't always end up with a group she likes.

“I have been trying to do the find a group thing and trying to be a little more open and extroverted and using my mic and whatever and trying to be like, ask those people on their opinions about my gender or whatever. If they're creepy, I can just leave. Every group that I join seems to have a good dose of male and female in there. I feel a little bit more comfortable if there's another woman in there.”

When faced with a situation she does not like, Ophelia simply leaves the match or group. While not serious, and easy to do, it is still noteworthy that in these cases toxicity is driving her away from what she wanted to do. Going even further, Kinetics states she may leave a video game entirely if there is too much toxicity.

“I will say when I buy a game, I look more at the content like what's going to be in the game, what is it. Staying is based off of the community. I may be still buy a game, but I might not play as long as I would if the community is super toxic.”

While she is not leaving a game immediately, she may end up leaving it sooner than she otherwise would have if the community is too toxic. Nova also seeks out different people, though they do it by seeking out female gamer spaces.

“Yes, Sometimes. Sometimes I guess I need an escape. A place where it's just like, ‘Yes, no honey, we totally understand what you're going through.’ because the only people that is going to understand a female gamer's problems is another female gamer. It only makes sense for a female to retreat to that space, to get the comfort that she needs or that they need before they go back out there, if they decide to go back out there.”

Nova feels that the experience of female gamers is unique, one that only another female gamer could fully understand. They also point out that they may not return to the environment after seeking out comfort.

While nearly all of the participants’ experiences and feelings related to toxicity were negative, Audree had one positive thing to say.

“I think it really depends on what time of day you're playing actually, because when there's, especially during the school year you play late at night, I think it's actually very respectful. The only thing like I said, if I play during the day when highschoolers are home from school like it's like after four o'clock in the afternoon or something. I do get the, ‘go back to the kitchen make me a sandwich’, that kind of stuff which is a negative

obviously, and if I'm playing at 4AM seems it's almost exclusively for older adults who just don't give a shit. The difference there though is that you do get more of the creepy stuff, but half the people I'm playing with are drunk and I'm half the time drunk and the other team is probably drunk, so it's probably fair to compare Overwatch at 4AM in my experience to a bar.”

Audree feels that later at night, when younger gamers, teenagers in particular, are asleep there is less toxicity. She feels that playing at this time is actually respectful, though she admits there was still an element of creepiness. This provides insight into what kind of person is toxic, with toxicity seeming to be more of an age related problem. It could be that teenage masculinity socialization and behavior is to blame for the majority of toxicity experienced by girls.

While many of the participants felt hopeless when it came to eliminating toxicity completely, they had their own ways of dealing with it. Some participants felt that toxicity might be able to be reduced, but that it was something they would have to do as a community. Others felt that it was just the way the gaming environment was and would always be. Both of these stances are right, to some degree.

*Conclusion.* For participants, toxicity had a very clear meaning, though no single definition was provided for it, being more of a “know it when you see it” sort of distinction. While everyone experiences toxicity to some degree in the gaming environment, girl gamers received more than guys via sex or gender specific toxicity. This led participants to feel that guys were more toxic, though some still preferred the company of guys over that of girls. Even with rampant toxicity, participants managed to find a way, or a space, to play and enjoy video games. That space could be a physically different space, such as a different game, a different social space with different people, or even just a different time of day. Overall, while feeling negatively about toxicity, playing video games was still a positive experience for participants.



### *Positive Experiences*

This section highlights some of the positive experiences that girls had while playing video games. How girl gamers construct their identity and make space in the gaming environment, how they identify with characters, and some themes they find attractive in video games are discussed. This section shows how girl gamers overcome the negativity in the gaming environment and are able to continue to enjoy playing.

*Getting into it.* There were several different ways that girls were introduced or attracted to video games. While many girl gamers talked about people trying to make them feel unwelcome in the gaming environment, or being discouraged from playing video games, many were also encouraged to play by people in their lives. Ophelia was introduced to and encouraged to play video games by her father.

“Probably what got me into the games was my dad. He and I, we played Super Mario Brothers all the time. Then after that, I played Mario games all throughout, until high school because we played Mario party together and all that. Then I met my boyfriend who introduced me to PC games. He was like, ‘Oh, it’s like the best. You got an array of different video games. You got to spread out your wings and try out different things.’ I did that. I started out with the games that he suggested, that he enjoyed, Skyrim and Fallout. Then after that, I went into online multiplayer.”

Ophelia is not only introduced to video games by her father, but encouraged to play by him and her boyfriend. Here Ophelia has actually been brought into the gaming environment by guys, rather than pushed out of it. Ophelia also branches out on her own, exploring other video game types besides what is recommended to her, demonstrating her independent interest in video games.

When asked what games got them into video gaming, Nova also says that her dad introduced her to video games.

“Those really old online games that would catch a young girl or a young boy's attention. It was one of the very first online games and you would hang out with other people and you would chat and you would build your house whenever. Those really simple games. Then at the time I was getting into video games, my dad was already playing video games and he was playing a game called Myth. That was a bloody, gory game. He exposed me to that at a very young age. That just was just like, ‘Bloody, gory games, this is my thing, please tell me more.’ I wasn't playing those young kids games for long. I started playing Call of Duty at eight, nine. Yes. Because my dad was playing it and he was playing with his friends. I wanted to play, I want to shoot people [laughs].”

Nova started playing online games with what would be considered more casual games, but is then attracted to gorier, shooter type games. At a young age they started playing shooters, playing Call of Duty, which is one of the more guy-dominated gaming communities. Nova goes against stereotypes of what a girl gamer is interested in from their gaming start, and is also brought into the gaming environment by a guy.

Participants also talked about strong female characters attracting them to games. Julia is happy that female characters in *Overwatch* are treated as powerful and independent, rather than second to male characters.

“In terms of roles, they don't brush females aside and they're not like, ‘They're female, so they have lesser accomplishments than males.’ Like we were saying, Zarya is the world championship and Ashe is the leader of a gang. Mercy created this great healing technology and D.va is this really amazing gamer. It's crazy to see females treated in such like a more of a higher regard in their roles, which I think is very nice. I haven't had any issue with how they portrayed females in *Overwatch* in their roles. They've all been given, as far as I'm aware, nice roles and important roles.”

Julia mentions it is “crazy to see” female characters in such high regard, reflecting the general state of the roles female characters have had in video games (Dietz 1998). Nova also mentions being attracted to the strength of female characters in *Overwatch*.

“Mei's backstory is a powerful one, I want to say. It shows how strong she is. It shows how strong a female character can be. People can look up to that. She was left alone and it wasn't even her fault. They died and she was alone, caught in a blizzard in the middle of, I think, Antarctica, and she got out. She cried, she went boohoo, but she put on her brave face and her big girl panties and she did what needed to be done and then she got

out. She did that all by herself. That's powerful. That's strong. That's a strong female character. I like Mei because of that.”

They are attracted to the character Mei because of an animated short film that depicts Mei being strong, independent, and capable. Nova feels it is important to have female characters that can be looked up to, enjoying seeing strong female characters as role models in video games.

Some participants experienced an emotional attachment to characters in Overwatch.

Roary mentions that she likes some of the characters' backstories and lore, being touched by Reinhardt's animated short film, one of the more emotional and touching short films produced by Blizzard for the game.

**Roary:** I liked her backstory. Like you were saying how she just does whatever. The fact that she's a geneticist. I don't know the full term for it but I just thought she had a really interesting story as to what she did. Reinhardt was pretty cool too. He had a little adorable story. It was sad. I almost cried.

**Me:** Yes. A lot of people cried. Are you talking about the animated short?

**Roary:** Yes. That's so sad.

**Me:** It was.

**Roary:** I also really like Hanzo and Genji's background. They're so sweet too.

Roary mentions that the Reinhardt animated short film almost made her cry, showing how the characters can affect players emotionally. Ophelia also mentioned being touched by the Reinhardt short film.

“Definitely Reinhardt only because I literally bawled that one made me really cry and it might be because my dad was in the army and just being overseas kind of hit a chord with me. That could be it.”

Ophelia is especially touched by the short film due to her identifying it with her dad's deployment in the army. Both participants seemed a little reluctant to admit the short film made them cry, possibly due to reluctance to appear overly emotional, or weak as a guy might view it,

though this short film easily made me cry. Audree like the background stories and lore because she felt they made the game more immersive.

“Okay, yes. The background stories and lore. They allow me to understand the world better, to really actually appreciate inter-character interactions. Like I have friends who turn off all the character dialogue because it just bothers them, and to me that's like I actually want to hear that, I want to feel like I'm somewhere else.”

The lore for the characters makes her feel more involved in the game, with it helping her to understand the comments the characters make to each other in match (the character a person is playing will occasionally say a voice line on their own in response to something that happened in game.). This makes Audree feel more like she is in the game world, rather than just playing a video game.

There were many different things that attracted participants to the video games, and got them into playing. While there is a lot of toxicity in the gaming environment, with people trying to push girl gamers out, it was refreshing to hear about the things that pulled them in. Having people in their lives that encourages them to play, and being able to identify with things in game helped them get into video gaming.

*Coalescence.* Another positive experience for participants was the feeling of coming together. This took several forms, some of which ended up with real life outcomes. For some participants feminine solidarity was an important aspect of playing video games online. For Angela, this was especially important, with her taking more of an activist stance.

“I don't feel like it's really a big deal whether I am a woman or a man playing video game. However, I do feel the need whenever I am playing with other women to- basically, if they're in a situation where the environment is toxic to them, I feel the need to step up and be there for them because there is not as many girl gamers as there are men playing games. I feel like it's my duty as a woman to be there for other women. We're kind of our own community in a way even though we are not really part of any community specifically. The environment is toxic whether we want it or not, whether we

like it or not, even not just for women, for men as well. The environment is toxic and that's the way it is. It's just a bit worse for females.”

Angela feels a “duty to be there for other women” in the gaming environment. She feels that they are a minority and must band together to support each other in a hostile environment. While she does not feel that gender is, or should be, an important factor when playing online, she does feel that the experience in the gaming environment is different depending on gender. Her solution to the toxicity that women face is to stand together and fight for each other.

Audree values the company of other girls while playing games online, saying she sometimes needs a “girl’s night out” when asked if she ever seeks out girl-friendly spaces.

“Sometimes you just need a girl's night out. Sometimes you just need a girl's night out where same way that I think some guys just need to have a night with their bros, and there's nothing wrong with it because when you have a girl's night out there's no, usually in a social dynamic there's flirting, there's conflict between genders, even among friends, it's usually low level, it's usually not that important, but you can always, there's often a situation where you can tell that a guy has a crush on another girl who is in the voice chat. They can just sometimes be awkward, and sometimes you're just not in the mood for it, sometimes you just want to hang out with other girls who, everyone understands that there's never going to be, it's not even, sometimes there will never be a relationship, that never crosses their mind. It's more you get a different social interaction.”

Audree feels that the socialization that girls and guys have leads to them needing time apart from each other, or at least that it is refreshing sometimes to have. She values the lack of sexual tension and awkwardness that is given by being in an all-girls group.

Teamwork, or working together with others, was one of the main things that attracted Kinetics to Overwatch.

“There's the teamwork, well it's like one of the most frustrating things you are talking to someone who is a former girl scout, robotics member so I'm so used to being in a team environment, so that was very attractive to me. I like all different roles so it's not just like six people with guns all trying to kill each other. It's like you have your tanks, your DPS, you have your off tanks, you have your off supports. There's a lot more in complexity to it and like I said, I really like the art in it. I'm an art major so when I see something that is

a very aesthetically pleasing design I'm into it and the Lore. I'd honestly never heard of Lore until I saw the cinematic shorts for it and I got interested.”

For Kinetics the difference between roles and characters, and the objective oriented play of Overwatch was important. She values this because it set Overwatch apart from other team-based shooters, where the main objective is just to kill the other team. In Overwatch the necessity of having people playing support, tank, and DPS, to make a team composition that can perform a specific task, and necessitates communication and teamwork between players, is what is important to Kinetics. Due to her background, she finds the added complexity these game mechanics provide satisfying, as well as also liking the art style of the game.

Other participants found the aspect of socialization important, feeling that being able to socialize and interact with others attractive in Overwatch. Rachel feels that being able to make friends in online video games and interact with others is of huge importance.

**Rachel:** ...I was really bad at first. I was getting frustrated. I'd never played enough FPS games before so I died a lot. I was getting really frustrated. I almost quit the game but [her boyfriend] was like, 'Just keep at it. Keep at it.' We played a bunch of bots which helped. It's good. It's good to introduce new players to bots first, I think. That's what they're there for. Then I just got better. I don't know. I just kept with it. Now, I play a lot because of the social aspect. I've made so many amazing friends on Overwatch. I tend to like games of war like WoW, Ark, stuff like that where you can interact with the people.

**Me:** So, interaction and socialization are something important to you?

**Rachel:** Yes, for sure.

Rachel is encouraged by her boyfriend at the time to keep trying when she is doing poorly, keeping her from leaving the environment. While initially playing because the game looked interesting, and keeping at it because of encouragement from her boyfriend at the time, the social aspect of Overwatch was what kept her playing in the long run.

Audree attributes her identity as a gamer as developing from the ability to socialize and make friends in online video games.

“I’m not very good at socializing. I’d even worse than high school. I had friends, but the type of friends I felt secure with, so when I was able to move on to online communities. I didn’t really game for a couple of years in my teenage years, but I did go back like a starting right after I turned into an adult. High school social networks dissolved at that point and I didn’t have people. But you could find people online very easy. It was a very easy place. It was a much easier place for me to socialize and it was a much easier, I guess it was a safe way instead of putting yourself out there in the world. I got drawn into gaming more for social interaction than probably anything else.”

The loss of high school friends that she felt secure with, due to having gotten older and going separate ways, led her to go back to playing online video games. Here she could easily socialize and make new friends, while also feeling safe due to not having to physically go out to meet people. Audree names social interaction as the strongest factor in getting her back into video gaming.

One of the most interesting forms of coalescence mentioned in interviews, was meeting partners online, with Rachel having met a former boyfriend through another video game.

**Me:** While you said that most of the people who were in your guild were couples, do you feel that the women that were in the couples were there because they played it or that they started playing because their partner did?

**Rachel:** No, because a lot of the met on WoW.

**Me:** Okay.

**Rachel:** They played it before they started dating.

**Me:** They coupled up through WoW?

**Rachel:** Yes.

**Me:** Interesting.

**Rachel:** That’s what me and my ex did too. We met on WoW.

I found this particularly interesting, since I had heard of other people finding their real-life partners in WoW (World of Warcraft), with one of my longest video game friends having met her partner through WoW, relocating across the country to be with them. While I wanted to

explore this more, it was unfortunately outside of the scope of this study, though future studies should look at this phenomenon, specifically looking at the differences between WoW and other video games.

For participants, the collective nature of online video games, or the act of coming together, was an important factor for why they enjoyed and stayed in video gaming. Their lives outside of video games, such as their feminist perspectives or education backgrounds, affected the way that they entered and interacted with the gaming environment. Conversely, their participation in video games sometimes ended up affecting their lives outside of them, with some meeting their partners in video games.

*Conclusion.* It was nice to see that there were many positive and satisfying experiences for participants in the gaming environment. While there were many instances of negative experiences, the good times participants had were enough to keep them involved in video games. Either through balancing out, or outweighing, the negative experiences, or through desensitization to the negative experiences, positive experiences made video games still enjoyable for the girl gamers.

### *Anxiety Online*

This section addresses the question of “How do girl gamers construct their identity and carve out space in the online video game environment?”. There is more of a focus on their creation of spaces for themselves, though elements of identity construction are also present.

*Online Sneakiness.* Due to the toxicity they might face in the gaming environment, due to being a girl, some participants were covert with their gender. This ranged from avoiding voice chat to using voice changing software to sound less like a girl. Exercising caution with their



gender online was the most common form of sneakiness employed, with participants simply being cautious to avoid gender-based attacks. Z anticipates being mistreated in the gaming environment, experiencing different emotions as a result.

**Me:** When you do join voice chat, how does that make you feel?

**Z:** Anxious and then angry.

**Me:** Why does it make you anxious then angry?

**Z:** The anticipation of how I'm going to be treated and then how I do get treated. I know that there's going to be some repercussion for being female. When I join the voice chat and then, not all the time, but most of the time there's the down talk, the condescending tone, the automatic blame of loss.

Joining voice chat is initially a nerve-racking experience for Z, though this transitions to anger at having been made to feel anxious about being mistreated. Z has come to expect condescension and blame for losses from the voice chat, causing her to avoid joining voice chat sometimes.

Angela also expresses feeling unwelcome and anxious, mistrusting and avoiding strangers. She has mixed feelings when asked if she feels welcome in the online gaming environment.

“Yes and no. There are some hostile people out there and it does make me uneasy at times. Most people are very welcoming but some of them I guess you can feel like it's not really genuine. They are nice, but it's like they want something more, that's why they're nice. In the end, are they really nice? It's hard to gauge people that's why I steer clear of those I don't really know. I don't really add a lot of people. Not that I'm scared but just I'd rather be safe.”

While she does encounter plenty of welcoming people, she mistrusts some of their intentions, feeling some of the people are being nice because they want something from her. She questions if they can be considered truly nice, if they have ulterior motives. This questioning of intentions leads her to avoid adding people to her friends list, not out of fear of strangers, but convenience. During the match where I met Angela, one such interaction possibly occurred, with a guy player being, in my opinion, overly supportive and friendly towards her after she received harassment

from another. This was enough to make me uncomfortable at the time, and we had a laugh about it after the match.

Audree takes a proactive approach to dealing with guys having feelings for her, an attempt to eliminate the ulterior motive driven friendliness.

“I have to consciously have conversations with any male friend I make making it clear that, one, not interested, two, taken, and three, not interested and changing that number two. I feel like I have to have that conversation with everyone I meet that is male. I feel like I have to constantly protect myself because men who will get attached end up having unrealistic expectations. Then, you end up just losing a friend and it just sucks. If you're upfront with it, it saves time. It's something that I consciously do anyway.”

Audree has trouble with guys becoming emotionally attached to her, so as a precaution she is upfront with them, having blunt conversations with male friends making it clear she will not be interested in them. While this may end up losing friends up front, it is better than growing close to a person and then losing them, in her opinion.

When caution online is not enough, some participants took to hiding their gender identity altogether. When asked if she ever tried to conceal her gender online, Ophelia responds that she doesn't use her mic if possible.

“Most of the times if I can, I don't use my mic. For example, Overwatch Quickplay, I never really jump in the mic voice chat. I also changed my user IDs. I changed them from feminine names to gender-neutral names just so that they can't guess if I'm a girl or not because it honestly, it shouldn't matter in my opinion, but it does.”

She also tried using gender-neutral in-game names to avoid suspicion of being a girl. Here she is not only hiding her voice, but changing her identity, in the form of her name, to conceal her identity as a girl. Nova also has tried to conceal their gender, agreeing that voice chat gives it away, but is very talkative.

“It's really hard because some people can just identify your gender just by your voice if you're using voice chat. I'm a very talkative person and I hate texting. When I play games with people, I prefer talking. It's hard to hide my gender.”

Nova does not like using the text chat to type out communication, preferring to be able to talk, though they do also wish to hide their voice. They are stuck between wanting to be able to communicate and wanting to avoid being treated a certain way on the basis of others gendering them. Kinetics solves this problem through the use of a voice changer.

“I downloaded an E-voice changer to deepen my voice, during a time when I was trying to be a bit more vocal when I was playing online, but I've sometimes run into some backlash, so I thought that would help. While people made fun of it, I felt like they still listened to me.”

Kinetics, who greatly enjoys the teamwork and communication aspect of Overwatch, was driven to altering the sound of her voice with software to continue to avoid being gendered and harassed.

Being sneaky was effective at reducing anxiety for some participants, though it did not eliminate it entirely for them. While solutions could reduce anxiety, they could also introduce new anxiety, such as not being able to communicate if you do not talk. Anxiety was mitigated through sneakiness, not eliminated, with participants finding optimal ways of dealing with stressful situations.

*Feeling Limited.* Participants sometimes expressed feelings of being limited in their options or choices in the gaming environment. This ranged from feeling forced to play a certain way to feeling less confident about their abilities. Being pushed into a role was common among participants. Angela was initially attracted to Overwatch after hearing about Hanzo, an archer character in the DPS role.

“Well, I heard the Hanzo was an archer because when I said I looked into the characters, I didn't really look at videos or anything. I was just talking to a friend back then and asking about those different heroes. I saw pictures. Then he explained to me, ‘He's an archer. He's a sniper.’ Then I said, ‘Well, I like to throw arrows as Link when I play Breath of the Wild,’ so I thought I would like that. Those were the heroes I was more drawn to before starting the game, but then once I started playing the game, I was pushed towards the support role as I was playing with friends that had more experience.”

Because she was playing with friends who were more experienced, Angela was pushed out of the role she wanted to play initially, and into the support role. Angela now mains support and enjoys the role, however, so this is not completely negative for her. Rachel expressed negative feelings in response to being pushed into a role, though.

**Rachel:** Guys all the time, they're like, "That's so hot. A girl that knows her place. A girl that knows her role." I'm just like, "Whoa." That's scary. [response to sarcastic self-deprecation by Rachel about her playing a role]

**Me:** How does that make you feel when you hear them feel that way about what you said?

**Rachel:** Crappy because it's not my role. Who knows if I practice DPS as much as I practice support, I might kick your butt. I don't, I heal instead, but yes, it doesn't make you feel good when people are like that.

Rachel feels as though she is missing out on an opportunity to be good at another role by being pushed into the support role. While she chooses to play as a healer, she still feels bad when people want to force her to play healer.

Nova also feels as though girls are forced to play as support characters, as well as being meant to play as characters of their own gender.

“I think genders have been set to specific roles, if that makes sense. Females are to play female characters and boys are to play boy characters. If a gamer girl isn't playing Mercy, then she's isn't good to the team. She's isn't viable. It's like, no, a girl can play fricking Widowmaker and kick ass. A girl can play McCree and kick ass. A girl can play Roadhog or Junkrat and kick ass. It doesn't matter what's between their legs. If they play the game and win you the game, what else is important?”

By not choosing Mercy, a main healer (healer with the majority of healing responsibility), Nova feels a girl gamer will be viewed as not contributing to the team. They do not feel this is true, though, feeling that a girl could be just as capable in any other roles as a guy. Nova questions why anyone would care what gender or sex you are if you play well. This brings up the point that there is more to why guys are forcing girls into certain roles than the perception that girls suck. It is about controlling the environment, roles, and social power.

Some participants ended up with lower confidence as a result of anxiety caused in the gaming environment. Angela feels like she is letting down the team when she plays characters outside of the support role.

“Sometimes I feel bad whenever I play it because I feel like I'm disappointing my team. I tend to stay more with support. I used to play only Mercy. I started playing other supports a bit more just to diversify my abilities in terms of flexing. It's not flexing because it's still support. At least, it's not just Mercy. I play all of the other supports I feel like I'm pretty good with but because I don't have a lot of experience with other DPS heroes, I feel like my skill level with them is very much lower than my skill level with support.”

She stays mainly with support characters, though she has started playing supports other than Mercy, the character she was initially pushed into playing. She still feels bad about not getting to play other roles, though also feels bad when she does, due to feelings of performing poorly. This sort of being forced into a role and made to feel less confident in one's abilities, or feeling more emotionally impacted by poor performance, when playing a different role could help explain why there are many girls in the support role and why that is a stereotype.

Concisely exemplifying the lowered confidence that the gaming environment can cause girl gamers, Rachel mentions her lower skill in the DPS role when asked about characters she liked.

“I started recently playing Moira a little bit just because she's fun. If I'm in the mood to try DPS, for some reason I'll play Tracer. I really like mobility. I love mobile characters, but I'm not very good at DPS.”

I had not asked her what characters or roles she was good at, or anything related to skill, but she mentions that she is not good at DPS without any prompting. Considering that she also stated she might be good at the DPS role if she could practice it, this comes off as being made to have lower confidence, rather than a statement of natural lack of ability or interest in the DPS role.

Anxiety online led some participants to have a preference for gender when making friends, feeling they are able to form closer bonds with others of their own gender. When asked if her friends were mostly one gender Audree says, “There's a good mix, but I would say of my close friends, I find it easier to trust women.”. This shows that some guys can be trusted, but they are not as trustworthy as girls to girl gamers. Nova also has mainly female friends, though for different reasons. When asked if their friends were mostly female, they respond:

“Yes, and I think that has something to do with my sexuality and my sexual preferences. I'm mostly interested in women versus men. I do have some male friends in the gaming community. I actually have a lot, I just don't talk to them as much as I do as my female friends. I think that's just because I'm closer to them than I am with my male friends.”

Nova also has some guy friends in Overwatch, but they more frequently talk to, and are closer with, their female friends. Nova also mentions that this may have to do with their being attracted to women sexually. This is interesting, as their sexual attraction to girls online does not cause an issue with befriending and interacting with those girls. This makes the sexual behavior of guys in the gaming environment towards girls especially glaring, as it is not the sexual desires, but the guys themselves that are the problem.

While feeling limited, girl gamers were still able to find places online where they could exist in peace and enjoy themselves. In some cases, things were left to be desired, such as being

able to play the way they want, and with who they want, but this was not enough to stop them from playing. Even though they feel pressured into certain things, they find ways to keep this from defining them or being indicative of their potential.

*Conclusion.* Even with guys, and the gaming environment in general, making them feel anxious, participants were still able to find places for themselves online where they felt comfortable or that they belonged. Using a variety of tools, they were able to exercise caution of, or hide from, things that caused them stress, and continue to navigate the gaming environment. Even when feeling limited by others' pressure to be a certain way, participants were still able to find ways to enjoy themselves in Overwatch. Participants were also able to form meaningful relationships online, though sometimes this meant seeking out specific spaces or types of people.

### *Identity*

This section answers the research question "How do girl gamers construct their identity and carve out space in the online video game environment?". Here participants discuss how they feel about themselves and other aspects of identity. Feelings of community and collectivity are also discussed.

*Self-conception and Gamer Identity.* Participants discussed not only their self-identity, but also their desires to identify with certain things in-game. In these ways participants gave me a deeper understanding of what they connect with in video games, and how they view themselves as individuals and fitting in in the gaming environment. Some participants talked about their self-identity, discussing how they related to others, and how they felt about themselves in relation to other things in the gaming environment. Angela tells me how, while she is not part of any gaming groups online, she does feel like she has built her own community.

“I am not. I'm not part of any gaming community or any of that though I do watch a lot of Twitch and I follow a lot of female gamer channels. That's probably those I watch the most only because I feel I can relate to them more and like seeing other women play rather than a guy, I think that's just preference though. I guess I built my own community with those small streamers where I play with them sometimes. I talk to them. Not that we're a group necessarily, but we're there to support each other.”

Her identity as a female gamer makes it easier for her to relate to other female gamers, such as streamers. Her identity not only drives her towards the female streamers, but spending time with them strengthens her identification, feeling she is part of her own community now. By spending time with them and getting to know them well enough to play with them, she feels supported.

Julia feels that the game *Overwatch* fits well with who she is as a person.

“At the moment, I mostly just play *Overwatch* and whatever my mutual friends will want to do because, *Overwatch*, more than anything, affects me because it's what I do and it's this outlet where I enjoy myself and I get this competitive experience that I've always wanted, but I've never been that good at anything that's competitive in society kind of thing. That game more than anything translates into, *Overwatch* is a big part of my identity as a gamer because it's just what I mostly do.”

Because she is very competitive, playing a competitive online video game like *Overwatch* makes her feel like she has an outlet to express herself. While she was not able to find an expressive outlet for her competitive feelings in the real world, she found it in video games, stating that *Overwatch* is now a big part of her identity. Angela also wanted to identify with characters in *Overwatch*.

“I wish that someday we would get a Canadian hero because that's what I really, Sorry. My cat's on my keyboard. [laughs] That's what I really connect with. My culture is being Canadian. That's my nationality and that's what I'm proud of most.”

While she enjoyed characters like Mercy, identifying with them in some ways, she wanted a character that was Canadian so that she could more closely relate to them. With being Canadian being very important to her identity, she finds it easier to connect with characters if they are also Canadian.



Roary also expresses a desire to identify with characters, especially when being able to customize a character.

**Me:** What role does gender play in your identification as a gamer if any?

**Roary:** It does when you can create your character. I prefer to be able to make her and also a female character, but if they're preset characters, I don't really care so much about whether it's female or not or cute or not. There it's mostly how the character plays.

**Me:** Okay. Do you get to customize your character? What makes you start to care when it's customizable?

**Roary:** Cus usually one thing you can customize, have like a story based off it, and so it's just more immersive if I can feel that's me as opposed to some man.

Roary feels like she is able to get more into the video game if she is able to relate more to the character she is playing as. While she doesn't care as much if the characters are preset (already created and unchangeable), when she is allowed to create or customize her own character she tries to make it feel more like she is playing as herself in the game. She mentions that in games where you can customize your character, it is more likely to have a more involved story, where immersion becomes a larger factor, and being able to identify with your character is more important to the experience.

While still a factor in girl gamers' experience, identity as a girl gamer, or identity in general, did not play as large of a role as I had thought it would. Participants tended to view themselves either as unhyphenated "gamers" or just as someone who plays video games, not incorporating it into their construction of identity.

*Community Identity.* While participants felt certain ways about themselves, and where they fit in online as individuals, some participants also expressed feelings of collective identity, or of being part of a particular community. Sometimes this involved their gender identity, and sometimes it was related to people in gaming in general. Some participants had feelings of

collective solidarity, feeling that those in the gaming environment as a whole were a collective.

Angela feels that gamers, regardless of their gender, are a community. When talking about people getting banned for toxicity and buying another account to keep playing, Angela talks about how it is a collective responsibility to deal with toxicity.

“If they buy another account, it’s not like they can do anything about it. It’s not realistic to say that the game on its own can deal with the toxicity. There is something that we need to do as a community against that toxicity, but then again, it’s never going to be perfectly fine, there’s always going to be something. We just need to be more, I’m looking for the word, I guess I’m going to say connected, but what I mean is just closer together. We should all have each other’s backs regardless of gender, regardless of sexuality, just as a community of gamers. We should be there for each other and defend each other when someone is being toxic. When someone is being toxic, their communication is not useful people should be quick to block. That’s something that doesn’t happen and most of the time what happens is two people start arguing going back and forth. Then it starts getting toxic, and then the whole moral of the team goes down, and it just escalates from there. That’s really on the community’s shoulders, it’s not on the game’s.”

Angela feels that it is not only not the game’s responsibility to deal with toxicity, but that that it is not possible for the game alone to eliminate toxicity. She feels that the community of players in a game must come together and work to stop toxicity. She feels that the gaming community should be closer with each other, and stand up for others.

When asked about any other tools they thought could help reduce toxicity, Nova also feels that the community is ultimately what stops toxicity.

“I think it comes down to overall how the community reacts. There’s only so many things the devs can implement in the game to reduce toxicity. It comes down to the actual people playing the game. The more you stay positive and the more positive reinforcement you give to your players especially if they’re getting hated on, the more likely that you’re going to have the butterfly effect and they’re going to pay it forward. Standing up to toxicity, standing up for the smaller person and telling the other person to shut the fuck up and just play the game is the best way because if you stand up to them, they might come back at you, but they’re not focusing on that person anymore and that person can now focus on the game.”

They feel that the developers and the game itself are limited in their ability to stop toxicity. Nova believes that the people who are playing the game need to stand together and fight toxicity. Nova advocates for responding harshly to toxic people, if not to stop them, at least to make them redirect their toxicity away from their original target. They are willing to make a sacrifice for their team and teammate to make sure they can perform as well as possible with the toxic person present, epitomizing collective over individual good.

Similar to the idea of collective solidarity was the idea of feminine solidarity, where participants had a feeling of collectivity based on gender and their identity. Angela expresses feelings of feminine solidarity frequently,

“I don't feel like it's really a big deal whether I am a woman or a man playing video game. However, I do feel the need whenever I am playing with other women to, basically, if they're in a situation where the environment is toxic to them, I feel the need to step up and be there for them because there is not as many girl gamers as there are men playing games.”

Angela feels a duty to be there for other gamers she identifies with based on her gender identity.

While she does not feel that gender *should* be important, she acknowledges that it is treated as such in the gaming environment. The fact that girl gamers are a minority strengthens her feelings of duty.

Nova feels that female spaces are sometimes necessary for female gamers. When asked if they ever felt like they needed to find girl friendly spaces online, the respond:

“Yes, Sometimes. Sometimes I guess I need an escape. A place where it's just like, ‘Yes, no honey, we totally understand what you're going through.’ Because the only people that is going to understand a female gamer's problems is another female gamer. It only makes sense for a female to retreat to that space, to get the comfort that she needs or that they need before they go back out there if they decide to go back out there.”

Nova feels that a female space is the only place really understanding the issues that female gamers are faced with. They attribute this to female gamers' experiences being unique, and their perspective being necessary for full understanding. Nova treats these kinds of spaces as a refuge, an escape from the hostility of the general gaming community.

Feelings of collective belonging and identity were more present than feelings of the importance of individually identifying as a girl or a girl gamer. When considering that participants expressed that gender identity *should not* be important, but was treated as such in the gaming environment, this makes sense. When thinking of themselves as individuals, not in the collective context of the gaming community, their feelings that gender identity should not matter showed, with them not feeling strongly that they are "girl gamers". When thinking of themselves as individual pieces of the gaming community, however, group statuses and identities shaped their self-perception. They were then more likely to feel gender identity was relevant and identify more strongly with others based on gender.

*Conclusion.* Themes of identity played out in interesting ways. While I had expected gender to play a larger role in the identity construction of participants, many felt that it was irrelevant, or wished that it would not be considered at all. It was only when it was treated as relevant by others that it mattered, pushing some participants towards feelings of community with others based on gender, or feeling collective duty to fight toxicity.

### *Characters*

This section deals with the research questions "How do girl gamers identify with characters in-game?" and "What themes in the game do girl gamers find attractive?". This

section deals mostly with participants' feelings towards the characters in Overwatch, with some other broader issues touched on as well.

*Sex Still Sells.* Not a great deal was said about the sexualization of characters, with Overwatch doing a relatively good job of avoiding sexualizing them. It would be a huge mistake not to mention it, however. When asked how she felt about Overwatch's portrayal of women, Rachel focuses on the sexualized aspects of some characters.

**Rachel:** I haven't really thought about it. They're all different. We have Mei, who is big and she's thick. I think it's fine, I guess. I know there was that whole with Tracer's, whatever, victory pose, and they had to redo it because her butt was so crazy, people were freaking out. But that's every video game, sex sells. What are they going to do? I get it. It's not a big deal.

**Me:** Do you feel like Overwatch portrays the women characters in an oversexualized way or...?

**Rachel:** Yes, of course. I feel like every video game does.

Rachel feels that the characters are *overly* sexualized, running counter to the development team's goals. She feels that this is something that is present in every video game, and is not bothered by it very much, however.

Ophelia also feels that sexualization is common in video games.

“I think it's pretty, pretty typical of video games. Especially like the whole boobage and booties for the women. I think you're not going to really be able to escape that because you have to be able to please, try to please majority of your customers and a lot of dudes like seeing the bootie boobies. I just kind of accept it, it's a game. I try not to get too upset or tilted about it because it's just the way it is. They're pretty, at least they're pretty.”

Ophelia feels that sexualization is viewed as a necessity by video game companies, being present to please male consumers. She does not seem to be as okay with sexualization as Rachel does, though, commenting that she tries not to get too upset about it, and talking about escaping it.

Not all participants felt that the characters were sexualized, with some feeling the characters were presented as strong and capable, as well as being no more sexualized than the male characters. For some, however, unnecessarily sexual or revealing outfits or poses caught their attention. For them it was something obvious and something they had noticed in many other places as well.

*Getting into Character.* Participants expressed several different ideas concerning identifying with, or preferring, certain characters. This could be based on things ranging from characters' personality or background, to their appearance, skins, or gender. While not everyone identified with characters, with some preferring characters based on how they played, or what role they were, many participants found something to identify with characters in the game. Angela identifies more with female characters, even though they have dissimilarities.

“At the same time, I do identify with other female characters even though they're not from my country like let's say Mercy. I do at this point in life relate to her a lot. Not only because she's my most played character and my favorite but because of her whole persona, of how she cares for other people. I refer to her as the mom of Overwatch just because she was the main healer in terms of the lore. I relate to her in that way. I'm not a nurse or anything but I personally feel the need to help my friends and my family. Having this character that is always there to help others and to care for them makes it easier for me to relate.”

Angela relates to Mercy due to her caring nature, with Angela caring a great deal for the other gamer girls online, as well as people she cares about in real life. Mercy's personality is what attracts Angela to her. Alice also identifies with Mercy for similar reasons.

“I think, if anything, Mercy, because I do like helping people and making, I feel like that's where the girls like Mercy in particular because they want to take care of people. I guess that's accurate with me, but I feel is the one I mostly identify with, if anything.”

Alice feels that Mercy's caring and nurturing nature make her more appealing to girl gamers. This makes sense given the socialization that girls often receive in society to be caring and nurturing. Though Alice does not feel a *strong* identification with any of the characters.

Audree also like Mercy, when asked if there were any male characters she identified with, she responds saying she wished Mercy were a real person that she knew.

“See when you say like, there's two ways I can think of this. There's one way I like the character. I want to be like, ‘I wish she were real I would like to be her friend. I would like to be her,’ secretly want to be Mercy, confession, but there's a play style, play styles that I like.”

Audree not only identifies with Mercy, but would not mind *being* her. While there were no male characters she identified with, she did like certain play styles that some male characters had.

Kinetics also identified with play style and roles, as well as Mercy in particular.

“I like to say I'm similar to Lucio because I'm definitely here for a good time. A part of me does identify with Mercy just because of the caring nature she has. Then a part is Ana because I like to not take shit from people [laughs]. I'd say it's this three which is fun because they're all Support.”

Kinetics identifies with Lucio, since as a character he is very energetic and upbeat. She also identifies with Mercy due to her caring nature, demonstrating how common this theme was for girl gamers. Lastly, she mentions identifying with Ana, admiring her attitude and toughness. All three of the characters she mentions are supports, which is Kinetic's main role.

It was interesting that while many disliked the stereotype that girls are all Mercy players, many identified with and enjoyed playing Mercy. Whether this was due to the way that Mercy plays or her appearance and personality is not clear. It should be noted that Mercy is an all-around popular character, and has been since Overwatch's release.

Participants also expressed a preference for the gender of the characters they played, with some preferring to play characters of their own gender. Angela finds herself playing characters of her own gender in other games as well.

“It's hard to say because the other games I play don't typically have heroes divided this way. Let's say in Hearthstone, I just played the class that I felt that fitted more my play style. Not necessarily, "I'm going to play Mage because she's a female." I would say if I had the choice to create a character, yes, I would create a female. Let's say I'm playing Mario Kart, I will try and take female characters, but I'm not necessarily going to go out of my way to play a female character if I don't like her play style.”

While she will not play a certain role because of the gender of the character, if given the option to play a female character in the role she wants to play she will. For Angela the playstyle and role of the characters is more important, though she does prefer female characters.

Kinetics also has a preference for female characters.

**Kinetics:** Yes, I usually play female characters. Oh my God. I feel like I'm being outed. In League which I've just recently started, I think all the characters I've played so far are women. Oh my God, when I'm given the choice, holy shit [laughs]. Oh my God, this is funny to me. This is really funny.

**Me:** Do you play one gender on purpose or is that also a coincidence?

**Kinetics:** I would like to say it's a coincidence because in my head if you were to say, "By the way, blank is a male now," I'd probably still play them. Because I'm more interested in kit. However, while I'm still more interested in kit, I think I find that when I'm looking at a character roster, I look at the women first. I think this is where my direction goes.

Kinetics is attracted to characters that are women, not realizing how strong her preference for women characters was until asked about it. She is also more interested in the playstyle and mechanics of a character, but picks first from women characters if they are available. She is amused that she has done so without being conscious of it up to this point.



Immersion was an important aspect of a character for some participants, with Audree previously mentioning how it was important to her to be able to get into the game world.

“The background stories and lore. They allow me to understand the world better, to really actually appreciate inter-character interactions. Like I have friends who turn off all the character dialogue because it just bothers them, and to me that's like I actually want to hear that, I want to feel like I'm somewhere else.”

Being able to feel as though she is really somewhere else. Feeling that the characters' voice lines are not just canned audio, but are related to their relationships with each other in the game's lore, is an important part of her enjoyment of Overwatch.

Being able to find a little bit of themselves in the characters they were playing made the participants better able to have fun in the game, making them more attached to the characters they played. While it was not something that was necessary, with some saying they play games even if they cannot identify with characters, or if there were no female or women characters, it was a well-liked bonus. From Mercy's popularity among participants, this might play a bigger role than it appears to in girl gamers' attraction to a video game.

*Diversity and Inclusivity.* Diversity and inclusivity have been stated as explicit goals in Overwatch's development. It is therefore not surprising to see elements of diversity and inclusivity appearing in participants' responses. There were some surprising themes that arose when discussing *how* participants wanted diversity and inclusivity to be executed, however. Most participants agreed that representation is important, feeling that there should be characters with elements of different groups in video games, or at least in Overwatch. Angela is pleased by Tracer's presentation of sexual orientation in game.

“I like the story behind Tracer. I like the fact that she was the first Overwatch hero that was openly gay. I feel like that's important to the gay community to have a character that they can look up to and that represents them.”

Tracer was the first character in Overwatch to be canonically LGBTQ, having a girlfriend in one of the webcomics produced by Blizzard. This is especially important, as Tracer is a hugely popular character, and is considered the face of the Overwatch brand. Angela appreciates that the gay community has someone to look up to in such a visible and important character as Tracer.

Representation is also very important to Alice, with her feeling it should be in everything.

“Yes. I feel like, in everything should represent. I don't mean, everything has to have everyone represented into it. I'm just saying, it's very difficult to play a game or to watch a movie or to watch a TV show or just go anywhere and not see anyone that you can identify with, that's a very lonely feeling.”

While she doesn't feel that every single group should be represented in everything, Alice feels that it is difficult to get into something if there is no one to identify with in it. Here she means more than just video games, also referring to television and other media. Without being able to see someone similar to herself in a form of media, Alice feels lonely, the lack of representation is very noticeable to her.

Kinetics is very excited about the personalities of characters, and their uniqueness.

“I love them so much. I like how unique and different all of them are. You have four war vets, but they're all completely different personalities. Reinhardt is so loving with gung ho. Soldier is just the grumpy grandpa of the group. Ana, she's a smartass but she deserves to be one. Torbjorn is like the family man. They all have such fun-loving personalities. I can't help but fall in love with the characters. That's why I need more lore, excuse me Michael Chu. [directing her comment at Michael Chu, Overwatch's senior lore and story designer]”

Kinetics likes how even when characters have something in common, they still are developed enough to be noticeably different. The depth of personality in the characters and the types of personalities they have help Kinetics to “fall in love” with them, helping her to identify with and enjoy the characters more when playing.

Some participants focused more on female character diversity either wanting more diversity among female characters, or feeling that it was important. Z feels that the Overwatch development team could be doing a better job in this area.

“I think they could do a little bit better being diverse in the whole body type thing. They have Mei, who's a little thicker and they have Moira who's tall and lanky. Other than that the other ladies are thin waists, big butts, busts are pretty big.”

She feels that, besides a few characters that break body type standards, the female characters in Overwatch are all essentially the same, having some similarity of traits in thin waists and big butts and breasts. Angela feels the opposite, however, feeling that all the characters are fairly different.

“I feel like they are making a good representation. They're not all the same shape and size and they don't have all the same personalities. Though I hope that they will make a Black woman at some point, I do feel it's important. There aren't a lot of Black representation in Overwatch and I feel like that's one of the race that get the less representation in general. I feel like it would be important for them to have more representation. Though it doesn't really link to me at all, but I do feel like it's important for others.”

While she is unhappy about the lack of Black women in the game, she is happy because she feels that the female characters have different body types and personalities, rather than being presented with some idea of traits essential to women in general. This is not an issue that affects Angela directly, but is something she wishes for in Overwatch for the sake of others, demonstrating more collective solidarity.

Nova is halfway between Z and Angela, feeling they are doing okay, but that there is a lot of room for improvement.

“I think the biggest thing is they're doing okay, but they can be doing better. All over the internet, we're seeing people going, ‘Wow, this character is a copy-and-paste. Look at their facial structure, the exact same thing as Widow's, Ashe.’ That needs to get fixed. We have so much diversity in the male facial structure and body structure, but in the females, it feels really copy-and-paste. We have people like Zarya who are these big buff

Russian women, and it's just like, 'Oof, good.' Then we have little small chunky Mei and it's like, 'Oof, good,' but all the other characters, there's no diversity in terms of like torso structure. I'm an artist and I study anatomy. To see women that all have the same hourglass figure and you don't really see any pineapples or pears or anything like that, it's frustrating because it's like there's more to the female body than just hourglasses. Women that have the pear-shaped body or the pineapple-shaped body, they're beautiful. Like I said before, if you put in diversity into a game that is really popular, you're going to see diversity in the real world. Put a beautiful female curvy character in a popular video game, you're going to see a lot of beautiful curvy female characters in the real world feel confident and beautiful because they're included.”

Nova is an artist who has studied anatomy, so they notice things about body shape that others might not. Looking deeper than breast size, or butt size, Nova is concerned with body proportion, overall shape and structure, and differences between the genders in terms of these aspects. Nova mentions two characters, Widowmaker and Ashe, as having very similar faces. While a contentious point in the *Overwatch*, with some seeing *little, if any* similarity, this issue has caused considerable criticism of *Overwatch*'s character design.

Other participants focused more on the background and social roles of the characters when asked how they felt about the way gender was treated in *Overwatch*, feeling they were strong female characters. Julia appreciates the competency given to women in *Overwatch*'s lore.

“In terms of roles, they don't brush females aside and they're not like, 'They're female, so they have lesser accomplishments than males.' Like we were saying, Zarya is the world championship and Ashe is the leader of a gang. Mercy created this great healing technology and D.va is this really amazing gamer. It's crazy to see females treated in such like a more of a higher regard in their roles, which I think is very nice. I haven't had any issue with how they portrayed females in *Overwatch* in their roles. They've all been given, as far as I'm aware, nice roles and important roles.”

She is happy that women are not treated as secondary to men, both in terms of their importance to the story as well as their achievements. Julia is surprised by this treatment, reflecting how poorly women are generally portrayed in video games. Nova finds aspects of the characters' lore to be done well, even though they are not totally in favor of their design.

“Mei's backstory is a powerful one, I want to say. It shows how strong she is. It shows how strong a female character can be. People can look up to that. She was left alone and it wasn't even her fault. They died and she was alone, caught in a blizzard in the middle of, I think, Antarctica, and she got out. She cried, she went boohoo, but she put on her brave face and her big girl panties and she did what needed to be done and then she got out. She did that all by herself. That's powerful. That's strong. That's a strong female character. I like Mei because of that.”

They feel that the ability to see Mei as a strong woman, and as someone you can look up to, is important, being Nova's reason for liking Mei. Countering stereotypes was also an important aspect of being a strong female character. Audree does not identify with, but admires D.va.

“I don't identify with D.va. She's a like 19-year-old Korean girl nothing in common, but her play style is fun. She's not a very typical in freaking gamer design perspective. It's unusual to create like a female character that dives in and shoots everything point-blank and is really in the thick of it and then it's a petite 19-year-old Korean girl. It's an interesting design on their part, but I just like her play style. I do notice though that I find it a lot easier to play female characters than I do male characters.”

D.va is portrayed as a successful professional gamer, being one of the best in the world in Overwatch's lore, going against the stereotypical view of video gaming, and being skilled at video gaming, as a “guy thing”. Audree also comments on the aggressive style of play that D.va has as a playable character, being very up close and personal in-game.

The most surprising theme of diversity, in my opinion, was how some participants expressed a want for apathetic, neutral, or evil characters. While wanting villains and antiheroes is not surprising, it was interesting that some participants wanted neutral characters that did not care about the outcome of events in Overwatch's lore. Alice wishes for one of these kinds of characters.

“...I think I would like a little bit of apathy because, both of them, All the characters are either on one side or another, even on Overwatch side or the bad guy side, Doom, Reaper, and Widow are on, I forgot what it's called. Blackwatch. I want a character that's just there on the sidelines. Because, not every story is just two people, two groups.”

Alice wants a character to balance out the good versus evil mechanic in the story, feeling this is too binary. She wants there to be more than just two sides in the conflict in *Overwatch*'s lore.

Nova wishes for a more selfish as well as neutral character, not caring what gender they are.

“...I would like to see a character that is, whether male or female, it doesn't matter, whether male or female, strong within themselves, have a very, very diverse body structure, a new twist on the good and bad side meaning. Give us somebody that doesn't have a side that's doing stuff for their own gain. We have Ashe but she's clearly supplying weapons, not only for herself but for the bad guys, come on. That's the whole point of Deadlock. Give us something that's not part of any of that. It's just there for the fucking fun of it. Just like, ‘Oh, shooting? I'm going to be a part of this. Let's do it.’ They're doing it for their own gain and for their own entertainment. It adds a new twist. There's Junkrat and Roadhog, true, but let's see from the other side of the world because they're from a place where it's like, ‘Do it for your own fucking gain or else you die.’ Give him some of that grew up from the high life or from the low life and then we'll just go, ‘Okay, I'm going to do whatever the hell I want because I can.’”

Nova wishes to see a more chaotic and neutral character that has involved themselves in *Overwatch*'s conflict for the fun of causing trouble. While the game has some characters that are sort of like that in Junkrat and Roadhog, who they mention, Nova feels this is different since they are in a wasteland where that is the norm. They want a character that does not have an excuse for being chaotic, but does so just because they can.

Audree has an interesting desire for a new character in terms of lore and personality.

“Not for the same character we were just discussing, but for a new character in the future. This will sound weird, I would like to see someone in the game who struggles, someone who isn't so heroic, someone who on the side is battling a drug addiction or, probably want to be part of gameplay, you can really do that in gameplay. But in the lore, behind the scenes, someone who really struggles at life because I think that's something that's almost never represented in gaming. Someone who's, mental illness. Everyone on *Overwatch* is so successful, even the evil characters, the ones who went bad, like Reaper. He's still very good at what he does. He doesn't seem to struggle, he doesn't seem to, maybe he does a little bit actually. He is pretty emo, but they play it comically. I would just like to see in the back story, characters that, there's plenty of characters I do relate to in this game, but there's no character that I relate to completely. So it would just be cool to have a character that I relate a part of my own existence to them and someone who struggles a lot.”

Audree wishes to see someone who isn't presented as heroic or easily capable of tasks. She wishes to see an everyday person, with some negative traits other than just being evil. For her, the ability to completely identify with a character is absent, since everyone has fairy tale levels of success and competency. Struggle is the central aspect Audree wishes to see within a new character's lore and personality.

Some participants did not feel there was enough diversity, saying they want more diversity in Overwatch. Angela feels that there is a lack of diversity within the roles themselves.

“There are a lot of support characters that are female, I think, compared to their roster. If you look in DPS, there's a bit less females. I do think there is the stereotypical idea that females are supports, that they put more female characters in the support role, but I don't really have something against it either. I think it's fine. I don't think it's a bad thing that there are female characters that are supports. It's not like they haven't put any male in the support role. There's Lucio, there's Tekharta Zenyatta, even though he's an omnic, but I do hope that the next one, even though I doubt so, I do hope that the next one is going to be a male again, but I do think it's going to be Echo, which is the omnic but a female. Again, that's fine. It's not a human anyway, it's a robot.”

Angela focuses on how a majority of the support characters are female, while the majority of the DPS characters are male. She wishes for more diversity in this context, mentioning the stereotype of female gamers playing support. It should be noted that she got her wish, with Baptiste being released as the new *Black, male*, support character. Alice also feels that there are too many male DPS characters and too many female support characters.

“There are more female supports than male supports and there are more male DPS than female DPS. I do notice that but, I would love to see a male support or another female DPS.”

Alice was even more lucky with the last two new characters in Overwatch being a female DPS and male Support (Baptiste also). It was interesting that few participants mentioned caring about

gender diversity in the tank role, though that role actually has *more* females than males, if you exclude the animal characters.

Most participants valued and appreciated diversity and inclusivity in video games, with Overwatch faring better than other games in their opinions in this aspect. While some were excited by the representation provided by characters in the game, others saw missed opportunities or flaws. The overall sentiment, however, was positive regarding representation in Overwatch, with a feeling that the developers were trying to some degree.

*Conclusion.* A video game's characters were very important to participants. The ability to identify with characters, while not a requirement, had a great effect on participants' attraction to a game, both initially and once already playing. While participants had issues with character design, such as oversexualization and lack of diversity in some forms, Overwatch's characters were generally liked, with efforts for being diverse and inclusive being noticed. Though not a deal-breaker, character gender was also quite important to participants' identifying with, and choosing, characters in games they played. Competent and stereotype-breaking female characters were loved, as is expected, but participants' desires for chaotic and less capable characters surprised me.

#### *Views Towards In-game Moderation*

This sections deals with the final research question, "What are girl gamers' feelings towards the in-game mechanics for reducing toxicity and do they perceive that more could be done?". Participants' views of how well Blizzard moderates the Overwatch community, and how much they care about the harassment girl gamers receive are the main focus here.



Participants were also allowed to explore their own ideas for improving moderation and reducing toxicity in the gaming environment.

*Faith in System.* While some participants reported feeling that moderation in Overwatch's gaming environment was effective, many felt there were problems with it. Some participants had very little faith in the moderation and reporting in Overwatch, with some feeling it was pointless. While a few did believe in the system, and that there was institutional effort in reducing toxicity, nearly all had some doubts about if anything was actually changing.

One of the more popular feelings of doubt was the idea that reporting is ineffective. Participants often felt that using the in-game reporting mechanism to report other player's bad behavior did not have any real effect on reducing that bad behavior. Ophelia feels that reporting is ineffective, to the point of not bothering to use it.

**Ophelia:** I've never used it only because I didn't dwell too much on it in game. I'd probably rant about it to my friends and my boyfriend, but I don't go as far as reporting people unless, like, it hasn't happened yet, but if someone did something really terrible, I guess I would try report. I don't see what reporting is going to do honestly. In some games you get reported, they get blocked, banned for a bit and then they come back. I know Blizzards got something different. I don't really know all the rules for it, but I just honestly don't see the point in doing that unless if I was feeling petty enough to report someone, like look them up, check their profile and then report them for something. I haven't done it yet.

**Me:** Do you feel that reporting is effective?

**Ophelia:** Honestly, I don't really think so. I think they put it there to satisfy the customers that there is that option of being reported. Other than that, I don't think it really stops people. If they really want to be toxic and be rude, they're going to do it regardless.

Ophelia feels that the reporting mechanic is there just to make people feel like something it being done, rather than to actually do anything. Her feelings towards the reporting mechanic prevent her from attempting to use it, with her also feeling that reporting someone is "petty". Audree also does not believe that reporting is effective.

“If it's effective at all, I'm unaware of it. I've gotten notices that someone that I reported, if see a slur, I report it, and sometimes I'll get a message like, ‘Action was taken’, but most of the time I don't. I know that the reputation system is supposed to be like a social idea, it doesn't, the commendations, or whatever it's called, that does encourage less toxic behavior but there's no way to really see when someone is toxic beforehand. There's no flag on their account or something, ‘This person has been suspended for saying the N-word five times.’”

While Audree does use the reporting mechanic, and sometimes gets feedback, the infrequency of feedback leads her to feel it is not very effective. She also mentions the endorsement system (she uses the term commendations), where players can endorse others for *good* behavior, where a player's endorsement level shows how many endorsements they have received. Audree criticizes the system for not having an indicator of negative behavior. Audree wishes to be able to identify toxic players before they act toxic.

Views of the toxicity of an environment shaped participants' participation in certain games, and their outlook on toxicity as well. Kinetics mentions leaving the environment if it is too toxic.

“I will say when I buy a game, I look more at the content like what's going to be in the game, what is it. Staying is based off of the community. I may be still buy a game, but I might not play as long as I would if the community is super toxic.”

While the toxicity of an environment does not stop her from buying a game, with her caring more about the content of the game, toxicity can cause her to stop playing a game. Participants' lack of faith in moderation also led to their feelings that toxicity is just part of the environment. As Angela mentioned, she feels toxicity can never be completely eliminated.

“I feel like we're never going to be really able to get rid of it completely, people are going to be people. People are going to be mean, it's always going to happen. There are ways to mitigate it and that way is just through a report system. I do feel like the report system could be a bit more harsh on people with multiple offenses. There should also be something that's done a bit more for sexual harassment. I know it's not accepted, as soon

as there are reports going in, but I don't think that's something the game can do about it. It's really us the community.”

Angela has less faith in the moderation and reporting mechanics of the game, not just because she feels it is not very effective, but because she feels that the community is what controls whether toxicity occurs, not the game. She feels that toxicity is not treated as severely as it should be, feeling that repeat offenders should face harsher punishment.

Nova also feels that toxicity is inevitable due to the nature of the game.

“I hate saying this, but it's bound to happen. Toxicity is always going to be there like opinions and assholes. They're always there, it's bound to happen. That's just because- specifically if it's a competitive game. Competitive games breed competitive players and it breeds toxicity.”

They feel that the competitive nature of the games makes it so that nothing will be able to stop toxicity from happening. This nature *creates* toxicity in their opinion.

One of the major issues causing participants to lack faith in the moderation system's effectiveness was the lack of proof of punishment. While Overwatch cannot provide details regarding the action taken based on reporting, due to the abuse of the system this would create, occasionally messages will pop up when you log in saying action has been taken for one or more of the reports you recently submitted. This is not enough for some participants, who would like to know what kind of action is being taken. When asked if she feels if reporting is effective or reduces toxicity, Julia doubts that it is effective.

“I end up reporting a lot of people. It's rare that I actually get the whole thanks for reporting thing. It's like, ‘Thank for reporting.’, but what did you do to them? Did anything actually get that or is it just like, ‘Thanks man, we're looking into it.’ A lot of people say that their reporting system doesn't do much. I wouldn't doubt that.”

While she uses the reporting system frequently, she does not receive much feedback, leading her to wonder if her reports are effective, or even being paid attention to. Audree's feelings go even further, with her feeling unsatisfied with *any* reporting system in *any* game.

“No, not really because I think most games that I'm familiar with, most games I've played, the reporting system by design, the company's like, 'For privacy reasons, we can't tell you what happened.' I would like to know what happened. I would like to know that actually, I've been in games where someone spoke on voice and everyone else could tell that that person was black and that person was subjected to like 20 minutes of straight racism. I would like to know that when I report that, it's more than just, 'We received your report and action was taken.'”

Audree wants to know what has happened to someone she has reported. Audree wants to know that when severe acts of toxicity are perpetrated severe action is taken against the perpetrator.

Some participants *did* have faith in the system, however, feeling that there is effort in moderation for Overwatch. Z feels that Blizzard is doing as well as they can, though that is not quite enough.

“I think they're doing what they can. They're making good efforts. I don't think it's quite there yet, there's still a little bit more work that they could probably do on it on monitoring mostly, but we only have so much staff, right?”

While she feels they put in good effort, she feels like they could try harder. She also wonders about how much staff they have, questioning if there can be enough manpower for moderation to be effective in a gaming environment. Nova also feels that moderations efforts are effective, mentioning a mass-ban in Overwatch.

“Yes, they did ban over 14,000 people for toxicity a couple years back. I think they're trying, but I think they need to be taking bigger steps than the steps that they're taking.”

While Nova feels that Blizzard is trying, they feel that Blizzard should be taking larger steps for dealing with toxicity.

Rachel also feels that Blizzard puts in an effort, but that it falls short of being truly effective.

“They're definitely trying. It shows they're definitely trying. xQc just got in trouble again and I don't know, in some ways I wish they were a little bit more harsh. I guess they're doing what they can. Maybe I have too much faith in them, but they're definitely trying, like the endorsements things and they follow the reporting system. I think the reporting system works well, but I think they're trying their best, but it's always going to be an uphill battle.”

Rachel mentions a professional Overwatch player and streamer, xQc, who is especially toxic, getting in trouble for his behavior. This was a big deal, with the popularity xQc has making this a very high profile punishment. Rachel still wishes that punishments would be harsher, however, feeling that it will always be a tough fight to get rid of toxicity.

Participants all had doubts about the effectiveness of reporting and moderation in Overwatch, though to varying degrees. Some completely lacked faith in the system, while others felt the system worked, just not as well as it could. The lack of perceived effectiveness of reporting led some participants to not use the reporting system, in turn further reducing the effectiveness of this in-game mechanic. As Angela pointed out, the mechanisms for reducing toxicity can be there, but if people do not use them they will not be effective, with her placing responsibility for reducing toxicity on the community.

*Things Done Differently.* Many participants wanted to see things done differently in the in-game moderation and reporting systems. One of the more popular changes desired by participants was wanting harsher punishments. Angela feels that toxic actions should have different levels of response by moderation.

“I feel like there would be definitely levels. Like someone who's getting reported for abuse of chat just because they used slurs. When I say slurs, I'm not talking about the N word, because I feel like that should be insta-banned. When I say slurs it's like using

words I won't say right now because we're in an interview. C words, something like that. Yes, it's not nice, but I wouldn't permaban someone based on that. Everyone has their rough days where they just talk without really thinking about what they're saying and stuff like that and whatever. Of course, if it happens a lot then yes, you're going to get silenced, you're going to get banned. I feel like sexual harassment should not be acceptable. I know it's not, it's not their thing, Sorry, I got mixed up. What was I saying? Yes, about sexual harassment. If I see someone sexually harassing someone, as a mod that would be for me, permanent ban instantly. It's not something that's ever acceptable. You can't have the excuse of, 'I wasn't feeling well that day,' or, 'I had a lot on my plate.' That's just not acceptable in any way.”

Angela feels that racial slurs should lead to instant bans, regardless of circumstances, though not permanent bans. If slurs were used frequently, or if they were to get in trouble for it several times, Angela feels that a permanent ban would be deserved, however. She also feels that sexual harassment deserves an instant and permanent ban, feeling this kind of behavior is inexcusable.

Rachel also suggests using permanent account bans, also feeling some actions are inexcusable.

“If you say ‘Kill yourself’ to someone, I would just perm ban the account. I feel like there's no excuse for that. Maybe it will be a little bit more harsh in my consequences, I guess, [laughs] being toxic. I think that if you lost your account and had to go make a new account, and re-buy the game more, I think that would cut down the toxicity because that's like hitting your wallet. You know what I mean? They're hitting where it hurts. I know some people have like a bajillion Smurfs, but not everyone does. If you really had to watch what you said, because I don't know, maybe that's a better way to do it. It's more harsh.”

Rachel feels that the monetary cost of having your account banned would be effective in stopping toxicity, though not entirely as some people have multiple accounts. She feels that the threat of losing all the time and money you invested in an account would cause people to think before they acted.

Participants also wished for stricter moderation, wanting Blizzard to be more sensitive to toxicity. When asked how she would deal with toxicity if she were made a moderator on Overwatch, Ophelia says she would act on the slightest misbehavior.

“If I was a moderator, I probably, If I even see like a smidgen of negative toxicity and anything like, saying anything rude to anyone, I'd probably be like a you're out, kicked out, reported, blocked, or whatever it is. You just got to nip that in the bud. That's what I think.”

Ophelia feels that you have to punish even the smaller instances of toxicity, to keep toxicity from developing in the gaming environment. While this might lead to a decline in Overwatch's population at this point, due to the prevalence of toxicity, stopping toxicity before it develops is an interesting idea.

Audree also has an interesting idea for dealing with toxicity, giving players the option to separate themselves.

“Yes, but one that you can choose. Some people don't mind sexism. If you just want to hang out with a bunch of dudes, and you all want to be sexists, but you don't want to deal with racism, that's cool. That should be available to you for gaming. It'd be cool if the game would facilitate that type of, create a social space just for you. Even if it becomes insular and it becomes even more misogynistic, whatever. It'd be cool if games created more communities within them. Being able to filter different types of players who have had action taken against them, that would be one really cool thing. Don't know how possible it would be. Another cool thing I think is what I just said, I would love like a monthly, I have to pay them \$5 a month, but that \$5 a month puts me with other players who are paying \$5 a month. The deal is basically, for that \$5 a month, they actually investigate reports. It funds the ability for them to hire staff to actually moderate the game better. I don't know how expensive it would be. I don't know if it's even feasible. To create a moderated space like that, I would pay for that subscription understanding that my subscription is paying for employees to go through and actually remove people who don't deserve to be there.”

Audree does not mind if toxicity exists as long as she could avoid it, even if this reinforces toxic behavior. This option of being able to filter out players and choose what kind of people you were playing with is something she is willing to pay extra for.

Even with this study focusing on gender, racism ended up being the most hated form of discrimination for most participants. Alice feels that racist comments and slurs should not even be allowed to be typed into chat saying, “It would be a great idea to not be allowed to type slurs because, you are allowed to say certain words that should not be said.”. She would gladly allow censorship in order to remove something that she feels should not exist in the gaming environment. Angela’s comments also show strong feelings towards racism, having said, “...like someone who's getting reported for abuse of chat just because they used slurs. When I say slurs, I'm not talking about the N word, because I feel like that should be insta-banned.”. She favors removing players from the game entirely for using the “N word”, and harsh punishments for other acts of racism.

Several participants felt that rewarding good behavior, as well as punishing bad behavior, would be effective for reducing toxicity. Rachel suggested that people that are “actively not toxic” and inclusive be rewarded.

“I don't know how to go about promoting that though. Maybe in the e-sports scene, I know that they're coming down with harsher punishments for people. Maybe they should start rewarding people that are super actively not toxic and more inclusive and promote good community. Maybe they should start rewarding instead of punishing also. Do you know what I mean?”

Rachel is especially interested in the e-sports scene, with professional players and streamer having more influence.

“The only thing I can think of is like rewarding good behavior. Having more role models that are big deals, like having Blizz promote the heck out of streamers and the pro players that are like they're never toxic or they're actively helping the community or being nice or giving back. Just promote the heck out of them. I don't know how they could do it, like get them more sponsors, promote them on the b-net app, stuff like that, so that people are seeing more, because xQc has so many viewers and he's toxic like, people are watching just because he's a jerk.”



Rachel feels that role models, such as streamers who are popular, have a huge impact on the gaming community, being able to socialize good or bad behavior into the community. She feels that Blizzard should promote streamers and professional players who are not toxic so that more people end up viewing them. She again mentions xQc's toxicity and popularity as a problem.

Nova feels that the endorsement system in Overwatch is a good tool for encouraging positive behavior.

“I think that's a good thing [the endorsement system]. I think that is a very- what's the word? I think it's a very positive tool because it's the small things that sometimes make people feel good. Especially if they feel as though they did horrible in the match, but they get that nice job endorsement. It's like somebody actually appreciate me and what I also like is if you're friends with this person, you can't endorse them which sucks, but at the same time, it encourages people that you don't know to give you that little bit of positivity that can win you the next match. There's other games that I play that have endorsement systems, League of Legends is one of them and when you play those games and you get an endorsement, a certain amount of endorsement gives you a little flag next to your name and just be like, ‘They had the most endorsements. They're the MVP of the game’, and that feels good to get MVP.”

Nova feels that the positivity that being given a reward, or an award at the end of every match, can encourage people to be positive. They reference the MVP system from League of Legends, feeling that the visible marker given to the person with the most endorsements makes that person feel good about the award, encouraging people to try to behave to get endorsed.

Kinetics, however, feels that endorsements are not effective.

**Me:** How do you feel about the endorsement system? Is it effective?

**Kinetics:** Personally, not really. I range around endorsements three and four in general. That's where I level around. I do wish they would give you a bit more reward for being that high-level endorsement. Because at this point, they just give you maybe two boxes every month or something, which I don't feel is good enough incentive to endorse or be endorsed. It's a cool system and I like the thought of it, but I feel like there should be a better reward system for it. It's like incentivize people to want to be endorsed.

**Me:** Is there anything you would like to see done to improve reporting or moderation in *Overwatch*?

**Kinetics:** Well, like I said, I would like an improvement to the endorsement system. One thing that would be pretty cool is if you get endorsed in comp. If you could get comp points in a way, if you could receive more comp points to get a golden weapon by being nice in competitive play, I think that would be really awesome. Other than that, I honestly think there really isn't much that I know of that they could feasibly do. If they come up with the ideas where I'm like, "Woah, that's awesome," then all for them. They really have a lot of stuff in place to try and help us. Well, the most they can do as far as I know is fix the endorsement system and look at more cases.

Kinetics feels that the reward for being endorsed is not a strong enough incentive, wishing that a higher endorsement level would lead to other rewards, or increasing rewards that are received in other areas of the game. She feels that stronger incentives or better rewards for good behavior would be effective for reducing toxicity.

While participants had mixed feelings about the effectiveness of moderation and reporting in *Overwatch*, they generally agreed about how to improve these things. Most participants felt that increasing the severity of punishments for extreme cases of toxicity would be effective. This would either lead to the prevention of toxicity through deterrence, the toxic person changing their behavior as a result of harsh punishment, or the complete removal of the toxic person from the environment. Many participants also mentioned racism in particular as a problem they wanted to see dealt with more harshly, with very little tolerance being shown by participants for this kind of toxicity. Participants also wished to have good behavior encouraged, feeling that the moderation in *Overwatch* had overlooked this solution, or not given it enough attention.

*Conclusion.* Views towards the moderation of *Overwatch* ranged from total distrust and lack of faith, to cautious optimism. Participants felt that many issues were not being dealt with effectively, or at all, with some choosing to leave environments altogether as a result. Pessimism

about the ability to stop toxicity also resulted from participants' lack of faith in moderation, with some feeling that toxicity was inevitable and could never be fully eliminated. There were, however, some that felt game developers were putting in an effort to stop or reduce toxicity, though often this was accompanied by feelings that more effort could be put in, or that these efforts would, or could, not be enough to be effective for stopping toxicity. Potential solutions for the deficiency of current moderation systems fell into two basic categories, stricter punishment or moderation and the rewarding of good behavior. Participants felt that the threat of harsh punishment, and the complete removal of certain types of toxicity and toxic players from the environment would be effective. Participants felt combining harsher punishment with stronger encouragement and rewards for positive behavior would lead to a less toxic gaming environment.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### *Discussion*

While I was open to being surprised by my findings, I did have some expectations for what I would find. As a member of the Overwatch community on both the Xbox one and PC platform, with a combined 500+ hours in-game, I have firsthand experience of toxicity in this community. I know that toxicity exists in this environment and I have been present when sexual harassment occurred. As an agender video gamer who frequently uses female characters and avatars in online video games, and uses a feminine gamer handle, I have often been mistaken as a girl gamer, experiencing some sexual harassment and toxicity based on this misperception. Due to this I expected that some of the interviews would have themes of sexual harassment and toxicity. I have been invited to several “girls only” groups or groups supporting female or feminine gamers in online video games due to this misperception. Because of this I expected there would be some perceptions of girl gamer space or communities. I have also personally noticed that I play characters that I can see myself in and identify with, and have had a friend justify not playing with female characters by saying, “I am not a girl”. Prior research (Littleton et al 1998, 1999, Gibson 1977, Snow 1994) also indicated that identification with characters in a game as well as the game space played a role in performance. This led me to believe that there would be some themes of identification, based on sex or gender, with characters in Overwatch and that this could play some role in how girl gamers play or what roles they take up in the team. I have also used the in-game reporting mechanics quite frequently and have in the past been subjected to penalties in other games, so I expected perceptions of in-game moderation and institutional involvement to exist.

This study shows variation in how participants perceive the gaming environment, but also how they share many views. Most participants had similar views when it came to their experiences of toxicity in competitive online video games. Participants felt that they were often treated differently based on their gender. Sometimes this resulted in others being overly friendly towards participants, but usually this resulted in participants receiving extra hostility due to being a girl gamer. In either situation they were given more attention than a “typical” person in the gaming environment would, being seen as “tokens” (Kanter 1977). This helps to explain why girl gamers’ presence draws more attention, it is a more noteworthy event due to its uncommonness. Tokenism helps explain why attacks on girls are based on stereotypes so frequently, as they are viewed as representative of their group as a whole. The effect of men acting more masculine when in the presence of token women that Kanter discusses is also seen, with toxic masculinity and sexism being frequent in participants’ experiences.

The stereotypical views of a “girl gamer” ranged from views that they lacked ability and skill at video games, to questioning their intentions in the video game environment. A common theme in stereotypical constructions of a girl gamer was that they sucked, with participants mentioning they were often blamed for losses, or for the team’s poor performance. This idea was also linked with the notion that girl gamers were just playing video games for attention from guys, with the term “e-girl” being used by many participants for this kind of girl gamer. Even when participants were treated more nicely than usual, they were suspicious, suspecting there were ulterior motives. This idea of girls being involved in video games for reasons other than the enjoyment of those video games, or to compete and succeed, led to several other ideas.

An elitist view of what it is to *truly* be a gamer existed with or without gender being a component. This was composed of viewing games and their players as falling into softcore and

hardcore groups, with games that are typically played by and attractive to guys being viewed as hardcore, while those that appealed to girls more often being considered softcore. Games that were hardcore legitimized someone as a “gamer”, though they could still be viewed as a softcore player of a hardcore game, such as an “e-girl” playing Overwatch, and viewed as illegitimate in their “gamer” status. Softcore players of softcore games would not be viewed as legitimate gamers. As a further step, technical knowledge of one’s computer was used as a test of legitimacy by elitists, with a lack of knowing how to build a computer, what the parts in your computer were, or other specialized computer knowledge being used as a means to attack someone’s legitimacy. For one participant, Angela, this manifested in a strange girl-on-girl attack, where another girl gamer attacked her on this basis, claiming Angela was making girl gamers look bad. Angela’s attacker was trying to distance herself from what she thought was an undesirable way of being perceived, though reinforcing a stereotype that negatively affected her in the process. While the idea of girls being in the gaming environment for reasons other than to play video games delegitimized their gamer status, it also brought more directly gender-based toxicity.

Due to the idea that girls were playing video games to gain attention, and not possibly being interested in or skilled at the game itself, participants described guys as being more toxic towards them. Participants also described guys as likely to minimize toxicity girl gamers received, with participants feeling they either could not understand because they were guys or that they did not care about girl gamer’s problems. Participants mentioned instances where their friendliness was viewed as flirtation by guys, with some participants claiming that guys in video games were possibly less skilled or experienced at interacting with girls in general. This led some participants to start any online friendship with a disclaimer that they were not, and would

not become, interested in them romantically. Sometimes this allowed participants to develop positive, health relationships with guys, though sometimes it led to extreme toxicity. One such instance of extreme toxicity happened to Audree, with a guy who felt she was not reciprocating his affection claiming he had a right to have sex with her and that it was not fair to him for her to have had sex with so many other people, but not him. He ended their friendship by hoping for her to get raped, but claiming that, as a whore, she could not truly be raped. While shocking, interactions like this were not presented as a rare occurrence by participants. For participants, even somethings as simple as mentioning they were in a relationship was enough for them to be viewed as “bitchy”. Unsurprisingly, when asked what they imagined when they thought of a “stereotypical gamer” many participants described them as a slovenly, overweight, socially inept, adult male, living in their parents’ basement, being creepy or toxic to people as they played video games.

Even though Audree’s instance of sexual harassment stems from the guy’s attraction to her, sexual harassment in general was used against participants in a way that is in line with MacKinnon’s views (1979) of sexual harassment as expression of gendered power. Participants spoke of being outnumbered and ganged up on when attacked, with sexual jokes and harassment sometimes leading to group attacks on them. This served the dual purpose of silencing the girl gamers present, while also establishing and enforcing the gendered norms of the environment. With the idea of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), and the social norms and views gay athletes experience (Clarke 1998, Anderson 2002), the attacks on girl gamers directly, as well as the perpetuation of the abstract idea of the “girl gamer”, can be seen as maintenance of the idea of masculinity as necessary for competitive ability. Girl gamers, or

anyone not fitting with the idea of masculinity as important for success in video games, is a threat and is attacked, excluded, or silenced, to help this idea survive.

The common occurrence of guys being creepy or overly sexual in their interactions with girl gamers online doubtlessly shaped this conception of the “stereotypical gamer”. Beyond toxicity aimed at girl gamers due to perceived illegitimacy in the gaming environment, or intentions other than playing, there was also toxicity directed at them simply because they were present and perceived as girl gamers. As an agender person who plays Overwatch with a feminine in-game name, interestingly I have ended up as the target of these kinds of toxicity as well, unless I use voice chat, in which case it is replaced with homophobia. Many participants described having guys attack them as soon as they discovered they were a girl gamer, ranging from comments about girls sucking at video games and lamenting the coming loss, to various acts of sexism. Sexism ranged from “back to the kitchen” type jokes and generally disparaging comments about females to hostility towards girl gamers, with overt efforts to force them to leave the environment or do what the attacker wanted them to. These efforts included things such as harassing someone to play, or stop playing, as a certain character, or asking them to leave the match, because they were a girl gamer. Typically, the character Mercy was the character attackers demanded girl gamers play, with a stereotype existing that girl gamers are all support players and all Mercy mains.

The added toxicity that participants received led some to develop feelings that they did not belong, or that others wanted them to feel unwelcome, in the gaming environment. Participants dealt with those feelings in different ways, with some leaving the environment altogether, either through leaving matches or abandoning games entirely, some used sneakiness to remain in the environment, with others simply tolerating the abuse. This sneakiness included



things such as participants using neutral names and avoiding voice chat when playing with strangers online, as well as more impressive efforts such as using voice changing software to make their voice sound like a guy's. The downside to using sneakiness was that participants had to limit their actions or maintain an effort to continue to interact in the way they did. For those who were playing in ranked matches, where voice communication is important, these options were not viable. Participants who played ranked, as well as those that did not wish to employ the sneakiness methods, described developing a "thick skin", getting used to having toxicity directed at them for being girl gamers, on top of the hostility experienced by everyone in competitive online video games. This led some participants to prefer to play with gamers of their own gender, though surprisingly, some participants preferred playing with guys. Those that preferred guys cited not getting along with and not identifying with other girls as their reasons for this preference. While these participants self-identified as girl or woman, they did not feel a connection with girl gamers, sometimes not with other girls or women in real life as well. While these participants also viewed guys as more toxic than girls, they were willing to put up with additional toxicity to play the game as they wanted to.

Fortunately, not all of the participants' experiences surrounding video games were negative. I was surprised to hear that several of the participants were introduced to video games or encouraged to play by their fathers or boyfriends. While I would expect their fathers and boyfriends to be supportive, it was surprising that they would be the entry point into this environment for the participants. Ironically, and also surprising, video games were the entry point into relationships for some participants, with them meeting their partners online. While meeting a partner in video games was not common for participants, the aspects of socialization that video games provided was important for all of them. Some participants valued the ease of

finding people to socialize with, as well as the safety of socializing with them, in online video games. Some participants also described how the aspect of working with others was appealing to them. The opportunities for organization, communication, and teamwork in a competitive group scenario drew them into games like Overwatch. Some participants described having wanted a competitive outlet in their life, but had not been able to find one until they got into video games. The toxicity towards girl gamers in the environment also had the ironically positive effect of driving some girl gamers together, rather than driving them away from the environment. Participants described feelings of solidarity with other girl gamers, feeling the need to stand up for and fight for other girl gamers when they were being abused.

Participants also described positive feelings, such as emotional attachment, towards characters in Overwatch, with many being particularly happy about the way female characters were presented in-game. The characters were important to participants for many reasons. Some participants found the characters to be role models, with many identifying strongly with certain characters. Interestingly, the most commonly and strongly identified with character was Mercy, the character that was stereotypically associated with girl gamers. Mercy is popular in general, so this does not necessarily lend any truth to the stereotype of girl gamers as Mercy players. One of the most appreciated aspects of the characters for participants was the diversity and inclusivity of the cast of characters in Overwatch. Participants appreciated characters such as Tracer, who is openly lesbian, and Zarya, who is a very muscular yet heterosexual woman, liking how they broke stereotypes and norms for women characters in video games. Some participants, however, felt that more diversity could be shown in the female characters, with Angela mentioning the lack of a black woman, even though she is not black, standing up for others she felt she had common cause with as a woman. Preference for characters of their own gender, and characters

with traits they could identify with personally, were important to participants. While many participants identified with Mercy in some ways, many still wanted more diversity in the cast of characters in Overwatch so that they could see a bit of themselves represented in the game. Participants surprisingly also wished to see more characters that were involved in the conflict Overwatch's story revolves around "just for fun", wanting a neutral or apathetic character. While many participants felt positively about characters, and the diversity and inclusivity of the cast, in Overwatch, some did feel that female characters were unnecessarily sexualized, or were actually not as diverse or inclusive as the male characters.

While most felt the Overwatch team was doing a good job with the characters, many participants felt that they left much to be desired with reporting and moderation. The toxicity experienced by girl gamers left many participants feeling unwelcome in the gaming environment, with some feeling that little was being done by Blizzard to reduce this toxicity. Several participants expressed feeling that the reporting system was not effective, with many doubting if anything was actually being done to punish people who were reported. Some way of providing proof that punishment had occurred, or details on punishment enacted, were mentioned by participants as ways that trust in reporting and moderation could be built. Lack of faith in reporting and moderation, or the ability for in-game mechanics to change human nature, lead some participants to feel that only the online gaming community itself could stop toxicity. This collective effort would either work by negatively sanctioning toxicity, though some participants felt that if the community felt motivated enough to combat toxicity through social sanctions they could simply, or already would have, used the reporting mechanics to eliminate it. The latter opinion differed based on trust of organizational commitment to reducing toxicity. Participants also felt that harsher punishments and stricter moderation would be effective for reducing

toxicity. Some felt that words such as the “n-word” should either be blocked from use in text chat, or be grounds for instant or permanent bans for accounts if used in voice chat. This was balanced by some participants’ feelings that good behavior should be more rewarded, through two main ways. The improvement of the current endorsement system by providing better or different rewards was the simpler solution provided, with many feeling the endorsement system was a good idea, but was not adequate, not going far enough. The other method was for Blizzard to promote professional players and streamers who exhibited positive behavior, while also possibly limiting negative ones, with xQc directly mentioned as a negative player. Through this promotion, participants hoped that positive behavior would be socialized into the community, and that players would start to look up to the positive professionals and streamers as role models, rather than some of the currently popular toxic ones.

While participants experienced many difficulties in the gaming environment, and were frequently targeted for being girl gamers specifically, they continued to enjoy playing video games. Even though some participants would leave individual matches, or even entire games, none mentioned the possibility of leaving video gaming altogether. Participants developed many different ways of dealing with the toxicity they experienced, and found many different things in the gaming world to feel good about. Identification with others in the gaming environment, as well as with the characters in the game, helped participants to find places and ways they felt they belonged. Though they did not have a great deal of faith in Blizzard’s efforts or ability to stop toxicity, they were hopeful toxicity could be stood up to, with some inventive suggestions for fighting it.

## *Conclusion*

This study shows how video gamers can come to think of themselves, both in the real world with their gender identity, but also in the gaming environment with gamer identity. The complex and unique mechanics of gender identity, gender performance, and other's perception of that identity and performance in the online video gaming environment, make this environment invaluable to sociological research. The importance placed on interactions and perception, combined with the near total freedom of expression, lead to myriad interesting ways in which gender and identity can shape and be shaped by other things. This study shows the difficulty of correctly capturing the important aspects of gender or sex, with neither working adequately on their own, but causing problems when used together. While toxicity aimed at "girl gamers" targeted an assumed cis-gender girl or woman, recipients of this toxicity may not be cis-gendered, or even gendered. Beyond interactions, the video games themselves become a reflection of the values and beliefs of their creators, similar to film and other visual media. The added component of video gamers actually *participating in*, as well as experiencing, the video game gives even more power to the socializing power of the medium, with the addition of online multiplayer and social interactions with actual people taking this well beyond any other medium studied so far in sociology. Even in the harshest and most hostile environment, this study shows the resiliency of its participants. Facing extreme hostility and harassment, participants still managed to laugh and have fun.

*Limitations.* There are some limitations to this study. The requirement of a signed consent document, using the participant's actual name, by the IRB proved to be a huge problem. Many of those who agreed to participate initially backed out once they were asked to sign the consent document, either fearing giving a stranger their name, or being made anxious by formality and

paperwork. The lack of my ability to ensure they were the ones signing the document, and the total inability to tell if they used their real name or a fake name, makes these documents essentially useless. More than half of the total possible participants were lost at the consent document stage, greatly reducing the number of interviews, and increasing the time needed to complete the project. The lack of understanding of the nature of online interactions in the video game environment, with girls being especially cautious and mistrusting of strangers, by the IRB was the largest limitation to this study. In the future, better methods for obtaining consent should be developed, with my suggestion having been to have an audio recording of the participant consenting, though this was rejected by the IRB. Due to the great distances between myself and participants, fear of giving out real names by participants from real life experiences of online stalkers, and the impossibility of verifying the signatures or identities of participants, requiring a consent document is not reasonable for these kinds of video game studies.

I do feel that theoretical saturation was achieved, or nearly achieved, even with the smaller sample size of ten participants. I still feel that the study would have benefited from having more of the initial potential participants actually participate in the study. It is possible that there were certain qualities to the group of girl gamers that were scared away by the consent document that was missed due to their not participating. While the random nature of matchmaking in Overwatch made the people that I encountered more random, there is the issue of players being generally grouped by skill rating in matchmaking, meaning that the game tries to place players in matches with other players of similar skill. This means that the participants that I recruited through meeting randomly in matchmaking were likely to have this in common with me. This was offset by snowball sampling from friends in Overwatch, from which I was able to gain participants from higher and lower skill levels. There is still the issue of my only

being able to guess if a person was a girl gamer based off of their name in-game, or their voice, with some possible recruits being passed over due to not using voice chat, or my perception they were a not a girl. However, I feel that these issues are virtually unavoidable, with there existing no way to randomly sample girls in this environment. Limits of ability to sample and gather participants also impacted my ability to recruit more tran-women and non-binary individuals.

*Future Research.* I believe that this research is important to the field of Sociology and Gender for several reasons. Since Overwatch has been created with inclusivity and openness in mind, it is important to see how this is perceived and if creating games with these themes in mind has an effect on the perception of its players. Little research has been done on girl gamers' perceptions of the environment in competitive online video games or the characters in these games. With the mindful creation of characters and character backgrounds and efforts to counter gender stereotypes present in Overwatch (Bratt 2017), I think it is necessary to look at how these efforts are being perceived by girl gamers. I feel that future research should take a deeper look at girl gamers' perceptions of each other, with an interesting divide existing between my participants, where some felt a duty towards other girl gamers and others avoiding them due to lack of identifying with them. Further research into what attracts girl gamers to characters in video games, and how they identify with these characters, is also needed. The majority of my participants identified with, and played as, Mercy, showing there is something more than just being attracted to her playstyle or aesthetic style that draws girl gamers to Mercy.

No other area allows the creation of new communities and identities, as well as new forms of communities and identities in the way that video games do. While similar to films and art, the element of interaction, whether with other human beings or with the game content, makes video games different from other types of media studies. Anonymity allows greater freedom in

expressing oneself and creating identities. Presentation of self takes on new forms with virtual bodies that can be manipulated in endless ways. With the freedom to create any body you want or choose a certain character, online video games present a way to escape race, sex, gender or other constructs in a way not possible in the real world. Ideas and feelings of identity and community are experienced and expressed in online video games in ways never before possible. With the video game environment, you have a small version of the social world that players come from, with norms and values being expressed with more freedom and less fear of repercussion. This can lead to the expression of ideas and behaviors that would not be acceptable in public, such as racism, or exaggeration of behaviors that are already exhibited. While borrowing from the society its members come from, video game environments are miniature societies on their own. They contain the interaction, identity formation, norms and values, and other social aspects that Sociologists are interested in, but with the video game environment a researcher can see how things develop much more easily and clearly. Studying video games is essentially looking at a society under a magnifying lens, with many of the social aspects of the world amplified and highlighted. Researchers with experience playing video games and being part of the video game communities is also important, however. With the fast paced changes to the community, the structure and type of games themselves, and the norms and behaviors of the gaming environment, understanding how these things used to be is important for understanding how they are and where they could end up. Without actually playing video games and interacting with others in the gaming environment in a long term capacity, understandings of interactions, of what exists in the gaming environment, and the ability to interpret events within the gaming environment are limited at best, impossible at worst. Lifelong participation in video gaming, and participation in online multiplayer video games nearly since their advent, equipped me with the



specialized understanding necessary not only to interpret interviews, but to know what to look for in the first place and which arising themes needed further exploration. Similarly, it would be very difficult, and possibly worthless, for someone with no understanding of Andy Warhol to interpret his Campbell's soup can art, even those in the art world often misinterpreted the works for lack of understanding the specifics of their meaning to Warhol. For these reasons I feel that video games are not only interesting for study, but important for sociological understanding and have a need to be studied, but that it needs to be noted who is studying it and how.

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