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The Changing Face of Gender Relations in the Gamer-Verse

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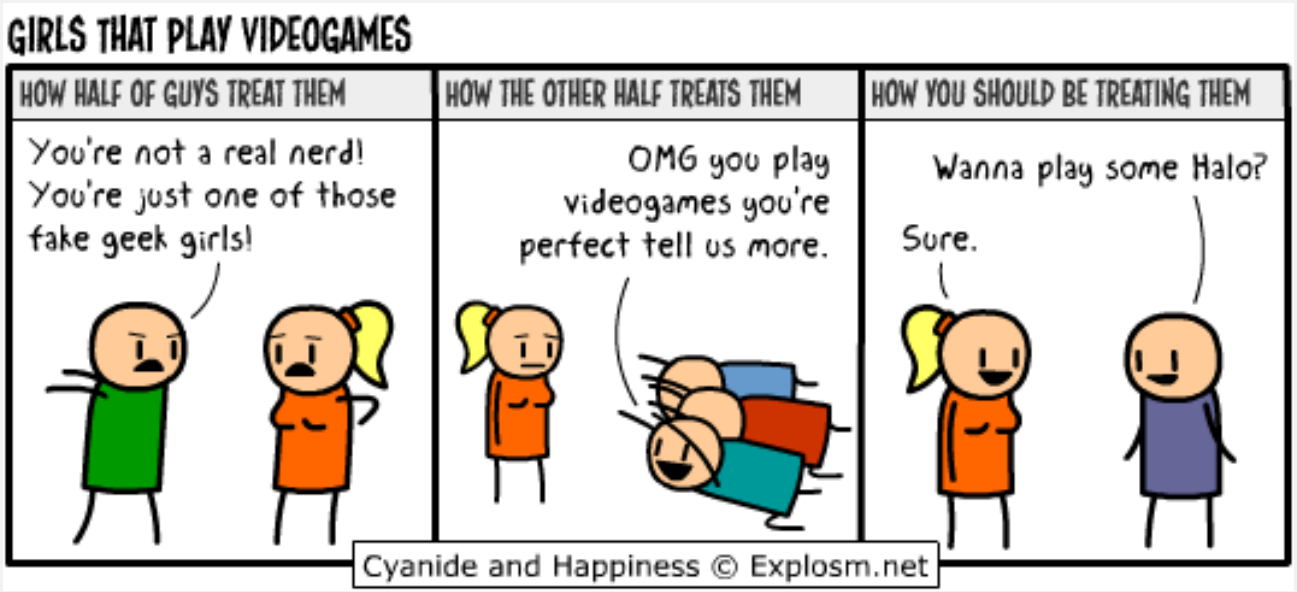
THE CHANGING FACE OF GENDER RELATIONS IN THE GAMER-VERSE



Arguably, video games became a dominant form of in house media in 1985 with the release of Super Mario Bros on the Nintendo Entertainment System. Over thirty years later, the franchise has sold over 240 million games and remains a strong influence to modern games. The game's premise? To take on the role of a male protagonist and rescue a kidnapped princess from the giant turtle who wishes to marry her. Your reward? Marrying her yourself.

This unflattering representation of women in video games set a standard that is only recently being challenged. Whether female characters need rescuing—a la princess Peach—play through the game wearing little more than fantasy loin cloths, or are presented as "rewards" for male characters, the portrayals are decidedly and nearly universally misogynistic.

Modern characters often fare little better as even strong female leads, such as Quiet (bottom left), are scantily clad; Quiet, specifically, also undulates in quite a risqué manner in several cutscenes, despite being a professional military sniper. Roll from the Mega Man series is a highly intelligent female robot with fighting skills equivalent to that of the eponymous hero. Her weapon? A broom. The ratings-leading Grand Theft Auto series boasts a loot system that rewards players for hiring prostitutes and then killing them to take back the money originally given to those female characters. The latest iteration of this series "V" is played in over fifteen million homes. Demeaning and dehumanizing tropes are a constant fixture in triple A games.

Further, programmers are so infatuated with pixelated female bodies they created "boob physics," which is exactly what it sounds like: programming that causes breasts to bounce in unrealistic manners that they hope is appealing to male players. It should be noted that, of these male players, the average age is now 36. These are adult men who, alongside impressionable youths, are being marketed to with the overt exploitation of the female body. Consider that these same men and boys share space and communication in the games "on-line" components.

The phenomena of exploitation through game play media is not a victimless crime. These representations of women as Other or "less than" have created new social norms in game space that undermine healthy gender differences.

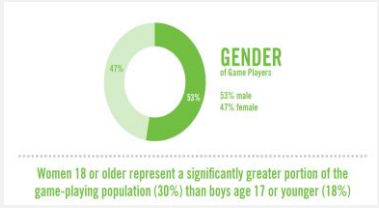
Female gamers experience an extraordinary amount of on-line harassment in game space. From being called demeaning names, to cyber stalking and bullying, to threats of death and rape. This is not simple "trash talk," but legitimate verbal assault and threats of physical violence. In the ethereal world of gaming, police have little power and the female gamers are often left to fend for themselves. Some male gamers don't insult female players, but rather make unwanted advances during gaming sessions, seeking dates or sexual encounters. There are no age constraints on many on-line games, creating a dangerous environment for young women in addition to hostile and abusive.

Nor is the abuse held solely to female gamers; male gamers also attack female video game programmers for "ruining the industry." Brianna Wu (top left) received death and rape threats from male gamers for intruding in a male dominated space; her personal information, including her home address, was posted to Facebook by a gamer who was angry that a woman took part in creating his beloved, imaginary, escapist, video-game reality. These are not isolated incidents of a few "bad apples," but rather instances exposing a systemic problem in gaming culture. This harassment is supported by a gaming industry that portrays women as objects of desire rather than as fellow humans.

Thankfully, change is happening. Pauline went from another "damsel in distress" to an strong independent mayor in her most recent outing in Mario Odyssey. Women are being positively represented in both games and in advertisement. Hypersexualized franchise leads, such as Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series are becoming independent heroines who are not only fully clothed but intelligent and competent not only in survival skills but academic pursuits as well. The Call of Duty franchise advertised its most recent games with just such a character. Women are wearing armor in fantasy games that will protect more than 8% of their body mass. No longer dependent on structuring games to sell male fantasies and relegate female characters to roles of objectification and subservience, developers are exploring female roles as leads and role models marketed to male and female gamers alike. Some progressive games, such as the science fiction exploration game Mass Effect, allow the player to decide the character's gender with no discernible difference other than physical appearance, which is also created by the end user.

Gaming industries now have to cater to a user base that is nearly half female. Women in game design are on the rise in AAA developing studios, and scandals such as "Gamergate" brought to light the abuse towards female programmers that caused some programming houses to protect their employees and "ban" abusive players from their servers. Women continue to be a significant presence at game expos but now as players, panelists, and designers rather than "eye-candy" in scanty, fantasy outfits provided by gaming studios in earlier years.

These changes are not radical nor out of the blue but the slow, steady, result of years of struggle against discrimination and negative gender portrayals by gamers and those in the industry of all genders. Representation in video game media created social norms and values that affected men's behavior in real life, to the detriment of women's safety and wellbeing. Once those norms were challenged, we observed the change in gaming cultures values as well. The multi-billion-dollar industry has some direct responsibility for shaping cultural normative behaviors in the gamer society. Some studios have accepted those responsibilities and have changed their archaic and chauvinistic portrayals of woman, and some gamers have responded with a safe gaming community. Hopefully, this trend will continue as more female gamers and game designers demand fair, ethical treatment from their male counterparts.



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