ABSTRACT

DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE SYSTEM TO REDUCE ADVERSE BEHAVIOR

TOWARDS GIRL GAMERS WITHIN THE VALORANT COMPETITIVE GAMING COMMUNITY

by Kimberly Ann Huffman

Esports, which is another name for online competitive gaming, has become more popular in recent years, with millions of players striving to be the best. With the increase in girl gamers, specifically in Valorant, a 5v5, character based, tactical shooter game, online gaming communities are experiencing adverse social conditions. The purpose of the research is to implement a design system that hinders negative players and incentivizes positive players to reduce the harmful effects that girl gamers are exposed to. This research study explores my experience as a female gamer in the Valorant online competitive community. Using Autoethnography as a transformational research method to examine further into the issue.

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List of Abbreviations

GLHF – Good Luck Have Fun

GG – Good Game

VAL – Valorant

COMP – Competitive

NT – Nice Try

GH – Good Half

COMMS – Communication

STRAT – Strategy

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, I always want to make you proud of me. I am so grateful to be your daughter and love you very much.

To my best friends Alicia and Brian. You have been such an amazing support system throughout this process. I could not have done it without the two of you.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

With the increase in girl gamers, specifically in Valorant, a 5v5, character based, tactical shooter game, online gaming communities are experiencing adverse social conditions. Due to the large influx of female players, there is more interaction between male and female games in the online gaming community. Online games are very popular, with more than 2.2 billion people playing them around the world (UKie, 2019). By 2023, 6.2 billion people are anticipated to be active online gamers (Statista, 2018). Between 2006 and 2022, the gender split among gamers increased from 62% men identifying to 52% men identifying and 48% women identifying (Statista,2022). In the Valorant community, the numbers for monthly active players have

reached 14 million. Out of those 14 million monthly players, 30–40% identify as girl gamers (GameBeat, 2021).

Within those particular settings, the communities within various games interact differently. When it comes to the interactions between genders, Valorant seems to trend more towards the toxic side. Based on my personal experiences and research on social media applications (YouTube, TikTok etc.), I have come to the conclusion that gamer girls tend to receive sexist remarks such as "Get back in the kitchen" or "Make me a sandwich" which could be perceived as verbal abuse. As a result, girl gamers who participate in competitive gaming report no desire to play or interact with their teammates when they are online. This is just one part of the numerous problems girl gamers face in the online gaming community. The frequency in which this occurs could be detrimental to the motivation of girl gamers wanting to continue playing and improve in a competitive setting.

THE PROBLEM

Riot Games, the company that created Valorant, has made efforts to encourage inclusivity and diversity in the community. Riot Games also has the power to put measures in place to deal with players who conduct themselves in ways that are harmful to females who play Valorant. Riot has historically banned players who engage in unjust/sexist behaviors and forbade their ability to talk in-game using features such as voice chat or text chat. However, Valorant is a free-to-play game, so the banned players could just create a new account and continue playing without being penalized for their aggression towards the girl gamers within the Valorant gaming community.

An organization called AnyKey has taken on the task of creating a group that aids in supporting inclusivity in eSports. They made a "GLHF" (Good Luck, Have Fun) pledge, in 2017, that anyone in the gaming community can sign to help reinforce the idea that everyone is welcome. Regardless of such efforts, the lack of inclusivity in the gaming communities is still a prevalent problem. It seems that online competitive gaming is getting more divided than ever. The girl gamers in eSports cannot contribute to their full potential when there is a lack of inclusivity and

equity. Although there have been efforts to establish distinct communities, the overall effect is negative and leads to numerous instances of discrimination and harassment.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the project is to implement a design system that hinders negative players and incentivizes positive players to reduce the harmful effects that girl gamers are exposed to. Creating a way to get more girl gamers to play games in a positive way would also help competitive gaming platforms grow and make the overall gaming experience for girl gamers significantly better.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study aims to explore the following primary research question:

What design systems could enhance positive collaboration within the Valorant competitive gaming community to support high performance in-game for girl gamers despite negative social conditions?

SIGNIFICANCE

As a girl gamer who has participated in multiplayer competitive video games for over two decades, I could attest to the challenges one has to overcome to be the most recognized, accomplished, well known and successful player in the field of Esports. To play in an environment where you may face discrimination because you identify as female is no easy task. Even though esports are growing in popularity, there are still not enough girl gamers participating, and it's important to know why. (Journal of Sport & Social Issues, 2018). In addition, the purpose of this study is to investigate, in a more in-depth manner, the role that playing Valorant's competitive mode plays in contributing to the decline in the number of female players who compete professionally.

As a result of the exclusion of girl gamers from the competitive Valorant gaming scene, girl gamers have started building their own communities in order to get support from one another and confront the difficulties of toxic behavior and harassment. Lack of inclusivity prevents girl

gamers in the Valorant community from fully engaging in the competitive gaming experience. It is necessary to encourage ideas of positive cooperation and communication so that players can go into a competitive game with the purpose of coming out on top. The game instead establishes separate gaming groups, which results in the formation of social boundaries and makes it more difficult for players to emerge victorious.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Girl Gamer – someone who identifies as female who regularly engages in playing video games. This can be from the most casual interest to the most serious professional gaming. (reddit.com)

Esports – (short for electronic sports) involves competitions between professional players in video game tournaments. Also referred to as competitive gaming for non-professional video game players. (dictionary.com)

Vibe – a general feeling or thought about something that someone has. (dictionary.com)

ASSUMPTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND DELIMITATIONS

This research paper predicts that autoethnography is used appropriately. It is acknowledged that the research will focus on analytical and cultural ideation and not narration about oneself, others will be a focal point, data collection will not be based on personal memory and that the research will follow the ethical standards and guidelines set in self-narratives.

CONCLUSION

The overall benefit of this research is to provide a design system that will allow girl gamers in the Valorant community to identify the gaps in the Valorant competitive community among girl gamers and continue to improve the overall performance in games. Since participation in the Valorant competitive community has been growing significantly in recent years. It is important to understand how to make the experience better for all.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

While Valorant provides inclusivity through use of various skins, characters, and agent names, this first-person shooter game lacks the design/organization/planning to create meaningful connections between players in the game. While data indicates that girl gamers make up over half of the players who participate in online competitive gaming, according to X and Y's research, there is a divide between the issues related to being marginalized and silenced within the gaming community (Ballard and Welch 2017; Chess and Shaw 2015; Fox and Tang 2014; Gray 2012; Salter and Blodgett 2012). Sadly, when it comes to player interactions on Valorant,

the gaming culture I have encountered as a girl gamer has been unfavorable and occurs frequently.

Unfortunately, various forms of online sexism and harassment could be observed within the online gaming community. Over the years, there has been scholarly research and media publications that have drawn attention to harassment of players based on their gender identity (e.g. O'Leary, 2012). Harassment refers to behaviors of offensive nature such as verbal, physical, or text-based, which could cause a negative effect on a person (Maass, Cadinu & Galdi, 2014; Pater, Moon, Mynatt, & Fiesler, 2016). In Valorant, such ranges of harassment could occur during competitive matches between players. Specifically, X research shows that in-game verbal abuse is commonly observed/experienced in the Valorant community during a match/round. After reviewing the existing literature on gaming and the online game, Valorant, following categories were found to be relevant: the growth of esports, media exposure of online competitive gaming, online gaming communities, sexism and online competitive gaming, and the determining factors of the theoretical framework.

GROWTH IN ESPORTS

Competitive online multiplayer games (esports), provide a place for individuals to form/join teams to create a strategy to accomplish their objective. The outcome is to win, reminiscent of dominant athletic sporting events. Esports first gained recognition in the mid-90s, with numerous professional leagues forming around the same time (Wagner, 2006). Recently, the rate of this work has intensified as the esports industry has grown considerably in the past few years (Jenny et al., 2018). Total revenue for the esports industry approached roughly $1 billion in 2018 when more than 380 million people around the world started watching various eSports competitions (Willingham, 2018). Twitch, a live streaming service, was used for such competitions and events for viewers to watch from the comfort of their homes. With the growth of competitive gaming, interest from gamers of all genders in competing increased. Within the Valorant community, approximately 30–40% of the players identify as girl gamers and that number continues to grow (Venture Beat, 2021). The projected growth could lead to

more and more players, especially girl gamers, competing within the Valorant community which has largely been male dominated.

ONLINE COMPETITIVE GAMING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The gaming community content on various online platforms, such as Twitch and YouTube, could give an insight to how players think and feel when it comes to the interactions with other players. Twitch, a streaming platform, provides a space for all gamers to watch and chat with millions of people around the world. There are differing attitudes and perceptions about girl gamers who play competitive games, and having a live audience creates a significant impact on these perceptions as having a platform open to commentary from all with little to no repercussions could cause some unsolicited behaviors. All viewers on Twitch (serious/casual gamers) whether subscribed or unsubscribed, to the streamer, could watch their favorite gamers play and participate in the community chat. The chat of a larger female streamer (with over hundreds of viewers when live streaming) is monitored by moderators who actively remove negative comments posted in the chat. When playing a competitive online multiplayer game during a live stream, negative comments could impact the performance and the overall mindset of the streamer.

Gender identity of Twitch streamers is significantly tied to the frequency of spectators' messages of objectification that are directed at the streamer (Nakandala, Ciampaglia, Su, and Ahn, 2017). According to a study done in 2018, girl gamers receive more messages with body-focused content, whereas male players receive more messages with gameplay-focused content (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Notably, it is common for a woman to be objectified for their looks instead of their skills when playing a competitive game. More recently, comments made about streamers that utilize the well-known live streaming service, Twitch, showed a gender divide, as noted in the research of Nakandala, Ciampaglia, Su, and Ahn (2017). In particular, game-related comments were more common for male streamers, whereas objectifying statements were more frequent for female streamers (Darvin et al., 2020). Without rules and restrictions set in a player's chat, the amount of sexual and stereotypical comments can be overwhelming.

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ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES

An essential element of online gaming is the development of the player base and the online community. These are locations where players may meet others who share their love and drive for the game. These online communities are typically in the form of a Discord public server that allows you to connect with online gamers from all over the world. Discord is a free communication application that is used to voice, text, and video chat with friends of all types of communities. Depending on their preferences, users can join any number of different servers within Discord. For that community, there are Valorant-specific servers that can be joined. In light of these problems, it is best not to make assumptions about how similar, well-known, or united gaming communities are (Easpaig & Bróna, 2018). Most Discord servers have a zero-tolerance policy for any form of harassment, which allows people to reflect and freely share experiences and opinions. It does raise questions about the views people have within the community.

Unlike more traditional forms of online communities and social media, online gaming communities typically have diverse, extremely complex communities that are focused on the coordination of different game-related issues and events. Online gaming communities can range from relatively small online interactions to massive, interconnected network activities encompassing gaming websites and different forms of gaming networks (IGI Global, 2020).

Media reports from outlets including Twitch and Discord report an increasing number of "flaming," or abuse, which includes sexually explicit remarks aimed at female players, in gaming (Easpaig & Bróna, 2018). With Valorant being a new FPS game (2020), there have been a reported 22 million monthly players that actively play (Dexerto, 2022). Valorant has taken action to assist in decreasing the amount of toxicity revolving around in game voice and chat usage. In January 2021, there were over 400,000 text and voice chat restrictions that involved temporarily muting a player as well as 40,000 bans to players (Riot Games, 2021). Although these are great steps to address in-game toxicity, the in-game voice and text restrictions only last a week and the players that get banned create new accounts.

SEXISM IN ONLINE COMPETITIVE GAMING

Sexism takes many different forms in online gaming situations. The majority of earlier studies on internet gaming recruited male participants. However, studies have brought attention to the unfavorable encounters that girl gamers sometimes face. It is important to have a deeper knowledge of what women go through and how their online social connections affect not just their play but also their life as a whole (McLean & Griffiths, 2019). The difficulties and problems that women encounter on a daily basis are shown through the experiences of female players of competitive online games. This problem may be related to sexism in the real world and the effects of harassment and discrimination against females based on their gender identity.

A recent study by Fox and Yeng Tang (2017) on girl gamers' experiences with online video games showed that girl gamers would reflect on the experience after the game and then show disengagement from the game. In order to lessen harassment, women reported using a variety of coping mechanisms. These different forms of coping included disguising their identities, refraining from communicating with other players, and asking for assistance or social support both within and outside of the game (McLean & Griffiths, 2019).

Girl gamers face harassment when placed in a primarily male-dominated environment. The lack of inclusive surroundings and how competitive gaming for girls has been seen are two major causes of these underlying issues. Since many competitive settings for esports participants are found in online settings, a veil of anonymity, discrimination and hostility toward women can likely occur (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Kim, 2017). It is very challenging for there to be a voice of reason in an online environment given the aggression that occurs there.

SEARCH DESCRIPTION

My research will focus on the use of articles, websites, and media coverage that discuss access and inclusion in video games. I will be using scholarly sources such as articles, books, and e-

books using the keywords: sexism, gender discrimination, e-sports, transformative theory, autoethnography, feminism, and inclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Four theories—the feminist perspective theory, transformative theory, grounded theory, and gender role theory—will serve as the basis for this research and the design outcomes.

In order to build a community where all gamers are equal, we need to understand feminist perspective theory. Women are no longer understood in firm or lasting ways, and there is a lot of literature that casts doubt on "the subject" as the ideal candidate for freedom or representation and shows that there is no consensus on what women should be. (Butler, 1990). A great approach to this research can be found in this theory, which is based on three principal claims. The three identifiable principal claims of this theory clarify this perspective. First, it is impossible for anyone to possess total objectivity. Second, every individual has a unique point of view. Third, we shouldn't assume that everyone will share our opinion.

When it comes to girl gamers in the Valorant community, using autoethnography as a transformative theory and challenging the status quo are essential. From this stance, this research will be designed to help girl gamers in the competitive Valorant community gain a better experience when playing in a competitive match. The process of transformation can be observed to take place significantly when an individual exhibits the courage to reveal their true self to society and willingly embarks on a remarkable journey (Hankivsky, 2005).

Gender Role Theory as it relates to competitive gamers, whether you socially identify as male or female, and how there is segregation and judgment between genders. This goes back to the social and gender theories in relation to sports. There have been plenty of stereotypes around the perceptions on genders in athletes even starting when a child is young (Harrison and Lynch, 2005). A study found that younger boys are more likely to be good at sports than girls, even among kids in kindergarten through third grade (Eccles & Harold, 1991). Even at a young age,

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