“Act like a lady, game like a man”? An analysis of masculine behaviors performed during competitive esports and their effect on women

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Abstract

In the last decade or so, competitive multiplayer online games have exploded in popularity. Esports and competitive games are not only widely played, but widely watched as well. However, competitive gaming is notably devoid of women; a mere 5% of professional e-sports players are estimated to be female (Gamecrate). The exclusion of women in online gaming spaces is a well documented phenomenon, but the physicality of playing competitive online games itself may exclude women as well. In this paper, I use observations from field research at a gaming cafe to analyze how societal stigmatization of certain behaviors, when performed by females, may contribute to the sparsity of women in competitive gaming, and lead to the exclusion of women in offline gaming spaces as well.

Introduction

In 2018, about 100 million worldwide watched the League of Legends championships (New York Times). To put things in perspective, about 103 million people watched the 2018 Super Bowl. Esports have become a worldwide phenomenon - so much so, in fact, that the LA 2024 bid for hosting the Olympics considered including esports in the Olympic Games if they won the bid[1]. Its popularity only continues to grow every year at an unprecedented rate.

However, the population of female e-sports participants is still significantly smaller than its male counterpart. While the proportion of female esports spectators is shown to have increased - according to Nielsen Games' 2018 U.S. Games 360 Report, women now make up 25% of the esports spectator base - there is still an alarming lack of professional female esports players, which may contribute to the relatively low female spectatorship. Coupled with the rampant misogyny and harassment that female gamers encounter in most multiplayer games, the lack of pro women gamers is just another reason that girls are empirically just not as into games as guys.

I would also contest that there may be other, less visible forces in play. Competitive online games like DoTA, LoL, and CS:GO force a certain type of playstyle - hunched over a large monitor, often with large headphones on, to both block out the outside world and communicate with teammates. Although online multiplayer games are not antisocial endeavors in reality, to an uninformed observer - such as a parental figure - it may appear as if this gamer is being antisocial, or trying to withdraw from the world around them. Due to the higher policing for young girls performing activities that are not considered appropriately feminine, young girls playing competitive online games may face stricter judgment and control from parental figures than their male counterparts do.

Furthermore, women generally receive more criticism for competitive behavior than men do. This is a well-studied phenomenon, both in athletics as well as in the workplace - competitive behavior is generally considered masculine, and women are punished for "doing gender" in a

[1] Unfortunately, the IOC confirmed that they would not be including e-sports in the 2024 Olympic Games.

way that is not considered feminine[2] (West and Zimmerman 1998). In *The Handbook on Well-Being of Working Women*, Smith, Brescoll, and Thomas write, "Women incur social and economic penalties for expressing masculine-typed emotions because they violate proscriptions against dominance for women. At the same time, when women express female-typed emotions, they are judged as overly emotional and lacking emotional control, which ultimately undermines women's competence and professional legitimacy."

Combined, these factors could prevent young girls from getting into competitive online games from the lowest levels - the policing that occurs within their own homes may hinder them from even getting started in competitive games to begin with.

Literature Review

Several bodies of academic literature have informed this investigation. Firstly, we will examine the behavior of parents enforcing the behavior of their young daughters. Throughout history, and continuing into the modern day, young women have traditionally been policed much more harshly than their male counterparts of the same age. Indeed, "[parents] of girls [are] more likely to express worries about the dangers their children face on the streets and to structure girls' time for productive household activities or educational play" (Matthews 1992). Traditionally, "girl culture formed under closer maternal supervision and girls' toys were designed to foster female-specific skills and competencies and prepare girls for their future domestic responsibilities as wives and mothers".

The implications of this societal practice stretch beyond the realm of computer games. Although improvement can be seen in the last few generations, there is still a notion that girls must do things that are 'ladylike' and not engage in actions with prescribed masculine connotations. Examples of this mindset can be seen in many places across recent history; women were prohibited from combat positions in the military until 2013, playing in professional sports or running in marathons until the mid-20th century, and even applying to certain elite colleges up until four decades ago. It is only natural that young girls are discouraged from participating in the most recent arena colonized by men: video games.

Second, we examine the relationship between women and competitive behavior. Women, in general, face higher societal penalties for emotional behavior, both in competitive and professional environments. "[Women are] considered to be difficult when we get angry, whereas men are perceived as being tough and powerful" (MarketWatch). Behaviors such as yelling, expressing anger, or being assertive are considered "emotional" when performed by women, but men are considered "in charge" for performing the same behaviors. Women have also been shown to react strongly to stereotype threat. In other words, "women tend not to compete with men in areas where they (rightly or wrongly) think that they will lose anyway – and the same holds for men, although to a lower extent" (Gunther et. al 2010).

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[2] Not as badly as men are punished for "doing gender" in a way that is not considered feminine, however.

Last, we can look at ethnographic reports of womens' experiences at gaming cafes. As a woman, it is hard not to notice one's presence in an entirely male-dominated space. Indeed, in Holin Lin's paper on "Body, Space, and Gendered Gaming Experiences", Lin noted that "the girls interviewed express keen awareness of the great imbalance in gender ratios at cybercafes...the layouts of some cybercafes serve as gender barriers". For most young women, it is unpalatable to walk through a room of men to try to find one's own space; "most girls are not willing to subject themselves to the scrutiny...and therefore only enter when accompanied by male friends" (Lin 2008).

Methodology

I made the observations that inspired my hypothesis at a gaming cafe located in Boston, Massachusetts. Balance Patch describes itself as "Boston's first Video Game Cafe" with the "goal [of creating] a fun, unique environment for video game and e-sport enthusiasts to hang out with people who share their passions" (Balance Patch). I observed and took notes on the cafe from a seat at the food bar with a male presenting friend for around three hours on a Saturday afternoon. On this particular afternoon, there happened to be a Counter Strike: Global Offensive tournament in progress, and I was told by my friend that as a result of this, the cafe was particularly loud and bustling in comparison to an average afternoon.

Observations

Upon a few minutes of entering Balance Patch, I became acutely aware of my presence as one of the only females in the cafe. In the three hours I spent observing, there were never more than seven females in the entire cafe at any given time, and there were a maximum of two at the computers actually playing games. For contrast, at any given time, there were about fifty males, if not more. Demographically, there seemed to be some homogeneity; the participants in the CS:GO tournament seemed to be primarily high-school or college aged white males. There were also a few interspersed clumps of male Chinese and Korean League of Legends players.

I observed that the group play area, for couch co-op games such as Super Smash Bros and for VR games like Beat Saber, took up a surprisingly small amount of space and seemed fairly cramped. I would estimate that eight people, the maximum number of people that the most recent iteration of Super Smash Bros can accommodate in a single game, could all fit in the couch space, but perhaps not comfortably. The space definitely could not accommodate many spectators.

The spectator space for the PCs was also fairly limited. A few groups of people were trying to gather behind (presumably) their friends to watch them play in the tournament, but it looked fairly cramped. The seats for the PCs were all quite close together; there was just enough space to squeeze into one without worrying about disturbing neighboring players.

The high-stakes environment of the tournament continually prompted yells of triumph or anger from its participants. Despite the staff members' repeated requests, the participants seemed unable to restrain their emotions while immersed in play.

The color palette of the cafe was primarily black and red, a color scheme that I personally find reminiscent of stereotypically male branded items, such as Axe body spray, various brands of men's soap, watches, etc. I could not deduce, however, if this was a marketing decision or merely an aesthetic one.

Discussion

After observing the behavior of Balance Patch's patrons and consulting the relevant literature mentioned above, I would argue that it is extremely probable that women are excluded from competitive gaming simply on the basis of society's strict policing of 'correct' feminine behavior. The behaviors performed by the primarily male competitive gamers were all behaviors that, upon further research, are likely heavily discouraged in young girls, and not as heavily in young boys.

The cafe was notably absent of teenage girls, and considering that teenage girls make up a notable chunk of the gaming demographic, I found this to be concerning. After comparing this observation to those of Matthews and Lin, I would deduce that the parents of teenage girls are likely unwilling to let them go to a gaming cafe, both because what they would be engaging in at the cafe and because of the demographic of the cafe. Furthermore, the lack of privacy in today's connected world makes it hard for girls to even sneak out to these cafes, as some of the girls in Lin's observations did. With phone trackers on top of curfews, it is difficult for young girls to go anywhere without their parents monitoring them.

Furthermore, the behavior performed by the young males competing in the tournament is behavior that would likely be considered "emotional" or "difficult" if performed by women. Yelling, cursing, and screaming aggressively, whether in frustration or in triumph, is a fundamental part of participating in a high-action competitive environment. Examples of such environments would include team sports like soccer or tennis, individual sports such as fencing, and esports such as CS:GO. If a female was to play on a competitive esports team, her performance of the same behaviors as her male colleagues would likely garner more societal criticism, and this can be extremely demotivating for the female in question.

The ramification of society frowning upon masculine-typed behaviors performed during competitive activities is that women feel demeaned simply for participating in the activity itself. This is not just true in esports - women who participate in especially masculine sports such as American football or rugby, or work in a masculine field, such as construction, are also treated like outsiders in an activity that they are skilled at.

While it is difficult to find a comprehensive solution for society's treatment of women, improving the structure and reputations of the gaming cafes themselves may help improve female patronage. For example, restructuring the seating in Balance Patch might help make the

experience of being part of a small female minority less uncomfortable - if the seats and monitors were put in small, circular clusters instead of long linear rows, the feeling of being surrounded by males may be ameliorated. Indeed, research suggests that "LAN cafés operate as a location that is particularly amenable to reformulative work in relation to gendered gaming identities" (Beavis and Charles 2007).

Conclusion

A powerful solution to the demographic imbalance in gaming cafes would be to eliminate the societal idea of gendered pastimes. A primary reason that young girls are not given video games, or discouraged from playing them at all, is because video games are 'for boys'. Although prior generations were far more guilty of these kinds of behaviors than the current generation is, it is still true that girls' leisure time is policed more strictly than boys' is.

Furthermore, the higher levels of discrimination towards females performing certain behaviors, usually those considered masculine, also need to be eliminated. This is not only true for females; society discriminates against men performing feminine behaviors, such as crying, as well. The idea that behaviors are inherently male or female leads to the development of structures that harm all genders, such as toxic masculinity.

The world of esports would benefit greatly from diversity in demographic. More women in professional esports would likely increase female viewership and overall participation, giving the esports industry even more of a monetary boost. Furthermore, more diversity would lead to the development of different types of competitive games, and add to the creativity of the industry. After all, diversity in representation of any industry has only ever improved the well-being of the entire industry.

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