

5. Women Gamers Comming within a Toxic Community

threats & opportunities

JESSIE SU

Jessie Su explores how design decisions that shape communication systems within esports games can either support gender inclusivity or work against it, each generating their own types of gaming communities. Jessie is a Junior at CCNY studying computer science. She played League of Legend competitively for CCNY and is now ranking-up in Valorant. She runs her own Discord server and Twitch channel.

I want to talk about how I got into gaming.

The first game that I started playing was League of Legends. Since the communication structure in that game was limited to text chat and pings, that made it easier for me to play without revealing to anyone that I was a woman playing video games.

You see, back then, six years ago in high school, I was scared to tell people that I played games. A lot of my friends that were girls didn't play games. All they wanted to do was go out to eat or do their makeup. So when I would go home, I was really happy to play League of Legends because it was fun to play and I didn't have to worry about being a girl playing games.

I met a lot of people playing League. I also joined an organization that ran tournaments for League. That's how I got into competitive gaming. I met people who were thousands of miles away. After school I would just get on and hang out with them. They became a group of people I could play with and talk to. I consider them close friends now, because that's just how gaming is: a tight knit community of friends you find online.

When I went to college, the game Valorant came out. At first I played Valorant casually. To compete, however, you need to use voice chat if you want to climb the ranks. My friend warned me, saying, "Oh, it's really toxic.

Don't talk in the game." So I was scared to talk. I didn't want to get flamed or harassed by males in the game, just because I'm a woman. So I was scared to play competitively, as I was scared to use voice chat, scared to talk. I had been told how toxic the community was, for me as a woman in a male dominated community.

And then COVID hit. Now that I was in lockdown, I had more free time. I thought to myself, "I don't want to play Valorant just for fun anymore. I kind of want to rank up." I like being competitive. But if you want to rank up you have to use voice chat. The communication structure required me to use voice chat to speak my mind about what strategy my team should use. It was not designed to be gender inclusive. Once I speak and they hear my voice, they'll be toxic to me.

But how was I supposed to climb if I was too scared to talk?

And I had good reasons to be scared. I saw female players getting flamed on TikTok saying how we are boosted. If you do bad you can feel everyone watching your every move; if you whiff, they're gonna say that you're a bad player, even if it was just a minor mess up. If you're second to last you're still gonna get blamed because you're a woman, over a male in the last spot. This is interesting because we can connect this back to the real world where women often aren't allowed to make mistakes in the workforce.

In April of 2022, a man on Twitter, @_Od26, conducted an experiment to see how it was as a woman playing Valorant. He said"

I played under a girls name and no com'd for a week in both imm3/
radiant and gold-immortal¹ just as an experiment to see how big of a
difference there was... this is what I found.

Out of the 60 games I played while in lower elo² I had 3 people

1. These are highly ranked players within the game.
2. The Elo ranking system, originally designed for Chess, is now used in a number of sports and games, including esports.

intentionally throw games over the simple fact I was a girl. I was also dodged³ significantly more than I'm used to when smurfing⁴.

Not only this but when I played I was watched much more closely. Even though I was way better than everyone my actions were judged much more heavily and for the 3 games I went negative there were sexist comments in each of them.

And this is just the surface of it, because he didn't talk at all.

Now I will also say because I typically over-performed in lobbies in this elo I was given praise at a much higher rate and the amount of friend request [sic] I was sent was extremely disproportionate. Which was weird to me.

My final conclusion was being a girl in lower elo is that you're watched much more closely and judged much harsher than you should be. Although the praise/compliments were nice the trade off was sexism so it's obviously not worth it.

Gaming can create a tight knit community but there are people within the community that look down upon women. The gaming community should be more welcoming to others that are not male in order to create a more exclusive gaming community.

To summarize so far: the voice chat communication structure in games like Valorant are not gender inclusive because it is a male-dominated community. The design of Valorant makes competitive players use the voice comms in order to make winning more likely, and women are made uncomfortable to speak because they feel they're going to get flamed for talking.

What solutions are there? Sure, the developers can make the reporting

3. Queue dodging is canceling a match before it begins, which is generally disliked and may penalize the player.
4. A player using an alternate account or multiple accounts, often to play against lower-ranked players.

system better, to catch flammers and issue punishment, but at the end of the day it all comes down to the gaming community policing itself.

What can help with gender inclusivity around esports is the ecosystems that surround it. For example, Twitch features many women streamers, such as Kyedae [@kyedae] who shows us that we don't have to respond to every sexist comment because silence speaks more, or shows us that playing competitively isn't as scary.

Another example is Discord, where you make friends on the internet, and can chat or play games with them without worry of being flamed. Even TikTok helps gender inclusivity because a lot of women share their bad experiences of sexism while playing games on the platform.

I would like to connect this back to how being a woman competing in esports has helped me in the real world.

It made me more passionate about planning for a career in technology because I love video games.

It helped me work on my communication skills because I talk about what strategies I want to do, and that takes a lot of speaking skills.

It strengthened my interpersonal skills, because it's ten times harder to talk to someone that's thousands miles away and try to figure out how they feel than someone you're talking to face to face.

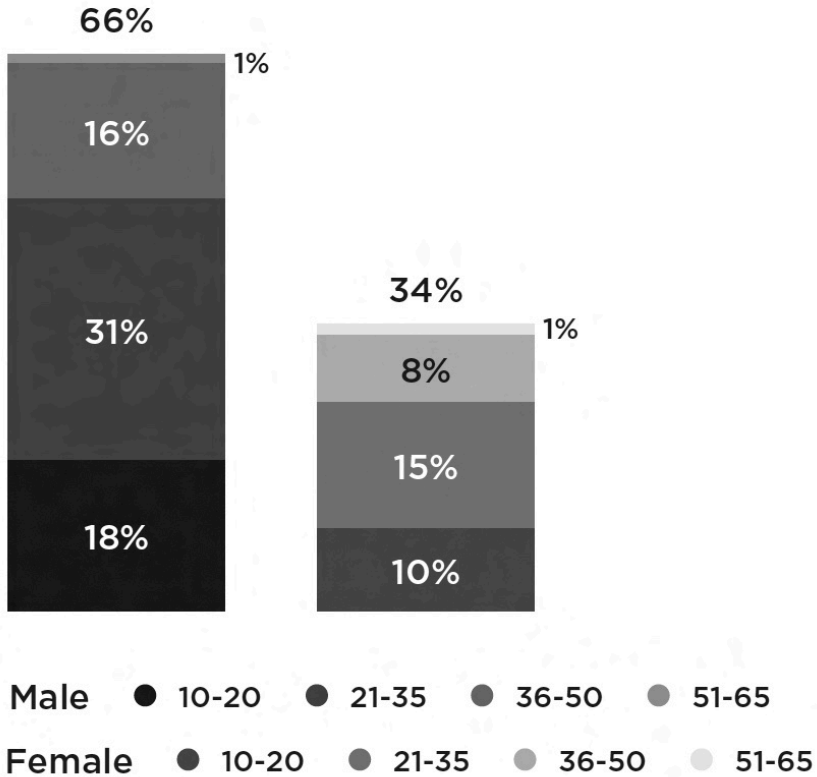
It built resilience, because after a loss, I go right back into a game because I just want to play.

And it also helped me prepare for my major because computer science is a male dominated field, so it gave me the confidence to speak out.

Again, what works for generic inclusivity is having the ability to not reveal your gender or how you identify or holding the community to a higher standard. If you do play a game and you do witness a woman or someone in the LGBTQ+ community getting harassed, say something, because staying silent is just as bad as harassing. It's better to say something rather than not because at least the person being flamed won't think everyone else is against her.

Age/Gender Esports Enthusiasts

Global | 2021



In 2021, women accounted for 34% of esports enthusiasts. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at [Newzoo](#), who provided the above information.