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To my mother, Shana, without whom this would have not been possible.

Abstract

This thesis investigates the impact on women of aggressive, demeaning and blaming talk in the online video game* space. The objective is to understand how players talk to each other and how this kind of talk presents issues for women trying to enter the online gaming sphere and become recognised as players. The main method was participatory observation and interviews with women who have experienced such talk. Key results which came from this research is that the process of keeping specific people out of communities through different means of talk - gatekeeping, women being viewed as objects of sexual gratification for men through bad representation in video games and media and using women as scapegoats for frustration and blame in the competitive online video game space, are the main issues which arise from the way players communicate with each other. In conclusion, the research presented that there needs to be an effective system of unlearning and relearning these behaviours in communities and a change in the way women are represented and seen in media is necessary in order to change the behavioural patterns which exist in gaming culture.

**Some researchers prefer to use 'digital games' in place of 'video games', but this research project uses 'video games' to refer to the medium in question.*

Index

Chapter 1: Context and Introduction

1.1 A history and understanding of the video game industry.....	1
1.2 Understanding <i>Overwatch</i>	7
1.3 The issue with gaming culture.....	14

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Participatory culture and gaming culture.....	21
2.2 Stereotypes, representation and women in video games.....	27
2.3 Talk in online video games.....	34

Chapter 3: Methodology and Ethics

3.1 Methodology.....	40
3.2 Analysis.....	44
3.3 Validity and accuracy.....	46

Chapter 4: Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Participatory observation.....	49
4.2 Interviews.....	57

Conclusion.....	64
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Reference List.....	68
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Chapter 1: Introduction and context

1.1 A history and understanding of the video game industry

The question that this research project aims to answer is how different types of player-to-player communication in video games – language, texts, jargon and representation – affects the abilities of socially disadvantaged groups to immerse themselves comfortably in these given spaces. The purpose of this research is to understand how talk operates in the culture of online gaming, how that contributes to a particular culture which bleeds into communities which exist as a result of interests in online gaming, and how that culture affects socially disadvantaged people who play online games and who seek to exist in these communities. Furthermore, the research investigates how toxic behaviour manifests through communication and talk, and as such could serve as a means to find a solution to bring about change in these spaces.

When I was a young child, I used to watch my father play video games for hours on his computer. Sometimes he used to let me have a turn, and it ended up turning into a situation where I would play for hours as well. These are some of the fondest childhood memories I have of him. I also used to play with my cousins when the opportunity presented itself, or I would play with my friends and their siblings. Five years ago, in my second year of university, I joined the gaming society and met some people who afforded me the opportunity to delve fully into the world of video games. Since then, I have been an avid player of multiple online games and have completed over 20 single-player games. I started playing *Overwatch* three and a half years ago. At first, I just played for the fun of it, with my friends. When my boyfriend at the time decided to join a competitive team and they needed another player, I offered to help. That was the beginning of my personal career in esports. I started out as a sub for the team, Equinox, and I played competitively with them for a year before I moved on to my second team, Evo Esports. I became captain and manager of Evo and played competitively with them for two years. At the time of this thesis, I have accumulated 1034 hours of *Overwatch* playtime. Throughout my time playing *Overwatch* (2016), I noticed some disturbing behaviour. When I played alone (which means playing in a team with strangers) and I spoke in voice chat with my team, they would often berate me for being a woman. Comments I received ranged from, “Why don’t you go suck Doomfist’s dick” to “How can you be a girl and be so bad at Mercy?”. On the opposite end of the spectrum, however, there were also many instances where I received unwanted advances from men online, based

purely on the fact that I was a woman playing a video game. So, I decided to do some academic research into whether or not this was a me problem, or if this was problematic behaviour which was rampant in video game culture. The latter ended up ringing true. I followed multiple means to collect relevant data. I made sure that I played *Overwatch* three to four times a week minimum over a span of two months. I also conducted interviews with multiple women who played video games to record personal accounts and individual experiences. As a broader method of research, I also observed how people in both local South African communities and global communities interact on the social media (for example Twitter, Discord and Twitch) associated with gaming. In conjunction, the methods of research have painted an interesting picture of *Overwatch* gaming culture and how video game culture treats women. Before we can take a deep dive into these concepts, though, I would like to present a short history and context of the video game industry.

In 1946, the first programmable computer could be found at the University of Pennsylvania (McNeil, 2019:13). It was named the Electronic Numeric Integrator and Calculator (ENIAC). It was so far removed from the advanced technology that we own today that it was incapable of running even Solitaire (McNeil, 2019:13). The following year, 1947, a machine was patented which one could plug into one's television in order to interact with it, using controllers (McNeil, 2019:13). Unfortunately, not much more was done with this machine, and it was not developed further. In 1950, Bertie the Brain was created. Bertie the Brain was an early computer which used noughts and crosses as a means of demonstrating Josef Kates' addriton tube – an electron tube designed with the goal of increasing the success and reliability of the electronic computer, while also reducing size, power consumption and complexity (McNeil, 2019:14). However, much as these early developments are important for the understanding of where the computer really started, in the opinion of Steve McNeil, the first video game ever played was in 1951 at the Festival of Britain. (2019:15). John Bennett had created a system whereby players were able to play a digital version of Nim, a game in which players pick up objects and try to avoid being left with the last one (McNeil, 2019:15). The initial goal of this computer was to prove its ability to handle complex mathematical problems and, although not created in the spirit of fun, the crowds which it attracted proved that it possessed this ability (McNeil, 2019:16). Throughout these early years of the development of computers, it is evident that forms of games were used to try and demonstrate different components and uses of the machines. This is particularly evident in the way that they developed different versions of chess and checkers in an effort to explore artificial intelligence (McNeil, 2019:16).

It was clearly evident that computers could be used for video games, but the aspect which slowed down development of this idea was the cost involved (McNeil, 2019:17). Despite this challenge, development continued. In 1952, Alexander Douglas created a version of noughts and crosses on the University of Cambridge's Electronic Delay Storage Automatic Calculator as part of his PhD thesis which focused on human-computer interaction (McNeil, 2019:17). In 1958, William Higinbotham decided to offer an engaging exhibit which was set up as a version of a tennis game on an oscilloscope screen. This was done in an effort to understand how to build time switches that made sure bombs exploded at the best possible moment (McNeil, 2019:17). There is significant evidence indicating how the production of 'video games' assisted in the understanding of computer programming and how that in itself assisted with the understanding of other developments in the world. The reason why I put video games in inverted commas in this specific context is simple: we have a completely different understanding of the video game genre today as compared to the 1940s and 1950s, during the first period of computer development. As seen in the examples above, games used to be a means to understand and test different facets of computer development. Today, video games are a massive and important part of entertainment and popular culture (Thorne, Fischer, Lu, 2012:280). Not only have they become a space for players to have emotional and interpersonal interactions (Yang, 2012:236), but they have also grown into an industry of online competitive sports (esports) and financial gain both for players and developers.

So, how did video games change from being a means to test different aspects of technology to what they are today, a form of interactive media which entertains, generates vast profits, and also allows for job creation based on coaching teams, managing teams, and development? One of the first revenue sources for Atari, a video game developer and home computer company founded by Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney in the United States in 1972, was the pinball company Bally. Bally worked together with Atari to develop extra-wide pinball machines (McNeil, 2019:28). Then Bally, impressed by a game called Computer Space created by engineering student Nolan Bushnell, commissioned Atari to create a space-based racing video game (McNeil, 2019:28). From there, Atari invested in the development and creation of games of different styles and genres in order to keep up with consumer demand (McNeil, 2019:32).

According to an article published by *Polygon* and written by Tracey Lien, the creation of video games from the 1970s to the 1980s is referred to as the "Wild West" of video game development

(2013) because there was neither a marketing focus nor an understanding of who was actually playing the games that were being developed (Lien, 2013). As a result, North America experienced a recession in the video game industry in 1985, which is now referred to as the video game crash (Lien, 2013). There are a variety of reasons behind this crash, the most prevalent being the fact that the video game market was saturated with low-quality video games, and they lost the confidence and interest of consumers (Lien, 2013). Following this crash, Nintendo, a multi-national Japanese electronics and video games company, was largely credited for the revival of the video game industry (Lien, 2013). One way in which they tackled the problem of the video game crash was marketing, something which had been largely ignored in the past (Lien, 2013). Together with creating its own magazine, *Nintendo Power*, the company also sent officials to competitions to see first-hand who were playing their games. This objective of identifying who were playing their games was done in order to understand the demographic. The results at the time showed that more boys were playing video games than girls were (Lien, 2013). In the 1990s, advertising for video games took a turn, differing from Atari's original advertising techniques. After the video games crash, Nintendo classified their video games as toys in order to get them back into the market. When video games started becoming more present in toy sales, they took it as an opportunity to identify aggressively who was playing their video games and how they could start advertising in a way that would not lead to another 'Wild West' situation (Lien, 2013). The whole idea was to move away from general advertising and target the most present demographic more, in order to use their marketing to the advantage of video game sales (Lien, 2013). Instead of using people across the scope of gender in their marketing, the industry started using males of all ages in their commercials and on their marketing platform (Lien, 2013). This then created the narrative that video games are for males, and the industry turned from one which made games for all for fun and entertainment, to one that catered for one very specific demographic in order to reach their sales targets.

A history of Activision Blizzard

Activision Blizzard is the parent company of the game *Overwatch* which is the focus of this thesis. Blizzard was founded in 1991 by Allen Adham, Frank Pearce and Mike Morhaime, originally under the name Silicon and Synapse (Blizzard, 2014). By 1993, the studio had released 11 projects and changed their name to *Chaos Studios*. 1994 is the year that they adopted the name Blizzard Entertainment, and it has stayed that way ever since (Blizzard, 2014). *World of Warcraft* (2004) is arguably one of Blizzard's most popular and longest running games

(Blizzard, 2014). Based on their original *Warcraft* (1994) game. The game is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game, which means that you are able to create your own character and play through the available content through various methods in-game with other people from around the world. When *Wrath of the Lich King* (an expansion to the original game) was released in 2008, it sold 2.8 million copies in the first 24 hours. By that time the game had 11 million players worldwide (Blizzard, 2014).

Overwatch is a team-based online video game. It is in the first-person, which means that it is played through the eyes of a single character that you, the player, control, either with a keyboard and mouse on a computer, or with a handheld controller for a console device like a PlayStation. *Overwatch* was released in 2016 and has risen to be one of the most popular online games since, with over 40 million players worldwide as of 2018 (Statista, 2018).

Although it is a company which has achieved clear and rampant success since its inception, Blizzard has been no stranger to controversy. These instances have stretched from issues amongst players in the games which they create, to direct bans and decisions made by the company itself. Since the inception and release of *Overwatch*, Blizzard has attempted to make it as accessible as possible to all kinds of players in terms of representation of characters in the game. An example of this is a case from 2016, the year of the game's release, where players were unhappy with a specific pose of a character named Tracer (Tassi, 2016). Tracer, a woman, has been the cover hero of *Overwatch* from the beginning. The issue raised by the players was unhappiness with the way she was executing a "victory pose" in the game. A victory pose is a cosmetic item which you can buy or win through playing the game and levelling up. The winning team's characters appear at the end of the game, standing in a line, all displaying the victory pose. But Tracer's pose was considered provocative, showing her standing with the lower end of her back pushed out towards the screen (Tassi, 2016). Players were upset by this, saying that it sexualised her and did not represent her character accurately. The game director of *Overwatch*, Jeff Kaplan, apologised for the pose and removed it from the game, saying: "The last thing we want to do is make someone feel uncomfortable or misrepresented" (Tassi, 2016). In this instance, it seems clear that Blizzard, or at the least the developers of *Overwatch*, cared about how their game represented the playable characters they created. While this could point to better representation practices in online video games, this incident does portray the issue of still stereotyping minority identities – particularly the issue of sexualising women's bodies. Moreover, this paying attention to representation does

not mean that Blizzard doesn't turn a blind eye to exploitation that exists outside of it.

In fact, we could assume that their responses to their audiences are often merely performative and market-driven, and not because of an inherent social justice message they believe in themselves. For example, when one considers the gold farming billion-dollar industry which also exists in World of Warcraft, this 'caring' attitude becomes questionable. Gold farming is the business of selling virtual credits, amassed in online multiplayer games such as World of Warcraft, to gamers for money (Friedman, 2011). In 2011, China was the biggest proponent of gold farming in World of Warcraft, and this extended to using prisoners for the industry. According to an article by *The Atlantic* in 2011, prisoners would be forced to play the game for up to 12 hours each day, and they would never see any of the money they made during that time (Friedman, 2011). If they did not reach a certain quota, they would be punished. Blizzard took no action to try stop these specific instances directly, but instead updated their terms of service and proceeded to ban thousands of accounts which violated those terms when farming gold. These terms of service are not specific enough, however, and as a result there is a legal grey area which exists around the situation – allowing for the continued exploitation of gold farming in World of Warcraft (Tassi, 2011). Gold farming can still be exploited, and the manner in which Blizzard has dealt with the entire situation has been questioned. Another case which could bring Blizzard's moral standpoint into question is the controversy regarding Blitzchung and the Hong Kong protests of 2019. Chung "Blitzchung" Ng Wai is a professional Hearthstone player. Hearthstone is a Blizzard produced online card game which has become popular since its initial release in 2014, due to the fact that it costs nothing to play. In 2019, Hong Kong protests flared up in response to a bill which would allow the extradition of Hong Kong citizens to mainland China. Blitzchung, wearing goggles and a face mask, used the official slogan of the protest, "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our time", during an interview conducted after he had won the *Hearthstone* Grandmaster Tournament – the highest level of achievement in the game (Beauchamp, 2019). In response to this, Blizzard banned Blitzchung from playing the game for a year, fired the interviewers and forced Blitzchung to forfeit his winnings from the tournament (Beauchamp, 2019). The backlash from the communities which support their games was immense. Blizzard ended up formally apologising for their actions and withdrawing some of the punishments which they had handed down to those who were involved in the interview (Clark, 2019). They ended up allowing Blitzchung to claim his prize money and reduced his ban to six months.

It is evident that Blizzard is concerned about the contentedness and safety of its players, but the question that remains is: how far will the company actually go to ensure this? Essentially, they have taken steps to make the games they create a safe space in which people from all backgrounds, ethnicities and identities can exist. Their response to politics, however, is a cause for concern if they are given the space to apply their personal beliefs to their games and the people who play them. This is also a concern given that gaming has accelerated in popularity to such an extent that it could be used reliably as a political platform in popular culture.

Essentially, through the increased popularity of video games and esports, it is inevitable that companies in charge will have a public and political platform to stand on. As such, companies like Blizzard have an opportunity to use selective censorship to impose their own morals and viewpoints on their audiences – and thus play a big part in shaping the culture of online video games.

1.2 Understanding *Overwatch*

Before delving into the issues with communication between people who play, it is imperative to understand the complex nature of *Overwatch*. If we cannot understand why people are reacting to others, then there is no real basis from which to work to find out why they use the kind of language that they do.

Overwatch refers to a specific group of playable heroes who were members of a fictional organisation called *Overwatch*. *Overwatch* is an online game for which you need a stable internet connection. You download the game content through an application called Battle.net, which is also where you insert your details in order to log into your personal account. This account logs your personal time spent playing the game, what heroes you play most and what your overall online skill score is. You are able to choose a name for yourself, which might not be your own, referred to as your unique “battle tag” or “gamer tag”.

The game is set 60 years into the future on a fictionalised Earth, 30 years after the resolution of the revolt known as the “Omnic Crisis”. Omnics are artificial intelligence units created for the purposes of bolstering manufacturing and creating economic equality. The Omnics were created by Omniums whose facilities were established all over the world. This meant that when the Omnics went rogue – for reasons which are not specified in game lore – all of Earth was under attack.

In the game story, Overwatch was an establishment founded by Jack Morrison (Soldier 76), Gabriel Reyes (Reaper), Ana Amari (Ana), Reinhardt Wilhelm (Reinhardt), Torbjörn Lindholm (Torbjörn) and Mina Liao (Echo). All of these characters are playable in the game itself.

The purpose of Overwatch was to take down the force driving the Omnic Crisis, and this is what they achieved. The result of this success was adoration from the public and Overwatch continued to grow, fighting against terrorist organisations and establishing peace throughout the world. Internally, however, things were not as peaceful. Morrison was appointed the First Commander for Overwatch, which created tension between him and Reyes, the other contender for the position. This tension created a rift in the organisation with some siding with Morrison, while others sided with Reyes. Additionally, the organisation was under scrutiny after allegations accusing Overwatch of negligence, mismanagement, weapons proliferation, human rights abuse and more that are not specified. After an attack on their Swiss headquarters, which consequently resulted in the alleged deaths of Reyes and Morrison, Overwatch slowly crumbled until it completely disappeared 20 years after the appointment of Morrison as First Commander. In the present, where the game is set, a super-intelligent, genetically engineered gorilla and scientist named Winston, travelled to Watchpoint Gibraltar, a previous Overwatch outpost, and recruited left over members of Overwatch to stand together once again. Today, Overwatch is an independent organisation of individuals who are looking to create a more peaceful world. This is the story and background in which the game is set. The available characters each have a specific backstory which ties into this story, and the available maps which can be played in the game are also tied into the individual backstories of the characters, as well as the general backstory of Overwatch.

Overwatch has a variable number of players depending on which mode of the game is being played. Players need to work together to achieve a specific objective identified by the game mode that you choose to play. An “objective” ranges from a car (referred to as a payload in game) that needs to be escorted to a certain point by players who need to be in close physical proximity to it in-game, to capturing an outlined static point. Capturing the static point is done by standing in the designated area and stopping enemy players from being in that space using the different abilities your chosen hero has. A game “mode” refers to the different ways you need to play the game in order to win the game. One of these is the competitive mode, which is a mode that gives you a score based on your performance in the game. That score determines your skill rating. There are eight tiers of performance, and your skill rating determines which tier you are

placed in. From the lowest to highest, these tiers are bronze, silver, gold, platinum, diamond, masters, grandmasters and Top 500. You are able to climb the tiers by playing more competitive games, as you are awarded points for winning. You can also be demoted to a lower tier when you lose games and points are taken away from your total skill rating.

Competitive modes in *Overwatch* pit two teams of six players against one another, and these teams take turns either attacking and defending static objectives and moving payloads or contesting neutral points. You can choose to play any hero in a given category (support, damage, or defense*). Your objective depends on which of the 21 maps is being played at the time. For payload maps and static objectives – as well as hybrid maps, a combination of payload and static objective maps – you start with four minutes to attack, which turns into more time once you have reached a certain point on the map, up to a maximum of eight minutes.

If you have run out of time at one of these specific points but you are still present on the objective, an overtime clock starts. Overtime can continue for an indefinite amount of time, as long as a member of the attacking team is touching the objective. This time is not deducted from time additions. For neutral points (control maps), your objective is to get 100 seconds in the bank before the enemy team does, and an overtime clock triggers once you reach 99 but there are players from both teams present on the objective. There are three rounds in these control maps, and the first team to two wins the map. Overtime mechanics are true for most available game modes.

**Defense is referred to as 'tank' in-game and will be referred to as such moving forward.*

There are also several arcade modes which deviate from the regular formula of the game. For example, there is an arcade mode called “Mystery Heroes”, where you do not pick the usual hero that you play, but instead you are assigned a random hero by the game. This hero also changes each time you die in-game. You have the same type of game modes and objectives in this arcade game, but it is different due to the way heroes are picked. There is also quick play, which is the same formula as competitive mode, but you only attack or defend the map once and the winning team is the one who defends or attacks successfully. I will be focusing mainly on the mechanics of competitive play, as it is the standard for the highest tier of competitive esports in the game, *Overwatch* League, as well as the standard for many other competitive leagues which exist in different communities around the world. These leagues range from local leagues, such as the South African *Overwatch* League, to leagues where people from different countries come together to play, such as the Esports Broadcast Collective Europe, Middle-East and Africa League (EBC EMEA).

In competitive play, there are three different roles in the game which you can choose to play. These are tank, damage, and support. There are eight tank heroes, 17 damage heroes and seven support heroes. Recently, the developers have implemented a system where you can queue for a game and choose which role you want to play, and you will get that role when you load into the game. There are two of each role on a given team, which is referred to as the 2-2-2 format. Once you are in the game, you can choose what hero you want to play. The constant is that each hero has an ultimate ability and different tactical abilities, but these ultimate and tactical abilities are different for each of the 32 heroes. Tactical abilities work on different time sensitive cool downs. The ultimate ability works on a passively generating resource bank which charges up faster once you start doing damage or healing, depending on what hero and role you are playing. Ultimate abilities are usually used tactically as a team in order to swing an in-game fight in favour of your team, whereas tactical abilities are often left up to the discretion of the person playing the specific hero. Sometimes ultimate abilities and tactical abilities are used together in a plan to achieve the goal of winning an in-game fight between the two teams, or to counteract the ultimate and tactical abilities of the enemy team.

In formalised play, each player’s role is divided into a sub-role with different elements of play. Tanks are divided into main tank and off tank. Main tanks are meant to create appropriate space on the map they play in order for the team to perform their functions and achieve game win

conditions. Off tanks help the main tanks achieve their goal of space creation and fulfil a supportive role to the rest of the team. Damage dealers (DPS) are divided into projectile and hitscan, which speaks to the way that they do damage. Projectile means that shots take time to travel, and as such require an understanding of predicting where the enemy player will be instead of trying to hit them where they are at the time. Hitscan is more straightforward, as shots do not take time to travel, and as such is a more aim-intensive role. In general, hitscan DPS are more useful for their damage dealing capacity, while projectile DPS are more useful for the utility their tactical and ultimate abilities add to the team fights. Supports are divided into main support and flex support. Main supports are roles which assist a team in engaging in an appropriate way, by using their abilities to heal damage done to their team by the enemy or utilising their abilities to ensure that their team can survive the fight for longer. Flex supports offer more utility in fights and create opportunities for the rest of the team to achieve their win conditions. While healing the damage done by the enemy team, flex support heroes also usually have abilities which effectively shut down enemy ultimate abilities, making it difficult for them to do damage to your team.

Blizzard regularly updates *Overwatch*, and these game updates change the way that the abilities of each hero work. These updates usually shift what composition of heroes is strongest at the time, which is referred to as the “meta” of the game. Meta is crafted based on the synergy of heroes’ abilities together, and how well these compositions work against other compositions. There are three basic meta structures which vary in strength, depending on these updates: dive, bunker and brawl. Dive is a very fast engagement composition, which uses fast-moving heroes to target one, easily isolatable enemy hero at a time. Brawl is a slower composition, but it is hyper aggressive, and requires the team to engage the enemy directly to achieve win conditions. Bunker is the slowest type of composition, where the players maintain distanced engagement and take space by maintaining conservative engagements for extended periods of time. This is referred to as “poke” damage in the game.

In-game communications

The game has text and voice channels which can be used for communication. In high tier, pre-established teams that practice together, there are different communication responsibilities, traditionally but not exclusively, macro and micro callers. The macro callers are the players who guide the team and plan engagements. They are responsible for making the calls on where to take

fights, how aggressive or defensive the team needs to be, which ultimate abilities should be used in specific fights and if they need to disengage from a fight. These calls are generally based on elements such as how many enemy players die before players on your team do and how much time is left on the clock in order to achieve win conditions. The micro callers are the players who manage the fight once it has started. This includes calling which enemy player to target first, guiding the team's commitment to the engagement while it persists as well as determining playstyle.

Understanding the context of what environment players are in when they play *Overwatch* allows for a clear analysis of how they interact with each other, and how the game itself influences those interactions. *Overwatch* is inherently a competitive game, which can be seen through the fact that competitive points are kept track of and place you in a specific ranking among all the players who play the game. It means that most players have goals they want to achieve in the game, and if those goals become increasingly difficult to reach because of other players' decisions there is space for visceral and aggressive reactions towards those players. It is a team game, which means that you need to rely on other players' performances as well as your own to do well. The vast selection of characters and roles that are available make this somewhat contentious, especially when considering that players do not always pick the characters which are better suited for the situation at the time. In play where there is not a designated leader who can direct the team accordingly, such as quick play and competitive play with strangers, things can become heated quickly. Players get frustrated, and sometimes decide to 'throw'. This term refers to intentionally making the game difficult for their teammates by either standing still and not contributing anything, running into the enemy team and letting them kill them, or picking a character which does not fit with the goal the team is trying to achieve. These frustrations and issues could be alleviated by playing in a pre-established team. Firstly, there is usually an appointed captain or leader who can keep check of all players in the team and make sure they are contributing as much as everybody else. Secondly, teams usually practice and come up with specific compositions and plans for each map and situations. Putting these plans into practice regularly gives more structure to the game, and builds trust between the players when they face difficult situations. This trust is not usually found when playing with strangers. This leads to issues like people making decisions for themselves which actively hinders the team, having little concern for the feelings of their teammates when interacting with them.

Why play games like *Overwatch*?

There have been multiple academic research reports which raise concerns about the mental effects on people who play violent video games like *Overwatch* (Kasumovic, Blake, Dixson, Denson, 2015:2014), research which affirms this concern and which contests it. According to studies conducted, it is possible for people who play violent video games to display increased aggression, aggressive thoughts and hostile feelings and this occurs in both children and adults (Kasumovic et al, 2015:204). In light of this information, why do people still carry on playing violent video games? Challenge and competition were identified as the main reasons why people play violent video games (Kasumovic et al, 2015:204), and this might explain why individuals who enjoy competition actively decide to play these kinds of games (Kasumovic et al, 2015:204).

I am personally a product of this theory. I started playing *Overwatch* three years ago. At first, it was just a game I would play with my friends. Once I decided to join a team, it became a much more serious commitment during the week. I ended up being captain of my team for two years, and went on to compete in various international and local competitions and leagues. The reason behind deciding to join a team was because, at the time, I had a great passion for the game and playing with strangers on the internet became frustrating. It was no longer enough to play the game casually with friends who did not know much about it, and I wanted to take advantage of the competitive *Overwatch* scene in South Africa. This led to a type of short career in esports. Even though I was by no means one of the top players in the world, I was part of a team that ended among the top five in South Africa. This gave me purpose beyond academics and other commitments. It was something I took charge of and made great for myself. Beyond the fact that *Overwatch* can be considered a violent video game, it brought me great joy and allowed me to foster friendships. However, through playing *Overwatch*, I started to notice some disturbing things about being a woman in the online gaming space. Oftentimes when I was playing competitive modes alone, and I would speak in the voice channel, I would be berated by men who were playing on my team. Comments would range from sexually inappropriate statements to blaming me for the loss of the game. It made it very difficult to be in that space, and I stopped speaking in the voice channels to avoid any further incidents and being identified as female. This allowed me to observe – and what I saw was that the way people spoke to each other, whether or not it was intended to be hostile, was often of a hostile and toxic nature. This occurred both in game and outside of the game in different communities. This kind of talk seemed to be an

integral part of gaming culture. But also, importantly, I noticed it was directed more at female players than male players.

1.3 The issue with gaming culture

Video games are a form of entertainment and are mainly defined by the level of interaction from the consumer (Klimmt and Hartmann, 2005:133). This feature distinguishes video games from other forms of entertainment. This interactive feature of video games means that not only are players in control of the outcome of the video game they play, but they are an active part in the story which contributes significantly to the progress of the story (Klimmt and Hartmann, 2005:133). Their decisions and actions often determine how the game looks and how it develops (Klimmt and Hartmann, 2005:133). These features are seen differently depending on the type of game that is played, but generally stay true. This is no different for *Overwatch*, where players are the active part of the game and determine whether or not they win or lose with no real element of chance involved. Every decision is actively made by the players, and those decisions affect their teammates and enemies in one way or another. The pressure which arises from being in control of these decisions could partly explain why people get so hostile with each other in situations where they lose a game, or even sometimes use toxic language with enemies, win or lose. In conjunction with this, there are some players who raise concerns about the way the playable characters are represented in the game when they do not fit a specific mold. One example of this is when developers confirmed the sexual orientation of Soldier:76, a playable character in *Overwatch* who is an older, white ex-soldier and commander. When he was confirmed to be homosexual, there were players who threatened to boycott the game (Shepard, 2019).

Representation in video games refers to more than just how characters are designed and presented. For example, a lot of issues with representation in video games arise with the actual story and goal of the game. Usually, the protagonist is a muscular, strong man whose task is to fight a monster or another muscular man in order to save a woman (Dickerman, Christensen, and Kerl-McClain, 2008:21). The woman is usually depicted as weak, incapable of violence, and wearing tight fitting or revealing clothing covering an unrealistic and disproportionate body (Dickerman et al, 2008:21). In *Overwatch*, there are at least 13 playable characters who are women, not including characters which are not playable but present in lore. They range in age, race, body type and sexual orientation. All the female characters have a place in the game, and all of them are able to shoot and kill and heal their teammates depending on the role they fall

under. This scope of characters allows us to assume that *Overwatch* developers make a conscious effort to make representation a progressive point in their game, allowing people of all races, genders and sexual orientations find a character with whom they connect on a personal level in game. That then begs the question: Why do people still have such aggressive reactions to female players when they play *Overwatch*, considering the effort the developers have made to try make it a game for everyone through representation? This is something that this thesis will explore further, but the basic answer is the history of representation in video games. The attention to better representation in video games is a fairly new development. Previously, women in games have been portrayed as weak and in need of saving (Dickerman et al, 2008:21), or used as a marketing strategy to target men and young boys by displaying them as almost nude or with a body that appeals to the male gaze (Dickerman et al, 2008:23). Long term consumption of this kind of media can skew the perception of the consumer (Ivory, 2006:105). Using women as a marketing strategy or merely the ‘girl in need of saving’ in games for so many years has then clearly skewed the perception of the long-term gamer, and this makes it a difficult space for women players to enter into. So, when they do, they are often met with a polarised reaction: they are condemned through discrimination and aggressive behaviour, or they are put on an unrealistic pedestal, so to speak.

For the woman who plays video games, the issue arises when you do not fit the mould that has been pre-established for you. If you are assertive, a leader, or just want to play a role that is not a healer, people treat you in such a way that it is difficult to immerse yourself in the online video game world. This experience is deeply personal, something which has happened to me time and again as a leader in the South African *Overwatch* community. It is so severe at times, that even when I speak online to strangers and they can hear that I am a woman, they start to attack me needlessly with awful slurs and insults. I have heard this happen to other women, and even to men who have a voice with a higher pitch. So, why do players feel the need to exclude gamers who do not fit their stereotype and why do they mostly turn to discriminatory language and insults to try exclude those gamers? The basic answer is that there is no real authority online which can stop them. The complex answer lies in assessing if there are any specific situations which cause these reactions, and why a lot of men in particular who play games have not moved past the stereotypical ‘damsel in distress’ perception of women. This thesis will not only explore possible answers to these questions but ask new ones about how women deal with this in online gaming, and why the chosen weapon of exclusion seems to be language, jargon and talk.

***Overwatch* League**

Women are still underrepresented in the workplace (Krivkovich, Robinson, Starikova, Valentino, and Yee, 2017). In the video game industry, research has shown that women are frustrated by having constantly to speak for and about their gender identity (De Castell and Skardzius, 2019:837). At this stage it is so prevalent, that women have prepared answers for questions such as “What is it like working as a woman in the industry?” and “What can we do to include more women?” (De Castell and Skardzius, 2019:837). We are at a stage where women no longer want it to be seen as abnormal for them to part of the industry (De Castell and Skardzius, 2019:837). The questions they want to answer are about their work in the industry, not about their identity as a woman in the industry (De Castell and Skardzius, 2019:837). The fact of the matter, however, is that this is still the case. Women are seen as an anomaly in the esports and video game industry, and it is no different with *Overwatch*.

Overwatch League is the professional esports league for *Overwatch*. Players who are good enough to play in the league come from all over the world. These players are truly the cream of the crop. It is where recruiters find players for the world league. Turnover in the league is quite high, as teams usually drop players and pick up new ones at the end of every leg of the league. Despite this high turnover and the fact that it has been running for four years, only one woman has participated in the league. The broadcast team is more diverse, with female casters, hosts and behind-the-scenes staff who are necessary for the running of the league. As far as playing in teams goes, however, Kim “Geguri” Se-Yeon has been the only woman present in the league. People who participate in the League do get paid for that participation, and generally spend most or all of their time dedicated to it. Moreover, there is a 3.5-million-dollar prize pool dedicated to the League each year. As such, I will consider this a workplace. The recruitment of Geguri to The Shanghai Dragons was considered a pioneering moment in *Overwatch* esports. However, considering that there are a total of 20 teams with a minimum of six players per team, that is one woman out of a minimum of 120 players, in four years. The moment Geguri was recruited was definitely a step forward for the esports scene, but the scale tips so far towards recruiting men that at that stage, so long after the first season had kicked off, it seemed a token hire. After Geguri decided to depart the *Overwatch* League in 2020 (Marshall, 2020), all players are now male.

Overwatch Contenders is a high-tier league where pro-rank players are able to attempt the ascent

to *Overwatch* League. Many new players in *Overwatch* League are drawn from Contenders, and Contenders teams are drawn from the Open Division League - a place where people of all ranks and from all regions are able to compete against each other, showing off their skill and attempting to rise in the ranks. In December of 2018 a Contenders team, Second Wind, picked up a player who they thought was a highly ranked woman playing under the name of Ellie (Smith, 2019). Ellie would have been the first woman at the time to play in the North American roster (Smith, 2019). As news of her signing spread across the internet, there seemed to be quite a lot of pushback from the community in terms of misogynistic and sexist comments (Smith, 2019). After some time and issues resulting from these comments, it was revealed that Ellie was a fraud - somebody else playing under her account, who was in fact a man (Smith, 2019). An investigation was launched and it was found that it was indeed a fake account created by a veteran male posing as a woman (Smith, 2019). Originally, the attack was launched due to a history of questioning the skill of women who make it into these top ranks. A similar thing happened to Geguri, where she was accused of cheating. She had to debunk these accusations by posting a video which showed her hand movements while she played (Smith, 2019). Second Wind had no sponsors and was not affiliated to any *Overwatch* League major teams, and as such they had no need to divulge or ask for their players' personal information. As such, because Ellie had spoken in a Discord channel with the team multiple times and her voice was identified as that of a woman, the team stood by her and supported her statements that she was a woman (Smith, 2019). Because of the heavily toxic treatment and threats towards women who game online, a lot of female gamers are reluctant to share any kind of personal information about themselves (Smith, 2019). This was another factor which allowed the team to have sympathy for Ellie, who claimed she felt the same way about sharing her personal information. After it was confirmed that Ellie was in fact a man playing under a guise, it was alleged by multiple streamers, *Overwatch* players and Second Wind that this whole situation was meant to be a type of 'social experiment' done by the player accused – allegedly another ladder player under the name 'Punisher' – in order to expose sexism in esports (Moore, 2019). This was incredibly misguided, however, because all it ended up doing was perpetuating the toxic idea that women can only be good at video games if they cheat or let men play in their place.

We can see through this discussion that women are either severely under-represented or treated with contempt. As seen with *Overwatch* League, in the 4 years it has been active there has only been one woman present on any of the teams. Geguri, the woman in question, then felt the need to

prove her worth to be in the league by recording the way she plays games in order to prove she does not cheat. This has never been a prominent issue with male gamers as they are generally accepted as best in the world from the get go. As a workplace, the best example to showcase how women are treated are the controversies involved with Riot Games. In 2018, Kotaku released a report which called out the sexist culture of Riot Games (Rand, 2019). This report noted the experiences of 28 women who worked for the company. All of them had experienced some level of sexism; from generalised issues with corporate culture to blatant individual attacks (Rand, 2019). Riot released many reports throughout 2018, claiming that they understood there was work to be done and that they were doing their utmost to ensure that women felt safe in their workspace (Rand, 2019). However, in 2019, Riot moved towards a private arbitration policy in their company. This policy was subsequently the cause of a walkout of over 200 employees in May of 2019, and Riot had to settle in a gender discrimination class action suit for 10 million dollars (Rand, 2019). This, a year after the original reports in 2018, was eventually the tipping point for people who had started to believe Riot's commitment to the cause. There have been efforts to highlight the importance of women in the industry. Blizzard, for example, released an article on the *Overwatch* League website which specifically pointed out each woman who was involved in the running of the league (Gao, 2019). This was meant to honour their hard work done for the league and point out their value. However, considering that we are still contending with these issues today, this might not be enough. Bringing awareness to the topic and the resultant issues is a good start, but Blizzard is in a position where they can make real change in the industry. When we consider their reactions to the Ellie controversy, for example, they seem to go radio silent. However, positive steps have been taken when we see how they have reacted to the allegations against Sinatras. It is a contentious situation, because Blizzard is not a company which deals with politics and issues such as this. They are a company which releases video games meant for enjoyment and competition. However, when the players and staff members involved in the playing and creation of these video games are being harassed and abused to the point where they cannot speak up, should it not be their responsibility to take some steps to improve the situation? Currently, there are no programmes run by either *Overwatch* League or organisations who operate within the *Overwatch* League to promote the growth and success of women in the community and game. This could be the first step forward to a more diverse and positive competitive space for women in highly competitive spaces.

Gamergate

Gamergate was a social movement which started in August 2014 and is a prime example in the history of video games of how an attempt was made to keep women from immersing themselves in video games and its culture. It is also one of the most prolific examples of how gatekeeping as a dynamic in video game culture can affect the people who try to be a part of it. It was justified by those who fueled it as an ethical criticism of gaming journalism, mostly by people who identified politically as alt-right (Lees, 2016). Gamergate turned into a fully-fledged online war of sorts, where one side was fighting for more inclusion of women in the gaming industry, while the other side believed they were being lied to by a corrupt press (Dewey, 2014). The side which was fighting against this inclusion also consisted of misogynists, people who did not want change in their games and anti-feminists. The divide was between the stereotypical gamer and the reality that a wide range of people had a devout interest in playing video games. How this unbelievable war on women in the video game industry started was essentially with one blog post about Zoe Quinn, an independent game designer, who produced a game called *Depression Quest* in 2013. It is not your typical game, but more of a text-based online game which tells the story of a man with depression. Many players and critics were fans of this game, but there were also many who took issue with the way it was presented (Dewey, 2014). This set the stage for what would come next; a series of blog posts describing in intimate detail how Quinn had allegedly cheated on her ex-boyfriend with multiple men in the gaming industry in order to get ahead in her career (Dewey, 2014). One of the men she was accused of sleeping with was a prominent reporter for Kotaku, which is a massive gaming publication. Before any allegations could be confirmed or denied, people in the tens of thousands had taken to multiple social media platforms in order to protest unethical gaming journalism. Quinn was the first victim of the Gamergate controversy to receive rape and death threats, so specific that she fled her home (Dewey, 2014). The Gamergate controversy is an extreme example of how far some people invested in gaming culture will go in order to keep others out. There seems to be an obsession with who can identify as a real gamer or hardcore gamer, and who can identify only as the casual gamer. Lizzy Garcia wrote an article in 2018 on *But Why Tho?* addressing a piece she had written when she had fallen chronically ill and simultaneously fallen in love with video games. In this piece, she speaks about how she received comments which attacked the fact that she identified as a gamer, and that she could not possibly do this because she had not been playing games for a very long time (Garcia, 2018). One argument states that players do this because they feel that the space they are in is threatened, and thus no longer provides the safe feeling it once

did (Alhadad, 2020). This argument stems from the idea that players who engaged in video games long before they became part of mainstream pop culture still think of the space as it was before; that it is their space to be had, and anybody who is in that space who is not of their demographic or opinion, is purely there to be ridiculed (Alhadad, 2020). The key weakness in this argument, however, is that the popularisation of video games was a slow burn. It was not something which happened overnight, and as such there has been ample time for these players to adjust to the new climate of video game culture (Alhadad, 2020). The second weakness is that the people who are targeted most often, when it comes to gatekeeping practices, are women. There is no justification for chasing somebody out based on how they identify. However, players have been fed the narrative by popular media and advertising that video games are for men, and the misrepresentation of women in video games has exacerbated the problem. Here, we see a perfect example how the threat of gender-based violence and rape is enough to push women out of their jobs and homes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Participatory culture and gaming culture

The development of new technologies has introduced new ways for people to socialise, play and communicate (Li, 2010:428). According to a study done in 2005 by Pew Internet & American Life Project, 57% of teenagers who use the internet in America could be considered media content creators (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton and Robison 2009:3). The creation of web pages, photography, videos and artwork is all part of the package in terms of media creation. Statistics for these creators are also interesting, because contrary to popular belief, more girls than boys were participating in media creation and embracing participatory culture (Jenkins et al, 2009:4). For the purpose of this paper, participatory culture will be defined as a culture where people feel that their creations matter in whatever form they are, and that these creations create space for meaningful social connections with others (Jenkins et al, 2009:6). In the gaming industry, participation is understood and accepted as an important part of gaming culture (Jenkins, 2006:2), and since participatory culture is enabled through the same technologies which give people access to creative platforms (Jenkins et al, 2009:5), these two cultures come together, forming an important part of each other. Due to the vast nature and variety of video games, the argument could be made that one cannot merely define a singular 'video game culture' (Muriel and Crawford, 2018:2). This is because video games themselves do not exist as a homogeny (Muriel and Crawford, 2018:2) as there are many different types of players, games and platforms on which to play. In essence, it is problematic to attempt a discussion which recognises video game culture as static or singular (Muriel and Crawford, 2018:2). It would be expedient to focus on specific aspects of video game culture, how those aspects have grown throughout the years, as well as how they are experienced in video game culture today. The first aspect of video game culture relevant to this thesis is the place of the 'fan' or 'player' in gaming culture. It is imperative to understand that a fan of a certain thing might not be committed to an exclusive relationship with that thing (Jenkins, 2006:18). Instead, it is possible to be a fan of multiple things, while also disliking things which exist in the same realm. The sheer scope of video games means that there are many things for the audience to love and hate. There are many games and stories which some people love passionately while others are merely indifferent about them, and the rest seem to hate them with the same passion as those who love them.

This love-hate relationship often translates politically, especially when it involves women and other socially disadvantaged groups. For example, The *Overwatch* community had an overtly hostile reaction to the *Overwatch* comic which confirmed Soldier:76, a burly, older soldier as a gay man. Michael Chu, the narrative director for *Overwatch*, made a statement on Twitter confirming this fact. There were positive reactions to this statement, but there were many which called for the boycotting of *Overwatch*, as well as blaming the Millennial generation for forcing a narrative which did not make sense to the people reacting negatively. As seen here, there is a certain polarisation which exists in the *Overwatch* community, which might refer to the gaming community as a whole. There is existing research which accounts for how political polarisation bolsters polarisation in the media (Ozduzen and Korkut, 2020:498). While this literature is focused more on voting behaviour and party alliances (Ozduzen and Korkut, 2020:498), I would like to apply this theory to the fans and players of video games and their behaviour concerning ‘controversial’ topics. Discussion, debate, sharing and comparing views are the cornerstones of healthy political attitudes within a community (Pattie and Johnston, 2016:483). The darker side of this dynamic is the emergence of ‘group think’, where individuals tend to occupy echo chambers where their views are considered reasonable and correct while any opposing view is dismissed without giving it a hearing (Pattie and Johnston, 2016:483). This kind of behaviour is in evidence when, for example, players discuss representation in video games. The danger of this is when the opinion that video games are a haven for cis-het white men and nobody else, women experience great difficulties in attempting to immerse themselves in video game communities where that opinion dominates. As such, the place of the ‘fan’ or ‘player’ of video games exists as one where they tend to dictate who (in their opinions) can and cannot enter their communities and play the game in which they are interested. If this is not an open-minded and accepting mindset, it tends to swing to the extreme with no middle-ground, as I will explore further in this thesis.

The second aspect of video game culture which is relevant to this thesis is communication. In video games, there are many different physical ways in which people communicate with each other. In online games, this often means speaking through text or voice channels. In communities which exist outside of the game, there are many platforms on which fans and players communicate with each other about different games (Twitter, Facebook, Discord and Reddit are some examples). Twitch is another platform which fans and players often use to communicate, while they are watching a streamer play a game they enjoy. Here, they communicate both with

the streamer and the other people who are watching them play. Gaming culture is unique in the way that it is structured. There is almost a Mobius Strip of reality and imaginary, which switches, based on what is deemed appropriate at the time (Cross, 2014:5). Gaming culture moves from drawing from the real to sticking to unreal perceptions when it is suitable for the situation, but it always results in real consequences (Cross, 2014:5). Researchers have observed that when placed in an anonymous situation online, people often display what is referred to as the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2005:184). This can range from a benign disinhibition where people are more kind and caring online than they appear offline, to a toxic disinhibition where people display more hostile, aggressive and overall unacceptable behaviour when presented with situations in which they can be anonymous (Suler, 2005:184). In online video games, toxic disinhibition is usually the phenomenon which can be observed. This theory of disinhibition is further bolstered by the idea that gaming culture is something which refracts and reflects the culture of the real world (Cross, 2014:4). These elements make gaming culture a distinct and different kind of space to the social structure of the offline world, as it adopts some of its customs, makes them its own and clings to older views with no sight of change in the near future (Cross, 2014:4), making it, more often than not, a toxic and hostile environment in which to be.

Social dominance theory is the idea that group-based status and hierarchies are formed in order to minimise conflict in those groups (Foels and Pappas, 2004:743). The SDO, or social dominance orientation, refers to the social hierarchy preference of the individual (Foels and Pappas, 2004:743). While ethnic differences have been observed to be socially defined categorization, the gender difference is something which is not thought to be culturally determined (Foels and Pappas, 2004:743). The gender difference is more likely a result of men's reproductive strategies and their innate predisposition to group boundary dominance (Foels and Pappas, 2004:743). Social dominance theory suggests that the difference in SDO is driven by the fact that men feel it is necessary to establish their dominant position in society (Foels and Pappas, 2004:745). Moreover, the theory places emphasis on evolutionary mechanisms and suggests that higher levels of SDO in men have to do with their reproductive strategy (Foels and Pappas, 2004:745). Specifically, social dominance theory explicitly states that men and women should exhibit differences in SDO due to this evolutionary theory that bore their reproductive strategies (Foels and Pappas, 2004:745). Due to this evolutionary explanation and view, gender differences are not seen as arbitrary, but fixed (Foels and Pappas, 2004:745). A study conducted by Foels and Pappas presented some interesting insights into the way that we see men and women

in society; men have a higher projected SDO due to masculine socialization, and femininity is seen as little to no threat to the status quo (2004:755). These insights give us a deeper insight into how societies have illustrated the positions of men and women within them. If women are seen as less dominant, and femininity is seen as something insignificant that does not influence the status quo, then it would make sense that the male-dominated video game culture finds it difficult to embrace women.

As mentioned before, culture is influenced by language and talk, and these concepts form an important part of it (Jiang, 2000:328). Because this thesis is focused on talk, it is therefore imperative to understand how gaming culture informs the talk which is prevalent. The concept of culture as a whole is complex, but there are a few factors which we can use to identify similar traits in different cultures. There are four traits: the implication of stability, which speculates that certain phenomena persist over time and display stoutness even in the face of change and pressure (Schein, 2012:312). Conceptual sharing, which refers to similarities in communities in terms of their behaviour, perceptions, cognitions and feelings of that given community; on a greater scale conceptual sharing is the similar consensus within a given culture (Schein, 2012:312). Specific patterning, which refers to the degree in which patterns and paradigms exist that lead to a premature formulation of cultural types. Early typologies proved to be more stereotypic and ignored variations among societies, which provides good reason to study patterns in a given culture more closely (Schein, 2012:312). The last trait is dynamics, which refers to the socialization process necessary to understand how culture forms in the first place (Schein, 2012:312). For a basic definition of culture, I will be using this definition: “the pattern of shared basic assumptions invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore is taught to new members of the group as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 2012:313). In other words, this thesis considers culture the concept which dictates our way of life. With this basic understanding of culture, we are able to move on to finding a clear space for video game culture and how it fits within this definition. Video game culture has been defined as a subculture identified by certain tastes and art forms (Shaw, 2010:405). Some researchers see video game culture as a kind of social practice (Shaw, 2010:406) defined in terms of social practices which exist in the online gaming space and the shared community which is found in the game space (Shaw, 2010:406). Since its inception, the gaming industry has evolved into a fully-fledged society composed of the

living experiences of those who play them (Cade and Gates, 2017:71).

The first issue we encounter, and the most pertinent to this thesis when considering video game culture, is who belongs to it (Shaw, 2010:407). Many people believe that most gamers are men, perpetuating the stereotype that online gaming belongs to this demographic (Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer, 2017:422). When it comes to the consumption of entertainment media, it should be a general acceptance that anybody can participate in that consumption. However, this stereotypical idea that only white, cis-het men are truly interested in video games is harmful to the idea that people outside of this demographic may be interested in them. This is the first identifier of who 'belongs' in video game culture. However, the second one is more difficult to standardise: the difference between the casual and hardcore gamer, and how they fit into the scope of video game culture (Paaßen et al, 2017:423). The difference between the two usually concerns defining the casual gamer as somebody who has lower skill levels than the hardcore or professional gamer (Paaßen et al, 2017:423). This difference can also be defined by patterns such as gaming knowledge and attitudes, playing habits and buying habits (Paaßen et al, 2017:423). Casual gamers and hardcore gamers can also be defined by the genre of game in which they participate; with MMOs, shooters and strategy games defined as hardcore gaming genres (Paaßen et al, 2017:423). The third means of identification which will be the main focus of this thesis is the self-identification of gamers. Research has found that in a given focus group of people who play games, only 35% of female adolescents self-identified as gamers, against 69% of their male counterparts (Paaßen et al, 2017:423). This disparity may be explained by the conflict which exists between the 'gamer' identity and the gendered identity of people who play video games (Paaßen et al, 2017:423). Specifically, women have been found to identify as either a gamer or a woman, but there is never really space to identify as both simultaneously (Paaßen et al, 2017:423). This pattern of thinking is made worse through the marketing practices of video game publishers who usually target young, male consumers (Paaßen et al, 2017:423). Research has also shown that women who play games are more likely to internalize a fluid understanding of gender identity in gaming, whereas women who do not play games will almost entirely associate video games and the industry with men (Paaßen et al, 2017:423).

Evidently, there are many factors to consider when we think about who 'belongs' to gaming culture, and how they fit into the various categories that seem to exist within it. Another interesting thing about video game culture, however, is that it is mostly based on the consumption

of a form of entertainment. One classic portrayal and understanding of culture is that it is made up of social practices and embodiments of material things in which people of that culture participate and find important (Schudson, 1989:154). Culture as a concept universally includes rituals important to that culture, and within those rituals lie symbolic signs or objects without which the ritual cannot exist (Schudson, 1989:154). Symbolic signs exist in video games on a wide scale. As a small example, the keys W-A-S-D when playing on a personal computer, are universally known and understood as the keys which make the character you are controlling move. This is a connection between all players who play on computers and game developers. However, beyond this simple example, signs and symbols seem to be the basis on which video game culture was born. An example of this can be taken from the popular video game Dark Souls. Dark Souls is infamous for being an extremely difficult game. Dark Souls has no difficulty setting, and when players complained about this (specifically on the internet), the response would often be 'git gud', which means: get better at the game so that you can beat it and stop whining. Since this interaction, 'git gud' has become a significant symbol in gaming culture. Originally worn as a badge of honour for completing Dark Souls, it has now evolved into a gate, which people new to gaming communities need to open in order to be accepted, no matter what game they are playing. Starting from one video game, the symbol of 'git gud' has become a barrier to entry of video games in entirety, especially when it comes to online competitive video games. This example also falls into the broader understanding that culture itself evolves through individuals passing on knowledge and customs to the next generations of people (Whiten, Hinde, Laland, and Stringer, 2011:938). In conjunction with this idea of the evolution of culture, since the popularisation of esports and professional players excelling, more space has been created for people who want to help others improve at video games. *Overwatch* has many streamers who dedicate their time to reviewing videos of people who want to improve themselves, and coaches who release videos helping players and teams understand different metas and how to improve their gameplay. Beyond those who dedicate themselves to this idea of helping others improve, however, there are still a significant number of people who judge others based on their skills in game whether or not they are professional players. This is just one example of how one symbol from one game has permeated the thinking of people who immerse themselves in gaming culture. What is of more concern is the concept that video games are for men. There is more than one stereotype that exists in gaming culture concerning women who play video games - women only play games for the attention of men; when women do play, they have to play healer subtypes and women are automatically less skilled than men. These are just three examples. These stereotypes

and beliefs are a direct result of the same concept 'git gud' introduced, and is still a huge problem in gaming culture today; gatekeeping.

Gatekeeping

In social fields, gatekeeping theory usually refers to the control of information that needs to pass through a gate to reach other people (DeIullis, 2015:4). Gatekeepers are the people who control the passing of this information (DeIullis, 2015:4). Gatekeeping theory was developed by Kurt Lewin (DeIullis, 2015:4). For Lewin, the task of social sciences should be to conceptualize the world, and in this process of conceptualization, gatekeeping theory organically emerged (DeIullis, 2015:4). The social world, according to Lewin, was conceptualized as a relationship between individuals and groups (DeIullis, 2015:5). As such, when this theory was explored after Lewin's time, there was ample space to explore it in terms of organizational and external factors (DeIullis, 2015:8). In the world of video games, gatekeeping can come in many forms. There is the classic definition of gatekeeping theory; where people withhold information from new players. This can range from refusing to help new players get better at a game, or merely not telling them about certain mechanics that are not self-explanatory which could serve to help them. Gatekeeping in this context extends beyond the keeping of information to an attempt to withhold access to video games. Players who do not identify as white cis-het men are particularly exposed to this experience.

2.2 Stereotypes, representation and women in video games

There is a highly specific, caricatured and often negative perception of gamers in popular culture (Kowert, Festl, and Quandt, 2013:141). This stereotype revolves around concepts of unpopularity, unattractiveness, idleness and social incompetence (Kowert et al, 2014:141). The specific stereotype this thesis is interested in, however, is the overwhelming portrayal of video games as the 'province of straight white adolescent boys' (MacLean, 2016:17). This stereotype is perpetuated by news media in the sense that articles, TV shows, web-based programs and other forms of media refuse to acknowledge the diversity which exists in online gaming (Kowert, Griffiths, and Oldmeadow, 2012:472). This implies a drastic misconception of people who play video games, especially when considering the scale of the video game industry. It is estimated that by 2015, 68% of Australians, 59% of Americans, and 69% of Britons were playing video games (MacLean, 2016:17). Despite these statistics, this stereotype that all gamers are young,

white and male, is ill-informed; especially considering that in Australia alone, the average age of gamers is 33, and nearly half are women (MacLean, 2016:17). This misinterpretation may seem to be just another statistic, but considering that news media is the medium looked to by the public for policy and perception (MacLean, 2016:17), it is incredibly damaging to the public's understanding of people who play video games. The lack of portrayal of socially disadvantaged groups in video games is often tied to the fact that the gaming industry does not recognise people who identify as part of these groups as gamers (Shaw, 2011:28). This could be linked to the ill informed stereotypes which are perpetuated by the media and in popular culture, in conjunction with advertising targeted at white men. Although representation in video games has improved in recent years, this improvement is largely based on an emphasis of targeted marketing based on those identities (Shaw, 2011:29), and this is a problematic solution to the issue of representation in video games. Despite the improved representation, researchers have found that when women are represented, it is often in a sexually objectifying manner, and infrequently (Ivory, 2006:104). Furthermore, they are also usually non-essential, passive characters who indulge in sexually suggestive behaviour (Ivory, 2006:105). Stereotyping is central to this misrepresentation of women; the stereotypes which are most frequently used are the 'damsel in distress', as well as the afore-mentioned sexual objectification of female characters (Kondrat, 2015:172). This becomes an issue specifically when players actually gain something in game, when engaging in this male gaze orientated type of representation. For example, in Grand Theft Auto, a player is able to have sex with a prostitute, kill her afterwards and gets a health bonus for performing this act (Kondrat, 2015:172).

Researchers have been trying to gauge the effects that mass media has on our perception of the world (Kondrat, 2015:172). As video games form a large component of mass media, they can also be seen as responsible for the perceptions of body ideals and the roles of women in society. This influence on young children who play these video games might shape their perceptions to fit these negative standards, but it also paints a picture for those who are older and engage in playing video games often, of how women should look and/or be treated in general society (Kondrat, 2015:173). Painting the male protagonist as the 'hero' who saves the damsel in distress, or as the man who can do what he wants with the bodies of women, has consequences for women who try to immerse themselves in the online gaming space. The media's consistent portrayal of video games as a man's world, in conjunction with the targeted advertising at men by video game

companies, means that the space for women becomes limited in the eyes of gaming communities. It is not perceived as natural for anybody but a straight, white male to exist in these spaces, which means that groups with other identities experience difficulties when engaging with a form of entertainment. The issues with stereotypes, with regards to people who play video games, then have a significant impact on the experience of women who play video games. Despite the stereotype that video games are for a small demographic, it is true that many people from many backgrounds play video games (Fox and Tang, 2017:1291). Building relationships and teamwork are common when playing video games online, but frameworks such as the online disinhibition effect suggest that, with anonymity and a lack of observable authority, space for online harassment and discrimination is created (Fox and Tang, 2017:1291). This harassment and discrimination is particularly hostile toward those who are considered outsiders (Fox and Tang, 2017:1291), which includes women.

One of the issues for women gamers is the societal pressure that is put on them to act – even within a game – in a certain way. Men are seen as more competent and of a higher status than women, according to socio-cultural stereotypes (Fox and Tang, 2014:315). As such, women are expected to act with submission, and when they display assertive characteristics there is a perceived issue (Fox and Tang, 2014:315). Due to the fact that online video games are perceived as a male-dominated space, competency and authority come into question when the player is a woman (Fox and Tang, 2014:315). It is also generally the case that when a woman asserts herself in these spaces, some sort of punishment will occur, usually in the form of harassment or trash talk (Fox and Tang, 2014:315). In *Overwatch*, this assertion can be something as simple as a woman not playing the role of healer in game. A major stereotype of female gamers is that they are usually support players, and when they try any other role, they are assumed to be bad at the game. Combat in video games is typically seen as something which men crave and actively seek, whereas women will opt for indirect conflict situations which involve less violence (Hayes, 2005:26). One explanation for this perception is that combat links too directly to competition, and women are likely more comfortable with an indirect kind of competition which does not involve combat (Hayes, 2005:26). This perception is intimately tied to the sociocultural perception of women. However, there is ample evidence which points to the fact that women who play online combat-heavy video games actively enjoy the combat and competition that come with them (Hayes, 2005:26). But again, the issue is that women who do enjoy these games are treated as aberrations instead of as general players (Hayes, 2005:26).

Since communication is the main subject of this thesis, harassment in the form of verbal punishment will be the main focus of how women are treated online. The prevailing societal culture of prejudice and harassment has made itself present in the virtual world (Cross, 2014:4). As mentioned before, when women are playing video games online, they are often seen as less competent than their male counterparts (Assunção, 2016:55). When faced with toxic behaviour as a result of this perception, women often try distance themselves from the situation or try not to get involved in the first place (Assunção, 2016:55). The kind of harassment that women experience when they are put in these situations range from name calling and insults (Cross, 2014:4) to what is referred to as trolling (Ortiz, 2020:1). Scholars argue that trolling is a blanket term for the multi-dimensional aggressive and antagonistic behaviours which occur online in order to attack other people (Ortiz, 2020:1). However, there is also an argument which specifies trolling as something which is done based on identity targeting and harassment (Ortiz, 2020:1). For the purposes of this thesis, the term trolling will refer to the latter definition, because there are many players who recognise trolling as a racist and/or sexist act (Ortiz, 2020:1). In the early years of video game development, characters and other visual elements of the medium were largely of a much lower quality than we would expect today (Dickerman et al, 2008:21). In fact, looking at the modern video game, there are visual effects that put some real world beauty to shame. The growth of graphics abilities is incredible, but it has brought significant issues along with that technical development. The most glaring issue is how women are portrayed in video games. Many video games follow a common plot which includes a damsel in distress in need of saving (Dickerman et al, 2008:22). Besides the problematic issue with the constant narrative that women need saving, more often than not the way this woman is portrayed is disproportionate to how a real-world woman looks. For example, the ‘saviour’ in this situation would usually be a big, burly man who is carrying a large sword, gun or whatever massive weapon fits the motif of the game. The villain in the situation would be either very similar to the ‘saviour’, or would be portrayed as a creature of some description (Dickerman et al, 2008:22). On the contrary, the woman in need of saving is portrayed as helpless, incapable of violence and has body proportions which are impossible to achieve (Dickerman et al, 2008:22). As discussed previously, video games have not represented women in a realistic way. In fact, the representation which does exist in many video games perpetuates the idea that men are dominant in society. This comes through mostly when looking at the ‘damsel in distress’ stereotype, where players take control of a male character and need to save a woman from the villain. The other issue is how these women look in video games; they have disproportionate bodies, with extremely large breasts and tiny waists

which would make no sense if translated to a human being. The representation issue seems to be inherently sexual, playing into the male gaze, or at the very least displaying a sense of heroism for the man and neediness from the woman. There are exceptions to this rule, but an overall look at how women are presented as characters in video games is not positive. In *Overwatch*, even though there are different women with different body types, many of them do play into the classic and stereotypical tropes. It seems to be a situation where women are not only seen as one thing, but they still play into a stereotype more often than not. A good example of this is Widowmaker, who is a hitscan DPS character in the game. She is known to be cold and calculating as a result of being experimented on by the people who killed her husband in what she calls her 'previous life' - where she was also a ballet dancer. So, we have a character with a semi-rich backstory who does not fall into the trope that women are healers. However, her body proportions are heavily sexualised. She has large breasts, long legs and her back curves in an unnatural way in order to enhance her bottom. The result is a sense that it is possible for women to be other than what is portrayed by their stereotypes, but it does not wholly commit to this idea as it portrays her body proportions, which tailor to the male gaze, in a stereotypical manner.

Interestingly enough, this depiction is worse in the advertising of the game. For instance, *Neverwinter Nights* (2002) used a full-page advertisement with the heading, 'Have you seen this girl?' to display what their game would essentially be about, but the woman in question was virtually naked and only some areas were covered by seashells (Dickerman et al, 2008:22). This portrayal proved to be somewhat of a lie, as she was not represented in the same way in the game. A second example of a game using advertising in this manner is *Civilization IV*, a popular strategy game. In the advertisement, a busty version of The Statue of Liberty is portrayed alongside the words "Civ Goes Big", this despite nothing overtly sexual actually existing in the game itself (Dickerman et al, 2008:23). There are many examples where women in video games are portrayed in a manner to fit specific societal expectations, with tiny waists, very large breasts and otherwise disproportionate body symmetry, such as Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series (Dickerman et al, 2008:23). The issue of representation occurring on more than one platform in the video game industry means that it has become a difficult thing to escape. Magazines that portray women either as sex objects or ignore women entirely in favour of men, promote ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Fisher, 2015:563). Due to the fact that these publications are intrinsically connected to the actual video games, it seems that no medium in this industry is

exempt from poor representation of women. A concerning factor in how women are represented in video games is that they are under-represented in the first place (Breuer, Kowert, Festl, and Quandt, 2015:197). This under-representation, in tandem with the poor representation of women when they are present, results in a problematic perception of women by the people who play these video games (Breuer et al, 2015:197). It promotes toxic ideals of gender roles in society.

Beyond the actual video games, magazines and media platforms do not assist in exploring these ideas in a positive way. The whole concept that video games are for men started with advertising when video games started to gain traction in the 1990's. First, I would like to fully revise the influence that media and advertising has on society. Media is a principal influence on reflections of mainstream culture's beauty standards (Jung, 2006:335). Due to this, the industry has experienced negative feedback regarding the advertised model, who is often in near perfect shape more often than not (Jung, 2006:335). A key aspect of media influence is its ability to create a dominant reality which reinforces dominant power structures (Easteal, Holland, and Judd, 2015:104). This acts as an exposure to people who do not have access to experiences in their immediate social circles or their personal lives, and as such media holds the responsibility of painting a particular picture about these topics (Easteal et al, 2015:104). Media logic is central to the way these issues and topics are shaped (Easteal et al, 2015:104). This is usually presented in such a way that the reality which is presented in the media is taken for granted as accurate representations (Easteal et al, 2015:104). The primary function of media is meant to be objective, but objective writing and journalism is an extremely difficult thing to achieve. As such, media functions as a way for audiences to learn and think about experiences which they cannot find in their own lives, as well as a means for audiences to find out what goes on in the world. This responsibility that the media holds can be burdensome, and sometimes it can affect the views of the audience in a way which is harmful. Advertising in the gaming industry is a prime example of how, when not taken care of, this function can be harmful. Advertising is often more than a simple communication channel between seller and consumer. Advertisements aim to tell us how we should live our lives by how they present their products or services to us (Hayko, 2010:79). Through the use of images, videos, writing and more, advertisements present an 'ideal' lifestyle which can allegedly only be pursued through the purchase or use of the service and/or product it is presenting (Hayko, 2010:79). In the video gaming industry, advertisers rely heavily on stereotypes to establish a mass appeal and connect with their audience (Behm-Morawitz, 2017:221). In particular, this section of the industry calls on gender and/or racial stereotypes to

market products which cater widely to a white male audience (Behm-Morawitz, 2017:221).

It is clear that media and advertising have a significant influence on the way audiences perceive the world around them. In 2012, Playstation released an advertisement of a simulated woman who had breasts on both her chest and her back. The tag line was 'Touch both sides for added enjoyment'. This was an advertisement for their Playstation Vita console. This example is the kind of advertising which perpetuates rape culture and unrealistic body standards for women. It makes no attempt to be subtle, making sure that their viewpoint is that women's breasts are there for enjoyment and touch only. These types of messages then get translated into actual video games with character design and overall representation, and audiences start accepting that women are objects meant for their enjoyment or meant to boost their ego in some way. With this messaging, it becomes laborious for women to try immerse themselves in the space of video games. Although there is more awareness of these issues, through observation research and the way interviewees spoke about how they are treated online, issues with women's representation and their being pushed out of communities and online games is obviously still an issue. The more that video game media is aimed at men, the more the message will express to whom video game culture belongs. As a form of entertainment, however, video games should not belong to one specific demographic. In fact, industry statistics showed that in 2013 45% of people who played video games in the USA were women (Behm-Morawitz, 2017:221). In 2019, it was projected that more women played video games than young boys did, with a 46% presence in the audience (Saltzman, 2019). As such, women are present in video games and enjoy them as much as their male counterparts. Still though, they find it difficult to become part of this space completely.

In *Overwatch*, there are 14 playable characters identified as women, out of a total of 32. Percentage wise, that means women comprise 43,75% of the total roster. Of these characters, there are women of colour, women of various ages, women who are scientists, women who are soldiers, women with different body types, women who identify as LGBT, women with disabilities, women who are successful business owners and robots (or omnics, as they are referred to in-game) who are presented as women. Considering the abysmal representation that has plagued the video game industry in the past, this kind of range in a popular online video game is definitely a step forward. The woman they used on the cover of their game at launch is Lena Oxton (Tracer). Tracer is a woman of short stature, who identifies as lesbian. She is upbeat, friendly and always ready to help her friends and community wherever she can. This contrast to

the stereotypical damsel in distress who cannot fathom violence, or needs help from the ‘saviour’ male character, is most certainly a breath of fresh air. *Overwatch* developers have made a conscious effort to bring the backstories and personal histories of each playable character to life. They usually do so through animated short videos, or through comic strips released periodically. Despite this effort, however, they are no stranger to controversy. In game, there are multiple cosmetic items which you can obtain. These range from different ‘skins’, which refer to costumes that your character can wear in-game, to voice lines and victory poses, a pose your character will affect at the end of a game which you have won. Some of these cosmetic items raise some eyebrows. For example, Symmetra, an Indian woman, has a skin which sees her portrayed as a Hindu Devi (Goddess). It seems as though this attempt to bring awareness to Hindu culture merely became an excuse to use cultural appropriation to make one of their characters more ‘appealing’. Religious statesman and president of the Universal Society of Hinduism, Rajan Zed, actually requested that Blizzard remove the skin from the game entirely, stating that it “trivialised Hinduism’s highly revered goddesses” (Fahey, 2016). However, he seemed more concerned about the fact that it seems as if you can control a goddess in game, which is problematic in itself. The skin is still available in game.

2.3 Talk in online video games

Language and talk forms an important part of culture, and is shaped and influenced by it (Jiang, 2000:328). At the same time, language reflects culture, making it possible for the outsider to understand a little bit more about a specific culture by understanding communication patterns (Jiang, 2000:328). With this in mind, it will be impossible to understand the culture of online video gaming without attempting to understand the way fans and players speak to each other. In that vein, this thesis is focused on understanding how the manner in which players speak to each other on these platforms informs the ability for women, in particular, to immerse themselves in these spaces. Speech is used to navigate and construct the lines of the world in which we find ourselves (Herbert, 2017:1). Whether it is verbal, signed or written, speech is used to interact with others to convey ideas, pursue and construct relationships or seek out projects (Herbert, 2017:1). As such, it forms an imperative part of our day-to-day lives and the way we conduct ourselves in society. This is no different for online video games. Through speech, players communicate with each other about their intentions in-game, about feelings they have during play and how they can work together to pursue a specific goal. Speech is an action; it is more

than simply putting forward words to convey thoughts, but it is used actively to make change in the world (Herbert, 2017:18).

One of the greatest things that online video gaming has brought to the table is the ability to socialise with people in different ways (Christou, Law, Geerts, Nacke, and Zaphiris, 2013:3239). It is not the point nor entirely possible to engage in online video games in a meaningful way without interacting with other players (Christou et al, 2013:3239). However, with communication being such an important part of online gaming, different forms of harassment and ‘trash talk’ arise. The rise of popularity in online gaming also means that these types of talk and communication have evolved to form new levels of communication between players and fans (Eveljung, 2018:1). The main feature which distinguishes video games from other forms of entertainment is the level of interactivity (Klimmt and Hartmann, 2005:133). This interactivity includes, but is not limited to, the way that players are able to communicate with each other. In most online games, there are both text and voice chat capabilities. This is fantastic for players as they are able to communicate with each other. However, it also creates a space where they can discriminate against women and other socially disadvantaged groups. Trash talk, defined as “insults, threats, or profanity directed at other players” (Cote, 2017:139), is directed both at fellow teammates and opponents, depending on the situation. The use of ‘trash talk’ in online video games often maintains a specific kind of logic which rationalises sexism and racism in gaming culture (Ortiz, 2019:886). Using ‘gay’ as a slur, as well as using more direct slurs like ‘fag’, are prominent in the way that gamers speak to each other and about certain things (Eveljung, 2018:1). These slurs are also not necessarily used to refer specifically to people who identify as LGBT, but instead to express frustration about something or refer to something which they do not like (Eveljung, 2018:1). Another example of this kind of talk is the way ‘rape’ is used to refer to a player being beaten in some way by another. This is insensitive to what rape actually is and what it means in general society. These terms are used so frequently that they fall under the blanket of ‘common gamer lingo’ (Eveljung, 2018:1).

Rape threats are often an issue between people who play games together, and are often dismissed as a fair and rational way of merely expressing how they are going to beat somebody else in-game (Ortiz, 2019:887). Using rape as a term for this is accepted because of the domination that comes with the territory, but any thought beyond that and the weight behind using this word is often not processed (Ortiz, 2019:887). Sexist trash talk in gaming relies mostly on ideas of

domination, and because of the frequency that these terms are used, it is seen as nothing more than a different way of expression (Ortiz, 2019:887). The issue with this view is that a barrier starts to form against women and other players who feel uncomfortable with this kind of language, but nothing is done about it because it is merely accepted as the way gamers communicate. This kind of talk implies that there is an inherent need for cis-het men to display themselves as dominant in gaming culture (Ortiz, 2019:887). Moreover, practicing this type of presentation with no challenge creates more ground for the acceptance of this behaviour the longer it continues. Thus, the barrier for entry of women and other socially disadvantaged groups remains and becomes stronger. There has been significantly less focus in research on discriminatory language in gaming culture than general discrimination in gaming (Elveljung, 2018:1), and this thesis hopes to help fill the gap which exists in this research.

Normalization is the process through which stigmatized or deviant individuals in a given society become included in as many facets of day to day life as possible (Sandberg, 2011:2). In the context of video game culture, normalization refers to the acceptance of and expectation that people who do not identify as cis-het white men will receive some form of abuse when trying to enter the space. Normalization discourse is particular pertinent as a concept to this research. The idea is that discourse exists to present a framework to refer to certain conditions of existence in a given situation (Sandberg, 2011:4). Discourse is usually made up of a limited number of statements. Essentially, discourse functions as broader structures of language which help determine speech habits of people in a given field (Sandberg, 2011:4). Normalization discourse is then the idea where certain statements and references about video game culture ring true no matter evidence to the contrary. For example, if somebody says “a woman enjoys playing video games competitively”, it is more out of the ordinary than a man saying something like “women only play video games to get the attention of men”. Not because the former is less true than the latter, but because that is what has come to be expected when entering the video game space. In this context, normalization discourse is something which needs to be looked at as a main functionality in conversation.

Media and advertising is a means of communication. Through images, videos, and writing, audiences are able to disseminate what message the advertiser is trying to get across. These messages look to construct a meaning to life, or to a specific aspect of life, and therefore have an

influence on the perception of audiences. Whether or not audiences believe the messages is another conversation to have, but the point remains that these messages play a vital role in how life and its aspects are viewed. In other words, some kind of meaning is derived from these messages and inevitably somehow applied to different ways of living. A critical analysis of meaning is dialectically interconnected with social life in totality (Graham, 2002:233). This approach does not assume a linear approach to meaning, and outlines that meaning cannot exist outside of reality nor cause it (Graham, 2002:233). The meanings which people make cannot be seen outside of their historical contexts, but also cannot be derived simply from those contexts (Graham, 2002:233). At the same time, language is a part of this reality, a shaper of this reality and a metaphor for it (Graham, 2002:233). Language is a defining characteristic of humans and culture (Wheeler, 1999:158). Certain words in language carry inherent value judgements (Wheeler, 1999:158). Words like alcoholic, insane, or pervert are negative judgements while still being used to describe a perception or fact about a given person (Wheeler, 1999:158). Words that call attention to differences in humans, like “negro” and “chinaman” are seen to carry a more powerful negative meaning (Wheeler, 1999:158). In video game culture, the words “e-girl” and “e-boy” come to mind. E-girl refers to a woman whose online presence specifically pertains to the fact that she is attractive. For a more visual understanding, e-girls usually have unnaturally coloured hair, alternative clothing and piercings along with elements of many different types of fashion (Jennings, 2019). E-boys can be identified visually through the same elements. The people who identify as e-girls or e-boys usually only have this persona online, like on Twitch while they are streaming a game. These terms are used in a derogatory fashion more often than not, however, and that is what I would like to focus on. E-girls are specifically targeted online for the issues that have been brought up time and again: they are looking for attention, they only play video games for the attention of men specifically, or they are deemed too strange and uncomfortable to interact with. However, e-girl is a term which has also been used to deride women who do not identify as e-girls. This speaks to the derogatory nature of the term, as well as the idea that women are only on the internet for attention. E-boy is often used as a derogatory term when men online display feminine traits.

Online video games have a platform for people to interact via communication. *Overwatch* alone has three different ways in which players can communicate with each other; voice chat, text chat, and through different prompts that their character has. Apex Legends is known for its substantial and effective ways of communicating through a ‘pinging’ system where you can communicate

with your teammates by pointing out enemies, loot, giving suggestions for different positions to move towards and more on the map on which you play. As such, communication and talk is a central part of playing video games online with other people. This communication is primarily meant to be used in order for teams to work together more effectively and achieve the winning goal. However, these communication portals are often used for abuse. Because you are usually not within physical proximity to the people you play with, these portals of communication are the only way you are able to talk to your teammates. This means they are the only way that players can insult and goad other players, and verbal abuse is the direct result. In this way, talk and language is the tool which is used in order to provoke and abuse women while playing. There are means in these games to report abusive language and hate speech. However, the issue is that the people who are disciplined for behaving in these ways can get around the censure by making new accounts and playing again under a different name. There is no effective way to remove them from this space. During the interviews conducted for this research, all the women spoken to suggested that education is an important way to effect real change in gaming. None of them felt particularly helped by reporting systems, but said they would feel safer in these spaces if there were ways to educate people about why the way they speak is harmful.

Toxic Talk

Online abuse has many forms in which it manifests in conversations and communication. Hate speech, aggression, toxicity, cyberbullying, harassment and incivility are some of its subcategories (Carton, Mei, and Resnick, 2020:96). The task of detecting this kind of abuse for research has been challenging, because of the subjective and context-specific nature of online abuse (Carton et al, 2020:96). Different communities consider different things acceptable, and different individuals also have different perceptions of what constitutes online abuse regarding subjects like profanity (Carton et al, 2020:96). For now, I would like to focus on the hostile and aggressive nature of online conversations and ways in which it manifests. There are certain aspects of online communication which make it particularly susceptible to incivility (Anderson, Yeo, Brossard, Scheufele, and Xenos, 2018:157). Compared to a face-to-face environment, the physical isolation of the internet and absence of non-verbal cues makes it a space where incivility is more prevalent (Anderson et al, 2018:157). This kind of behaviour has been defined as “hostile and aggressive interactions via text-based computer-mediated communication” (Anderson et al, 2018:157). In studies conducted, which analysed major newspapers and mainstream media, the most common form of incivility found was name-calling, insults and

mockery (Anderson et al, 2018:157). Previous research has also identified that incivility has various effects on the way people engage with conversations online; including the encouragement of biased perceptions and the erosion of open-mindedness on issues (Anderson et al, 2018:157).

Although this kind of behaviour is also directed at men, it is particularly concerning when it involves women due to the exclusionary history of video games. The general uncivil behaviour is a cause for concern, but the ways in which women are abused online - and the fact that this is done because of their identity as women - makes it a more serious issue. In the case of online video games, incivility can refer to the insults and abuse specifically aimed at women who play games. The aggressive and hostile interactions mentioned in the definition of the term are usually aimed at women and that could be born from stereotyping. Stereotyping does not necessarily have to be bad as it can provide perspective on how to categorise and simplify complex information (Smith, 2010:4). Having this standardised mental picture achieved through a process of categorising allows us to understand concepts without spending too much time on them (Smith, 2010:4). However, the tendency to categorise groups of people can keep them isolated and makes it difficult for outsiders to understand and perceive individuals within that group (Smith, 2010:4). In video games, this can be seen through the way women are treated as outsiders, despite the fact that there are many women around the world who play video games. The stereotype is that video games are played by and competed in by white, heterosexual men. The consequence of this perspective is manifested online abuse and isolation, usually directed through communication.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Ethics

3.1 Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, this study is meant to look at the state of online video games as a space for women, with a specific focus on the jargon, language and representation in game and in outside communities. Through personal experience, interviews and observation techniques, I collected data to try and answer the thesis question. This was in an effort to, firstly, show that there are major issues in video game culture when it comes to making space for women, secondly, to find out where exactly these issues occur, and thirdly, to find out if there are solutions to this problem. This chapter explains how the research was conducted, provides reasons for why it was conducted in this manner and comments on the ethics involved in the research process.

The research question was born from personal experience. As a woman in gaming communities, it is often difficult merely to exist in these spaces. This is difficult because players and people within communities tend to be derogatory and presumptuous based on the fact that I identify as a woman. These behaviours can come in many forms: unsolicited, romantically intended interactions or inappropriate behaviour, toxic assumptions of your intentions in the community based on your gender, underestimation or uncalled for judgement of the way you play games based on your gender, and difficulty gaining respect and/or positions of leadership as a result of this kind of treatment. This behaviour also extends to people who identify as LGBT, as well as people of colour, albeit in different forms. However, the main focus of this research project is on people who identify as female. This behaviour is a wise place to start asking questions about how the culture of online gaming is a proponent of the creation of toxic spaces for women and other socially disadvantaged groups. What is at the centre of online gaming culture? How does the culture of online gaming influence these behaviours and how does communication influence that culture? These are the broader questions this research project hoped to answer.

Particularly, my personal position in these communities and as a researcher presented some challenges to overcome. When it came to gathering data, my own experience taught me what I need to look for. However, I needed to ensure that I was not focusing solely on data that would present just my argument, but rather find all-encompassing data to paint a bigger picture of what

could be happening in the online video game world. Being acutely aware of this fact, I ensured that I could use all the data at my disposal: I played the game by myself and with others in different modes, I sought information from a variety of communities, and I took points made by the people I spoke to as a reference instead of my own emotions and recognitions while playing the game. When it came to collecting data playing alone, I ensured to record games in order to refer back to them, and I was able to dedicate time to picking out every word and phrase that came across in these games frequently. In performing this practice, I was also aware of the power structures that exist as a researcher - I could choose what to add into my study and what to leave out. These decisions were difficult, but through ensuring that the outcomes of my research were valid in the experience of others (which is covered later in this chapter), I believe that I was able to circumvent these issues to the best of my ability.

The research process for this thesis adopted three primary methods which always intended to serve as a means for a deeper understanding of the data. The research procedure for this thesis was as follows:

- Participant observation: daily observation and participation in conversations online, playing *Overwatch*, participating in team-based activities, organisation and administration of events, managing toxic behaviour in the South African *Overwatch* community and observing reactions to toxic behaviour in the South African *Overwatch* community.
- In-depth interviews with individuals who fit the demographic relevant to the research project.
- Content analysis of media articles, press releases, individual accounts and relevant academic literature.

Considering that culture is a key aspect of understanding behaviours and communication techniques, the chosen form of research was mostly ethnographic. Ethnography is defined as a method of research which uses participant observation, making the researcher the primary research instrument (Walsh, 2012:246). Ethnography is a method primarily used by anthropologists in their research of cultures and is a method to allow the values and institutions of a given society to be credited as having an internal logic of their own (Walsh, 2012:246). An attempt to judge the given society as inferior or superior through the lens of the researcher's own

culture is condemned as ethnocentric (Walsh, 2012:246), and as such anthropologists take the view that culture should be studied with immersive means in order to achieve accurate results (Walsh, 2012:246).

Phenomenology is a research method within ethnography which focuses on inter-subjective social structures and social daily life (Walsh, 2012:246). It is the primary method used by sociologists within ethnographic research in order to understand how a given social group has its own pattern of life (Walsh, 2012:246). Concepts such as laws, habits, customs and etiquette are taken for granted in this pattern, and as such are mostly automatic, which lies at the basis of phenomenology (Walsh, 2012:246).

Constructionism, which is the view that society is seen as constructed on the basis of how its members make sense of it, is key to the phenomenological approach (Walsh, 2012:247), and is seen as the primary foundation of contemporary ethnography. It is possible to see ethnomethodology as part of the constructivist approach (Walsh, 2012:247). For this specific research project, ethnomethodology was key, as researchers who choose to conduct research with this method in mind are more interested in how people do things, specifically regarding their uses of language (Walsh, 2012:247).

Ethnomethodology refers specifically to the methods that people in a given society use to make sense of the situations in which they find themselves, and thus maintain a particular “orderliness” in their interactions with other people (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:30). A key question at the centre of the ethno methodological approach is: “How is it that everyday behaviour appears on the surface level to be stable and ordered, even in situations where there is potential for misunderstanding and ambiguity?” (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:30). Garfinkel, the proponent of this metatheory, believed that people are highly aware of their social lives, and in turn, use this knowledge to create an environment whereby they have a smooth interaction concealing the unspoken rules of interactions (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:30). Part of this research was focused on the unspoken tenet of who gaming belongs to. Evidence presented in an earlier chapter suggests that gaming belongs to white, cis-heterosexual men, and this base of unspoken knowledge has created a hostile environment for anybody who tries to penetrate the community or the given online game who does not fit into this identity. Asking why this belief existed in the first place brought research back to the source of gaming, the organisations who create games and

advertise them. This source then led to an investigation of representation in *Overwatch*, its advertising, the conduct of its parent company Blizzard and how that has affected this unspoken tenet of who gaming belongs to.

This ethnographic approach is the main facet of research for this thesis. An important focus is on the culture of online gaming, and how people in these spaces use language. As such, primarily existing in these spaces as a participant observer will allow for research to produce results highly relevant in answering the research question. Playing the game *Overwatch*, the primary game of the project, partaking in team-based online gaming activities, being an active member of the South African *Overwatch* community Discord and administrating the South African *Overwatch* League are the four ways in which I immersed myself in the communities and social groups. Through these methods, the hope was to gather enough data and understand the way the culture is formed and applied in these different social groups and communities. This method of research allowed access to data which would have been difficult to come by using interviews or focus groups. This was highlighted in the way that interview participants responded in interviews which were conducted – there seemed to be a disconnect between how people interact in the natural online gaming environment and how they answered questions in retrospect. The interviews did, however, give deeper insight into why people who experience online toxicity and abuse react the way they do. This furthered understanding of interactions which were observed. This research process was considered successful, as gaining a deeper understanding of observed interactions was the intention of conducting interviews.

Using interviews as a part of the research process means that this thesis used reception research in conjunction with ethnographic study in order to gather data. Reception research primarily uses in-depth interviews to gain understanding of how participants experience media products, in this case, the online video game *Overwatch* (Mabweazara, 2006:59). As such, it is imperative that the researcher has a deep understanding of the media product in question, in order to have meaningful conversations with interviewees and know what questions to ask to gather relevant information (Mabweazara, 2006:59). Being so ingrained in the local community and *Overwatch* itself, this was easily done. I had been a part of the community and played the game for three years prior to the conception of this research project. Having thus an in-depth knowledge of the game and community, I was able to conduct fruitful interviews and glean relevant information. During World War II, it was widely supposed that audiences were susceptible to influence and

manipulation by mass media (Deacon et al, 1999:115). As a result, qualitative content analysis was developed as a means for academics and politicians to detect and police the presence of propaganda in symbolic materials of mass media (Deacon et al, 1999:116). In a broader sense, content analysis is now used to quantify a large number of texts, and uses the data and statistics from these texts to inform broader understandings of the processes and politics of representation (Deacon et al, 1999:116). This method was imperative in the research process of this thesis.

Texts were drawn from press releases, personal posts and articles from relevant individuals, media articles and advertisements to inform the research process. These texts provided insights into the larger issues which exist in larger entities beyond the South African *Overwatch* community and in the gaming industry as a whole. This allowed a deeper understanding of representation in video games, the treatment of women in the industry, as well as responses from organisations to these issues. Analysis of this content informed how these concepts helped in the construction of gaming culture from the beginning and how it has changed throughout the years since gaming started becoming a popular form of entertainment.

3.2 Analysis

Linguistic ethnographers often emphasise that language and social life work together mutually to shape perceptions and human interaction (Mercer, 2010:2). Talk is always referential, interpersonal, emotive and evaluative, and socialisation is a never-ending process mediated through talk and interaction (Mercer, 2010:2). Socio-cultural researchers often emphasize that talk is a cultural and psychological tool which influences how people reason (Mercer, 2010:2). These two concepts in conjunction are the base point on which this thesis is built. Because I was working with a qualitative study and my data cannot be quantified, it was slightly difficult to find a method which would stay true to the data while at the same time express it in an understandable way. In total, 250 hours of *Overwatch* were played in the duration of this study. This amount of time was selected because I needed to start from a point where I was starting to do research as I had been playing *Overwatch* for a while before I started this study. 250 hours seemed like ample time to conduct research in, especially as games last between 20-30 min for the competitive mode, and quick play games last about 10 minutes. This gave me enough time to collect data from an average of 750 games. Gameplay examined included mostly quick play and competitive, as well as some experimental modes (like mystery heroes) to establish any differences (of which I found little). During this time, I documented instances where women, including myself, were

spoken to in an aggressive manner. To understand the type of talk which occurred during this time, I also looked at the ways people communicated about *Overwatch* on social media platforms like Twitter and Discord. Here I did not take part in the conversations, but rather took the opportunity to try to understand why people had spoken in particular ways. I also investigated the way professional players are treated and how even the minimal presence of women in professional capacities in the video game industry influences perceptions of them playing games.

Seven women were interviewed in-depth on multiple occasions on the text and voice application Discord. All interviewees have been playing video games online for many years, and all of them have been part of a competitive *Overwatch* team. The participants were between the ages of 17 and 27. These interviews were semi-structured, as this allowed space for the research participants to interpret and place their own meanings on specific words and phrases (Ortiz, 2019:882). Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and an hour. Through observation and speaking with the research participants, the hope was to identify key phrases and words which trigger a response from women who play video games online. To ensure that I didn't lead the conversation to these phrases, I identified key phrases and terms that the interviewees used. I also made sure to structure my questions in a way that asks what the interviewees felt, and not questions which led to answers I might have wanted to hear. Furthermore, I also focused on how often certain phrases and words are used in the online gaming space. The intention was to assess whether or not the discourse which exists in the online gaming space inhibits the expression of certain identities. During this process, it was also important to understand whether or not these words and phrases were used in a professional setting - which refers to playing competitively in a pre established team that takes part in leagues and tournaments - and how that further affected the abilities of women to express themselves fully. The analysis of talk online was done through pinpointing words and phrases which came up frequently, and then moving on to find how they affected those they were targeted at. After this was established, I would then look at the reasons why these words and phrases were used against the research participants and those observed during play and conversations. The findings which these methods of research brought forward were analysed in two ways. For the observation research, it was documented how often trash talk would occur and in what kind of situation it would occur. Furthermore, it was also noted who was doing the trash talk, and why they were doing it in the first place. Social media and other online content put forward reasons for this, and as such was the best way to understand why people were doing this in the first place. The interviews were meant to document the reactions of the research

participants to trash talk, how it made them feel as individuals, how it affected their time playing *Overwatch* and what they did to deal with negative emotions. Guided mainly by dominance theory, the influence of media on interactions and the theory on how culture and language shape each other, I was able to come to a reasonable conclusion about the persecution of women in video game culture. Moreover, through the interviews and observations, there was space for a possible solution to the problems this research presented.

3.3 Validity and accuracy

In social research, the practice of ethics often comes down to the professional integrity of the researcher (Ali and Kelly, 2004:118). Feminist researchers have argued that from a political perspective, researchers have to pay particular attention to power structures in methods of research (Ali and Kelly, 2004:118). In terms of this research project, careful attention needed to be paid to power structures in my own research. As captain of a team, administrator for a social server and administrator for a local league, it was imperative that I was aware of the power I held in certain situations. In an attempt to curb problems arising from this issue, I made my requests in a personal capacity and ensured that the people I spoke to were aware of the risks involved in participating in this research. The relationship between the researcher and the participant should be characterised by trust and integrity (Ali and Kelly, 2004:118). Informed consent and confidentiality were key aspects in recruiting these participants. To achieve both of these, it was required that the aim of the research be explained fully to each participant, including the risks involved in participating in the research. It was made clear that personal information, such as the name of the participant, was not needed in the research project, and as such their anonymity would be safeguarded. Furthermore, a form of written confidentiality acknowledgement was made available to each participant. The confidentiality form specifically existed as a security against non-participants having access to the identities of the interviewees.

The most pressing ethical challenge during the research process was ensuring that emotions did not get in the way of data analysis and conclusions. Data analysis involves the process of deciding what information to include and which to set aside at the end of the research process (Ali and Kelly, 2004:124). As such, the researcher then takes on a position of power in the construction of a narrative. This narrative can be constructed to favour the desired outcome of the research, or it can be used to make rich, intellectual points which were not considered before and during the research process (Ali and Kelly, 2004:124). This power means that the researcher

could make unethical decisions to make points and observations which are personal instead of purely academic. Since I am so personally involved in the communities I was studying, it was imperative that I did not make this error. As a precaution, I constantly referred to multiple academic resources which could argue the same point I was making in data analysis. This was meant to ensure that I was pointing out a true pattern to bolster the argument, instead of making an emotional choice which might render the research unethical.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Participatory observation

Physically playing in online competitive quick play and arcade games was the first platform I used for observation research. The players were not aware of my position as a researcher. I made sure that this was done because I was concerned there may have been a change in behaviour if they did know, and I wanted to make this data collection as authentic as possible. Since it was on a public platform, I considered this a legitimate position. The first difficulty I encountered while trying to collect data by playing was that I could not accurately quantify how many women I came across. The reason for this is because while playing, players often do not make use of the voice chat. This was the only means I had to identify women players, other than them identifying themselves as such to the team. The fact is that I could have played with women more often than I was aware, but they just did not speak in voice chat so were unidentifiable as such. Most of the time, when I played alone online, there were only one or two people in the team who communicated frequently using voice chat. Because of this, I will be discussing what I found in the situations where women were obviously present in my games. My hypothesis going into these games was that these women would experience significantly more abuse than their male counterparts. The factors that needed to be considered while doing this observation research were more than expected. In these examples, I used general toxic talk to refer to toxicity in-game, which is not based on the identity of a specific player. Targeted toxic talk, however, is used if toxicity in-game is used based on the identity of a specific player.

Overwatch players	Game lost	Game won	If there was tension in game lost	If there was tension in game won
General toxic talk				
Targeted toxic talk				

Figure 1: Table used to identify toxicity for each game played

Firstly, players tended to be generally more toxic towards each other if they lost a game. Usually, the team would choose an individual player to pick on, and that person would receive the blame for the loss in total. Sometimes individuals would blame the entire team. Players would say things like, 'l2p (learn to play)' and ask questions like, "Are you retarded?" most frequently. In games that were won, there was less toxic talk present. However, there were some situations where targeted toxic talk was used against a player on the team based on their identity. Sometimes the player targeted would be a man with a feminine voice, or a woman. Often, if a woman was paired with a man in a group, other players would ask questions like, 'Are you getting carried by your boyfriend?', insinuating that the woman in question was playing with a man so that he could help her advance to higher tiers of play. These are examples of targeted toxicity, and occurred outside of the scope of general toxicity. This kind of toxicity was difficult to quantify whether or not it was about the assumed gender of the person being targeted. A lot of the time, the patterns of toxicity saw the healers being blamed for the loss of a game. This is an interesting point, because as mentioned, healers are often identified with women, as it has been established as a feminine role in video game culture. However, there is no evidence that this is why the healers were targeted. It could also have been because they are meant to keep the team alive. I did just want to point this out, however, because I feel that it could have played into targeted toxicity towards healers because they were assumed to be women, because their job is to keep the team alive, or a combination of both as an easy scapegoat for blame. Even though my research focused on examples of targeted toxicity, I found that general toxicity happened in most of the games which I played. This general toxic behaviour came about as a reaction to many situations: losing games, somebody being killed by an enemy player, not being healed at the right time by a teammate or somebody not behaving as a team player, are just a few. The things the players said ranged from comparatively mild frustrations to full-scale abuse: 'l2p' (learn to play) and 'I hope you get cancer' are some examples, respectively. It was apparent, however, that the insults were usually targeted at one player and on the side of severity. The most common insults that came through were 'kill yourself' (usually abbreviated to kys), threats against a certain player's family - with specific focus on mothers and sisters - like 'I'll rape/kill your mother/sister', calling people neuro-divergent slurs like 'retard', and homophobic remarks which use 'gay' in a negative context, like 'you're too gay to play that hero'. It was interesting to observe this while playing, as the picture painted was that the mainly male players seemed very angry about something all the time. At times, it truly seemed as though some players were getting angry with their teammates for no apparent reason. For example, in some matches,

people would insult and lambast another player for choosing to play a certain hero. Throughout the entire game, that player would be picked on. Overall, whether the games were won or lost did not seem to be a determining factor for the presence of toxic behaviour. However, toxic behaviour was more apparent in games lost. In this toxic behaviour, words like ‘faggot’ and ‘retard’ were used as a derogatory means of communicating frustration. These derogatory terms were not necessarily used against people who do identify as homosexual or who are neuro-divergent, but merely used as a means to attack people using words that have negative associations.

My second observation platform was communities which form outside of *Overwatch*. In this situation, some of the members were aware that they were being observed in my capacity as a researcher. This was mostly because I talked about my thesis and research topic with them directly, and they were mostly people in administrative positions. This means that some of the observations I saw could have been inauthentic due to them knowing that I was there in my research capacity. As such, I tried to draw as much as I could from what I saw as authentic reactions to situations. Overall, as I did with observation during gameplay, I tried to keep it private that I was observing the communities. When it came to international communities, however, they were not aware that I was there in a capacity as a researcher. In South Africa, the Competitive *Overwatch* South Africa (COWZA) Discord server is the biggest *Overwatch* community in the country. Players and teams who take part in all local tournaments are present in some form on this server and interact on their social media accounts. A number of women form part of this community. These women are team members, interact on the server regularly and hold positions of high status in many ways. In 2020, 16 teams took part in the finals of the local major *Overwatch* league. These teams housed players ranging in skill level, from bronze to grandmaster. A total of 19 women participated in the league, either as part of core team rosters, substitute players, captains and/or managers. Compared to *Overwatch* League, for example, the diversity of players in South African *Overwatch* is in a much better state. The women who were members of these teams were fully represented throughout, being present in teams placed from second to 16th place. It must be noted that the number of players in the pool of the South African *Overwatch* scene is significantly lower than the number of players in the pool who compete to take part in the *Overwatch* League. This detail could trump the idea that women do not have an interest in playing video games competitively, because if that were true, the South African league would consist entirely of men, considering the small pool of players.

COWZA is not the only Discord community platform which exists as a basis for *Overwatch* interest. There are several others, including Elo Hell Esports, Competitive Overwatch League, Scrim Central, /r/Overwatch and Amateur Esports Organization. These are examples of global communities, consisting of people from all over the world who are interested in playing *Overwatch*. Some of these platforms are specifically dedicated to helping teams find other teams against which they can play for practice purposes. Others are there to advertise different tournaments and/or serve as a social platform on which players can interact. Closeness of community was questionable when it came to bigger communities. Generally, international communities form anonymous-like platforms where players are able to communicate their frustrations about the game, ask advice, and find other teams to practise against. Women were not actively recruited in these communities. However, there are exceptions to this; there are teams who looked specifically for women to play, but this was up to the individual teams and not the communities at large. There were some tournaments that focused on pride and inclusion, but nothing significant enough to record or make a statement that women were actively encouraged or recruited to be part of these communities. This brings into question community accountability - is it up to the communities to encourage women and other socially disadvantaged groups to be part of them, and how can they do this?

Nonetheless, *Overwatch* has a large community base which takes part in conversations about the game, outside of playing it. In these conversations, people often speak about issues that concern them about the game and about other people who play the game. They also share jokes and memes with each other. These communities are very supportive, generally speaking, for example when people raise concerns there seems to be constructive discussion around the issues. Trolling and insulting others for having different opinions is rampant on the internet at large, and this is present in these communities at times, but the overwhelming ambience one gets from these communities is welcoming. When it comes to playing in the tournaments hosted by international organisers, however, this ambience changes drastically. While competitive spirit can be healthy, there are multiple issues with people displaying the same toxic behaviour that I found while playing online alone with strangers. When my team participated in these tournaments, which was frequently, we would more often than not come across an enemy team who would use any opportunity to insult something we were doing, especially if we were losing the game in question. There are means to report this behaviour, but without proof it was difficult for the administrators of the tournaments to do anything about it. When we were able to prove it, it was a

grueling and lengthy process. This happened in tournaments like GGEU. In South African leagues, there were also quite a few instances of toxicity and disregard for rules by some teams. For the purposes of this discussion, I will not be mentioning specific teams. Instead, I will speak from the point of view of somebody who was an administrator of this tournament during 2020.

In smaller communities - communities which do not have as many active members as others - there seemed to be a lot more tension. This was due to the fact that mostly everybody is aware of everyone else in the community, and many players form part of more than one team during the course of play time. This creates rivalries. Sometimes this was good fun, but many times it caused a lot of tension and drama in the community. This was particularly evident when teams who had bad blood between them played games against each other. For example, after the games, it became something of a tradition for the captains to say 'gg' (good game) in the league discord channel. Sometimes this would not happen in games where tension was present. In a smaller community, tensions like this that arise can be particularly counter-active to its functioning. Multiple people left the COWZA server throughout the course of the tournament in reaction to this kind of drama, further breaking the community apart. This was difficult to record, as some of these people left and returned multiple times. Overall, the reasons that could be recorded were that the people who left were unhappy with the way these situations were dealt with, or that they no longer felt welcome in the community due to individuals who were also part of the arguments and drama. For the sake of anonymity, however, as this was observation research and sometimes the community was not aware that I was recording data, I have voted to leave out names and quotes from members who left. Some members of the community, who were mostly white men, took to social media platforms like Twitter to air their grievances. In particular, these issues would be with the admin team, or an individual in the community with whom they had an existing issue. The hope was to bring attention to how they perceived the wrongdoings of the people in question, but it would often devolve into a fight between one side and the other - a constructive conversation where some kind of resolution was reached was not easy to find. Months later, some of the members who left and took their issues to Twitter did not come back to the server. When looking at the grander stage of *Overwatch* communities, this kind of behaviour was more prevalent in small communities like COWZA. For context, COWZA has only 882 people on the server compared to Elo Hell Esports, for example, which has over 10,000 members. In larger community discords, it seemed that there was little space for people to get to know each other personally or form rivalries with other teams. The reason for this appears to be that there are

too many people present in these larger communities. This was something I was able to notice and record due to my positions in these communities. As a team captain/manager and administrator of COWZA, I was privy to a lot of information that may not be available to the general public of these communities.

As such, the focus is generally on *Overwatch*, how the game frustrated different players and how playing with strangers online can be frustrating. The focus in smaller communities more often than not strayed away from *Overwatch* as a game and honed in on the dramas which existed between individual people or teams. This tension was often expressed in a passive-aggressive manner, however, which is different from the direct aggression one experiences when playing *Overwatch* with strangers. Either it would be a situation where somebody who was disliked would be ignored in a conversation, or memes and comments would be made under a guise of some sort. The aggression was hardly ever direct. This made it quite difficult for administrators of COWZA to regulate it, because this passive aggression did not technically break any rules of the server. These grievances were also often different from the ones which existed in larger community tournaments. Where the larger tournaments would experience issues with general *Overwatch* toxicity, the tension and drama which existed in COWZA appeared to be incredibly personal much of the time.

Twitter is a popular social media platform on which *Overwatch* has a large presence. For example, there is an account named *Overwatch Anonymous* where people can submit tweets anonymously to a link. These tweets are then sent out on the account. The account has 12,800 followers. These tweets range from players complaining about their fellow *Overwatch* players to praising the game. Most of the tweets, however, are focused on issues with *Overwatch* as a game and the treatment players receive from other players. This treatment which people speak and tweet about is usually negative and highly toxic. What is interesting about it though, is that it is often taken as something which is a given when you play the game. It is not unnatural for players to be harassed, bullied and insulted when they go online. An example: “My routine: play as support for 10 hours straight (even in open queue), think ‘playing as a dps is very cool, how about giving it a try?’, play [competitive] as a dps, get bullied ‘our dps sucks!’ [and] ‘we don’t have any damage’, cry (mentally), repeat”. This quote is an anonymous tweet submitted to *Overwatch Anonymous* and posted on February 14, 2021. This person took time out of their day to share anonymously with other *Overwatch* players what their routine is when they play the

game. Given that this person allegedly plays 10 hours a day, he/she/they has/have significant experience in playing the game. The 30+ comments on this post were mostly ones of agreement, or a shared routine which sounded similar to the original post. This example points to a disturbing reality, which is that when you play *Overwatch*, the expectation is that you will be on the receiving end of insults and bullying at some point. The intention of playing *Overwatch*, for the gamer who is not a professional, is to play a fun game. It is a form of entertainment.

However, people seem to take it seriously, to the point where others' lives and self-esteem is negatively affected. Another example of disturbing behaviour in-game comes from Overwatch Anonymous: "Wish this wasn't a hot take but there's not a single fucking reason you should be telling another player to kill themselves in game. Doesn't matter if they're bad, boosted, or a Brig player. The lives of others shouldn't be seen as worth so little". This tweet was posted on 10 February, 2021. In the 20+ comments on this post, there were some comments which expressed the opinion that if you are not rude in game, it is likely you will not receive this treatment. However, there were many other comments which concurred with the fact that this abuse happens frequently in-game, whether or not you interact with the person who targets you. A pressing issue I found while doing observation research is how casually people used words like 'rape' and 'retard' to explain simple processes. For example, there were multiple accounts where I was playing online, sitting with people in a Discord channel, or reading comments online where 'rape' was used to describe one player beating another playing; as in "that Ashe raped me when she headshot me". 'Retard' is often casually used to describe somebody doing something which does not come across as particularly intelligent, or sometimes even just to point out a mistake that another player made. As such, there seems to be a normalization of these terms, whether or not they are actually meant as a threat.

Observation analysis

It is imperative to note the difficulty in identifying whether or not women were on my team while playing. Regularly, I would hear male voices coming through on the voice chat, but this happened significantly less often with women. Considering that a large percentage of *Overwatch* players are women (based on observation on social media sites and communities of which I am a part), I found it strange that I hardly ever heard women speaking while playing online. This is crucial evidence that women, while playing games online, feel that they will be attacked and/or harassed if they identify themselves, so they choose not to do so. While playing myself, I found

that the words and terms used have become so normalised that calling somebody 'retard' if you think they are dumb is accepted. For women, this could become particularly triggering when 'rape' is used to describe basic events which occur in games like *Overwatch*. Essentially, it has been turned into a synonym which describes, for example, players getting killed by other players. The essential difference is that in *Overwatch*, if you have a basic understanding of the game, you likely understand and consent to the fact that you will be killed by other players. It is a choice made by the player and a critical mechanic of the game. This is not the same thing as rape - which is forced and non-consensual. Making a term like 'rape' casual inherently takes away the seriousness of the act. That means when rape survivors enter the gaming space and hear this term being used in such a casual manner, they are triggered and the trauma they experienced becomes devalued.

Similarly, this issue arises when players tell each other to kill themselves. Suicide is a severe reaction to mental illness and feelings of hopelessness. Whether or not the person saying this means it, there are many people around the world who struggle with mental illness and feelings of hopelessness and not belonging. Inherently, losing a game is not a pleasant experience, especially for those of us who are incredibly competitive. Due to the impersonal nature of working together in a game like *Overwatch*, it is likely that a given player is not aware of the struggles another might be facing. Losing a game and then hearing someone tell you to kill yourself is a traumatic experience which should not be normalised. It is a response made in anger as well. When this would happen in game, it would be in retaliation to a player perhaps not playing as well as the team hoped. Sometimes, disturbingly enough, there would not be any event in game to react to, but rather somebody taking a dislike to a specific player. Once again, the experience of living with trauma and/or mental illness becomes devalued through this normalisation. Using words like 'retard' and 'gay' as negative ways to describe somebody or something they have done perpetuates homophobia and discrimination against people who are mentally impaired - continuing the trend of normalising the use of words which devalue the life experiences of people who are critically stereotyped and isolated from society. It seems that there is an existing pattern which either ignores or does not understand the weight behind the words which are used in game communications.

There is a lot of activity and communication between players outside of the game, mostly on social media platforms like Discord and Twitter. The conversations which take place here show

me that people have an approximate awareness of the issues which exist in-game, but do not necessarily understand why these issues are so pervasive. The main problem is that there are no real places to have conversations which are constructive and meaningful. There are avenues for players to express their concerns and frustrations with the state of the game and how they interact with one another, but very little change has come out of this. The first difficulty is that the problems we deal with here have a lot of emotion attached to them and it is challenging to separate from that emotion in order to have a constructive conversation. As seen with COWZA, community members took their problems to Twitter and oftentimes did not attempt to find a potential resolution for these issues. When people are expressing negative feelings, it can be a challenge to find a positive way to resolve the issue. This arises when people are confronted with how they speak - because it has become so normalised to use words like 'rape' in a casual manner, it is a demanding task to try unlearn this behaviour. This does not mean this behaviour should not be unlearned, but it does mean that the average gamer needs an inherent understanding of how their words affect the emotional, mental and physical well-being of those around them.

4.2 Interviews

The second method which I used to collect data was conducting interviews with seven women in the South African *Overwatch* community. To clarify, I did not include any quotes from interviewees in this section to protect their identities. Some of them have a very distinct manner of speaking, and I did not want to take the chance. Participants were selected on a voluntary basis. I put out on social media platforms that I was looking for participants to interview, and spoke to all who responded to the call. I also personally reached out to some women in my communities who I knew had been playing competitively for at least a year. The idea behind interviewing individuals was to hear about behaviours avid *Overwatch* players, who have been playing the game for years, have experienced. Moreover, these interviews were meant to gain insight into issues which are not immediately apparent through pure observation. Each of the women interviewed has played competitively for teams in South Africa and has been playing *Overwatch* for three years or more. For this purpose, their identities will be kept anonymous, as it is their experiences that are the important data necessary for this research. The constant in each of these interviews is that during their time playing *Overwatch*, each of these women experienced different forms of abuse in game based on their identity and unwanted and unnecessary advances from men online. The reason for the relatively low number of interviews is not only because it was a secondary mode of research for this thesis, but also because only seven women reached out

to participate in the research. To bolster my findings, I also took a sample of people who spoke about the key issues brought up in these interviews on platforms like Reddit and Twitter in order to fill in the gaps. There were two main takeaways from the interviews: the fact that three out of the seven women had received rape threats and that they all expressed criticism of the reporting systems which exist in *Overwatch* and its associated online communities.

It is an understatement to say that the issue of rape threats in online video games like *Overwatch* is an extreme cause for concern. After understanding that this in particular was a regular experience of some of the interviewees, I decided to take a sample of women who had received some form of rape threats online while playing online. Reddit has a dedicated thread for gamers who identify as women called [/r/GirlGamers](#), and this is from where I drew the sample. This thread, or community, consists of 140,000 members. A sample of 45 posts was taken within a time span of 23 days. Of the 45 posts, 20 of them were of women expressing their frustrations with how men treat them online. The most prominent issues brought forward were men implying that the only reason the women were playing video games was to get the attention of men, or insinuations that women players were the reasons that they were losing games. Another prominent issue was men making unwanted advances. Six of the 45 posts called out issues of sexual talk. In other words, 46,5% of the posts were by women who felt unsafe in the online gaming environment specifically because of the behaviour of men. Six of these posts were about sexual harassment or rape threats these women had received online. Gender-based violence is violence which is perpetrated against a woman which is primarily or exclusively motivated by their gender identity (Díez Gutiérrez, 2014:58). In these instances, where the people who posted on these platforms had received rape threats, they had experienced a form of gender-based violence. The condition of being raped is harmful in a mental and physical capacity, because it has a tendency to generate further harms such as anxiety, feelings of degradation and other psychological states which may interfere with the ability of the victim to pursue projects and various avenues of their life (Baber, 1987:126). In essence, it is a physical *and* psychological attack which usually results in the victim having to live with trauma for the rest of their lives. For a victim of rape and other forms of gender-based violence, merely hearing or reading something which reminds them of this event can be triggering. Hearing the words “I’m going to come and rape you” in an online space which is already hostile towards women can be an extremely traumatic experience. Even for women who have not been raped or abused, hearing these kinds of threats makes the online video game space an unsafe and unwelcoming one. This was evident in

the way the research participants recalled their experiences. Although each of them had a different way of dealing with the situation, they were all shaken and scared to play the game again. In my conducted interviews, one of the three participants, who had experienced this rape threat while playing CounterStrike GO, refused to play without friends ever again because of this threat. A key issue with rape threats is a history of victim blaming and rape not being taken as seriously as other crimes of violence (Baber, 1987:126). These are still key issues which women who are victims of rape contend with today. Through the use of language which insinuates that the person wants to commit such atrocities against the woman in question, we suddenly have a situation where not only is it seen as “not so bad”, but also that the woman would be overreacting if she were to react at all. In fact, there was no stage at which any of the research participants presented a case where somebody who was not their friend stood up for them in situations where they were receiving abuse online. That means that when the research participants received these threats, nobody tried to help them or stop the abuser. There seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding that rape threats cannot be bad if the person does not know who you are, what you look like or where you live.

The Gamergate controversy acts as an example of how resistant video game-based communities can be to change. As previously discussed, gatekeeping has been defined as the withholding of information from people outside of a given community. In video game culture, gatekeeping becomes a little more complex than simply just withholding information, and that can be seen through the way that women are spoken to while playing online. Through the use of rape threats, for example, gatekeeping becomes a complex mechanism which uses specific language to isolate and threaten a particular group of people. It has to be clear that rape and rape culture are different. It is unclear who coined the term ‘rape culture’, but feminist scholars have used the term to refer to the normalisation of violence against women in society (Philips, 2017:5). The violence in rape culture specifically refers to aggressive and violent sexual behaviour. Digital media consumption in the culture of today’s society has evolved to be the standard for how many people receive their information and form their viewpoints (Zaleski, Gunderson, Baes, Estupinian, Vergara, 2016:922). As has been discussed in this thesis, video games are a major form of media in contemporary culture - there are millions of people around the world who play games and partake in community activities which are based on those games. As such, it is not unreasonable to see video games as a form of media where people can form viewpoints about different aspects of life and society. The casual use of rape as a threat towards women as such

perpetuates rape culture and the normalization of rape and violence against women. Using rape as a means of gatekeeping triggers victims of rape. Moreover, using rape in video games as a threat against somebody purely because they are a woman, perpetuates rape culture. This is a psychological attack on players who identify as women. The use of rape, an extremely violent and egregious act, as a means to express frustration towards someone creates a space where that person cannot exist without being psychologically and physically threatened. In essence, it is a cause for extreme concern. Without significant intervention from community administrators, game developers and advertisers, we could see that rape culture in video games will not change for a long time coming.

This brings me to the next issue raised by the research participants: the failure of reporting systems. In *Overwatch*, you are able to report other players for misconduct in game. This ranges from cheating to inappropriate behaviour, and you are able to choose what you report a player for, depending on the situation. Sometimes *Overwatch* will send you a notification that somebody has been reprimanded for their behaviour during the game, and other times you will not receive any notification that action has been taken. Either way, the identity of the reprimanded player is not disclosed to the person who reported them. This was a particular concern the research participants voiced about this system. The main concern, however, was that people always found a way to work around getting banned from the game. The main method used by reported players to work around being banned is to make an alternate account using a different email address and thus they are still able to play the game. This happens because *Overwatch* bans players per account, and not per their Internet Protocol (IP) address. This is something that I tested myself, as I have two accounts that I play *Overwatch* on. While one was temporarily suspended for swearing in chat, I was still able to play on the other account on the same computer. As such, players are able to own and play on multiple accounts on the same computer. That means the same person who is using abusive talk online can continue to do so, despite the fact that they might be banned on multiple accounts. The issue with this is clear: players who threaten women with rape should not be able to continue playing the game. However, it is a daily occurrence which many women online face. There has been no indication that reporting systems actually work to remove abusers from the game, but rather that they make it more difficult for abusers to play the game - which they still get to do in the end. The other area of concern regarding reporting and reprimanding arose in communities which exist outside of the game. One research participant in particular mentioned that in the discord community she

played a role as an administrator and she felt comfortable in that community, until she saw what happened behind the scenes. The administrators she worked with would talk badly about community members behind their backs and make decisions based on personal biases instead of on the good of the community. They would also be specifically hostile and use words like “bitch” to describe women whom they did not like. In these communities, it is usually the responsibility of administrators to uphold certain standards. If these standards are not upheld, and in the case of the mentioned research participant, administrators themselves are the people who are causing issues within the community, then this creates a space for community members to act how they want to, without consequence. This was presented as an issue by the research participants, as the overall feeling was they had nobody to go to in cases where they felt unsafe or unwelcome in some of these communities.

Analysis

The major issue which arose from this research was the issue of who video gaming belongs to and who can form a part of it; in other words, the gatekeeping of games by men and how they deny entry is a key issue for women gamers. There are substantial disparities when it comes to this issue: you have people who do not participate in gaming who have a very particular and caricatured idea of what a gamer looks like; people who do identify as gamers who struggle to let anyone else into their space and those who would just like to participate but feel unsafe to do so because of how they identify. However, the more pertinent question is: why is there such deep exclusionary behaviour in these communities against their own members? As has been established in this thesis, gamers have defined patterns of behaviour, beliefs and traditions which fall well into the definition of a culture. Different communities have formed as a basis for discussion and participation in different games. These communities also exist on multiple social media platforms and create a base for friendships and lifelong partnerships to be born. It is a complex system of people from all over the world who come together and connect around a form of entertainment.

Overall, the idea of gaming communities and culture is a positive one, but the established behaviours in these communities and the culture itself are overwhelmingly negative for women, more often than not. There have been breakthroughs in challenging these behaviours; they have not been major, but there has been an obvious effort to try talk more about issues that exist within gaming communities. Despite this rising discourse however, the issues of gatekeeping and threats to members within those communities still persist. Gatekeeping is the most prominent negative

behaviour which affects women specifically when they try to penetrate a given community or gaming scene. As seen through the experiences of the interviewees, it does not matter if you have been a gamer for most of your life, you will probably still experience abuse from other gamers based on the fact that you identify as a woman.

One of the reasons for this is the idea that a woman could not possibly be playing games for competitive reasons. This stereotype specifically perpetuates the societal idea that women are more interested in being stay-at-home mothers and wives to their husbands, as can be seen by the fact that the interviewees experienced multiple men telling them to go back to the kitchen. This is not an issue inherent to gaming culture, but instead is an old societal expectation of women which has bled into it. This can be taken back to the initial popularisation of video games, when advertising specifically targeted men in the way they presented video games. There is an established idea that video games belong to men, and this is perpetuated to this day by the way women are represented in video games.

Talk is used as a weapon in the online video game space. Because most interaction online is through text and voice, the means players and community members use to communicate is purely talk. As such, this is the same tool which is used to attack and abuse women in this space. Through the research done in this thesis, it has been established that some of the talk that happens in *Overwatch* and other video games online can be a traumatic experience. Specifically, women have had to contend with players who threaten to rape them. There is also a general understanding that if you play video games online, you will experience toxicity of some kind. Whether or not that toxic language is directed at you, it is a true issue which exists in the online video game space. The general toxic language used is generally language which seeks to isolate members of specific groups of people. In the discussion, I pointed out that the two terms I heard the most were 'faggot' and 'retard'. To clarify: 'faggot' is used as a direct slur, and although gay is not a derogatory term itself, it was used as a negative connotation. Both of these terms are used to insult and isolate people who identify as LGBT and intellectually disabled individuals respectively. As such, it is evident that toxic talk in *Overwatch*, and other online video game spaces, usually comes from a place of oppression. The normalisation of using words like 'rape' to describe somebody beating a player in a game, and the normalisation of using words like 'retarded' to point out that somebody has made a mistake, speaks to this oppressive origin. This could be a possible reason as to why rape threats and toxic talk are seen as an acceptable way to express

frustration with other players. When they are used as threats, however, then it is meant to be a point of dominance. There is a clear hierarchy of members in video game culture, and anybody who is not a cis-het white male has a very good chance of having to deal with hetero-normative insults and issues. Using rape as a threat against women is the most glaring issue with how they are treated in this space. Rape is a forceful act of power and dominance and using it either casually or as a threat through talk has the same basic definition - it is used to assert dominance in a traumatic way. As has been pointed out on multiple occasions in this research, language and culture shape each other. The basic issue with patterns of behaviour which exist in video game culture and playing them online presents a case for game developers and community leaders to take more responsibility for the education of people who play games online. Through the research done in this thesis, one concept which is a blatant option for a possible solution to the issues women face in the online video game space comes to the fore: unlearning and relearning. But what needs to be unlearned? And to whom is this directed? When speaking with research participants, they were asked what they think needs to happen in order for change to occur. Each and every one of them said the same thing: education. More specifically, there seems to be a need for administrators of communities (particularly on discord) and game developers to take more responsibility in educating players and community members about issues that exist in the online video game space. To reiterate, the two main points which came from the interviews was the fact that rape is used as a threat to women and the reporting systems which exist in games and communities are not good enough. Through observation research, it was clear that toxic behaviour and threats were a daily part of playing video games online.

There are three main effects which arise from the way players talk: gatekeeping to keep women out, using women as sexual gratification for men and using women as scapegoats. Gatekeeping comes primarily in the form of talk, through casually using terms like 'rape', to isolate women who have experienced sexual abuse. However, this term also affects women who might not be victims of abuse by keeping them on edge by threatening to make them victims. The use of the words and terms explored in this thesis primarily aim to instill fear in the person to whom they are directed. This fear makes the online gaming space dangerous in the eyes of women who are either in it or want to enter it. It then makes it difficult for them to try rise to higher positions in communities where they will be in the spotlight. Why would they want this, if they are abused on a daily basis based on their gender identity? Taking up a higher status in gaming communities puts a spotlight on women which makes them even more vulnerable to this kind of abuse. This

desire not to be exposed is evident in in-game communications, where often women do not make themselves heard. The second effect, stereotyping and taking power, is perpetuated by representation and the normalisation of terms such as rape and other aggressive language. The challenge for women is to feel comfortable while playing and being able to rise to higher status in games and communities without being targeted. Using aggressive talk puts them in the perceived place they should stay, according to men playing, all the while keeping them as objects of sexual gratification and victims of objectification. Paradoxically, women need to be kept in gaming spaces (according to men who play), because they are used as scapegoats for their frustrations. This is seen through targeted blame as well as women being the primary victims of sexual aggression online. This is problematic because the role of a woman online has been decided before she has a chance to make herself and her own identity as a gamer, irrelevant of her gender, known.

5. Conclusion

Through the research done in this thesis, it has become pertinent that education and the process of unlearning and relearning is imperative to bring about change in the gaming space. In order to incite change in the basic patterns of behaviour which exist in video game culture, leaders in the community need to work hard at putting in place the structures to make gaming spaces safer for women and other marginalised groups. The first set of leaders to look at here are the game developers themselves; the very people who create the games we play. As mentioned, the reporting systems which exist in *Overwatch* have not been highly successful in making players feel safer in the *Overwatch* space. This is not necessarily the fault of the reporting and banning system, but rather that players are aware that toxic people are able to come back to the game through the creation of alternate accounts with a different email address. Making a process more difficult for an abuser does not mean that they will not come back or feel truly reprimanded. As such, my suggestion for this is specifically banning players based on their IP address instead of just banning an account. Fortnite, a popular battle royale game, is one such example of a game which bans users based on their IP address. This means that instead of banning one account, the player in question will not be able to play the game from their computer, no matter what account they are using. Although it is not free to create a new *Overwatch* account, it is a possibility. The fact that female players still experience severe toxicity and rape threats on a daily basis speaks to the fact that the reporting and banning system currently in place is not dealing with these abusive players well enough. This is a practical solution, however, as the main issue still exists in the way people interact, according to the established culture of video games.

So, how is it possible to change the way people think within a culture? Since video games culture is influenced by society and media specifically, game developers could look at how they use advertising in their games as a first existential step. Ensuring that advertising does not have an inherently misogynistic message or portray women in a way that makes them seem weak or have unrealistic body standards is a starting point in making women a natural body in gaming culture. As has been established, the media carries a huge responsibility for the way that society shapes its views and perceptions. As such, it is a pertinent place to start. Then game developers could genuinely focus on the way women are represented in their video games. Doing meaningful research and gaining insights into how women exist naturally, in different cultures across the world and having them represented accurately in video games, can start the shift of thinking in video game culture. Video games are a major part of popular culture, and they have a responsibility in shaping the perceptions of the people who play them. Ensuring a realistic diversity of women and other marginalised groups, without making that their entire identity, may help to start shaping a healthier perception of these groups. The responsibility of the developer is to unlearn outdated means of representation and advertising and start implementing messages which perpetuate healthy perceptions of women, LGBT people and people of colour. It is clear that this is an issue, considering how some players have reacted to characters in games being LGBT, for example. This in conjunction with improving reporting systems for their games could be a starting place for their players to unlearn behaviour which makes it difficult for women to immerse themselves in the online video game space. Lastly, women are under-represented in the gaming industry. As such, if it is not possible to make a conscious effort to employ more women, there should be a significant effort in bringing together women across all cultures, backgrounds and classes to gain meaningful insight into how female characters are represented in-game.

A possible solution to make learning and unlearning effective in communities and games is to have designated organisations of women who support each other and find ways to communicate frustrations. The point of these organisations would be to support women in games where they can effectively communicate frustrations which exist in the gaming space, as well as making a point of educating players about what kind of conduct is appropriate for making online gaming a welcoming space for all. There is one such organisation called Women in Games. Women in Games is a non-profit organisation which strives to make gender equity and parity a lasting reality in the gaming industry. They host a festival, have awards for women who do good work in the industry and have various projects which aim to support their main goal. However, this

organisation is mainly focused on women working in the gaming industry - I am calling for more organisations which speak on grassroots level in gaming spaces. Captains, managers and players need to come together and create spaces where all women can express their concerns and unmet needs in the online gaming space. From there, there are multiple platforms which can be used to express these concerns, using statistics and other forms of data collection to give visual representation of issues women find themselves facing. Women do not only exist as workers in the industry; they also exist as casual and competitive players, captains and managers of teams, administrators of Discord communities and as casual and professional streamers. There are many avenues which exist in the gaming space and there should be effective representation for all.

Making the voices of women heard will present new ways of talking. There will always be frustration in a competitive space, whether or not you take it seriously, but there needs to be healthier ways to vent that frustration. Unlearning behaviours is challenging, especially in a culture where the behaviours in question have been solidified for so long. However, it is possible, and the most effective way of doing so is making sure that there is a standardised way of dealing with the myriad issues which exist in gaming culture. There are too many games which use too many different ways to deal with reporting and issues within their organisations – listening to what the affected players need out of this will help gain this standardised means of dealing with these issues. There should be no opportunity for players to make a different account or play another game which does not deal with these issues as effectively. Instead, if different game developers work together to find a standardised solution to make gaming a safe space, it will make what is currently happening in the industry unacceptable and people will start speaking out against it.

Although there is more diverse representation of women in video games compared to early years of game development, this representation is not always healthy. Presence becomes diluted when it is not meaningful. Just because there are many female characters in a game does not mean that hurtful stereotypes are not being perpetuated. There are many challenges which exist on different levels of the gaming space. It seems like an impossible task to try fix them all - which is why we need to start at the top. Advertising and media is a giant in telling the stories of people. Gaming developers and communities should use this to their advantage. Creating communities which are dedicated to telling the stories of women and other under-represented groups through webinars, videos, articles and social media could have great effect in shifting the mindset of gaming culture

as it is today. Using real women to tell real stories and applying the lessons learned in games and communities will be one of the most effective ways for unlearning uncivil behaviour. The world is changing and the gaming industry and communities should be no exception to that.

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