

Gamer Words

Racism in Gaming

by Gabriel Rakow

If there's one thing I like, it's video games. If there's one thing I don't like, it's racism. These should be some very basic and understandable opinions. However, the two are unfortunately intertwined in a way that is detrimental for literally everybody. Creating an unpleasant and aggressive environment for all and an unsafe and cruel environment specifically for marginalized groups. This environment and rhetoric obviously isn't born in a vacuum. The anonymity of online gaming has provided a space for misogynistic, bigoted, and white supremacist ideologies to flourish; allowing gaming to act as a microcosm for suppressed white American ideals. As a white, American, male, gamer, it should not come as a surprise that I have witnessed much of this kind of behavior for a long time and even spent a decent portion of my adolescence indoctrinated into this ideology. It's a part of my life that I'm not proud of and have since worked very hard to not only not be racist, but be actively anti-racist. So, I wanted to take a look at how and why these discriminatory ideologies have taken such a strong hold in gaming culture and the gaming industry to the extent that slurs are sometimes referred to as "Gamer Words" (Foreign).

The first thing I want to get across is that these are not small isolated incidents. According to the Anti-Defamation League, an organization dedicated to ending and educating about discrimination and antisemitism, 20% of adults and 15% of young people between the ages of 10 and 17 who played video games in 2022 were exposed to white supremacist beliefs. (ADL) That's 1/5 adults and 3/20 children. This is up from only 8% of adults who reported being exposed to white supremacist beliefs in games in 2021 (ADL). Instances of discrimination are on the rise in the gaming space in a way that it hasn't been in some time, since an event known as "Gamer-gate." Gamergate was an event that followed an article written by Anita Sarkeesian which criticized gaming's discriminatory culture. In response many white men began to organize a counter effort that involved verbally

attacking women and people of color in the gaming environment (Foreign). This is the nexus event that has led to the growing popularity of “anti-woke” content, as this was the first instance in modern times in which we saw the organization and radicalization of white men on the internet against minorities. These ideals have begun to fester and spread, infecting all reaches of popular culture and young men of all ages. This has made it easier for something known as the “Alt-Right Pipeline” to manifest. The Alt-Right Pipeline is simply an established series of steps or seeds in seemingly innocuous things and media that secretly lead people, typically young white men, towards white supremacist ideologies (Foreign.) It can often start with a game or YouTuber, from there it can lead to “anti-woke comedy” or something similar, which can lead to right-wing commentators, which can lead to alt-right commentators. This isn’t an exact blueprint but it’s a very common series of steps that can accidentally be followed by young people. But one of the first steps has to be making bigoted remarks seem acceptable. According to VICE journalist Mack Lamoureux in a section paraphrased from the research of Dr. Rachel Kowert, Prof. Bill Swann, and PhD Student Alexi Martel:

There is a subset of gamers who turn to video games for the community they may lack elsewhere in their life, and they form strong bonds within the subculture. In the paper, the authors dub this a “double-edged sword” as finding a community could be a positive thing for the gamer but it could also introduce them to toxicity and hateful speech. In the worst-case scenario, this may lead some to “be lured into embracing extremist beliefs that lead them down the path to radicalization.” (Lamoureux)

This sense of community leads to racism, misogyny, and bigotry being used as a bonding tool. As a way to share in a taboo subject and trust in the fact that neither side will leak about the other because there’s a mutual understanding and sometimes sense of humor around this subject. According to online personality and professional black media analyst F.D Signifier:

Racism for [white gamers] is a bonding practice. In their heads they’re not being racist it’s just “we like to say N___ and make fried Chicken and watermelon jokes, we don’t hate black people.” And then you get a

black person in there and they're calling you a N___ and making Chicken and watermelon jokes, and- and you're like "hey can you stop" and they're like "what we're just joking." (Foreign)

This is one of the largest and most important aspects in the rise of radicalization that we've seen in the past several years. By taking white supremacist language and making it familiar by making it into a "joke" it normalizes the rhetoric and exposes more people to it and makes it part of the culture. One very common phrase that you'll hear online in response to someone expressing that they're upset by the use of racial slurs is that "they wouldn't last a day in a CoD [Call of Duty] lobby." This is to say that discrimination and use of harmful rhetoric was so widespread and ingrained in Call of Duty culture that its use was not only accepted, but is encouraged and glorified, and anyone who expresses anything different is viewed as weak. According to the previously mentioned study in a section that compared the players and culture of Call of Duty against those of Minecraft: "We found that fusion with gaming culture uniquely predicted more antisocial and extreme outcomes among Call of Duty than Minecraft players, including willingness to fight/die for gaming culture... extrinsic racism, and recent aggressive behaviors" (Kowert 13). Many of these gamers feel like the racism of their community is a part of them and an attack on that language is an attack on their personal and community identity. Which is part of why it's so difficult to deal with this issue, because as I said earlier, it's become a part of the culture.

According to the International Game Developers Association, 81% of game developers identify as white or caucasian (PBS). Gaming is an incredibly white dominated area of entertainment, which unfortunately means that it is plagued by white supremacy, which the ADL defines as "the collection of extremist ideologies and groups undergirding the beliefs that white people should dominate in all ways and exercise power over other identities, that there should be a 'whites-only' nation, and that 'white culture' is expressly superior to other cultures and must be supported at the expense of other cultures." All this to say that this is not an isolated issue. This is not an instance of "a few bad apples." In a survey conducted by journalist Matt Zajeckowski over half of the gamer's surveyed admitted to bullying other people online, and of that group the most common type of bullying

admitted to was racism (Zajechowski.) From the other perspective, After a series of interviews conducted with 12 men of various ethnicities about their experience on the online gaming platform Xbox Live, Dr. Stephanie M. Ortiz noted in her findings that “Harassment on Xbox Live begins the moment one’s racial and ethnic identities are perceived as being nonwhite.” That is to say that the second someone was identified as an “inferior race” they were immediately met with harassment regarding their ethnicity. One of the interviewees identified in the paper as Nico stated that “Immediately after the game ended the opposing team started up. We had just beat them and their response to me saying “good game fellas” was, Think you’re good nigger? A few seconds passed and after I didn’t say anything one of the players said, Oh we got us a nigger who can’t speak. I don’t know why they said this, either. Maybe how I talk? I don’t know, it was just so unprovoked and sudden.” These aren’t instances of “trash talk.” This isn’t “oh well, maybe he’s being taken out of context.” This is just flat out racism being used as a weapon against someone who beat them. This problem is systemic and pervasive throughout gaming as a culture, not just as a pass time, but as a profession. In 2020, ESPN interviewed multiple esports personalities who each participate in a different area and aspect of esports and while they each faced different barriers to or levels of systemic issues as an esports player, all of them could confidently say that as a community they would face discrimination, especially when they would beat someone; racism would be used as a sort of trump card or hail mary response, when it shouldn’t even be an option (ESPN). This isn’t a benign problem either, according to the CDC “suicide rates among young Black people ages 10 to 24 rose 36.6% from 2018 to 2021, the largest percentage jump among any demographic” (Ramirez). Young black people are being exposed to more unhidden racist rhetoric, more frequently, and more directly thanks to the internet age and that fact showing through in troubling ways.

But discrimination in gaming isn’t just a community issue, and it also isn’t exclusive to racial matters. The gaming industry has been growing at an incredible rate for the last several decades, however despite this, throughout its history video games and video game marketing has had a consistent history of not only stereotyping people of color, but also heavily objectifying women. According to a study conducted by Professors B. Mitchell Peck, Paul R. Ketchum, and David G. Embrick

“...we found that minorities and women were depicted using stereotyped imagery more often than whites and men. White male characters are overrepresented in positive and powerful roles and women and minorities are overrepresented in inconsequential, stereotyped or, in the case of women, sexualized roles. Both black men and white women were largely relegated to tightly constricted roles, with black men limited to athletes, street thugs, or military support personnel. Women, though possessing physical strength, and some level of empowerment, are relegated to second class status as sexualized objects.” (Peck)

I think the last portion of this quote is very important to bring attention to. It's possible for a member of a marginalized group to be put in a strong and/or empowering role, and still be subject to stereotypes and objectification. There sometimes seems to be the notion that including a woman and/or person of color as a one-sided caricature is enough, and anything more than that is “forced.” But this also feeds into the larger issue that I mentioned previously and that is that not only are these issues present in gaming communities, but they are catered to and sometimes encouraged and prompted by the companies that create these games. During the Gamergate event that I mentioned previously, game development company Ubisoft was developing the game Far Cry 5, which was originally going to pit the player against a white supremacist cult in Montana. However, they received enough backlash for this premise that it caused them to tone down the racist tones of the game, and add several black antagonists to try and balance it out, to the point that the percent of black enemies in the game was higher than the percentage of black people in the state of Montana (Foreign). You could look at this through the lens that Ubisoft originally wanted to make a game which had the player combating white supremacy, but if they're going to immediately fold under white supremacist pressure then it proves that there really wasn't any strong conviction behind the idea. In another instance, Carlos Rodriguez, CEO of the esports company G2 Esports was seen partying with who was at the time one of the world's most famous misogynists, Andrew Tate, who is currently under house arrest pending trial for sex trafficking. When Rodriguez was asked to denounce this man he said “Nobody will ever be able to police my friendships... I party with whoever the f*** I want.” This response hurt the brand image enough that he was eventually fired

(ADL). This all to say that not only is gaming often an unsafe environment for women and people of color on a community level, but also on an industrial level.

Which feeds into another issue that I've been dancing around which is women's experience in gaming. Women receive an especially hard time in the gaming space, not just from white men, but also from men of color as well; Because being a member of a marginalized group, does not absolve you of your prejudices against others. According to the ADL, the most commonly cited reason for "identity-based abuse" for the last several years is gender (ADL). This is because on top of gaming being very white-centric, it's also incredibly male dominated. According to a 2020 survey "female gamers are more likely than men to experience sexually inappropriate behavior. The survey also found 27% of female players are excluded from games because of their gender... 31% of female gamers do not reveal their gender identity while playing online multiplayer games" (Yeung). This type of behavior is a byproduct of women's frequently discounted and objectified role in society, compounded by the anonymity and lack of consequences offered by the internet.

All in all, gaming has become a hotbed for open misogyny and white supremacy to an extent that we haven't seen since the Jim Crow era (Foreign). And what I've discussed here only covered two aspects of this discrimination, and didn't even mention issues such as anti-semitism, transphobia, ableism, islamophobia, etc. All of which have their own places in the gaming community. So, how do we solve this problem? It's hard to see a way out of this kind of behavior short of solving discrimination, and history has shown that that's not really a thing that happens, humans just invent new things to be racist about. However, there was a game that not only managed to bring its discrimination to almost zero, but all online toxicity, and that game was Dawngate. Dawngate was a MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) who's open beta was released in 2014. MOBA fanbases place a very strong emphasis on their online rankings, where players play against each other and receive a rank based on their skill at the game, similar to something like chess ratings. Dawngate made two decisions that would have changed online gaming as we know it. The first choice they made was to not let players be ranked until they hit max level, which they got by playing

more games and earning more experience. The second choice they made was that each time you beat a game you got one game's worth of experience... unless other players voted positively about you, in which case you could get up to 32 games worth of experience from a single game. This means it was less time consuming and more efficient to be nice to people while playing the game (Pirate). This made toxic players incredibly rare, as it would only make their own life much harder (up to 32x harder). Unfortunately, the game never received a full release. The game's beta was only open for 5 months, at which point EA canceled the game's development in exchange for League of Legends, one of the most popular and most toxic games in the world. Sadly, no game since has successfully implemented this mechanic because they miss the key features that would make it successful. But I honestly think that this is how you make a better community for your game. Just saying "Be nice to people or we'll ban you" won't work. Someone being mean, racist, misogynistic, etc. towards their teammates has to actively punish the perpetrator and make their life disproportionately harder than it would if they were just nice. Because if lack of consequences is what has led to the dire state that gaming is in, we need to reinstate those consequences to make everyone's experience better.

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