



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2021:  
The 22nd Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers**  
Virtual Event / 13-16 Oct 2021

## **PLEASURE+GENDER+PLAY**

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### **Panel Rationale**

From the start, play and game studies scholars have investigated the experiences of women and girls who play games online, as well as gendered assumptions around digital as well as non-digital play (Brunner et al., 2000; Bryce & Rutter, 2002; Delamere & Shaw, 2008; Fron et al., 2007a, 2007b; Pearce, 2009). Scholars have challenged ideas such as that girls and women have weaker gameplay skills than boys and men (Jenson & De Castell, 2008), that women are not interested in competitive play (Taylor, 2006), that girls and women are different in their play experiences and interests (Royse et al., 2007) and that women are not frequent or loyal players (Consalvo & Begy, 2015; Williams et al., 2009). However, there is still more to learn about how women, girls, boys, men, nonbinary and other individuals play, as well as how gender can play an important role beyond as an identity marker in playful expressions as well as normative expectations for play.

This panel offers new ways of examining how gender, games, and other forms of online play, can be analyzed and understood. These four papers argue for a more nuanced  
Chess, S., Massarani, A., Kruse, H., Consalvo, M., & Boudreau, K. (2021, October).  
*Pleasure+gender+play*. Panel presented at AoIR 2021: The 22nd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

understanding of gender and play, further challenging gaming culture's preoccupation that certain games and certain styles of play are more "valid" than others (Consalvo & Paul, 2019). To do that, we offer fresh analytical tools, different theoretical lenses and underexplored sites for study.

### *Analytical tools*

"No Need For Speed" makes a unique contribution to gaming and play literature, offering a new articulation of the temporal experiences within and external to game play - especially in COVID/pandemic times. In particular, the authors argue that the concept of "slow gaming," might offer new possibilities for both our experiences of play and the way that time within the games industry itself is being reconceptualized. The authors offer three different games as examples of how "slow gaming" challenges our relationship to play, domesticity, notions of gender, and labor practices within the gaming industry more broadly. This paper argues that playing slow games, or playing games slowly, might provide a unique political rejoinder to contemporary life under late capitalism.

### *Theoretical lenses*

Two papers in this panel bring underutilized theoretical frameworks to the study of gender and games: examining how socioeconomic class and boundary keeping intersect with gender and gameplay in important ways. The presentation "Working for hearts: Social class and time management games" reads popular casual games such as *Sally's Spa* through an intersectional critique. Adding to gendered examinations of casual games (Chess, 2012, 2017), this paper brings in a critique of social class. It does so through exploring the classed positions of jobs in these games, as well as how the player's agency is limited both through classed expectations of certain occupations as well as further undermined by particular design decisions and gameplay mechanics as well as game narratives. It demonstrates how class is an important aspect of identity that can help us better understand gaming representations. The second paper to bring in underutilized theory is "Gendered expectations of playing nice, boundary keeping and problematic/toxic behaviors in casual video game communities." This paper offers a different way of understanding the role of toxic behavior and players in game communities: through the sociological lens of boundary keeping. While not dismissing the real effects of harassment, it explores how activities such as trolling and other problematic gameplay is defined differently within different player groups, how it can strengthen some in-game communities or spur the creation of groups dedicated to combating such problems, and in the process helping to further enrich and make more inclusive gaming culture.

### *Overlooked cases*

"Girls, Platforms, and Play" examines an offline form of gendered play and competition – pre-teen and teen girls riding hobbyhorses – and how the activity has been differently contested and/or constructed on two platforms: YouTube and Instagram. Legacy media video content of hobbyhorse competitions uploaded to YouTube inevitably have led – given YouTube's largely antisocial comment culture (Burgess & Green, 2018) – to hobbyhorsers' activities to be delegitimized for a number of reasons by commenters: mainly, because it's just girls playing with toys, not participating in a sport; or because it is an athletic endeavor, but its participants should compete in a "real" sport, like track

and field; or because it's not real equestrianism. Instagram's affordances, which help encourage connections among subculture participants and the creation of communities (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020), have allowed hobbyhorse enthusiasts to create a space of their own online.

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## **NO NEED FOR SPEED: THE GENDERED PLEASURES OF SLOW GAMING**

While video games used to be poised primarily for a presumed masculine audience (Kocurek, 2015) industrial shifts, changing technologies and new habits have seen the outcome of new kinds of players and games (Cote, 2020; Chess, 2017; Harvey, 2015). On the surface, the importance of these shifts might appear minimal - after all, for a medium to “grow up” it necessarily needs to broaden, and needs to find new kinds of audiences. But the overwhelming pushback from larger game-related culture such as the hashtag movement #GamerGate has demonstrated the politicized implications of why the diversity of audiences *and* game types matter. While, certainly, many video games are built for expected masculine or feminine audiences, these categories were always imperfect. In our presentation, we argue that rather than understanding this faultline in terms of gendered politics, it is far more useful to think about that rift in terms of speed. To this end, our paper interrogates the politics of slow gaming as a necessary rejoinder to the industry’s prioritization of speed.

### **Time, speed, and games**

Time and speed have long been of interest to media and communication scholars, especially the ways that new technologies shift our collective experiences of each. Paul Virilio, Manuel Castells, and other critics note the increasingly “sped up” nature of our everyday lives creates a world where politics, culture, networks, and war are global, and instantaneous communication is portrayed as a sign of progress and a net positive for society (Castells, 2011; Virilio, 2006). Judy Wajcman (2015) argues that there is a dialectical relationship between technology and time, with contemporary society awash in discussions of the acceleration of everyday life enabled by/through new technologies. The experience for individuals is one of acceleration, with instantaneous communication, immediacy, and always-on connectivity creating a sense of anxiety and pressure. In response, we see Silicon Valley offering other solutions: meditation apps, life-hacking tools, and ever-present monitoring of our well-being. But as Wajcman and others argue, these solutions work to prop up late capitalism: making us stronger,

faster, and fitter for a world that is actually detrimental to our health. In addition, feminist scholars remind us that time remains a commodity that is unequally shared, with women doing the bulk of this invisible work in domestic settings and thus having less time for other pursuits (Hochschild, 2001). Other scholars remind us that our class position also determines our relationship to time, with, for example, gig workers experiencing time as a commodity controlled and surveilled by others (Sharma, 2014; Gray & Suri, 2019).

Narratives of speed have also long overwhelmed the industrial and cultural conversation about what makes video games fun. Speed is both a mechanic, but also a framing device used by game developers and players: players are often timed, we speak of processor speeds, and timed actions. Player competitions often focus on a combination of time plus skill, and achieving goals as quickly as possible. Some players engage in speed runs - getting through the key milestones of a game as quickly as possible to demonstrate their expertise in the gaming domain (Ruburg, 2019). Speed is both representative of a core group of players that have dominated the fiscal output of the industry and a cultural conversation *within* the industry about what games, systems, and companies matter. In this way, speed has become a kind of heuristic device and aesthetic choice, one that not only defines output, but also input: it suggests how the video game industry understands itself and the craft of making video games within that industry.

### **Slow gaming: a new paradigm**

However, because of this historical focus on competition through the lens of speed, it is easy to miss alternative modes of thinking about speed. As the industry continues to shift towards more complex, nuanced, and mass audiences the aesthetics of speed have promoted the development of an alternative mode of gaming, *slow gaming*, as its antithesis. In this presentation, we focus on the rhetoric of speed, paying specific attention to the emerging qualifier of “slow gaming” and how it represents a new face on the industry in terms of aesthetics, technologies, and industrial practices. We argue that slow gaming matters as a label and heuristic because - while it has always existed to varying extents - the previous emphasis on speed has defined the products, nature, and culture of the industry. Considering the politics of *inaction* and *stasis* can help to understand different kinds of affective experiences (Scully-Blaker, 2020). The emergence of slow gaming as a cultural category marks a shift wherein games are increasingly being built as a more accessible medium and affirming a new industrial zeitgeist wherein slowness is appreciated as a stylistic marker.

Slow gaming is not a rejection of time as an organizing principle in our everyday lives; instead, it provides an experience of time that is liminal and malleable through particular gaming mechanics. Thus, we argue that playing a “slow game” or embracing a “slow gaming” approach can encourage players to think more reflectively about the nature of time more broadly. It is also, we suggest, explicitly political, becoming a kind of “pleasure activism” per adrienne maree brown (2019), allowing us to reclaim and reimagine the world in ways that are more just and humane.

To that end, in our presentation, we argue that speed - whether characterized by fastness or slowness - is at the core of thinking about diversifying game playing

audiences. Slow gaming offers both opportunities and pitfalls for thinking about the complexities of how we play video games and perform leisure. Our presentation both considers how time functions broadly within the rhetorical space of digital play, but then uses examples of slow gaming instances in games such as *Animal Crossing*, *Stardew Valley*, and *Gorogoa* to think about how they represent changing heuristics and audiences. Each of these games offers distinct and different experiences that highlight the value of observing, waiting, and meditating while playing. While slow gaming has always existed as a mode of analog play (for example, chess), we consider its significance as an emerging point in digital play.

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## GIRLS, PLATFORMS, AND PLAY

## Introduction

In spring 2017, the release of the Finnish documentary *Hobbyhorse Revolution*, which chronicles the lives of girls who ride stick horses in jumping and dressage competitions, made the sport “go viral,” inspiring news media coverage and social media discussion. In March of that year, the *Times of London* and the *Wall Street Journal* both featured the competitions in stories. In May, a headline in the British tabloid *The Mirror* exclaimed, “Bizarre Hobbyhorse Craze Sees Teenage Girls Compete at Showjumping Contests with TOY Horses.” Comments on YouTube videos of hobbyhorse competitions were divided, with most popular early comments ridiculing the events, with statements like “Nothing like girls jumping around with rods between their legs, guess this makes me a pervert,” and “Finally a ‘sport’ women can be good at.”

Though recently newsworthy, the hobbyhorse, or stick horse, has existed for more than a millennium, although not as a children’s toy. Early hobbyhorses appeared in the Arab world in the ninth century A.D. or earlier, when men used them to ritually reenact battles. Accounts of children playing with hobbyhorse-like toys soon followed. Hobbyhorses spread to North Africa and Andalusia and were present in Catholic areas of Europe by the thirteenth century, where they were used in festivals by, among others, Morris dancers.

Through most of its history as a toy, the hobbyhorse has been used by both boys and girls: domesticated, but only recently gendered. The development and spread of hobbyhorse competitions has taken place almost exclusively among girls. The sport now has approximately 10,000 competitors. Many of them construct their own stick horses, and others buy and then customize their hobbyhorses.

## YouTube comment culture and hobbyhorse competitions

Recent competitions in Finland and elsewhere have generated media coverage. The tone of mainstream media stories in outlets like the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* ranges from curious to perplexed to mocking. Commenters on news reports on legacy media YouTube channels about hobbyhorse competitions, and on videos shared through social media, primarily ridicule the competitions and participants. A clip from the American daytime television talk show *The Doctors* that featured a prominent Finnish hobbyhorse competitor elicited comments like “These kids have developmental delays.” Of course, antisocial commenting practicing have long been a defining feature of YouTube culture (Burgess & Green, 2018). The sexualized comments directed at hobbyhorsers mentioned in the introduction point to how girls’ interests tend to be marginalized and how their pre-adolescent and adolescent bodies are surveilled.

Comments on videos posted by the Associated Press and *Walls Street Journal* question the legitimacy of hobbyhorse competitions, mirroring discourses about who counts and who doesn’t count as a “real gamer” (Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Hobbyhorsers never claim that they are equestrians, but many perform difficult athletic maneuvers. Despite this, comments include “Anyone can do it and you are fucking dumb thinking this takes effort compared to riding.” The presence of the hobbyhorse confounds some

commenters: "Why can't you just do normal, athletic, human stuff? Like sprinting, running, jogging. Why do you have to go around with a freakin stick and walk like a horse?" Self-identified equestrians make clear that hobbyhorsing is not legitimate, writing, "This is a true insult to REAL riders."

In watching online videos of girls on their hobbyhorses, however, we can see, or at least imagine, them using stick horses as means to define and control the self and the body, to "become hobbyhorse." In studying Welsh girls in mining communities who ride real horses, Emma Renold and Gabrielle Ivinson (2014) observe that the girls experience moments of "becoming horse." In *Kafka*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986) argue,

To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out a path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone. (p.13)

In becoming horse/hobbyhorse, girls find a line of flight that enables them to transverse spaces, to become assemblages that are able that occupies the borders of our understanding, often confounding observers; for example, YouTube commenters.

Hobbyhorsers do push back on YouTube (e.g., "I have a horse but still do it"). The participants in video clips and news stories argue eloquently for the aesthetic, athletic, personal, and social value of their sport. Even though they participate in public competitions and maintain social media presences, they report that their involvement feels private. Participation in hobbyhorsing doesn't just happen at competition or in training "rides" with friends. It also happens on Instagram.

### **Semi-public hobbyhorse space: Instagram**

On Instagram, hobbyhorse fanciers find a friendlier space than on YouTube, one that seems semi-private. Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020) argue that subcultural communities that require in-group knowledge to access are common on the platform (p. 149). Hobbyhorsers post photos of their hobbyhorses, and videos of them riding hobbyhorses, under hashtags that include #hobbyhorse and #keppihevonen (Finnish for "hobbyhorse"). They also create and share identities for their hobbyhorses.

Instagram is treated by hobbyhorsers as a relatively safe space where they can not only share photos, videos, and stories about their "horses," but also be supported when they discuss issues in their daily lives. In this way, the Instagram terrain occupied by hobbyhorse girls reflects the physical spaces of girls who ride real horses. Studies of girls and horses show that girls' horse spaces are places where they can create their own subject positions without the burden of gender-related expectations (Ranio, 2009, p. 34).

Many traditional spaces of girl-only culture have been inaccessible to researchers because they are located in the home and/or in other private spaces (McRobbie & Garber, 1977). The association of horses with girls' "rooms of their own" is the



inspiration for Patricia Cronin's 1997 art exhibit *Pony Tales*, a sentimental display of fifty oil portraits of horses faces arranged on a wall meant to resemble a girl's bedroom (Cronin, 2001). Her subsequent installation, *Tack Room*, Cronin explains, "looked like a woman's private tack room in the country, but it was really my private fantasy room, in which I imagined the adolescence I had not had and fantasized about my future" (p. 95).

The "hobbyhorse revolution" helps us understand the gendering and domestication of technologies in online (and offline) spaces, as well as the policing of girls' bodies and behaviors in public. Shouldn't something as "cringe" – to quote some YouTube comments – as pre-teen and teen girls riding hobbyhorses happen at home, in private? Instead, hobbyhorse girls have used platform affordances to create semi-public places of their own.

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## WORKING FOR HEARTS: SOCIAL CLASS AND TIME MANAGEMENT GAMES

This presentation examines time management games such as *Sally's Salon 2* and *Sally's Spa* for their intersectional representations of class and gender. Prior work on time management games has examined them primarily from the axis of gender as well as their designation as casual and/or mobile titles (Chess, 2012, 2017; Juul 2010). Yet in addition to their gendered design, these games feature important socioeconomic class markers that are crucially and critically intertwined with these representations. To examine this more fully, this presentation engages in game analyses of the titles listed above, arguing that the work being done in these games is not only gendered, as Chess has argued, but is also classed, in key ways.

This analysis draws on theorizations of social class as well as temporal labor. Scholars of social class and media have argued that our class positioning not only determines our educational and social opportunities, but also structures our use of media, our sense of ourselves, and our life expectancy and opportunities (Deery & Press 2017). In her studies of time and work, Sarah Sharma writes of how work time can be differently experienced depending on one's occupation (Sharma, 2014). For example, taxi drivers can spend long periods waiting for customers but then engage in frenetic bursts of speed as passengers wish to reach their destinations as quickly as possible. As a result, they are not simply producing a ride for passengers, but are instead "producing time" (2014, p. 71). The daily life of the taxi driver "is structured by the constant tension of being out of time while responding to and maintaining the time of others" (p. 56).

### **Game Design & Class Representation**

Games such as *Sally's Salon 2* have a complex relationship to social class. As with other games like *Diner Dash* or *Supermarket Mania*, the lead character is a white woman who is positioned as the owner of the establishment in question (salon, spa, supermarket), but is also its central (often only) worker. Game narratives center on wanting to run a successful establishment and being a valued member of the community. Gameplay mechanics are similar to other time management games. In *Sally's Salon 2* the player starts the game by learning how to do basic tasks such as assign customers to the appropriate stations and then moving between them, cutting, washing, and styling hair, finally ringing up completed customers before the end of the workday. Customers want different services and can have varying levels of patience. Days have monetary goals to achieve, which then allow the player to purchase game facilitating upgrades (i.e., a new couch will keep customers happier for a longer period of time while waiting). Each game level increases gameplay complexity – such as by adding different types of customers, adding more customers, having players complete quests within the round (find a mouse on the screen when it appears), or adding new items or services that customers might want. Players receive bonuses for quick attention to customers throughout their visit, but also lose tips and/or money when customers get angry for having to wait too long at any one particular station.

*Sally's Salon 2* features gendered work – the hair salon has long been considered a feminine gendered space, where women not only get their hair maintained but can socialize with other women (Gimlin, 1996). While the game does have male customers, a large number of the customers are women, and the intervening cut scenes also

feature mostly women. Chess (2012, 2017) has written about how gender permeates not only the narratives and representations of such games, but also how the games are designed (including their mechanics) with “player two” in mind. Yet this game and others similar to it are also classed in certain ways.

Despite being the salon’s owner, the player-as-Sally must also do the customer-facing work. In this way they are similar to Sharma’s taxi drivers, who are sole proprietors and often mention their desire not to work for other people: taxi driving is a way to control their own work/day/life. Yet just like Sharma’s drivers, the player-as-Sally is not in control of those elements. This is further reinforced via gameplay: despite the expertise that stylists have in their craft (Gimlin), there is no opportunity in the game to offer advice or commentary on NPC choices. The player must acquiesce to demands, or else simply stop playing.

The game’s reliance on hearts as a currency similarly reproduces the “emotion work” that stylists must engage in – affirming, celebrating, and enhancing the well-being of their clients (Gimlin, p. 512), which further undercuts their position as beauty experts. Further, the player-as-Sally is not in charge of their time: she must wait for others to request her services, and then speed up to complete tasks as quickly as possible, saving time for her clients. And just as with the taxi drivers who must also keep passengers happy (or at least avoid generating negative emotions in them), the player-as-Sally must literally move as quickly as possible to keep hearts/approval from disappearing. This repetition through each day and level results in a procedural rhetoric affirming the job of stylist as lacking in authority and only able to make choices about the smallest details, such as the order in which to perform prescribed tasks (Bogost, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

In these ways and others, this game (and others like it) reinforces classed expectations such that service economy workers must strive to keep customers happy as their central goal. This is accomplished through careful management of their time. When engaging with customers, Sally moves quickly so that customers leave the shop in the shortest time possible, with no or very few mistakes made. The player learns through gameplay the most efficient ways to move customers through the shop, learning to read NPC cues and interface elements quickly. Just as Taylorism was a process to make production lines more efficient, the player learns that to be successful, each move must be carefully choreographed. Although in this case the player is responsible for all steps of the production process, there remains no room for improvisation, down time, or leisure. Work is a series of tasks to be performed in the most logical order, quickly, and on demand. Despite being the proprietor, and an alleged expert in styling and beauty, the player-as-Sally is largely relegated to a service role, where pleasing others takes center stage.

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# **GENDERED EXPECTATIONS OF PLAYING NICE, BOUNDARY KEEPING & PROBLEMATIC/TOXIC BEHAVIORS IN CASUAL VIDEO GAME COMMUNITIES**

“in any game community the informal rules decided upon by the group opens doors for players to play their own way, in ways that offend the norms of many players, or at least the loudest collective voice.” (LaJeunesse, 2018)

As the dominant demographic of players in the casual game space are adult females, there is an informal assumption that everyone is happily playing nice. While there is research on toxic player behavior in casual games (Bergstrom, 2021), it is often framed within the context of outsider players causing problems for the player community. While this is the experience of some casual game communities, there is little research on the ways in which casual game players who identify as part of the core player base may engage in their own form of problematic or toxic behaviors. These behaviors may not stem from the same place, have the same purpose, or look the same as the trolling toxic outsider, yet they still act to keep outsiders ‘out’ and may cause the game communities to be unpleasant, problematic, or toxic for other members of the casual game community.

Broadly defined, casual video games are digital games that are designed to require low time commitment in any given play session, have themes and fiction that do not require deep thought or attention, have a low barrier to entry, and do not require previous knowledge of other video games in order to play (Juul, 2010). Often contrasted to “hardcore” or “real” video games that require more commitment, skill, and have more mature themes, casual video games are regularly perceived as inferior games that are played predominantly by non ‘gamers’ and considered gendered spaces of play (Vanderhoef, 2013). While the dominant demographic who play casual games are (older) adult women (ESA, 2020), the ESA does not unpack the different ways casual games are consumed in terms of actual time invested in playing or the extent to which players are engaged in casual game communities. The low expectation of time investment and the design features of casual games often lead people to believe that the players themselves are not invested in the games or in game communities.

## **Gender Norms & Social expectations for female players to be and play nice**

Even before girls are old enough to play video games, they are taught to play nice with others. Within the construct of gender roles and norms, “[F]eminine characteristics are: affectionate, cheerful, childlike, compassionate, does not use harsh language, eager to soothe hurt feelings, feminine, flatterable, gentle, gullible, loves children, loyal, sensitive to the needs of others, shy, soft-spoken, sympathetic, tender, understanding, warm, and yielding.” (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Similarly, when research explores gaming preferences of female players, the games are often described as cooperative, social, and lighthearted in themes (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006) and with a low skill expectation. When females play video games that are typically considered male games (violent, competitive, and engage in aggressive behaviors), they are often considered to be

unfeminine, trying to fit in, or in cases of environments where toxic gamer culture is present, a defense mechanism to cope or deflect toxic behaviors (Cote, 2017).

## **Boundary Keeping & Casual Game Communities**

Boundary keeping – broadly defined as the expected group behaviors, definition, and enforcement of social norms, occurs in almost all social groups. The ways in which boundaries are defined and maintained between who is part of the group and those who are outsiders varies almost as widely as the group themselves. Within the scope of digital game communities, boundary keeping strategies are often used to exclude newcomers or other players whom the core community may perceive as outsiders, however, some forms of boundary keeping move beyond simple exclusion and can venture into problematic gameplay and toxic gamer behavior (Boudreau, 2019). However, the ways in which casual game players engage in boundary keeping and potential problematic behavior may vary widely and be expressed in very different ways than the tactics seen in more mainstream, male dominated toxic gamer culture.

The perception of toxicity and problematic behavior is subjective and is often based on social, cultural and even linguistic norms of the individual (LaJeunesse, 2019). One could argue that this is the case even more so in casual game communities as players also may appear to be less cohesive in terms of adhering to gameplay norms and fostering community in a casual game space. To this point, this paper is interested in three primary research areas: identifying the ways in which casual game players define and determine gameplay and community norms; the ways in which casual game players engage in boundary keeping within their casual gameplay and game related communities; and how these norms and tactics may be perceived as problematic or toxic both within the player community and to players who do not actively consider themselves part of the casual game community. Finally, this overarching aim of this research is to explore the ways in which boundary keeping strategies that may be perceived as problematic and toxic behaviors are framed within the gendered expectations of 'playing nice' are fundamentally different than the current mainstream occurrences of toxic gamer culture and problematic gameplay that is grounded in racist, misogynistic, and prejudicial social behaviors, yet may have the same negative or damaging effects on the players and the casual game communities.

## **Conclusion**

In working to understand the nuances in the perception and occurrence of problematic and toxic behaviors in different player communities in general, and in the casual game community specifically, it is possible to address the ways in which boundaries are defined and maintained outside of the frame of the male-dominated, mainstream video game culture. In doing so, it is possible to work towards awareness and strategies to confront and change problematic and toxic gaming culture more broadly.

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