

Why sexual harassment is worse than other types of abuse online

March 22 2016, by Jeff Grabmeier

While many women gamers can shrug off much of the name-calling and abuse they receive while playing online video games, sexual harassment sticks with them even when they're offline.

A survey of 293 [women](#) who played video games online showed that, while they didn't like general abuse such as swearing and insults about their game-playing skills, they could dismiss these types of comments from their mind pretty easily.

But even after the game was over, women continued to think about the sexist comments, rape jokes and threats, and other sexually related comments that they received while playing with men.

"Most women players understand trash talking and having their playing skill insulted, even if they don't like it," said Jesse Fox, lead author of the study and professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"But what disturbs them is being targeted simply for being a woman. They don't easily forget those comments and continue to think about them when they're done playing."

And while the results suggested women didn't think it was the responsibility of gaming companies to stop general harassment, they did seem to blame the companies for not doing more to end [sexual harassment](#).

"The moment that abuse stops being about them as players and becomes about them as women, that's when gaming companies are seen as part of the problem," she said.

Fox conducted the study with Wai Yen Tang, a graduate student in communication at Ohio State. Their results appear online in the journal *New Media & Society* and will appear in a future print edition.

The researchers recruited women from online forums, blogs and social media sites for an online survey on experiences with trash talking and harassment in video games.

The average age of the women who participated was 26, and the players as a group averaged about 13 hours of online [video game](#) play each week. Some of the games they played most frequently were World of Warcraft, Team Fortress 2 and Defense of the Ancients.

The women were asked about whether they experienced general harassment or sexual harassment while playing online games, how much they thought about the abuse offline, how game administrators or game companies responded to harassment and how they coped with abuse.

Results showed women didn't spend much time thinking about general abuse when they were offline, although it did make them more likely to quit playing the games. Women reported that the responses by gaming companies to general harassment didn't play a role in whether they quit or not.

"Most women don't blame the companies for not stopping trash talking about things like player skills, even if it does cause them to quit," Fox said.

Sexual harassment was a very different issue for women players.

For one, sexual harassment seemed to bother them more than general harassment. "They don't forget about sexual harassment. The abuse that women experience online stays with them and has a real-world impact. They withdraw from the game and continue to think about what happened."

In addition, women who perceived that gaming companies didn't do enough to stop sexual harassment were more likely to withdraw from playing.

"Gaming companies do drive women away when they don't take an active stance against online sexual harassment," Fox said.

Results showed that women coped with sexual harassment online in some of the same ways they deal with abuse in real life: avoidance, denial that it's a problem, seeking help and blaming themselves.

But they also use a coping strategy that is not often available in real life: gender masking. They make sure their avatars are not female. Some players reported choosing masculine or neutral user names.

"Instead of calling themselves 'Miss Kitty Princess' they choose 'User 42' for their online screen name. It just makes it easier for them and they don't have to deal with the sexual harassment," she said.

But there are costs to that, according to Fox.

"It makes women invisible in the gaming community. Gaming companies assume that there aren't many female players or that women aren't interested in online games when they're really just hiding their identity," she said.

"Women shouldn't have to do that."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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