

Discourse and Action: Female Players' Resistance Against Gender Inequality in Games Through Social Media

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Abstract: In patriarchal gaming culture, female gamers have limited space for discourse. The establishment of the “Female Gamers’ Association” provides a new channel for female gamers to resist male hegemony in both games and reality through game sharing and discourse criticism. Therefore, this paper tries to explore how female gamers confront male discourses and build their identities through a series of discursive practices around games and gender on social media. This paper analyzes the posts from the “Female Gamers’ Association” group on the social media platform Douban and uses online ethnography for further observation. The study finds that although female gamers have formed a new discursive space and resisted the mainstream gaming environment by creating their own communities, there are still limitations to this resistance, and the active resistance of female gamers also contains elements of passive submission. The study of the “Female Gamers’ Association” provides a clearer understanding of the complexities of female gamers in a male-dominated virtual space and their agency in the face of pressure.

Keywords: female gamers, game community, social media, male gaze

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The traditional stereotype of gamers as unpopular and aloof male gamers is statistically inaccurate [1]. In recent years, with the rise of female gamers, the situation where men dominated video games has long since disappeared. According to Usertracker, a database about multi-platform internet user behavior, from 2016 to 2018 the overall male-to-female ratio of Chinese mobile game users has stabilized in recent years, with the proportion of female users remaining roughly at a level of 42% [2]. Statistics from other countries also show similar trends. In the U.S., 45% of video game players are women [3]. With the development of online technology, more and more women are entering online games. However, the status of female players in games is marginalized, and stereotypes and male gazing in games still exist, which affects the gaming experience of female players. At the same time, more and more women are aware of the gender inequality in games and try to criticize and transcend the gender power constructs in games by speaking out on social media. In China, the establishment of a group named “Female Gamers’ Association” on Douban, one of the most popular social media platforms in China, is a visual representation of the rise of female gamers. Established

in 2020, the group has over 40,000 members and is currently the most representative online female gaming community in China. The group explicitly excludes “biologically male” gamers and has formed a unique cultural consumer landscape by sharing gaming experiences from a female perspective and criticizing male gaming hegemony.

Based on the above research context, this paper focuses on this female gamer community and aims to find out how female gamers confront male discourses and build their identities through a series of discursive practices around gaming and gender on social media.

1.2. Literature Review

Research related to women and gaming can be divided into four categories. The first one focuses on women’s reasons for playing games. For example, some studies suggest that women play games for different motivations. Female mobile gamers in the U.S. play games to combat boredom and build relationships, while men engage in games to achieve success and compete with others [4,5]. It has also been argued that female players achieve the experience of seeking excitement in games through emotional interaction, creating a temporary escape from the pressures of real society [6]. These studies reflect gender stereotypes of female gamers in both the gaming industry and among researchers [7]. The second category examines why fewer women than men play games. Some women believe that being a female gamer is stigmatized and women are often objectified and harassed in video games [8]. Some studies have argued that the exclusion of female players from gaming culture is in part a result of the gender identities and norms that players are assigned [9]. The stigma of being a female gamer has a significant negative impact on women [8]. The third category focuses on the role of women in game narratives. Studies have shown that the female body is over-sexualized in games, and women often play secondary roles [10]. The fourth category is about the place of women in gaming culture as a whole. According to the nonprofit organization Women in Games, the gaming industry has the worst gender imbalance of all creative industries, with women being underrepresented among executive managers of gaming companies, and only 5% of competitive video game players are women [11].

In summary, the literature on women and games has focused on the portrayal of female characters and the reasons for the low number of female gamers. In contrast, the number of studies on female gamer communities is scarce. This study explores how the “Female Gamers’ Association” resists male hegemony in games and reality through social media discourse, starting from the main issues of concern to the female gaming community.

1.3. Research Method

This study uses textual analysis and online observation. The sample of this study is from the Chinese Douban group “Female Gamers’ Association” on which a certain number of posts discussing games on a daily basis can be found. It is currently the largest female gaming community on the Chinese Internet. This study also adopts the method of online ethnography to observe, participate, and understand the communication of group members.

2. Female Players’ Reflection on the Image of Women in Games

2.1. External Image of the Character

Game characters play an essential role in constructing the virtual world and driving the plot forward. As a medium, they enable real-life players to enter the digital space [12]. They can be regarded as a core concept that embodies the micro-power relations of games. In recent years, some scholars have noticed several issues in the game industry, including the flawed portrayal of female characters, lack

of diversity, and extensive and intensive male gazes. They sexualize female characters and further reinforce sexual stereotypes [13]. In the female gamer community, members reflect on the female role settings in games from a female perspective and further point to real-life gender issues through the game world.

Female gamers' dissatisfaction with female characters primarily stems from the appearance of these characters. The members of the "Female Gamers' Association" frequently discuss why women's bodies are constantly sexualized in games. This type of sexualization is manifested in the exaggeration of physical features, such as breasts and hips. These body parts of women are often portrayed in a highly prominent way, highlighting the curves and sexiness of female characters. The design of women's clothing also overemphasizes their gender characteristics and sometimes even contradicts the plot. For example, a member of the "Female Gamers' Association" criticized the female protagonist in the game called *Ten Trials of Babel: The Doppelganger Maze* for wearing a super-short skirt even amid a fierce battle. Similarly, a member of the group named "Honor of Kings" criticized the female character in the game for showing her legs with bare feet, despite being a warrior.

Female gamers in the Douban group have attributed the objectification of women in games to the male gaze, pointing out that the male gaze is essentially a power gaze. The concept of the male gaze refers to a masculine and heterosexual point of view, where women are represented and reproduced as sexual objects to satisfy the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer. It has become a common term on social media in China with the popularity of feminism. Murray's research on the male gaze in the context of cinema can be applied to explain this sexualized phenomenon in games. She argues that because the political and economic power of men and women is not equal in real life, female characters in films are subjected to two kinds of desires: the possessive desire of male characters in films and the sexual desire of male audiences outside films [13]. In a male-dominated patriarchal society, this double desire also exists in games, where female characters are often portrayed as sexual objects for male characters and players to possess and desire.

2.2. Role Function Setting

The second level of dissatisfaction relates to the functional set-up of female characters. Compared with the appearance of characters, the spiritual core and narrative function of characters are more important, affecting players' experience with these characters [13]. Regarding character presentation, status, and role, female characters in games are often designed as passive and dependent on male characters, lacking agency and autonomy.

One player believes that female characters in general have three main functional roles: one is as tools to advance the plot or to be rescued by the male protagonists; the second is to appear as motherly figures; the third is to act as pendants for the male protagonists to make male players feel powerful. Furthermore, female players are dissatisfied with many games which present female characters as love interests or "love brains." This reinforces the stereotypes that women are only interested in romantic relationships and are not capable of having their motivations and desire. For example, in *Zelda*, supporting and non-player characters (NPC) are somehow attracted to the main character Link. Similarly, in *Heavy Rain*, male characters are responsible for solving crimes and puzzles while women can only care for injured men at home. They reinforce these gender biases and limit the potential for diverse and complex representations of female characters in gaming.

As an alternative to the real world, the virtual world in the game will inevitably reflect the gender power structure in reality, which can result in female characters in games being portrayed in stereotypical ways in terms of their appearance, persona, and narrative function. Female characters are typically depicted as young and attractive, whereas male characters are diverse and multi-dimensional.

3. The Formation and Consolidation of the Female Gamer Community

Game communities on the internet are distinct based on shared interests and value identity. The construction of a community requires a set of cultural mechanisms that can activate the organization's emotions and cohesion [14]. In the Internet era, emotional communication and value identity are essential features of community formation.

For female gamers, the "Female Gamers' Association" is a kind of cyber home where female gamers gather to form an online community for communication, which is a kind of resistance to the male-dominated gaming culture. The group's rules state, "Since most gaming forums are predominantly male, women often feel uncomfortable, which is why this group was created. The group does not welcome players of the male biological sex to participate in the discussions; only true sisters are allowed in the group." In the group's operation, male players are segregated, as the biological sex is set as a threshold. A purely female gaming community is created. In addition, applicants must also provide their device information and account photos to prove their identity as gamers, establishing membership criteria through double identity verification. At the same time, the group members call themselves "fierce women," breaking the gender stereotype that men are masculine, and women are feminine in the traditional gender binary perspective and becoming a discourse symbol for female gamers to identify themselves in the virtual space [12].

In the "Female Gamers' Association," players often share their negative experiences when playing with male players in daily scenarios or encountering female-unfriendly content in games, which often inspires other women to empathize and achieve emotional connection and reinforcement. In addition to free conversation, group administrators sometimes set up topics to guide the direction of the conversation. For example, the group created a post to discuss the male gaze phenomenon in games, which helped them vent their anger towards male gaming culture and seek approval. The tweets include the behavior of male gamers that made women feel uncomfortable in games, such as randomly speculating about female gamers' gender and sexual orientation, abusing teammates, and disparaging games that are popular among women. These posts are set up to facilitate collective management and organize all members to act in unison to a certain extent, promoting community harmony and identity.

By establishing this group, the members of the "Female Gamers' Association" have created a home for female gamers. They are divided into internal and external groups according to the process of joining the group. This exclusionary approach excludes men, strengthens the group's identity through emotional ties and value recognition, and resists the pressures encountered outside the group.

4. From Words to Actions: Female Gamers' Realistic Resistance

The resistance of female gamers to the male gaze and sexism in gaming culture goes beyond social media posts; instead, these words of resistance are transformed into tangible actions to fight against gender inequality in reality.

When female players encounter offensive content in a game, they post criticism in the group to warn other female players. This can influence whether other players buy and play the game, potentially affecting the game's ratings on the platform. For example, when the game *Retirement Simulator* was released in 2022, a group of women gamers criticized it for having offensive text options for the protagonist and revealing drawings of female characters. In response to these criticisms, the producers soon issued an apology on social media platforms and removed the game's arrogant, frivolous, and vulgar language and imagery. Similarly, when Microsoft released an Xbox gamepad called "Deep Pink Controller" in February 2023, Xbox China translated the name of the controller as "fierce pink. The members of the "Female Gamers' Association" criticized the game as

sexist and demanded a change by reporting it to Microsoft. Xbox China eventually changed the name to “Romantic Pink” and corrected the previous sexist promotional strategy.

From this, it can be seen that the discussion within the female gamer community is not just a small circle of self-indulgence. The number of female gamers has reached a significant level, and their voice for change in inequality is being heard by game developers and producers. However, their calls for reform are met with resistance from other stakeholders. For instance, when the producers of the game *Retirement Simulator* listened to female players and modified the unfriendly female game content, they were boycotted and abused by a large number of male players, who gave the game a low rating on the game platform. In the face of this phenomenon, despite female players’ efforts to make up for the loss by giving the game a high score, the game’s rating on Steam was eventually reduced to 38%. Although female gamers have resisted in many ways, their efforts are still limited, and they remain a minority group in the vast gaming market.

5. Conclusion

Compared with the loss of female gamers’ voices in the gaming field, female gamers on social media have the space to express their opinions. The “Female Gamers’ Association” consists of only female gamers who form a composite group identity. Many female gamers express their negative emotions in the community after encountering inequality or discrimination in games, which further strengthens their female group identity. The emergence of the female players’ community provides a new space for women’s discourse, allowing female players to freely discuss and create a more inclusive communication atmosphere. In a female-friendly atmosphere, players can criticize male gaming hegemony and focus on female groups more broadly. Their topics range from the representation of female images, the stereotypes faced by female players, to the experiences of female game developers. This leads to a wider discussion of gender issues and a female perspective on the game industry.

However, it is undeniable that despite the progress online, men still dominate mainstream discourse in the real world and the gaming industry. The voices of female gamers in disadvantaged positions are often drowned out and ignored. The choice of “de-masculinization” in the community is a limited form of resistance against patriarchy, indicating that the power of female gamer communities is not yet sufficient to fully enter the public space. In the history of video games, women have long been absent both as players and developers. In such a context, the game industry, with a limited representation of women is likely to continue producing game content that aligns with male values, and the game industry today is still grappling with the perpetuation of patriarchal norms. Although more and more women are entering the gaming market and industry, women still face many obstacles at both the real-world and gaming levels, and there is still a long way to go for the empowerment and inclusion of female gamers.

This study explores how female gamers resist the patriarchal culture in the real and game spheres in various ways from the perspective of the resistance behavior of the gamer community, providing new ideas for the study of game culture and feminist research from an intersectional perspective. This study also has some limitations in terms of the observation target and sample size. Other researchers can enrich the number of community samples in subsequent studies and adopt a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods for further research.

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