

Girlfriend Mode pt. 2 – Shaming, Silencing, Self-Sacrifice

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents qualitative research of interviews with women who play videogames with their partners and analyses the limited affordances women have for performing their gender and femininity, against the context of the normalised acts of toxic masculinity in the new gaming public. Since hypermasculinity cleaves femininity as being ‘other’ from the gamer identity, this dichotomy between gaming culture and femininity forces women to modulate their own performances of gender identity and gaming practices in order to create refuge. Hypermasculinity in gaming has made women mask their gender, by retreating, avoiding, or downplaying their femininity, in order to play games. These coping strategies turn gaming into an act of affective labour, and also places the onus of creating safe spaces onto the victims of harassment. Silence from partners and spectators in the face of verbal abuse creates a communal sense of shaming and further isolates women when these acts of toxic masculinity are sanctioned as admissible behaviour by loved ones and onlookers. In the palpable hostility of the post-Gamergate climate, women have to balance considering leaving gaming altogether as they feel increasingly threatened and unwelcome, with their own personal investment in gaming. This paper will also examine how women attempt to create positive gaming experiences within the limited parameters given to their gender, even in the face of constant adversity and antagonism.

Women temper their identities and gaming practices in response to the affordances given to their gender, affectively transforming themselves and their environments in negotiations of social gaming and playing with their partners, and as techniques to form positive gaming experiences and refuge for themselves from toxic masculinity. Considering the impact of traditional gender roles which expect women to continuously perform affective labour, the demand for self-sacrifice leaves little room for women to access the same affordances in gaming and online activity available to their male counterparts. In order to avoid letting their partners and teammates down, women feel obligated to participate in games they would rather not play, and feel pressured to perform well instead of having fun. These pressures contaminate the experience of gaming and result in unenjoyable and unpleasant ongoing strains for women. These feelings are intensified by the inaction of partners and friends witnessing verbal abuse during moments of gameplay. Communal silence when faced with occasions of abuse,

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fosters anxieties of speaking up for oneself, as it might appear as feminised ‘complaining’ or ‘over-reaction’. One of the consequences of the hypermasculine status quo is that women are made to regulate their own safety. This applies a form self-discipline on women in which they are more likely to be self-sacrificing in order to avoid conflict. Under the imagined dichotomy of ‘gamer’ versus ‘femininity’, women are forced to sacrifice elements of their gaming practices, or else diminish their performance of femininity in their gender identity, as a means of self-defence which is culturally imposed as compulsory.

In this study, gaming was considered one among many interests, and a single facet of the interviewee’s complex lives and everyday experiences. Interviewees reported a fluctuation in gaming intensities and assortment of commitments to the practice: from a fun and intermittent leisurely pastime, to a passion-driven “lifestyle”; from a solitary hobby which was sometimes shared with their partner, to couples who would only play games together. Regardless of frequency or dedication, gaming was seen as an option of how personal and social time could be spent. Although, these options afforded to women are limited, and in many cases, stipulate the modulation of their gender, in order for women to participate in social forms of gaming, or to express elements of ‘gamer’ as part of their identity within a public domain. The construction of gender and gaming practices for women are swayed by affective powers tied to the hypermasculinity of gaming which sees femininity as ‘other’. If there is a manner of ‘Girlfriend Mode’ which exists, it is in the many modes of living – negotiating spaces and time – into which women are attuning themselves and their affective environments. While the shifting of ‘modes’ is part of the processes of becoming, under the hypermasculinity of gaming these modes are problematically being restructured in order to attenuate femininity and severely inhibit the enjoyment of gaming for women.

OPTIONAL BIO

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