

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Jennifer deWinter, Dean of Lewis College of Science and Letters at the Illinois Institute of Technology, who studies video game culture. Now, although surveys routinely find that women and girls make up about half of gamers, this is in spite of a variety of facts that disincentivize female participation. So if we could start with, what are the kind of behaviors that we're talking about when someone is playing an online game that might make women and girls less comfortable and less inclined to participate?

JD: Sure. So video game cultures online are actually quite large. So if I play Scrabble online, you actually see much more women in that that space. So often, when we talk about being disincentivized in an online environment for women, people of color, people of the global south, these groups, what typically happens is that they're verbally harassed online, that they are called horrific things, that they are in-game harassed, right? So people will target them and kill them, that they'll do lewd or sexual-looking acts to them, and that in worst-case sorts of scenarios, they'll start being cyber-stalked by these online harassers. And so as they're playing these games, they might get DMs, not only verbally sexually abusing them or whatever, but also going, "oh, I see you live at this address because I just cyber-stalked you and did a thing." And so we see like this very wide range of activities that disincentivize underrepresented groups.

AT: And there's also this self-reinforcing trend where women and girls will try to avoid harassment when they play online by using male avatars, hiding their voices, and just generally pretending to be male because they don't want to experience all the things that you've just been talking about. It appears that less women are online than actually are, which makes it less likely that other women and girls will feel comfortable in those spaces.

JD: Not only are they hiding themselves or going only onto mute, and in fact men play with female avatars all the time because to quote the creators of Tomb Raider, "if I'm going to look at the butt of someone, I'm going to make it something I want to look at," right? Like people create avatars all the time of what they want to have. So they're hiding that way, but I'll give you an example of a thing I used to do in a class that I in fact stopped doing because it ended up being traumatic for people involved. I used to teach a video game design class at the graduate level at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and typically around 18 to 20 students, maybe like one or two was female, and I used to in the unit on online safe environments have all the students go online into an online game that they played and put a female member in their life, like a sister, a friend, a girlfriend, whomever, put them on the headset, but then they get to play. So they get to control for skill, but the voice that the gamers heard was a female voice. And many gamers like to think of themselves as welcoming and not sexist, not racist, because we want to believe that we are in fact good people. And so then they put these close women in their lives online as the voice and reported just being horrified. And the day I stopped it was the day that a young male student just started crying because of like what his girlfriend ended up suffering from.

AT: Which brings us to an interesting question that I've actually discussed before in a separate episode with Angelique Joy, who's doing their PhD on digital spaces. And so we talked a lot about how can male-presenting players make the space safer for their female-presenting cohort. And the issue does seem to be largely that when someone who is believed to be a woman is being harassed, the other players aren't necessarily stepping up to defend them.

JD: Yeah, so this is a really tricky thing. So the easy thing to say is that no one else is stepping up to defend them, but it gets so tricky when you talk about online gaming cultures, because it actually starts mimicking sports cultures, right? So the ways in which locker room talk is all about razzing each other and saying derogatory things to each other, but in a way that's loving, right? And I know that that sounds bizarre to talk

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about, but if you're like,

“oh my gosh, you're so dumb, like, ha ha ha.” Everyone understands that this is a joke, because I would never say that to someone I didn't love, right? And we have all this evidence showing that this happens in sports culture all the time. And that razzing then becomes a one-uppersonship where you razz me and then I razz you and like we all have a good laugh at the end of it. Even in that sort of sports culture, there's always an uncomfortable taboo line that you can cross very easily. But because it's happening at the edge of taboo, which allows for the humor and the blowing off of steams and everything, people don't know how to say “whoa too far,” because we haven't been trained to say that. So like, if you think about that already happening in real life and how we're enculturated to do that from like high school sports or PE classes or anything like that, and then move it into games, the moment someone starts doing that, are they razzing? Are they being sexist? Are they being racist? They are, by the way. And did they go too far?

AT: So it's just that that line is very hard to define in other people's intentions and other people's relationship dynamics can be difficult for you to be certain that, oh, *that's* what you mean to say and do.

JD: Sure. Or their intention is, in fact, to be a complete, unacceptable, horrible human being, insert cuss words here, right? Like their intention is the worst version of themselves, but because we already have a culture in which we excuse that through a different razzing culture, we don't have a mechanism to call that out.

AT: I'm curious if this culture is gendered, because I also feel like you see this in the Greek system with fraternities and sororities and hazing that frankly already seems cruel to begin with. It doesn't seem like there is that “oh, we're all just having fun here,” even in the start, but it does seem like when you get these particular types of arguably insular groups, that form of bullying just often develops and is difficult to intercede, for the people who do want to intercede, but feel like they may be the only ones who have a problem with what's going on.

JD: Yeah. So I think if you think about rhetorics of humor, right? So let's take what you were talking about and set it aside for a second, like let's look at how humor works. Humor works at like really the very edge of taboo, that it's funny because like I've said something I shouldn't say, but it's not so far that I've crossed a line. And we all know when humor starts failing because then the line crosses and then everyone gets uncomfortable. So now let's go back to the question that you have on sorority/fraternity/Greek culture, right? It's that same sort of thing of like when you create in groups and out groups and sororities and Greek culture and gaming communities are all about in-groups and out-groups. You go through like this process of testing, of hazing, of joking around, right? And there's a certain kind of like jokester hazing that like we're all kind of okay with because it's always skirting the edge of taboo. And because like incrementally we move to this point, once it crosses the edge, we've all been enculturated up to that point. And so then it becomes uncomfortable, but of course that's the direction that we went. And it really takes like someone outside or something egregious to like stop it and say like no, too far, right? And then how in fact this culture created? It's created through the practice of things. So when I look at online communities, I'm like, when is it joking around, right? And then when does it go too far? When is it culture? And then when is it when is it misogyny or racism? I was talking to a friend from Australia, she goes, “in Australia, we call mates the C word. We call C words mates.”

AT: I live in Australia and I can verify as an outsider it was very jarring at first, but yes.

JD: And so this is exactly that same sort of culture that we're talking about of like that there's this friendly razzing. And then there's this moment that it goes too far. And that's what we're seeing in the game industry. And thus people will back out of it and self select in and out of it.

AT: And I think you see the same thing with, it really depends on who a word is coming from. Like if a middle-aged female diner waitress calls me honey, that's fine. If a man in a business suit calls me honey, he's getting smacked. (laughter)

JD: Sure. Sure. And like the in-groups and the out-groups and the ways that we've been enculturated to think about like what's okay and what's not okay. Yeah, no, you're absolutely right. And so one of the challenges oftentimes when we talk about online game communities right, in the research we either talk about them as all good or the danger of toxicity. But I want to talk about the all-good one really quick because you saw a lot of articles coming out during the pandemic of, online games gives people a community, it decreases loneliness, it increases community and so forth. Except for it doesn't, it created in-groups. A community is in fact a diverse set of people who don't always agree but are willing to come together around a sense of shared purpose or shared obligation to one another. Gaming communities are not functioning like that. They're around a hobby identity. And especially when you start seeing toxic behavior, toxic masculinity behavior in online games, that online gaming identity is around like this idea of "gamer," which really is very gendered, becomes gendered in the 1980s supercharged in the 1990s. And now when we say "gamer" we mean male.

AT: We have seen with the evolution of different options, so different ways for people to engage, it doesn't generally get better. And one of the things that AJ was saying when they were on the podcast was the problem with these digital spaces as safe spaces is that they were created by humans and largely by privileged white men. And so they're just replicating the same issues that we see in the real world. I would say Twitch arguably combines two of the worst arenas for the online harassment of women because you've got that combination of video gaming and social media. And last I checked there were only two women in Twitch's top 50 highest earners. And I'm going to mispronounce these, I'm sorry, I'm not a gamer. But it was Pokimane and Amaranth and Pokimane recently quit because of all the misogyny. Female Twitch streamers are regularly accused of "stealing views from hardworking men just because they have boobs." Like it's insane, the misogyny that you see on Twitch.

JD: You're absolutely correct. We saw early in games history, especially in online YouTube influencers in games. People like Nintengirl and everyone having a much more influential presence. Twitch for sure shifted that into a very masculinized space.

AT: And something else that we're getting into here is the benefits that people can derive from gaming. And Twitch and esports both give players an opportunity to monetize and actually make a career out of gaming. So women are being kept out of Twitch largely from what we just discussed. But they're also drastically underrepresented in esports. And I noticed that, going back to those overlaps, there is a lot of similarity between the issues with women in physical sports and the issues with women in esports.

JD: Sure yeah so esports is a whole new can of worms, right, because we do have high-visibility women who are driven out of esports all the time for being harassed, for being passed over for sponsorship, for being passed over for team formation, for all of these things. Your connection into physical sports is dead-on, like the idea of sports being about masculine performativity now moves into an electronic space. The electronic space has already been masculinized based upon concerted efforts in the 1970s and '80s to drive women out of computerized cultures when manufacturing left the US. So you've got like these two heavily intentionally masculinized areas intersecting. And then you put into that the additional sort of weirdness that comes with a type of nerd culture that needs to prove that they're valuable in ways that are coded differently from how they might have been valuable in like, I don't know, high school popularity contests or like the best internship in college or whatever else right? Like these are people who may not have won those awards but now have this place to have a certain type of status and recognition that is on par with that.

AT: It is interesting when we're talking about that difference in perspective, where I would imagine a fair number of the misogynistic male players are bringing that resentment, that sort of incel mindset to their misogyny whereas the "jocks," I would guess it's more a question of feeling entitled. So we've got men on opposite ends of the, shall we say, "secure in their sexual attraction" spectrum but the behaviors they're displaying are actually quite similar from the perspective of the women they're harassing.

JD: Yeah, that's a super interesting question because I also wonder how much of this has to do with the performativity of identity, right? So jocks get to perform a type of misogyny, because the performance of their identity is hyper-masculine - how do you prove that you're hyper-masculine? Because you're not feminine, like you're defined against something. Similar in these types of spaces, how do you prove that you're hyper-masculine and and high-performing in mastery and fast blah blah blah and so virile, right? You're defined by not being feminine. And so once you have that, then of course toxic masculinity is going to follow even if outside of that identity you in fact have a lovely relationship with your mother and sisters right? In fact, the number of people who get called out for toxic masculinity and then their greater networks are like, "I've never seen that before, he was always so nice to me" speaks more to identity and how certain types of identities are formed around a type of masculinity than other identities that we then display to the world.

AT: I think we're also getting into the question of accountability, because with online games if you're hiding behind a username and an avatar then it's a lot easier to not be held accountable. Like if you go and say awful things, the things that these men would say to women online anonymously - if they went and said that to a friend, a relative, someone at work, there would be serious consequences, one would hope. But there is definitely that removal, it feels like you're not there so it's not real.

JD: For sure there's the removal. I've had multiple conversations - again I've been working in game development and game design for about 20 years now, both as a designer and as a teacher. And the number of times that we've caught students online being really their worst self, either to other students in a class but also because we're paying attention to online communities. And we bring them in and they're like, "but it's not the real life" and of course it's the real life. Just because it's mediated by technology, and yet they understand that this is not real in how they formed it in their brain. And so I always just remember, there's a famous article called *A Rape in Cyberspace* by Dibbell and it's actually talking about the era of MOOs and Mooks, like this horrific sort of psychological distress that happened during a rape-like activity happening in a MOO or Mook. So it's all digital, it's all anonymized and and it has horrific consequences because in fact violence doesn't have to be physical. It has to be to the human and we are human selves in mediated online spaces.

AT: Well this makes me wonder if, because everybody's talking about AI right now, with the rise of AI digital girlfriend - so they're not chatbots they're actually meant to simulate (JD: Oh, I know) yeah you know (laughter). But they're meant to simulate a real human woman, but they're also, I assume, designed to tell men what they want to hear because the creators want men to keep using those services and I am really worried about how that is going to increase behaviors like this, because presumably the men who are using that service are the kind of men that real women don't want to date.

JD: Or maybe not. Okay so this was super interesting. So I'm finishing up a project right now about people who are marrying Hatsune Miku in real life. I don't know how much you followed this but like there's this movement of people literally having \$50,000 wedding ceremonies with Hatsune Miku because why not I guess, but when you interview these people, they seem like completely normal people. Like they're principals of high schools, they're workers in marketing firms and they look like normal human beings right? They don't look like, in a way that people are like "oh no one would ever date them because they look trashy" or whatever. They look like

middle-class, well-tended human beings.

AT: I do want to clarify when I said “men that women wouldn't want to date” I mean in the context that for someone to get to that point, I meant psychologically not like -

JD: No, I'm getting there as well! (AT: Right.) So yeah, no, I'm covering the whole realm right, because like you look at them and they look normal. You talk to them and they sound normal, they have meaningful relationships with the people in their lives. They have friend groups, they have family groups, they have work groups and the relationships are healthy. And yet their romantic interest is into Hatsune Mikus and it's so fascinating reading about it because in some ways, like it's dismissible of all like “oh culture has gone too far, no.” But in some ways you're actually seeing the logic of games and gamification right? So when we talk about games and gamification, we're always talking about how games teach us so much, like it's important for everyone to have access to games and video games and everything because in fact it's teaching us empathy and it's teaching us skills and it's teaching us culture and it's teaching us all this stuff right? And we see that logic in games for training, we see it that logic in games for relationships. If you even pick up the book *The Rules*, it's about gamifying dating, like you meet someone and you can't call them for three days right? Like it's a whole series of rules that functionally read like a rule set for a game. And so you're coming out of this, so of course if we allow games and gamification to teach us everything from how to kill people with a drone to how to date someone for the first time, why wouldn't games then be the natural conclusion to romantic relationships? Because we've developed an entire society that allows it to be the stand-in for so much of interpersonal and intercultural relationship-building, training, teaching, empathy-building, romance, blah blah blah and now marriage, right? So then we have these virtual girlfriends and of course they love these virtual girlfriends because they're getting what they need at that moment, they're getting sympathy and empathy and someone telling them that they're fine and someone to turn on the lights when they get home. Like reading these accounts of these people is fascinating. But they're also getting these men who are reporting it are like, “I don't have time for a relationship. I have all these obligations and if I try to get into a relationship, I would let someone down, and so this is this is a way for me to get like emotional support without letting anyone down.” So in fact it's so much weirder when you think about these online relationship things. And it's not unique to men, women are playing in this space as well.

AT: I guess I'm just wondering about the ethics of what these digital girlfriends tell their users in terms of, because we see human women who do this as well (JD: Sure.) where they just are happy to smile and nod to any misogyny their partner lets loose upon them because they are just that deeply in need of having that relationship - for whatever reason, we're not here to get into that. (JD: Sure.) But my concern is that if these digital girlfriends are specifically designed to just keep the user using them and paying for that service, that they're going to have someone that they think of as almost a real woman telling them that everything they're doing and saying is totally fine and reinforcing those unhealthy behaviors.

JD: Sure so I'm gonna ask a provocative question and I know the answer beforehand and the answer is that it is different but what's different from that than dating on an app like Sugar Daddy? So I'm a rich dude who pays on an app to go on a date with a real human woman and she's taking the money with the understanding that she's now got a sugar daddy and that she has certain subservient obligations into that relationship. She goes into it knowing it, this isn't human trafficking this is often like educated, like the number of graduate students on Sugar Daddy is kind of shocking.

AT: It's not though to me, in the sense that that is a viable way for people who need money to make money when they also have significant time commitments. But I would say from my perspective the two big differences there are consent, so we have an actual human person who is an adult who has agreed to this arrangement.

And I would also assume that the price point is higher, which means that it's less commonly available, so any negative impacts would be lower overall because of that higher price point in terms of how many men would be impacted.

JD: Sure, maybe. (AT: I would guess, I do not know.) I also think that it's different. I didn't have the answer of how it's different. Yes it's different but we have to actually start asking these questions because once we have like these digital assistants, it why is it worse to have a digital girlfriend than a digital assistant to manage my calendar?

AT: It's interesting that you mentioned digital assistants, which are pretty much always female voices as well. (JD: Gendered female, yeah.) When we're getting into non-real women in games, so when we're talking about the female avatars that are represented that are often, there's far fewer of them or they're hyper-sexualized or you've got video game design that assumes that degree of misogyny. So, girls might want to play Grand Theft Auto but Grand Theft Auto V as an example had an option to pay a female sex worker to perform a menu of sex acts on the male avatar and then encourages the player to kill her to get his money back. (JD: Ah, hilarious.) It just seems excessive.

JD: Yeah, I agree. It's part of it's part of the pornography of criminal violence right? It's that Scarface sort of genre of which masculinity is defined. How is it defined? It's defined by criminality, it's defined by not being feminine. Like the moment that you're called the p-word - look at me self-policing my language right? Like the moment that you're called anything that is around female genitalia, like that's the worst thing that you could say to someone in that genre. So of course we're murdering the lady folk.

AT: But even ones that aren't specifically around criminality, a lot of times you will see the female characters running around in basically no clothing while the men are clothed.

JD: Sure, bikini armor. I like bikini armor the most. I'm all like "yes, my bikini is stopping the spear from my midriff." Yes absolutely. This goes back to that point I made earlier, the creators of Tomb Raider originally said that they they designed Lara Croft, who's was considered like the feminist icon blah blah blah right? Designed Lara Croft because if they had to look at the butt of a character running around it was going to be a female butt. And so why is it super tight, big-buttred female character with midriff showing? It is because men wanted to look at that and that is one of our earlier powerful female avatars. And yet women saw power in that as well, so designed from a place in misogyny, consumed in the complexity of culture.

AT: It is fascinating when we're talking about the male gaze and how it applies to really all forms of media because I was watching something the other day that was talking about how the Transformers series, Michael Bay is not just being demeaning towards women in the way that he's representing women in them. He's also being demeaning towards the men in his audience because when you look at like Shia LaBeouf's character and other male characters, I think she was only looking at the first couple films but I don't watch them so I can't speak to that. But when you look at Shia LaBeouf's character, he *sucks* (JD: Sure.) and he's the guy that they're meant to be identifying with. So you're seeing, Michael Bay doesn't think much of his male fans either and I think you see that in video game design as well, because it seems like you've got, I'm going to generalize here but the Silicon Valley tech bros saying "this is what we think teen boys, and we think that even the adult men think like teen boys, but this is what we think they want." And so they're underestimating the male players largely as well.

JD: Sure so there's an Australian academic, Potanin, writes this really good article called Forces at Play and in that, they talk about I Design methodology, like the letter I as in me, myself, and I. And that the danger of that is

that we have an entire industry that is built around the idea that if I build the game that I want to play, everyone else will want to play it as well. But if the industry is in fact over-representing white men, which it is, then we get a whole bunch of games that are white men. Now the last time I looked at the average age of attrition from the industry, when people like leave what we understand to be the video game industry and go into different or similar industries, like they go into app design or they go into project management. They just go into something else and use the skills that they got out of the video game industry. It's 33 years old. So you get white men who top out at 33 years old designing the games that they want to play. So you don't get complicated life experience "I've had a daughter and I've discovered feminism" white men. You get white men who are designing these games in their 20s and 30s like fulfilling these teenage dreams artistic desires and then leaving before a type of lifetime maturity kicks in. So I don't even think that it said they're underestimating their audience, they're designing for themselves as the audience and then it just continues to attract that audience. And then it becomes an echo chamber so there's nothing pushing on it to become something different.

AT: And it does seem like they're not actually self-aware enough to instead of saying "well we're designing for the gamers and these are the gamers" and they don't realize that they are creating the demographic by virtue of what they're putting out.

JD: Correct and the entire idea of gamers, like that's such a new concept because if you actually look at the early video game industry, it was designed around like gender-balanced families. It doesn't become like masculinized gamers, like it starts under Atari of course, that there's this sort of rock and roll ethos that's happening among like the Nolan Bushnell set and everything. But when Nintendo enters the scene, you start seeing much more balanced understanding of what a gamer is. In fact, tracking with the numbers, that doesn't change really until the Sega wars happen, the console wars around Sega and Sega leans into hyper masculinizing the console and now we start seeing what a gamer is and it's coming out of console wars.

AT: Sorry, when you said hyper-masculinizing the console I was picturing a joystick.

JD: Sure, as one should. (laughter)

AT: Now apart from not wanting to just be harassed while you're trying to play a game which is meant to be enjoyable and relaxing and fun, as you mentioned earlier there is a real physical danger to online harassment as we saw in Gamergate.

JD: So in 2014 Zoe Quinn releases this game Depression Quest. It's early in the empathy game movement using the Twine engine. It's right at the front end of that type of movement in the industry. Zoe Quinn herself was dealing with depression, she had broken up from a boyfriend. She creates this game, releases it, it gets critical acclaim. It's a solid game at this moment that the industry understands what empathy games are. But on the release of this game, her ex-partner writes this diatribe because he's struggling in the game industry as well and is just not getting the traction that Zoe Quinn is getting at that moment in time, for obvious reasons. And writes this diatribe about how she is only getting good press coverage because she's sleeping with the journalist and that starts this "truth in journalism" campaign of that video games needs truth in journalism and that women shouldn't be able to sleep their way into recognition and awards because that's what we all do. And then that morphs into Gamergate, borrowing from like the Watergate type of language of like "there's a conspiracy here and the conspiracy is against the gamer and it's the lady folk that have all the power" - because that's what my salary says. And so then it starts this online harassment campaign that is fueled mostly on Twitter. It goes into other into other online social media that snowballs off of this original post and then starts reacting to other women that are prominent in the industry at that moment in time as well. And so at this

moment it ostensibly is about ethics in games journalism and then it becomes anti-all women in the gaming industry. So then what starts happening is that this amorphous mass of humans organizes under the hashtag Gamergate and identifies individual women in the gaming industry with targeted harassment. And the targeted harassment of course is digital, like that they're harassing them in DMs, in their Twitter feeds and whatever. But it's also moving very quickly as we watch the progression of this, it's moving very quickly into phone calls into their workplaces, phone calls into their housing. It begins taking photos of people in front of their office spaces with knives going "I know where you work" or people getting out of their cars and going, "I know where you live." It will eventually morph into swatting and then that amorphousness of Gamergate then becomes this powerful tool in the US and Canada at least that then becomes an anti-liberal media news outlet which eventually will become Breitbart. So the trajectory of Gamergate is insane.

AT: And something that's interesting to note is that even before Quinn's ex wrote his diatribe, Quinn was getting rape and death threats including mailed to their home. And then we've got these other women being pulled into it, you've got media critic Anita Sarkeesian and developer Brianna Wu and we're seeing the actual impact. So like Sarkeesian had to cancel a speaking engagement because multiple threats had been made. Wu's studio pulled out of an expo over security concerns and Quinn has said, "I used to go to game events and feel like I was going home. Now it's just like are any of the people I'm currently in the room with ones that said they wanted to beat me to death."

JD: What Brianna and Quinn and Sarkeesian are all talking about proceed Gamergate and it's preceded it for all of us. Like I haven't gone to GDC in 20 years because in my 20s when I went someone just wrapped their arm around me and grab my breasts and I'm like why would I do this thing, right? I don't need to be part of that part of our community. Anita Sarkeesian is super interesting because she wanted to go into a public feminism persona on YouTube and she fundraises for a series of YouTube videos to talk about feminism and gaming. Someone creates the Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian game where people literally logged on and punched her face and you could watch her face just deteriorate with like black eyes and bloody noses and bruises. This is pre-Gamergate, not by much like it's intensifying a lot at that moment. And so when Gamergate happens and when I talk about like those trolls organizing, like Sarkeesian was meant to give a talk at University of Utah and a bomb threat was called in prior to her arriving. And this is why she cancels it, so she doesn't cancel it because people are like "I hate you, I'm gonna kill you" although we've all received those messages if you've been in the gaming industry. It wasn't that, it was like literal bomb threats where police were brought in or SWAT teams were brought in. So it wasn't psychological damage, it was the real threat of physical damage.

AT: But we're also going back to the monetization aspect and how this is impacting women's ability to make a living. Not being able to give a talk and being prevented from going to big events because it's just such an unhealthy and unsafe environment makes it harder for women to do business and to have their careers, even when it's not directly gaming as a player.

JD: Absolutely, like in every way they're figuring out how to exclude women from these spaces. So if you think about women as workers in these spaces, the number of women programmers actually tracks with the national average for CS (computer science) as a whole which is only like 13%. The larger number of women are in art, that's around 40%. Or they're over in marketing and legal. So they're not at the place of creative design. They're not in sound design, they're not in engine design. They're not in like those those main areas they're in, "make it pretty" or "sell it." That's where they're relegated. And so if they're going to be in these other spaces they're either hyper-sexualized by their people or they're driven out and so we've got a number of women in the games industry who talk about like, it's very bizarre when I walk into a meeting room and people are all like "whoo-hoo I like your jacket, it makes you a boobs look big!" These are things that women report. There was prior to Gamergate a really famous Twitter hashtag called one reason why and it stemmed from a very simple

question that the gentleman asked from the gaming industry of, why aren't there more women game developers in the industry. And it was such a passing question by this person and the outpouring of stories under this hashtag, one reason why are appalling to look at. And then if we think that it's bad for women and I really want to make sure like people understand, it's bad for women. I have a folder on my desktop called "rape and death threats" that I just put stuff in there in case like I need to file a complaint.

AT: So as we're talking about the issues around women's employment in video games we have to mention the Blizzard situation, so could you tell us about that for anyone who's not familiar?

JD: I'm sorry, so there's so many Blizzard situations so which one are you talking about? I wish I was joking about that but...

AT: I suppose if you want to give us an overview of the problems that we keep seeing at Blizzard.

JD: Sure, so it's not unique to Blizzard, like we get this out of Rockstar, we get this out of EA, so historical problems. And I'm sure that this is going to hit one of the ones that you're thinking about, is twofold. One is that these industries are overrepresented by men and so all of these industries have actually had pushback by family members. There was I think 10 years ago a series coming out of Rockstar, EA and Blizzard where it was I think the most famous version was Rockstar Wives Unite, where a bunch of women are like, "stop doing crunch time with our men! Our children would like to see their fathers." So that happens. Right about the same time that those things were happening we were also seeing the systematic push of women out of those fields. So because crunch time was such a part of the culture, people were having to sleep in the offices. We were finding evidence of rapey culture happening but also like men parading through the cubicles naked and whooping it up around their women colleagues because they were blowing off steam at 2 a.m because everyone was loopy. So of course women are going to be leaving the industry.

AT: And so just to clarify for anyone who's not familiar because I think you also have heard about this in animation roles as well (JD: Oh yeah.) but crunch time is, "we have to get the game out by the deadline and we're running out of time" and so everybody is working basically non-stop. And it's a super high-pressure super unhealthy situation that as you said is probably exacerbating whatever was already there. But what was already there was also problematic.

JD: Right so what was already there was already problematic and now we have like sleep-deprived, bonkers situation now like 15% female, 85% male and now we're gonna like look like a dormitory on drugs. And this is what crunch time kept on looking like and so we started getting these reports 10 or 15 years ago and we've just seen it progress each year in each of these industries that they're going to do something to clean it up and then something horrific happens again. And so when I asked which Blizzard, like there's so many of these, so I'm not sure how far back in the past you're looking right now but I can give you stories of rape. I can give you stories of suicide. I can give you stories of being hounded out. I can give you stories of this sort of naked frat house crazy land. I can give you all these weird stories because they're all talked about and they all come in about three- to five-year cycles out of each one of these places

AT: So it's not so much a Blizzard as it is a shitstorm.

JD: Exactly. So yes, I wish I knew exactly which one you were talking about because I'm all like, "oh yes in 2023 this sort of thing happened." No, it's so incessant that if I see it I'm all like, "yep."

AT: "There's another one." Well specifically, I'm thinking of there, was a female high-level executive who, I think

she was trying to address the issues and basically realized she couldn't and so she left and started her own company.

JD: So and this happened in EA as well. A number of years ago EA hired a female high-level executive into HR. The female executive, I think her name was Jen or something, was all like "it's not that bad we're gonna do all these things" and then she eventually gets hounded out. We see the same sort of thing happening in Blizzard where they can't make the cultural change because culture resists change. And so then they leave and they start their own company but then they're vilified as soon as they leave and start their own company because they're the bad guy. And so yes I know exactly which one you're talking about now, because she tried to do all these positive things, all the way from increasing representation in games, increasing diversity on the teams, increasing diversity training in the teams and at every moment hit resistance.

AT: I'm seeing two factors that we've talked about. So it's a combination of the spoilsport and the fact that you mentioned that 33 is the age by which basically they're all gone and so you've got that cultural immaturity.

JD: Yes, you've got this cultural immaturity like this frat house and then you have a mother figure come in and wag her finger at you. And no one likes a mom, my children don't like me, right? Like no one wants someone to come in and say, "please, for the love of god, grow up and use your fork correctly" And so this is functionally what's happening and they're. "she doesn't understand, we're tight, we know what it is, we understand games," blah blah blah. Everything's going to resist that type of character and in fact if we go back five or six years ago there's this moment where like the senior executives are in fact trying to figure out how to get other female senior executives out because they're dampening the creativity of the teams. Because they're saying like "you can't put female genitalia barely covered by shorts on something." So in every way the culture self-perpetuates and it's not a case of, like if I can't be gushing blood of misogyny and then someone come around with like a little bandaid and they're like "ha-ha feminism!" That's not how triage works in this sort of thing. And that's in fact what we're constantly seeing is that we have these moments in the game industry of embarrassment in the public forum around toxic masculinity, whether it be toxic masculinity of game creators, of game producers, of game players, of game Twitch streamers, like any of these things. And they're like, "you know what's going to fix this? Token female. She'll come in and she'll learn us good and then we'll be better." And it never fixes it. In fact it it creates a more vilified female villain in this moment. So of course that's gonna happen.

AT: Are you familiar with the term glass cliff? (JD: Oh yes.) So for anyone who's not, it's analogous to the glass ceiling but the idea is that you put a woman in a position where she is almost certainly going to fail and there's a lot of other interesting aspects of it but we're not gonna get fully into this. But it does sound like that's what's going on here.

JD: And it's worse for people of color to be sure, like whatever the lady folks are experiencing, anyone of non-white skin tone, it's just so much worse for them. So if I am the band-aid patch of the of the gushing blood misogyny wound like already my leg has been amputated without any treatment around racism and then we're gonna bring in one black speaker a year to deal with that problem. Like we don't even hire for that, we bring in a consultant or we bring in this other thing and it's not systemic at all

AT: You mentioned something that I wanted to get a bit more into which is the creativity and the claims that not being assholes stifles creativity which is part of this larger myth around the male creative genius and "nobody can do what he does." And the simple fact is that studies have shown that more diverse teams are more creative.

JD: Yep, yep. I think I just strained my eye from the eye roll that I just gave you. Yes, absolutely right, all the studies show that more diverse teams lead to more creativity that it leads to more tried and true with the twist because we're telling really different stories that articulate different backgrounds. That in fact we bring more diverse perspectives both in the design into but also in the expression, which in fact increases the demographics. So if this was making economic sense, we would diversify the games industry. Nothing makes economic sense in the games industry. Culture's never about logical systems. We always say it is, like "oh if the money was there, we would do the thing." That's absolutely not true. The money is there and we're choosing not to do the thing because we believe we - like I'm using that as a very loose "we" right now - we believe that "my artistic auteurship creative vision needs to get out there as an artiste" and that other people will have their worldview changed by that. But that's not how any media, even painters don't work in isolation like that. And so yes I agree with you completely - diverse teams lead to more creativity. We have so much evidence to show this and then we still opt not to do it in the US context I'm going to speak firmly from the US context I'm sure other contexts also do not do this thing.

AT: Well and of course it's not just a question of women and people of color we're also talking about really any forms of marginalization, of intersectionality.

JD: If it's bad for women it is worse for transgendered, non-gender binary, gender fluid people. So much worse for them and there's there's much more evidence about that as well.

AT: Well and when we were talking about masculine equals "not feminine" that also made me think that there's probably homophobia aspects playing into that as well, that anti-feminine also translates to anti-queer not just on the gender front but also the sexuality front?

JD: Sure because queer is always feminized right? I mean that's the problem is that to be queer is to be feminized you're not the dominant heteronormative masculine so everything else has to fit under a different category. And it doesn't matter if you're on the non-dominant masculine hetero side and you're like "actually this is really complicated, like it's not the same thing." "No it's this bucket or this bucket" in their brain.

AT: So it's not masculine for the sake of masculine it is masculine equals dominant.

JD: If you think about the deep structure of things, like if we have like male versus female. When we think about the word "male" what do we think about? We think about powerful, earner, father, manager. We have all this deep structure - athletic, muscles. We can just keep on going and think about all the words that we think about with male versus if you think about female - caretaker, romance, home, children, motherhood, right? And all of that. So if this is our two ways of thinking about male versus female and remembering that anything that doesn't fit under "male," in their brain it fits over on the other side. It doesn't matter if the women don't think it's the same thing. If that's the deep structure you can see why if it's not this then it's bad and it risks pulling me over into this other side.

AT: Well I think it largely is that need for power and control that they likely don't have, many of them, in their own lives and there was actually a study that found that the harassment of women is actually correlated to being less skilled at the game. So the the better you are at playing, the less likely you are to be the one harassing women. (JD: Right.) And so I think we're getting into that whole power and control, like "I want to be in control in this space because I'm not necessarily in control in my real life and you're messing with that so I must attack."

JD: Yeah like 10 years ago there was like a series of articles coming out about bullying. So it wasn't talking

about the gaming industry, it was talking about like bullying in high schools or whatever. And it was talking about how everyone bullies because everyone's jockeying for a position. So even if you're at the bottom and you've been historically the most disadvantaged, you'll figure out someone to bully because like you're always trying to go slightly up unless. And they found that the only exception to this was the top one to three people in a high school, because they're already at the top so they get to be magnanimous and sweet. And in fact when I present this research to my students, they're always all like "oh yeah, the most popular girl in our school was super nice, everyone loved her" because she was already at the top, he was already at the top. So what did they have to prove? And then everything below that was all about bullying culture. And then at the same time there was this other article, it was super interesting, where they asked in elementary school, rank the most powerful person to the least powerful person in the classroom. And I think it was like fourth grade or fifth grade, something like that, and it was a classroom of like 25 students. And every student could name the exact order of popularity or however they were ranking it, and the only place that they disagreed on was like the middle five students. And there was a little bit of movement right there but everyone else, they knew exactly where they were on the pecking order. So if we know that we're doing this everywhere, of course we're doing it in a video game in an online space.

AT: It's funny to think about again these self-reinforcing cycles that we see where, "oh everyone loves her because she's so sweet, everyone loves him because he's so cool and such a great guy and so confident." And it is that question of chicken and egg where, are they at the top of the pecking order because they've always been that way and it just happened naturally and they're allowed to continue being that way or did they get to the top and then that changed their...

JD: Right, did they "mean girls" their way to the top and then sweeten up? I don't know the answer to that, like the research didn't show that. But they were just finding that that was consistent - the people least likely to bully were already at the top.

AT: So now that we know that the guys harassing women are losers in more ways than one, that does then come back to this question of if these are not the best players if these are not the ones at the top, if these are not the powerful ones, then it comes back to that question of, why is it hard for people to stand up to the?m Because from that context you would think it would make it easier, but we know that because of what we were talking about earlier with the group dynamics and when does good natured razzing become bullying and harassment and it's that sort of slow boil, normalizing until things get completely out of hand.

JD: Sure, so how much of it is that I'm worried that they're going to go after me next? "Dude, too far!" and now you're going to go after me and so I risk putting myself out of the community to call it out. How much of it is, "you said the same thing an hour ago," ignoring whatever context or maybe I did do the exact same thing an hour ago. How much of it is self-preservation? How much of it is conflict avoidance? A lot of people don't like conflict and the moment you call someone out is the moment that this can come back and bite you. And how much of it is that we just been trained, if you look the other way it will die down, of which many people have been given that feedback in K-12 education at the very least. And I don't even think like it's a boys will be boys, I've never heard that as an excuse in this space, only ever been all like "oh that's what you just say in that space." It's not good. I think what you're getting to is all the critiques of locker room talk. If you normalize it in the locker room, it's gonna spill over because that's how ideology works but I think that that's why we can't call it out easily.

AT: I think we're also getting into going back to that question of accountability because part of the reasoning of locker room talk is that there are no responsible adults or if there are, they're the kind who are permissive about that kind of behavior. And similarly with games, a lot of people even if there are tools in place to report

“this person is being a bully” (JD: yep) that takes time, it takes you out of the game and it can also just be exhausting like if you're trying to keep up with it. And that's part of the problem with the deluge, like when you were saying “oh yeah we've all gotten rape and death threats” like it's normal which it shouldn't be but it is and that's awful. But the sheer amount of time that people have to spend like even obviously not just in gaming but how much time does somebody have to spend blocking people on Twitter or clearing out their DMs of all of these awful messages and it's just exhausting.

JD: And also like once you start thinking about stopping a game or reporting on something, you become the spoilsport and the spoilsport is the worst human to be in any game because no one likes you at that point. Even if they agreed with you, you spoiled the game.

AT: And so they're not acknowledging that the game was already spoiled for you (JD: Right.) by the bully. You're being “too sensitive.”

JD: Right. you spoiled the game for everyone else. You're the spoilsport.

AT: And so we're getting back into that in-group which I was also just thinking clique, like I feel like those are two very similar concepts of that particular set of people. (JD: Yep.) But it's taken it from, “well you were the only one having a bad time so now you've ruined it for the rest of us, therefore you are the true villain.”

JD: Yeah, because like once I once I pull out of that game and I'm all like “you did the wrong thing” and if a fight starts between us - spoilsport. Now everyone's uncomfortable, not just me, everyone's uncomfortable. If I pull out of the game to report it, then my best friend calls me up and he's like “oh we don't have a tank now, like you spoiled the game. We have to go find another tank.” That's spoiled it. The spoilsport is the most vilified member of any gaming community.

AT: But it's not just gaming it also feels like any any situation where you have like the tattletale (JD: Right.) or back to the sports metaphors, if we're talking about someone has reported hazing that's dangerous and the whole team got suspended, “well now we're not going to go to the championships and it's *your* fault” and that you're following the victim mentality.

JD: It's your fault. Yeah, you reported our Greek thing and now we're not allowed to do rush - spoilsport. You've ruined it for everyone. We spend so much time talking about online toxic gamer culture. We don't actually talk about what the solutions are to.

AT: There are solutions?!?

JD: Right, well there should be solutions and the solutions shouldn't just be like ,I report to Xbox Live some douchebag who says horrible things to me. But that there are ways in which we can actually function like a culture that we do in other places, so that if people step over the line in our workplaces we have mechanisms by which we're trained to talk to each other and to report each other. At school we have mechanisms in which we're trained to talk to each other and report each other, and we also have whisper networks. And so in a lot of ways I don't mind rehashing the toxicity of of gaming culture because for sure we need to keep on talking about it in order for us to understand that it's important. But I think we need to start moving as an industry and as a culture into saying, “yes we recognize that this thing is happening. What are the solutions to that, that is not just putting it on the person being abused or the person who's witnessing abuse, which is also a type of abuse to call it out?” That there has to be other ways in which we can start imagining solutions to this. I mean sports has been figuring this out. One of the ways in which sports had to figure it out in the US at least was by Title IX

in the 1970s where all of a sudden you had to have equal opportunities in sports for men and women. We don't have that in esports in the US, there's no Title IX dictating it. So there's no equal opportunity even embedded in federally funded activities. Another thing that we've been thinking about collectively is how do you moderate and mediate online classroom spaces, which Discord is slowly becoming an online classroom space. I want to make sure people understand, we're actually figuring that out. So if we can figure it out in this space, why can't we figure it out in this other space? And so that's the next phase of this challenge

AT: I would say well I would imagine the big barrier there is that there are still people who are trying to pretend it's not a problem. (JD: Sure.) So as we were talking about, the people making the games are trying to act like this isn't an incredibly unhealthy situation (JD: Right.) And so it kind of seems like we have to get to that point of agreeing "this is a problem that needs to be fixed" before we can fix it and there is so much resistance.

JD: Well and you have to witness it, right? So that goes back to that point I made very early in this conversation, where I was making students put female friends, family members, partners online, is because historically they had played in all-male spaces. So they had never witnessed it and so hashtag not all men but also hashtag not all men because women are absent in those spaces. So they haven't had to bear witness and so they haven't had to be uncomfortable. And then I joke about it but, I also don't joke about it because I actually don't care how people come to feminism, just that they do Like that way in which men are like complete "mrrmr" for like most of their life and then they have a daughter and they're like "ahhhh, feminism!" But I'm like yes welcome, we'll welcome you over right? I think that that also has to happen in game spaces sometimes, that you have to you have to have an emotional attachment to someone who's now being a victim of a thing to be compelled to transform. And so if in fact women are opting out of these spaces or being driven out of these spaces, we are not providing these sort of transformational - and it's not our responsibility to do it right - but that there's no opportunity for people to have an emotional transformative moment because they don't care about the thing until it's personal.

AT: I think you've brought up a really interesting point here about discomfort because I feel like that's actually what we're getting into a lot of things, like a lot of that misogyny I think comes out of discomfort in their own situation, their own life, their own skill levels. And so they are transferring that discomfort to others - if I can make you feel bad then maybe I'll feel better. And it's also the issue with men not wanting to think about why are there no women in this gaming space? Not wanting to discomfort themselves by calling it out. When someone does make them uncomfortable by saying "I'm leaving because I'm being harassed." As you said that makes them uncomfortable and their response is to transfer that discomfort back onto the victim. So I think what I'm saying here is grow up and get over the discomfort.

JD: Sure I'm with you, yep, and now you're the mom wagging your finger in a space. It's great, I love being in that position. I love it.

AT: I mean the thing that gets me about men who complain about women nagging is that they don't seem to realize we don't want to nag. I shouldn't have to do this. I shouldn't have to spend my energy wagging my finger. It's exhausting, my finger is tired. I sprained it from wagging it so hard, guys.

JD: Did you ever read the the short story by Ursula Le Guin, Those Who Walk Away from Omelas? (AT: No.) I actually really recommend this short story. So in the short story, Le Guin imagines like this perfect utopian society like everyone's happy, they're doing their things. But eventually in the short story in order to understand where your happiness comes from, they take you into like this underground cavern and there's this child that they're beating, that they're abusing, that's locked away from light that's starved, that's being abused. And so the entire utopic society is built on the abuse of this one individual and the title of it is, Those Who Walk Away

from Omelas, and a paragraph of the thing right at the end, like those who witness this child and are like “uh-uh” but the majority of the people actually go back into this utopic society that they now know is built on the abuse of this individual. And I think what you are talking about constantly is that we have this utopic masculine space built on the abuse of the feminine.

AT: As someone who is not a gamer, I would like to hope that things have gotten better, that there are safer spaces and different options (JD: Sure.) Please give us a reason to hope!

JD: Sure I mean we're talking about a fairly a fairly small subset in the genre of games, right? Like if you think about books - we have many genres of books and there's misogynistic ridiculous books, I don't know by Hemingway, that men enjoy reading. And then there are books that predominantly women enjoy reading, like I don't know, Twilight I hear? So if you think of these two extremes, we've already got ways and other media that we do this. The gaming world is so diverse and so interesting that in fact there are many communities and some of those communities are very welcoming online and some of them are like weird in the ways that we've talked about around toxic masculinity. But at the same time, I think you said it earlier, hashtag not all men. Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu, Zoe Quinn, what Gamergate gave us is like a Batman-level spotlight on this thing that women have been talking about for years. And we've already seen and we've already seen giant improvements in the working conditions for women, in the online harassment reporting mechanisms for women, but also in the diversification of the types of games that people can play. And so that more and more we're seeing games that serve different types of community engagement, different ways that communities can form or individual solo play can form across multiple areas. So I stay in games against this uphill climb because movies had this uphill climb, like the casting couch existed at a time in order for women to succeed in Hollywood and that is now vilified and terrible and in fact we see it's still a problematic and misogynistic and racist thing, but not as bad and it's still getting better. And we're seeing that happen in all these different media and we have to continue to fight for it, that right, because games make culture and we have the right to make and consume our own culture.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.