jamk

(Why) Girls don't play videogames.

Experiences of Finnish female competitive Overwatch players

Peetu Luiro

Bachelor's thesis
11/2023
Degree Programme in International Business

jamk | Jyväskylän ammattikorkeakoulu
University of Applied Sciences

Luiro, Peetu

(Why) girls don't play videogames. Experiences of Finnish female competitive Overwatch players

Abstract

Overwatch is a first person shooter game developed by Activision Blizzard. It has often stated that community and environment in gaming is toxic and abusive towards female gamers and they are often lost when moving from normal competitive gaming to tournament gaming. Task was to find reasons for this and to collect experiences of Finnish female competitive Overwatch players. For that there was four individual interviews and supporting literature. Interviews and literature were analyzed thematically and looked through intergroup contact theory and women's empowerment framework (Longwe framework). It was found that experiences of respondents were largely different to literature. Respondents mostly felt that environment in game was safe and that it has gone to better during the years. Their absence from higher tiers of esports were due conflicting timing and other hobbies. Toxicity was not seen as an issue in larger scale but more as singular mishaps.

Overwatch on ensimmäisen persoonan ampumapeli, jonka on kehittänyt Activision Blizzard. Usein on väitetty, että pelaajayhteisö ja -ympäristö ovat myrkyllisiä ja naispelaajiin kohdistuu asiatonta kohtelua. Naispelaajien on nähty usein katoavan siirryttäessä normaalista kilpapelaamisesta turnauspelaamiseen. Tavoitteena oli selvittää näiden asioiden syitä ja kerätä suomalaisten naispuolisten kilpailullista Overwatchia pelaavien pelaajien kokemuksia. Tähän tarkoitukseen tehtiin neljä yksilöhaastattelua ja käytettiin tukevaa kirjallisuutta. Haastattelut ja kirjallisuus analysoitiin temaattisesti ja tarkasteltiin ryhmien välisen kontaktin teorian ja naisten voimaantumisen viitekehyksen (Longwe-viitekehys) näkökulmasta. Havaittiin, että vastaajien kokemukset olivat suurelta osin erilaiset verrattuna kirjallisuuteen. Vastaajat kokivat pääosin peliympäristön olevan turvallinen ja sen parantuneen vuosien varrella. Vastaajien poissaolo elektronisen urheilun korkeammalta tasolta johtui aikataulusyistä ja muista harrastuksista. Myrkyllisyyttä ei nähty suurena ongelmana laajemmassa mittakaavassa, vaan pikemminkin yksittäisinä tapahtumina.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

gender studies, Overwatch, electronic sports, women´s studies, online games, women, game research, social interaction, gender, empowerment, human relations

Miscellaneous (Confidential information)

Contents

1   Introduction

Overwatch is a team-based shooter game developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment in May 2016. It was updated to Overwatch 2 in October 2022. This game is a subtype of the first-person shooter genre, or FPS, where the world is seen and interacted with from the first-person point of view. Specifically, Overwatch is considered a hero shooter game, since every single character, or hero, has their own distinctive set of weapons, abilities, and skills.

Overwatch is currently available to play on PC, Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo Switch. It has casual crossplay enabled, which means that console players can play with PC players if they want. Competitive game modes do not have the crossplay option because the mouse and the keyboard are often seen as a superior control device for FPS games.

Teams in Overwatch are composed of five players, who each get to select a hero to play as from a roster of over 30 heroes. A team comprises three basic roles: a tank, damage players, and support players. The tank serves as the hero who soaks damage and shatters fortified positions and narrow chokepoints. The tank's primary goal is to lead the charge. The two damage players are heroes that seek out, engage, and destroy the enemy team with their tools, abilities, and playstyles. Damage heroes are often fragile and require backup to survive. Finally, the primary goal of the two support players' heroes is to empower other players in the team by healing, boosting damage, and disabling foes. Supports are seen as the backbone of team's survival (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023A).

However, amongst the gaming community, Overwatch is often seen as toxic and dangerous space. In October 2022, Rhiannon Bevan reported in two separate articles on *The Gamer* about issues in the Overwatch community. After the launch of Overwatch 2, players have been reporting an increase in hostile and abusive messages (Bevan,2022A). Bevan further points out how Overwatch has never been known for having a welcoming community. She explains that players are simply switching off voice and text chats and encouraging others to do the same (Bevan,2022B).

Academic research suggests that toxicity makes environment hostile specially for female and other non-male players to participate in videogames. In an early study I conducted about this topic, the

answers of female and non-binary gamers indicated that environment in Overwatch is indeed negative, and they don't feel safe in participating any sort of competitive tournaments (Luiro, 2023).

Previous academic studies about toxicity in online gaming environments have been rather universal in their scope; thus, I wanted to focus on experiences of Finnish female Overwatch players and to find out whether or not there are notable issues regarding toxicity in the Finland-based Overwatch gaming community. It is an interesting case to see that there is a notable lack of players who are something other than white or Asian males as the highest-ranking players in the Overwatch league (Ruotsalainen, 2022).

The aim of this study is to investigate why women disappear from the game and what can be done to create safer, truly inclusive games that everyone can enjoy without the fear of being harassed in-game or in its communities. The objective is to ask questions about harassment and experiences of different players during Overwatch gameplay and in Overwatch communities via previously conducted survey and one-on-one interviews and supported by analyzing academic and gray literature sources about this topic. Research question is "What are the experiences and perceptions of Finnish female competitive Overwatch players?" Sub-questions are "How do their experiences compare with the literature of other female players of this game" and, based on the literature and my data, "What can be done to make it a truly safe and inclusive experience for all?" This thesis will investigate the issues through the intergroup contact theory and gender theory as frames for understanding the culture of the community. I intend to investigate the issues of perceived toxicity both in practice and experiences as presented in the literature and the lived experiences of the study´s respondents. For the clarity, I created short list of words commonly used when discussing about Overwatch and its communitys more toxic side. (Appendix 1)

There are other aspects in topic of inclusivity in gaming beyond self-reported gender and racial inclusion. However, the scope of this research, it is using dichotomy of sex as frame and looking into experiences of Finnish female gamers.

2   Literature review

According to the game demographics expert Nick Yee in 2017, Overwatch is an incredibly popular game among girls and women. According to Yee's data, Overwatch has a 16% female gamer population, more than double the genre average for shooter games (Yee, 2017). Since Overwatch had sold over 30 million copies worldwide, the game's female player base would be approximately 5 million.

When referring to statistics, it is pointed out that female gamers often dislike the colors and atmosphere of conventional war, not violent games themselves (Embaugh, 2017). Overwatch has a colorful palette and a wide roster of heroes with different tools that seem more like magic or sci-fi weaponry than traditional guns. Thus, it could be argued that the atmosphere is one of the reasons why Overwatch is so popular with females in the gaming community.

In their bachelor's thesis, Hampus Bergström and Niclas Ericsson (2020) found that Overwatch players see toxicity as an issue in Overwatch's culture, and most of them have been negatively affected by it. In their research, they found that women are more affected by toxicity than men.

Their findings point out that female players feel they must hide their gender to avoid negative feedback from other players (Bergström & Ericsson, 2020). It would make sense, then, that female players would use in-game voice chat less, hindering their chances of achieving higher ranks in the game. After all, when teams are better in higher ranks, it's more critical to discuss strategies with teammates and warn them about incoming enemies.

In her doctoral research, Maria Ruotsalainen (2022) suggests that the ongoing sportification of Overwatch has affected how gender is portrayed and seen in Overwatch's context. Sportification has led to the portrayal of athletic masculinity as desirable within Overwatch. Ruotsalainen further suggests that Overwatch does have more nuanced gender expressions for white and Asian men, but this does not affect the position of women and others who are marginalized in Overwatch esports.

Ruotsalainen points out also that men are seen as "the norm" in Overwatch. It is important to note this presumption since it also contributes to the real (pro-players) and imagined (in lower-tier e-sports) absence of women (Ruotsalainen, 2022).

Nicholas Taylor and Bryce Stout (2020) noted that the inclusion of women in competitive esports in the collegiate setting is often found in student-run clubs, whereas well-funded esports programs are overwhelmingly male-dominated. They argue that this is because the goal is often to recruit highly skilled players, not to develop them.

Why esports are widely male-dominated, according to Taylor and Stout (2020), comes from multiple overlapping reasons. Some examples include the ability to play without fear of harassment or violence, greater access to leisure time, play technologies and contexts, and material-discursive connections between gaming and masculinity, and computation and masculinity. Together, these aspects create an environment of toxic meritocracy (Taylor & Stout, 2020 p3).

Madden et al. (2021) discussed gender biases in detail in 2021 by interviewing 19 male and female esports participants. In their work, they point out commonplace assumptions like men are aggressive and women don't enjoy violence in games (Madden et al., 2021). Interestingly, Embaugh pointed out in 2017 that violence is not the issue for women; rather, they just do not want to kill their opponents with traditional guns.

Furthermore, Madden et al. (2021) point out how the assumption of gaming as a boys' hobby is not supported by any scientific evidence. They point out that previous research has shown that the skills required in competitive gaming are just as obtainable for female gamers as they are for male gamers.

Madden et al. (2021) describe female gamers' experiences as being difficult. In other words, their respondents pointed out how the lack of visibility for female gamers is an additional hardship for female gamers to overcome, which comes with an increased risk of toxic behavior by others. Their results note that both sexes admit that there are disadvantages in being a female gamer. According to them, female players often receive death threats and rape threats, but also experience a

stereotyping "white knight" attitude from men, who would be stereotypically chivalrous toward women (Madden et al., 2021).

Hayday and Collison (2020) pointed out how online communities and platforms offer many opportunities for players to behave badly. The communication channels are often used for harassment and verbal assault. Their further research points out how toxicity and hostility by the majority against marginalized groups do not discriminate: whether you are a woman or a person of color, you will get harassed. Also, harassment was evident across gaming platforms and not only one or two (Hayday & Collison, 2020). This, in turn, can lead to the phenomenon described by Bergström and Ericsson (2020) where female players feel urged to hide their gender because, according to Bergström and Ericsson, women are more affected by toxic and abusive behavior in video games than men are (Bergström & Ericsson, 2020).

Hayday and Collison (2020) further argue that, due to esports' lack of governance and a fractured industry, there is now unequal participation and a hypermasculine, sexualized environment led by tribal dynamics. This would then lead to toxic behavior and harassment of women in virtual spaces.

Moreover, Hayday and Collison (2020) also point out that the business focus and commercial growth in eSports have enabled harassment since the growth of participants in virtual spaces has been ignored. That, in turn, has resulted in young and female participants being exposed to toxic spaces and cultural inaccessibility (Hayday & Collison, 2020).

Ruotsalainen and Friman (2018) provide more details about the experiences of female players. They point out that, in competitive Overwatch, it is assumed that women only play female characters and support heroes. (Especially the hero called Mercy, presented as a traditionally beautiful, angelic healer with "pure" intentions.). There is also beliefs that women prefer character customization, looking hot in game, over gameplay. Ruotsalainen and Friman further point out how they themselves have also experienced toxic behavior in video games: "jokes" about how there are no women on the Internet, being referred to with male pronouns, and teammates being more comfortable with the false belief that writers were 15-year-old boys, not thirty-something-year-old women (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018).

As part of their article, Ruotsalainen and Friman (2018) opened an online questionnaire for female players to present their participation experiences in Overwatch esports. The respondents explicitly mentioned their gender as a reason not to participate in esports. Further, the women described the culture as toxic to women, indicating how women face gender-based harassment in gaming environments (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018).

The findings of Ruotsalainen and Friman (2018) are in line with the questionnaire I conducted previously (Luiro, 2023). Of the respondents, 58% said they had faced harassment in the Overwatch community, and that it noticeably targeted minorities. Toxicity was seen as the largest issue by 53% of respondents. According to the data, there is not enough control over what can be said in game chats, and even slurs and tilting are seen as funny.

In research completed by Darvin et al. (2020), the authors concluded that there is a significant difference between the experiences of women and men regarding hostility and discrimination. Women reported experiencing higher amounts of discrimination than men. However, in their results, both genders reported low levels of discrimination. These authors suggest this outcome could probably be due to the fact that both genders have already set expectations about behavior in online environments and in esports.

On the other hand, Darvin et al. (2020) also pointed out that men were less likely to report that there was discriminatory treatment against women in esports. This, in turn, would point towards the premise of hegemonic masculinity in esports (Darvin et al., 2020).

3   Methodology

The main method of collecting data was qualitative research via one-on-one interviews, which was conducted with four participants. Interviews were conducted in Finnish to minimize misunderstandings; the data was then translated into English by the author. Interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed into text using Microsoft Word. Interviewees were invited to participate from online communities dedicated to gaming and women in gaming. I used premade questions (see appendix 2). Interviews were conducted on Zoom, and the data management plan (see appendix 3) was presented to interviewees and read aloud. They gave their verbal agreement at the end of each sentence.

Interviews were summarized in English, and the results were analysed by comparing them with each other and supporting literature. The results were also placed within the frameworks of Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) and the Women's Empowerment Framework (Longwe, 2002).

In short, Intergroup Contact Theory (formerly known as the contact hypothesis) states that under appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact can reduce prejudice between minorities and majorities. It has four conditions:

- Equal status: Both groups must engage equally in the relationship.
  • Common goals: Both groups must work on a task and share a common goal.
  • Intergroup cooperation: Both groups must work together for their common goals without competing with each other.
  • Support of authorities, law, or customs: Both groups must acknowledge and accept some sort of authority that supports the interactions between the groups (Allport, 1954 p.281).

The Women's Empowerment Framework was developed by Sara Hlupekile Longwe in the 1990s. The goal of this framework is to question what women's empowerment and equality mean in practice and critically assess the extent to which an intervention supports this empowerment (March et al., 1999). The framework consists of five concepts called levels of equality, which indicate to what extent women are equal to men and have achieved empowerment. The levels are:

- • Welfare: Do women have equal access to resources?
  • Access: Do women have access to factors of production on an equal basis with men?
  • Conscientization: Understanding the differences of sex and gender: gender roles are cultural and can be changed.
  • Participation: Are women equal in opportunities to participate in the decision-making process, policy making, planning, and administration?
  • Control: A balance of control between men and women, so that neither side dominates (Longwe, 2002 p.6-10).

The Longwe framework was originally designed to examine development in the third world (March et al., 1999), but it surprisingly works well when applied to any setting. Only the types of resources and factors of production are vastly different. In this case, with the Women's Empowerment

Framework, we can ask whether women have equal access to gaming systems. Is there an understanding of sex and gender in the gaming community, and how gender is a cultural norm that can be changed? Are women equal participants in a game and on a team? Are they also shot callers, or are they simply on the sidelines? And, in the end, is there a balance between both sexes in Overwatch?

4 Results

To illustrate interviewees better, I created a simple table about them (Table 1) for a fast way to refer who is who in this research.

Name	Age-group	How long she has played Overwatch?	Why she plays Overwatch?	Participation in competitive Overwatch
Alice	30+	Multiple years	Enjoys social aspect and competing in good spirits.	Plays competitive Overwatch. Interested in single tournaments, does not want to physically move around.
Beth	24-30	Stopped playing in 2019	She does not play Overwatch anymore.	Not interested. Feels that women are not encouraged to participate in any competitive games.
Cathy	18-23	Multiple years	Social aspect and competitive hobby.	Plays competitive Overwatch. Has participated in virtual tournament. Would like to participate in tournaments
Daisy	24-30	Started in 2022	Person close to her recommended Overwatch and she got hooked.	Plays competitive Overwatch, but does not see herself moving to pro. Timetable issues and lack of ambition. Interested in playing competitive games with an active group.

Table 1: respondents

As seen on Table 1, the social aspect of Overwatch plays a significant role in the relationship of each interviewee with the game. In fact, two interviewees identified the social aspect as their primary motivation for playing Overwatch. Daisy and Cathy mentioned that they began playing the game based on a recommendation from someone close to them. On the other hand, Beth's decision to stop playing Overwatch was influenced by the negative behaviour exhibited by other players within her skill rating.

4.1 Challenges and relationship to the game

When asked about the challenges they face in the game, Alice stated that she does not consider there to be any specific challenges within the game itself. According to her, if her team loses, it simply means they need to improve their gameplay for the future. However, she did mention experiencing toxicity during her gameplay, although she does not perceive it as a personal challenge.

In contrast, Beth held an opposing view. She explained that her biggest challenges revolved around the limitations of time and resources she could invest in Overwatch. Beth further expressed her struggle with feeling "stuck" in Bronze rank and unable to advance. She described the gaming environment in that rank as highly toxic.

To Cathy, biggest challenges were the lack of time due school and other matters. She holds a strong wish to be a better player. She explained that for example, if she is playing as a sniper hero, she becomes irritated with herself if she misses the shots. She further tells that she feels the pressure to be a better player, to be recognized as a real gamer. She pointed out how this pressure is also something she would feel in other activities as well, such as in movie-fandoms.

Daisy reported as a main challenge the lack of gaming friends. Often, she needs to play in random groups who she cannot get to know any further: Players are always changing between the matches. She points out that the challenge in finding gaming buddies in her case could relate to her preference to play in middle of the day, when there is not that much players online. Moreover, she has other hobbies and social relationships as well.

4.2   Relationships with other players

Alice explains that to her biggest reason to play Overwatch, is its social aspect. How it is a multi-player game played in a small group of people. Games are short enough, so if there is someone annoying in the team, it is not too long stretch with them. She likes how she can mute people she does not find kind, but after all, game is played with other people and to her, that is the main attraction. She tries to be nice to other players even if the team is losing the game. When Alice is looking at other players, their skill level does not matter too much, but it is more important that other players have a good attitude with them.

Beth tells that she mostly played by herself and that there was not positive communication in her games. She felt that people do not understand that others can't read their minds. Communication skills were lacking. She explained that, at first, she tried to use communication channels, but when it did not work, she got fed up and stopped communicating in game. In a group game, she would prefer everyone to be on equal skill level. She had strong belief that lack of communication comes from Cognitive bias: People believe themselves to be better than what they are.

Cathy explains that she plays, by default, with other people. To her, Overwatch is a hobby, and she gets to do her hobbies with other people. Originally, she just looked for groups to play with, but now she thinks it's more valuable to have familiar and safe environment to play in. To her, it's easier to play with people she knows, even if relationship spans only couple of games back.

Daisy said that she started to play the game with someone who recommended it to her, and she got hooked, the one who recommended Overwatch, stopped playing soon after and Daisy had to play by herself. She feels that it is difficult to get to know new players, because they always change after every single game. She would like to play in groups with friends and thinks that its much more important that the group has safe environment to participate in than to have everyone in the same skill level. She pointed out how, specially as a female gamer, she appreciates that she is treated equally with others, and she does not need to fear when opening the mic.

4.3   Experiences with toxic behavior

Alice has faced toxicity. She explained that even if player is good, if they are toxic, she is not going to play with them. A toxic person can't be fun. She believes that toxicity is often displayed by people who are not maybe as good as they think themselves to be. Thus, they start to lash out and accuse other players about smurfing (Playing with alternative account in lower tiers) or cheating. According to Alice, she has experienced abusive behavior towards her and her female friends in the game. She said that her experiences were like "day and night" before and after Blizzard implemented strong reporting systems in game. She told how, in first two years she played, she could not even use the microphone, because men would start to verbally assault her. In her opinion It was seen as a normal gaming culture to verbally abuse female players. She felt that if she would open the mic for even a one second, she would get lewd comments. Alice felt that community and society has been going to better direction after 2016 and amount of abuse has gone down. She told that now its only a couple of times per year that she gets abusive chat targeted towards her due her gender. However, she told that at some point there was a short-lived phenomenon where approximately 13-years old boys were constantly being rude and lewd. She further points out how currently most toxic people she meets in game are Finnish—and especially Finnish boys aged 13-17 are being abusive in their comments.

Beth had experienced toxic behavior in game every day until she ultimately muted voice chat after she got fed up with abusive people in game, she explained that she simply could not take it anymore. In the end, bad behavior in game and lack of recourses made her to stop playing Overwatch completely. She felt that since she was in the lowest rank in game, people were toxic and mean because they were bad and could not climb out of that pit of being bad players. She felt that everyone was angry because they were there and skill-differences between bronze-players were huge.

Cathy felt that she encountered toxic behavior mostly in Overwatch 1. According to her, it was by random chance if someone would get triggered about game going badly and starting to yell and abuse verbally their teammates without any reason. She explained that when she played as part of a group, they would usually say something back and that way it did not matter if someone was mean, because she had people with her. She told that when she was younger player, aged approximately 14-15 years, she would get older men in chat asking if she had boyfriend and if she would

be their girlfriend. When she said something back, she would get more abuse. She pointed out how she got more lewd comments if she played a support role—and Mercy in particular—whereas if she played as DPS, she would get more direct comments about how she is a bad player. Further Cathy explained how internalized the sexist outlook in the game is: even though she herself is a female player, she would often think that if woman plays tank role, that woman can't be that good tank.

Daisy told that in Overwatch there has been just a couple of instances when she has encountered toxic behavior. Cases she encountered were in text chat, not verbally. She explained that toxicity in Overwatch has been just a broad rage, nothing that is personified in her unlike in other games, where she has been verbally assaulted due her gender and expectation has been that she can't be a good player because she is a woman. She explained that one challenge in text-based chat is that its difficult to know when people are joking and when they are genuinely toxic. Daisy felt that Blizzard does enough to keep environment safe and that overall, toxicity in Overwatch is not as bad as in other games. According to her, there have been some rotten eggs, but muting them in chat and later avoiding them as a teammate has been enough to empower her gaming.

5   Discussion

Overall, results of these interviews were surprising to me since they contradicted previous literature heavily. In bigger picture, only one of respondents reported that toxicity was such a large issue that it hindered her wishes to play the game. Interestingly, she had reported stopping playing the game in 2019 and lots of material that dealt with toxicity were written during that time such as Bergström and Ericsson (2020), Taylor and Stout (2020) and Darvin et al. (2020). It could be thus argued that after 2019 and 2020, overall situation has improved, but on the other hand, Bevan (2022) reported that Overwatch 2 players are feeling that the community is now more toxic than before. But since Bevan is American and her articles are from American point of view, it can be argued that we can't do direct conclusions based on those reports when looking into issues in Finnish perspective.

When discussing the challenges in game, three of the four respondents thought that challenges lie within their resources: lack of gaming friends, lack of time, and unusual times of days when playing were some issues they faced. It would thus be in line with findings of Taylor and Stout (2020),

when videogames are seen as a masculine hobby, there is a lack of female gamers and video games are seen as perfectly fine leisure time for men, but not for women (Taylor & Stout, 2020). Only one respondent outright stated that toxicity was a challenge in game, which contradicts my previous findings, where 58% of players claimed encountering harassment in this game (Luiro, 2023). This noticeably large difference could be explained by having only a small pool of respondents or that everyone faces toxicity in game, but only one of respondents felt that it was a challenge.

When comparing respondents' answers about their relationships with other players, it is evident that they appreciate social aspects in video games. Half of the respondents reported that social aspect is very important to them and that they enjoy it. One of respondents said that she gave up with being social in game when it seemed that it did not matter in long run. Three of four respondents thought that its more important that the group has safe environment than having everyone on equal skill level. Only one preferred equal skill level to safety. Such a large bias towards safe environment would logically be in line with previous studies. Ruotsalainen & Friman (2018) pointed out how women reported their gender being reason for receiving harassment in the game. When experience is like that, it is clear why safe environment is more important than one where everyone has equal skill level. One of my survey's respondents explicitly pointed out that, as a female gamer, she appreciates that she knows that she can open her microphone without fear of being harassed. This is in line with idea suggested by Bergström & Ericsson (2018) that women have the urge to hide their gender in-game due harassment keeps true.

All my respondents had faced toxic behavior, only in their own interpretation of situations were drastically different to academic sources. Three out of four felt that overall, there is not that much toxicity in game, and it does not affect their gaming. They simply would mute and report abusers and go on with their days. Two of respondents directly stated that in their opinion Blizzard has good reporting system which bans toxic players. Only one respondent reported that toxicity was overwhelming and affected her negatively. However,, she stopped playing the game in 2019 and all other respondents implied that situation has became better in later years. This would once again hint that overall situation is now better, but academic literature has not yet caught up with it.

Half of my respondents felt that they or their friends have been targeted in game because they are female. Another felt that sexist, lewd remarks come from young boys and other respondent felt that they come from older men. Interestingly, woman on her 30s gets harassed by teens and woman when she was 15, got harassed by adult men. In my interview with Dr. Maria Ruotsalainen, she pointed out how young boys are acting in a similar manner to older participants and trying to negotiate their own being in the group via hostility (M. Ruotsalainen, personal communication, 2022). Thus, it could be reasoned that, in this case, younger boys have seen that it is okay to harass when they see older men get away with it and then they copy that attitude and thus they create a vicious circle of abuse in game.

5.1 From point of view of intergroup contact theory

As stated in methodology, Intergroup contact theory has four distinct criteria. Those are:

- Equal status both groups must engage equally in the relationship
- Common goals both groups must work on a task and share a common goal.
- Intergroup cooperation both groups must work together for their common goals without competing with each other.
- Support of authorities, law, or customs both groups must acknowledge and accept some sort of authority that supports the interactions between the groups. (Allport, 1954 p.281)

Intergroup contact theory argues that, under the right circumstances, interpersonal contacts would decrease the level of conflict and reduce prejudice between majorities and minorities (Allport, 1954). In the context of this thesis, majorities would be men and minorities would be women. It is important to note, as pointed out by Yee (2017) there is large difference between genders in different genres of videogames: For example, in family/farm simulators, female player base is 69% of total players whereas it is 6% in racing games. Thus, if we would analyze same issues in farm-gaming, men would be the minority and women would be the majority. Even though as pointed out by Yee (2017) Overwatch has double the female audience to the genre-average, women are still in minority in Overwatch. Thus, in this study where I am using dichotomy of sex as a basis, men are discussed as a majority and women as a minority.

First requirement of Intergroup contact theory states that both groups must engage equally in the relationship (Allport, 1954). In my results, three out of four respondents implied that they felt that

they are equal. If someone would be mean to them, they would be mean back or simply block the aggressor. While this doesn't negate the fact that, in all the reported cases they shared with me, the aggressors were men, indicating a majority attacking a minority. On the other hand, three of the four respondents explained that these issues rarely happened and overall, they felt safe in game.

Second criteria states that both groups must work on a task and to share a common goal (Allport, 1954). This criterion seems to be self-explanatory in this context. Overwatch is a team-based game and thus there is always team working together. Only one of respondents felt that there is no teamwork in game and that everyone is just doing their own thing. Respondent stated that she was playing in lowest possible rank whereas this was not the case with other respondents. Thus, it could be argued that group working skills are something that needs to be learned even in game and if they are lacking, those people are often found in lower ranks.

Third point states that both groups must work together without competing with each other. None of the answers directly stated that there would be straight up competing with majority in game, but one of respondents did mention that even she often thinks that women can't be as good as men in certain in-game roles. I argue that such an outlook would lead to situation where gamer belonging to the minority would need to show the majority that she is a good player, thus creating a feeling of competition between the two groups. This perspective suggests that this internal competition is not so much an issue in Overwatch two as it was in Overwatch one, since Blizzard changed how statistics are seen in game. Previously every game had "medals" that showed how good player was compared to their team. This is now removed and there is only numerical data available on performance. As stated on the Imagine Games Network, that helps to lessen some of the in-fighting between teammates over "underperforming" (Cotten et al. 2022).

Final point of Intergroup contact theory states that these must be supported by authority, laws, or customs and that both groups must acknowledge and accept that authority supports the interactions between the groups. In this case, the authority would be Blizzard. In recent years, Blizzard has implemented rather severe reporting mechanism that bans players who use foul language or otherwise grief their teammates. System even records voice chat used in game (Overwatch, 2023). When specifically looking at tournament gaming, Blizzard states that community tournaments

must promote a fun and engaging experience for the players and that organizers and sponsors must comply with Blizzards community policies. Blizzard also requires that community tournaments must moderate all chats to prevent vulgar, abusive, or mean-spirited environment. Further Blizzard requires that broadcasted stream shall not infringe on or violate the rights of any person or contain any libelous or defamatory matter (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023). Thus, it can be argued that the support of authority and "law," meaning the game's own rules on how people can interact with each other. In case of Overwatch, to participate in game, participant must accept that authority. All the respondents had faced toxic behavior but, for three of the four, those issues were rare and not something that would happen daily.

As the theory states, intergroup contact can reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members (Allport, 1954). And based on respondents' answers, it sounds true. Two of the four respondents told how environment used to be toxic before the 2020s, one of respondents who stopped playing on 2019 felt that back then game was toxic and respondent who started to play game just in 2022, reported how much safer she felt in Overwatch than in other games. Thus, even though there are some issues with bad behavior, when looking through the lens of Intergroup contact theory, it seems Blizzard has managed to create safer environment in Overwatch.

5.2 From point of view of the women's empowerment framework

As previously stated in methodology, Women´s empowerment framework has five criteria that determine whether or not women are empowered in their community. Those are:

- Welfare: Do women have equal access to resources?
- Access: Does women have access to the factors of production on an equal basis with men?
- Conscientization: Understanding the differences of sex and gender: gender roles are cultural and can be changed.
- Participation: Are women equal to participate in the decision-making process, policy making, planning and administration?
- Control: A balance of control between men and women, so that neither side dominates. (Longwe, 2002 p.6-10)

Women's empowerment framework is intended to help question what women's empowerment and equality means in practice and to critically think to what extent intervention is supporting that

outcome (March et al, 1999). *Empowerment,* defined by theorist Sara Hlupekile Longwe, is enabling women to take an equal place with men and to participate equally in the development process to achieve control over the factors of production on an equal basis with men (Longwe,2002). All though this framework was originally constructed to be used in developing nations, its five criteria can be used in other sorts of situations as well. As I argued in methodology, it could be used when assessing women´s empowerment in all sorts of situations.

First point asks if women have equal access to resources. Academic sources have stated that gaming is seen as a leisure time that is seen more acceptable to men than women (Taylor & Stout, 2020) and how lack of governance has created hyper-sexualised and dangerous environment (Hayday & Collison, 2020). Three of four of my respondents reported that they saw lack of time as an issue in their gameplay. Although it cannot be determined whether this lack of time resources is due to their gender or simply because gaming is not their top priority. One respondent said that lack of time comes from "school and other stuff" while other commented how social life takes its toll, and she usually plays in middle of the day. None of the respondents said that there would be any issues with actual physical recourses. Only issues with the time and gaming-buddies. Thus, with my respondents, they do have equal access to resources, since there was not any gender-specific reasoning behind in lack of time, or gaming friends. Though in question about friends, it could be further speculated if issue is having gaming friends altogether or having female gaming friends. In environment often described as toxic and hostile, it would make sense to look for gaming buddies from a gender that is not stereotypically predatory in this context. That is something that could be looked at in future research for this topic.

Second point asks if women have access to the factors of production on an equal basis with men. In this context it would mean do women have equal access to competitive games, tournaments, teams, and clubs. Academic sources state that this is not the case. Taylor and Stout (2020) notes how collegiate teams recruit often already skilled players, not those who would become ones, and this has led to point where female gamers are often found in student-run clubs, not on collegiate teams (Taylor & Stout, 2020). It is also noteworthy that men are seen as a standard in Overwatch and that notion contributes to perceived lack of female gamers in collegiate tiers (Ruotsalainen, 2022).

Interestingly majority of my respondents did not imply that gender would hinder their participation in those activities. One respondent pointed out that she would love to play in singular tournaments, but she dislikes the idea of *"Hauling her ass around and stressing about timetables."* Other respondent stated that, even though she personally does not want to compete anymore, she feels that women are not encouraged to play in tournaments competitively. One respondent had participated in online tournament and felt that it was positive experience. She is interested in participating again if opportunity rises. Fourth respondent saw herself as playing regular competitive Overwatch more actively as part of a friend group, but not really in collegiate tiers. These results were rather baffling when compared to literature. Multiple studies have found that women don't have equal access to competitive gaming, but all my respondents but one felt that they had equal access. Rather, not participating more was merely about their own choices.

Third point asks if the differences of sex and gender are understood: gender is a cultural norm and thus how it is viewed can be changed. Issues related to this point did not really emerge in the participants' responses. One respondent did report that she often subconsciously thinks that women might not be as good in game as men, but she herself points out that it is internalized misogynism. That points out how cultural norm can be changed specially since other respondent reported that she felt that in Overwatch there was little to no targeted harassment towards her that was related to her gender. One of respondents also stated that there has been a cultural shift in a way that now she can talk in game without fear of being harassed.

As stated by Ruotsalainen (2020), men are seen as the standard in Overwatch. Hayday & Collison (2020) pointed out that women have the urge to hide their gender in game. Thus I argue that these results could suggest there has been some cultural shift, at least in the Finnish gaming community in span of last two years.

Fourth point asks if women are equal to participate in decision-making process. In this context it would mean, broadly, women are equal to participate in teams, in strategy making, and in gaming altogether. Are they equal in shot-calling? are they equal teammates to men? Literature makes it seem that consensus amongst research is that women are not equal to men in decision making concerning e-sports. Women are found in student-run clubs, not in collegiate teams (Taylor & Stout, 2020). Moreover, both sexes admitted there being disadvantages in being a female gamer.

Female gamers encounter death- and rape threats (Madden et al.2021). Gaming community is unequal and hypermasculine (Hayday & Collison, 2020). And women are seen as players who prefer looking good to being good (Ruotsalainen, 2022). Those things would clearly indicate that women are not seen as equal and thus they <u>can't</u> participate in any decision making process in gaming community on an equal status to men.

The results of this study, however, significantly contradict literature. Only one of respondents stated that she felt women are not being as good as men in gaming, whereas Beth, who stopped playing the game did not clearly state that toxicity would have been due her gender, but due rather to the rank she had in the game. All though she stated that overall women are not encouraged to participate in gaming communities. Consensus amongst respondents was that things improved: Those who have played Overwatch for multiple years told how there is less rude commenting these days which implies to me, that since they do communicate -and one even more than before- that they are on equal status with men in game. Daisy, who started playing the game in 2022, praised Overwatch for its non-toxic environment, as compared to other games she has played. All respondents who currently play Overwatch, felt safe in game.

Fifth point is about control: neither side dominates. As pointed out, FPS games, as a genre, have only 7% female player base, while Overwatch has 16% female player base (Yee, 2017). When one of sexes is that much in a minority, it cannot be argued that there would be a real balance between sexes. Women in gaming are reporting more harassment than men (Darvin et al, 2020). Surveys suggest that gender is a clear reason for not participating in Overwatch e-sports (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018). Gender is seen as an additional hardship to pass in gaming (Madden et al, 2020). Even going as far as stating clearly: If you are woman, you will get harassed in gaming (Hayday & Collison, 2020).

Even though my respondents' answers indicated that they don't see their gender as much of an issue in Overwatch, I cannot, with good conscience, argue that gaming and Overwatch are not male-dominated. When competitive gaming college programs are widely male-dominated (Taylor & Stout, 2020), there is no balance between sexes. On the other hand, Daisy stated in the interview that Blizzard, Overwatch's creator, has empowered her gaming in Overwatch and, in her ex-

perience, any "toxicity" seems to embody just broad rage, unrelated to her being a woman in gaming. Alice pointed out how a good reporting system makes Overwatch a safer place and how it makes players more equal with each other. Conversely, Cathy's point illustrates how she had internalized a sexist outlook in the game and how she received more lewd comments when playing as a girl-coded hero, demonstrating that there is not yet a real balance between sexes in Overwatch.

6 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have analysed interviews conducted with four different Finnish female Overwatch players and compared how written research literature confirms or contradicts the data. I have also incorporated written literature. In particular, my data analysis included viewing that data through the lens of Intergroup contact theory and the women's empowerment framework. My research question and literature suggested that there is significant amount of abusing and harassment going on in game and that's why there is large bottleneck when moving from competitive Overwatch to collegiate, or tournament levels One unique finding in this study is how the interviews with four Finnish Overwatch players did not align with the vast research in online gaming, particularly as it relates to toxicity, abuse, or harassment in the Finnish Overwatch community. Analysis with Intergroup contact theory indicated that with these respondents, it largely worked, and Blizzard had managed to create safe community inside Overwatch. My analysis through Women's empowerment framework on the other hand strongly suggested that there could be issues with women not being equal to men in game, but even in that case respondents mostly felt that they are on the same level and equal to men.

Literature and interviewees had very different opinions on how things are. It could be argued that this would be due literature being mostly written around 2020 when some of materials could be from 2016-2020. Most of the respondents felt that situation is better now than just a couple of years ago, so it could be that in the future academic research will get different results. Other possible explanations are cultural differences. Most of the literature is written from American point of view whereas my respondents were Finnish, and I am Finnish. It is also a limitation to this study that I am a straight male, thus I might miss some crucial points which would be perfectly clear to those who are women in gaming.

I suggest that in the future there could be further studies in larger scope about this topic to see if my respondents' answers and my findings are in line with majority, or if these results were by random chance as they are. My provocative statement in headline was that girls don't play videogames and to ask why, and that statement was proven wrong. Girls play videogames and girls play Overwatch. They find Overwatch to be great game and community to enjoy and that it will only get better as years go by.

7 References

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice.* Reading, Massachusetts; Menlo Park, California; London; Amsterdam; Don Mills, Ontario; Sydney: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.

Bergström, H., & Ericsson, N. (2020). *How toxicity differ between male and female players in competitive Overwatch.* Uppsala universitet, Faculty of Department of Game Design. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet. Retrieved 3 15, 2023

Bevan, R. (2022A, 10 23). *Overwatch Players Think The Community is More Toxic Since Going Free To Play*. Retrieved 5 17, 2023, from TheGamer: https://www.thegamer.com/overwatch-2-more-toxic-players-free-to-play/

Bevan, R. (2022B, 10 24). *Overwatch 2 Players Are Refusing To Communicate Because Of Toxicity*. Retrieved 5 17, 2023, from TheGamer: https://www.thegamer.com/overwatch-2-players-disable-chat-abuse-toxic/

Blizzard Entertainment. (2023A, 1 9). *Overwatch 2 - A future worth fighting for*. Retrieved from overwatch.blizzard.com: https://overwatch.blizzard.com/en-us/

Blizzard Entertainment. (2023B). Overwatch 2. (v. 2.5.0.0.113652) [PC].

Blizzard Entertainment. (2023C, 6 26). *Community Competition License Conditions for Overwatch:*. Retrieved from overwatchleague.com: https://overwatchleague.com/en-us/community-tournaments-license

Cotten, S., Rothery, J., Heaney, S., & Sanchez, M. (2022, 10 5). *Overwatch vs Overwatch 2 Major Changes*. Retrieved from ign.com: https://www.ign.com/wikis/overwatch-2/Overwatch_vs_Overwatch_2_Major_Changes

Darvin, L., Vooris, R., & Mahoney, T. (2020). The playing experiences of esport participants: An analysis of treatment discrimination and hostility in esport enviroments. *Journal of Athelete Development and Experience, 2*(1), Article 3. doi:10.25035/jade.02.01.03

Embaugh, K. (2017, 2 9). *Female Gamers Want To Kill You, Just Not With Guns*. Retrieved from Quantic Foundry: https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/02/09/theme-and-weapon/

Hayday, E. J.;& Collison, H. (17. 8 2020). Exploring the Contested Notion of Social Inclusion and Gender Inclusivity within eSport Spaces. *Social Inclusion, 8*(3), 197-208. doi:10.17645/si.v8i3.2755

Longwe, S. H. (2002). Addressing Rural Gender Issues: A Framework for Leadership and Mobilisation. *III World Congress for Rural Women.* Madrid: Sara Hlupekile Longwe.

Luiro, P. (2023). *Market analysis about organizing inclusive Overwatch tournament.* Jamk university of applied sciences, School of business. Jyväskylä: non-published.

Madden, D., Liu, Y., Yu, H., Sonbudak, M. F., Troiano, G. M., & Hartevald, C. (2021). "Why Are You Playing Games? You Are a Girl!" : Exploring Gender Biases in Esports. *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI ´21)* (pp. 1-15). Yokohama; New York: Association for Computing Machinery. Retrieved 3 20, 2023, from https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3411764.3445248

March, C., Smyth, I., & Mukhopadhyay, M. (1999). Womens Empowerment (Longwe) Framework. In *A Guide to Gender-Analysis Frameworks* (pp. 92-101). Oxford, Great Britain: Oxfam GB.

Ruotsalainen, M. (2022). *Overwatch Esports and the (Re)Configurations of Gender and Nationality.* University of Jyväskylä, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä. Retrieved 3 15, 2023, from https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/82456

Ruotsalainen, M., & Friman, U. (2018). "There Are No Women and They All Play Mercy" : Understanding and Explaining (the Lack of) Womens Presence in Esports and Competitive Gaming. *DiGra Nordic ´18 : Proceedings of 2018 International DiGRA Nordic Conference.* Digital Games Research Association. Conference of Digital Games Research Association. Retrieved 3 28, 2023, from http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_Nordic_2018_paper_31.pdf

Taylor, N., & Stout, B. (2020, 9 7). Gender and the two-tiered system of collegiate esports. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 37*(5), 451-465. doi:10.1080/15295036.2020.1813901

Yee, N. (2017, 1 19). *Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down The Percentage of Female Gamers by Genre*. Retrieved from Quantic Founrdy: https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/

Appendices

Appendix 1. words

Hackusations: Accusation of player hacking or cheating in game.

Pinging: act of pointing out area or person of interest in game with M3-button.

Ranks: In-game system to classify players in different skill levels. From worst to best: Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, Grand Master. Additionally, there is Top 500 list for each region and each rank includes five divisions from one to five, five being worst and one being best.

Tilting: getting unreasonably angry in the game.

Smurfing: Playing game with new account, goal is to get to play easier games than with the original account.

Shot-calling: Giving order to team to do something. For example "Soldier on high ground, lets take him out"

Toxicity, Being toxic: Person behaving in a way that it adds negativity and upsets other person

Appendix 2. Interview questions

-Miksi pelaat Overwatchia, kerro pelaamisestasi (Why do you play Overwatch? Tell me about your playing)

-Mitä haasteita on pelaamisessa (What challenges there is in playing?)

-Mihin nämä haasteet liittyvät? (To which these challenges are connected?)

-Muut Pelaajat? Oma tietokone? (Other players? Your own PC?)

-Oletko sinä tai kaverisi kohdanneet myrkyllistä käytöstä? (Have you or your friends encountered toxic behaviour?)

-Pelaatko yksin? (Do you play by yourself?)

-Pelaatko muiden kanssa? (Do you play with others) -> turvallinen tila vs. yhtä hyvät pelaajat? (Safe space versus equally good players)

-Mitkä kommunikaatiovälineet? (What communication tools you use?)

-Näkeekö, että voisi olla ammattilainen tai puoliammattilainen? Turnauspelaaminen? miksi ei jos ei. (Does she see that she could be pro or semi-pro? Tournament playing? If not, why not)

-Mikä on minäkuva pelaajana, Miten se on muuttunut? Onko joskus ajatellut, että voisi olla kilpaileva, mutta ei enää? -> miksi? (What is her self-image as a player and how it has changed? Has she thought at some point that she could play competitively, but not anymore? Why?)

-Mitä toivoisit, että asioille tehdään? (What you wish that would be done to things?)

-Onko tietoinen siitä, että Blizzard seuraa ja on säännöt toimintaan? (Is she aware that Blizzard has rules about how to act in games and follows things?)

Appendix 3. data management plan

Data management plan -Peetu Luiro

Tämä tutkimus on opinnäytetyö Jyväskylän Ammattikorkeakoululle.

Haastateltava suostuu siihen, että haastattelu tallennetaan.

Haastateltava suostuu siihen, että tallenne säilytetään korkeintaan 31.12.2033 asti.

Haastateltava suostuu siihen, että tallennetta voidaan käyttää jatkotutkimuksissa.

Haastateltavalla on oikeus keskeyttää haastattelu mistä syystä tahansa missä vaiheessa tahansa.

Haastateltavalla on oikeus tarkistaa, mitä tietoja hänestä on tallennettu.

Kerättävä tieto säilytetään kahdella erillisellä muistitikulla, joita haastattelun suorittaja säilyttää asunnossaan "ei itsestäänselvissä paikoissa" Tallenteet tuhotaan viimeistään 31.12.2033.

Haastateltavista ei kerätä henkilötietoja, jotka voitaisiin yhdistää heihin henkilöinä.

Haastateltavasta henkilökohtaisia tietoja kirjataan ylös vain nimimerkki, jota haastateltava haluaa hänestä käytettävän lopullisessa tutkimuksessa ja ikä haarukoituna 18-23, 24-30, 30-

Tallennetut haastattelut litteroidaan tekstimuotoiseksi dataksi.

Opinnäytetyö on julkinen. Mikäli haastattelussa ilmenee asioita, jotka voidaan suoraan yhdistää henkilöön, anonymisoidaan nämä seikat, mikäli ne ovat haastattelun kannalta oleellisia. Mikäli ne eivät ole, ei niitä tulla käyttämään julkaistavassa opinnäytetyössä.

Mikäli haastateltava haluaa itselleen opinnäytetyön lopullisen version, voidaan se toimittaa haastateltavan ilmoittamaan sähköpostiosoitteeseen.

Tutkimuksen tekijä:

Peetu Luiro

DP in International Business

School of Business

JAMK – University of Applied Sciences

peetu@peetuluiro.fi

Opinnäytetyötä ohjaava opettaja (yhteydenotot englanniksi) barbara.crawford@jamk.

Translated in english

This research is a thesis for Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences.

The interviewee consents to the interview being recorded.

The interviewee consents to the recording being retained until December 31, 2033, at the latest.

The interviewee consents to the use of the recording in further research.

The interviewee has the right to terminate the interview for any reason at any stage.

The interviewee has the right to review what information has been recorded about them.

The collected data will be stored on two separate USB drives, which the interviewer will keep in their residence in "non-obvious locations." Recordings will be destroyed no later than December 31, 2033.

No personal information that could be linked to the interviewees as individuals will be collected. Only the interviewee's chosen alias and age bracket (18-23, 24-30, 30-) will be recorded as personal information.

Recorded interviews will be transcribed into textual data.

The thesis is public. If there are aspects in the interview that can be directly linked to a person, these will be anonymized if they are relevant to the interview. If they are not relevant, they will not be used in the published thesis.

If the interviewee wishes to receive the final version of the thesis, it can be sent to the email address provided by the interviewee.