

# Male Gamers, Identity and Masculinity

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*gamers, identity, masculinity studies, game studies, focus groups*

## INTRODUCTION

Although the so-called #gamergate campaign has lost traction since the controversy in 2014, videogame culture is frequently described as being a toxic environment ripe with harassment and hate speech against females and minority players. There remains a schism between players who speak up for more inclusive and diversified games and gameplay spaces, and players who see this plea as an attack on traditional videogames and want to preserve games as a subculture for “geeks” with a narrow interest in technology, science fiction, and games. This understanding of videogames is indeed part of a stereotype and a mythologization of game culture, but is also symptomatic of a situation in which male gamers feel that their position as core audience for games is challenged.

The schism in game culture coincides with the idea of masculinity in crisis, illustrated by the emergence of male rights movements and fueled by statistics of young males dropping out of and falling behind in education, lower expected life-span and higher suicide rates among males, and the fact that an increasingly larger portion of men remains childless. Among the more glaring examples of a masculinity in crisis are gender-related terrorist attacks from so-called incels (involuntary celibates). In public discourse, this crisis is often connected to men’s inability in forging new, more flexible and more adaptable masculine identities, in particular in relation to the rise of feminism and a feminist consciousness – but what often lacks within these discussions is the awareness of how masculinity is tied to cultural processes of inclusion/exclusion, and the ways in which “toxic” masculinities may be constructed, not only by men who find that they are unable or unwilling to perform popular/hegemonic forms of

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masculinity, but also by an increasingly polarized public conversation in which also certain forms of modern feminism appear hostile.

## AIM OF THE PRESENTATION

This paper will present and discuss the preliminary results from a pre-study for a larger research project that investigates the current schism in videogame culture from the perspective of male gamers. The pre-study consists of focus group studies among young male gamers of varied socio-demographic background in a larger city in a selected Western European country. “Gamer” is here understood as a term of identity rather than as a descriptive label (Shaw 2012), and we will explore the seeming paradox that gamer culture is an inclusive environment for individuals who see themselves as socially marginal “underdogs”, at the same time as it is a subculture which is strict in policing their boundaries (Boudreau 2019). Using a phenomenological perspective focusing on people’s lived experiences, the project examines what it is that male gamers experience is at stake, spanning from their emotional responses to the increasing diversity and politicization of game content and game culture to the cultural and social meanings that they attribute to gaming.

The aim of this research is not to give harassers a voice; rather it stresses that the male perspective is important not only for shedding light on attitudes of misogyny and racism, but also for understanding to what degree being a gamer is inherently gendered, and how this relates to the schism in videogame culture. This new project aims to bring together game studies and masculinity studies, investigating how male gamers spanning from cis white males to minorities including colored, immigrant, and queer males experience the current schism in videogame culture. While not undermining questions of a changing hegemony, the project looks at the role of identity and the increasingly polarized public discourse surrounding identity politics in the schism (Banet-Weiser 2018), and includes the lived experiences of male gamers to gain insight into how they negotiate their identities as gamers and as men.

The research is inspired by Michael Kimmel’s phenomenological research of “angry white men” (2017) and C.J. Pascoe’s research on masculinity and identity (2003, 2011), as well as recent research on #gamergate (Braithwaite 2016, Chess and Shaw 2015, 2016, Massanari 2017, 2018, Mortensen 2016) and on geek and gamer masculinity (Condis 2018, DiSalvo 2016, Krampe 2018, Salter 2017, Taylor & Vorhees 2018).

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