

The Influence of Gender on Stress Among Video Game Players

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Keywords

stress, gender, perception, self-assessment, performance

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Video games provide a reprieve from the demands of players' daily lives (Whitbourne, Ellenberg, & Akimoto 2013). Part of this is likely tied to stress-relieving properties of video games, particularly those that are more casual (Russoniello, O'Brien, & Parks 2009). However, stress responses have also been recorded, especially when players are engaging with violent content (Hasan, Bègue, & Bushman 2012). Outside of video games, gender tends to influence sources of and responses to stress. Women often have different coping strategies, may feel more comfortable expressing stress through emotions other than anger, and have been observed as having more regular sources of stress (Jakupcak, Salters, Gratz, & Roemer 2003; Matud 2004). Adding to this, gender can influence self-assessments and self-perception. In areas associated with masculinity, like technology and math, women are less inclined to see themselves as skilled (Correll 2001; Sax et al. 2015).

How, then, does gender influence potential stressors for video game players? To explore this question, this project uses interviews and online forum text analysis. The interview sample included just over 50 respondents, with just over half being women. The majority of the sample was from the United States and interviews were conducted via Skype or over the phone and took approximately one to two hours. The online forum data, totaling approximately 1,000 posts, was collected from five online forums, with two being general forums and three being aimed at women gamers. Gender is difficult to confirm in these cases but is based on user self-reporting in posts and comments. Data was collected from the most active conversations several times per week over the span of a month and from targeted searches for terms related to stress and frustration. Interviews and online conversations were coded for themes and patterns and analyzed for overlapping experiences and ideas.

Video game players encounter a wide range of sources of general stress, but also experience influences of gender. For example, men are less inclined than women to discuss these experiences openly. While online formats like forums appear to remove some of the pressure of talking about stress and frustration, allowing players to share their negative gaming encounters, being interviewed directly about these topics leaves men hesitant to come up with examples. More frequently, they mention frustrated friends, sometimes questioning why they play brutally punishing games. In the cases where men do discuss their own stressful gaming experiences, they tend to hedge their responses before acknowledging situations where they became frustrated, angry, or even broke something.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

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Women, on the other hand, easily highlight specific examples of stressful gaming experiences. They are also more willing to avoid particular genres and situations that could lead to stress, which extends to playing with others. While it is common for women to play with people they know (Yee 2008), they also have a variety of protective methods to avoid harassment in multiplayer play, including hiding their gender (Cote 2017). For women who continue to play multiplayer games, even the common approach of playing with friends does not always ensure stress reduction. While men do not typically cite playing with friends as stressful, most women continue to note a variety of concerns. These include potential harassment, scheduling, and worries about skill. For women, these aspects of playing with other people take on unique facets of stressfulness. They are more likely than men to focus on other players destroying their game progress, but also mention that playing with people they know does not necessarily reduce harassment. Women also report feeling pressure to live up to and exceed perceived team expectations. In cases where the players felt they fell short, coping with the stress often became too much, causing many women to dread future encounters with their team. This also exacerbates familiar struggles that women report in terms of harsh self-assessments and feeling like they are not as skilled as other players.

Why, when potential stressors are a concern, do players continue to engage with video games? Hobbies are meant to be stress relievers – and tend to be used as such – but players frequently find themselves in situations of frustration and negatively manifested stress. This aspect of stressful gaming transcends the influence of gender, with players discussing their dedication to overcoming challenges and proving that the game cannot “beat” them. However, gender does have some influence on how dedicated players are to persisting despite negative experiences. While men continue to play specific games, genres, or formats of game that lead to prolonged stress, women will seek more resolutions to avoid these experiences.

As a growing means of entertainment and leisure, video games offer an opportunity to relax and get away from everyday obligations. However, nearly all players can recall tedious, frustrating, and stressful events linked to gaming. While gender influences some of the sources – and approaches to dealing with stress – there are many shared experiences that place players in less than ideal positions when trying to engage in their hobby. Across the spectrum of potential outcomes, this can leave players feeling anything from bouts of anger to consistent stress over how well they can perform. Ultimately, most players feel that overcoming many of these struggles and challenges is worth the stress, hoping to prove themselves within and against the game. While this is the case and players report the desire to overcome challenges frequently, women are more likely to walk away from situations that continually present the potential for negative experiences.

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