

# Towards a New Paradigm for Understanding Men and Masculinity in Gaming

**Mikko Meriläinen**

Tampere University  
Kanslerinrinne 1  
33014 Tampere  
Finland

[mikko.merilainen@tuni.fi](mailto:mikko.merilainen@tuni.fi)

**Kristine Jørgensen**

University of Bergen  
Langes gate 1–3  
5007 Bergen  
Norway

[kristine.jorgensen@uib.no](mailto:kristine.jorgensen@uib.no)

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## INTRODUCTION

Scholarly work on men's game culture participation typically frames men in gaming through their dominant position in many game cultures. In parallel with the wider field of critical studies of men and masculinities (CSMM), the topic is often approached through the notion of hegemony, typically using Raewyn Connell's theory of *hegemonic masculinity* (2005) and theories such as *hybrid masculinities* that build on it (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). This approach has resulted in concepts such as *geek masculinity* and *gamer masculinity* that have become established in game studies literature (Jørgensen & Lindtner, 2024).

The current body of literature presents compelling analyses of gendered power structures and how they are visible in different domains of game culture from tabletop gaming magazines to esports to the content of individual games. However, there is a notable lack of literature that engages with how men in gaming encounter and navigate these gendered power structures and do gender in game cultures. Furthermore, the literature is typically situated in a North American cultural context which, while influential, is far from universal.

A key and sometimes explicitly mentioned feature of this body of literature has so far been a sense of pessimism. Game culture is commonly presented as a monolithic bastion and trap of hegemonic masculinity that offers little potential for doing things differently or contesting masculine dominance (see for example Taylor & Voorhees, 2018; Ouellette, 2021). While this pessimism can be justified, it has nevertheless made

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it difficult to even conceptualise change and consider how gaming might take a turn for the better in terms of gender equality.

This pessimism, however, stands in marked contrast with what can be observed in many game culture domains: more and better representation, more discussion and concrete initiatives to dismantle problematic structures, and the often ignored community pushback against bigotry and perceived injustice in its different forms. Much as the notion of the 'ideal man' has evolved through time, the video gaming culture of the early 2000s, explicitly constructed for young men and arguably at its sexist peak, is vastly different compared to that of the 2020s in terms of gender representation and the diversity of games, characters, and narratives available to players. The many dramatic clashes in game cultures are a sign of both this change and the different reactions diverse men have to it (Maloney et al., 2019).

Reflecting this change, our ongoing studies of gaming men in two Nordic countries, Finland and Norway, have produced findings that raise important questions and complicate straightforward categorical narratives of men, masculinity, and gaming culture. To present a few examples: how should we perceive men in culturally privileged positions in gaming who leverage their privilege to make space for minority groups in gaming? What should we make of men repeatedly mentioning the constant competition and toxicity as the most unappealing facet of gaming, or who mention the supposedly idealised 'gatekeeping geek' as exemplifying the worst kind of person inhabiting geek and gaming spaces? How do the ambivalences that many gaming men associate with masculinity tell us about gaming as a perceived masculine space? And where does the liberating, empowering potential of gaming for trans men fit in?

## **AIM OF THE PAPER**

Drawing from interview and qualitative questionnaire data with men of different ages, we illuminate the complex gender negotiations of that men, most of whom have grown up in Nordic welfare states with fairly high gender equality, undergo in game cultures 30 years removed from *Tomb Raider* and 10 years removed from #Gamergate. Building on queer and feminist literature on gender, such as the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), Judith Butler (2004), and Sara Ahmed (2004, 2006), we discuss how gendered problems, such as discrimination, harassment, or toxic meritocracy, have not disappeared, but nor are they equally present in different gaming contexts and communities. Phenomena such as hegemonic masculinity and geek masculinity can be discerned, but the inherent messiness of human experience does not fit neatly in such categorical framings. While masculinity, whether prefixed with 'hegemonic', 'geek' or 'gamer', obviously plays a part, "it is not the whole story", to quote CSMM scholar Andrea Waling (2019, 103).

Through both our own work and an extensive body of existing literature, we know that there is tremendous variation in both men's subjectivities and different game cultures. In this paper, we use results from our studies as a starting point to advocate for a research paradigm for the study of men and masculinities in game culture that acknowledges this diversity as well as the gendered, hierarchical power structures deeply embedded in many game cultures. This shift of emphasis from an analysis of power structures to the interactions between individuals and these structures in different cultural contexts helps construct a more robust understanding of men's gendered experiences of game cultures and helps pave the way towards a more hopeful future.

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