

MISOGYNY IN THE GAMING WORLD

MOST OF SENIOR Anne Brown's* girl classmates go home after school to binge TikTok or Netflix shows. Anne's midday sanctuary? Flying sniper bullets, raging warzones and the threat of annihilation.

At least, it used to be. She'd queue "Call of Duty" or "League of Legends" matches after restaurant shifts, curling over her desktop and a grilled chicken salad. Sometimes Anne played with online friends — people she trusted to watch her flank and warn her about enemies. Sometimes she played with strangers.

That was until "Get off the game bitch" and "Quit whore" boomed louder in her headset than rapid gunfire and chopping helicopter blades. Sometimes the strangers — often men in their 20s and 30s — got too comfortable insulting her behind screens.

Back when she played mostly first-person shooter games, Anne battled those taunts at least once a day. Switching to offline games changed that. Offline games mean no more voice chat, and no more voice chat means no more male teammates intentionally losing matches or shooting her character to sabotage the team.

"A lot of these people are grown adults throwing little fits over having a girl in a game," Anne said. "And half the time, you're queued with them because you're on par in skill, so it's like, 'What is the issue here?'"

Even if it's just a 12-year-old boy screaming "There's a *girl* in the party?" or "Send her back to the kitchen," the words have discouraged girls from playing, so much so that Anne rarely hears another girl's voice in online games.

But gaming isn't *that* male-dominated. Despite females being 48% of video gamers in the country, according to Statista, many live in fear that the other 52% will hear their voice. Online, they hide their gender. In real life, they don't mention the hobby that keeps them up at night.

If a girl does reveal herself? Backhanded compliments and sexual remarks are practically inevitable, Anne said. Comments that sophomore Avery Foster is also used to hearing by now.

Disbelief is a typical first reaction to Avery turning on her mic — her teammates aren't used to playing with girls. Players sometimes ask "Are you a girl or a little kid?" at the sound of her high-pitched voice. Next, they might beg for her Snapchat or Instagram even when Avery says she's just there to play — unless they're the type to groan about how they'll probably lose since

she's on the team.

One time, a boy invited multiple friends to the party to laugh with him after finding out he was playing with a *girl*. His buddies couldn't believe it.

"If the guys are like, 'Oh my God, there's a girl on my team,' it's really demeaning," Avery said. "I'll mute them. I'll turn on music because I just don't wanna listen."

Those reactions are why Avery rarely enables her voice chat. Watching TikToks of female livestreamers, she scrolls through comments sexualizing the gamer's body or accusing her of lacking skill.

Avery used to dream of playing professional esports — always wanting to be like her dad, a gaming fanatic since his first Atari — but girl players aren't respected the same as guys, she said.

Avery knows she shouldn't care. When she's swapping the headset with her dad — who introduced her to the game "Apex Legends" — he tells her to speak up. Be mean back, that's what he says. He raised her with a "girls can do anything" mindset, signing her up for a *real* baseball league, never softball, growing up.

So Avery overcomes it the best she can. Mutes the insults. Plays harder. With the misogyny comes the pressure to represent all female players, she said.

"If I'm not doing good, it's like I'm failing women," Avery said. "It's a drastic thing to say, but I don't want this guy to go into another game with a woman and be like, 'My previous experiences say that all women are bad at video games.'"

Freshman Nia Zugelder prefers to avoid that pressure and risk of mockery. Last time she played "Overwatch 2," she muted her mic, even after eliminating more players than anyone else on her team and advancing the payload significantly — the end goal of the battle game. Her teammates called out "*He's* carrying us!" She let them.

It's better that way, she said. If Nia misses a shot or gets killed, she's scared other players will discover her gender and target her because of it. But if she aims *too* well, they may scream that the game is rigged or that she shouldn't be playing.

In both her and senior Lillie Dirks' experience, people can forget their morals in multiplayer games. It's why Dirks prefers single-player games — automated characters are less likely to verbally berate her.

"There's a sort of mask effect where, being anonymous online, people are willing to say and do things that they normally wouldn't," Lillie said.

Female gamers are singled-out off the screen too. Girl players who livestream video games are seen as "eye candy" or labeled "attention-seekers" gaming for male validation, Anne said. It shapes the way all girl gamers are viewed.

In school, Lillie tends to *not* mention her gaming habits so she can dodge the stereotypes. But during one get-to-know-you project in business class, she paired up to present with a partner, sharing her hobbies — reading, cross-stitching, writing... and gaming.

"It was like an angel had descended," she said. "He got up in front of the class and said, 'This is Lillie. She plays Valorant.' The other guys in the class, their faces, it was like when a cat smells the treat. Like, 'We're paying attention now.'"

Lillie wishes girls were embraced rather than fetishized or shunned as players — after all, games are meant to be enjoyed by all genders. But she feels powerless against the comments.

But what can *she* do to stop virtual bullies? Boys should just act more appropriately online, she said. Some male players, like senior Roberto Galicia — who has gamed with both Lillie and Anne — may stand up for the girls. Even if it doesn't really help.

Galicia has heard sexist slurs tossed around by teammates simply because a player has a feminine username like "Sparkle" or "Starlight." But retaliation often just causes the bully to leave the game or aggravates them further, he said.

"Even if I try to argue with them, they're just way too stubborn to even see the other side if you're telling a guy to chill out," Galicia said. "Guys like that don't like to be commanded."

Reporting other players for harassment is a direct solution he's found. Still, many online games he's played ban gamers for only a couple of days for offensive behavior. It's not enough, he said, but girls should play with mics anyway. Maybe then, they could fight two enemies at once.

For now, Lillie urges gamers to welcome players of all genders and experience levels. Make gaming more enjoyable for everyone. If that means getting beaten by a girl, so be it.

"Gender doesn't matter when it comes to interests and skills," Lillie said. "If you're playing online and someone in your party or in the call is a female, just move on.

Don't make a big deal out of it, don't start degrading her, don't even praise her. If somebody's interested in something, then they're allowed to experience it."

CYBER STIGMA

stories by **francesca stamati**

While female gamers face misogyny during multiplayer video games, leading them to hide their gender or avoid certain games altogether, many still game to connect with others and improve their real-life skills

**name changed to protect identity*

WHY GIRLS STILL PLAY

BEHIND THE CONTROLLER, they don't feel like victims. They're in control — for the most part. Even though the gaming world is undeniably uncomfortable at times, they say that girls interested in gaming should try it.

Past the negativity are worthwhile perks — take it from seniors Anne Brown* and Lillie Dirks, sophomore Avery Foster and freshman Nia Zugelder. They're some of the only female gamers at East.

Girls can be hesitant or embarrassed to download a simulation app or buy a console, Lillie said, afraid of being labeled as lazy or weird for the hobby. But she knows that there's more to gaming than hunching over for hours and tapping computer keys in the dark.

Why does Lillie game? To transcend reality.

"I certainly cannot fight God with the power of Satan in real life, but I can do that in 'Persona 5,'" she said.

For Lillie, games are a creative outlet to explore alternate realities and limitless storylines. In "Persona 5," she can enter "mind palaces," acquiring special powers by fighting people's inner demons, eventually creating a "persona" — a physical embodiment of her

character's personality. The game's complexity and emotional exploration amazes her.

"The themes within 'Persona 5' are pretty cool because it gets pretty dark," Lillie said. "It does get a little cheesy from time to time, but your connections with other people and how you view reality can change what your truth is in the game."

For Anne, it's strategizing plays and raising her rank that keeps her gaming. Nia loves connecting with other gamers equally eager to boost their dexterity and reflexes. Avery says playing improves her emotional perseverance, staying calm when she gets frustrated.

Gaming goes beyond entertainment. Playing video games — including violent shooter games — can enhance children's learning, health and social skills, according to the American Psychological Association.

Still, only 42% of students consider playing video games a productive use of time, according to an Instagram poll of 207.



his violent games — when their mom wasn't home, of course. Lillie's fondest childhood memories are of soaring through space in "Super Mario Galaxy" and beating her dad and brothers in "Just Dance" battles.

It was Avery's dad who showed her video games. When she was a little girl, he'd sometimes hand her the headset and controllers to play with his buddies.

Now when she plays with her dad, they push each other to improve. If he asks "Why are you aiming downside?" then she'll remind him to "Pick up that loot!" Some fathers and daughters play puzzles or grab lunch together. Avery and her dad blast down enemies.

Her dad has taught her virtually-learned skills that are applicable to real life. While playing "Apex Legends," he tells her to visualize a mental map of their opponents and battle grounds. Learning to drive was no different. "Think of it as a video game," he said, training her to map out the pedestrians and surrounding cars.

Besides making driving more fun for

A very, video games may have helped her learn to make quicker maneuvers and driving decisions. Improved spatial skills and perception can also be benefits of gaming, according to the American Psychological Association.

And gaming doesn't have to involve pointing a gun. Some players like Lillie prefer life simulation and farming games to wind-down instead of getting ramped up by warfare. From high-speed racing to solitaire, there are over 5 million games that exist today, according to National Today.

Compared to the magnitude of options and benefits, enduring ignorant remarks and online idiocy is an obstacle worth overcoming for Lillie and the other gamers.

"It's absolutely mind-boggling how vast the [video game] world is," Lillie said. "There's something for everybody. There's games where you get to be active, there's games where you get to really think, games where you have to stay on your toes because you're in this world of crazy demons. There's so, so, so many different games out there."