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Stressing Out the 'Damsel in Distress': Intersectional Shifts in Women's Representation in Video Games

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving representation of women in video games, exploring intersectional shifts that challenge longstanding gender stereotypes. Through a qualitative investigation involving semi-structured interviews with 19 participants, the study investigates persistent tropes such as the 'damsel in distress' while highlighting the growing presence of complex female protagonists. The analysis situates these changes within postdigital feminist frameworks that emphasize how offline biases intersect with digital spaces, resulting in both heightened misogyny and opportunities for resistance. Findings reveal that online communities and competitive environments often perpetuate harassment and tokenistic inclusions, but they also offer avenues for marginalized gamers to advocate for authentic representation. Participants identified a desire for multifaceted character portrayals and recognized developing trends in popular franchises that depict women as autonomous heroes or ambitious villains. Nonetheless, concerns about 'forced representation' and cultural backlash remain. The study proposes that robust strategies—such as hiring more diverse teams, nuanced narrative design, and enhanced communal engagement—are necessary to establish meaningful inclusivity. This study advances three original claims. First, it shows how the everyday negotiation of misogyny in competitive play is conditioned by the infrastructural design of postdigital platforms rather than by textual representation alone. Second, it demonstrates empirically that intersectional self-positioning—articulated by participants through references to personal identities and experiences—shapes the reception of female players, avatars, and characters in ways not yet mapped in feminist game literature. Third, it argues that both these elements—representation and digital infrastructures—are interlinked with practices, communities, and policies in a triad that reinforces existing power structures and reproduces misogynistic experiences. This paper contributes to feminist game studies by illuminating how postdigital cultures reinforce or reconfigure gender norms and offers potential pathways for broader equity, both within the gaming industry and in wider sociocultural contexts.

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Introduction

Video games have become a defining media language of contemporary culture. Their significance for gender scholarship, however, cannot be grasped by isolating either on-screen depictions or workforce demographics. In postdigital societies, where online and offline practices are deeply interwoven, gendered power takes shape through the reciprocal shaping of texts, platforms, and communities (Sinclair and Hayes 2019; Jandrić and Knox 2022).

Accordingly, this article adopts a postdigital feminist framework from the outset. Postdigital feminisms treat technology and everyday life as inseparable and gendered, interrogate how biases are encoded in infrastructures, and foreground situated, intersectional voices (Hurley 2023; Crenshaw 2017). Within this orientation, questions of representation and visibility, rather than as ends in themselves, are read as effects of a socio-technical assemblage that includes platform governance, datafication, monetization, and community practices.

Empirically, we examine how intersecting biases migrate across three mutually constitutive layers of postdigital gaming cultures: representation (female avatars and narrative tropes), infrastructures (platform affordances that canalize harassment and resistance), and practice (workplace composition, communities, and corporate discourse). Nineteen gamers participated in semi-structured interviews conducted within Discord, a polymedia environment widely used for play and sociality, which enabled a situated approach at the interface of everyday life and platformed interaction (Postill and Pink 2012). This framing organizes the study's research questions: how gamers of different intersecting identities interpret contemporary portrayals of women (RQ1), and how the affordances of postdigital platforms mediate harassment, resistance, and community support (RQ2). By analyzing the same interview corpus across the three layers, we argue that misogyny in gaming is reproduced or disrupted less by textual representation alone than by the convergence of representational forms with digital infrastructures and communal practices. The fieldwork also speaks to scalar arenas invoked by participants—the supranational market of Europe, the global cultural reference of the USA, and the national horizon of Italy—which continue to shape broadband policy, language use, and formal education. Our orientation thus attends to how discourses and infrastructures travel across these scales while being locally negotiated.

The remainder of this section establishes the theoretical ground for that analysis, first by outlining postdigital feminisms and their relevance to game studies; then revisiting debates on representation in light of this framework, preparing the move to the methodological design and empirical analysis.

Postdigital Feminism and the Entanglements of Gaming Cultures

Within the evolving field of postdigital theory, feminist scholarship examines the interconnections among online/offline practices, cultural logics, and embodied experiences (Hurley 2023). The prefix 'post'—as in postdigitalism, postfeminism, postmodernity, poststructuralism, postcolonialism—signals a critical departure from earlier interpretive paradigms (Sinclair and Hayes 2019). Postdigital feminisms emerge not only as critiques of normative and universalist strands of historical feminism but also as theoretical spaces capable of recognizing and embracing the multiplicity of experiences, claims, and epistemologies that characterize feminist thought today. In particular, postdigital feminist theorization responds to the technocultural configurations of the contemporary world, exposing their often sexist and exclusionary logic (Hurley 2023).

Postdigital feminisms integrate feminist genealogies that trace how gender and power shape digital infrastructures, while acknowledging the 'post' as a prompt to question prior frameworks (Sinclair and Hayes 2019). Ontologically, they treat technology and everyday life as inseparable and gendered. They challenge the assumption that digital spaces are 'neutral,' highlighting how biases are encoded in platforms and social practices (Hurley 2023). The study of video games benefits from this worldview by revealing the ways female characters are produced and consumed within entangled socio-technical realms. From an epistemic point of view, feminisms critique technocentric narratives and investigate how unequal power relations persist in online/offline experiences. Feminist epistemologies emphasize the multiplicity of lived realities, urging scholars to foreground women's voices across race, class, and sexuality (Crenshaw 2017). In gaming contexts, these approaches reveal how female gamers navigate stereotypes and objectification. Our study aligns with such perspectives by querying the cultural codes shaping female representation and by acknowledging intersectional differences among participants. As for their methodological stakes, postdigital feminisms endorse critical, often activist-oriented methods. They advocate context-grounded inquiries that include, rather than homogenize, diverse women's experiences.

In our qualitative design, open-ended interviews capture participants' narratives of inclusion, marginalization, or latent biases in gaming. Biases embedded in technology are not accidental; they are coded from the outset into the systems and models that underpin many digital platforms. Postdigital cultures tend to reproduce technocentric and hierarchical worldviews, often failing to counter, or even reinforcing, sexist and misogynistic content (Jandrić and Knox 2022; Hurley 2023). A distinct strand within this field concerns feminist and queer gamer activism and community-led interventions. These initiatives not only challenge exclusionary practices within gaming cultures but also actively construct spaces of participation and empowerment for marginalized groups. Notable examples include organizations such as AbleGamers,[1] which advocates for accessibility in gaming for people with

[1] See https://ablegamers.org/about/. Accessed 21 November 2025.

disabilities; Women in Games,[2] which supports greater gender diversity in the industry; and community-driven modifications (mods) that de-sexualize avatars and promote inclusive representation (Ruberg 2019). Such interventions demonstrate how grassroots activism and community engagement can reshape digital environments, making them more accessible and equitable. Rooted in the principles of equality and equity across ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation, postdigital feminist activism promotes intersectionality and expansive identities. It opposes gender-based discrimination, ableism, racism, and homophobia. It embraces body positivity, plus-size representation, transgender activism, and other identity positions that challenge normative boundaries (Hurley 2023).

This framework anchors the analysis that follows. Representation, infrastructures, and practice are treated as co-constitutive dimensions through which gendered power is reproduced or reconfigured in gaming. In the next subsection, we revisit debates on representation—long a focus of feminist game studies—not as a self-contained object, but as one node within this postdigital assemblage.

Revisiting Representation: Stereotypes, Symbolic Power, and the Video Game Imaginary

While representation is not the sole object of our inquiry, it remains a key site where gendered meanings are articulated and circulated, and thus must be read in relation to the infrastructures and practices through which games are produced and played. On the one hand, such representations raise critical questions about the rules and conventions that govern virtual environments; on the other, they intersect with feminist theoretical frameworks, particularly postfeminism, understood not as an instrumental 'tool' but as what Gill (2007) terms a cultural sensibility that suffuses late-modern media with neoliberal notions of choice and agency. In aligning postfeminism with postdigital critique, the study treats it as a discursive horizon against which players articulate ambivalent readings of empowerment.

In terms of representation, historically, many female characters in video games have been subject to hypersexualization, and only a minority have been portrayed as protagonists. Women have been frequently depicted as vulnerable, fragile, or child-like, often dressed in ways that are implausible for the situations they face. But how do such portrayals affect the way female gamers perceive themselves? These dynamics reveal a form of structural misogyny, highlighting the extent to which attention is often directed at women's bodies rather than their actions or agency (Brown 2014). The aim of this study is to analyze video games through a gender lens, understood as the set of social processes by which societies assign meaning to sexed bodies and construct gender roles in hierarchical and segregated ways (Piccone Stella and Saraceno 1996). As with other forms of media, video games actively contribute to the formation and reinforcement of gender models. These models are often stereotypical and restrictive, limiting the space for plurality and complexity that characterizes

[2] See https://www.womeningames.org/our-mission/. Accessed 21 November 2025.

real social life. The video game industry thus functions as a vehicle for ideological norms, shaping cultural imaginaries, behaviours, and attitudes across all gender identities (Chirchiano and Tuselli 2016).

In the 1960s, a fertile and stimulating dialogue emerged between feminism and media theory, leading to some of the first theoretical reflections and empirical studies on media representations from a gender perspective (Azzalini and Giusti 2019). Advertising, film, and television were critically examined, disrupting the passive reception and internalization of media imagery from childhood onward. According to some scholars, a similar analytical process has yet to take place in a systematic way within video game studies. Although journals such as Games and Culture[3] (established 2006) have produced a substantial body of scholarship on interactive media, these debates have been taken up unevenly within mainstream gender-studies curricula in continental Europe, allowing stereotypical representations and narrative devices to circulate with limited critical scrutiny (Dahl and Kennedy-Macfoy 2020).

Even when confined to rigid typologies (white, heterosexual, male), male characters in games benefit from a greater range of visual traits, abilities, and biographical complexity. The origin of a kind of 'video game machismo' may lie in the overwhelmingly male composition of the industry, both in terms of production and consumption (Chess and Shaw 2015). The result is a product made by men, primarily for young men—a monoperspectival vision that influences how all characters, particularly women, are represented. By contrast, female characters are often trapped within a narrow and suffocating imaginary: relegated to secondary, passive roles, removed from action, devoid of agency or power, and frequently sexualized or objectified. Despite the growth and complexity of the video game phenomenon, the industry remains, in many ways, a male-dominated space, both in terms of its workforce and the content it produces. Consequently, video games reflect broader collective symbolic structures that exert powerful identificatory forces on players (Chirchiano and Tuselli 2016).

Media are embedded in our everyday lives and reflect society in its specific spatio-temporal contexts, articulating both social transformation and constraint. This is perhaps even more true for video games, which offer not only representation but also interaction, allowing users to actively engage with experiences, desires, and imaginaries (Ruspini 2009). Beyond in-game representations, female gamers often face hostility from predominantly male gaming communities, including insults, harassment, and threats (Brown 2014).

Methodology

Study Design

This investigation employed a qualitative approach to probe how participants interpret and describe female representation in video games. Qualitative methods are

[3] See https://journals.sagepub.com/home/gac. Accessed 21 November 2025.

particularly valuable for delving into personal experiences, especially when seeking nuanced views about evolving portrayals of women in gaming (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014). Through one-on-one conversations, it becomes easier to understand the underlying factors shaping how interviewees perceive shifts in female characterization. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their capacity to generate elaborate reflections on attitudes and experiences. This design aligns with the call for in-depth analysis of subjective impressions and promotes the emergence of themes rooted in personal interpretation (Gray et al. 2018).

The design was guided by two research questions:

RQ1. How do gamers of different intersecting identities interpret contemporary representations of women in video games?
RQ2. In what ways do the affordances of postdigital platforms mediate experiences of harassment, resistance, and community support?

Participants and Sampling

Nineteen individuals volunteered for the study, and all had different social and gaming backgrounds. Their ages ranged from teenagers to late thirties. Six participants identified as women, and 13 identified as men. All of them were of Italian origin, even though they lived across multiple countries. Each shared a distinct set of habits regarding game choice, from role-playing enthusiasts to fans of fighting games, cooperative shooters, and visual novels. Some played every day for multiple hours, whereas others reported briefer weekly sessions. This spread of ages, gender identities, and gaming genres aimed to capture diverse outlooks on female characters and to reflect a cross-section of gaming practices. No personally identifying material was collected. Participants were chosen primarily on the basis of expressed willingness to discuss their experiences. Individuals who had a history of playing a variety of game genres were included to gather more comprehensive insights into representation across multiple contexts. Participants' demographic data are represented in Fig. 1. The first plot contains the age of each participant, identified by their IDs. The second plot represents how many hours each participant spends gaming in a week. The third plot represents the amount of years each participant has been gaming for. Yellow columns indicate male participants; green columns represent female participants.

Sampling followed a pragmatic–convenience logic (Etikan et al. 2016) because the project was self-funded and exploratory. Recruitment began with a public call circulated on Italian Reddit communities and university mailing lists, then snowballed through Discord referrals. The gender imbalance (13 men, six women) is treated analytically rather than idealized; female perspectives are therefore read with heightened attention, while male dominance itself becomes an empirical datum. All volunteers were of Italian origin because the ethical clearance obtained from the authors' institution stipulated linguistic homogeneity for a first phase; subsequent comparative work will extend the frame.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually in a private Discord channel dedicated to this study. Interviews were conversational but followed a guiding framework, covering topics such as general gaming background, views on representation, experiences of interaction in online communities, and reflections on how the industry might shape or be shaped by player perceptions. Discord was selected because it represents what Postill and Pink (2012) call a 'polymedia environment', blending text, voice, and video in a single, persistent space widely adopted by gamers. Conducting interviews inside the same platform used for play enabled a situated, postdigital approach in which method and field collapse, allowing participants to share screenshots, emotes, and real-time game clips that enriched the conversational flow.

Each participant was informed about the aim of the research and how their responses might be used, then asked for verbal consent before discussion began. Demographic data, such as age and gaming history, were recorded separately to allow for contextualization during later analysis. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 min, and all were preserved as text transcripts. Because the interviews took place in Italian, the transcripts were subsequently translated into English by a native speaker with experience in video game discourse. Translations were checked to maintain the personal expressions shared by each participant.

Coding

In this research, an integrated coding procedure was adopted that drew on both inductive and deductive approaches (Braun and Clarke 2006). The deductive element stems from the conceptual ideas uncovered through preliminary reading of feminist game studies and intersectional literature. The inductive element allows themes to surface naturally from the participants' own narratives, thereby widening the scope of discovery beyond existing theoretical assumptions. To prepare the interview transcripts for this process, they were rendered manually or through a form of intelligent transcription that aimed to capture participants' original phrasing while omitting superfluous pauses or filler words that did not contribute to meaning.

During the coding, attention was paid to recurrences in how players discussed representation, character tropes, the agency of in-game characters, and the lived experiences of gamers, including those who identify with marginalized groups. This process involved labeling excerpts of text and linking them to codes reflecting either constructs explored in previous research or novel insights from the interview data. Inter-coder reflexivity sessions were held twice during analysis; agreement on code application reached 82%, which Braun and Clarke (2022) deem satisfactory for thematic coherence in reflexive approaches. Disagreements centred on whether 'objectification' and 'hyper-sexualization' should be merged; the team ultimately retained both to foreground subtle discursive differences raised by participants.

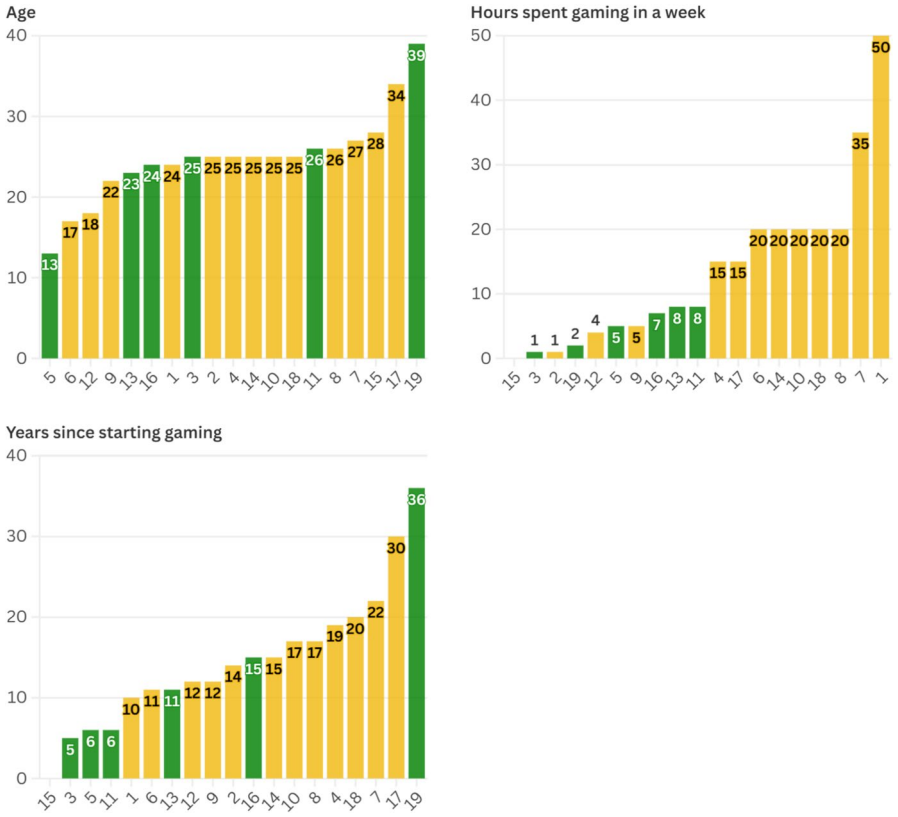


Fig. 1 Participants' demographic data

Thematic Analysis and Analytical Framework: Situated Postdigital Feminism

The project adopted a three-cycle analytic protocol. A first phase analyzed the participants' belief regarding the representation of female bodies, characters, agencies, and actions across gaming environments. This led to a classification where relevant sections of their statements were marked as dominant, negotiated, and oppositional, with regard to specific game elements (e.g., Lara Croft's sex appeal). This process was largely inspired by Hall's (1997) encoding/decoding model: when players interact with gaming environments, each character, action, setting, or simply each design choice is—often subconsciously—assigned a sense within a specific belief system or discourse, thus 'decoding' the meaning that was originally 'encoded' by the game's developers. This does not only apply to fictional characters, but also to multiplayer experiences, where a real-life event becomes entangled, in postdigital fashion, with a ludic setting. Through the eyes of a gamer, under this perspective, the actions of a fictional female character and those of a woman teammate may be encoded and decoded through much the same process, but with widely different results and producing structurally diverse analytical interpretations.

A second round focused on the feelings and emotions that surfaced through the interviews when discussing key topics. Such a step was deemed necessary to holistically understand the forces that move the daily actions of members of the gaming community, in an effort to concretely analyze which elements spark which reactions, and how those reactions are handled and coped with in practical terms. Ahmed's (2013) theory of affective economies can be considered a point of reference for this process: in a complex, intertwined environment—once again, a postdigital reality, where lives are no longer physical or digital but transcend beyond this dualism—it is imperative to take into consideration the raw emotional values of interactions, whether positive or negative. How does the 'anti-woke' discourse make diversity feel 'forced' or threatening? How does shame 'stick' to female voices in chat, making silence a preferable state?

Finally, a third and overarching approach consolidated the overall analytical framework: looking at the results through the lenses of situated, postdigital feminism. The entanglement of offline biases with digital infrastructures and hybrid play experiences represents the basis for understanding how and why both the representations and the effects we observed are produced and circulated.

Two validation tactics grounded the interpretation. First, an in vivo check: four participants reviewed thematic summaries in a follow-up Discord call, confirming resonance with their experiences. Second, a peer-debrief workshop with scholars of feminist game studies challenged preliminary claims of 'progressive trajectories,' prompting a re-examination of the preliminary readings. After thoroughly reading the annotated materials, the next step involved grouping similar codes into thematic clusters. This process included examining how players depict female characters in gaming, recount personal experiences in online spaces, perceive the gaming industry's role in shaping or reinforcing stereotypes, and imagine possible improvements to inclusion in future game design (Gray et al. 2018).

Themes were refined by comparing them to the research questions and the recognized complexities of representation and identities in digital contexts (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014). Any cluster that lacked solid backing in participant accounts or was too broad to convey specific insights was either dropped or condensed into a more fitting thematic label. Each final theme was articulated as a distilled statement of the core idea, eliminating extraneous codes or data excerpts that did not align with it. These finalized themes feature prominently in the results, offering a structured lens on what participants value, criticize, or aspire to see within modern gaming cultures.

Overview of the Questions' Macro Areas

A few initial questions encouraged participants to reveal personal histories as gamers and situate their identities and experiences before approaching specific issues of representation or community dynamics. Individuals were prompted to name a favourite video game character ('Who is your favorite video game character, and why do you like them?') and to describe their overall trajectory as players ('Could you describe your overall experience with video games?'). This macro area helps

build a foundational context, shedding light on how people first developed their gaming interests and establishing whether they entered gaming cultures with any preconceptions about gender roles.

The second macro area investigates how participants perceive the portrayal of female characters in the games they play. During interviews, respondents were asked, 'How would you describe the portrayal of female characters in the games you currently play?' and were encouraged to supply concrete illustrations from specific titles. This was supplemented by references to notable figures, such as Samus Aran from *Metroid*[4] or Ellie from *The Last of Us*,[5] through the question, 'Which female characters from popular games (e.g., Samus Aran, Ellie) stand out to you, and why do you think they are significant?' The purpose of these prompts is to elicit opinions about whether current female roles uphold or subvert established tropes and to gauge whether participants have seen any meaningful progress in the industry's scrutiny of stereotypes.

A third macro area explores how identity-based differences can shape social experiences in online platforms. Questions such as, 'Have you or people you know ever adjusted how you present yourself when playing online games?' and 'In your experience, do a player's identities (such as gender, race, or sexual orientation) affect interactions within gaming communities?' expand upon the notion that multiplayer spaces are not neutral. They can be marked by discrimination, harassment, or acceptance, often depending on perceived or revealed identities.

A fourth macro area directs attention to the wider forces at play in shaping representation, including publisher strategies, fan responses, and developer practices. The question, 'Do you feel portrayals of women in certain games might influence perceptions beyond the games themselves?' gauges whether participants detect a link between fictional women on screen and real societal conceptions. Interviewees were further encouraged to discuss fan communities and their power to contest or reinforce limited portrayal. Some were asked, 'What role do fan communities (forums, social media, modding groups) play in shaping or challenging how female characters are represented?' to clarify whether, for example, player-driven modifications lead to more diverse narratives or, conversely, reinforce narrow ideals.

Another macro area brings into focus the entwined nature of virtual and real-life settings, initially explored here through questions such as, 'How do you think online platforms influence perceptions of women in gaming?' The intent is to examine whether postdigital environments, where offline and digital realities intersect, help shape or dismantle gender stereotypes. Participants were also asked, 'Have you come across any initiatives or conversations aimed at changing or improving female representation in video games?'.

Finally, participants were prompted to imagine strategies for more inclusive portrayals by reflecting on questions such as, 'What steps, if any, could game developers or publishers take to foster inclusive and authentic representations of women and

[4] See https://www.nintendo.com/it-it/Giochi/Universo-Nintendo/Portale-di-Metroid/Portale-di-Metroid-627595.html?srsltid=AfmBOooCoPRR-fiUtZPQwugLQQOEpqFIqcGFnYJlAWbL7Ul80-kfv6Fm. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[5] See https://www.playstation.com/it-it/the-last-of-us/. Accessed 21 November 2025.

other marginalized groups?' and 'What do you see as potential challenges or barriers to achieving broader inclusion and diversity in gaming?' Spearheading possible improvements underscores the prospective directions for feminist and intersectional engagement.

Results

This section consolidates the themes that emerged from the interviews and contextualizes them within feminist game studies and postdigital perspectives. We present the findings as a series of theoretically embedded analyses. A broad reading of the interviews found several topics grouped in three macro themes: 'Representation,' 'Infrastructures and Harassment,' and 'Policies, practices and communities.' Some mirror concerns in feminist studies regarding stereotypical female roles; others convey more nuanced experiences in online spaces shaped by participants' identities. Several themes cut across issues such as 'woke' conflicts, character objectification, and the influence of online communities. The thematic analysis indicates that certain motifs recur across the corpus, often reflecting tensions between entrenched stereotypes, evolving portrayals, and the push-and-pull of audience expectations and production constraints.

Before presenting discrete themes, it is necessary to trace the analytical path from code to argument. Table 1 maps each macro-category to (i) the discursive formations identified through Hall's encoding/decoding schema, (ii) the affective elements that were identified and linked to them, and (iii) the postdigital processes—datafication, platform governance, latency—that mediate those formations.

Reading laterally across the table shows how gendered meanings do not pre-exist the interface; they crystallize in what Goggin (2011) calls 'playbour'—the fusion of play and digital labour. When women mute themselves, they do not merely avoid interpersonal hostility; they cede affective bandwidth to men who then dominate sonic space, reinforcing patriarchal audibility.

Representation: A Contested Terrain

Representation in our corpus functions as a postdigital element whose meanings crystallize across platforms, genres, and fan practices. Characters like Lara Croft or Bayonetta circulate through what Goggin (2011) terms 'playbour', accruing affective value in communities that debate bodies, agency, and legitimacy over time. Participants' readings—nostalgic, oppositional, or negotiated—index this circulation and show that 'progress' hinges less on single titles than on the socio-technical assemblages through which characters are produced, modded, monetized, and remembered (Ahmed 2013; Hall 1997).

Table 1 Macro-categories, discursive position, postdigital mediation processes

Macro-category	Dominant code (cycle 1)	Affective elements (cycle 2)	Postdigital mediation (cycle 3)
Representation	Female characters caught between stereotypes and actually compelling characterization	Gaming experiences shape feelings towards certain characters, calls for authenticity	Characters become mediated postdigital objects which carry values and affective economies with them
Digital spaces, infrastructures, and harassment	E-girl aesthetics; voice chat vehicolates harassment	Hegemonic reading of platformized femininity	Twitch monetization incentivises self-sexualization; voice-chat default routes harassment in real time
Industry and communities	'Forced representation,' wokeness, necessity for better hiring policies	Oppositional reading of corporate rhetoric	Algorithms and controversies as deliberate power structures

Several interviewees offered lengthy reflections on Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*.[6] ID 19 remembered 'playing the first game in '96 on the PlayStation 1,' describing Lara's original iteration as 'super badass' but criticizing subsequent reboots for toning her down: 'She became too emotional, too weak.' By contrast, ID 15 articulated a preference for older sagas, highlighting *Angel of Darkness*[7] as where 'Lara is much more mature and self-assured.' Others, like ID 13, identified with Lara's archaeology background: 'I study archaeology, so she's a character who's closest to my passions.' ID 18 also appreciated the game's departure from conventional tropes, observing how 'a girl, and not just the classic man like Indiana Jones, is interested in history and faces certain situations.' Beyond her, participants highlighted Samus Aran, *Bayonetta*,[8] Areelu (from *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous*[9]), Sadie Adler (*Red Dead Redemption 2*[10]), and others who exemplify authority or formidable abilities. ID 1 felt Pathfinder intentionally 'places women primarily in positions of power,' while ID 14 praised Bayonetta's style of 'literally kicking ass' and subverting conventional depictions. ID 7 shared a detailed reflection on Sadie Adler's transformation 'from a sad woman who lost her husband to a character with nerves of steel, not envying her male counterparts.'

Although not as frequently mentioned as Lara Croft or Samus, Zelda's progression stands out for one participant in particular. ID 6 described how 'Zelda too, in recent games, is more independent, whereas initially, she somewhat reflected the 'damsel in distress' stereotype.' This participant contrasted earlier *Legend of Zelda*[11] titles (where saving Zelda was the central quest) with more recent iterations that grant her direct involvement in the plot. By highlighting that 'these games are more about her,' ID 6 suggests that the series is now moving beyond its legacy of passively imperiled royalty.

On the other hand, a few participants expressed disappointment in the lack of unrepentant female antagonists, with ID 3 praising Sister Friede from *Dark Souls*[12]: 'She's a violent female character without redemption… I want more totally evil female characters.' The participant notes a pattern across games where female foes receive redemptive arcs or softened motivations. ID 1 cited Areelu as a main villain who 'has a very strong, impactful personality' often absent in female depictions, thus giving her an unusual commanding presence.

When asked about their favourite characters, a strong emphasis was placed on protagonists celebrated for uprightness. ID 1 spoke at length about Kiryu Kazuma

[6] See https://www.tombraider.com. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[7] See https://store.steampowered.com/agecheck/app/225020/. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[8] See https://www.nintendo.com/it-it/Giochi/Giochi-scaricabili-per-Nintendo-Switch/Bayonetta-1313466.html. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[9] See https://store.steampowered.com/app/1184370/Pathfinder_Wrath_of_the_Righteous__Enhanced_Edition/. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[10] See https://www.rockstargames.com/it/reddeadredemption2. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[11] See https://www.nintendo.com/it-it/Giochi/Universo-Nintendo/Portale-di-The-Legend-of-Zelda/Portale-di-The-Legend-of-Zelda-627606.html?srsltid=AfmBOopne82Qk6MDRNt2uix-9730ORSkDmriHGbNKi-qI_vi6CzSAZFz. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[12] See https://it.bandainamcoent.eu/dark-souls/dark-souls-trilogy. Accessed 21 November 2025.

from *Yakuza*[13]: 'He's a very good person, always willing to help others, with a strong moral code not to kill anyone.' ID 2 similarly commended Cole McGrath (*Infamous 2*[14]) for heroic perseverance amid adversity. Interestingly, a vast majority of the mentioned characters were male.

A pervasive theme concerns the tension between shallow sexualization and more fleshed-out female arcs. ID 3 singled out Alisa Bosconovitch from *Tekken*,[15] describing her as 'a female character with robotic body parts who was not sexualized at all.' The participant commended the game for not capitalizing on Alisa's unusual nature by over-fetishizing her mechanical limbs. Another participant (ID 16) critiqued Jill Valentine from *Resident Evil*[16] for being 'strong but still… sweet, defenseless, naive,' implying that scripts often compromise female toughness with 'mandatory' feminine traits. While praising subtle design improvements in certain games, participants lamented the persistent overemphasis on body shape or revealing outfits. ID 15 insisted that 'Bayonetta was designed by women,' attempting to mitigate criticism by pointing to female-led design. These accounts exemplify RQ1's concern with interpretive variability while foreshadowing how platformed circulation conditions what forms of femininity are audible and visible in play.

Infrastractures and Harassment

A second overarching theme that emerged from the conversations focused on sexist harassment and how gaming infrastructures facilitate and enable it. Participants consistently described misogyny not as an interpersonal anomaly but as a product of infrastructural design. Default-on voice chat, the immediacy of the headset, matchmaking logics, and streaming monetisation together configure who can safely speak and how femininity is made legible in competitive settings. In this sense, harassment is routed by platforms: voice reveals become triggers; identity masking becomes a situated tactic; Twitch's economies incentivize hyper-feminine self-presentation while also exposing women to scrutiny (Anciones-Anguita and Checa-Romero 2024; Hurley 2023).

A set of participants emphasized how competitive environments shape judgment. ID 2 described interactions on *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*[17] servers where 'as soon as a woman spoke in voice chat, she was kicked out of the match.' ID 5 recalled that her friends' *Fortnite*[18] sessions devolved into 'insults' and 'ableist slurs' after team conflicts, with the game organizer eventually banning the offenders. ID 4 took this further, calling 'some players brainwashed by competitiveness.' Participants who liked to play free-to-play shooters often rated those spaces as hostile. Younger participants, in particular, framed multiplayer toxicity as almost inevitable unless

[13] See https://www.xbox.com/it-IT/games/yakuza. Accessed 21 November 2025.
[14] See https://blog.it.playstation.com/tag/infamous-2/. Accessed 21 November 2025.
[15] See https://it.bandainamcoent.eu/tekken/tekken-8. Accessed 21 November 2025.
[16] See https://www.playstation.com/it-it/introduction-resident-evil. Accessed 21 November 2025.
[17] See https://www.xbox.com/it-IT/games/store/counter-strike-go/c4q8mjnv4564. Accessed 21 November 2025.
[18] See https://www.fortnite.com/?lang=it. Accessed 21 November 2025.

moderators or entire communities intervene. Much overlap exists between toxicity issues and rigid stereotypes in multiplayer games. ID 14 recalled a friend playing *Valorant*[19] who 'pretended to be a man to avoid flame' because of the assumption that 'girls are always bad at the game.' Similarly, ID 6 perceived how some streamers negatively portray women, 'spreading these thoughts to their audience' and normalizing misogyny.

Expanding on community behaviours, participants described how streaming exacerbates or counters sexism. ID 11 highlighted that 'on Twitch… if you are a woman, you have to behave in a certain way to advance in the gaming field,' hinting at expected self-presentations. Likewise, ID 4 admitted, 'Personally, just a few times I've tried creating a female character, just to see what it felt like to be an e-girl. Unfortunately, nobody ever hit on me any of those times,' suggesting a simultaneous curiosity and ambivalence about occupying the 'e-girl' label, a concept often linked to performance, style, and viral visibility (Dahl and Kennedy-Macfoy 2020). ID 11 also observed community tactics around identity concealment: 'Boys pretend to be girls to receive positive attention from men, while girls pretend to be boys to avoid it.' The same participant further pointed to a recurring image of femininity online: 'Very often, they are girls with the whole pink setup, headphones with cat ears, so it's inevitable to identify a pattern. Then, whether they are being themselves or doing it for attention and marketing, it's a very difficult mechanism to escape from.' Meanwhile, ID 6 worried that negative streamer commentary 'can spread these thoughts to their audience.' Indeed, postdigital frameworks emphasize how digital spaces intensify offline stereotypes rather than simply transcend them (Hurley 2023).

Finally, participants identified persistent obstacles: high development costs (ID 1), audience hostility (ID 16), marketing constraints, and cultural inertia. ID 16 singled out mainstream gamer male communities as reluctant to embrace female bodies or narratives. ID 3 further contended that 'the community often doesn't want change; both men and women don't seem ready to accept an anomalous role for a woman,' citing an example from Genshin Impact: 'A *Genshin*[20] character has her children call her "father," so the game's community justified this by saying the character is trans, when according to the plot, this isn't the case, and the community wanted to cancel her.' Meanwhile, ID 19, referring ironically to 'Trump' and anti–social justice movements, concluded that 'it's part of the market,' implying that many Western studios hedge representation efforts to avoid alienating core fans. Read through RQ2, these testimonies position platforms as co-producers of gendered harm and resistance, rather than neutral conduits of player behaviour.

Policies, Practices and Communities

Debates around 'forced representation' and 'wokeness' in our corpus illustrate a platformed economy of visibility in which outrage travels quickly and accrues value

[19] See https://playvalorant.com/it-it/. Accessed 21 November 2025.
[20] See https://genshin.hoyoverse.com/it/. Accessed 21 November 2025.

(Banet-Weiser 2018; Kanai and Gill 2020). Participants' scepticism toward corporate diversity rhetoric sits alongside calls for structural change—hiring, consultation, and pipeline reform—suggesting that authenticity is read at the level of labour and governance, not only at the level of character rosters. Intersectional inclusion, in this view, is a contested practice shaped by algorithms, community norms, and market hedging (Crenshaw 2017; Jandrić and Knox 2022).

Numerous participants mentioned so-called woke controversies. ID 7 explicitly criticized the 'uproar' surrounding *Sweet Baby Inc.*,[21] alleging that 'they forced ideologies into games (the so-called woke), aiming to change the plot or dialogues.' This frames an undercurrent of distrust toward expansions in gender or racial representation that participants viewed as imposed. Moreover, ID 16 remarked on how some male players label certain releases as 'woke' if 'there's a rainbow in the background,' noting that 'the main obstacle is the gamers themselves, primarily male gamers.' Reflecting on 'forced changes,' ID 7 indicated that 'instead of writing a well-characterized character, developers focus on forcing an ideal,' fueling negative community reactions. By contrast, ID 5 expressed curiosity about re-centering stories on female protagonists precisely to gauge how audiences respond. In a related vein, ID 18 recounted a fantasy RPG (*Dragon Age: The Veilguard*[22]) that introduced a storyline on trans identities, but in a way the participant found jarring. 'The problem isn't the topic but how you present it,' they observed, pointing out that such efforts need to be 'well diluted into the story' rather than 'slapped' onto a plot. They also noted that many players in fantasy universes expect freedom from real-world prejudices, so handling delicate themes requires cohesion and depth to avoid the impression of 'tokenistic' or forced representation.

Despite frustrations, many participants suggested solutions. ID 11 recommended a design approach similar to *Monster Hunter Wilds*[23] or *The Sims*,[24] letting players combine traditionally 'male/female' traits or outfits. ID 2 advocated having studios find distinct creative identities, rather than 'a wave of political correctness' purely for commercial aims. ID 7 pointed to *Celeste*[25] as an example of a subtle, effective portrayal of a queer protagonist, neither forced nor peripheral. Others brought up hiring policies: ID 14 credited the presence of more women developers as a likely impetus for inclusive content. These proposals echo scholarship calling for structural changes, not short-lived gestures (Crenshaw 2017).

The influence of online and offline communities was discussed profusely: multiple participants tied one's social environment to vulnerability in adopting problematic attitudes. ID 2 mentioned the term '*hikikomori*,[26]' explaining that such isolated gamers might 'have no contact with real life' and thus treat games as primary

[21] See https://sweetbabyinc.com. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[22] See https://www.ea.com/it/games/dragon-age/dragon-age-the-veilguard. Accessed 21November 2025.

[23] See https://www.monsterhunter.com/wilds/it/. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[24] See https://www.ea.com/it-it/games/the-sims. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[25] See https://store.steampowered.com/app/504230/Celeste/. Accessed 21 November 2025.

[26] Hikikomori individuals are characterized by prolonged social withdrawal, with potential cultural and chronological differences in age, gender, and duration across countries (Nonaka et al. 2022).

reference points for behaviour or beliefs. ID 15 likewise contended that 'the experience the person has with women' in the offline world more strongly mitigates internalizing stereotypes.

The discussion often moved from in-game players' experiences to game development environments. ID 18 recounted that 'men and women can both produce good or bad content,' but that 'we need a 50/50 split in design to reflect different experiences.' ID 3 insisted that studios 'interview women and minorities' to avoid recycling gamer-centric viewpoints. ID 19 similarly pointed out the importance of genuine effort, asserting that internal practices must align with external messaging: 'Hiring policies, it's clear that's where you start. If you have to talk about a certain topic, it's useless if internally you do the exact opposite, like greenwashing.' Several participants recognized that misogynistic or marginalizing outcomes can still arise under female leadership if broader cultural norms remain unchallenged. These dynamics complete the triad, showing how representational disputes and infrastructural affordances are braided with organizational practices and community gatekeeping.

Common Pattern Visualization

An accompanying table (Table 2) was compiled, summarizing recurring keywords from each macro-category. While younger females (IDs 5 and 13) expressed frustration at sexualized depictions, older male participants sometimes reflected ambivalence, praising strong, 'tough' women while opposing 'forced changes.'

Discussion

The findings presented in the previous section offer a textured account of gender in contemporary video games, but it is our aim to enrich them with an analytical lens capable of moving beyond a simple inventory of representations or player grievances. A postdigital feminist framework provides such a lens, revealing that the tensions and conflicts described by participants, more than discrete phenomena, are symptoms of a deeply entangled system where gendered power is produced and contested at the intersections of representation, infrastructure, and practice. This discussion will unpack the results through this framework, following the three thematic areas to argue that misogyny in gaming is fundamentally an infrastructural problem, one that is coded into the very platforms, economies, and materialities of play.

The contested terrain of representation, as articulated by the participants, exemplifies the workings of a postdigital cultural economy. Iconic characters like Lara Croft function as postdigital objects, their meaning constantly renegotiated across an assemblage of platforms, editions, and collective memory. The debate between her original 'badass' iteration and her 'emotional' reboot, more than a dispute over narrative preference, becomes a conflict over the affective and political value of a digital asset that circulates through decades of technological change, marketing campaigns, and fan-made modifications. Participants' readings of Lara—whether

dominant (accepting her original sexualization as empowering), negotiated (appreciating her agency while critiquing the reboot), or oppositional (identifying her as a product of the male gaze)—are shaped by their own situated positions within this entangled history. The desire for unrepentant female villains or morally complex heroes, then, can be read as a demand for subjectivities that disrupt the restrictive symbolic order where female agency is so often compromised by what one participant called 'mandatory' feminine traits. In a postdigital context, these characters are data points in a vast, affective economy where their value is debated, their bodies are modded, and their stories are fought over in the forums and fan communities that constitute their extended life.

The figure of Lara Croft, a recurring touchstone for participants of varying ages and genders, offers a particularly potent site for an analysis of representation. Her evolution from the hyper-sexualized icon of the 1990s to the more emotionally grounded protagonist of the recent reboots can be considered a complex reconfiguration of her function within the political economy of the games industry. The original Lara, as Han and Song (2014) argue, was a 'female Frankenstein monster,' an assemblage of contradictory signifiers engineered for a predominantly male gaze. Her exaggerated physique and the game's voyeuristic third-person camera were not incidental details but were infrastructural components of her design, coding objectification into the very mechanics of play. The nostalgia expressed by participant ID 19 for this 'super badass' Lara, who was later deemed 'too emotional,' illuminates the affective power of this original construction. For some, her invulnerability and unapologetic aggression, even when framed by a sexualized aesthetic, constituted a form of legible power that was subsequently diluted. This tension reveals how a character's meaning is not inherent but is produced at the intersection of platform affordances, market logics, and player reception.

This contested legacy is further complicated by the divergent ways in which players decode her character, a process contingent on their own situated identities. While one participant fondly recalled Lara's original iteration, another (ID 13) forged a connection through a shared passion for archaeology, demonstrating a negotiated reading that foregrounds professional identity over physical representation. This capacity for multiple, often contradictory, interpretations is central to Lara's status as a postdigital object: she can exist simultaneously as a symbol of feminist empowerment for some, a product of sadomasochistic male fantasy for others (Han and Song 2014), and a professional role model for another. The reboot's emphasis on her vulnerability and trauma can be read as a narrative deepening, yet for players who valued her initial imperviousness, it registers as a weakening. Her character thus becomes an affective battleground where different structures of feeling—nostalgia, identification, critique—compete for dominance. Ultimately, her trajectory exemplifies the limitations of representational progress when the underlying patriarchal infrastructures of the industry remain intact. Han and Song (2014) make a compelling case that even in her most heroic moments, Lara's agency is circumscribed by her inheritance of a patriarchal system; she is perpetually 'her father's daughter,' her quest a validation of his legacy. This narrative containment resonates with the participants' broader desire for more varied female roles, including unrepentant villains and women in unambiguous positions of power. Lara's story demonstrates that

Table 2 Overview of the main patterns observed. Each one has been assigned a unique code made up of the initials of its relative macro area and a progressive number

Code	Pattern description	Frequency	Representative quotes (IDs)	Macro areas
IB-P1	Cross-platform, cross-genre growth – most players began on consoles and later moved to PC/online	9	'Mostly single-player – from consoles to PC' (1); 'From multiplayer and consoles to single-players and PC' (3)	**Introduction and background**
IB-P2	Games are viewed as skill-building (logic, reflexes, teamwork)	7	'They help with logic and can challenge biases' (14); 'Yes – lateral thinking, teamwork, strategy' (19)	
IB-P3	Favourite characters admired for ideals and integrity, not gender	11	'Kiryu Kazuma … ideals and integrity' (1); 'Kratos – overcoming violence' (18)	
OR-P1	Ongoing shift from hyper-sexualized to nuanced women (older vs. newer titles)	13	'Female characters were mostly sexualised in the first games … now more understated' (2); 'Lara Croft – first badass, later too sensitive' (19)	**Observations of representation**
OR-P2	Appreciation for strong yet diverse female leads (Ellie, Samus, Aloy, Abby, Bayonetta)	14	'Samus breaks gender stereotypes by being a bounty hunter' (6); 'Abby … goes against usual stereotypes' (10)	
OR-P3	Recognition of studio or IP dependency – some franchises consistently better/worse	8	'It's varied, based on the studio – Genshin good for women, bad for ethnicity' (3)	
OR-P4	Violent or 'non-feminine' women valued when narratively justified	6	'Marika – a violent female character without redemption' (3); 'Bayonetta – badass and uses sexuality in a fun way' (14)	
PI-P1	Gender masking to avoid harassment (mostly women → male nicknames; some men → female for advantages)	10	'Friend faked her gender to avoid flame in multiplayer' (2); 'Men fake being women to receive help' (11)	**Player interactions and identity**
PI-P2	Toxicity rises with competitiveness/voice chat	12	'Attitude fostered by the competitiveness in video-games' (7); 'Online environments are toxic; you shouldn't show weaknesses' (12)	
PI-P3	Players agree that identity does affect in-game treatment	15	'Assumptions of women's gaming incapacity – trolling' (1, 4); 'Female friends received hostility' (12)	

Table 2 (continued)

Code	Pattern description	Frequency	Representative quotes (IDs)	Macro areas
IC-P1	Fan backlash against 'woke' or gender-diverse choices, yet sales often unaffected	11	'Fanbases can create controversies on "woke" choices' (8); 'Vocal online minority does not drive sales (TLOU)' (18)	**Industry and community**
IC-P2	Community resistance to changing female roles	9	'Community doesn't accept change in female characters' roles' (3, 4)	
IC-P3	Hiring and meritocratic policies seen as key levers for better representation	10	'Meritocratic hiring policies' (8); 'Female developers are now more recognised' (10)	
PD-P1	Social media amplifies both misogyny and advocacy	12	'Internet culture amplifies controversies on Reddit & Twitter' (9); 'Twitch is helping show women's abilities' (2)	**Postdigital spaces**
PD-P2	Female streamers face sexualization regardless of content	8	'Female streamers are sexualised even when content isn't' (14); 'People think female streamers get more viewers because of the male gaze' (10)	
PD-P3	Smaller or niche communities perceived as safer/more inclusive	5	'Indie games with small communities are better' (9)	
LA-P1	Normalization over tokenism – 'just write good characters'	9	'Forcing it is useless – write a good character' (15)	**Looking ahead**
LA-P2	More female protagonists and variety of roles (incl. villains)	11	'Not many female antagonists or bosses' (18); 'New IPs introducing female characters in a variety of genres' (1)	
LA-P3	Main obstacles = audience expectations and market risk	8	'Following the trend too much leads to users being tired' (2); 'Community expectations, gaming market, cultural norms' (7)	
LA-P4	Diverse dev teams repeatedly cited as the structural fix	10	'Rely on many women to include as many people as possible' (3, 7)	

a female protagonist can be granted immense strength and capability, yet still be framed in a way that reinforces a male-dominated order. She is permitted to be a hero, but not in a way that fundamentally threatens the system that produced her. Her enduring, contested presence in the gaming imaginary therefore serves as a powerful reminder that shifting representation is only a partial victory; a truly transformative feminist project must also address the narrative scripts, economic incentives, and technological architectures that continue to stress out the damsel, even after she has saved herself.

Treating game characters as postdigital objects clarifies why their meanings cannot be located in textual representation alone. Within a postdigital feminist orientation, an object persists across interlinked layers: it is at once a diegetic figure, a bundle of code and assets subject to versioning and patch cycles, a commodity in circulation through storefronts and streaming platforms, and a node around which communities, algorithms, and labour practices coalesce. In this sense, Lara Croft, Bayonetta, or Samus Aran are travelling assemblages whose salient properties—camera work, bodily style, narrative voice, monetizable skins—are repeatedly selected, amplified, or muted by postdigital processes. A postdigital object is also materially configured by interfaces. Camera systems, control schemas, and sonic channels mediate what bodies can do and how they can be perceived. The third-person framing of classic *Tomb Raider* titles and Bayonetta's choreographies operationalized its sexualization as a rhythm of play, folding gaze and agency into a single package. Participants' remarks about voice chat and audibility extend this point beyond single-player representation into multiplayer practice. When a player's voice renders their gender legible, the 'female character' becomes an infrastructural object in the sonic field: her presence is mediated by input defaults, matchmaking timings, and moderation tools. As several interviewees described, muting or masking one's identity is a way of reconfiguring the object's affordances by withdrawing from channels where harassment is algorithmically and temporally facilitated. The character, in this register, includes the auditive trace that platforms produce and regulate. The object's biography is further shaped by platform economies and 'playbour' (Goggin 2011). Characters circulate as monetizable surfaces—cosmetics, emotes, branded collaborations—whose value depends on the attention infrastructures of Twitch and social media (Banet-Weiser 2018). Participants' observations about the 'e-girl' aesthetic on streaming platforms point to the same logic: the feminine-coded figure becomes a postdigital object whose visibility is incentivized through self-stylization that aligns with platformic norms (Anciones-Anguita and Checa-Romero 2024). This broader framing helps to interpret several patterns in our corpus. The desire for 'unrepentant' female antagonists (e.g., Sister Friede) and for protagonists whose toughness is not softened by compulsory sweetness, as articulated by multiple participants, is a demand for objects that can persist across their circulations without being continually re-domesticated by familiar scripts. Understanding characters as postdigital objects also clarifies why customization systems—celebrated by some interviewees in titles like *The Sims* or *Monster Hunter*—do not automatically resolve representational tensions. Modularity can widen expressive possibilities, but it can also displace responsibility onto players by treating identity as an optional skin while leaving the object's default biography, camera language, and marketing

circuits unchanged. In postdigital terms, customization adds surfaces of inscription; it does not, by itself, rework the infrastructures through which the object travels or the practices that stabilize its meaning.

Under a postdigital feminist analysis, moving on to our second macro theme, harassment can be reframed not as an interpersonal failing but as a byproduct of the gaming infrastructure itself. The accounts of hostility in competitive multiplayer games move beyond the familiar narrative of 'toxic players' when examined as a more-than-human phenomenon. The default-on settings of voice chat, the material reality of the headset piping abuse directly into a player's home, and the algorithmic logic of matchmaking systems are active agents in an assemblage that systematically exposes female-perceived voices to hostility. The platform's architecture, therefore, performs a gatekeeping function, conditioning the very possibility of speech.

In this context, the participants' descriptions of gender masking become legible not as acts of passive concealment but as 'mashrabiyya' practices. As theorized by Hurley and Al-Ali (2021), the mashrabiyya is a screen that strategically manages visibility. When women in Valorant or Counter-Strike turn off their microphones or adopt male-coded nicknames, they are engaging in a deliberate and agentic act of refusal. This avoidance becomes a tactic of infrastructural navigation, a way of remaining present while deflecting the patriarchal gaze that polices sonic space. This practice is deeply affective; as Ahmed's (2013) work on affective economies suggests, shame and toxicity, in this case, 'stick' to audibly female voices, making the curated silence of the muted microphone an emotionally safer state of being. Similarly, the 'e-girl' aesthetic on platforms like Twitch is a lot more than a personal style choice. It is a form of 'playbour' (Goggin 2011) that is actively incentivized by the platform's monetization infrastructure, which rewards performances of a specific, often hyper-feminine and sexualized identity. This dynamic is empirically demonstrated by Anciones-Anguita and Checa-Romero (2024), whose content analysis of Twitch reveals that female streamers resort to self-sexualization as a direct strategy to engage followers and secure economic benefits. They find that behaviours such as wearing revealing clothing, adopting suggestive postures, or even simulating sexual acts are often performed in exchange for the monetary donations and subscriptions that form the backbone of the platform's economy. This performance aligns with what scholars term 'porn chic,' an aesthetic that, while not explicitly pornographic, shares the commercial goal of monetizing a sexualized product and portraying women as available (McNair 2002, as cited in Anciones-Anguita and Checa-Romero 2024). The platform itself, through its economic and algorithmic logic, becomes a co-producer of these gendered norms, a reality underscored by Twitch's own evolving community guidelines, which now explicitly regulate—and in some cases permit—content that deliberately emphasizes the body so long as it is appropriately labeled (Anciones-Anguita and Checa-Romero 2024). The 'e-girl' is thus not merely an individual identity but a postdigital subjectivity forged at the nexus of platform capitalism, patriarchal expectation, and the affective labour of live performance.

Finally, the participants' reflections on policies, practices, and communities reveal a keen awareness of the political struggles that define postdigital gaming cultures. The 'anti-woke' discourse surrounding games that feature diverse characters

is a deeply political project that gains momentum within the environments of YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter, where algorithms are key in shaping discourse. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, such backlash operates within an economy of visibility where outrage itself becomes a form of capital, amplified by platforms designed for high engagement. The participants who critique 'forced representation' are often responding to the feeling of being marketed to, decoding a corporate diversity rhetoric that feels inauthentic. Their desire for narratives where inclusion is 'well diluted into the story' is a call for a sincerity that they perceive to be absent when diversity appears as a tokenistic gesture. At the same time, most of these remarks often appear conditioned by ideological campaigns with much bigger cultural and political objectives, such as undermining feminist, queer, and generally underrepresented voices in the mediatic ecosystem (Kanai and Gill 2020). Crenshaw (2017) identifies this as backlash against intersectional inclusion, proving how systematic and pervasive oppression can become, with character identities deriving from cultural tensions and being used to reinforce or fight against dominant group interests. The charge of 'wokeness,' then, is mostly a tool used to police the boundaries of gender, race, and queerness in gaming.

Consequently, the repeated calls for structural solutions, such as hiring more diverse development teams, represent a political necessity. Participants intuitively grasp that authentic representation is not a matter of simply adding different faces to a roster, but of changing the material and labour conditions of production. By insisting that studios 'interview women and minorities,' they are advocating for a shift in the very standpoint from which games are made. This connects directly to the observation that offline social isolation can make players more susceptible to internalizing stereotypes under the postdigital collapse of the online/offline divide. The norms encoded in game worlds have material consequences, and participants rightly identify that changing those norms requires a fundamental change in who holds the power to encode them in the first place.

Conclusions

The present discussion has shown that the video game industry serves as both a pivotal economic force and a central medium shaping cultural imagination, yet it continues to reproduce gender-based imbalances. After years of catering almost exclusively to presumed male audiences, companies and gaming communities are slowly acknowledging women's voices as both creators and consumers. Nevertheless, the interviews analyzed here demonstrate that female characters in games still face restrictive tropes, intrusive sexualization, and peripheral positioning within stories. Many participants described how these portrayals reinforce male-centered norms and fuel hostility toward women who venture into competitive or supposedly 'male' genres. Data on workforce composition similarly confirms that women remain underrepresented, limiting the diversity of perspectives in production teams.

Representational imbalances were shown to influence how female gamers perceive themselves, especially when government or marketing-led transformations appear to be superficial or driven by commercial motives. Several participants

stated that forced or sudden attempts at 'inclusion' can spark backlash among loyal, conservative fans, who read these efforts as ideological impositions. Others noted that objectification or simplistic narratives often persist, for instance when established female icons are reimagined in ways that some interpret as diluted or inauthentic. These tensions point to a climate where many welcome more multifaceted female characters, yet the introduction of complexity is hindered by concerns about alienating an existing user base.

Some participants cited personal experiences of harassment and disparagement in multiplayer contexts. A few told of female friends who concealed their voices or nicknames to avoid sexist remarks. Others recounted offline isolation, especially among younger audiences, that leaves them more open to adopting the narrow stereotypes encountered in game worlds. By foregrounding moral or heroic sensibilities, many interviewees recognized female characters' potential to move beyond clichés, yet they have seldom encountered ensembles where women lead without being overshadowed by male-coded archetypes.

From a postdigital standpoint, the data show how digital and everyday realities converge: the sexism encountered online builds on and amplifies the exclusion women feel in typical media spaces, while the existence of more female-centered titles or modding communities attests to alternative possibilities. The interplay between online fandoms, corporate decisions, and players' personal journeys can thus uphold or erode gender biases. Developer choices, when rooted in consultation with broader communities and shaped by diverse creative teams, carry the promise of authentic transformation. Such collective efforts require ongoing collaboration: hiring more women, challenging narrowly defined roles, and addressing how 'fandom gatekeepers' react to representation shifts all demand sustained attention.

This study therefore extends postdigital feminist theory by evidencing how platform design—voice-chat default settings, identity labels in user profiles, algorithmic teammate selection—structures the conditions under which misogynistic tropes are either reinscribed or contested. Future work must integrate critical code studies (Hayles 2021) with ethnographic observation to parse these infrastructural dynamics.

Methodologically, the three-cycle protocol demonstrates a scalable template for future postdigital-feminist inquiries. By toggling between granular affective cues and meso-level platform study, researchers can map how power operates simultaneously in narrative tropes, server geographies, and capital flows.

In sum, the findings point toward a gaming landscape where patriarchal traditions are partially easing, but where disputes over 'woke' agendas and token gestures often derail meaningful progress. Future research and industry praxis must explore more robust strategies—designing female characters with agency and nuance, instituting inclusive pipelines, and addressing long-standing biases in gaming culture—to ensure that women's presence is not marginal but integral. Through such approaches, earlier patterns of hypersexualization and trivial roles may give way to a wider range of gaming experiences, resonating better with the complex realities that female players embody.

Author Contribution Nadia Di Leo (corresponding author): conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, resources, visualization, writing—review and editing, writing—original draft (Abstract, Methodology, Results and discussion, Conclusions); Alice Rizzi: conceptualization, investigation, writing—review and editing, writing—original draft (Abstract, Theoretical background); Luigi Traetta: supervision. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability The de-identified interview transcripts generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality and privacy. However, relevant excerpts and answer summaries of the de-identified data are available as supplementary material.

Materials Availability All materials used in this study are available either in the manuscript itself or as supplementary materials. These materials are shared for transparency and replication purposes.

Code Availability No custom code, software, or algorithmic tool was developed for this qualitative study. Therefore, there is no code availability statement applicable here.

Declarations

Ethics Approval All procedures involving participants were conducted in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations, as well as with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Prior to data collection, the authors' institutional review process was consulted and confirmed that no formal Ethics Committee approval was required, given the nature of this qualitative interview study and its low-risk profile. One participant was 13 years old at the time of the interviews; for this minor, we obtained permission and informed consent from the participant's legal guardians and assent from the minor.

Consent to Participate Informed consent for both participation and publication was obtained from all participants. Adult participants received a detailed privacy form (translated as needed) outlining the study's objectives, data handling procedures, and assurances of anonymity. Each participant provided voluntary verbal consent and was informed of their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Minor participant: in compliance with ethical guidelines pertaining to minors, the authors obtained written or verbal consent from the participant's legal guardian. The minor participant also gave assent, and both were informed of how pseudonymization and confidentiality would be maintained in publications.

Consent for Publication The authors hereby grant their consent to the publication of the manuscript and its additional materials.

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