Women in the World of Digital Games: The Case of Slovakia

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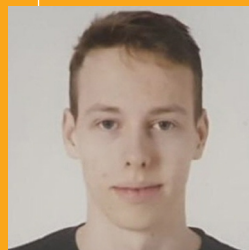*University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava*
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ABSTRACT:
This research paper aims to provide a picture of women's participation in various positions in the field of digital games in Slovakia, such as creators of game content, women involved in eSports, the gaming industry, casual gamers as well as women working in the field of digital game education. Based on theoretical knowledge and qualitative in-depth interviews with seven women working in various positions in the gaming industry, the women's positive and negative work experiences, and the problems and obstacles linked to their gender were identified. The research is specifically focused on the situation of women in the gaming industry in Slovakia. The results show that female gamers and streamers face negative behaviour from their fellow players and viewers which may result in an array of negative consequences. Findings also indicate that the low representation of women in some areas of the gaming industry is a consequence of prevailing gender roles in society. Furthermore, women's participation in eSports and competitive gaming is limited due to toxic meritocracy, prevailing masculinity and sexism.

Introduction

Currently, there are hundreds of millions of active players in the world, and this number is constantly growing.[1] It is only recently that the participation of women in this medium has begun to stand out. Thanks to women's emancipation within the technological world and feminist efforts, the area of digital games has become more tolerant of both male and female participants.[2] In this respect, women are gaining bigger space and are speaking out against prejudices and stereotypes related to the female gender. Although the euphoria of the game consumes mainly men, female players are getting closer to equalizing this score. The gaming industry experienced its biggest boom during the coronavirus crisis when women were much more inclined to try a new form of entertainment. The fact that digital games are still considered to be predominantly a male hobby is supported by gender-specific socialization, which simply means that from birth we are exposed to different gender roles that have been socially and historically determined.

Globally, the interest of men and women in being engaged in games is balanced; however, there have been several prejudices, fears, and stereotypes that discourage women and prevent them from being fully engaged in this industry.[3] Women who play online

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1 HOWARTH, J.: *How Many Gamers Are There? (New 2023 Statistics)*. Released on 10th August 2023. [online]. [2023-12-06]. Available at: <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/number-of-gamers>.
2 See: SZCZEPANSKA, A. M.: Women's Inclusion and Neoliberal Governmentality in the Swedish Digital Game Industry: An Analysis of Discursive Positions and Recruitment Strategies. In *Gender, Work & Organization*, 2023, Vol. 30, No. 3, p. 842-861. [online]. [2023-12-06]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12923>.
3 See also: STYHRE, A. et al.: Masculine Domination and Gender Subtexts: The Role of Female Professionals in the Renewal of the Swedish Video Game Industry. In *Culture and Organization*, 2018, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 244-261. [online]. [2023-12-06]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2015.1131689>.

games and women who are publicly known often face sexism and sexualization. The gaming industry is a particular breeding ground for the culture of misogyny and sexual harassment. Women, LGBTQ people, and people of colour trying to break into this industry are exposed to toxic masculinity, which often encourages sexual abuse and bullying.[4] Furthermore, research has acknowledged that social dominance orientation and forms of masculinity such as the desire for power over women and the need for heterosexual presentation[5] or, quite surprisingly, religiosity and game exposure[6] define digital game sexism.[7] A study by B. Ruberg, A. Cullen and K. Brewster address gender-based harassment in game live streaming, which is a problem for female streamers.[8] The persistence of a culture of masculine dominance is dealt with by J. Drenten, R. Harrison and N. J. Pendarvis, M. Condis and L. Eklund.[9] There are still few female figures in senior positions in the digital games industry, including management, and the most commonly cited reasons are the lack of perspective in the industry and opportunities for career growth, as the vast majority of permanent positions in management are occupied by men. Additional reasons include the fear of being judged and the stereotypical opinion that the gaming industry is a male domain; lack of awareness and the persistent idea that girls and women are not interested in games, which is evident in the way game content is designed, making it obvious that the target audience is male by creating provocatively dressed or even undressed characters.[10] The lack of well-known female role models is also a problem – there are only a few role models that women could identify with.[11] However, the key turning point could be the visibility of popular women in eSports. Successful women in the industry could help overcome stereotypes and female role models could bring other gamers closer to the gaming industry.

Research dealing with the representation of women in the world of digital games in Slovakia has not been the focus of researchers so far, and to the best of our knowledge, there are no academic studies in Slovakia into the investigation of the representation and position of women in the digital games and the gaming industry. In the Czech environment, studies examining the position of women in Czech video game journalism have been conducted, e.g., the study conducted by T. Fousek Krobová and

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4   LORENZ, T., BROWNING, K.: *Dozens of Women in Gaming Speak out about Sexism and Harassment*. Released on 23rd June 2020. [online]. [2023-12-07]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/style/women-gaming-streaming-harassment-sexism-twitch.html>.

5   For more information, see: FOX, J., TANG, W. Y.: Sexism in Online Video Games: The Role of Conformity to Masculine Norms and Social Dominance Orientation. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2014, Vol. 33, No. 1, p. 314-320.

6   For example, see: BÈGUE, L. et al.: Video Games Exposure and Sexism in a Representative Sample of Adolescents. In *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2017, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 1-7. [online]. [2023-12-12]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00466>.

7   See: COTE, A. C.: *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games*. New York, NY : New York University Press, 2020.

8   See also: RUBERG, B., CULLEN, A., BREWSTER, K.: Nothing but a "Titty Streamer": Legitimacy, Labor, and the Debate on Women's Breasts in Video Game Live Streaming. In *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 2019, Vol. 36, No. 5, p. 466-481. [online]. [2023-12-10]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2019.1658886>.

9   For more information, see: DRENTEN, J., HARRISON, R., PENDARVIS, N. J.: More Gamer, Less Girl: Gendered Boundaries, Tokenism, and the Cultural Persistence of Masculine Dominance. In *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2023, Vol. 50, No. 1, p. 2-24.; CONDIS, M.: *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture*. Iowa City, IA : University of Iowa Press, 2018.; EKLUND, L.: Who Are the Casual Gamers? Gender Tropes and Tokenism in Game Culture. In LEAVER, T., WILLSON, M. (eds.): *Social, Casual and Mobile Games: The Changing Gaming Landscape*. New York, NY : Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, p. 15-30.

10   See: KONDRAT, X.: Gender and Video Games: How is Female Gender Generally Represented in Various Genres of Video Games?. In *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, 2015, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 171-193.

11   See also: ROGSTAD, T. E.: Gender in Esports Research: A Literature Review. In *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 2022, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 195-213.

J. Švelch[12]. In general, research into digital games in Slovakia is not abundant, which is related to the exclusivity of this field of study at universities and the low number of academics dealing with digital games. Therefore, the authors of this study aim to fill a research gap in this area.

Representation of Women in the Gaming Community

Statistics addressing the distribution of digital game players in the US from 2006 to 2022 show that in 2022, males make up the majority of players, namely 52%, and females make up 48% of digital game players. In 2022 and 2014, the number of female players was the same and at the same time, at the highest level among the years listed above. Women had the lowest player representation in 2006 and 2007 when they made up only 38% of players. According to these statistics, the trend of direct percentage growth of women stopped in 2012.

From 2014, the representation of women decreased to 41% in 2016 and 2020, and it did not return to the level of 2014 until 2022.[13] A 2017 report by the German video game analytics company Quantic Foundry, based on surveys of approximately 270,000 gamers, found different proportions of male and female gamers across different game genres. The study did not attribute the percentage differences solely to gender, illustrating a correlation between games played less by women and features that discourage women, such as the lack of female protagonists, the need to communicate with strangers online, or the games' tendency to cause motion sickness. Furthermore, Match3 puzzles and family or farm simulators are the only two genres in which women players have a majority position making up 69% of all players. The percentage of women in other types of games varies by theme, with female representation ranging from 36% to 16% in MMOs, 33% to 20% in RPGs, and 18% in the adventure genre. Women are not interested in strategy games and make up between 7-11% of players of this genre. They are least interested in sports games, shooting games, and racing games. Women make up only 2% of sports game players, 4-7% of shooter players, and 6% of racing game players.[14]

However, it is worth noting that despite the increasing diversity of video game audiences in recent years, individuals who do not fit the stereotypical image of a straight, White, male 'gamer' often encounter exclusion and harassment within online gaming communities. Nonetheless, many persist in playing games despite this adversity, employing specific coping mechanisms to either sidestep or address the harassment they face.[15]

12   FOUSEK KROBOVÁ, T., ŠVELCH, J.: "Never Good Enough": Player Identities, Experiences, and Coping Strategies of Women in Czech Video Game Journalism. In *Games and Culture*, 2023. [online]. [2023-12-06]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231166791>.
13   CLEMENT, J.: *Distribution of Video Gamers in the United States from 2006 to 2022 by Gender.* Released on 6th November 2023. [online]. [2023-11-21]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/232383/gender-split-of-us-computer-and-video-gamers/>.
14   YEE, N.: *Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down the Percentage of Female Gamers by Genre.* Released on 19th January 2017. [online]. [2022-11-21]. Available at: <http://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/>.
15   See: COTE, A. C.: "I Can Defend Myself" Women's Strategies for Coping with Harassment while Gaming Online. In *Games and Culture*, 2017, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 136-155.

Low Presence of Women in Esports and Competitive Gaming

Esports, or electronic sports, is a growing market that includes professional gaming and competition in digital games. Despite the growing popularity and financial investment in eSports, there is still one big barrier for female players and that is the low representation of women in this industry. When it comes to participation, opportunities for girls and women to participate in eSports competitions are scarce and often accompanied by extra obstacles.[16] As a result, well-known competitive games such as *Overwatch*[17] (26% women), *Hearthstone*[18] (26% women), *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*[19] (24% women), *Rainbow 6: Siege*[20] (23% women) consistently show low interest among women and only 35% of those engaging in eSports games, primarily on consoles or PCs, are females.[21] L. Darvin et al. found that the situation is improving for girls between the ages of 13 and 15. They are more likely to watch and participate in eSports than boys in the same age group. The number of women among eSports fans has steadily increased in previous years, with female viewership of eSports events rising from 23% in 2016 to over 30% in 2018.[22]

Several studies examining the differences in genre preferences observed that male gamers tend to exhibit greater competitiveness and a stronger inclination towards action-packed and role-playing game genres compared to female gamers.[23] O. Ruvalcaba et al. categorized games between hardcore games and casual games and found that 85.9% of men played hardcore games, compared to 42.7% of women. Only 16% to 26% of teenage females reported playing hardcore games.[24] Moreover, women play more games that are aimed at entertaining the player regardless of their skill such as *Candy Crush Saga*[25] which is a type of game that is not found in eSports. C. Chen and L. Leung documented that 69% of Candy Crush Saga players were women.[26]

16   See also: DARVIN, L. et al.: Breaking the Glass Monitor: Examining the Underrepresentation of Women in Esports Environments. In *Sport Management Review*, 2021, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 475-499.
17   BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: *Overwatch*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2016.
18   BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: *Hearthstone*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2014.
19   VALVE CORPORATION, HIDDEN PATH ENTERTAINMENT: *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. [digital game]. Bellevue, WA : Valve, 2012.
20   UBISOFT MONTREAL: *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege*. [digital game]. Saint-Mandé : Ubisoft, 2015.
21   DARVIN, L. et al.: Breaking the Glass Monitor: Examining the Underrepresentation of Women in Esports Environments. In *Sport Management Review*, 2021, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 476.
22   DARVIN, L., VOORIS, R., MAHONEY, T.: The Playing Experiences of Esport Participants: An Analysis of Treatment Discrimination and Hostility in Esport Environments. In *Journal of Athlete Development and Experience*, 2020, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 37. [online]. [2023-11-23]. Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/jade/vol2/iss1/3/>.
23   See: HASSAN, H., MAILOK, R., HASHIM, M.: Gender and Game Gender Differences in Playing Online Games. In *Journal of ICT in Education*, 2019, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 1-15. [online]. [2023-12-08]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.37134/jictie.vol6.1.2019>.
24   RUVALCABA, O. et al.: Women's Experiences in Esports: Gendered Differences in Peer and Spectator Feedback During Competitive Video Game Play. In *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 2018, Vol. 42, No. 4, p. 297.
25   KING: *Candy Crush Saga*. [digital game]. Stockholm, London : King, 2012.
26   CHEN, C., LEUNG, L.: Are You Addicted to Candy Crush Saga? An Exploratory Study Linking Psychological Factors to Mobile Social Game Addiction. In *Telematics and Informatics*, 2016, Vol. 33, No. 4, p. 1156.

Depictions of Female Protagonists in Digital Games

Some authors, e.g., M. Skowronski, R. Busching, B. Krahé,[27] and L. N. Matthews, T. Lynch and N. Martins,[28] emphasize the negative portrayal of women in video games, claiming that the negative portrayal of women is mostly associated with sexism, objectification, and unrealistic standards of women's bodies, which can lead to women's dissatisfaction with their bodies and other problems related to women's mental health. Often, they also mention the lack of female protagonists. M. F. Perreault et al. points out that there has been a lack of depth in female characters and that the female protagonists in the games have been largely limited and defined by male figures.[29] M. Burgess, S. Stermer and R. Burgess analysed the number of female characters in 33 Nintendo games, and found that 41% of the games did not contain any women. In 21% of the games, they were shown in a situation that required the help of a man, and only 10% of games had women as protagonists, and the authors describe that they were often sexualized.[30]

A more recent study conducted by J. Friedberg states that men acted as game characters in 51% of the games studied, while in the case of women, it was only in 26.5% of the games. Women were also more likely than men to wear revealing clothing and be sexualized.[31] Another study conducted by S. Cheryan et al. investigated the so-called 'Lara phenomenon' in 12 digital games in which there were 22 characters and revealed that 13 of the 22 game characters are men. The vast majority of male characters (70%) did not appear in the leading parts. This research shows a higher representation of women in games; however, the research sample of games was small.[32]

Underrepresentation of Women in the Gaming Industry

Game development is stereotypically seen as a male issue and for this reason, the majority of workers in the gaming industry are men. Stereotyping that people engaged in the gaming industry and in computer science, in general, are males with masculine

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27 See also: SKOWRONSKI, M., BUSCHING, R., KRAHÉ, B.: The Effects of Sexualized Video Game Characters and Character Personalization on Women's Self-Objectification and Body Satisfaction. In *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 2021, Vol. 92, No. 1, p. 1-10. [online]. [2023-12-08]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104051>.

28 For more information, see: MATTHEWS, L. N., LYNCH, T., MARTINS, N.: Real Ideal: Investigating How Ideal and Hyper-Ideal Video Game Bodies Affect Men and Women. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2016, Vol. 59, No. 1, p. 155-164.

29 PERREAULT, M. F. et al.: Depictions of Female Protagonists in Digital Games: A Narrative Analysis of 2013 Dice Award-Winning Digital Games. In *Games and Culture*, 2018, Vol. 13, No. 8, p. 843.

30 BURGESS, M., STERMER, S., BURGESS, R.: Sex, Lies, and Video Games: The Portrayal of Male and Female Characters on Video Game Covers. In *Sex Roles*, 2007, Vol. 57, No. 5-6, p. 420.

31 FRIEDBERG, J.: *Gender Games: A Content Analysis of Gender Portrayals in Modern, Narrative Video Games*. [Master Thesis]. Atlanta, GA : Georgia State University, 2015, p. 23. [online]. [2023-11-20]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.57709/7000435>.

32 JANSZ, J., MARTIS, R.: The Lara Phenomenon: Powerful Female Characters in Video Games. In *Sex Roles*, 2007, Vol. 56, No. 3-4, p. 146.

interests may make some women doubt whether they belong to this area.[33] In 2021, a game developer survey aimed at game developer distribution worldwide 2014-2021 found that 61% of game developers worldwide were men and 30% were women with the share of female game developers rising by 21% in 2017. About 8% of game developers identified themselves as non-binary, genderfluid/genderqueer, two-spirited, and transgender.[34] However, it should be noted that although the question of sexual orientation or gender identity is another intersectional variable, and this study consciously does not work with it.

The segment of the creation of digital games and related services in Slovakia has been growing continuously for several years, according to the updated survey entitled Slovak Game Industry in 2023, published by the Slovak Game Developer Association (SGDA).[35] A survey conducted by the Next Gen Skills Academy found that there is a problem with corporate discrimination. In 2015, 45% of women working in the gaming industry in the UK claimed that their gender was a restraining factor in their career promotion, and 33% of them expressed their experience with harassment or even bullying directly connected with their gender at the workplace.[36] As regards the situation in Slovakia, there are 70 companies professionally engaged in game creation which currently employ 1,079 professional creators, of which 16.4% are women and 7 % are foreign developers. The most popular job positions in Slovakia include programmers, game designers, and graphic designers.[37] The findings of a 2020 study on female representation in the gaming industry conducted by 20-first, a global firm focused on empowering leaders to achieve gender balance, reveal that in the top global gaming companies, 84% of executive positions are occupied by men. Outside the executive positions, women constitute only 24% of those working in the industry.[38]

Data and Methods

The paper aims to provide a picture of the presence of women in various positions in the field of digital games in Slovakia, to identify the reasons for the low representation of women in various areas of the gaming industry, and to investigate the problems, prejudices, as well as positive attitudes that women encounter in the workplace due to their gender. It also aims at identifying the pathways for change and improvement of their situation in the industry. All these aspects are described from the perspective of our respondents. The research problems were formulated in the form of research questions as follows:

- RQ1: What are the experiences of women engaged in the gaming industry?
- RQ2: According to the respondents, what are the reasons for the low representation of women in the gaming industry and how could this situation be improved?
- RQ3: What obstacles and challenges do women have to overcome to succeed in the various fields of the gaming industry?

33   See: CHERYAN, S. et al.: The Stereotypical Computer Scientist: Gendered Media Representations as a Barrier to Inclusion for Women. In *Sex Roles*, 2013, Vol. 69, No. 1-2, p. 58-71.
34   CLEMENT, J.: *Distribution of Game Developers Worldwide from 2014 to 2021, by Gender.* Released on 12th December 2023. [online]. [2023-12-19]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/453634/game-developers-gender-distribution-worldwide>.
35   SGDA*: Slovak Game Industry 2023.* 2023. [online]. [2023-12-12]. Available at: <https://sgda.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/SGDA_catalog_2023.pdf>.
36   PEARSON, D.: *Survey: 45 % of the UK Industry's Women Feel Gender Is a "Barrier".* Released on 13th January 2015. [online]. [2023-12-12]. Available at: <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/survey-45-percent-of-the-uk-industrys-women-feel-gender-is-a-barrier>.
37   SGDA: *Slovenský herný priemysel v roku 2022.* 2022. [online]. [2023-11-24]. Available at: <https://sgda.sk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/infografika-SK-1-1.pdf>.
38   *20-first's 2020 Gender Balance Scoreboard. Top 14 Global Gaming Companies.* 2020. [online]. [2023-12-08]. Available at: <https://20-first.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/200825-2020-Global-Gaming-Scorecard-Web.pdf>.

A research sample consisting of 7 women was selected to represent as many areas as possible from the world of digital games. In total, around 20 women were approached; however, most of them were not interested in the interview and did not respond. The selection of the research sample was deliberate and women from different areas of the gaming industry were chosen, such as game content creators, female eSports gamers, casual gamers actively involved in the gaming community, and women working in various positions in gaming companies as well as institutions of tertiary education in the field of digital games. Women journalists publishing articles about digital games as well as activists focusing on women in digital games and eSports were also contacted, but without success. Six of the respondents lived in Slovakia and one in the UK. For ethical reasons, the real names of the interview participants were not revealed but they were assigned numbers from 1 to 7.

Respondent No. 1 is 25 years old, lives in Slovakia, and is a player of the competitive game *Apex Legends*[39] in which she regularly participates in tournaments with her team. She also broadcasts regularly on the Twitch platform, where she has created her own community. Respondent No. 2 lives in Slovakia, she works in an institution of tertiary education in the field of digital games as a lecturer, and she is also a digital game player. Respondent No. 3 is currently developing her own game, but in the past, she worked in a game studio. She prefers hardcore single-player games and AAA titles. Respondent No. 4 is mainly a player of competitive games, she is currently playing Apex Legends, and she also streams on the Twitch platform, where she has an established base of followers. Respondent No. 5 is a Slovak living in England, she is a player of leisure and competitive games, and she is currently playing Apex Legends. Respondent No. 6 is 22 years old, lives in Slovakia, and is a university student of digital game theory. She is a player in one of the school's eSports teams, and in the past, she was part of the all-female eSports team of the eSuba organization. She prefers competitive games, but also plays sports and leisure games. Respondent No. 7 is 23 years old, lives in Slovakia, and plays leisure and parlour digital games.

Data for this study were collected through qualitative in-depth interviews. The interviews were recorded using software, as the interviewees were recruited online. Consequently, the recorded conversations were transcribed on paper, and then irrelevant information from the obtained data was removed, such as pauses or hesitation sounds. Some interviewees' quotations were slightly reworded for clarity purposes while keeping their meaning. The interviews consisted of 13 questions; however, the first question focused on biographical information, so the 12 remaining questions were actually analysed. The interview questions were open-ended to provoke a broader discussion and additional questions during the conversation. The interviews took place over video chat and were recorded so that the findings could be consequently explored. The interview questions addressed encounters with the world of digital games depending on the respondents' work experience, and also frustrating moments, obstacles, and challenges they need to overcome in this predominantly male world.

When evaluating the collected data, qualitative coding was conducted as developed by A. Strauss and J. Corbin.[40] A three-stage coding process was used – open, axial, and selective coding. The first approach to the data was applying open coding which deals with labelling, and subsequently, through an intensive analysis of the data, phenomena were conceptualized and categorized. After identifying the phenomena, axial coding was needed to study the relationships between concepts and categories developed in the process

39   RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT, PANIC BUTTON GAMES: *Apex Legends*. [digital game]. Redwood City, CA : Electronic Arts, 2019.
40   STRAUSS, A., CORBINOVÁ, J.: *Základy kvalitativního výzkumu. Postupy a techniky metody zakotvené teorie*. Brno : Sdružení podané ruce, 1999.

of open coding. The broken-up data were joined together in a new way to work out links between a category and its subcategories. In short, axial coding helped to identify the main themes from which ten categories and subcategories were created. The next step, selective coding, is very similar to axial coding, but it is conducted on a more abstract level. The goal of selective coding is to theoretically integrate the different categories that may need to be refined and further elaborated into a coherent theory. Once having found the core category around which other categories are merged, a grounded theory that arose from the data was created.[41]

Findings

Below are described in sufficient detail the categories and subcategories created by in-depth interviews with female respondents engaged in the areas of the gaming industry such as game content creators, female eSports gamers, casual gamers actively involved in the gaming community, and women working in various positions in gaming companies as well as institutions of tertiary education in the field of digital games.

Women in the World of Digital Games

Using the method of in-depth interviews, the stories of women who are still active in some areas of the world of digital games were revealed. Six out of seven female respondents got into the world of digital games through their family members, and three respondents were given some kind of game console by their family members as a present.

Respondent No. 2 started playing games on a game console her parents bought her and currently plays digital games in her spare time, which was an impulse that triggered her interest in finding a job position in the field of digital games education.

Respondent No. 3 received a game console and various games from her parents for her birthday. Subsequently, she described how from that time on, she started to enjoy games and plays digital games until now. At the same time, they ignited the spark of her interest in digital games in general and, consequently, she found a job as a game developer. Currently, she is completing a game that will be available soon. Respondent No. 5 received a game console from her uncle when she was 5 years old. After that, she had newer game consoles and is currently playing Apex Legends.

Respondents No. 4, 6, and 7 were shown games on home computers by their parents. As she states, respondent No. 4 has a great experience from her childhood: "When I was little and I was about 5 years old, I sat in my father's arms and played Barbie games". Respondent No. 6 started playing the game *Counter-Strike 1.6*[42] at a young age and has continued to play competitive games until today, and currently, she spends her free time playing a newer version of the game called Counter Strike: Global Offensive. Playing digital games also led her to study the field of theory of digital games at university.

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41   See: VOLLSTEDT, M., REZAT, S.: An Introduction to Grounded Theory with a Special Focus on Axial Coding and the Coding Paradigm. In KAISER, G., PRESMEG, N. (eds.): *Compendium for Early Career Researchers in Mathematics Education*. Cham : Springer, 2019, p. 81-100.

42   VALVE: *Counter-Strike*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA, Bellevue, WA : Sierra Studios, Valve, 2003.

Most of the women played single-player games at the start and respondents No. 1 and 6 started with competitive games. The only respondent who started playing digital games as an adult is respondent No. 1. Since she started playing games only a few years ago, she still plays the game she started with, the competitive FPS Apex Legends.

The respondents were also asked to provide an answer about their favourite game genres, and it was found that four out of seven women like playing competitive games. The term competitive games include several genres, but their main feature is competition between players. Although compared to the average of female players, there is a high number of women who like competitive games in this research sample, these women also like leisure games. In this research sample, five out of seven women play leisure games. Three out of seven women play competitive games and leisure games at the same time, so they do not focus on just one game genre. Two of the women play primarily leisure games and only one of the women plays purely competitive games. Other game genres are also represented, e.g., sports games such as *FIFA*[43], story games, popular AAA games, multiplayer social games, and, in general, multiplayer games where there is no element of competition.

The results obtained from the in-depth interviews may be in line with those reported in studies available,[44] which state that not only are women engaging more in video gaming, including widely popular online games, but they have also evolved into more skilled gamers who actively compete against others. Owing to the small research sample, it cannot be determined whether competitive games are that popular among women, but the well-known stereotype that women only play leisure games can be rejected.

Digital Games and Reactions from the Outside World

Based on the interviews, it was found that the majority of female respondents encountered all types of reactions, i.e. negative, neutral, and positive. Two female respondents encountered only positive reactions, three female respondents received mixed reactions from the people surrounding them, one female respondent described the reactions as neutral, and one of the female respondents encountered only negative reactions. Positive reactions and support for five out of seven female respondents came from their friends, i.e. the younger generation. Two of the women encountered negative reactions from their friends or classmates. The negative reactions of the majority of female respondents came from their family, i.e. the older generation. Four women expressed that their families had negative reactions or did not support them in their activities in the field of digital games.

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43   EXTENDED PLAY PRODUCTIONS, EA VANCOUVER, EA ROMANIA: *FIFA (series).* [digital game]. Redwood City, CA : EA Sports, 1993-2022.

44   LACONI, S., PIRÈS, S., CHABROL, H.: Internet Gaming Disorder, Motives, Game Genres and Psychopathology. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2017, Vol. 75, No. 1, p. 652-659.; LOPEZ-FERNANDEZ, O.: Generalized Versus Specific Internet Use-Related Addiction Problems: A Mixed Methods Study on Internet, Gaming, and Social Networking. In *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2018, Vol. 15, No. 12, p. 1-33. [online]. [2023-12-09]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15122913>.; LOPEZ-FERNANDEZ, O., WILLIAMS, J. A., KUSS, J. D.: Measuring Female Gaming: Gamer Profile, Predictors, Prevalence, and Characteristics from Psychological and Gender Perspectives. In *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 1-13. [online]. [2023-12-09]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00898>.

a) Positive reactions to women's interest in digital games

As mentioned above, most of the positive reactions came from friends, but there were positive reactions from the family, too. Respondents No. 4 and 7 state that they received positive reactions from their families, but they are in the minority. Respondent No. 4 states: "I was mainly supported by my father, but my mother doesn't really understand playing and when I played for 12 hours a day, she didn't understand it at all, but she knows that I am doing what I enjoy and now she supports me". She expressed that her only friend at the time supported her.

Respondent No. 7 received positive reactions mainly because when some of her friends found out that she played digital games, they could play the game together and she did not face any negative reactions. She also remembers how she played games with her friends and evaluates her gaming experiences positively.

The support of female respondents from friends took different forms, respondent No. 1 said that she received "a lot of support from her friends". The support did not consist only of positive comments but also of help that led to the improvement of game skills and the explanation of various game mechanics.

Respondent No. 5 did not get any support from her parents who only allowed her to play games for an hour a day, but she found support from her friend and his mother: "I often went to my friend's house and his mother allowed us to play all the time, that was the only time we could play games together, she was very supportive". Respondent No. 6 also describes the positive reactions of her friends: "Most of my friends were excited that a girl like me succeeded in establishing herself in this domain, that is, that I had an influence on the boys' scene for a while".

b) Negative reactions to women's interest in digital games

During the in-depth interviews, the women described various negative experiences and reactions from those around them. The first part of negative reactions dealt with reactions from their family with five out of seven female respondents stating that they did not have support from their family or had experienced negative reactions.

Respondent No. 1 said that she received a lot of negative reactions from her parents: "They think that I am addicted to the computer and that it affects me negatively when I play such games". Respondent No. 3 had negative reactions in that her parents restricted her from playing digital games because, in their opinion, it was a waste of time. Respondent No. 5 was also restricted from playing games, and as mentioned above, she used to play games with her friend. Respondent No. 6 stated that her mother also restricted her from playing digital games: "My mother was not a big fan of it and wanted me to be a diligent student".

Respondent No. 2, who works in the field of digital games education, described the negative reaction of a family member, which consisted of stereotyping digital game players as 'addicts'. This information raises the question of whether gender plays a role. Not a single woman commented that her gender played a role in the negative reactions from parents. As for the reasons for negative reactions, they stated that their parents thought that games were a waste of time, game players are stereotyped as addicts regardless of their gender, and parents wanted respondents to devote more time to their studies. Two female respondents expressed that the older generation does not understand digital games and does not perceive any positive aspects of games.

Three women faced negative reactions from friends and the wider community. Respondent No. 1 faces negative reactions from the wider community, which consist of the stereotyping of female streamers: "I often hear such comments when I tell someone that I stream, so they think that I make bathtub streams". Bathtub streams are a live streaming

category popular on the Twitch platform which includes women dressed only in swimsuits and mostly sitting in an inflatable pool. This kind of stream is controversial in the gaming community because these women use nudity to get money from viewers.

Respondent No. 3 faced negative reactions from her classmates and ex-partners that resulted from the expected social role: "I wasn't open about playing games because when I ever talked about it, their reactions were that it's not a feminine thing to play games".

When respondent No. 5 was at elementary school, she faced negative reactions from her friends, which also consisted of conservative expectations of her social role: "None of my friends played games and they condemned me because of it, so as a result, I stopped playing games for about a year". When asked if her gender played a role in the negative reactions, she answered: "Yes, my friends at the time were very feminine women, playing games did not fit their criteria of what a woman should do".

From the information obtained in this category, it was found that negative reactions by family do not seem to relate to gender, and negative reactions by the wider environment seem to relate to gender.

Reactions of the Gaming Community to Women

This category deals with the reactions of the gaming community to women and contains information from in-depth interviews with the respondents based on their opinions and experience with the gaming community. The category is divided into several sub-categories because women's experiences differ in different areas of the gaming world. Every digital game player who is part of the gaming community has encountered negative reactions that have negative psychological effects on them.

a) The experience of women in multiplayer games

The majority of female respondents take the view that women face worse treatment than men in multiplayer games from random teammates. Five out of seven women base their opinions on their experiences, and respondent No. 2 bases her opinion on information that she acquired during her time in the field of digital games education. Respondent No. 7 does not think that women face worse treatment from teammates and justifies it as follows: "In my opinion, not at all, everyone complains about everyone in the games and everyone finds a target to insult you and because you are a woman, so everyone complains that you are a woman. Many of my friends I used to play with used to say worse things to each other than to me". Three female respondents stated that the insults directed at them by their teammates are adapted to their gender, and if they were men, their teammates would also insult them, but they would use different types of insults.

Regarding the types of negative reactions and specific experiences of women, respondent No. 1 indicated several types of negative reactions that, in her opinion, she would not have experienced if she were a man: "People threaten to rape you or do something to you, and they have inappropriate comments. They scream that you should shut up because you are a woman, and you shouldn't play games". Three respondents, including respondent No. 1, identified the sexualization of women by random teammates. Other types of negative reactions are misogynistic comments. Five respondents have experienced misogynistic comments.

Respondent No. 4 described her negative experience as follows: "A Russian YouTuber made a video of me swearing at him in the game, he edited the video to make me look like a bad one but in fact, it was him who said terrible things to me. I was 16 years old then, the video had 260 thousand views and I woke up to people threatening me with death, via email, on stream, on Instagram, and just everywhere. It took about 2 weeks until I managed to demonetize the video and set up a private account on all platforms. It was very traumatic".

Respondent No. 6 perceives that women are generally underestimated in digital games. The above-mentioned negative experiences and reactions only apply to random teammates, that is, people with whom women have no relationship.

b) The experience of women on streaming platforms

The research sample contains three female respondents who are actively streaming or have streamed in the past. Respondents have from 2 to 9.6 thousand followers. Respondent No. 1 sees the support and mostly positive reactions of visitors to her live broadcast and has created a close community in which she considers part of her followers to be her friends. In terms of corporate sponsorships for streamers, she does not think that women are in any way disadvantaged. Respondent No. 4 feels that she cannot say certain things on the stream because consequently, she would be sexualized. So he feels that men can say unspecified things without being sexualized by the opposite sex. She also mentioned the positive side of the community of the game Apex Legends, in which she is active, and described the community as 'very nice'.

Respondent No. 5 identifies sexism as a problem, not only when streaming, but also when playing games, but she considers the overall reactions of her viewers to be mostly positive: "I received a lot of positive reactions, and I think it's because my community was made up of grown-up people". When asked if people's reactions to her stream would be different if she were a man, she said: "Yeah, I think there's a bit of truth in it when people say that it's easier for women to get a community of viewers if you're a funny woman and you start streaming so it's a little bit easier for you. People prefer to watch women because there aren't as many of them as men in the field of FPS games, but there is a ceiling". Women have mostly positive reactions from their viewers, but they also perceive negative reactions which include sexualization and sexism.

c) Consequences of negative behaviour towards women

Five respondents mention the consequences of negative behaviour towards women. The most widespread consequence among our female respondents was a reluctance to play which was recorded by 3 female respondents. Another consequence of negative comments is lower self-esteem which was observed in two female respondents.

Respondent No. 1 states that it depends on what someone says to her, she does not experience horror-inducing comments daily and it has no effect on her, and if it does, she can get rid of the unpleasant feeling quickly. The problem comes when more negative reactions from people accumulate in a shorter period: "Then I feel down, I'm in a bad mood, I'm uncomfortable and I feel sexualized even though I'm not doing anything sexual". She feels that her self-esteem is low when someone comments negatively on her appearance.

Respondent No. 3 mentions the only consequence of negative behaviour, more specifically, she sometimes does not feel comfortable travelling to gaming conventions alone. However, it is difficult to state whether the digital game players or the overall society in which she lives are to blame for this consequence.

When respondent No. 4 was around 15 years old, she faced a feeling of insecurity, and depression and was influenced by the negative comments she faced: "When someone told me that I was bad at the game, I believed it. I listened to such things every day and it made me feel like I was a different person than I really am, it lowered my self-confidence and self-worth. There were times when I went to my father crying because I was being bullied in the game".

Respondent No. 6 stopped playing with random teammates, not only because of their negative sexist comments but also because her teammates were killing her in the game and thus made her playing uncomfortable. The negative consequence was also caused by her mother and resulted in her stopping playing Counter Strike: Global Offensive competitively for about a year.

As a result of her teammates making the game unpleasant, respondent No. 7 felt unwilling to play, she also expressed that if she were younger, she would be affected by negative comments directed towards her in the gaming community in which she is active and she would have negative feelings. Respondent No. 5 does not mention any negative consequences that she would have to deal with, but she feels angry if someone scolds her friends with whom she plays.

Negative Stereotyping of Women

Not a single respondent from the research sample regards any form of positive stereotyping such as being considered smart, being 'nerdy' in a positive way, or being techy and good with gadgets.[45] The most widespread stereotype felt by women is that women play digital games worse than men, and this stereotype is noticed by all female respondents. This stereotype may be based on the fact that there is a lower representation of women in the field of eSports. According to 2019 stats, nearly half (35%) of gamers are women, but among that group, only 5% are recognized as professional eSports athletes.[46]

Respondent No. 2 stated that digital game players are stereotyped as nerds, addicts, and people who have no life. The answer of respondent No. 2 suggests that women in the field of digital games face a double barrier of stereotypes. The first barrier is how they are perceived by the wider society and the second barrier is how they are perceived among digital game players. Another stereotype mentioned by respondent No. 3 is that women only play leisure games. This stereotype may be based on the fact that women prefer more relaxing game genres in which there is no element of competition.

Respondent No. 4 mentions another stereotype that women should not play games, but should take care of the family. Respondent No. 5 notices several unique stereotypes: "Women who play games are perceived as tomboyish.[47] Another stereotype is that women play games only to please men, that is, to have something in common with men".

45   AMBY, A. et al.: *Analysis of stereotypes: How non-gamers view gamers*. 2020. [online]. [2023-12-09]. Available at: <http://www.academia.edu/download/62301617/Analyss-of-Stereotypes-how-nongamers-view-gamers20200307-128480-ha50k8.pdf>.

46   BADILLO, K.: *How Many Women Gamers are There in Esports Worldwide?*. Released on 6th December 2023. [online]. [2023-12-09]. Available at: <https://playtoday.co/blog/stats/how-many-women-are-esports-gamers/>.

47   Remark by the authors: There is no equivalent of the word 'tomboyish' in Slovak, but it is a description of women who are engaged in masculine activities, dress in a masculine way, and behave like males. This stereotype may be based on the fact that part of society still sees playing digital games as a boyish activity.

Respondent No. 7 mentions that the stereotype that women play games worse than men is followed by another stereotype saying that women need more time to find their feet in the games and it takes them longer to acquire skills compared to men.

Prejudices of individuals are based on certain stereotypes or previous experiences that led to them, and negative prejudices can be an obstacle to success, which in this case may hinder women's complete involvement in the gaming industry.

Concerning streamers, respondent No. 1 notes only one obstacle she has had to face because of her gender. The obstacle she mentioned is the sexist and lewd behaviour of some people on streaming platforms. She sees this as an obstacle because some women may not be able to cope with this type of interaction, and as a result, they may limit their activity on streaming platforms. For women to be successful, they have to cope with a certain amount of negative comments directed at them precisely because of their gender. Respondent No. 4 notes the fact that she cannot say certain things because of which she would be sexualized as an obstacle and thus she is limited in a certain way. Respondent No. 5 is also the last respondent who is engaged in streaming and does not perceive any obstacles in creating content for the public.

Four of the respondents are engaged in eSports. Respondent No. 1 has experience with the fact that someone would not want to play with her because of her gender; however, it is one negative experience out of many. When asked if she faced any obstacles related to her gender, she answered: "Probably not real obstacles, but maybe respect or recognition is what I would like to get, and I'm still overcoming it. I feel that if I'm doing anything and I'm doing great, I'm trying and I'm getting good results, it's still not enough. I played in a tournament in which I had good results, but still, people insulted me and playing skills were held in very low regard". Respondent No. 4 states that concerning obstacles to success, it is more difficult for women to find their feet in eSports and find a team, which results in women not having room for improvement because players improve the most if they play against more experienced people. Respondent No. 5 notes that when selecting new players for eSports teams, women are stereotyped in such a way that worse results are expected from them than from men. Also, she maintains that men in eSports teams often do not agree with a woman leading the team.[48] Respondent No. 7 perceives the fact that women must make a greater effort to gain awareness on the eSports scene as an obstacle to success. In her opinion, women face double dilemma barriers and if they want to achieve success, they must first gain awareness in the women's eSports community and then also in the men's eSports community because that is where the best players and the best teams are.

Respondent No. 2, who works in the field of digital games education, feels that men are taken more seriously on professional platforms. She has this feeling even when she is lecturing or presenting somewhere but she attributes part of it to the fact that she may be less confident as a woman and to other factors that can influence this feeling.

Respondent No. 3 stated that she was evaluated and promoted based on her good work performance and that her boss treated her kindly. She sees the fact that some men were not open to her ideas in the beginning, and she had to try harder to get men to listen to her and give her ideas a chance as an obstacle.

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48   Remark by the authors: The position called IGL means in-game leader, which means the team leader who leads the team in multiplayer competitive games, and this position is held by the most experienced player in the team.

Depictions of Female Characters in Digital Games

During the in-depth interviews, the topic of the portrayal of female characters in digital games was addressed, and women's opinions on the positive and negative portrayal of female characters in digital games and, at the same time, the influence of the portrayal on game selection were sought.[49]

Respondent No. 1 stated: "If I saw that in some game someone was trying to support women and portray them as independent and strong, it would add points to my view of that game, but I don't know if this would be the reason for this game to play because I mostly only play Apex". Respondent No. 2 said that when choosing a game, the style of portraying female characters does not play a role for her, but other factors are more important. If there is a choice to play as a male or female character in the game, respondent No. 2 usually chooses a male. She also commented on the negative portrayal of female characters: "Sometimes it upsets me when there's a game in which a woman is completely stereotyped, portrayed as a stupid-head, and it's on purpose, but sometimes it's not, because that's the purpose of the game, or there's a reason for it".

Respondent No. 3 expressed her reaction to the negative portrayal of female characters as follows: "I'm interested in it, but not that much, I roll my eyes and I wouldn't give the game a good rating if a woman was portrayed negatively, but not only because of that, but also because it's not a good story and it's a cliché. I mainly play games because of their game mechanics, and I wouldn't play a game I'm not interested in just because a woman is portrayed positively". Respondent No. 3 does not have a problem with the excessive sexualization of women in digital games because she perceives it as art.

Respondent No. 4 is not interested in the fact of how women are portrayed in digital games, nor is she bothered by the sexualization and stereotyping of women. Regarding the influence of the portrayal of female characters when choosing a game, she said that she finds the negative portrayal of a female character embarrassing, but if the game was fun, she would play it. She finds the negative portrayal of female characters unpleasant, but she thinks it can have a purpose: "When there are some stereotypes shown and it's explicitly pointed out that such stereotyping is bad, then I would play the game anyway. If such a display is intended as a mockery, then it will discourage me from playing". As she states, if a game contains a female character she considers this fact to be a great asset when choosing a game. According to respondent No. 7, the style of portraying women in a game plays a role to some extent but she is not bothered by the negative portrayal of women in digital games.

Summarizing women's opinions on this topic is not easy, because most of them perceive the style of portraying women in digital games differently. While three respondents feel there has been a positive shift in the portrayal of women, two other respondents do not mind women being portrayed negatively. The style of representation of women influences the choice of the game only to a certain extent, and women focus more on other factors such as game mechanics. Anyway, most of the respondents would react either positively or negatively regarding the representation of women in games.

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49   Remark by the authors: Negative portrayal in this context does not mean antagonistic characters, but female characters who are negatively stereotyped, sexualized, and sexist.

Improving the Situation of Women in the Gaming Industry

When asked about the possible solutions for improving the situation of women who are active in eSports, respondent No. 1 stated that the rules in tournaments should be tightened up and communicated to the players: "If someone has sexist comments and you have proof, you can send it to admins. That's the way it is now, but nobody talks about it and it's not mentioned in the rules". From her answer, it can be deduced that some women do not know about the possibility of reporting negative behaviour to the tournament admin because it is not mentioned directly in the rules. Thus, there is room for improving players' awareness of the rules and their rights to report violations of the rules. Respondent No. 4 sees room for improvement for women with mixed tournaments that give women a chance to demonstrate their skills and play against men, as the top players in Apex Legends are overwhelmingly male. In this way, women can gain a reputation in the eSports community. Although mixed tournaments are organized in Apex Legends, respondent No. 4 considers their number to be insufficient. In the mixed tournaments she talks about there is a rule saying that each team must include at least one woman. Respondent No. 6 perceives an opportunity for improvement through the integration of women in the field of eSports. She perceives that it is gradually being worked on and the situation is visibly improving; as an example of progress, she points to the increase in female commentators of eSports matches. According to respondent No. 7, the situation of women would improve if they learned how to play digital games better, which would consequently lead to other women having someone to look up to and be inspired by. As she has no experience with eSports, she commented on the overall situation of women who play digital games, so her answer also includes eSports and the process by which women get into the eSports community. The respondents were also asked whether quotas aimed at the equality of the number of women and men in the highest leagues of eSports tournaments would be a good solution; however, all respondents who work in the field of eSports have a negative attitude towards quotas.

Streamers constitute another large group of female respondents. In their opinion, the possibility of improvement comprises the increased moderation of chat on streaming platforms and thus the limitation of problematic chatters. Currently, streamers can ban people they do not want in their chat. What content should be blocked on platforms belongs to a long discussion and a common consensus will probably never be found. So it is up to the streamers what content they keep in their chat and what content they delete. Platforms like Twitch penalize accounts for inappropriate behaviour but nothing prevents people from creating a new account.

Respondent No. 2 who works in the field of digital games education sees opportunities for improvement in schools: "Girls are not so supported in programming, for example, and education is still stereotypical. But it is difficult to eradicate it from society. We cannot force parents how to raise their children, but schools should show those girls that they can be active in this field as well, for example, based on role models. It needs to be explained to the children at schools and maybe even the parents should be trained to it". Respondent No. 3, who works as a game developer, sees the possibility of improvement as well as room for improvement in supporting the interest of young girls in the digital games and gaming industry. According to her, the situation in the gaming industry would improve if women

felt more valued and did not have to face the negativity associated with their gender in this predominantly male industry.

Respondents were asked to express their opinions regarding the disproportion of women and men in the fields of the gaming industry they are engaged in. As outlined above, according to the respondents, more problems can cause the disparity between women and men. The most common problem that women mentioned is persistent stereotypical upbringing by the older population who do not understand games, and still consider digital games to be 'male-to-male stuff'. During the in-depth interviews, four respondents mentioned stereotypical education as the reason for the low representation of women in the gaming industry. Another problem women note is the lack of role models to inspire them. Respondents No. 6 and 7 confirmed previous findings that women are less interested in competitive games. Respondent No. 7 also stated that women do not spend as much time on games as men and that they do not enjoy information technologies or the development of games, i.e. working in the gaming industry.

Conclusion

For six out of the seven respondents, family members were the ones who introduced them to the realm of digital gaming, indicating that their entry into the gaming world largely relied on their families. However, most women do not find support from them; this may not be because of their gender but parents want their children to engage more in activities that they consider meaningful, such as studying for school. They get as much support as possible from their friends. Women face mostly negative comments in connection with digital games from older people and from people who have insufficient knowledge about the world of digital games.

Women like different genres of games but compared to the available statistics, in our research sample, there was a higher number of women who like competitive games; women also play leisure games and AAA games to a larger extent regardless of genre.

Female online gamers face negative behaviour from their fellow players, which can lead to negative consequences such as depression, dislike of the game, and bad moods, they may also stop playing games with strangers, and they may stop playing games for a certain period. Female players would receive negative comments from teammates even if they were male, random teammates modify negative comments according to the characteristics of the person they want to offend. Some negative reactions would appear only based on the feminine gender. Female streamers also face negative consequences, but the negative comments come from their viewers. Despite a certain amount of negative reactions, streamers receive mostly positive reactions from their viewers.

Other widespread stereotypes revealed in this study include the fact that women play games less skilfully than their male counterparts, female gamers are ugly and fat, a woman cannot achieve success in the gaming industry without the help of a man, women are supposed to take care of the family rather than playing games, or women play games only to please men and have some common interests with them. Among streamers, opinions on women being disadvantaged differed. Two of the three female streamers do not feel disadvantaged compared to men as long as they can cope with negative comments; one streamer feels disadvantaged by not being allowed to say certain things that may cause her to face sexualization. The available body of research on gaming and gender supports our findings by arguing that gaming culture is actively unfriendly toward women,

not seeing and accepting them as true gamers despite their demonstrably similar gaming behaviour.[50]

There are several reasons why there is a low representation of women in some areas of the gaming industry. It can be argued that gender-related factors affect a child's future, specifically the choice of further education which is related to helping them succeed in the competitive labour market,[51] and which indicates that gender roles are present in society and that males and females are expected to fulfil different tasks. This assumption was not confirmed nor refuted because most of the women interviewed entered this industry thanks to their family members; however, there is not a sufficient amount of information from women who may have been denied their careers in the industry by the different expectations of people surrounding them.

In light of the opinions expressed by the respondents, there is room for improving the number of women in the industry through educational institutions, which can present women with opportunities even in fields that are perceived as stereotypically male and increase their interest in digital games. The lack of and need for female role models in the world of digital games to inspire women were identified, which can subsequently increase their interest in the industry.

In the field of eSports and competitive gaming, women's participation is low; however, they are not in favour of quotas to determine the minimum number of women gamers in the highest eSports competitions, on the contrary, they argue that players should be evaluated in the light of their skills, not on their gender. Our findings support the conclusions drawn from previous studies referring to eSports and competitive gaming as areas dominated by toxic meritocracy and prevailing masculinity, and women's room for participation in eSports as still being very limited, both as regards their presence and ways of participation.[52] The conclusions drawn from our research are consistent with another study that concludes that despite a strong belief in meritocracy in eSports and competitive gaming, there are still prevailing barriers limiting the participation of women gamers in competitive Overwatch such as doubts about their identity and requests to prove it, threats of publishing private personal information to reveal the identity of the female gamer without her consent, bullying, and other forms of misogynist hostility.[53] Elements of gender discrimination that may lead to harmful stereotypes against women are undoubtedly present in digital games.[54]

As for obstacles and challenges women in the gaming industry face, women creating content on streaming platforms perceive sexism and sexualization by the visitors of their stream as the only obstacles. In the eSports scene, women recognise several obstacles that they have to face. They find it difficult to win respect in the eSports scene and face negative comments from some members of the community who criticize their skills,

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50   See: PAAßEN, B., MORGENROTH, T., STRATEMEYER, M.: What is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture. In *Sex Roles*, 2017, Vol. 76, No. 7-8, p. 421-435.
51   See also: MORTREUIL, F.-X., ROŠTEKOVÁ, M.: Multilingualism in the Daily Life of Companies. What Challenges for Slovakia?. In *Politické Vedy*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 212-219.
52   For more information, see: RUOTSALAINEN, M., FRIMAN, U.: "There Are No Women and They All Play Mercy": Understanding and Explaining (the Lack of) Women's Presence in Esports and Competitive Gaming. In VERHAGEN, H. et al. (eds.): *DiGRA Nordic '18: Proceedings of 2018 International DiGRA Nordic Conference: Subversion, Transgression, and Controversy in Play*. Bergen : DiGRA, 2018, p. 1-14. [online]. [2023-12-09]. Available at: <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_Nordic_2018_paper_31.pdf>.
53   For example, see: FRIMAN, U., RUOTSALAINEN, M.: Gender and Toxic Meritocracy in Competitive Overwatch: Case "Ellie". In RUOTSALAINEN, M., TÖRHÖNEN, M., KARHULAHTI, V.-M. (eds.): *Modes of Esports Engagement in Overwatch*. Cham : Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, p. 135-154.
54   See also: BALTEZAREVIĆ, B. et al.: Stereotypical Negative Female Gender Roles in Digital Games. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 42-61.

attributing this criticism to their gender. As mentioned above, when selecting new members, some teams prefer men, which is linked to stereotypes against women, and they expect worse results from women than from men. The best players in the most famous eSports are men, higher-level players improve their skills by playing against more experienced players. As a result of the fact that teams prefer men, women have less room to play against better teams and, at the same time, room for improvement. In competitive games in which players play in teams, an IGL, the so-called in-game leader, is needed, who leads the team and is the most experienced player. Some players do not want their team to be led by a woman, which can be considered a form of discrimination. Women engaged in digital games education and working in the gaming industry note that men are not so open to their ideas and are not taken so seriously. The respondent who works in the field of digital games education feels that this feeling can also be caused by the fact that she may be less self-confident.

Most of the research we came across is carried out abroad; however, the authors of this study wanted to go further and focus on the situation of women in the world of digital games in Slovakia and shed light on this completely unexplored area. They are aware of the fact that there are some limitations to this study resulting from its qualitative nature and a limited number of respondents. In future research, it would be worthwhile investigating a wider variety of barriers, stereotypes, and challenges women in this industry are exposed to. More research should also be conducted to explore the experience of women working in managerial positions in gaming companies.

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