Verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming:
a survey of its prevalence and effects on the playing experience

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Videopelit ovat nykyään yleinen harrastus ja nykyteknologia mahdollistaa pelaamisen ja kommunikaation ihmisten kanssa reaaliajassa ympäri maailman. Usein pelejä pelataan monen hengen ryhmissä, ns.moninpeleinä, joka edellyttää sosiaalista kanssakäymistä. Tällainen verkossa tapahtuva sosiaalinen kanssakäyminen tarjoaa monia mahdollisuuksia, muttei ole täysin ongelmatonta: peliyhteisöissä huomiota ovat saaneet esimerkiksi pelien yhteydessä tapahtuva aggressiivinen kielenkäyttö ja sanallinen väkivalta.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää, millaista aggressiivista kielenkäyttöä ja sanallista väkivaltaa ilmenee verkossa pelattavien moninpelien yhteydessä, miten pelaajat sen kokevat, sekä millainen vaikutus tällä on ihmisten pelitottumuksiin. Tutkimuksen tiedonkeruumenetelmänä oli verkossa julkaistu anonyymi kysely, joka koostui sekä suljetuista että avoimista kysymyksistä. Kyselyvastaukset analysointiin tilastollisin ja osittain sisällönanalyysin menetelmin.

Tuloksista kävi ilmi, että vastaajat kokivat aggressiivisen kielenkäytön olevan yleistä ja suurin osa koki sen haitallisena. Moni myös kuitenkin suhtautui asiaan välinpitämättömästi. Yleisin sanallisen väkivallan muoto, joka kyselyvastauksista kävi ilmi, oli erilaiset loukkaavat nimitykset. Eniten sanallista väkivaltaa esiintyi tilanteissa, joissa joku pelaajista suoriutui muita huonommin, tai häviämistilanteissa. Useimmat vastaajista kertoivat reagoivansa aggressiiviseen väkivaltaan; moni raportoi käyttävänsä erilaisia pelinsisäisiä keinoja hiljentää tai estää aggressiivinen pelaaja, mutta pahimmillaan sanallinen väkivalta saattoi johtaa peliharrastuksesta tai tietyistä peleistä vetäytymiseen.

Tutkimuksen tulokset viittaisivat siihen, että aggressiivinen kielenkäyttö peliyhteisöissä on ongelma. Jotta tähän ongelmaan voidaan puuttua, tarvitaan lisää sekä syvempää että laajempaa tutkimusta sen ymmärtämiseksi.

Asiasanat – Keywords computer-mediated communication, gaming, questionnaire, social interaction, verbal abuse, video games
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1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, video games are an increasingly common pastime for many people. Current technology allows us to play games with other people—both friends and strangers—from all around the world in real time. This makes gaming a means of social interaction, and much like other computer-mediated communication, it presents us with many possibilities, but also challenges and problems.

As video games have evolved rapidly over the past couple of decades, and multiplayer gaming in online spaces is a rather recent phenomenon, not much research has been done regarding language use in this context. Though there are studies on multiplayer gaming (see Mihan, Anisimowicz and Nicki 2015), communication between players (see Keating and Sunakawa 2010), and gamer culture (see Schott and Horrell 2000; Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer 2017), as well as relevant research regarding other forms of online communication (see Rösner and Krämer 2016; Christie and Dill 2016; Viljakainen 2016), problematic language use, such as verbal abuse and hate speech, in online multiplayer gaming is yet to be studied extensively. However, there is a need for such research: people both from the gaming community as well as the game industry have noted that the amount of problematic language use is an issue in multiplayer gaming. Notably, Jeffrey Kapplan, game director of the popular multiplayer game *Overwatch* by Blizzard Entertainment, published a video where he publicly addressed the issue and appealed to the community to do better (Kapplan 2017). This study examines the problematic language use in online multiplayer gaming, and how it affects members of the gaming community, by analysing questionnaire responses from gamers, and thus aims to begin filling this gap in the research of gaming and language use.

The thesis is divided into five chapters, and the structere of it is as follows: in Chapter 2, the thesis will give definitions to key concepts of the study, and discuss aspects of online gaming and gaming culture, computer-mediated communication and anonymity, and verbal abuse, in further detail. Then, Chapter 3 will describe the research aim and the methods used in the study, as well as introduce the reader to the respondents of the questionnaire. The analysis of the data follows after that in Chapter 4, and finally Chapter 5 will end the thesis with a discussion of the study results and their implications.

2 BACKGROUND

This section shall first define online multiplayer games, and then describe online multiplayer gaming and its communicative aspects, as well as gaming culture itself, in more detail (Chapter 2.1). Then, it shall move on to defining and discussing computer-mediated communication and how it is affected by anonymity (Chapter 2.2). Finally, verbal abuse, its effects, and what kind of language—written or spoken—can be perceived as verbal abuse is discussed (Chapter 2.3).

2.1 Online multiplayer gaming and gaming culture

Online multiplayer games are video games that are played with other people—friends and strangers alike—via an internet connection; being in the same physical space as the people one is playing with is not necessary. As a result, communication with other players happens through different, computer-mediated means, such as voice chat and direct messaging tools. Thus, as Mihan, Anisimowicz, and Nicki (2015: 300) note, gaming nowadays is social behaviour. Verbal communication is often an essential part of multiplayer games where players work together. But it is more than that; Mihan et al. (2015: 300) also bring up social media and how current game consoles (not to mention computers that are used to play video games) enable people to share their gaming experiences with their social networks directly. Furthermore, communities are built within and around online multiplayer games and people form friendships with other people online based on these gaming interactions (Guitton 2012). Playing with other people may also have a positive emotional impact on players: in Mihan et al.'s (2015) study, multiplayer gaming—whether it was cooperative (players work together to achieve a common goal) or competitive (players play against each other alone or in teams)—resulted in less hostility and negative emotions post-game than single player gaming.

The interaction between players in multiplayer gaming is tied to its context: although any kind of conversation can happen, there is often a purpose to communication in online multiplayer gaming in the sense that the players interact with each other to "orient to, plan, and execute collaborative actions" (Keating and Sunakawa 2010: 332) to coordinate their plays in order to achieve their in-game objectives. Additionally, the context of the shared virtual reality of the game and the multimodal, computer-mediated communication environment, create a unique space of interaction that the players adapt to in order to communicate effectively (Keating and Sunakawa 2010).

Gaming culture refers to the norms and shared knowledge that have developed within and between gaming communities and the game industry. 'Gamer' is an identity or a descriptor of a person who plays video games actively—a relative term—and has some sort of commitment and relationship to gaming. This sets gamers apart from the average person who may occasionally play or may have occasionally played a video game. There is also a common conception that gamers are good at video games, are in some way a part of a wider gaming community, and are more or less up to date with what is happening in the game industry. The stereotypical gamer is a young, white, heterosexual male (Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer 2017). However, in reality, gamers consists of a diverse group of people. According to the Entertainment Software Association (2018), the average US gamer is 34 years old and 45% of all gamers in the US are female; in fact, there are more adult women than underage boys playing video games. Regardless of the statistics, however, gaming culture is a largely male dominated space: men are seen as the primary target audience for games and are viewed as somehow inherently better at gaming (Schott and Horrell 2000, Paaßen et al. 2017). Furthermore, as Paaßen et al. (2017) repeatedly point out, men are the most visible gender demographic in gaming both as fans and professionals. Thus, it can be argued that this has an effect on gaming communities and gaming culture as a whole, especially on women and other gender minorities that consider themselves to be gamers.

2.2 Computer-mediated communication and anonymity

Communication in the context of online video games is often computer-mediated; it can be either spoken (using a microphone and some sort of voice chat service) or written (a chat or a direct messaging tool, for example). Online gaming is also relatively anonymous; people usually operate from behind of an avatar and a username, rather than their own name and picture. According to Rösner and Krämer (2016) and Christie and Dill (2016) researchers have connected hostility in computer-mediated communication to anonymity; however, their own research does not completely support this. Instead, they claim that there are social (Rösner and Krämer 2016) and individual (Christie and Dill 2016) factors that affect whether anonymity leads to increased hostility and aggressive language use in computer-mediated communication.

Rösner and Krämer (2016) argue that the social norm—whether the language used by others in the context is generally aggressive or non-aggressive—has a stronger impact on people's language use than whether they are anonymous or not. However, they also note that in their study, when the

social norm was aggressive, and the participants were anonymous, the people were more inclined to use aggressive language than when the social norm was aggressive, but the participants were identifiable (Rösner and Krämer 2016: 10). On the contrary, Christie and Dill (2016) focused on individual differences and found out in their study that higher self-esteem, higher sense of autonomy, and lower social anxiousness resulted in more aggressive language use, whereas lower self-esteem, lower sense of autonomy, and higher social anxiousness did not result in aggressive language use despite of anonymity. Based on these results, it seems that rather than cause verbal aggression, anonymity only makes it easier for people to verbally abuse others in computer-mediated communication if they are already so inclined or if the (social) environment supports it.

2.3 Verbal abuse

In the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2017), verbal abuse is defined as "harsh and insulting language directed at a person". Rösner and Krämer (2016: 2) have a slightly broader definition for "verbal aggression", describing it as a way of communicating "that uses words rather than physical attacks to do harm". Verbal abuse can appear in both spoken and written form and technically in any situation where communication occurs, including online gaming.

Nuccitelli (2012) categorises verbal abuse within computer-mediated communication as a form of cyber bullying, and links it directly to online multiplayer gaming contexts (among others). According to him, "[h]aving the ability to exchange information with gaming opponents and fellow peers, children will verbally abuse others, use threatening and profane language" (Nuccitelli 2012: 25) and so on. However, though he speaks of children specifically, verbal abuse is not necessarily limited to this particular age group of gamers. Nevertheless, his focus on children and cyber bullying is not unfounded, and not only because children and teenagers make up a considerable portion of gamers (ESA 2017): in their study, Teicher et al. (2010) found a connection between issues such as anxiety and depression in young adults and peer verbal abuse from childhood.

Verbal abuse can be placed under the umbrella of (linguistic) impoliteness. Culpeper (2011: 23) defines impoliteness as context-dependent behaviours that are seen negatively, and "cause or are presumed to cause offence". He also notes that impoliteness is context and culture dependent and the analysis of impoliteness depends on the researcher's subjective interpretation (Culpeper 2011: 8-12). Culpeper (2011: 2) asserts that impoliteness, or what is perceived as impolite, does not only

consists of what is said but also how it is said; nonverbal aspects of communication, such as one's tone of voice or intonation, also contribute to impoliteness. When studying impoliteness in computer-mediated communication, one has to keep in mind that the communication is not always spoken but sometimes written—in such cases the how is conveyed by different means. Viljakainen (2016: 20-22), for example, mentions the use of capital letters, emoticons or punctuation marks, use of multimodal tools such as images, or altering the typeface of text (bolding or italicizing, for instance).

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

This section will first establish the aim of the thesis and introduce the research questions that the study will attempt to answer (Chapter 3.1). Then, the data collection method will be explained, and the collected data will be briefly introduced (Chapters 3.2 and 3.3). Finally, the section will explain the methods used in analysing the data (Chapter 3.4).

3.1 Research aim and questions

The purpose of this thesis is to better understand the phenomenon of verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming. The aim is to find out what kind of abusive or aggressive talk players use when they communicate in online gaming situations, how players perceive this talk, and how it affects their playing experiences. The research questions the study attempts to answer are:

1. What types of verbal abuse can be found in online multiplayer gaming contexts?
2. Does verbal abuse affect people's playing experiences, and if it does, how does it do that?

3.2 Data collection

Given that the study's aim is to find out about people's perceptions of and experiences with verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming, the method for data collection needed to be one that allowed gamers themselves to talk about their experiences. For that reason, and in order to attain generalizable results from a wide and diverse group that would sufficiently represent gamers, the method chosen for data collection was an online questionnaire. Questionnaires are a suitable method for gathering large enough amounts of data to be generalizable in a short amount of time (Davies and Mosdell 2006: 36–37). They can consist of two kinds of questions: closed questions,

with answer options given to the respondents, which allow the researcher access to quantifiable data, whereas open-ended questions, where respondents are able to use their own words, offer more insight to what is being studied (Davies and Mosdell 2006: 81). An issue with creating a questionnaire that people can respond to anonymously and sharing it online is, however, that there is no way of knowing or controlling who responds to the questionnaire or if they are being honest.

The questionnaire was created in Google Forms (a survey-creating service developed by Google LLC: https://www.google.com/forms/about/) and was distributed online via the social media platforms Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook, as well as directly shared with some friends and acquaintances with experience in online gaming. The questionnaire was open from the 21st of December 2017 to the 11th of January 2018 and received 186 responses altogether, most of which were submitted during the first two days of the questionnaire being open.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, the aim of the survey was explained to the respondents in a disclaimer (see Appendix 1). Furthermore, it should be noted that the term 'verbal abuse' itself was not used in the survey; instead it was replaced with 'harsh and/or insulting language use', as abuse is a word with potentially strong connotations and its use might have limited some answers. The questionnaire itself consisted of 14 questions, out of which twelve were obligatory (see Appendix 2). Questions 1-6 were background questions, of which the question about the respondent's country was optional. Questions 7-14 were specific to the study's research aim, the last one being an optional one where respondents could further elaborate on their experiences, if they so wished. The closed questions were all multiple choice questions; in some cases, respondents could choose more than one option (Question 5, 7, 8, and 13), and two of the closed questions had an 'other' option where the respondents could write their own answer (Question 5 and 13). This was done to ensure that important aspects of online multiplayer gaming and reactions to verbal abuse within it would not accidentally be excluded from the data.

3.3 The respondents

This chapter is about the first six questions of the questionnaire, and gives a brief overview of the demographic information about the respondents. The remaining questions and data are discussed in Chapter 4.
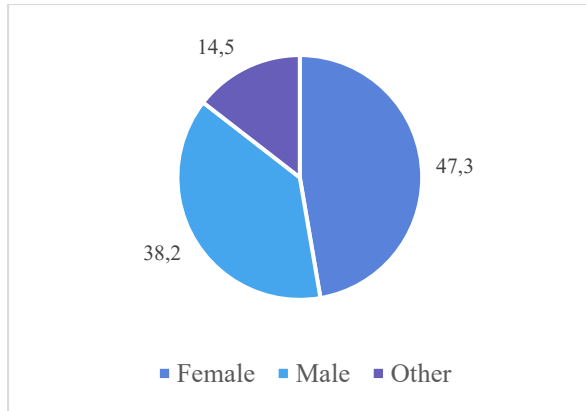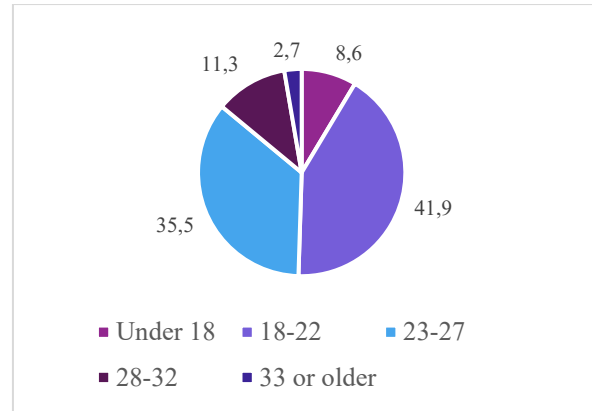
Figure 1. Respondents' gender
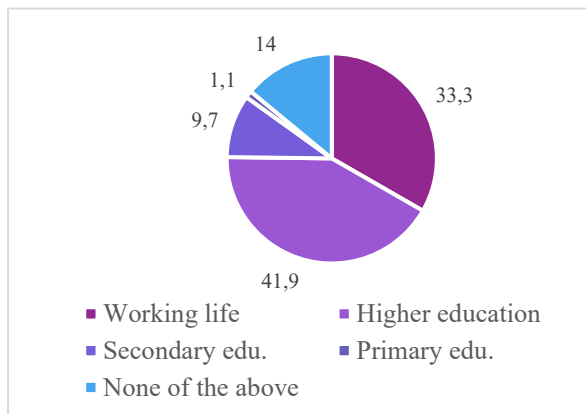
Figure 2. Respondents' age

Figure 3. Respondents' occupation

Of all the 186 respondents 47.3% were female and 38.2% were male, while 14.5% chose the option 'Other' (see Figure 1). The majority of all respondents were young adults, with 41.9% belonging to the age group of 18 – 22-year-olds and 35.5% to the age group of 23 – 27-year-olds (see Figure 2). Similarly, 41.9% of the respondents claimed to be currently in higher education and 33.3% in working life (see Figure 3). 178 respondents reported their country, altogether 17 different countries: Finland, Germany, the UK, the US and Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Malaysia, Argentina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and South Africa.

Most of the respondents were active gamers: according to the responses, 56.5% played online multiplayer games several times a week, and 21% played a few times a week; the remaining 22.5% played online multiplayer games several times a month or less. An overwhelming majority used a computer as an online gaming platform: 157 respondents. 54 respondents used PlayStation and 16 respondents used Xbox for online multiplayer gaming. Six respondents also mentioned Nintendo

3DS or Nintendo Switch, and eight respondents mentioned mobile phone as an online gaming platform they used.

3.4 Methods of analysis

The remaining eight questions are discussed in the results section of the thesis. The five closed questions were analysed using statistical means. The analysis of the two obligatory open-ended questions is based on Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness strategies and formulae: the types of and reactions to verbal abuse have first been identified from the data, and then categorised for further discussion. The strategies listed by Culpeper (2011: 256) were used as a starting point; ones he has listed and that are relevant to this study regarding instances of aggressive talk include *insults*, *pointed criticism/complaints*, *negative expressives*, *patronising behaviour*, *threats,* and *other taboo behaviours*. These categories are presented in table form in the analysis and will be followed by more detailed discussion as well as illustrative examples from the data. The reactions and effects of verbal abuse are categorised and analysed in a similar manner. Responses to the optional, open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire are used, when necessary, to further discuss themes that arise from the rest of the data.

4 RESULTS

This section shall focus on the results of the questionnaire responses. First, it will look at how common verbal abuse is found in online multiplayer gaming (Chapter 4.1). Then, it will identify different types of verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming based on the questionnaire responses (Chapter 4.2). After that, it will cover the situations where verbal abuse can occur in online multiplayer gaming, answering questions about when and where the respondents had encountered aggressive language use (Chapter 4.3). Finally, the last section shall examine how the respondents reacted to verbal abuse and how it affected their gaming habits and experiences (Chapter 4.4).

4.1 The prevalence of verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming

First, in order to understand verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming better, this chapter will briefly address who the respondents played online multiplayer games with, as well as how many of them had encountered verbal abuse during their gaming experiences, and how common the phenomenon was understood to be among the respondents.

The respondents reported that they play online multiplayer games with strangers approximately as much as they do with people they know (Question 7): the answers 'strangers' and 'friends and/or significant others' were both chosen 143 times in the altogether 186 responses (76.9%). 'Acquaintances' was chosen in 85 responses (45.7%) whilst 'family' was chosen in only 18 responses (9.7%).

Harsh language use is prevalent in online multiplayer gaming, according the questionnaire responses. 43% of the respondents found harsh and/or insulting language use to be, in their own experience, very common in online multiplayer gaming, and 44.6% found it somewhat common. 10.8% found harsh language use to be somewhat rare, and only one person (0.5%) found it to be very rare. Two people (1.1%) responded that they were not sure. The one person to find harsh language use in online multiplayer gaming very rare was a woman from the 28–32-year-olds' age group, who played a few times a week on the PlayStation; she elaborated on her experience in the last question of the questionnaire:

> "A male player cursed the whole team throughout the gameplay for not choosing a healer in Overwatch, while not opt to become one himself until halfway. He still uses the F word as the team didn't work the way he wanted. I've only experienced this once."

In her personal experience harsh language was very rare as it had only happened to her one time, but her description of the language use and the situation where it occurred and why—lack of teamwork and one player behaving aggressively for things not going the way they want—came up in other responses, where harsh and/or insulting language use was found more common, as well.

Question 8 (see Appendix 2) asked the respondents to choose all the options that applied to them regarding whether they had been subjected to, witnessed, or used verbal abuse towards other players themselves. Of the 186 respondents, 146 respondents (78.5%) reported to have been subjected to harsh language use when playing online multiplayer games; an even larger number, 168 respondents (90.3%) reported that they had witnessed harsh language being directed at other players. Only five people (2.7%) responded that there had been no instances of harsh language use directed at them or other players in their online gaming experiences. However, despite how common harsh and/or insulting language use in online multiplayer gaming was found, only 43 respondents (23.1%) admitted to having used such language towards other players themselves. It

may be that some of the respondents were less aware of their own abusive language use, or were at least more reluctant to admit to using such language.

4.2 Types of verbal abuse found within online multiplayer gaming

This chapter focuses on the latter half of Question 10 (see Appendix 2), which was about what kinds of harsh language the respondents had encountered in their online gaming. The question was open-ended, and was answered properly by 165 respondents.[1] These answers were first read through to find and identify different types of verbal abuse, which were then categorised (see Table 1). In addition to Culpeper's (2011: 256) strategies that were used for this analysis, a category of *unspecified mention* was created for instances where the respondents described their experiences with aggressive language use on a general level without identifying the type of language they had encountered in those situations. Many responses included several types of verbal abuse, whereas some included none (as they had focused on the first half of the question, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.2).

Table 1. The different types of verbal abuse.

type of verbal abuse	insults	pointed criticism / complaints	negative expressives	patronising behaviour	threats	other taboo behaviours	unspecified mention
times found in the data	67	18	20	11	11	27	29

The most common type of verbal abuse the respondents mentioned was *insults*. Because of how often it was mentioned compared to the other categories (see Table 1), another categorisation based on commonly mentioned types of insults was created (see Table 2). For this reason, insults will be discussed separately later on in the chapter.

The second and third most common categories, *unspecified mention* and *other taboo behaviours*, covered different instances that did not fit the other categories. Unspecified mention included

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[1] The remaining 21 responses were excluded from the analysis, as they failed to answer the question correctly; they, for example, only listed game titles or the actual languages they had heard or seen when gaming. It should also be noted that in some cases the respondents did not answer the entire question.

responses where respondents mentioned verbal abuse on a general level only, or used the questionnaire's wording, "harsh and/or insulting language use", but did not specify how they interpreted that, or give examples of the language they had encountered. For instance, a male respondent from the 28–32-year-olds' age group, who reported playing on the computer and the PlayStation a few times a week, used the term "harsh languages" but did not explain what he meant by it:

> "FPS [first-person shooter] based games like Overwatch, harsh languages were often thrown into chat for no reason. People are just rude for no reason sometimes, they use online games as an avenue to channel their daily frustration and unhappiness."

Even if he did not specify the type of harsh language use, he stated that it was something he encountered from time to time, as was the case with most responses that described experiences of verbal abuse in an unspesific manner. Though he claimed verbal abuse happens "for no reason", he followed up with an attempt to explain verbal abuse in gaming as a way to deal with negative emotions, not only because of the game itself, but from players' daily life outside of gaming. His "often … for no reason" seems to imply that harsh language is used casually when playing online games.

Other taboo behaviours included yelling, blaming other players, and treating (people presumed to be) women inappropriately, as well as otherwise hostile or inapproriate behaviours that did not belong to the other categories. For example, a female respondent from the 23–27-year-olds' group, who played on her computer several times a week, wrote: "most of the times, when we are losing, some players just started being toxic and blaming others". Among the respondents, players blaming others for losing or not getting what they wanted was mentioned several times, and was perceived as aggressive behaviour (as we see in the previous example, where blaming others was associated with being toxic). Another female respondent, from the 18–22-year-olds' group, who also played on her computer several times a week, mentioned "guys obnoxiously flirting with an obviously uncomfortable girl on voice chat" whereas a different female respondent from the same age group, who played several times a week on various platforms including the computer, had been told that girls should not play video games and to "go back to the kitchen". These kind of sexist attitudes in gaming may make gaming communities and spaces feel unwelcoming to women despite the high number of women who play video games. Unsurprisingly, given that gaming is viewed as a

predomintantly male space (Schott and Horrell 2000, Paaßen et al. 2017), there was no gender specific taboo behaviour targeting men found in the data.

Negative expressives refer to the use of profanity. This was found 20 times in the data; it is likely that not all respondents who had witnessed the use of swear words thought to mention it, as what is considered to be impolite language, or in the case of this study harsh or insulting language use, is subjective (Culpeper 2011: 8-12) and it might be that not all respondents found swearing to be particularly offensive. What was considered a swear, and what the difference between swearing at and insulting someone was, if there was any, also varied among respondents; as one respondent (female, 18–22, played several times a month on her computer) put it, "if someone messes up […] other players get angry and frequently swear at them (often using homophobic language[…])". Similary to the male respondent who used the term "harsh languages", a female respondent from the 23–27-year-olds' age group, who played several times a week on the computer and the PlayStation, also described using harsh language—specifically negative expressives—as a way of managing negative emotions, saying that "swears are used to vent anger". In that sense, this type of verbal abuse has a practical function as a way to release tension.

Pointed criticism and complaints and *patronising behaviour* were often linked. Criticism and complaints had to do with players making harsh and rude comments regarding, for example, mistakes, whilst patronising behaviour included making derisive remarks towards, or bullying, newer or less skilled players. According to a male respondent from the 18–22-year-olds' group who played several times a week on his PlayStation, verbal abuse is mostly directed "towards players who are new/are not yet comfortable with the content/not that experienced yet/etc.". A female respondent from the 23–27-year-olds' age group, who gamed several times a week on her computer, had a similar experience: "insulting language is either at a seemingly "unskilled" player, usually a teammate in team-based games, […] mocking them by saying they are useless". Another female respondent, from the 18–22-year-olds' group, who played on her computer a few times a month, gave specific examples: "stuff like "how are you X level you're terrible" "you don't deserve that potg [Play of the Game]" "why are you playing X hero you suck lol" stuff like that". It seems that attacking players for their skill-level is relatively commonplace in multiplayer gaming. Criticism, complaints, and patronising behaviour are also clearly related to their context—playing

the game—whereas the other types of verbal abuse found in the data can be more personal and have nothing to do with the game itself.

The *threats* found in the data were instances where people were told or encouraged to die or kill themselves. For example, a person from the 23–27-year-olds' age group, who played online multiplayer games on their computer several times a week, described the harsh language they had encountered as follows:

> "the most common were ableist insults, like calling players retarded or autistic. Racist insults were also extremely common. Sometimes it was a constant string of insults. Rarely, there were death threats".

A female respondent from the 18–22-year-olds' age group, who played a few times a week on her Xbox, mentioned "insults aimed at myself/friends telling us to kill ourselves, that we're a waste of space, etc." in her response, whereas a male respondent from the 28–32-year-olds' age group, who played on his computer several times a week, wrote: "when playing MOBAs [Multiplayer online battle arenas] […] the toxicity is enough to make a sizable masses of land unfertile. Example: "You are so fucking bad. KYS [kill yourself]"". How seriously these comments are made, and whether the people making them realise how damaging their words can be, is unclear. However, it is evident from the data that verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming can, potentially, get very graphic and violent.

Table 2. The different types of insults.

type of insults	racist remarks or slurs	lgbt+ discriminatory remarks or slurs	sexist language	ableist remarks or slurs	other or unspecified insults
times found in the data	25	22	21	13	38

As stated earlier, insults were the most common type of verbal abuse mentioned in the data. Often, respondents mentioned them but did not give examples of what kind of insults they had encountered. However, four types were identified from the responses that identitied insults as a type of verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming: racist insults, insults that were discriminating towards LGBT+ people, sexist or misogynistic insults, and ableist insults. Many responses included several of these types in one answer. Some types of insults seem more salient to some groups than

others: of the 25 mentions of racism, twelve came from male respondents, eight from female and five from other respondents; mentions of LGBT+ discriminatory insults were found ten times in responses by women and six times by both male and other respondents; sexist language was mentioned 15 times in women's responses and four in others', while only two male respondents mentioned it; ableist remarks or insults were mentioned once by a male respondent, eight times by a female respondent, and four times by other respondents. Unspecified mentions of insulting language, or insults that did not fit the listed categories, appeared evenly amongst the respondents regardless of their gender. It might be that respondents were more susceptible to and aware of insults that could potentially harm them, as for example sexism was mentioned most often in female respondents' answers. A female respondent from the 18–22-year-olds' group, who gamed several times a week on her computer, gave a very typical answer regarding verbal abuse that the respondents had encountered in their gaming experiences:

> "Usually, when someone is not satisfied with another player's performance (regardless of their own misplays), and chooses to go straight to hateful insulting. I've also experienced instances of casual antisemitism, homophobia, and racism, used in situations that had nothing to do with gameplay, but rather just because the person wanted to "troll"."

However, a person from the 18–22-year-olds' group, who played on their computer a few times a month, pointed out the context-dependent nature of impolite language use, and how even insults can be meant and interpreted as something other than verbal abuse:

> "People tend to talk really rudely at their opponents, and even those on the same side if they have messed up in some way. However, the insulting things said to friends and family are often meant as jokes (and are usually seen as jokes by everyone involved) so the "bad" kind of harsh talking is related to anonymity."

4.3 Situations where verbal abuse occurs in online multiplayer gaming

This chapter focuses on the specific instances of where the respondents had encountered verbal abuse in their multiplayer gaming experiences. The first half of Question 10 (see Appendix 2) asked the respondents to elaborate on what kind of situations they had encountered verbal abuse, which will be discussed further here.

Table 3. Situations where verbal abuse can be found in online multiplayer gaming.

occurence of verbal abuse	losing situations	unsuccesful plays or unskilled players	competitive situations	cooperative situations	disagreement over in-game choices	public in-game chatroom	female player	other or unspecified
times found in the data	41	45	33	12	8	4	8	24

Verbal abuse was perceived to happen most commonly in competitive gaming, in situations that caused frustration among players (see Table 3). Mistakes, failed or unsuccessful plays, or players—who were perceived as less skilled—that affected the overall performance of their team were the most often mentioned reason that lead to verbal abuse. The second most common reason was losing a game, and competitive situations in general were reported as situations where the respondents were likely to encounter verbal abuse. A male respondent from the 33-year-old or older's group, who gamed several times a month on his computer and Playstation, for example, remarked that "competitive or difficult moments sometimes bring the worst [kind of language use out of people]". A female respondent from the 28–32-year-olds' age group who also played several times a month on her computer described her experiences followingly:

> "Competitive situations with random strangers, especially when a player isn't as skilled or knowledgeable as others in a group or is still learning the game. People insult the lack of skill (and eventually the person) and have no patience for newcomers. Also, as a female gamer I've been harassed a couple of times for being female. Usually sexual favors are asked or the other player doesn't wanna play because "girls aren't good at playing games"."

Her response includes elements that are common in the data: competitive situations and perceived lack of skill leading to verbal abuse. She also mentions how being female has invited inappropriate behaviour towards her, something that was specifically mentioned in seven other responses (see Table 3) as well. The findings of the study thus seem to indicate that sexism and verbal abuse in gaming are somewhat significantly connected (see also for example the number of times sexist language was mentioned in the data as shown in Table 2).

Cooperative games that lack the competitive aspect—for example games where players must use teamwork to clear a stage or reach some similar objective, rather than defeat an enemy team—were mentioned 12 times in the data. However, the reasoning for verbal abuse was similar to competitive

games: frustration resulting from mistakes, especially if they lead to losing the game. Disagreement over in-game choices prompted impolite language use as well; a respondent wrote that she had faced harsh language use when she had not played the way another player wanted her to, and others mentioned, for example, a player being unnecessary rude when complaining about team composition or someone else choosing a certain game character. Public, large in-game chats came up only four times in the data, but they stood out as they were different from other instances of verbal abuse that the respondents described. Verbal abuse in such chats was reported to be aimed not at a specific person for a specific reason, but targeted at a wider, unspecified audience. The desription from a male respondent from the 23–27-year-olds' age group, who played a few times a month on his computer and PlayStation, is an illustrative example:

> "The "general chatroom" for all the players in the server also had surges of racial hate speech such as the n-word or "ra**ead" and alt-right discourse such as "trump kek", "MAGA" and so on. These were usually ignited by one player starting to spam something, others joining and the rest either ignoring or openly disapproving of it."

It is possible that only four respondents mentioned these open chatrooms because the hateful language use in them is not directed at anyone in particular, or because of it being "spam" as it was put by the respondent. It could also be that it is not as common, or that the games the respondents of the survey played did not have this general chatroom function. Nevertheless, it can be argued that such hatespeech is still abusive, as it can affect people in the spaces where it occurs, even if it is not aimed at them spesifically. The final category, *other or unspecified*, includes responses that did not specify the situations where verbal abuse had occurred, instead referring to online multiplayer games in general.

4.4 Effects of verbal abuse on people's playing experiences

When asked if harsh and/or insulting language use had affected the respondents' playing experiences or habits (Question 11), 104 (55.9%) out of 186 answered yes, 59 (31.7%) answered no, and 23 (12.2%) respondents were not sure. The reactions to being in the receiving end of, as well as witnessing, verbal abuse were varied. To the multiple choice question where respondents could choose more than one option as well as write their own answer (Question 13), most responses included reacting or responding to verbal abuse somehow: 93 people reported to responding to the person using abusive language directly, 117 people reported using other means to prevent that person from interacting with them, such as blocking or muting them in the game, and 114 people

chose the option 'I report the language user' (to the game developers). Some reported to using a more passive method of dealing with the abusive language use; they either stopped communicating with others in the game themselves (52 people) or stopped playing the game to remove themselves from the situation altogether (28 people). 82 people reported to simply ignore the aggressive language use. In the section where respondents could write their own answer, some respondents mentioned that how they react to verbal aggression depends on the situations when they game. This seemed to be the case for most of the respondents, as they often chose multiple answers to the question, including both somehow reacting to verbal abuse as well as ignoring it. In answer to this question, three respondents also mentioned reaching out to the person they had witnessed being abused to comfort or encourage them.

Question 12 (see Appendix 2) was an open question that asked the respondents to describe how they felt when they encountered verbal abuse and to elaborate on how verbal abuse had or had not affected their gaming experiences. The responses varied from indifference to being strongly affected (see Table 4), and in many cases the reactions to verbal abuse were situation-dependent: thus, some responses included multiple, sometimes contradictory, reactions. Two out of the 186 respondents avoided answering this question by inputting a nonanswer such as a full stop and nothing else.

Table 4. Reactions to experiencing or witnessing verbal abuse.

reaction to verbal abuse	indifference	irritation, annoyance etc.	anxiety, severe upset	discouraged from communicating with other players	discouraged from gaming	sympathy towards the victim	amusement	other
times found in the data	60	48	22	21	40	9	7	29

Indifference was the single most often mentioned reaction to experiencing or witnessing verbal abuse. Some did not care or chose not to give any importance to harsh or impolite language, whilst some claimed they had grown so used to it that it no longer bothered them. However, many, while not personally offended by verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming, still disapproved of it in

some manner. For example, a female respondent from the 28–32-year-olds' age group who played less than a few times a month on her computer, felt "desensitised towards it now really. Which I don't think is a good thing," while another respondent from the 18–22-year-olds' group who played a few times a month on their computer, wrote:

> "I don't mind it THAT much, it doesn't really affect me, but I would rather not hear it at all. I feel like the people using it don't really like it either, they just kind of accept it as a part of the gaming culture and adapt and talk like everyone else."

Several others attributed verbal abuse to gaming culture as well, and accepted it as a part of the experience due to the anonymity and online aspects of gaming. However, the majority of the respondents had a stronger negative reaction to verbal abuse.

Many respondents reported to feeling irritated by verbal abuse in gaming. A male respondent from the age group of 33-year-olds and older, who gamed on his computer several times a week, felt angered "as there is no need for it". He also claimed that a player using verbal abuse ruined the experience for others. A female respondent from the 18–22-year-olds' group, who played a few times a month on her computer, described emotions that were common in the responses: "I usually feel tired and sometimes angry about seeing harsh language, most of the times just annoyed." Another male respondent from the 33-year-old and olders group, who similarly gamed on his computer several times a week, also claimed that being on the receiving end of verbal abuse made one want to respond in kind.

Some responses mentioned feelings of anxiety and upset resulting from verbal abuse and they were often mentioned alongside feeling discouraged from communicating with other players or even playing a game altogether. A female respondent from the 18–22-year-olds' group, who played on her computer and PlayStation a few times a week, responded: "I feel awful. The harsh and insulting language has made me really nervous to play games that has communication with my teammates. I'm always afraid I'll do badly and then they'll turn on me." A male respondent from the 28–32-year-olds' age group, who played several times a month on his computer, had a very similar response:

> "Personally it makes me feel stressed and scared, and takes away almost all enjoyment of the game experience. I am reluctant to try new multiplayer games, am stressed when teaming up with new people and don't want to play in competitive modes because of these experiences".

These two examples mentioned above are fairly typical among responses that reported finding verbal abuse upsetting. Two male respondents, one from the 18–22-year-olds' and one from the 23–27-year-olds' group, even mentioned having cried because of the verbal abuse they had encountered when gaming. Often, respondents did not go into detail about how they felt about the verbal abuse, but wrote that encountering it would make them leave the game for some time. This varied from "a few days off to get back in the groove" (a female respondent from the 18–22-year-olds'age group who played several times a week on her computer) to a two-year break from a game (a male respondent from the 18–22-year-olds group, who now played several times a week on his computer, who had felt overwhelmed by the "toxicity" of the game's players). Others did not stop playing but their gaming had been affected so that they felt forced to minimise communication with other players, for example by stopping using their microphone.

Sympathy and amusement only appear nine and seven times respectively. However, they still deserve categories of their own as they stand out from the rest of the data. Respondents who reported feelings of amusement mentioned laughing at insults and that they found the verbally aggressive player's anger amusing. A male respondent from the 18–22-year-olds'age group, who played on his computer several times a week, wrote:

> "Even when someone did use harsh language they often made some pretty entertaining insults. I remember myself laughing at at least one insult while simultaneously thinking about how freaking offensive it had been."

The respondents who mentioned feelings of sympathy for others who were on the receiving end of verbal abuse had the tendency or desire to stand up for the victims; for example, a female respondent from the 18–22-year-olds'age group, who player on her computer and Xbox several times a week, wrote that she "either defend[s] them or [tries] to build them back up with encouraging words". Both the respondents who felt amused because of verbal abuse, and those who felt sympathetic towards those on the receiving end of it, inclued male as well as female respondents.

The 29 responses that do not fit into any of the categories mentioned above include impersonal observations that do not address the respondent's feelings or how their gaming has been affected, or reactions that do not occur often enough in the data to warrant their own categories. The impersonal observations include disapproval of verbal abuse in gaming overall and how it affects

the gaming atmosphere in general, and coming up with possible motivations for people who use verbal abuse in gaming. Some reactions in the 'other' category include engaging with the verbal abuser by "trolling" them, taking steps to remain calm and polite in the situation, or even finding motivation from being on the receiving end of harsh language use; as a female respondent from the 18–22-year-olds' age group, who played on her computer several times a week, put it: "I will try my best to perform at my best as I'll prove them wrong."

5 CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to understand verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming, and find out where, how, and why it manifests, and how it affects people's playing experiences. The results show that verbal abuse is perceived as a commonly occuring phenomenon in online multiplayer gaming: a vast majority of the respondents had both witnessed and been subjected to verbal abuse directly during their gaming experiences. Whilst a significant portion of the respondents were indifferent about the issue, seeing it as an inherent part of gaming and game culture, others felt very bothered by it. The majority of the respondents reported to having experienced or witnessed verbal abuse and taking some form of action—actively responding to the abuse or abusive player, or more passively withdrawing from communicating or gaming themselves—because of it. Many respondents felt that the verbal abuse they encountered took some enjoyment out of gaming and made communicating with other players a stressful experience.

Among the respondents, verbal abuse was most commonly perceived as insults, as well as negative, aggressive and inappropriate talk towards other players. It was commonly understood that verbal abuse was often a result of frustration arising from the competitive nature of many of the games, and especially prevalent in situations where games were lost or plays were unsuccessful. Thus, it was noted by the respondents that newer or less skilled players were often targets of aggressive and abusive language use. However, often the abuse itself had nothing to do with the context of the game, as was the case with sexist behaviour and insults with degoratory meanings. Interestingly, the data supports the notion in Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer (2017) that a young, white, heterosexual male is viewed as the norm in gaming; the insults, when specified in the data, targeted women and marginalised people noticeably in comparison with, for example, pointed criticism regarding gaming skills alone. However, the general experience of verbal abuse being a part of

online multiplayer gaming, and having a negative response to it, was shared to some degree amongst most of the respondents regardless of their gender. Similarly, the respondents' age group or how often they played did not have much effect in how common they perceived verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming to be, which further points it to being a prevalent phenomenon.

It should be noted that as a study for a Bachelor's thesis, this was a small-scale study and that a sample of 186 gamers is not large enough to represent the gaming communities worldwide. Furthermore, though the sample of the study is international, it was not possible to take cultural or national differences into account in the analysis; overall, the study could not fully utilise its demographic information in the analysis. Nevertheless, this thesis helps better understand the issue of toxic language use within gaming communities. In doing that, it can give both players and creators better chances of ensuring players of all kinds can have safe and pleasant playing experiences. For this reason, further studies on the subject are necessary; larger, as well as more in-depth, studies on people's perceptions of verbal abuse in online multiplayer gaming are needed in order to attain generalizable results, and the phenomenon of verbal abuse in gaming itself needs to be recorded and analysed to gain a better understanding of when, where, and why it happens.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The survey disclaimer

The aim of this survey is to find out whether or not people encounter harsh and/or insulting language directed at them or other players when gaming online, and how they react in such situations. It is meant for people who play online multiplayer games, and use or have used communicative tools related to their gaming, e.g. voice chat or instant messaging functions.

Instances of harsh and/or insulting language include, for example, angry shouting or offensive remarks directed at a particular person or people. However, since people can have different views of what harsh or insulting are like, respondents are encouraged to elaborate on their understanding of what harsh and/or insulting language means for them, or specify what kind of harsh and/or insulting language they have encountered when gaming, in the open questions of the survey.

Answering the survey will take 10-15 minutes at most. The answers are completely anonymous and will be analysed using statistical methods. The data will be used as a part of a BA thesis carried out in the University of Jyväskylä. If you have any questions related to the survey, please email me at laaneepe@student.jyu.fi.

Thank you for input, it is very much appreciated!

Appendix 2: The survey questions

1. My age

- o   Under 18
- o   18-22
- o   23-27
- o   28-32
- o   33 or older

2. My gender

- o   Female

o   Male

o   Other

3. Right now, I'm in

o   Primary education (e.g. primary/elementary school, middle school)

o   Secondary education (e.g. high school)

o   Higher education (e.g. university)

o   Working life

o   None of the above

4. My country:

5. Choose the ones that apply to you. My most used platform for online multiplayer gaming is/are

☐ Computer

☐ PlayStation

☐ Xbox

☐ Other:

6. On average, I play online multiplayer games

o   Several times a week

o   A few times a week

o   Several times a month

o   A few times a month

o   Less than a few times a month

7. Choose the ones that apply to you. The people I usually play online multiplayer games with are

☐ Strangers

☐ Acquaintances

☐ Friends and/or significant others

☐ Family

8. Please choose the option(s) that apply to you

☐ I have been subjected to harsh and/or insluting language when playing online multiplayer games.

☐ I have witnessed harsh and/or insulting language directed at other players when playing online multiplayer games.

☐ I have used harsh and/or insulting language directed at other players when playing online multiplayer games.

☐ There have been no instances of harsh and/or insulting language directed at me or other players in my online multiplayer gaming experiences.

9. In my experience, I find harsh and/or insulting language use in online multiplayer gaming to be

- o   Very rare

- o   Somewhat rare

- o   Somewhat common

- o   Very common

- o   I'm not sure

10. In what kind of online gaming situations have you encountered harsh and/or insulting language use? What kind of language use?

11. Has harsh and/or insulting language use in online multiplayer gaming affected your playing experience or habits?

- o   Yes

- o   No

- o   I'm not sure

12. How do you feel when you encounter harsh and/or insulting language use when gaming online? If you answered 'yes' to the previous question, how has such language use affected your gaming? If you answered no, why not?

13. When you encounter harsh and/or insulting language use when gaming online, do you respond or react to it? How? You can choose more than one option.

☐ I respond to the language user directly

☐ I mute, block, etc. the language user

☐ I report the language user

☐ I stop using the communication function where I encounter harsh and/or insulting language

☐ I stop playing the game

☐ I do not respond or react to harsh and/or insulting language use when gaming online

☐ Other:

14. If you have anything to add, in your own words, please describe your experiences with harsh and/or insulting language in online multiplayer gaming.