IS GAMING A BOY'S CLUB?
WOMEN, VIDEO GAMES AND SEXISM

Marketed primarily to boys and men, video games do not have a good track record when it comes to positively including girls and women. Female characters are rarely in the games and, when they are, they are often portrayed in negative, stereotypical and one-dimensional ways. The lack of female characters, the over-sexualization of them and the violence directed against women are just a few of the problems. Women media critics have called attention to the sexism and misogyny within the gaming world and, in resulting backlash, several of them have become victims of violent threats themselves. Anita Sarkeesian, one of the more well-known media critics, was in the news recently because, when she was invited to speak at Utah State University, she received threats that there would be a shooting massacre if she came. The campus police reportedly told her they could not search people entering the talk for weapons and therefore could not guarantee her safety, so she cancelled. Over the past several years, Sarkeesian has repeatedly been threatened with rape, violence and murder because of her outspoken analysis of sexism in the gaming world.

This advanced high school lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the world of video games, understand how sexism and misogyny are perpetuated in gaming and express their own thoughts about the issue.

[**NOTE:** This *Current Events Classroom* lesson is intended to reflect relevant timely issues in the news, in this case manifestations of sexism and misogyny in the computer gaming world. The activities included are designed to solicit input from students and to generate discussion in the classroom. Teachers are always encouraged to supplement the curriculum with additional material offering a wide range of perspectives.]

See these additional ADL resources: *Current Events Classroom* lessons "Addressing Hate Online: Countering Cyberhate with Counterspeech" and "Stereotypes of Girls and Women in the Media," Rosalind's Classroom Conversations "League of Lessons: Why Gaming Matters" and Best Practices for Responding to Cyberhate.

Grade Level: 11–12

Time: 60 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, Statistics and Probability

Learning Objectives:

* Students will learn some background facts and information about the current state of video games.

* Students will reflect upon their own experience with gaming.

* Students will understand the role of women in video games and the specific ways in which sexism is perpetuated in the gaming world.

* Students will express their thoughts by writing a letter to a video game company.

Material:

- [Our Experience with Gaming Statements](#)

- [*TEDxWomen Talk About Online Harassment & Cyber Mobs*](#) video (2012, 10 mins., Feminist Frequency)

- "It's Game Over for 'Gamers': Anita Sarkeesian On Video Games' Great Future" (*The New York Times,* October 28, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/10/29/opinion/anita-sarkeesian-on-video-games-great-future.html)

- Online Harassment: Summary of Findings (Pew Research Internet Project, October 22, 2014, www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/)

- *Post-it® Notes* or round stickers (at least 7 per student)

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL's "[Glossary of Education Terms](#).")

- abusive
- controversy
- critique
- cyberstalking
- dehumanize

- exploit
- feminism
- gamer
- harassment
- macho

- misogyny
- objectification
- offensive
- pernicious
- perpetrator

- protagonist
- sexism
- stalking
- stereotype
- victimization

WHAT IS GAMING?

1. Ask students some or all of the following questions to begin the lesson:

    - What are video games?

    - Where and how do you play video games?

    - What different kinds of games are there?

    - What is your favorite game and why?

    - What else do you know about gaming?

    Record their responses on the board. Explain that we are going to discuss video games, women and sexism.

2. Share the following information about the state of video games in 2014 according to the *Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*[1] report. Do this by taking each statistic and turning it into a question (e.g. What percentage of Americans do you think play video games?), allowing some guesses and then telling students the correct answer.

    - 59% of Americans play video games.

    - Video games are the fastest growing form of mass media today.

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[1] Ipsos MediaCT, *2014 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry* (Washington, DC: Entertainment Software Association, 2014), www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2014.pdf.

- The average age of video game players is 31 years old.

- Of all game players, 52% are male and 48% are female (this is up from 40% female in 2010).

- Women age 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (36%) than boys age 18 or younger (17%).

- The average age of most frequent game purchasers is 35 (50% women/50% men).

- 62% of gamers play games with others, either in person or online and 47% play social games. (Social games are where more than one person can play the same game at the same time and there can be interaction between them).

3. Ask students: *Do any of these statistics surprise you? Not surprise you? Do you think these statistics have changed over time and if so, how?*

OUR EXPERIENCES WITH VIDEO GAMES ACTIVITY

1. Post the statements written below around the classroom, using print-outs of Our Experience with Gaming Statements:

   - I have watched other people play video games.

   - I have played video games.

   - I play video games on a regular basis (at least once a week).

   - I have witnessed sexism in video games.

   - People have said or done sexist things to me through video game interaction.

   - I believe video games can have a negative effect on attitudes and perspectives in general.

   - I believe video games can perpetuate sexism.

2. Distribute at least seven sheets of *Post-it® Notes* to each student. Give students five minutes to walk around the room and place a post-it or round sticker on or near all of the statements that are true for them or if they agree. If you have a large class, you may want to call them up in smaller groups.

3. After placing their post-its on the statements, instruct students to move to the statement they are most interested in talking about with others. Give students 5–7 minutes to discuss the statements with each other. Have them talk about why they decided to stand where they are and what the statement means to them.

4. Have everyone go back to their seats and engage them in a class discussion by asking the following questions:

   - Where are the most post-its or stickers? The least? Why do you think that is?

   - How did you decide which statement to talk about with others?

   - As a class, do we watch video games often?

   - What do you like about video games?

   - What don't you like about gaming?

   - Have many of us witnessed or experienced sexism in video games?

5. Ask students: *In what ways does sexism exist in video games? Can you share an example of sexism?* Record their responses on the board/smartboard. Tell them that as we learn more about sexism in gaming, we will add to the list.

    NOTE: This list will be referred to and used in a later activity.

VIDEO, TURN AND TALK

1. Play this 10-minute video *TEDxWomen Talk About Online Harassment & Cyber Mobs* with Anita Sarkeesian, who speaks about her experiences with sexism and online harassment. Explain that Anita Sarkeesian is a media critic, blogger and author of the video blog "Feminist Frequency," in which she examines the depiction of women in popular culture.

    NOTE: Preview the video in advance to make sure it is appropriate for your students.

2. After watching the video together, have students turn and talk to a person sitting next to them to share their initial thoughts and feelings after watching the video. Allow each person one minute per share.

3.   Engage the students in a large group discussion by asking the following questions:

    - What is Anita Sarkeesian saying?

    - Why do you think people attacked her? Why does she describe them as a cybermob?

    - What are some examples of sexism and misogyny in gaming that she discussed?

    - Are those same forms of sexism present in other forms of media?

    - How do you think these images and messages about women impact girls and women? What about boys and men?

READING ACTIVITY

1. Distribute a copy of the article "It's Game Over for 'Gamers'" to each student. Explain that Anita Sarkeesian, and other women critical of sexism in video games, has been in the news lately because she was going to give a speech at Utah State University and received threats that there would be a shooting massacre if she came. The campus police reportedly told her they could not search people entering the talk for weapons and therefore could not guarantee her safety, so she cancelled.

2. Give students ten minutes to read the article silently or, you can give them the article in advance for homework to read the night before.

3. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

    - What more did you learn about Anita Sarkeesian after reading her article?

    - Why does she say she has a "love-hate" relationship with gaming culture?

    - Why is she critical of video games and the gaming world?

    - Why do the self-identified "hard core gamers" dislike some of the new genres of games?

    - What is the thesis of the article?

SMALL GROUPS: HOW SEXISM IS PERPETUATED IN GAMING

1. Explain to students that now that they have more information after watching the video and reading the article, they are going to get more specific about how sexism and misogyny are perpetuated in the gaming world. Also, explain that Anita Sarkeesian is one of the most well-known women who was targeted for her views about women and gaming but she is not alone.

2. Divide students into small groups of five and have them review the list developed earlier indicating ways sexism exist in video games. Give small groups 5–7 minutes to come up with a list of additional ways that sexism is perpetuated in gaming.

3. When the small groups are finished talking, have each share one or two items from their list and add it to your overall list. If the list does not include all the items below, share these as well:

   - Lack of female characters (Studies have consistently shown that at least since the 1990s, the percentage of female characters in video games has remained steady at around 15%.)

   - Women as victims of violence and abuse against women

   - Negative portrayals of women

   - Over-sexualization of female characters

   - Traditional gender marketing strategies (Video games are marketed to boys and men.)

   - "Women as background decoration" (These are largely insignificant non-playable female characters (NPC).

   - "NPC" (These are secondary players—the figures are not directly controlled by players and use automated scripts. They tend to be sexually objectified which dehumanizes the women and conveys the message that women's primary role is to satisfy men.)

   - "Damsel in Distress" (A female character placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character; she tends to be portrayed as frail, fragile and vulnerable.

4. Read the entire list out loud and engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

   - How does this list make you feel?

   - Do you see this same type of sexism perpetuated in other media forms? How so?

   - Do you think these portrayals of women impact how all people view women and girls in the real world?

   - What can we do about it?

READING AND DISCUSSION: ONLINE HARASSMENT REPORT

1. Distribute a copy of the Pew Research Internet Project's Online Harassment: Summary of Findings to each student. Explain that this summary is about online harassment and highlights differences in the way women and men experience online harassment. This discussion is separate but related to the conversation about sexism and misogyny in gaming.

   If time permits, review the whole summary but if not, highlight these two graphs: "Young women experience particularly severe forms of online harassment" and "Men and women experience different varieties of online harassment. "

2. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

    - How would you summarize what you see in the two graphs?

    - What is the difference between the ways in which men, women and the general population experience online harassment?

    - How can you explain these differences?

    - Why do you think there are such disparities between how women and men experience online harassment?

    - How is the report helpful or not helpful? Please explain.

    - Do you think there is a connection between the way women are portrayed in video games and online harassment? Explain your thinking.

WRITING ACTIVITY (HOMEWORK)

As a culmination of what they have learned, give students a homework assignment to write a letter to a video game company which outlines how they see women portrayed in their video game(s). Students will first identify a video game company that produces a game they want to address in their letter. If some students have never watched or played a video game, they should do so before writing their letter. Engage students in the writing, revision and feedback process so that the letters are high quality and able to be published and sent to the video companies.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- Feminist Frequency

- *2014 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry* (The Entertainment Software Association)

- "Online Harassment: Summary of Findings" (Pew Research Internet Project, October 22, 2014)

- "Harassment via Wikipedia Vandalism" (Feminist Frequency, June 12, 2012)

- "Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in 'GamerGate' Campaign" (*The New York Times,* October 15, 2014)

- "Sexism, Lies and Video Games: The Culture War Nobody Is Winning" (*Time,* September 5, 2014)

- "Why Does Sexism Persist in the Video Games Industry?" (BBC News, June 13, 2014)

- "Rape and death threats are terrorizing female gamers. Why haven't men in tech spoken out?" (*The Washington Post,* October 20, 2014)

- *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace* by Danielle Keats Citron

- "Open Letter to Jennifer Lawrence" (Forbes, October 8, 2014, letter in response to an incident of cyber gender harassment)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Writing
Standard 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to talk, purpose and audience.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Statistics and Probability: Making Inferences and Justifying Conclusions
Standard 1: Understand statistics as a process for making inferences about population parameters based on a random sample from that population.

OUR EXPERIENCE WITH GAMING STATEMENTS

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I have played video games.

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People have said or done sexist things to me through video game interaction.

I believe video games can have a negative effect on attitudes and perspectives in general.

I believe video games can perpetuate sexism.