2021

GAMES
AND ONLINE
HARASSMENT
HOTLINE

Impact Report

Contents

This report was produced by the Games and Online Harassment Hotline in partnership with The Representation Project.

Overview

This report analyzes the impact and reach of the Games and Online Harassment Hotline, a free, confidential emotional support hotline dedicated to serving the games community.

The Games and Online Harassment Hotline (also referred to as the "Games Hotline") was established by activist and advocate Anita Sarkeesian in 2019 in the wake of the gaming industry's first #MeToo moment, when brave survivors shared their experiences of harassment and abuse. Sarkeesian teamed up with Christoper Vu Gandin Le and Jae Lin to design the hotline.

So many people love games and dream of working in the games industry, but many are pushed out by the ubiquity and normalization of gender-based violence. Although recent stories about wide-scale abuse or sexist disparities within industry giants like Activision Blizzard and Ubisoft have made the mainstream headlines, this is no surprise to many who have been in and around games spaces. Gender-based harm, abuse, and

harassment in the games industry has been something of a family secret for decades, especially among marginalized folks.

Furthermore, the standard of overworking, burnout, instability, and low retention in games studios contributes to widespread mental health struggles throughout the industry. And we also know that so many of the issues of harassment, sexism, racism, and discriminatory gatekeeping extend to gaming spaces as well, including player communities, live streaming, and esports. The Games Hotline was established as a trauma-informed resource that offers real-time support with cultural insight into the gaming space. We hope that by encouraging help-seeking behaviors and promoting accountability, we can help to shift gaming culture to be more inclusive and compassionate.

The practices of the gaming industry matter because of its sheer size and reach. During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the video game industry earned $169 billion[1] and game play increased by 75% [2]. According to recent research, 56% of employees in the gaming industry experience inequality in the

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[1] Field Level Media. (2020). Gaming revenue to top $159B in 2020. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/article/esports-business-gaming-revenues/article-gaming-revenue-to-top-159b-in-2020-idUSFLM8jkJMl

[2] Shanley, P. (2020, March). Gaming usage up 75 percent amid coronavirus outbreak, Verizon reports. The Hollywood Reporter. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/gaming-usage-up-75-percent-coronavirus-outbreak-verizon-reports-1285140/

workplace[3] and 65% of players experience "severe harassment" while gaming[4]. This indicates that sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination are par for the course in gaming.

> **" People from all corners of the gaming industry have utilized the Games Hotline to seek and receive help for a wide swath of issues.**
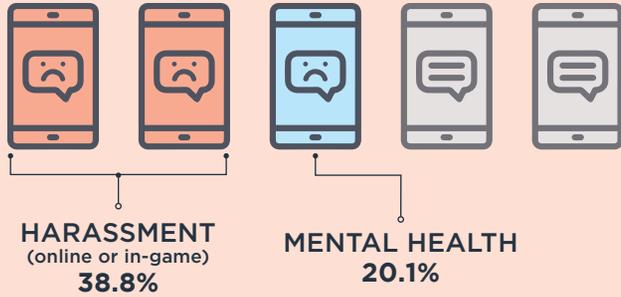
This report finds that people from all corners of the gaming industry have utilized the Games Hotline to seek and receive help for a wide swath of issues—from in-game harassment to toxic workplace environments to community conflict. We present our major findings below, followed by a more in-depth analysis in the full report.

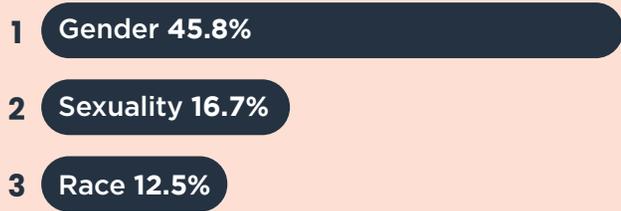[3] IGDA. (2021). Developer Satisfaction Survey (DSS). https://igda.org/dss/

[4] Shanley, P. (2020, March). Gaming usage up 75 percent amid coronavirus outbreak, Verizon reports. The Hollywood Reporter. https://www.reuters.com/article/esports-business-gaming-revenues/article-gaming-revenue-to-top-159b-in-2020-idUSFLM8jkJMl

Highlights

WHY ARE PEOPLE TEXTING US?

HARASSMENT
(online or in-game)
38.8%

MENTAL HEALTH
20.1%

HARASSMENT BASED ON IDENTITY MOST COMMONLY TARGETS:

1 Gender **45.8%**

2 Sexuality **16.7%**

3 Race **12.5%**

WHO'S TEXTING US?

PLAYERS
48.7%

INDUSTRY
WORKERS
41%

STUDENTS 5.1%

STREAMERS 2.6%

CONTENT
CREATORS 2.6%
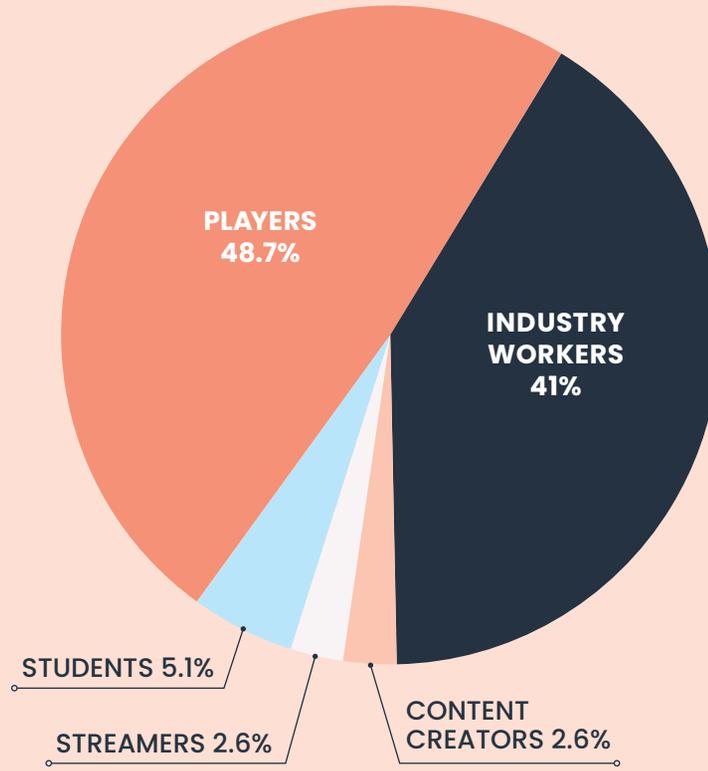
Methodology

The primary method used in this study is data gathered from texts placed to the Games Hotline from August of 2020 to August of 2021. The dataset includes all texts that came into the Games Hotline seeking help during that time period. This includes fully and partially completed texts. (We excluded seven conversations from people who contacted the Games Hotline but were not seeking help.) Our total dataset includes 150 unique conversations on the Games Hotline, made up of a total of 8413 texts.

The Games Hotline is designed to ensure accessibility and comfort, and texter anonymity and confidentiality are our highest priorities. Given the values of the Games Hotline, texters are never required to disclose personal information, and they aren't screened for demographic or other identifiable information. Multiple research studies confirm that requiring names or other identifying information may discourage people from using the resource[5]. While this limits our ability to analyze Hotline users by background, it reflects our priority that the Hotline be as accessible as possible.

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[5] Soltes, E. (2020). Paper Versus Practice: A Field Investigation of Integrity Hotlines. Journal of Accounting Research. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-679X.12302

Findings

In this section, we report the impact of the Games Hotline using an analysis of the information provided by texters. We provide an overview of why people text the Games Hotline, the types of harassment they face, hotline traffic, and feedback from texters.

REASON FOR TEXTING HOTLINE

People cite many reasons for texting the Games Hotline. As shown in Figure 1, the most common reasons are online or in-game harassment (38.8%) and mental health concerns (20.1%).

Figure 1

PRIMARY REASON FOR TEXTING

PRIMARY REASON	% OF TEXTS
Online Harassment	22.4%
Mental Health	20.1%
In-Game Harassment	16.4%
Relationships (platonic, romantic, community, etc.)	13.4%
Workplace Hostility / Abuse	9.0%
Workplace Stress	7.5%
Sexual Assault / Interpersonal Violence	4.5%
School Stress	3.0%
Addiction / Substance Abuse	1.5%
Hostility / Abuse at School	1.5%
Eating / Body Image	0.7%

Figure 2

TOP REASONS FOR TEXT BY GAMES AFFILIATION

In Figure 2, we present the top reason for texting the Games Hotline by the texter's affiliation with gaming. Players cite In-Game Harassment as their primary reason for contacting the Games Hotline. Workplace stress is the primary reason game developers text the Games Hotline. Nearly half (46.7%) of texters who work in the industry contact the Games Hotline because of workplace hostility and abuse. Students primarily text the Games Hotline because of school stress, while streamers and content creators texted in evenly around online harassment and mental health.
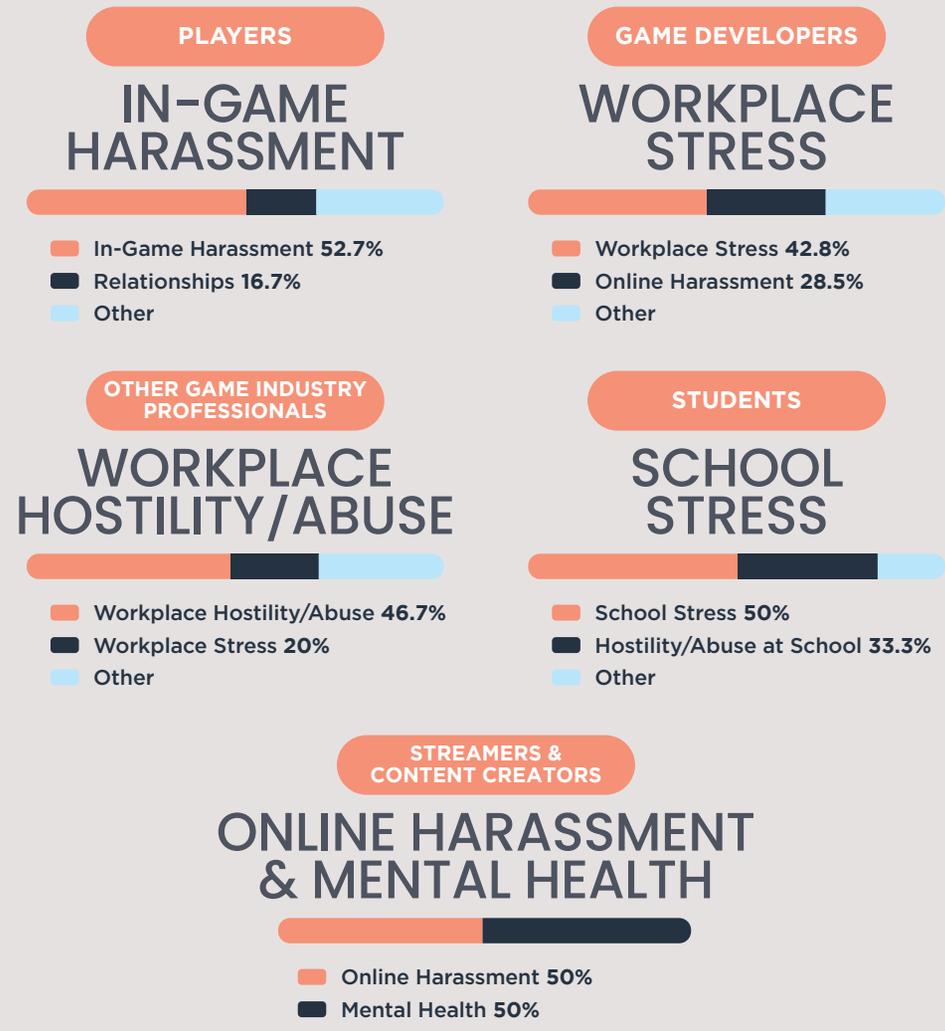
PLAYERS

IN-GAME HARASSMENT

- In-Game Harassment **52.7%**
- Relationships **16.7%**
- Other

GAME DEVELOPERS

WORKPLACE STRESS

- Workplace Stress **42.8%**
- Online Harassment **28.5%**
- Other

OTHER GAME INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

WORKPLACE HOSTILITY/ABUSE

- Workplace Hostility/Abuse **46.7%**
- Workplace Stress **20%**
- Other

STUDENTS

SCHOOL STRESS

- School Stress **50%**
- Hostility/Abuse at School **33.3%**
- Other

STREAMERS & CONTENT CREATORS

ONLINE HARASSMENT & MENTAL HEALTH

- Online Harassment **50%**
- Mental Health **50%**

TYPES OF HARASSMENT EXPERIENCED

Games Hotline texters reported experiencing numerous types of harassment, from bullying to violence, identity-based discrimination, and sexual harassment. As shown in Figure 3, the six most frequent types of harassment reported are blackmail (10.7%), flaming[6] (10.7%), sexual harassment (8.7%), non-consensual pornography (8.7%), hate speech (8.7%), and trash talking (8.7%).

Figure 3

MOST COMMON TYPES OF HARASSMENT

HARASSMENT TYPE	% OF TEXTS
Blackmail	10.7%
Flaming	10.7
Sexual Harassment	8.7%
Non-consensual Pornography	8.7%
Hate Speech	8.7%
Trash Talking	8.7%
Doxxing	6.5%
Bullying	4.3%
Impersonation	4.3%
Threats of Violence	4.3%
Extortion	2.2%
False Accusations	2.2%
Death Threats	2.2%
Griefing	2.2%
Name Calling	2.2%
Pervasive Harassment	2.2%
Cyberstalking	2.2%
Sexist Comments	2.2%
Catfishing	2.2%
Sexual Violence	2.2%
Spamming Messages	2.2%

[6] The act of "Flaming" refers to a gamer being hostile towards other players by insulting, swearing, or using otherwise offensive language.

Figure 4
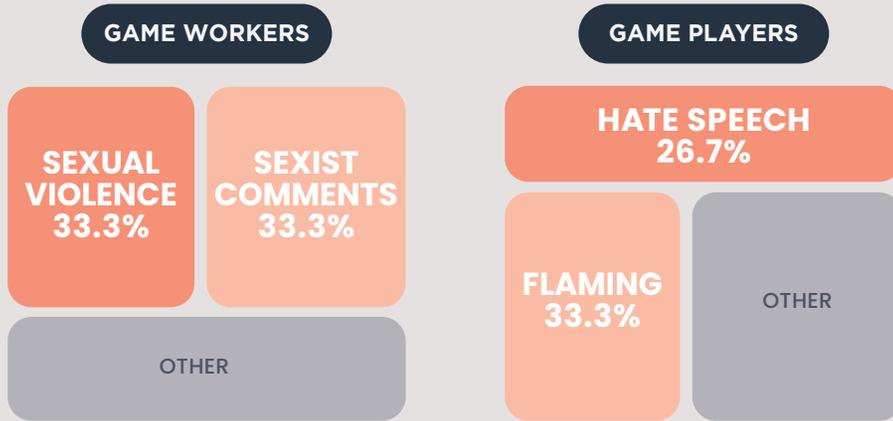
TOP HARASSMENT TYPES BY GAMES AFFILIATION

GAME WORKERS

SEXUAL VIOLENCE 33.3%	SEXIST COMMENTS 33.3%

OTHER

GAME PLAYERS

HATE SPEECH 26.7%

FLAMING 33.3%	OTHER

Figure 5

IDENTITY-BASED HARASSMENT

GENDER 45.8%

SEXUALITY 16.7%

RACE 12.5%

RELIGION 4.2%

BODY SIZE 4.2%

DISABILITY 8.3%

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY 8.3%

Figure 4 lays out the top two types of harassment experienced by different groups affiliated with gaming. The percentage within each group was too small to report individually so we combined them into game workers (game developers, other game industry professionals) and game players (players, content creators, streamers, students) into two categories.
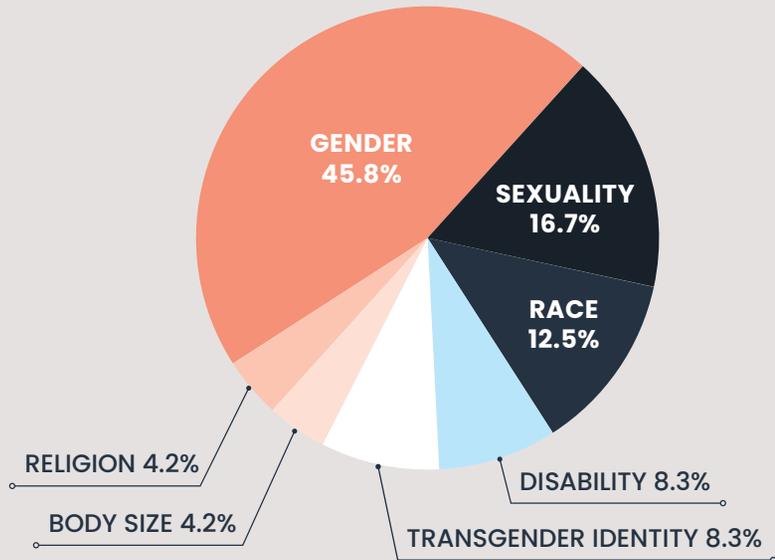
Figure 5 shows that texters report a variety of identity-based harassment—based on gender, sexuality, race, disability, body size, and religion. Nearly half (45.8%) of texters who experience identity-based harassment report gender as the form of harassment they face.

HOTLINE TRAFFIC

The Games Hotline had several peaks of activity since it launched in 2019. We saw our highest traffic in the first week the Games Hotline launched, a reflection of the media attention it garnered and the great need for a helpline for gaming. We saw another spike in traffic around the presidential election in November 2020 with increased anxiety during the leadup to the election. The Games Hotline activity spiked again in July of 2021 when news broke of the Activision Blizzard sexual harassment lawsuit. Some texters told us that the lawsuit news stirred up feelings of past, present, and potential future sexual harm in the industry.

HOTLINE FEEDBACK

One-in-three (28%) texters who contacted the Games Hotline offered unsolicited positive feedback about their experience. Texters express gratitude for the Hotline providing a space to help pull them out of a spiral and to untangle jumbled thoughts. Others praised the Hotline for providing a space to talk about anxiety and frustration. For some texters, the Games Hotline provided an opportunity to

tell someone what was going on, without fear of retaliation or escalation.

> **"Many texters ended their Games Hotline conversations feeling empowered and with a clear plan moving forward.**

Many texters who provided positive feedback about the Games Hotline noted their appreciation that the person on the other end had knowledge of and experience in the gaming industry. This cultural competency inspired their trust in the Hotline as a viable resource. Many texters ended their Hotline conversations feeling empowered and with a clear plan moving forward.

Lessons Learned

We have learned a lot about accountable conversations, digital security, and the nature of sexual harassment since launching in 2020. Here are a few of our reflections and evolutions:

THE RELATIONAL NATURE OF HARASSMENT

Mainstream narratives of online harassment largely center around cases where harassment comes from strangers and anonymous bad actors online. We were guilty of focusing on that portrayal as well, so when we realized that the vast majority of folks texting us about harassment had an existing connection or relationship with their harasser, we had to adjust our perspective. Most folks came to us struggling with harassment from friends, colleagues, classmates, roommates,

and/or community members. This really cemented for us that the problem of harassment is largely about the way we treat each other and the norms of our culture and community spaces. We adjusted our training to include more emphasis on addressing those relational ties and complexities when they come up.

ACCOUNTABLE CONVERSATIONS

When we started the Hotline, we did not anticipate how many people who have caused harm would text us. From the beginning, we heard from a surprising number of texters who were facing harassment or exile themselves as a consequence for their actions, and wanted a place to talk about that. For some, they sought our help in dealing with shame, fear, or anger about what happened. Others talked about their feelings of hopelessness around change; others sought resources and information about accountability and restorative justice. Because we believe that harassment is a systemic and cultural issue, not an issue of individual bad apples, we decided not to close the door on these folks. This required us to conduct additional training with our agents on how to hold accountable conversations that are empathetic and supportive without endorsing or affirming their harmful behavior.

DIGITAL SECURITY

Over the course of the year, we offered more and more specific guidance on digital security and technical tactics to deal with online harassment. We learned what guidance to offer through our interactions with texters who contacted us with digital harassment issues. We are committed to staying reactive to our community's needs and improving our digital security response based on trends from those texting us.

About the Organizations

Feminist Frequency is an award-winning nonprofit dedicated to ending toxicity and abuse in the games industry and gaming spaces at large. Founded in 2009 by Anita Sarkeesian, she challenged harmful media representations and advocated for a more inclusive media landscape. Today, the organization runs the Games and Online Harassment Hotline to provide free, confidential emotional support to people who make and play games. Feminist Frequency, in partnership with Take This, launched the Culture Shift Project, a robust training program to combat gender-based harm inside of game studios. Based on a foundation of justice, accountability, and care, Feminist Frequency is making games a better place to work and play.

The Representation Project is a leading global gender justice non-profit organization. We use films, education, research, and activism to challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes. In 2011, Jennifer Siebel Newsom founded The Rep Project in response to the overwhelming public demand for ongoing education and social action in support of her first film, Miss Representation. Since then, Siebel Newsom has released two more acclaimed films, The Mask You Live In (2015) and The Great American Lie (2019). The organization also runs a global youth filmmaker program to train the next generation of change agents. The Rep Project is also known for its impactful social activism campaigns, including #NotBuyingIt, #AskHerMore, and #RespectHerGame.

SPECIAL THANKS

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