

You are here: [Home](#) > [UFRGS](#) > [News and Information](#) > It's not only a video game: symbolic gender violence in digital games

It's not only a video game: symbolic gender violence in digital games

UFRGS doctoral thesis in Communication Studies aims to understand how symbolic violence against women occurs in digital games like Dota 2 and League of Legends

First published: March 11, 2021

by *Thiago Sória*

A study by the researcher [Gabriela Birnfeld Kurtz](#) for her doctorate in the Graduate Program in Communication at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul analyzed symbolic gender violence – and showed how it occurs – in the digital games Dota 2 and League of Legends (LoL). The research covered two directly linked theoretical axes: the relationship of the male gender with the female gender in these games and the definition of digital games and their rules systems. Gabriela, currently a professor at PUCRS, categorized the types of violence she observed and established the concept of "discursive gameplay violence" based on her findings. She defended the thesis in 2019 and was supervised by [Raquel da Cunha Recuero](#).

The two games observed by Kurtz for her doctoral thesis belong to the MOBA genre. The acronym stands for "*Multiplayer Online Battle Arena*", which characterizes a real-time strategy game. Players are organized into two teams, usually of five players each, to face off the opponents in this arena. The goal is to destroy the main structure located in the enemy base (in LoL, the structure is a large crystal called "Nexus"; in Dota II, it is a throne), and the winner is whoever achieves it first – somewhat like a checkmate in chess.

Gabriela says that she took her own experiences in the gaming environment to start the research. She noticed that, even though some hostility is quite common among players due to competitiveness, some of the insults directed at her were very different. "No one else was told to go wash dishes," she exemplifies. Based on these situations, one of the aims of the study was to detect how women are exposed to such type of violence in games. The thesis was a theoretical-empirical analysis, that is, the researcher theoretically analyzes the existence of violence against women in the game and its resources. Then, practical examples are used to prove the theoretical framework. In order to do so, she analyzed six videos of female gamers on Twitch (a live streaming platform for games, gamers and gaming performances) based on two theoretical axes and on a few hypotheses she raised about how gender violence usually occurs.

The researcher states that it is very common for studies with a feminist perspective to receive criticism – one of the most common, for example, is to claim that the cases of violence are very rare and isolated. To invalidate these claims, she established criteria that legitimized her results: she randomly watched the most recent matches; thus, everything that happened would be surprising for her. Gabriela also refrained from interfering in the analyzed situations. Even so, the researcher observed cases of symbolic gender violence.

The professor explains that symbolic gender violence does not require physical strength to happen. According to communication studies, this violence can be identified from our vocabulary (in words derived from prejudice) to our everyday attitudes, such as crossing the street when we see someone who makes us suspicious. Basically, it occurs in people's speeches and other kinds of communicative practices in a subtle way, which makes it very effective in reinforcing structural exclusion of minority groups in our society. Gabriela shares something she noticed in her analyses: "sometimes women were highly praised in matches, when they played well, which seems good, but in fact it is as if men did not believe they could play like that. So, for plays that were not that good, they received compliments".

The main issue is that many game elements end up being used to commit aggression. In this online environment, communication happens not only by text or voice chats, but also by predefined messages (selected with a command, so as to break the language barrier between people of different nationalities) and actions of the characters (dances, taunts, laughter). These elements can be used repeatedly, with the intention of mocking, criticizing, or annoying other players. Gabriela explains that up to this point symbolic gender violence did not necessarily happen. However, from the moment when, only by the presence of a female player, these behaviors are exhibited, aggression materializes.

By analyzing the matches, Gabriela categorized the witnessed violence types in direct and indirect. Direct violence is the most common one, committed by men, which had already been hypothesized by her. However, game developers were also included in this category, for sexualizing the design of female characters, maintaining a standard of aesthetically accepted and valued body features, while male characters have the most diverse sizes, body masses and ages. She reports that, although it is not such a harmful violence and does not make female players feel harassed – especially since beauty standards are a violence that women already experience off the games –, this detail has changed how other players interact with the characters, increasing the possibility of aggression through the game's mechanisms. Indirect violence is self-inflicted by the female players, by being too hard on themselves, belittling themselves for incidents that happen during the match or suppressing their identity out of fear of suffering aggression. Gabriela mentions that many female players use neutral or masculine usernames to hide themselves, or do not use voice chat at all. In extreme cases, female players mute the match – which makes it harder to play as a team and worsens the players' overall experience.

The main problem with symbolic oppressions is that there is nothing within the games that prevent them from happening. In a forty-minute match, one player can keep constantly offending another in many ways. If the person who is being insulted quits the match, penalties will be applied. However, at that moment, nothing can be done against the aggressor. According to the professor, this is precisely the power of symbolic violence. It is something that operates on a system, it is subtle and hard to combat. People constantly learn to act like this and there is not only one "villain", guilty of everything.

Discursive gameplay

The symbolic violence studied by Gabriela is not the same as that theorized by philosophers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. In fact, it acts similarly to those theorized, through communication in a social circle – in this case, in the digital environment of the games. The professor established the concept of "discursive gameplay violence", that explains how symbolic gender violence in digital games works and in which spheres it operates. Basically, the concept means that coercion occurs in a discursive, communicative way, within the mechanisms of game interaction (beyond direct verbal interactions), but with the particularity of the gameplay – that is, some rules and elements that have a certain purpose end up being subverted to allow the aggression. "It is in the fact that the person uses the very rules of the game to commit symbolic violence, which acts in a discursive way", explains Gabriela. This loophole can also characterize *griefing*: a set of attitudes that aim to spoil other players' experience. "The machine is not capable of understanding that this behavior is wrong. It is not against the rules. Only a player can tell that this is wrong", she says.

The professor explains that the computer only follows the rules that are encoded in the game code. For example: it is not possible to attack a teammate, the player will not receive damage nor suffer any negative effect. Thus, other concepts such as computer ethics and player ethics are related. The only ethics the computer reads is the one included in its programming code, so it cannot identify unanticipated actions, even if they harm the experience of other players. Therefore, game development companies need to create mechanisms that put these issues of ethics under the assessment of players, who are the only ones capable of recognizing such *griefings*. At the end of each match, players can evaluate how other participants played and report bad behaviors. As a result, countermeasures such as suspension or *ban* can be taken. "It is like scoring an own goal intentionally: it is not against the rules, but it breaks the ethics of the players, who may feel assaulted and wish that this teammate does not play anymore," she points out. However, Gabriela highlights that the system has flaws, and, since there are lots of players, few reports effectively result in any punishment.

Next steps of the study and its relationship with the context

Gabriela Kurtz's research encompasses the field of game studies. This field is recent and small in Brazil. The researcher says that, worldwide, qualitative studies (which analyze a small sample, with many details) like hers do not have as much relevance until they are undertaken to a quantitative analysis (much larger sampling, analysis of main points). In September 2020, the professor conducted a small study of this kind, analyzing the difference in perception of toxic behaviors between genders. Nonetheless, she hopes to accomplish a nationwide investigation. The researcher also wants to investigate the differences between the female and male genders during the game, what people perceive as problematic, whether the circumstance of playing a ranked match influences the players' actions, and how all these factors influence the discursive gameplay violence, including in other game modalities.

The researcher also intends to bring other axes of analysis to the study, such as the relationship between the political and the historical perspectives of the country and the behaviors within the games, and the impact of these elements on the competitiveness among players. According to her, competitiveness encourages a predatory logic, in which the best ranking is eagerly sought and hierarchy is highly valued. This leads to predictably toxic interactions, which sometimes bring out the worst in us.

Gabriela also highlights the role of game development companies in this process: "it is necessary to delve into the political and structural issues that shape the game industry in order to understand how the history and policies of development companies 'bias' the gender discourse in their productions. It is important to understand whether there is an actual plan to combat violence or isolated remediation only taken after scandals".

THESIS

Title: "Be respectful": discourses and rule subversion as manifestations of symbolic gender violence in the digital games Dota 2 and League of Legends

Author: Gabriela Birnfeld Kurtz

Supervisor: Raquel Recuero

Program: Graduate Program in Communication

Translated into English by Carolina Veiga Kirst Adami, under the supervision and translation revision of Elizamari R. Becker (PhD) – IL/UFRGS.



Photo: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

