

Video Games



Consider Gender Discrimination within Video Games

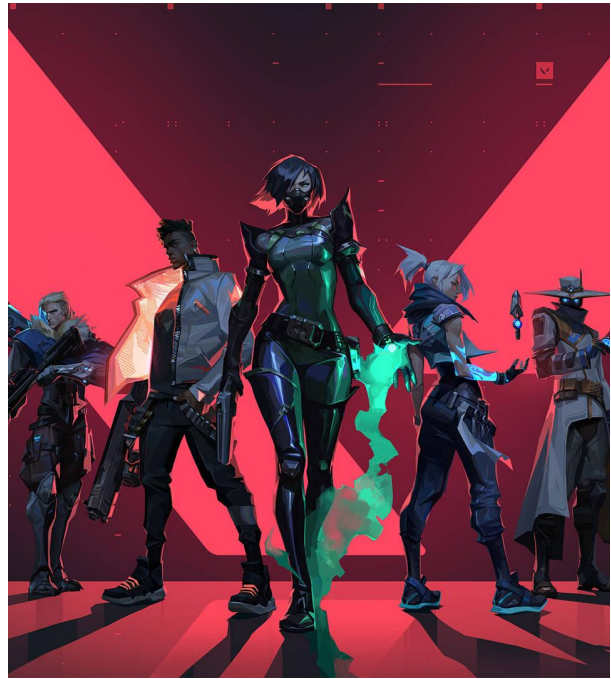
by Maleah Brady
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The fictional, entertaining, and well-known game called *Valorant* earns its following with around 3 million players playing the game each day. Available for free on the Windows PC platform, gamers can download *Valorant* from the United States and almost anywhere else around the world, as long as the user owns a Riot Games account.

Riot Games, Inc. is an American video game developer based in West Los Angeles, California. The company was founded in September 2006¹ and has since produced *Valorant* on June 2, 2020. *Valorant* was the first video game created by *Riot Games* as a first-person shooter game. It was designed with two main goals: make tactical shooters more accessible to new players, and create a highly competitive game. Within the game, players play as a set of agents originating from several different countries around the world. There are four types of agents: Duelists, Controllers, Initiators, and Sentinels. Each agent has unique abilities that evolve through kills, deaths, or spike actions. In the main

¹ *Riot Games* released their first game *League of Legends*, in 2009. *League of Legends* is a multiplayer online battle arena game that has over 100 million players. In 2013, *League of Legends* was the most-played multiplayer PC game in the world.

game mode, ten players are split into two sides and assigned to either the attacking or defending team. Every player starts each round with a classic gun and one ability charge. Each round, an assortment of guns can be purchased using an in-game monetary system that awards money based on the outcome of the previous round. The goal of the attacking team is to plant the spike before time runs out, while defenders aim to kill the attacking team and defuse the spike.



From a general standpoint, everyone knows what video games are. A video game is an electronic game that interacts with a user interface or device to generate visual feedback for a player. Video games² originated in the 1950s. The first video games were simple extensions of electronic games using video-like output from large room-size computers. In those early days, computer processing power limited the types of games programmers could create. Fast-forward to today, however, video games come in many different forms. There are dozens of different kinds worldwide, of which the relevant genre here is the first-person shooter. First-person shooter (FPS) is a video game genre centered on gun and other weapon-based combat in a first-person perspective³. First-person shooters generally focus on action gameplay, with fast-paced combat and team fights being a central point of the experience.



Now, of course, video game development requires numerous skills to produce a game that will last. Since its commercial birth in the 1950s, gaming has blossomed into one of the most profitable entertainment

² The first appearance of the term “video game” did not emerge until around 1973.

³ Not to be confused with third-person shooters in that, in a third-person shooter, the player can see the character they are controlling.



industries in the world, but it comes at a cost. In the early days of the industry, it was more common for a single person to manage all of the roles needed to create a video game, but as user demand has become more complex, larger teams have been needed to generate all of the art, programming, and cinematography required in producing a video game.

In fact, in the years 2000 through 2010, there is an evident general decline in the number of releases made by gaming companies. If video games are to survive in modern society, they must address public opinion. It is emphasized over and over when launching video game ideas that the success of the game must take into account the target audience. Today, forty-two percent of Americans are gamers, and they desire new, unique forms of entertainment.

Be advised, though, that *Valorant* is almost an exact replica of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*⁴. The shooter's economic system, spike-based competitive game mode, and cosmetics all resemble the *CS:GO* playstyle, which may relate to the fact that Salvatore Garozzo, former professional player and map designer for *CS:GO*, is a game designer for *Valorant*. This has its own share of problems, including the fact that players of *Valorant* have termed the phrase "like in Counter-Strike" to mock the similarities. Nevertheless, *Valorant* still rises in popularity every day. But as a whole, video games are, for the most part, adored by society. Multiplayer gaming took the gaming community to a new level because it allowed players to compete and interact with others across the globe, which improved the social aspect of gaming. Technology allows millions around the world to

⁴ Counter-Strike: Global Offensive is a multiplayer first-person shooter developed by *Valve* and *Hidden Path Entertainment* in 2012.

enjoy gaming as a shared activity. The recent Entertainment Software Association's gaming report showed that fifty-four percent of frequent gamers feel that their hobby helps them connect with friends. Since its creation, however, people have had problems with the aspect of gaming, specifically its immobile environment.



Video games are essentially an escape from reality. For many people, the world of video games is a perfect break from a reality filled with deadlines, stress and responsibilities. People play them because they are fun, interesting, and relaxing. But too much video game playing may cause problems. It's hard to get enough active play and exercise if you're always inside playing video games. Without exercise, people can become deconditioned and unfit. Overdoing video games could also affect productivity and mental health⁵. While parents emphasize these problems to kids, other people dislike certain issues within video games, like the issue of gender discrimination.

An issue commonly seen within video games is the gender gap. Video game culture has changed since the 1980s, when video games were perceived as an interest to men. Women make up about half of the gamer population as of now, contributing to increased attention towards issues related to sexism in video gaming. Nevertheless, sexism still prevails in video gaming. In *Valorant*, for example, women continue to face harassment and toxicity.

So then here is a question that is all but unavoidable as a *Valorant* gamer: Have video game companies done enough to address gender discrimination in game? And related concerns: Is the previous question relevant to all video game genres? What does "done enough" even mean in this context? Is it just a matter of individual opinion?

As you may or may not know, hundreds of thousands of people think that the issue of gender in video games is far from perfect. And hundreds of thousands more female gamers face gender discrimination. In fact, one of my first experiences playing *Valorant*...

⁵ While in small cases video games can worsen mental illnesses, recent studies have shown that playing video games improves mental health and makes people happier. I would also like to add that a common misconception of video games is that they make kids more violent and disruptive. From my viewpoint, this is completely false in that I have never experienced a violent outburst as a result of playing video games. And given that everyone today is on social media, the violence of certain video games should be the least of your worries.



well, to set the scene: I'm loading into an unrated⁶ game of *Valorant* at around 8 p.m. on a school night, accompanied by my friend the same age as me. We had both just finished our homework and were looking forward to a relaxing, entertaining hour or two of *Valorant* before heading to bed. We had gotten the game a week before, and we were excited to learn our first FPS game together. As we shoot the enemy team — just to die moments later — she and I laugh at each other about how bad we are at the game. We make lighthearted jokes about our poor aim and shooting skills and imagine our skills months later.

It turns out that our teammates did not appreciate our lack of skill. One of the boys, spectating us after we had died, told us, “You boys suck, just quit playing.” I politely typed that we were both girls who were new at the game, to which he then responded with “Oh you’re girls? That explains why you freaks suck so much.” Our other teammates, both boys, proceeded to laugh and agree, adding some inappropriate, sexist remarks and threats. While we refrained from replying, they continued to voice their disgust at our incapability until the end of the match.



This whole interchange takes place within a mere forty-five minutes, the average time of a *Valorant* match, but it left both of us feeling bleak and dispirited for the time afterward. We decided not to play anymore that night, based on our silent agreement that we had lost all motivation to play.

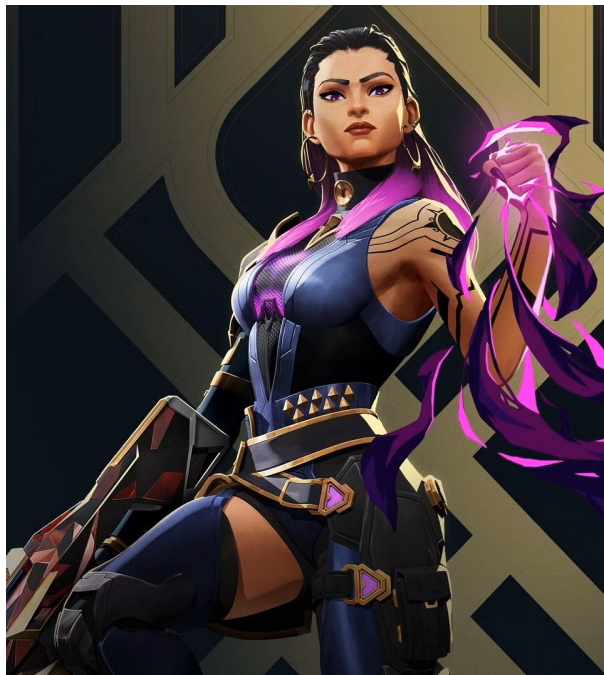
Besides the fact that fifty-eight percent of women encounter sexual harassment online, we had already faced our first experience of sexual harassment only one week into the game. And while it was the most jarring incident for us both, it certainly wasn't the last.

⁶ It is important to note here that the match is unrated, meaning that winning these games do not result in any rewards. This is in contrast to *Valorant*'s competitive mode, where players are assigned a win-based ranking system.

We continue to experience moments of sexual discrimination in the voice and text chat options implemented in the game. As a result of this, my friend has voiced multiple times to me that she will never speak in voice chat for the reason that our teammates, specifically boys, will make fun of her for being “bad” and for being a girl⁷.

Before we go any further, let us acknowledge that *Riot Games*’ tactical first-person shooter has the same issues that many video games have: hackers and toxic players. But women have been targeted much more frequently by these players than others. Because of this, women find themselves with only one option while playing: turn off voice chat. But most competitive players know that muting voice chat creates a major disadvantage for teammates in a game like *Valorant*. Communication and teamwork are key to success, meaning that voice chat is often a very important feature in these games. Moreover, female players revealed that there is no specific option to report someone for sexism, and when they asked *Riot* to address this issue, *Riot* did not respond to the concern. Even *Valorant*’s own executive producer won’t play *Valorant* with random players because of the sexism she frequently withstands while playing the game.

And then there is the sexism displayed towards the agents’ appearance in game. As mentioned before, players in *Valorant* are able to choose their own agent to play each match. There are currently fifteen agents to pick from, with eight of them being female. Each of these female agents has been designed to be sexually attractive and has been carefully crafted with unrealistic proportions more often than the male agents.



The more important point here, though, is that the entire gender discrimination issue is not just complex, it’s also uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable for me at least, and for just about every girl I know who has faced sexual harassment while playing video games. As far as I can tell, my own main way of dealing with this conflict is to ignore the harassment to avoid backlash or a more mentally destructive situation. This also prevents me from quitting *Valorant*, which I deeply love. Since, however, I have spent several moments in the midst of *Valorant* matches with sexual harassment situations, it turns out that there is no honest way to avoid certain moral questions.

⁷ I, myself, have only spoken in voice chat once to help my team win the round. While she refuses to speak in voice chat because of gender prejudice, I mainly prefer not to on account of personal security. Let it be known, however, that my friend’s reasoning also completely exemplifies my situation.

I would like to point out that *Riot Games* has received criticism for allegations of gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace and has dealt with those situations appropriately⁸. *Riot Games* also says that they are looking into the issue of gender discrimination and claim that *Valorant* is getting more features to combat sexism. Additionally, *Valorant* pro-player Jay “Sinatraa” Won was suspended from competitive tournaments after sexual abuse allegations only a few weeks ago. And from 2007 to 2014, there was a decrease in the sexualization of female characters in all video games, with a depiction of positive characteristics to give the women more character development.

Still, after all the intensive studies, there remain the facts of women in gaming. It is hard to deny that the issues have been resolved. After all, *Valorant* continues to have problems with gender discrimination, along with other video game companies as well. In any event, when playing *Valorant* to relax, only to get harassed by threats, it is difficult not to sense that gender inequalities still persist.

I’m not attempting to persuade you of my individual thought process, but instead I am articulating some of the troubling questions that arise amid the action-packed gameplay. Furthermore, I’m curious about whether the reader can identify with any of these experiences and discomforts. Given the possible moral status and very possible mental health concerns of the gamers involved, what ethical beliefs do video game producers possess that allow them to exploit the gender gap? And for those developers that dismiss the issue with no considerations, what makes it feel okay to do that? Furthermore, is their denial of thought the result of actual reflection, or do they just not think about it? Essentially, isn’t being mindful and observant of public opinion part of what results in a video game’s success?



These questions, while applicable, require much more abstract understanding between enjoyment and morality that lead into entire other worlds of thought that cannot be deduced in the discussion here. Ultimately, gamers, developers, and designers alike must be willing to understand each other to resolve these issues.

⁸ The criticisms stated here pertain to a class action lawsuit over alleged gender discrimination in 2018. *Riot Games* agreed to pay at least \$10 million to the 1,000 women who worked at the Los Angeles game studio in the last five years. Although employees were compensated, no individuals accused for the situation were fired.