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Women Experience Guilt, Shame and Exclusion in Gaming Culture

- Almost a third (29%) of women experience guilt about taking the time to play video games
- Almost two in five (16%) keep gaming a secret for fear of judgement
- A third (30%) are embarrassed to call themselves a 'gamer'
- Despite this, 41% feel that playing games is a daily highlight in their lives
- New study in partnership with Cardiff University and University of Stirling reveals key barriers for women in gaming

London, UK. X October 2023: A new study exploring the game landscape for women in 2023 has found that many experience guilt and shame around playing games and that this is related to feeling excluded from the traditionally male pastime.

That's according to Swedish gaming studio Undone Games, in partnership with Dr Steph Rennick, Lecturer in Interactive Media from the University of Stirling, and Dr Seán Roberts, Lecturer in Communication from Cardiff University.

The study surveyed 1000 women of all ages across the UK who play mobile games - the most popular way for women to play¹ - on how they felt about gaming.

What's stopping women from playing more video games?

Despite gaming being a traditionally male-dominated pastime, "*women gamers are more prevalent than ever, with 51% of women now gaming in some capacity compared to 53% of men². However, women are still under-represented in many game genres and in [the content of games](#)*", **comments Dr Rennick.**

While more than 41% agreed that playing games is one of the things they most look forward to each day, almost 60% felt that they do not play enough games to consider themselves a 'gamer', and more than 30% agreed that they would be embarrassed to call themselves one.

The results also suggest that many women feel excluded from video game culture, with significant numbers of women feeling guilty about playing video games and ashamed about what others think of them taking time to play games. Interestingly, feeling guilty or ashamed did not correlate with how much time women spent playing games. **Dr Rennick found this surprising. She comments:** "*We expected a significant proportion of women to report feelings of guilt around playing video games and taking leisure time more*

generally. But while we thought feelings of guilt or shame would have a negative impact on the amount of time women spent playing games, we didn't find such a connection. Those who feel guilty or ashamed don't play less, but they feel worse."

Guilty gamers

Almost a third (29%) of women feel guilty about taking time to play. In fact, women who look forward to playing are more likely to feel guilty than those who do not (34% vs. 25%). Previous research has found many gender disparities in leisure time with women being almost twice as likely to feel guilty about taking 'me time' than men.³

Using machine learning techniques to identify connections in the data, the experts found some striking patterns. For example, younger players were more likely to feel guilty about playing video games, with those aged 16-24 being three times more likely to 'strongly agree' that they feel guilty about taking time to play than those aged 55+.

Dr Rennick also noted that guilt was associated with gaming experience: *"We found that women were twice as likely to feel guilty if they didn't know which games to try (41% vs 23%) or if they thought games were too violent (29% vs 10%). This aligns with previous research; one of the key barriers to gaming is the lack of awareness in the diversity of games now available, not least because there is a limited range marketed to women."*

Finally, guilt seemed to be related to whether women felt they fit into gaming culture. 60% of women surveyed believed that they do not play enough games to consider themselves a 'gamer'. Women were twice as likely to feel guilty if they thought that gaming was mainly a male past-time (46% vs 23%) or if they said they would be embarrassed to call themselves a gamer (55% vs. 35%). In contrast, women who felt that occasionally playing any game made you a gamer were 42% less likely to feel guilty.

Many women have taken to Reddit to discuss their feelings of guilt around gaming and their words resonate with these findings, such as user [Barenhaft](#) who admitted: *"I tend to feel quite guilty that my main hobby for the past few years has been gaming... Even though I logically know there's nothing wrong with gaming, I feel like because it's not a "productive" hobby, I shouldn't be doing it."*

Or [Exciting Wallaby 630](#) who shared her experiences: *"I find myself trying to rationalize video game time - for example I will play video games while riding the spin bike so I feel less guilty."*

The survey found that 75% of respondents classified themselves as "casual gamers". But a quarter of these were also spending more than an hour per day playing video games

on PC or console. Strikingly, even amongst women who spent more than 5 hours a day playing games on mobile, console or PC, only one in six identified as a “hardcore gamer”.

Dr Seán Roberts, who studies gaming at Cardiff University suggests that this shows that women have an unrealistic perception of gaming. *“When I ask people if they play video games, women often say ‘no’. But if you ask about playing games on a mobile, many of them will suddenly say ‘yes’. It’s like they have an idea of what a ‘real’ gamer is in their heads, and they feel like they don’t meet that ideal”.*

Secret Gamers

There appears to be a link between shame and worrying what others think of you, with 16% keeping gaming a secret from friends and family for fear of judgement. Women who reported feeling anxious or depressed when scrolling social media were twice as likely to keep gaming a secret compared to women who were not (31% vs 12%). Furthermore, feeling and expressing pride in gaming as a woman is a difficult balancing act: women who felt very proud of their achievements in games were actually slightly more likely to keep it a secret than those who did not feel as proud (22% vs. 14%). In contrast, women who were motivated to play games to challenge themselves were half as likely to keep it a secret (11% vs 20%).

Dr Roberts suggests ways to break down some of these barriers: *“Women tend to spend less time playing if they feel they don’t fit into gaming culture – for example if they believe that gaming is a male past-time, or that they don’t play enough games to be a gamer, are embarrassed to call themselves a gamer, or think video games are too violent. In contrast, women spend more time playing if they are proud of their gaming achievements. This suggests that guilt and shame are just symptoms. While these are clearly negatively impacting women gamers, they may not be the root of the problem. Instead, removing barriers to play for women may require deeper changes such as reducing leisure inequality between men and women. But people in the games industry and gaming culture can also help by broadening the perception of who plays video games, who games are for, and what types of games are available. It would also help to normalise the celebration of gaming achievements for women.”*

The most popular genres of mobile games were puzzle and word games, with 84% of women regularly playing one of the two. The team is now trying to understand women’s relationships with these genres.

Anna Bostam, CEO of Undone Games comments: *“Women have long been an integral part of the gaming community, yet they often find themselves overlooked or inadequately represented in the virtual worlds they engage with. Our decision to develop the women-*

centered game - LetterMe - is a proactive response to this disparity, seeking to offer an intellectually stimulating and enjoyable gaming experience but also aiming to amplify representation of women in the gaming world. By authentically representing women, we aspire to break stereotypes and challenge preconceived notions about what a "gamer" looks like."

LetterMe is a two player word game – think Wordle meets Words With Friends, featuring beautiful Swedish design. LetterMe is perfect for friends, couples, or competitive family members. LetterMe is available now on [App Store](#) and [Google Play](#). For more information, visit www.letterme.se

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¹:<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/deloitte-uk-digital-consumer-trends-2022-gaming.pdf>

²: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/pwcresearch/blog/is-gaming-still-male-dominated.html>

³: Game House, Me Time - Game Time Study: <https://company.gamehouse.com/press>

About Undone Games:

Undone Games is a creative game studio based in Malmö, specialising in high-end, intellectually challenging games with exceptional design. The company was founded by three colleagues who shared a passion for words in all their forms and noticed a gap in the market for games that catered to the same picky audience.

As avid word game enthusiasts, the team poured their passion and expertise in communication and branding into their first effort, LetterMe. This game really stands out in the genre and has been soft-launched in Sweden to high praise from players in the market.

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