Game Development

Beyond Play in one of Yayoi Kasuma's Obliteration Room Installations.

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Beyond Play

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Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Christian Schwarzenegger and Karsten D. Wolf

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Asymmetries and Limits in the Transformative Power of Video Games for Women

Katharine Sarikakis, Ayça Becerir, Oleksandra Gudkova and Lisa Baumgartner

Abstract
This paper examines the extent to which video games can transform the lives of women, with regard to aspects of identity, social belonging, and agency. The existing literature demonstrates that video games have the potential for transformation among women by fostering creativity, community-building, skill-acquisition, and even professional pathways in gaming and technology (Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019). Yet video games can simultaneously reproduce systemic exclusions related to race, class, and gender (Gray 2014, Nakamura 2009). Drawing on a mixed-methods approach combining desk research and 30 semi-structured interviews with women across gaming communities, industry, and policy contexts, the paper differentiates between individual and structural forms of transformation. The findings show that while gaming might support individual-level empowerment and social connection, structural inequalities within gaming cultures and the industry constrain broader societal change. Importantly, the paper identifies that the industry often relies on practices of personal transformation, placing the burden of change on individuals, often requiring emotional labour and self-censorship. At the same time, the focus on the adaptable nature of individuals allows many structural characteristics of the gaming culture, and by extension the gaming industry, to continue unchanged. This paper calls for careful, evidence-based analysis of the conditions under which digital gaming may contribute to gender equality and social value or continues to reproduce and reinforce existing inequalities.

Keywords: Video Games, Transformative Power, Individual Transformation, Structural Transformation, Women in Gaming, gamevironments

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Introduction

Video games have become a major cultural and economic force, forming social relations, leisure activities, and creative industries across the globe. Women constitute a significant and increasingly diverse portion of the gaming population, engaging with games across a wide range of ages (Video Games Europe 2024, Video Games Europe 2025a). This widespread participation has contributed to growing claims about the transformative power of video games in women's lives, particularly in relation to empowerment, community formation, and skills development. Research increasingly recognises video games as spaces that can support women's empowerment by encouraging creative expression, community engagement, skill acquisition, and pathways into gaming and technology-related careers (Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019). However, critical scholarship emphasises the limitations of these gains by drawing attention to enduring structural inequalities within the gaming industry and digital cultures more broadly (Harvey and Fisher 2015, Gray 2014, Nakamura 2009). Although games can foster personal empowerment or create a feeling of belonging within specific gaming communities, they still sustain structural inequalities based on gender, race, and class (Gray 2014, Nakamura 2009).

This paper argues that the transformative power of video games in women's lives can only be understood by distinguishing between potential individual and structural forms of transformation. Individual transformation is understood as personal and social experiences, such as community building, learning, and self-expression. In contrast, structural transformation changes within the broader video game ecosystem, encompassing industry practices, norms of representation, and community cultures. This paper applies this conceptual distinction to critically examine both the possibilities and the limits of the transformative power of gaming in the lives of women

Rather than considering transformation as an intrinsically positive aspect of gaming, this paper conceptualises transformative power as a contested and conditional process, formed by market logics, policy agendas, and existing social inequalities. Drawing upon this conceptual framework, the paper first sets the scene as to the state of the industry, followed by the conceptual underpinnings of the research and a methodological account. Following, we analyse interview findings, and reflect on the implications of these findings for research, industry practice, and gender equity in the gaming ecosystem.

Women in the Video Game Industry

The European video game ecosystem continues to grow, with widespread player participation and increasing economic revenue. In 2024, the sector included approximately 128.3 million players across Europe, up from 124.4 million in 2023, showing a consistent growth trajectory (Video Games Europe 2025a). Women represent a significant share of this community, constituting 43.5% of the total gaming population. The average age of women gamers is 32 years, and their engagement spans a broad age range, with 26% of players aged 6-17, 32% aged 18-34, and 42% aged 35-64 identifying as women, highlighting the growing diversity and maturity of the female gaming audience (Video Games Europe 2024, Video Games Europe 2025a). These figures are frequently mobilised in industry and policy discourse as evidence of the sector's inclusivity and transformative potential.

Women participate in gaming across multiple platforms, although almost half of women gamers (45%) use smartphones or tablets primarily (Video Games Europe 2024). Console gaming is preferred by 39% of women, while 38% primarily use

personal computers. These numbers demonstrate that women's gaming habits are diverse and spread across multiple formats, but can also reflect the lesser level of disposable resources for gaming than men. Platform diversity does not result in equal participation across all game genres or gaming environments. Women comprise up to 70% of players in casual categories, such as family-oriented games or farming and life simulating games, and mobile puzzle games, which are typically associated with accessible gameplay and flexible engagement. By contrast, their participation in tactical shooter games is often limited to 2-3% of players (Cook 2024, Try Evidence Research Team 2022). These disparities suggest that participation may be shaped by genre hierarchies and community norms, rather than purely by individual preferences.

These uneven patterns of participation are closely linked to broader gaming cultures within the community. Sexist norms, exclusionary practices, and online harassment continue to shape online environments and esports, where women are frequently exposed to hyper-sexualisation, sexist language, and the devaluation of their skills. Such dynamics lead to genre avoidance and to women's withdrawal from certain gaming spaces altogether (Esteban-Ramiro, Fernández de Castro and Díaz-García 2025). In this sense, participation is governed not only through access to technology, but also through conditions that define who can participate and where, safely.

A report by Bryter (2024), conducted in the UK and US, documents the widespread harassment faced by women in gaming: 59% of women gamers experienced harassment from male players, 26% reported sexual harassment, and 12% received rape threats. The situation is particularly acute for LGBTQI+ women of colour (52%) reporting repeated incidents of racial abuse, sexual threats, or stalking (ibid.). These statistics highlight that hostile community cultures are a pervasive reality for the majority of women gamers and not an exception. In response to these challenges,

women have developed coping strategies and solidarity networks, such as adopting male avatars, disabling voice interactions in multiplayer games, and forming women-led organisations.

Despite their high level of participation as players, women remain underrepresented within the video game industry workforce. According to Video Games Europe (2024, 2025a), the European video game industry employed approximately 116.419 people in 2024, of whom only 24.9% were women, a marginal increase of 0.5 percentage points from the previous year. While these figures suggest some gradual progress, they also underscore the persistent structural barriers to gender parity, indicating a disconnect between participation as consumers and inclusion as producers. Women's representation in the workforce combined with pay inequity maintain a hostile industry environment: the *Games & Interactive Salary and Satisfaction Survey* by Skillsearch (2024) reports a global gender pay gap of 22%, with men earning on average over €12.600 more per year than women in comparable positions. To address these imbalances, organisations, such as the European Games Developer Federation (EGDF) and the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE) have implemented inclusive recruitment practices, mentorship programs, and transparent pay frameworks to support women's advancement into leadership roles (EGDF and ISFE 2019). While these initiatives signal growing awareness, they often operate within existing organisational structures and are unevenly implemented across the sector, particularly in smaller studios with limited resources.

Despite increasing visibility of women as players, structural inequalities, pay disparities, and exclusionary cultural norms continue to shape their experiences as employees and community members. Although some progress in representation and awareness has been made, barriers related to safety, equality, and access persist.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how the transformative potential of video games is constrained at the structural level, even as individual women may experience empowerment, creativity, and skill development. Without addressing these systemic conditions, transformation remains partial and uneven, limiting its capacity to produce broader social change within the video game ecosystem.

The *Transformative Power* Narrative and its Limitations

The discourse on the transformative power of video games has been shaped by multiple actors and institutional bodies, including academic, industry, and policy stakeholders. Significant efforts have been made to highlight the empowering potential of video games for women, and many initiatives, such as industry-supported ambassadors or diversity programs and campaigns encouraging female participation in tech and gaming, have been put into practice to foster this potential. These efforts have contributed to a dominant narrative that frames gaming as a vehicle for social progress and inclusion. While a growing body of literature also affirms that video games can be empowering for women, fostering participation, creativity, community, skill-building, and even professional pathways in gaming and tech (Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019) – critical scholarship simultaneously underscores the limits of these transformations by pointing to persistent structural inequalities within the gaming industry and digital cultures more broadly (Harvey and Fisher 2015, Gray 2014, Nakamura 2009). While video games may offer individual empowerment or subcultural belonging, they can simultaneously reproduce systemic exclusions related to race, class, and gender (Gray 2014, Nakamura 2009, De la Torre-Sierra and Guichot-Reina 2025, Ibrahim et al. 2025, Di Leo, Rizzi and Traetta 2026, Phillips 2025, Scidone, Phillips and Pantaleo 2024). This tension necessitates a more precise conceptualisation of what *transformative power* entails, particularly through a

distinction between individual transformation and structural transformation. This section discusses the origins of the transformative power claim and outlines the conceptual limits of this frame. It provides an analytical foundation for examining both the significance and limits of gaming in women's lives.

Discourses surrounding the transformative power of video games have developed at the intersection of industrial ambition, policy objectives, and academic inquiry, resulting in a compelling yet fragmented narrative. Industry stakeholders have actively framed video games as technologies capable of delivering significant social benefits beyond entertainment. European industry organisations, such as Video Games Europe (2025a, 2025b) and the European Games Developer Federation (2022), consistently present games as drivers of creativity, innovation, and skills development, aligning the sector with the broader aims of the creative industries and the digital economy. In these narratives, transformation is closely linked to market growth, technological advancement, and workforce diversification, with inclusion depicted both as a social responsibility *and* as a strategy for securing future talent and competitiveness. These framings situate transformation within market-oriented logics, where social value is primarily measured through consumer participation, productivity, and technological innovation.

Policy discourse at the European level has reinforced and legitimised this framing. The European Parliament's report (2022) positions video games within strategic agendas, such as digital transformation, youth employment, cultural participation, and innovation-driven growth. Games are presented as tools for fostering digital literacy, creativity, and entrepreneurial skills, particularly among young people, thereby aligning gaming with established European priorities around education, employability, and social cohesion. This perspective is further supported by European

policy initiatives, including *Shaping Europe's Digital Future* (European Commission 2020) and *Europe's Digital Decade: Digital Targets for 2030* (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2022). Both acknowledge diversity and inclusion, particularly in relation to women's and other underrepresented groups' participation in the gaming and wider digital workforce, as well as access to digital skills development. Nevertheless, transformation is primarily conceptualised as a linear and cumulative process, in which increased participation of these groups is presumed to yield positive societal outcomes. Structural issues, such as power relations, labour conditions, platform governance, and persistent gendered and racialised inequalities receive comparatively limited attention. Consequently, policy framings tend to privilege growth and visibility while leaving underlying social hierarchies largely unexamined.

Beyond industry and policy discourse, the concept of transformative power has been extensively explored within academic scholarship, particularly in media studies, game studies, education, and feminist literature. In this body of literature, transformation is typically understood as a process through which engagement with media technologies leads to changes in perception, identity, social relations, or practices. Early research on digital games highlighted their potential to support learning and cognitive development, framing games as environments that facilitate experimentation, feedback, and situated learning (Gee 2003). Later studies broadened this perspective by suggesting that games can promote wider forms of transformation, including shifts in social awareness, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement. These analyses position games as cultural artefacts capable of shaping values and practices, rather than as neutral entertainment technologies.

Within gaming scholarship, significant attention has already been given to the ways in which gaming can shape women's everyday lives, particularly in relation to identity, participation in the gaming and workforce, and empowerment despite ongoing challenges (Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019, Kuss et al. 2022, Scidone, Phillips and Pantaleo 2024). Extending these findings, feminist game studies[i], particularly intersectional and political economy approaches, have further complicated the discourse on the transformative power of gaming by examining *how* and *for whom* transformation occurs with regard to broader socio-economic dynamics. Rather than merely focusing on the potential for games to be meaningful or empowering, existing literature emphasises that transformative effects are profoundly influenced by gendered power relations within both game cultures and production contexts. Scholars, such as Chess (2017) and Shaw (2015) demonstrate that transformation is frequently mediated by market logics that determine which identities are visible, recognised, and valued in gaming. From this standpoint, empowerment is often provided in limited forms that align with commercial interests, resulting in what Shaw (2015) describes as pluralistic representation rather than structural diversity. Moreover, recent content analyses of mainstream video games demonstrate that female characters remain significantly underrepresented and are often depicted in secondary or stereotypical roles. Even in games that aim to foster inclusion, female characters are still often depicted in masculinised ways (De la Torre-Sierra and Guichot-Reina 2025). This indicates that industry practices continue to prioritise male-centred narratives and commercial conventions over substantive diversity. Critical scholars thus conceptualise transformative power not as an inherent attribute of games, but as a contingent process shaped by social norms, institutional structures, and political economy within a broader context. This approach redirects analytical focus from celebratory narratives of empowerment to critical questions of distribution, power, and inequality.

The impacts of transformation must also be understood as uneven and reversible across different social groups. Analyses of race and gender in digital gaming cultures reveal that participation in gaming can simultaneously foster a sense of belonging and subject players to harassment, surveillance, and exclusion (Gray 2014, Kuss et al. 2022, Nakamura 2009, Scidone, Phillips and Pantaleo 2024). From this perspective, individual experiences of transformation, such as increased confidence, visibility, or sense of belonging do not necessarily result in lasting changes to social relations or institutional structures. Therefore, drawing a critical distinction between personal change and structural transformation becomes even more crucial as empowerment narratives may obscure persistent inequalities by prioritising individual success stories rather than collective conditions. Within this context, it is vital to view games not simply as neutral spaces of entertainment, but as cultural products embedded in socio-economic and institutional power dynamics that shape representation, participation, and community interactions.

The educational literature on video games, particularly regarding girls and STEM education, constitutes a prominent area in which transformative power is both operationalised and empirically examined. Research on game-based learning and constructionist pedagogy argues that games and game creation can facilitate learning by integrating technical skills with creativity, narrative, and collaboration (Gee 2003, Kafai and Burke 2015, Li and Zhang 2025, Videnovik et al. 2023). A significant body of scholarship specifically investigates girls' engagement, demonstrating that designing games can enhance girls' confidence with technology, support computational thinking, and offer alternative pathways into STEM fields that challenge prevailing masculine stereotypes of technical expertise (Denner, Werner and Ortiz 2012, Kafai et al. 2008, Spieler, Krnjic and Slany 2019). These studies provide

substantial evidence that games can be individually transformative in educational settings by reshaping learners' self-perceptions, aspirations, and relationships to technology.

While game-based STEM interventions may support individual skill development, they often operate within educational and labour systems that continue to reproduce gendered inequalities. As a result, transformation is frequently framed as a matter of fixing girls' confidence, motivation, or interest, rather than interrogating institutional cultures, assessment practices, or labour market dynamics that disadvantage women in technology fields. This mirrors broader patterns in the gaming ecosystem, including both the industry and gaming environment, where women face gendered expectations, marginalisation, and discrimination and where responsibility for change is often placed on individuals rather than on systems (Gray and Leonard 2018, Harvey and Fisher 2015, Chee, Hjorth and Davies 2022).

Across these domains, transformation is most evident at the level of individual experience, learning, identity, confidence, and aspiration; however, evidence of sustained structural change is considerably more limited. Transformation does not automatically scale from individuals to institutions. This perspective informs the conceptual framework of this study, which approaches transformative power as a contested and conditional process, shaped by existing inequalities and power relations.

Individual versus Structural Transformation

Video games may function as spaces for identity exploration, empowerment, and social connection for women. However, a tension persists between individual

experiences of transformation and the potential for broader structural change. Therefore, in order to critically examine the transformative power of video games in women's lives, it is crucial to define and distinguish these two levels of transformation, and analyse the transformative experiences accordingly.

Individual transformation refers to changes in a person's sense of identity, skills, or wellbeing. There is a growing body of literature demonstrating that playing video games can help enhance women's cognitive, psychological, social, and physical skills (Alwhaibi et al. 2026, Carrasco 2016, Coyne et al. 2011, Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019, Scidone, Phillips and Pantaleo 2024). For example, recent work with female university students found that gaming supports problem-solving, strategic thinking, time management, teamwork, and communication skills (Alwhaibi et al. 2026). Another study indicates that developing video games for mental health applications is promising and offers insights into how psychotherapeutic concepts can be integrated into game-based environments (Carrasco 2016). A further study shows that women players view gaming as empowering, a space for exploring identity and reducing stress through emotional release despite experiences of harassment and discrimination (Scidone, Phillips and Pantaleo 2024). These findings can be considered as examples of individual transformation, yet, the existing literature also underlines that women often face challenges to participation because of gender-related expectations and adverse experiences in gaming. As a result, they often create new tactics to cope with online bullying and harassment (Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019, Scidone, Phillips and Pantaleo 2024). The coping strategies include concealing gender identity, avoiding verbal communication, and building supportive networks with other women to navigate online harassment (Fox and Tang 2017, Linderoth and Öhrn 2014, Scidone, Phillips and Pantaleo 2024). Playing as male characters in gaming environments also illustrates one of the strategies women use to deal with

harassment (Cote 2015). Persistent problems in video game environments undermine women's ability to participate in gaming in ways equivalent to men and limit their opportunities for progression and sustained engagement within gaming environments. In other words, structural problems related to gender norms have been also reflected in video game environments. While strengthening these structural challenges, they concurrently restrict the transformative potential of video games at both individual and societal levels. Therefore, while coping strategies demonstrate women's agency, they serve as compensatory reactions to structurally produced risks and exclusions, showing that transformation at the individual level is not adequate to challenge the community norms and industry practices that sustain inequality.

Structural transformation, by contrast, denotes lasting changes in the social, cultural, institutional, and economic factors affecting media production, representation, and participation. In the context of video games, this involves examining how cultural values are produced and how power operates across industry practices and market logics. Representation, in this sense, extends beyond numerical inclusion to address why certain groups are marginalised or stereotyped. As Shaw (2015) argues, representation by itself does not restructure the power of dynamics that sustain inequality. When diversity is framed through market logic, marginalised groups gain conditional visibility without challenging dominant norms, resulting in pluralistic rather than transformative representation. Representation therefore carries political significance beyond consumer recognition.

Moreover, the transformative power of video games should not be understood as limited to game content alone or gamer experiences. While research on video games has examined the conditions under which specific games, game mechanics, or design principles can foster behavioural, educational, or social benefits (Lopez-Fernandez et

al. 2019), this paper adopts a broader perspective. Rather than focusing on individual game models or gamified interventions, it takes a bird's-eye view of the gaming ecosystem, examining transformation at the meso and macro levels of industry structures, cultural production, and policy frameworks, and connecting these to women's everyday experiences across different positions in the ecosystem. From this perspective, video games are understood as cultural products shaped by complex production processes involving multiple stakeholders. Their transformative potential therefore extends beyond gameplay to include working conditions, industry practices, and institutional dynamics. In this regard, Shaw (2015) highlights how representation alone does not redistribute power, while Harvey and Fisher (2015), focusing specifically on the games industry, criticise the pursuit of diversity primarily through market-based logics. They argue that diversity is often framed as an individual responsibility rather than a structural matter requiring systemic change.

Although women's initiatives and organisations for empowering women in the games industry appear progressive, these efforts often rely on women's unpaid labour and largely preserve the existing power structures. In that sense, such initiatives can enable individual transformation, such as skill development, visibility, or professional progression, but they often remain inadequate to challenge systemic working conditions and organisational structures that sustain inequality in the industry.

Methodology

This paper adopts a mixed-methods research design that combines desk research with semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews to develop a comprehensive understanding of the transformative power of video games in women's lives. This approach enables the study to connect dominant discourses and structural conditions

with women's lived experiences of gaming. The study aims to explore the ways in which women engage with video games, the ways in which gaming experiences can be personally, socially, and culturally transformative, and the key challenges women encounter within gaming spaces.

The desk-based research consisted of a structured review of academic literature, feminist media studies, game studies scholarship, and relevant grey literature. This review focused on themes, such as identity formation, self-expression through gaming, women's representation in video games, community-building, empowerment, and women's participation in the video game workforce. By synthesising existing literature, the desk research establishes a conceptual framework for both understanding the transformative power of video games in relation to women's gaming experiences and identifying its limits by distinguishing between individual and societal transformation. The desk-based research included a review of relevant scholarship and grey literature. The research was organised around aspects of transformative power such as identity, expression, representation, community building, and women's engagement with the culture and practices surrounding video games. A major theme throughout this literature is the idea of transformative power operating at both personal and structural levels. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with resource individuals as stakeholders in the video games ecosystem included academia, policymaking, industry, game development, streaming, player communities, NGOs, and students studying game development and game business. This diversity of perspectives was intended to capture both experiential and structural dimensions of gaming, while satisfying the standards of saturation in qualitative research. A total of 30 interviews were conducted. Of these, 19 interviews were carried out online, 3 were collected via email in written format, and 8 were collected through video-recorded interviews at industry events, such as TwitchCon Rotterdam

and GameCity Vienna. Interview durations ranged from 15 minutes for event-based recordings to 60 minutes for online sessions. To protect participants' identities, all interviewees were anonymised and are referred to throughout the paper as R1–R30, where “R” denotes “Respondent”. Any information that could identify participants, including names, organisations, and specific roles where necessary, was removed or generalised to preserve confidentiality.

The interview questions aimed to capture the ways in which games may provide a focus on women’s experiences within gaming cultures, the challenges women currently face in gaming spaces, and the perceived transformative role of video games in women participants’ personal and professional lives, through reflection. Participants were also asked to reflect on whether and how video games have contributed to *change*, including empowerment, skill development, or community building, and to suggest concrete steps that could strengthen the transformative potential of video games for women. Interview data were analysed thematically, through which with attention to recurring patterns related to empowerment, exclusion, coping strategies, and structural constraints emerged. These interviews provided rich, first-hand accounts of how video games intersect with participants’ lives, shaping their sense of self, relationships, coping strategies, and creative or professional pathways.

Together, the desk research and interviews allow for a comprehensive analysis that situates individual experiences within broader cultural and social contexts, making it possible to examine not only how transformation is experienced, but also why it remains uneven and constrained, highlighting both the empowering potential of video games and the structural and cultural barriers that may limit this transformative impact.

A Site of Significant Change in Identity and Self-Perception

Our interview findings indicate that women perceive video games as a site of significant change, in line with the literature on individual empowerment, identity exploration, and social connection (Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019, Scidone, Phillips and Pantaleo 2024). Interviewees highlighted that video games offer opportunities for socialising and making new friends, and enable them to stay connected with old friends. Additionally, interview findings suggest that video games serve as spaces for women to relax, escape daily pressures, and form new connections. Many participants emphasised that gaming provides both enjoyment and opportunities to build friendships. A game studies student reflected:

> "Gaming is definitely one of my biggest hobbies and it's also very important to me because of the whole community aspect. Now that older I get, it's also a way for me to stay connected with friends." (R21 2025)

Similarly, another game designer underscored the role of gaming in stress relief and social connection:

> "I like to calm down, de-stress after work, and also connect. I have found so many friends through gaming." (R22 2025)

Importantly, one another game studies student also pointed out that gaming can strengthen offline relationships and family bonds. She explained that gaming had provided a means of shared experience with her father since childhood, shaping their relationship over time:

> “It started when I was pretty young because that's how my father and I bonded over video games on the couch. I always liked how you’re drawn into the story and become a part of it, and I think that inspired me the most. I've loved it ever since.” (R24 2025)

This account highlights that gaming can also facilitate intergenerational connections and serve as a platform for emotional and social engagement beyond online spaces. These experiences demonstrate the transformative potential of gaming at the individual level, highlighting how women can build social networks and foster a sense of belonging within gaming environments. The development of such communities aligns with existing research on identity formation and social empowerment (Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019, Scidone, Phillips and Pantaleo 2024).

As these reflections show, video games provide spaces for change and transformation in the personal lives of women, both in the sense of entertainment and engagement as a leisure activity, but also as sites with deeper personal meaning, including intergenerational connections. They provide spaces where women can enhance social and emotional skills, explore different roles, and engage actively with gaming communities.

Several women framed video games as educational platforms. They mentioned that they could develop their language skills while playing. They explained that frequent exposure to English-language content during gameplay, including narratives, instructions, and dialogue, supported the development of their language skills. These experiences show that video games can function as informal learning environments, enabling women to develop their language skills alongside entertainment and social engagement.

> "And I also think games have changed me. I mean, I was a lot into multiplayer games, […] I met a lot of people. I could socialise, I could learn English really well. […], in a way, it has changed the trajectory of my life and of so many players." (R25, game industry consultant 2025)

However, the transformative potential of video games at the individual level is not without constraints. In line with the literature, participants reported that there are still gaming communities that are unwelcoming or hostile toward women players. The most recurring problems raised by interviewees include the misrepresentation of women in games, such as hypersexualised characters and gender stereotypes, the prevalence of unsafe or poorly regulated multiplayer environments, and the persistent gender gap in the industry, especially in leadership roles. These discriminatory experiences reflect a culture of exclusion toward women, where ongoing structural and cultural barriers limit both women's participation and wellbeing within the gaming ecosystem. Harassment, exclusion, and gendered expectations continue to affect women's engagement in gaming environments. An NGO professional stated:

> "It is an unfortunate truth that misogyny has become more socially acceptable again. This has direct impacts on how safe young girls feel while gaming, when deciding whether to engage in gaming, or when thinking about career paths in the gaming industry." (R6 2025)

Another interviewee highlighted how gaming environments can normalise and even foster toxic behaviour due to a lack of accountability:

> "Video games are… one of the last, uh… spheres where man can be man… there's no social control. If you go on TikTok… people are gonna get angry at you. If you do it in a video game, no one's gonna even notice… So, it's a field where you can… express toxic masculinity without having the consequences." (R17, NGO professional 2025)

This perspective highlights how structural conditions shape behaviour within gaming environments. The lack of effective moderation, accountability mechanisms, and stronger regulations creates spaces where toxic behaviour can be expressed and directed at women with possible minor consequences. As a result, the structure does not only allow those behaviours but sustains them by failing to intervene, thereby reinforcing toxic norms over time.

Asymmetry: Individuals Fixing Structural Rifts

The interview analysis shows that although gaming can offer individual empowerment, women's participation remains constrained by structural inequalities that require adaptation to existing norms. Consequently, coping strategies tend to place responsibility on individuals and reinforce these inequalities. Women also reflected on the strategies they adopt to navigate exclusion and harassment within gaming spaces:

> "Luckily, and something I've been pushing for is there are... voice converters on PC... I always say, I feel like, you know, we women need to also just learn more to play the game. You need to start using tools and tactics... to get into the places, to climb up the ladders... How do I manipulate this situation…" (R25, game industry consultant 2025)

> "Because I'm pretty good, I usually don't get a lot of harassment at the moment, especially since I do fine in games. In the past, when I started to learn and used more voice chat, I had people tell me I should go back to the kitchen, a very basic, boring insult, I know." (R13, digital media professional 2025)

These accounts show that women have to *play the game* in order to be included in both the gaming environment and the industry. Rather than having a fair and equal gaming experience and career opportunities, women often rely on protective tactics,

modify their behaviour, or use various tools to avoid harassment or be taken seriously.

> "Coupled with a laissez-faire approach from many of the largest tech companies when it comes to youth online wellbeing, young girls are disproportionately bearing the impacts of harms, such as online sexual exploitation and harassment (including through gaming platforms). The issues compound further when considering intersecting identities and stronger impacts on young girls of colour, with disabilities, belonging to the LGBT+ community and so on." (R6, NGO professional 2025)

Despite these transformative experiences, women also highlighted a range of persistent challenges they encounter in the gaming industry. They explained the ways in which they develop coping strategies in response to repeated negative experiences in workplaces. Women also emphasised that staying in the industry often requires significant costs for women, such as emotional labour and sustained efforts.

> "Persistent barriers include underrepresentation in leadership roles (still hovering around 20–30% globally), gender pay gaps, and limited access to sponsorship and mentoring opportunities, these barriers are compounded by cultural and structural inequalities—especially at the "first step" into management, often referred to as the broken rung." (R8, NGO professional 2025)

> "Sadly, like, you have no choice, but I think I know how to cope with these things way better, because I've grown up in the games industry... **It makes you build confidence, it makes you build, like, armor. To her (sic.) extent, it makes you stronger, I think." (R21, game studies student 2025)

> "Women's health isn't always, um… taken into consideration, and women… As well as having time for having children, which I think holds us back... **when there are women that don't have easy monthly periods, and have difficulties, you aren't given as much support." (R18, game industry professional 2025)

> "And that is not because they're such good people, but that is because they have made very bad experiences in the gaming industry so far. And then the longer they have their studio, they kind of start... putting in some measures to kind of counteract that." (R12, researcher 2025)

These narratives demonstrate that women's experiences in the gaming industry are shaped by persistent structural and cultural barriers across hiring, career progression, and leadership positions. Underrepresentation of women in the industry, unequal access to mentoring and sponsorship, and limited institutional support restrict women's professional progression. Within this context, developing coping strategies and forms of resilience remain limited to individual acts rather than systemic changes.

A game industry professional discussed the structural time lag in the gaming industry that significantly limits women's participation in the industry:

> "If you are looking to hire somebody who has 20 years' experience in the industry, well, that's gonna be a man. Probably a straight, white, cis male. Like, it… because… They just were 20 years ago. So… so, yeah, I would much rather see… the young people who want to grow... getting more support... And then just force a quarter and call it a day, right? Because people need to… people need to be able to grow into those rows (sic.)." (R26 2025)

This remark raised the issue that the underrepresentation of women in the gaming industry has its roots in broader structural social and gender inequalities that affected women long before entering the job market. This reflects a structural time lag, where systems demand seniority and long-term experience but historically exclude women from accumulating it. As a result, employment practices appear to be fair and merit-based, as experience becomes a key justification; however, on closer examination, this is already itself an outcome of an unequal system.

The interview data further demonstrate that even women themselves might internalise gendered expectations around competence, which shapes how they interpret their own technical abilities and interactions within professional contexts.

> "I caught myself thinking, well, of course the women have technical trouble setting that up... I am just, you know, judgmental and participatory, and I am just as… much coded to think this way... we… we have a lot that we have to unlearn." (R25, game industry consultant 2025)

This points out that discriminatory gendered norms are not specific to the gaming industry, but are embedded in broader socialisation processes. They reflect wider cultural frameworks that are reproduced across educational, professional, and digital environments. Therefore, gaming functions as one site in which these pre-existing inequalities become visible and are further reinforced through everyday practices and interactions.

The interview analysis indicates that the transformative power of gaming remains largely at the individual level and continues to be shaped and limited by structural inequality. While gaming can facilitate skill development and empowerment, women's participation in gaming is still characterised by conditional inclusion that demands adaptation to existing norms rather than their transformation. In this context, coping strategies function less as mechanisms of change than as forms of endurance that allow exclusionary systems to persist. These coping strategies place the burden of navigating exclusion on individuals, framing adaptation as a personal responsibility rather than addressing structural conditions. Instead of challenging structural inequalities, these practices risk reproducing them by shifting responsibility onto individuals. Moreover, the interview analysis demonstrates that women continue to experience multiple challenges in the gaming industry, where institutional practices and cultural norms are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. In

this context, the gaming industry and gaming culture are therefore not separate spheres but continuously shape and influence one another. Therefore, for games to have a transformative impact on women's lives at the social level, both industry practices and cultural practices must be addressed.

Static Structural Transformation

Participants emphasised the significance of diversity in the video game ecosystem. Importantly, they stated that fostering diversity and representation within games is inseparable from the composition of the teams creating them. In this regard, workforce diversity and game content are deeply interconnected with each shaping the other. The main argument given by the interviewees was that if one seeks to represent a group of people in gaming narratives, the team should include people from that background to represent them well. Otherwise, there is a risk of representing certain groups based solely on stereotypes. On this point, an interviewee stated:

> "If there are not as many diverse people in a company, you already don't really have the knowledge. Something that, for example, got a lot better is how to make kinky hair for Black characters, something that was always very cartoonish and not well done. That is something that has improved. And nowadays, there are consultants who help companies, and outsourcing studios that are like: "hey, this is how Black people actually have their hair, and this is a good representation of how to do it." And this is the same as how I work in accessibility. If I don't have a disability and I want to make things accessible, not only do I research it, but I might hire a consultant for a couple of hours." (R25, game industry consultant 2025)

Although nearly half of the gaming community are women, the gap in the workforce remains striking. Diverse teams are important to attract more women into the sector, as representation within development teams shapes perceptions of inclusivity and

belonging. On this point, one respondent succinctly captured this dynamic by noting that *the same attracts the same:* in the absence of women in development teams, other women are less likely to apply or feel comfortable in these environments. This reflects the broader argument that diversity initiatives in the games industry often remain superficial within market-driven representation logics and fail to address deeper structural and cultural inequalities (Shaw 2015, Chess 2017).

Concerns around diversity emerge in relation to employment practices. Entry into the gaming industry is shaped more by informal pathways than of formal and structured mechanisms.

> "So there is my experience was accidental, like a lot of women or a lot of people my age in the industry, it's not just women really, a lot of folks. I think we come from a generation. We joined the industry around 2010 to 2015, and it was a period where there was not enough talent. A lot of companies were popping up, and the games industry was starting to grow, especially with mobile and so on. And a lot of us just accidentally entered the games industry." (R11, game industry professional 2025)

The limitations of voluntary approaches to diversity are also reflected in interviewees' accounts of leadership and organisational culture:

> "If there's a man in charge and he's like, 'Yeah, I have to hire some women now', so I don't care, that wouldn't change anything. People need to understand that and actually let change happen. But if it stays a boys' club, that's not going to change." (R13, digital media professional 2025)

Another interviewee highlights the discrepancy between team composition in companies and gaming narratives when it comes to diversity and inclusion:

> "Interestingly, change within games often outpaces change within the companies that produce them. That means the products themselves may be more progressive than the structures behind them... is equality embedded in the DNA of the studio - or only in its outward-facing messaging?" (R16, game industry professional 2025)

This quote reflects a tension between performative and structural transformation in the gaming industry. While companies may create games that seem relatively progressive and inclusive, these narrations may not be a product of a diverse team, thereby obscuring organisational practices. Diversity may therefore function as part of marketing strategies than being also truly embedded in workplace culture.

In this regard, the pace of progress is painstakingly slow, and the gaming industry continues to lack sufficiently diverse teams capable of producing truly inclusive games. Increasing diversity in game development is not simply a matter of representation in terms of numbers, but a structural requirement for rethinking how games are produced and how narratives are created. It requires a reconfiguration of production logics that continue to shape meaning, representation, and access within the industry. Therefore, gaming's transformative potential at a wider societal level necessitates changes in both cultural and institutional practices encompassing the industry and gaming culture.

Interviewees raised concerns about companies' discourse on diversity. They indicated that although diversity is an important value that should be pursued, it has become a popular concept with marketing value. Participants mentioned a discrepancy between companies' public claims about diversity and the actual composition of their teams. They noted that diversity is frequently used as a marketing strategy rather than as a genuine commitment to inclusive practices.

This perspective highlights the limitations of diversity as discourse and draws attention to how it is embedded in organisational structures, particularly in relation to workplace culture and team composition. Rather than being understood as mere rhetoric, workforce composition emerges as a key indicator of how diversity is realised in practice. A game industry professional emphasised the importance of commitment to diversity:

> "You need to want to do it. The leader of the company needs to live this. It has to be something they understand and genuinely believe in. If they say they want diversity, then they need to surround themselves with diverse people. You cannot claim to value diversity if your advisory board or C-level executives all look the same. Having one marketing or HR person from a different gender or background, whether in terms of ethnicity, language, or religion, is not diversity. That is just like saying, 'Look, I have a Black friend.'" (R11 2025)

Another interviewee noted:

> "…because we have Pride Month, to put a rainbow flag on your website, I would never do that […]. That is so cheesy. And people understand that a lot of companies are doing that just for PR reasons. You need to act and work on a daily basis, and you need to let your actions and what you do as a company do the talking. I do not think the other way around works, because it is very clear that some PR people are just doing a PR stunt, that it does not have any value or weight […]" (R14, game industry professional 2025)

> "When we feel that the company's achievements have value and are worth communicating, then we do that. And I see the same thing with DEI initiatives. I think, first, you need to do things. First, you also need to do your homework internally, so that your team is convinced that what you are doing is the right thing and that your team supports it." (R14, game industry professional 2025)

The interviews indicated that while discourse on diversity may support visibility, it is insufficient to produce the systemic change necessary for equitable participation and representation. Companies should first internalise these values and genuinely

establish an inclusive working environment composed of diverse teams. In this way, it becomes more possible to observe the industry's transformative potential, both within the sector itself and through the more inclusive games produced by these teams.

It is worth noting that individual and societal transformation are deeply interconnected. While individual experiences of empowerment, skill-building, and socialisation are valuable, they exist within structural conditions that shape opportunities and constraints. For example, women may develop new skills and make new friends through gaming, but persistent harassment, workplace inequities, and tokenistic diversity initiatives can limit the translation of these personal gains into broader societal change.

Despite ongoing challenges, a game studies student and NGO member pointed out the existence of non-mainstream games with significant potential for social transformation:

> "I think there is just so much that you can do within gaming, and I think that's also something that a lot of gamers realize, because there are so many different stories told, especially when you look into indie games. The AAA and AA titles kind of always tell similar stories, but indie games, in particular, tell a lot of different ones. There are so many educational and impactful games out there, so I do think that gaming can have a very big transformative power." (R15 2025).

This demonstrates that while some developers regard games as cultural products instead of mere entertainment activity and design them to be used as tools for social and cultural change, mainstream games published by big companies remain mostly dominated by male-centred narratives, which in turn shape players' experiences. This situation points out the need for greater support in increasing visibility and

accessibility of those indie games, which requires developing new funding opportunities and policies.

The transformative potential of video games is therefore contingent on content and its production, its consumption and the contexts surrounding these aspects. On the one hand, games themselves can facilitate individual growth, social bonding, and skill development. On the other hand, the broader structural ecosystem, including community culture, workforce demographics, and industry practices, determines whether these individual gains can be sustained or institutionalised. Interviewees emphasised that reaching meaningful transformation requires deliberate strategies to cultivate diverse teams and inclusive communities, as well as mechanisms to address structural issues. In this sense, video games can only achieve their full transformative potential when individual, community, and institutional dimensions are considered together.

Conclusion

This paper interrogated the possibilities and conditions of the transformative power of gaming in women's lives from a broader cultural and social perspective. Within this framework, it conceptually distinguished forms of individual and structural transformation for analytical reasons although they are deeply interconnected and mutually influential. By examining this distinction, the study contributes to ongoing debates that portray gaming as inherently empowering, yet often neglect the specific conditions that enable transformation. Transformation on an individual’s life level includes processes, such as community building, skill development, and identity exploration. Individual transformation refers to the changes that occur at the personal level through gaming, such as skill development, emotional well-being, and identity

exploration. However, these experiences do not occur in isolation, they are shaped by wider structural conditions, including the gaming culture, industry practices, and social norms. Structural transformation refers to fundamental changes in the social, cultural, and institutional levels that, in turn, can shape these individual experiences. In the context of gaming, structural transformation relates to the ways in which the industry is organised as a workplace, as a business model and as a culture.

Based on desk research and interview analysis, the research identified several barriers that hinder the potential of games to transform gendered norms in the gaming ecosystem and limit their contribution to wider social change. These barriers emerge in three different but interconnected areas: those in game contents, such as underrepresentation and stereotyping of women which reinforces structured gender norms and cultural expectations, those in gaming culture, such as toxic practices, harassment, sexism, and exclusionary behaviour in online spaces which discourage women's participation and silence diverse voices, and lastly those in industry culture, such as gendered labour conditions that rely on precarious work and unequal opportunities for women to enter the industry, lack of women in decision making and leadership positions, and market-driven logic of the industry that prioritises profit-driven diversity claims over lasting social change. The identified barriers reveal a tension between the dominant value system of the industry and the need to redefine these values in order to achieve social and cultural transformation both in gaming and through gaming at a broader level.

Semi-structured interviews revealed that achieving better representation in games, safer gaming communities, and equitable workplaces are mutually interdependent objectives rather than isolated goals. While the passion and persistence of female gamers help the industry to sustain itself through their continued involvement, it

does little to transform existing institutional practices, workplace norms, community standards. Instead, this pattern is part of a larger trend in creative and digital industries, where passion and commitment can be used to mask inequality while normalising precarious or exclusionary working conditions. Participants reflected on workforce participation and production processes highlighting that meaningful structural transformation depends on who creates games, how development teams are organised, and the policies and practices that shape the gaming industry. The interviews demonstrate that diverse teams and inclusive communities contribute to the production of richer, more nuanced games that resonate with a broader range of players, whereas homogeneous teams risk reproducing stereotypes and limiting innovation. These findings empirically reinforce critiques of market-driven diversity initiatives that prioritise visibility without redistributing power. Structural transformation is stagnant or performative, as described by respondents. Instead of real structural transformation, there is a sustained approach of incrementalism where small changes are pursued instead of change. A true transformative process on the site of the industry unavoidably involves a shift in workplace conditions and industry practices that rely on old networks and untransparent hiring procedures, women's representation in games, and the cultural norms that govern gaming communities.

Collectively, these findings support the theoretical distinction between individual and societal transformation. Although women experience video games as sites of personal development, social connection, and learning, structural barriers limit the broader societal impact of gaming. The transformative power of video games depends on aligning individual experiences with structural reform. Meaningful transformation requires sustained political will, institutional responsibility, and collective commitment to equality and social justice. Interventions must operate simultaneously at personal, community, and systemic levels, recognising their

interdependence and addressing both the possibilities and limits of change within the video game ecosystem. The video game ecosystem, with its diverse components and actors, holds significant potential for transformation at both individual and societal level. To realise this potential, it is crucial to comprehend the challenges that hinder it. From this perspective, the transformative potential of video games, especially concerning structural change, necessitate a reorganisation of the institutions and systems that have historically perpetuated gendered, racialised, and sexualised inequalities within the media landscape. Such transformation would encourage representation that transcends stereotypes and address the conditions under which games are produced, distributed, and assessed.

Within the games sector, industry and policy narratives converge on a market and technological idealisation of games, framing transformation in terms of innovation, growth, participation, and skills, while rendering structural questions comparatively implicit. As a result, despite some counterexamples, male-dominated community cultures persist and continue to pose significant barriers to women's participation and well-being. Feminist analyses demonstrate the ways in which market logics organise visibility and empowerment in contingent and constrained ways, privileging pluralistic representation over structural diversity and reform. As this paper demonstrates, postponing structural change produces material consequences across the ecosystem, such as persistent pay inequities and uneven workplace conditions, which hinder the translation of individual gains into broader societal transformation.

True equity in the gaming ecosystem requires a fundamental role reversal that shifts the responsibility for transformation from women to the industry structures and institutions. Currently, women are expected to adapt themselves to existing cultures that exclude them, by developing strategies such as self-modification, identity

concealment, or emotional and *social armouring*, in order to participate and succeed as gamers or professionals in the gaming industry. While the adaptation strategy allows women to be involved in the gaming ecosystem, it reinforces the current gendered structures by placing the burden of change on individuals rather than on institutions. In this context, the industry and the gaming culture broadly remain static, with hiring practices, workplace cultures, and informal networks often rooted in historically male-dominated norms. As a result, the current changes and diversity initiatives in the industry become descriptive and superficial instead of structural. Therefore, the industry needs to redefine its values *and* practices which allow and enable women to remain authentic without exerting themselves to fit, and it needs paradigmatic transformation in hiring, promotion and overall work culture. Without meaningful structural changes, the responsibility for transformation falls to individuals as an expectation that they will assimilate into established cultural expectations rather than transforming them.

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[i] Feminist approaches are heterogeneous, with a wide range of theoretical traditions and methodological orientations, including intersectional, poststructuralist, materialist, and political economy perspectives. However, despite this diversity, they are broadly united by a concern with questions of equality, recognition, and the analysis of power relations that shape social life. This is also reflected in broader critical scholarship, where methodological and theoretical approaches may differ significantly, yet the central concern is similarly framed around the identification and theorisation of power asymmetries between individuals, groups, and within broader social and institutional structures.