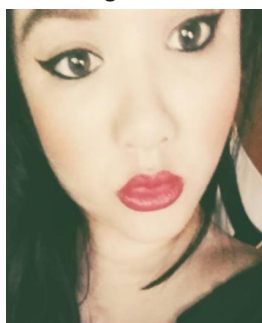


More than just a game another level of online abuse

With video game culture a notoriously hostile place for girls and women, any female gamer in the public eye is vulnerable to an onslaught of harassment. **Sophie Turner** investigates what happens when online vitriol begins to bleed into 'real life'.

Video game live-streamer Toasty, 24, adjusts her headset and skim reads the chatroom full of strangers watching her play. "I want to rape your mother whilst you watch," one person writes. "I'm going to slit your throat," says another. Toasty ignores these messages – she gets threats like these every day so they have become the norm. But one comment in particular catches her eye, preceded by a familiar username that fills her with dread. 'I'm outside your apartment.'

Toasty, as she calls herself online, uses the streaming service Twitch to allow people to watch her play video games in real-time from her home in California. Her live streams have been viewed over 150,000 times, and in an industry that is notoriously inhospitable for women this exposure means that she often has to deal with negative attention.



Game streamer Toasty

"The internet's a really hostile place," Toasty says. "People pick on everything about you: how you play, how you talk, how you

look. They threaten to rape and kill you just for being a girl that likes games. I laugh and try to pretend it doesn't affect me but sometimes it crushes me really badly – I think about it when I go to bed at night." Persistent online abuse began to take its toll on Toasty, and to make matters worse she soon discovered that there's not always a computer screen separating harassers from their victims.

Toasty started streaming video games 3 years ago and began to build online friendships with some of her regular viewers. One of the many people she added on Skype was Jack, whose name has been changed. They barely spoke, but Jack's obsession with Toasty quickly grew. He used readily-available software to trace Toasty's IP address – her computer's digital fingerprint. From there, he was able to find personal information such as her home address and telephone number and could even remotely disable her internet in a process known as DDoSing. Things quickly began to escalate.

"To begin with he would get jealous when I'd play a game without him. I'd never actually given him my phone number – he'd found it out for himself – but he would shut my internet down and I'd get a text message saying 'put

Photographs by Frazer Varney, Toasty and seier on Flickr

me on the team or no internet.” The situation soon began to escalate. Jack began to ask her for nude pictures, and to hear her voice before he went to sleep. “When I refused he would shut down my internet for hours at a time,” she says, “he had decided that I was his property.” Feeling threatened, Toasty tried to cut off all communication by blocking him on Skype and Twitch, but the ordeal was not over.

“He sent me a message saying ‘I’m outside your apartment’”

Weeks later whilst Toasty was at home live streaming a game, Jack popped up unexpectedly in the chatroom. “He sent me a message saying ‘I’m outside your apartment,’” Toasty says. He had illicitly found her address and travelled for almost two hours without warning. “I was terrified. I peered out of my front door, and I could see him standing there through the window of the apartment lobby. I ran straight back inside and told him through Twitch that I couldn’t leave because I was in the middle of streaming.” Jack disabled her internet again, shutting down her stream and leaving her completely disconnected. “He texted me saying ‘it’s my birthday, you won’t get your internet back until you come outside and spend time with me.’ I was so scared – I turned him down as politely as I could but he wasn’t happy.” She locked herself in her apartment and didn’t leave.

Jack kept Toasty’s internet disabled for almost a week, texting her occasionally to tell her he was outside or driving by. “It got to the point where I only parked in the garage because I was scared to walk through the front door. I thought he was going to ambush me.”

To restore her internet and get rid of Jack for good Toasty had to buy a new internet modem, change her phone number and remake her Skype account. She had a friend confront him online to scare him away and

she hasn’t heard from him since. Despite this horrifying ordeal Toasty feels fortunate that the situation ended the way it did. “I was absolutely terrified but I’m lucky that nothing worse happened. If I hadn’t managed to avoid him in person who knows what he would have done.”

After researching the law and other people’s experiences, Toasty didn’t feel comfortable going to the police with her concerns. “I know exactly what would have happened,” she says, “they would have laughed in my face. Even if they’d have understood the problem they couldn’t have prosecuted him for it. He’d used a foreign server when DDoSing me so it’s impossible to prove that it was him, and although he was outside of my apartment he never physically hurt me.” This reluctance to seek help from the police is a common trend with victims of online abuse.

troll terminology

Online trolls use a wide variety of methods to harass people over the internet. Some of the most popular ones in video game culture are:

- Dogpiling – a large group of people sending a barrage of abusive tweets to one person in an attempt to overwhelm and upset them.
- DOXing – finding someone’s personal details and posting them online. This often includes phone numbers, home addresses and bank details. Sometimes family and friends of the victim are also targeted.
- DDoSing – this involves the use of computer software to remotely shut down an individual’s internet connection or sometimes even an entire website.
- SWATting – popular in America, the harasser sends in a false report of terrorism or violence to the police. This can result in an armed SWAT team raiding the victim’s house.



Photograph by Frazer Varney

In both American and UK law, harassment is both a civil tort and a criminal offence. In the UK this means that under the Harassment Act of 1997 perpetrators can either be prosecuted or sued. But in reality only 11% of adults who experience online harassment report it to law enforcement, and of that number only 40% are likely to receive any support from the police. Despite online abuse having very real consequences, the law still hasn’t fully caught up with the digital age, leaving many victims disillusioned with the system.

“Only 11% of adults who experience online harassment report it to law enforcement”

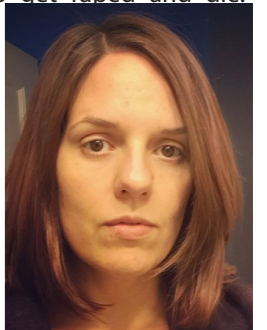
As well as the lack of repercussions for illegal online behaviour, the consequences of technically legal acts are often overlooked. Web psychologist Nathalie Nahai points out that it’s not just the illegal harassment that should be addressed, as online name calling and empty threats can be dangerous to the victim too. “It can be very pernicious, psychologically speaking,” she says. “We receive most of our social interactions online through our phones, and to be harassed through such an intimate medium can feel very personal.” Victims are often extremely distressed, in extreme cases suffering from paranoia and even PTSD as a result of online abuse.

Courtney Stanton, 34, is a video game producer based in Boston, USA. She is one of the victims of the ‘Gamergate’ movement – an online hate campaign that has resulted in women in the games industry being harassed extensively through social media and beyond. In 2011 the organisers of PAX, a gaming convention hosted in America, were selling t-shirt designs that showed support for a fictional rapist. Courtney had been booked to speak at a panel at PAX, and wrote a blog post objecting to the sale of this offensive merchandise. Unrelated to

this, PAX staff decided themselves to remove the t-shirts. Although she was not actually responsible for this decision, some people assumed that it was Courtney’s fault. This launched a tirade of vitriol that continues to this day.

“I’m a rape survivor,” Courtney says, “and I had decided not to attend PAX because of the merchandise they were selling. One blog post was enough for harassers to latch on to. I went to sleep a relatively unknown games producer and woke up the next day to over 300 Twitter messages telling me to get raped and die.”

Like Toasty, Courtney felt that her physical safety was under threat. “I could see what people were writing online, they would discuss their progress towards finding out my home address and talk about the horrible things they would do to me.” Well-known in her local area and with conspicuously neon pink hair at the time, she was constantly anxious about being recognised.



Courtney Stanton

protecting yourself online

➤ Create a secret email address.

Don’t use your public email address to sign up for online services. Using a completely private email address makes a hacker one step further away from being able to access your accounts.

➤ Choose different passwords each time.

If your password is the same on all of your accounts, cracking one of your accounts can give a hacker access to all of the other services you’re signed up for too.

➤ Don’t give real answers to security questions.

In the age of social media, finding out your mother’s maiden name is just a Facebook click away. A security question is simply a password with a prompt so you don’t actually have to answer it truthfully – instead use a memorable word or phrase that’s completely unrelated to the question.

➤ Protect your IP address.

Every computer has an IP address – a unique digital identifier. Anyone that knows your IP address can use this to find out personal details like your phone number and home address, and can even remotely disable your internet. Never tell a stranger your IP address and don’t add anyone you don’t trust to applications like Skype. You can also use a Virtual Private Network (VPN) like cyberghostvpn.com to hide your IP.

For more information about protecting yourself online visit www.getsafeonline.org, the government-supported guide to internet safety.



www.getsafeonline.org



Photo: Frazer Varney Model: Elisi Carmichael

“When someone repeatedly says ‘I’m going to track you down in the street and throw acid in your face’ you begin to realise that they could feasibly do it. I stopped being able to eat and sleep after that. I was eventually diagnosed with PTSD and I’ve slowly been getting treatment since.”

So what causes ‘ordinary’ people to want to hurt women in this way? The ‘disinhibition effect’ causes people to act without fear of consequences online, fuelled by the supposed anonymity of cyberspace. This sometimes encourages people to voice their nastiest thoughts, and allows individuals with similar views to find each other and form hateful online mobs.

At the core of the problem is gaming culture’s hostility towards women. Video games are classically assumed to be male territory, but a 2014 study published by the Internet Advertising Bureau shows that with the rise of smartphone gaming 52% of UK gamers are now female. This breeds a territorialism in some men that causes them to lash out at women who enjoy – and sometimes criticize – a hobby they feel they have ownership over. Donald Pulford,

an academic expert in masculinity, believes that this is encouraged in males from a young age. “Boys are told that part of being a man is showing allegiance to something, whether it’s to a football team or soldiers in a video game battle,” he says. “This can encourage an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality, which ultimately leads to situations like this.”

Gamer women in the public eye – whether players, streamers, developers or journalists – almost always become the target of negative attention. Sometimes this manifests itself as obsessive stalking behaviour like in Toasty’s case, and other times as a long-lasting hate

campaign like the one against Courtney. Studies show that contrary to popular belief playing video games doesn’t make people more likely to be physically violent. But as the boundaries between gaming and social media are becoming less distinct, some gamers are using this opportunity to be abusive online, hiding behind the anonymity of the web. And even when the harassment doesn’t extend beyond the computer screen, the effects of the harassment most certainly can.

**A harasser said
‘I’m going to track you down in
the street and throw acid
in your face’**



Photo: Frazer Varney Model: Elsi Carmichael