

# Gaming Equity: Women, Videogame Companies, and Public Discourse

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**Abstract:** It is by now well documented and widely acknowledged that the videogame industry has since its inception been a bastion of hegemonic masculinity. Only more recently, however, with events like Gamergate, #metoo, and the public accusations of workplace toxicity and sexism brought against prominent AAA giants like Riot and Activision Blizzard King, have game companies initiated policies and processes for change—or at least what looks like change, based on company websites and interviews with female employees. Does this mean women are being heard, at last? These are turbulent times for the industry, with legal actions, policy shifts, personal callings-out and billion-dollar corporate mergers and restructurings. What has changed and what is changing for women in games? How, and by whom, is that change being made? This paper begins with a closer look at what women have said since these events, about their experiences, expectations and frustrations working in the industry. Has the public scrutiny turned upon the games industry, post-gamergate and beyond influenced what women have to say about their conditions and experiences working in games? Are they better supported in taking the risks and shouldering the costs of speaking up? What workplace changes in policy or practice may have resulted from women giving public voice to their experiences? Building upon an earlier study of public speech by women about their experiences in the videogames industry (de Castell & Skardzius, 2019), this study both updates and extends its database, and deepens its analysis, by looking explicitly at a speech event's context of elicitation: who elicits the "event" of public speech, on what topics, with what purpose? Through that dialogical lens we can make more visible and explicit how minority self-representation and marginalized identities and voices are deployed to bolster business as usual, even as they are still expected to lead the charges and fight the battles for a just and inclusive working life in games.

**Keywords:** Women, Video Games Industry, Equity, Legal Action, Riot Games, Activision Blizzard King

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## 1. Background

Over the past decade, several major events have shaken the videogame world, as well as exposing it to wider public and political scrutiny. In 2014, Gamergate, an internet-based movement targeting women<sup>1</sup> in games whether as makers, players, researchers or journalists, exploded in vitriolic attacks against "feminists" in general, and against several moderately prominent individuals in particular. During Gamergate (Mortensen, 2018), many women connected to the games industry, writing about games, or doing gender-focused research in the academy, were harassed and threatened online and off. Some had to conceal or change their address to protect themselves and their families, others to request police protection, others to simply cancel their own events. An aggressive anti-woman campaign demonstrated how deeply invested, and how widespread, was resistance to changing the hegemonic gender order in game culture no less than in the games industry.

"Boundary policing" in male-dominated industries (Jenson & de Castell, 2016) is of course nothing new and long pre-dates Gamergate. The work of classicist Mary Beard has established that gender-based boundary-policing has been around for centuries. Her argument also rings true in the context of the games industry when she writes, "If you venture into traditional male territory, the abuse comes anyway. It's not what you say that prompts it—it's the fact that you are saying it" (Beard 2014, p.11).

Zoe Quinn's echoes Beard's point: "GG [Gamergate] was a symptom of the larger systemic bigotry that has always existed, an extension of DV [domestic violence]" (2021, Jan 6). Who gets to find and make a home in games, whether as players or builders or anywhere in between is closely bound up with what has happened to public speech rights. Have women had a stronger public voice since Gamergate, or have they been further

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<sup>1</sup> "Women" is used throughout this paper in its trans-inclusive sense.

silenced by the echo chamber of abuse it exposed and amplified? Above it all, what has been the game industry's response?

When the #MeToo movement started in the movie industry in October 2017, the initial reaction in the games sector was not especially noticeable. Since that time, however, events signalling a crisis in the videogame world have become increasingly frequent. For example, in August 2018, *Kotaku's* reporter Cecilia D'Anastasio published an investigation exposing the culture of sexism at Riot Games (D'Anastasio, 2018). Three months later, two women, one current and one former employee of Riot Games, filed a class action lawsuit against the company, "accusing it of endemic gender-based discrimination and fostering a 'men-first' environment" (D'Anastasio, 2018b). Following the *Riot* case, in August 2019, a series of sexual assault allegations were made on Twitter against high-ranking men in the industry. The Twitter movement was started with an artist and game designer Nathalie Lawhead's blog post "Calling out my rapist". Commended for its bravery, this post encouraged more women in the industry to speak out, and to publicly support each other's accusations. Some women in relative positions of power, such as [Meghna Jayanth](#), a video game writer and game designer, spoke on behalf of others, who, unsurprisingly, wanted to keep their identities private.

One year later, in summer 2020, a groundswell of reports of sexual misconduct shook the video game industry. Jessica Richey, a streamer based in NYC, [has collected and archived 418 testimonies](#), 13 anonymous and others public. Many of the reports that surfaced in summer 2020 were directed at one particular gaming company—Ubisoft. In addition to Twitter, many Ubisoft employees anonymously reported to *Gamasutra* ongoing issues of toxic work culture, abuse, sexual misconduct, systematic harassment, lack of support from HR, and that abusers remained immune, while those trying to speak up were silenced (Kerr, 2020b). Have women been more encouraged and better enabled by cultural movements in longer-established creative industries to venture into the public domain and share their experiences and voice their concerns about working in the videogame industry? And if so, what change has been the result?

## 2. How do we Know what we Know? (What we did)

To learn more about the impacts of these events on women's public-domain communications about their conditions and experiences working in the industry, we began by extending and updating a dataset we'd created for an earlier study (de Castell & Skardzius, 2019) of 189 women working in the games industry in Canada and the USA. As in our previous study, we compiled public domain communications by women concerning their experiences working in the games industry from corporate employee profiles, published books, interviews, panels, presentations, social media, news, and podcasts available on the internet, and included women working in diverse roles in the games industry, across the different areas of the industry - the AAA, indie, casual, mobile educational, etc., and with various lengths of experience. We wanted to see if women were speaking more often and/or differently about working in games after these exposing and supportive events than they had been during and following the gender-focused campaign of hostility and aggression that was Gamergate.

To try and find out, we began by adding interviewees from *Women in Gaming: 100 Professionals of Play* (Marie, 2018), which included interviews with one hundred women selected to represent a "diverse array of life experiences, skills, and opinions" (Marie, 2018, p. 6). Focusing only on women living and/or working in North America, and accounting for the women who had already been included in the first dataset, we were able to draw 55 new names from Meagan Marie's book. We next added names sourcing IGDA [Women in Games Special Interest Group profiles](#), [Women of Ubisoft Profiles](#), [Dames Making Games](#), and [Pixelles](#) websites and Twitter pages. We expanded the search to include Twitter (since rebranded as X) because what got said there was less 'curated' than interviews conducted and published in other media, and being used not just to express individual perspectives, but as well to connect with and support others in shared communities of interest. As Anna Megill explained when asked why she chose to stay on Twitter despite the harassment she was getting there: "my answer? To be seen. It matters that I'm still here" (Megill, 2019, July 26). And Twitter was used to learn about other women in the industry. For instance, women in tech were using Twitter to consolidate lists of "inspirational women in games". The [2021 list](#) received 306 comments, each including multiple names of inspirational women, 1.1K likes and 300 shares. Whether used to encourage and support one another, to be visible, or to build a collective sense of agency, Twitter was an important public speech medium for many women in games.

By these means we added 108 women working in games to the database already compiled for the first paper, which brought us to 297 women in games. We then searched LinkedIn profiles to expand our information about these women's educational background and career paths.

To see what each had written or said publicly since Gamergate, and to look for indications of responses to the #MeToo effects on the gaming industry, we ran 2 advanced Google searches, one from 2014-01-01 to 2017-12-31, and the second from 2018-01-01 to 2021-12-31 for each of the 297 women from our combined datasets using queries name AND 'women' OR 'video games' OR 'gender' OR 'diversity'. For women with active Twitter accounts, we also ran advanced Twitter searches using the queries: 'women' OR 'video games' OR 'gender' OR 'diversity', for the same 2 periods, 2014-01-01 to 2018-12-31, and 2018-01-01 to 2021-12-31.

We retrieved and listened to podcasts and presentations, as well as transcribing texts from interviews, and then we copy-pasted and transcribed 'answers' to the following questions: How did they start in the industry? What drew them to working in games? Did they have to leave a job? Why? Where did they go next? Do they comment on diversity in the industry? How do they speak about gender/race/sexuality? Do they share their own positive or negative experiences? Do they talk about working conditions? What do they say about their own work?

Each of these instances of 'public speech' (public-domain communication) for each woman was then contextualized, by identifying the conditions of its elicitation. Speech is responsive, and dialogical, (even if the interlocuter is a machine) so we began by distinguishing explicitly solicited from unsolicited public communication. We noted who and what that public speech event was a response to. We noted the date of public appearance, and sorted all public speech events into one of two periods, the first, "Gamergate" (GG) including postings from 2014 through into 2017, and the second, #MeToo aftermath (#MT), from 2018 to 2021, two comparable time periods.

When analysing public speech events by women in games, we identified two main categories of context:

1. Solicited speech
  - a) by employer or on behalf of employer
  - b) by critical media
2. Unsolicited speech
  - a) speaking unasked, expressing own views
  - b) speaking independently but choosing to respond as an employee

As is shown in table 1, we found an increase in women's public communications matching our search criteria between the two periods we focused on: 173 from 2014-2017 (gamergate era) and 268 from 2018-present (#MeToo era). Of these, 125 of the 173 Gamergate speeches and 208 of the 268 #MeToo were coded as either critical of their games industry work experiences (-), or approving (+). The distribution in both periods was very close, with almost identical negative vs positive statements in the GG period, and slightly more positive statements in the #MT period (GG= 62-/63+; #MT=100-/108+).

**Table 1: Public Speech**

	#MeToo Period Solicited Speaking		#MeToo Period Unsolicited Speaking		Gamergate Period Solicited Speaking		Gamergate Period Unsolicited Speaking	
	Solicited by Employer (or on their behalf)	Solicited by the Media	Speaking Alone (unasked)	Speaking personally but as an employee	Solicited by Employer (or on their behalf)	Solicited by the Media	Speaking Alone (unasked)	Speaking personally but as an employee
<b>Any NEGATIVE Experiences at work</b>	13	45	40	2	8	19	35	0
<b>Any POSITIVE Experiences at work</b>	34	41	29	4	9	21	30	3

Where things get rather interesting is when these overall data are disaggregated into conditions of elicitation, where we can see in Table 1 that while solicitations from employers almost tripled from 17 to 47, solicitations from the media also more than doubled from Gamergate levels during the #MeToo period, from 40 to 87. Overall, speech events elicited in the #MeToo period compared with the Gamergate era by BOTH employers and by other media outlets grew by 133%. Across these periods there were nearly as many ‘positive’ as ‘negative’ statements elicited by non-employer media outlets (45-/41+ for #MeToo, and 19-/21+ for GG), which is also true of the employer-solicited speeches after Gamergate, at 8- to 9+. This is in telling contrast to the speeches solicited by employers after #MeToo, where the ‘positive’ statements far exceeded the ‘negative’ ones, 13- to 34+. What else is interesting here is that, very differently from solicited speaking, the number of unsolicited public communications by women working in games rose only very slightly in the second time period (66-70), although the proportion of ‘negative’ to ‘positive’ comments moved substantially higher, from 35-/30+ in Gamergate to 40-/29+ in #MeToo. It is important to note that while the data in Table 2 represents all of the 441 speech events we looked at from both periods, the data in Table 1 represents the subset of 333 that evinced either a positive or negative comment on the speaker’s working conditions within the games industry or about the games industry in general.

**Table 2: Solicited vs. Unsolicited Speech**

	#MeToo Period Solicited Speaking		#MeToo Period Unsolicited Speaking		Gamergate Period Solicited Speaking		Gamergate Period Unsolicited Speaking	
	Solicited by Employer (or on their behalf)	Solicited by the Media	Speaking Alone (unasked)	Speaking personally but as an employee	Solicited by Employer (or on their behalf)	Solicited by the Media	Speaking Alone (unasked)	Speaking personally but as an employee
	73	93	93	9	32	53	84	4
<b>Years Working Averages</b>	17.8	19.6	18.8	12.3	18.2	22.3	20.9	0.0
<b>Years working in Games Averages</b>	14.4	18.1	16.5	10.2	15.2	18.4	18.9	0.0

When we cross-reference speakers with age, years of overall work experience and years of experience in the games industry, we see the women whose voices were solicited by their employers (e.g. “the Women of Ubisoft”) generally had fewer years of work experience, fewer years in the games industry, and were younger in age than the women invited to speak by non-employer media outlets. For #MeToo this worked out at an average of 14.4 years working in the industry for employer-solicited women vs. 18.1 years for those solicited by the media. During the Gamergate period the average industry experience was 15.2 years for employer solicitations vs. 18.4 years for the media, as can be seen in Table 2. Employers seemed to be selecting as their spokespersons younger women with less experience working in games. Not surprisingly, non-employer outlets featured the voices of women who were both older and had more work experience on the basis of which to speak. It would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that the games industry has elected as its spokespersons younger women with less games work experience, and made spaces for women’s voices that have less to do with hearing about their work experience and more to do with appropriating women’s voices to enhance a company’s public image.

We witnessed a marked increase in public statements by women in games in blogs, interviews, books, and social media after Gamergate. Some of this increase in public speech by women about their work, however, far from being a manifestation of increased equity, voice and empowerment, appears appropriated and mobilized by game studios to create a positive public image of the organization’s intentions and achievements: a kind of ‘protective colouration’ whose function is to create the illusion of respectful and equitable diversity and inclusiveness, while keeping substantive positive changes to a minimum.

### 3. What has the Industry Been Doing? The Cases of Riot Games and Activision Blizzard King

What influence does women's always risky public speech appear to have in the places they work? To track industry response to this series of public counter-hegemonic, gender-based challenges, we looked at three game companies' websites between 2013 (before Gamergate) and October 2021 (this paper's time of writing). We focused on Riot and Activision Blizzard King (ABK) because of the prominent and public scrutiny they received during this time.

#### 3.1 Industry Case #1: Riot Games, Problems Brought to Light

Riot Games is a major player in the gaming world, with over 3000 employees across 20 offices and earning over \$1 billion year after year from popular games like *League of Legends* and *Valorant*. As mentioned earlier, in 2018, Cecilia D'Anastasio published a scathing piece about a culture of misogyny and gender-based harassment at Riot Games. She details a workplace where women were routinely rejected for promotions to leadership teams, questioned about their families and love lives, subjected to commentary about their appearance, and sexually harassed at work. Former employees spoke about receiving unsolicited images of male genitalia from colleagues or supervisors. One woman reported hearing from a co-worker that her name was on a list that senior management was passing around noting women working at the company they would like to have sex with.

#### 3.2 Regulatory Response

In October 2018, California's Department of Fair Employment & Housing (DFEH) advised Riot Games of an investigation of sexual harassment, discrimination, and retaliation against women in its workplace. The investigation would eventually become a "state government gender discrimination and sexual harassment lawsuit against Riot Games" in 2019 (DFEH n.d.). In early 2019, Riot Games made public that it had reached a \$10 million private settlement with approximately 100 women who had all been required to sign non-disclosure agreements. Both DFEH and California's Division of Labor Standards Enforcement objected to that settlement, arguing that it was insufficient and would not deter the company from continually violating pay equity laws. DFEH sought those agreements as part of their investigation, requiring that Riot Games produce them by January 2021. Riot Games dragged out that process until April 2021. Upon receipt of the settlement and separation agreements, DFEH found that they contained language meant to dissuade or intimidate employees from "voluntarily and candidly speak[ing] with the government about sexual harassment and other violations" and suggested that employees could not "obtain relief in the government's actions" (DFEH, Aug 2021). As a result, The Court ordered Riot Games to issue a correction, but again the company delayed in doing so for another two months.

Ultimately, the case was settled for \$100 million in December 2021. The company also agreed to implement "systemic reforms to resolve allegations of workplace sex discrimination and harassment" (DFEH, Dec 2021). The settlement was made to address legal violations against approximately 1,065 women employees and 1,300 women contract workers. Beginning January 2021, Riot Games has agreed to pay \$80 million in compensation to workers (another \$20 million in legal fees) and another \$18 million over three years for diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. Riot Games is also required to provide 40 full-time positions in engineer, quality assurance, or art-design roles to members who had previously worked as temporary contractors. Finally, the company was required to hire an independent third-party approved by DFEH to "conduct a gender-equity analysis of employee pay, job assignments, and promotions" and to "audit compliance with workplace protections, including a review of complaint investigations and outcomes" each year for three years (DFEH, Dec 2021).

#### 3.3 Company Response

Given the amount of public attention Riot Games received related to gender-based discrimination and harassment in 2018/2019, it is not surprising that some changes were made to their public-facing website. One small, but noticeable change is an increase in the number of women in leadership roles. In December 2018, Riot Games created a "Chief People Officer" (CPO) position as part of their senior leadership team. They hired Emily Winkle, who, at the time, became only the 3<sup>rd</sup> woman holding a senior leadership role at the company (out of over 20). The role of the CPO is to oversee "talent acquisition, onboarding...compensation, perks and benefits, performance management, learning and development, cultural programs, and employee relations" ([Emily Winkle | Riot Games](#)).

In the end, Riot was required to pay out \$100 million to resolve those pay inequities. The “individual issues” they *resolved* without state oversight were found to be wholly inadequate. Reading through the various diversity and inclusion-related pages on the Riot Games website would lead one to believe that the company was making diversity and inclusion changes of their own volition. In reality, those changes that have been made happened when there was increased public pressure in the form of media scrutiny, and government intervention. Moreover, it is evident that while putting a positive public face on the scandal by highlighting even the tiniest changes in a positive direction (e.g. hiring more women), the company was at the same time, doing what it could to push back against challenges to their hostile, discriminatory, and sometimes illegal workplace practices.

### 3.4 Case #2: Activision Blizzard King, Problems Brought to Light

The most recent of the three companies highlighted in this paper to face public scrutiny over allegations of sexual misconduct is Activision Blizzard (AB). Activision was founded in 1979, merged with Blizzard in 2008, and Activision Blizzard acquired King to become Activision Blizzard King (ABK) in 2015. In February 2022 (after the allegations were made), the company announced that it was being purchased by Microsoft, though the purchase had not yet been made official at the time of writing. The company employs about 10,000 people and owns enormously successful titles such as *Call of Duty*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Candy Crush*.

In November 2021, reporters from *The Wall Street Journal* published a piece detailing a frat-boy culture, sexual harassment, and alleged rapes that happened in the workplace. The allegations include over 500 reports from current and former employees of harassment and discrimination since July 2021. The article also outlines a culture of dismissal and a refusal to take any steps to correct behaviours or hold offenders accountable (Grind, Fritz & Needleman, 2021). One particularly egregious example is that of a former employee who was allegedly raped by her supervisor, Javier Panameno, once in 2016 and again in 2017. The employee reported the rape to HR at the time in both cases, and to the police in 2017, but in all cases, nothing was done. The accuser emailed Activision CEO Bobby Kotick directly about the incidents in 2018, threatening legal action. She ended up settling out-of-court. Two months following the settlement, her former supervisor and alleged rapist was fired (Grind, Fritz & Needleman, 2021).

#### 3.4.1 Regulatory Response

Over the past few years, ABK has faced multiple state and regulatory interventions. In 2018, California’s Equal Employment Opportunity Commission opened an investigation into ABK. The complaint that initiated the investigations stated that employees endured “sexual harassment that was severe or pervasive to alter the conditions of employment” (Grind, Fritz & Needleman, 2021). ABK paid \$18 million to settle the case in September 2021. The settlement also requires that eligible claimants can request to have harmful documents removed from their personnel files and that unfair termination be reclassified as resignation, as well as many other provisions to prevent workplace harassment, discrimination, and retaliation (see: <https://www.eeoc.gov/newsroom/court-approves-eeocs-18-million-settlement-activision-blizzard>).

In July 2021, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) filed a lawsuit against ABK. The suit alleges the company has fostered a “pervasive ‘frat boy’ workplace culture”, stating that “Male employees proudly come into work hungover, play video games for long periods of time during work while delegating their responsibilities to female employees, engage in banter about their sexual encounters, talk openly about female bodies, and joke about rape”. It specifically names former *World of Warcraft* developer Alex Afrasiabi as a serial abuser and makes reference to his 2013 BlizzCon hotel room commonly known by its nickname the “Cosby Suit”, referencing convicted rapist Bill Cosby (Gach, 2021). The suit details systemic gender-based pay, compensation, and opportunity inequity across the company. It outlines how the company has consistently ignored complaints of harassment and discrimination against female employees, as well as discouraging employees from making complaints. The suit provides an example by telling the story of a former employee who died by suicide after a nude photo of her was widely distributed at a work event. On August 25<sup>th</sup> 2021, the DFEH updated the lawsuit to include temporary workers. They also accused the company of interfering with their investigation, by shredding documents requested by the DFEH, by falsely informing employees they must speak with ABK before contacting the DFEH, and through its hiring of law firm WilmerHale (Farokhmanesh & Totilo, 2021).

The DFEH lawsuit led to United States federal regulators launching their own investigation into ABK. That investigation resulted in a February 2023 fine of \$35 million (Fung, 2023) for failure to collect and respond to employee workplace misconduct. While the DFEH suit is not yet settled, Microsoft acquired ABK in October 2023 for a record setting \$68.7 billion USD (Welsh, 2023).

### 3.4.2 Company Response

On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021, Frances Townsend, Executive Sponsor of the ABK Employee Women's Network and the Chief Compliance Officer, sent an internal email to ABK employees in response to the DFEH lawsuit. In the email she broadly dismissed the complaints, writing "A recently filed lawsuit presented a distorted and untrue picture of our company, including factually incorrect, old, and out of context stories" and later calls the DFEH lawsuit "meritless and irresponsible" (<https://twitter.com/jasonscreier/status/1418512291218264065>). Throughout the email, Townsend repeatedly doubles down on the claim that ABK values equity and fairness. That same day, Blizzard President J. Allen Brack emailed all staff addressing the DFEH lawsuit with broad generalizations that harassment and discrimination are unacceptable and that everyone should feel safe at work. He wrote, "I disdain 'bro culture,' and have spent my career fighting against it" (<https://twitter.com/jasonscreier/status/1418512291218264065>).

In response to the lawsuit and Townsend's internal email, more than 2600 current and former ABK employees signed an open letter to leadership claiming their "values as employees are not accurately reflected in the words and actions of [their] leadership" ([Activision Blizzard employees call leadership response to harassment suit 'abhorrent and insulting' - Polygon](#)). Townsend held a Women's Network listening session on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. During the call with 500 participants, Townsend defended her email. Later that day, Townsend stepped down from the Women's Network (Liao, 2021). That same week, in response to the outpouring of allegations and stories of harm endured while working at ABK, several former Blizzard Executives posted apologies on social media for failing their former employees.

Over the next more than a year, there were a series of moves made internally and externally by AB, too many to document here, that resulted in the April 2022, hiring of Kristen Hines as the new Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer. In an official statement announcing her new role, she committed to increasing the percentage of women and non-binary employees at ABK to 50% over the next five years, but made no mention of any other form of diversity ([Activision Blizzard Appoints Kristen Hines as Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer](#)).

## 4. Very Little Changes: By way of a Conclusion

In general, each of these companies have responded to grievous allegations of widespread harassment and harm in the workplaces they are responsible for with public relations-inspired public apologies, commitments to make donations to social justice focused organizations, and promises to hire more women and people from underrepresented groups. Apologies and donations are well and good, but this last response – to hire more women – is problematic and could easily do more harm than good. The notion that the dearth of women in games (and tech more broadly) has been because of a 'leaky pipeline', in other words, a lack of recruitment efforts and support for women in the industry, has long been understood to be an inadequate assessment of the problem. While there are barriers for women at all stages of the recruitment process, what this moment really highlights is how unwelcoming, hostile, and outright harmful the games industry can be for women *once they get there*. If games companies do not resolve rampant sexism and hateful behaviour in their workplaces, simply adding more women to the mix subjects more women to potential harm and gives them plenty of reasons to leave.

There is little in these cases to suggest, however, that companies are invested in responding meaningfully and substantively to or resolving the issues women have been speaking about. Their objective seems simply to make the *publicity* of the problem go away so they can go back to selling games without having to address deeply structured problems of workplace inequity and carry on as they always have. This is evidenced in the ways these companies responded publicly to accusations of inequity or harassment. All acknowledge there is a problem, in some small way, all indicate that they have resolved said problem, and then reinforce the notion that it was never really that much of a problem to begin with. Arguably, the most blatant example of this is how Riot responded to accusations of gender-based pay inequity discussed earlier.

More meaningful consequences for inaction on the part of these companies have thus far occurred only when the state has stepped in to investigate and hold management to account for meeting the minimum standard of satisfying employment laws. In the cases of Riot and ABK, accountability came in the form of \$100 million or more in fines, court imposed hiring quotas, and a state-approved third party to assess human resources and employment practices and processes over a three-year period. Without the public speech of so many women to focus the attention of the media and the public, however, it is unlikely the state would have pursued any such action against these companies. It is also noteworthy that both Riot and ABK are based in California, known to have stronger legislative protections for workers than many (indeed most) jurisdictions.

Workplace inequity, whether that workplace is public or private, is a public concern. Governments have both the authority and the responsibility to enforce fair and decent workplace conditions. Failing to do so renders public speech pointless—and has much the same effect as prohibiting it. As the public sphere is eroded, with its crushingly mis-named ‘social’ media becoming ever more explicitly the private property of the wealthiest among us, political incentive is required to move regulators to use their power and exercise their responsibility. That is why speaking in public is so very important, for all the risks and harms it brings. What has been accomplished by women and allies giving public voice to their experiences via such public events as gamergate and #meto, catalysed critical responses from gamers both ‘lay’ and professional, and from sponsors of professional gaming events. Withdrawal of sponsorships, contraction of a fan base, and all-around bad press has enabled the identification and indictment of games companies for actions too long overlooked, forgiven, and even rewarded, and there is some reason for optimism that as game companies begin to publicly criticize their erstwhile confreres, there may be some wider impact even without recourse to the kinds of legal actions described here. What this paper hopefully can demonstrate is that “women in games” is not any kind of special interests issue, it’s a public domain problem, and while “speaking in public” is surely a fraught and dangerous tactic for women and marginalized others, and one which is all too easily appropriated and subverted, when those voices *can* make themselves heard over industry’s “blah blah blah” mantras of good intentions, heard by both the gaming and the general public, and *listened to* by state regulators, things can change.<sup>2</sup> Placing the responsibility for that change on the shoulders of women, however, simply will not work, and will continue to cost them dearly for the audacity to speak in public about the harms done to them in their workplace families and communities. Harms *can* be reduced, toxicity diminished, abusers removed, and opportunities, resources and rewards more equitably distributed across the workforce—but only with a groundswell of public censure will state authorities charged with responsibility for enforcing inclusive and equitable workplace regulations acknowledge and act on it.

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<sup>2</sup> After three decades heading up Activision/Blizzard, having overseen the recent merger of ABK with Microsoft, CEO Bobby Kotick is resigning. “..the same month the company reached a \$50 million settlement over claims of widespread discrimination against female staff.” <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/world/2023/12/controversial-gaming-figure-bobby-kotick-departs-activision-blizzard-new-gaming-titan-emerges.html>



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