



Online Gaming: Survivor Privacy Risks & Strategies



Contrary to popular perception, online gaming is not just a pastime for teenage boys. Online gaming is popular in the U.S.: nearly half of American adults have played video games, while 10% consider themselves “gamers.” Unfortunately, many people experience online harassment while playing games that can also cross into real life. Those who choose to join online gaming communities should not be isolated from those communities because of online harassment. Additionally, survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking may have additional privacy concerns when trying to engage in online spaces. Fortunately, it is possible to increase privacy and safety when gaming online.

Online Gaming Basics

Games include sports, shooter, simulation, adventure, real-time strategy, role-playing, and educational games. Online gaming communities use their own lingo in chats between players within the game.

Many games still use older-style hand-held game controllers, though increasingly games call on users to move their whole body, or to enter “virtual reality” through the use of goggles. In addition to purely online gaming platforms, some games cross into the real world through “augmented reality” which creates a filter or overlay of game-related information as the user moves through the real world.

The ability to remain anonymous online varies depending on the gaming platform. In some games, a user can make up any screen name and choose an “avatar” or online image to represent them. Users often have a choice about what personal or contact information to share with other users through an online profile or chat conversations with other players. As games cross into virtual reality or into real life with augmented reality, privacy and safety concerns may increase. Augmented reality games may link a player’s online presence to a specific location in order to let other gamers interact with them at a shared location.

Privacy and Safety Risks

Young adults, and particularly young women, experience online harassment at a high rate.¹ People who identify with other marginalized groups are also more likely to experience harassment.

#GamerGate brought online harassment in gaming to light in the media. Female gamers reported death threats, rape threats, stalking and doxing (posting private contact information online).

Harassment, threats, and abuse that happen “only” online should be taken seriously. Such experiences can be traumatizing, and may include financial crime or identity theft. Victims report efforts to ruin their reputations and drive them from the online community. If enough identifying information is known, the abuse can also quickly become an offline threat. While people of many genders and backgrounds experience abusive content online, women and survivors are more likely to find harassment “very” or “extremely” upsetting.

Potential Benefits to Survivors

Online gaming provides an opportunity for connection, particularly with people who share a common interest. Some games have vast numbers of users, some of whom have played for many years, building up a sense of familiarity or community. Some survivors who are wary of meeting in person, or prefer to be able to choose the identity they present to the world, may find more flexibility and comfort online. As with any activity, online or offline, everyone should be able to participate free from harassment and abuse.

Strategies to Increase Privacy and Safety

Responsibility for stopping online harassment and abuse should rest primarily with those who misuse tech against other people online. In addition, game developers and companies can take steps to counter online abuse and to promote

¹ The Pew Center on the Internet and American Life [Online Harassment report](#) says that 1 in 4 women have been stalked online or were the target of online sexual harassment. About 16% of respondents said harassment occurred through online gaming rather than the 66% who said it was through social media.

good behavior in their spaces. As the International Gaming Developer Association says, “...The onus is on harassers and their communities to discourage harassment and report harassing behavior when it is observed. *You have a right to work, speak, create, and exist in a space free of harassment and the threat of harassment.*”

Many gamers and survivors may want to consider some of these steps to increase their personal safety and privacy online.

1. When creating accounts and profiles, choose a username that doesn't include your real name or other identifying information. Protect your privacy by not giving out identifying or contact information.
2. You may consider using different email addresses, profile pictures, and strong passwords for gaming, and for each game you play. Keeping this information separate from the rest of your life can help avoid doxing, or other users begin able to connect your gaming profile to your real life.
3. Search for yourself online, or use privacy checking services to find out what information is available about you online.
4. Be careful about attachments and links, which might install spyware or other malware on your devices.
5. **Trust your instincts.** If you start to feel uncomfortable, it's always ok to cease contact.

When considering augmented reality games or meeting up in real life, here are some additional steps to consider.

1. Let a friend know ahead of time where you are going, and that you will reach out to them after the gaming session is done.
2. Leave an address and some information on where you'll be.
3. Familiarize yourself with the meet-up spot ahead of time. Only meet where you're comfortable.

4. Watch out for people saying they want to visit but need loans to be able to get to you, or who use other stories to gain your sympathy and then ask for money.
5. It's ok to cut a gaming session short if it's doesn't feel safe or fun. **Trust your instincts.**

Evidence

Survivors of online harassment and abuse may choose to report their experiences to the gaming platforms and/or to a legal system. Because the technology uses both hardware like computers or smartphones, as well as Internet providers and the gaming company's servers, digital evidence may be available. In addition, survivors may consider taking pictures, screenshots, or saving other relevant information. See our [tips on documenting abuse](#), and a [sample documentation log](#).

Online harassment and abuse may fall under a number of crimes, depending on what is happening. To learn more about laws in your state on online harassment, visit [WomensLaw.org](#).

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We have a variety of handouts describing the risks and potential benefits of online communities. We update our materials frequently. Please visit [TechSafety.org](#) for the latest version of this and other materials.