Gaming can’t fix its abuse problem one person at a time

Over the last week, dozens of developers, journalists, and streamers have come forward on Twitter with allegations of abuse they’ve endured as part of the video game industry. Their stories span several high-profile companies and include figures in powerful positions. While the sheer number of people speaking up at once is remarkable — and concurrent with similar waves of #MeToo allegations in the worlds of comedy, pro-wrestling, and comic books — it’s not new. This is an important moment of reckoning; it’s also one that seems to replay in the video game industry and others every few months. Now that gaming has had what many call its “#MeToo moment” several times over, we know what to expect. Each new story — if acknowledged at all — is met with the same weak promises and little material change.

It’s true that some individuals accused of harassment or assault have experienced consequences. But removing perpetrators one by one after they have caused harm neither undoes that harm nor prevents its wider spread in the future. Individuals create their own behavior, yet they are not the only ones responsible for it. Only a system that enables abuse can allow so many offenders to flourish across the industry. The only way to solve this problem is for the people in charge to admit the truth: that they have failed to protect their colleagues by instead protecting abusers and creating toxic workplaces. And so many of the video games on the market have an unseen feature in the trauma of those who made them.

They have failed to protect their colleagues by instead protecting abusers

For years, women, nonbinary people, and other victims of harassment have turned to whisper networks to seek support and keep each other safe. The rise of the #MeToo movement on platforms like Twitter have helped amplify those stories, giving new power to those previously forced into backchannels or silenced completely. It is, and has always been, an imperfect solution. Victims who speak up do so at a huge personal cost. Loud victims have historically faced blacklisting or retaliation after speaking up, and the game industry is no different. Coming forward online also means waves of harassment from fan bases and even threats of legal action from the accused. It is ugly, cruel work that places a heinous burden on individuals to stop predators, rather than the institutions that armed them. A victim having no other option but to come forward on Twitter, a platform that can't even keep its own employees safe from harassment, is not just tragic. It's a failure of the systems currently in place that claim to keep people safe.

Consider that it took a tidal wave of more allegations made against more than 60 Twitch streamers for the platform to begin permanently banning those in question. At Ubisoft, rot formed at the top. Allegations made against several Ubisoft employees, including vice presidents Tommy François and Maxime Béland and *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* creative director Ashraf Ismail, prompted a feeble pledge from the company to "do better." That includes launching investigations into the allegations as well as now "auditing our existing policies, processes, and systems to understand where these have broken down, and to ensure we can better prevent, detect, and punish inappropriate behavior." After multiple women came forward with stories of sexual misconduct and harassment about prolific games writer Chris Avellone, *Dying Light 2* developer Techland told *Kotaku* that "together with Chris Avellone, we've decided to end our cooperation." *Business Insider* reports that EA has also cut ties with Avellone on *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*.

On Twitter, victims continue to speak out about their experiences; countless more stories have yet to be told. For each person made visible for bad behavior, they are only the tip of an iceberg sailing through the industry. The work is far from done. This is not a moment that will pass. It is a long-established reality of game industry culture, one that cannot be solved by plucking out a few harmful figures every few months. Outing a single predator may, in an ideal outcome, remove that one person. It does not prevent a new one from popping up in their place.

Hand-wringing has no place in this conversation

The task before the industry is one it's needed to tackle for years: reforming its culture on a massive scale. Those who work within games are already plagued by toxic work practices and harassment from overzealous fans. As more dangerous men are outed, it is impossible to ignore how many held powerful positions within games. If companies want to fix their problems with sexual misconduct, harassment, and assault, they have to examine their relationship to alcohol-driven events, in-house policies for reporting, and the structure of their teams. It's easy to disavow a single person and harder to identify the points of failure that allowed them to rise in the first place. This requires studios across the industry — not just those exposed in each new round of allegations — to get their houses in order.

Companies have an ethical obligation to their employees to provide safe work environments. One person's bad behavior does not only affect those they victimize; it is a source of secondary trauma for colleagues. Left unchecked, it is a poison that spreads to anyone attached to the culprit. As the current culture of harassment stands, it asks individuals to do the work. Accountability must be a commitment from the community, but especially men who want to claim allyship. It's true that women can be abusers, and men can be abused; yet the game industry, in particular, has demonstrated an

overwhelmingly male-driven pattern of harm. Men must hold their male colleagues accountable, both at work and outside of it. Hand-wringing has no place in this conversation.

As allegations surface, it’s okay to mourn. It’s normal to feel shock, anger, and grief. But those feelings cannot be a stopping point. They are the beginning of a long, hard conversation about abuse and how even the best-meaning people can be complicit. The game industry can no longer say it didn’t know, or its more tiresome counterpart, that it isn’t surprised. Companies and individuals can’t flounder in their shock and guilt or continue to be selective about what qualifies for correction. Good products require healthy companies. Abuse is everyone’s problem.

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