unicef ✦

for every child
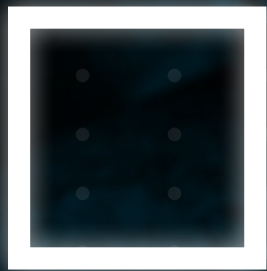
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS
AND ONLINE GAMING:

INDUSTRY TOOLKIT ON ADVANCING DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Acknowledgments

This toolkit was developed by Milka Pietikäinen, independent consultant and Director of Threefold Sustainability and Josianne Galea Baron from the UNICEF Business Engagement and Child Rights team.

The development of this toolkit also benefitted from insights and collaboration from a wide range of stakeholders from industry, civil society, and academia. UNICEF would like to acknowledge in particular the contributions of Barbara Leal and Tania Myöhänen (We in Games); Electronic Arts; Kate Bryant, Marie Enemark Olsen, Elizabeth Milovidov (The LEGO Group); Kimberly Voll, Laura Higgins, and Lizzie Curran (Fair Play Alliance); Kruakae Pothong (5Rights); Lauren Comp (Star Stable Entertainment); Lucy Rissik (Women in Games); Minh Tue Le Ngoc (Newzoo); Niina Ojala, Pekka Korpela and Tommi Lappalainen (Rovio); Petter Karlsson and Maria Hallgren (TocaBoca); Sonia Livingstone (LSE); and Usva Friman (Tampere University).

We would also like to thank the following colleagues for their reviews and contributions:

UNICEF – Andrew Mawson; Anne Grandjean; Afrooz Kaviani Johnson; Daniel Kardefelt-Winther; Emer O'Doherty; Erik Nyman; Geetanjali Narayan; Ida Hyllested; Kyle Matthews; Lauren Rumble; Maricar Garde; Marcos Mendez Sanguos; Oumayma Raimi; Ronen Rapoport; Rosangela Berman Bieler; Shreyasji Jha; Stephen Blight; and Tasha Gill.

We are grateful for the financial support from the LEGO Group for the development of this toolkit.

Design and layout: Blossom.it
Editing: Small World Stories

Accessibility

UNICEF strives to make its documents and websites accessible for all, if you find any accessibility issues with this document, or require additional support please contact us at digitalaccessibility@unicef.org

Copyright and disclaimer

This toolkit is a UNICEF publication. Acknowledgements of company representatives do not imply a company's approval or endorsement of the toolkit. Any reference made to a specific company does not imply endorsement by UNICEF of the company's policies and practices. This toolkit has been drafted to engage companies within the online gaming ecosystem on the topic of diversity, equity and inclusion from a child rights perspective. Research findings are used solely to highlight potential risks or opportunities for children presented by the online gaming environment. This toolkit is not meant to offer a comprehensive or conclusive view of research findings or industry practices in any of the areas covered. This toolkit does not articulate, nor does it represent, any official position of UNICEF.

© United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), May 2023

All rights to this publication remain with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).
Permission is required to reproduce any part of this publication: reports@unicef.org.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

ACRONYMS

ADHD – Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder

ADL – Anti-Defamation League

ASD – Autism spectrum disorder

AI – Artificial intelligence

DEI – Diversity, equity and inclusion

ERG – Employee resource group

FPA – Fair Play Alliance

ICT – Information and communications technology

LGBTIQ+ – Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer or questioning and other terms

PC – Personal computer

PEGI – Pan European Game Information

SOGIESC – Sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics

WHO – World Health Organization

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

INTRODUCTION

Wherever they manifest, discrimination and stereotypes of all kinds can have profound impacts on the lives of children.[1] They can limit children from achieving their full potential, affect their self-image and well-being, and prevent them from exercising their rights – including their rights to non-discrimination, free expression, participation and play.

As the chance to participate in online gaming environments gains importance in children's lives and matters more and more for their social relationships,[2] dedicated efforts are needed across the online gaming ecosystem to advance diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) within these interactive environments, and to address reasons why some children may be or become inappropriately excluded.

In addition to meeting industry's responsibility to respect children's rights (including the right to non-discrimination and beyond), actively embedding DEI also promises to bring many positive opportunities for companies to support children's rights. Companies in this ecosystem have the creative freedom and potential to create diverse and inclusive worlds that can break stereotypes and norms, where adult and child players alike can feel seen, represented and safe to be themselves.

Understanding core concepts

Understanding what diversity, equity and inclusion mean is an important first step to inform action by companies. A more complete set of key term definitions can be found in the glossary.

Diversity: The wide variety of shared and different personal and group characteristics among human beings. Diversity includes many characteristics that may be visible. It also includes less obvious characteristics like personality style, ethnicity, disability, education, religion, job function, life experience, lifestyle, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), migration status, geography, regional differences, work experience and family situations that make us similar to and different from one another.[3]

Equity: The process of being fair to all individuals and groups by addressing present and historical inequality in order to work toward equality in outcomes. Equity may involve the use of temporary special measures to compensate for the historical and systemic bias and discrimination faced by marginalized groups. Systems, institutions, policies and programming

---

1   According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the term 'child' refers to every human being under the age of 18 unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier. Link to full text of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2   See, for example, data from Smahel, D., et al., 'EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries', 2020; Common Sense Media, 'The Common Sense Census: Media use by tweens and teens, 2021', March 2021; Ofcom, 'Children and Parents: Media use and attitudes report 2022', March 2022.

3   'UNICEF Glossary of Terms Related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2022. (Internal).

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

may be described as equitable or inequitable depending on their approach to addressing inequality. Generally speaking, equity is a means to the goal of equality.[4]

Inclusion: Inclusive societies recognize and build development policies around the diversity of their members and enable everyone's full inclusion and participation, regardless of their status. Inclusive, people-centred development means addressing the structural or legal barriers that discriminate against particular peoples and groups. In other words, inclusion is not only about including those who are traditionally excluded but must also be about dismantling the many forms of discrimination that contribute to the persistent marginalization of groups on the basis of arbitrary distinctions, such as their age, their gender or the colour of their skin.[5]

Intersectional discrimination: A situation where several grounds operate and interact with each other at the same time in such a way that they are inseparable and thereby expose relevant individuals to unique types of disadvantage and discrimination. Intersectional discrimination can appear as direct or indirect discrimination, denial of reasonable accommodation or harassment. For example, while the denial of access to general health-related information due to inaccessible format affects all persons on the basis of disability, the denial to a blind woman of access to family planning services restricts her rights based on the intersection of her gender and disability.[6]

The lens of intersectional discrimination needs to be considered and understood throughout efforts to advance DEI within the industry.

> **"A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."**
> – UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

For millions of children around the world, playing online games is not only a much-loved hobby but is also often among their first online experiences.[7] To illustrate, data from the European Union and South Korea show that an overwhelming majority of children in these geographies enjoy playing online games.[8] Research from East Asia revealed that that online gaming is popular amongst groups as diverse as upper-income international school students and children in street situations.[9]

---

4   Ibid.

5   Ibid.

6   Ibid.

7   See, for example, data from UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, 'Growing Up in A Connected World', 2019; Smahel, D., et al.; 'Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021'; 'Children and Parents: Media use and attitudes report 2022'.

8   According to ISFE, 'Key Facts about Europe's Video Game Sector 2021', 68 per cent of European 6–10-year-olds and 79 per cent of 11–14-year-olds play video games. According to Statista (2021) 93.7 per cent of 10–19-year-olds play video games in South Korea. Link to Statista source for quoted figure.

9   United Nations Children's Fund, 'Our Lives Online: Use of social media by children and adolescents in East Asia – opportunities, risks and harms', UNICEF, 2021.

As smartphones and faster Internet connections become more ubiquitous, the popularity of online gaming is projected to increase across the world.[10]
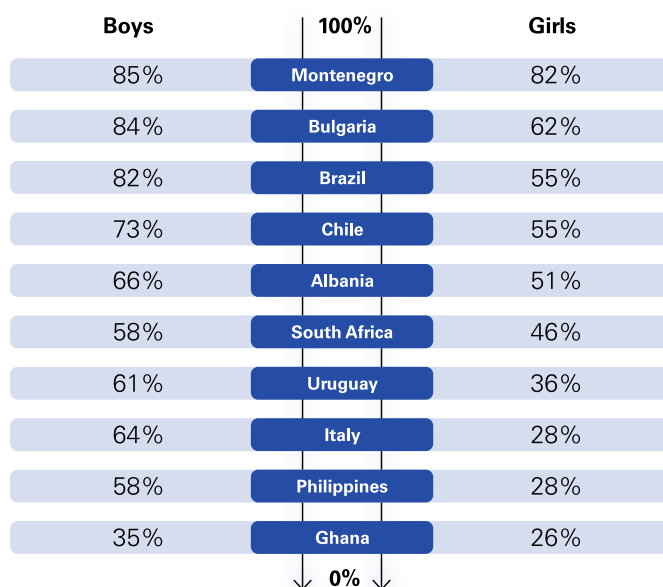
Indeed, the online gaming community is truly global. Data from Newzoo indicate that 55 per cent of players live in the Asia Pacific region; 15 per cent in the Middle East and Africa; 14 per cent in Europe; 10 per cent in Latin America and 7 per cent in North America.[11] Moreover, while there is a common perception that online games are only enjoyed by boys, data from 11 countries suggests that many girls who use the Internet do, in fact, participate in large numbers (see Figure 1).

Accounting for this wide audience, creating diverse and inclusive games also calls for a diverse and inclusive workforce to offer broader perspectives and keep companies accountable on issues of bias and misrepresentation.

© UNICEF/UN0582709/Willocq

Figure 1. Children who play games online at least weekly[12]

Boys		Girls
100%		
85%	Montenegro	82%
84%	Bulgaria	62%
82%	Brazil	55%
73%	Chile	55%
66%	Albania	51%
58%	South Africa	46%
61%	Uruguay	36%
64%	Italy	28%
58%	Philippines	28%
35%	Ghana	26%
0%		

---

10   See, for example, Mordor Intelligence, 'Africa Gaming Market: Growth, trends, COVID-19 impact and forecasts 2021–2027'.

11   Newzoo, 'Global Games Market Report', update July 2022.

12   UNICEF, 'Growing Up in a Connected World'.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

Diversity, equity and inclusion matters for child well-being

The RITEC (Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children) project,[13] co-founded by UNICEF and the LEGO Group, explores the relationship between the design of digital play experiences and child well-being.

The first-phase report of the project, launched in 2022, prioritizes the voices of children, collected through workshops with over 300 children from 13 countries along with analysis of existing survey data from 34,000 children aged 9–17 years across 30 countries.

The report presents a well-being framework (see Figure 2) that highlights the dimensions of well-being that children involved in the research believe are most likely to be positively influenced through digital play experiences.

The importance of diversity, equity and inclusion emerged as a key finding of this research and constitutes one of the eight outcomes of the well-being framework.

Outcome: Digital play experiences need to be diverse, equitable and inclusive to ensure all children of different backgrounds and circumstances can participate. Digital play needs to be accessible for children with disabilities and appropriate in terms of age and culture.

Rationale: Inclusive digital experiences allow children from many backgrounds and contexts to participate, supporting human rights and ethical values and providing children with new experiences.

These findings have direct implications for industry, further reinforcing the relevance of considering questions of DEI in the creation of digital play experiences.
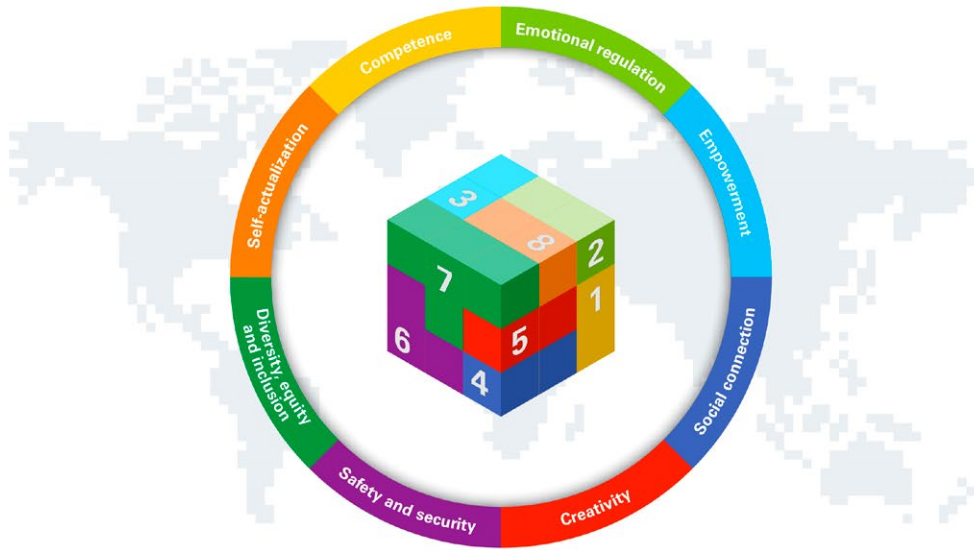
> **"[It's important for games to have] several types of skin tones, hair, nose shape, mouth shape, etc; have strong female characters, LGBT+; offer several languages and [welcome] people from different countries."**
> – (RITEC Child Consultation, Brazil)

---

13   The project RITEC was co-founded by UNICEF and the LEGO Group and is funded by the LEGO Foundation. The project is being delivered in partnership with the Joan Ganz Cooney Centre; the Young & Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University; the CREATE Lab at New York University; the Graduate Center, City University of New York; the University of Sheffield and the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child.

Figure 2. RITEC Well-Being Framework

Competence

Digital play experiences contribute positively towards children's perception of their own competence, knowledge and ability.

Emotional regulation

Children use the digital environment to adjust their mood, relax and regain energy to engage with peers and the world. This includes using digital play experiences to reduce the sense of stress or enter flow-states where they become immersed in a feeling of energised focus, full involvement and enjoyment in an activity.

Empowerment

Engaging in digital play should encourage feelings of autonomy, choice and agency in children. Children are able to feel in control and make decisions, and they can attain a sense of mastery and achievement.

Social connection

The digital environment, including play, should facilitate children's social connection with peers, family or other significant people in their lives and do so in a way that keeps children safe from harm.

Creativity

Children's engagement with digital play should enhance their feelings of curiosity, nurture an openness to new experiences and strengthen their creative ability.

Safety and security

Children should both feel safe and be safe while engaging in the digital environment and digital play. This includes safety from a wide range of risks including, but not limited to, contact risks, conduct risks, content risks and contract risks.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion

Digital play experiences need to be diverse, equitable and inclusive to ensure all children of different backgrounds and circumstances can participate. Digital play needs to be accessible for children with disabilities and appropriate in terms of age and culture.

Self-actualization

Children's digital play provides them with a sense of purpose and improvements in their social engagement and feelings about themselves.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is intended for use by companies who create, sell and market online games as well as companies who provide tools that allow players and communities in and around those games to interact with one another. Collectively, this wide variety of companies are referred to in this toolkit as the 'online gaming ecosystem'.[14]

'Online gaming' is defined to include playing any type of single- or multi-player commercial digital game via any Internet-connected device, including dedicated consoles, desktop computers, laptops, tablets and mobile phones. It is understood that online games (or video games) can also be played offline.

Many game development companies are small and medium-sized enterprises. While companies of all sizes should proactively consider DEI and impacts on children's rights, the scale and complexity of the ways through which companies meet that responsibility may vary according to these factors, among others.[15] The suggested actions in this toolkit should be considered with these variables in mind.

© UNICEF/UNI358183/Himu

This toolkit addresses four themes relating to children's rights and DEI within the online gaming ecosystem. Each section consists of an overview of what is currently known about the topic and how it connects to children's rights; some examples of current industry actions on the issues involved; actions for companies to consider and topics for further exploration. Click below to explore the different themes:

- **I feel welcome: Inclusive communities**
- **Seeing myself: Representation in and around games**
- **I can participate: Accessing online gaming environments**
- **Finding role models: Attracting and involving diverse talent**

---

14   See 'Components of the Online Gaming Value Chain' on p. 35 of UNICEF, 'The Online Gaming Industry and Child Rights', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2019.

15   UN, UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, Principle 14, United Nations, New York.

The right to non-discrimination

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**[16] asserts that: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Article 1), and that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms in the Declaration without "distinction of any kind such as based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" (Article 2). The Declaration also states that "all are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination" (Article 7).

The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** (CRC)[17] – the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world – sets out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of children. It reaffirms that all children must be treated without discrimination, irrespective of "the child's or their parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status" (Article 2). Respecting the right to non-discrimination requires preventing direct and indirect discrimination and taking positive steps to eliminate the conditions that perpetuate discrimination.

Article 3 of the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**[18] highlights a series of general principles, including "non-discrimination"; "full and effective participation and inclusion in society"; "equality of opportunity"; "accessibility" and "respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities".

Methodology and limitations

To produce this toolkit, the authors undertook a desk review of grey and academic literature examining DEI in the online gaming ecosystem. Companies, academics and industry associations, as well as diversity and inclusion professionals, were also consulted. The toolkit builds on previous UNICEF resources on children's rights and the online gaming industry.[19]

There has been some research on DEI in online games and the wider online gaming ecosystem and companies themselves are increasingly mobilizing around this theme. However, sourcing global research and representative data relating to DEI that focuses on children has been a challenge. While one reason for this is that mainly English language sources were accessed, the general lack of data and available research on these issues within the industry with a focus on children has been also noted by many of the sources consulted. Consequently, much of this toolkit relies on findings (often

---

16   UN, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations, New York, 1948.

17   UN, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, New York, 1989.

18   UN, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, United Nations, New York, 2006.

19   For a broader overview of how children's rights connect to online gaming, see 'The Online Gaming Industry and Child Rights'; UNICEF, 'Recommendations for the Online Gaming Industry on Assessing Impact on Children', United Nations Children's Fund, 2020.

based on research centred on adult experiences) from the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) and other high-income settings. Since children all over the world play online games, this gap poses a significant limitation and highlights the clear need for further global research into these issues, informed by children's diverse lived experiences and perspectives.

> **"Children may be discriminated against by their being excluded from using digital technologies and services or by receiving hateful communications or unfair treatment through use of those technologies."**
> – UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 25

It should also be noted that this toolkit is not an exhaustive analysis of DEI issues. There are a wide variety of other business practices involving online games which have DEI implications for children that fall outside the scope of this toolkit. Some of these are highlighted within each chapter.

In general, more transparency as well as disaggregated data on children's participation, experiences and outcomes from companies within the online gaming ecosystem would be valuable to better understand the full scope of impacts and to support the design of appropriate and effective responses.

Practical examples of existing industry approaches to tackling the challenges discussed are highlighted throughout. While not exhaustive, these are intended to provide illustrations of practical measures currently being undertaken by companies. Examples of company practices have not been independently assessed or evaluated for their effectiveness. It should be noted that any mention of companies and examples of industry initiatives does not constitute an endorsement by UNICEF.

Other relevant resources include:

- Recommendations for the Online Gaming Industry on Assessing Impact on Children, UNICEF, 2020.
- Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Advertising: A UNICEF playbook, UNICEF, 2021.
- Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children, UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, 2022.
- Playful by Design, Digital Futures Commission, 2021.

Additional links to further topic-specific resources are included within each chapter.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

This section focuses specifically on hate speech and harassment, or bullying targeting the identities and personal attributes of children, as it occurs within in-game communication and the wider online gaming ecosystem.[20]

Key Messages

Children can be made to feel unsafe and unwelcome in different online gaming environments when they are targeted on the basis of their identities and personal attributes.

When designing community management and safety measures, it is necessary to acknowledge the presence of children, to consider how they may be vulnerable and to tailor responses accordingly.

Because children experiment within boundaries of acceptable behaviour and can be influenced by the behaviour of others, it is important that companies are transparent about consequences for disruptive behaviour and communicate what is unacceptable (and why) in child-friendly language.

There are different ways in which online gaming communities interact. Interaction happens:

1. Within individual games, using in-game social interaction tools;
2. On messaging services designed for players;
3. Through services where players stream and comment on gameplay; and
4. On different social media and discussion boards around specific games.

The focus in this chapter is on the first three, where much of the communication occurs via real-time speech or chat.

---

20   UNICEF's 2019 discussion paper, 'Child Rights and Online Gaming: Opportunities & Challenges for Children and the Industry' and 'Recommendations For The Online Gaming Industry on Assessing Impact on Children' cover child rights considerations relating to the safety of children within gaming communities more broadly. They also include general recommendations for community management, which should be considered alongside the actions listed at the end of this section.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

© UNICEF/UN046033/Gilbertson VII Photo

What is hate speech?

There is no international legal definition of hate speech, and the characterization of what is 'hateful' is controversial and disputed. In the context of this document, the term 'hate speech' is understood as any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are. In other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor/s. This is often rooted in certain contexts. It generates intolerance as well as hatred and can be demeaning and divisive.[21]

Rather than prohibiting hate speech as such, international law prohibits the incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence (referred to here as 'incitement'). Incitement is a very dangerous form of hate speech because it explicitly and deliberately aims at triggering discrimination, hostility and violence, which may also lead to or include terrorism or atrocity crimes. Hate speech that does not reach the threshold of incitement is not something international law requires States to prohibit. It is important to underline that even when not prohibited, hate speech may too be harmful.[22]

In the context of online games, the Fair Play Alliance and Anti-Defamation League (ADL) acknowledge that hate speech can include 'dog whistles', defined as the use of subversive or coded messaging around hateful activity to avoid detection from game developers or moderators.[23]

A more complete set of key term definitions can be found in the **glossary of key terms.**

---

21   UN, United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, United Nations, New York, 2019.

22   Ibid.

23   The Fair Play Alliance and Anti-Defamation League, 'Disruption and Harms in Online Gaming: Framework', 2020.

Overview of key issues

The targeting of players based on their identities and personal attributes is reportedly common in online games, as well as in other online environments. As such, the challenges addressed in this chapter are not exclusive or unique to online gaming contexts but are also very relevant to a much broader cross-section of digital environments. For example, one study involving UK teens (aged 12–15 years) found that two in three children who reported experiencing broad online harms said the incident had happened on 'social media'.[24]

While research on children's experiences in particular is limited, research on adult women players consistently shows frequent experiences of targeted sexual harassment.[25] A study of 271 women gamers found that 57 per cent experienced some type of harassment, 54 per cent were asked for a sexual favour and over 22 per cent encountered rape 'jokes' while playing games.[26] Further studies of women players demonstrate several consequences of frequent harassment: women often remain invisible in online gaming communities by playing under male usernames; registering under male relatives; or playing alone, offline, or not participating in in-game communication.[27]

In a Finnish study of gamers (aged 15–29 years), 70 per cent of respondents reported having been targets of hate speech or harassment, with those under 18 reporting having experienced significantly more hate speech and harassment than the rest of respondents.[28]

A 2022 survey of children playing online games in the US by the ADL and Center for Technology and Society found:

66% **70%** **31%**
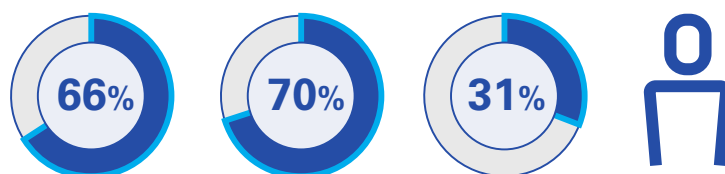
Sixty-six per cent of teens and 70 percent of pre-teens had experienced harassment in online multiplayer games. Thirty-one per cent said the harassment was identity-based.

24 'Harm' in this study did not focus only on content and interaction but also included harms relating to data, privacy, hacking and security. Link to quoted Ofcom study on 'Experiences of using online services'.

25 As highlighted in McLean, L. and M.D. Griffiths, 'Female Gamers Experience of Online Harassment and Social Support in Online Gaming: A qualitative study', International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, July 2018; and Geena Davies Institute on Gender in Media, Oak Foundation, and Promundo, 'The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An analysis of masculinity in video games and the gaming community', 2021.

26 'The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An analysis of masculinity in video games and the gaming community'.

27 Cote, Amanda C., '"I Can Defend Myself": Women's strategies for coping with harassment while gaming online', Games and Culture. vol. 12, no. 2, 2015; Bryter Research, 'Female Gamers Survey 2020'; ISFE has reported that 86 per cent of women play in single player mode.

28 Alin, E., 'Non-Toxic: Selvitys kilpailullisia tietokone- ja konsolipelejä pelaavien nuorten kokemuksista vihapuheesta ja häirinnästä', Helsingin Kaupunki, Finland, 2018.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

35% **20%** **7%**
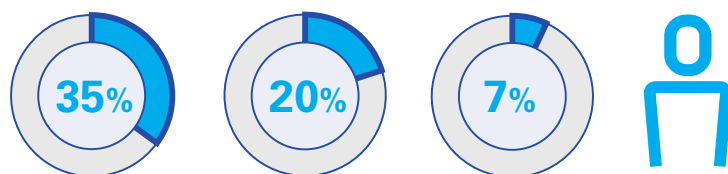
Thirty-five per cent of 13–17-year-olds reported they avoid certain games due to harassment. Twenty per cent reported they talked to someone about the harassment and only 7 per cent said they contacted a helpline.
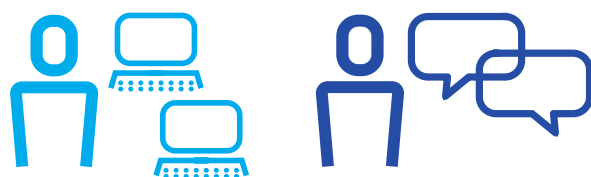
The most common communication mode for harassment experienced by 13-17-year-old children was within gameplay or in-match voice chat.

15%
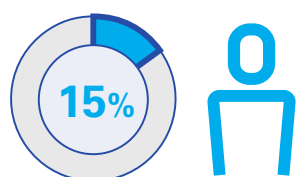
Fifteen per cent of children ages 10-17 reported exposure to white supremacist ideology.[29]

Streaming platforms serve as extensions to in-game communities and many children stream their own gameplay and watch others. They are also an important pathway to professional gaming for aspiring young esports players. Streaming platforms are independent from the studios that develop games, with their own moderation policies and practices. However, there is often significant collaboration, commercial interaction and mutual promotion between the two.

An analysis of chatrooms during 302 segments of gameplay by the top 20 streamers on Twitch (one of the most popular platforms for esports and online games-related streaming) showed 62 per cent of streams included sexist language; 37 per cent included racist language; 84 per cent included ableist language; and 97 per cent included violent language. The research also found that when streamers used this language, the audience was more likely to replicate it in chats.[30]

29   ADL and Center for Technology and Society, 'Hate Is No Game: Hate and Harassment in Online Games', December, 2022.

30   'The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An analysis of masculinity in video games and the gaming community'.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

While there is little research on the long-term effect of children's exposure to hate speech and identity-based harassment online, there is a risk of normalizing this behaviour as an acceptable part of gameplay.[31] For those children who are directly targeted, this can have significant impacts on self-esteem and hinder their participation, hence impacting their right to play and access information, culture and expression.

Games are increasingly built as social, interactive spaces that facilitate shared experiences, which also makes them attractive to children.[32] As such, it is important that companies acknowledge children's presence within their player community or on their communications platforms. Consultations with children show an expectation that there is at least some level of human moderation and that they appreciate and welcome clear rules around safety.[33]

For younger children, the social interaction with others that occurs in games can be their first introduction to interactive online environments – meaning they serve as platforms where children can interact with friends and strangers as well as test identities and behaviours. As newcomers to online communities, their ability to understand what appropriate behaviour is and how to protect themselves from dangerous influences and abuse is still developing.

Current industry approaches and initiatives

Hate speech and identity-based harassment should not be tolerated or considered an acceptable part of any community. Children's presence within online games and other parts of the ecosystem, regardless of whether these are intended for them, should be recognized and accounted for in companies' responses. Most online games and platforms explicitly prohibit sexist or racist language as well as sexual content in their codes of conduct. Companies across the online gaming ecosystem also use AI-based filtering to remove unwanted content and an increasing number of companies have dedicated human resources for moderation.

Reporting and moderation processes

Online games include mechanisms for users to report and flag communication and behaviour contrary to the game's rules, community standards or code of conduct. This is one of the requirements for a game to receive a PEGI age rating.[34] To be effective, reporting mechanisms must build trust, including by relaying feedback on decisions taken.

---

31 Ibid.

32 Superawesome, 'How the Kids Gaming Ecosystem Has Changed', Report, p. 4, 2020.

33 Livingstone, S., and K. Pothong, 'Playful by Design: A vision of free play in a digital world', Digital Futures Commission, 5Rights Foundation, 2021.

34 See 'PEGI Code of Conduct', Article 9.3, Pan-European Game Information.

For child users, it is particularly important that reporting mechanisms are, for example, easy to find and presented in child-friendly language. The language used in reporting mechanisms can sometimes be vague, making it difficult to connect to racist, sexist, homophobic or other types of identity-based harassment a user may be experiencing.

Interviewees for this toolkit highlighted that, with millions of players communicating in real-time, the sheer volume of content (whether written, visual or spoken) can lead moderators to focus only on what are perceived as the 'most egregious' violations of codes of conduct, such as the grooming of children for sexual abuse or exploitation.

Online gaming companies have adopted different mechanisms to reduce the amount of inappropriate content in in-game communication. In Activision Blizzard's 'Hearthstone', the communication between players is limited to a few pre-set 'emotes' (short voice quotes).[35] Riot Games has disabled cross-team text chat altogether, apart from the use of emotes, in its 'League of Legends' online game – where two teams play against each other.[36]

As mentioned in 'Methodology and Limitations', practical examples of existing industry approaches to tackling the challenges discussed are highlighted in each section. While not exhaustive, these are intended to provide illustrations of practical measures currently being undertaken by companies. Examples of company practices have not been independently assessed or evaluated for their effectiveness. It should be noted that any mention of companies and examples of industry initiatives does not constitute an endorsement by UNICEF.

Clearly highlighting what behaviour is unacceptable and what the consequences are is both helpful for children and sends a strong and clear message to the entire community. One promising example of clear messaging is the instant half-hour suspension for players found using slurs in chats, implemented in the game 'Rainbow Six Siege' by developer Ubisoft. A repeat offence leads to a longer suspension, while a third triggers an investigation and potentially, a permanent ban.[37]

Many games contain tools that allow individuals to mute or block contact from abusive players. When much of the communication is verbal and in real time, interviewees indicated that compliance with community guidelines could be difficult to proactively monitor and enforce effectively with artificial intelligence (AI) and filtering tools. For example, players can quickly learn how to circumvent filters in chat using simple modifications in spelling.

One company, Sony, has introduced a functionality into its PS5 game consoles to allow audio reporting of verbal harassment in multiplayer environments. The reporting solution allows players to pick clips from the preceding five minutes of gameplay and include these in their own verbal report.[38]

---

35   See the Hearthstone Wiki on emotes.

36   Knoop, J., 'Riot is Disabling Cross-Team Chat in League of Legends', PC Gamer online, 12 October 2021.

37   Costello, J., 'Foul Play: Tackling toxicity and abuse in online video games', The Guardian online, 17 August 2018.

38   Playstation blog, 'Details of New Voice Chat Functionality', 16 October 2020. Link to quoted Playstation blog.

Incentivizing positive behaviour

Companies are also introducing recognition for positive behaviour and new ways to encourage kindness in interaction with others. Riot Games revamped its 'League of Legends' honour system in 2017, enabling players to endorse each other for good gameplay but also for showing resilience and keeping their cool. Endorsement brings players rewards and has been widely adopted.[39]

Another company, Star Stable Entertainment, created a bespoke AI-based moderation filter that drew from language used by the player community of its Star Stable Online game. Users who were flagged by the system were sent messages to nudge them to rethink their behaviour: "Hey! It seems you've sent an unkind message. Stop and think: How would you feel if someone said that to you? Remember, being a good friend can also get you lots of new friends!" The approach reportedly had an immediate effect on toxicity.[40]

Engaging parents or caregivers

In addition to parental controls that large online gaming platforms have had in place for some time, many bigger game development companies and their trade associations[41] are starting to offer support materials to parents or caregivers. These tend to focus on the content of the game and how it is played. Supercell, for example, advises parents and caregivers specifically on how different levels of social features (in this case chats) work and what the company is doing to filter user-generated content. The company also provides guidance about advice that can be given to children if they encounter unwanted contact or language, including what can be done within the game (i.e., mute and report).[42]

Parental controls in the online gaming context often appear to be blunt instruments, either allowing interaction with other players or not. When much of children's social lives is spent online, this approach offers little help to parents or caregivers struggling to embrace new forms of digital play while protecting children from identity-based harassment and other online harms. Some solutions allow for more flexibility. An example of this is Microsoft's Xbox game console which allows parents or caregivers to restrict children's interaction to their friends only.[43]

Research suggests that there is no one combination of enabling and restrictive mediation by parents or caregivers that would both increase opportunities and reduce risks for children in the

---

39 See detailed description of the honour system and how it is integrated throughout the game's ecosystem in a Games Developer Conference 2018 talk by Senior Technical Designer Dr. Kimberly Voll, 'Honorable Intentions: Player behavior today at Riot Games'.

40 Star Stables Entertainment, 'Towards Next Generation Chat Moderation in Star Stable Online', Press release, Star Stables with Oterlu AI, 15 March 2022.

41 See, for example, #Seizethecontrols, a public awareness campaign launched by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE)

42 Supercell, 'Parent's Guide', accessed February 2023.

43 Microsoft Xbox, 'Gaming That is Safe For All', accessed June 2022.

online environment.[44] While enabling mediation brings both opportunities as well as risks, restrictive mediation reduces risk as well as opportunities. This serves to further highlight the importance of the complementary actions that can be taken directly by companies.

Industry-level action

Hate speech and identity-based harassment are a shared challenge across the online gaming ecosystem and beyond. Some industry players have raised the importance of working collaboratively to reduce disruptive behaviour as games are played across platforms and in conjunction with additional messaging services,[45] but what this means in practice remains unclear.

The Fair Play Alliance (FPA) is an example of an initiative focusing on trust and safety issues that is driven by industry insiders with a wide membership, including game studios as well as streaming platforms and messaging services. Similarly, companies that sponsor esports teams, leagues and events can use their leverage to demand more inclusive teams and tournaments, in addition to prohibiting any unacceptable behaviour from the players they support.

© UNICEF/UN0462801

---

44   Stoilova, M., S. Livingstone and R. Khazbak, 'Investigating Risks and Opportunities for Children in a Digital World', UNICEF, New York, p. 35, February 2021.

45   Dring, C., 'EA and The War Against Toxicity', Gamesindunst.biz online, 23 June 2020.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Taking action

The following questions are designed for companies to consider as they work to create and maintain more inclusive communities. See 'Further Resources' for additional guidance available to support implementation. The questions below are especially relevant for any games with social features or messaging platforms that allow interaction between players. They can be relevant to game developers, publishers, distributors, platforms and streaming or messaging services. In some cases, the questions can be requirements a publisher, distributor or platform places on different partners that they collaborate with to promote their games.

Prevention

☐ Do you make efforts to assess how inclusive your community is and actively seek ways to prevent hate speech and identity-based harassment from becoming widespread?

☐ Has your company carried out a full risk assessment to identify scenarios where there may be a heightened risk for hate speech and identity-based harassment, including game mechanics or player interactions, and implemented strategies to address these?

☐ How does your company engage and collaborate with influencers who are strongly connected with your games to build positive communities? Are policies or procedures in place to respond to incidents of influencers engaging in hate speech or identity-based harassment?

☐ Do your codes of conduct call out hate speech and identity-based harassment specifically? Do they clearly – and in a language that all players can relate to – explain what is unacceptable within your communities, with concrete examples and avoiding general terms such as 'offensive'?

☐ Are your codes of conduct and moderation guidelines regularly updated and do you seek input from expert organizations, including child protection organizations, to ensure these are up to date with the latest trends and evidence?

☐ Do you actively and clearly communicate to your communities what the consequences are for violations of your code of conduct? Are these messages communicated in child-friendly language?

☐ Does your company offer or trial incentives for positive behaviour in line with your Code of Conduct? How are your game's values integrated into rewards and penalties – and across all communication about the game?

Reporting and managing reports

☐ Do you offer multiple reporting possibilities, including for voice chat and in audio format that may be more accessible to children? Is reporting available in multiple languages?

☐ Are your reporting methods easily accessible? Is it easy to report hate speech and identity-based harassment and provide evidence of this? For example, do player profiles include a drop-down menu of options for reporting, including a category for hate speech and identity-based harassment?

☐ Do you seek to actively engage players identified as having engaged in identity-based harassment within your communities to help them understand why their behaviour has been unacceptable and help them to re-enter the community?

☐ Does your reporting system offer timely and user-centred feedback on the outcome of their report, even if no action was taken?

☐ Do you offer a channel for parents and/or caregivers, who may not be part of the online gaming community, to report incidents of hate speech or identity-based harassment?

☐ Are you tracking trends in reporting to understand recurring issues or to identify vulnerable groups? Are you seeking feedback from players on the effectiveness of your reporting processes?

☐ Do you aggregate reports on players to enable the identification of those who frequently engage in unacceptable behaviour?

☐ Does your reporting process consider the context of hate speech, allowing for opportunities to educate as well as respond to repeat offenders?

☐ Do you have procedures in place for moderators to identify, escalate and report any potentially illegal activity to law enforcement or other organizations as per local law?

Community management and moderation

☐ Do you have dedicated and trained staff to encourage inclusive communities (including dealing with hate speech and identity-based harassment)?

☐ Are your community managers, trust and safety teams, or other relevant staff trained to engage with children who are victims or who may be spreading hate speech in your communities (or work with dedicated experts who do)?

☐ Do you offer versions of your game for children of different ages with stricter moderation? Alternatively, do you give players the opportunity to apply different strength filters to chat?

Further resources

The FPA's Disruption and Harms in Online Gaming offers a comprehensive resource for companies to build and foster healthy communities including dedicated advice on penalty and reporting systems. Although this does not consider children specifically as a stakeholder group, the tool offers many valuable insights. The ADL provides further recommendations for companies on tackling hate and harassment in communities, which are applicable and relevant for companies beyond the US. The PEGI Code of Conduct, used in 38 countries, is another relevant resource.

Notes

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

© UNICEF/UN0757673/Ho Hoang Thien Trang

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Topics for further exploration

The following topics were identified during the course of research for this toolkit as requiring further exploration – including more detailed academic investigation, further disclosure from online gaming companies or multistakeholder discussion and efforts to build shared solutions.

- Participatory research with children on their in-game experiences of content, contact, conduct and contract risks[46] from a DEI lens, and how to tailor company responses appropriately.

- The role of influencers, such as popular streamers and esports stars, in creating and promoting kinder and more inclusive communities.

- How hate speech and identity-based harassment in a community around a specific game could be tackled holistically (within the game itself, in messaging and streaming services and on different social media platforms where communities come together).

- Opportunities for collaboration between companies to identify bad actors and dynamically share intelligence relating to new words, symbols and imagery that seek to bypass moderation.

- How to effectively communicate to children what they can and should do when they encounter hate speech or identity-based harassment in games.

- Research on the role of the online gaming ecosystem in relation to children's exposure to violent extremism, including specific measures companies should take in this regard.[47]

---

46 For further detail on content, contact, and conduct risk, see OECD, 'Children in the Digital Environment: Revised typology of risks', Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris, France, 2021.

47 For example, see the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network's conclusions paper on 'Extremists' Use of Video Gaming: Strategies and narratives' (2020), which notes that 'although the use and abuse of not only video games but also gaming adjacent communications platforms and gaming imagery by violent extremists receives high profile press attention, the nature and extent of this problem remains poorly understood by many frontline practitioners'.

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

This section focuses on the issue of children's digital access from a DEI lens. It also takes a closer look at accessibility challenges faced by children with disabilities, as well as the positive opportunities and experiences that online gaming environments can offer.

Key Messages

Numerous factors prevent children around the world from meaningfully participating in online games, including challenges in accessing connectivity and devices, societal barriers and cost.

Children with disabilities can benefit greatly from experiences in online gaming environments but can also experience a variety of accessibility barriers that hinder their participation.

Companies in the online gaming ecosystem can play an important role in tackling these barriers, including by accounting for the experiences of children with disabilities in design processes.

Overview of key issues

Digital access

Meaningful access to the Internet is a prerequisite for children's participation within many parts of the online gaming ecosystem. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 63 per cent of the overall global population was using the Internet by the end of 2021. While the younger population (aged 15–24) is more likely to be connected, only 34 per cent of young people in least developed countries had access to the Internet in 2021.[48] Regional variations to digital access are significant. For example, Asia has the highest rates of child Internet use globally,[49] while around 60 per cent of the young population in Africa are not online, compared with just 4 per cent who are not online in Europe.[50]

While access to the Internet is deeply disproportionate across regions, inequalities also exist within countries. COVID-19 has put a spotlight on the digital divides that exist within high income countries

---

48   International Telecommunication Union, 'Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2021', ITU, Geneva, 2021.

49   United Nations Children's Fund, 'Our Lives Online: Use of social media by children and adolescents in East Asia – opportunities, risks and harms', UNICEF, 2021.

50   UNICEF, 'The State of the World's Children: Children in a digital world', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2017.

(e.g. among rural and historically marginalized populations).[51] In the US, research into distance learning revealed that 30 per cent of all public-school students lived in households without either an Internet connection or a device adequate for distance learning at home, with Native American, Black, and Latinx communities most affected.[52] There is also a gender-imbalance to address. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), roughly 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone or can access mobile Internet globally.[53]

The games children are able to play can also be determined by the devices and online gaming platform subscriptions they have access to or can afford. While free-to-play mobile games have gained popularity and smartphones have become more ubiquitous, lowering the threshold to access, monetization within these games can still lead to disadvantages between players of different financial means. Participation at high-level competitive esports, streaming and other forms of professional play often requires access to expensive devices and connectivity that may be out of reach for many.

In addition to having the latest consoles, controllers and other devices, there are challenges relating to digital access and connectivity specific to the online gaming ecosystem. Stability and speed of Internet connections is crucial for competitive online gaming, but also for equal participation in play more broadly. The ability to compete and contribute to multiplayer environments is also affected by where game servers are located – the *ping* (or time it takes for the server to respond to players' instructions) is enhanced the closer the player is to the server. Children living in high income countries are likely to have an advantage in this regard.[54]

Internet service providers, as well as social media companies, have been actively engaging to address different barriers to equal digital access.[55] However, no examples of online gaming companies actively engaging on this issue could be found in the process of this review.

"Meaningful access to digital technologies can support children to realize the full range of their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights. However, if digital inclusion is not achieved, existing inequalities are likely to increase, and new ones may arise."
– UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 25

---

51   GSMA, 'New Perspectives: How COVID-19 has shifted sustainability priorities in the mobile sector', The GSM Association, London, UK, November 2020.

52   Boston Consulting Group and Common Sense Media, 'Closing the K–12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning', Boston, Mass., 2020.

53   The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 'Bridging the Digital Divide: Include, upskill and innovate', OECD, Paris, 2018. Global studies on girls' mobile phone ownership could not be found, but a six-country research 'Girl Effect', sponsored by Vodafone, found that boys were 1.5 times more likely to own a mobile device than girls.

54   Bottomley, E-J., 'Amazon is Ready to Provide Local Servers for Fortnite – But Epic Has to Say Yes', Business Insider South Africa, 6 May 2020.

55   See, for example, the work of mobile operator trade association GSMA on 'Mobile for Development'; and Pepper, R., 'With More Than Half the World Online, How Do We Connect the Rest?', Meta, 25 February 2020.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Accessibility for children with disabilities

One in 10 of all children worldwide have disabilities (*see Figure 3*). This estimate is higher than previous figures and is based on a more meaningful and inclusive understanding of disability, which considers several domains of functioning, including those related to psychosocial well-being. Psychosocial issues predominate at every age, in some cases in combination with other functional difficulties.[56]

> **"Children with different types of disabilities, including physical, intellectual, psychosocial, auditory and visual disabilities, face different barriers in accessing the digital environment, such as content in non-accessible formats, limited access to affordable assistive technologies at home, school and in the community and the prohibition of the use of digital devices in schools, health facilities and other environments."**
> – UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 25.

Figure 3. Percentage of children aged 0–17 years with disabilities, by region[57]

Europe and Central Asia: 6
East Asia and the Pacific: 8
North America: 10
Latin America and the Carabbean: 10
Eastern and Southern Africa: 10
South Asia: 11
Middle East and North Africa: 13
West and Central Africa: 15
World: 10
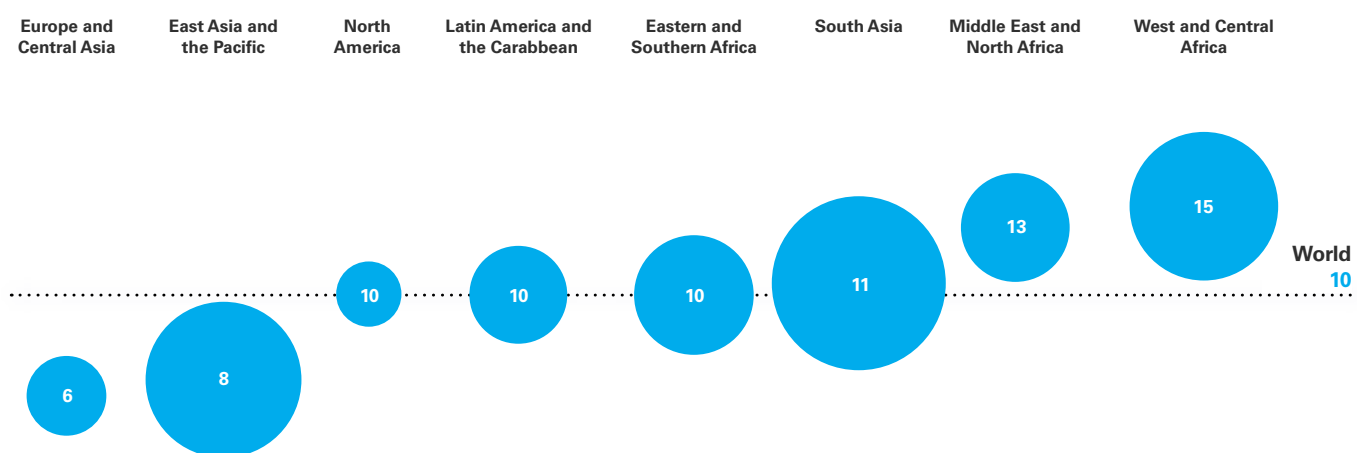
Note: The size of the circles reflects the number of children with disabilities in the respective regions.

---

56   Ibid.

57   '[Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities](#)', UNICEF, 2022.

Children with disabilities

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), children with disabilities "include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis".[58]

Children with disabilities are a highly diverse population group. They include children born with a genetic condition that affects their physical, mental or social development; those who sustained a serious injury, nutritional deficiency or infection resulting in long-term functional consequences; or those exposed to environmental toxins that resulted in developmental delays or learning disabilities. Children with disabilities also include those who have developed anxiety or depression as a result of stressful life events.[59]

When it comes to the growing body of evidence on children's lives online, there remains a dearth of information about the experiences of children with disabilities.[60] However, some research suggests that children with disabilities can both benefit and be disadvantaged disproportionately in the digital environment compared to children who do not have disabilities (see box on 'How do children with disabilities experience the digital environment?').[61]

Online gaming can provide children with disabilities the possibility to play and socialize in collaborative spaces with their peers. When they can participate and are represented in online gaming, children with disabilities can feel included and simply enjoy being connected with others – exercising their rights to play and association.[62]

However, in addition to opportunities, children with disabilities can encounter harms online. According to the 2020 ITU Guidelines for industry on Child Online Protection, children who are victimized offline are more likely to be victimized online overall. This places children with disabilities at higher risk online, yet they have a greater need to be online. Victimization can include bullying, harassment, exclusion and discrimination based on a child's actual or perceived disability or on aspects related to their disability, such as the way that they behave or speak, or equipment or services they use.[63]

---

58   UN, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, United Nations, New York, 2006.

59   UNICEF, 'Children with Disabilities Overview', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2021.

60   Lundy, L. et al., 'Two Clicks Forward, One Click Back: Report on children with disabilities in the digital environment', Council of Europe, Strasbourg, France, 2019.

61   Ibid.

62   See testimonials at: Special Effect, 'What You Said: Testimonials', Charlbury, UK.

63   See 'The special situation of children with disabilities' (p.11) in ITU, 'Guidelines for Industry on Child Online Protection', 2020.

Children with disabilities can also face exclusion when their accessibility requirements are not included in the design of new products and services to enable full participation. In addition to physical or sensory disabilities (those affecting any or several of the five senses), accessibility should also be considered from the perspective of neurodiversity (for example, see 'Autism: Key Facts' box).

Children with autism often prefer to engage in social play experiences within virtual spaces, such as Minecraft (which provides a virtual 'toybox' of building blocks), as these can be more accessible than physical world play spaces.[64] Studies suggest that children with autism may embrace certain elements of online games, such as predictability. At the same time, they can have more difficulty disengaging from games.[65]

It is important that game designers seek to understand barriers children with different types of disabilities experience, how these barriers intersect and how they can be tackled through design. Investing in understanding game play from these perspectives may bring opportunities to improve experiences for all.

Autism: Key Facts

- Autism – also referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) – constitutes a diverse group of conditions related to development of the brain.

- About one in 100 children has autism.

- Characteristics may be detected in early childhood, but autism is often not diagnosed until much later.

- The abilities and needs of autistic people vary and can evolve over time. While some people with autism can live independently, others have severe disabilities and require life-long care and support.

Source: World Health Organisation, 'Autism: Key Facts'.

---

64   See, for example, Ringland, K.E., '<u>Who Has Access? Making accessible play spaces in Minecraft for children with autism</u>', Department of Informatics, University of California Irvine, Calif., June 2017.

65   Ibid.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

How do children with disabilities experience the digital environment?

The findings summarized below emerged from a 2019 study, 'Two Clicks Forward and One Click Back', commissioned by the Council of Europe on the experiences of children with disabilities in the digital environment, including online games. The study was supported by four advisory groups of children with – respectively – intellectual, physical, hearing and visual impairments, in six countries (Belgium, Germany, Republic of Moldova, Portugal, Türkiye, UK). The report, including the full set of findings, can be accessed on this web page.

Diversity: The challenges and barriers faced by children with disabilities vary significantly according to the type and nature of the impairment. It does them a disservice to lump them together as an undifferentiated group. The requirements of children who use sign language or are blind, for example, are very different from those who lip-read or who have limited vision.

Digital dividends: The digital environment can be an enabler that brings significant 'added value' to children with disabilities in terms of the realization of their rights. It opens up a range of possibilities for some children with disabilities and, when it works well, is considered to operate as an 'equalizer'.

Disadvantage: Children with disabilities are disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of their ability to access and use the benefits of digital technology. Multiple barriers impede their access. These include technological barriers, financial barriers and the dominance of English online.

Disclosing disability: Participating children were unanimous in saying that they did not disclose their disability online. Their reasons were varied but included a fear that so doing would lead to discrimination or rejection, as well as the view that it was a personal issue and no-one else's business.

Dealing with danger: The majority of children with disabilities across the study had been alerted to potential online risks. Many children involved in the study considered that they were no more vulnerable online than their peers without a disability. Children with intellectual impairments were an exception, being more likely to be more protected by parents and less likely to be online.

Decision-making: The findings suggest that children with disabilities may experience multiple barriers in the enjoyment of their rights. However, overall the children indicated greater acceptance of parental controls than is found in other research with children, where children expressed frustration with parents' over-protectiveness and lack of understanding.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

Current industry approaches and initiatives

There has been an increasing focus on improving accessibility within online gaming (notably among companies creating and publishing online games), with most accessibility tools currently focusing on supporting players with physical and sensory disabilities; that is, those with challenges with either hearing, vision, motor skills or speech. Consequently, most of the actions reviewed for this toolkit were targeted to people with physical and sensory disabilities generally (and not specifically children). Action has also been driven by regulation. For example, in the US any video games released in 2019 and beyond requires that in-game communications and related user experiences be accessible.[66]

Improving accessibility with adapted hardware

For children (and adults) with physical or sensory disabilities, online gaming hardware that adapts to their accessibility requirements can facilitate greater participation. This includes designing game controllers that allow buttons and joysticks to be customized according to the requirements of the player. Xbox, for example, offers a fully customizable system controller for players with disabilities affecting their fine and gross motor skills and has introduced the possibility of routing two controller inputs into a single controller, allowing for a co-player or caregiver to support the player.[67] Sony also offers a highly customizable controller kit designed to help many players with disabilities play games more easily and more comfortably.[68]

Introducing additional adaptability in the game or platform software

Several companies have focused on accessible visual or auditory design for persons with visual and hearing impairments, including integrating magnifiers and speech-to-text functionality. Xbox, for example, supports transcribing speech into text and vice-versa.[69] EA's 'FIFA 21' game allows the same, as well as enabling players to adjust overall game speed to support differences in motor skills.[70] 'Forza Horizon 5' by Playground Games integrates American and British sign language support for in-game cinematics.[71]

A specialized charity, Special Effect, has developed 'Eye Gaze Games', a website featuring online multiplayer fully eye-controlled web games. It offers a wide variety of adjustable settings for players to tailor the interface.[72]

In another example, EA offers free use of its patents and code it has developed for technology solutions that support equitable participation of people with visual, hearing and other disabilities. The company hopes this will spur further innovation and availability of accessibility features.[73]

---

66 3PlayMedia, 'The 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act', within The CVAA & Video Game Accessibility, 18 March 2019.

67 Microsoft, Xbox Adaptive Controller and Xbox One Copilot.

68 Sony, Introducing Project Leonardo for PlayStation5

69 Microsoft, 'Introducing Party Chat Speech Transcription and Synthesis', Xbox Insider online, 12 May 2021.

70 Electronic Arts, FIFA 21 Accessibility Features.

71 Brown, M., 'Gaming for Everyone: The accessibility features of Forza Horizon 5', Microsoft Xbox Wire online, 4 November 2021.

72 Special Effect, 'Eye Gaze Games'.

73 EA, 'Using our Patents to Drive Positive Play', Electronic Arts.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Directly engaging gamers with disabilities and accessibility advocates

There are several examples of companies seeking feedback and engaging people with disabilities to improve accessibility in product design. The game studio Ubisoft, for example, has hosted workshops on accessible product design where product designers work together with players with disabilities to improve their understanding of accessibility.[74]

EA has created an 'Accessibility Portal' – one central location for all relevant information on accessibility regarding their games – while also using this location as a feedback channel from users to gain more information on how to improve accessibility.[75]

Providing guidance to game designers

Guidance on how to design for accessibility has been developed both by industry groups and at company level. The International Game Developer Association (IGDA) has a dedicated special interest group driving to improve the accessibility of games. This also includes guidance for developers.[76]

© UNICEF/UN040564/Cybermedia

---

74 Maguid, Y., '<u>Accessibility at Ubisoft: Making games for everyone</u>', Ubisoft, 16 May 2019.

75 EA, <u>Accessibility Portal, Electronic Arts.</u>

76 IGDA, <u>Game Accessibility Special Interest Group</u>, International Game Developer Association.

One company interviewed has developed accessibility guidelines for its game developers, including considerations in terms of visual, auditory, motor and cognitive design. The guide includes simple 'dos and don'ts', a checklist of issues to consider, as well as clear visual examples on how different guidance could be actioned.

Taking action

The following are questions for companies to consider while working to increase access to and accessibility of online games. See 'Further Resources' for additional guidance available to support implementation. The questions below can be answered from the perspective of game developers, publishers, distributors and platforms, and streaming or messaging services. In some cases, the questions can also be answered in terms of the requirements a publisher, distributor or platform may place on different partners they collaborate with to develop or promote their games.

Digital access:

☐ Does your company actively seek to understand potential connectivity issues facing your customer base (e.g. location of your servers)?

☐ Has your company considered what role it could play in tackling connectivity barriers and ensuring children around the world are able to access your games (as appropriate)?

☐ Does your company have programmes in place that support access to online gaming experiences for children who may not have the connectivity or devices to otherwise participate? (For example, collaborations with schools, after school programmes, public libraries, youth centres or children's services to provide a variety of quality devices and content).

☐ Does your company understand which communities have lower access to your products and why? Does your company take a DEI approach to understanding those root causes and make efforts to address them?

☐ Do you ensure the enjoyment and progression in your games are not dependent on in-game purchases?

☐ Has your company designed for interoperability across multiple platforms, devices and operating systems so that players can use any device, platform and operating system to participate and play together?

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Accessibility for children with disabilities:

☐ Do the relevant teams in the company understand the different types of disabilities that exist, such as sensory impairments or psychosocial impairments?

☐ Do your product design processes include considerations for accessibility and inclusion of players with disabilities? Do these consider the evolving capacities of children with disabilities?

☐ Does your company conduct impact assessments on new features and products to identify and account for potential barriers to accessibility?

☐ Does your company have a process to assess the effectiveness of current accessibility solutions and potential gaps?

☐ Do you engage with accessibility advocates or with players with disabilities (including children) directly to understand potential accessibility challenges and seek feedback?

☐ Do you clearly communicate about accessibility features in your games?

Further resources:

Detailed design guidance and support specifically for companies to improve accessibility is publicly available. These include:

- IGDA resources highlighted above as well as the industry-led Game Accessibility Guidelines.

- Special Effect's 'DevKit' contains examples and inspiration collected from developers around the world on implementing accessibility.

- A comprehensive list of additional accessibility and online gaming resources is available at the US National Library Service for the Blind.

- The ITU Child Online Protection Guidelines, revised in 2020, also include further information about children with disabilities.

- For more guidance on inclusive language, refer to the Disability-Inclusive Language Guidelines prepared by the United Nations office in Geneva.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

Notes

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Topics for further exploration

The following topics were identified during the course of research for this toolkit as requiring further exploration – including more detailed academic investigation, further disclosure from online gaming companies or multistakeholder discussion and efforts to build shared solutions.

• The ways in which online gaming can play a positive role in the development, participation and well-being of children with disabilities around the world.

• Review of professional game education curriculums in promoting greater accessibility.

• The role of online gaming companies in helping address socio-economic barriers preventing some children from participating (whether as a hobby or professionally).

• Possibilities of standardizing accessibility tools and features in online gaming that would allow them to be more widely available and easy to use and recognize.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

This section examines representation of game characters – what characters look like and what they can do – and how design decisions around these questions can impact children's development of self-image, identity and life choices.

Key Messages

Online games represent a significant proportion of the media that children consume from a young age.

The way game characters are represented, including storylines and the marketing used to promote them, can serve to amplify negative stereotypes that adversely impact children.

Companies in the online gaming ecosystem have a unique opportunity to actively promote and support diverse representations and counter negative stereotypes that affect children.

Overview of key issues

The different media that children consume – including online games – can profoundly influence their attitudes, behaviours and beliefs around gender roles, social norms and other aspects of their identity.[77] Even when viewers are not conscious of the effects, fictional characters engage in behaviours that subtly encourage and discourage activities, professions and life paths.[78]

Online games are a significant component of children's media consumption. For example, according to Common Sense Media, 'tweens' (8-to-12-year-olds) and 'teens' (13-to-18-year-olds) in the US spent between 1:27 and 1:46 hours gaming every day in 2021. Playing online games was the most popular activity after watching TV/videos and ahead of social media use.[79] This high level of exposure spotlights the large imprint that online games have in children's overall media consumption.

An analysis of the 100 highest selling online games released in the last five years showed that approximately 79 per cent of the main characters were male and 54 per cent were white, with just under 32 per cent of games having only male characters. Of all 810 characters analysed, around 6

---

77   UK Government and Geena Davies Institute on Gender in Media, 'Closing the STEM Gender Gap', 2021.

78   Ibid.

79   Common Sense Media, 'The Common Sense Census: Media Use by tweens and teens, 2021', p.21.

percent were non-binary.[80] A 2021 study of games played by the 20 most popular Twitch streamers found that only 0.1 per cent of game characters were shown with a physical disability.[81] The same study found that LGBTIQ+ characters were virtually absent from online game representations.

On a positive note, other studies that have examined representation over time show that there is some movement towards more diversity. For example, an analysis of games launched at the Electronic Entertainment Expo found a particularly big jump from 2019 to 2020 in terms of titles featuring female characters: from 5 to 18 per cent.[82]

The roles and depictions of different characters also matter. Research into online games in 2016 found that rather than being leading characters, Black men were most often represented as violent thugs or sports figures, while Black women were assigned to roles such as bystanders or victims of violence.[83]

The analysis of games played by top Twitch streamers previously mentioned also found that, in those games, over 60 per cent of male characters enacted violence. The study concluded that online gaming provided incredibly important opportunities for boys and young men to connect to others in ways that are taboo in other spaces – but that these environments are also rife with language and behaviours that reinforce toxic masculinity and prejudice.[84]

Sexualized representation of female characters also persists. In a 2022 survey of women gamers in China, UK and the US, 69 per cent of the respondents found female characters "often oversexualized" while over a half thought there were not enough strong female characters in games.[85]

An analysis of video game content between years 1983-2014 found frequent sexist narratives that objectified female characters or represented them as delicate and fragile.[86] While both male and female characters were often 'idealized' with respect to physical characteristics, for female characters this often translated to being dressed in revealing clothing, inappropriate for the tasks they were performing.[87]

80   Lin, B., 'Diversity in Gaming Report: An analysis of diversity in video game characters', Diamond Lobby, September 2021. This study selected the 10 highest selling games from each of the years 2017–2021, along with every other major game release from the biggest gaming publishers including Activision, EA, Nintendo, Ubisoft, among others. Games with customizable characters were removed.

81   'The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An analysis of masculinity in video games and the gaming community'.

82   Sarkeesian, A., and C. Petit, 'More Video Games Featured Women This Year: Will it last?', Wired online, 15 October 2020.

83   Kafai, Y., G.T. Richard and B. Tynes, eds., 'Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat: Intersectional perspectives and inclusive designs in gaming', Carnegie Mellon Press, Pittsburgh, PA. 2016.

84   'The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An analysis of masculinity in video games and the gaming community'.

85   Bryter, 'Female Gamers Study 2022', London and New York, 2022.

86   Lynch, T., et al.,'Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A content analysis of female characters in video games across 31 years', Journal of Communication, vol. 66, no. 4, 2016, pp. 564–584.

87   Ibid.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Promoting diversity and inclusion in advertising: A UNICEF playbook

Stereotyping in advertising and marketing – in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, culture, disability, family structure and many other facets of identity – remains widespread and can be harmful, affecting children's confidence, aspirations and health, including mental health.

Discriminatory stereotypes can also cause harm by restricting opportunities for all children to lead a life with dignity, especially for marginalized and excluded children. For girls, gender stereotypes may reduce their agency and limit educational achievement and economic opportunities. For boys, they may restrict their involvement in family life and increase a tendency to commit gender-based violence.

Other forms of negative stereotyping such those regarding race, ethnicity or disability, also have negative effects on children and often intersect with other harms. For example, racial and ethnic discrimination have been linked to poverty, lower educational attainment and school completion, and higher school dropout rates – and those numbers are particularly high for girls with disabilities.

Access the full playbook, developed in collaboration with the LEGO Group, for more details including tools for business to create guidelines and strategies for ensuring diversity and inclusion in their creative content and products for children.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

An analysis of 27,564 video game characters published in 2021 found that female characters were 10 times more likely to be shown in revealing clothing and nearly five times more likely to show some level of nudity. It concluded that as more women appear in video games, their roles remain highly stereotyped.[88]

Physically idealized characters can contribute to children's expectations of what bodies are supposed to look like. When girls and boys cannot emulate the level of perfection in beauty norms presented to them in all forms of media, they can develop a strong sense of dissatisfaction and anxiety.[89] Unrealistic beauty norms can distort children's perceptions of self, which can lead to confidence issues, mental health problems and self-harm. An unrealistic body image can lead to unhealthy eating habits and disorders among both girls and boys.[90]

These issues do not exclusively relate to high budget console or PC games. For example, nearly half of UK and US women surveyed in 2019 felt that mobile games used sexist stereotypes in their design and that mobile games for younger children instilled gender stereotypes.[91]

Children themselves are also asking for better representation: 60 per cent of children (aged 10–17 years) in the US and 44 per cent in the UK surveyed in 2020 thought it was important to have diverse characters in the games they played.[92]

What representation within a game (or the marketing used to promote it) implies about its intended audience may have an impact on whether children choose to play certain games. The same 2020 survey referenced above found that just over half of child gamers in the US had not played certain games because they felt they were not made for them.[93] While there may be various explanations for this finding, it does suggest the possibility that the lack of representation may also limit a game's audience and appeal.

Current industry approaches and initiatives

Companies have started to introduce different ways to ensure that DEI is considered during game design. Relatively little information is available publicly on how this is being tackled but some public examples, together with practices shared by interviewees, are described below.

---

88 'The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An analysis of masculinity in video games and the gaming community'. The study involved 27,564 characters in 684 fifteen-minute gameplay segments from sessions with the top 20 Twitch streamers.

89 The American Academy of Pediatrics, 'Children, Adolescents, and Advertising,' Pediatrics, vol. 118, no. 6, 2006, pp. 2563–2569.

90 UNICEF, 'Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Advertising: A UNICEF playbook', United Nations Children's Fund, New York.

91 Bryter, 'Female Gamer Survey 2019', London and New York, 2019.

92 Newzoo's 'Gamer Sentiment Study: Diversity and inclusion', 2020.

93 Ibid.

Diversity and inclusion frameworks

Interviewees for this toolkit shared that one reason companies may be cautious about implementing policies and processes around DEI is that they may be perceived as stifling design teams' creativity. There seem to be ways around this. For example, Electronic Arts (EA) reports that it has implemented an Inclusive Design Framework into its design process to ensure that diverse representation and avoiding stereotypes are systematically considered. The framework also includes a set of best practices from across the company and the industry, with a dedicated central team that helps game teams with the implementation of these learnings. In this context, diversity is understood not only from the perspective of appearance but also around roles, actions, dialogue and narratives and that diverse characters are represented in an authentic way rather than focusing on their difference.[94]

Defining diversity

In order to push for more inclusive representations and build experiences that everyone can relate to, a shared understanding of what diverse representation means is important. Game developer Toca Boca reports that it ran an internal process to create general definitions for diversity – what it means for the company, its scope and the different issues for staff to be aware of. The company states that it found the process of working through definitions to be even more helpful than some of the tools and frameworks that have followed as a result. This was because the process allowed different teams to think deeply about the topic and helped to build general awareness of the issues.[95]

© UNICEF/UN0710657

94   Wallace, C., 'The Diversity Framework: How EA is representing diverse voices in games', MCV/DEVELOP Magazine online, 9 December 2021.

95   Children's Design Guide, 'Defining Diversity at Toca Boca', D4CR Association.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

Diversity audits

As a starting point for discussions around representation and DEI, one company carried out a gender audit of its game titles to understand the percentage of male, female and non-binary leading playable and non-playable characters. This practice could be extended to other diversity considerations and can be a helpful conversation starter, especially if results are contrasted against the makeup of the known player community to understand how representative the game is of its audience.

Employee resource groups (ERGs) and advisory boards

ERGs (where employees from under-represented groups convene to support each other and effect change together), were mentioned by numerous companies as both important initiatives for internal inclusion as well as helping to ensure fair representation within game characters and narratives. Companies interviewed shared that ERGs have been both encouraged or proactively initiated by employees from under-represented groups within online gaming companies. In some cases, ERGs have been called upon to review game narratives and character representations to ensure that representations are inclusive and not stereotyped.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that this practice can have limitations, especially if not specifically compensated and formalized. ERGs should not be a substitute for ensuring there are resources to consider DEI within each step of a game's development and marketing. For example, using an ERG to review representations can become an added burden for its members and serve as a frequent reminder of their differences.

To avoid this, Toca Boca, for example, has formed an external diversity advisory board consisting of experts on diversity and inclusion, mostly with academic backgrounds. Any employee can contact the advisory group for their opinion relating to DEI for visuals in the games, marketing material, physical products, or other questions related to the projects in the studio.[96] Crucially, the board provides support with respect to in-game elements, but also with marketing content and physical products when requested.

Considering diversity of fantastical characters

Games with entirely cartoonish or fantastical characters that visibly have no gender or race can also present diversity challenges. For example, this may occur if one group of characters are consistently portrayed as 'the evil ones'. This can lead players to draw parallels between this type of character and groups of people in the real world. One company interviewee reported that their company's design processes ensured that characters within different types of character groups were assigned diverse roles.

---

96   Karlsson, P., Creating Inclusion in Play, YouTube presentation, Toca Boca, Stockholm, Sweden, 2019.

Actively supporting diversity through marketing

Several interviewees pointed out that companies should seek opportunities to attract new audiences and not rely too heavily on existing player demographics when launching new titles. Diverse and inclusive representations can also be created in the marketing and other public relations collateral of a game, even if the game is already established with a certain set of characters. There have been examples of brand partnerships that have turned the creativity of online gaming companies into an asset for diversity. One is the collaboration between Gillette Venus and Nintendo's 'Animal Crossing' game that aims to encourage users to celebrate their different skin conditions, body types and disabilities by replicating them through their in-game avatars.[97]

Influencing others

Companies who license their characters for games can also play a role by demanding that licensees actively consider diverse representations when developing games using these characters; have diverse teams develop games; and take action on wider DEI issues.

Taking action

The following questions are designed for companies to consider in efforts to improve representation within and around online games. The questions can be answered from the perspective of game developers, publishers, distributors and platforms but may be less relevant for streaming or messaging services. In some cases, the questions can also be answered in terms of the requirements a publisher, distributor or platform may place on different partners with which they collaborate to develop or promote their games.

☐ Have you reflected diverse and balanced representation in your games?

☐ Have you assessed potential implicit or unconscious biases in your game development processes? Do you have a way to hold your team accountable to those biases when designing games?

☐ Are you portraying characters from different backgrounds with diverse attributes?

☐ Is the company making a conscious effort to include characters from under-represented groups (including lead and playable characters)?

☐ Has the company worked on shared definitions for diversity and inclusion and how these are to be reflected in the different facets of its work?

☐ Do you provide any guidance to your design teams on how to build inclusive and authentic representations of under-represented groups?

☐ Are there any gates or reviews built into the design process to address issues of diversity and inclusion in representation? Are concepts and scripts checked for unconscious bias with teams or by external reviewers who are diverse in their representation?

---

97   Gilette Venus, 'Introducing the Skinclusive Summer Line by Gillette Venus'.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

☐ Do your creative and marketing or game design teams include employees from under-represented groups at all levels of engagement? Are you ensuring their perspectives are heard and built into the creative process?

☐ Are characters from under-represented groups included in advertising, marketing and communications around games?

☐ What drives decisions on representation and target groups in marketing (for example perceived market forces, audiences, or fear of loss of market share)? Are these drivers founded in evidence?

Further resources:

• EA has published a practical guide, Designing Inclusive Products to Global Audiences, that can be found on the UN Women's HeForShe website.

• The FPA's Disruptions and Harms Framework's 'Assessing the Behaviour Landscape' chapter guides an activity to help companies identify and align a joint vision of the values they want to see expressed in their games.

• Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Advertising: A UNICEF playbook provides further examples to inform and inspire diversity and inclusion in products and content.

Notes

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

Topics for further exploration

The following topics were identified during the course of research for this toolkit as requiring further exploration – including more detailed academic investigation, further disclosure from online gaming companies or multistakeholder discussion and efforts to build shared solutions.

- Researching connections between internal company diversity at all seniority levels and stereotyped representation or lack of diversity in game character representation.

- What games children of different age groups play and whether their choices and preferences are influenced by representations.

- How design choices around representation and narratives can support empathy and cross-cultural understanding.

- Methods for avoiding monolithic representations of diversity and applying intersectional frameworks.

- The impact on children's self-image of immersive experiences in online games and playing idealized or sexualized characters.

- The role of industry-level initiatives, awards, or other incentives in addressing representation in games.

- Review of professional game education curricula from a representation perspective.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

This section focuses on the state of workforce diversity in the industry and how this links to impacts on children. It also highlights some of the efforts currently being made at the company and industry level.

Key Messages

Being able to see and relate to role models is important in driving children's aspirations and ambitions.

Workforce diversity is key to driving more diverse and inclusive representations within and around games.

The industry can play an important role in engaging with schools and supporting the participation of girls and other groups under-represented in STEM fields.

Overview of key issues

Online gaming is a growing industry and an increasingly significant employer, with projected global revenues expected to reach US$211.2 billion by 2025.[98] The industry offers opportunities for people from different backgrounds and with different skillsets: from coders and data scientists to audio engineers and psychologists.[99] Ensuring diversity within the industry is important in bringing forward role models and encouraging children of all backgrounds to view this growing industry as a potential employer, where everyone is welcomed and valued for their skills and perspectives. It is also crucial for building a diverse talent pipeline and for ensuring continued creation of content that is representative of its diverse audience.

Exposure to relatable role models has a significant impact on the education and career choices children make as they grow older. For example, one US study found that Black students who were exposed to at least one Black teacher were 13% more likely to graduate from high school and 19% more likely to enrol in college.[100]

---

98   Newzoo, 'Newzoo's Games Market Estimates and Forecasts', update November 2022.

99   See 'Games Industry Career Map', ScreenSkills, 2019, for the different careers possible in the UK games industry.

100 Gershenson, Seth et al., 'The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers', National Bureau of Economic Research, February 2021.

Many industry insiders interviewed for this toolkit spoke of challenges related to attracting diverse talent. The majority of respondents to the International Game Developer Association's (IGDA) 'Developer Satisfaction Survey 2022', were white (78 per cent), male (62 per cent) and heterosexual (68 per cent) with only 5 per cent identifying as Black/African American/African/Afro-Caribbean.[101] The Association for UK Interactive Entertainment (Ukie), the UK video game industry trade association, reports that the demographic make-up of workers in the UK games industry showed marginal improvements to diversity in the 2022 census when compared to 2020.[102]

According to Europe's Video Game Industry Association (ISFE), 22% per cent of online gaming company employees in Europe were women in 2021.[103] The low proportion of women in online gaming companies largely mirrors digital and ICT industry averages.[104]

Industry representatives interviewed for this paper estimated that 25–50 per cent of roles in a game development studio would require technical skills. A study of large Swedish game studios showed that women were especially under-represented "in production, tech and leadership"[105] – often the highest paid roles in the industry. The fact that women have been historically under-represented, especially in technical roles, likely explains the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) focus of many diversity initiatives targeting children and young adults that are being supported by the industry.

Evidence from the UK suggests that girls' interest in STEM begins to drop by high school.[106] Helping to change this requires direct engagement with schools; increasing the visibility of role models from under-represented groups within the industry; and supporting different initiatives that promote participation and opportunities for women and other under-represented groups – from coding camps to scholarships. Indeed, research suggests a link between girls' online gaming behaviour and their selection of STEM undergraduate degrees (*see* 'Research Spotlight' box).

101 IGDA, 'Developer Satisfaction Survey 2022', International Game Developers Association, Toronto, Canada, 2022.

102 Ukie, 'UK Games Industry Census 2022'.

103 ISFE, 'Key Facts from 2021', Europe's Video Game Industry, Brussels, Belgium, 2021.

104 See, for example, European Commission, 'The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)', 2020. Women made up 18 per cent of ICT specialists across the EU. According to McKinsey and Company and Pivotal Research, 26 per cent of employees in Fortune 500 tech companies in the US in 2018 were women; McKinsey & Company, 'Closing the Tech Gender Gap Through Philanthropy and Corporate Social Responsibility', New York, 12 September 2018.

105 Nilsson, M., 'Gender Distribution Within Sweden's Video Game Industry', Independent Thesis, Malmö University, Sweden, 2021.

106 'Closing the STEM Gender Gap: Executive summary'.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Research spotlight: Girls, video games and STEM studies

A study published in 'Computers and Human Behaviour' in 2019 found that:

- Girls currently studying a STEM degree were more likely to be gamers and to engage in multiplayer games.

- Girls who were heavy gamers (over nine hours per week) at 13–14 years were found to be more likely to pursue a STEM degree, but this was influenced by their socio-economic status. Similar associations with boys and STEM degrees were not found or were weak.

The author concludes that girls were self-socializing or self-determining their identity groups through online gaming and that this research can provide the basis for whether encouraging gaming in adolescent girls can help them onto STEM pathways.[107]
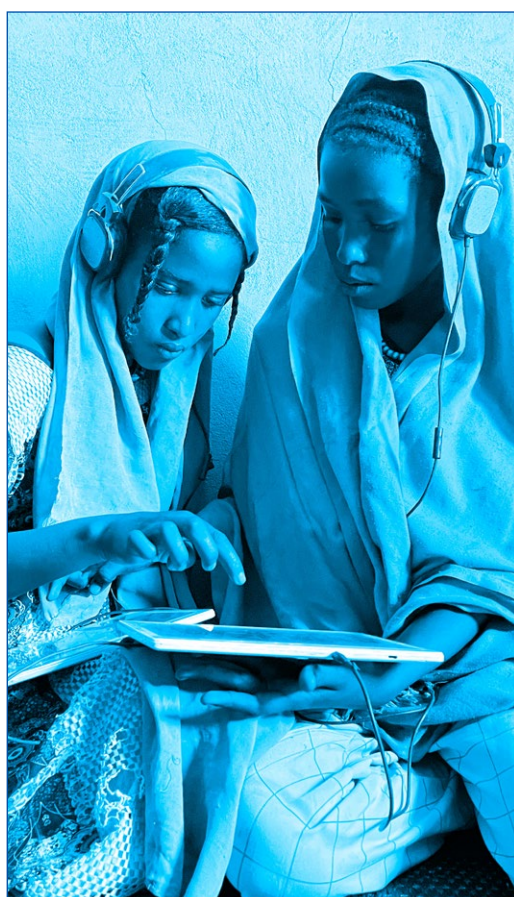
© UNICEF/UN0710657

For many children, the most visible ambassadors of the online gaming world are likely to be popular streamers and professional esports players. An analysis of the top 20 streamers on Twitch showed that all were men. One publicly identifies as a gay man; one is a man of colour; and none have visible physical, sensory or cognitive disabilities.[108] There are as yet no women among the top 10 YouTube online gaming influencers in 2023.[109]

By contrast, the esports audience displays a greater gender balance. For example, a study of esports viewers under the age of 18 in 32 markets (frequent and occasional viewers combined), found that 56 per cent identified as boys and 44 per cent as girls.[110] The lack of role models for women and girls, especially for girls of colour, together with harassment and sexism, social isolation and lack of professional networks have been highlighted as reasons for the lack of women's and girls' participation in esports.[111] Parental attitudes towards online gaming, together with cultural norms, also play a role in girls' participation in esports.[112]

107 Hosein, A., 'Girls' Video Gaming Behaviour and Undergraduate Degree Selection: A secondary data analysis approach', Computers in Human Behavior, vol. 91, 2019, pp. 226–235.

108 'The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An analysis of masculinity in video games and the gaming community'.

109 '150 Top Youtube Gaming Influencers and Best Gaming Youtube Channels in 2023', amraandelma.com.

110 Newzoo's Consumer Insights, '2020: Games and esports – aggregate numbers for 32 countries'.

111 AnyKey, 'Diversity and Inclusion in Collegiate Esports: Challenges, opportunities and interventions', 2019.

112 UNICEF, 'Child Rights and Online Gaming: Opportunities and challenges for the industry', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, p. 16, 2019.

Many of the issues highlighted throughout this toolkit – such as identity-based harassment within communities and the lack of diverse representation in games – contribute to an image of the sector as only directed at and welcoming to a narrow demographic. Many companies and voluntary industry initiatives are aiming to address these issues as well as workforce diversity. As the voices of under-represented groups within the industry grow and are reinforced by increased public conversation and awareness, claims around harassment and discrimination directed at the industry continue to surface.[113] To avoid responses being seen as tokenistic, it will remain important for companies to openly communicate about the impact and progress of their DEI initiatives launched as a response. High-profile sexual harassment cases underline the importance of all DEI initiatives being founded on robust anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies that are effectively enforced.

Current industry approaches and initiatives

During the course of research for this toolkit, a large proportion of DEI industry initiatives identified related to the issue of increasing diversity and inclusion within the workforce. Most of these activities, whether driven by individual companies or industry associations, focused on issues within the immediate control of companies, such as:

- **Improving recruitment practices through more inclusive adverts and ensuring a balanced gender mix at all stages of the recruitment process;**
- **Ensuring company materials and websites display diversity;**
- **Strengthening internal inclusion via employee surveys and ERGs; and**
- **Providing training on unconscious bias and the importance of diversity and inclusion.[114]**

Online gaming industry associations have been issuing diversity guidance for their members which also go beyond these internal considerations to consider representation within products and services, inclusive events and accessibility.[115] Further illustrations of industry actions are described below.

Supporting STEM education

Companies can play a significant role in encouraging under-represented groups of children to embark on careers in STEM – consequently increasing their chances of finding future careers within the industry.

There are a number of promising examples of companies and industry associations in Europe and the US supporting different initiatives to encourage more widespread interest in and access to STEM education and careers in the online gaming ecosystem. Examples include:

---

113 RFI: 'Top Executives Quit French Gaming Giant Ubisoft in Sexual Harassment Probe', 12 July 2020; Korn, J. and Reuters, 'Riot Games Agrees to Pay $100 Million Settlement in Gender Discrimination Lawsuit', CNN Business online, 28 December 2021; Rohan Goswami, 'Activision Blizzard pays SEC $35 million to settle probe', CNBC, 3 February, 2023.

114 See, for example, '#RaiseTheGame One Year On Report 2020/2021' on company activity relating to the UK Video Game Association's diversity and inclusion pledge, Ukie, London, March 2021.

115 See, for example, The German Games Industry Association's Diversity Guide, and Ukie's #RaiseTheGame Guidance.

- **Industry ambassadors engaging in career talks, mentoring and classes for students. For example, 'Into Games', an initiative dedicated to "making a career in the video games sector more accessible to young people in the UK, no matter their background".[116]**
- **Financially supporting relevant initiatives or non-profit organizations.**
- **The European Games in Schools project which aims to improve teachers' ability to use games in the classroom as a supplement to the curricula.[117]**
- **Supporting informal youth clubs and design jams around game development.[118]**

Promoting and supporting initiatives and organizations that work to advance inclusion

Some industry players collaborate with organizations dedicated to advancing inclusion, such as the Able Gamers Foundation. This organization promotes adaptive and inclusive gaming through initiatives such as professional training for game developers.[119] Ukie has also organized Pride Chats, where online gaming companies presented different aspects of LGBTIQ+ inclusion.[120]

Supporting diversity and inclusion in esports

There are also dedicated activities within the industry focusing on esports, particularly relating to gender.[121] Women-only tournaments have been introduced to create spaces free from harassment where players can train and excel.[122] Increasingly, large sponsors of esports are supporting female teams and tournaments as a way to promote participation. For example, ESL Gaming announced a new '##GGFORALL' program in late 2021, focused on making 'gaming and esports an inclusive, respectful and all-empowering space'.[123] In another example, Riot Games has launched 'VCT Game Changers', a program geared towards fostering greater inclusion and representation.[124]

---

116 See, for example, 'Video Games Ambassadors'; see more at the 'Into Games' website.

117 See 'Games in Schools' website.

118 Examples include 'Pukeahu Game Dev Girls', in New Zealand and Finland's 'Vartiosaari Game Jam Games'.

119 Able Gamers Foundation (also known as Able Gamers Charity).

120 Ukie, 'PRIDE Chats: Celebrating LGBTQ+ matters beyond June', London, UK, 2021.

121 See, for example, AnyKey, who advocate for more D&I within esports and provide guidance for esports event organizers.

122 See, for example, Castello, J., 'Women-Only Esports Events Are Building Toward a Future Where They're Unnecessary', The Verge online, 22 October 2019; eSports Charts, 'The Most Popular Women Esports Tournaments in 2020 and 2021'.

123 ESL FACEIT Group, 'ESL Gaming Announces New #GGFORALL Program and Launches $500,000 Prize Pool Women's Circuit for Counter-Strike: Global Offensive As First 2022 Initiative'.

124 Riot Games, 'VCT Game Changers'.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Other ways industry players are supporting DEI

Many other initiatives aimed at increasing diversity and inclusion in the industry have been conceived and spearheaded by individuals working within it. For example, Limit Break offers a 6-month mentorship program geared towards increasing diversity within the UK games industry.[125] In another example, Code Coven describes itself as a 'global games industry classroom and accelerator for marginalised talent'.[126] Organizations such as 'Women in Games' and 'We in Games' have focused on supporting the visibility and advancement of under-represented groups within the industry by:

- **Maintaining lists of speakers for events;**
- **Providing networking opportunities;**
- **Organizing dedicated job fairs; and**
- **Supporting participation at events.[127]**

There is also dedicated funding for games developed by women or more diverse teams.[128] Increasingly, companies are joining these initiatives and supporting their activities in various ways.

© UNICEF/UN0441162/Shing

---

125 Limit Break, 'Limit Break Mentorship: Celebrating 5 Years of Mentorship'.

126 See Code Coven LinkedIn profile: 'Code Coven: Online learning; inclusive community'.

127 See, for example 'Women in Games International', and its different national sections, which are the source of many of these activities; see, for example, 'We in Games Finland's' Speakers List.

128 See, for example, 'Wings', who provide funding for inclusive teams.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

Game Changers Coalition

Starting in 2023, UNICEF is coordinating the conception of a new "Game Changers Coalition" centered on developing STEAM skills and fostering opportunities for girls to create and develop the safe and engaging games of the future, representative of their voices, that millions of girls and boys will play.

The new initiative will aim to bridge the gap between the skills of girls today and the future of women in tomorrow's online gaming and technology industry. From exploring diversity, equity and inclusion in the gaming industry, to engaging and financing concrete and measurable actions for girls worldwide, the Game Changers Coalition is deeply anchored in UNICEF gender equality programming to train adolescent girls all over the world with innovative tools to increase their skills, demystify professional pathways in the gaming and tech industry for girls; and inspire young girls to enhance their STEAM learning and pursue future careers in this industry to feel represented and safe.

Companies interested in being a part of this work are encouraged to get in touch.

Taking action

The following questions are designed for companies to consider in efforts to promote diverse role models and attract diverse talent. The questions below can be answered from the perspective of game developers, publishers, distributors, platforms and streaming or messaging services. In some cases, the questions can be answered in terms of the requirements a publisher, distributor or platform may place on different partners they collaborate with to develop or promote their games.

Encouraging and supporting all children to consider careers in STEM and online gaming:

☐ Does your company provide support for children from under-represented groups to learn skills demanded by online gaming companies, such as game jams, youth clubs, coding camps or graphic design?

☐ Does your company work with schools and other educational institutions? Does this engagement consider diversity and inclusion (including building awareness and understanding of the various roles available within the industry)?

☐ Does your company provide scholarships for esports, computer science, game design or other relevant fields for children from under-represented groups?

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

☐ Does your company support organizations that provide mentoring as well as networking and otherwise support the visibility of women and other under-represented groups within the industry?

☐ Do you consistently consider diversity when representing your company at public events, product launches and within esports leagues or tournaments?

Improving transparency and accountability on DEI initiatives:

☐ Has your company joined diversity initiatives, pledges, or provided support to organizations that work to increase diversity and inclusion in the industry?

☐ Have you assessed your hiring process from a DEI perspective to ensure, for example, that adverts are inclusive in language and that the hiring process is transparent and fair?

☐ Are specific, targeted actions in place that continue to support the integration of new employees from of under-represented groups after they are hired?

☐ Has your company undertaken efforts to understand how company policies and processes may be unintentionally discriminating against under-represented groups?

☐ Does your company demonstrate that it is proactively working to increase diversity within the workforce by measuring and communicating your current level of diversity and setting public targets for gender balance and the inclusion of under-represented groups in your most senior teams?

☐ Does your company publicly report on its progress on increasing diversity at different levels, including baseline and targets?

☐ Is your company providing assurance for current and future employees that DEI issues are taken seriously (e.g., through transparently reporting about DEI activities and statistics, including reports of harassment in the workplace and how these have been handled)?

☐ Does your company demonstrate it is proactive in offering opportunities for game developers from under-represented groups by providing dedicated funding, scholarships or mentorships?

☐ Has your company put in place family-friendly policies that are inclusive and accessible to all employees with care and parental responsibilities; for example, paid parental leave, support for breastfeeding, access to quality childcare support, flexible working hours and the possibility for employees to care for sick children? Are there additional support measures for employees who have children with disabilities? Are these benefits available to all workers (regardless of contract type) and different types of families?

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Further resources

The industry itself has produced guidance for online gaming companies on internal policies and actions that can be taken to improve workforce diversity through more inclusive recruitment and workplace practices.

Country-level examples that have wider application include the German Games Industry Association's 'Diversity Guide' and Ukie's '#RaiseTheGame' guidance and related initiatives (see the 2022 'Access November' campaign and 'Putting the G into Gaming' campaign). The University of York, the Screen Industries Growth Network and Ukie, backed by Women In Games, also recently developed guidelines for the industry to ensure informal learning events are more inclusive.

Women in Games has also produced a second edition of its 'The Women in Games Guide: Building a Fair Playing Field'.

Refer to UNICEF's 'Redesigning the Workplace To Be Family-Friendly: What governments and businesses can do' for further business resources on family-friendly workplace policies.

Notes

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

Topics for further exploration

The following topics were identified during the course of research for this toolkit as requiring further exploration – including more detailed academic investigation, further disclosure from online gaming companies or multistakeholder discussion and efforts to build shared solutions.

• Measuring and reporting on the impact of companies' internal DEI initiatives.

• Understanding whether the increased number of under-represented groups within STEM education is translating to employment in technology companies and at what stage (and age) 'intervention' is most effective.

• Measuring and reporting the number and percentage of women participating in professional game education in secondary and higher education.

• Understanding children's motivation to become game developers and ensuring there is no financial exploitation of children's creativity when they develop games.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Companies in the online gaming ecosystem touch on DEI issues in a multitude of ways relevant to children, from inclusion within communities; barriers to access and accessibility; representation within and around games and DEI within workplaces. These issues are relevant to all parts of the industry, including providers of games not explicitly designed or intended for children.

While numerous promising examples of industry actions addressing these issues exist, more work needs to be done to comprehensively advance DEI in the industry with the goal of ensuring respect for children's rights, including the right to non-discrimination. However, without robust global research and transparency from companies, it is challenging to assess what impact, if any, these initiatives are having – and what gaps remain to be addressed. On the journey ahead, meaningful participation of children themselves is crucial to assessing impacts and designing solutions that work for all.

© UNICEF/UN0462803/

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME:
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE:
ACCESSING
ONLINE GAMING
ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF:
REPRESENTATION
IN AND AROUND
ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING
ROLE MODELS:
ATTRACTING AND
INVOLVING DIVERSE
TALENT

FUTURE
DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY
OF KEY TERMS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Accessibility
The condition of a facility or service that ensures that persons with disabilities have access, on an equal basis with others, to "the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public".[129]

With respect to technology, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) further specifies that States Parties shall take appropriate measures to "promote access for persons with disabilities to new information and communications technologies and systems, including the Internet"; and to "promote the design, development, production and distribution of accessible information and communications technologies and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at minimum cost".[130] This highlights that in order to be accessible, technology solutions must also be affordable.[131]

Biases
Cognitive 'shortcuts' used by our brain to process information about others easier and faster. This includes beliefs, traits and behaviours assigned to specific groups based on one or a few characteristics such as gender, age or nationality. This oversimplification often results in the stereotyping of a particular group and can easily turn into discrimination. Biases can be conscious or unconscious.[132]

Cultural appropriation
Adoption of icons, rituals, aesthetic standards and behaviour from one culture by another. Culture is often appropriated by a dominant group from a minority or subordinate group in terms of social, political and/or economic status. In this process, significant artefacts and beliefs are used/exploited without understanding or respecting their original meaning.[133]

Persons with disabilities
A term that includes those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Art. 1, CRPD. Note: Although the CRPD uses the term 'mental impairments', the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities now uses the updated term 'psychosocial disabilities'). Persons with disabilities are a diverse and heterogeneous group and go well beyond stereotypical representations of someone using a wheelchair. Conditions leading to disability can be visible or invisible; temporary or long-term; static, episodic, or degenerating; painful or inconsequential.[134]

---

129 'UNICEF Glossary of Terms Related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2022. (Internal).

130 United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 9 – Accessibility.

131 The issue of affordable technology solutions for persons with disabilities is addressed specifically within the 'Council of Europe Disability Strategy 2017–2023', Strasbourg, France, 16 November 2016.

132 'UNICEF Glossary of Terms Related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion'. (Internal).

133 Ibid.

134 Ibid. For a more detailed definition see UNICEF, 'Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2021, p. 9.

ACRONYMS

INTRODUCTION

1. I FEEL WELCOME: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

2. I CAN PARTICIPATE: ACCESSING ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS

3. SEEING MYSELF: REPRESENTATION IN AND AROUND ONLINE GAMES

4. FINDING ROLE MODELS: ATTRACTING AND INVOLVING DIVERSE TALENT

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Digital access

Digital access in this toolkit refers to Internet access, as well as access to connected devices and digital products as well as services (such as online games). When it comes to internet access, barriers related to gender and social norms, cultural practices, disability or minority status remain.[135]

Diversity

The wide variety of shared and different personal and group characteristics among human beings. Diversity includes many characteristics that may be visible; it also includes less obvious characteristics like personality style, ethnicity, disability, education, religion, job function, life experience, lifestyle, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), migration status, geography, regional differences, work experience and family situations that make us similar to and different from one another.[136]

Equality

A powerful concept grounded in the principle that all people are created equal and must be treated equitably. Equality is achieved where all individuals and groups enjoy equal dignity, rights, opportunities, and outcomes, unfettered by injustice and discrimination. More equal societies create more social stability and cohesion, as they work well for everyone. Generally speaking, equality is the outcome toward which equitable policy and programming strives.[137]

Equity

The process of being fair to all individuals and groups by addressing present and historical inequality in order to work toward equality in outcomes. Equity may involve the use of temporary special measures to compensate for the historical and systemic bias and discrimination faced by marginalized groups. Systems, institutions, policies and programming may be described as equitable or inequitable depending on their approach to addressing inequality. Generally speaking, equity is a means to the goal of equality.[138]

Gender

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for individuals based on the sex they were assigned at birth, while sex is the classification of a person as having female, male and/or intersex bodily sex characteristics.[139]

Gender identity vs. gender expression

Gender identity refers to a person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with their sex assigned at birth or the gender attributed to them by society.

Gender expression refers to the range of cues, such as names, pronouns, behaviour, clothing, voice, mannerisms and/or bodily characteristics, used to interpret other individuals' genders. Gender expression is not necessarily an accurate reflection of gender identity.[140]

---

135 UNICEF, 'Policy guide on children and digital connectivity', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2019, p.9.

136 'UNICEF Glossary of Terms Related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion'. (Internal).

137 Ibid.

138 Ibid.

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid.

Hate speech

There is no international legal definition of hate speech and the characterization of what is 'hateful' is controversial and disputed. In the context of this document, the term 'hate speech' is understood as any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are. In other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor/s. This is often rooted in certain contexts. It generates intolerance as well as hatred and can be demeaning and divisive.[141]

Implicit bias (or unconscious bias)

Prejudice or unsupported judgments in favour of or against one thing, person or group as compared to another in a way that is usually considered unfair. Many researchers suggest that unconscious bias occurs automatically as the brain makes quick judgments based on past experiences and background. As a result of unconscious biases, certain people benefit and other people are penalized. In contrast, deliberate prejudices are defined as conscious bias (or explicit bias).

Although we all have biases, many unconscious biases tend to be exhibited toward minority groups based on factors such as class, sex, race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, age, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics and other such traits.[142]

Inclusion

Inclusive societies recognize and build development policies around the diversity of their members and enable everyone's full inclusion and participation, regardless of their status. Inclusive, people-centred development means addressing the structural or legal barriers that discriminate against particular peoples and groups. In other words, inclusion is not only about including those who are traditionally excluded but must also be about dismantling the many forms of discrimination that contribute to the persistent marginalization of groups on the basis of arbitrary distinctions, such as their age, their gender or the colour of their skin.[143]

Intersectional discrimination

A situation where several grounds operate and interact with each other at the same time in such a way that they are inseparable and thereby expose relevant individuals to unique types of disadvantage and discrimination. Intersectional discrimination can appear as direct or indirect discrimination, denial of reasonable accommodation or harassment. For example, while the denial of access to general health-related information due to inaccessible format affects all persons on the basis of disability, the denial to a blind woman of access to family planning services restricts her rights based on the intersection of her gender and disability – cf. multiple discrimination.[144]

Marginalized groups

Communities that experience discrimination and/ or exclusion (social, political and/or economic) because of unequal power relationships across economic, political, social and/or cultural dimensions.[145]

---

141 UN, United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, United Nations, New York, 2019.

142 'UNICEF Glossary of Terms Related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion'. (Internal).

143 Ibid.

144 Ibid.

145 Ibid.

Multiple discrimination

Concept used to describe the complexity of discrimination implicating more than one ground – cf. intersectional discrimination.[146]

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term covering a number of neurodevelopmental conditions. These are: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia or dysgraphia. All these conditions are neurodevelopmental, which means individuals are born with them and they do not go away – although neurodiverse people may get better at coping with their condition(s). This is a key difference between a neurodiverse condition and a mental health issue. Mental illnesses can fluctuate widely and it is possible to recover, but neurodiverse differences are lifelong.[147]

Race vs. ethnicity vs. nationality

Race is a social construct tied loosely to skin colour and other physical features, and is used notably to establish and justify systems of power and oppression.

Ethnicity generally refers to membership in a specific people group united by culture, religion, language, etc.

Nationality generally refers to country of citizenship.[148]

Sexual orientation

Each person's enduring capacity for profound romantic, emotional and/or physical feelings for, or attraction to, other people. Encompasses hetero-, homo-, bi-, pan- and asexuality, as well as a wide range of other expressions of sexual orientation. This term is preferred over sexual preference, sexual behaviour, lifestyle and way of life when describing an individual's feelings for or attraction to other people.[149]

Stereotype

A generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by members of a particular social group or the roles that are or should be performed by members of that group. Stereotypes can easily lead to discrimination.[150]

Tokenism

The practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of diversity. Essentially, it gives the appearance of equality without achieving it and can give a false sense of achievement.[151]

---

146 Ibid.

147 Neurodiversity Association, 'What is Neurodiversity?'.

148 UNICEF Glossary of Terms Related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion'. (Internal).

149 Ibid.

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid.

For every child

Whoever she is.

Wherever he lives.

Every child deserves a childhood.

A future.

A fair chance.

That's why UNICEF is there.

For each and every child.

Working day in and day out.

In more than 190 countries and territories.

Reaching the hardest to reach.

The furthest from help.

The most excluded.

It's why we stay to the end.

And never give up.

Published by UNICEF

unicef ✿

for every child

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS
AND ONLINE GAMING:

**INDUSTRY
TOOLKIT ON
ADVANCING
DIVERSITY,
EQUITY AND
INCLUSION**