

Dozens of Women in Gaming Speak Out About Sexism and Harassment

After more than 70 allegations surfaced on Twitter this weekend, gaming companies and streamers responded with action. Some say it's the beginning of real change in the industry.

By **Taylor Lorenz** and **Kellen Browning**

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More than 70 people in the gaming industry, most of them women, have come forward with allegations of gender-based discrimination, harassment and sexual assault since Friday. They have shared their stories in statements posted to Twitter, YouTube, Twitch and the blogging platform TwitLonger.

The outpouring of stories from competitive gamers and streamers, who broadcast their gameplay on platforms like Twitch for money, led to the resignation of the C.E.O. of a prominent talent management company for streamers and a moment of reflection for an industry that has often contended with sexism, bullying and allegations of abuse.

Already, the response has been a far cry from Gamergate in 2014, when women faced threats of death and sexual assault for critiquing the industry's male-dominated, sexist culture. Now, some are optimistic that real change could come.

Gamers began sharing their stories after a Twitter user who posts as Hollowtide tweeted about an unnamed "top" player of the online game Destiny on Friday night, referring to the person as a "scum lord." Three female streamers, JewelsVerne, SheSnaps and SchviftyFive, saw the post and decided to come forward about their experiences with the gamer in question, who is known online both as Lono and SayNoToRage. The women posted their allegations, including nonconsensual touching, propositioning for sex and harassment, on Twitter using their streamer handles. (The streamers did not provide their legal names to The New York Times. In years past, women gamers who have spoken out against the industry using their legal names have been subjected to further harassment, hacking and doxxing.)

In interviews with The Times, when asked to describe their experiences with Lono, the streamers asked a reporter to refer to their public statements on Twitter, TwitLonger and Twitch.

Lono responded to their Twitter accusations in a YouTube video posted on Saturday. "There is no excuse for my behavior. There is no way to gloss over it. The things I did were unacceptable," he said in the video. "Being inappropriate with these people robbed them of their sense of safety and security and it broke trust, and I am deeply sorry." (He declined to speak to a reporter from The Times on Monday, and would not share his last name.)

After those accusations, other streamers began to open up about their experiences with high-profile men in the industry, including fellow streamers, YouTubers, game developers and talent managers.

Jessica Richey, 28, a streamer and content creator in New York City, began compiling the allegations into a Twitter thread.

Ms. Richey said in an interview on Sunday that she received more than 50 direct messages from people asking that their stories be added to her thread. On Monday morning, she compiled all of the allegations in a Medium post, which was shared widely within the streaming community.

“I’m not casting judgment or asking anyone to witch hunt those who are named,” Ms. Richey said. “I’m trying to give survivors of these issues a voice so they don’t feel alone or gaslit based on their experiences in this industry.”

Molly Fender Ayala, a Twitch streamer and community development lead for the video game Overwatch, posted a message on Twitter Sunday morning, in which she accused Omeed Dariani, the C.E.O. of Online Performers Group, a talent management agency that works with many streamers, of acting inappropriately toward her and propositioning her for a threesome in 2014. (Ms. Ayala denied a request for comment. Mr. Dariani did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

“I feel that it’s my responsibility to speak up,” Ms. Ayala wrote, so that other women in the streaming and gaming world “know that this isn’t ‘just how the industry is.’”

Mr. Dariani responded to Ms. Ayala’s allegations in a Twitter thread on Sunday. “I do not specifically recall the conversation referenced, but I’m not going to sit here and argue about whether or not it happened,” he wrote. “Because I promised I would believe women. Even, and probably most especially when I’m the person being called out. And I do believe her. So as far as I am concerned, this happened.”

That night, he stepped down as C.E.O.

“OPG is a special company,” he wrote on Twitter. “It has created opportunity where none existed before. The talented women and men who work there pour their hearts into it daily. Give them a chance. Please don’t destroy it because you’re angry at me.”

Some of the accusations saw a swift response. At least one company, Astro Gaming, said it would stop sponsoring Lono and two other streamers who had faced accusations. High-profile streamers and clients quickly cut ties with the Online Performers Group. Facebook Gaming temporarily suspended one streamer after public allegations of domestic abuse.

Brooke Thorne, 32, a streamer and gamer in Britain who is managed by Online Performers Group, announced that she would be stepping away at the end of her contract. She said that in light of Ms. Ayala’s allegations and the way Mr. Dariani responded, she no longer wants to be associated with the company.

She noted that sexism and misconduct in the industry run deeper than one person or one company. “When it’s one call-out, it’s a problem with a person,” Ms. Thorne said. “When there’s a ton of call-outs, it’s a problem with the industry.” As more allegations surfaced over the weekend, gaming companies and corporate partners struggled to respond. “It’s not just other members of the streaming community taking notice,” said Chase, the head of communications at StreamElements, a livestreaming tools provider, who goes only by his first name. “Brands and companies that work with streamers are seeing

who these individuals are and might not want to associate with them on future endeavors.”

This isn't the first time gaming has been said to be having its #MeToo moment. Last summer, several game developers went public with accusations of sexual assault, harassment and abuse, and were met with a swift backlash from the gaming community. But this time, the reaction has been different.

Fellow streamers, fans and companies have shown support for the women speaking out.

Believe and support women when they speak out
— Broman (@Professorbroman) June 20, 2020

While respecting the wishes of those wronged by Lono to not speak out until they were ready, we at RD revoked his creator rights at our event. We did everything we legally could to protect more from experiencing the same. I'm so proud of these ladies for telling their stories.
— Gothalion (@Gothalion) June 20, 2020

Kenzie Gordon, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Alberta who studies gaming in relation to prevention of sexual and domestic violence, said that “if studios get to the point where people are actually being fired for these accusations and stepping down and there's some actual structural change happening,” that would be evidence of a “watershed” moment.

Twitch released a Twitter statement on Sunday saying that the company takes “accusations of sexual harassment and misconduct extremely seriously” and was “looking into the accounts concerning streamers affiliated with Twitch and will work with law enforcement where applicable.” A Twitch spokeswoman declined to comment further.

On Monday, streamers began calling for a “Twitch blackout,” in which users would refrain from using the platform on Wednesday to pressure the company to address racism and sexual misconduct.

That night, the C.E.O. of Twitch, Emmett Shear, shared an internal company email on Twitter that stated that Twitch was “looking into all the incidents and will be cooperating with law enforcement.”

“We support people coming forward, commend their bravery in doing so, and know there are many others who have not,” he continued. “The gaming industry is not unlike others that have had to reckon with systemic sexism, racism, and abuse that rewards certain people and disadvantages — even harms — others. The status quo needs to change.”

There's been a lot of important conversation happening over the previous couple days, and I've heard your voices. I'd like to share the email I just sent internally to the company on the topic. pic.twitter.com/B1V34IT9EI
— Emmett Shear (@eshear) June 23, 2020

Gaming scholars said the community may be more receptive to addressing allegations of sexual misconduct this time around after embracing social activism during the recent Black Lives Matter protests.

“It did seem like there is a wellspring of support that might have been there in the past, but because of the times we're in, it seemed to me even more profound and supportive,” said Jennifer Jenson, who

studies video games and gender at the University of British Columbia.

It's also possible that "we've just hit a critical mass of these allegations coming out over and over," Ms. Gordon said.

The gaming industry is particularly conducive to a culture of misogyny and sexual harassment, Ms. Gordon said, because straight white men have "created the identity of the gamer as this exclusive property." When women, people of color or L.G.B.T.Q. people try to break into the industry, she said, the "toxic geek masculinity" pushes back in ways that often lead to sexual abuse and bullying.

Gaming studios are often reluctant to defy those fans, Ms. Gordon said, but recently it has become clear that there is a demand for a variety of video games that appeal to all types of people, which requires more diversity among game designers and could necessitate changes in the industry.

"I think there really needs to be this top-down reorganization," she said. "Setting up a diversity committee is not going to solve this problem."

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