



Online Gaming: Privacy Risks and Strategies

A Note on Language



In this toolkit, we will sometimes use the word woman/women and feminine pronouns for simplicity and to recognize the significant impact technology-facilitated violence has on women and girls. We recognize that TFGBV also impacts trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people. We hope that all people impacted by TFGBV will find these documents useful.

Contrary to popular perception, online gaming is not just a pastime for teenage boys. Online gaming is very popular in Canada. Unfortunately, many women experience online harassment while playing games that can also cross into real-life abuse. Additionally, women experiencing violence, sexual assault, and stalking may have additional privacy concerns when trying to engage in online spaces. Women who choose to join online gaming communities should not be isolated from those communities because of online harassment. Fortunately, it is possible to increase privacy and safety when gaming online.

Online Gaming Basics

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

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

Privacy and Safety Risks

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

Potential Benefits to Women who have Experienced Violence

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

Strategies to Increase Privacy and Safety

Responsibility for stopping online harassment and abuse should rest primarily with those who misuse tech against other people online. Game developers and companies can also take steps to counter online abuse and promote good behaviour in their spaces. As the International Gaming Developer Association says, "The onus is on harassers and their communities to discourage harassment and report harassing behaviour when it is observed. You have a right to work, speak, create, and exist in a space free of harassment and the threat of harassment."

Nonetheless, female gamers may want to consider some of these steps to increase their personal safety and privacy online:

1. When creating accounts and profiles, choose a username that doesn't include your real name or other identifying information. Protect your privacy by not giving out identifying or contact information.
2. Consider using different email addresses, profile pictures, and strong passwords for gaming and for each game you play. Keeping this information separate from the rest of your life can help avoid doxing, or other users being able to connect your gaming profile to your real life.
3. Search for yourself online or use privacy checking services to find out what information is available about you online.

4. Be careful about attachments and links, which might install spyware or other malware on your devices.
5. **Trust your instincts.** If you start to feel uncomfortable, it's always ok to stop contact.

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

1. Let a friend know ahead of time where you are going and that you will reach out to them after the gaming session is done.
2. Leave an address and some information about where you'll be.
3. Familiarize yourself with the meet-up spot ahead of time. Only meet where you're comfortable.
4. Watch out for people saying they want to visit but need loans to be able to get to you, or who use other stories to gain your sympathy and then ask for money. These may be signs of a scam.
5. It's ok to cut a gaming session short if it doesn't feel safe or fun. **Trust your instincts.**

Evidence

Women experiencing online harassment and abuse may choose to report to the gaming platforms and/or the legal system. Because the technology uses both hardware-like devices such as smartphones, as well as Internet providers and the gaming company's servers, digital evidence may be available as they can be stored within these tech companies. In addition, women may consider taking pictures, screenshots, or saving other relevant information. See our tips on [documenting abuse](#) and a sample [documentation log](#).

Online harassment and abuse may fall under a number of crimes, depending on what is happening. Learn more about preserving evidence or about the laws on online harassment.

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) is part of a continuum of violence that can be both online and in-person. If you or someone you know is experiencing TFGBV, you are not alone. You can use [sheltersafe.ca](#) to find a shelter/transition house near you to discuss options and create a [safety plan](#). You don't need to stay in a shelter to access free, confidential services and support.

Adapted for Canada with permission from NNEDV's Safety Net project, based on their resource [Online Gaming](#).

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