



*Operation*  
**sandwich**

Empowering female gamers

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Got back from the kitchen and brought you something good honey xx

# *Tools of* empowerment

## **Take-aways from research**

Women are actively obstructed when trying to play video games. They are often seen as less competent, their character choices are questioned and they are blamed for losing the game. They are structurally excluded and degraded. Women get discouraged from playing. Some interviewees reported having stopped playing certain games altogether and when asked for advice they would give to other female players, it was to quit the game and find something else.

My goal with my project is to empower female players. They face a lot of harassment resulting in feelings of insecurity, inferiority, and generally feeling unwelcome. I want to show that their feelings are valid. I want to bring my tools of empowerment into the gaming space itself and make it visible. I have used my personal experiences and those of who I've interviewed, to design tools to reclaim the power that is taken away through the harassment and disparagement.

Hopefully, then, more women will stay in gaming and we will see more women not only play video games but also pursue careers in tech and eSports. This would not only increase the visibility of female players but also bring more women into the tech workspace, resulting in more adequate [female] character designs, well-rounded stories, fewer stereotypes and overall representation.

From my research, it became clear that most harassments took place in shooter games like Overwatch, Valorant, and Rainbow Six Siege. So I wanted to design something fitting for shooter spaces.

# Concept *phase*

The harassment and disparagement of female gamers is done in a lot of ways, as I have described in my research document. But the one way that really stood out and is used the most due to the voice chat function of online gaming is verbal abuse. The toxic side of the community has created a lot of awful names for female gamers ranging from general slurring to playing into old-fashioned stereotypes and gender roles. These words are used to bring women down and to make them feel inferior to others. Hence, I wanted to find a way to empower female gamers.

## Reappropriation

Ever since my minor and my interest in colonial studies, I have been fascinated by the act of reappropriation. This is the cultural process in which a group of people reclaims certain words or aspects that were previously used to disparage them. I find it a beautiful way of taking something that was supposed to hurt you and turn it into something powerful instead. This seemed like a great start for my project and I started looking into what kinds of reappropriations there were.



## Trixie Mattel

Trixie is best known for her participation on RuPaul's Drag Race, which is a competition in which drag queens battle for the title of 'America's Next Drag Superstar'. Every drag queen has their own unique name, the same goes for Trixie.

She chose the name Trixie because when she was younger, she had a rough relationship with her stepfather. Whenever she was acting too feminine, her stepfather would call her Trixie like it was a slur. Hence, she made it her drag name, to reclaim it as her own as a symbol of power instead. In Dutch this is known as a 'geuzennaam' or 'gueux' in French, meaning beggars. It's derived from an event around 1560 in which a group of 'lower nobles' were labeled as 'gueux' and decided to wear the name with pride.



## #proudboys

This was a social media trend in 2020. Proud Boys is an all-male organization known for its far-right members. As a protest against all the hate-filled messages, the hashtag #proudboys was hijacked and used under pictures featuring LGBTQIA+ content. It became trending and Twitter was filled with rainbows and love. I thought this was an amazing and positive way of protesting.



## Gamergirl [on Tiktok: gamergirl check]

A gamergirl, in the most simple way of explaining it, it really just a girl who games. But the term is often used to differentiate male from female gamers. It used to have very negative connotations and still does sometimes. But as of late it is being used as a way of proudly displaying that you love videogames. This is done by showing their 'setup' for example, which is all the equipment involved in the act of gaming. It is comprised of a gaming chair, a desk, a keyboard and mouse, one or more monitors, and the PC itself. Once you have the basics in place, you can accessorize to elevate and personalize your gaming setup. For female gamers on social media, it is often characterized by a lot of pinks and cute things.

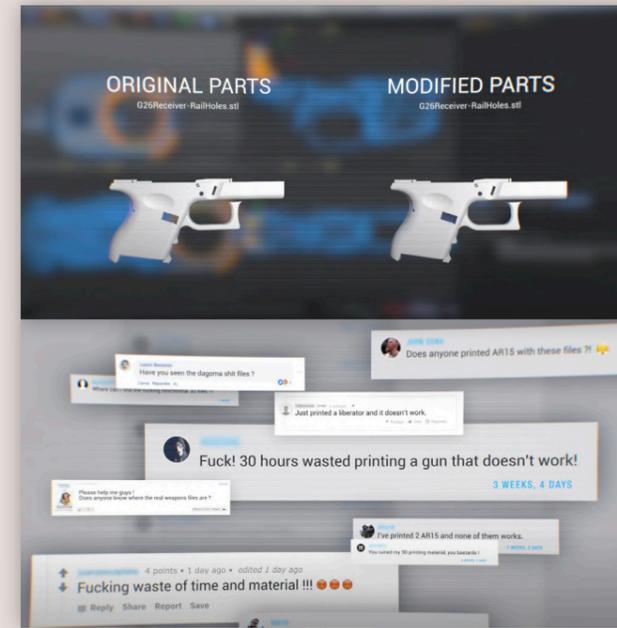
# Inspiration *and* case studies

My field of study is currently Advertising and also the sector I want to work in in the near future. During my research, I stumbled upon various agencies with projects that related well to what I was doing and formed great inspiration. Besides advertising, I have a big interest in social design as well. Hence, for inspiration, I looked into both of these fields.



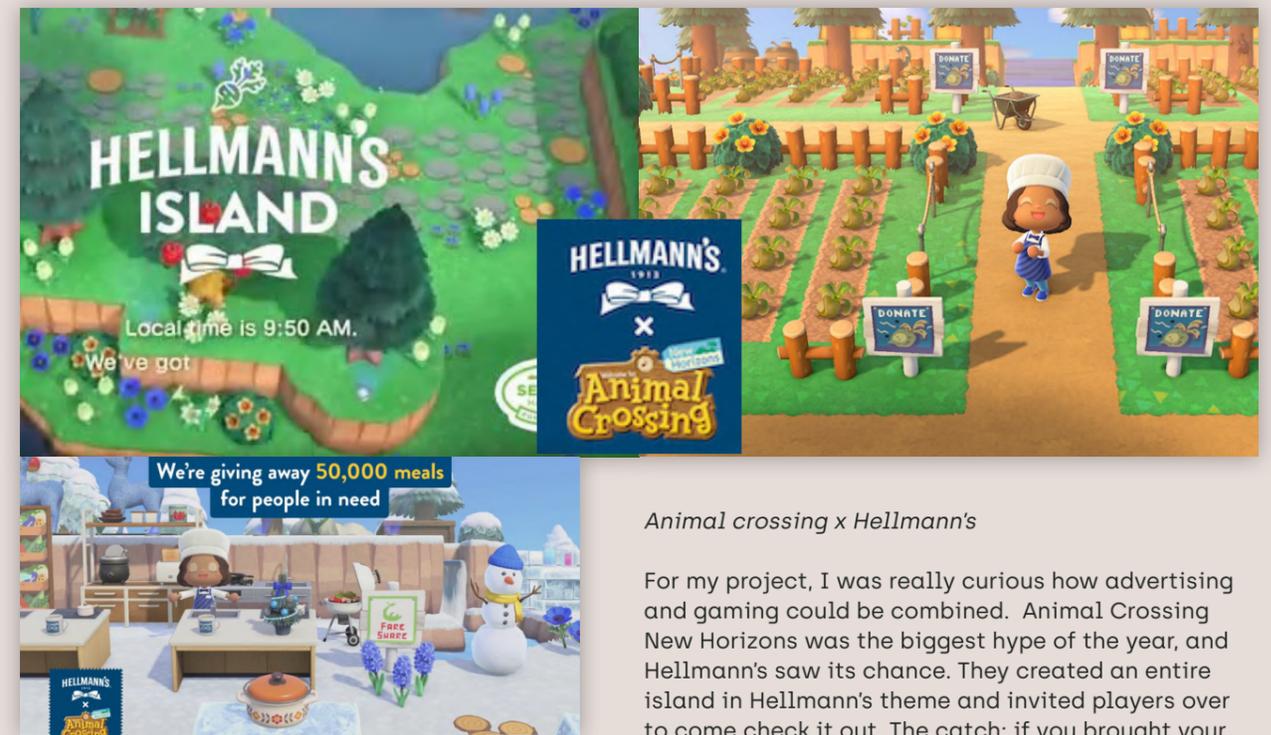
*Diesel hate couture - Publicis*  
This campaign by Diesel focused on celebrities and what kinds of awful comments they received online. In the video, the people wear the words like a sign of pride and turn it into something that can empower them instead. The video ends with the tagline: 'The more hate you wear, the less you care'. The campaign aims to show that, by exposing negative comments and treating them like you don't care, hate can lose its power.

I thought this was a great way to empower someone if they were harassed.



*Dagoma harmless guns - TBWA Paris*  
3D printing is used for a lot of good things, but also for a lot of bad things. Dagoma noticed that their software was used to 3D print guns, which is very dangerous. TBWA Paris came up with the idea to render these guns harmless. They created files for the guns and altered all the parts slightly so they could not be assembled when finished. This way, many people would download and print the guns, only to find out after hours and wasted material, they were useless.

This was a great example of how to 'depower' a certain object.



*Animal crossing x Hellmann's*

For my project, I was really curious how advertising and gaming could be combined. Animal Crossing New Horizons was the biggest hype of the year, and Hellmann's saw its chance. They created an entire island in Hellmann's theme and invited players over to come check it out. The catch: if you brought your spoiled turnips, Hellmann's would give a meal to the homeless in exchange. A beautiful way of using the digital space for social impact.



*Lipstrike - Chloe Desmoineaux*

This performance featured the artist, Chloe, applying lipstick while playing Counter-Strike. Using a Makey-Makey Chloe connected the lipstick to the computer and turned it into a controller instead. Every time her lips touch the lipstick, she shoots in the game. I thought this was such a cool way of combining femininity and shooter games. Also, a great way to feel empowered.



*True Damage - Louis Vuitton x League of Legends*  
League of Legends (also known as LoL) is one of the biggest games out there, it isn't strange that brands would try to collaborate with it.

In 2019, Louis Vuitton made great use of the 'skins' feature in gaming. Skins are outfits you can give to characters. They designed skins featuring clothing from Louis Vuitton. This collab was done to promote the LoL World Championship in Paris.

A clever way for a brand to use the game in such a way that it fits the whole aesthetic and environment.

 **BUMBAG DAUPHINE BB**  
**\$2720** PHP 137,659.20

 **LOUISE HOOP EARRINGS**  
**\$660** PHP 33,402.60

 **V GLOVE**  
**\$735** PHP 37,198.35

 **ZIPPED CARROT PANT**  
**\$2130** PHP 107,799.30

 **LAUREATE DESERT BOOT**  
**\$1320** PHP 66,805.20

 **BI-FABRIC CHECK TOP**  
**\$3350** PHP 169,543.50

**TRUE DAMAGE TO YOUR WALLET**  
**\$10915**  
PHP 552408.15



**STEAL HER LOOK!**  
TRUE DAMAGE QIYANA PRESTIGE EDITION



# Practice

## First prototypes

For a long time, I was a little stuck with my project. What kind of shape should it take on? How can I help these women? From the gamercommunity, I took inspiration from the term gamergirl already having been reclaimed, but I didn't simply want to reappropriate a word like a hashtag. I wanted my project to relate to the online world, especially in the environment of shooter games. I wanted it to take on a physical form so to speak and give actual tools to these women.

I created an idea document and wrote down everything that came into my head. I had thoughts to incorporate the characters in the game, create army suits based on rankings but one idea immediately stood out for me. Due to my personal experience in gaming but also because it really spoke to my imagination and the idea of reappropriation. How could I take the sandwich and reclaim it?

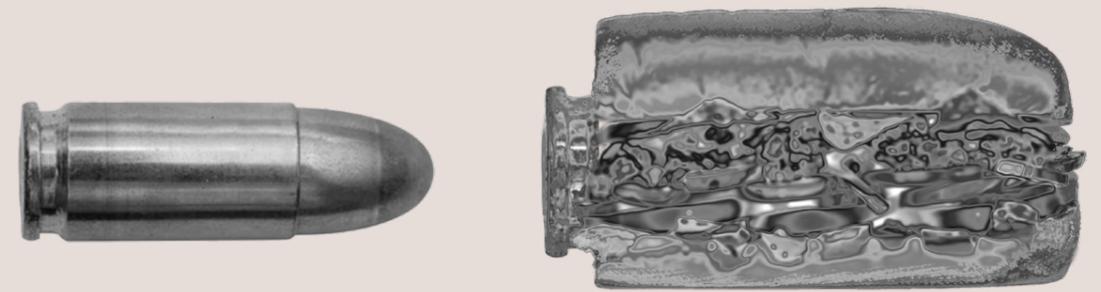
- Fighting fire with gunfire
- Writing new voice lines for characters -> together they form a sentence (copywriting)
- Voice distortion over mic -> hiding that I'm a woman/ or amplify it
- Own character reacts to harassment -> uses voiceline to tell you off

- Ordering you to make food for them -> send sandwiches, weapon called the sandwich. Kill them with a sandwich. Sandwich grenade. Taking something offensive, turning it into something empowering instead. Combining feminine and masculine qualities, breaking stereotypes. Harassment mostly in online shooter game (make a weapon, use that space and design)

- vrouwen fotograferen side by side met weike karakters ze spelen -> overwatch, csgo, r6, WoW, league (let them do the same poses?)
- Prefab comebacks, soundboard
- Collage messages received on playstation/xbox
- List of gamertag of annoying guys, blacklisted
- Designing a skin - revenue for gaming company. Chef skin/sandwich skin. Design for the most toxic games for women: rainbow six, overwatch, Valorant, league etc.
- Play of the game -> compilation of women making winning kills/collection of skill

“Go back to the kitchen and make me a sandwich”

One of the phrases most commonly heard by women in gaming



## Bullet sandwich

This is how my practice project started. I realised that the shape of a bullet was very similar to that of a sandwich. I made the first experiment by giving a sandwich a metallic texture in Photoshop. By choosing the bullet you also immediately reference shooter games, so it fit the environment.



## Sandwich gun

Inspired by the bullet sandwich idea, I started expanding on the concept. I made this image of bazooka shooting sandwiches and started venturing into shooter game territory.



## Bread grenade

Besides shooting and bullets, I also made this design of a bread-inspired hand grenade. To explore what others kinds of weapons there are other than guns. I looked into games such as Rainbow 6 and CS:GO.

## Concept art

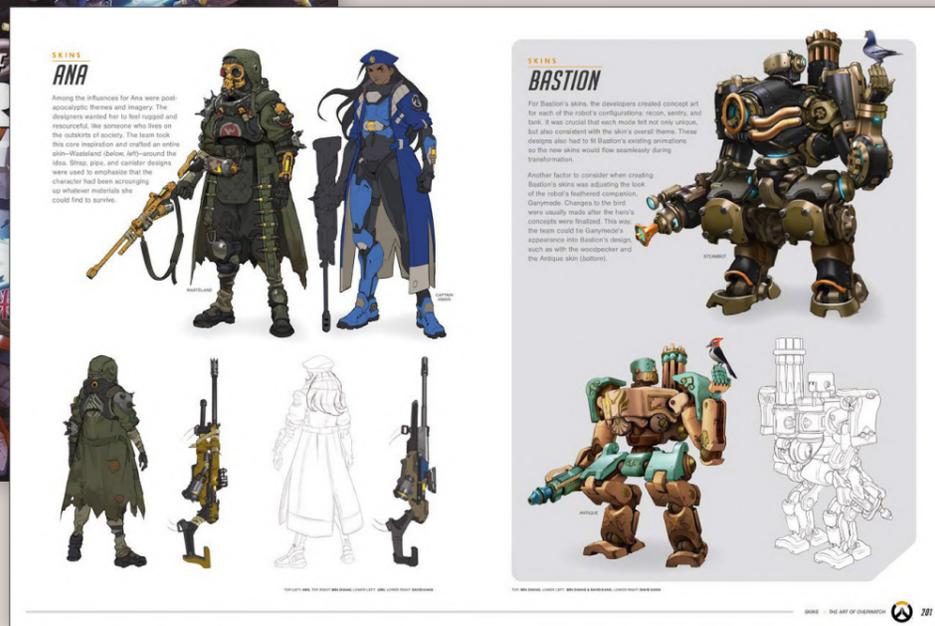
To take my concept a bit further, I started to create more elaborate sketches. I picked my favorite weapons out of the ideas I had and created more detailed designs. These designs are greatly inspired by my love for Overwatch. Overwatch is the shooter game I have played the most and the one where I experienced the most harassment. I also own a book containing all the art of the game. I love art books and finding out the origins behind characters so I own quite a few concept art books myself. I used them as inspiration to create these weapon designs.

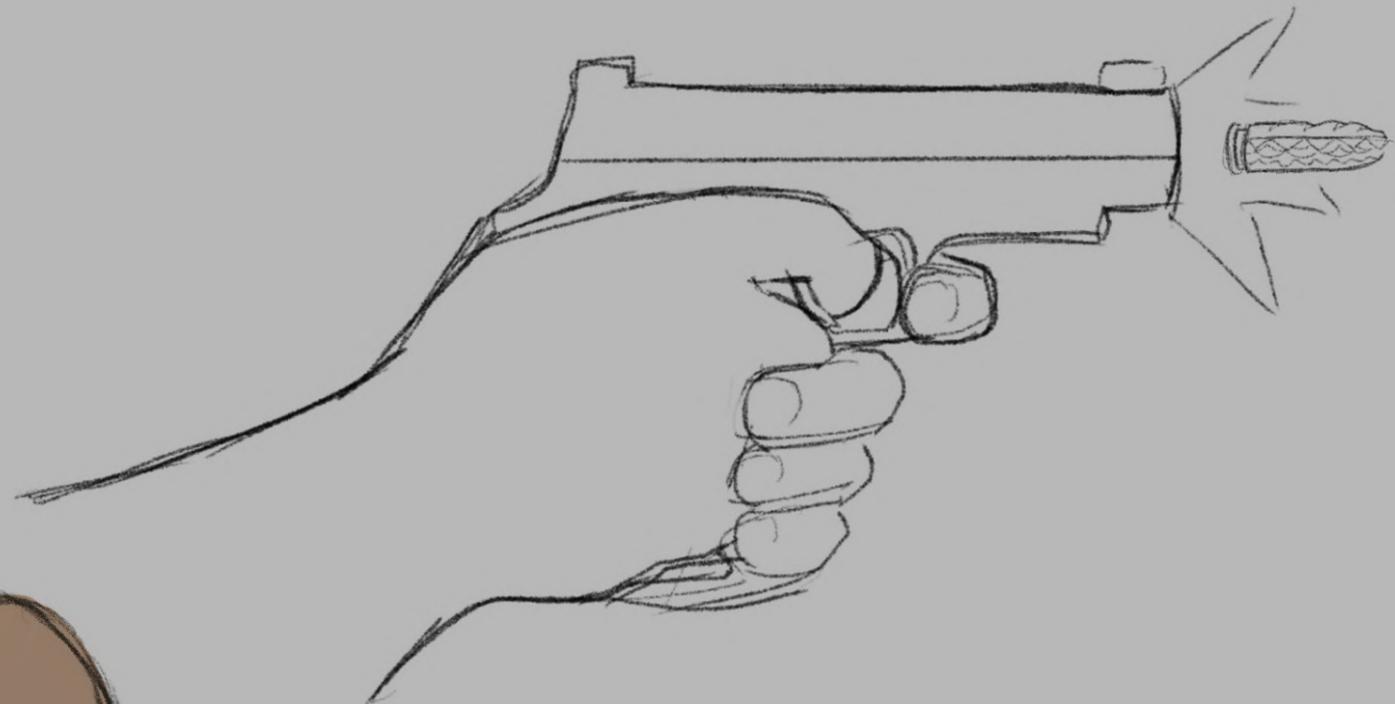
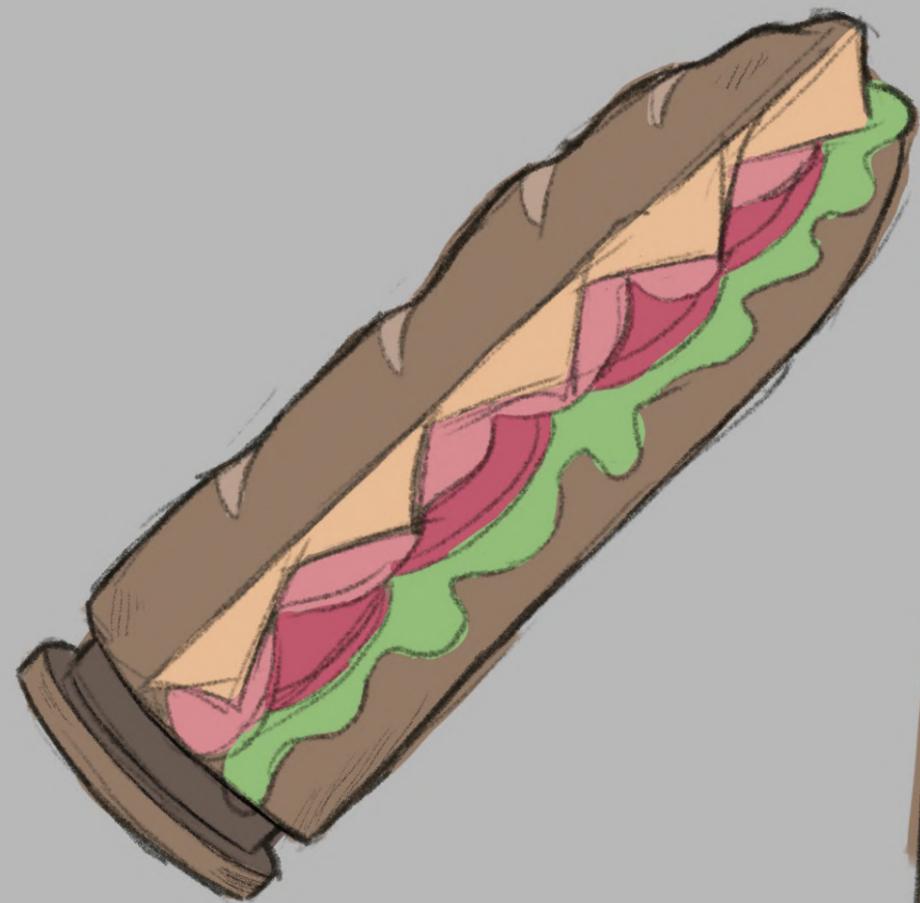
I've always liked drawing and digital illustrations and there was no better way of incorporating it into my project than by sketching the weapons myself.

The results were 3 different designs. The bullet sandwich from my first draft I kept, really spoke to the imagination and quickly connects with female gamers. They understand quite well how it relates to the 'go back to the kitchen and make me a sandwich' comment. Besides the sandwich-inspired bullet, I also looked into what other objects I could find in the kitchen. I created the sketch of the cutting board shield and bread knife because they are both involved in the process of sandwich making and can be found in the kitchen.



Examples of characters and weapons from art books, used as inspiration for sketches and design





# MAKE ME A SANDWICH

A M M O

Sketches I made on my Ipad based on the first photoshop concepts.

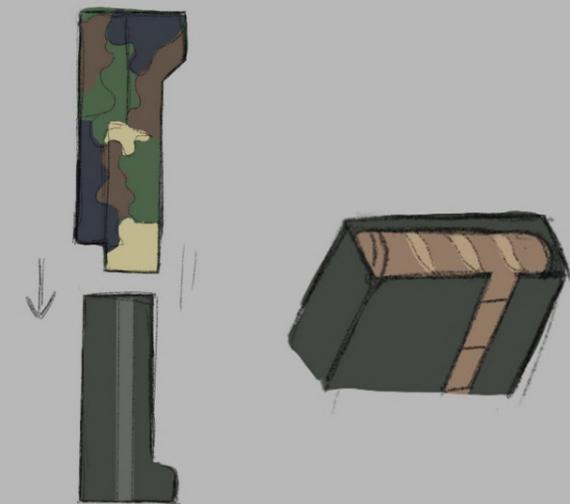


# MAKE ME A SANDWICH

CUTTING  
BOARD SHIELD

# MAKE ME A SANDWICH

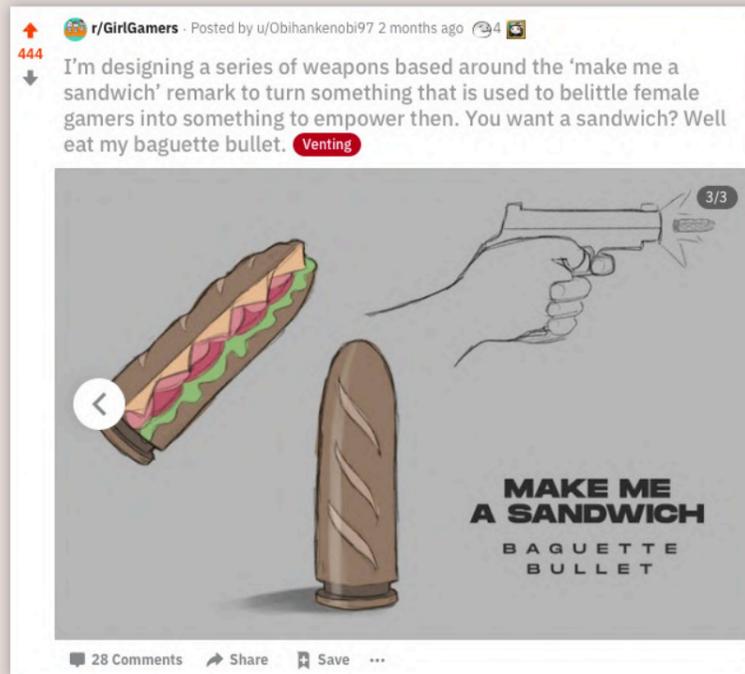
BREAD KNIFE



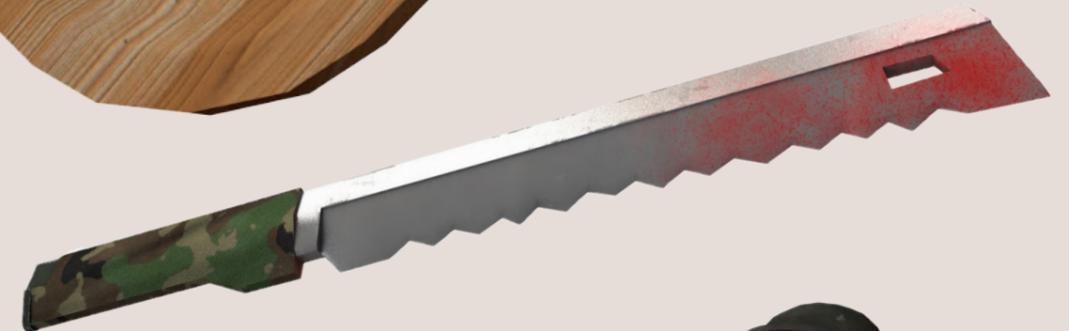
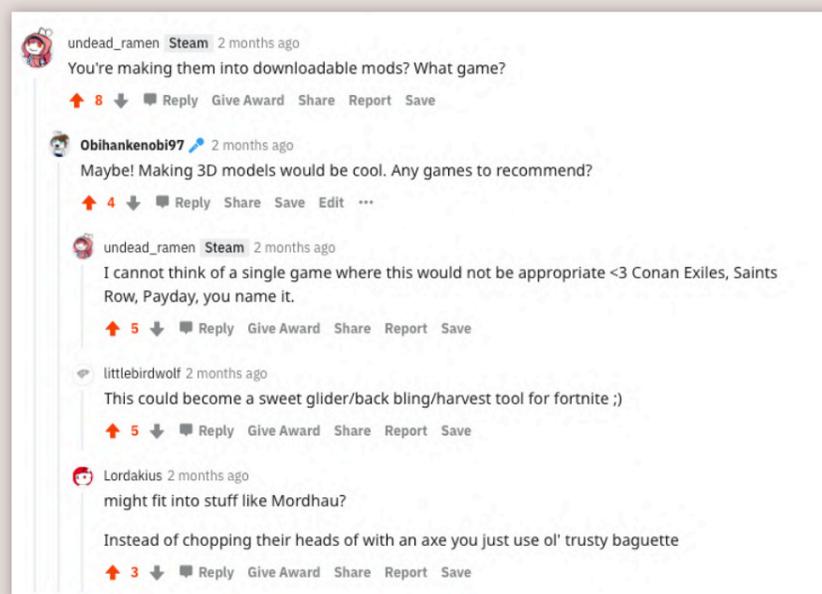
## 3D modeling - Marco den Uijl

After posting my sketches on Reddit, I got overwhelming positivity and motivation to make my weapon designs a reality. I really wanted to use the virtual environment of gaming for my weapon series. I wanted to bring my sketches to life and show them in the game world itself. An appropriate way for doing this by using 3D modeling, which is also a technique applied in gaming design. It gives the possibility of integrating the model into an engine and exploring the design from multiple perspectives.

Because I have little experience I worked together with a second-year animation student, Marco. A student with already a lot of experience with 3D modeling and animation. He made the models very quickly and even added texture, color, and lighting.



I posted my sketches on the subreddit 'Gamer Girls' and received a lot of support from women liking the project. They recommended me to make mods.

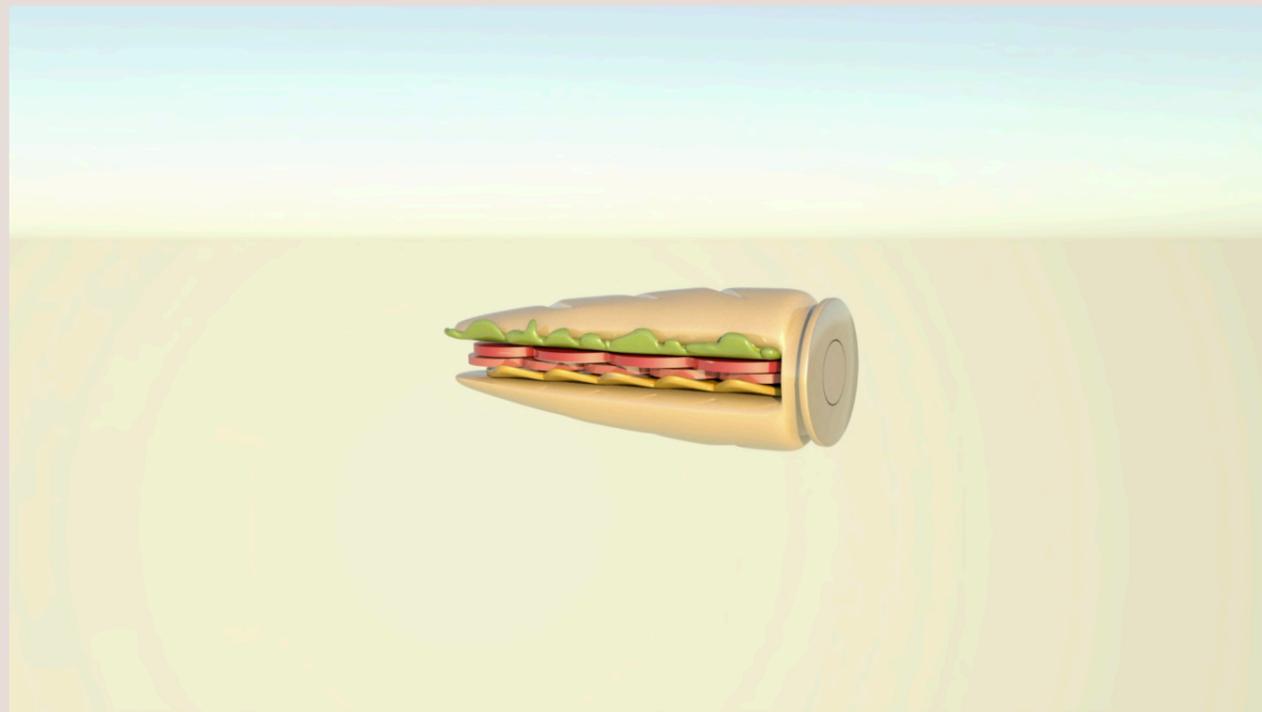
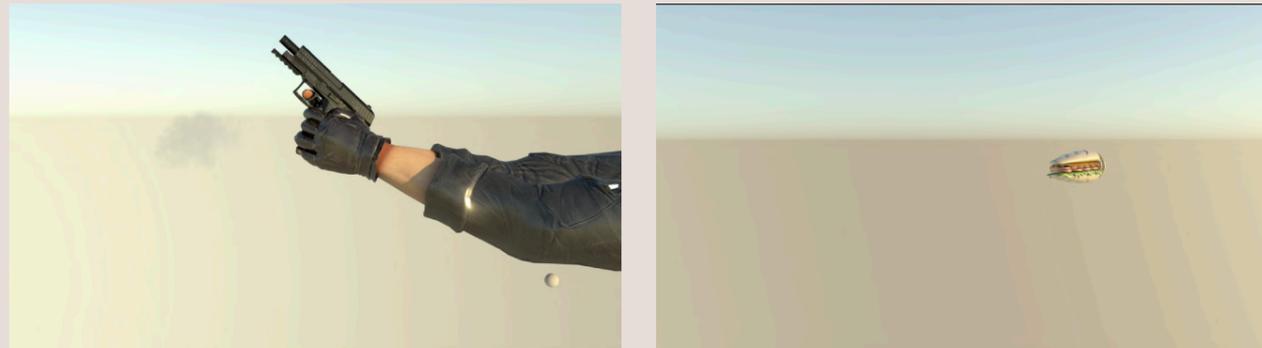


A Counter-Strike soldier holding some of the weapons.

## Animation - Emma van Wanrooij

To take it a step further, I wanted the models to be used in a setting that relates more closely to that of a shooter game. I got the feedback that for people that don't game it's not clear that it relates to gaming. Since Marco was already very experienced, I took up contact with first years who could use the experience of 3D modeling.

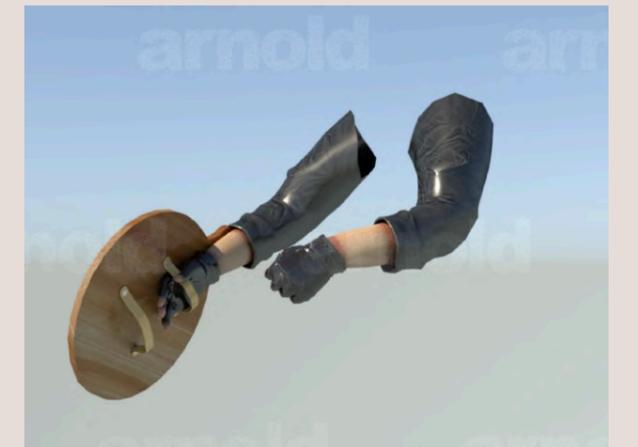
The first-years have the assignment at the end of the year to help graduate students. There, I recruited Emma, who related to my project and is a gamer herself. I briefed her to make the animation look like a first-person setting. She also made a slow-mo shot of the bullet being fired from the gun and an emote in which the shield is thrown up in the air.



Slow-mo shot bullet sandwich fired from a gun



First person view with the bread knife



Shield animation: being thrown up in the air and caught again

## Sprays and stickers

I explored my idea of the weapons further, how could them integrate it into a game and empower women right now? Since the weapons are more of a type of symbolism.

Some games have very active communities in the making of stickers and sprays. Stickers can be used in Counter-Strike, for example, to be proudly displayed on your weapon of choice. These are provided by both the developers and the community itself. You can design a sticker and put it in the Steam workshop, if you can get enough votes, you have the chance of being voted into the game.

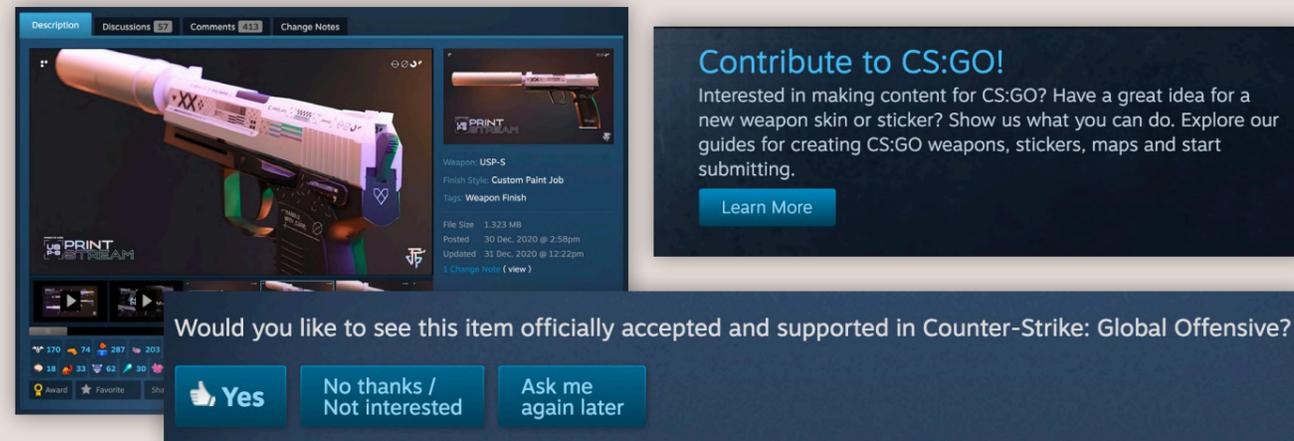
### Steam workshop

If I want to get attention, I have to get my designs into an existing game. The Steam Workshop was the perfect tool for this. Here, any user can submit designs and get voted for having a great design. Especially in Counter-Strike, a game widely known for its sexism, it is very popular to submit your own stickers, graffiti, skins, and maps.

Sprays are equal to graffiti, they are illustrations and sentences that can be sprayed on walls on a game map, to leave a little souvenir of you being there. There are often specific sprays for specific characters and you can equip multiple at the same time, as is done in Overwatch.

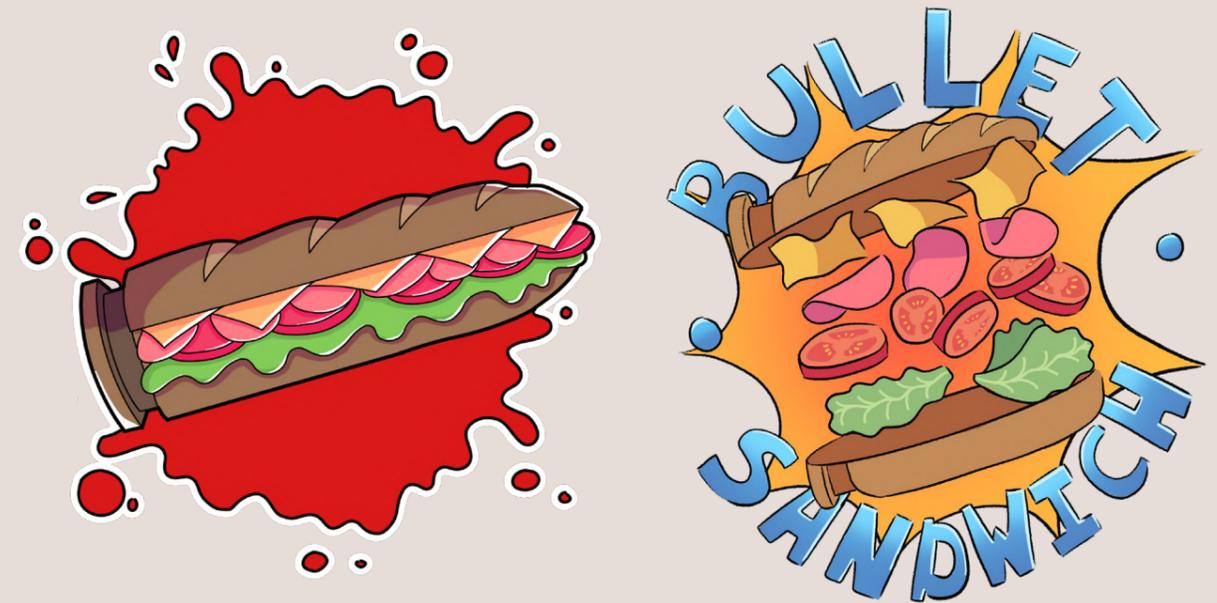
I used my own digital illustration skills to design stickers based on the weapon concepts I made. I tried out several different styles within the process.

I plan to make some nice designs based on my weapons and getting them voted into the game. In the coming time, I want to gather a community and start a social media campaign and collaborate with streamers to get my stickers inside the game.



### Cartoon

The first style I tried was a cartoon style. In gaming and for my project I want to stand out, and by using bright colors and cartoon-inspired graphics you attract more viewers.



### Inspiration



**Graphic**

The second style I tried was more realistic and inspired by Overwatch and Valorant. This is more graphic-based rather than cartoon. It showcases the use of shapes and clean coloring instead of the use of painting.

This style is very visually appealing and aesthetic wise a good choice. But it isn't very powerful or immediately clear what it is about.



**Inspiration**



**Graffiti/spray**

Lastly, I looked into sprays and graffiti. This is more of a rebellious/movement kind of style. For inspiration, I looked at existing protests and movies. Since the issue is quite serious, this style would be very suitable for some kind of underground movement.



**Inspiration**



# Documentary

The documentary is a way of connecting with people outside of the gaming world. Within communities, the abuse is already clear and a common topic of discussion. However, in the real world, people are not aware. To explain how this cycle of abuse and harassment works and to explain the structural exclusion of female gamers, I have made a short documentary.

I've divided the documentary into 3 categories: Gamertag, XP, and GG. Gamertag stands for the identity of female gamers; how do the women feel about the stereotype of gamergirls and the sexualization around it. XP has two meanings. XP stands for experience, meaning the experience of the female gamers, but also for Experience Points, which indicates a character's level. This references how women are often thought to be bad at gaming, being less experienced than their male counterparts.

GG means Good Game, which is something that is said at the end of the match to be sportsmanlike and say it was a good match. However, GG is also said ironically when the other team was at a clear disadvantage. I've chosen GG because harassment leads to women quitting online gaming, so it's the end of the match for them and they've lost the battle. Also because of the irony, it's not a good game at all. It also indicates the last part of the documentary.

The documentary was, besides being made for educational purposes, a way to empower female gamers. Inside the gaming world, there isn't much room to have a voice within the power dynamic. With the documentary, I am giving the women a podium to speak their mind and openly talk about their experiences and how it bothers them.

## Interviews

The documentary consists of the interviews I have conducted for the research paper, to let gamers talk about their experiences. They were all asked the same questions and the interview is basically a compilation of various answers to give insight into these experiences and how they can differ from each other. They are telling the story and I use my research paper and gaming knowledge to explain it to the viewer, where do these stereotypes come from and how are they connected.

I dug up old contacts from my gaming days and wondered how their experience was when they played online. I asked all interviewees the same set of questions and used the answers to create small compilations. I wanted a bit of variation in the types of people I interviewed. Julia, Selma, and Max were all people I knew from when I was on active in Overwatch. I wanted to interview Max as well to have a male perspective on the situation, but I give him very little screen time in documentary so the focus is on the women.

## Highlights docu



Documentary intro: you can see someone clicking a mouse and starting up a game, while hearing excerpts from verbal abuse. Later revealed to be me gaming. The clicking you hear in the background is a recording I did while gaming. I play very aggressively, hence the loud mouse clicking.



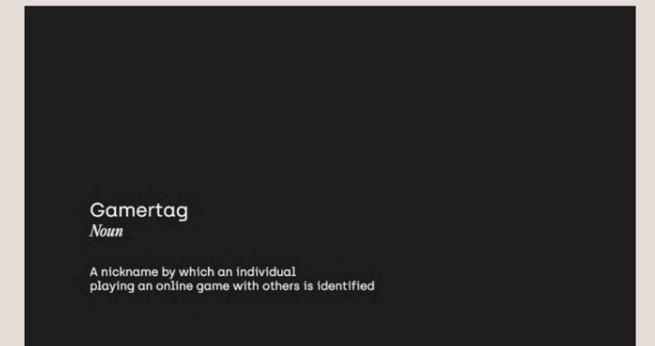
Many women quit because they don't feel welcome. The intro ends with me clicking the yes button to quit the game. This also hints at my personal experience of quitting because of harassment.



Throughout the documentary I show clips of news articles and research papers to strengthen my case of game sexism being part of a bigger structure.



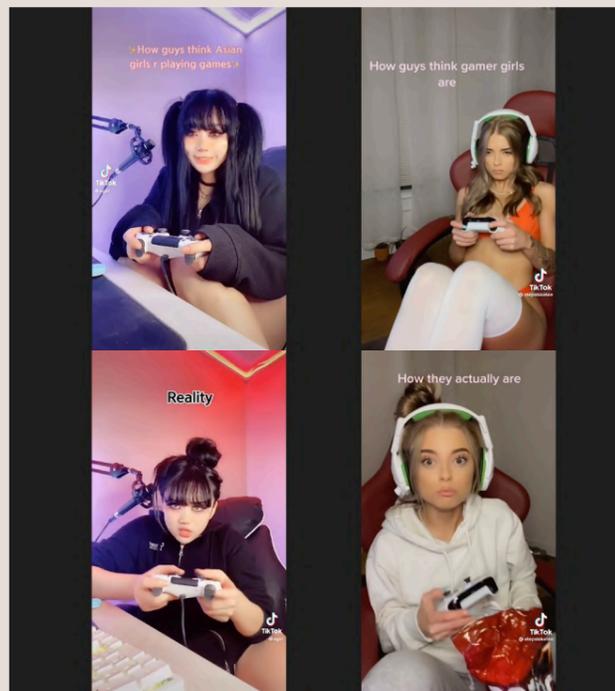
During my research I stumbled upon forums where women were venting and asking for advice. I put shots of these in my documentary to show how my experiences were reflected by others.



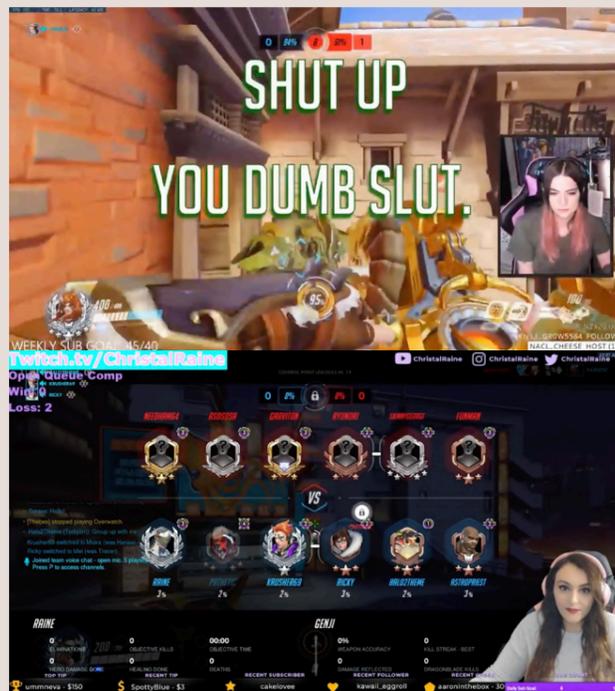
Gamers have their own language, I explain terms by showing dictionary definitions of them. This is very important for non-gamers to understand the documentary.



I have interviewed various female gamers including the female Overwatch team 'Leo's Angels', they form a huge part of the commentary. Because they are pros, they have dealt with the most harassment.



As of late, gamers are reappropriating the gamergirl stereotype. A trend such as 'Gamergirl check' is a good example of this.



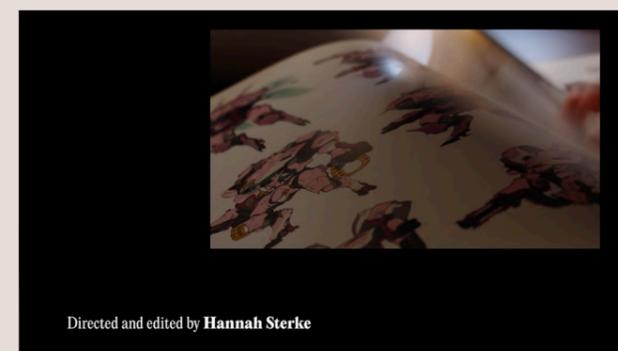
Throughout the documentary, I introduce types of harassment women hear and their origins. After every stereotype introduction I also edited in clips of women experiencing them. so the viewer can see the evidence and hear how stupid it is that it's happening.



Videogames are still seen as a boys' activity, which is a very old-fashioned image. This is reflected by comments women get such as 'get back to the kitchen' and 'women can't game'. I wanted to compare these comments by showing it side-by-side with sexist vintage advertisements.



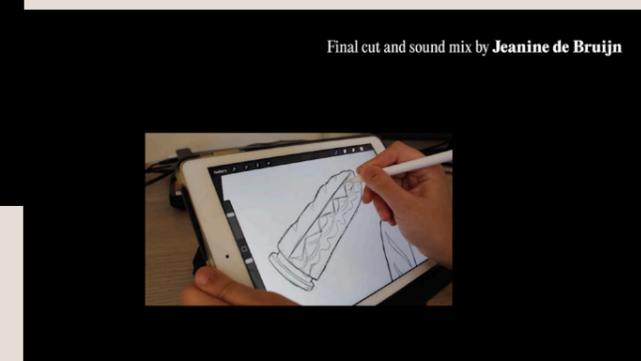
It is normalized in our society that women are categorized as pink and the boys are blue. This is also reflected in marketing and during Christmas for example. The boys get the Playstation and the girls get the Barbie Dolls. I edited in clips of Christmas unboxing videos to show how these types of gender roles are already forced upon you from a young age.



Directed and edited by **Hannah Sterke**

The documentary ends with the credits accompanied by shots of me designing the weapons. It starts with me going through pages of my game concept art books. The next shot is me sketching the weapons and the last shots feature animations by the animation students I collaborated with and some stickers designs, to wrap it all up nicely and hint at my further practice projects.

As accompanying audio, I included reactions to the weapons and stickers. During the interviews I asked the women what they thought about the designs and they responded positively. So it was appropriate to include it in the documentary.



Final cut and sound mix by **Jeanine de Bruijn**

The documentary ends on a commentary by Selma who says that if you're in a position of power such as a developer or studio, you should put out statements. This was purposely put at the end to leave the viewer with an afterthought. I want to send the documentary to studios and gaming companies as well, so this is a way to speak to them indirectly.

## Why 3 seperate things?

The gaming world is something that makes a lot of sense for gamers themselves, but not so much for others. Gamers have their own type of language, way of behaving and design that appeals to them. An obstacle I came across during my project was the alienation of non-gamers. They would see the weapons I made and not really make the connection to the problem at hand. I wanted to reach as many people as possible. To both raise awareness among non-gamers, and give the female gamers actual tools. Hence, I wanted to divide my project into multiple parts.

### Part 1: weapons

The weapons were a great way of visualizing the harassment and reappropriating the saying of 'go back to the kitchen', but it's also more of a symbolism rather than something that could actually be used. It is quite hard to model weapons for a game engine, let alone get it into an existing game.

### Part 2: stickers

The stickers are a way to actually integrate usable tools into an existing game. By making clever use of the steam workshop, I can actually give the women something to fight back against the sexism and leave a mark inside the gaming space itself.

### Part 3: mini-documentary 'Go back to the kitchen'

To explain how the sexism works and explain certain terms, I made a short documentary consisting of the anecdotes of the interviews I have conducted and voice-overs elaborating on the sexism and their origins.

# Future *plans*

## **Expanding**

I feel like 'Operation Sandwich' is really at its starting point and has potential to be so much more. Video games have so many great features that could be utilized to expand my project.

### *More weapons*

As of now, I have 3 different designs based on sandwiches and/or things that can be found in the kitchen, but I feel like there is much more to explore.

### *Modding*

Modding is a technique of applying your own models and designs to an existing game, 'mod' stands for modification. It's a way to alter what is already there or to add to it. As of late a lot of game companies offer the possibility of modding their games and even publish manuals how to go about it. When I posted my designs on Reddit already a few games were suggested in which my weapons could be integrated. However, modding takes a lot of time and the right people. Hopefully, after graduation, I could work on turning the models into open-source downloadable files and create the opportunity for the community to use them.

### *Stickers*

I have created some sticker designs for Counter-Strike but it is not quite finished yet. Ideally, I want to create an entire range of stickers and hopefully collaborate with illustrators and the gaming community to really bring it to life. I want to set up a campaign and use social media to create a bigger reach or start some kind of crowdfunding before I publish it. I really want to get my stickers into the game, but that needs the right strategy, timing, and planning to be successful. Not many stickers get chosen by developers/community to actually be published inside the game itself.

### *Skins*

Besides stickers, it would be cool to also make some 'skins'. Skins are ways to change appearance of characters or weapons. In Counter-Strike for example it is done with illustrations on weapons, often with bright noticeable colors.

## *Collaborations*

Besides working together with animators and illustrators, it would be great to work together with streamers and gaming influencers to expand my reach with the weapons. They could showcase them and usher people into voting for my stickers and skins in the Steam workshop. Furthermore, I want to approach existing gaming companies and talk to them directly about my weapons. It could become an event for example, that the weapons are available for a few days and the proceeds could go towards fighting toxicity and mental health.

## *Wearables*

The weapons now exist in-game and as models, but taking it outside of the game into real life would be a nice step as well. As badges, pins or charms for your backpack. That would be way of creating more visibility and provoke discussion in real life as well.

For all these ideas I would need time and people. I've had a talk with 'voordekunst', which is an art funding initiative that helps you with starting a crowdfunding. I would love to turn this into a longterm project and actually create impact in the gaming community.

# Reflection

For a long time, I was looking for this was one interesting insight. A thing I realised was that sexism that takes place in the real world is very similar to what happens in the gaming world.

I really tried to push this and work my way around ideas only to realise that it wasn't working. From the start, I wanted to involve all these different kinds of aspects, but the more I added the less clear the research and the documentary became. I had too much material and had to strip down a lot.

In retrospect, I thought that now the research was too short but to be honest, it's better to have a short and to-the-point story and thesis instead of pages upon pages just adding unnecessary details distracting from the answer of my research. I wanted to research and expose this structure/pattern that I was starting to see and I feel like I achieved that in the end. There were some things that I would've liked to research further and add to the documentary. For example, where the toxic behavior stems from, but the more I delved into that the more I got into this downward spiraling rabbit-hole of sexism in society and it got very complicated.

In terms of practice, I'm really glad I picked the form of weapons. For a long time, I was scared of drawing and incorporating it into my projects, but it fit perfectly for this style. Brainstorming through drawing is my strong suit I discovered, and the weapon designs were the result of that.

The most time of the project was spent making the mini-documentary. I am definitely not a film maker and have no experience whatsoever, but I'm really glad I made that step. The more I worked on it, the more I started expanding and structuring. I tried to plan everything out beforehand but the best ideas came to me during the editing process and spontaneously grabbing a camera to film. A thing I did struggle with was that the documentary mostly consists of the interviews and I was scared that this wasn't interesting enough. Gradually I started adding more clips but it still mostly comes down to interviews. This was a good choice though, since the experience of these women is the reason for the documentary. It provides them with a stage to reclaim their voice. I also added clips inbetween with voice-overs explaining how certain game mechanics work. This creates both variety and explains to the [non-gamer]viewer what happens inside the game.

## Personal growth

For my graduation project, I got off to a very rough start. For over two months I dabbled with another subject that didn't quite fit me resulting in having somewhat of a breakdown. My teachers and SLC recommended me to take a break, to empty my mind and go do something I enjoyed. For a whole week, I sat down and gamed, which is a hobby I hadn't picked up in a long time. Gaming is something I've been doing my whole life, it's a part of who I am. Something personal but also something I had a love-hate relationship with.

This time of frustration due to my previous subject, was paired with me failing my last competency assessment, which overall revolves around who you are as an artist and how you want to define yourself in the near future. As a female gamer, I was met with many stereotypes growing up. 'You're a girl, girls don't game', 'you're doing this for attention', I would get dolls from family members while my brother would get the Playstation games. It made me self-conscious about my identity and honestly made me not want to discuss it at all. The only thing I focused on was showcasing skill, practicing, and proving the stereotype wrong.

This project was besides a way of empowering female gamers, a way for me to embrace who I was and come to terms with it. For a long time, I accepted that gaming was a boys' activity and that I was just a strange kid for liking it. I kept my mouth shut in voice chat as to not receive harassment. If I spoke up, I felt like I was overreacting and I judged other women because I thought they were doing it for attention. The interviews were such a great way to personally reflect and by discussing experiences you gain so much insight into what others go through and how they deal with it. You suddenly realise you are not the only one.

I've become proud of what I like and who I am. I am a nerd, a really big one.

