

Comedy and Gender: The Rhetoric of Feminist Comedy

Alizeh Jawaid

I am a lot of things. I am a woman, I am Pakistani, I am bisexual, I am a musician. Among that list of things, I am also a gamer. It's not like it's a massive part of my identity, some title I proudly bring up at any point I can. It's just part of who I am. Being a woman, especially a queer woman of color, and also being a gamer is a strange paradox that I find many men (mainly those who are straight and white) are unable to comprehend. I was 14 when I first started to play video games, right when the pandemic hit. To fill the time I would otherwise spend talking with friends at school, I started to make friends over Minecraft instead. Minecraft was probably the first video game I started playing seriously. I would join competitive fighting servers, ones with millions of players all pitted against each other. Unless you were in a guild. I was invited to one by the name of 'Bad Manners', which was in the top 100 guilds in the entire server (wildly impressive, by the way). While everyone was kind to me, a large chunk of them were either only kind with the intention of getting something out of me. They saw me as a conquest. An even larger chunk of them saw me as a "cool girl", an epiphany I recently had.

As the "cool girl," they felt inclined to make jokes constantly about women. This included jokes as miniscule as "girls can't game" and got as serious as "I bet girls like to be raped." I had so much power over them, as I was an admin in this guild and was able to ban and silence people at my will. I was so young, but so above them, but I still felt as if I couldn't do anything. Fourteen and afraid, I struggled to speak up. Sure, I wanted them to like me, but they also managed to find my social media accounts from nothing but my first name. I felt like I couldn't speak up, so I didn't. Instead, I just sat there and dealt with it. I was like a deer in headlights.

The moment most embedded in my memory happened when I was 15, Halloween of 2020. We chose to watch *Us*, a film by Jordan Peele that features a world where shadows are human as well. I hosted a movie night for everyone. We all joined a call with no hesitation and prepared for the horror that awaited us. The first few minutes of the film featured a ton of bunnies, to which I told my so-called friends that I loved bunnies. I called them cute, as most people would. Instead of agreeing, I watched a message pop up in the chat that read "I bet Alizeh is a rope bunny." I swear I felt my heart shatter into a million pieces. I felt rage, I felt discomfort, I felt disappointment. Instead, I just forced out a laugh so they wouldn't press on it even further.

Rope bunny is a sexual term, one that I would rather not dive into here. It is something that I would never *ever* call a child. To do that is disgusting. The man who called me it (yes, *man*, as in grown) was 19 years old and someone I considered close. It was a moment that I think I will always remember. It was a wakeup call that as much as I wanted to, I would never fit in with this community. I would never be viewed as equal by other people who played video games, all on the basis of my gender. Yes, this all happened online, but it still left a scar. I remember staying silent for the duration of the movie because of how upset I was. I couldn't leave or be audibly upset, though, because that would break my title of "cool girl." I'd become the stereotype they were all waiting for me to show. I'd be deemed the bitch they all hated so much.

I didn't realize how damaging and unhealthy this was for a teenage girl until I was 16. At that point, I decided to distance myself from the group instead of standing up. Backing down from the fight was easier than arming myself. I stayed in a couple of groups with them but chose not to talk. I had some friends from that same guild that were kind and respectful and treated me as they would any other. They also agreed that a good chunk of the guild made unacceptable remarks, and so one of them, Nicko, and I decided to write a long, detailed message about their behaviors on the cusp of my 17th birthday. It was harsh, but I do not regret it. I explained to them that their behaviors are not only rude, but also borderline predatory, and that the comments they often made towards me were absolutely vile. I then blocked them all on everything.

To this day, I still get message requests from them. I still get murmurs from mutual friends that tell me I was deemed an overdramatic feminist. If that's what I am, I will wear that title with pride. It's much more empowering than the title "cool girl," which they often use against me now. They will say that I am an outlier, and that their jokes are funny because they know cool girls who find their humor funny. I guarantee that those women, like me, are just afraid to speak up. I guarantee that one day they will. It's only a matter of time until they have the same epiphany I did.