

Three Words I Said to the Man I Defeated in Gears of War That I'll Never Say Again

By Patricia Hernandez

"I raped you."

If words could lynch someone, then this was the moment for it. The post-game scoreboard said I had technically won, so I'd shown them all, right? No, no I hadn't. The avalanche of trash talk was one thing—you play online enough, you come to expect it—but the laughter, the laughter stripped meaning from my victory. The laughter made me feel like I was shrinking, like I was in danger of disappearing at any moment.

Again.

"I raped you."

The words weren't coming from them. No, they were coming from me. Me. The rape survivor. I was the one saying those words, which now hung tremulously in the air after they failed to find a target. Shaking, I got up from my seat and turned the Xbox off.

At one point, those three words were a little girl's parroting, an attempt to puff my chest and make it seem like I was tough enough to roll with the rowdiest, nastiest of them all. I, too, was one of the boys—see?! It almost seems like the words crept up on me, really—I can't tell when I started using them, but they quickly became a part of my daily language. I didn't win things, no, I 'raped' them—raped people, too. The phrase became compulsion, knee-jerk.

How did that happen? How did I come to sling that idea, which was of the worst experiences of my life, so nonchalantly at others?

I've been raped a number of times, by a number of different people. It was always different, but it was always the same in one important, crucial way. Rape, in my personal experience, was the literal manifestation of a power dynamic. My aggressor was physically assaulting me, yes, but more than that, he was 'metaphorically' subjugating me. To rape someone, after all, is to lack respect for someone as a human being enough that consent is no longer necessary.

I know that. And yet...

That match. Something about it made me break. For them, this was just another milking match in Gears of War 3 where one poor sap—that'd be me—decided to brave the odds. My teammates had abandoned me after a lackluster first round in an attempt to protect their precious K/D ratio. They were convinced that the other team was superior, so it didn't make sense to waste time with a hopeless match. Might as well take the penalty for leaving a game and go find a match where we stood a chance, instead.

I couldn't leave though.

For starters, I'm an extremely competitive person—in this ranked gametype, I was one of the top one hundred players in the world. They'd seen that to start off. That was the reason that I became a person of interest, someone to look out for just in case I posed a threat. Once the pre-game banter made it obvious that I was a woman, it was like Sam, my character, now had a bullseye painted across her forehead. A decision was taken: they were going to make an example of me.

Fine. While they were busy homing in on me, going for the kills, I'd go for the objective. This happens all the time regardless of game; while a team is too preoccupied with something stupid, I'd just stay focused, play it straight and win. Whatever.

There's something 'special' about Gears of War, though. When you don't fully kill someone, they go into a state called 'Down But Not Out.' This state is when a character model goes on all fours. Like teabagging in Halo, a new, unintended dynamic arose in multiplayer: players would take downed characters and pretend to rape them.

Playing games can bring the Hyde out in many of us. Well-mannered, sometimes meek friends in an intense setting will transform into someone else, temporarily. They'll don an entirely different demeanor, and spit disgusting, vitriolic words with passion, with gusto. The more ridiculous the string of words, the more amusing it could be when you stop to listen to yourself. I mean, most of the time, it's 'harmless,' just a natural spirit that arises from competition.

Or, so I wanted to think. It's easier to not feel accountable for your actions and words when everyone is doing the same thing, isn't it?

And me, there was something about my experiences with rape that facilitated the way I acted, too—not that I was aware of it at the time. Here's my deep dark secret: after the rapes, I felt completely worthless. What the hell did I care anymore? I had already been broken. I didn't feel like I have a reason to push back against 'rape culture' because I wasn't worth fighting for anymore. Who gives a shit?

So yeah. I "rape" things. What of it? What are you gonna do? That was my attitude. It wasn't until a friend heard me say it that everything changed.

"I raped everyone."

I was smiling, but when my friend looked at me like I had just murdered a small child, the smile vanished. Oh.

Oh.

Crap. She was a rape survivor, too, you see. I understood, then. Everything fell into place. Maybe I didn't feel like I was worth anything, maybe I didn't value myself anymore, but this friend, she was dear to me. I loved her. I needed to change what I said—if not for myself, for her sake.

Back to that match. As my friends left, it became easier and easier for the other team to gang up on me—and why wouldn't they? Not only did they want to make me feel less than nothing, I was the only one left. The rest of my team were mindless, aimless computer-controlled AI. Ideally, the match would be entirely against AI, because that made it easier for players to boost points online—the bots are too dumb to provide any resistance. Boosting would help improve their rank, so many players try to make entire teams leave if possible. So this was their attempt to try to make me leave, too. The fact that I wouldn't just leave made their resolve that much steelier, made them that much bolder.

So there I was, my counter steadily rising as I was winning, but I was almost perpetually surrounded by an entire team of players who decided they'd take every opportunity to pretend to rape me. At first, it didn't phase me—the rape thing was a normal part of playing Gears online, really. Hell, even I did it (!), sometimes. It's kind of a part of the 'culture,' as problematic as it is to say.

Matches didn't usually take this long, though. The other team was good, and as proficient as I was, there was only one of me. After a couple dozen grating 'sessions' of it, I was wearing down. And that wasn't all; they were sending me messages, too, asking me how I liked it, egging me to leave.

I refused.

Instead of backing down, all the theatrics just made me that much more determined to win. I was going to show them. They weren't going to get the best of me. And on the chance that they still beat me, I'd walk out feeling like the better 'man,' because I stuck it through instead of cutting and running like my friends.

I tried sending messages back to them, to let them know my spirit was still in it. I took every opportunity to perform 'executions' on them, which are lavish, indulgent QTE kill sequences. An arm ripped off here, a head golfed off there. I wanted to express my superiority in the 'right' way. See, I was trying to be better about the way I carried myself in games. I was in the middle of finding alternatives to the things I said online, and was trying to stop performing the pseudo-rape, too. I wanted to do right by the people I cared about.

One of those players got under my skin, though. The ring leader. Towards the end of the match, all I could feel was anger, but Gears of War can be a frustrating game on its own. It was after he sent me a message of himself cackling, that I snapped. That was it. I found him, cornered him, and, screw it all, I wanted to make it clear to him that he would not hold power over me. I downed him, and instead of mercifully killing him, my character raped his.

That unnerved me. And when I won, I was so disheveled that I wanted my words to feel like lacerations. I wanted my voice to burn them through the headset.

"I raped you. I fuckin' raped you."

What I said is troubling, especially because the way I was saying it, I wanted to make it clear the sentiment wasn't figurative. I wanted them to have some vague semblance of the actual experience: that was just how upset I was. I wanted to make it clear that I had destroyed them, because that's what rape represented in my mind. Someone destroying someone else.

But they just laughed. It didn't mean a thing, it wasn't something that would 'register' or even something that could be used against them.

The power dynamic was already set in place before the match even started, and it wasn't in my favor. Trash talk makes it obvious that the implicit understanding of the language of dominion isn't just sexualized. It's gendered. That power struggle is culturally understood to be a man versus woman thing, even though rape doesn't just happen to women. Most of the slurs of choice point toward the same thing. Someone is a bitch, they're a faggot—feminine—and if you beat someone, then you raped them. The imagery there for most of us will be the same: a man physically assaulting a woman, not the other way around.

That's the tragic thing about rape and its surrounding culture. It's not just that it's so potent as an image of power dynamics, but that that potency also has the ability to pull even survivors like me into using it against others. It's not just what I did in Gears of War. There's plenty of other things that I've been guilty of in the past, before I started giving a damn—like slut shaming, like thinking that a woman could 'ask for it.'

I can't help but ask myself, then. Who really won that match? Me, who completed the objectives successfully? Or them, who, despite as hard as I tried, made me complicit in the rape culture that has taken so much away from me?