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A pure meritocracy blind to identity

Exploring the Online Responses to All-Female Esports Teams in Reddit

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ABSTRACT

Despite recent growth and popularity, esports as a scene is struggling with a number of problems ranging from payment problems and cheating to questionable treatment based on various factors such as race and gender. In this paper we seek to uncover how perceptions of women in esports are guided by stereotypes

of all-female teams and ‘female professional players’. Our data consists of 952 Reddit comments on two announcements of all-female teams in *League of Legends* and *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. The nature of esports was perceived as a working meritocracy where only player skill matters. Especially all-female teams were seen to be a threat to this order, since they were considered to lack dedication and have ulterior motives for playing the game. Ultimately, getting to visibly exist as a woman in the scene was a reward for compliance in the esports meritocracy: exhibiting skill, playing in mixed teams, and tolerating harassment.

Keywords

esports, female gamers, all-female teams, professional players

INTRODUCTION: WOMEN’S ROLE IN COMPETITIVE GAMING AND ESPORTS

In this study, we seek to uncover how the esports-networked public receives women as professional and casual players into the scene. Rather than directly studying women or women’s experiences in esports (Vesterby, 2005; Beavis and Charles, 2007; Taylor et al., 2009; Ratan et al., 2015; Cote, 2017), we are researching how women are perceived as esports players by the esports community. Our aim is to uncover stereotypes and perceptions that stick to two concepts in particular, which we call the ‘all-female team’ and ‘female professional player’, in the eyes of mainly male esports audiences and fans (Newzoo, 2017; Superdata, 2018).

Women have always taken part in esports. For as long as games have catered for player versus player, there have also been initiatives aimed at creating more women-friendly spaces and women-only teams and tournaments. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (1998) introduced the ‘‘girls’ game movement’ as a relevant participant in the 90s competitive gaming culture, and

in 2013, Gabriela Richard and Christopher Hoadley further established PMS Clan as the largest and most renowned ‘female-oriented’ gaming group since the 2000s. They also point out that the members of the clan felt highly connected to gaming, despite varying levels of skill. Industry interest in recruiting for and sponsoring women-only competitive teams is likewise already reported in Janelle Brown’s article from 1997, which introduces PMS and CrackWhore (another all-female gaming clan from the 90s) as ‘all-girl Quake (1996) clans’ aggressively disclosing their gendered identity in the male-dominated world of Quake. Furthermore, Tore Vesterby describes a female division in the 2004 Electronic World Sports Cup (Counter-Strike) in his 2005 dissertation on professional Danish female Counter-Strike (2000) and Liquidpedia.net records 2003 as the earliest instance of a public professional women’s tournament in Counter-Strike (liquidpedia.net).

Regardless of this indisputable role in the history of competitive gaming, women have remained a minority, especially as professional and semi-professional players. While studying women’s roles in the 2008 competitive LAN tournament scene of *Halo 3* (2001), Nicholas Taylor, Jen Jenson and Suzanne de Castell (2009) found that women were mostly relegated to various supportive roles familiar in the world of traditional sports; the ‘cheerleaders’ cheering on their sons’ or boyfriends’ teams, and helping them monetarily, or the ‘booth babes’ advertising gaming products to the assumed straight male audience. The rare women who were competing in the tournaments risked being labelled as ‘halo hoes’ who only play the game to get attention from male gamers (Taylor et al., 2009).

A decade later, women can increasingly be found as casual players and streamers in esports titles, and in the audiences, as both spectating and betting on esports (Gainsbury et al., 2017), but the public face of the scene remains male. Major tournaments are open to all players, yet women rarely play in them. Although women-only tournaments and leagues are becoming more widely

available, they tend to be low-level competitions. Even when played in conjunction with major open tournaments and carrying the same name, women-only tournaments have smaller prize pools and are often played exclusively online.

Professional female players that have appeared on the esports scene, such as Maria “Remilia” (formerly also known as Remi and Sakuya) Creveling in the 2016 North American league of *League of Legends* (2009) (*LoL* onwards), have largely been signed by low-tier teams, and found little success in official championship tournaments – although exceptions to the rule exist, such as *StarCraft II* World Championship 2012 North American champion, Sasha “Scarlett” Hostyn. Reluctance or trouble in signing women as professional players is still apparent, such as when the *Overwatch* (2016) premier esports league launched on 10th of January 2018 without any female players, despite team managers and spokespeople widely endorsing the equal treatment of women in the scene in the hope of signing women and women-only teams under their ranks (Beck, 2018). Some progress was made a few months after the launch when South Korean, Kim “Geguri” Se-yeon was signed by the Shanghai Dragons and debuted on April 5th 2018 as the first female player on the league (Morrison, 2018).

Recent increasing interest in esports in the US collegiate sports scene may help women’s position in the future, as esports can offer US universities and colleges relatively easy opportunities to better comply with Title IX requirements if they actively promote esports for women or establish women-only teams (McTee, 2014; Kane & Spradley, 2017; Keiper et al., 2017). Despite such future possibilities, the larger growth of esports into a highly profitable market does not come without problems. Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell argue that instead of helping, “new and emerging economies of gameplay [...] threaten a further entrenchment of gendered relations” (2018, 1). Thus, it continues to be important to look into how women are received into esports,

in order to assess how they can have a fair shot at reaching more central roles in the scene.

DATA AND METHOD

In November 2015 and June 2016, Team YP (owned by YouPorn, pornographic video sharing website) announced their sponsorship for two new esports teams comprising solely of female professional players in *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (2012) (*CS:GO* onwards) and *LoL*, respectively. News articles of both announcements (Juillet, 2015; Cocke, 2016) were posted on the social media site and forum, Reddit.com, in the two games' respective subreddits r/GlobalOffensive (November 13, 2015) and r/leagueoflegends (June 13, 2016). The general contents of the articles followed very closely the contents of the actual Team YP announcements (Team YP, 2015; Team YP, 2016), establishing that such teams were now active, had been playing in women-only tournaments and would henceforth be playing in mixed amateur tournaments. There was no mention of the monetary value of the sponsorships or the long-term goals of the teams. In the announcement of the all-female *CS:GO* team, YouPorn also announced their acquisition of an all-male *CS:GO* team.

These two comment threads were originally chosen as case studies for uncovering how a company producing pornographic content, that broke into the scene, was discussed by the contemporary online fan communities of esports games. However, it quickly became apparent that discussions such as whether YouPorn was an acceptable sponsor in esports was not a topic of interest to the community, in the least. Instead, what we did find were intense discussions of the players chosen by the sponsor. Especially the terms 'all-female team' and 'professional female player' were repeatedly raised and discussed by Reddit commenters. As a result, we found ourselves asking: how are women as esports players discussed in Reddit fan communities? What kind of perceptions and stereotypes are attached to women as players?

Stereotypes are commonly understood as generalized beliefs about a certain group of people, and while they might be useful in some situations, they can also be incorrect when applied to individuals, and can give rise to prejudice. They can also affect their targets in negative ways, by causing a situation where negative stereotypes add extra pressures on an individual and thus cause them to perform worse than their peers, even if they do not believe the stereotype themselves (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This effect has been shown to work with several different kinds of stereotypes concerning race (Steele & Aronson, 1995), social class (Croizet & Claire, 1998), gender (Spencer, Steele & Quinn, 1999), age (Lamont, Swift & Abrams, 2015) and other features.

The data comprises of the 3rd of August 2017 archived versions of the comment threads that ensued the posts. All in all, the two comment threads had over 1100 comments, of which 952 were accepted into the study. We excluded comments that had been removed or deleted, as we could not gain access to their content. The comment thread on r/leagueoflegends was significantly larger (910 comments used in study) than that of r/GlobalOffensive (42 comments used in study). The two threads also differed in composition: for example, over 40 percent of r/GlobalOffensive comments counted as jokes, whereas only 8 percent of comments in r/leagueoflegends did. Despite these differences, both comment threads were eager to discuss the ‘female professional player’ and ‘all-female team’ with great intensity, and shared a similar enthusiasm in sharing a different side to the story than the one presented in the news articles of the announcements.

In addition to the textual content of the comments, we considered their position in regard to other comments: whether they were part of a conversation between commenters, a reply to the original news article or a reference to other topical issues, stories or gags. Attention was also paid to what kind of comments had received most points from other users to figure out what kind of comments and opinions were considered popular. Reddit features a voting system where each user has the possibility to add a point (upvote)

or take a point (downvote) from discussion threads and individual comments. While up and downvoting in Reddit is supposed to be used to vote on content based on contribution to discussion (Reddit.com, 2017), at least in our experience it tends to be just as often used to vote on the basis of opinion.

While the opinions expressed in the two subreddits cannot be said to reflect those of the esports community as a whole, they certainly do give insight into general opinions and expectations of women in the scene. Especially the r/leagueoflegends subreddit has become the central venue for *LoL*-related discussion, heavily surpassing the official forums moderated by Riot Games on their own web domain. Threads containing over 900 comments are a common, daily occurrence. The thread's low number of total points (483) compared to its relatively high number of comments shows the controversiality of the subject. As a comparison, the highest number of points that a post in r/leagueoflegends subreddit has had is about 69,000 on an April fool's day thread about Riot Games giving Graves (a playable character in the game) back his cigar that Riot Games had earlier censored (SimplifyEUW, April 1st, 2017).

The opinions expressed by those commenting must also be understood in the context of Reddit and its scoring systems. Reddit is a link aggregation board that allows for and encourages discussion, and houses a number of dedicated communities. In her book, Adrienne Massanari (2015) describes the content on Reddit as a carnival, for one, where a single comment thread may contain anything and everything, from memes and puns to grotesque images, racist speech and sincere commentary. The community/ies reaffirms its culture through ritualistic retellings of stock answers, phrases and memes, and can be considered to participate in play while creating content and voting on it to gain points (Massanari, 2015, 19-25). The importance of voting is emphasised even further by Jenny Kennedy, James Meese and Emily van der Nagel, who list voting and the Reddit algorithm as the primary building blocks for Reddit culture (2016).

A highly-rated comment not only rises towards the top of the discussion thread, but also at the time of the two discussion threads (November 2015 and June 2016) posters were given a chance to earn a month or more of Reddit premium membership, called Reddit Gold. This membership could be awarded¹ by other Reddit members, as part of “a long-running tradition in the Reddit community as a way of saying ‘good job’ when someone provides a particularly insightful comment or funny post” (Bond, 2017). Thus, commenters are not merely sharing their opinions, but taking part in a discussion in which writing in an insightful, persuasive or funny way can become lucrative in multiple ways and currencies. In Craig Finlay’s research on what comments are successful in relation to a user’s karma, which is yet another score system within Reddit for individual users, there is a correlation between long and complex comments and a higher karma score (2014). Thus, although the Reddit community is the loudest community for LoL in particular, long and winding discussions are also directed by how Reddit works as a platform.

On the other hand, Massanari argues that Reddit culture can be described as geek masculinity, where technical expertise combined with “a white, able-bodied, young straight cisgendered male” is the norm (2015, 129). While both of the subreddits we studied prohibit “hateful language” (r/GlobalOffensive) or “hate speech” and “discriminatory language” (r/leagueoflegends), the threads we looked into did contain slurs and discriminatory comments towards minorities. While moderators may frequently remove such comments, this merely keeps the language civil while actual discriminatory opinions can be expressed as long as they are worded in a polite way.

Our research method consisted of two phases. In the first conventional content analysis phase (cf. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) the comments were read through individually and divided into sets by topics or functions, emerging from the comments themselves.

1. Since 2018 this gifting system is still in place albeit with some slight differences, such as the possibility of gifting an award without any premium membership time.

Comments that covered multiple topics or functions were counted into all of them. During this initial phase we identified eight different sets across the two threads that can be found in Table 1. In the second phase of the study we focused on identifying stereotypes and perceptions of women, and “all-female teams” and “female professional player” in particular, from the comments in context of the larger conversations they were part of, using close reading (cf. Brummett, 2009) as our primary method.

	Esport	Professional players	YouPorn as a sponsor	The all-female teams	Women's abilities	Women's experiences	Jokes	Miscellaneous/off topic
r/leagueoflegends	277	62	74	186	179	44	148	148
r/GlobalOffensive	5	13	12	3	2		19	2

Table 1: Number of comments divided into different topics for both threads.

We will first discuss how esports, gender segregation and women as potential professional players were discussed. Then we move on to the perceived skill difference between men and women and the suggested reasons behind it, and the reception that the announcements of these particular sponsorships got. Finally, we will focus on how the stereotypes were moulded by previous all-female teams' public appearances and the influences brought on by YouPorn as the sponsor. We end the paper with opinions and expressions of the few self-proclaimed professional or semi-professional female players in the comment threads.

DISCUSSIONS ON PROFESSIONAL PLAY, SKILL AND GENDER SEGREGATION IN ESPORTS

One of the most commonly occurring themes in the two threads was the commenters' comprehension of esports as a meritocracy. The commenters were very eager to proclaim how the scene of competitive play was ruled by skill, above all else. As one

commenter put it: “What I like about gaming is that it’s a pure meritocracy blind to identity” (ID 613). Another commenter stated that “[o]ne of the biggest appeals of esports is that literally anyone can play on the same field. Fat, thin, man, woman, muscular, doesn’t work out except when he picks up his Red Bull lol” (ID 532). Overall, we tracked 64 comments emphasising the same idea: regardless of the player’s background, gender, identity or looks, their position in the competitive ladders was based only on their individual skill. Anyone could reach the highest tiers of the ladder if they were dedicated and worked hard.

Similar expressions have been found in a number of previous studies on different competitive gaming communities. Todd Harper (2013) and James Thompson (2014) both discussed in their respective studies of fighting game players that players see their scene as a strict meritocracy, while T. L. Taylor notes the same on esports in general as “fundamentally individualistic and meritocratic” (2012, 124).

The same meritocratic attitude was reflected in the fact that the comment revealing Team YP’s *LoL* team members’ individual rankings in the game’s competitive ladder was the second highest voted comment of the entire thread, with 334 points. Part of this particular comment’s success probably had to do with it being posted about 25 minutes after the thread opened, but out of all *r/leagueoflegends*’ 910 comments, only eight had a score of 100 or higher. Discussions of the team’s rankings and perceived skill were a popular topic and on the receiving end of several jokes, with 85 comments taking part. The general consensus of these comments was that the team was not professional enough to consider even trying to enter LCS², nor should they have received a sponsorship to do so.

The news article by Taylor Cocke, posted as the opening of the *r/leagueoflegends* thread, briefly mentions the team’s previous

2. EU/NA LCS: League of Legends Championship Series, the highest level of competitions in North America and Europe respectively, preliminary to entering the world championships of League of Legends.

success in women-only tournaments. Commenters were very eager to discuss this in length. Women-only leagues caused derision and they were mostly considered to be interfering with the established esports meritocracy. Most of the commenters that mentioned women's leagues considered them to be a negative or at the very least a redundant phenomenon. Often commenters talked about how women-only leagues and tournaments were an unneeded restriction on competition, or even disrespectful towards women as they suggested that women were "mentally deficient" (ID 365). They were also considered to be "coddling" (ID 424) women and did more to hold women back than actually help them (ID 446). The general reasoning behind these comments was that, unlike regular sports where women have a more or less clear physical disadvantage, in esports men and women should be on a level playing field without any physical or mental advantages.

However, some commenters saw a need for female only leagues: they gave women safer and more familiar opportunities to enter the competitive scene until they were ready to "compete on a real stage" (ID 613) and "having a BIGGER woman's league would promote more girls to playing, therefore being better, and then being taken more seriously" (ID 203).

Whereas the *r/leagueoflegends* thread was very invested in discussions of rank and gender segregation in esports, the *r/GlobalOffensive* thread was less interested in the subject. The topic was breached only in three comments (ID 15, 38, 39), all of which pointed out that female players were simply not good enough at the game to make it to the professional scene at the moment. Similarly, though, they were not unanimous about whether women-only leagues were necessary or not.

GAMING SKILL AS A BIOLOGICAL, SOCIETAL OR CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

Interestingly, even though many of the commenters touted the idea of esports as competition with a level playing field, the longest conversations in the *r/leagueoflegends* thread circled around the reasons why there were so few women in the top leagues of any esports game, or playing video games in general. The general belief was that women are a minority demographic in all esports scenes. Eight comments established a specific percentage, estimating that women make up 5 or 10 percent of players in most esports games. This might be referencing a statistic released by Riot Games four years earlier, which stated that women make up 10 percent of their players (Riot Games, 2012). There were no comments estimating that women were the majority, or even an equal half of the playerbase.

Why women play less esports and video games in general was a question that was posed and answered with considerable attention by many commenters. The longest discussions in the *r/leagueoflegends* thread (especially under comment ID 60, with 293 replies) as well as comment lengths (for example ID 108 with 756 words) were involved with finding out if women were so much worse in esports and playing video games that they could never be top professional players, and if they were, why that was. In comparison, the *r/GlobalOffensive* thread had no comments seeking to explore the topic.

In *r/leagueoflegends*, two main reasons were proposed. Either women had some sort of a biological or physical disadvantage, or they faced societal and cultural pressure. One commenter even suggested that women had not gotten above the rank of high Diamond³ (ID 111). All in all, commenters in the thread agreed

3. Diamond, Platinum (or Plat): Ranks in League of Legends competitive ladder, from worst to best: Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, Challenger. Bronze to Diamond is further divided into 5 divisions, Master and Challenger have only one. Challenger tier consist of the 200 best players in each region. Changes to ranks are incoming in 2019.

almost unanimously that women exhibit less skill in video games; only the reasons behind the skill difference was debated. To summarize the conversation, this particular snippet of a comment is quite representative of the others: “Nobody really knows, exactly. But they [women] are [worse at playing video games]” (ID 115).

Some commenters felt that the lack of women among gamers was natural to gaming culture; “women generally aren’t as hardcore into games” (ID 76), “it’s naturally a guy thing” (ID 133). The biological hindrances that some of the commenters considered women to have were slower reflexes, lower spatial intelligence, receiving less pleasure from gaming and less competitive nature. One commenter argued that “videogames activate the reward centers in the male brain to an enormously larger degree than they do in girls” (ID 77), according to academic research and, after requests by other commenters for the source of the claim, the commenter posted a link to a Stanford University School of Medicine internal news piece covering the study in question (Brandt, 2008). Despite the fact that esports is mostly seen as an equal and fair competition for both men and women, very few people who commented on women’s gaming skill seemed to believe that there was absolutely no difference between men and women. There might be some truth to this claim, at least when it comes to *LoL* players. In their study on learning to play the game and acquiring skills, Rabindra Ratan, Nicholas Taylor, Jameson Hogan, Tracy Kennedy and Dmitri Williams (2015) found that when controlled for time spent playing *LoL*, men and women acquire skill at the same rate. Men, however, on average played more than women and had a higher average skill level (Ratan et al., 2015, p 15-16).

In direct rebuttal, a few commenters pointed out that women have an advantage over men in fine muscle control, which could be beneficial in esports (ID 705). Furthermore, many suggested that it’s impossible to know how many women might be in high levels of ranked play, as many choose to keep their gender secret. Few

also mentioned the high-level women players that they knew of, either in their personal lives or those very few who have reached the top levels of public competition, like Sakuya in *LoL* or Scarlett in *StarCraft II*. Eleven comments purposefully excluded existing female professional players based on transmisogyny, but these views were also readily challenged in other comments. Inclusion of trans athletes is not a new debate in sports culture, where transphobia continues to be an all too familiar issue in general (Love, 2017).

However, a number of commenters also felt that men did not have a natural tendency to play more videogames than women. An alternative opinion for the difference in demographics was that contemporary society and culture do not encourage women to compete or play games like men (ID 374). For example, comment ID 209 wrote that “[i]t has to be a societal/cultural thing that leads to women not caring about gaming in the first place, thus lowering the potential talent pool for competitive gaming”, while ID 374 added that “women are not encouraged to play video games by their peers the same way that men are and they’re certainly not encouraged to take them seriously in the way that men are”. Furthermore, some commenters thought that women playing publicly were subjected to more scrutiny (ID 229), more harassment (ID 175) or lacked role models (ID 74).

Commenters who favoured biological reasons answered these comments by pointing out that cultural and societal factors were created on the basis of biological differences (ID 133) or claimed that societal pressure, indirect barriers and sexist stigma as “feminist/SJW rhetoric” (ID 136) did not really exist in society, or at least not in the phenomena of or connected to esports. Furthermore, some commenters considered discussing the issue to be pointless, and it would be better to “[j]ust let them be worse at it” (ID 115).

DEFINING THE PLACE FOR THE ‘PROFESSIONAL FEMALE

PLAYER'

Regardless of what the commenters considered to be the underlying reasons behind women's lack of skill and competitive success, they tended to have very similar answers on how to improve this record. 31 comments in r/leagueoflegends and three comments in r/GlobalOffensive encouraged women to simply get better at the game. The biological reasons were considered to be only minor hindrances, and societal and cultural factors something one could ignore if they so wished. 12 comments in the r/leagueoflegends thread argued that harassment specifically was a part of the game that every professional player had to deal with, even if female professional players might receive significantly more of it.

Insistence on personal hard work and dedication being the key to overcoming any barriers one might have to reach top teams and competitions further supports the idea of esports scenes as meritocracies. Commenters stated over and over again that anyone unwilling or even unable to overcome the inevitable barriers and hindrances is considered "not worthy of that career path" (ID 72). A person who cannot "take the hits" should not "go for it" (ID 263). The commenters also stated that the "correct" way for a player to earn a place on a team with sponsors, is to climb the competitive ladder on their own, without help from others; upon reaching the highest tier, professional teams would automatically recruit the player as a promising talent (ID 197). The commenters' insistence on focusing on the act of climbing the competitive ladder as the measure of one's worth as a player has been recorded in earlier studies on *LoL*. For example, Yubo Kou, Xinning Gui and Yong Ming Kow (2016, 5) argue that players "emphasized not only their present rank, but also the trajectory of ranks changing through their gaming history" as important descriptors of themselves as *LoL*-players. Climbing the ladder is thus a way to not only prove one's skill, but an origin story that endears the professional player to the fans.

Some commenters also made a very clear distinction between those female players who revealed their gender and those who did not. ID 176 suggests that if women wished to just play and become good at the game, if she “[was] really focused on playing and climbing, I don’t think [she] would feel the need to bring up [her] gender”. The suggestion seemed to be that if a woman does reveal her gender, she wants something else than to merely play the game and climb the ladder. In fact, as comment ID 147 puts it: “Gaming is one of the few avenues in life where a girl can be treated 100% fair, which has a lot of appeal to certain types of people. That falls apart if they go online and say, ‘omg i’n [sic] a girl guyz!!’”. Coming forward as a female player is thus not only a reason fair treatment does not manifest, but it is a choice made and wanted by the player herself.

The comments of r/leagueoflegends not only define the place for the ‘female player’ on the competitive or professional scene, but also suggest a set of behavioural rules for her. A good, skilled female player does not reveal her gender, but focuses only on playing (but without some of the social aspects, such as the use of voice communication). A bad female player discloses her gender in order to get special treatment. Interestingly enough, a number of comments also suggest that it is impossible to openly be a female gamer and not receive special treatment. Thirteen comments even considered it easier to get on the professional scene as a female player purely for the novelty value of being a woman.

YOUPORN AS A SPONSOR OF THE ALL-FEMALE TEAMS

Seventy-four comments on the r/leagueoflegends thread and 12 comments on the r/GlobalOffensive thread addressed the owner of the newly signed teams, Team YP. Many of the comments offered clear reasons for the acquisitions. As the teams had quite low rankings in their respective competitive ladders, they had to be a publicity stunt for the company behind the team, YouPorn. The highest voted comment on the r/leagueoflegends thread, with

a score of 376, was worried that the esports community would see the acquisition as a PR stunt “causing yet another time period of women gamers being mocked. Especially because of this team sponsorship specifically” (ID 60). Very few comments considered YouPorn and the porn industry to be despicable directly. Commenters were much more worried about how the sponsor would affect the way women in general, and these women in particular, would be viewed by the esports community and mainstream audience. In the r/GlobalOffensive thread, one commenter joked that “[m]om’s and dad’s will be proud” (ID 25) about the players working for a porn company. In another comment the same commenter specified that this only affected the female team, and not the male team, as it is “[n]ot as bad I wouldn’t think” (ID 27).

The sentiment was not shared amongst all commenters, as some saw Team YP as doing the scene a favour by giving women a chance to play professionally. In the official announcement of Team YP’s LoL team, a similar story was presented to the scene: “...female teams are still offered less time under the spotlight. Team YP believes in equal opportunity for all, which is why our organization is ecstatic to support the female LoL scene by forming its own roster, consisting of some top female talents active” (Team YP, 2016). The emphasis on social awareness and respectability in acquiring and sponsoring the team is similar to the brand construction lately undertaken by Mindgeek, the company owning YouPorn, and especially that of another pornographic website in its ownership, Pornhub (Paasonen et al., in press).

Comments about the teams’ ability to enter top competitions in their respective games were particularly interesting, since in both *CS:GO* and *LoL* pornographic companies such as YouPorn are banned from visibly sponsoring teams in top competitions. In the case of *LoL* the official LCS 2016 rules state that “[s]ponsorship acquisition is unrestricted”, but sponsorships that are related to pornographic imagery or products cannot be displayed in any way in any relation to *LoL*, *Riot Games* or LCS (Riot Games, 2015,

17). In *CS:GO*, ESL⁴ organizes most of the major professional competitions, and they have banned Team YP from participating because of their pornographic sponsor (Grubb, 2016). ESL's decision also affects the *LoL* team, as ESL also organizes lower level *LoL* tournaments. Due to these rules it would be impossible for Team YP to sign a higher-level team and still get exposure for the YouPorn-brand.

Comments in the r/GlobalOffensive thread jokingly suggested the reason for acquiring the two single-sex teams was pornographic in nature, and bluntly said: “‘why?’ money” (ID 40). In r/leagueoflegends, 13 comments drew attention to how the team members' skill level was likely an intentional choice on Team YP's part: “Of course they're not professional. The org that picked them up isn't even allowed in lcs” (ID 53). Furthermore, no information was released on how big the sponsorship was. Consideration about whether the teams would actually receive enough money to live on, or if they would be living in a gaming house (as is common for professional teams) did not appear in the comments that were miffed about the teams' sponsorships. Perhaps the assumption of the *LoL* teams, and the sponsor's aspirations to break into the professional competitive scene was an effect caused by a previous all-female *LoL* team called Team Siren (discussed in more detail below), who announced that their aspiration was to become a fully-paid professional team, and had moved into a gaming house even before they had accrued any significant sponsorship or public interest. As of 26 January, 2018, there is no mention on Team YP's website that either team is still signed by them.

4. Originally Electronic Sports League, an esports company that organizes various professional and amateur competitions and tournaments worldwide in several esports titles.

RUNNING JOKES ON WOMEN AS GAMERS, SEX APPEAL AND PORNOGRAPHY

Both threads had a lot of jokes and banter in them. In r/leagueoflegends, there was a specific joke that was very popular. The fourth highest voted comment on the thread was “I’m a Siren” and there were 19 similar comments, 8 that said “Siren 2” or something similar, and 46 other comments alluding to the infamous all-female Team Siren. The 73 ‘Siren-jokes’ were exactly half of the total number of jokes in the r/leagueoflegends thread.

Team Siren was an American all-female *LoL* team established in early 2013 or late 2012. On May 30, 2013, they released an ambitious introductory video⁵ that was soon posted on the r/leagueoflegends subreddit. After a loss against a team of streamers and ex-professional *LoL* players led by George “HotshotGG” Georgallidis⁶, and a parody of their introduction video posted on YouTube by Jason “videogamedunkey” Gastrow⁷, Team Siren became a running gag that tended to appear at the time when a thread in r/leagueoflegends somehow related to women in esports or *LoL*. Comments with Siren jokes were also likely to have a good score in Reddit. On June 19, 2013, it came to public attention that Team Siren had disbanded.

Although Team Siren was not the first all-female team in *LoL*, it was the first to gain such infamy in the Western *LoL* audience. The team moulded the figure of the ‘all-female team’ as one that is likely to be a publicity stunt not expected to persevere – or even attempt to persevere – in competitive play. This ties into the expectations of women as professional players in general. The case of Team Siren is a convenient example of women having thought too much of themselves and their skills, but also of having used the revelation of their gender as a way get attention, money or

5. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Gz9um3wV1o

6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zparciz8Res>

7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7onpZl0tayA>

special treatment from (male) gamers. Many of the Team Siren players were active streamers and saw subscription spikes in their personal channels as a result of the team announcement. However, publicity runs within the scene are not rare nor limited to one gender in general, even in official leagues. For example, the North American Challenger team, Delta Fox, which comprised of male ex-professionals turned streamers, purportedly took part in the Challenger Series⁸ 2017 for team franchise visibility rather than expected tournament success (Bates, 2017).

Most of the other jokes in the two threads were sexual in nature or related to the players' gender. In r/leagueoflegends, these jokes often carried on familiar memes related to Reddit, internet pornography or the porn industry, such as "5 Girls 1 Rift"⁹ (ID 643) (alluding to the infamous "2 Girls 1 Cup" porn video (cf. Paasonen, 2017)) and wondering if the team used the casting couch to do interviews (ID 680) (alluding to the 'casting couch' meme (cf. Knowyourmeme.com)). The sexual jokes were not very popular among other commenters, as they were among the comments with the worst scores. The third and fourth lowest voted comments (-11 and -10 scores) wished to "see some videos of them playing, if you know what i mean :PPPPPPPPPP slurp heheheh" (ID 679) and to "[r]ace to backdoor"¹⁰ them first" (ID 3). Also, a transmisogynistic joking question about the players' genitals ("are this grills or grills with sausage" (ID 354)) was not received very well (-8 score). Many jokes in comments also carried on widespread stereotypes associated with female *LoL* gamers. One such stereotype is that women only play support characters, so a few jokes wondered "how can you win with 5 supports?" (ID 860) while others asked what would the team do if Janna (a popular support champion) was banned (ID 738). The low

8. CS: Challenger Series, used to be the semi-professional series in League of Legends, top teams could compete over entering the LCS.

9. Rift: Summoner's Rift is the name of the map on which professional League of Legends competitions are played on.

10. Backdooring: Winning the game by destroying the enemy's base behind their back, a term originally coined in relation to Enrique "xPeke" Cedeño Martínez securing victory for Fnatic against SK Gaming in IEM Katowice 2013.

scores of the sexist, sexual and transphobic jokes show that the r/leagueoflegends-subreddit does not receive straightforward discrimination of women well, even in jokes. Casual sexism, misogyny and transmisogyny had a more positive reception in serious or persuasive dialogue, as established in the previous subsections of this paper.

In the r/GlobalOffensive thread, over 40 percent of the comments were sexual jokes. The highest voted comment of the thread with a score of 47 suggested “how about they mix the 2 rosters (٧٤٧)” (ID 7). The other sexual jokes commonly alluded to the two teams doing pornography together, or them being something akin to a sex worker due to the sponsoring party. Interestingly, there were also a few sexual jokes about the all-male roster. The commenters felt “let down” (ID 3) that the players they had wished to be in the team, such as Dosia who was called “the sex god” (ID 6), had not been signed. The jokes in r/GlobalOffensive were more blatantly sexual in comparison to r/leagueoflegends, and they were received much better. This might be because the original post included a link to a news story of Team YP announcing their two new single-sex rosters for *CS:GO*, instead of only the all-female roster. It might have also been caused by the fact that there had not been an iconic all-female team like Team Siren in the *CS:GO* scene in the recent years, and therefore no familiar gag or meme to fall back to in the thread, or simply because of cultural differences between the two games’ subreddits.

WOMEN COMING FORWARD WITH THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES

Reddit does not have any features that would let us know users’ genders, but a small number of commenters came forward unprompted with their gender and drew from personal experiences in the matters discussed. In r/leagueoflegends, 21 comments were from self-proclaimed women, whereas r/GlobalOffensive had none. Commenters in r/leagueoflegends were also keen to reveal

their gender as men, which did not happen in r/GlobalOffensive either, possibly due to the fact that commenters in r/leagueoflegends drew from their gendered experiences in more serious discussions, which the thread had plenty of, compared to r/GlobalOffensive.

Especially interesting for our purposes were comments from members of Team YP and Team Siren, and a woman who proclaimed to be part of a mixed team that was competing seriously in amateur competitions. Firstly, Tanja “Escape” Reither (using the name xTanii in Reddit) from Team YP gave her perspective (ID 800) on the sponsorship and the team’s goals and made a clear distinction between Team YP and Team Siren. According to her, Team YP differed from Team Siren as they did not aim to reach the LCS or CS, but would instead focus on competing in amateur tournaments. Reither described her team as “just 5 girls who are playing and having fun and trying to get better at League” and responded to the critical comments about the team members’ individual ranks with, “Hey, who cares?” In addition, she explained that Team YP did their sponsorship with the roster “like every other organisation would do”. The comment received a score of 251, the fifth highest on the thread. The highest score (60) response to Reither’s comment asked for a statement on the negative behaviour in-game and alleged boosting¹¹ (ID 807) by one of the team’s members, addressing major concerns commenters had had earlier, and that had not been initially answered by Reither. Most of the direct responses to Reither, however, wished the team good luck and success in the future, in clear contrast to the rest of the comment thread where the team was often described as being too bad to even compete publicly.

Secondly, Caitlin “ilysuiteheart” Shloush from the former Team Siren commented (ID 904) on the thread with her own experiences in Team Siren as an example of a failed all-female team. According to her, it would be better to make a mixed team that

11. Boosting: Helping someone to reach a higher rank than their skills allow by f.ex. playing on their account. This is prohibited in most competitive games and can result in a ban.

could compete consistently on amateur level rather than stick to the concept of all-female teams, leagues and tournaments. Shloush also expressed that the only thing keeping her from reaching LCS was her own lack of natural talent, not sexism or missed opportunities because of her gender. She finished her comment with a reminder that, instead of hating the girls signed by Team YP, people should hate the organization sponsoring them. Shloush felt that the organization was exploiting the girls (ID 904). Unfortunately, her reply was written after the most heated discussion had already run its course, and therefore it accumulated no responses from other users.

Thirdly, a female member of a mixed amateur team gave her perspective on all-female teams receiving sponsorships (ID 848). In her comment there is a clear distinction between “girls like [her, who] are serious about wanting to make a name for themselves and people that aren’t even high Diamond create all-female teams for a publicity stunt”. According to her, all-female teams use their gender as “an excuse to not be as good as males”, describing them as lazy and only wanting attention. Her argument draws directly from the lower ranks of the Team YP members, who were all below her rank of Diamond 1-2. She finishes her comment by stating that “I hate that these people are the face of female e-Sports and making the rest of us look like a fucking joke... angers me to no end” (ID 848). Her comment solidifies a core part of the meritocracy expressed directly or indirectly by other commenters too: sponsorships should be reserved for those teams that are already at, or close to, a professional skill level. One of the responses to her comment exclaims: “[f]inally a girl which just straight and knows what she is talking about” (ID 855). Both ID 848 and ID 855 seem to be upholding the idea of two kinds of female players, of which only the latter should reveal their gender publicly: women undeserving of their position in the limelight and women with a ‘correct’ approach to gaming and competition, and thus, being a ‘(professional) female player’ in esports.

ID 848 is not the only self-proclaimed woman in the thread who draws from this dichotomy. ID 166 states that it is impossible to be yourself, as “[y]ou’re either seen as a quiet, reserved, don’t speak and play gamer or seen as one of those pandering ‘girl gamers’ who uses their sex to get them advantages by any means necessary [...] your always put into one of the two categories. :/”.

CONCLUSIONS

The comment threads in subreddits *r/leagueoflegends* and *r/GlobalOffensive* offer an insight into how women are currently received in the esports scene as players. The dominant discussions revolved around esports as a meritocratic haven where the only thing that matters is individual skill, not gender or identity. While some commenters believe that women are about to make their grand entrance as professionals in esports at any minute now, the majority were content with establishing that, since women have not reached the top of any esports titles as professional players, it means that there must be something they are lacking.

The commenters did recognise that there are possible biological and social hindrances for women, stopping, or at least slowing, their ascent to the highest levels of competition. However, most of the commenters still seemed to consider these hindrances to be something that could be overcome with hard work and dedication. Public proclamation of one’s gender was a heated topic in the *r/leagueoflegends* thread, with commenters arguing that a dedicated woman should not bring her gender into play or general knowledge, but preferably hide it altogether. The figure of the ‘female professional player’ – one unapologetically disclosing her gender – was established as one more likely to be a casual player who didn’t truly care about competing in esports, but was instead in favour of getting attention from the male audience for monetary gain, publicity or other reasons.

While the problem of being a female player in the esports scene did elicit solutions from the commenters, such as hiding one’s

gender and embracing the harassment as a natural part of the game, the concept of the ‘all-female team’ was one that could not be imagined as being part of the competitive scene; and, was even considered to threaten its credibility. The individual players in Team YP’s teams were urged to work on proving their worth in mixed teams or in solo play. Whereas, as a team, they were considered to be little more than booth babes or a public relations stunt bringing fifteen minutes of fame to the YouPorn brand.

The terms ‘female professional player’ and ‘all-female team’ have resulted in problematic assumptions and stereotypes that stick to women in esports in general: women are seen to lack dedication to their sport, and they are readily accused of having ulterior motives for merely existing publicly in the scene. Indeed, there are few possibilities in the esports scene for a female gamer to also be a woman, if she wishes to be taken seriously or become a professional player.

The current situation seems to mostly stem from a combination of blind belief in the meritocracy of esports, that the playing field is truly level for all, and from the lack of women in the highest tiers of competition. Persuasive and investigative discussion that touches on controversy is also popular with (and possibly lucrative for) commenters on Reddit, which suggests that a number of the comments are probably exaggerated or should be taken as playing devil’s advocate. And while, in a moderated public forum like Reddit blatant harassment may be quickly acted on, the negative stereotypes associated with female players themselves can affect the performance and participation of women in gaming (Kaye & Pennington, 2016).

As Jenkins and Castell have noted, the recent developments in gaming, from the rise of DIY gaming professionals in Twitch.tv to gendered controversies like Gamergate, threaten to further entrench the oppositional gender positions rather than alleviate the precarious situation that aspiring (professional) female gamers are, and have been, in (Jenson & Castell, 2018). It is crucial to

study how the situation changes in the future without becoming complacent that the scene will naturally grow towards equal opportunity.

In the future it would be interesting to study how contemporary professional female esports players have been perceived by their communities, and also how they themselves believe the professional esports scene could better support women as competitive players.

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