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Gender and Toxic Meritocracy in Competitive Overwatch: Case “Ellie”

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INTRODUCTION

Case “Ellie”

When we originally contacted Ellie, there was nothing that would spark suspicion. They seemed to be very genuine and willing to work with us on calls and within private messages. Due to the fact that we do not have any physical contact with our players, we wanted to verify their identity but also wanted to respect their privacy as well. We genuinely had no idea of what was to come, and at the time we underestimated how important it would be to set an example as the first team to take on a female player for Contenders. (Second Wind 2019b)

On December 21, 2018, a North American Overwatch Contenders league team Second Wind announced via Twitter that they had signed a

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new DPS player to their roster. The newcomer went by the handle Ellie, and was—it seemed at the time—a prominent woman player, who had reached the fourth rank on the North American competitive ladder. As it is extremely rare to witness a previously unknown player to reach that kind of a placing in such a short amount of playtime, this gathered considerable attention from both esports media and the competitive *Overwatch* community.

Overwatch Contenders is a part of the *Overwatch* esports ecosystem. At its top lies the Overwatch League, a multimillion franchised global league owned and operated by the game’s publisher Blizzard Entertainment. Similarly operated Contenders is a second-tier league, divided into multiple regions. For the players, whose ultimate goal is often to be signed by an Overwatch League team, North America is one of the more notable ones in terms of visibility and career prospects. In principle, both are mixed gender leagues, as they have no gender regulations for players. The reality, however, is quite different. In the Overwatch League, there has so far been only one woman: Kim “Geguri” Se-yeon from South Korea, representing Shanghai Dragons from February 2018 until the end of the 2020 season. The Contenders players too are overwhelmingly men, and at the time Ellie appeared, there were no women in the North American Contenders teams. This is another reason why Ellie suddenly showing up on the leaderboard and being recruited by Second Wind drew much attention.

There was an instant reaction to the recruitment announcement from both the competitive *Overwatch* community and game media. Reactions varied from cheers to suspicion and hostility, including threats of “doxxing” and open disbelief about Ellie’s identity and existence. Attempting to prove the doubters wrong, Ellie started a Twitch channel and streamed some of their gameplay. The community, however, judged Ellie’s gameplay as highly inconsistent, further fueling the arguments against their legitimacy as a player. A number of well-known community figures suggested that Ellie’s account was played by multiple people, proposing a number of men players who they suspected could be hiding behind the handle.

On January 2, 2019, only twelve days after the recruitment announcement, Second Wind (2019a) announced that “due to some unforeseen reactions, Ellie has opted to step down from the team”. The same day, team owner Justin Hughes (2019) posted a Twitter statement reprimanding the community of their reactions toward Ellie, claiming that while the team had “wanted a player, [...] it seemed like the public wanted

something else”. According to Hughes, Ellie had been treated as “a symbol of empowerment” and “their Messiah”, while “on one side, we had people questioning her legitimacy, issuing threats, etc.” At this point, it appeared yet another woman had stepped down from competitive *Overwatch* due to misogynistic harassment and threats. This again quickly drew the attention of both game and mainstream media, and the community discussions rekindled a new flame.

Ellie had stepped down, but the story was far from over. Two days later, on January 4, at the time Cloud9 team *Overwatch* player Becca “Aspen” Rukavina announced on her Twitch stream that “Ellie” did in fact not exist, but was a “social experiment” devised by a man player called Punisher. After this, the story of Ellie started to unravel and was again a target of lively discussion and speculation both in the media and among the community. The following commotion also led to yet another statement from Second Wind (2019b) on January 5, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, further explaining their reasons for recruiting Ellie and their reactions to the community response.

GENDER AND TOXIC MERITOCRACY IN OVERWATCH AND COMPETITIVE GAMING

There exists a great amount of earlier research on the role of gender in game cultures and competitive gaming (on the latter, see, e.g., Maric 2011; Groen 2013, 2016; Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Voorhees and Orlando 2018; Witkowski 2018; Zhu 2018; Siutila and Havaste 2019; Hayday and Collison 2020; Taylor and Stout 2020). A large part of this work is focused on women (e.g., Groen 2013, 2016; Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Witkowski 2018; Siutila and Havaste 2019; Hayday and Collison 2020), as they are perhaps the most visible and largest group of marginalized gamers. The GamerGate movement, initiated in August 2014, signified an extreme harassment campaign targeted particularly against women and non-binary game creators, journalists, critics, and researchers, and affecting everyone identifying with gender identities marginalized within hegemonic game culture (Braithwaite 2016; Mortensen 2018). Although research on gender and gaming has been conducted from at least the 1980s (Richard 2013), since GamerGate, the various issues women face in gaming have received increasing attention in game and mainstream media, player communities, game companies, and institutions, as well as in research. While

the public attention and extensive discussions have led to some improvements, such as esports leagues and gaming events creating and enforcing codes of conduct to tackle gender-based harassment, many of the problems persist—as can be seen from Ellie’s case.

Overwatch was developed and also marketed as an inclusive multiplayer first person shooter (Cullen et al. 2018; Hayday and Collison 2020; Hawreliak and Lemieux 2020), including a wide roster of playable heroes representing a variety of genders, ages, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, and reaching audiences who do not usually engage with shooter games (Välisalo and Ruotsalainen 2019). According to Emily Jane Hayday and Holly Collison (2020), the diversity of representation in *Overwatch* exemplifies how developers can attempt to increase social justice in games and esports by moving away from highly sexualized representations of women and instead creating role models within the game, thus encouraging more women to participate. Amanda Cullen et al. (2018) point out how *Overwatch* also includes characters representing disabilities, further illustrating how major developers can create popular titles with diverse characters.

Despite the diversity of playable characters in *Overwatch*, the game’s playerbase, and its professional esports scene in particular, remain largely dominated by men. In the Overwatch League, there has only been one woman player, and women’s participation is also rare on the lower competitive tiers. In a previous study (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018), we found that the community had noted the lack of women in the Overwatch League. Potential reasons for this were discussed being structural and cultural, such as the fact that FPS games in general have been a genre dominated by men, meaning there are less women gamers who have spent enough time developing their skills up to the required level, and also the culture being hostile toward women (for similar findings from other games, see also Siutila and Havaste 2019).

While women are actively playing digital games, their opportunities for participation in competitive gaming, particularly esports, is still extremely limited, both in terms of presence and in terms of ways of participation. In a previous study (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018), we analyzed how women who play digital games negotiated their own participation (or, more commonly, the lack thereof) in competitive gaming, and how women participants in competitive *Overwatch* were discussed within its community. In the study, women’s reasons for not participating in esports were not only directly related to the nature of games played and competitive play. Women also chose not to participate because of reasons related

to gender and the toxic nature of the community: they did not consider esports to be a field accommodating to women, but rather misogynistic and hostile.

The cultures and communities surrounding esports and competitive gaming are defined by a combination of hegemonic, geek, and athletic masculinities (e.g., Taylor 2012; Witkowski 2012, 2018). In the context of *Overwatch* esports, one can also find traces of “kawaii masculinity” which centers around juvenility and cuteness of the men players (Ruotsalainen and Välisalo 2020; for kawaii masculinity, see Jung 2011). For women competitors, this environment is challenging to navigate, as they are constantly placed at the crossroads of the contradictory requirements to simultaneously perform the role of a competitive gamer, embracing the hegemonic masculinity, and that of an “other”, the one marked as an outsider of the scene because of their gender. As Emma Witkowski (2018) describes it, “for women engaging in such expert gaming endeavors, their gender performances (while varied) are made alongside productions of hegemonic sporting masculinity as a gender performance that is locally dominant, associated to traditional sports, and aligned to male body skill superiority, antagonistic competitiveness, and heterosexual virility”. Women competitors’ gender is often overly emphasized (e.g., Cullen 2018; Witkowski 2018) and their presence is interpreted through problematic gender-based stereotypes (e.g., Siuttila and Havaste 2019). When competing, women are seen not only representing their team, but their gender, whether they succeed or fail (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018). Women entering the scene as gamers, streamers, and competitors also face gender-based harassment and discrimination (e.g., Fox and Tang 2017; Uszkoreit 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Richard and Gray 2018).

Opportunities for participation in esports should be, in theory, equal to all genders. Indeed, there are strong beliefs upheld within esports communities that there is nothing stopping women from participating—if only they are good enough players to make it. Christopher A. Paul (2018) calls this assumption the “toxic meritocracy in gaming”: a system which excludes women and other marginalized player groups by not acknowledging the specific circumstances negatively affecting their opportunities, and leading those who thrive to falsely believe their success is solely due to their effort and capability. In competitive *Overwatch*, women do not only have to play well enough to proceed through the ranks and get noticed by potential teams through their skill and achievements, but they are also met with hostile community members every step along the way, from team

members harassing them on voice chat throughout the match—or even throwing the game entirely after realizing there is a woman in the team—to having to publicly and humiliatingly prove they are a real person playing their own account (e.g., Choi et al. 2019). Because of the misogynistic and hostile culture, many do not deem it worth the effort in the first place, which further decreases the number of women as competitors.

In this chapter, we discuss the confluences between toxic meritocracy and gender in the public discussions related to competitive *Overwatch*. Asking how the player's assumed gender is seen to affect their opportunities for engagement in this scene, we analyze online news stories and community discussions concerning “Ellie”—an imaginary competitive gamer woman created as a “social experiment” by a man player. Our analysis will show how the idea of meritocracy is strongly upheld within the community—all the while the entire question of Ellie's legitimacy as a player is being reduced to their gender.

READING CASE “ELLIE”

Data and Method

Considering how the whole “Ellie” situation was created and then already over within a timeframe of two weeks (from December 21, 2018, to January 4, 2019), there was a surprisingly large amount of material related to the case available for this study. Our primary research material consists of online news articles and Reddit discussions, both collected between January 10 and March 11, 2019. In the current hybrid media system (cf. Chadwick 2013), these kinds of discussions are rarely limited to one platform. The news stories and community discussions were often formed around or linked to other (social) media content, such as Twitter posts or Twitch clips. We used these as our secondary research material to contextualize our reading of the case.

The news material consists of 86 articles written in English and published between January 3 and February 8, 2019, on international online media platforms. They were collected by an online search using search phrases “Ellie” + “Second wind” and “Ellie” + “Overwatch”. The range of the material was further expanded by the method of snowballing, in practice by following the path of links within the articles to find new ones. The news material mostly contains publications focused on gaming and esports such as *Kotaku*, *Game Informer*, and *Dot Esports*, but also includes

mainstream media outlets such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Forbes*. It is worth noting that because the material was collected afterward, many of the stories had been updated to reflect the new information on Ellie's identity, affecting the way Ellie and the events were described in this material—and our reading of the case. In the analysis section, we will refer to the news story material by the publication name and date.

We chose the subreddit r/Competitive overwatch as our source for the community discussions on the topic due to it being the most active discussion platform for *Overwatch* esports. The material was collected using the search function within the subreddit to find the discussions containing the word “Ellie” in their title. In total, we collected 21 discussion threads. In the analysis section, the discussion posts will be referred to by the thread identifier (D1–D21 in chronological order) and the post number (at the time we collected the material).

We analyzed the primary research material using reflexive thematic analysis, a method emphasizing the active and reflexive role of the researchers throughout the analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019). The analysis was conducted in stages. We began the process by reading and coding the material to find the most relevant themes from the perspective of gender and meritocracy. In reflexive thematic analysis, “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun and Clarke 2006). We did not only look for explicit themes, but also aimed to identify latent ones—the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualizations, and ideologies beyond what was explicitly expressed. In this process, we defined three central themes across the two material types: (1) Ellie's character, (2) agency, and (3) women players. After defining the main themes based on the initial coding, we further explored the data within each theme, identifying and coding relevant sub-themes, that is, the various nuances in the discussion, which we will describe in the following sections.

GENDER, PERFORMANCE, AND SUSPICIOUSNESS: (DE) CONSTRUCTING “ELLIE” AS A (FAKE) WOMAN GAMER

It is common for women esports players to be seen as representatives of their gender rather than gamers and individuals (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018; Cullen 2018). In the news material, Ellie was most commonly

described through their performed gender, often simply as “a female gamer”. Occasionally, Ellie’s reduction to their presented gender was taken to an extreme level in these descriptions: “Late last year, tier two professional Overwatch team Second Wind announced that they’d signed a female player” (*Rock Paper Shotgun* 1/5/2019) and “An Overwatch team has found their female player was an imposter” (*Eurogamer* 1/8/2019). In these examples, Ellie is objectified, reduced to “the team’s female”, dismantling them of any personality or agency.

Ellie was also often described through their performance. Ellie’s competitive rank was commonly mentioned, and they were described as an extremely skilled player: “Ellie first appeared on the Overwatch scene in early December, quickly shooting up the ranked ladder to Grandmaster and eventually Top 500. Her skill was incredible, and she managed to play high DPS and tanks extremely well” (*Newsweek* 1/4/2019). Ellie’s rank and skill level were discussed as the reason why they were noticed and picked up for the Contenders league: “No other information on the player was available at the time other than she was a teenage girl on North American Overwatch leaderboards ranked #4. Her rank, and impressions of her skills after Second Wind’s team members played with her online, were enough for the Contenders team to sign Ellie” (*USGamer* 1/7/2019). The same reason was also used to describe why Ellie was noticed—and deemed as a suspicious character—by the community: “Doubters pointed to Ellie’s account age—relatively low-experience for having a high rank—as grounds for suspicion” (*Dot Esports* 1/3/2019). For the most part, being a skilled and high-ranking player was not used as a praise, but rather as a basis for justifiable suspicion. This happened especially when Ellie’s gender was added into the equation, as high-performance play and related expertise are not usually considered areas available to women (Witkowski 2018).

As soon as Second Wind announced Ellie’s signing, a discussion thread was created in the Competitive Overwatch subreddit (D1). The community members’ reactions to the announcement varied from excitement to suspicion. While some discussants expressed their happiness for a new and prominent woman player being signed, many were doubtful about Ellie and their identity. Multiple commentators argued that it was suspicious for Ellie to appear out of nowhere, be totally unknown to most, and to be playing on a new account with such high win rates. Some commentators explicitly denied that their suspicions had anything to do with Ellie’s gender and argued that they would be doubtful of any new player coming out

of nowhere and performing particularly well, bringing up examples of famous (men) players who had at some point been suspected of cheating. The crucial difference was, as pointed out by some discussants, that Ellie was not suspected of cheating, but for either faking their identity or having someone else, for example a boyfriend, play their account. This shows how Ellie's perceived suspiciousness was tied to their gender rather than their actions. Geguri, too, had to go through a humiliating process of proving herself against misogynistic suspicions and accusations when first appearing in the competitive scene. Two professional men players even promised to quit their careers if Geguri would be able to prove her skills to be true—and so they did (Choi et al. 2019).

In the community discussions, Ellie's suspiciousness was further increased through their choice of a team role: DPS. Some discussants stated that while top-ranking women players are as rare as it is, women playing damage-dealers are almost nonexistent, like something out of a fairytale: "The fact that she also is a top DPS player would also draw people's attention since great female DPS players seem to be actual unicorns in *Overwatch*" (D1/82). Among *Overwatch* players, women are constantly suggested they should play the support role, as DPS is considered too difficult for them (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018). This prevalent sexist prejudice seemed to be one of the factors making Ellie seem dubious in the community's eyes.

Suspiciousness was a general trait in the news stories' descriptions of Ellie, too. Remarkably, there too it was closely tied to the fact that Ellie presented herself as a woman. The question of Ellie's credibility centered around their gender: "Some fans believed the mystery about Ellie's name called her entire identity into question, including her gender. Ellie is one of very few women in Blizzard Entertainment's *Overwatch* Contenders league, and some fans speculated that she could be any number of notable male players impersonating a woman" (*Kotaku* 1/4/2019). As seen here, it was seen as entirely possible that this fourth-ranking new gamer could be "any number of notable male players", yet it was simply not seen as possible that they could be a woman. Gender seemed to be the main factor making Ellie suspicious both in the community discussions and in the news stories.

Although presented as such in the news stories and community discussions, the real question unanswered was not if Ellie was a real player, but if they were a real woman. This can be seen in the news story descriptions such as "After a few days of online rumbling on Reddit, what seemed like

yet another case of toxicity and misogyny in gaming turned into something far stranger, and problematic. Ellie was revealed as a fraud, a fake account operated by a male player posing as a female” (*The Washington Post* 1/6/2019). Ellie’s whole story and character described in the news stories were mostly constructed around their gender. In their January 5 statement, even Second Wind (2019b) confessed that they had “underestimated how important it would be to set an example as the first team to take on a female player for Contenders”, further underlining the significance of Ellie’s gender. Both the community discussions and the media stories were, in their essence, about (de)constructing Ellie as a (fake) woman gamer.

GENDERED AGENCY, BLAME, AND CONSEQUENCES: DISCUSSING THE “EXPERIMENT”

Although the events were often referred to, in both the news stories and the community discussions, as a “social experiment”, what is interesting in this case is not the “experiment” itself. The discussion on the experiment is, essentially, discussion about women in competitive *Overwatch*. To understand the dynamics of toxic meritocracy at play in the case, it is important to pay attention to the distribution of power and agency within this discussion: whose voices are allowed to participate, who are getting listened to, who are getting blamed—and who, in the end, will be carrying the consequences?

The whole situation was described to unravel when Aspen revealed that behind “Ellie” was actually Punisher who had created the handle as “a social experiment”. The description of the events as a social experiment gone awry was often repeated in the news stories without any further critical approach: “According to Cloud 9 *Overwatch* streamer, Aspen, Ellie was just a social experiment created by overwatch player PunisherOW to expose sexism in esports” (*Main Menu Games* 1/5/2019). It was taken for granted that Punisher had wanted to prove a point of some kind, apparently somehow related to women in esports.

Several news stories did, however, point out the questionable nature of this setting—a man gamer posing as a woman to, allegedly, bring attention to how women are being treated in competitive gaming:

Women have been telling stories of harassment for years. There are new clips continuing to come out, of female Overwatch streamers experiencing multiple levels of harassment and this has happened since the game’s launch in 2016.

Many prominent female streamers have even stopped playing the game entirely due to toxicity they faced in ladder games. Why did it take a man pretending to be a teenage girl for people to take these stories seriously? (The Game Haus 1/5/2019)

Some women in the community took the discussion to Twitter, like Liz Richardson (2019), at the time the managing editor of an Overwatch League news site OverwatchScore.com, who was also quoted in several stories. Richardson (2019) expressed her anger over Punisher performing his so-called experiment at the expense of women and non-binary players: “People involved aside, this ‘stunt’ will have lasting ramifications for ANY woman/nb person trying to get into Contenders. They will ALL now be subject to ‘lol are you real??’ harassment”. She further called for the men in the community to use their position of power to make a change. This discussion brought forth the gendered nature of agency and power in gaming, and how men are able to use their privileged position to either help or hinder women and others in marginalized positions.

Some men in the community confessed that the hostile reactions toward Ellie led them to realize, for the first time, the number of barriers in front of women competitors’ success. Houston Outlaw’s general manager, Matt “Flame” Rodriguez (2019) tweeted about his personal experience: “Some girl started talking and people literally abandoned my [r]anked game ... I’m realizing the female player base might have significantly higher SR if they didn’t have to deal with morons throwing their games for existing”. The comment was mentioned in some of the news stories—as was the irony of the fact that “The Outlaws, notably, were one of the teams that once used another barrier to entry, single-gender team houses, to explain why they couldn’t pick up Geguri” (*Rock Paper Shotgun* 1/5/2019).

In the news stories, most of the agency in the case, which is supposedly about a woman gamer—or, alternatively, about an experiment designed to provoke attention into issues surrounding competitive women players—was given to men. In the community discussions too, several notable community figures—competitive men players and streamers—were actively voicing their opinions on Ellie and were often referred to by others. They were also given space to do so in the news stories: “Atlanta Reigns DPS player Daniel ‘Dafran’ Francesca of the Overwatch League suggested that Ellie was just providing a voice for someone else who was actually playing. Some were skeptical about Dafran’s assessment [...] but if eSports insider Rod Breslau is to be believed, Dafran was right on the money” (*Game*

Rant 1/4/2019). Putting the spotlight on men's voices when writing a story like this further emphasizes men's position of authority within competitive gaming. Instead of focusing on Ellie, the focus is put on the men gamers' opinions of them.

Describing the events, there was a lot of blame being thrown around. One of the news stories summarized the situation:

It's just ... a disaster all around. For who is to 'blame' here, it's just a tornado of finger pointing. Second Wind for not vetting enough. Punisher for organizing this madness. Journalists for jumping the gun. The toxic climate in these communities for creating a situation where this kind of 'experiment' would happen in the first place. Just a total mess. (Forbes 1/6/2019)

Punisher was obviously being blamed for causing the whole situation, Second Wind for recruiting a new team member without a proper identity check, and Blizzard Entertainment for making this possible (despite Ellie never being an officially registered Contenders league player). Media outlets were also blamed for rushing on with the story without proper research and critical approach (ironically, this became a question about ethics in game journalism; cf. Braithwaite 2016).

In the community discussions, the players and community members participating in Ellie's harassment were disclosed and condemned (although their actions were also in part excused due to the assumption that Ellie must not be "real"). Surprisingly, a part of the blame was also placed on those who chose to take Ellie's side from the beginning—some of them women who were eager to see another woman take a turn in breaking the *Overwatch* esports glass ceiling. When Second Wind's owner Justin Hughes (2019) posted his statement regarding Ellie after they had been revealed to be a fabricated person, he too placed the blame on "both sides".

After all the blame game, who, then, was seen to be carrying the consequences of this "experiment"? Ironically, it seems that Punisher has not and will not be punished—his identity is not known, he is not a professional gamer whose livelihood could be affected by potential sanctions, and, after all, it has not even been officially confirmed that he was behind Ellie. Instead, many of the news stories described the dire consequences this case will have on women trying to enter the competitive gaming scene, both in *Overwatch* and more extensively:

This situation continues to be a huge mess, and I don't see a winning side here. Blizzard is likely none too happy with how this might damage the reputation of their Contenders league, Second Wind can't be happy with having its legitimacy as a team thrown into question, and every woman who dreams of becoming a professional Overwatch player will now have more hurdles in their way whenever they decide to take their leap of faith in to a pro league. The people behind this 'social experiment', whatever its purpose might have been, should have known better, or were actively trying to impede any woman making their way into competitive play. Neither version of the story makes the situation any less frustrating. (Game Informer 1/6/2019)

It is intriguing how much power was given to Punisher in these narratives. While countless women gamers sharing their experiences did not seem to have made much difference in making things better, a man pretending to be one apparently managed to severely hinder the opportunities of all the potential women competitors to come. This too reflects the way power and agency over this case were usually given to men.

It is worth noting that the expected consequences of the events described in the news stories were not all negative. There seemed to exist an air of hope that the great failures witnessed in recruiting a new player into a Contenders team, in dealing with harassment targeted at a team member, and in writing in media about cases with sensitive aspects, will be better dealt with in the future after learning from what happened. Some members of the community also took the opportunity to highlight the many women already part of the Overwatch League in various roles, and a Twitter thread was created aiming to list all the current women Contenders players (*Overbuff* 1/7/2019).

BEING A WOMAN IN COMPETITIVE OVERWATCH: SIGNIFICANT, CHALLENGING, AND IRRELEVANT

The news stories on Ellie extended toward the topic of being a woman in competitive *Overwatch*, described as being both significant and challenging. As noted earlier regarding the descriptions of Ellie, being a woman was commonly seen as the primary feature of women competitors, and their whole character and even the question of if they are “real” or not seemed to be reduced to their gender.

In the community discussions, too, gender was always present. Sometimes in the form of denial that gender had anything to do with the skepticism toward Ellie, sometimes in directly addressing the issues

concerning women in esports. Regardless, the discussants were continuously “doing” gender and defining women in relation to games and esports (see also Witkowski 2018; Siutila and Havaste 2019). Assumptions that women do not succeed in esports because of assumed fundamental differences between women and men, such as women being less competitive by nature, were rather rare (cf. Siutila and Havaste 2019; Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018). However, an underlying conviction that esports is a meritocracy and hence women—if they just are skilled enough and possess a skin thick enough—will have equal chances to succeed than men, emerged often. The fact that the current League teams consist almost solely of White and Asian men (Blizzard Entertainment 2021) alone proves that the path to success is not purely meritocratic. As Paul (2018) puts it, “a lack of diversity in the player community already demonstrates the fact that the game is not a perfect meritocracy and, therefore, simply adding more players to a structurally imbalanced system will not fix the problem”.

Nevertheless, some discussants speculated that women’s chances may actually be even higher than men’s due to their alleged “better marketability”:

wouldn't being a woman in pro gaming be more significantly more beneficial than detrimental? I can't imagine how much most players would give to have the marketing power that literally any female pro player would have simply because of her gender. They actually have to play at a pro level- but assuming they can- being female would skyrocket your marketing power as a player for essentially no effort. (D7/589)

Similar assumptions related to the “novelty value” of women esports players were found in Siutila’s and Havaste’s (2019) study on *League of Legends* and *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*. In some esports contexts, women players have indeed been used as marketing tools, sometimes in ways that threaten their position as professional e-athletes (Maric 2011).

The misogynistic nature of (competitive) gaming and esports, evident from the many forms of discrimination, harassment, and threats of violence women face in this environment (Fox and Tang 2017; Uszkoreit 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Richard and Gray 2018), was often brought up in the news stories, using both general and well-known individual examples: “The Overwatch League’s only female player, Kim ‘Geguri’ Seyeon, was forced to prove that she wasn’t cheating after receiving

harassment for her performance, including another pro player threatening: ‘I may visit Geguri’s house with a knife in hand. I am not joking’” (*Rock Paper Shotgun* 1/5/2019). Geguri’s story, particularly the community’s suspicions against her and their similarities with those against Ellie, was frequently mentioned in the news stories and community discussions as an example of the misogynistic attitudes hindering women’s progress in esports.

In the community discussions, some women also brought up their personal experiences, particularly in relation to comments addressing Ellie’s lack of voice communication while playing, explaining how they too rarely use voice chat due to harassment. This is known to be a common coping strategy among women gamers and players of color (Fox and Tang 2017; Richard and Gray 2018). Some commentators shared how they or someone close to them had eventually stopped playing the game altogether because of harassment, but there were also some women commentators who insisted they had never, or had very rarely, experienced or witnessed any harassment.

From the news story descriptions, it became clear that before a woman can become an esports player, her skill as well as her identity and gender are placed under hostile scrutiny. To be accepted, she does not only need to prove herself as a player, but also as a “real” woman. Within the community discussions, there was also a continuous attempt to define a “good woman” and the type of acceptable femininity in the sphere of *Overwatch* esports. This was done by referring to notable women players and streamers and discussing their positively perceived qualities, presented as preventing them from receiving negative community responses. These qualities usually included friendliness and wholesomeness, being good at the game—and not complaining. In their study on how women esports athletes were discussed on Reddit, Siutila and Havaste (2019) too found that “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”.

Meritocracy was a constant underlying ideology in the community discussions, and occasionally, it was discussed explicitly. Some expressed discomfort that external factors should determine a player’s success (especially the allegedly higher “marketability” of women). Others argued that *Overwatch* esports had never been a meritocracy but plagued with nepotism and gatekeeping: “A meritocracy necessitates everyone being on a level playing field. Women deal with way more shit in OW by virtue of

their gender from the very beginning, in every tier and environment. There is no way to have a ‘meritocracy’ when certain groups are disadvantaged from the very beginning” (D5–154). Some discussants adamantly held onto the idea of *Overwatch* esports as a meritocracy—despite the gender-focused reactions toward Ellie and the countless examples of misogyny women players face within the game and its community. In both the news stories and the community discussions, women players’ gender was simultaneously made the focus of the story and presented as irrelevant due to the alleged meritocracy.

WHY YOU CANNOT TRUST THE LEADERBOARD: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

What is clear from the news stories and community discussions surrounding Ellie’s case is that it was always, in the end, about gender. The question being argued was never if Ellie was a real player, but if they were a real woman. Ellie’s skill or rank was never under suspicion, their gender was. When it was revealed that there was indeed a man behind the account, both the media and the community seemed to let out a huge sigh of relief and get back to their lives, considering the case Ellie closed. Ellie’s performed gender, or the suspicions concerning it, were a topic of discussion in all the news stories and community discussion threads, without an exception. This alone shows that gender is considered a significant matter with various effects in competitive *Overwatch*.

The news stories and community discussions showed how much of the power and agency in the culture of competitive *Overwatch* is given to men. Not only did Punisher feel entitled, as a man, to pose as a woman to prove some kind of a point about being a woman in *Overwatch* esports, but the men in the competitive *Overwatch* community were taking—and given the power to take—over Ellie’s narrative, too. Key community figures, who just so happened to be men, were given the floor to speculate on the realness of Ellie’s womanhood. In other words, men are still offered the position of gatekeepers into (competitive) gaming.

In their statement regarding the recruitment of Ellie, released after Ellie’s resignation and the Punisher disclosure, Second Wind (2019b) justified their decision by saying that “As a team, we have always had faith in the leaderboard when it comes to scouting for players”. What we can learn from this situation, however, is that you cannot trust the leaderboard alone. Ellie, an imaginary character or not, faced many of the issues that

are all too real to women players in competitive *Overwatch*: doubts about their identity and demands to prove it, threats of doxxing, team members who bully and purposefully lose or abandon games, and many other forms of misogynistic hostility. Similarly to other forms of esports and competitive gaming (see, e.g., Taylor 2012; Witkowski 2012, 2018; Zhu 2018), the culture of competitive *Overwatch* is defined by the structures of hegemonic masculinity, marking women as “others” and aggressively trying to exclude them from the space. For a woman, climbing the rank ladder is not a simple task, and their capability cannot be judged based on that alone.

Belief in meritocracy was both implicitly and explicitly present in the descriptions and discussions of Ellie’s case. It became visible when Ellie’s rank and skill level were brought up—especially when they were presented as the sole reason for Ellie getting picked up for Contenders. It could also be seen when the suspicion and hostility against Ellie was presented as objectively justified and having nothing to do with their performed gender. In these narratives, Ellie swiftly climbed the rank ladder and got noticed and recruited merely based on their performance and exceptional skill. Ellie’s identity was then placed under scrutiny because of legitimate suspicions that could and would have been directed at any player in a similar situation. It is clear, however, that Ellie’s performed gender affected both their recruitment and the following negative community responses. This is the toxic meritocracy of gaming (Paul 2018): ignoring how the player’s gender, among other things, affects their opportunities for participation and progression, which then enforces the existing discriminatory structures and further marginalizes these players.

As mentioned in the introduction, *Overwatch* is a game known for its aspiration for inclusive and diverse design. It is clear, however, that the culture surrounding competitive *Overwatch* is still far from these ideals. For the women entering competitive *Overwatch* still need to prove not only their skill, but also their gender, to be considered legitimate players. In future research, it would be worthwhile to investigate the wider variety of barriers and demands players of different marginalized identities face when trying to enter the sphere of competitive gaming. Players of color, disabled players, and trans women players are some of the marginalized player groups known to be having to deal with specific forms of discrimination and harassment as well as questions of legitimacy as esports players. More research should also be conducted to find good practices and to develop guidelines to create more inclusive and equal esports environments.

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