"There Are No Women and They All Play Mercy": Understanding and Explaining (the Lack of) Women's Presence in Esports and Competitive Gaming

Maria Ruotsalainen
University of Jyväskylä
Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies
Pl 35, 40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland
+358406469488
maria.a.t.ruotsalainen@jyu.fi

Usva Friman
University of Turku
Digital Culture
P.O.Box 124
FI-28101 Pori, Finland
umifri@utu.fi

ABSTRACT
In this paper, we explore women's participation in esports and competitive gaming. We will analyze two different types of research material: online questionnaire responses by women explaining their reluctance to participate in esports, and online forum discussions regarding women's participation in competitive Overwatch. We will examine the ways in which women's participation – its conditions, limits and possibilities – are constructed in the discussions concerning women gamers, how women are negotiating their participation in their own words, and in what ways gender may affect these processes. Our findings support those made in previous studies concerning esports and competitive gaming as fields dominated by toxic meritocracy and hegemonic (geek) masculinity, and based on our analysis, women's room for participation in competitive gaming is still extremely limited, both in terms of presence and ways of participation.

Keywords
Gender, esports, hegemonic geek masculinity, toxic meritocracy, Overwatch

INTRODUCTION

> *"Why do the female humans always play the female characters?" Acayri wondered soon thereafter. "Like, they're always playing Mercy."*
>
> *"They can't play games and be good at them —" Joel responded.*
>
> *"That's true, so they just pick the hottest girl characters," Acayri said.*

The previous is an excerpt of an article published on a digital media site Mic on May 11th 2017 (Mulkerin, 2017). In May 2017, a competitive Overwatch player Glisa

Proceedings of Nordic DiGRA 2018

uploaded a public video (Fractions of a Penny, 2017) of her recent game experience with a team of three men players previously unknown to her. After hearing Glisa's voice on the team voice chat and assuming her to be a woman, the team members spent the whole 16-minute match verbally abusing her: telling her that she, as a woman, had no right to voice her opinions, saying they assume her to be "ugly", and proclaiming they were "raping" her with their comments. Deciding to upload the video and make it public, Glisa emphasized that it was "not just for entertainment", but instead "to give people a look into how women are treated online" (ibid.). The video received hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube and made it to a few other media sites as well.

The reason we are highlighting this particular story here is not because it is unusual – in fact, it is distressingly common for women gamers to experience such behavior while playing online, and perhaps the most surprising thing about the matter is that the player targeted by the harassment stood up to it and decided to bring it public. What we find interesting in the excerpt is that it aptly summarizes so many of the prejudices women players are facing in competitive Overwatch: how it is generally assumed that women only play women and support heroes (Mercy in particular), that women are bad at gaming, and that they prioritize cosmetics (being "hot") over gameplay.

These prejudices and the continued harassment targeted at women gamers are widely known and well documented, particularly ever since the wide-spread harassment campaign known as Gamergate (e. g., Mortensen, 2018). At the same time, there seems to be a strange myth actively upheld within gaming cultures and communities – the competitive ones in particular – about women not existing there in the first place. As women gamers as well as game researchers, we are, also on a personal level, well used to the repeated "jokes" about there being no women on whichever particular game community (or the internet in general), constantly being referred to with male pronouns in game, and our team mates in the game voice chat being much more comfortable assuming us to be fifteen year old boys than thirty-something years old women.

While some notable women gamers have made it to the top of the sports in their chosen games, women's participation at the professional level of competitive gaming remains scarce. And while women esports professionals cannot be rendered invisible in the way the women playing competitive games as a past time hobby often are, they too face gender-based prejudice and harassment (Taylor, Jenson & de Castell, 2009).

In this paper, we examine the complicated relationship between women and competitive gaming: the way women seem to be seen not present at all and, at the same time, present in very limited and particular ways. Our aim is to disentangle the ways in which women's presence (or lack thereof) in competitive gaming is constructed in the ways it is being discussed – both by women gamers themselves and other gamers talking about women gamers. For this purpose, we are analyzing two different types of research material: game forum discussions from a competitive game community and online questionnaire responses from women who play digital games. Through this process, we wish to deepen the current understanding and open further discussion on the very narrow space currently available for women – in terms of presence, visibility, and roles of participation – in competitive gaming cultures. We will also place this discussion in the wider game cultural and academic discussion concerning women's position in gaming, competitive gaming in particular, starting by looking at the previously presented theoretical concepts related to the topic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There has been a variety of previous research concerning esports, a notable part of it approaching esports from a cultural perspective, contextualizing esports in relation to game culture and sports culture, for example. Because of the apparent lack of women in the field of competitive gaming, most studies concerning esports, no matter which academic discipline or methodological approach they entail, and no matter if they have been focusing on the players themselves or other participants, such as the audience, have essentially been studies about men and boys participating in this activity. This of course has not been left unnoticed by the researchers conducting the studies, and many have brought up the elements of hegemonic masculinity they have encountered while studying esports (e. g., Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2012).

The concept of geek masculinity was first introduced by T. L. Taylor (2012) in her groundbreaking study concerning esports, where she pointed out that "[t]he construction of masculinity is central to understanding the nature of gender and professional computer gaming". Even though geek masculinity has had the opportunity to offer alternative forms for masculinity, it has often instead ended up blending in with hegemonic masculinity, thus transforming and enforcing the hegemonic masculinity in the context of geek gamer culture (Lockhart, 2015; Taylor, 2012). Esports, particularly, is a field where traditional athletic masculinity is combined with geek masculinity, enforcing a new form of hegemonic masculinity, sometimes referred to as hegemonic geek/nerd masculinity. In the context of gaming, this can be also viewed as a continuation to what Mia Consalvo (2012) has described as toxic gamer culture, "a pattern of a misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position". Gerald Voorhees (2015) has described similar phenomenon through the concept of neoliberal masculinity.

A recent study by Ruvalcaba et al. (2018), focusing on women's experiences in esports through peer and spectator feedback, comparing their experiences to those of men, showed that women were more likely to be targeted with sexual harassment and comments on their appearance than men particularly while streaming their gaming. The authors argued that experiences such as these may discourage women from participating in esports, or even have a negative effect on women's gaming performance due to stereotype threat (ibid.). This is a significant issue related to esports, since streaming is a very central practice related to it.

In his recent book, Christopher A. Paul (2018) has suggested gaming having an issue with "toxic meritocracy", describing how gaming's "meritocratic norms limit the potential audience for videogames and structure how players and designers interact", and suggesting it to be another cultural structure excluding women (and other minorities) from gaming. Paul argues that the meritocracy in gaming ignores the structures preventing certain groups of people from participating and leads to those who succeed to falsely "believe they have attained their status through the quality of their effort, a compelling ground on which to build the impression that they are simply better than others are" (Paul, 2018). In esports tournaments and competitive gaming in general, the players are competing on their skill, but there is a long way to travel before getting to that point, and for some players that road may be filled with obstacles – or completely blocked. In other words, women are not missing from competitive gaming because they would essentially not be able to possess the required skills to succeed, but because there are many limits to the possibilities for them to even begin acquiring those skills in the first place, and even when they are playing at the same level than men, they are not considered as equally credible competitors (see also: Cullen, 2018).

Even though esports is growing to be an ever more popular form of media sport and mainstream entertainment, with a total revenue estimated to exceed $900 million in 2018 (Trefis Team, 2018), a few women have broken the glass ceiling of participating in the most remarkable (and lucrative) leagues and tournaments. Kim "Geguri" Se-yeon from South Korea was the first (and so far, the only) woman to join the Overwatch League in the team Shanghai Dragons in February 2018. In her commentary on Geguri's role in the field of (Korean) esports, Amanda L. L. Cullen (2018) writes about how she is considered a feminist icon by some, and primarily perceived as a woman competitor, while Geguri herself has found her gender to be irrelevant for her career. Cullen refers to Geguri as a "(post)feminist icon in esports", describing her struggle to maintain "control over her own narrative". While it is important for researchers to acknowledge the gendered structures in game culture and esports, as well as the experiences told by women and other gamers in marginalized position, it is equally important for researchers to recognize these gamers not as representatives to a certain marginalized group or assumed identity (see also: Shaw, 2014), but indeed as highly skilled individuals competing at a professional level.

In her study concerning the archaeologies of gender in videogame histories, Laine Nooney (2013) suggests that instead of asking "Where are women in game history?", we should ask "Why are they there in the way that they are?" Instead of desperately searching for the existence of women in the various contexts of game culture, or focusing our attention to their absence, we should look at the structures which define the access to the culture, its intangible and material spaces. In the context of competitive gaming and esports, instead of trying to fix the lack of women participating by "adding them on" (Nooney, 2013), we should be looking for the structures that are limiting and enabling participation, for why and how are women (not) participating.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We are building on these previous studies and concepts, exploring their presence in current day through looking at how (the lack of) women in competitive gaming is talked about by the community and the women gamers themselves. While we are looking at competitive gaming and esports in general, we focus especially on one particular game: Overwatch. Overwatch is a team-based first-person shooter (FPS) game published by Blizzard Entertainment in May 2016, with 35 million registered users in November 2017 (Activision Blizzard, 2017). Overwatch has been played competitively from the start (the competitive mode was added in the game within a month from its release), and it has also been played as an esport from the beginning, including the annual World Cup tournaments organized by Blizzard in their annual game convention Blizzcon (Turtiainen, Friman, & Ruotsalainen, 2018). The Overwatch League (OWL from now on), launched in January 2018, is the first major global esports league with city-based teams. The first season's OWL Grand Finals event held June 27–28 sold out the Barclay's Center in New York and was watched by millions of global viewers on TV networks as well as streaming platforms (Activision Blizzard, 2018). We selected Overwatch as our point of focus in this study because it has a widely popular and constantly growing competitive scene. The competitive gaming culture surrounding Overwatch also presents many particularly timely examples related to women's position in esports and competitive gaming. Furthermore, the developer of Overwatch has from the beginning on marketed Overwatch as an "inclusive" first person shooter, targeting thus also the audience who does not traditionally engage with shooter games and having created a wide roster of playable heroes with variety of genders and sexual orientations (Graft, 2017).

Our aim is to not only analyze how women are perceived by others in the context of competitive gaming, but also to give a voice for the women themselves. This is why we are analyzing two types of research material: game forum discussions regarding a competitive game community and online questionnaire responses from women who play digital games. By combining two different types of research materials, we wish to gain better understanding on how women in general voice their participation to competitive gaming and how they discuss about potential obstacles to it, as well as gain deeper understanding about women's position in one particular competitive gaming community, that of Overwatch.

Our first set of research material is a part of a larger online questionnaire concerning the gaming, gamer identities, and participation in gaming culture of Finnish women, conducted in December 2016. The questionnaire was answered by 737 Finnish self-identified women who play digital games at least occasionally. In this paper, we focus only on its three questions concerning watching and participating in esports: 1. Have you ever watched electronic sports (competitive play of digital games)? (733 respondents), 2. Have you ever participated in gaming tournaments? (733 respondents), and 3. If you have not (participated in gaming tournaments), have you ever considered participating? Why? (511 respondents). The women who replied to the online questionnaire were quite active gamers in general, spending more time playing digital games than average Finns, and playing a variety of game genres on many different platforms. Of the questionnaire respondents answering this question, almost a half (47.06 %) had at some point followed esports either through an online broadcast (32.2 %), from television (27.29 %), in person (10.1 %), or some other way (2.05 %). However, only 6.55 % of the respondents had ever participated in any esports tournament themselves in any role (audience included).

Our second set of research material consists of discussion threads gathered from the former official Overwatch discussions forums (the United Stated version) maintained by Blizzard Entertainment, the developer of Overwatch. The forum was closed on the February 20th, 2018, when the currently active, new forums were introduced. From the old forums, we gathered all the discussion threads from the forum section "general" which mentioned one of the following keywords or keyword combinations: "Overwatch League"/"owl" together with "female"/"women"/"woman"/"girl"/"grill", "Geguri", and "Mercy" together with "female"/"women"/"woman"/"girl"/"grill". The data was gathered in February 2018. The earliest posts are from May 2016 and the latest from February 2018. While these forums are currently closed, they can still be partially found online in "read-only" mode. For this reason, we have avoided using direct quotes from the forum data, as this might make the discussants recognizable.

For both sets of research material, we performed a close reading and applied thematic analysis (Guest, Macqueen, & Namey, 2012) on the selected questionnaire replies and forum discussions. Analyzing the questionnaire responses, we categorized the different types of reasons the women used to explain their reluctance to participate in esports. For the forum data, we categorized the posts and, as a result, defined the three most popular discussion themes related to the topic of women and competitive gaming (as defined by the search terms we used during the data gathering), selecting the posts under these themes for a further analysis. In the messages posted under these three discussion themes (spanning across several discussion threads), we then looked at the ways in which those discussants identifying as women players discussed about their position and experiences in gaming as well as how those who did not identify as women or in any way disclose their gender discussed about the women in gaming. Furthermore, we also aimed to trace the consistent themes and tropes which were present in the discussions and examine how those were used to create different kinds of narratives and imaginaries as well as used as tools of negotiating inclusion

and exclusion. In the following section, we will analyze first the questionnaire responses, then the forum discussions, to find how the lack of as well as specific kind of presence of women in competitive gaming or esports is explained by both the women themselves and the community discussing about them.

ANALYSIS

"Being a Woman in Esports Is Like Pouring Gasoline on the Fire": Women's Reasons for Not Participating in Esports

In the online questionnaire, 511 women answered the question: 'If you have not [participated in esports tournaments in some role], have you ever considered participating? Why?' Of the 511 respondents, 69 women (13.5%) wrote they had considered or could consider participation in gaming tournaments as competitors. Other respondents gave various reasons for not having considered participation, the most common reasons being ones directly related to the games played as esports and playing games competitively, such as dislike for competitiveness (113 respondents / 22.1%), not being interested in the games or genres played as esports (64 respondents / 12.5%), and not considering oneself skilled enough to participate in tournaments (57 respondents / 11.2%). Interestingly, there were also reasons given that did not really have anything to do with the games or playing them, and although these kinds of reasons were significantly rarer, they were still something that were repeated in multiple responses. In this study, we are focusing particularly on these responses, which we placed in two categories: reasons related to the nature of the esports community and reasons related to gender.

In the questionnaire responses, some women said they had not considered participating in esports because of the perceived nature of the community. Not all of the responses were very elaborated: for example, one respondent simply replied with "because the community is what it is", without any further explanation. One respondent wrote she did not "have the will to develop a skin thick enough to endure that shitstorm". Another one told she had witnessed harassment related to competitive gaming, and that it was one of the reasons she did not consider esports to offer any addition compelling enough to her gaming "to cross that threshold". A couple respondents brought up their perception that the negative atmosphere is maintained by men, one of them saying she had heard that "the sports are filled with chauvinist boys" and another that while she had occasionally considered participating in esports, "the gamerhardcore men would just ruin it anyway".

The women who had not considered participating in esports because of their gender expressed various views and feelings related to esports being reserved for men. One respondent simply replied with: "I am old and a woman, I do not fit in there" and another that "as a woman, I feel insecure about going to gaming events". Some respondents felt that as women competitors, they would be seen as representing their gender: one respondent explicitly wrote that "I would be scared of the pressure coming from the audience regarding my gender" and another how she "would not want to be on display as a Woman Gamer". A few women described they would assumedly be facing negative reactions, comments, and treatment because of their gender if they would participate. One respondent even described being a woman in esports as "pouring gasoline on the fire".

As mentioned earlier, 13.5 % of the women answering the question said they had considered participating in esports. However, gender could be seen as a limitation for participation even in some of these responses. Some women described how they had considered participation but were afraid of "the harassment women gamers

unfortunately still experience". One respondent brought up that her appearance would "certainly get criticized a lot". Some respondents assumed their skills would be under special scrutiny because of their gender, which also raised the threshold of participation even higher. As one respondent said, "I doubt my abilities and possibilities to develop to be good enough before a tournament, because, as a woman, I feel the need to show everyone that we should not be underestimated". This quote once again highlights how women playing competitively are often viewed as representatives of their gender – and some of them may even consciously assume that role, willingly or not.

It is important to note that even though we were able to find comments explicitly mentioning gender as a reason to not participate, these were likely not the only reasons affected by gender, but simply the ones in which it was visibly present. In fact, in light of previous studies shedding light on the complex relationship between gender and gaming, gender may very well play a part in the responses concerning dislike for competitiveness, lack of interest towards the types of games typically played as an esport,and feeling inadequate in regards of player skill.

It is also worth noting how some respondents brought up that they would like to see more women as professional players. One respondent even brought up that she could participate if she could be certain that there would be other women present in active roles, and that she "would not have to fit in any box".

Altogether, the questionnaire replies presented here supported the perception of esports and game culture being toxic to women (Consalvo, 2012) and governed by hegemonic (geek) masculinity (Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2012). Women competitors are often seen as representatives of their gender rather than merely players, which was visible in the responses in two ways: the women wished to see more other women participating in tournaments in active roles, and, at the same time, they felt extra pressure about participating as a woman, which lead to a higher threshold for participation. For some women, being a woman competitor seemed to signify a chance for proving women can play skillfully and competitively and succeed, while some refused to be put on a "display as a Woman Gamer" (see also: Cullen, 2018).

From Non-Existent Women to Mercy Mains: Discussing Women Gamers on the Overwatch Discussion Forums

From the Overwatch forum data, we examined three most popular discussion themes related to women and competitive gaming, spread around multiple discussion threads. We chose the Overwatch forums rather than some other online discussion forum as they are maintained by the developer of the game and are thus inviting and easy to find to everyone playing Overwatch, unlike platforms such as Reddit which can be more exclusive and tend to have more defined userbase.

The first discussion we examined was about the lack of women in the OWL. When the OWL's inaugural season launched in January 2018, there were no women players in any of the twelve teams that were part of the league. It was only later in February when Geguri was signed to the Shanghai Dragons that OWL got its first woman player (e.g., Webster, 2018). Before this, multiple discussion threads were started in the Overwatch forums to address this lack. The second theme we analyzed dealt with the signing of Geguri and the reactions it evoked. While analyzing these two themes our aim was to understand how the lack women in the OWL was discussed, what kind of reasons were given for it amongst the player community, and finally how Geguri's signing was discussed in relation to these reasons.

The third popular discussion theme we found circulated around women "Mercy mains" – a consistent imaginary amongst the players which claims that women players would only play one hero in Overwatch, Mercy, and would be unable and unwilling to play any other heroes. Analyzing this theme, our aim was to uncover how women are discussed and treated in the everyday gaming practices and how this resonates with the way the lack of women on the top of the gaming is discussed.

"No Women in the OWL"

The discussants speculated several, sometimes contradicting, reasons for the lack of women players in the OWL. The most common reason speculated was that there are currently not many women players that would be good enough to play in the OWL. Moreover, most discussants agreed that women do need to be as good as men to be part of the OWL, while few did suggest some type of affirmative action or quotas in order to bring women to OWL. Many also argued that Geguri is good enough to be in the OWL and expressed their discontent for the fact that she had not been signed by any of the teams. There were some different opinions as to why Geguri had not been picked up by any of the teams: some argued that multiple good players had been left out and Geguri's gender was not the reason she was not picked up, also quoting Geguri herself on this, while others argued that Geguri's gender had been at least partially the reason why she had not been signed.

Some discussants also pondered why so few women are currently good at Overwatch. The reasons suggested can be separated to two broad categories: to gender-essential claims which assigned the lack of women in esports to women's biology or to some other difference from men and to those which assigned the reasons to culture or environment.

The gender-essential claims tended to use sexist and populist rhetoric, claiming that there are less women in competitive gaming due to biological differences. Discussants using these tended to argue that women lack certain qualities that men have, qualities that enable someone to become a high-level gamer (see also: Taylor, Jenson & de Castell, 2009). Women were considered essentially less aggressive, having poorer reaction times, and having not as good spatial awareness than men, to mention some examples of these types of arguments. It was also argued that women tend be more nurturing than males and less interested in competition. Some discussants would simply use vague phrases such as "that's how women just are". Those who argued for the biological differences also tended to vaguely refer to some scientific research, but without giving any actual sources. On the contrary, a fairly recent study by Ratan et al. (2015) with a considerable sample size (16,821 participants) exploring gender differences in player skill in *League of Legends* found skill differences to be negligible between women and men who had played an equal amount of matches, and the main difference found was that the women were less confident with their own ability than the men, implying that the perception of women's player skills are formed more by social and cultural structures than their actual capability.

It was also seen that women were more interested in being "cute" or "gaining attention through showing skin" than showcasing their skill in the game while streaming. Streaming appears to be one of the activities related to play were women are heavily gendered. Study conducted by Nakandala et al. (2016) about women streamers on *Twitch.tv* suggests that women experience harassment and gendering during streaming: their analysis concludes that women streamers' chats tend to contain more gendered language and the messages they receive from the viewers are more often objectifying than those that men streamers receive. Similarly, the

messages the men streamers receive are more often game related than those received by women streamers.

Those discussants who claimed that women are not well presented in esports due to their physiology or biology or some other essential quality were, however, clearly a minority. Most discussants argued the lack of woman is due to cultural or other kind of environmental reasons.

The most prevalent reason suggested amongst the discussants was that men simply have been playing games and particularly FPS (first person shooter) games longer than women, which puts them into an advantageous position. This is also suggested by research (Ratan et al., 2015). Some discussants would expand on this and speculate that FPS games have traditionally been hostile environments for women, which has not encouraged them to participate and consequently get better at FPS games. It was also noted that Overwatch is a somewhat atypical FPS game: it has number of heroes which do not require skills such as aim (aim can be seen one of those elements that construct gamer capital as it acquired through years of playing games) and it has variety of women heroes to play. It was seen that this has encouraged people who do not generally play FPS games to play Overwatch

Overall, the discussants appeared to be sensitive to different kinds of reasons which would explain the lack of women in the highest-level play. While some did indeed suggest gender-essential reasons, many more brought up the structural and cultural reasons, including the harassment women encounter in everyday gaming.

Geguri Signed to the OWL

In February 2018 it was announced that South-Korean off-tank player Geguri had been signed by the team Shanghai Dragons, making her the first woman to join the OWL.

When the news about Geguri's signing were announced, multiple discussion threads were started in the Overwatch forums. Many of them addressed Geguri's signing as a positive event and multiple discussants stated that she deserves to be in the OWL. While some discussants expressed joy that she had become the first woman signed to the league and an inspiration for other women, many were eager to point out that she was signed, not because of her gender, but because of her skills (see also: Cullen, 2018). Some discussants also argued that this furthermore proofs that women can make it to the highest top of the competitive play if they are just good enough in the game – an assumption in line with what has been called toxic meritocracy (Paul, 2018). Few discussants even noted that maybe Geguri's signing will finally put an end to the threads about "no women in Overwatch League" in the Overwatch Forums.

While some discussants wanted to downplay the role of Geguri's gender in her signing and the discussions surrounding it, her gender remained as a vocal point of discussions. Somewere concerned that her gender would single her out and she would get bullied and harassed because of it. Others expressed their concern that she would have to perform not just well, but exceptionally, to prove that women can play at the highest level. Some even suggested that signing Geguri might be a publicity stunt made to silence those questioning the lack of women in the OWL.

Overall though, it was seen that Geguri was signed because she is a skilled professional. While Geguri's gender was commented, there were also many discussants who rather or also discussed about her gameplay: as an Overwatch player, Geguri is known for her Zarya (one of the off-tank heroes in the game), and it was

speculated if she can play other heroes well enough at the high-level. Her play was also praised and the link to her Twitch.tv streaming site shared. It is also worth noting that while the study of Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) has shown that women are more often subjected to comments regarding their looks while streaming, in the discussions regards Geguri her looks were rarely commented or mentioned at all.

"Why Do All Women Play Mercy?"

As pointed out in the introduction of our paper, amongst the players of Overwatch there is a consistent imaginary about women only playing one of the heroes in the game, Mercy.

Mercy is one of the playable heroes in the Overwatch, angelic by her visual appear and support by her role. Her task is to keep her teammates healed up and she can also occasionally resurrect them, bringing them back to life in the midst of the fight. In many ways, her role can thus be seen that of "affective labor", assumed to be taken on by women players (see: Butt, 2016; Ratan et al., 2015). Amongst the Overwatch players, Mercy is largely considered as one of the easiest playable heroes in the game. This is because playing Mercy requires no aim, which is often seen as the hallmark of the skill amongst the players – even though it is easy to argue that aim is not the only skill required in team-based shooter like Overwatch. She is, as mentioned, also consistently connotated with women playing the game. This setting is by no means unique to Overwatch but rather common across team-oriented game genres. For example, in their study on the MOBA game League of Legends, Ratan et al. (2015) found that many women players were "compelled, pressured, or otherwise directed toward playing the Support role that, though requiring no less competence than other in in-game roles (and arguably more), is nonetheless seen by many players as subordinate to, and less desirable than, the role of ADC [the damage-oriented role]".

In the material gathered from the discussion forums, we examined all the threads which mentioned Mercy and female/woman/women/girl/grill. We furthermore distinguished, on one hand, how those identifying as women and as Mercy players discussed about why they play Mercy, and, on the other hand, what kind of reasons other discussion participants offered for why they think many women play Mercy or why they think the general assumption of many women playing Mercy exists.

Those who identified as women and as Mercy players gave three main reasons for playing Mercy. Firstly, they would play Mercy because nobody else in the team would pick a healer – so they were "flexing" i.e. filling for the needed hero role for the good of the team (a practice that could be considered a form of affective labor). This would also lead to the expectation of them playing Mercy in future. Secondly, some said that Mercy as a hero appealed to them due to her background story: Mercy is a pacifist amongst the soldiers, a doctor, and out to do good. Few also mentioned that they were drawn to Mercy due to her visual design: "blond", "angelic", and "feminine" were some of the adjectives mentioned. This can be seen as a way to negotiate one's femininity in an activity that is often regarded as very masculine (see also: Walkerdine, 2009).

Thirdly, there were reasons related to Mercy's gameplay design and her role: some discussants noted that they had not played any FPS games before, so playing Mercy gave them a hero to play they could feel they were good at and useful for the team while playing her. Others pointed out that they enjoyed playing support and taking care of their team: few echoed the discussions about women's nurturing nature and how it is their biology to care rather than compete, thus highlighting the way playing

Mercy can indeed be a form of affective labor. This, however, was a minority of the discussants.

There were also some discussants who identified themselves as women but pointed out that they never played Mercy or that they disliked playing her, in contra of the popular idea of "all women play Mercy". They would challenge this idea and point out that they enjoy playing for instance heroes that require precise aim. Some of them pointed out that they are, however, consistently told to play Mercy while being suggested that as they are women they are not able to play anything else. In a similar manner, a number of discussants who identified as male wrote that they do play a lot of Mercy and while doing so, are often assumed to be female or queer by their co-players. Mercy thus functions as a boundary: femininity and queerness on one side and masculinity on the other, Mercy marking the "other" for that part of the gaming community upholding values of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity.

Amongst those who did not identify as woman or Mercy player, the idea that Mercy is played by "all" women as they cannot or do not want to play anything else, was very prominent. It was suggested that women play Mercy because they cannot, due to their biology or physiology, play heroes which require skills such as aiming, and are thus only able to play Mercy Many of these discussants also argued that women play Mercy because she appeals to their nature by being caring and nurturing as well as anti-violent. A different line of argumentation for the apparent popularity of Mercy among women was that women play Mercy because they have historically not played so much FPS games and have thus not acquired the transferable skills needed to play aim-based heroes as effectively as men.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In the women's online questionnaire responses, gender was explicitly mentioned as one of the reasons preventing them from participating in esports. Based on these responses, toxic meritocracy (Paul, 2018) seems to apply to esports, at least in some ways, considering how the women answering the questionnaire had so many things to consider, so many obstacles in the way of their participation, related to their gender. Likewise, hegemonic (geek) masculinity (Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2012) was seen strongly present in esports at least by some respondents, who considered it as a field reserved for men. Experiences of esports culture (or game culture in general; see Consalvo, 2012) toxic to women was present in the responses as well, as some women brought up how women competitors must face gender-based harassment, such as comments on their appearance. A previous study by Ratan et al. (2015) has suggested that the social climate hostile to women and the stereotype that women do not belong in or are not skilled at the game are likely to be central factors in what they call the systematic gender gap in competitive games. It is worth noting that because of these negative attitudes faced by women in competitive gaming culture, gender affects the ways women are seen as players and competitors – both by themselves and others. Because of this, gender may also be a part of the reason for not participating in esports and competitive gaming even when it is not explicitly mentioned as such.

Women who play competitively and professionally are often considered as representatives of their gender rather than individual players (see also Cullen, 2018). This was mentioned in the questionnaire responses, in which some women described experiencing extra pressure regarding the need to display high level of skill in competitive play because of their gender. Interestingly, for some women it was important to see other women participating in esports in active roles, but at the same time they generally did not wish to participate as "Woman Gamers" put on display.

Examining women's position within the competitive gaming culture of Overwatch through forum discussions shows that when discussing about lack of women in the OWL, at the very top level of play, the discussants assigned a number of reasons for the lack of women, including both gender-essential and cultural or environmental. Overall, the discussants were more likely to look at the latter to explain the lack of women. However, when examining the forum discussions in relation to the popular idea amongst the players, that of "all women play Mercy", the discussants, mainly other than those who identified as women and Mercy players themselves, did tend to argue that women play (only) Mercy because of their assumed physiological or biological qualities. It might then be that these types of gender-essential misconceptions play more prevalent role in everyday play-practices. At the same time, for women playing Mercy can be seen as one of the ways to negotiate belonging to the player community: playing Mercy, a hero which is still a very useful hero and needed for the team, but which creates no "threat" to the male dominated culture – as Mercy players can be ridiculed as low skilled players – becomes a position of subordination which is seen as preferable and acceptable for women players to take and women players are continually suggested to take this position. It is thus a position in which women can be, if not fully accepted, tolerated. Mercy thus functions as one of the narrow locations where women can be present in games, and yet they simultaneously remain quasi absent as one cannot claim a full "gamer citizenship" (nor aspire to become a professional gamer) through solely playing Mercy, who remains ridiculed as an easy hero by part of the players, marking the hero and her player as feminine, queer, and other within the community.

In this paper, we have explored the ways in which women's (lack of) presence and participation in competitive gaming and esports is being constructed in the ways it is being discussed by women gamers as well as those talking about women gamers. Through our analysis of the women's online questionnaire responses regarding participation in esports and the online forum discussions related to competitive Overwatch, we have been able to draw some outlines for what could well be described as women's almost impossible position within the competitive gaming culture. In the forum discussions related to competitive Overwatch, women are simultaneously being written out of existence and written into existing in extremely limited ways, their possibilities for participation determined by and their active presence interpreted through their gender. In the online questionnaire responses, women are describing their lack of will to participate in esports, because of their gender and for various other reasons, while at the same time hoping there would be other women present, and, most importantly, that the environment would be safe for women to participate. While our analysis is based on limited data and largely focused on the competitive gaming culture surrounding one particular game, our findings resonate with those made in previous studies regarding women's position in competitive gaming and esports. It is clear that more research is required on the significance of gender in participating in competitive gaming and esports. Based on this study, discussions within the competitive gaming cultures and communities, as well as women's own thoughts and experiences regarding participation in competitive gaming seem fruitful areas for further exploration in order to increase our understanding on this topic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by the Academy of Finland project Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (CoE-GameCult, 312395).

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