

# “A pure meritocracy blind to identity”: Exploring the Online Responses to All-Female Teams in Reddit

**Miia Siutla**

Department of Media Studies  
University of Turku  
Finland  
mimasi@utu.fi

**Ellinoora Havaste**

[ehavaste@gmail.com](mailto:ehavaste@gmail.com)

## **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 ‘girl-gamers’. 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 seen as a working meritocracy where only player skill matters. Especially all-female teams were perceived to be a threat to this order, since they 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**

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 (see Vesterby, 2005; Beavis and Charles, 2007; Taylor et al., 2009; Ratan et al., 2015; Cote, 2017), we are researching perceptions of women prevalent to the online esports public. Our aim is to uncover stereotypes and ideas that stick to two figures in particular, the all-female teams and ‘girl-gamers’, in the eyes of mainly male esports audience and fans (Newzoo, 2017; Superdata, 2018).

## **WOMEN'S ROLE IN COMPETITIVE GAMING AND ESPORTS**

While women's position in videogame culture has been well researched, studies on women as professional players or as participants in the esports-scene are more rare. However, for as long as games have allowed for online player versus player play there have been initiatives aiming at creating more women-friendly spaces and women-only teams and tournaments. Justine Cassell and Richard Jenkins (1998) introduce the ‘girls’

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game movement' as a relevant participant in the 90s' competitive gaming culture. They argue that the movement is loosely linked to the underground feminist Riot Grrls movement and suggest that the 'Game Grrls' in turn juxtapose traditionally feminine iconography with their expertise of playing violent and extreme masculine-coded games. They introduce women-only gaming clans PMS Clan (formerly Psycho-Men-Slayers or Psychotic Man Slayerz, now Pandora's Mighty Soldiers), Die Valkarie and CrackWhore as women's game movement groups dedicated to competing against male players in online multiplayer games such as the first-person shooter *Quake* (1996). Gabriela Richard and Christopher Hoadley (2013) further establish PMS Clan as the largest and most renowned 'female-oriented' gaming group since the 2000s, and point out that the members of the clan feel highly connected to gaming despite varying levels of skill. Industry interest in recruiting for and sponsoring women-only competitive teams is likewise reported already in Janelle Brown's 1997 article, which introduces PMS and CrackWhore as 'all-girl *Quake* clans' aggressively disclosing their gendered identity in the male-dominated world of *Quake*.

Regardless of women's role in the history competitive gaming, female players remain a minority in contemporary esports. While women can increasingly be found as casual players and streamers in esports titles and in the audiences for both spectating and betting on esports (Sally Gainsbury et al., 2017), the public face of the scene is still indisputably male. An important factor for this appearance is the lack of women as professional competitors in tournaments. Even though major tournaments are open to all, women rarely play in them. The professional players that have appeared on the scene, such as Maria "Sakuya" (formerly Remi/Remilia) Creveling in *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. Additionally, 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. Many of these roles are familiar from the world of traditional sports, such as 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' that only played the game to get attention from male gamers. (Taylor et al, 2009) Teams' reluctance of signing women as professional players especially onto mixed rosters is still apparent in 2018, when the *Overwatch* (2016) premier esports league launched on January 10 without female players, despite team managers and spokespeople widely endorsing the equal treatment of women in the scene and their hopes of signing women and women-only teams under their ranks (Beck, 2018). However, some progress has been made, as South Korean female player Kim "Geguri" Se-yeon was signed by Shanghai Dragons and is set to debut on April 5th (Morrison, 2018).

Women-only teams and tournaments have also existed in the public eye since the early pioneers like PMS Clan and CrackWhore, and there have been copious teams in competitive games. Tore Vesterby describes in his 2005 dissertation on professional Danish female *Counter-Strike* (2000) players a female division in 2004 Electronic World Sports Cup Counter-Strike. Liquidpedia.net records 2003 as the earliest instance of a public professional women's tournament in *Counter-Strike* (liquidpedia.net), although women-only underground tournaments have existed before this date. However, it is interesting to note the early date that public female-only tournaments have existed in the

sphere of professional *Counter-Strike* (and later *CS:GO*<sup>1</sup>) competitive play in light of our results. At present, women-only tournaments and leagues are more widely available than ever, but they tend to be lower level competitions. Even when played in conjunction to major open tournaments and carrying the same name, women-only tournaments have smaller prize pools and are often played exclusively online. However, in January 2017 Australian Esports Media Group announced the first season of Female CS:GO League WPGI for the Oceania region, looking to change the competitive landscape for women in esports not only for Oceania, but worldwide (Jessica Citizen, 2017). The first season final of WPGI was held as a LAN event in Queensland with a prize pool of 10,000 AUD. *LoL*, likewise, has a history of women's leagues and tournaments that have similarly been lower level competitions played exclusively or chiefly online, such as the KeSPA Amateur Challenge Ladies in 2014, and various Go4LoL female cups and tournaments.

## DATA AND METHOD

On 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 *CS:GO* and *LoL*, respectively. News articles of both announcements (Jacob Juillet, 2015; Taylor 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 be henceforth playing in mixed amateur tournaments. There were no mentions of the monetary amount for 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 chosen as case studies for uncovering the underlying stereotypes attached to the figures of 'all-female team' and 'girl-gamer' in the contemporary online esports audience, since both figures were generously brought up and discussed by the Reddit commenters.

The data comprises of the August 3rd 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. In addition to the textual content of the comments, we considered their position in regards 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 to figure out what kind of comments and opinions were considered popular. 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 these two subreddits our study indicates that it tends to be used to vote on basis of opinion.

Reddit itself is a surprisingly hard entity to define. It is a link aggregation board that allows for and encourages discussion and voting of the links and has a dedicated community (or communities). While the description is true, it doesn't really tell much of Reddit or the varied content and communities that frequent it. In her book Adrienne Massanari (2015) depicts Reddit through five metaphors: carnival, performance/ritual, play, community and platform. According to her, the content on Reddit can be described as a carnival, 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. Reddit is also a community (or more precisely, many communities) of varied users, as well as a platform that allows and encourages certain kinds of interactions, actions and activities of its users. (Massanari, 2015, 19-25)

According to Massanari, the Reddit culture can mostly be described as geek masculinity, where technical expertise combined with “a white, able-bodied, young straight cisgendered male” is the norm (2015, 129). While all of Reddit’s subcommunities do not fit this description, the two used in our study, r/leagueoflegends and r/GlobalOffensive, do. It is therefore not surprising that the commentary in them contains also misogynistic comments and opinions, nor that female voices are rare. Both subreddits prohibit “hateful language” (r/GlobalOffensive) or “hate speech” and “discriminatory language” (r/leagueoflegends), and the moderators frequently remove such comments, but this merely keeps the language used civil, while the actual misogynistic opinions can be expressed as long as they are worded in a polite way.

Our 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. 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 teasing out the stereotypical intensities from the comments in context of the larger conversations they were part of using close reading (cf. Brummett, 2009) and quantitative analysis as our primary methods.

	r/leagueoflegends	r/GlobalOffensive
Esports	277	5
Professional players	62	13
YouPorn as a sponsor	74	12
The all-female teams	186	3
Women’s abilities	179	2
Women’s experiences	44	0
Jokes	148	19
Miscellaneous/off topic	148	2

**Table 1:** Number of comments on each topic.

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

so. 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. 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 on general opinions and views on women in the scene. Especially the r/leagueoflegends subreddit has become a central venue for LoL related discussion, surpassing the official forums moderated by Riot Games on their own web domain. Comment threads of over 900 comments are a common and 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. To give comparison, the highest number of points that a post in r/leagueoflegends subreddit has had is about 69 thousand on an April fools 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).

In this paper we will first discuss the general attitudes expressed in the comment threads about esports, gender segregation and women as potential professional players. Then we move on to the perceived skill difference between men and women and the suggested reasons behind it, and the reception the announcements these particular sponsorships got. Finally we will focus on how the stereotypes were molded by previous all-female teams' public appearances and the influences brought on by YouPorn as the sponsor. Finally we will discuss the opinions and expressions of the few self-proclaimed women 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 which emphasised 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 and 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 the 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 whole 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 in these comments was that the team was not professional enough to consider even trying to enter LCS<sup>2</sup>, 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 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 interfere with the meritocracy. Most of the commenters that mentioned women's leagues considered them to be a negative or at the very least redundant phenomenon. Often commenters talked about how female 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 in 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, many commenters also 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). Women’s leagues were also considered to possibly increase their skill level and the respect they receive as “having a BIGGER woman's league would promote more girls to playing, therefore being better, and then being taken more seriously” (ID 203). The news article about the signed team does not contextualise the team's previous wins or members' individual rankings, which commenters brought up as necessary information in defining their place in the scene.

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 3 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 of all esports players. 8 comments established a specific percentage, estimating that women make up 5 or 10 percent of the players in most esports games. This might be referencing a statistic released by Riot Games four years earlier which stated that women make 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 word 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. Some commenters felt that this was natural to games culture; “women generally aren't as hardcore into games” (ID 76), “it’s naturally a guy thing” (ID 133). 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, posted a link to a Stanford University School of Medicine internal news piece covering the study in question (Brandt, 2008). 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). 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). One commenter even suggested that women had not gotten above the rank of high Diamond<sup>3</sup> (ID 111). All in all, it was an almost unanimously agreed-on truth in the thread that women were exhibiting less skill in video games, and only the reasons behind the skill difference were debated. To summarize the conversation on this issue, this particular snippet of a comment is quite representative of the others: “Nobody really knows, exactly. But they are” (ID 115).

Firstly, 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. The commenters presented several scientific studies to support these claims and these studies in turn were scrutinized in detail by others. Those originally supporting the argument of biological factors having a heavy influence on women’s potential found the presented studies to be quite reliable, while those who argued for reasons beyond biology to be the culprit found the studies to be lacking in some respect. Despite of the fact that esports were 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, did on average play more than women and had a higher average skill level. (Ratan et al, 2015, p 15-16)

In direct rebuttal to the biological reasons 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 there 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. 11 comments purposefully excluded existing female professional players based on transphobic gender-segregation, 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).

Instead of biological reasons many r/leagueoflegends commenters believed that the lack of women playing or competing in esports was in social and cultural factors, mainly stemming from a lower number of women playing games in general. 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”. Commenters who favoured biological reasons answered these comments by pointing out that cultural and societal factors were created from the basis of biological differences (ID 133) or by claiming societal pressure, indirect barriers and sexist stigma as “feminist/SJW rhetoric” (ID 136) that did not really exist in society, or at least not in the new phenomenon of 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 PROFESSIONAL FEMALE PLAYERS**

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 3 comments in r/GlobalOffensive encouraged women to simply get better. 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 players might receive significantly more of it.

Insistence on personal hard work and dedication being the key to overcoming any barriers one might have on reaching top teams and competitions further supports the idea of esports scenes as meritocracies. Anyone unwilling or even unable to overcome barriers and hindrances is considered “not worthy of that career path” (ID 72). A person who can not “take the hits” should not “go for it” (ID 263). The commenters also establish the “correct” way to earn a place on a team with sponsors to be by climbing the competitive ladders on your own, without help from others, until reaching the highest tier where professional teams would automatically begin the recruitment of promising talent (ID 197).

Some commenters 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 “were 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 bring out 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 a girl guyz!!!”. Coming forward as a female player is thus not only a reason for why fair treatment does not manifest, but it is something expected and wanted by the player herself.

The comments of r/leagueoflegends not only define the place for the 'female player' on the competitive scene, but also suggest a set of behavioral rules for her. A good, skilled female player does not reveal her gender, but focuses only on playing (but without the social aspect or the use of voice communication that is beneficial in the game). 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. 13 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**

74 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 to be doing a favour to the scene by giving the 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 can not be displayed in any way in any relation to LoL, Riot Games or LCS (Riot Games, 2015, 17). In CS:GO, ESL<sup>4</sup> 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 affects the LoL-team too, 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 of acquiring the all-female team, and the all-male team, to be pornographic in nature, as well as 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 angry about the teams' sponsorships. Perhaps the assumption of the LoL team's and sponsor's aspirations to break it into 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 moved into a gaming house even before they had accrued any significant sponsorship. As of 26 January 2018, there is no mention on Team YP's website that either team is still signed by them.

## **RUNNING JOKES ON WOMEN AS GAMERS, SEX APPEAL AND PORNOGRAPHY**

Both comment threads had a lot of jokes and banter in them. In r/leagueoflegends, there was one very 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 video<sup>5</sup> that was soon posted on the r/leagueoflegends subreddit. After an abysmal loss against a team of streamers and ex-professional LoL players lead by George "HotshotGG" Georgallidis<sup>6</sup>, and a parody of their introduction video posted on YouTube by Jason "videogamedunkey" Gastrow<sup>7</sup>, Team Siren became a running gag that tends to appear when a thread in r/leagueoflegends somehow relates to women in esports or LoL. If the thread is about an all-female team, comments with Siren jokes are likely to have a good score. On June 19, 2013, it came to public attention that the team 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 in competitive play. This ties into the expectations of women as professional players in general. The case of Team Siren allows a convenient example of women who commenters could point out as 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 special treatment from (male) gamers. However, publicity runs within the scene are not rare in official leagues in general, such as the North American Challenger team Delta Fox which comprised of male ex-professionals turned streamers purportedly taking part in the Challenger Series<sup>8</sup> 2017 merely for the team franchise visibility (Bates, 2017).

Most of the other jokes in the two threads were sexual or related to the players' gender. In r/leagueoflegends, these jokes often carried on familiar memes related to internet pornography, Reddit and the porn industry, such as "5 Girls 1 Rift"<sup>9</sup> (ID 643) (alluding

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 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 :PPPPPPPPPPPP slurp heheheheh” (ID 679) and to “[r]ace to backdoor<sup>10</sup> them first” (ID 3). Also a joking question if the team were trans women (“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).

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 ( ٩٥٩ )” (ID 7). The other sexual jokes commonly alluded to the two teams doing pornography together, or them being something akin to a sex worker. Interestingly, there were also a few sexual jokes about only 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 linked 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.

## **WOMEN COMING FORWARD WITH THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES**

Reddit does not have any features that would let us know users' genders, but a number of comments had the users coming unprompted forward with their gender and drawing from it as a personal experience 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 differs from Team Siren as they do not aim to reach the LCS or CS, nor to be the best in the world, but will 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 best on the thread. The highest scored (60) response to Reither's comment asked for a statement on the negative behaviour in-game and alleged

boosting<sup>11</sup> (ID 807) of one of the team's members, addressing major concerns commenters had had earlier and had not been initially answered by Reither. Most of the direct responses to Reither wished the team good luck and success in the future, however, in clear contrast to the rest of the comment thread where the team was often described to be too bad to even publicly compete.

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 could compete consistently on amateur level 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 comment came so late that it accumulated no responses.

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) The meritocratic ideals of esports are in play here as the commenter seems to believe that sponsorships should be reserved to those teams that are already of, or close to, a professional skill level. One of the responses to the comment supports this ideal by exclaiming: "[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, womanhood 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 a number of views into the possibilities and identifications for women in the esports scene. 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 comments seem to believe that the scene thus allows women to make their grand entrance as professionals any minute now, the majority of them were content with establishing that women have not reached the top of any esports titles as professional players, which 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 female gamer 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 favor of getting attention from the male audience for monetary gain, publicity or other reasons.

Whereas 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 figure of the all-female team was one that could not be imagined into 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.

Through the figures of the "female professional player" and "all-female team", problematic ideas and stereotypes stick to women in esports in general: women are seen to lack dedication in 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 be herself, or to be a woman, if she wishes to be taken seriously.

The current situation seems to mostly stem from a combination of blind belief on 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. In order for the situation to change, we see two possibilities: either the community needs to stop believing in the meritocracy blindly, or there needs to be a significant increase in the number of women in the top competitions and teams. Unfortunately, neither of these options is an easy and fast solution.

In the future it would be interesting to study how the few professional female esports players have been perceived by the community as well as how they themselves see the (professional) esports scene. In addition, a study on how the attitudes in the esports scene towards women have changed could provide valuable information.

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## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Counter Strike: Global Offensive, 4th installation of the Counter Strike series

<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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

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

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_Gz9um3wV1o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Gz9um3wV1o)

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

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

<sup>8</sup> CS: Challenger Series, semi-professional series in League of Legends, top teams can compete over entering the LCS. While NA CS has now been replaced by another series, the EU version is still in operation.

<sup>9</sup> Rift: Summoner's Rift is the name of the map on which professional League of Legends competitions are played on

<sup>10</sup> 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

<sup>11</sup> 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

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