Aalborg University

Where are all the female pros?

A Study of perception, sexualization, and representation of women in contemporary video game culture

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Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Multiplayer video games as a medium have introduced social play in entirely new dimensions. Distinct from other media, such as movies where interaction between participants is limited, the social interaction afforded in video games serve as reflections of behavior and socialization, so when reports by ESA in 2021 defined the American gaming population as 55% male and 45% female, showing an increasing number of women playing video games as time passes, one would assume that the demographic is accurately represented. Yet, in the decade that Counter-Strike: Global Offensive has had an active esports scene, the scene has yet to see a woman play at a major tournament. On the English broadcast for those majors, the highest ratio of female-to-male representation was three women to thirteen men, with the men taking up all analytical roles. This study claims these patterns such as these are not coincidences, but results of a toxic culture that the study investigates through female perception in online spaces. Video games and the surrounding culture are viewed through angles of cultural analysis. Through this, we find that there is both a notion of video game culture being a result of the values of the people who play it, and the notion that the video games being played are cultural artifacts that incite a certain culture of behavior through their (mis)representation.

The study incorporates a number of theories, including Myers and their theory of social contexts of play, used to introduce the concept and different instances of social settings within video games. This serves to lay the foundation for understanding how sexist values are represented on a micro-level through groups and how it further leads to a negative experience and perception of women in game culture. Additionally, cultivation theory and the online disinhibition effect is used in analyzing social perception of female streamers on Twitch as a result of representation. Through the application of cultivation theory, the study investigates the relationship between video game media and sexualization of female characters and

voyeuristic perception of female streamers on Twitch, connecting female perception in two spaces, concluding that the two spaces affect each other and help to perpetuate and spread their cultures. Approaching this pattern through the online disinhibition effect indicates that there is a possible connection between the voyeuristic behavior and viewers being virtually invisible, rather than anonymous.

In the professional, competitive end of team-based video games, the study approaches cases of initiatives for female visibility and the response from the surrounding community as a framework for understanding the harassment

The study highlights the problematic relationship between misrepresentation and perception before moving onto a discussion of rape culture and sexism in Valorant's community, where it problematizes the culture as being unwelcome for women despite featuring no sexualization of female characters. Through the sexist discourse retained online by the community, the discussion emphasizes how representation is one step on the ladder, meaning that the culture of sexism is not dissolved by one highly popular video game, but a general shift in the approach to female characters and actors in video game culture.

The study not only elaborates on how video game culture is constituted of online spaces that reflect an underlying sexism, but also how these cultures help to perpetuate their values and reinforce them through closed instances with little opposition.

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Introduction

""..the thing that I actually did like about the whole MMO scene was that things would change. It's just the people were a problem." (twenty-four-year-old female, referring to playing *Skyrim* alone)" (Vella et al. 761, 2016). Social play can produce extremely joyful interactions between friends and strangers alike, but it also has the capacity to do the opposite and negatively impact them. This capacity is shaped by the behavior of those who play. Many factors matter in defining and influencing their behavior, yet commonly we see that video game culture suffers from a toxic environment and hegemonic masculinity. This environment is reflected in surrounding culture: The highest-earning female player comes in at 401st place over top earning esports athletes ("Top 500 Highest Overall Earnings - Esports Player Rankings: Esports Earnings"), which does not align with the fact that 45% of US gamers are female, according to the ESA. ("2021 Essential Facts about the Video Game Industry"). This disproportion of female participation to female representation warrants an analysis of the social landscape of video game culture with an emphasis on female representation, both in video games and surrounding media. In seeking a solution and understanding of this problematic culture, I will investigate contemporary video game culture, primarily through online social spaces as reflections and perpetuators of gendered socialization. In approaching online spaces, I will theoretically approach them as three different parts, contemporary competitive team-based video games, esports, and live streaming. To this end, I will make use of cultivation theory as a central approach in understanding trajectories of culture, which

not only helps in explaining, but underlines the urgency of the problems outlined in the paper. Approaching onward, the study will relate to the following problem statements:

- *Why is sexism so prevalent in competitive team-based video games?*
- *Do we see a reflection of the sexist culture at the professional level? How are women represented in the mediation of popular team-based competitive tournaments?*
- *How are women represented in live streaming spaces of video games?*

Defining game culture

Shaw outlines, in their 2010 study on video game culture, an interesting notion of game culture's problems being based in "who plays", stating that game culture is largely defined by those who play: ""Game culture" is often defined via descriptions of gamers" (404), and "[F]or most of the last two decades gaming has been considered an odd, insular subculture, the territory of teenage boys and those who never outgrew their teens" (408). This presents a question: as the definers of a culture reside within that culture, how will they react to a change in culture? This question pinpoints one of the core issues behind the abundant sexism and hostility found within game cultures, because, while the reaction towards an expansion of the diversity of both people and subjects found in the culture is a change, it is seen as a challenge by gamers. To a considerable extent, one could argue that it is a question of expectations: The white, young male, whether consciously or subconsciously, does not expect the person they are interacting with, within the game space, to be anything but a white, young male. It is when that expectation is not met, that hostility might become the reaction.

That expectation, however, is misconceived. Women have played video games just as long as men, yet the culture's perception does not reflect that diversity in participation. The fact that numerous articles and this paper itself engage in reasserting the expectation that all gamers are not young and white males is an indicator of how unwelcoming that space is towards anyone that does not fit that profile. As such, this has a rippling effect throughout various spaces of video games, both the representation of women in high-level esports tournaments, both as media personalities and athletes, or women being exposed to sexist remarks and behavior by men in their casual online games. Naturally, the people who play video games and do not fit the profile of the white, young male also view themselves as gamers: "In interviews, however, Arab gamers did not position themselves outside the ''traditional'' gamer culture. Neither did lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender gamers in

another project" (Shaw 409). This divide in culture between white, young males and everyone else manifests through social interactions with each other in online video games. This is not to say that single player video games with no social interaction are exempt from engaging and perpetuating the traditional gamer stereotypes, rather, there are numerous examples of sexist ideologies and historically male habits and values represented in single player games, such as the "Grand Theft Auto" series, a widely popular series with crime-centered narratives, where the player can engage in an array of actions such as hiring prostitutes or going to strip clubs. The catch is that both prostitutes and strippers only exist as women within those games. Additionally, in most of the Grand Theft Auto games, the player's character is male, and the wide majority of them are white. As such, many mechanics are designed to appeal to a heteronormative white male fantasy.

> "A content analysis of images of video game characters from top-selling American gaming magazines showed male characters (83%) are more likely than female characters (62%) to be portrayed as aggressive. Female characters are more likely than male characters to be portrayed as sexualized (60% versus 1%), scantily clad (39% versus 8%) and as showing a mix of sex and aggression (39 versus 1%) (Dill and Thill 851).

Especially the gap between 60% female and 1% male characters being sexualized indicates consumers being straight males. Admittedly, the analysis is based on gaming magazines and not games, yet they share genres and demographics, if anything, the content of the magazines are likely things from gaming that are highlighted as being worthy of extra media space, so it still stands as a reflection of values and opinions in the demographic of gamers. This misrepresentation turns into a problematic situation when those values and opinions are, whether consciously or subconsciously, realized and perpetuated through social interactions, hence why diversity in this field of media is paramount for it to be socially responsible.

> Among game enthusiasts, it is commonly argued that negative gender stereotypes in the media do not matter because they are just harmless entertainment. Brenick et al. (2007) exposed 41 male and 46 female college students to gender stereotypes and to violence in video games. These authors found that high frequency players, especially males, were more likely to condone negative stereotypes in video Sex Roles (2007) 57:851–864 853853 games such as sexually exploited females and violent males. Furthermore, Brenick and colleagues found that their subjects, in general, believed exposure to negative gender stereotypes does not cause changes in attitudes or behaviors. Given that youth, especially males and gamers, do not understand that negative media content can have negative effects, then it follows that they do not understand why such content has detrimental effects (Dill & Thill 853-854).

Dill & Thill presents an interesting point in that it is common for game enthusiasts to disregard negative gender stereotypes as harmful, and then become prone to behavior that enforces those negative gender stereotypes. The pattern between negative gender stereotypes and the blatantly sexist representations of gender in video games are inarguably connected: because of misrepresentation of gender in a medium, the consumers of that medium will learn from experiences and values that are wrongly founded in a misogynistic setting and proceed to perpetuate that belief by not critically assessing their behavior. This then affects the player base, by reducing the number of female players, because of gender expectations (Lopez-Fernandez 2019). Those expectations are, as previously iterated, an expression of a misconceived perception, because studies show that women reach similar levels of success within a game they have spent as much time in as men (Lopez-Fernandez 2019). This shuts down a common notion among male gamers: women are worse, that is why there are less of them. Not only is that statement wrong, but it is also an indicator of a culture that is shaped by a lack of representation. If we continue considering the wrongful statement of “women are

worse than men", we notice that male gamers value performance, since the argument relies on the notion that one has to be better or worse than others, granted, games are often about winning or losing, but the difference lies in the fact that males do not unprovokedly start questioning their male teammates' competencies as gamers, yet women are questioned on a daily basis. This perception that men are inherently gamers and women are not only damages the social infrastructure of video game communities and gamers, it perpetuates itself through a negative feedback loop: "The association between gaming and the male gender leads to less visibility of female gamers—due to a reduced feeling of fitting in, reduced self-identification, prescriptive stereotyping, and active discrimination—which in turn leads to a stronger association between gaming and the male gender" (Paaßen 429). Primarily, the popular games being played rarely do much to engage a female audience through representation. Often, the player character is male, or at least assumed to be. There is a strong correlation between games with non-exploitive, positive female representations and the representation of female gamers in the player base.

Having laid the foundation for understanding some of the identification and discrimination issues within video games, we will proceed to elaborate upon another aspect of video game spaces that are relevant and connected to video game culture, the facilitation of play in multiplayer Player versus Player (PvP for shorthand) video games with regards to behavioral habits and patterns within PvP games, as they are largely a product and example of the underlying sexism within the culture.

Social contexts within gaming

American professor of cultural and media studies David Myers has critically described and analyzed human interaction and cognition within video games. Myers' theory is suitable because of its applicability and natural translation to the video games being discussed within this paper, seeing as it largely explores team-based video game communication as a space

where culture is expressed. Myers' theory stands out from a lengthy line of online video game communication research by not focusing on text chat. There is plenty of research on interpreting social settings of play in relation to textual spaces within MMOs such as World of Warcraft, yet surprisingly little on team-based competitive games and their communication, as they dramatically differ from the "general" chat in World of Warcraft by featuring a commonly used voice chat and smaller sized spaces. In his 2010 work "Play Redux: The Form of Computer games", Myers outlines an important distinction between different social contexts of play that is illustrated below:

	individual play	**group** play
PvE	solo play	cooperative social play
PvP	oppositional play	competitive social (team) play

Source: Myers, David. *Play Redux: The Form of Computer Games*. University of Michigan Press, 2010, figure 9.1.

Individual play describes social contexts where the player is a lone agent, so there are no other social agents trying to cooperate with the player. Conversely, group play involves players typically having to align their goals and efforts to a common goal via communications, most frequently, these communications take form as verbal or textual communication between the group members, but they are not restricted to those methods.

Secondly, there is a distinction between the two terms: Player versus Environment (PvE) and Player versus Player (PvP). The two terms describe what the players must overcome in each game. PvE refers to a mode of game where the players face AI-controlled enemies, whereas PvP pits players against other players. While the PvE mode is an essential and equally important part of video game culture, its use in this study is limited, therefore, going ahead, the study will instead investigate the concept of PvP and its communications.

PvP play is particularly interesting regarding the behavior found within that social space because of how people identify and relate to themselves. What used to be leaderboards and high scores on arcade machines has since developed into “simultaneous and participatory play” (Myers 122), meaning that no longer are players limited to engaging in separate sessions and comparing their performances between games, they can now directly compete with and against each other with scores updating in real-time. This reinforces Myers idea, that “In general, PvP’ers tend to be much more concerned about the relationship between their in-game characters and their out-of-game selves than are PvE’ers” (Myers 123). By this, Myers does not only mean their aesthetics, Myers states that PvP players strongly identify with their in-game character, which also means their in-game character becomes a vessel for them to identify with. In that identification, players might, for instance, expect themselves to be at a certain level of skill, and whether they fulfill that expectation, it becomes an important part of their experience and is often what distinguishes a joyful session from a dreadful one.

There might still be a lack of understanding as to why players identify so strongly with their in-game performance. However, we can further establish our point through Suler’s understanding of a certain implication of online social contexts. Suler notes:

> While online a person’s status in the face-to-face world may not be known to others and may not have as much impact. Authority figures express their status and power in their dress, body language, and in the trappings of their environmental settings. The absence of those cues in the text environments of cyberspace reduces the impact of their authority (324)

A person cannot identify with their physical, social, or economic status, thereby they align with their in-game body and standing. In-game “standing” is typically reflected in statistical measurements of performance, such as leaderboards or scoreboards, resulting in the gameplay systems becoming crucial in determining a person’s place within the social

hierarchy and (self-) perception. This notion also carries implications for the way people communicate within those spaces. Notably: PvP players communicate and measure each other based on their performances. While that is a simple statement that does not provide us any significant information, if we correlate it to our theory from Shaw, Dill & Thill, we can elaborate on this theory: PvP players communicate and measure each other based on their performances *if* they perceive them as a gamer, in other words, white and male. In many instances of PvP play where a female player communicates, male players tend to ostracize the female player based on their gender, and performance metrics are either disregarded or used negatively against them. This hostility is not only facilitated by gender, but as Myers states, a result of "Inequity aversion", a term which primarily concerns the assumption and subsequent reaction to a fair game.

> "Inequity aversion" promotes the assumption that the game is fair and that all PvP combatants have equal opportunities—regardless of characters played to "win." Any variation in winning outcomes is then attributed to the single aspect of play considered to be uncontrolled and undetermined by the game rules: the game player. This is, of course, a more popular assumption among consistent PvP winners than among consistent PvP losers. However, both winners and losers share this common value. It is just that the winning players, with a higher status granted by their in-game winning characters, are normally louder, more persistent, and more persuasive in its assertion. (124)

Inequity aversion can explain how people struggle to emotionally manage the stakes in a PvP mode. If we consider the end of a PvP battle, with a winner and a loser, the loser might argue "The only reason you won is because of X reason", where the winner replies "X reason is insignificant, you lost because of skill". This argument might never be settled, and

simultaneously, it might not matter if it does: it is merely a projection of the emotions held by the players, yet it always falls on the idea of the PvP interaction being unfair towards the loser. Inequity aversion as a problem for female players is twofold: If a female player is on a team of male players, and a male player loses their battle, they might blame the female player based on their gender. This, again, is simply a projection of emotions and sexism, and often it is not the case that the female player did something to provoke their loss, they are just, yet inherently targeted by male players. Conversely, if a female player is on the opposing team of a male player and they engage in a PvP fight, regardless of who wins, the female player is likely to be berated for their performance or gender. Whereas male-to-male, the inequity aversion might have manifested as "I died because of my internet connection" or "You got lucky". Male players thereby perpetuate hegemonic masculinity, as is apparent from their inability to accept female players as their equals.

Alienation and otherness are central terms to understanding the sense of belonging players have. Many traditional, hardcore gamers feel alienated from what they perceive to be theirs, because gaming is growing into an accessible and mainstream media. Conversely, they associate this change with casual games, casual meaning that they do not require the same amount of time, dedication, or technicality as a 'hardcore' game, which they associate with masculinity. "The association of these casual games with femininity, while hardcore games and technology are intertwined with masculinity, perpetuates the marginalization and invisibility of femininity within gaming culture" (Salter & Blodgett 407).

Salter and Blodgett's quote is not only interesting because it highlights how femininity is marginalized within gaming culture, but also because it explains the marginalization of femininity and the idea of a meritocracy blind to its sexism as a product and perpetuator of toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity is understood by Kirby Fenwick as "consisting of male dominance, emotional repression and self-reliance. These characteristics,

it appears, manifest ‘aggression and superiority in men at the expense of community and emotional expression’” (Casey 2020). Significantly, the three characteristics are self-perpetuating, describing both what toxic masculinity perpetuates and the causes for it manifesting within a person. The three characteristics of toxic masculinity serve as a good foundation for understanding the emotions and viewpoints of men and their reactions within team-based shooters.

Salter and Blodgett’s notion of femininity being invisible rings true throughout most of gaming culture, namely two important parts of culture which have not yet been mentioned: esports and streams.

Streaming, also called live streaming, has become a huge part of contemporary video game culture as the rise of the platform Twitch has paved the way for video games and related content to be globally broadcast all days of the week. The culture of streaming on Twitch is shaped by video game culture and its unique affordances as a medium. However, to regard streaming on Twitch as a whole reduces the different subcultures within that space and diminishes the interesting factors to be found within those subcultures, for instance, competitive esport broadcasts are vastly different from speedrunning streams produced by the person who competes. Considering this, scholars should be careful when defining the causes and results of culture on Twitch and other resources.

Hello world! Hello Twitch!

Twitch, founded in 2011 as a web-hosted streaming service originally hosted by Justin TV, allows users to broadcast content live to any viewer with an electronic smart-device and an internet connection. Viewers can interact with the stream through a growing set of affordances such as a text chat, supporting a specific channel through subscription or donation, and much more. Streamers can set their own preferences and restrictions for users on their channel, such as automatically blocking a message if it contains a certain word, or

restricting the text chat so a user receives a cooldown timer after writing a message (called slow-mode in Twitch's interface), and so on.

With both professional play and media work being reserved for male representatives, where can women display their competencies? This is where Twitch comes into play: While female gamers have struggled to enter the top leaderboards and pro circuits in their respective games, feminine visibility has boomed on Twitch, and allowed for many female gamers to support each other and create strong platforms that cultivate female representation within gaming. Cultivation is an interesting term to apply in the case of social identity and reshaping it, since the term explains part of the reason female representation has been scarce, but also how to grow female representation. It lies at the core of the problem - the more people watch male-dominated media, the more they will adopt the hegemonic masculinity as normative. This specific notion is the primary hypothesis of cultivation theory, and it suggests that we equate the world of the given media to reality, even when they are not equivalent.

> For example, the world of television is more violent in general than the real world, violence is disproportionately enacted on certain groups (children, elderly, minorities), and the prevalence of certain occupations is portrayed as disproportionately high for certain groups (e.g., lawyers, doctors, police officers) but disproportionately low for others (e.g., blue-collar workers) (Shrum 2).

Cultivation theory stems from a time when television was the primary focus of study, yet the ideas behind the theory seem easily applicable for modern media. Much of the same disproportion we observe between the television world and the real world, we can ascribe to modern games, and to some degree, streams. Furthermore, we can assume a proportional relationship between the extent of a given person's consumption of a given media, and the influence the media holds on the person's perception of social reality. Cultivation theory not only applies to streaming, but to the video game medium, as well. Thus, if we observe

teenagers who have spent most of their spare time playing popular games with violence perpetrated by male characters, we can assume that they associate men, power, and violence in the real world, as compared to someone who might play the same game once every other week, whose perception of social reality is primarily based upon events from reality. This is not to say that reality is inherently ideal, but the disproportionate representation within video games can cultivate negative beliefs, which not only streamers, but video game developers have partially contributed to by gendering video games, both in their appeal and their characters: Counter-Strike has only introduced female playable characters in 2019, despite being out for two decades. Until that point, there was no female representation to be found within the game in any capacity. That lack of representation is captivating, because the playable characters in Counter-Strike were anonymous and intentionally generic, yet they were all male, as can be heard in their voice commands. In my view, this all-male cast serves to cultivate and reinforce the social perception of gamers as male: The voice commands of the playable characters very much reflect the behavior and tactical norms of Counter-Strike, i.e. to some degree, gamers learn how to communicate with their teammates from the way their character speaks, and considering that their voice commands are masculine, that masculinity cultivates hegemonic masculinity within video game culture and sets a subconscious expectation of who gamers are. As time has passed by, however, gaming as a culture and technology has developed, and it has reached a point where new media can be utilized to help de-establish male hegemony, such as the platform introduced earlier, Twitch.

Twitch constitutes a huge part of gaming culture and has changed the way the culture perceives itself and its constituents.

> The created visibility can help reduce the perceived pervasiveness of the white male gamer stereotype. If the image of gaming women stops being a rare occurrence and becomes normalized, female gamers would be perceived as less of a minority and

> therefore be less marginalized. It also creates opportunities for the many women who excel at gaming to showcase their skills to a broader audience and could therefore help to mitigate the most common sexist stereotypes in gaming, such as the misconception that women are generally bad at video games (Uszkoreit 2018).

From Uzkoreit's words we can establish Twitch as an important part of female representation in contemporary gaming culture. But therein also lies a dangerous potential: It can also perpetuate or cultivate new stereotypes. In the analysis of Twitch as a platform for female representation, I will investigate how Twitch's female representation and culture is a result of surrounding cultures and preconceptions along with the technical affordances that define the social setting of a live stream. Before diving into that, however, the paper will investigate women in esports, underrepresented and uncredited, looking into the ideological association with sports and cultural association with video games indicates that female competitors are seen as inferior to male competitors.

Esports, sports and the female experience

Looking into the mediation of professional team-based esports proves relevant since the professional level and its representation reflect the values and peak of the general player base. Unfortunately, women are widely underrepresented within professional gaming, and while initiatives to put them on the map exist, they are met with a lot of unwarranted criticism by the gaming communities. A popular tournament organizer, ESL, announced a competitive women's circuit for Counter-Strike:Global Offensive in 2022, and some of the critique from Twitter users complained along the lines of: it should not be gender-based. If women were good, they would be playing at the top level (Twitter). That notion is full of fallacies, and primarily serves to project a viewpoint that clearly fails to understand the implications of men's perception of women as 'others'. The argument can be countered by understanding the

relationship between improving and enjoyment: Professional teams want to get ‘the best players’, and the best players are those that have spent thousands of hours within the game. These hours are presupposed by the players enjoying the game, otherwise they would not spend thousands of hours in it - and that is where the problem occurs. If we consider that women, as previously iterated, face more toxicity and hostile social situations within team-based PvP gaming, they are, in turn, less likely to continue playing because of decreased enjoyment. That, even, only constitutes a small fraction of reasons why professional gaming is male-dominated.

Another area of interest is not the professional play itself, but the media event surrounding it. Like in traditional sports, esports broadcasts make use of quantifiable statistics, replays, commentators, analysts, etc., and is not only iconographically, but ideologically associated with its predecessor.

Let us consider the top-level Counter-Strike: Global Offensive tournament, BLAST Premier: Fall Finals 2021. This tournament was held and broadcast in November of 2021. With several teams being at the top of the competitive ranking system and high viewership, the tournament is highly representative of the aesthetics and ideas that the Counter-Strike esports scene values. The tournament’s cast of broadcast personalities, frequently called “talent” within esports speech, consisted mostly of male characters, with the only woman represented being Freya Spiers, the desk host of the broadcast. Furthermore, the broadcast talent consisted of four male casters, two male analysts and a male interviewer. Of all those positions, the desk host is the one least expected to deliver critical and analytical evaluations and conclusions. Instead, the desk host aims to engage and extract information from the two analysts that are also stationed at the desk. Furthermore, the desk host is the visual center and anchor of the desk segments. As such, Spiers’ role is not to be a credible analyst, but to be visually pleasing and allow the (male) analysts to speak. It echoes sentiments from traditional

sports media, where women have struggled to gain credibility and liberty to the same extent as their male coworkers

> As sports sociologists have long observed, however, it is gender, and not sex, that is a powerful category for understanding how athleticism functions in our society. By this I mean simply that it is not about the genitals one is born with but instead the gendered identity and body in a specific sociocultural context (woven through with race, class, sexuality, disability, religion, and nationality) that shapes athletic participation (Taylor 196)

Taylor then elaborates on this notion with a significant remark on sports media which is equally true for esports media:

> Sports media plays a powerful role in upholding the binary and segregation model. It offers limited coverage of women's sports despite audience interest (or potential), regularly focuses on women athletes' sexuality or looks over skill and accomplishments (196).

There is a plethora of examples to be found in American sports history, such as Jane Chastain, a female sportscaster who worked television for twelve years until 1974, she was hired by CBS as sideline reporter on select NFL football broadcasts, ultimately lasting one season. Or Lee Arthur, who "shocked Pittsburgh viewers when she wore "a tank top and a short, short skirt" during live interviews from the 1973 U.S. Open at Oakmont (Kirkpatrick 91). According to Arthur, "Athletes are physical types. Not wearing a bra seems to make somebody interesting to them" (Creedon 1994). And while esports might not be directly related to specific conventional sports, the mediation of esports is indisputably connected to the ideals and iconography of historical sports, thereby perpetuating toxic ideals which undermines perceived minorities. As such, women in esports media still deal with scarce

representation and less credible roles than male counterparts. While popular esports games such as DOTA 2, League of Legends and Valorant have helped to balance out this underrepresentation through their broadcasts, sections later in the paper reveal that all these esports games and communities also contribute to male hegemony and sexist values being perpetuated. Firstly, we will delve into why female talent is underrepresented within popular esports.

The underrepresentation of female analytical broadcast talent correlates with the fact that many of the contemporary analysts within the scene are former professional players. The notion makes sense, since former professional players are credible in their views of the game being played: They played it at this level themselves, they are able to understand and convey it. However, we can also consider that the pattern of former players turning to analytical work is a correlation, not a requirement. After all, there are numerous examples of male personalities who go into analytical roles despite not possessing any experience of professional play within their sports, such as Nick “LS” De Cesare, who coached various top teams in League of Legends, despite never having played the game professionally, as well as Dota 2 broadcast analyst Andrew “Jenkins” Jenkins, who, prior to his professional play, was also an analyst and caster. Assessing the analysts attending the ESL ONE Stockholm 2022 major in Dota 2, four out of the nine analysts have experience in professional play prior to their role, only one of the nine are female. Conversely, those who do not have professional playing typically have other merits, such as being successful content creators. Jenkins and Godec both have tutorials and guides uploaded to their channels on YouTube, amassing millions of viewers (Jenkins) (Godec). Initially, this appears positive. People can still enter broadcast analyst work by displaying their knowledge of the game on other platforms. However, it becomes less of a positive pattern when we consider that there is still a low amount of female analysts, adding to that the difficulty for women to be heard and be given

the same credit as their male peers in online spaces. While the sole female analyst of the event, Michelle “Moxxi” Song has been able to work their way into the sphere through streaming on Twitch, that path has not been one of positive reinforcement from male viewers, in fact, Song has criticized gaming culture for its association to sexual harassment, stating that it happens “the whole damn time” (MoxxiCasts). As such, the notion that merits can be earned from other online spaces becomes less positive, as we can observe sexism in those cultures as well. Returning to the notion of pro players entering analytical work, this also reinforces the previously iterated theory that women are less likely to go professional due to the abundant sexism they are exposed to when playing the game at an amateur or hobby level. This leads us to the urgent need for a women’s pro circuit. In an effort to introduce more female players to the ecosystem, games such as Counter-Strike: Global Offensive and Valorant have established such leagues, yet they remain initiatives that have been met with a lot of criticism, primarily from the male audience because they cannot understand the differences of their experience of the video game to the common female experience. Prominent characters within Counter-Strike: Global Offensive’s esports scene, namely the caster, Auguste “Semmler” Massonnat, a renowned spokesperson for the sport, reflected this uninformed viewpoint in his response to an all-female league being actualized in his Tweet: “When will the men-only tournament be scheduled? #ggforall” (OnFireSemmler). Additionally, another common argument seen in the discourse on social media is the argument that if there were world-class female players, they would already be at the top of the scene (SizzlerCS). This argument, however, ignores the notion that women are discouraged from gaming throughout their aspiration to become professional. As such, it seems that there is a disconnect from male gamers, who are not informed or aware of women’s issues within gaming.

Adding to male perception and its implications, female gamers have historically been assumed to be pushing an agenda in their esports careers. For instance, Maria "Remilia" Creveling, the first female League of Legends player to qualify for the North American top circuit, LCS. "Remilia" stepped down from her position six games after reaching the circuit because she "did not want to be put on some lgbt agenda" (Conditt). Another instance is the story of Team Siren, an all-female League of Legends team that received an immense amount of backlash on their announcement video and other social media, with commenters ridiculing their efforts and agenda (TeamSirenGaming).

Female perception in esports as a result of misrepresentation

Team Siren entered a rough scene full of prejudice towards them, and a large cause of that might be the game's misrepresentation. A 2019 study by Siutila found that the subreddit "r/leagueoflegends" had a significantly larger number of comments stereotyping women when compared to the subreddit "r/GlobalOffensive" (51). While this difference can also be attributed to female players receiving more attention in one game than the other, another interesting correlation is that Counter-Strike: Global Offensive has not misrepresented female characters, it has not featured female characters at all. League of Legends, however, features many female characters, but they are sexualized to varying degrees. "Of the 40 female characters, 100% agreement on the level of sexualization of the character's base avatar artwork was reached on 19 characters" (Bell 69). However, only identifying sexualization proves insufficient, as League of Legends warranted another degree of sexualization.

> In addition, a final category was added. Loosely referred to as "hypermax" by the researcher, this category included skins that were clearly purposefully pushed to the very limits of hypersexualization. Three skins fit this category: Battle Bunny Riven,

> Kitty Katarina, and Heartbreaker Vayne. All three skins were sexualized far beyond even what might be considered "normal" hypersexualization (Bell 70).

Additionally, the "Battle Bunny" skin for Riven is no longer the only one from that line, as Riot Games, the developers of League of Legends have announced further "Battle Bunny" skins for other female characters, indicating that the hypersexualization of female characters remains at large within the game (Kelly). I would argue that, while all-female teams have had more presence and discussion in League of Legends, the recurring joke on r/leagueoflegends of female gamers having YouPorn as their sponsor is not only a result of female players receiving more attention than in Counter-Strike, it is also a product of male adversity that is fueled by women being represented as sexual objects and not competent fighters. Furthermore, a 2021 study by Song indicated that many of the game's "utility support" champions, champions who rely on their other teammates doing damage while they heal and enable them, were disproportionately gendered as female (2649-2650). Further exploring the relationship between gender and supports, Song's survey found that the top three frequent opinions on the reason behind all utility supports being female were:

> 'Heal is for female, combat is for male', 'Healing reminds me of mother or sister', and 'How come players can feel natural when tumultuous male gives healing and small beautiful girl sacrifices for the team as a tanker? The opposite is what we have learned so far and it is common in the society" (2650).

These reasons resonate with our understanding of gender roles playing to social perception in video games, as women are devalued in terms of being the "heroes" that take the fights, instead, they are the ones supporting the heroes in the limelight. On the contrary, if we consider the "Battle Bunny Riven" incident, we can observe that Riven, as a character, is not a support but a fighter, as such, Riven's role is to independently fight against opponents. Yet,

instead of receiving a skin with an armored suit that embraces their role on the team, Riven receives a skin that emphasizes their sexual body, making the connection that Riven, as a strong female character, is sexy, and not strong. This plays into gender socialization, as equivalent male characters do not receive hypersexualized skins, but instead, receive various armored outfits, none of which emphasize their sexual bodies (in role and aesthetic, we can consider characters such as Garen and Darius an equivalent, both feature no sexualized skins). While gamers from all backgrounds can play as several characters, the implication that women are presented as dependent characters hurt female perception in online spaces. We can further this notion by Austin's 2022 study on Overwatch, where they found a similar pattern in the video game Overwatch.

> Socialization into gender roles transcends the boundaries of virtual space, creating expectations of online behavior analogous to those in offline spaces. Men are assumed to take on tasks that position them to conquer and control potential threats, while women are assumed to play more tangential roles and nurture men in their endeavors (Austin 1123)

It is a group thing

A common theme of toxic behavior towards Female gamers is the impact of the group dynamic. A significant portion of female gamers experienced supportive and accepting male behavior in one-to-one settings. In groups, however, female gamers felt that issues surfaced when male gamers were grouped, which then changed male behavior and led to more negative interactions (McLean, Lavinia, and Griffiths 984-985). Myers' social contexts provide us with the notion that group PvP instances correlate to harsher tone and inequity aversion, giving us the context as to why grouped male players behave differently. Myers' theory, however, lacks an explanation of why that toxicity does not translate to a one-to-one setting. A post from McLean's article provides us with half the answer: "I think proving

yourself in competitive environments is natural, even in gaming" (985). Schott, Quandt and Kröger provide us with the other: male gamers have been socialized to be experts when gaming and prove themselves to their male group (Schott 2000) (Quandt & Kröger 2014). With no male group, however, the expectation to perform as an expert is diminished, leading to less negative criticism within the social space (McLean, Lavinia, and Griffiths 985). Elaborating upon Myers' social contexts, we can ascribe the frequency of inequity aversion as being proportional to the expectation, or pressure, male gamers face. Whether the pressure is internal or external, if a male gamer is grouped up with four other male gamers in a PvP group setting, they will respond more negatively and toxic to events they perceive negatively or disagree with. Therefore, in a team of five: four male gamers and one female is the most likely group structure to result in toxic male behavior as a result of pressure and inequity aversion projected onto the female gamer. Furthermore, male gamers as experts justify their play as supportive, but in fact, they are undermining female gamers' skills.

On the topic of psychology, we are reminded that the social setting in online games is, as iterated, online. The physical disconnect and lack of sensual presence bears implications for both our social perception and communications. Suler remarks this implication in his 2004 publication, coining it *the online disinhibition effect* (321). He elaborates, stating that the disinhibition can be further divided in two: *benign-* and *toxic inhibition*. Benign disinhibition outlines when people reveal secrets and show unusual acts of kindness. Toxic disinhibition is the opposite, when people turn to hatred, rude language, etc. "Territory they would never explore in the real world" (321). Considering cultivation theory and the notion that our social perception is shaped by the reality we interact with, there is an underlying, quite scary notion that male gamers have created a social space of toxicity that, too, is shaped by the medium being online, allowing them to create incredibly harsh and uncomfortable environments for anyone not socialized in a gaming sphere. Through cultivation theory, we

understand that this online disinhibition effect is carried over into real life settings as a result of the extensive amount of time male gamers, typically the most toxic ones, put into gaming on a regular basis.

Perception of women on Twitch

Many Twitch viewers (as can be seen in posts on reddit or various other social media and gaming media) seem to believe that women can make an easy living on Twitch by exploiting the predominantly male viewership of the platform. This assumption is likely based on, as well as constantly perpetuating, a stereotype of a female Twitch streamer commonly known as ‘titty streamer’ or ‘boob streamer’. The stereotype describes a female streamer who usually has a large webcam feed, her camera angled to show her upper body rather than her face, wearing low cut shirts and showing lots of skin. Often, these streamers are bad gamers or not ‘real gamers’ and only streaming for money and attention, according to male perception. An interesting side note on boob streamers is that while they receive a lot of negative feedback and commentary in chat as well as on Reddit or Twitter, many of the most successful female streamers can be categorized to align with this stereotype at least partially, which proves problematic, as aspiring, new streamers, will imitate successful ones. This sets a worrying precedent for streamers who do not identify with this stereotype (Uszkoreit 2017).

> However, wherever there is an in-group, there will also be an out-group. Not every female streamer will want to tweet out selfies of herself on the beach or comment on how great someone else’s selfie on the beach looks. There is a lot of pressure on female streamers to keep up with the amount of skin others show and to reaffirm each other’s strategies for attracting viewers to their channels and social media profiles. Hafu mentioned in an interview that a lot of expectations the community has for what she is supposed to deliver on and

> off stream stem from how other female streamers present themselves (Uzskoreit 178 2018).

What is fascinating about this stereotype and its discourse is the recurring theme of attire. The concept and practice of attire is completely disconnected from the experience of gameplay, but it is relevant to spectatorship. Thus, it has been one of the most debated topics among creators, critics, and consumers of the platform. In 2014, Twitch released a Rules of Conduct stating: "Wearing no clothing or sexually suggestive clothing - including lingerie, swimsuits, pasties, and undergarments - is prohibited" (Taylor 231). Since then, they have redefined these guidelines to reflect a more lenient view on the matter. "Nudity and sexually explicit content or activities, such as pornography, sexual acts or intercourse, and sexual services, are prohibited" (*Twitch Safety Center*). This change is reflected by the content output on Twitch, which has seen a rise in popular female streamers who output sexually suggestible elements in their streams, such as revealing attire. Unfortunately, this plays into a correlation of objectification of female streamers, explained by Uszkoreit:

> I also found that there is a strong negative correlation between what viewers think to be important for a female streamer's success: personality or attractiveness. The same negative correlation was found for attractiveness and good gameplay as criteria for success (Uszkoreit 2015). This leads to the conclusion that many viewers either watch because they are interested in a female streamer's personality or their looks. Given the way the question was phrased, the results also imply that women on Twitch can either be attractive or have an entertaining personality but not both. This gives reason to believe that female Twitch streamers are often objectified - viewers perceive their bodies and especially their sexual body parts as disconnected from their personality and their person as a whole (169 2018).

This pattern of objectification has grave implications for the larger perception of women, not only within Twitch or gaming culture, but on a potentially global scale. Through cultivation theory, the implication is that male viewers who spend a lot of time watching these streams and cultivating their objectification will retain those cognitive patterns. They will presumably then enter reality objectifying women based on their experience from watching Twitch streamers. Furthermore, this objectification "can lead to perceiving women as less competent as well as less moral and warm" (169). This helps to explain why many women, especially those that have gained traction through streaming, even though they are becoming visible, are still not given the same credibility and attention as their male peers. However, what we have not accounted for is where this objectification starts - if male viewers tend to objectify female Twitch streamers, what is the common cause to explain this objectification? The answer is, of course, a plethora of variables too wide to fully account for in this thesis, but we can consider a few significant influences that result in this pattern.

The most obvious common cause would appear to be front and center when looking at the issue: their medium of interaction, Twitch. Surely, the framework that allows and defines how these parties interact and perceive each other must bear implications for the subsequent patterns of behavior. To contextualize our understanding of why Twitch's framework can bear implications, we must first return to Suler and the online disinhibition effect. Suler introduces the term dissociative anonymity, explaining that when people can hide some or all of their identity, they can separate their online actions from their "in-person lifestyle and identity" (322). As Suler puts it:

> Whatever they say or do can't be directly linked to the rest of their lives. In a process of dissociation, they don't have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity. The online self becomes a

> compartmentalized self. In the case of expressed hostilities or other deviant actions, the person can avert responsibility for those behaviors (322).

Suler then goes on to elaborate on this, stating: “almost as if superego restrictions and moral cognitive processes have been temporarily suspended from the online psyche. In fact, people might even convince themselves that those online behaviors “aren’t me at all.”” (322). This notion of the online psyche seems fitting in understanding how people can act in such deviant manners without sensing remorse.

Suler then introduces the term invisibility. While there are several layers to Suler’s explanation, putting it briefly, invisibility outlines how people can go unseen in online environments (322). We can frame this notion through a fitting example: a person watches a popular live stream that currently has ten thousand viewers on Twitch. While watching, they do not leave messages or interact with the streamer or community in any other manner. By the time they stop watching, they will only have left a tiny footprint that most likely will never be addressed. Not only does this invisibility amplify the online disinhibition effect (322), in tandem with male perception of women, it results in voyeuristic behavior and enjoyment of female Twitch streamers as sexual objects. This argument is furthered by Suler’s finding: “This invisibility gives people the courage to go places and do things that they otherwise wouldn’t” (322). From this, we can hypothesize that heavily objectified female streamers have a disproportionate relationship in their chat activity to their concurrent viewers as a result of a significant number of male viewers engaging in voyeuristic behavior allowed by the invisibility from Suler’s findings.

Unfortunately, this hypothesis remains hard to prove as Twitch does not release information on chat activity, and I have struggled to find any research on viewer interaction that can challenge it. It does, however, remain an interesting hypothesis to further study. Perhaps by comparing the number of participants in chat to the rate of text messages sent in

the chat per minute can illuminate some interesting patterns, such research would have to account for users sending multiple messages, the content of the stream, different regions, user habits. Overall, an analysis on that level requires an extensive amount of preparation and care but can provide meaningful results and insight into female perception in parasocial online spaces.

Problematically, this voyeuristic behavior and pattern of consumption works against diversity and openness to female visibility within gaming culture. As Taylor states, a strange fear has cultivated amongst male users of the website, a "fear that men are being manipulated by women's bodies" (234). This leads to male users policing female broadcasters on their attire and bodies.

> As one poster, ellis0896, wrote on November 30, 2014, "There's a *League of Legends* streamer right now who literally has the biggest breasts I've ever seen in my life but she has them hanging out of her top so is this still allowed? I don't want [to] ruin her income and whatnot but it should be about the game, not her incredibly large breasts." Another, HeartofTractors, cut to the chase more quickly on January 13, 2015, asking, "Why do so many of you put on make up and all this other beauty crap just to play games?" (235).

This indicates two notions of female perception on Twitch: Male viewers hold expectations of what female streamers look and act like. Secondly, if their expectations are not matched, they take issue with it and attempt to police it. This claim does not extend to all male or female viewers, of course, but tendencies and patterns within the culture that represents part of gaming culture. Failure to match expectations conversely leads to dissatisfied male viewers, since their satisfaction is derived from voyeuristic, and thereby sexual gratification. The objectifying culture has led to a female perception characterized by body shaming and downplaying female streamers. Since the majority of viewers on Twitch are male, many of

which might engage in watching female streamers with sexual intent, female streamers are not only policed and shamed on their bodies, but in the process, the viewers who are shaming are also contributing to a concurrent viewer count, enabling the streamers they shame to gain traction and expand their platform. Conversely, this shaming culture leads to female streamers having to conform to male expectations. It echoes the same sentiment we observed with Team Siren or Remilia. Male hegemony in gaming culture has set up an expectation of what a gamer is, as soon as something is noticeably different from that, white male gamers take offense. The objectification on Twitch also plays into a larger sexist pattern of sexualizing women, yet that is not the only factor. T.L. Taylor experienced it first-hand, and as she explains:

> As a woman who is older, is known by initials, and doesn't dress in particularly feminine ways, I've long been struck by how little I've been targeted despite doing publicly feminist work. One of my longtime informants crystallized this for me one day when he said, trying to clarify his own frustration with "social justice warriors," that he didn't mind "people like me" who didn't "push their gender on everyone." As he commented, my name was gender neutral, and even my Twitter handle ("ybika") wasn't clearly gendered. Perhaps left unspoken was how my age also factored in. My own gendered identity performance was fine with him, and he said that if others were like that, he'd have no problems. It was the ones who make it "a thing" that cause problems. I hypothesized back that it was only because my gender performance didn't upset his mental schema for who was a legitimate participant in game culture that he had no problems with it. Other women in the space have remarked on this, observing that as long as they dressed "like a tom-boy," or took up language conventions or other mannerisms of the men they

gamed with, they had few problems (234).

Through this logic, we can expand upon male objectification on Twitch and hypothesize that "breasts" and "make-up" constitute problems, not only because of sexual nature, but because of the gender they are associated with, these two things are, to many males, *inherently* female. Add to this, women who do not embrace their femininity in a visible fashion are not faulted for their behavior. If we look at Twitch and the problem of 'cam girls', it becomes abundantly clear that the problem is rooted in a culture that polices women into behaving and dressing differently than they normally would, which leads to a misrepresentation of female gamer identity, as they must adhere to male ideas of femininity.

Another cause behind the objectification of female streamers lies in representation in video games, as they are cultivators of social perception and strongly associated with Twitch, therefore it can be assumed that a lot of the male viewers on Twitch have had their perception of gender saturated by their video game consumption.

Connecting male perception of femininity from Twitch to video game representation leads to a realization that there is a discrepancy between the two. Video games and associated media, such as video game magazines, often sexualize women, as established by Dill & Thill. Additionally, another content analysis by Melinda Burgess and fellow scholars on video game covers found that not only were males twice as likely to be featured on the cover compared to females (423), featured males were also much more likely to be relevant to the game action and active (424-425). "The female characters were significantly more likely to be physically objectified than male characters were" (425). On thirty-eight out of the two hundred twenty-five covers, female characters were visibly reduced to a physical body part, such as drawing the legs and buttocks only (425).

In some sense, this plays into Twitch's affordances of subscription and donations. In most Twitch streams, if the streamer gets a donation or subscriber, the donation as well as the

donator is mentioned on the stream. Furthermore, the streamer thanks and mentions the donator. Through time, this culture of support has evolved into further enticement systems such as perks. These perks vary depending on the stream and their choices, yet if we look at a popular female streamer who has been heavily scrutinized for their content, Amouranth, we can see that her subscription perks provide the subscriber with “access to forty-five emotes, Snapchat, and Discord with a subscription to Amouranth” ("Twitch"). The Snapchat and Discord provides users with more direct ways of interacting with Amouranth, as well as receiving more sexually focused photographic content. I would argue these perks provide a sense of intimacy for the subscriber, shaping their notion of the relationship they have toward Amouranth to be less parasocial than before. This plays into cultural perception of women from other video game media, as we can see women in games being seen as “trophies” for males (Brown 10). The enticement to receive a more intimate relationship with a female streamer through monetary donation can be seen as parallel to the protagonist becoming worthy to get the “trophy” female. This connection is further established by the language used on Twitch, with them being “sub goals”, or “rewards”, setting it up as a gratification not only for the streamer who gains money, but the viewer. Besides the subscription perks, Amouranth’s appearance adheres to the same culture that video game magazines have, with a banner on her channel sporting two pictures of her in front of a chest with the pink text “OPEN MORE Amouranth Content” superspersed. Both pictures have feature Amouranth in body tight attire with her sexual body parts highlighted. Amouranth is wildly popular and controversial among Twitch users, regularly having view counts surpass four digits. Yet, to many, she also serves as an example of a dreaded “cam girl”

So female characters are often physically objectified and sexualized in video game media, leading to male consumers cultivating a perception of women based on passive and seductive behavior. Yet, on Twitch, while a significant portion of male viewers are serving as

perpetuators of this perception by engaging in objectification of "cam girls", there is also a number of viewers who police these female streamers into not wearing anything revealing, and this cultivation does not account for the latter. However, if we consider that there is a distinction between video game characters and video game culture, we can approach this in an angle that helps to understand the problematic relationship between these two perceptions.

Female streamers on Twitch are not video game characters, they are actors engaging in video game culture, which we understand to be dominated by male hegemony and the following expectations that other gamers are male. As thus, women are objectified and reduced since they are, for lack of a better phrase, trespassing on foreign territory - that is how male viewers perceive it. That also explains the policing of female streamers' attire, framing it as a migrant integration, where female streamers must conform to the standards and practices of male streamers, except women are undermined because of male toxicity and sexism. That note brings us back to video game characters, who serve to not only cultivate a perception of women as lesser, but they also actively present them as incapable by framing them as damsels in distress or trophies. So, while visual perception of women not only results in objectification, systematic and social perception paints them as unable to take on the roles that our male protagonists in video games do. This is part of why the policing on Twitch happens. Female streamers must be integrated into established culture instead of adding and developing new culture, because they are seen as less valuable in contributing something impressive to the culture and surrounding society. This, then reshapes our understanding of the policing: female streamers are not only judged because they do not match the expectations of male viewers, but they are also policed because they are seen as inferior and therefore must adhere. Through this notion, female streamers could be wearing anything and still be objectified or disregarded. A quote from female streamer Patty underlines this culture and their response to it.

> It really doesn't matter what you look like, how old you are, and how you're dressed. You could be dressed like a ninja with everything totally covered and somebody would still find something to be rude about. Really, it doesn't matter. You should not modify your clothing and look based on what people are saying because it doesn't matter. You should just be you (Freeman & Wohn 811).

Unfortunately, this culture of objectification has not only led to women being harassed, it has set a mistaken precedent that you cannot mention streaming without also mentioning "gamer girls":

> I would be amiss if I did not mention the bane of the Twitch community, the "gamer girl." Now I don't mean girls who play the game normally, like the Hearth-stone streamers Hafu and Eloise. I mean girl gamers who flaunt massive cleavage and play League of Legends poorly to anger the people watching. My advice is to avoid any streamer whose camera on screen is bigger than the actual game (though you'll check them out anyway) (Asarch).

Publications that mistakenly establish and compare groups of female streamers serve to perpetuate sexistic viewpoints among readers while legitimizing a destructive culture that antagonizes women relative to other women, thereby cultivating an involuntary struggle between groups. Introducing terms such as "gamer girl" and "titty streamer" reduces persons to their sexual bodies and enables a discourse within the culture that oppresses these groups, making it an unwelcome space to both existing and future streamers who will be evaluated according to terms they might not identify with.

Elaborating on the effect of cultivation of gender perception from game to Twitch, the cultivation should not be seen as a linear pattern, translating values from space A into space B. We should rather consider it as rapid exchanges of values happening simultaneously in

both directions. We can observe this happening from Twitch to game culture through language. Twitch features emotes viewers can in chat. Some of the most popular emotes, such as “pepega” or “pogchamp” have become colloquial language for people to express the emotions associated with the emoticon. When winning in a video game, a player might yell “pogchamp” to celebrate their victory. This culture exchange is not only concerned with language, as it also implies that the objectification of women on Twitch affects other parts of game culture. Thus, instead of Twitch becoming a help in changing the perception of female gamers, it appears that it has largely cultivated a further sexistic culture resulting in conflict and adversity between groups of gamers. This matters for game culture as a whole, as the games being viewed on Twitch will create further spaces through other media for a sexistic perception of gender to cultivate and feed back into Twitch’s culture. Visually, we can think of this cultural exchange as a market and a dozen of adjacent villages. People from the villages go to the market and buy groceries and return to their village. While at the market, people pick up on the common tongue and perceptions used within that space. They return to the village, yet the different setting and language cultivates their perception in the village. People who live in the village but do not go to the market are subsequently affected by this perception, as it seeps into the village through consistent trips to the market. The villages might interact with each other independently, but we cannot fully account for that here, as that is specific to the villages themselves (games being played). Keep in mind, this metaphor is a brutal reduction and only serves to help convey the scope of the effect the exchange carries, as well as how it is invisible to many of the villagers.

Does representation make a difference?

While cultivation as a term helps to explain these omni-directional trajectories of culture, it does not account for a fundamental change in perception of gender, which remains a problem within gaming culture. To this notion, I would like to reintroduce Valorant, albeit with a

different focal point. While we have discussed the representation of broadcast members and professional players, we have not discussed the efficiency of these matters along with in-game representation.

Firstly, we can establish that Valorant's in-game set of playable characters does go against the typical profiles of white, male gamers, as the cast of eighteen playable characters feature nine female characters, as well as each character representing a different nationality. If we consider the earlier examples of League of Legends and Overwatch, where female characters were typically assigned supporting classes, we find that Valorant is refreshingly different. Valorant's most aggressive class, called "duelist", consists of six playable characters, four of which are female. There are three other classes, which support the team in diverse ways, and they are mostly split evenly between male and female characters with "initiators" being the most skewed class, with three male characters and two female characters. Thereby, it actively disrupts the gendered socialization observed in games like Overwatch and League of Legends. On the topic of female characters and sexual bodies: while the characters have different builds and sizes, none of them appear objectified or reduced to their sexual body parts. The game also features storylines between female characters that do not involve male peers. However, the difference in size between the smallest male character and the largest one is noticeably bigger than the difference in size between female characters. This difference is especially apparent in the characters who appear muscular in their design, Brimstone and Skye, respectively male and female characters, are both stylized through muscular upper arms, yet Brimstone's arms are noticeably larger than both Skye and his male peers, whereas Skye's arms are noticeably more defined than other female characters female characters, but simultaneously much smaller than Brimstone's. Women are not sexualized via disproportionate body parts, they are, however, generalized as slimmer and smaller, regardless of their specific bodies. As

such, Valorant, while not sexualizing, still perpetuates women as being certain sizes by generalizing them relative to their male peers. The in-game representation does not explicitly hint at a sexistic perception of women. But, if we move from the video game toward the culture of those who play it, we can observe a plethora of sexism. In fact, there are numerous instances of sexistic behavior displayed by community figures that influence their viewers. A streamer by the name of Darren "IShowSpeed" Watkins was playing a game of Valorant where their team calls their skill into question, and upon realizing that one of the teammates in the discussion is female, Watkins replies by raising their voice and yelling in both anger and disbelief "is a female talking to me?" (Lucky). Watkins continues to yell for about 15 seconds and ends it with "get off the fucking game and do your husband's dishes bitch" (Lucky). Watkins was permanently banned from Valorant shortly after this post was brought to the attention of Valorant developers, highlighting that the developers do not condone this behavior and distance their product from it.

Beyond Watkins, there is the case of Jason "JasonR" Ruchelski. Another popular Valorant streamer and former professional player in Counter-Strike, Ruchelski was brought to public attention by high-ranked female players who were annoyed by Ruchelski's pattern of muting or disconnecting when teamed up with a female gamer (Emory) (Roberts). Ruchelski initially denied the allegations, citing that his computer would frequently crash (forcefully exit the game) because of the way he had set it up to live stream. Later, however, Ruchelski admitted to disconnecting from games with female teammates out of respect for his wife. While he has not elaborated upon what this further means, his behavior is highly problematic for the normalization of sexistic behavior on an already problematic live streaming service. Ruchelski has not seen any official penalties by the developers like Watkins did, arguably because Ruchelski holds a more prominent standing within the Valorant community through a bigger audience and Valorant being his game of choice when

streaming, whereas Watkins plays a multitude of games on his channel. Yet, the official punishment seems to be inefficient, just as the in-game representation has not managed to directly counteract the sexism and harassment happening.

While Valorant's own outputs, such as the major tournaments and the video game does not cultivate sexist views, these views are preconceived by other games and media that gamers interact with. Gamers typically play more than one game, so rather than observing representation as something that has an immediate effect, we should consider it a part of a jigsaw, where we must make all the smaller pieces fit, to change the final image. As such, Valorant and its merits of representation does not account for a culture much larger than its own, but it can participate in a bigger paradigm change, if all other games in the genre had the same diversity in approach as Valorant, then cultures outside of Valorant would be affected consequently. "Short-term and long-term exposure of sexually objectified female characters within video games resulted in men, more so than women, being more tolerant of abuse toward women, rape myth acceptance, and sexist attitudes toward women in a real-life setting" (Gestos 539).

Discussion: Rape culture and Valorant's ugly scene under the covers

While this paper approaches gaming culture with regard to toxic masculinity as an opposition to femininity, that is only a fraction of the social culture and its problems within gaming.

There is a big, underlying issue that this paper has been unable to treat, partially because of the problem's severity and spread, but also because the theory outlined in this paper proves insufficient to analytically approach those matters: Rape culture and men defending other men. Let us consider the unfortunately recent case of Jay "Sinatraa" Won from Valorant's esports scene, one which has a lot of female representation, both in players and broadcast talent. Won was playing for one of the top North American teams when he was accused of sexual abuse by his ex-girlfriend in March 2021. After failing to cooperate in a

sexual assault investigation, Won was subsequently suspended from competitive play for 6 months, resulting in his team “Sentinels” benching him (Bernal 2021). During his suspension, Won turned to Twitch, where he would still live stream him playing Valorant under the “Sentinels” brand, allowing him access to their sponsors and legitimizing his presence within the scene. With Won’s suspension ending, he took to Twitter to announce that he would be returning to competitive play. His announcement was met with many established male personalities within the scene welcoming him without confronting or inquiring about his sexual assault. While the announcement is met with critique from users who feel his return is unjustified “Sad to see so many caring so little about abuse and rape” (MagnusKingen), they are vastly outnumbered by people disregarding their opinion or character. If we consider the comment that MagnusKingen left and the replies they received. We can observe a rhetoric which is frequent within gamer culture, where empathy for victims, especially female, is reduced to being stupid. This speaks for a much larger problem within rape culture, where men protect other men they respect and are prone to excuse their actions even if the person in question’s innocence is uncertain. Furthermore, this discourse is furthered by the contemporary term “cancel culture”, also seen in a reply to MagnusKingen’s post: “Sad to see people following this sheep cancel culture and not having the ability to think for themselves” (PRATIK24X7). The term, and the discourse above is often used to steer the attention away from the perpetrator of a given crime, and instead antagonize the ones who accuse, as seen in MagnusKingen’s case. While Won’s case was never concluded, the reaction to Won’s suspension and subsequent return to the competitive scene sets a precedent for how sexual assault is perceived within that social sphere.

In the search for a method to discourage toxic behavior, many online games feature penalty systems for toxic or unlawful behavior. Often called a “report” system, they typically allow the player to report another member and provide a brief description of their behavior. A

case is opened and consequently evaluated by an impartial party. While many games feature a system like this, their effectiveness is varied, and unsuccessful in large communities.

> A number of posts (n = 13) argued that females had a responsibility and a right to report any inappropriate behaviour to game administrators, although some acknowledged that there was not much point in doing this. Some of the gamers felt that the system for penalising people if they were reported was inadequate, and at times the female who was in receipt of the negative behaviour left a particular game due to this behaviour was then penalised (McLean, Lavinia, and Griffiths 986).

And to be fair to the argument of this thesis, the underlying roots of the toxic behavior will not go away by simply punishing the result of their cultivation, a symptomatic treatment like that will only serve to transfer the toxic behavior into a different outlet or expression. By banning the sexist members of a group, they will unlikely change their sexist views consequently. Instead, penalizing them can result in adversity, thereby reinforcing those beliefs. Alternatively, to avoid harassment, many female gamers hide their female identity by using a voice changer or simply by not using voice chat. This leads to some problematic implications: while they will not receive harassment, their silence or male imitation reduces the presence of female gamers, perpetuating the male hegemony in video game spaces. Male hegemony in the case of video gameplay, often reaffirms its position by interacting with itself. Male gamers watch male professional gamers who are managed by male superiors, which is problematic because that statement might not contain the whole truth, there might be female superiors or female professionals, but they are not getting enough visibility to socially exist in the larger sphere of the sport. There are all-female leagues for many of the games discussed in the paper, yet they do not reach the same numbers or budgets that almost exclusively male leagues. Furthermore, all-female leagues, while they might increase

visibility of female gamers, that visibility can potentially have a negative effect, such as Paaßen notes in their discussion on female-only leagues:

> "it might also reinforce ideas about women and men having different "innate" skill levels, comparable to prevailing notions of different upper-body strength in physical sports where female-only leagues are common. As such, female-only leagues might serve to reinforce, rather than challenge, gendered gamer stereotypes" (Paaßen 430).

Additionally, on a practical level, if we assume that female-only leagues rise to such a level where they are financially and commercially on par with the existing leagues, things might become troublesome for culture, as the audience will have to choose between the two, and only if we assume that viewers will make their decision based on performance and entertainment, and not gender, will we reduce gendered culture. Thus, the goal of female-only leagues is to eventually eliminate gendered tournaments and have mixed tournaments with fair representation. Yet, if female gamers beat female gamers, male gamers will likely not care, as it does not collide with their perception of female gamers as being inferior to male gamers. Male gamers simply do not expect female gamers to be able to compete in the top leagues, the top male streamers on Twitch are former professionals or renowned for their skill, while the top female streamers on Twitch are perceived "boob streamers". Having stated that, it remains unclear how to solve male hegemony, when multiple attempts at creating visibility for female gamers not only show how powerful these initiatives are, but how their influence can have negative effects on gendered perception. Twitch as a platform has definitively been an important effort in making a space accessible for women, yet with time, it has produced a culture that eventually shuns women because of stereotypes. So, instead of being a model, Twitch's method and subsequent results are something to learn from. Genderization and gender-specific harassment, however, does not begin and end in video games, it is merely a space where it is channeled and spread, which worryingly is cause

for bigger concern. While video games remain relatively safe in the physical dimension, if those sexistic values are furthered and brought into real life settings, they can have even more grim implications than the violence of harassment within a video game.

Conclusion

Analyzing social perception through cultivation theory has led to the realization that, while the theory helps to explain cultural trajectories within specific spaces, it simultaneously highlights the complexity of these issues, alluding to the conclusion that these normalized sexist views are not fully de-established alone by having larger representation of women in legitimate, credible roles in esports and video games. Women have been placed in these roles because of an underlying sexistic culture, and misrepresentation has helped to perpetuate this culture to the point where it feeds back to other cultures, not only a movement we can infer from our use of cultivation theory, but also as discussed by Beck in 2012. “However, study findings did indicate that sexual objectification of women and violence against women in video games do increase rape myths in male participants” (3025). Cases such as Won confirm the social reality of this pattern, and unfortunately renders esports in Valorant and the surrounding culture an unwelcome space for female gamers. A game which, by comparison, does not hypersexualize characters, yet still suffers from cultural problems that, among other things, are cultivated by hypersexualized characters. Beck’s notion along with our findings and conclusions in this paper seem to highlight the scarcity of attention to solving problems of sexism. While there are many journals to contextualize and understand the causes and effects of gender perception within video game spaces and culture, communities of several of the researched video games in this paper seem to continue obscene behavior that further bridges male and female experiences and perceptions. If the underlying sexism truly is to be disrupted, then video game culture must undergo substantial changes in not only the male consumption of content, but something that changes the cognition of male gamers, such as gender representation in video games. Although, as apparent by our analysis of Twitch’s female perception by cultivation theory and online disinhibition, online, males perceive females as their lesser. And this pattern can be hard to pinpoint a cause to, as it seems to be a

culmination of a large number of correlations that come together to form a *loose* hivemind of individuals that share underlying common values of sexist nature. Dissolving such a hivemind on the platform itself might seem like a lasting solution, but the perception on Twitch is a cultivation of values introduced by other media as well. Hence, the solution must not be a rule or guideline on a single platform or video game, it must be a cultural change that affects several of the platforms it exists on - only by abolishing it on a global scale, will male hegemony be removed from these cultures. Through the analysis, it has become clear that women's invisibility is not due to inferiority, but due to the ties video games and social play have to ideologies from other spaces, such as traditional sports. We must not look at video games and streams as spaces that only cultivate perception, but spaces that reflect culture, which is why it becomes near impossible to pinpoint a certain beginning. Instead, we can attempt to reduce male hegemonic representation and perpetuation to help de-establish many of the underlying affordances that pave the way for sexism to be furthered in these spaces, while keeping in mind that the process is a gigantic sequence of de-establishing values that are deeply integrated in our social systems and policies.

Concluding on voyeuristic behavior patterns on Twitch, further research is warranted on whether Suler's theory of invisibility can be observed through a quantitative relationship between the number of viewers and number of messages on women's streams. While there is a plethora of academic studies considering the language and group culture of Twitch chats, they are lacking when it comes to making any quantifiable conclusions, which is not in due to blindness from scholars, more so it is the result of Twitch being confidential about their data, and while gathering the data is a critical process, gathering it oneself is technologically complex and, unfortunately, something I am unable to do. Furthermore, other factors such as content on the stream, i.e., if a game is being played, or the demographic of viewers, "raids"

from other Twitch streamers, are to be considered when studying the subject, rendering it an even greater task.

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