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PLAYING WHILE FEMALE: RE-READING IDENTITY FIXATIONS IN *OVERWATCH*

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Introduction & Context

In early 2019, *Overwatch* professional player, “Ellie” quit playing just weeks after having been named to one of the teams seeded into the professional league. The harassment cited as a reason to leave was related especially to whether or not “Ellie” was truly “female”. Not much later, Ellie was revealed (and confirmed by Blizzard, the parent company of *Overwatch*) to be an account created by a male player (Tassi, 2019). This paper sets out to map the controversy that ensued from a self-styled “social experiment” of playing while female.

This paper brings this current “revelation” into conversation with past, more fully embodied/manufactured identities to better understand why this case is particularly important to internet studies. To this end, we begin by briefly describing some earlier, more familiar cases of people revealed to be someone other than, in online spaces, they said they were. Then, we further outline the instance of Ellie: its uptake by mainstream media, prominent Youtubers and Twitch streamers, and its discussion on internet forums like Reddit and 4Chan. Paying particular attention to the ways these discussions frame the “trick” played in disguising Ellie’s ‘true’ identity (singular), we suggest that this kind of case has always been galvanized by an underlying conviction that the best gamers are always and only men, and one contribution internet scholarship can make here is to show how these discursive patterns are unhelpful in understanding contemporary identificatory politics and practices in online spaces.

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In the early landscape of what was once known as the “information superhighway” were publicly reported instances of faked identities in “cyberspace”. One particularly famous case discussed at length by transhuman, cyberspace scholar A. Rosanne Stone (1991), recounts the “case of the cross-dressing psychiatrist,” a crippled, house-bound woman who amassed, for those early days, quite the community of online friendships. She is later revealed as a fraud – an able-bodied, male psychiatrist – and Stone explores the community’s outrage, hurt and betrayal that he wasn’t who he pretended to be online.

Ellie as “Social Experiment”

Fast forward nearly a quarter of a century, and here is the case of “Ellie”. For the proposed paper we examined mainstream media reports of Ellie in news sites including *Forbes*, *Kotaku*, and *The Washington Post*, Reddit and 4chan posts, and YouTube and Twitch commentary. Due to abstract length constraints, we briefly overview and analyze just a fraction of that commentary explored in more depth in the paper.

On December 21st, 2018 the *Overwatch* Contenders team “Second Wind” announced via Twitter that Ellie was joining their roster for the upcoming season, without identifying Ellie’s legal name. Shortly after, Reddit posts, tweets, and YouTube videos emerged that speculated about Ellie’s ‘real’ identity. Some players assumed Ellie was cheating (a woman could not be that skilled), others that “Ellie” was actually an alternate account of an existing top500 male player. High-profile professional player “Dafran” flatly dismissed the idea that Ellie could be a woman, telling his Twitch viewers on-stream that “someone is playing this account and Ellie is talking right beside him”.

Shortly after, on December 22nd, 2018 Ellie tweeted a screenshot of someone encouraging others to dox them. The screenshot read: “People in contenders need their first and last name leaked pretty much right? ... It’s doxing time. Not for malicious intent. Just to figure shit out”. The toxic chatter around Ellie prompted several high-ranking female players to publicly recount their own experiences of toxicity and sexism while playing *Overwatch*. One player who goes by, Fareeha tweeted about some of the typical comments she is confronted with after saying hello in voice chat, for example, “when did ur bf boost you”, “how much did you pay for that [account]”, and “Whats ur snapchat” – all of which contributed to the community’s ongoing debate about the importance of identity in *Overwatch*. In early January 2019, Second Wind tweeted that “due to some unforeseen reactions” Ellie was stepping down from the team. Journalism outlets like *Kotaku* (Grayson, 2019) and *The Mary Sue* (Hale-Stern, 2019) quickly picked up on the Ellie story situating it in the broader context of hyper and toxic masculinity, misogyny, and harassment of female players in esports and gaming more generally.

However, on January 4th, popular streamer, Aspen, announced to her viewers that the Ellie account was actually being played by Punisher, a top500 male player. Punisher and a female collaborator had been working together to create Ellie. The result? Mainstream media outlets publishing pieces about Ellie’s ‘false identity’, the misogyny and gender inequity in esports, and the likely ramifications of this deception (Ezerberger, 2019). Nearly every piece concluded that this controversy ‘set women back’ or would make it more difficult for women to enter the professional esports arena in future.

Conclusion

Paul Tassi (2019), writing for *Forbes*, states: “I am the most concerned about the takeaway that many will believe future attempts to “expose” female players in the future will now be considered justified because of the Ellie situation.” That is certainly true, players who identify as women, as many of them recount, have their skills and abilities challenged over and over again. However, we argue that it is important to view Ellie’s ‘deception’ as yet another in a long line of people who adopt a different identity online. It remains the case that there are plenty of skilled women who play *Overwatch*, and that they will continue, as they have for many years across many multiplayer games, to either hide their identity or have their identity challenged more frequently the more skilled they are. What is troubling here, including in the significant media coverage on Ellie, is that it wouldn’t even merit commenting on if not for the hegemonic view that men are more skilled.

Perhaps less a “social experiment”, as her creator was reported to have claimed after the fact, and more just another brief instance of manufactured non-normative identity. Returning to Stone, what was so radical about her argument, both then and almost 25 years later, is that she was exploring how identities shift and multiply, online and off. Far from being a ‘setback’ for women, Ellie reinforces how much is at stake for women in competitive leagues like *Overwatch* – for those who did not already know that. However, it’s the larger challenge to “gender as usual” that her brief appearance presents to mainstream and niche media that best demonstrates its importance of this case for internet researchers.

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