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GIRL GAMERS?: PLAYER AND INSTITUTIONAL ORIENTATIONS TOWARDS WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN AND AROUND E-SPORTS

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Address me as a player, or don't address me at all. This expression, made by a high performance *StarCraft 2* player, grounds this paper. Her statement is suggestive of many players' experiences around the stagnated characterization of "girl gamers", and ultimately their identification as one (Beavis & Charles 2007). This significant theme takes its lead from ongoing research on young women who live-stream their high performance computer gameplay on the broadcasting channel *Twitch*. As players, they are positioned on the margins of e- sports. Meaning they are or have been on the outer edge of organized, institutional scenes of competitive computer game tournaments, which are channels towards financial and socio-cultural benefits (N. Taylor 2009; Taylor, Jenson & de Castell 2009). Benefits can include acquiring prize-winnings or sponsorships, attaining a recognizable public "personality", or transitioning from "piecemeal" players to career "wage-earning" administrators. Not all players necessarily see the full spectrum of these benefits. Though, when players voice how they run a gauntlet as a gendered object in their path towards elite competition, these realizable benefits start to highlight some of the disparities in those pathways, experiences and results on a foundation of difference (T.L. Taylor 2012).

Four long interviews with mid to high level players starts this exploration around how the "girl gamer" is lived and produced: zooming in on players' reflections on the dualistic gendering of a slice of their (desired or not) player identity, and their accounts on what that means for their everyday play. In these continuing conversations with women who play computer games as a serious leisure activity, echoes resonate in previous research and interviews I have undertaken over the past five years in and around e-sports and with the women who participated in diverse fields of play. The variety of organizations and players I have collaborated with since 2008 comprises ethnographic work within progress raiding guilds, where women were guild leaders and key players (2009 - 2012); qualitative fieldwork at organized LAN e-sports tournaments (DreamHack 2009, 2011; MLG 2010; WCG 2010; BlizzCon 2010; Blizzard Invitational 2008; D3 Expo 2008); and extensive player/team and e-sports organizer interviews conducted online or on-site at various events. Women are present in both fieldwork and interviews, and more often than not these various participants had direct experience with the label "girl gamer". As such, this exploration extends beyond the nuanced descriptions laid out by

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Twitch broadcasters, and ties the many voices and actions of women in and around e-sports who have also been confronted by this moniker.

This experiential and structural tracing brings together site specific game cultures and diverse conditions of participation from within scenes such as MMOG progress raiding guilds (*World of Warcraft*), MOBA teams (*League of Legends*), RTS online tournaments (*Starcraft 2*), LAN fighting game tournaments (*Super Smash Bros.*), and MMOG team PvP networked tournaments (*Arena Tournament*). Such a spread of participation offers both the initial steps towards a thick description of player and institutional meaning making surrounding the title of “girl gamer”, and a nuanced consideration of this catchall term that affects many players’ lives and livelihoods on their way “to the pro’s”.

Beyond these explorations, this paper draws on two external channels. The small handful of qualitative studies that investigate women’s voices and institutional practices at this border space of high performance gaming, often titled roughly as “pro/am” (T.L. Taylor 2012, Beavis & Charles 2007, N. Taylor 2009), and the wealth of “self-produced” online documents in the form of e-sports player interviews. These latter forms are sourced as key documents, which further unpack the situation of “girl gamer” from various insider perspectives.

From these elite level player descriptions across various fields of play, it could be said that “girl gamer” is no easy mark to convene. Players detest it as a socially constructed stigma designating lesser ability on the grounds of biological essentialism (T.L. Taylor 2012, N. Taylor 2009); yet players also deploy it, often as a reversible tactic of shame when being trash-talked along gendered lines during play. In these complex moments, the tease “You just got beaten by a girl” denotes traditional interpretations around strategic essentialism. The “girl” in this action is reversible. It is employed as an offensive insult, though here it is initiated from a woman’s body – a gendered attack most often heard moving from boy-to-boy as an ultimate condemnation on their physicality. But the “girl” also has a reverse side. Moving on the offense, she (the player) claims ownership and direction over that gendered terminology: she belittles the essentialist power of the statement whilst reinforcing its gendered connotations. Many players toy with this reversability and are quite cognizant of the power and complications held within. To which it must be added, with the essentialist character of “girl gamer” in focus, this analysis is sensitive towards the problematic linguistic and methodological essentialism on which such a study relies (Stone 2004, Taylor 2008).

Through this original gathering of on-the-ground experiences around high performance play and the confines of “girl gamer”, the study develops a rich qualitative document on the everyday lives of players who are marginalized in various degrees from within their preferred site of serious leisure (Stebbins 2007). Though orientations towards or away from the term in question can be convoluted. Young women also take on the “girl” to establish their active identity as something not to be “looked down on” and, by doing so, stress that “girls” are playing games too. Thus highlighting how traditional notions and expressions of femininity is colonised in game cultures with connotations of being “less than”, rather than with players own directed playfulness with “the feminine” as a part of their powerful and personal expression of self.

“Girl gamer” is as complex a title as those individuals that are working around it. To think within the complexity, the work of Sara Ahmed (2006) is used to address how the many actors involved at the top levels of competition are oriented to and from the scaffolding around “girl gamer”. Thinking with orientations assists in the critical consideration of the entrenched term. In particular, Ahmed brings a delicate understanding towards a key issue involved – that of the making and maintenance social borders, as highlighted when she notes, “The social also has its skin, as a border that feels and that is shaped by the ‘impressions’ left by others. The skin of the social might be affected by the comings and goings of different bodies, creating new lines and textures in the ways in which things are arranged”(p. 9).

Just as tender a cultural skin, and as a boundary which prompts questions around privilege and involvement writ large, “girl gamer” is a designation for computer game players beyond the biological. It acts as a token title: a badge of difference for those who are made to wear it, a badge of honor for those who choose to. This paper finds the significance of these positions in the articulations of those who choose to play within and shape its fluid guidelines: the institutions, the players, and the interactions made on the numerous skins of pro/am game culture.

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