Chapter 41
(Un)Doing Gender?
Female Tournaments in the E–Sports Scene

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ABSTRACT

Professional digital gaming has established itself as e-sport. The gendered usage of digital games has an impact on the social structure of participants in the professional realm: gamers, organizers, commentators and fans are mostly identified as white men. The background of this phenomena are streaming platforms, where harassment is experienced by most female identified gamers at some point. The community has never been silent about these problems, but how to deal with the gender gap in tournament participants is another question. Gender segregation can facilitate visibility and solidarity – but is this an unnecessary dramatization of the socially constructed line? Do these segregations maybe just reinforce stereotypes? What does it mean for female identified people to participate? And how do gaming communities react? The chapter discusses problems and possibilities of female-only tournaments with vivid examples from different games and takes diverse perspectives of (female) gamers, fans and organizations into consideration, while pointing out crucial facts about the topic.

CURRENT SITUATION AND BACKGROUND

As Digital Games continue to grow and attract more players, the issues at work within the gaming community both reflect and affect wider social questions. Although studies demonstrate that many women and girls play digital games (Quandt, Chen, Mäyrä & van Looy 2014), digital gaming communities continue to be male-centered and male-dominated spaces (Salter/Blodgett, 2012). This fact is mirrored within game narratives themselves, which cater to young male heterosexuals as the industry's expected target audience (Fron, Fullerton, Morie& Pearce, 2007; Kerr, 2003).

However, this article does not focus on representation in or content of games, but instead on competitive digital gaming, referred to as electronic sports, or e-sports. In e-sports, big and small companies support gaming teams who compete in front of an international audience for millions of dollars in prize money. Not only do organizers, publishers, hardware producers, and other industries profit from this

trend, but e-sports increasingly offer players the possibility of earning money – even a steady income – as well (Taylor, 2012). Although this emerging gaming field is not yet very well documented or researched, one thing strikes even the casual observer at first glance: the overall predominance of men. The majority of spectators, participants, observers, casters, and hosts is recognized as white, heterosexual, and male. Most remaining visible women exist primarily in the "service of masculinized techno-culture", as Nicholas Taylor (2009) points out in his analysis of competitive Halo 3 players, although there are of course women participating on various levels.

Considering the ongoing interest of women and girls in gaming (Duggan 2015), this gender discrepancy is not easy to explain. Some may dismiss the fact that more boys than girls are competing as merely the outcome of a gender difference in gaming interest. While this assumption is questionable to begin with, it can hardly be the sole explanation for the phenomenon. The few studies that do show gender differences in gaming choices far too often focus on an androcentric perspective that neglects female involvement in the scene, thus diminishing it further (Jenson &de Castell, 2010), and should therefore be questioned critically. The few broader studies that explore female-identified gaming habits show that motives and behavior patterns of gaming girls are quite similar to the assumed norm of the "male gamer". Like gaming boys, gaming girls are looking for social contacts, find the possibility of online social interaction intriguing, and are seeking competition to prove and improve their gaming skills (Krause, 2010).

Research Question

So why isn't there an equal amount of women competing in e-sport tournaments? One might even assume that the supposed anonymity of e-sports offers a more inclusive and less discriminatory environment than traditional sports when it comes to judging players on their physical characteristics. In virtual worlds, it is at least theoretically possible to hide your gender, side-stepping instant visual judgment in favor of judgment on gaming merit. It is true that, unlike face-to-face communication, online gaming does not allow an observer to immediately assume gender by looking at a body and therefore has the potential to be less discriminatory. However, this lower degree of discrimination would require that players actively mask their status by creating gender neutral nicks or avatars – an avoidant coping mechanism which actually is common among marginalized groups in gaming, such as women (Cote, 2015). This strategy, in turn, is rarely possible in competitive gaming, where most multiplayer games require active (voice-) chat to successfully cooperate with your teammates. Thus, even beginning with slight anonymity would require considerable effort.

Furthermore, self-streaming on platforms like twitch.tv is not merely popular among (aspiring) e-sport athletes, but virtually unavoidable for success in the scene. Self-marketing in the form of broadcasting yourself gaming is fundamental to gaining popularity and sponsors (Taylor, 2016). Creating yourself as a marketing factor always involves performing in front of an audience; to be deprived of that opportunity by trying to avoid harassment at the very least takes away a potentially useful learning environment.

The phenomenon of excluding women from the center of a scene is not limited to e-sports alone. Ostracizing mechanisms are common in other male-dominated spaces, such as adventure sports (e.g. skateboarding and free climbing) and music styles (e.g. Punk and HipHop) as well. These spaces rely on mechanisms of ostracization to create in-groups and out-groups such that some people are allowed in and up to the top, whereas others struggle to even participate without repercussions (Hitzler & Niederbacher, 2010). If achieving more gender equality in e-sports is a goal – be it for reasons of inclusivity or to foster the growth of the community in general – a way to support women within the scene must be

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