

# LIPSTICK BULLETS: LABOUR AND GENDER IN PROFESSIONAL GAMER SELF-BRANDING

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## ABSTRACT

*With the growing professionalisation of electronic sports (or e-sports), the individuals who compete are, like their more “traditional” sport counterparts, becoming celebrities. Actual competition is a fraction of the labour a professional gamer undertakes to earn a living and generate a self-brand—there are also complex arrangements involving sponsorships, team-memberships, and digital reputation management. Indeed, taking part in e-sports can be understood as another mode of celebrity-creation within a particular fan community. A key vector to the persona formation of professional gamers is gender. Female professional gamers must navigate additional hurdles in the creation and management of their brand and attempts to commoditise their personas. Female gamers carefully negotiate and perform their gender while maintaining their status as a competitor and influencer in gaming’s highly masculinised culture. This performativity places these young women in a precarious position not just in terms of economic stability, but also in terms of their gendered identity. This paper compares the online personas of professional gamers Matt “NaDeSHoT” Haag and Kelly “MrsViolence” Kelley, analysing their social media presences and mainstream media appearances. Reframing the labour of professional gamers as one of building a commodifiable work persona can help us better understand the economically precarious position in which professional gamers, particularly young women, find themselves.*

## KEY WORDS

Branding, E-sports, Video games, Labour, Professional gaming, Social media, Gender, Persona

With the growing professionalisation of electronic sports (or e-sports), the individuals who participate in these competitions are, like their more “traditional” sport counterparts, becoming more and more celebritised. As with professional athletes in basketball or football, the actual competition is only a fraction of the labour a professional gamer undertakes to earn a living and generate a self-brand. As this article examines, reframing the labour of professional gamers as one of building a commodifiable self-brand can help us better understand the economically precarious position in which these gamers find themselves. In other words, more time must be spent analyzing the labour of professional gamers that does not involve playing games.

The commodification of professional gamers involves a complex arrangement of sponsorships, team-memberships, and digital reputation management. Most importantly, however, is the fact that these relationships are frequently temporary, particularly for the

individual gamer. Competitive e-sports as a profession is almost exclusively dominated by the young, with most players only participating for a short amount of time. Physical deterioration plays a factor, as response time and alertness can weaken with age, meaning older players may be at a physical disadvantage to succeed at high levels of play.

There is also the impact of a constantly shifting menu of games being played at the highest levels, as professional gaming leagues constantly change the games being offered for competitive play. These changes arise because licensing deals with game developers and publishers are constantly restructuring and developers want their latest games given the most coverage on the e-sports circuit. There is also a need on the e-sport organisation side to draw in audiences to broadcasts of their events, which in turn raises sponsorship deals. To attract those audiences, popular games must be featured and rotation is necessary to keep up with interest and demand. Professional gamers frequently perfect a single game or genre of games, and thus may not be able to successfully shift when a new game becomes more popular on the professional circuit. This means they may have a limited time where their game proves lucrative at the big-money events sponsored by these major gaming leagues.

The major gaming leagues that make up this industry primarily cater to a male audience, as professional gaming culture is intimately tied to the masculinisation of video gaming more broadly. Major League Gaming (MLG), a New York-based North American professional gaming circuit and operator of the online broadcast network MLG.tv, boasts a 50% 16-34 year old demographic. Even more telling, however, is the 90% male audience that leads MLG to tout itself via its "About Us" webpage as "the definitive property for major advertisers to reach young men." Many have written about the positioning of women and gender in gaming spaces (see Royse et al. and Shaw 2014), but here we have a strong, explicit articulation of how competitive gaming is gendered.

Age and gender play key roles in the identity formation of professional gamers. Since many of these professional gamers are in their early twenties, particular attention must be paid to their status as young adults and early labourers. The brevity of their careers weighs heavy, and future plans are always conceived of in terms of what happens after one stops competing professionally. The other key element is gender, as women in this space must navigate extra hurdles in the creation and management of their self-brand and future attempts to commoditise their labour and influence. Women gamers must carefully negotiate and perform their gender while also maintaining their status as viable competitors and influencers for what is perceived as a highly male audience. This performativity in a masculine culture puts these young women in a precarious position not just in terms of economic stability, but also in terms of their gendered identity.

The neoliberal information economy has led to a rise in precarity for many workers, ushering in a new culture of self-branding with a particular focus on building a credible work persona. No longer a simple pastime motivated by a desire for self-expression, digital profile management has become integral labour in its own right, and professional gaming's young status makes it an excellent case study for this larger phenomenon. This paper thus opens with some background on the rise of e-sports and how the academy has addressed this phenomenon. While previous scholarship has primarily focused on games and competitive spaces themselves, this article argues for an expanded approach to the representational labour these professionals perform online and in press outlets. By analyzing and comparing the representational practices and surrounding discourse of two professional gamers of different genders, NaDeSHoT and MrsViolence, we can uncover a greater understanding of the role of brand-management in the realm of professional gaming. This comparison highlights the legitimate labour professional gamers perform *outside* the competitive space and demonstrates that it is just as caught up in fraught gender performances as the games and competitions themselves.

## THE RISE OF E-SPORTS AND THE PRO-GAMER

The professionalization of competitive video gaming is a story of working towards legitimation: both industry and labourers within it have constantly attempted to create more public awareness that would lead to more profits. While e-sports first blossomed in South Korea, today they have become so internationally popular that “pro gamers have been spotlighted as new celebrities” (Jin 81). This celebrity status indicates the degree to which online branding and persona management has become a critical part of the profession. Professional gaming careers demand a broader awareness of the industry beyond the skills required to play games at a high level. As T.L. Taylor argues, successful players—defined in terms of both economic gain and career longevity—earn that success through career-focused praxis like “building a recognisable name/brand for themselves, having a public reputation, dealing with contracts and sponsorships, changing teams as needed to maintain a stable playing trajectory, and in many cases adapting their play to fit the evolving nature of the competitive scene” (*Raising* 97-98). Professional gaming is thus a story not just of legitimising a competitive practice or industry, but also of legitimising a form of identity, labour, and the individuals performing them.

Professional gaming as a form of labour is thus more than knowledge-based economics. Jin classifies professional online game players in Korea as “new media workers” (84) because they do not just produce goods and services, but are able to commoditize their public personas through strategic identity management. This construction of a commodifiable self allows professional gamers to leverage their reputation and persona into other coaching, managing, and media careers after they are no longer able to play competitively. Companies and advertisers are also invested in the production of these identities, “because the images of the pro gamers affects the images of the companies and the sales of the goods of those companies” (Jin 97) leading to a star-making process well beyond that of gaming prowess. Professional gaming as an industry is built upon corporate sponsorship and advertising, and so the labour of those participating in that field is also deeply indebted to these marketing practices.

Underlying all of this, of course, is the precarious nature of such labour. The world of professional gaming is certainly home to contemporary neoliberal policies and temporary employment opportunities: players can change teams or be dropped very quickly. In order to carve out a living both during and after their time as active competitors players must construct a particular work persona that is seen as valuable within the professional gaming industry. The creation of a commodified self in the realm of professional gaming involves a complex interaction between individual and institution, persona and platform, and notoriety and network. At stake are the financial lives and capitalistic statuses of these gaming labourers, not just in the present, but also in their potential futures. What makes this particularly troubling is the fact that most of these players are in their late teens or 20s, prime years for career and job training with more long-term stability. These players quickly realise the stakes in themselves as products, “in some senses... training themselves to be more valuable commodities” (Jin 98). It is for this reason that critics should pay more attention to what happens *after* a professional gamer has hung up the controller, as it is more important to their status as workers than simply what goes on during their time in competition.

Professional gaming has high stakes—both economic and cultural—for its players beyond the obvious tournament cash prizes. Every competition is another opportunity for gaining followers, building one’s reputation, and crafting a marketable persona that will allow a professional gamer to earn money through sponsorships and endorsements well after they have stopped playing competitively. While this might be true for a variety of industries that value individual persona management, professional gaming comes with the problematic identity politics of video game culture more broadly.

The gender disparity in professional gaming is steep as the vast majority of audiences and participants are men. T.L. Taylor explains how this gendering is relative to the larger “geek” culture surrounding video gaming. This is most evidently seen in the complex relationship between “geek masculinity” and “hegemonic masculinity” (*Raising* 112). While hegemonic masculinity is more traditionally associated with physical prowess often displayed in traditional sports, geek masculinity, in contrast, emphasises skill and knowledge of technology or science. These two masculinities are “typically framed in opposition” (*Raising* 114), yet are both present in professional gaming as a sport-like competition and a technology-based activity. In e-sports the result is a highly masculine space based on multiple—and sometimes conflicting—masculine ideals.

So where does femininity, as well as the female professional gamer<sup>i</sup>, fit in? Women are often framed as outsiders in both geek and sport culture, making them doubly marginalised in the e-sport realm that combines these: “The on-the-ground lives of women in pro gaming reflect a complex navigation, with not only the practical issues of being a top e-sports player, but the additional challenges being a woman in the scene presents” (T.L. Taylor, *Raising* 122). These challenges for women in professional gaming extend into the other forms of labour they perform, like self-branding. When crafting these gaming personas, the way to craft this identity *as female* can take many forms; Taylor calls them “compensatory signals” meant to reaffirm the player’s gender in this highly masculinised sphere (*Raising* 123). These signals can be “pictures (or avatars) meant to convey sexual attractiveness, mentions of other ‘girlie’ interests, or notations of hobbies or other activities that perform a more traditional femininity” (T.L. Taylor, *Raising* 123). A more aggressive, traditionally masculine stance may be taken up in order to present oneself as not only belonging to, but also dominating the video game being played. Interestingly, some women “try to simultaneously enact both ends of the spectrum – a dazzling display of performative agility where they come to represent *both* a hyper masculinity and femininity” (T.L. Taylor, *Raising* 123). Taylor does not go into more detail on this, but the case studies in this paper will show how these actions of reaffirming femininity while also reinforcing masculine dominance also become part of the self-branding strategies that some women professional gamers undertake.

Gendering practices and structures within the professional gaming industry often mirror those of traditional mainstream sports, both intentionally and unintentionally. As Taylor, Jenson, and de Castell note, “the e-sports industry may be replicating the same ornamental and secondary role of women well established in the domain of professional sports” (240). This comes from the representations and discourses of gender within the professional gaming spaces as well as in the secondary markets surrounding it in websites, journalism, and promotional material. Effectively, these elements combine to create a masculine domain that rewards and encourages a hypermasculine subject position.

This comes about in several ways, mostly in the limited kinds of roles that are made available to women who wish to participate in this industry. Most women who appear at professional gaming events are often sexualised in supportive roles such as the cheerleader or promotional “booth babe,” both of which have their own conceptions of how to perform femininity. Taylor, Jenson, and de Castell show how those women who are active participants are also subject to increased scrutiny, particularly when it comes to appearances. In their analysis of one competitive gamer with the professional handle, Final Fantasy, they note her contradictory need to perform a heteronormative femininity—as dictated by the culture—as well as gaming competence as a competitor. This results in her being one of the only gamers to emphasise her gender through her appearance during competitions, both in her use make up and more formal feminine outfits, as opposed to the young men frequently in sweatpants and casual clothing (Taylor et al, 245).

Final Fantasy and other professional gamers like her do have some agency within these spaces in how they perform their feminine identities. It is made clear, for example, that Final

Fantasy is self-aware of her status as an “outsider” and expresses a desire to distance herself from the more objectified women in the industry. Taylor, Jenson, and de Castell point out that Final Fantasy was adamant that her reasons for participating were to compete and win, effectively positioning herself against the “booth babes” whose purpose is to promote and gain attention. This means female gamers perform their femininity within and against the expectations of a space and culture that privileges and promotes women as sexualized objects.

Men are also constricted in their self-presentation in this hypermasculine environment that encourages heteronormative behavior. Like the performances of femininity described above, these accepted forms of performative masculinity are reinforced via discourse and practice much as they are in mainstream sports. Nicholas Taylor describes professional gaming as a culture of “safe or sanctioned physical contact that act as forms of self-regulations and bodily discipline in the service of gendered subjectivity” (237). These forms of heteronormative male-to-male contact include high-fiving, slight hugging, and back-patting, but are restricted to very quick celebratory moments.

Masculinity is also performed through how male gamers dress, and is particularly apparent when contrasted with female gamers’ more “made-up” appearances. Clothing choices for male gamers is frequently casual with jeans, t-shirts, sweatpants, and hoodies all being the norm. These clothes also serve a marketing function as shirts or sweatshirts often sport graphics for teams or logos of sponsoring brands. Formal attire that could be construed as overly fashionable—and thus possibly feminine—is almost non-existent among players. Only male commentators or others working for the hosting company might appear in business casual attire. The overly casual display and seeming disinterest in fashion is, in fact, a calculated form of presenting a heteronormative geek masculinity that belittles and avoids feminized forms of fashion.

The physical surroundings and cultural apparatuses that are a part of e-sports competitions are large contributors to the masculinised culture of competitive gaming, but we must also consider the institutional parameters that influence this gendering. Janina Maric addresses this in her empirical study of e-sporting events, noting not just the actions of the individuals participating, but the structures laid down at an institutional level. For example, in tournaments where male and female participants are separated into their own divisions, the male side is naturalised in the nomenclature such as *Counter-Strike*: the women’s division, on the other hand, is called *Counter-Strike Female*. Since mainstreams sports are also divided along gender lines, the companies’ reasoning goes, instituting such divisions in e-sports will make the endeavor appear more legitimate. This is not often the case in the US where teams and divisions are all inclusive and there is growing pressure for competitions to stop dividing altogether (Mullis).

While there are crucial differences between traditional sports and e-sports, what is important here is not so much in how they are played, but the business behind them. Female gamers, “booth babes,” and cheerleaders are seen as desirable from a sponsor perspective, as they can generate significant and valuable attention and thus provide a powerful platform to showcase gaming-related products to a presumably heterosexual male audience. As Maric notes, “Unlike (traditional) sports, gendering within e-sport is not understood as a result of competing bodies, but as the result of an economic logic which relies on gendered bodies for marketing” (215). The bodies of male and female gamers are not divided and gendered so much for their physical abilities as for their potential value and contribution to the sponsorship system undergirding the entire enterprise. These women thus carry an additional value as bodies to attract attention—rather than skilled agents—creating additional pressures in their self-presentation as both competitors and profitable commodities.

E-sport competitions are highly masculinised spaces with gendered practices and cultures, but that gendering structure does not end when the competition is over. For

professional gamers, the need to brand themselves online comes with just as many gendered expectations as their competitions. The case studies that follow reveal how professional gamers must act within and against gendered expectations, both in press interviews and in their own social media. While the masculinity of male gamers like Matt “NaDeSHoT” Haag is less explicitly part of their strategies of self-representation due to it being considered the norm, female gamers like Kelly “MrsViolence” Kelley must directly address questions regarding their femininity and are constantly, explicitly reaffirming their gender performances. The gendered realities of professional e-sports combined with the precarious and limited nature of the labour involved leads to a highly gendered and conflicted form of self-branding.

### **WHAT’S YOUR HANDLE? NADESHOT, MRSVIOLENCE, AND GENDERED GAMERS**

The presentation of professional gamers in the press often focuses on their young age and non-traditional labour practices. Articles written about Matt “NaDeSHoT” Haag, a 21-year old competitive *Call of Duty* player currently signed with OpTic Gaming, are indicative of a larger discourse surrounding professional gamers that establishes them as a new form of labourer. Most importantly, this discourse frequently describes not just the act of performing in gaming competitions, but the use of social media in the generation of larger self-brands, indicating the strong link between professional gaming and the generation of commodifiable online personas. The discursive construction of Haag within these media outlets frames his persona as an accomplished entrepreneurial success story as well as a vision of a future industry.

A January 26, 2014 article in the *Chicago Tribune* by John Keilman summarised the dual role of professional gamers as competitors and cultural icons with the headline, “Pro Gamers Enjoy Celebrity, Income from Heeding the 'Call.'” The sub-header continues this connection by emphasising the ability to form a “steady living” while also using social media sites for “capitalising on fandom.” Language in the article emphasises the disconnect between Haag’s age, profession, and degree of celebrity noting, “the lanky, dark-eyed 21-year-old is a global celebrity to an enormous number of young people, very few of whom know him as Matt.” The description focuses on the young age of both the player and his audience, as well as hints at the fact that such connections are not “traditional” in the sense that Haag’s fame is for his online persona, NaDeSHoT, rather than his given name. NaDeSHoT is clearly a successful brand as Haag charges \$4.99 per month for fans to watch him practice on his Twitch.tv channel. This is a common practice among professional gamers, not unlike gaining “backstage” access to watch athletes in a non-competitive atmosphere. Drawing on advice from his team and teammates, Haag established financial stability through means outside the tournaments, a skill represented as necessary to the life of a professional gamer. Playing for OpTic Gaming on national and international stages becomes another opportunity to build a fan base, which leads to more *direct* income for Haag. Suddenly prize money is not the only thing on the line at a competitive gaming tournament: a precious audience is also up for grabs.

Haag’s other primary source of income is through his sponsorship deal with Red Bull. Haag is part of their e-sports division of athletic talent and they promote his recent activities, training, and e-sports events on their website. The site includes footage shot by Haag that appears on his personal YouTube channel where he discusses his team’s training regimen at the Red Bull headquarters. Moreover, the site also discusses personal events surrounding his performance, always using his handle NaDeSHoT rather than Matt or Haag, and frequently promotes his social media activity through hyperlinks and images. One article, for example, mentions how, “Nadeshot also finds himself under the weather. A few days before the Call of Duty Championships, he suffered a bout of the stomach flu that required a trip to the hospital. This time it’s a sore throat and cold” (Smith). This is followed by a screen capture from Haag’s (verified) Twitter account where he mentions the illness. References to Haag’s personal life and integration with the Red Bull sponsorship indicate how Haag is always performing his persona on these social media sites both for his fans and his business partners.

Despite running his YouTube and Twitter accounts on his own, he references his sponsorship to Red Bull in those account profiles. While Red Bull is not producing any of this content (although they do have in-house publicity teams), they are still *using* it to promote Haag and his upcoming tournament. We see a symbiotic relationship here between sponsor and athlete that challenges formulations of celebrity commodity branding systems as exclusively top-down. Haag clearly has autonomy to construct his online persona through various social media accounts while maintaining his affiliation with Red Bull. At the same time, however, Red Bull is able to exploit Haag's social media labour by reposting this content as they build up their own brand within the professional gaming community. Haag becomes a team member not just for his play in tournaments, but also for his actions online.

Essentially, the NaDeSHoT persona is a product of Haag as well as his corporate sponsors although Haag performs most of the labour. Haag is not an atypical example of the type of relationship a professional gamer might have with his or her sponsor and the responsibilities gamers undertake to build a fan base on their own. In neither his own self-generated content nor profiles like the Red Bull and *Chicago Tribune* articles is Haag's gender made a particular point of interest, which is very much in contrast to women professional gamers whose gender is frequently mentioned across their media footprint. The male gender is thus positioned as "neutral" or "natural" within this space, reinforcing the masculine identity as primary for professional gamers.

Representations of NaDeSHoT (whether generated by himself or by others) also prioritise a particular mode of masculinity that privileges violence and enforces heteronormative behavior. These markers of "traditional" masculinity are both performed by Haag and imprinted upon him from outside. The gamertag, NaDeSHoT, itself emphasises violence tied to his particular competition in the *Call of Duty* series, as the name is a reference to killing someone with a grenade instead of shooting them.<sup>ii</sup> The way gamertags, slang, and in-game banter build upon these apparatuses of violence affirm a hegemonic masculinity built on aggression, competitiveness, and technological skill (Donaldson 644). Haag's heteronormative masculinity comes not so much from presenting himself as a sexual or gendered being, but from the privilege of him *not* having to present himself as such. This is in contrast to female gamers whose sexuality is a constant point of representation and performance both in terms of appearance and interactions with other gamers.

Women gamers are constantly presented and considered in such a way as to invoke their sexuality and/or gender, marking them as "other" in this masculine space. Kelly "MrsViolence" Kelley is a 26 year-old professional first-person shooter (FPS) gamer. Like many professional gamers, Kelley has an extensive social media presence wherein she not only builds her status as a professional gaming celebrity, but also performs her gender in a way that both sets her apart *from* and embeds her within the masculine space of professional video gaming. As we shall see, Kelley emphasises both her femininity and her dominance in a masculine field across various media channels to show that she belongs to a sphere that can and does include femininity.

Kelley's negotiation of traditional binary gender identities is immediately present in her choice of gamertag or nickname that all professional gamers take on. While nicknames in more traditional sports may be a mix of journalistic creativity mixed with a dash of self-branding, professional gamers often choose their nickname in the same way non-professional gamers choose their account names at home. The choice of nickname is important beyond self-expression, as it becomes intrinsically tied to the gamer and part of a much larger branding practice that extends outside the realms of competitive play. Kelley's choice of MrsViolence is significant, as it emphasises both her gender as well as her penchant for violent video games like first-person shooters. In interviews she frequently emphasises how she only plays violent games (typically first-person shooters), hence "Violence" is evidence of both her personal

preference in genre, but can also be read as her desire to affirm her belonging to this masculine space (and a response to those who see her as invading it).

There is also the curious choice to use “Mrs” rather than “Ms,” which implies that MrsViolence is married or takes the name “Violence” from a partner (presumably a man). While Kelley does date a male professional gamer, it would be incorrect and inappropriate to conclude she derives her game playing tendencies from him as she was already competing before that relationship. Ultimately, the use of “Mrs” is troubling to her strategies of self-representation as an independent woman, but I would speculate that her use of “Mrs” was ill-conceived and, perhaps, was only meant to be read as a humorous way of juxtaposing the informal violent worlds of gaming with the more formal, domestic-sounding “Mrs.”

Although she is active on Twitter, Facebook, and live-streaming gameplay on Twitch.tv, Kelley’s YouTube page carries the most significant and influential content that crafts her online persona. The banner on YouTube notes her various jobs in the professional gaming industry, noting her roles as a “pro gamer,” “show host,” and “livestreamer.” There are also links to her sponsors, like gaming gear companies Razorzone and Gunnars, the latter of which is a brand of gaming glasses that Kelley praises in many videos. Here, Kelley reaffirms her corporate sponsorships out of contractual obligation, but these statements also work to legitimate her public identity within an industry where achieving sponsorships is a sign of success. While still competing in various tournaments, Kelley, like other gamers, has built a larger online following that allows her to net lucrative sponsorship deals to promote products not just during competitive play, but also on various social media platforms. These products are primarily high-priced video game peripherals<sup>iii</sup> that add to her public image as a highly competent and technologically savvy competitor, key markers of success in the masculine culture of professional gaming.

Kelley not only attempts to fit in and belong to this masculine culture, but also to stand out as feminine within it. Her YouTube video series plays a critical role in building the feminine aspects of her public persona, often mashing up hegemonic symbols and markers of both genders. Each video begins with a quick montage of images mixing gameplay and older YouTube videos of Kelley. The various border designs around these images mixes traditional masculine and feminine iconography in unique ways. The first border design is a pink background with various types of makeup displayed on the corners: a compact with blush or powder, mascara, and other makeup tools. The next border, silhouettes of guns on a purple border, surrounds images of a first-person shooter played by MrsViolence. A graphic overlays the main video and border with the image of two lines of ammunition, not unlike a bandolier, but with the tips of the ammunition coloured pink. The result is a hybrid ammunition that looks like both a bullet and lipstick. The final piece of the montage features a flower-topped bright orange background with a clip where Kelley takes up the centre of the frame while chatting into her webcam. The introduction ends with a shot of Kelley being awarded a giant novelty cheque for \$50,000 for winning a *Battlefield 3* tournament.

This montage that plays before every video on Kelley’s YouTube channel sets up an interplay of femininity and violence, blurring the line between conventional masculine and feminine iconography. Bright pastel colours emphasise her femininity, and dramatically contrast the greys and browns of the first-person shooter role played in parts of the montage. The stark difference between the colour palettes represents the difference in the masculine and feminine spaces, but connecting them reflects MrsViolence’s belonging to both. Images of makeup and flowers seem to reinforce her femininity in contrast to the videos of violent gameplay in which she participates. Ammunition coloured to look like lipstick perhaps best encapsulates the complex identity Kelley is performing. The persona of MrsViolence is built upon disjunction, seen in images and colours being paired in unique ways. Her desire to mark her own online spaces as feminine must also meet the demands and expectations of a gaming

culture that expects masculinity: the result is a contestation of gender norms through the melding of masculine and feminine symbols.

One of the most direct ways Kelley crafts her gaming persona is through a series of videos on her YouTube channel called “Question & Answer.” In these videos Kelley addresses fan questions and promotes her competitions, media appearances, and sponsors. In “Mrs Violence [sic] Question & Answer #4 - TeamRedBaron Giveaway!,” for example, Kelley notes that the video is sponsored by “Team Red Baron Pizza” and SteelSeries professional gaming gear which explicitly highlights her value and significance in the gaming community. Again, the highlighting of brands fulfills both contractual obligations as well as contributes to her persona as successful within the field—in fact she claims she is the only female gamer to have been sponsored by Red Baron Pizza (“Mrs Violence [sic] Question & Answer #4”).

In “Mrs Violence [sic] Question & Answer #2,” Kelley answers what she describes as “an offensive question” that asks why she wears “so much” makeup. She hesitates before answering, suggesting that it is not something she wants to address, but she does provide a personal answer. First, she reflects on her personal history growing up feeling, as she characterises it, unfeminine: “When I was growing up, I didn’t play with makeup. I didn’t play with dolls, makeup, girls... eww. So I was a boy growing up.” Claiming that her youth did not involve these self-described “girl activities,” MrsViolence goes on to state how “now is [her] time to shine with the makeup.” She emphasises that she has spent *her* money on the makeup and that she is “obviously going to have fun with it.” Using makeup is presented as a way for Kelley to define her femininity as well as her adulthood. She *chooses* to use makeup: it is an agency borne of a personal growth into womanhood as well as a mark of her success as a professional gamer/labourer which is, again, irrevocably tied up in those lipstick bullets.

The question and answer videos also provide a forum for Kelley to construct her gamer persona as one built on a kind of femininity that challenges certain hegemonic ideologies (and leaving others alone like her use of “Mrs,” makeup, and other traditionally feminine symbols). When asked what her favourite part of working at the video game retail chain GameStop, she answers: “proving every dude wrong that thought I was not a gamer... So you never know guys. So stop judging women the moment you walk into GameStop” (“Mrs Violence [sic] Question & Answer #4). Kelley is using her celebrity to not only build a persona and valuable audience that increases her value as a commodity, but also to address issues of shaming women in gaming culture. By answering a question this way, she moves beyond her role as professional gamer and into an ambassador role for women gamers more broadly.

In “Mrs Violence [sic] Question & Answer #5- GunnarOptiks Deal, Favorites, & eSports!,” she begins the question and answer segment by showing various screengrabs from social media all featuring forms of questioning if she is single, if she has a boyfriend, or if there is a “MrViolence.” She emphasises that anyone who has followed her for the past two years should know the answer, as she has been very public about her relationship with fellow professional gamer Tom “Tsquared” Taylor. This montage is designed to demonstrate that such a question is unnecessary and, ultimately, disrespectful: questions about her relationship availability are clearly frequent, and the sheer quantity indicate a larger cultural issue. Her frustration with the question further cements her image as an “outsider” in gaming as she implies that such questions are overwhelmingly common (and offensive) for women gamers.

Kelley’s interest in the larger political project of female empowerment in gaming communities was also emphasized in a 2011 *Gamespot* interview. When asked if she would like to say anything else, she takes the opportunity to connect to her fans on a personal level by referencing broadly some personal hardships she says her fans would know about and to make a statement on women in professional gaming: “Thanks for all the support you guys. It’s been a rough couple years, but I’m here to dominate. I’m here showing you guys that female gamers

can definitely win it” (Sampson). Again, in an interview with CNET, Kelley articulates a long term desire to be “the ultimate female gaming ambassador”:

There needs to be a female ambassador in competitive gaming. We need someone out there who can s\*\*t [sic] on boys and say they can s\*\*t [sic] on boys. And I feel like I’m the only girl who can do that right now. (Profis)

In both of these interviews, Kelley uses her celebrity in order to call for change in the gender dynamics of professional gaming. Noting the difficulty and lack of female role models and representation, Kelley sees her role as one of stewardship and shows a greater awareness for the gendered nature of professional gaming than one sees in the public commentary of many male professional gamers. Haag, for example, is never questioned about the role of men or women in professional gaming. Kelley’s social media persona and branding thus goes well beyond her need for financial and economic stability in the pursuit of earning a living: she creates an explicitly political dimension to her public persona. However, Kelley’s calls for new gender dynamics and more acceptance of female gamers is also self-serving as becoming the “female ambassador” in competitive gaming also means more publicity for her. This is not to say that her intentions are entirely selfish, but by positioning herself as a spokesperson for women within professional gaming, Kelley builds on her image as an empowered woman in a masculine space which has strong value in generating her audience.

The two case studies presented here help show the ways professional gaming both imprints and is influenced by traditional gender norms and how this affects persona construction and self-branding for professional gaming labourers. It is worth noting that these case studies replicate and reflect the overall binary gender constructions of gaming where there is little acknowledgement or engagement in trans or queer identities. This silence is at odds with a culture where the use of avatars and the creation of digital representations of identities within virtual spaces enables and, perhaps, even encourages gender identity play and experimentation. Adrienne Shaw analyzes interviews with those in the video industry to surmise, “it is not necessarily a matter of homophobic exclusion (though that exists too) but rather specific concerns of this industry make including GLBT content difficult and shape how the content that does get into games ultimately looks and plays” (“Putting the Gay in Games”). In other words, the solution to the lack of video game diversity must take place at an industrial, cultural, and formal level. More diversity behind-the-scenes of the video game and professional gaming industry is needed in order to pave the way for more diverse representations in games and among those who play them for leisure and for work.

## **MAKING MONEY AND CRAFTING IDENTITIES IN E-SPORTS**

A decade ago, “professional gamer” was not a job title. Now e-sports have emerged as a new form of spectator sport that takes advantage of the technological, cultural, and political foundations of the present in order to craft a new experience for player and viewer alike. Video games have broadened as a medium that extends beyond entertainment to include education, training, and now professional, organised competition. These new uses are still being explored and understood, and the people looking to profit or earn a living off of such activities find themselves in a precarious position in an ever-changing field. The people with the most at stake in e-sports are the professional gamers, as they pay in time, energy, and physical strength for the opportunity to win prize money and gain sponsorships. Due to the field’s unpredictable nature and short shelf-life, it is becoming more and more necessary to make money elsewhere, primarily through building a fan base via social media that can then be monetised through advertisements and sponsorships. In many ways the professional gamer is a signal for a growing trend in all Web 2.0 neoliberal economics for it epitomises the rise of personal accountability and the need to generate digital influence and audiences in order to position oneself in the highly competitive, highly precarious economic system.

That said, divisions and inequities along gender lines still persist in this new economic system, and this is especially true for the world of professional gaming. As an offshoot of the highly-masculinised video game culture, e-sports is a heavily policed space, often unwelcoming of signs of femininity or any perceived “attacks” on heteronormative masculinity. Just as all e-sport professional players find themselves in a perilous position to earn online notoriety that can then be commoditised, female professional gamers face additional hurdles in crafting their online identities in these spaces for they also must also explicitly explain, negotiate, and perform their femininity. For female professional gamers, what is at stake is not only their economic livelihoods, but their identities as women, as gamers, and as “female gamers.” Self-branding for female professional gamers must be understood as both an act of economic independence and stability as well as one of personal, political identity work.

## END NOTES

“Female gamer” commonly appears as legitimate in industry discourse, and thus appears in this article as reflective of that usage. I have otherwise tried to avoid the phrasing.

<sup>ii</sup> Nadeshot is shorthand for “grenade shot.”

<sup>iii</sup> Auxillary devices for playing video games include controllers, keyboards, computer mice, and even eyeglasses.

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